Warrior Mothers: Narratives of Women from the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA)

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Abstract

The archetype of the mother is always perceived as 'pacifist' in war and conflict situations. However, there are numerous examples when mothers are not 'pacifist' but become participants and perpetrators of war. This article, through the analysis of the experiences of the mothers in the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), an armed nationalist organization waging war against the Indian nation-state to establish 'sovereignty' and 'liberate' Assam since1979, argues that mothers can also be warriors, going beyond their 'pacifist' archetype. With the analysis of the oral narratives of the women cadres of the organization, this article discusses how these mothers tried to negotiate their identity of being warriors and mothers and aims to set an alternative identity of the mother as 'warrior-mother'.

Keywords: Warrior mother, United Liberation Front of Assam, ULFA, Conflict, Pacifism

Introduction

In the context of conflict and war, mothers have normally been perceived as the 'peace initiators' or the 'mothers of martyr sons', celebrated as icons of sacrifice (Allen, 2009; Enloe, 2000; French, 2001; Hamilton, 2007; Manchanda, 2001; Peteet, 1997). This pacifist notion of mothers is based on the idea of man being naturally linked to warfare, and women, with their caregiver nature, linked to peace (Ruddick, 1989; Yuval-Davis, 1997). Motherhood is considered to be the deterrent of the binary. Many parts of the world, especially conflict-ridden areas, have witnessed movements by mothers as promoters of peace, using the perception of 'motherhood' to confront authoritative rules or to organize movements for a better living environment for their families (Femenia and Carlos, 1987; Miller, 2009; Mooney, 2007; Strelnyk, 2019). In all these movements, women could make their voices audible in the public sphere by making the conventional notion of motherhood their political identity. In fact, the conventional notion of motherhood, which identifies the mother as a pacifist, provided these women with some kind of agency in the public sphere of politics. But at the same time, this pacifist archetype of the mother in conflict and wartime situations limits the role of the mother only to the traditionally sanctioned role of a victim, a protester, and a mourner. (French, 2001).

In situations of conflict, women in south Asian nations—whether the ethnic conflict of Sri Lanka, Maoist civil war in Nepal, or conflict in India's North East—have always taken the forefront to prevent outbreaks of conflict and violence. Women organizing themselves under different banners have tried to resist outbreaks of violence and mitigate peacebuilding in the aftermath of conflict. In Nepal, mothers, and grandmothers organized and protested against the Maoists'

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forcible recruitment of one child per family. *Ama Samuha* (Mother's Group), a grassroots women's organization, contributed to peacebuilding in Nepal by mediating conflict and taking up the community-level development program (Luintel, 2016). In Sri Lanka, Mothers' Front, a grassroots women's organization, was formed to protest the 'disappearance' of young men in violence by militants and state forces (Alwis, 2008). In 1984, Mothers' Front of the North in Sri Lanka started protesting against the arbitrary arrest and detention of two hundred Tamil youth. Women took the initiative to make peace in the conflict-ridden North-eastern part of Sri Lanka (Manchanda, 2005). Three mothers fasted to death to pressure LTTE and Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) for a ceasefire. LTTE valorised the 'martyrdom' of these women and appropriated 'motherhood' for the cause of the nation glorifying the sacrifice of the mothers (Manchanda, 2005).

Post-colonial Northeast India marked an era of the emergence of numerous insurgent groups with the region tagged as a 'conflict zone'. In the situation of armed conflict, different women organizations took an active part in peacebuilding processes in the region for the last few decades. The collectives of the 'tribal mothers' especially are engaging themselves in peacebuilding and conflict resolution and in that process attempted to exercise their right and take on a greater role in politics and policy (Kolas, 2014). Out of the numerous examples, one well-known instance comes from the Naga Mothers Association (NMA) and its initiatives in the peace process. The NMA, which started as a social welfare organization, reoriented its activities to more peace politics, albeit on the couch of motherhood politics (Das, 2008; Manchanda & Kakran, 2017). The NMA prioritized its 'stop all bloodshed' campaign in Nagaland enthused by different armed groups and started extending support to all grass-root level women's organizations (Patra and Manna, 2008). Mothers Union (Meghalaya), *Meira Paibi* (Manipur), Mizo Women Federation (Mizoram)are some other women organizations participating in the peacebuilding process. Anuradha Dutta (2008) suggests that the Bodo women in Assam have always been active in the peace process under the banner of All Bodo Women's Welfare Federation (ABWWF).

The most remarkable demonstration by women was the naked protest by a group of women of *Meira Paibi* in front of Assam Rifles headquarters in Imphal. They held a banner that read: 'Indian army rape us'. This protest was provoked by the custodial rape and murder of a young Manipuri woman Thangjam Manorama by counter-insurgency soldiers of Assam rifles. While nationalist discourses read the protest as desperation of the mothers who wanted to protect their children, feminists from the Northeast like Dolly Kikon criticized that this kind of nationalist narrative has limited women's roles only to mothers and actors in peacebuilding, and reduced the space of women in the politics of the Northeast as social but not political (Bora, 2010).

Apart from the narrative of women being peace initiators in conflict situations because of their role as natural caregivers and nurturers, there are instances when mothers are not pacifists, but rather perpetrators of war and actors of politics. For example, the mother activists of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), an armed struggle group from the North-eastern region of India, provide another perspective to look at mothers in conflict and wartime situations.

Motherhood is the subject of a widely discussed domain in feminist scholarship. Motherhood can be understood considering a mother's activities, understandings, and experiences (Arendell, 2000). Motherhood is universally associated with femininity and defined as dynamic social interactions located in a societal context with given gender norms (Arendell, 2000). However, with the publication of *Gender Trouble* by Judith Butler (1990), it became generally accepted that gender binaries no longer stand; all identities are fluid and in the process of becoming. The central argument of Butler's theory is that no identity exists prior to the act by the subjects, and the subjects came into being through their 'performances'. Thus, Butler states that

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motherhood is performative, which implies that women do not become a mother by the biological function of giving birth, but by performing culturally encoded lived realities. Therefore, motherhood can be performed in different ways in different contexts, implying that mothers fall under a heterogeneous category. For example, drawing from the experiences of the mothers from conflict-ridden Kashmir, Shazia Malik (2020) argues that Muslim mothering is neither homogeneous nor passive, but agential. With this understanding, this paper analyses the experiences of the mother activists of ULFA and tries to look at how far these mothers could create an alternative idea of motherhood by being warrior mothers. Can we look beyond the 'pacifist' archetype of the mother by analysing the lived experiences of the activist mother of ULFA?

Background of the Conflict

The formation of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) in 1979 is a historical moment in postcolonial Assam. It marks the emergence of 'armed struggle' and 'secessionist' movements with the participation of the youth and the massive state retaliation in the form of 'counter-terrorism' operations. The ULFA was formed by a group of young people gathered at Rang Ghar (in Sibsagar), an amphitheater constructed by the Ahom, to liberate Assam through armed national liberation struggle from the clutches of the 'illegal occupation' of India and to 'establish a sovereign independent Assam' (Mahanta, 2013, p.39).

In the initial stage of the formation of the ULFA, it had a strong ideological support base among the common people, especially from the middle classes. But due to the organizations' gradual involvement in violent activities like extortion and murder, the popular image of the organization started losing public sympathy. However, though there may have been a noticeable decline in public sympathy for the ULFA's activities, the people, by and large, seemed to be against any kind of 'stern' action being taken against its members (Misra, 2000).

In 1990, ULFA was denounced as a 'terrorist group' by the Government of India, and a series of military operations were carried out against the organization. Operation Bajrang was led by the Indian army between September 1990 and April 1991. It was followed by Operation Rhino in September 1991. In 2003, Operation All Clear was launched against the ULFA by the Bhutanese Army since many camps were operating in the jungles of southern Bhutan. This series of counter-insurgency operations weakened the base of the organization. From 2005, with the arrest of the top leadership of the outfit, the three-decade-long conflict entered into another phase, paving the way for peace talks between the outfit and the Indian state. However, a faction of the organisation named the ULFA (Swadhin) is still upholding the struggle for independence of Assam under the leadership of Paresh Baruah, the commander-in-chief of the organisation.

Methods and Ethical Issues

The present article is based on the oral narratives of women who were activists of the ULFA. The interviews were conducted mainly with the pro-talk faction and surrendered members of the ULFA. The number of interviewees was increased by the snowballing method developing based on a few initial contacts, and through this method, I reached twenty women for in-depth interviews. The life story narrative was adopted in which the interviewees were encouraged to narrate life stories in their own manner. The interview model was semi-structured with open-ended questions. This model of interview allowed space to formulate research questions in the process of the interview itself whenever required following the interview guide (probe).

This research project, which demanded the participation of human subjects, needed to take into consideration research ethics and dilemmas confronted in the fieldwork. My fieldwork, which included in-depth interviews with members of the ULFA, in fact, raises many ethical dilemmas to rethink the ethical approach to field work. To look at human subjects from the rationality of academia and at the same time be empathetic to the respondents and their subjectivity itself was a challenge during the fieldwork. Even though there are no uniform and universal ethical issues, the general issues that arise in the field include consent of the respondents, the vulnerability of the respondents, the question of trust and confidentiality, sensitive topics, and physical safety of the respondents. Recognizing that ethnography is based on intense human interactions in diverse situations, it would also suggest that 'there is no simple rule or ethical principle' that produces ethical social and behavioural research (Seiber, 2004, p.402). So, it is the particularity of the research field which determines the issues in that particular context of the field.

There is a strong but contested disagreement among feminists about speaking for others. The problem can be looked at from two perspectives: first, the location of the speaker might affect the truth. In other words, the speaker has the epistemological ability to authorize and de-authorize one's speech. Second, not only the epistemological position but the privileged socio-cultural position of the speaker can also affect the representation of the truth.

My epistemological position provides me the power to represent the voice of these women. So, it is the prime duty of this study to represent the reality and truth of the lived experiences of these women. But representing the reality is not unproblematic. My analysis differs from the way the respondents look at the truth or reality. For example, most of the women agreed that they were treated equally with the men in the organization and they were 'respected'. But later on, when I started interpreting their excerpts, their responses did not fit with their idea of 'equality' and 'respect'. Providing critical comments on respondents' existing practices and views can be unsettling, threatening, and disempowering to the informants. Gayatri Spivak (1988) criticizes knowledge production by western intellectuals in which the oriental society is essentialized as homogeneous and the 'object' of study, providing little opportunities to the subalterns of the third world to speak of their own. She promotes 'speaking to others' rather than 'speaking for others', which allowed the oppressed to produce 'counter sentences' to suggest new historical narratives. The spontaneous mutual dialogues, which occurred many times in the conversations traversing the rigid boundaries of self/other, provided the scope for 'speaking to others'. For example, one of the respondents expressed her views on the menstruation taboo in Assamese society and how it made her feel excluded while she was taking shelter in different families.[2] Belonging to the same socio-cultural background and being brought up in rural Assam, I could connect to her experiences. A critical dialogue with the respondents on the menstruation taboo, which is disempowering for women, made the conversation interesting and enriching for both of us.

The ULFA was banned as a 'terrorist organization' in 1989 by the government of India. Many of these members, both surrendered and the pro-talk faction, are still under different legal procedures. So, issues of confidentiality, consent, and trust were very crucial for my fieldwork. Explaining the purpose of my research, research method, and possible outcome to the respondents required me to be familiar with their situation, especially when the respondents belonged to the rural villages and small-towns. The question of familiarity was not only crucial for me but also to the respondents as they were going to disclose their experience and were not comfortable sharing

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[2]In many societies in India, menstruation is surrounded by myths and taboos which exclude women from articipating in many aspects of socio-cultural life. Women are considered impure and dirty while menstruating, and this restricts their movements and activities during these days.

their experiences with a mere stranger. Considerable time was spent in developing personal 'rapport' with the respondents to gain trust, assure confidentiality, and attain familiarity with their situations. Most of the respondents were contacted based on a few initial contacts who were members of the organisation and their close acquaintances. It helped them to gain more confidence to share their experiences with a stranger. Respondents were met more than once to have better familiarity with their present situation. Thus, attempts were made to make the respondents more comfortable with an unknown researcher. My cultural affinity with the respondents as a native Assamese language speaker helped me immensely to apprehend them and also make them comfortable and make it easier for them to express themselves in the familiar language.

The respondents can be placed under the unique condition of vulnerability as they still had not surrendered to the government, and numerous legal procedures were pending against them. Another question of vulnerability emerges from their present socio-political location. As most of these women are now middle-aged wives and mothers, exposure to their past days of activism might harm their present respectable status in society. These women were placed in a unique position of vulnerability because of their unconventional pasts and their present social status of respectability.

The 'Imagined' Mothers in Assam

Assam is characterized by the conjunction of both tribal and caste Hindu social formation. There is a self-proclaimed assertion that the society in Assam is egalitarian, where the caste system doesn't exist and women get equal status. But this assertion is demystified by the fact that the tribes are marginalized and the society is highly patriarchal, adhering to the traditional caste Hindu gender norms. However, Assam has been free from many social practices like child marriage, widow burning, dowry, and female infanticide. The self-sufficient traditional economy of Assam has necessitated the participation of womenfolk in labor, which, in another way, makes women visible and provides them with more physical freedom and mobility (Hazarika, 2008).

Nevertheless, all these practices do not make the society of Assam a gender-equal or non-patriarchal society. While the long tradition of Hinduism is considered to be the main reason behind the stereotyping of gender roles in society, there may be another perspective to look at it. While talking about motherhood in North Korea, Ryang (2000) has argued that it was not only the legacy of Confucianism, which is the main reason for the construction of women essentially as a mother, but it is also the new cult of leadership and patriarchal discourses that essentialized femininity with maternity. Similarly, it has been a pervasive trope in India through the twentieth century where motherhood became a subject of state policy for modernizing projects (Chatterjee, 1989; Sarkar, 1993; Sen, 1993; Qadeer, 1998).

In India, motherhood started to become a subject of nationalist projects in the nineteenth century when the image of the mother was politicized through the nationalist discourse. Jasodhara Bagchi (1990) argues that when it comes to nationalist reconstruction of motherhood in colonial India, to lend force to nationalism, an 'ideal motherhood' was constructed by the bourgeois nationalist project of nineteenth-century Bengal. A religious, cultural, and aesthetic domain was politicized with the help of the notion of motherhood. The bourgeois nationalism of the nineteenth century caught hold of the image of the mother to represent nationalist aspirations. Women and women's bodies became central to the process of nation-making. Samita Sen (1993) suggests that the self-styled cultural revivalists of the nineteenth century portrayed the nation in feminine terms. The core of this nationalist project was the creation of ethnicized community identities involving

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the identification of women with culturally and morally invested domestic domains and the projection of a multi-layered and empowered mother image. The nation was termed as the 'motherland', and its protection became the major duty of the sons of the motherland. The icon of the motherland became the honor of the men who would sacrifice their lives to protect the motherland. The overarching nationalist aspiration was not only carried in Bengal, but also to other parts of the country, and the image of the ideal mother became the site of a middle-class bourgeois nationalist project (Gupta, 2001).

In Assam, the nationalist project was carried on by the Calcutta-educated middle class or the elite class by taking up the mission of reviving language, culture, literature, and interpreting tradition in glorifying ways (Baruah, 1999; Baruah, 2012). Education became a major facet of the nationalist and modernizing project. A section of Assamese elites like Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, Gunabhiram Barua, Hem Barua, and many others started advocating for women's education, widow remarriage, and other social issues. As a result, a few Assamese women came to Calcutta to attain formal education. But there always existed a conservative backlash against those who supported women's education. In fact, women's education was advocated to make them better housewives or mothers. For, example Sarat Chandra Goswami, who later became an inspector of schools, spells out the value of women's education in his article on *'AmarSamaj'* (Our Society) in 1904, where he speaks of educating women to be *'grihalakshmis'* (the goddess of the house) who needs to be well educated to look after children's physical and mental development (Mahanta, 2008).

An ideal image of 'womanhood' was constructed through a nationalist project of glorification of tradition which essentially produced the new image of the mother adorned with chastity, docility, self-sacrifice, and unconditional love. This embodied ideal was metaphorically signified to represent the nation—*matribhumi* (motherland)—and language—*Matribhaxa* (mother tongue). This representation of the nation as mother resonated through the patriotic songs and poetry of nineteenth-century Assamese literature. This period is marked by the creation of a new genre of patriotic songs and poetry expressing the nationalist spirit of worshipping the motherland and offering their lives for its protection.[3]This motherland trope was so strong that it came alive later during the Indo-Chinese war of 1962 and the 'Assam agitation' of 1979-1985. Sanjib Baruah (1994) suggests how the motif of a mother as a nation appeared in the songs of Bhupen Hazarika in the post-colonial construction of 'micro- nationalism' in Assam. Baruah refers to a song of Hazarika where the body of a mother is metaphorically signified with the landscape of Assam where *Luit* (river Brahmaputra) becomes the affection of the mother (Baruah, 1994). During the mass mobilization of Assam Agitation and Language Movement of the 1960s *joi aai Asom* (hail

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[3]Assamese nationalism emerges in the nineteenth century, asserting the distinctive identity of the Assamese language i.e., *Matri Bhaxa* (mother tongue) and the land of Assam as *Janani* (mother). In the effort to assert the distinctive identity of the Assamese language *'Asomia Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sabha'* (Society for the Development of Assamese Language) was established in 1888 by young Assamese students with the motto *Siro Senehi Mur Bhaxa Janani* (Mother tongue is my eternal love). The literature produced in forms of poetry or songs in the late 19th and 20th century have often resonated the popular trope of 'nation as mother'. The poetic piece of Lakshminath Bezbaruah 'O Mur Aponar Dekh' is remarkable. The last stanza of the song can be roughly translated as 'O' my land of birth; O' my mother Asom; Let me have one; Look at your face; My heart hasn't been sated'. Later on, this song was adopted as the state song of Assam in 1927. Numerous creative works produced during this period by Kamalakanta Bhattacharya, Padmadhar Chaliha, Jyotiprashad Agarwala, Ambikagiri Roychoudhuri, Nalinibala Devi, and many more imagined the 'nation/land as mother' and urged that it was the rightful duty of the sons of the land to protect 'mother Assam'.

mother Assam) and *siro senehi mur bhaxa Janani* (mother tongue is my eternal love) became household slogans. These popular slogans portray the obligation towards mother tongue and motherland with the underpinning tone of protection of both.

The Warrior Mothers of the ULFA

The academic historiography of the ULFA has hardly mentioned the women activists of the organization. However, the presence of the women cadre in the ULFA can be assumed from the numerous examples of news reports of women members of the ULFA getting arrested. For example, *The Times of India* (2003) report titled 'top ULFA women militant nabbed' reported the arrest of Pranati Deka, the cultural secretary of the ULFA, near the India Bangladesh border when she came for medical treatment of her child with her associate, even though there are no written documents showing the point in time in which women started entering into the fold of the ULFA. However, unofficial documentation can be retrieved from the oral narratives of members of the organization. After a decade of the ULFA's existence, women gradually entered the ULFA during the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, when the activities and the popularity of the organization were at its peak.

Operation Bajrang and Operation Rhino started in the 1990s as a counter insurgency strategy to uproot the ULFA. It was during the period of Operation Bajrang and Operation Rhino that women came to the forefront to keep the ULFA alive through their activities (Interview with PD, October 2016). RS, a former member of the ULFA who joined the ULFA in the mid of the 1990s explained how women became the safety valve for the organization when all male members of the ULFA went underground during Operation Bajrang and Rhino (Interview with RS, September 2015). Women worked to cover the male activists, worked as messengers, and on many occasions organized protests under different banners to fight against human rights violations (Interview with RS and MS, September 2015). Even though there are no proper official documents about the exact number of women cadres in the ULFA, the interviews revealed a strong presence of women in the organization.

Marriage was considered as the ground to reproduce the next generation of revolutionaries. The institution of marriage was termed as 'revolutionary marriage' by a former ULFA member (Interview with RS in September 2015). The conjugal union in marriage transcends the boundary of the personal and became political in the wake of a 'revolutionary marriage'. The family, which came up out of this 'revolutionary marriage', was supposed to have a complete obligation towards the organization. 'Who will carry on our revolutionary cause if we will not reproduce the next generation?' said one of the former members of the ULFA (Interview with RS, September 2015). The ULFA was highly accommodative to the new generation of revolutionaries, unlike other armed groups which discouraged women from getting pregnant and reproducing. For example, Farabundo Marti Liberation Front, a guerrilla group of El Salvador, was very strict about women getting pregnant, and the women of the organization were forced to obtain abortions and use contraception which left little room for the women to have control over their bodies and sexuality (Dignas, 1996).

Since the 1990s, the ULFA formed different camps in and around Assam including Bhutan and Bangladesh. Different groups of men and women were sent for training in the mountains. The organization did not have a particular policy to deal with maternal issues of the women members. Kaberi Kochari Rajkonwar (2013), in her autobiography, described her journey of motherhood from pregnancy to being a mother in an interior Nagaland-Myanmar border region. The

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experiences of Kaberi and the other interviewees reveal that when a woman got pregnant in the hilly interior camps, they were sent to some safe shelter in the plains. If a pregnant woman in the camp could not be sent back to these safe shelters, a person with some kind of basic medical training would be sent to take care of the situation. During pregnancy, Kaberi was staying in the home of a sympathizer in the Mon town of Nagaland with some of her fellow members. Staying in a room divided by a bamboo partition with two other male members, this was a time of negotiation with her personal life where she couldn't even have a 'private' moment with her husband (Rajkonwar, 2013:116). She notes:

> Despite the extreme desire to conceive, situations were such unfortunate that we could not even talk to each other; as if intimacy is prohibited for us. In the contest of suppressing emotion, he was always active and successful. I didn't speak, flushed out all my anger and emotions on a piece of paper. He replied 'have patience, harder situations are to come, we need to be prepared for that. Don't lose heart. They are here.' As if it was not my husband, but some religious preacher.

Most of the interviews reveal that being pregnant and bringing up children within the camps of high mountains simultaneously with their revolutionary activities was proving to be another grave struggle for the women. In the hilly terrain of Bhutan, raising children with very little or no facilities simultaneously with their political struggle was itself a struggle for the women. PD mentioned her emotional struggles when she left her nine days old baby with her mother and went to imprisonment. In fact, during her entire eight years in jail, she could hardly meet her son, which always left a strong feeling of deprivation. She said, 'It is very painful. A woman needs to struggle with herself. Only because of strong ideological commitment I could overcome that.' (Interview with PD in October 2016). She explained the hardships to raise children with very limited facilities like food and clothes:

> Women had lots of mental sacrifices...we didn't have anything else to offer our child than rice. We got biscuits after many months...if someone managed to get it. We will get one packet each...so I didn't give him even one if he will not ask for it. Sometimes if he asked for biscuits I said '*Baba,* we have to keep the biscuit with us if there will be a bad situation.' He replied 'Ma, then I will just touch it once.' I said, 'Today you just touch the biscuits once, tomorrow you will have the biscuit. 'It was really painful...he held the biscuit for some time...and gave it back to me. (Interview with PD in October 2016)

The narrative of PD highlights the powerlessness and considerable psychological pain of the mother in terms of not being able to provide the basics of food, clothing, or education. In her narration, the term 'sacrifice' comes up frequently, which signifies how the memories of a woman are often related to socio-cultural values to be an 'ideal mother' and 'ideal wife' adorned with selfless sacrificial qualities. While the memory of a male activist is related to political activities, the memory of a woman is related to her identity as a mother or wife apart from her political activities. In radical movements, men's sacrifice is giving up his life for the cause while for women it is the sacrifice she does for her children (Hamilton, 2007). This kind of role conflict needed negotiation on the part of the women.

The story of AD narrates her experience of the journey from Assam to the camp in the mountains of Bhutan with her three-month-old daughter:

> We almost reached the Assam Bhutan border. There was a little plain space. I asked them to rest there for a while and started changing the dress of the baby. The NDFB boys went to the nearby *basti*[4] to get some food for us. We were waiting for them in the plain; started changing the clothes of my baby, asked him (the boy who accompanied her to the border) to hold her. Suddenly a stream of bullets targeted us. It was such a sudden attack that I could not take any defense but lay on the ground. One of our colleagues died on the spot. I took his rifle and other instruments and ran into the hills. The boy, with the baby in his arms, ran in the other direction. I could hear the cry of my baby continuously. The boy was trustworthy; I hoped that my baby will be alive. We were ambushed in a place from where we can see both the army and our boys. But at night we could stay there; it was full of wild animals. I can't explain in words how hard the time was. I was thirsty. There was no water anywhere around. I didn't have anything for the last 24 hours. And I was breastfeeding the baby. I was exhausted. We managed to reach the nearby *basti*. We informed the nearby camp that we need an armed troop immediately. It was a little relief now; started thinking of my baby-Is she safe...alive? I started consoling myself- Ali is responsible…trustworthy...he will take care of her…she will be alive. If he will throw her also…I can't blame him...being a mother…I couldn't protect her...who else will do then. (Interview with AD in November 2016)

In a time of crisis, her role as a mother and an activist put her in a state of anxiety. She regrets her inability to perform her duty as a mother to protect her baby. Her maternal sentiments were aroused with all their embedded social values. The narratives highlighted their attempts to protect their children physically and emotionally.

Narratives of the women reveal that women mostly settled themselves in one place, either in the camps or in shelters. As narrated by one former ULFA member, 'because of the biological reason it was difficult for the women to move from one place to another. The baby needed breastfeeding…and it was difficult for them to roam with the baby' (Interview with RS in September 2015). Eventually, it became an established fact that women, after becoming mothers, were more into their family lives and often reluctant to carry on their organizational activities. After becoming a mother, women's images were constructed as a caring mother, contrary to a warrior who will carry military activities. They were not expected to leave war and militancy, but ideologically they were excluded, reinforcing the rhetoric image that 'motherhood and war is presented as unnatural or exceptional' in the imagery of war and militancy (Macdonald, 1987; p.13).

But this establishment did not go entirely unchallenged. There were women who resisted the unofficial declaration that women can't move from one place to another. A collective of women resisted the decision by calling a formal meeting with the authority. The authority declared them to 'do something and prove it'. RM, a mother in a camp in Nagaland voiced her frustration:

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[4] An Urdu term meaning a small settlement or village.

> A woman doing a government job is getting a few months of maternal leave and again she will join the job after a certain period of leave. Then why it was not so with us. Why are we getting permanent leave from work? Even though it was not a rule of the organization, some people kept that mentality...that after being a mother we will not be able to carry on activities. (Interview with RM in November 2016)

The memories of RM underscore her resistance to the unofficial declaration that 'women cannot carry on certain responsibilities' and her journey from Nagaland to Assam to prove her capability. She, with her eight-month-old baby, walked down to Assam from Nagaland and attended the meeting in Dibru Choikhua forest to prove her credibility. She emphasized her challenge to stay in a jungle with her baby under the constant threat of wild animals. With her act of resilience, she negotiated to prove her capability of being an activist along with being a mother. This resonates with the popular imagery of a woman with a rifle over one shoulder and a baby in her arms. It reiterates the protector/protected image of mother and child conveying the qualities of a good mother—maternal devotion, desire to protect one's child, but at the same time, not primarily focusing on her child but the larger political goal (Miller,2009).

Although the revolutionary marriage in the radical movement attempted to bring up an egalitarian familial space for both men and women, it also involved the idea of conventional motherhood embedded with all its socio-cultural values. This socio-cultural burden of motherhood was always on women in the organization. In most cases, while performing their mothering role, their activist role took the back seat. Either they had to sacrifice their motherhood for becoming an activist or to sacrifice activism once they became mothers. Once they became a mother, women were confined in the camps and mainly took care of the children. They were assigned only those duties which could be done in the camps. Women took care of the kitchen garden, raised poultry, managed the school for the children, and often took responsibilities for the health centre. Pregnancy and motherhood limited their activities mostly to the camps. The ideology of the ULFA was based on equality of all members, but the above excerpt indicates that there was constant negotiation by the female members to meet that 'equality'.

Conclusion

In light of the above observations, motherhood in the context of the armed struggle of the ULFA could be understood in terms of women's negotiation of their identity as mothers and activists. The idea that women are the reproducers and nurturers of the 'revolutionary offspring' who carry on the revolution, further, demanded negotiation between motherhood and activism on the part of the women. There was a constant demand for role reversals, where one identity was substituted with another and the maternal figures overshadowed the identity of the woman as an activist. In other words, the juxtaposition of the roles of mothering and activism made the women somewhat invisible in activism, when these women had initially chosen to enter the ULFA not as reproducers of male activists but as activists themselves.

However, the mother activists of the ULFA, with their constant attempts of resilience, resistance, and negotiation, created and expanded their space to exercise subjectivities and agency in the masculine culture of war and militancy. The women of ULFA, carrying on their identity and work, both as mothers and activists, in fact, could challenge and defy the conventional image of mothers as peace initiators in war and conflict situations. The performance of the women as mothers redefined them as political actors and opened up avenues to understand that wartime

maternal framing is not universal and homogeneous, but it is the given context that produces the performance of motherhood.

Declaration of interests

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