

ALL INDIA DEMOCRATIC WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION

**Convention
of
Women of the North-East**

February 13-14, 1999

*Issues concerning women's development
and equality in the northeast*

APPROACH PAPER



February '99

Cover Photo: Tribal Women of Ujanmaidan, Tripura

Published by:

All India Democratic Women's Association
23 V.P. House Rafi Marg,
New Delhi-110001

INTRODUCTION

Women's struggles for development and equality in the north east region take place in a very specific context. In social relations women here do not face the kind of blatant inequality which marks women's lives in other parts of the country. This is not to say that there are no gender related discriminations in community or social life, but that their reflection is quite different than in other parts of the country. In many parts of the region, normal life has been severely disrupted over a period of time due to extremist related violence with all its implications. There are some general aspects also which need to be kept in mind.

1. In all these years of data collection by different Government agencies, detailed information about women's position in the region is extremely inadequate. Unfortunately there is hardly any women centred research of the region. There is a lack of information, understanding and interaction by women's struggles for equality and justice in other parts of the country and women of the northeast. This has adversely affected both. Indeed, the achievements of women of this region in many areas which can be an example for the rest of the country are hardly known, leave alone propagated. At the same time, the discrimination faced by women in this region does not find much reflection in the demand charters of national movements. Thus it is imperative for the movement as a whole to ensure closer links between organisations and groups working in this region and those outside so that the concerns become common concerns.

2. Another aspect is the rank discrimination faced by the entire region due to policies followed by successive Governments at the Centre which have a direct impact on north east women's struggles for economic self reliance and advancement, for better education and health facilities. This is one region in the entire country in which as many as eight States are very closely linked and deeply interdependent because of the geographical location as well as for cultural and historical reasons. Although each State no doubt has its specific concerns and priorities which at one level have to be viewed separately by policy makers, the development of each is dependent in substantive measure on the development of the others. Thus women's economic rights and access to education and health facilities are closely linked to a struggle for a drastic change in the policy approach and availability of funds for the entire region.

3. This is also a region which houses the largest number of tribal communities—over 200—and nationalities. Nowhere in the country is there such a rich diversity of cultures, traditions and dialects symbolising the pluralism of our traditions. In Assam alone there are at least 66 tribal communities comprising about 13 per cent of the population. In Manipur there are 29 recognised tribal communities comprising 35 per cent of the population, the corresponding percentage of tribal communities are 64 per cent in Arunachal Pradesh, 86 per cent in Meghalaya, 95 per cent in Mizoram (where there is one dominant tribe) 88 per cent in Nagaland and 31 per cent in Tripura. And yet there has been a totally insensitive approach and no assistance by Governments at the Centre for the protection of tribal identities and cultures. For example even now in some of the autonomous district councils the language of instruction in schools is not the local dialect. At the same time the vexed problem of continuing infiltration by foreigners continues, changing the demographic profile of many areas and leading to tension. Inter State migration also leads to tensions such as the influx of Reang refugees from

Mizoram to Tripura. Now with the advent of the BJP led Government at the Centre, there is an added danger. Since a large percentage of the tribals in some of the northeast States are Christians the agenda is strongly communal in nature apart from being destructive of tribal cultures, tribal unity, peoples unity, national unity. This leads to further alienation and discontent. Thus women's social position within the family and the public sphere in the northeast is also linked to the struggle to preserve pluralist traditions, secular principles, protection of traditional cultures while struggling against those which are inimical to the constitutional guarantee of equality. For example while polygamy is being opposed by many women they are equally interested in protecting the rights and status of widows, choice of marriage partners and so on which are an intrinsic part of many tribal traditions.

4. The escalating violence at different levels whether by secessionist extremist groups or by armed ethnic groups waging war on equally deprived and oppressed groups is one of the major and urgent problems facing women in this region. As citizens women are also concerned that many foreign agencies are infiltrating the area. Three international borders form part of this region and the implications for national unity are very grave. The recent combined and united moves of various extremist outfits of different states in the region have added a more dangerous dimension to the violence adversely affecting all the States.

What is of grave concern is the tragic loss of innocent lives. Armed groups have been targetting families, women and children have been brutally killed, houses torched and their meagre property destroyed. In many areas, the armed agencies of the State have in the name of curbing terrorism, unleashed savage repression on innocent citizens. While all citizens are affected, women face the main burden of the violence. In fact what is going on in the north east is the violation of the minimum human right to survival by both the extremist groups on the one hand and the para military forces on the other with citizens caught in the cross fire. It is poor women of these separate communities who become the target of attacks in ethnic conflict. Again, it is women who have faced sexual assault at the hands of the armed forces in many of these States. Women have the highest stakes in peace in the region. In the present political context, there can be no development or advancement without peace and at the same time, equitable development is the best guarantee of peace.

The whole concept of the northeast is challenged by the newly developing ethnic conflicts. Communities who have lived in peace for generations are now in the midst of severe hostility and armed conflict. One of the most stark consequences of this conflict can be seen in the terrible plight of the inhabitants of the Kokhrajjar camps where the poorest tribals, the santhals on the one hand and the bodos on the other have become victims of senseless violence which has helped no one but those interested in disrupting peoples unity.

Clearly no struggle for women's rights can be isolated from the wider struggle for peace. The question is: can women who are most affected, rise above community tensions and build a united movement in the whole northeast for peace and development?

Rank Discrimination

Issues concerning development in the eight States in the north east received national attention through the Rs. 6100 crore package promised by the then United Front Government in 1997. Even though such an amount would hardly meet a fraction of the region's needs it at least signalled a message of concern for the region by the powers in Delhi. Some very important recommendations concerning the basic minimum needs of the people were also made by the Shukla committee in March 1997 which was set up by that Government. These included minimum services to provide safe drinking water, 100 per cent coverage of primary health service facilities, universalisation of primary education, provision of public housing, streamlining the public distribution system, connecting all unconnected villages and habitations. It is a matter of great shame that even after two years no action has been taken on the report or the assurances made then. Thus, a welcome initiative by the UF Government is being sabotaged through a partisan approach by the present BJP led Government towards the urgent problems of the region. Indeed it is precisely such an approach which has marked policies towards this region in the last fifty years leading to a sense of alienation, frustration and despair among large sections of the people.

How much anger and resentment will there be when the resources of the region as for example, oil, natural gas and tea are appropriated and exploited by the Centre in the name of national wealth, but the needs of the region are ignored. How much suffering will there be when year after year floods ravage large parts of the region as in Assam but the most meagre relief funds are given — only Rs. 40 to Rs. 50 crores annually, while States which are far less affected have got Rs. 200 crores or more. There is a master plan for a permanent solution of the flood problem by the Brahmaputra Board, but the funds have not been given by the Centre. The attention given to harnessing the waters of rivers in the plains through various projects are completely absent as far as the north east is concerned although hydro electricity projects would be most viable for this region. The production of electricity is a tiny fraction of the requirement. The use of electricity in the north east is less than half of the national average. Industrialisation is therefore at the very minimum and there has been extremely negligible public sector investment and almost no private sector investment in the region. There are very few industries, the only jobs available being the limited number of government jobs. Unemployment is high. Agriculture, which is the mainstay of the economy has seen no investment. This is in glaring contrast to the huge expenditures on irrigation projects in other parts of the country. Even nationalised banks are not giving credit although there is a high rate of savings. The deposits made by residents of this area are used by banks for activity elsewhere. The most glaring example of the rank discrimination is that even after fifty years of independence the only State in this region to be linked by rail to the rest of India is Assam. Tripura has only 45 km of rail line and that also of the metre gauge. Even communication roads between the northeastern States which are interdependent on each other, are very poorly developed. Maintenance of national highways in the region is extremely poor. This has a direct bearing on the economy as movement of goods becomes greatly hampered. At the same time it has the most adverse impact on integrating the region with the rest of the country.

Although there is a North-East Council its intervention is far below the needs of the situation.

This criminal neglect and gross discrimination of the region, intensified by the present BJP led coalition, provides fertile ground for the expansion of extremist groups to draw in sections of youth. The fight against this discrimination and for development, should be an important part of women's movements in this region.

Women in the economies of the region

It is in this background that women wage struggles for economic advancement. Women play a very crucial though unrecognised role in the economies of the region. All the economies are mainly agriculture based. There is also a high percentage of household industry including handicrafts and weaving. Taken as a whole women's work participation in the north east is very high compared to the rest of the country being over fifty per cent. Work participation in the 15 plus age group compared to men is 57 per cent in Mizoram, 65 per cent in Nagaland, 57 per cent in Manipur, 56 per cent in Meghalaya, 57 per cent in Sikkim, 67 per cent in Arunachal Pradesh, 15 per cent in Tripura and 31 per cent in Assam.

Except for ploughing women participate in all economic activity as well as domestic work. They cook the food, wash the clothes, spin yarn, weave cloth, fetch water from the nearest available source, collect firewood and eatables from the forest, work in the field.

Hill farming in the north east is still largely under jhum cultivation. Women go out from early morning to remote jungle areas and come back late at night. Jhum cultivation requires more heavy labour. Some efforts are being made to replace jhum cultivation with other settled methods of agriculture but because of lack of land for distribution there are problems. In Tripura for example some 25,000 to 30,000 jhumia families face acute problems of poverty and unemployment. However the Ministry of Environment and Forests does not allow the use of Government forest land for rehabilitation of tribals. The Tripura Government has been trying to rehabilitate tribal families through the cultivation of rubber plantations which should be treated as forest cover. But the Centre has still not moved in this matter depriving tribal families of alternate means of livelihood. Why should rubber trees not be included in forest cover? This is a shameful example of how the positive efforts of a State Government in the region to protect tribal interests are being sabotaged by the Centre.

Wherever there is settled agriculture women perform all the jobs except for ploughing. In most States, land ownership is either mainly small plots or community owned, so women work mainly as cultivators. There are fewer women agricultural workers in the region because of different land ownership patterns. In Assam although it was claimed over ten years ago that 30 per cent of pattas would be given to women, no figures are available as to whether this promise was ever implemented.

The region is one of the richest in bio diversity. There is tremendous potential for developing women's indigenous knowledge about valuable herbs, medicinal plants and increasing production. It seems that the authorities will only wake up to this potential after MNCs start coming to this area to exploit the bio diversity here for their own profits. Similarly the potential for horticulture and vegetable gardening is immense. There are no godowns, cold storage facilities, no marketing facilities and huge problems of transportation. These urgent needs have to be addressed. This would directly benefit women since in all these activities women would play a crucial role. However there are no women centred schemes in this sphere.

The most widespread home based industry is that of weaving. Unlike other parts of the country where men do the weaving, in the north east from the rearing of the silk worm to weaving on small looms women do most of the work. The Silk Board has virtually been ignoring the tremendous potential to develop sericulture in this region. All types of silk are produced here-but the development is ignored. Other work they engage in is producing baskets from cane and bamboo and other such products. However the retreat of the Government from taking any responsibility for marketing and for transport of the goods from one place to another have led to a serious crisis in all the traditional industries which were dominated by women and which were crucial in providing incomes for family survival. Schemes to

advance the interests of self employed women are essential. Training for developing animal husbandry including piggeries is also necessary.

A report of the National Cooperative Development Corporation divides the country into three regions—needless to say the entire northeast comes under the least developed region as far as cooperatives are concerned although the potential is rated very high. One of the problems has been the poor rate of loan repayment. This has resulted in a virtual freeze on all credit. Whereas in the rest of the country rich farmers benefit from wiping out huge arrears of loans, in the northeast, the most backward regions are deprived of this minimum need. An area of grave neglect for women in these industries is also the lack of training to cooperativise, upgrade skills and so on. Rules for forming and running cooperatives are so complicated and bureaucratic that women find it extremely difficult to use any of the benefits which should be provided under these schemes.

In Government service only a very small percentage of women are given jobs. Perhaps the largest number are employed in the ICDS schemes through the anganwadis. Funds for the further expansion of the ICDS are being cut by the Central Government affecting their legitimate demand for increase in the meagre allowances they are being given. Their demands form an important part of our struggles. Because of lack of industrialisation employment for women in the organised sector is negligible. Women find employment in tea plantations, however their wages are lower than men and there are no child care facilities.

- In some of the States notably Manipur and Nagaland, women dominate petty trade and commerce. The only women owned market in the country is in Imphal where 2000 stalls have been allotted to women after a big struggle by them. The market plots so allotted are inherited only by daughters.

The poorest sections of women also do daily work wherever they can find it at very low wages.

Schemes like the Jawahar Rojgar Yojana which could have been effectively used to increase employment opportunities while creating important community assets, have been dwindling because of cuts in resources. In fact all the Central Government schemes including DWCRAs have more or less failed in the north east. There are no Women's Development Corporations in these States. The IRDP is supposed to have 40 per cent women beneficiaries but the average in the NE is less than 25 per cent.

To conclude this section, many families in the region are dependent on women's earnings for survival. In one estimate whereas the national average of such households is 8 per cent, in Manipur it is as high as 12 per cent. Some of the other States also have as high a percentage. The increase in drug trafficking and alcoholism has also increased this dependence. At the same time, the complete insensitivity of planners towards the important role of women in the economies of this region within the general callousness towards the region as a whole is apparent. A reflection of this can be seen in the shocking omission in all the official reports, including the comparatively much better Shukla report, of the importance of women centred schemes for the development of the region as a whole. The demands to change this situation and to help develop women's roles in the economy need to be concretely worked out.

Food, health and civic facilities

The region is almost entirely dependent on imports of essential commodities including foodgrains, edible oils, sugar and so on. High prices of most of these goods are a constant feature, with women having to balance family budgets. The public distribution system is extremely weak particularly in remote tribal areas where it is most needed. Improvements in the rationing system and regular supply

of essential commodities at controlled prices are an essential demand of women of this region. In this context, the recent price hikes of essential commodities will severely hit the northeast since the special subsidies for the region have also been removed.

Primary health, drinking water supplies and housing are other important issues for women here. It is estimated that in Assam for example at the present rate of providing houses for the homeless, it would take 15 years to clear the backlog. In Tripura there are 2.25 lakh families who have been identified as in need of shelters. In Manipur and Nagaland it is estimated at around 1 lakh each in Mizoram at around 15,000. It goes without saying that homelessness is hardest on women and children. Also many of the families identified would be of widows or female headed.

Similar to their sisters in many other parts of the country, women in the northeast have to spend a large amount of time in getting drinking water. According to the estimates of the Shukla Committee there is a big gap in provisions of safe drinking water supplies which will require an expenditure of over Rs. 1860 crores if the needs are to be fulfilled. It has been estimated that there are as many as 10,060 habitations in Assam which have no safe drinking water supply at all, 1170 in Tripura, 730 in Arunachal Pradesh. The problem is also of the quality of the water being presently used which could be brackish or contain unacceptably high content of fluorides, arsenic and iron adversely affecting the health of the population. Women have to spend a great deal of time in getting the water. So central assistance for this is an essential demand to improve the quality of life of women in this region.

Another very important issue for women is that of health facilities or the lack of them. Traditional and alternative forms of medicine have been of great use in offsetting the woeful lack of modern medical facilities. But for any serious illnesses there are hardly any facilities available except in Guwahati. To get an idea of the inadequacy an example is of Manipur where the average availability of a hospital bed is 89 beds for one lakh population which is well below the national average. Primary health centres do not exist in large parts of these States. These centres have to be strengthened. At the same time check up and treatment of STD is necessary. In some States there is an alarming increase in drug abuse. Aids is also increasing. The health care system has to be geared to these illnesses.

As far as education is concerned it is an indication of a more supportive environment that the literacy rates in the north east as a whole apart from Arunachal Pradesh, are higher than the rest of the country. But the dropout rates for girls is still quite high. There are very few girls hostels. Another important aspect is the increasing withdrawal of girl students during the agricultural season in which they are expected to help their mothers in the fields or in the absence of creche facilities look after their younger siblings. In such a situation it is essential to work out a timetable of holidays to coincide with the agricultural seasons which will enable these girls to continue in schools.

Customary practices, women's status and representation

Although the northeast has been free of the kind of savage domestic and social violence against women prevalent in many parts of India, it is disturbing that in non tribal communities in particular in Assam, the trend of dowry demands and dowry related violence has increased even leading to dowry deaths. The spread of alcoholism in the whole region has also led to increased levels of violence compared to a decade ago. Here the role of women's groups and traditional forms of community organisation have been crucial in supporting women. In Meghalaya for example a most successful anti-liquor agitation controlled such tendencies. It is reported that media portrayals of women as

sexual commodities has also had an adverse impact in this region leading to more cases of sexual harassment. However, the main violence that women face is not in their social interaction with men, but by State agencies or extremist groups. This will be taken up in the following section.

There is no doubt that women's social standing in this region is higher than in the rest of India. This is mainly because of the more democratic tribal traditions and practices in most of the communities. There are five matrilineal tribes in the region such as the Khasi, Garo, Jaitia (Meghalaya), the Tiwa/Lalung and Dimas Kachari tribes in Assam. In other tribes the rights of marriage, divorce, choice of marriage partners, widow remarriage and so on benefit women to an extent far beyond the so-called educated sections of non tribal societies. However, apart from the matrilineal tribes, in the others there is no equal right to inheritance of immovable property including land. Polygamy is also a big problem women face. In some communities as in Mizoram custody of children is not given to mothers. Mizoram has a higher rate of divorce which is being interpreted to mean a misuse of the liberal tribal practices by men, since most of the divorces are at their instance. In Arunachal Pradesh problems relating to polygamy and child marriage are quite acute. Women's groups here had strongly protested a Government effort to legalise polygamy in the name of tribal tradition. A demand has been raised by many sections for codification of tribal laws and practices. Given the large number of tribes it has to be considered whether such a proposal is either feasible or appropriate particularly when each tribe would like to maintain their individual identities. However, some common grounds can be found in ensuring that practices which go against constitutional guarantees of equality and dignity of women be legally ensured, including prevention of polygamy, child marriage and for equal property rights.

A disturbing process which is taking place is the sanskritisation of tribal communities which is nothing but the undermining of their own traditions and the imposition of upper caste Hindu rituals. In some areas it is reported that bride price is being replaced by dowry. The girl's family is expected to bear a burden of expenditure during marriages which was not the case earlier. Such practices are being associated with higher social status. These trends need to be actively fought.

Further, in struggling for equal legal rights, great care should be taken not to undermine traditional community organisations which play an important part in supporting women. At the same time it is essential to include women representatives in village councils.

On the question of women's representation, the 73th and 74th constitutional amendment for one third representation for women in panchayats and municipal bodies do not apply in three States of Nagaland, Mizoram and Meghalaya which have officially recognised traditional councils. However there have been problems in the method of constitution. Recently the High Court had to quash an order relating to the Shillong council because it had limited the electoral college depriving certain communities of their right to vote. The biggest drawback is that there is no provision for women's representation in the traditional councils. Even in matrilineal tribes women are excluded from holding office in the councils. Recently in Nagaland, women's groups have started a struggle for representation in the councils and are also considering having a "women's ho ho", the traditional council. In Tripura, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim there are women representatives as per the constitutional amendments. The reports of their participation are on the whole quite positive. Elected women members have been demanding that special training programmes should be conducted for them. In Arunachal Pradesh a move was made to disband the panchayats and to go back to the traditional councils. However this move has been opposed by many groups in the State. In Assam, elections have been due for two years. In the two autonomous district councils in Assam there is no provision for women's representation. Such representation needs to be ensured.

Peace and development

Women's struggles for advancement in the various fields do not take place in a vacuum. A critical prerequisite is an environment of harmony and normalcy. But today not only are the violent activities of the extremist groups intensifying, but new areas of conflict are being created for example the tension in Meghalaya between Khasis and others, between Nagas and Kukis, between Santhals and Bodos, against Muslim minorities, by tribal extremist groups in Tripura who attack any who dare oppose them including members of their own community. Although only a very small section are instrumental in these hostilities, the fire reaches out to engulf whole communities. The terror, the trauma, the homelessness caused, the hunger, the destruction of life and property-in such a situation the most crucial need of the hour is normalcy. But who will bring the normalcy? Can we depend on the State?

The State itself along with successive Central Governments have been instrumental in not only causing the problem but in making it worse. In Manipur and Nagaland where secessionist forces have been active, the use of armed might hit innocent people. Today in Manipur, there is a big movement led by women against atrocities committed by the para military forces. This includes rape and sexual assault of women in so-called search operations. There have been a series of "disappearances" of young men and kidnapping by these agencies. Such atrocities have taken place in other States also. In Tripura the Ujan maidan case in the late eighties when tribal women were gangraped by some personnel of the Assam Rifles is well known. It was only the intervention of the Supreme Court which brought justice to the women. Accountability of these forces has to be established as far as their behaviour towards the general population and particularly women are concerned. At present there is no means of redressal or check and monitoring. The proposal for a human rights commission for the entire area should be seriously considered.

On the other hand the opposite problem also exists. There have been savage attacks by extremists on innocent people in Tripura and other States, often not sparing women and helpless children. The extremists find shelter in neighbouring countries from where they strike again and again at innocent people. Fencing the borders and ensuring adequate forces is also a most urgent demand. In the remote jungles of Tripura, tribals who refuse to accept the dictates of the extremists often become victims. In an inhuman incident tribal women who were in the jungles for jhum cultivation were attacked and assaulted. Here also there is need for protection. However, when the State Government has demanded more armed forces to patrol the border areas and set up centres in some of the remote areas, the Central Government has withdrawn a number of battalions dictated by narrow partisan considerations.

Although this may appear contrary--the struggle against repression by para military forces on the one hand, and the demand for more forces on the other--it only reflects the situation, where women and children in particular and innocent peace loving citizens in general, are caught in the pincer of violence between the extremists and the armed forces and are often victimised by both.

It is in such a situation that we have to discuss the urgent need of a widespread and broadbased movement of women for peace and development. Women are also members of communities with their community identities. But at the present juncture is it not true that as women it is our security and dignity which is threatened most of all? Is it not true that as mothers it is our burden of unbearable agony to have to see our children victimised by violence, killed, tortured. As citizens we are equally concerned about the development of the region, we are equally concerned about our democratic rights, but we shun extremist violence which in the name of achieving justice ends up destroying the very principles of humanity. How many more innocent people will have to be killed before the region can be liberated from violence?

Who has the highest stakes in peace if not the women of the north east? The boundaries of the eight States should not prevent us uniting across them in a powerful movement for peace and development. Can we not raise the slogans ; No to armed violence. Peace talks not gunfights. Stop the massacres of innocent people. Women for peace Women for justice Women for development

This convention of north east women should strive hard to build such a platform which is crucial for our advance.

DEMANDS

To the Centre:

1. End discrimination against the northeast. Develop infrastructural facilities. Implement the Shukla committee recommendations to ensure minimum basic services including health, education, drinking water.

2. Recognise women's role in the economy and provide them necessary facilities in different spheres of their work. Develop women centred schemes for self employed women and workers both in agricultural based work as well as in homebased work like weaving, bamboo products etc.

3. Increase subsidies in foodgrains and strengthen the public distribution system by including other essential commodities.

4. Set up Women's Commissions in all States by helping State Governments with the required funds.

5. Ensure accountability of the armed forces and prevent atrocities on women. Punish the guilty. Set up a Human Rights Commission for the whole region

6. Fence the border. End illegal immigration. Send the required number of armed forces to Tripura as demanded by the State Government.

(From Back Cover Page)

As citizens we know that there are many who are not our friends who use you for their own selfish ends. These vested interests will use you, as they are doing, to destroy the unity and harmony in which we have all lived together.

Our future is in India but whether it will be a future bright with hope or dark with despair depends a great deal on what you do.

We want to see you beside us, standing firm, resolved to struggle peacefully for our joint demands. Unity among us will bring more force to our struggles, than all the power of all the guns you use.

Our voice is heard in other parts of the country. There are people who support us, but your guns are trained on them too.

As women we want to build a wider unity with women all over the country. We want them to raise their voices to stop the discrimination against the northeast, to build the bridges which have been destroyed by our common opponents, our common enemies.

Today the people of India are in a crucial struggle to defend our country from the forces of communalism who want to destroy our pluralist traditions and cultures. We too are part of that struggle.

We are with you in your struggle for justice for the northeast. But for any type of development and advance, we need peace first. This is the lesson of history.

We appeal to you - give up the gun, give up the bloodshed, give up this life of violence. Don't turn your back on history. Don't turn your back on us.

To our friends, brothers, our sons:

AN OPEN APPEAL

We women of the northeast who have gathered together in this convention make this open appeal to our friends our brothers and sons who have taken to arms and are involved in extremist activities:

Today the northeast bleeds, the unmatched beauty of these green valleys and hills reverberates with the sounds of gunfire, with the sounds of women and children crying, the skies turn dark with the smoke of burned houses.

Who is to blame?

We know that this region, rich in natural resources has been for decades exploited by successive Governments at the Centre. The policies of development followed by them has left the northeast underdeveloped .

Our fields have no irrigation, our looms lie idle, our sons and daughters, brothers and sisters have no jobs.

It is this discrimination which has ignited the anger in all of us and has led to high levels of frustration. It is in this context that many of you have taken to arms.

But today after so many years , we ask you, who has this violence helped?

Today, the violence is used as one of the main reasons why there is no investment in the region.

Have you seen the camps of Kokhrajjar, Assam? Have you seen the children, bloated stomachs, with not a single full meal since the day that they, whether bodos or santhals, were forced to flee their homes, their meagre belongings burnt to ashes?

Have you met the families of those killed in Tripura? The widows, the fatherless children whose only crime was that they were born in communities which are the target of attack by those with arms?

Have you met any of our sisters who have been forced at gunpoint by some, using your names, to succumb to their dreadful lust? Have you seen our sisters in remote jungles, who have been forced to part with their last bit of food by extortionists?

Is it not true that the guns which were taken up in the name of justice, have become the symbols of injustice because in too many cases have they been turned on those equally poor and exploited?

We the women want an end to this bloodshed. We have suffered too much.

As mothers we have given you life-it is agony for us to see you destroy that life and the lives of others.

As sisters we have grown up with you-it is agony to see you waste your youth in activities which help no one

(Cont'd On Back Inside Page)