

**Equality, Pluralism and the State:  
Perspectives from the Women's Movement**

**XIV National Conference on Women's Studies**

Guwahati, 4<sup>th</sup> -7<sup>th</sup> February 2014

**A Report**

Organised by:

**Indian Association for Women's Studies**  
in collaboration with  
Dept. of Women's Studies, Gauhati University, Guwahati  
Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Guwahati,  
Cotton College State University, Guwahati  
North East Network.

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## **Equality, Pluralism and the State: Perspectives from the Women's Movement**

Recent decades have seen a continuous engagement of the women's movement in India with issues of equality and pluralism. Equality and respect for diversity were key principles which featured in the Constituent Assembly debates and provided the basis for constitutional guarantees to which India committed itself at the time of independence. However, there remain several challenges to achieving these goals. That there would be serious obstacles in achieving equality for women was visible from the intense opposition and responses to women's rights in course of the Constituent Assembly and of Parliamentary debates in the early years. The Committee on the Status of Women in India in its report *Towards Equality*, published in the mid 1970s, argued that women's struggle for their rights is inextricably linked to the success of India's experience to emerge as a vibrant secular democratic country.

While the diversity in the social tapestry of India has historically seen continuities and contestations, interactions between different social segments have increasingly come to be mediated through socio-economic processes, where the needs and principles of a marketized economy prevail. This has been all the more so since the 1990s. While the years after independence marked significant attempts to negotiate these rights in different spheres with the aim of keeping alive the spirit, moral framework and guiding principles laid out in the Constitution, current policy frameworks and paradigms of development pose serious challenges to these efforts. The development policies pursued in recent years have directly impacted the rights enjoyed by different social segments and aggravated prevailing inequalities in multiple sites and domains. While the inter-sectionality of gender-based experiences of inequalities with prevalent hierarchies is not new, the increasing overlap and convergence between different forms of discriminations and exclusions is adding to the vulnerability of specific sections of women and posing greater challenges for their quest for a life with dignity.

Patterns of exclusions draw their strength and sustenance from long histories of social and economic inequalities, discrimination, and marginalisation. With increasing vulnerabilities in the economic sphere, mounting tensions with regard to the rights of diverse communities and ethnicities, hierarchies of the inequalities based on caste and class acquire volatile proportions. These also determine people's abilities to garner their citizenship rights. Given the uneven and unequal nature of development and lack of respect shown for federal democratic principles in the modes of governance adopted, the negotiation of these rights has itself come to be seen as problematic. Women's struggle for their democratic rights as citizens is, hence, inextricably linked to issues of equality and respect for its diverse pluralist traditions.

The list of challenges faced by women in contemporary Indian society is indeed long. What is equally striking is the manner in which intolerance and dominant hegemonic perspectives seek to replace the pluralist heritage of our cultural past. In a nation which promises to carry forward diversity in faith, languages, and ways of living, we see greater aggression in defining 'correct' behavior which acquires special characteristics with reference to women and the attempt is to present a homogenized notion of the nation, nationhood as well as of Indian womanhood. While political formations actively propagate such strident assertions with moral overtones, the media and the market play their part in defining these. Such homogenized 'mainstream' articulations seek to marginalize and delegitimize pluralistic discourses, thereby also exacerbating exclusions and denials in both the cultural and the political domain. The exclusion and marginalization of women appears to be a common pattern cutting across religions, communities and regions, erasing the rich variety of customary rights and cultural practices. Together these pose a complex set of challenges at both the individual and societal level.

The central concerns of equality and pluralism cannot be perceived in isolation from the State, its policies and the changing terms of interface between the State and its citizens. The withdrawal of the State from the public sphere in favour of the private sphere in recent decades, also marks a departure from fundamental concerns of wellbeing. The reduction in investment in social and public goods in the name of reducing fiscal

deficits has seriously affected educational institutions, as well as citizens' ability to garner their rights. The retreat from universal commitments, accompanied by withdrawal of subsidies and support has resulted in a rising burden on the poor, especially women. There has been a change in the character of the judiciary even as gender biases prevail. The increasing use of military and para-military forces against citizens and people's movements has posed intense conflict in the pursuit of democratic goals. As problems mount and protests against these policies and their impact on the lives of the people gather momentum, the State in an attempt to contain the tide of unrest appears to have embarked on a mission to carve out an artificially generated consensus and hold together a fragile coalition on behalf of the ruling elites, further aggravating the vulnerability of the masses and of women.

The XIV National Conference of the IAWS was, in fact, was planned and held in the background of nationwide protests and intense discussion on the context, forms and scale of gender-based violence, including, more specifically, sexual violence in its various locations. These debates, perhaps the most intense and widespread in recent history, encompassed vastly different sections of society, movements and organizations and sought to address the multiple sites of violence extending across regions, social classes and communities. All these point to the fact that women are directly in the line of fire in the current scenario. Equally significant, it shows that the message of the women's movement and its struggle for the rights of women can no longer be seen as a movement for sectional rights. This at once highlights the immense possibilities, as well as the challenges before us.

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In recent years, as the discussion on violence against women has acquired greater visibility, there is a realization that this violence is enacted and embedded in the wider context of growing inequalities, social hierarchies and gender based prejudices. Further, there is evidence today to show that in the two decades since the initiation of the 'new' economic policy and imposition of a monolithic market-driven model of development, the challenge of ensuring the well-being and quality of life for the masses has become greater. This is visible in various indices of development. Gender gaps have widened and social inequalities including those premised on historically determined exclusions, have deepened in numerous ways. These inequalities are manifested in inter- and intra- regional division, caste and community-based divides, and inequality reflected in ownership and access to resources, especially land, housing, food and water. This is more specifically gender-based hierarchies, e.g., with regard to labour; wage disparities; rural-peri-urban-urban livelihood and employment patterns and the feminization of poverty. With the increase in 'developmental' imbalances and unequal access to basic entitlements, there is a blurring of the distinction between 'inclusionary' policies to address 'exclusionary' practices. There is a persistence of caste, tribe and community based disparities, of discriminatory attitudes towards issues of disability and, towards expressions of non-normative sexual orientations. Overall the structural barriers to attaining a human and 'humane' life appear to have become more rigid.

The women's movement, over the last several decades, has engaged in debates on these issues from its myriad locations. While studying the impact of globalization, it has critically engaged with processes of policy formation to argue that these need to be democratized along with the content of policies. Similarly, the movement has worked actively to

preserve the pluralist culture and historical legacies of our people against fundamentalist assertions of womanhood per se, even as it has lent its voice to democratic articulations. Commitment to equality and pluralism is both an underlying principle as well as a necessary condition for women's democratic advance in Indian society today.

The National Conference was planned with the objective of providing a platform to reflect on the complex set of challenges facing our democratic polity and the nation state, from diverse disciplinary perspectives and experiences from the ground. This reflection was needed to redirect attention to some of the fundamental goals and challenges. The organizing of the Conference in Guwahati, in the North Eastern Region, (NER) points to the significance attached by the IAWS to some of the fundamental challenges of our times and the need to learn from experiences from the NER in particular, as well as other regions to find alternative and constructive ways to advance democratic, egalitarian and pluralistic perspectives. This also requires sensitivity to the complexities prevailing in the context of the enormously diverse situation within the NER.

Equally challenging is the way in which a monolithic paradigm of development goes hand in hand with monocultures of the mind and intolerance and dominant hegemonic perspectives seek to replace the diverse pluralistic heritages of our cultural past. There are assertions of homogenized notions of Indian 'womanhood,' as also of the nation, with the media and the market playing a role in defining the same. The movements for equality and pluralism cannot be divorced from the state, its policies and the manner in which the state interfaces with its citizens. The women's movement has engaged with these debates from its multiple locations over the last several years. The National Conference specifically aimed at providing opportunity to reflect on the complex set of challenges facing our democratic polity from different disciplinary perspectives within the academic domain and experiences from the ground, to advance the debate on democracy, equality, pluralism.

## *The Inaugural Session*

The Conference began with a welcome and felicitation of Dr. Syeda Hameed, Hon'ble Member, Planning Commission, the Hon'ble Vice Chancellor, Gauhati University, Dr. Mridul Hazarika, Hon'ble Vice Chancellor, Cotton College State University, Professor Dhruba J. Saikia, Dr. Monisha Behal of Northeast Network, Dr. Udayan Misra, Prof. Tilottama Misra, all members of the Patrons' Committee, along with Ms. Samhita Barooah on behalf of TISS, Guwahati in view of the inability of Prof. Virginius Xaxa to be present.

Welcoming the dignitaries and the delegates, Prof. Meeta Deka, History Dept, Gauhati University and Convenor of the Local Conference Secretariat, noted that indeed it was an honour to welcome all present on behalf of the Indian Association for Women's Studies and members of the Local Conference Secretariat (LCS), comprising members from Gauhati University, Cotton College State University, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Guwahati Campus and the North East Network. The LCS had worked hard and contributed immensely by both, shouldering specific responsibilities as well as in generating support for and interest in the Conference in Assam and in other states of the region. She noted that while Gauhati University had hosted several conferences, the XIV National Conference on Women's Studies marked a difference. Firstly five institutions were working together. Also, the participants, numbering over 850 from all over India and abroad, were themselves drawn from diverse backgrounds. These included not merely the academia but also vastly different sections of society and organizations, cutting across regions, social classes and communities. Social activists and grassroots level entrepreneurs, from the region, had put up their arts, crafts and local cuisine on display in the stalls. The conference would host cultural troupes from the NER. This interaction between people drawn from all the states of India would, in itself, be a whole new experience for everyone and would provide the context for a healthy and rich exchange of ideas. The theme of the conference, itself very apt for women in the northeast, where societies are an interesting mix of patriarchy located within patriliney as well as matriliney, would allow for a more informed debate on women's lives in



this region and the development of Women's Studies in the universities of Northeast India.

Prof. Hazarika welcomed the conference participants and looked forward to enriching debates while Prof. Saikia outlined some of the aspects of patriarchy prevalent in society, including in the NER, which deny to women the equality that is their due. Prof. Tilottama Misra, referring to the long history of the women's movement in the NER, hoped that the conference would provide an opportunity to strengthen linkages within the women's movement as well as between the women's movement and society in the region.

Prof. Ilina Sen, began her Presidential Address as a remembrance to the pioneers in Women's Studies, many of who we had lost in the recent years, and to who IAWS owed a special debt. These include Prof. Neera Desai, Prof. Lotika Sarkar, Prof Vina Mazumdar, Prof. Hemlata Swarup, and Dr Ila Pathak who was a regular at IAWS. She specially remembered Prof. Sharmila Rege who was with us at the previous IAWS Conference in Wardha. Addressing the young participants in the Conference, she observed that the world that our founder members encountered and the world that our young friends would have to deal with was very different, and the challenges facing women in the twenty first century were both, extreme as well as serious. Sen referred to a sense of disillusionment and also a disconnect due to the falling apart of many of the painstakingly built structures, state led protective measures through policy-related interventions. Although Women's Studies scholars had engaged on a long term basis with the possibilities that existed within the state guaranteed systems, yet, the legal structures in place did not always work in practice. As could be seen in the case of laws for the protection of contract labour, women workers and child labour, which, despite continuing to exist in the statute books, were negated every day in the actual functioning and practice of the labour courts. At the same time the immiserisation of women- rural, urban under-privileged, minority, adivasi, and dalit – documented by data sources like the NSSO, had not been sufficiently addressed by Women's Studies scholars or activists.

She drew attention to how attempts to impose a monolithic definition of national interest, national identity as well as national security had grown out of the same myopic understanding that saw only one side of reality and refuses to acknowledge any nuanced version of the 'truth.' In the North East, this myopia had led to years of conflict and unrest, and imposition of legal instruments like the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) which had ensured that an entire generation in societies like Manipur had grown up without knowing their basic democratic rights. The stresses and strains of the political economy had also perhaps been responsible for another feature of the new millennium-- an extreme misogyny towards women's rights to basic dignity, equality being a far cry. Sexual assault and violation of women's bodies was not unknown before the present day. In fact generations of Dalit women, as well as women from conflict areas, will testify that rape and sexual domination of women's bodies had been an accepted tool of domination for years. Yet it was the brutality of many of the cases that had come to light in recent times that has been shocking. The women's movement had always dreamt of a society free from discrimination and injustices of all kinds, for women to be really free. The following lines from the 1911 song of the Lawrence Textile Mill strikers came to her mind:

As we come marching, marching, we bring the greater days.  
The rising of the women means the rising of the race.  
No more the drudge and idler -- ten that toil where one reposes,  
But a sharing of life's glories: Bread and roses! Bread and roses!

Dr. Syeda Hameed, Member Planning Commission congratulated the IAWS for its decision to hold the Conference in the NER. She emphasized the need to build bridges between the people of the North east and the rest of the country in present times. The women's movement she, noted, had a special role to play in the peace building process since women in the region and elsewhere, such as in Kashmir had specially been victims of the prolonged years of conflict and the absence of peace. The government, she said, was committed to facilitating the process of advancing women's rights. One of the concrete ways this was being attempted was through allocation of resources in and through the planning process so as to strengthen the economic base for women to be able to effectively enjoy the

rights guaranteed by the Constitution. She spoke at length about the processes of gender budgeting and the strategy worked out at the policy level in the Approach paper for the Twelfth Plan on the basis of which it was proposed to take forward the issue of women's equality through the period of the 12<sup>th</sup> Plan.

**Plenary I: Building Women's Studies in the North East,  
C-ordinator: Prof. Archana Sharma, Dept. of Economics /  
former Director, Centre for Women's Studies, Gauhati  
University.**

The plenary on Building Women's Studies in the North East attempted to draw together persons/organisations from various fields and from different parts of NER to share their experiences in building women's studies in the region. The endeavour was to ascertain the present status of Women's Studies in the region both within and outside the institutions of higher education and to unveil the agony and ecstasy of those who identified themselves with Women's Studies.

Initiating the discussions, the coordinator Prof. Archana Sharma provided an overview in the beginning and spread of the UGC Women's Studies Programme in the North East as these Centres, which have provided a formal space for Women's Studies. In fact, she observed, the process of building Women's Studies in the region began much earlier gives the vibrant tradition of research on women's issues which existed in the universities since their inception. Individuals and organisations outside the university system too worked on women's issues. To document the process of building Women's Studies in the region, therefore, one would have to delve into the past, to explore and collate the materials strewn all over. She also stated that two broad strands could be identified in the process of building Women's Studies in Gauhati University - one within different disciplines, secondly through the Women's Studies Research Centre, GU. A third dimension could be added, to focus on developments that took place in the colleges.

Prof. N. Promodini Devi of Manipur University and Dr. Chungkham Sheelaramani, Associate Professor of D.M.College of Arts, Imphal narrated

the Manipur experience. Promodini Devi spoke about the establishment of the UGC sponsored Women's Studies Centre in Manipur University during the eleventh plan period to carry out activities as per the UGC Guidelines and the appointment of research staff. These honoraria had to stop halfway due to the non availability and receipt of funds from the UGC.

Dr. Chungkham Sheelaramani's presentation covered a wide variety of issues including how she herself developed an interest in Women's Studies through the women's movement in Manipur. She referred to Macha Leima, a journal which published articles on women's issues. She identified the women's day observed by this organisation to commemorate the women's movement in Manipur and the beginning of processes to build Women's Studies in Manipur. She observed that minor research projects on Women's Studies had now become popular among both men and women but women's representation in different bodies like curriculum development committees was so low that it rendered women's voices ineffective.

Dr. Paramita Saha from Tripura University observed that while trying to trace the genesis of Women's Studies in Tripura it would be necessary to locate the agencies which had influenced the process. In this respect the long history of women's movement in the state cannot be overemphasized. However, Saha restricted her focus to Women's Studies in the formal higher educational institutions. She spoke about the setting up of the first Women's College in Tripura, the Women's Cell in Tripura University and the change in the approach after Tripura University, which was earlier a State University, became a Central University. She put on record her appreciation of the guidance and support received from the State Commission for Women to develop the activities of the Women's Cell. Her involvement with the UGC's Programme for Capacity Building of Women Managers in Higher Education - drove home to her the necessity of the Women's Studies Programme in the University, despite the fact that there were very few women teachers in the university in the early years. She hoped that the setting up of the Women's Studies Centre at UGC during the eleventh plan and new Centre would provide a space for developing Women's Studies.

Dr. Madhumita Purkayastha, Convenor, Cell for Women's Studies and Development of D.H.S.K. College discussed the challenges faced in building Women's Studies in the colleges of Assam, which highlighted the dichotomy inherent in the Higher Education system. On the one hand undergraduate teaching institutions had no scope to formulate syllabi autonomously which prevented them from making strategic curricular framework required interventions for an effective syllabi in Core and Major courses. On the other hand they had no technically feasible options or marked resources for students' research projects. In this context, a proactive role by Centres in universities to network with motivate and sponsor projects on women's issues albeit on a small scale. Most importantly, documentation of such work needs' to be promoted.

While the initiative taken to set in place functioning women's cells in colleges was welcome, there was a general lack of understanding regarding the scope, role and functions of such cells. In most cases they remained as desultory committees undertaking development activities for underprivileged women in the neighbourhood, acting like NGOs and sometimes even got registered as such.

While sensitization workshops under the UGC Scheme of Capacity Building of Women Managers in Higher Education had brought about some attitudinal and perspective related changes regarding the role, scope and functions of the Women's Studies Cells, a lot remained to be done in terms of linking the Women's Studies Cells in the colleges and Higher Education institutions in the North East with the National network. In this context, a survey and review of the activities of already existing Centres (in universities and colleges) was necessary. Meaningful and synergistic linkage of the Centres and the Cells would go a long way in mapping the ground covered and charting out the future course of action in terms of academic interchange, research collaborations, issue based proactive advocacy, pressure building and lobbying, building collaborative research, documentation and publication. The need was to take the initiatives of Women's Studies Centres and Cells forward to foster a sensitized women's community in the Higher Education system and reinforce efforts by working in tandem with social agencies that work towards transformation.

From the presentations, it became clear that the UGC Women's Studies Programmes had resulted in laying the foundation to promote Women's Studies. However, there was a need to document and consolidate the work done in different locations since this could provide a complete picture of the process of building Women's Studies in the Region.

### **Exploring Pluralities: From Women's Studies to Northeast Studies**

**Madhuri Shah Memorial Lecture by  
Nandita Haksar, Human Rights Lawyer and woman activist.**

Nandita Haksar approached the theme of Exploring Pluralities: From Women's Studies to Northeast Studies from her location as a socialist feminist engaged with political movements in the Northeast which are patriarchal and based on nationality, ethnicity or region. She wished to share her experience of working within the human rights movement, most of the time with issues relating to the peoples of the Northeast and the problems she faced as a socialist and feminist who did not feel comfortable with identity politics and yet felt compelled to take positions which seemed to be supporting just that. Haksar observed that neither the Women's movement nor Women's Studies on the one hand and the North East Studies are concerned with the problem of pluralism; their focus has been largely within the discourse of development for "national integration" and in that the nation has been largely defined within the concept of "unity in diversity" falling far short of the concept of pluralism. The terms "equality" and "pluralism" are neither objective nor without their own histories, she argued, with pluralism being a more conceptual category developed in reaction to the increasing cultural diversity of the Western societies, largely due to immigration. As a human rights lawyer she felt she did not need to grapple with the problems with definitions of equality or pluralism; however, when it came to discussing the violation of women's rights within the family, community or religion then the human rights discourse proved to be inadequate for defining those rights.

The UNESCO which looks upon cultural pluralism as a policy offshoot of cultural diversity has postulated seven cultural conventions which form a

solid basis for an alternative framework to the human rights standards based on individual rights. Referring to the women's movement in its plurality, Haksar traced the lineages from Towards Equality, the report of the CSWI. She recalled that the women who wrote Towards Equality were not feminists but products of the Indian national movement against British colonial rule which also defined their vision for the women's movement. Thus Towards Equality did not use the vocabulary of either the human rights discourse or the feminist discourse. The Report did not question the patriarchal basis of the Constitution, the reference point being the rights incorporated under Articles 14, 15 and 16 of the Constitution which define lack of equality as being the presence of discrimination. Though pluralism was not a concept in currency at that time, Towards Equality did make an exception from the overwhelming vision of bringing women into the mainstream of Indian social, political, and economic life, by recognizing the rights of religious minorities. She maintained that the reason that Women's Studies had a dynamic aspect in the beginning was that it was inextricably linked to the women's movement, at the regional and international level, and this was reflected in IAWS conferences. However, with the depoliticization of the women's movement and the inroads by funded NGOs, the movement's ability to challenge policies and articulate demands was severely undermined, becoming issue-based without theoretical or political moorings. Women's Studies too has begun to grow in new direction, with no links to any movement. At the same time it is interesting that in the objectives of Northeast Studies in several Universities also there is no concern with pluralism. This, despite the fact that in the context of the Northeast region of India, pluralism is definitely an issue given that there are eight states with very different histories lumped together. Also there is a need to focus attention on the dynamics of the relationship between more than 400 communities, as also the problem of power sharing between the tribal communities living amidst caste based societies. Some of these studies have been explored in her book Across the Chicken's Neck.

In some universities the Northeast Studies seem to be conceptualized as a more sophisticated version of Tribal Studies. The Anthropological Survey and Tribal Research Institutes, set up after Independence, generated lots of ethnographic data on tribes in India. Much of this material reflects the researchers' condescending and patronizing attitude towards the tribal

peoples. Tribal Studies was concerned with national integration while Northeast Studies is concerned with countering insurgencies in the region. Northeast Studies serves to help the aims and objectives of the counter-insurgency policies, which are not concerned with addressing the genuine grievances of the peoples or the reasons for the growing alienation. Pointing to the tension between approaches signifying **Equality versus Patriarchy**, argued that there is no society or community in the Northeast (as in the rest of India) which is not based on patriarchy. However, often women activists have undermined the struggles of the peoples of the Northeast by advocating the rights of individual tribal women's rights against the rights of the community as a whole. There is a need to understand that the law which denied the right to women to own land also protected tribal lands from outsiders. But by challenging the law which was enacted to protect tribal people's land from contractors and other outsiders, feminists put the whole question of protection of tribal lands into jeopardy. This problem of conflict between individual women within their community, especially when that community itself belongs to an oppressed minority, is a persistent one and also came up in the case of Shah Bano.

At the same time some of the demands, such as in-camera trials, anonymous witnesses and shifting the burden of proof were principles incorporated into the anti-terrorist laws and allow for precedents to lower human rights standards on the whole. Today the rage and anger in the aftermath of the rapes in the region has ensured that there is almost no discussion or political awareness of the reasons for the growth in violence against women. And the only remedies on offer are stricter laws and greater state power. Added to this is the discussion in the context of a countrywide war on terror, in which members of the Muslim community find themselves as the main target. Neither the women's movement nor have the human rights movement in India developed a critique of the framework of the human rights discourse itself. The fact that the human rights discourse was based on a liberal-democratic world view which did not see patriarchy as problematic did not seem to disturb the women's movement, which supported the Western feminist slogan "women's rights are human rights." To sum up, the question facing those who wish to intervene in the Northeast remains that of balancing the rights of women,



the rights of tribals and the rights of corporations, who are also treated as persons under the law.

## **Plenary Session 2: Women in the North East: Issues, Struggles and Challenges**

**Co-ordinator :Monisha Behal**

This was planned as one of the plenary sessions to focus on issues arising in the North East, especially from the experience of the women's movement in the region. The session was co-ordinated by **Monisha Behal** of the **North East Network**. The panel of speakers included Dr. Rakhee Kalita, Anumla Ayar (Peace Research Institute, Oslo, Prof. Anthropology, Nagaland), Bablu Loitenbamb ( Human Rights Alert), Rosemary Dzuvichu, (Associate Professor, Nagaland), Rashmi Goswami ( one of the founders of NEN).

At the Plenary Monisha Behal gave an overview of women's movements in the North East, pointing out that each movement of women in the region had different trajectories and arose in different situations. For instance, **Manipur** had women agitating against the state way back in 1904 against forced labour and then against the rice tax in the 1930s. They went into collective action against alcoholism in the 1970s and went around the streets with torches lit-up, identifying those houses where alcohol was being consumed. This was successful though the problem of brewing remained because of the lack of adequate opportunities in the state. The torch bearers, better known as Meira Paibi women, soon turned into defenders of human rights agitating against the security forces which caught young men unawares and tortured them without reason. The movement soon turned into struggles for repeal of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act which continues till date. The movements of women in the hill states relate to their histories and are inter-woven through conflict, militarism and state apathy. In **Nagaland**, where village feuds were of significance, men in war were ruthless. It was against incidents of extreme violence that women would intervene and call on the men to stop the war. All this was in the early part of 20<sup>th</sup> century. In later years, the Naga Mothers' Association,(NMA), addressed the issues of conflict and militarism. Their oft spoken appeal "Shed No More Blood," was spread all

across the state and because of the NMA's decentralized functioning, messages such as the above had a remarkable impact on the women. Women in the north east have worked tirelessly as collectives and, given the absence of transportation facilities, they devised ingenious ways of conveying messages through bus drivers, truckers etc. Irom Sharmila appealing for the dismissal of the AFSPA since 2001 is an example of this determination. In Manipur, in 2004, after the death of T Manorama, NGOs in the region explored the possibilities of working together. One such example was that of NEN opening a dialogue between the government and the movement. Ironically, many Civil Society Organisations do not consider the Meira as useful, especially the middle aged women who are a central part of the movement. They are often seen to be old, emotional, uneducated and so on. In **Assam** the women became active as early as during the period of the national movement. Encouraged by intellectuals and also their own husbands who were in the movement, women went into activism in the 1920s, both in the villages and the towns without meeting with much resistance and acquired legitimacy in the political domain. There are nearly 7000 informal women's groups which federated under this influence with the Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samiti, backed by the AIWC. Many women's organizations were registered around 1954-as part of Nehru's Community Development Programme of 1952 - but these fitted into the prevailing social frameworks since they somehow maintained the status quo and never quite questioned issues of inequalities, violence and so on. They were not inclusive and did not really work with other tribal groups in the 70s-80s. Homogenization of the larger Assamese women's struggles remained exclusively Assamese. By the 1980s more women's groups came up due to both political party-based obligations and also because of newer ideological influences. These raised issues specifically from gender perspectives and also of exclusions and social inequalities, but continued to meet with government apathy. Behal admitted that she herself became more aware of these aspects when she met Vina Mazumdar, a pioneer in Women's Studies, who was instrumental in the setting up of the IAWS, she learnt many things from her and other members of the CSWI.

But the 21<sup>st</sup> century opened up for debate both larger issues as well as some more specifically being addressed by women's groups. This is because of

new legislations, the influence of feminist ideologies disseminated through social media and also to address issues of increasing violence.

**Rakhi** Kalita Moral, *Fellow, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library*, emphasized the need to recognise the fact that India's northeast is a troubled terrain where, as many as four states are in various stages of conflict and insurgency and rebellion has become an important aspect of studies on the region. This needs to be factored into discussions in academic form. All the more so since, at particularly critical moments of this history this engagement with significant stakeholders has yielded some remarkable results. Interestingly, the marginalisation of women in the transforming economy of the country was inevitably an entry point for academics into the historic women's movement on gender and development in the 80s. Clearly there are close links between changing social processes and the development of Women's Studies as well as responses to it. The necessity of a women's lens to examine the long and unabated struggles in India's northeast for economic freedom and political powers is more comparable to the rest of the country and an indication of the extent to which women have been implicated in them.

Referring to studies by the World Bank, Kalita drew attention to huge sections of women in civil society (read academics, writers, ngos, activists among other organisations) who have brought agency to women in conflict-ridden societies, with the Northeast India becoming a classic example of this "agency discourse." She focused on the growing body of politically conscious and empowered women across the northeast, who have stepped in to fill a vacuum that neither governments alone, nor struggling militant outfits and rebel organisations have been able to close. The *Meira Paibis* of Manipur, *Naga Mothers' Association* of Nagaland, the *Nari Adhikar Sangram Samiti* (NASS) and the *Asom Mahila Sachetan Mancha* of Assam, among others, have striven to reach afflicted women and vulnerable sections of the community in order to arrest continuing hazards to their life and liberty and bring some semblance of order. Most of their members have experienced untold suffering, whether by being part of the struggle, or, having been victims of it. These collectivities close the gap or divides between principles of theorising that exist in textbooks and research documents and the actual spaces where gender social realities

really unfold. The participatory “politics” of activist groups, such as the NMA or the NASS for example, straddles the borders between normative female behaviour and aggressive resistance, of which a glaring and unique demonstration was the now iconic slogan “Indian Army Rape Us” on a banner draped around the nude Meira Paibis on the streets of Imphal, in the wake of the Manorama murder case. Triggering off a major focus on militarized societies in India’s northeast, this moment in the region has come to assume a symbolism that draws from the power of women’s agency and their political awakening, Kalita observed.

The panel included two scholar-activists from Nagaland, who endorsed the view of women as citizens to invoke their political rights and entitlements in repudiation of their other identities in extreme cases of violence and impunity in the state. It was argued that the scholar who comments, observes and writes about them from within the academy also fulfils an obligation that these tumultuous times demand. Women academics, it is needless to say seized such moments and the performative power of the “event”, which is both “metaphor” and “memory”, to construct a new scholarship that has arisen from conflict-torn societies in contemporary times. The more active organised sector of NGOs seamlessly knit these two categories into a combine that is mutually enriching providing not just data and seminal theoretical information, but also much needed information on the ground scenarios to enable real time intervention and policy change. The North East Network, is one such organization, which has inspired several young women to be agents of change in a society sundered by violence and backwardness.

Kalita argued that women in the region have necessarily empowered themselves as *political subjects*, and joined advocacy groups to facilitate and understand the extent of participation that is required under the present circumstances. The transformative capacity of women’s social roles is nowhere more evident than in the Northeast where women have been drawn to become politically involved in causes that affect their own tribe of women, and mobilise support and aid for them. At the other end of the spectrum of women’s changing roles, is the phenomenon in Assam and Nagaland where sections of women from civil society have themselves turned into militants in the insurgencies led by ULFA and NSCN

respectively. This is a sensitive area requiring new research on a category of women subjects, who suffer erasure or are misrepresented in studies on conflict societies. But more significant is the involvement of an increasing number of women who have taken initiatives at peace-building in these very societies through active negotiations, spontaneous activism both within and outside the state and by continuing to write and speak vociferously at various forums against violence and for the need for conflict resolution and peace building. The Northeast chapter of Women in Governance (WinG) is an example of what the coming together of academic enquiry and field based activism can lead to. Based in Jorhat, this fledgling women's organization, has reached out to ordinary women trapped in endless litigations within family to invoke legislation on violence against women in remote backward rural settlements has scaled many milestones.

The entry of the woman scholar into conflict zones is however not without the perils of slipping into the quicksand of doubt and surveillance, where the researcher-scholar often finds herself by default being "identified with her subjects". The limitations of such an exercise must be borne in mind as we go through the bumpy and rough terrains of divisive ethnic forces that have ruptured the northeastern borderlands, or the now forgotten killing fields of insurgent aggression and state violence. Kalita flagged the following issues while focusing on as part of India's Northeast's continued search for peace and order within grids of control and subjection both from the state and the patriarchal order in which it is subsumed: how do conflict situations determine new modes of approaching gender studies and direct state policy towards resolution of gender issues? Is the woman in conflict, victim or agent, seen as a subject at the outer edge of society? Does state silence on such issues do anything to the discourse and consequent activism that evolves from such regions? What about the discourse on justice? And is the woman subject, the activist, rebel or academic, seen as equal citizen before the law or is she outside the natural space of society, governance and redressal? Finally, must the woman activist/academic remain confined to the specific category of "Women's Studies" project or can she move beyond these boundaries

**Babloo Loitenbamb** recalled that when the Armed Forces (Assam and Manipur) Special Powers Bill was introduced in the Lok Sabha in August 1958, the MP from Dhenkanal raised a point of order stating that “we cannot proceed with this Bill unless certain constitutional obligations imposed under article 352(1) of the constitution are fulfilled”, as certain parts of the bill directly come under emergency provisions of the Indian Constitution. The then Union Home Minister, Mr. G. B. Pant, justified the bill arguing that “*the local Government may make use of the army, if it so chooses in the manner provided in this Bill, and can use the army only for this limited purpose, and thereafter the ordinary processes of law are to be followed*”. Fifty five years have gone by and leave alone being replaced by “the ordinary processes of law” the application of the “special powers” has been steadily spreading ever since. The “disturbed areas,” confined to only the Naga Hills in 1950s spread to Lushai Hills in the 1960s, to Tripura and Imphal valley in 1970s, Brahmaputra valley and Punjab in 1980s and the Kashmir valley in 1990s. In these areas, fundamental rights such as the right to life, the right to a fair trial, the right to remedy and reparation, the right against torture and the right against arbitrary detention (as well as a series of economic, social and cultural rights) have been consistently violated. The Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of AFSPA in 1997, but it warned that prolonged and too frequent deployment of armed forces for handling such situations is likely to generate a feeling of alienation amongst the armed forces. Justice Verma, the architect of the 1997 judgment, as Chair of the *Committee on Amendments to Criminal Law* pertaining to violence against women recommended that so far as sexual offences are concerned, the need to obtain sanction from the central government for prosecution or to initiate legal proceedings, be dropped. The government however, ignored the recommendation, despite recommendation of the Union Home Ministry’s *Committee to Review Armed Forces Special Powers Act* that AFSPA’s constitutional legality is “*not an endorsement of the desirability or advisability of the Act (...) the Act, for whatever reason, has become a symbol of oppression, an object of hate and an instrument of discrimination and high-handedness. It is highly desirable and advisable to repeal this Act, altogether (..)*.” The same position was endorsed by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Administrative Reforms Commission. Following a PIL filed by the *Extrajudicial Execution Victim Families Association, Manipur* on 1528 alleged extrajudicial killings, the Supreme Court appointed the Justice Santosh

Hegde Commission, which also observed that “*though the Act gives sweeping powers to the security forces even to the extent of killing a suspect with protection against prosecution etc. the Act does not provide any protection to the citizens against possible misuse of these extraordinary powers*”. Despite all these voices of sanity and the solemn promise of the Prime Minister himself, in the aftermath of the rape and murder of Thanjam Manoram, that the Act will be "replace(d) by a more humane act", AFSPA continues. So does Irom Sharmila's unprecedented hunger strike continue for the 14th year! Meanwhile, the Cabinet Committee on Security also continues to sit over the matter, characteristically indecisive! Loitenbamb concluded by saying that we look forward to the day when AFSPA will finally be consigned to the flames of history and India can claim to be truly democratic!

## Plenary on South Asia

**Co-ordinator: Uma Chakravarti**

A plenary on South Asia has been an important feature of the IAWS conferences in the past few decades. Speakers at the plenary have included women's studies scholars, activists and creative artists. These sessions have provided for the forging and revitalizing of bonds of solidarities between women from South Asia. The 2014 conference initially hoped to have a plenary with scholars from South Asia but for a variety of reasons, including visa procedures, the format of the plenary had to be changed at the last minute as the original plenary speakers could not make it to the conference. An alternative plenary was put in place at short notice and the IAWS decided to have a series of films produced by feminists or about the work that feminists have done in the region. Three films were chosen by the anchor: Yasmine Kabir's *A Certain Liberation from Bangladesh*, Shirkatgah's *Two Steps Forward from Pakistan* and *No More Tears Sister*, a film on the life and work of Rajini Thiragamana from Sri Lanka. The films were preceded by an introduction to the context of the films, by Uma Chakravarti who has taught at a women's studies Institute for South Asian students in Lahore. It was followed by a highlighting of the issues raised by the film after each screening. The session opened and closed with a reading of poetry and the singing of songs created by women at a workshop for South Asian activists in the 1980s.

The session began with student participants from JNU reading out the famous poem *Hum Gunehgar Auratein* by Kishwar Naheed from Pakistan which has become something of a signature for the women's movement in Pakistan. Written as a challenge to the introduction of the Hudood Ordinance by the military dictator Zia ul Haque in 1981, the opening lines of the poem met with a resounding wave of appreciation from the audience:

*It is we sinful women  
Who are not awed by the grandeur of those who wear gowns  
Who don't sell our bodies*



*Who don't bow our heads  
Who don't fold our hands together...*

The poem was read in its original Urdu composition and in an English translation. Two other poems by Fahmida Riaz, also from Pakistan were read. The first poem was titled the Interrogator/Kotwal. One of its verses beginning with the words, the time is coming for accountability', resonated well with the large number of people from the North East who have been struggling for the need to have the basics of a rule of law to be put in place, for accountability from the administrative system. The second poem by Fahmida Riaz 'Search Warrant' and its last verse too were striking:

*All these tribulations over a book  
hidden in my past?  
Look beyond the curtains instead  
At my dreams of the future.*

A striking challenge in what may look like a moment of defeat!

The first film, *A Certain Liberation* a sensitively made film about sexual violence in 1971 but also of everyday relations among the ordinary people living off the streets whose humanity mediates the disasters wreaked by political considerations was then screened. After the film a connecting segment was provided by the anchor who recounted a South Asian feminist conference in Lahore at which the participants demanded acknowledgment of the violence wreaked upon the women of Bangladesh in 1971 from the Pakistan government. A moving song written by Faiz Ahmad Faiz and sung by Nayyara Noor was then played about relationships forged and then breached amongst erstwhile friends from different locations and linguistic communities was played, to recreate the atmosphere of the conference in Lahore.

The next film *Two Steps Forward* on the struggles of tenants against the military owners primarily in the Okara region of Pakistan was screened. The huge participation by women in this struggle to retain their tenuous hold on the land they and their families had been tilling for decades was a

powerful portrayal of women in Pakistan that was vastly different from the stereotypes that abound about 'Pakistani' women. Ironically while the struggle succeeded and the tenants could hold their lands for the moment, finally the land was just given over to multinational companies and the discussion that followed made comparisons with similar trends in India under neo-liberal policies.

The last film, *No More Tears Sister*, which could not be fully screened because of shortage of time, dwelt on a Tamil human rights activist in Sri Lanka whose political journey spanned the critical decades of Sri Lankan history. The central protagonist Rajani attempts to retain her early idealism and stand for the human rights of all communities in Sri Lanka by documenting human rights violations in Jaffna, where she teaches at a medical college. Participants recalled the way feminists from across South Asia went to attend her funeral when Rajani was killed by unknown gunmen, a killing that has not been owned by anyone in Sri Lanka to date. What it achieved was to make known to audiences across the world the existence of a powerful voice for the rights of all persons in Sri Lanka, voiced by a Tamil woman at the height of the conflict in Sri Lanka.

The plenary ended with a song sung by Ilina Sen and joined in by others in the room which included the words:

*Awaze kar buland ...  
Tere mathe pe yeh anchal bahut hi khub hai lekin  
Is anchal ka tu ek parchham bana leti to achcha tha  
Raise your voices!  
This anchal on your forehead is splendid  
But if it is made into a flag it would be much better!*

This was a good note for the South Asian plenary to end on.

The plenary was widely appreciated and there were many requests for copies of the films and the poetry and the songs to be made available to Women's Studies Centres from many diverse locations. The session drove home the point that sometimes the sharing of cultural products created by women can be a welcome change from speeches and presentations.

## **Sexual Violence Against Women: State Responsibility and Culpability Special Lecture by Vrinda Grover, lawyer and women's rights activist**

Vrinda Grover located the theme of her talk within three scenarios with multiple intersections and yet, each had its own factual matrix and role of the state. She spoke about how law shapes itself and develops tools across the social, political, economic spectrum. There were also multiple responses to the three scenarios with the state as brutal perpetrator, collaborator or remaining silent. Sexual violence in conflict areas- Kashmir and North east- is impacted by special legal regimes while in communal violence, women's bodies are targeted as in the case of Muzzafarnagar,(UP) where the gang rape of women has taken place but not received any attention.

Central to the violence perpetrated against women is the changing public discourse, a critical and necessary debate, even though parts of the debate do get hijacked by high profile cases. There was a need to highlight the amendments to certain laws which have taken place and to bring them into focus. At the same time, systemic and pervasive violence against dalit women needs to be looked at and brought into the debate.

In conflict zones, Grover observed, there is both the improbability and impossibility of securing justice where the state is directly implicated. Here the violence against women is embedded in special laws as also in regular laws, such as the AFPSA, which carries a colonial legacy. The CO of a unit in the Armed forces - has the prerogative of going by any law against an alleged culprit. How the law operates is highlighted by the rape and murder of two women in the Shopian - headquarters of varied security units- in the Kashmir case in 29/30 May, 2009. Their bodies were found and the Forensic lab report found it to be a case of brutal rapes and murder, with both bodies carrying injuries. This was also confirmed by the High Court Bar Association. A Commission of enquiry held that some men in uniform were involved. The bodies were exhumed and doctors brought from Delhi who certified that the 'vagina was intact' as was 'izzat' (honour) A 48 day peaceful hartal was organized. The CBI came in, the bodies were exhumed and CBI declared it to be a case of drowning, the forensic doctors

were suspended, while the brother and husband of the women, detained. There were witnesses who saw two women being taken in an army truck and some from the security forces were either witness to the crime or knew about the same.

Earlier, in February 1991, there was the case of the mass rape of women by members of an army unit conducting search operations in Kunan Poshpora village in Kupwara district in Kashmir. The enquiry by the Divisional Commissioner, Wajahat Habibullah- concluded that allegations of mass rape could not be sustained while the Press Council of India team led by B.G. Varghese appointed to look into the case - also ended up calling the case a hoax by militant groups, even though medical examination showed rape of many women, including unmarried girls. The Kupwara trial court called for closure of the case. The State Human Rights Commission in Oct.2011 termed it as mass rape by the armed forces. A petition was filed for reopening of the case.

The case of Manorama's rape and murder by the Assam Rifles unit in July 2004 showed that under AFPSA, the army was trying to widen the scope of its impunity. The case shifted from the Guwahati High Court to the Supreme Court in December 2010. An RTI was filed in 2011 to know how many applications for sanction of prosecution were filed in Kashmir on human rights violations. During 1989-2011, about 44 such requests were made of which 33 were rejected, while 11 were pending with the Ministry of Defence. No permission was granted for prosecution. There was a need to bring the armed forces under the purview of ordinary law and review the AFPSA with reference to such incidents.

Meanwhile Grover observed the gains made by the women's movement with regard to amendments in various laws in 2013 are significant. There is a breakthrough into the absolute impunity for men in uniform- an explanation in the Cr.PC states that any form of sexual violence by public person did not need sanction for prosecution. The sanction clause was removed. Sec.376, part 2-custodial rape by men in armed forces was termed as 'power rape'.

The 1984 anti - Sikh violence witnessed sexual violence against women, although there was no formal acknowledgement of it. There were whispers. Now there is news of an SIT being set up. During the Nanavati Commission hearings in 2005, there were 5 affidavits by women on sexual violence. There was no formal record of any case being registered. But there is a big shift due to the activism by women and pressure built the movement along with descriptions of a 'mob' and reference to a 'mob' which wanted to teach a lesson to Sikhs and came together for that purpose and hence could not be termed 'genocidal mob', as in the case of Gujarat in the 2002 violence against Muslims.

In the Naroda Patia case in Gujarat in 2002, sexual violence was central to communal violence and every member of the mob was named/blamed by the trial court. In the Bilkis Bano case, the NHRC, a statutory body, rose to the occasion and the police officials involved were convicted for not working according to the law. In this case, medical evidence, and absence of injury did not take away from her statement and constructing what had happened which was the basis for conviction. In the Naroda Patia case, the judicial proceedings took a huge step forward, a BJP MLA, Mayaben Kodnani was given a life sentence-it was termed as a case of criminal conspiracy- (racial crime) and unlawful assembly. In the Kausar Bano case - a pregnant woman, found half burnt and killed, her stomach slit open. The Tehelka sting operation where the perpetrator boasted about this brutal killing was used by the Court to convict the persons involved. It acknowledged that rape did take place and women given compensation, although the names of the persons involved in the mob may not be known.

In the recent communal violence in Muzzafarnagar, leaders from the BJP and Khap panchayats said that they would not allow any arrests from the village, while there is no victim protection here. Changes in the Evidence Act - custodial as power rape - in communal/sectarian violence, was not brought in into the FIRs in Muzzafarnagar nor was the criminal liability of the officials invoked. Though public accountability and command responsibility were brought into the law.

Post December 2012, it was acknowledged that power and prejudice intersect and an understanding that in a coercive context- there is need for

a recognition of 'power'. Clearly there were inter-connections from the police station to the court rooms, including judges and there was a need for gender sensitization.

Vrinda Grover concluded by stressing on the need for the women's movement to link with other movements and to bring gender sensitivity into these movements and for the women's movement itself to imbibe a human rights approach. The session was chaired by Prof. Anita Ghai, Prof. of Psychology, University of Delhi, and IAWS EC member.

**Looking to the Future: Women's Status, Sex Ratio and Contemporary Challenges**  
**Special Session on Declining Sex Ratios**

This session was planned with a view to addressing the challenge of understanding and addressing issues arising out of current trends with regard to sex ratios, in view of data generated by the last Census round of 2011 in India. Drawing in social science practitioners, researchers, activists and policy makers, this was to discuss the latest census data and also identify policies and issues for follow up action to guide concrete interventions from and in the field. The session was planned with 6 speakers over two sessions to address (a) data issues and (b) social contexts and research based findings.

It is widely recognized that the need to analyze the data and examine the larger socio-economic context which accounts for this situation as well as understand the social ramifications of emerging trends. This was the first IAWS conference being held after the release of 2011 Census data and also the first time the conference was being held in the North Eastern Region. Dr. Kumud Sharma, Chairing the first panel, drew attention to the report of the Committee on the Status of women in India -- Towards Equality --- which first drew attention to this startling reality. Sex ratios are a critical indicator of both social attitudes towards women as well as changing dimensions of social denominators with regard to Gender and Development. She said the Committee's findings had pointed to two extremely significant trends --of declining work participation rate and declining sex-ratio, both of which were critical indicators to assess women's status. It compelled scholars such as Prof. Vina Mazumdar and other pioneers of Women's Studies in India, to grapple with this phenomenon along with its social, intellectual and ideological ramifications. Since some of these pioneers were also founders of the IAWS, its platform has always addressed issues arising from these emerging trends as a significant field of social enquiry. It has also enabled women activists, scholars and policy makers to engage with the wider linkages of these emerging social trends. However, the problem of declining sex ratios has become worse as well as more complex over the years and, in fact, reached alarming proportions in certain states. Concern

with regard to this has been voiced on international platforms and through UN agencies. Studies have highlighted the multiple dimensions of the problem. These also point to the enormous and growing scope for such sex selection, given the advance in technologies which facilitate pre-birth selection through assisted reproductive technologies and practices which find favour in the midst of abiding patriarchal norms and mindsets. Activists have continuously pointed to the total lack of political will displayed with regard to the implementation of the PCPNDT Act and its provisions, delay in the issue of notifications and guidelines. All these allow for complicity between retrogressive social beliefs and modern day practices. These find complacent allies in the large and diverse community of medical as well as pre-natal diagnostic practitioners. There continue to be divergent patterns with regard to sex ratios and related trends at the regional level, even as there is a tendency for more and more districts and states to draw closer to an all India pattern which is becoming more universal along and across certain regional divides.

The discussion began with **Varsha Joshi, IAS, Director in the Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner India**, making a visually rich presentation on the decline in sex ratios and Child Sex Ratios across 2001 and 2011 from the Census Data. Joshi showed how over the decades, the Sex Ratio (number of females to every 1000 males) decreased sharply, starting from 972 in 1901 to a low of 927 in 1991, and since then has shown a steady increase, reaching 948 in 2011. However, the more granular picture of sex ratio from 2011, seen at the district level, shows sharp variations, with the southern and eastern areas having much higher ratios than northern and western states. This could be due to social factors as well as due to male migration towards economically better-developed states. More distressingly, the comparison of Sex Ratio with the Child Sex Ratio shows a sharp and steady fall in the latter, from 976 in 1961 to a low of 919 in 2011. Evidently the problem of sex selection is only growing despite all attempts to control it. Examination of the data points to the following trends: the state-wise comparison of Child Sex Ratio from 1991 to 2011 shows that the phenomenon has widened and deepened, spreading over the entire northern and western belt in 2011 compared to only Haryana, Punjab, Delhi and parts of Gujarat having very bad ratios in 2001; North East India has some of the best CSRs in the country. However, maps for



each state showing the difference between 2001 and 2011 bring out that things are not so good in Manipur, Nagaland and in parts of Arunachal Pradesh; the statistics also show the difference in boy and girl children as well as for all ages in the five-year age data of 2011. Joshi pointed to how other aspects of Census data can also throw up gender issues, as for example, the 2011 House-listing Data- shows a worrying increase in the proportion of households having the source of drinking water “away” from the premises in rural areas, in several small and large states. Through maps she pointed out that there is a need to look at regional specificities in terms of economic participation of women, cultural issues etc. in different areas to understand why and how the decline is manifesting itself. Questions were also raised about the huge gender gap at birth (0 years) and how to explain the slight upturn in the overall sex ratio with the declining CSR.

This was followed by a more specific focus on the situation in the North-East by **Prof. Rosemary Dzuwichu from Nagaland**, who drew attention to the discrimination within societies which are on the face of it matrilineal and not seen to be hostile or discriminatory to women. She narrated how the birth of a girl child is described as the birth of “their” child, i.e. the birth of a woman who will eventually go to the household of her marital family. (“the other family”). Discrimination against the girl child within the family, such as, reserving the choicest pieces of meat for the boys had been described in a novel by a Naga woman writer. Women had no control over their reproductive decisions, and female foeticide was rampant. The issue needed to be located within the larger social reality of poverty and insecurity with special reference to both, livelihood and food security. In Nagaland, as well as in Assam and other North-Eastern states, there was an abysmal lack of health and nutritional care and educational facilities. The Naga Mothers’ Association had in a memorandum to the Chief Minister pointed to the high rates of maternal and infant mortality. She described how a delivery bed in a Kohima hospital had broken down and the baby warmer looked like a decrepit oven. Despite the fact that Naga women contributed to the economy, there were traditional practices and prejudices which found reflection in the neglect of pregnant women as well as a sense of shame involved with women asking or wanting to see a doctor. All these went into the making of a definite trend towards sex selection with a

mushrooming of private clinics in the Kohima-Dimapur area, along the urban belt.

**Prof. Mary E. John, Centre for Women's Development Studies**, presented the findings of a joint study in different states of India (Planning Families, Planning Gender) which addressed the basic question of why families are agreeing/choosing to go for sex selection which manifests itself as son preference and daughter aversion. She drew attention to the need to look at concrete factors which influence decision making, rather than accepted notions of cultural stereotypes which frame cultural values, mindsets and the attitude of mothers/families in particular ways which are broadly seen to be traditional. This requires recognition of both, phenomenon such as accepted notions of compulsory marriage for girls even as we need to appreciate the peculiar logic of 'modern development' with skewed social attitudes. It also needs looking at the emerging trends in more specific ways in the different locations, be it Kangra which has plummeted, or Fatehgarh Sahib which has shown some improvement, Rohtak which remains somewhere in the middle and Morena, Dholpur which have seen some significant interventions. Dr. John observed that in households that had crossed the level of absolute poverty and had experienced some upward mobility and intergenerational transfer of resources, there was a clear trend towards hiring modern technology for the purposes of sex selection. More disturbing was the fact that otherwise apparently modern and progressive decisions, such as of educating the girl child, advancing age of marriage etc. were being taken alongside an underlying purpose which was to give away the girl in a "good" marriage" which also necessitated allocating resources for a dowry and the accompanying marriage expenses. It was clear that even when overt forms of discrimination may not be there, sex selection was being practiced; the small family norm translated into "at least one boy and at the most one girl". As a result the new small family hardly had any girls!

She posited that there appears to be a connection between neo-liberalism and falling workforce participation rates of women and the declining sex ratios. She concluded that it was still early days with regard to optimism for some of the districts which are now being seen to have achieved a 'turn around.'

**Prof. Malini Bhattacharya, former MP and Member, National Commission for Women** chaired the second panel. Initiating the discussion she recalled the long process of campaign and lobbying for passage of amendments to the PcPNDT Act. She referred to the continued failure in the implementation of the law, a trend she witnessed in her capacity as parliamentarian, as a member of the National Commission for Women and as part of the Central Monitoring Authority. New Reproductive Technologies and ways of Assisted Reproduction, opened up new possibilities of sex selection and pre-selection. This was a matter discussed in a consultation organized by the NCW, held with activists and experts in the field of Social Medicine and Community Health to draw up issues which should be addressed by the Guidelines issued by the Indian Council for Medical Research as well as the proposed draft legislation to deal with Assisted Reproductive Technologies (ARTs), which unfortunately still remain pending.

**Dr. Sabu George, researcher and activist** pointed to the rapidly changing situation in the North-East, with a burgeoning of ultra sound clinics, the lack of implementation of the law and the Census revealing declines in sex ratios in parts of the NER since 2001. In 2011 Census there are noticeable declines in Assam, Nagaland and Manipur at District level and the emergence of similar trends at the sub-District level in Tripura, accompanied by information on sex selection from a few other States. The emergence of large private sector hubs in major cities within and adjacent to Guwahati, Agartala, Shillong, Siliguri, Silchar, Imphal etc. could signal an unprecedented promotion of sex selection in the NER. The relatively more egalitarian gender and socio-economic conditions would not be able to resist the onslaught of popularity of foetal sexing. For several decades, the NER was not part of the trends such as the privatization of medical education, lack of regulation of obstetric ultrasound and increasing dominance of private sector in medical care, identified as causal factors for declining sex ratios at birth. The setting up of corporate hospitals has resulted in not just making sex selection a routine but also inculcating attitude among undergraduate and post graduate medical students contempt for medical ethics, as e.g. in Andhra Pradesh, where the largest increase in private medical colleges was accompanied by the sharpest

decline in child sex ratios in South India. This however, did not imply that the practice is confined to the private sector.

The fragility of peace in this region due to the fluid political situation across international borders and exacerbation of conflict among social groups (tribe, religion, migrants, caste,) within the region made it vulnerable to the rapid acceptance of sex selection, he argued. This also imposes constraints on the scope for a meaningful public dialogue which could lead to effective action, he observed. There is also a need to take into account the consequences of conflict in areas such as Kashmir, the North-East etc. on declining sex ratios. While the denial of the existence of the practice of sex selection remains an obstacle in dealing with the issue, a positive aspect is that over the last few years there is greater willingness among government doctors, officials and women's groups in the state to accept that sex selection is an issue, it is after child sex ratios have dropped below 900 at the district level. Fifteen years ago, Nagaland submitted an affidavit on implementation of the PCPNDT to the Supreme Court to ..... that there was no sex selection among the Nagas and the declines in 2001 were attributed to outsiders like Marwaris! That there is already a demand from privileged Nepalis, Bengalis etc for sex selection in these medical hubs, cannot be ignored and the sad reality is that in the adjacent areas of West Bengal, child sex ratios have dropped between 2001-2011. Sabu argued that we may be looking towards a scenario where there is likely to be a huge drop in CSR by 2021 in this region.

**Prof. Ilina Sen, TISS and President IAWS**, looked at time series data of the sex ratio over the decadal years. She emphasized the need to look at territories and their socio-economic and cultural specificities rather than states defined by artificial borders. While there were various types of discrimination, such as in breastfeeding, access to health care, food intake, these along with male selective migration were some of the causes for the decline. There was a need to plot the period and the highest rates of attrition with other issues related to political economy, just as there was a need to historicize and contextualize the issues that emerged over different periods of time. Poverty, development processes, the advent of new technologies, alongside income inequalities needed to be identified as

factors contributing to the trend of decline in sex ratios. These needed to be pinpointed as critical variables.

**Kiran Moghe**, from the All India Democratic Women's Association drew upon her vast experience of intervening on issues of declining sex ratios in one of the worst states, Maharashtra. She pointed to the tremendous effort required to have the PcPNDT Act implemented in Maharashtra which also uncovered the myriad ways in which the bureaucracy and governments combined to protect those indulging in the criminal acts of sex selection. However, the very act of charging some doctors focused public attention on the problem, and drew in many groups and individuals to campaign against declining sex ratios as a problem.

The presentations were followed by a lively discussion in which experienced scholars shared their experiences. These included Prof. Nirmala Banerjee, Prof. Jasodhara Bagchi, who drew upon their own work to emphasise the links between women's unequal status, the contemporary context of economic policies and trends with regard to women's employment, as also the regional variations in both contemporary trends as well as cultural practices. The interventions pointed to the linkages between sex ratio and the marketing of new technologies and poverty and social deprivations which made certain groups more prone to discriminatory practices.

The session was co-ordinated by Indu Agnihotri, Director, CWDS, and General Secretary, IAWS, who recalled the long years of struggle by the women's movement on this issue and the laws which perpetuate son preference, as has been documented in the recent publication by the UNFPA. It was felt that activist interventions needed to be backed by a display of will on the part of the state and governments to effectively check the spread of sex selection across regions, while also recognizing that the links between processes of neo-liberal development and cultures of patriarchy needed to be further explored. Clearly, a standard critique of patriarchy with reference to the continued prevalence of traditional practices alone was not sufficient to deal with the problem in the context of contemporary India.

## **A Report on Subthemes**

The paper writers were from both the academic field--students, researchers and teachers from the disciplines of social work, economics political science, history and sociology--- and from varied peoples' movements, women's organizations, NGOs and individuals. The latter spoke passionately about women's participation and role in individual and collective land struggles, that have changed their lives and perspectives, even when they may or may not have always got them tangible benefits. The situation of women of specific communities and regions from across India – the North East, Andhra, Kerala, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Goa, M.P., U.P., Bihar, Jharkhand, Orissa, W.B., and Rajasthan --added new dimensions to both the political debate and scholarship.

### ***Women's Rights and Entitlements to Land and Land-based Resources***

The key issues that emerged from the papers presented, from states like West Bengal, Gujarat, Orissa, Meghalaya, Andhra Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Kerala concerned the situation of adivasis, dalits and other marginalized sections of women. *Access to land is critical yet not enough in itself to enhance empowerment.* The changing land use in some parts of the North East, due to migration and commercial agricultural practices pushing out men, burdening women, and bringing in wage labour, was noted. For women in Nagaland, Matrilineality, without substantial control over the decisions on the use and management of land indicated that land ownership for women did not do away with patriarchal controls, nor did it give them more leverage in playing stronger societal and public roles. Women can own land but are controlled by agencies of men, in family, communities and societies, as the papers on Khasi and Sonbhadra tribal women suggested.

In the discussion which highlighted individual and collective struggles related to acquiring land and land based resources, the participants agreed that, if change were to come about then the following were critical: women acquire tangible benefits such as share and control in the land entitlements and effective use of and produce from the commons. If the power to take decisions on land use as well as effective market participation does not accrue, then achieving self-awareness, empowerment and identity status is of only limited value.

Several papers raised the issue of customary laws as pitted against the state laws, especially, but not only for the tribal women. It emerged that activists working for land rights as well as women acquiring land rights need to use different levels of

legitimization, to ensure that they are able to control the land they own and empower themselves. **The adoption of neither state nor the customary laws can be discarded.** Rather both will have to be used creatively to enable women's ownership and control over land for the specific tribal women, as a paper on the Dang area of Gujarat revealed. Again, land in itself, without development resources, may not necessarily enable women to enhance their economic and social status for different communities, as the studies from Andhra Pradesh indicated.

Land holding on its own is not an indication of enhancement in economic status and of the well-being of women. When the state's policy priorities undermine agriculture and land development, or are gender blind and insensitive, a plot of land may not bring real change for women owners. Studies show that the conventional binary like men's control vs. women's control or, state vs. customary laws, rural vs. urban, may not define the issue of land ownership completely for women. The intersectionality of identity and sub categories of the community of women need to be considered and the strategies would need to reflect that. It would of course be better if these can guide policy, legal and programmatic formulations.

Some papers raised the issue of channels for inheritance of land and property-- natal, marital, through state distribution etc. -- which could bring about critical change, though these would vary according to the situation of women. Research papers and action programs in Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh found that daughters, married, widowed or single, were reluctant to demand rights in natal property, even as the amended Hindu Succession Act allowed them this right. "How can we show our face at the **mayka**, after we have demanded our share?" Many of these women embodied the title of the book "Good Women Do Not Inherit Land." But there were instances of sisters, often goaded by marital families or widowhood, who sought their share in the face of opposition. This was true in fast developing semi-urban areas, where land prices were shooting up. In such areas the land gorging by the developers and even by the state, was surely changing social relations and the support systems for women. On the other hand, in cases of sale of family property or land in semi urban areas, family heads could deny the rights of wives, daughters and mothers, whose consent may not be taken for such transactions. This was pointed out in a paper from Maharashtra.

Ownership of land brings for women a certain recognition and identification, that can further help to access other kinds of resources which include material and social visibility and status. Therefore, for empowerment there is a need to continue working towards women's ownership, access and control for land. In order to

overcome the social and legal obstacles to women's land ownership it is important to sensitize the land revenue officials, social leaders, women and youth, and even the men in the family. Many papers focused on strategies for the same.

The papers on Uttarakhand, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Jharkhand, Arunachal, and Assam showed that a wide range of concerns of women were in the **forefront** of several land based movements, from the time of Koel Karo Netarhaat in Jharkhand in 1980s, to Mithi Viridi, presently in Gujarat. Several of these focused on land rights of tribal and dalit women who had struggled for their collective rights on commons; and all categories of women who worked on the family land but were denied their real status as co-owners, being wives, mothers and daughters, or even single women, given the context of imposing patriarchy.

In instances where women had taken an active part to stall the so-called development projects and entry of private industrial corporations that directly and adversely affected their livelihood, it was found that from their initial inclusion, participation and, graduating to leadership roles, they faced opposition from within the movement, their families as well as from society and the government at large. Yet, slowly but surely they found their way into decision making bodies. However, after the movement ended, both possibilities existed: they either moved to a different level of leadership away from the masses of women or became less visible. Men grudgingly acknowledged the role of such women, but their perceptions of who actually owns these resources remains patriarchal. Of course many now had stronger 'wife partners', as in Sonbhadra. It was pointed out that the real outcomes of such movements must be analyzed from their gender concerns and ensure that women should equally share their benefits. In Gujarat, several movements were thus analysed, revealing critical strategic interventions and both empowering as well as continuing gaps in gender equality within these.

Women's concerns with land and land based assets feature critically when internal conflicts and disasters devastate and displace communities altogether. While relief and short term rehabilitation efforts sometimes include women to address only primary needs like food, water, and temporary shelter etc., very few of the policies and programs look at rehabilitation schemes and policies as a domain through which asset creation for women should be done inclusively and effectively, on a long term basis. In fact, when government bodies design and implement schemes on behalf of the state, the traditional mindset of the bureaucracy is obstructive when it comes to transferring and enriching assets. Consequently real benefits do not accrue to women. The society is also not supportive, except in cases where families and communities can access resources on behalf of women. Women are



nominal or missing from forest protection or water distribution committees. When activists creatively use the legal and administrative systems they become aware of the nuances of bureaucratic language that can go against them, as was interpreted in a paper from Maharashtra analyzing Government circulars.

Papers from Nagaland, Assam, Rajasthan, Goa, Madhya Pradesh on land, livelihoods and women showed that in the case of women's collective farming through Jhum cultivation and community agriculture practiced by Naga women in the hills showed women's close relationship with nature, food security and control of land and agriculture, yet their role in public life and social empowerment had not been promoted. This very symbiotic relationship somehow bound them to hard labour, as the men in their families had either died in the struggle or were away for work, while the second generation is opting for a different life and is away in the towns. In the char lands in the Brahmaputra at Darrang, Muslim women worked very hard in agriculture and conservation of fast eroding lands. Yet their need for ownership of land and support for livelihood was always undermined. Men and society did not recognize their work or ownership.

A simple scheme adopted by the M.P. Government to allot 2.5 bigha land to landless families had resulted in substantially enhancing women's role in family-level decision making, participation in markets and, economic stability. However the traditional patriarchal perception of roles persisted. Nevertheless, a base had been created for the road to empowerment, as seen in the courage displayed by a dalit woman from Shivpuri in M.P., who asked her husband to leave the house to go and stay with the other wife- a woman he married without her consent, as she felt capable of looking after her children by working on the land that belonged to her!

In Sirohi, Rajasthan, on the other hand, outdated mind sets and procedures imposed by the regressive forest bureaucracy obstructed tribal women's access to the forest commons. There was no real perception of women-oriented approaches and their inclusion, if at all, was not only nominal, but also considered problematic. Displacement stared the Velip tribal community of Goa in the face with their common agriculture lands being taken away by the forest department for cashew cultivation.

Based on the above discussions, the Subtheme proposed that the following be adopted as action points: (1) Given that the 2005 HSA amendment giving women co-parcenary rights in ancestral and other property remains lost without rules and clear guidelines, we demand that the states frame women friendly procedures and

rules to enable them to easily avail of their entitlements. It was felt that as far as possible this must be done simultaneously with marriage registration at the Panchayat level and linked to disincentives for disinheritance, as well as incentives for timely inclusion; (2) clear guidelines to include and work towards real asset creation that effectively allows for control and ownership of women for all programs and schemes of the government, whether under NRLM, NREGA, MKSY, and any land and land based resource development and distribution under the Government.

### ***Encountering Globalization: Women and Social Security***

The discussions in this sub theme contextualized land rights, entitlements, access and the loss of land within a macro context and from a social security focus.

A presentation on Nagaland held that the pitfalls of increasing commodification of land, state sponsored policies to increase cash crop production and the increasing efforts to change the practice of shifting cultivation to settled agricultural practices are the denial to women of their right to land. The move from individual property rights over community rights in Naga society, understood as modernity in governmental terminology, does not conceal the fact that this new process of commodification of land and crop production undermines women's right over property and production. Dr Jamir argued that though the customary laws of Nagaland are gender biased and primarily address the interests of patriarchal norms, still there are ways through which women could find certain rights over land and other resources. While communication networks have increased in the last couple of years in Nagaland, rather than creating opportunity these only undermine the rights of women who constitute 75.5% of the total labour force in Nagaland. Another paper argued how development induced displacement has undermined women's right over land and resources in the three North Eastern States of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam and Manipur where tribal women are the worst sufferers as community resources are particularly important for sustainable livelihood of women.

Another paper highlighted that over the years, the strengthening of patriarchal practices in marriage and the increasing 'want' on the part of individuals to possess one's own share of property has resulted in fetishization of houses. This is seen as representative of status, wealth and comfort, along with improvement and has threatened women's right to property. The credit culture further enhances such insecurities. A paper argued that the natural resource policy under neo-liberalism actually undermines people's rights to land and resources. Pointing to the fact that nearly 78% percent of the 'collectors' of Common Property Resources are women,

it should be noted that the amount of time required for collection activity has increased because of the shrinking of the CPRs which have now also moved further away from their location. This was the main reason for the decrease in people's dependency on CPRs. Various legislations like the Land Acquisition Act, Forest Constitution Act etc have overnight annexed resources of the people. The policies of the IMF and World Bank which favour global markets have made matters worse for people. While they claim that their policies are de-centralised and that they practice extreme localism, in fact the local bodies are deprived of all powers of decision making regarding their own resources. Another paper reflected on the 'feminization' of labour, with reference to women who work as labourers in the garment industry in Bangalore, who are mostly migrants from rural Karnataka. Although they migrate for their livelihood yet they seem to migrate from only one kind of poverty to another as they experience alienation. The overtime labour they perform is not at their own will. Moreover, the hierarchies at work in the industries are exploitative in nature.

A paper on the informal sector, focusing on the second hand markets held that women stick to work that is placed lower in the hierarchy. While women's physical mobility is always restricted by various structures yet when it comes to the second hand market they are allowed to be there at three in the morning. Ironically, although they take an active part in the trade they operate within a very restricted space on the argument that it is for their safety and security. A paper looked into the insecurities faced and the lack of social protection for domestic workers. It showed that rules and regulations formulated by the state for securing the life and worth of domestic workers are non-existent. The vulnerabilities of workers in these sector stems from two factors: firstly, the lack of proper legislation in the host counties to protect their workers and secondly, in India, the lack of legislative provisions to cover domestic workers within social security measures. The last paper sought to understand the various implications of trafficking on women, with an emphasis on the commercial sex industry. Globalization is one important reason that has led to the accelerated pace of this phenomenon and has implications for the practices with regard to sex slavery as well. Women who are economically backward and fall under marginalized categories in terms of their caste, class, race, religion are more vulnerable to trafficking. There is an intrinsic link between the politics of immigration and anti-trafficking policies and solutions cannot be imposed from the top.

***Women in Urban India: Debating Labour/Employment, Poverty and Violence (1)***

The overwhelming response to this **subtheme** reflected what appeared to be a *resurgence of interest in women's work, labour* and issues of poverty, compelling the organizers to bifurcate the sub theme with one focusing on labour and employment and the other on poverty and violence. Most of the presenters (17) were young scholars/students. One third (9) of the papers were on women workers in the northeast. The papers presented a mosaic of occupation oriented as well as area based micro-studies. Their entry points -sometimes overlapping- ranged from migration to informality, from urban residential settlements to caste/community, from industry/sector to disability and education.

Of the specific occupations covered, 6 were on domestic workers, two on vendors, and two on policewomen. Others included clay artisans, nursing care work, sex work, tourism, textile factory work, and waste pickers. The questions addressed included the impact of women's employment on patriarchy based gender roles at the familial as well as work spheres, women's choices and cultural aspects of experience in employment and non-employment, related 'empowerment' questions, discrimination/disadvantage based on gender, caste/ community/ disability, hierarchies and differentiation among women workers, experiences of women in masculine work environments, harassment, violence. A couple of papers included questions of exploitation in employment, one addressed entrenched power of employers in their 'home', and one - experiences of collective organisation.

Of critical concern was the extremely low work participation rates among women in urban areas and 3 papers on analysis of labour force participation rates. Unfortunately, these macro-data based paper presenters were unable to come for the conference. However, Prof. **Nirmala Banerjee**, a pioneer in women's employment and labour studies, in the chair, brought in a macro-perspective into the discussion.

An ethnographic exploration of three migrant workers' settlements in and around Waluj Industrial Estate, (Aurangabad) sparked off by newspaper reports about 100 runaway women, 'seduced' by city life, revealed a contrary reality: of isolation; deprivation and physical hardship; differentiated access to basic civic facilities; and more importantly, that most women of all communities did not have employment, even as home based workers.

A paper drawing on research among domestic workers migrating daily from rural areas to Kolkata, concluded that these, mostly married women, migrate because of economic distress and that their experiences are also informed by the ideological dimensions of work and gender stereotyping of domestic work. Despite some

renegotiations of gender norms, their migration serves to instate new hierarchies of class, caste and gender.

A study of women workers with disabilities in a Mumbai slum stressed that the nature of the problems varied based on the types of disability. It argued that a lack of recognition of women with disabilities as individuals with a capacity to work and be independent also leads to reduction in the kinds of livelihoods that are accessible to them.

Four Assam based papers included one on women working in Oil India in Duliajan, which held that family expectations leading to stress appeared to be more evident in the case of married women. Another paper gave a statistical analysis of a sample of 60 post-graduate women in Guwahati, using a self-constructed 'Empowerment Attitude Scale'. Conversations with six migrant women workers in Guwahati's informal sector and their accounts of harassment and violence, concluded that reactions were differentiated, but most women were unaware of laws and policies regarding women's rights. A paper on small tea plantations in Assam's Sonitpur District outlined the heavy load of work and unequal wages for women labourers and argued that instead of enhancing well-being, this sector is 'marginalizing women' for profit.

A paper attempted to examine globalization linked prosperity among men of the OBC Nhani (barber) caste in Maharashtra with 'diminishing chances' for Nhani women's entering employment. Based on interviews and observations of self-presentations of girls and boys in 'Vadhu-Var Melawas' (marriage alliance conferences) organized by the apex body of the Nhani caste in Maharashtra – it was argued that new principles of individualism were being stitched to endogamy and Brahmanical patriarchy. Another paper described the largely unpaid forms of women's labour such as clay artisans in Kolkata, their poor economic and social conditions, and the social competition between the traditional kumhars and newer entrants into clay work from other communities. A paper discussed a Maharashtra Government scheme for free airhostess training for tribal girls, whose aspirations were negated by their negative experience of the job selection process, and argued that the perception that these girls were 'lacking in merit' was because of 'normalization' of the 'colour, English accent and cultural capital' that comes from 'an upper caste middle class background'.

A study of migrant 'lodge based' sex workers in Goa, suggested that they are more independent and have 'greater power to negotiate' their working conditions than those in red light areas. Based on women's statements, the scholar argued that they

had ‘consciously decided’ to practice sex work despite ‘risks’, ‘instability’ and ‘unreliability’ - because other options before them did not pay enough for survival, and that while legalization of sex work ‘was not on their minds,’ they did want to be free of police harassment.

A survey of three categories of policewomen - the new all women Veerangana police commando unit in Assam, women traffic police, and the All Women Police Station in Guwahati - pointed to greater public respect for Veeranganas and least to women traffic police. This was within a broader argument that all of them enjoy ‘more autonomy, liberty and equality than before,’ despite lack of adequate support structures for their ‘natural needs’. Another study focused on women traffic police constables in Delhi, inducted as part of the strategy to project Delhi as a ‘Global’ city. It held that although the lack of public utilities and facilities, difficulties in coping with job and familial responsibilities, and the impact of working in a ‘masculine job’ on notions of womanhood, chastity and domesticity are significant, with the entry of women into the “forbidden” domain, even men’s homo-social interactions acquire new dynamics in the presence of women colleagues.

A study of eight food processing units in Manipur provided detailed evidence of gender inequalities in the division of labour, skills and use of technology. It highlighted the absence of women at the supervisor and CEO levels, despite their constituting more than half of the workforce, with the solitary female supervisor earning the least among all supervisors. Tribal women vendors in Imphal, who came there from the hills, appeared as ‘outsiders’ to women vendors of the city’s ‘mainstream society’. Although lacking basic rights to vending space, clean drinking water, storage, sanitation, loans, health, etc., the work space became a place for companionable socialization for the women.

A study of the overwhelmingly female vegetable market vendors of Lall Market, Gangtok, found that it was dominated by migrant but urban women vendors, with very few coming directly from rural areas managing to find space for themselves. The lack of licenses in the vegetable section of the market is responsible for power politics among vendors over working space as well as for the inhospitable conditions, lack of facilities, and targeting by civic bodies and government representatives.

Drawing on a study of the tourist industry in Karnataka, a paper critiqued the claims of empowerment of women through the promotion of tourism as merely tokenistic and lacking in awareness of the several barriers faced by women in tourism destinations, whether as street vendors, artisans or sex workers. An

investigation of five Muslim women working as family breadwinners in Delhi, concluded that as women household heads, they were triply disadvantaged: by poverty, gender discrimination and absence of support, and that their informal sector employment was underpaid, without any protection, precautions, or control over working hours.

Another paper pointed to the harsh conditions of construction and brick kiln migrants from Orissa in Hyderabad under neo-liberalism, with increased casualisation of women's work in the informal sector.

Five papers on domestic workers included a survey in Tiruchirapalli, which showed poverty and husband's alcoholism to be overwhelming reasons for taking to domestic work, a completely BC + SC profile of domestic workers, most tasks being done by all, but cleaning drains/toilets and ironing done only by SCs. Prohibitions on using toilets in their workplaces, lack of paid leave, general physical stress and emotional unhappiness were prominent findings (74% reporting crying alone). Two participants presented their thoughts on domestic worker migrants from the northeast.

Drawing on narratives of 19 domestic workers in Delhi, a paper argued that their vulnerability is not contingent on their employers being specially 'oppressive' since power and privilege are inherently entrenched in the space of the 'home' of the employer. Missing or unattended 'valuables' are thus 'a source of worry and fear for workers,' on whom the burden of proving that they are not thieves weighs heavily - even if no explicit accusation is made - and is heightened by the discourse that portrays domestic workers as criminals.

A paper focused on singleness at the point of migration among domestic workers commuting from rural Bengal to Kolkata, the worker's construction as a 'good woman' for supporting her family in need, but also 'transgressive' when unable to fulfill her family's daily care needs.

Another paper drew on a study of adolescents recruited under 'Sumangali or Subhomangala scheme' and 'Thrimagal Thirumana Thittam', (collectively called the 'Camp Labour Scheme') to work at factories in the textile belt of Tamilnadu and camped in hostels - on the promise of a lump sum after three years for 'marriage assistance'. It was argued that in this case patriarchy and capitalism combine to reinforce regressive customs related to marriage - targeting girls of

marginalized communities --to exploit them through low wages and poor conditions of work.

Located in a perspective that women's work - even when commodified as 'exchange value labour' – is culturally and economically devalued, it was argued that 'informalisation and export of care workers' have led to a 'pyramidal structure' – with an elite section of protected registered trained nurses working with technology ('constructed as masculine') and managerial/administrative functions at the top, and a casualised base of attendants and private nurses doing menial work and servicing the body needs of patients (considered 'dirty' and 'distasteful'), that makes for differentiation within the existing female labour force in a hierarchical labour market rather than a change in the gender composition of nursing labour.

Based on a qualitative study of three active members of a wastepickers' trade union in Pune, it was argued that activism in a labour organization translates into changes in gender divisions in the home and domestic violence, through the interplay of material, cognitive and relational pathways. Improved material resources and changes in identity and sense of self due in the women were creating conditions under which their husbands seemed more open to change with improved standard of living, more facilities for their children and 'a sense of pride' in their wives becoming 'smart'.

### *Women in Urban India: Debating Labour/Employment, Poverty and Violence (2)*

Presentations under the second segment of the **subtheme focusing on women in urban India: poverty and violence** ranged from issues of urban poverty, including health and education, displacement, migration and resistance to issues of sex work, trafficking and rehabilitation to the meanings, experiences, portrayals of violence as well as its redressal in urban spaces. The papers explored experiences in various parts of the country from Delhi, Faridabad and other cities in Haryana in the North, to cities in Tamil Nadu in the South, to Kolkata, Durgapur and a few cities of Orissa in the East, to Dibrugarh and Guwahati in the North East, as well as some macro studies on pan urban experiences.

Gendered urban poverty manifests itself in many ways, ranging from problems of basic amenities, health and education for the poor to multiple cycles of displacement to issues of intermittent and poorly paid employment opportunities.



A paper drawn from doctoral research at a rehabilitation site in Kolkata, raised two important issues: the heterogeneity of the poor urban populace based not only on their residence and its legal status but also on the kind of negotiations with the state in terms of compensation and rehabilitation. A differentiated approach to the question of urban poor in terms of compensation and legal recognition fractures the possibility of collective resistance. The paper suggested the spatial metaphor of poverty such as the city of poor as against the city of development. A paper on Dibrugarh also pointed to the uneven compensation policy where a large number of households - displaced first due to river erosion and then construction of embankments - were denied any compensation because they were found to be occupying Government owned land. Many of these households were also female headed owing to the phenomenon of male migration. Women from such displaced families doubled up as construction workers or paid domestic workers during the day and sex workers at night. After trying to rebuild homes despite Government orders and facing demolition time and again, these households have taken a different path of resistance. Working in different parts of the city during the day, they come back to their old site of residence along the river bank and stay in rooms rented for the night. The author termed this as 'surreptitious settlement'.

The issue of resistance came up in yet another paper in the context of Durgapur, an industrial town in West Bengal. Research on women workers in the informal sector, showed that central trade unions often subsumed specific issues of women workers into token forms of resistance and, instead, focused on garnering women's support for the larger 'party' or a masculinist union agenda that consciously avoided any gendered reading of the situation or struggles. This severely curtailed the radical potential of struggle by women workers. Another paper explored the ways in which feminist voices have been depoliticized and women have been rendered invisible or treated as mere appendages of their communities in electoral politics. While up to the 1990s, there was a collective consciousness of women's issues, these were framed as social and not overtly political projects either by the State or sometimes even the actors in these movements. On other occasions, specific gender questions were subsumed by other categories of identity and class politics. However, with the onset of liberalization and the emergent imagination of the individual as a free agent, the discourse on gender and, especially, on women's rights has been marked by a lack of collective strength as each individual is seen to be acting in her own interest. Therefore, whereas the momentum of feminist interventions in the early years of post independent India was coloured by the imposition of the 'social', the 'individual' has increasingly hijacked that space, devoid of historicity but complete with meritocracy and libertarian emancipation. Questions were raised on whether such 'urban' imagining and practice of feminist

politics can incorporate Dalit and minority community women. The collective identity based politics that these groups represent may be unable to engage with an individualistic politics, at the center of which is an ahistorical self.

A paper focusing on state facilities for the urban poor in Giragaon- a textile district in Mumbai- held that with de-industrialization and the closing down of textile mills, the health and the education sectors in the region have undergone a paradigm shift. There has been a consistent manufacturing of public consent for downplaying the role of state in welfare, in favour of privatization of health and education. For example, municipal schools are being demolished or being rented out to private players in education. NGOs funded by international agencies are also playing an important role in monitoring. The manufacturing of public consent on the shift away from Government to the private based on the logic of increased efficiency applies to the health sector as well. ESI hospitals are increasingly focused on generation of profits which are being invested in teaching institutes. Public-private partnership is emerging as a popular model. Thus instead of struggling for entitlements and demanding better standards in Government institutions, the urban poor are being co-opted into the model of privatization based on the logic of an 'inherent efficiency of market led institutions.'

The abolitionist versus the legalization debate on sex work/commercial sex was revisited in a paper. In the background of research on trafficking in Guwahati in 2012-13, it was observed that the Immoral Sex Trafficking Act frames the woman as a naïve victim in the mould of patriarchy and the trafficker as the monster, obliterating any nuances of voluntary sex work. While sex work may be forced or may derive from pressing economic conditions, there is also a possibility of voluntary sex work or an agency that emerges over a period of time. A related issue is that of multiple occupational identities that sex workers may assume. Several presentations pointed to the phenomenon of women working simultaneously as sex workers and workers in low end informal sector jobs. An important question was raised about the primacy of sex work as an identity for a woman who had multiple occupations, including sex work. Another paper focused on the market for sex work, the reasons for entry and the conditions of work including violence, how with advances in the life cycle of these workers, new strategies and options had to be explored in order to survive in the market. Health was another concern driving this research and it was found that an NGO working with the community had conducted HIV-AIDS tests without the consent of the workers on the pretext of conducting basic blood tests. This is a legal violation of the right to an informed consent. It is debatable whether such violations stem out of

a concern to protect the health of the workers, or out of a need to fulfill the agenda of the funding organization associated with the NGO. While protected sex is important both for the worker and her client, it is not always the prerogative of the worker to ensure protected sex and in such conditions a worker who is marked as a carrier of HIV-AIDs may find it difficult to survive in the labour market. In such conditions, informed consent to such tests and counseling, both personally and as part of the community are essential. A final theme was that of rehabilitation site/shelter home for trafficked women in Guwahati. Though interviews did not include the inmates of the shelter home, discussions with officials and staff of the home gave an insight into the process of rehabilitation through an organized disciplined routine including vocational and literary training and psychological counseling that might facilitate the integration of the victims into the mainstream. Despite provision of basic facilities, it was found that victims who had enjoyed a measure of freedom and luxury in their previous situation resented the sparse and sanitized lifestyle of the shelter home and ran away. However, those who had faced violence and poverty in the trafficked situation adjusted much more easily to the new way of life. An important issue in this context was whether the process of rehabilitation was premised on a boarding school model or a disciplinary regime, depriving them of any recreational space and repressing their need and desire for sexual intimacy and male companionship.

Some presentations focused on violence faced by migrant women and poor workers in the informal sector. While one paper discussed the politics of space and violence in the context of North Eastern students in the city of Delhi, another talked about the relation between work and violence in the context of migrant workers in the city of Guwahati. There was surveillance in the name of protection in University Hostels, as well as sexual harassment on the streets faced by North-Eastern women students. Among women domestic workers and construction workers, work and earnings did not necessarily lead to increased status or diminished domestic violence. Moreover, many of the workers had to face sexual harassment at the workplace because of their vulnerable status as poor migrant workers. A paper also discussed the issue of violence and sexual harassment of women workers residing in urban slums, both at home as well as the workplace. A study of a slum area in Ballabgarh in Faridabad, pointed to the difficult situation in which women find themselves: first because of the double burden of work and second because of the double experience of violence. Women faced violence as vulnerable workers in unorganized sectors and also as working women whose earnings were important for economic survival of the families but whose financial independence threatened the masculinity of their husbands. The study showed the

insensitivity of the police in registering cases of domestic violence or sexual harassment, owing to their general apathy towards the slum dwelling population and especially women slum dwellers. Another study, based on the city of Guwahati, observed that married and older women reported less violence in the public domain than younger unmarried women. The cultural construction of the potential victim as a young and unmarried was forcing many women, including women from non Hindu communities, to adopt visible signs of Hindu marriage such as the Sindur or Mangalsutra, in their attempt to stave off violence.

The implementation of various laws on violence against women was another important theme that was discussed. The findings of a study on the implementation of the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act of 2005, conducted in four states- Maharashtra, Haryana, Orissa and Tamil Nadu, looked at the implementation of the law as well as attempted profiling of the women who filed cases under the Act. The study found that most of the applicants were in the age group of 18-30 years. There was gross dissatisfaction with the implementation of the Act because the types of orders passed by the Court had little bearing on the continuous and multiple forms of violence faced by women. An important question on law was raised by a presentation on acid attacks on women. The Supreme Court ruling on monetary compensation for victims of acid attack was both inadequate to cover costs and difficult to implement. The physical disability produced by such attacks and the lack of rehabilitation facilities and other opportunities for such victims needs to be considered. Victims of acid attacks are neither included under gender violence in NCRB Records, nor covered by the Disability Act. It was proposed that victims of acid attacks should be included under the Disability Act and provided the opportunities and rights that the Act enshrines.

The Delhi Rape Case of December 2013 was central to two presentations, one which explored the construction of the victim woman and the second, which explored the media construction of a new masculinity. One questioned whether the public rage over the rape case centred on metaphors of violating honour and outraging modesty at all veered towards a feminist politics. The paper brought forth feminist notions of restorative justice to critique the construction of the 'good victim' a Braveheart, who fights back and demands severe punishment vis a vis the 'bad victim' who focuses more on personal healing and survival. Another paper discussed the post rape media construction of the pan Indian man who is 'modern', 'sensitive' and 'liberated' but does not overstep the boundaries of 'Indian tradition.' This particular construction of man hinges on a pan Indian identity base, subsuming the specificities of class, caste, community and language. Soft

masculinity facilitates and protects the new woman's (also 'modern' and 'liberated' but within the bounds of 'tradition') agency up to the point where it does not transgress notions of 'honour'.

Finally, the tension between fighting harassment and preventing surveillance or moral policing came up in a presentation. In the process of making the public space such as the workplace safe for women, one needs to guard against rendering it asexual and devoid of romantic and sexual possibilities. Hinging on notions of mutual consent, the paper talked about upholding such possibilities and fighting as much against surveillance and attempts at sanitisation, as against violence and sexual harassment.

### *Pluralities, Caste, Inclusion and Intersectionalities*

The subtheme was divided into three sections: dalit women's work, entitlements, access to resources; dalit women addressing cultural practices; contemporary dalit women's movements. The response was overwhelming: there were 40 papers, from scholars in Universities, Women's Studies Centres, Research Institutions, NGOs and social movements, of which six were male presenters. Over ten papers were presented in each section. The issues addressed highlighted the intersectionalities.

A paper on Tamilnadu spoke of work and descent based discrimination and caste atrocities due to Brahmanical social values. Manual scavenging is an example and in state institutions and elsewhere, sweeping and cleaning is the lot of the dalit castes and, of women in particular. In Tamilnadu, dalit women -- Mathammas- had to perform free labour with sexual exploitation at its core and forced into religious prostitution. They had to dance in public during temple festivals. Landless and deprived of rights as full citizens, they did not have voter or ration cards. Transgression of caste norms would lead to violence, as was evident from the caste riots taking place in cases of inter-caste marriage, including in cases of inter-marriages among dalit sub-castes. Dalit women were the target during such violence. Rape and looting was frequent, with the state allying with the perpetrators. After such violence it was Dalit women who had to take on the main responsibility of rebuilding their lives and the household.

A young scholar focused on Balmiki women involved in toilet cleaning in north Delhi, observed that caste was the major factor at the back of the stigma and social exclusion faced by these women, which not only limited their work opportunities but also the access to productive resources such as land and capital. Being deprived of education, only the low to lowest kind of jobs were available to them. Since the Balmikis and Chuhras have historically been engaged in jobs such as scavenging, women from these castes are engaged in the manual scavenging practices, and in recent times, continue to be engaged for toilet cleaning work at the household level in the cities and semi urban areas.

Another paper contended that dalit cultural practices in urban workplaces have not been adequately discussed in contemporary writing on women. Based on fieldwork within a Public Sector Undertaking that manufactured fertilizers, the paper explored the lifeworld of women workers belonging to the Bhangi community who were part of the sanitation staff at the company township located in Chembur, an eastern suburb of Mumbai. Most of them had been on long term contracts with the company for over twenty years, and belonged to the age group of 40-55, who travelled 10 to 30 kilometers to reach their workplace every day, as Company policy did not allow for residence of contract workers in the township. Though spending a significant part of their lives away from the township, the festival of the 'gaon devi' celebrated in the month of Aashaadh (roughly third week of June to third week of July) acted as a rallying point for all the workers of the sanitation division to come together. The festival was marked by a **pooja** and an animal sacrifice in the morning at a small shrine located within the company township, followed by incantations and possession by the Devi of a series of workers, after which the sacrificial animal would be cooked and a community meal served. The paper studied this festival and the ritual sacrifice led by female members of the sanitation staff, and argued that it instilled in them claims of a 'space' within their workplace. However, the contours of this space were rife with everyday tensions and reflections of a hard working life as reflected in religio-cultural articulations like possession which were a not only escape routes from the arduous workday, but also pointers to a deeper crises that shaped the workers lives. There were many questions: about crises and how the workers perceived their own location? Was culture the battleground for articulation of resistance? How did dalit women workers respond to the pulls and pressures of diverse cultural trends that have

gained significance in Mumbai over the years, with some belonging to both the Brahminical canon and the Ambedkarite tradition? To what extent were these responses gendered?

Another paper, set within the existing national and international explored the debates around the category of sex worker, autonomy and nature of work/ labour, from a specifically Indian location, analysed the ways in which such these determined the field of assertions and oppression. *It contended that forms of sexual labour reconstructed the social stigma associated with those communities who have been involved in that work.* Feminist and dalit positions on sex work were analysed along with that of religious groups, to explore questions of justice given that these have generated critiques and justifications to ‘normalize’ this form of work . Radical feminists treat sex work as a product of capitalism while the civil societal gaze looks at women involved in such labour within the logic of appropriation and patronage. The paper attempted to map *dalit feminist critiques on the relations of caste gendered reproduction of labour* as a response to these. Another paper on sex work observed that India had seen an implicit relationship being established between traditional sex work and the caste structure, and the naturalizing of sex work to communities which primarily belonged to the dalit sections of society, be it the Devadasis, Jogins, Muralis, or the Kalavanteens of Maharashtra, all of whom were brought under the stigmatized identity of ‘prostitutes’ under the colonial legal framework, overlooking questions of livelihood, caste exploitation, and sexuality. Following Victorian morality, the national and social reform movements, lobbied with the colonial powers to deny the category of labour to this section of society although neither the dalit, nor the women’s movement, had a homogeneous response on issues of sex work in India. Both seem to be at the crossroads, negating the agency of the individuals involved to a large extent. Based on *field work among sex workers in Sangli, Miraj, Sholapur, Barshi and Karhad in Satara*, the paper explored the intricate relations

*between the caste structure, patriarchy(ies) and gender issues with a focus on sexuality, labour and identity politics to decoding the recorded life-histories. The work was done with SANGRAM and VAMP, organizations of sex workers who voiced resistance to their being labeling under a stigmatized identity and denial of their agency while also questioning the representation of their rights under the banner of any single community or identity of womanhood. They reflected on the self-hood they realized through organisational work that provided them social and political space to exert their agency as citizens.* This paper raised several questions such as: how does feminist politics address the issues of sex workers who neither fit into the framework of ‘ideal’ womanhood or even ‘victimhood’ and raise their voice against caste linked patriarchies and modernity, which also impose stigma and denial of livelihood on dalit women. Another issue raised was would Dalit politics introspect on sexuality and the agency of women within the community, to provide space to these sex-workers to assert their rights? How does Dalit feminism understand the intersectionality of caste, gender and sexuality to provide framework for the struggles of sex-workers?

The debates over land acquisition and alienation projects in recent times project these as insular from issues of caste, livelihood and HIV/AIDS. One does not come across the issues facing women of the performing communities or former Devasasis nor is it ever discussed as to how displacement affects them differently, even though, they represent the voice of subalterns or proletariats like dalits, adivasis [first inhabitants], farmers etc. A paper aimed to engage with the issue of land alienation in the context of women from Kalavanthulus [a former Devadasi communities] of coastal Andhra Pradesh to raise the following questions: what shape does it take when it is entangled with the issue of morality and HIV/AIDS discourse? In what way their experience is different from other marginalized communities. How does sexuality meddle here? Whether there is a politics in casting them as “other” in the matter of sexuality and at the same time not recognizing their marginality, especially by the left academia in the land acquisition discourse. How does the land acquisition process doubly affect Devadasis and performing communities? Whether the experience of land



dispossession of Devadasi community is any way different or similar from the women from Dalit communities? Based on the ethnographic accounts in East Godavari, the paper discussed land alienation and the struggle of the Kalavanthulus in response to measures undertaken as part of infrastructure development initiatives by the state. It highlighted the *inextricable linkages between political economy, policies of the nation state and HIV/AIDS discourse to argue that these were dialectical in nature*. The paper also attempted to discuss power-relations in the context of sexuality not just at macro-level but also at the micro level in with respect to conjugal relationships and the multiple and complex affinity of women from the Kalavanthulu community with the propertied classes or dominant castes of the region.

Similar issues were raised by a paper on Marriage, Violence and Sexuality: Understanding Dalit Women's Agency and Voice in Rural Tamil Nadu. The scholar observed that the literature on Dalit women largely dealt with issues of violence and oppression based on intersections of class, caste and gender.

Women's bodies, sexuality and reproductive choices were linked to class power and the ideological hegemony of the caste-gender nexus in India, with marriage and sexual relations playing a crucial role in maintaining caste boundaries. Dalit women's narratives reflected multiple concerns and dilemmas about marital choice and violence, generating in the process a deeper understanding of agency, gender relations, changing experiences, positionalities and subjectivities.

A paper on subaltern women and the politics of representation studied the sect of Kartavaja, an offshoot of the Bauls which arose in colonial Bengal in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Regarded as the marginalized people's response to Raja Rammohan Roy's Brahmo Samaj, this has in its centre a concept of feminine power embodied in the legendary character of 'Sati Ma', in an attempt to trace indigenous feminist lineages. Members of this sect, comprising mostly of lower caste people like the Sadgopes, worship 'Sati Ma' - as the woman with immense supernatural powers specially in the field of fertility and reproduction. The period of the emergence of 'Kartavajas' and 'Sati Ma' is that of Renaissance Bengal but the 'sati ma', the subaltern and indigenous version of femininity and power, remained marginalized in the narratives of renaissance literature. She was never included in the predominant idea of the empowered woman. The paper showed how 'kartavaja' and their legendary woman 'Sati Ma' had been represented in the literature of Bengal renaissance and explored the politics of that representation arguably, to see how this alternate version of feminine power was marginalized and trivialized by individualist and liberal scholarship of the upper caste intelligentsia under western influence.

Another paper explored the debates on the profession of *Tamasha*, a well-known folk art of Maharashtra, carried on since 16<sup>th</sup> century, with its components of Plot and Songs and known for erotic dancing by female artists. This art form was formed, stabilized and still carried on by a few lower-caste communities like Mahar, Matang and Kolhatis in Maharashtra. The elements of ‘eroticism’ in the dancing of these female artists raised concerns based on two approaches: one against this art form, due to its being a kind of caste-based exploitation carried on for centuries and the element of forced performance of sexual labour by lower-caste women which posed the need for discontinuation of such caste-based traditional exploitative profession. The second approach has seen this profession as a source of livelihood for women and urged that it be examined not from a moralist view but as an income-generation means for women, and their autonomy, and ability to have greater decision-making power within the family. Identifying the paucity of material on women from performing communities as an issue, the paper tried to highlight and contextualize the problems related to carrying on this art form as a caste-based exploitative tradition and the discontinuity of these as feminists concerns, while also highlighting dalit women’s rehabilitation issues. Another paper attempted to map the strength and endurance through the eyes of a Dalit woman protagonist, *Withaa Bhau Maang Narayangaonkar*, a Tamashaa artist, to see how she withstood discrimination based on of caste and patriarchy as reflected in the biographical poem *Aarpar Layit Pranantik (Through Rhythmic Intense)* in Marathi, by Pradnya Pawar . The poem depicting the life and struggle of Withaa - the artist against these oppressive forces- has the ability to nurture a fighting spirit among the Dalit women questions the validity of the established religion, polity, economy, caste, class and the mainstream feminism.

There were several papers on dalit women's writings and the theoretical/ conceptual issues emerging from these on questions of 'caste', 'gender' and 'resistance.' Through a reading of Dalit literary feminist writing in contemporary West Bengal a paper argued that *the Dalit could not successfully emerge as a distinct political subject in the formal-institutionalized domain of activities in West Bengal due to the unchallenged hegemony of the urban, upper caste bhadralok in public life in the state.* Currently, the organized Dalit literary movement through initiatives like *Chaturtha Duniya (The Fourth World), Dalit Mirror, Dalit Sahitya, and so forth, although a much latter phenomenon compared to the other states of India, has started to challenge not only the bhadralok aesthetics of literature, but also their hegemony in politics and society.* Dalit women writings in Bengali were mostly ignored by those who were recovering women's voices from history. The paper delved into a wider body of Dalit feminist writings in order to engage with their stories of victimhood – their narratives of caste-discrimination in their quotidian lives, the post-partition struggles as refugees and unequal treatment vis-à-vis rehabilitation and relief, and their tales of suffering to explore how the Dalit feminist writers in contemporary West Bengal are interrogating and contesting both bhadralok hegemony and also the forces of patriarchy within their own communities, through the voices of marginalized women in West Bengal. Manohar Mouli Biswas, eg., argues that the Dalit women's activism and their literature is inseparable. As underlined by scholars like Rege (2006), Dalit women's writing changes the way we understand both the women's movement and the Dalit movement in Maharashtra. She argues that one cannot write only caste or only gender, the two goes together.

A paper on Dalit Literature and Dalit Women Writers sought to analyse how Dalit women shaped Dalit literature differently, as part of an inevitable journey in favour of social, economic and cultural change. Dalit poetesses referred to women with courage and strength as reflected in the work of *Meena Gajabhiye, Kunda*

*Gaykawad, Asha Thorat etc. these have broken the existing framework and brought to Marathi Literature and the psyche of the society an awareness of a different sorrow, identity and of inner conflict, which find no mention in the autobiographies of dalit men. Kumud Pawade, Shantabai Kamble Babytai Kamble and Mukta Sarvagouda, in their autobiographies, while narrating how they fought with the circumstances have given an inspiring message to society. A paper on Dalit Women Litterateurs and the Marathi Dalit Literature A Study of its Role and Contributions, traced how Dalit literature emerged as rebellion in the established Marathi literature , to emerge as a first development, not only in Marathi but in any Indian language, drawing inspiration from the life and experiences of the lowly and submerged segments of Indian society. Depicting the living conditions and problems, voicing protest and the aspirations of the Dalits these have enriched the literary heritage of Marathi and other languages. Dalit literature has created a Dalit consciousness among the Dalits, with Dalit women writers sketched the realistic and authentic accounts of life conditions of the Dalit women, such as Urmila Powar, Jyoti Lanjewar, Kumud Pawade, Pradya Daya Pawar, Heera Bansode, Babytai Kamble articulating suppression, humiliation, sufferings, dilemmas and exploitation.*

Women's poetry in post Independence India has in fact largely been middle class, and autobiographical, focusing on problems faced by women, either in marriage, or in living alone, giving voice to middle class English educated women. However, it is only in the 1990s we find Meena Kandasamy, Nitoo Das, Nabina Das, Uddipana Goswami, Anindita Sengupta, Sweta Srivastava Vikram raising a politically committed voices taking up larger social causes, going beyond the self and speaking on behalf of other women who may not be in a position to express themselves. In a globalized world with a shift towards the rich and powerful combined with bigoted communal politics driven by religious fanaticism, there is a need to listen to the voice of Irom Sharmila, the Iron Lady of Manipur and her struggle against the AFSPA to also understand the issue being raised by Spivak in

‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ A notehr paper explored the lives of *tawaifs*, *baijis* or courtesans (used interchangeably) in Bombay, during the twentieth century, with a particular focus around the Congress House in the Grant Road area, which interestingly simultaneously developed as the hub of both Indian nationalist struggle in Bombay from the 1920 onwards and of the tawaifs’ activity. The attempt was to historicize *mujra* performances in the city and its presence in the nationalist hub of Bombay, exploring the contentious terrain of caste, gender, sexuality, nationalism and urban gentrification alongside efforts, during the last decades of twentieth century, to remove the presence of *tawaifs* from this space, through heightened interest of the real estate players in urban renewal and increased surveillance by the police or the moral crusaders, which happens to be the Citizen’s Forum of the neighbourhood. The paper explored: the nature of spatial relations between the tawaifs’ kothas (N.B. Compound) and the Congress House in Bombay through the twentieth century and the kind of self-definition asserted by the tawaifs, baijis, or courtesans, from historically marginalised communities, involved in the performance of *mujra* to reflect on *the transformations of the space inhabited by the courtesans—with the continued devaluing, dismantling and restructuring of the space, and the increased stigmatisation, criminalisation and marginalisation of the women—reading into*

*the newer modalities of constraints and newer sites of injury and injustice, from anthropological and historical perspectives.*

*A paper on Honour and Shame: Reconceptualising the State Response to Rape from a Caste-Patriarchy Perspective, argued that within the legal and criminal justice system of India, rape is not seen so much as a violation of bodily integrity as loss of honour or shame. The paper attempted to understand the notion of shame and honour as a construct of a caste-patriarchy system. The complex intersection of caste and patriarchy needs to be focused on not only to understand and address the issue of rape against Dalit women but to explore the control of sexuality that all women continue to face. The author argued that certain groups such as Dalit women and Muslim women- are seen as 'naturally' lacking in 'virtue' –due to their location outside the Brahminical setting and therefore also not given justice within the legal system, highlighting the fact that the state and the legal machinery remain tilted towards the upper castes, as in the case of Mathura and tribal women in the Northeast. An understanding of the association of shame and honour with caste- patriarchy needs to be addressed by the feminist movement to re-imagine the state response to rape and achieve larger understanding and imagining of sexual violence itself.*

The interaction between caste, gender and language and especially power was the focus of a paper based on primary field work on Denotified Tribes( DNTs) in Maharashtra, whose women face specific problems. The paper studied the women of the Vadar (VJNT) community, especial those involved in the activities related to Self help Group and Anganwadis.

Women in public spaces were the focus of several presentations. Reservation for women through 50% quota in Panchayats was seen as a landmark achievement. Also panchayats were expected to play a key role in inclusion of the SCs for enhancing democracy and the participation of the disadvantaged castes in the decision making process. The experiences of Dalit women and their participation needed special attention, with reference to both caste based atrocities and

patriarchal prejudices which get reflected in proxy candidates, among other aspects. Issues of caste are seen in the harassment faced by dalit candidates/ members, though the Prevention of Atrocities Act (PoA) could be invoked. The formal representation of women it was felt could not be an indicator of their effective political participation, given the multiple levels of discrimination faced due to entrenched caste hierarchies, chronic poverty and patriarchal bias. The questions posed included: what does it mean to participate as a dalit woman in local democracy given that the various manifestations of caste in everyday life are still an impediment in the robust participation of Dalit women at the local level. A paper on dalit women and forms of activism in recent times explored how globalization had changed the ways of looking at the social order and complexities within it. It has also led to the emergence of new public spheres, including cyber space which has also emerged as a potential space for transnational activism, even as the rise and consolidation of religious identity alongside the ‘shrinking’ of the welfare state has made dalit women more vulnerable to exploitation and discrimination, leading to further marginalization. On the other hand, there is a renewed spurt in the display of energy and activism of dalit women’s collectives, eg., the All India Dalit Women’s Forum, National Federation of Dalit Women and All India Dalit Women’s Forum, founded in 1994, 1995 and 1996 respectively. At the global level, the UN World Conference on ‘Against Racism’ held in Durban, South Africa in 2001 provided an opportunity to draw parallels between Dalit women’s oppression and racism. The ‘Delhi Declaration’ of (2006) emerged around the same time as transnational dalit feminist activism highlighting issues of survival and dignity even as there were other problematic issues of identity and sovereignty.

A paper on dalit women’s movement in Bhandara (Maharashtra) looked at cultural conflict and developments in the context of Maharashtra, with regard to tensions

between high-caste Hindus and Dalit Buddhists facing atrocities in East Vidarbha of Maharashtra, as seen in the Khairlanji Dalit Massacre of 2006, where women organized themselves under Action Committees, such as *Parivartan Mahila Sanghatana* (PMS) and *Sambodhi Mahila Sangh* (SMS) This paper based on qualitative research design explored the mobilization strategies and perceptions of these organisations towards creating a neo-Dalit Buddhist Woman's identity. The Dalit Women of this region do not adopt religious markers of upper caste Hindu traditions, viz. wearing *Mangalsutra* , bangles as well as applying vermilion by married women. Instead, they adopted white beads as an ornament as a newly *discovered* Buddhists tradition. Dalit brides do not follow the custom of the bride *touching the feet* of bridegroom during marriage ceremony and are rejecting pre and post-funeral Hindu rituals for women after death of the husband, thereby indirectly confronting patriarchal male cultural traditions. They have developed some new traditions and norms, viz. 'saving groups for books', 'a book – a week', 'each one-teach one' and 'use English within Marathi', 'twenty members-a SHG', etc. Though, these women started these movements as a part of their cultural identity, these generate an interest in reading, usage of English language and eloquence, especially among daughters. As a result, while the youth are appearing for competitive examinations, the employability, confidence, and ability to argue have spread among Dalit women, also boosting their entry into politics and the service sectors such as insurance.

A notehr paper focusing on the construction of womanhood in the context of religious reform and contemporary Muslim women of Kerala , attempted to problematize the gender discourses around the category of 'Muslim women' in Kerala by looking at the promotion of education and religious revivalism among them in the of material as well as non-material or economic and social benefits that they have gained through Gulf-migration and Kerala Model of Development. The



study mainly analyzed how the reformist and revivalist movements among Kerala Muslims have confined Muslim women to narrowly defined roles, relegating them to political and economic inferiority in the public sphere. Education amongst women, including Muslim has expanded markedly since the formation of Kerala state. The enrolment of girls in primary school has increased more than twofold and there has been drastic increase at the secondary and tertiary levels. Despite all these changes, Muslim women remain underrepresented in the social spheres, when compared to men. They constitute only a mere 5.9 per cent of the total workforce in the state. This study focused on this ‘under-representation’ of Kerala Muslim women, the underlying causes, impacts, and their significance to both society and to women’s lives.

Another study looked at caste, gender and embodiment in the context of village level health programs to argue that with the state using the language of “community participation”, “democratic decentralization” in the contemporary discourse, these vocabularies have become convenient tools under the liberalization paradigm for the state’s shifting its welfare responsibilities to communities. The state’s promotion of volunteerism is a key strategy to draw women in the name of women’s empowerment, as in the case of the ASHA (Accredited social health activist) and Anganwadi workers who assume the role of community welfare workers, as state sponsored community workers appointed through the village community (gram sabha). The question arises as to whether the woman’s caste marked gendered body become a deciding factor for being a suitable state volunteer? Does caste identity of these women volunteers play any role in determining how they are going to dispense the state services among different caste groups? Drawing on an ethnographic study conducted in Boudh district of Odisha state during 2006-07, the paper explored *the complex interplay of gender and caste in reproducing changing forms of political subjectivity, in the state practices.*

### *Pluralities: Ethnicity, Language and Gender*

There were eight papers spread over two sessions. The session started with a brief introduction by the coordinator on the significance and relevance of the theme on India in general and the Northeast in particular. Except for one paper by a faculty member in a university, all the papers were by young research scholars located in different institutions in the country: the Universities of Delhi, Hyderabad, Jadavpur, Pune, JNU, Vacha Trust and the Mahatma Gandhi Antarrashtriya Hindi Vishwavidyalay (Wardha) .

Subject-wise, the papers can be grouped into three broad categories. The first group dealt with the poor access of the socially marginalized, notably women, dalits and ethnic minorities, to language and the knowledge it generates. Given that language is not only a means of communication, but also a source of identity and livelihood, the denial of access to language poses serious obstacles to the empowerment of women and vulnerable segments of society. This fact came out clearly in a paper on the access to language by women and girls in the slums of Mumbai and another on the Anglo-Indians of Kolkata. Interestingly, while lack of proficiency in English was a major hindrance for the slum dwellers of Mumbai to access the vast opportunities brought in by the process of globalization and the IT revolution in the country, for the Anglo-Indians, who view and use English as their mother tongue, knowledge of English by itself offered them no real advantage. Denied access to elite institutions because of their poor economic condition, they were forced to learn and interact in Bengali the dominant language in the state. As a result, most young Anglo-Indians fared badly in studies seriously damaging their job prospects. The Anglo-Indians' poor proficiency in Bengali is particularly disadvantageous for the women of the community. Unable to communicate with their numerically dominant Hindi and Bengali-speaking neighbours they are reduced to a life of double marginality. The last paper in this group focused on the marginalization of women and dalits from Sanskrit, the language of Brahmanism. The paper questioned the use of Sanskrit as a 'language of God' and its monopoly by the Brahmins, with a call to the marginalized communities to resist this hegemony. In a distinctly combative note and apparent reversal of MN Srinivas' 'Sanskritisation' model of social mobility, the author turned to popular history to cull out several examples of women who used the knowledge of Sanskrit to challenge the very structure of hegemony that made the language a tool for the perpetuation of hierarchy.

In the second category were papers largely based on materials drawn from literary texts. Using novels as a prism to explore the complex and varied lives of women, the papers took the audience to different ethnographic contexts and locales. The first paper dealt with the representation of Indian women in the former colonies and western locations. Critiquing the representation of Indian diasporic women as a monolithic, passive and mysterious ‘other’ meekly submitting to the dictates of patriarchy in western writings, the works of contemporary Indian diasporic writers highlighted the diversity of women’s lives, characterized as they are by multiple identities, sexual choices, gendered ideologies, and show of resistance to the same, thus calling for a more nuanced interpretation of the situation. Moving from the distant and sanitized world of the diaspora, two papers focused on the heartland of Bengal and Jharkhand and the checkered lives of women and girls in these locales. Drawing on the works of Prabha Khaitan, Maheshweta Devi and Nirmala Putul, the papers revealed how, irrespective of the locations of middle-class Kolkata or tribal- concentrated Jharkhand, sexual violence and abuse of women and girls is endemic. Even the home is no longer a safe place for women, with fathers, brothers and husbands increasingly turning from protectors into predators of women’s sexuality, a point forcefully illustrated by the rape of Priya and apathy of the family to her plight in Khaitan’s novel. The same is true of tribal women, who despite the professed egalitarianism of their society are primarily viewed as sex objects by men. However, the chair was quick to note the slight variation in the views of Maheshweta Devi and Nirmala Putul with respect to the position of women in tribal societies, which took the discussion to the methodological debate on the ‘insider’/’outsider’ (emic/etic) perspective, and a note of caution against the colonial tendency to romanticize tribes. A similar danger was expressed about the ‘western gaze’ in the context of another paper.

The third group of papers shifted the discussion to conflict-ridden Northeast, with one paper each on Nagaland and Assam. The Nagaland paper used the policy of 33 per cent reservation for women in electoral politics and the state’s staunch resistance to the same as a pivot to highlight the highly patriarchal structure of Naga society, which denies social and political rights to women. At the heart of the matter is the conflict between loyalty to tradition which privileges men and democratic principles that guarantee social, political and economic right to women and other vulnerable segments of society. Complicating the issue is the special constitutional provision embodied in Article 371-A, designed to safeguard Naga culture and tradition, which has not only put women’s demand for reservation at loggerheads with both the traditionalists and those upholding the Constitution but also barred their access to the many progressive legislations introduced by the centre for the uplift of women, such as laws guaranteeing equal rights to property

available to Hindu women. What was a matter of concern was that while women were increasingly raising their voice against the discriminatory practices, ethnic loyalty and the hold of tradition made the struggle extremely difficult for them, a fact demonstrated by the ambivalence of civil society towards the policy.

Women are not only victims of tradition; ethnic conflict has also accentuated the vulnerability of women worldwide. This fact vividly came out in a paper on Assam. Delving into the peace process in Assam in the aftermath of the protracted conflict that rocked the state since Independence, the paper showed how ethnic conflict had not only seriously altered the perception of 'self' and 'other' but also given rise to new forms of violence against women both in symbolic and physical terms. The author was particularly concerned at the 'normalizing' of conflict-associated violence against women and the corresponding silencing of their voice and that of other marginal groups (notably the Bodos and Muslims) in the peace narratives of the state.

Collectively, the following points emerged from the papers and discussions that followed: (i) The intersectionality of caste, class, ethnicity and gender in the subordination of women, which strongly suggests that solution to the gender question would have to be found on multiple fronts and not on the plank of patriarchy alone; (2) when women dare to defy the system, success is sure to come. The victory may not be in tangible and immediate terms in the sense of complete overthrow of oppression. The very act of resistance can be empowering, giving women a voice, which together with other voices become powerful enough to shake the foundation of the oppressive regime; (3) processes captured in the papers indicated that social and political crises acts as an impetus for struggle and resistance-- be it in the domain of literature, law or social movements. This fact is illustrated by the surge of critical writings and changes in law in the wake of the Mathura and Vishakha rape cases. At the empirical level, we see it in the mass movements led by young educated youth in India's metropolitan cities and smaller town post the December 16 rape of the 23 year old para medical student in 2012. Similar processes are visible in the Northeast, which saw the phenomenal rise in women's movement in the states of Manipur, Nagaland and Mizoram as a reaction to atrocities perpetrated by army personnel on hapless citizens.

### *Equality, Conflict, Pluralism and Women's Studies*

There were two panels under this subtheme: I) Gender, Conflict and the State and (II) Gender, Pluralism and Religion.

The papers focused on women's experiences from the region, from specific community locations as well as gendered narratives in mainstream discourses. A paper held that the women's movement in Manipur had redefined the relationship between the home and the public, whereby the activities of the home shaped, nurtured and conditioned the political discourse in the public domain in Manipur. Another paper discussed the emergence of the women's movement in Nagaland, especially the role of the Naga Mothers' Association and how it had redefined politics in the state and also emphasized the challenges faced by the women's movement in the state. A third paper examined the discourse on 'shame' by looking at a theatre performance in Manipur and linking it to the 2004 protests in Kangla, while another looked at feminist critiques of the legal interpretations of rape. A paper on the contribution of the women's movement in Manipur—especially the *Nupi Lan* (women's war) and Meira Paibi Movement—in bringing [ethnic] nationalism in Manipur, spoke about the idea of nationalism as being dominated by a discourse of patriarchal masculinity in India, within which women were largely seen as 'moral and psychological' motivators, with their own activities often being reduced to being a private affair conducted within the home domain. Such a stereotypical construction of nationalist narratives would be unreliable to study colonial and post colonial 'national' movements in Manipur, where the 'Ethnic nationalist' movement also shows significant departures from Partha Chatterjee's framework of 'the inner' and 'outer domain' of nationalism in India. This paper argued that the women's movement in Manipur redefined the relationship between the home and the public and that the activities of the home shaped, nurtured and conditioned political discourse in the public domain in Manipur. The history of the 'nationalist' movement in Manipur is predominantly 'womanised' and any attempt to fit this into the dominant model of 'men centric masculine nationalism' would not only deny the political subjectivity of women but also erode the very meaning of the 'nationalist movement' in Manipur. In other words, women's movements in Manipur have redefined the meaning of 'political.'

North East India is known for the continuing turmoil and conflict, with political unrest and insecurities. The conflict between the people of the region with the Indian state for autonomy, the ethnic conflict between different tribes and groups and the internal conflict forms the backdrop to the lived reality of the people. In this situation, the response of the women's movements and Women's Studies in India and especially in Northeastern India is very crucial. Looking at the history of the women's movement, it is important to note how the women's movement emerged in this region. The Naga Mothers' Association (NMA), formed on 14 February 1984, as a state-level voluntary organization mandated to fighting social

evils and problems, was also a response to political unrest and militarization in the state. With conflict and violence touching every person's life in the state, the women felt the need to come together to address the serious problems faced due to the political unrest. A paper looked at the women's movement through the NMA which has battled serious social and law-and-order problems in the northeast. This history needs to be recorded and theorized, to understand the role they have played in different sphere of life in the state and also in the larger political struggle and peace process. The NMA's identity, of speaking not just as women but as "Mothers" also needs to be critically articulated and interrogated. Further, taking on from Talal Asad's essay 'Thinking about Agency and Pain' questions could be asked about the location of shame. Is shame located in the space in between the 'shamed body' and the 'shaming look'? Other papers too examined the context of the northeast and the evolution of the discourse of Women's Movement and Women's Studies in the region through similar questions. One presentation sought to examine two instances of performances around 'shame' in contemporary Manipur. During the climax of Manipuri director H. Kanhailal's play "Draupadi" (2001), veteran actress Sabitri Heisnam appears in the nude on stage, having discarded all her clothes one by one, in protest against her rapists. The audience, the paper argued, is forced to witness a willing performance of shame by someone who can be called, after Asad, an 'agent of shame'. Three years later, in July 2004, a group of Manipuri women stripped naked in front of the Western Gate of Kangla fort in Imphal, in order to protest the brutal rape and death of Thangjam Manorama, a 34-year-old suspected insurgent, whom the Indian army had picked up from her house and shot dead a few days earlier. From the evidence gathered it is fairly certain that the individual activists at Kangla were not aware of the existence of "*Draupadi*", which was performed only twice in Imphal in 2000-2001 and nearly-banned by an enraged community that declared Sabitri a 'whore' for her shamelessness. The paper sought to examine this apparent paradox: the differential configurations/receptions of nudity within these strangely reverberating theatrical and political events in contemporary Manipur (caught in what one may call, after Benjamin, a 'historical time-lapse camera') to raise questions such as: what are the contours of the 'respectable' and the 'necessarily' political, as against that which is deemed mere 'aesthetics' and willy-nilly located in the domain of pleasure? What then is this basic antagonism in situations of political extremity between the regime of pleasure and aesthetics— the wasteful, so to say, and the domain of the properly political and revolutionary: the realm of pain undertaken of necessity?

The brutality of incidents involving rape, sexual violence and its various manifestations in women's lives require us to have a deeper understanding of

sexuality and the implications of sexual violence. While these affect not only women, but also transgenders and men, yet the issues of sexual violence affect women in very different and specific ways. There is a need to discuss feminist perspectives on rape within the legal discourse, as also the idea of consent and coercion, which have specific meanings with regard to evidence in cases related to sexual violence. The legal system obscures the experiences of women who experience rape and sexual assault through extra legal considerations such as morality, virtuousness and appropriate sexual behavior, which include notions of a 'reasonable' and 'unreasonable' woman. The understanding of sexuality within the legal discourse needs to be broadened, along with transforming the judicial system to also encompass a broader theoretical understanding which includes the context in which crimes against women occur and address issues of social responsibility and the need to challenge patriarchal social and sexual assumptions to prevent stereotyping of men and women's experiences from feminist perspectives.

Two papers attempted feminist readings of the epics, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana respectively. Another focused on the socio economic effects of marginalization of Muslims in a settlement in Delhi, based on fieldwork. Drawing on her life and experience, Gabrielle Dietrich focused on the importance of the issue of secularism today and related it to the larger history of the women's movement in India. Another paper focused on the politics of Muslim women's groups in India, caught within the nation-state and the community, while another focused on the importance on self-reflexivity of researchers in dealing with survivors of sexual violence.

A paper attempted to look at re-tellings of the Ramayana through a feminist perspective focusing on Devdutt Pattanaik's *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana*, published in the year 2013. Pattanaik's retelling held great promise yet ended up as a celebration of the conventional and typical Sita, albeit dignified, magnanimous and a Goddess. The paper problematised the identity of women based on Sita, raising several issues: is Sita forced into captivity by society? What is the reason for her 'glorified domesticity and silence'? Is Sita a model for patriarchal control (wrong Sita taken as a right example)? Why does the burden of balance and welfare fall on Sita's shoulders and that of women to this day? Why is/are Sita and women seen as the body in need of disciplining both mentally and sexually? Lastly, why, despite having a 'choice,' does Sita choose to be Gauri (docile and domesticated) rather than Kali (wild and untamed)? The author argued

that ‘the key to the solution of women’s problems lies in four, religion, culture, law and education.’

The thinkers of third wave of feminism came out with the French term *écriture feminine* which feminists have explored to, question and problematize and explain different subjugated practices against women using discourses of religion, culture and tradition. In this context, a paper explored the feminist interpretation of Draupadi in the epic *Mahabharat* as described in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s novel *The Palace of Illusions*, a text written from the perspective of Paanchali or Draupadi, to give a different point of view and portray the characters of the epic in an altogether different dimension. Through the gendered lens Divakaruni raises pertinent questions of agency, sexuality, sexual desire, pleasure and power within the masculinized narration in the epic of the *Mahabharat*.

A paper examined how the spectre of riots haunts Bengali Muslims and affects the collective lives of Muslim women. While the first recorded communal outbreak in Bengal occurred in the industrial suburbs of Calcutta in May 1891, communal riots have been very rare in Bengal after 1964 and in the post-47 were more often provoked by the news of atrocities perpetuated on the Hindus of East Pakistan. Nevertheless, memories of riots, with their macabre violence, continue to haunt the individual and collective memories of Muslim women, alongside anxious forebodings, even when actual violence is extremely rare. The ‘fear’ of annihilation by the ‘other’ community became all the more marked after Gujarat, 2002. A paper chose to focus on how eruption of communal violence elsewhere in the country shapes the lives and sensibilities of Bengali Muslims, through the narratives of Bengali Muslim women, drawing on findings from extensive fieldwork conducted in Kolkata and Burdwan. It explored how the possibility of attack haunts women of the community and gets articulated in a sense of insecurity resulting in ghettoized neighbourhoods, despite the growth of communal solidarity. Not only individuals, but institutions, like factories and hostels belonging to Muslims, also get drawn into this ‘search for security’ in Muslim majority areas, despite a marked regional cultural identity visible among Bengali Muslims in a variety of ways. Such anxieties feed on past and present experiences, perceptions as well as propaganda by religious fundamentalists.

Discussions on the status of Muslim women in India, questions regarding their freedom and autonomy have often been trapped in the binary of religion and secularism as well as the community and the state, whereas the Sachar Committee



Report (2006) had given more importance to socio economic backwardness, eschewing the core issues pertaining to religion, culture and Muslim personal law. The core argument of a paper focusing on Muslim women in India was that they have to continuously grapple with two very different discourses<sup>1</sup> on equality and development drawing upon the Islamic and the state sponsored version of rights and equality, with both having largely neglected women's quest for rights and justice. This provides the backdrop to the search for an alternative discourse developed by Muslim women to address the gender question within the Islamic discourse. While the state sponsored discourse has sought to alternatively treat Muslim women as the wards of the minority community or as equal citizens of the country, the community centred discourse has constructed, perceived and interpreted the relationship between gender and Islam, as revolving around the interpretation and reinterpretation of the Quranic verses on women's rights in the context of a male dominated society and issues such as those of talaq, polygamy, purdah as well as inheritance rights revolving around the links between religion and patriarchy. More recently an alternative discourse on Muslim women's rights within the Islamic framework has been emerging from amongst women of the community in efforts to deal with their issues. The emergence of Muslim women's groups like Awaaz-e – Niswaan, Bharatiya Muslim Mahila Andolan in Mumbai, All India Muslim Women Personal Law Board in Lucknow highlights the shaping of an alternative discourse on women's rights within the Islamic framework. The efforts of these women's groups represent a claim of ownership on space, political and social, discursive and material, that uses both the 'secular', 'public' space of the Constitution and 'private' religious texts in a strategic manner for the purpose of gender justice. These have engaged with issues of the formulation of nikahnamas, that seek to redefine conjugal relations in the light of feminist interpretations of Quranic injunctions while at the same time incorporating the provisions of maintenance as given in the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act 1986 and redress against domestic violence as given in the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act 2005. This reveals possibilities of embodying and performing citizenship which do not segregate Muslim women into being abstract women in the public sphere and Muslim wives, daughters or widows in the private, governed by personal laws, thus pointing to possibilities of 'marked

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<sup>1</sup> The category of discourse refers to historically specific systems of meaning which form the identities of subjects and objects. Meanings are always dependent upon a socially constructed system of rules and significant differences. The concept of discourse has also been extended to a wider range of social practices and phenomena. Foucault has discussed about the ways discursive practices form the objects and subjects of *discursive formations*. Discourses are thus practices which systematically form the objects which we speak. It also raises questions about the historical construction of systems and the exclusion of human subjectivity and agency from the social world (Howarth, 2002).

citizenship'. Several papers attempted to understand the politics behind the construction of gender within these parallel discourses. Some of the questions they explored were: Can Islamic discourse on gender justice develop an alternative to secular and western discourse? Can the objective of gender equality be framed within the discourse of Islam? What is the role of the state vis a vis construction of minority identity in India? The papers drew upon qualitative analyses, field based studies and secondary sources to highlight the construction of *gender* within the discourse on development and equality through complex processes in women's search for equality.

The liberal ideal of an abstract, unmarked citizen has long been a point of criticism by feminist theory and practice for its exclusionary nature. Further, the public-private dichotomy in terms of citizenship in the postcolonial Indian nation state has also emphasised the modern, secular, unmarked citizen in the public sphere, pushing all ascriptive and associational identities into private sphere. This of course has been an unsuccessful attempt in the Indian context, with caste and religious identities weaving themselves through public contexts of citizenship whether through votebanks in electoral politics or eruptions such as protests, riots and pogroms.

However, the conceptualisation and implementation of a system of 'marked' citizenship – for example through reservation of seats in the Parliament for women – faces challenges as well, as seen in the opposition to 'quota within quota' reservation for Muslim and OBC women. Another question asked of this example is whether marked citizenship can be understood and enabled only through structures of formal representation.

*Poststructuralist Mikhail Bakhtin, in The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays described intertextuality in a text through the terms "heteroglossia" and "dialogism" which define a text as composed of unheard, multiple voices. The pathbreaking essays invited informed critical thinking hence, exposing oppressive, hierarchical, exclusionary interpretative practices of the patriarchal society. Jean Baudrillard's interrogation of the relationship between reality, symbols and society takes a step forward and tries to explain the reality behind the images which construct the society. While Michel Foucault proposes a link between these signs which exists in language and their cultures.*

*Jean Paul Sartre during the world war came out with the concept of Existentialism which gave birth to Existential crisis. Today, women being aware of these signs and voices have become more conscious of their existence. Their gaining of this*

*knowledge has made them suffer from a sort of existential crisis. Female identity from the beginning has been constructed from a male perspective. This identity has been conceptualized through the images and representation of women in religious text. The intellectual women of today are trying to re-construct the images of women in the ancient literature which till now came in the domain of phallogocentric world and hence, were explained by them. One of the texts which holds an important position in Indian cultural milieu and defines the idea of Indian literature and Indian consciousness is Mahabharat. This consciousness through the centuries has formed the image of an Indian women. The concept of women being chaste/unchaste, virtuous, voiceless, invisible has been burdened on Indian women through the images of women portrayed in Mahabharat.*

A study explored perceptions, expectations, and aspirations of Muslim girl students (15-25 years), with respect to their own schooling, and community's attitude towards girls' education. The landscape for the study was a Muslim dominated habitation, New Kardam Puri, in North-East Delhi. Using ethnographic observations and triangulation approach, the researcher also tried to understand the household dynamics of the inhabitants that plays a crucial role in getting educational opportunities for girls. The study showed *how general attitudes of non-Muslim community members<sup>2</sup> towards Muslim community based on existing stereotypes, contribute to a lack of understanding on the issue of the education and employment of Muslim girls.* Confirming to earlier studies (Quazi, 1999; Sachar Committee Report, 2005; Nayar, 2007; Hasan and Menon, 2006), it showed the multifaceted nature of the problem, wherein social and economic issues pose a big barrier in the access Muslim girls have to educational opportunities. In the midst of an inadequate and ill-structured Senior Secondary School system, the State fails to address crucial issues such as those of safety and security related to their religious identity of the population. The teaching-learning environment further deprives Muslim girls from accessing adequate educational opportunities. The study revealed the indifferent attitude of the school teachers towards the Muslim girl students, limited options of subjects and poor transition rate at secondary and higher secondary level of schooling further leading to poor enrolment in higher education. The community's efforts at educating girls were visible only in the form of Urdu training centres, or elder women teaching Urdu and Arabic to young girls, despite the desire to educate their daughters in mainstream education and the girls'

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<sup>2</sup> Non-Muslim community members included, neighbors, teachers, Principal of the school surveyed.

own aspirations to become fashion designers, teachers, lawyers, or business women, which come in conflict with the societal compulsions.<sup>3</sup>

A paper dealt with a long-standing debate regarding the women's movement's relationship and engagement with religion from changing contexts, which has been reflected in the IAWS as well, starting from when Vibhuti Patel protested against the breaking of a coconut at the inaugural of the IAWS Conference in Trivandrum to the early 1980s, and a workshop on women exploring religion as a source of sustenance and hope in a liberating perspective at the autonomous women's conference in Mumbai in December 1986 and Flavia Agnes pointing to the majoritarian bias in the Indian women's movement in the Jadavpur conference. Over these years, the anti Sikh riots showed the need for the women's movement to be drawn into the struggle against communalism, while the Shah Bano case forced a re-think on debates on the subject of the uniform civil code, given that the slogan had been hijacked by communal forces and there was a need to explore other ways to gender just solutions including within the existing frameworks for religious communities. Events in December 1992 and 2002 and developments in the South Asian region as a whole indicated that communalism and fascism were real possibilities, given the conditions in neighbouring Sri Lanka, where genocidal policies against Tamils were paired with a militarized Buddhist chauvinism; and developments in Pakistan, where Malala Yousafzai and other young women's struggle for women's education, had become symbolic of the new energy which had infused the women's movement and their link with other democratic struggles.

Meeting in the North Eastern region, those present noted the multi religious locations and tensions: Assam and several other states had faced ethnic tensions due to migration and anti-Muslim sentiments were on the rise; Arunachal Pradesh was leaning towards the "Hindu Nation", while in the Christian majority states, such as Nagaland and Mizoram, Christianity is often treated as a state religion. In this context, the debates on customary laws acquires great importance, and also points to the problematic and contradictory positions which can be taken given the plurality of customs as well as notions of gender in a highly polarized politico-cultural setting. This makes it necessary to enter into the debate on individual rights vs. community rights with sensitivity to the need to defend democratic rights in a pluralistic society.

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<sup>3</sup> Societal compulsion here refers to Muslim girls' familial obligations towards their parents and siblings like helping in domestic work, sibling care, early marriage proposals, limited public exposure associated with poor encouragement from the State's educational provisions.

Another presentation shared an understanding of Reflexivity and its value / import to women's studies research, practice and pedagogy, to emphasise 're-looking at one's experience, with the aim of learning something 'new' from it, even as Reflexivity can be practised in several different ways. Examples from research cited included An ethnographic study with sexual assault survivors, medico-legal professionals and NGO professionals. The research tools used included interviews, guided conversations, observations, analysis of documents, analysis and interpretation of researcher experience. A 'Researcher Diary' was maintained, transcribing her feelings and positionality in the field in her field notes. This helped externalize, reflect on, draw from and guide her fieldwork experience. It was felt that the curricula of Women's Studies, itself a multi-disciplinary project, must incorporate Reflexive theory and Practice to effectively imbibe and translate learnings from Feminist movements and research.

### *Education, Knowledge and Institutional Space(s)*

The sessions aimed at a discussion on the gender dimensions of education in institutional spaces, with the themes addressed including the theory and practice of education such as the curriculum, textbooks, policies, pedagogies, educational leadership, management, disciplinary domains, knowledge and identity formations, role of women's organizations in education etc. About 60 abstracts were received of which 37 were shortlisted. Finally and through the three days of the conference, 24 papers were presented, of which two were invited presentations.

In the first session on "Institutional Spaces of Education", five papers were presented which examined processes not just in formal institutional space of school, college, university, but in interaction with family and labour-market in diverse social settings. A paper deliberated on girl students' experiences of schooling in a village in Andhra Pradesh by focusing on disciplining and gender differentiation processes within and outside the school space. Another examined mothering processes in relation to children's school activities in a village in Odisha, while a third presentation suggested that in contrast with other studies, a positive relationship existed between literacy and work participation rates of women in Uttarakhand. Coming to the studies located in the higher educational institutions, a study of linguistic acts, discussed processes of construction of moral-self among students of a University with significant gender differentials. Two participants discussed under-representation of women in academic leadership positions and their perceptions about themselves and others in similar position.

The second session on “Engaging the Curriculum, Choice and School Space” included presentations on analysis of NCERT textbooks of science, human rights and gender studies, and SCERT textbooks of Assamese language. A paper analysed the dominant ideologies of reproductive health and fertility of women in NCERT science textbooks from critical science literacy perspective. Similarly, one critiqued the representation of women as custodians of tradition in Assamese language texts while another examined the curricula of English literature in Gauhati University and elaborated on the processes by which Human Rights and Gender studies syllabus and textbooks were developed at the NCERT. Two papers deliberated on the hetero-normative cultures of the school space where expressions of all other forms of sexualities are policed and prohibited while another paper discussed the factors influencing choice of higher education among women students in Engineering and Liberal Arts streams.

The first session on the second day of the conference had “Feminist Pedagogies” as its focus. Of the two papers in this session, one was based on the experience of teaching Gender Studies at two different levels in a Central University, contrasting the experience of teaching courses to research scholars with teaching at the undergraduate level. It sought to analyse and explain the differences in terms of institutional and structural realities of the University. The other presentation too was grounded in personal experience and focused on the diverse nature of experiences at three different undergraduate colleges and raised questions about the role of the management in constructing gendered identities.

The second session on sexual and other forms of harassment in campus had a panel of five speakers. The session attracted a large number of participants who responded to the presentation and joined the discussion by raising an array of issues, thereby highlighting the complexities involved. Taking the recent developments in JNU as the starting point, a paper discussed the process of normalization of violence in intimate heterosexual relationships within campus and on the responses to acts of violence as they emerged within the existing structures of hierarchy and power play. Two participants shared their findings from a gender audit they had conducted in Jadavpur University, Kolkata. The presentation highlighted the gendered division of forms of violence in the campus where different forms of grievance-redressal bodies existed, such as the Cell for Gender Awareness and Action Against Sexual Harassment (CGAAASH) on the one hand and Anti-Ragging Cell on the other. The widespread belief, that ragging happens to boys and sexual harassment to girls, affected the reporting of incidents of violence and development of mechanisms to handle these.

A paper discussed institutional response to incidents of sexual violence that resorted to surveillance measures to control women's behavior and movement. The presentation also probed the manner in which sexual harassment was dealt with in a technical-legal manner, without recognizing its connections with everyday social life. Two participants presented findings from their study of mechanisms instituted by different Colleges in Assam to respond to cases of sexual harassment. They found that a large number of cases were marked by the absence of any institutional mechanism for dealing with sexual harassment and, in Colleges that had attempted to set up redressal mechanisms, a great deal of confusion prevailed due to unavailability or lack of information about the norms for setting up of Cells.

One presentation was a reflection on the subject of sexual harassment, based on the experience of leading the UGC Task Force set up to review the measures for ensuring safety of women on campuses and programmes for gender sensitization. This drew attention to *the inadequacy of feminist discussion on and understanding of punishment for the accused in sexual harassment cases, while also pointing to the fact that the introduction of the new Act on sexual harassment seemed to have introduced uncertainty into the status of the sexual harassment cells that had been set up in academic institutions.*

A rich and useful discussion followed the presentations that were made. Audience response took the form of reporting and sharing of information and insights gathered from cases of sexual harassment that had been dealt with in different locations. There were reflections and comments from a variety of institutional and social contexts, including protests about delays, about neglect of the right procedures to be followed by the complaints committees and of decisions being taken to further vested interests. The discussion also provided pointers for further deliberation and reflection. Among the issues highlighted were the need for ensuring representativeness in the committees, the need for adopting an approach that went beyond the punitive, of being sensitive to the subjectivity of the girl or woman who had filed a complaint in the first place and for developing independent procedures for cases in which the accused is the head of the institution.

Discussants also highlighted the need to broaden the scope of existing agencies to examine violence by moving beyond the term of sexual harassment in the context of the new forms of responses within and outside educational campuses from different agencies such as the police, popular media, disciplinary committee etc. The need to protect the autonomy of university and colleges committees and to rethink ways of dealing with sexual violence in campus was also emphasized. The

session ended with the consensus that the issue of sexual harassment in educational spaces needed to be discussed a whole lot more to bring in a range of dimensions including the legal, ethical, social and the moral. These discussions need to be facilitated through consultations at the regional and the national levels.

The presentations on the last day of the conference were grouped under the theme “Identity Issues in Education.” There was a study of two villages in Gobindpur district of Assam, which examined the educational choices made by Muslim families differentially for their sons and daughters, depending on their socio-economic status. Another paper, on the marine fishing community in Puducherry region explored the ways in which literate women in the community are at an advantage in comparison with the illiterate women as also the causes that impede some sections of women in the community from gaining literacy. A third paper provided a critical analysis of the reform movement among the Muslim community in Kerala in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The conclusion arrived at by paper presenters was that Muslim women were better off in the pre-reform period in relation to socio-cultural and educational terms.

The interventions made by the Mahila Samakhya Programme of Assam in relation to the education of women from lower income groups of women was detailed by a paper which provided information about the structure of the federations established by the Programme and their role in ensuring educational opportunities for girls and women. Another paper analysed the situation within an institutional space that is widely regarded as the bastion of modern education for Muslims. The paper focused specifically on the point of view of Muslim women students who found problematic the extreme protectionist attitude of the institute towards its women students and highlighted the manner of their agentive negotiations by drawing on a framework of femininity and cultural rights. One paper foregrounded the impact of caste, community and gender on the primary education of children in Kamrup district of Assam. The institutional and educational barriers that impeded the education of children were also highlighted in her presentation as was the fact that the ascendance of communal ideologies posed a further threat to the education of children from minority communities.

### ***Culture and Region***

For this sub theme, 47 abstracts had been accepted, however, only 34 papers were presented. Culture and Region being a very broad canvas, a varied range of issues came up for discussion.



In the first session a total of 10 papers were presented. Of these, four related to women and violence, (Dangerous Domains: New Nexus of Violence against Women in Jharkhand; Deconstructing Violence against Women in South Asian countries; Facets of Honour Killings in India and the Policy Measures to Curb it; Women and Violence in Western Uttar Pradesh), five papers were on the representation of women in folk songs and literary narratives (Women's Voices in Male Genres: A Comparative Analysis of Bhojpuri Folksongs; Interrogation of Constructs about the North-East: A Reading of Literary Narratives from Assam and Nagaland; Retelling Myths and Retrieving Pluralities: Reading Women's Alternative Narratives; 'Najaayo Jomunaar paarey...': A Study of Eros and the Folk Imagination in Goalporiya Loka Xangeet; Agency and Resistance in Abhiyatri) and one paper was on women in performing arts.( Gender Performance of Kalaripayattu, A Martial Art of Kerala).

While all the papers were interesting when looked at in isolation, many presenters did not conceptualize their ideas in relation to the sub theme. Very few dealt with the pluralistic basis of the Indian state though some did try to analyse how an attempt is being made to negotiate the transition towards modernism and equality in different ways. The group of papers relating to representation of women in folk songs and literary narratives was interesting.

Of the ten papers, two papers were the most interesting in terms of originality and research. These were on: Dangerous Domains: New Nexus of Violence against Women in Jharkhand which examined the recent cases of violence against tribal and non-tribal women in the Santhal Parganas where the authors conceptualised their ideas by addressing multiple sites of violence and the varied disparities that persist. The other focused on Women's Voices in Male Genres: A Comparative Analysis of Bhojpuri Folksongs to look into the different genres of Bhojpuri songs and attempt a comparative analysis of the women's voices that are reflected in them. It noted the similarities and explored the differences in the content, narrative style and attitude of the women's voices in both the male and female genres although both had the same historical, cultural and regional background.

In the second session, held on 5 February, thirteen papers were presented. Six of these related to issues of marriage, widowhood, symbolism and social practices (Women's expression through the Symbol; A feminist Analysis of Marriage Symbol tradition; Widows of Vrindavan: Negotiating Restricted Spaces between their Spiritual and Sexual Lives; 'Sacred' Lives of Widows in Assam: Issues and Challenges in Gender Mainstreaming; Women Performance in Marriage Ceremony: Freedom, Knowledge Transfer and Resistance Special Reference:

Marriage Ceremony in Rural Areas of North Bihar; Balancing Preachings, Practice and Science: Women and Menstruation in Goa; Women and Menstruation taboo (taking case of Assam) and seven dealt with issues relating to gender and development. (Gross Gender Bias in a Skewed Development Paradigm; Cultural Politics of Hinduization & Indigenous Communities of Madhya Pradesh; Searching for the Dhentuli in Goa: Hidden Tribal Culture Sought by the Fashion Industry; Transhumance among Bhotias of Kumaon and its Gender Implication; Mukhyadhara Banam Deshaj Gyan Vyavastha: Adivasi Stree Ke Gyan Aur Sanskriti Ke Saath Antarsambandhon Ki Partal; Can women create culture or just follow it in the North East Region?; The Culture of Women's Market in Manipur, a North-East Indian State)

The presenters were clearly investigating interesting and important subjects, though several failed to adequately conceptualise their ideas within the parameters spelt out. In *Women's Expression Through the Symbol; A Feminist Analysis of Marriage Symbol Tradition*, the author attempted to investigate the different stages of a woman's life through symbol communication in the context of the marriage symbol tradition and to explore if there is any woman's voice beyond the symbol. *Transhumance among Bhotias of Kumaon and its Gender Implications* explored the practice of seasonal movement called transhumance among Bhotias of Kumaon, where ecology had played a big role in deciding the economy and livelihood of the area. The paper looked into the differences in the changing worldview of Bhotia men and women through narratives, with respect to ecology, infrastructural development and availability of alternative livelihood options. In *The Culture of Women's Market in Manipur, a North-East Indian State* in which the authors dwelt on the uniqueness of the women's market in Manipur. Women play a central role in an economic system which is based on an age-old concept of pluralism, having socio-political-cultural-economic implications. An agrarian and egalitarian economy is the objective of this market and, despite changes, the women of this market have been playing significant political, cultural and social roles in contemporary Manipur.

In the third session, eleven papers were presented. There were three papers covering issues of gender and power, (*Women as knowers in contemporary labile communities; Recasting of Brahmanical Patriarchal system in contemporary Maharashtra; Cultural Challenges to Access Reproductive Health – A Gender Analysis among Youth of Srirangam – Temple City in Tamil Nadu*) and eight papers on issues relating to the construction of femininity identity and contested social spaces. (*Construction of femininity in Neo Vaishnavite Religion of Assam;*

*Gender, Culture and Identity: Exploring the Interactions and Contestations of Group Rights and Gender Equality in North East India; Understanding gender in livelihood spaces: A study among Koli women in Mumbai; The two never shall meet? Childbirth as a Ritual Space: A study on the Dimasa community; Goa Re-lived in Mumbai Kudds through its Womenfolk; Reading the fit body: body work and identity formation in contemporary Bengal; Is Buddhism Emancipatory For Dalit Women? Focus On Contemporary Maharashtra).*

Although most of the presenters tried to conceptualise their ideas a few scholars addressed such a broad set of issues that it diluted the focus, but on the whole the papers were interesting and dealt with new issues. The following two papers were interesting in their focus: *Cultural Challenges to Access Reproductive Health – A Gender Analysis among Youth of Srirangam – Temple City in Tamil Nadu* where the authors attempted to assess the cultural perspective of the youths, both male and female, and their knowledge about and attitude towards reproductive health issues and rights across class, caste, gender and culture at a micro level in the temple city of Srirangam. Also, *Gender, Culture and Identity: Exploring the Interactions and Contestations of Group Rights and Gender Equality in North East India* which explored how group specific rights can actually bring about a serious contestation to the issue of gender equality. This paper located the issue of cultural rights and recognition of culture in public sphere within the ethnic identity movements in Northeast India and particularly in Assam vis-à-vis the question of women's rights.

### ***Women, Peace and Security in India***

The sub theme took into account the disproportionate impact of conflict on women and girls and incorporated three major aspects, namely, State, Security and Laws from women's perspective. The presentations ranged from a critical evaluation of the existing legal framework of the Indian security system from a feminist perspective to analysing the real situation problems. It centred the debate around the AFSPA in both the North East and Jammu and Kashmir. The use of a high level of force by both State and non-State actors remained a major concern confronting women in conflicts.

Referring to the relationship between the state, nationalism and religion, the concept of coercive security apparatus of the state was analysed. *It was argued that state security apparatus interacts with and legitimizes the discourse of nationalism and religion. This in turn, institutionalises the sites of violence against women.*

Interrogating the very concept of ‘security’, attention was drawn to the state-centric traditional notions of ‘masculine security’. Reference was also made to the gendered stereotypes that run along with this understanding of security. In this concept, women’s experiences, their voices and their agency gets suppressed and rendered almost invisible. Further, the masculine approach leads to the humiliation, dehumanization and marginalization of women. It was emphasised that security when defined in terms of ‘national interest’ has a very limited meaning and hence, it is important to deconstruct this concept.

One of the issues of concern however, was the role of women vis-à-vis the state security apparatus and the security narrative. It was mentioned that *women who are sufferers of the security discourse themselves endorse the nationalist ambitions of the state and the military gaze attached to it.*

At the same time, the very concept of ‘female victim’ was also problematized. *It was argued that the female victim also reinforces the image of a woman as completely powerless. Women in conflict situation, it was emphasized, go through a much more nuanced experience rather than merely being victim and continuous refererene to them only as victims takes away their potential as survivors and as agents of change.*

While analysing the role of the security laws in the North East and Jammu & Kashmir, emphasis was placed on the sufferings of women. As conflict exacerbates existing power relations, women suffer increased level of gender based violence. In response to the insecurity faced by men, they impose even more stringent restrictions on women’s freedom of movement. Both state and non-state actors resort to gendered forms of violence. Rape and physical assaults on women are therefore common recurrences. This has been specifically reflected in the North East. Much attention was paid to the implications of AFSPA and it was argued that its prolonged use had allowed the security forces to perpetrate abuses and Human Rights violations with impunity. AFSPA, it was noted, has failed to contain militancy and n fact has contributed to human misery. When this draconian law was introduced in the North East, the number of militant groups was very small. However, the number of the armed groups has now multiplied and the existence of as many as 79 armed militant groups reflects the futility of this law in even containing the militancy.

The Second theme concentrated around ‘Alternative Feminist Security Paradigms’. Continuing with the critique of the existing militarized and masculinised security perspectives, the paper presenters sought to offer an alternative security

perspective from a feminist standpoint. *It was argued that militarization and state security system represent one of the biggest paradoxes of the present state system. The state system attacks the very individual that it proclaims to protect.* The dominant mainstream international relations theories, especially liberalism and realism were also critiqued. Realism's preoccupation with the state, it was argued, renders conflict within a state invisible. Meanwhile, liberal international relations theory obscures the individual's social location like class, race and gender. These categories are not treated as important. *It was considered imperative to rethink and re-visualise the perceptions regarding the state as well as the security system. The need for gendered lenses in international relations theory was emphasized.* Feminist approaches, it was argued, would be better able to offer alternative security analysis. *It is from the perspective of women only that the social construction of sexual relations in militarized society could be understood.*

Referring to the lopsided approach of the Indian state towards security as it is translated into the policy framework, reference was made to defense spending. It was observed that the masculinist and patriarchal state has always prioritized defense spending in the name of security concerns. It was also observed that defense spending in the Indian budget is highest among all the development expenditures. *While sufficient part of the budget is devoted to the 'security' expenses in states ridden by conflicts, the expenditure on social security and welfare remains low. In the case of North Eastern states and Jammu and Kashmir, it was pointed out that these fare badly in the implementation of schemes such as NREGA and NRM. The figures on employment also show a downturn in these states.*

A special focus of the session was on the UNSCR 1325. A number of papers discussed the possible use and problems of using this resolution in maintaining women's central position at the peace table. In India the resolution is not considered a peace measure. The problem also arises from the fact that *the state does not recognize any conflict areas but calls them as disturbed areas.* However, despite such problems the UNSCR continues to be a significant tool in the hands of women to press for greater gender sensitivity in peace discourse and greater participation of women in the peace process. One paper referring to the application of this resolution to the Global South maintained that actors here are 'writing' 1325 through 'acceptance, resistance and subversion.'

The third session was the most important one, focusing on the issue of Women's Initiatives for Peace. Referring to the masculinised role of the state within the dominant realist paradigm and the violence perpetrated by it, the need for challenging the state security perspective and offering feminist perspectives for

peace was highlighted along with *the role of women in peace initiatives*. Many presenters focused on the existing examples of women participating in the peace processes. The role of Naga Mothers' Association specifically came up for discussion. Their role in spanning the peace discussions and the response of the state and non-state actors was analysed in a critical manner. This very crucial women's initiative, it was argued, though recognised by both the state and non-state actors was also used by both to their advantage. Women in the process were marginalized.

Another paper focused on the women of Manipur and referred to Irom Sharmila's resilience. Women of Manipur, it was emphasized, represent an ethos of East Asia. This ethos is about greater freedom of women to organize and control their own lives more than in many other parts of the world. Though their inequality and oppression is not to be undermined, however, sexual freedom and opportunity to work outside the house offered them opportunities which were denied to many others. Emphasizing the role of women in East Asian cultures, besides Irom Sharmilla, reference was also made to Aung Sung Sui Kyi.

Among the major issues that were raised in this subtheme, 'Borders' remained a most crucial one. *Sufficient discussion took place around the phenomenon of borders and bordering; nationalism and its implications through borders; volatility of borders; shifting borders, displacements; divided families etc.* Special focus was placed on the implications of the borders on women in Jammu and Kashmir, Punjab and Manipur. Discussion revolved around the issues of shifting borders, divided families and the role of ideology. Also discussion took place around 'camps'. In a variety of situations people have been dislocated from their roots and homes and have been living in camps. Women among those displaced by conflict in the western sector in Punjab, or communal violence in Gujarat or shellings in Jammu and Kashmir, faced multiple kinds of marginalization.

Space was another major point in the discourse. The discourse on space for women ranged from Bangladeshi women in Indian prisons, who crossed borders, were adventurous and did not understand the constraints set up by borders and who found no difference between India and Bangladesh. While these women wanted freedom from borders, there were others like the migrant women consequent to riots who weave around an invisible border for reasons of security. A paper from Gujarat presented the 'Dhobi Ghat' as a space for women's conflict resolution.

The increasing circles of violence was another issue discussed where violence against women is not only perpetrated by the occupying Indian armed forces but



also by the local police forces. Those attempting to escape the violence, for instance in Manipur, found themselves becoming easy targets of traffickers. *The breakdown of law and order, police functions, and border controls, combined with globalization's markets and open borders, contributes to an increase in the trafficking of human beings.*

One important aspect of the sub theme was the use of not only case studies but also interpretations of women's lives in conflict through fiction.

### ***Documenting Gendered Histories: National, Regional, Local***

This sub theme focused on the use of non-conventional historical sources to recover the voices of women in historical and contemporary writings. Its main objective was to map the types of theoretical and methodological issues raised by the use of non-conventional historical sources especially histories based on oral and textual sources. The sub theme attracted about 45 abstracts out of which 25 were selected. Of these 19 were presented at the conference over two days. On the third day three women from diverse backgrounds narrated their own personal histories and enriched the discussions.

The sessions were divided into three parts. The first day covered issues pertaining to the use and character of textual and oral sources. The second day focused on the question of representation and participation of women in both movements and public life. The third day was an attempt to record the personal narratives of three activists from the north east and discuss their experiences with organizing women and fighting for their own rights.

The first session of the sub theme focused on the methods by which women's voices and experiences could be recovered in history writing. The papers presented used a variety of oral narratives and interviews, autobiographies, texts, photographs and story-telling as methods of recovering and documenting women's voices. These narrated how conventional historical sources such as official records, representations and archival materials often ignored the experience of women. The archival record was in many cases embedded in institutional structures and relationships that espoused dominant patriarchal values that showed the biased character of the very production and reproduction of historical knowledge. This created an invisibility of women in many historical writings and also marginalized their experiences. Therefore *utmost importance was to be given to the search for alternative sources and their preservation through methods like digital archiving and videography.* The use of such sources could create and often contradict mainstream historiography

and lead to interesting possibilities, both for the historical as well as contemporary times. Further they were also an important step in the creation of a collective memory. The papers covered diverse themes from the lives of women performers, women activists in diverse revolutionary and reformist movements, mahila samitis, as well as the little known histories of Mizo, and Naga women. Some of the papers also pointed towards the *role of social positioning and structures like caste, ethnicity and class in the structuring of collective memories.*

In the discussions questions were raised about *the contested nature and the limitations of the process of the construction of collective memory.* The character of the construction of the Self (also identity) by these women in their narratives was also a theme that came under discussion. The papers emphasized the agency of women as leaders and actors in history, contesting the dominant projection of women as victims, in contrast to women's own self perception as it came across in several papers. In a way the papers in this session attempted *to recover the voice and experience of women as the creators of history through diverse representations and interpretations.*

On the second day the focus was on the collective memories of women in public life and struggles. The papers largely focused on three themes: participation of women in anti-colonial struggles and movements; the nature of women's participation and their representation in post-independence movements: especially the Assam movements; and the representation of women in post-independence politics and their use by right wing socially conservative movements, eg., the representations of Rani Durgavati by the Gondwana Gantantrik Party. The third also linked up with the experience of women in state institutional structures like the police and of women prisoners. The papers based on the use of dairies and personal narratives as well as oral interviews, focused on the self perception of these women and their role in society.

One point that came out of the discussion related to the character of women's representation in potentially counter hegemonic collective memories. Thus the patriarchal character of the processes of leadership formation in movements like the Assam movement came under much discussion. Questions were raised about the ways in which women's voices were undermined in the larger interests of the movement. The whole idea of the personal narratives was to point towards the omission of lived experiences and how such lived experiences can enrich the movements themselves. Further the ideological factors and perspectives that underlie the structuring of these narratives came under



discussion. For example certain women wrote about some issues rather selectively while ignoring another set of issues. In many cases they did not allow access to their personal diaries for fear of harming the larger cause. This created an ambivalence in the memory itself and it was agreed that memories of protest had to be put to more stringent questioning. The contested and the hegemonic character of the collective memories outside the women's movement was one of the main focus of the discussion in this session. Some methodological issues on the process of collection of data and the dynamic nature of the collective memory also came up. *The subjectivity of the process of recording and recalling and its influence on the character of the memory itself became a subject of debate with unanswered questions.*

The last session of the sub-theme was an interactive session between three activists who recalled their personal and collective memories in the context of Assam, Tripura and Nagaland. Held in the form of a conversation, the session began with the activists giving their backgrounds and the social situation in which they started dreaming about changing their own and other people's lives. *The intertwining of the personal narratives with the histories of their own movements was interesting in that it showed how the personal and the collective are closely interwoven with each other. The social basis for the personalized memories also became clear through these narratives.*

It was interesting to see that all three women participating in the dialogue were leaders and activists from diverse backgrounds-one was the Assam General Secretary of the Anganwadi Union, another a leader of the students organization from Tripura and the third activist worked for the North Eastern Network in Nagaland. *All three were engaged in different types of work and mobilization but had remarkable similarities in their personal lives. The first common point was that all of them were single women who had faced many social sanctions and pressures. They also undertook responsibilities for their families and shared their experiences about the way in which they struggled with the aspirations that their families had for them, especially with regard to marriage. The second important point brought out by all three women related to the main impediments in the participation of women in movements of social change. Since all three were from the North East they narrated how traditional councils and their practices were discriminatory and often curbed the creativity of women. There were some instances of the stereotyping of women and the way in which they should behave. All three narrated how they had to negotiate such stereotypes and build their own organisations. The third aspect that was*

prominent in this conversation related to the *problems of women's activism even within larger movements and the patriarchal character of the leadership.*

The discussion in the session focused upon further probing of their conversations and personal narratives. It also brought out the experience of all three women outside the north eastern regions. The experience shared between these women and the audience highlighted the multiple levels of stereotyping faced by women of the region when they participated in larger processes of social change. It was unanimously agreed that there was a need to document and to understand each other in order to bridge the social and regional distance between the north east and the others. There was also a need to create a unity amongst women in order to combat and build struggles against discrimination and violence against women.

The sessions yielded a rich body of research and experiences that pointed towards the frontier areas of research in documenting women's histories. Papers and testimonies presented also showed that alternative sources and methodologies were needed to capture the experiences and voices of women in the writing of past and contemporary histories. The papers were an important step in an attempt to bring together this body of emerging research.

### ***Women's Movement's Engagement with Government Policies***

A total of 15 papers were presented over the three days. The issues discussed included women's struggles to access state-mediated economic entitlements, women's movements' interface with social movements aiming to universalize social protection for the poor and, legal changes and their implications for women's movements.

On the theme of state-sponsored economic entitlements, the papers grappled primarily with the question of how to critically understand women's *en masse* participation in women-targeted economic development programmes, such as micro credit, livelihood and other anti-poverty interventions. The papers presented positions that ranged from what some participants felt was an unreflective celebration of women's participation in anti-poverty programmes to its polar opposite - a blanket denunciation of rural development programmes, (whether Self Help Groups or Community Forestry Groups) and the very notion that the state might intervene in community management of its resources. A paper making the latter argument pointed to the fragmentation and isolation of women via processes of group formation, vesting leadership with a few people and creating new power

brokers within communities, using SHG women as agents in the multi-level marketing initiatives of corporates etc. The first position was critiqued, in the discussion, for its unthinking reproduction of state rhetoric, its equation of women's participation with outcomes such as 'empowerment' or 'gender equity', the non-engagement with the pressing question of the distribution of women's unpaid care work and subsistence work and, the apparent disinterest of development NGOs working in these areas in documenting or responding to these issues in any serious manner. For instance, are we unthinkingly using the word 'SHG movement' in a knee-jerk fashion? Might not other criteria influence our use of this phrase? Also, what mediates the transition of the SHG phenomenon to a 'movement'?

On the other hand *it was pointed out that the position that statist developmental projects must be denounced for their interference in the internal workings of communities was problematic. It assumes that state intervention can never have transformative possibilities and that communities are unmarked by power relations or asymmetries, all of which flow from external intervention.* Some in the audience pointed out that women and the oppressed castes are using the spaces opened up by state developmentalism and the challenge is to map how they are doing so and, what new contestations are generated when they do so. Both by assuming 'empowerment' to be an automatic outcome of women attending meetings, seeking loans and initiating livelihood activities or by denouncing in entirety these initiatives and therefore not engaging with them, we overlook an issue that begs serious investigation viz., *the question of how the social identities of women and solidarities and tensions amongst women are re-worked through rural development programmes.* More nuanced perspectives emerged in the papers that discussed how perspectives from women's movements shape and influence inter-linked struggles and campaigns for the right to food, to minimum wages, to social security and pensions and to social protection, more broadly. *These perspectives were aimed at making policy makers recognize that the census definition of the household (2 adults, 3 children) does not cover large sections of the Indian population, including Adivasis, the rural landless or even the urban poor, while placing on the agenda the issue of individual entitlements and forcing acknowledgment of women as heads of households.* This is despite the fact that we may be careful to not reinforce women's 'natural' responsibility for food provisioning at the household level, or challenging, at the household and community levels, women's sense of shame in admitting to hunger and food inadequacy and at campaigning for linking maternity entitlements to minimum wages lost/foregone, following from the understanding that all women are workers. The paper presenters argued that *labour and feminist movements and discourses*

*have been intersecting and shaping each others' demands and campaigns and called for greater reflection of the vocabularies we use and the way we represent our struggles to ourselves and to others, whether through the 'rights' or 'empowerment' frameworks.*

The question of acknowledging women as workers was also discussed in the specific context of state / legislative action towards this end when it conflicts with another important interest group / vote block the state is interested in cultivating viz., the middle classes. A paper on organizing/ mobilizing domestic workers in West Bengal foregrounded this issue in the light of specific challenges such as the 'double invisibility' of domestic workers who labour within households (never recognized as workspaces) in a social and political environment that devalues care work and the prevalence of informal bonding mechanisms between employer and employee through which female domestic workers negotiate their entitlements. While the state government's welfare schemes for unorganized workers have been expanded so as to bring domestic workers within their ambit, the continuing use of the term 'domestic servant' in policy documents reinforces their subordinate class status and servitude. While this paper primarily documented NGO experiences in organizing domestic workers and also therefore the tendency of these initiatives to rely on continuing support from NGOs, a few papers dealt with the issue of women's autonomous and collective resistance seeking to pressure the state to respond to their livelihood and survival-related concerns. A paper on the history of women's movements in Manipur reminded us that women active in the local market exchanges (or 'market women') had valiantly resisted an increase in the water tax and the export of rice during a period of famine in the pre-colonial years, waging a 'women's war' to preserve and protect their survival resources. Another paper on women's participation in collective struggles sought to explore the 'grey area' between organized social/ political movements and the everyday invisible agency that women exercise. Through transgressive behavior such as mouthing obscenities and issuing threats of physical violence, women workers in the tea plantations of the Dooars region appropriated public spaces as political actors, even as they claimed to act as mothers struggling and unable to feed hungry children. This paper sparked off discussion on how women have invested the category of motherhood with political meaning and deployed it as a weapon of struggle in diverse contexts – as mothers of the 'disappeared' in Latin America, in Sri Lanka, Kashmir, the North East via the Naga Mothers Association and so on.

Papers on the 'protection' of women via legal interventions further opened up discussion of state intervention as a double-edged sword that simultaneously oppresses and creates spaces for women. In India, legislation against child

marriage has emerged as a critical area of state intervention with the National Population Policy (2000) and the National Empowerment Policy (2001) insisting that 18 be the legal age of marriage for girls and the Prohibition of Child Marriages Act (2006) recommending that all marriages below the age of 16 be made void. One of the papers mapped state legislative interventions in the light of conflicts between state and community (ex: conflicts between the Muslim personal law board in Andhra Pradesh and the State Women's Commission on this issue), the state's evident incapacity to implement its laws (ex: child marriage prohibition officers not knowing that they have been vested with this responsibility), the multiple bureaucratic hurdles and bottlenecks that make it difficult for families to access social sector schemes aiming to raise the age of marriage for girls and the strategic use of these laws by household and kin-based patriarchies to foist kidnapping cases on 'elopement' marriages just below the legal age of consent. While there is, on the one hand, a strong conservative tendency to criminalize sexual activity amongst 'very sexual young adults' as one respondent pointed out, and this tendency is reflected in the language of court judgments, there is also the disturbing rise in the incidence of political organizing by intermediate backward castes in states such as Tamil Nadu that seeks to prevent women from invoking the law to sustain marriages of choice, especially when they choose to live with Dalit men. It was pointed out that the links between social policies of the state to curb/contain child marriage and the social impulses, fears and anxieties of a caste society to control women's sexual choices and relationships must be closely scrutinized and further elaborated by feminist scholarship through a critical reading of the making of laws.

Another paper on legal interventions highlighted the welcome changes introduced by the new provisions of the Criminal Amendment Act (2013) to the Indian Penal Code (IPC) even as it cautioned that we remain alert to what is lost in the translation from people's movements, agitation and popular anger (such as that which followed the gang-rape and death of the young woman in Delhi in December 2013) to juridical embodiment via specific legal amendments. The Criminal Law Amendment retains the idea of rape as an individual event not addressing thereby the systemic culture of rape, treats spousal rape as an exception thereby making some rapes unreal and retains the notion of outraging the modesty of women, even if it is made a non-bailable offence. The proper subject of rape is still legally constituted in particular ways – as a woman who must be deserving of state protection. A third paper on legal interventions suggested that a fuller picture of women's engagement with the law could emerge through field research (that it proposed to undertake) on the experiences of women who use laws (in particular the Right to Information Act, the NREGS and laws on domestic violence, sexual

harassment and property inheritance) to redress a rights denial. What might change in a woman's personal relationships and social context during this process even if her access to the courts is mediated by an NGO or a woman's organization? And what might empowerment mean from the vantage point of women who have experienced a rights denial and have sought redress from the state?

The question of how different socio-economic classes of women access state or market-mediated and privately provided resources was discussed in the context of state support (or its absence) for elder care. Drawing on interviews with older women, a paper presenter argued that the interlocking structures of ageism, sexism, caste vulnerability and class deprivation shape the lives of older women in a city such as Guwahati with high reported rates of elder abuse. The 'Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizen's Act of 2007' that ostensibly aims to protect the elderly by fining or punishing children (the inheritors of property) who do not support their parents have little or nothing to offer property-less women without adult children. While the Assam State Policy appears utopian insofar as it envisions the creation of safe and comfortable havens for the elderly, destitute older women continue to live on the streets and some of the more privileged elderly find shelter in retirement homes to which their Non-Resident Indian (NRI) children make direct payment.

All paper presenters engaged with international conventions and national policies that have a bearing on women's lives. On the whole, the sub-theme presentations and deliberations delineated the complexities involved in invoking the state, rallying against the state, moving the state/ reforming the state and conversing with fellow-travellers when doing so. All acknowledged, in different ways, the inevitability of engaging with state and government policies given the prevalence of patriarchies so deeply embedded within all domains – households, kin/communities, markets and state institutions and actors.

## **Cultural and other activities**

**The IAWS Conference provided an opportunity to organize a series of cultural events, during the Conference days.**

A significant yet brief component of the XIV National Conference of Women's Studies was *Dristi – Celluloid Representations* on 4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> February 2014 at Phanidhar Dutta Memorial Hall of Gauhati University. The first day saw screenings of the award winning and internationally acclaimed regional film *Aideu- Behind the Screen* directed by Arup Manna and a documentary, *A Symbol of Courage* by Pankaj Kalita based on the life of a feminist from Assam. The delegates later had the opportunity to interact with the directors who were invited and felicitated. Arup Manna, the director of *Aideu* discussed issues about the making of the film based on his own conversations with the first Assamese actress of *Joymoti* (the first Assamese film by Jyoti Prasad Agarwala) at a time when women were excluded from the world of art or cinema. Consequently she was ostracised in her own village and had to live a tragic life of poverty. Among other issues Manna stated his purpose of making films as an exteriorization of his deep felt *angst* towards social/cultural/economic injustice.

On the second day a documentary on the matrilineal society of Meghalaya, *Spirit of Graceful Lineage* directed by Prerana Barbarooah Sharma was shown followed by several *shorts* projecting themes of violence on women, rape, women's rights, education and so forth. These films from around the world produced by an international NGO called 'Cultures of Resistances' offered political and sexual violation of women's rights in Samburu (Africa) and Afghanistan. The screenings were followed by a long session of discussions among the delegates on similar issues and ways of empowerment of women in remote regions of the world. The Film screenings and selection was undertaken by Dr. Asha Kuthari, from Gauhati University.

### **Cultural Activities during the conference**

A series of cultural events were also organized in the course of the Conference events. These included a musical evening where the well known rock band

from Shillong Fourth element performed on the 6<sup>th</sup> February. The highlight of the evening was the playing of the Bihu anthem by Monisha Behal. On the 7<sup>th</sup> students of Gauhati University performed the Bihu dance while TISS students performed a play titled.....

The North East Network shouldered the responsibility to set up cultural spaces during the Conference for people to attend, see and absorb a variety of expressions on those 4 days such as Assamese/ Bodo /Tiwa dance expressions along with contemporary music from Meghalaya and Naga harvest songs. Exposure of traditional products such as herbal medicinal products, millet food and ethnic weaves were exhibited through the stalls of North East Network and Anwasha Kalyan Samiti.

On 4<sup>th</sup> February, there were two segments in the cultural programme. Naga Folk song from Chizami village, Phek district. Eight women from Chizami village, Phek district presented community work song on agriculture and displayed different agriculture crops and tools throughout the songs). Interestingly, all the women, belonged to the Chakesang tribe of Nagaland, were from the village of Sakraba, Phek district. They were all agriculturists who were also excellent weavers as well as folk singers.

Their presentation highlighted Chakesang art and culture. The second was the Bareboronia Bihu .Bareboronia means colourful. A mixed bihu performance was presented by dancers and musicians representing different form of bihu of different tribes namely, Tiwa, Hajong, Mising, Bodo, Goalporia, Jhumur), including Bhorthaal Nritya (Sattriya Music based dance form using cymbals. The mesmerizing performance for 80 minutes also showcased different traditional musical instruments like Dhol, Pepa, Toka, Gogona, Flute, Taal, Khol, Nagara, Madal, Khanjari, Kham, etc. the artists included Poshetsolu, Thunoselu, Khuhucholu, Venulu, Vecutalu, Theyisulu, Pukhaculu, and Vesapolu. The songs they sang were Chu-tezu-li or millet sowing song usually sung during the month of



February; Kushe-vuzu-li or jobstar thrushing song sung in the month of December; Nekro-vuzu-li or soil breaking work song sung in the month of April; Thene-li sung during celebrations and festivals; Theri-li, a war song and lastly a duet with tati which is a one string instrument and sung during celebrations and festivals. The performance was choreographed by Dreamly Gogoi and the troupe was from her school, Gandharba Kala Kendra, Guwahati. The audience danced to the tune of Bihu dances and some were keen to learn the rhythmic steps and play instruments.

**On 5<sup>th</sup> February** Contemporary music was presented by 4<sup>th</sup> Element. Based in Shillong, 4<sup>th</sup> Element is the only band in Northeast India that bends and blends the four styles of funk, jazz, R'n'B and soul in its quest for creative expression. . Heading the band was Ribor mb, a music director in the Northeast, who is also a session keyboardist for bands like Soulmate, Lou majaw and others. Sara Lee, a young and dynamic singer, lent her soulful voice. During the conference, her performances included songs which went conveyed messages to break shackles which prevented women from wanting to be what they are. Others in the band included Amit Mullick playing the guitar and is also a session guitarist for Soul mate, Lou Majaw and others. Sam Shullai, on the drums and finally, on bass, Jeffrey Laloo, The highlight of the evening was the playing of the Bihu anthem by Monisha Behal from NEN.

The closing function of the Conference on **7<sup>th</sup> February** was a Musical Valedictory. A folk orchestra consisting of 25 traditional musical instruments was performed by students of Gauhati University. Eternal songs of Late Bhupen Hazarika were also performed by a young student on the flute.

Students of TISS Guwahati Campus performed a musical play on the negative impact of trafficking and larger issues of violence against

women. **The issue focused on was Can we afford to tolerate human trafficking in our society?**

The answer to this being a clear NO. The performance drew attention to human trafficking and the manner in which social-economic factors are contributing to this. The performance began by depicting of the gang rape of a girl and moved on to narrating her journey to the vulnerabilities and continued exploitation, only to be rejected by her own family which does not accept her because of fear of social pressure and 'shame.', her memory, of abuse, turns to guilt, to be followed by a sense of victimhood, and vengeance, all of which she carries into her relationships in the following years. Her attempts at resistance and starting afresh meet with several challenges and re-victimhood. The character of the woman was cast in a mould to go beyond victimhood and shame to raise questions about the perpetrators. The performance poignantly captured the life, experience and vulnerabilities of countless women in India who deal with such incidents and attacks in their daily lives. The power packed performance by the TISS students left an impact on the audience, moving them to anger and a fresh resolve to deal with such violence and other forms of subordination and oppression. Thus the issue of human trafficking was used to raise wider questions of linkages between violence, social development and human rights.

### **Book Release**

The IAWS conference provided the occasion for other forms of intellectual activity. The first day saw the launch of Nandita Haksar's book titled \_\_\_\_\_ by Ilina sen, President, IAWS.

On 5 Feb 2014 at the end of Plenary Panel II Sage Publications India Pvt. Ltd sponsored the book release: *Women's Agency and Social Change: Assam and Beyond*, authored by Meeta Deka. Women in the Northeast: Issues ,

Struggles and Challenges, The book was released by Iilina Sen, President, IAWS. Prof. Geraldine Forbes who wrote the Foreword was also present at the function. Speaking on the occasion, Forbes observed that Meeta Deka through her book *Women's Agency and Social Change: Assam and Beyond*, had addressed two marginalized topics: women and the northeast. Designed to encourage feminist research by addressing salient theoretical and methodological questions and identifying topics and areas for future exploration, the book was a valuable starting point. Deka urges the reader to think about the absence of women in historical record, the difficulty of retrieving their stories and the importance of locating women as agents of change and restoring them to their rightful place in history. This delightful book will prove to become an indispensable tool for teaching the history of Assamese women and women's history in India.

### **Resolutions adopted at the XIV National Conference held in Guwahati**

#### **1. Withdraw AFSPA**

The AFSPA and other similar Acts like PSA (J&K) remain the most repressive laws in India. We propose removal of these laws as these create an environment of violence against women and have serious repercussions on women's economic and social life. They have created a climate of impunity which we must attempt to remove by taking up the issue around the recommendations made by Justice Verma Committee.

The IAWS supports the continuing struggle by Irom Sharmila for the repeal of AFSPA and hoped that she can end her fast soon.

(this Resolution came from Subtheme 9 and was Proposed by: Rekha Chowdhary & seconded by Asha Hans)

#### **2. Violence against women in and from the North East**

The IAWS condemns the rising incidence of violence against women in and from the North East. The IAWS notes with alarm growing signs of racialized violence against youth from the North East in mainstream India, such as the city of Delhi. Women students and workers from the NER have been persistently protesting the discrimination and sexual violence and harassment they have to endure in their everyday lives. The IAWS expresses its solidarity against all such forms of violence and discrimination.

(Proposed by Mary E. John, Seconded by Veena Poonacha)

### 3. Communal Violence in Muzzafarnagar, U.P.

IAWS condemns the communal violence that broke out in Muzaffarnagar, U.P which displaced thousands of Muslims during the winter months of 2013. IAWS condemn the inhuman conditions in which the camps were abruptly razed. Reports of sexual violence and child deaths are deeply disturbing. The IAWS demands that the State government generously resettle rehabilitate and compensate the victims and that justice should be ensured and criminals brought to book.

(proposed by Nandini Manjrekar, Seconded by Varsha)

4. The IAWS condemns the attacks orchestrated by Right wing organizations with local television channels such as DY365 and a couple of others, ransacking the office of one of the organizations supporting activities organizing the first Queer Pride Parade in the city of Guwahati on 9<sup>th</sup> February '2014. The IAWS protests these attacks of 3<sup>rd</sup> February '2014 and extends support to the activists and collectives organizing the queer pride March, signifying inclusiveness of our diverse and plural societies. The IAWS furthermore supports the Queer Pride Movement in the North east region.

(Proposed by: Preeti Oza and Seconded by Meera Velayudhan)

## 5. Sexual Violence against Dalit Women

The IAWS condemns the widespread incidents of targeted sexual assault and gang rape against dalit women, including cases of murder, especially in the state of Haryana in recent years. The IAWS demands that the state machinery fulfill its responsibility to investigate these crimes and bring the perpetrators to justice. The prevailing climate of fear has grown due to the impunity with which these crimes are being perpetrated. This must be countered on an urgent basis so that Dalit girls and their families are able to lead their lives and pursue their aspirations with dignity and security.

(Proposed by Sangeeta, Seconded by Anita Ghai)

## 6. On the challenges faced by Women with Disability

The IAWS recommends the inclusion of issues and challenges faced by women with disability as part of the Curriculum in Women's Studies Curriculum, with special emphasis on how conflict (both familial and social) has its profound impact on understanding the structures within which disability operates and remains embedded. In this context the issues of structures and communicational access of care must take centre stage within the dialogue of women's groups.

(Proposed by: Chhaya Datar, Seconded by Samita Sen)

## 7. On Article 377

The IAWS expresses deep regret and shock and registers its protest at the Supreme Court judgment of Dec.11<sup>th</sup>, 2014, on Section 377, overturning the progressive judgment of the Delhi High Court (Shah & Muralidhar) of July 2, 2009, and creating a set back to the struggles and efforts of LGBTQI people and all others who have supported these struggles. The Delhi High Court Judgment had foregrounded Dr. Ambedkar's insistence on

Constitutional morality being the bedrock of rights of all citizens rather than public morality in India's deeply hierarchical and prejudice entrenched society. The IAWS continues to support the struggles and efforts for justice, dignity and rights of all marginalized people, including queer people.

(Proposed by Asha Achutan Seconded by SwatiDahodray )

#### 8. On the Declining Child Sex Ratio

The declining child sex ratio is of serious concern to the 14<sup>th</sup> IAWS as it means lesser women in the future. We resolve that the PCPNDT Act, painstakingly pushed through by the women's movement is implemented with a display of political will on the part of the state and not in the half-hearted manner as is presently the case. We also resolve that the one stop crisis centre for women for addressing the immediate needs of victims of violence, as recommended by the Usha Mehra Commission be implemented by framing of the rules and guideline, a process to which we from the women's movement would be happy to contribute.

(Proposed by Sehjo Singh, seconded by Sabu George)

#### 9. On Abolition of the Jogini System

The IAWS recommends the abolition of the Jogini System and also that those affected by it be identified and measures taken to support them to start their lives afresh.

(Proposed by Meera Velayudhan and seconded by Sujata Surepally)