

MEGHALI SENAPATI

Interviewed by MonishaBehal

Monisha Behal: Meghali, I would like to know little bit about your childhood. Since we are doing this interview on women who have worked on a social cause, or the women's movement I would like to know when you were young which is the first time you felt that there might be some kind of a discrimination within the family- brothers/ sisters/ cousins. How did you grow up and what were your thoughts then. It is difficult to answer but try.

Meghali: I grew up in this women-populated household. Meaning that we were five of us, including my mother and four of us. So my dad was there, and also the whole extended family was always with a pro woman kind of an attitude - that women's education is necessary. There were people with lot of liberal thoughts. And having grown up in this. And yet, when you first told me about this interview I actually reflected. Thinking when did I first realised that there is discrimination? There is no point from where I can say that this is the age and the time but ever since childhood there was always a comment passed. *Ooh sari joni suwali neki*. Meaning four daughters. No son. So it would make us feel: Are we little less? You know *lora nai* (with regret)... You know, no son. This thing stayed with us. And especially with me... I would feel why no son. You know, there are four of who are doing well in life. From childhood one has heard that throughout: Acchha you all have no sons. And it has not changed. I just gave birth fortunately or unfortunately (laughs) I don't know to a son. And the huge son preference which prevails here in Guwahati. Wherever the whole of the state that even Bibek commented finally that "Why are people so jubilant about us giving birth to a son." So it has not changed you see. The situation from childhood to... The discrimination remains.

MB: (laughs) you said your parents were very liberal or you family was very liberal... What are the indicators of your telling me that they were very liberal. I am interested to know.

MS: My father always used to say that "four daughters are the four pillars of my house". They are the foundation. So there was always this feeling within that we had to do more than what we are supposed to be doing in life. So whatever choices are...it becomes political that way. There was never issues about "Oh you all have to get married.. There was always "What will you do in life?" or "How will you earn your bread?" And also the life style my mother led also, in her age and times she never put on sindoor]vermillion mark on the forehead denoting a woman's marital status]. And you know even as a youngster you would sometime want to conform to social norms. I would ask her "Why no sindoor?" These things were imbibed in you that there is an identity. Yeah, like my sister used to work for a newspaper in Guwahati. And she would come at two in the morning and my father would at times get angry "Is this the time to walk into the house." But there was never an active attempt on his part to stop her from working as a journalist.

MB: Which paper was this?

MS: *A local newspaper* . She is 13 years elder to me. So, that worry was there that while will you come in at two at home. And yeah, like my mom used to say if you all have boyfriends and all get them home. Don't roam around... There was always this whole thing about acceptance... Yeah

MB: So, I wanted to know a little bit about your school. Was it a co- ed school?

MS: No.. I studied in a girl's school. I studied in St Mary's Guwahati

MB: Then in college how was that experience?

MS: Life was kind of protected. Though you felt discriminated at times here and there, you grew up independent. Meaning we never looked for a male in the house to change the bulb or to do a little plumber work or something. We could do it. We were independent.. and in school it was a girls' school so the co-existence with boys was not there ... I think I first .. in my graduation I started feeling ... also was in a relationship that time .. so that was the time with the own relationship ...one started feeling that things are not so fair .

MB: In what way did you feel it was unfair?

MS: I had this boyfriend (laughs) that time. It was a three-year old relationship. So in that I was never very happy about things. But for my other friends, things were normal for the boy to do this, for the girl to behave in a particular manner. I was really unhappy and would feel really stifled. Maybe [it was] because of my childhood and the liberty one grew up with that I could not conform to these things and in my post-graduation when I finally studied gender and studied women's issues etc I could put it in a framework for which I am very thankful that I studied that...because it helped me understand oppression systematically in a framework... that it is not only happening to me .

MB: So when you talk about gender studies, did it start in college or when you were studying your MA in the Tata institute

MS: I wish it had started earlier.. I had that way been protected from the outside world and I wish this had started in school , I would have prevented myself from getting into a lot of trouble.it was only in Post Graduation that one got exposure to gender issues etc and which is quite late I think.

MB: Because I know you had been to Tata Institute. Was joining Tata Institute your own doing?

MS: It was my own doing. I was studying in Delhi and I told you about this relationship.. actually I wanted to run away from that relationship. Hence I went to Bombay, not even knowing what course I was getting into (laughs). But I had applied. I knew TISS, I knew social work but I chose a department which specialised in women studies. That was the department of family and child welfare. Now one part of it is called women centred social work. So we studied a few papers and it was great for me ... it helped me put myself in a framework... my own doing I guess (laughs).

MB: While you were studying in TISS, could you tell me what were the kind of women you came across as teachers and if you did have women who were in the movement and who were your teachers, did they influence you and in what way?

MS: Greatly. Actually, I feel quite thankful. TISS had at that time had a ratio of 1:6, meaning six girls to one man. As students, and also as faculty there were a lot of women ... so anything and everything that happened had to have a gender lens to it. So the ability to analyse and also my field work placement was in the police station where this project called Special Cell for Women and Children was initiated by TISS. So more than teachers and all, talking to the violated survivors was always a story within women, that what we call transference, counter transference...whatever, it helps. In feminist counselling you also grow in the relationship. So my field work in Special Cell really helped me, hearing people's stories of helplessness, of oppression, it helps you to grow I guess.

MB: Who are these teachers? Could you name some of them who you think were great?

MS: My greatest teachers were, specially on women, one was Anjali Dave, then there was Trupti also. Trupti Panchal who used to co-ordinate the Special Cell. Then Padma Velaskar was another woman teacher who used to do Dalit Feminism. So you got to understand from her, issues of marginalisation of the Dalits and within Dalits again women...extremely, I think good teachers. I could name many more..

MB:So, when you met these kind of women and you were influenced by them, you were slowly progressing into the end of your course etc, could you tell me little bit about how you went ahead with your work and at which point you felt very strongly about the discrimination ... not as women only but in terms of the kind of class that people belong to, the kind of communities people belonged to, you talked about the Dalit marginalisation? How did you feel like that with the whole of India where these kind of discriminations take place?

MS: You know when I studied in TISS, it was two years of not just accumulation of knowledge or information, it was a time where I could consolidate myself. I was quite a rebel in my childhood. So if somebody would say do this, I would not do it. So it gave me lot of time to reflect on myself and also because of my bad relationship and then understanding gender. So it was a time where I could really understand me as a person and what I would want to do with **my life**. And one thing I knew that I wanted to do was to come back to the Northeast. It was such a thing within me. Though I was a member of the JPC, the job placement cell where we would invite organisations and I was an active member. I resigned from the JPC that I don't want the job, I just want to go back to the northeast and this was a very. Infact for six months I did nothing after passing out. Just looking out. In the northeast. Wanting to know what I could do. And that is how I came back to the northeast

MB: You wanted to get back to the northeast.

MS: Yeah, I wanted to get back to the northeast

MB: When you say you wanted to get back to the northeast, did you feel, is it because you felt you could do something for the northeast or did you feel that northeast is relatively a better place and in a better position to deal with issues of social injustices or to do deal with something that is more normal than with what it is in UP or Bihar. That is, oppression religious discrimination, bias or prejudice. What was it that made you really come back to the northeast?

MS: You know, more than comparing with other situations elsewhere in the country, I think, I mean, I have profound love for the region. I just wanted to be back and I knew there was work to be done and work is to be done everywhere that way. Situations might differ. I think it was profound love (laughs) that got me back here.

MB: I gather you had this profound love for the northeast I suppose it essentially comes from the way you were treated by your parents because they were so liberal and you could do what you want? Is it that freedom that you thought would be so nice to get back to the northeast. And people are different. Is that how you felt?

MS: One could be that, you know I have never really thought about that. Is it my parents that got me back here? It is the place I think. Like you have questioned about gender discrimination, how one has arrived upon understanding. I think northeast also somewhere is quite marginalised and especially when I was studying in Delhi and co-existing with other communities in the hostel etc . *Oh...Yeh log northeast ka hain..* You know. What all are you eating? Bamboo shoot? (MB laughs). You know it is so smelly or you know.*Oh northeast? You are ready to jump into bed with anybody. You have sexual liberty.* All this makes you feel that there is something else with us. It is not only that northeast women can drink and make merry but I think, you know, till you are poked you don't feel protectiveness towards anything, so that thing was there. To show or to demonstrate that, hello, we are not this or whatever we are you are also no different. Like I said...I have love for the northeast and I have love for women.

MB:I wonder if you could tell us something about your arrival (laughs) into the northeast. Say I think you came after your post graduation?

MS: Yeah yeah. After my postgraduation I was working on a small project in TISS, making study materials for women and law. Some compendium I had to do. But that was just buying time till I found something to come back and.I had friends in the northeast but unfortunately that time my exposure was not so much as in who were doing development activities here. Then I came across Jenny [Jennifer Liang]. I mean you know Jenny. So I came across Jenny in TISS. So she asked me "What are you doing?" I said , just wanting to work in the northeast, so finding contacts. So she said, "Come we are forming an organisation. Come join us."I said, what are your requirements? She said if you are mad enough you can join (MB laughs). So I think that gave me even more happiness that one had to be little mad to join their organisation. So the organisation got registered in October. So I started work in 2000.

MB: What is the name of the organisation?

MS: That organisation is *The Ant*. So I was their first employee that way and three of us were there. It was quite a happy set up. Jenny was working part time. So she would earn

money. She had another job. So she would actually feed us. And Sunil would do (laughs) her counterpart I mean would do consultancy etc and earn money for the organisation and I was doing full-fledged field work.

MB: And what did that entail? Your field work and the background and the ideology?

MS: Ideology of *TheAnt* was to have holistic community development. Whether women /children/ men/ youth. It was to work towards community development. So we actually did nothing for the first six or seven months. We just cycled and tried to find out from people what would they want. I think I put my heart into that work. I was there for two and half years. Almost three years and one would cycle more than 60 kms per day, sometimes. Average was 25 kms to 30 kmsone would cycle. It was not about cycling. It was about going to this whole new area where people didn't know you. One was with a Chinese background, one was with (laughs) with a Kashmiri Pandit background and I was an Assamese in this Bodo area. So whole thing was exciting to people also. You know *yeh log kyu aeye hain(why have these people come)*. Are they from the RAW [Research and Analysis Wing – the Indian military intelligence wing], are they from the Chinese people or why is this Assamese girl in this Bodo area. We ended up forming women's groups actually. That was my initiation. I kind of... could form certain groups of women. They did savings but other things too.

MB: What are these other things? I know savings was a very popular entry point but i know you were also growing up. You were also learning with your experience. But what were the other things?

MS: You see. My whole thing was I wanted to form groups of women just for empowerment actually. But like you said it had to have some entry point because you cannot go and say...for empowerment or talk about domestic violence etc. People would throw you out actually. Umm and northeast apparently you know it appears that I mean people would claim that there is no violence against women. It is even more difficult. So ... the other things which we did were slowly slowly. Lot of trainings I did on sexuality and birth control. I think that was a pertinent issue in every group. Somebody would have seven children or somebody would you know, the husband would not really adhere to any contraceptives or women's reproductive health basically. So in any saving groups meetings these issues were bound to come up. So that was one. I actually had a kit which I developed myself (laughs). Some condoms and copper T and lot of birth control methods but it was not only birth control it was lot of sexuality that one would talk about. You know, why birth control etc. And success of the trainings i would think (laughs) end of it from my kit only the condoms would disappear (laughs) "*muk diyok.. muk diyok*" (give me give me). So they would just disappear and it was quite difficult for me to buy condoms in Bongaigaon. Because why is this girl [laughs]... And there are a few pharmacies, and people know you usually.

MB: Let me just ask you this.. You were buying condoms in a pharmacy in Bongaigaon. Knowing Bongaigaon which is a highly conservative place and knowing that they can always identify you. And I can imagine that they would wonder why you were taking these condoms. But what I want to know is that, while talking about condoms with the members of your group, was that the first time that they heard about condoms. Do you think they didn't know how to use it or people never talked about it.

MS: Women knew. I think at least the area where I worked, that time mostly women knew.

MB: Can you just tell me the year?

MS: 2000-2003. They might not know some technicalities about how to use it etc, but a little knowledge they had. But what one always spoke about how this type of birth control or this method of birth control was doing more harm to the body etc. That awareness people did not have or what kind of hormonal changes you might have with OCPs it would have etc. But existence of methods people knew.

MB: You said you were travelling a lot. Sixty kms a day which is quite amazing. I think you wrote a book which I read which is very interesting, and I just want you to tell me in this interview that you travelled all over and you picked up experiences ... I wonder what the reactions of these people were. I know you would spend a lot of time with them. So can you tell me a little bit about what you learn. Can you tell me a little bit about what the women felt about you and were there any indications of them getting knowledge which is beyond their lives.

MB: What I learnt is something which I am still learning from those experiences. Everytime. Now also if I am in doubt about something there is always an episode from those days to put me back in action. So learning was immense. One small thing – once you know how you deconstruct your own learning from institutions also. Like what I learnt in TISS. So you know, I used to wear normal clothes and would be rather faded also. Would wear cycle, khadi kurta and you had this cycle and one bag. You have this image. So one day one woman asked me very quietly and politely that “why is your kurta little torn” she showed me. I said fine. I felt I am doing noble social work. She said, “Would you go to the CM’s [Chief Minister’s] house wearing this? Why do you come to meet us wearing this?” And you know this dignity that women here have. I mean the poorest of the poor would also borrow one *Dokhona* [a traditional Bodo garment] and would come to a formal meeting. They would be neat. They would know how to present themselves. Whoever it was. So she just looked at me: we are less?? I think after that I have changed my dressing sense and began dressing a little properly also. Wherever I go. Whether it is the village. Today whether I go to the village or walk into the CM’s house, I am almost in same clothes. But something that people want It is dignity that people want. This is one learning and there are many small things like that.

MB: I will add another appendage to it. In the sense that you were...I know I am asking what you learnt from them and now I wanted to also ask you what they learnt from you.

MS: That is difficult I think (laughs) what they learnt from me...

MB: I wanted to say that it was a conflict situation at that time and having to live through that conflict. Yes you were an outsider, and very soon I think they completely embraced you: your ideals, your thoughts, I know that. But the fact that you say that these people are dignified, did the conflict situation bring in a lot of indignities which you think have remained and the scars of which have remained amongst the Bodo community.

MS: I umm... I sometimes feel you know that, I don't want to give any sweeping statements of yes or no but sometimes I feel that movement has, especially in the context of women, have put them a step behind. Especially the younger generation which I felt at that time, and I wrote also about this. You know really brought out women. In the way one would want women come out. Meaning you know, suddenly all of them clad in their traditional dress which is a five metre piece. You know, a saree kind, I mean the *dokhona* which they wear. And then they had to withhold the communities identity. It is such a pressure you know, that we are the Bodos. The men didn't have to wear a *gamosa* and say "we are the Bodos" but women had to always. "We Bodo women are like this."

MB: Subservient, you feel?

MS: You see, you are in a movement and you have to be differently portrayed and sometimes I find that not as liberating. I once asked a woman who was an active member of the Bodo women's federation. I said now that you all are fighting for your own land, you know at that time BTC[Bodoland Territorial Council] was not formed. Anyways, what about fighting for women's right to inheritance, because the customary law you know don't really say that women need to inherit land. So she said "No, no, first let's get the community issues resolved and then we will see within that." But that will never happen whichever movement you have studied...so. ..

MB: I also need to know from you that in this conflict, I don't know whether that comes before or after, we have seen lot of young women leaving their villages and coming to the cities. There is a sort of a migration and I call it a negative migration because they have run away from the police and the military to escape all forms of abuse. And I don't know which comes first or second but the fact that a lot of Bodo women were coming into Assam, and they started becoming domestic workers. Is there a history of these women becoming domestic servants before the militancy started or do you think it started and also increased after the militancy?

MS: See, militancy or any kind of conflict situation for the whole community perse is not good. Not good because opportunities become limited. You do not have any facilities. You do not have doctors. You don't have any job or employment facilities. Because people do not invest in your area, due to fear or apprehensions, so what happens? People would need to go out, whether it is men or women. Women also. Because you have the army etc coming. So people feel that let them be outside. What kind of atrocities they might face from the police or from the force. And I don't know. I wouldn't have any research data to say that this is prior militancy or after militancy but opportunities in that whole area were limited. Where people would have to go out. And that could be a point. And also times were changing where you needed money. The monetised economy. We are anyways moving totally into a monetised economy, so from a very sustainable way of living to this monetary thing and where there are no opportunities. And also language etc I mean you know the Bodo movement. I will talk endlessly about it. Language also played as a great barrier for people not to participate in positive employment opportunities.

MB: Because they put more accent on the language?

MS: See, because they were studying Bodo in Assamese script. And then they changed into the Devnagiri script to write Bodo to move away from the Assamese hegemony... But introducing Devnagiri was a mistake which I would say. Instead of that you could have introduced Roman. So people would know a little bit of more English. Like in the other Northeastern communities. You know access to internet. Access to the outside world would have been easier. So what happened was this. Who goes to the government schools? The lower economic background people started going to the government schools and they also started learning Devnagiri. And the teachers themselves had difficulties teaching Devnagiri because teachers had studied in Assamese script. But anyways, so what happened was been as good as illiterate. You go to the street and there is a bus coming, either the script is in English or in Assamese. Say the bus says "to Guwahati" written only in Assamese. So if you have studied only in Bodo medium, 9th pass is looking blank. There was no new newspapers, nothing new. Nothing exciting for the mind. So... That is how I felt Infact I had started this whole English classes there. Just wanting girls to get more empowered and there were these young girls of class 8/9 /5/6 any young girls. We had lovely English classes and I think some of these people are now working with *The Ant*. When you asked me what did they learn from you. I think they learnt to be confident.

MB: It seemed you have interacted a lot with women, women's groups, formed groups etc. Knowing the Bodo men, at least from the field work that I did in my earlier days, they were as open hearted as the women are. Everybody been together and talk together. How did you relate to the men or how did they relate to you?

MS: You know, basically, my personality is little fun loving. So, I never had any problems getting along with men (laughs). There would be teasing and lot of flirting also. And I would also laugh. Like "*tum mera ghar ka bahu ban jana*" types. So I would also say "okay okay, I am coming". There was no such problems but what one had to balance was between the groups. There was NDFB and BLT at that time and both the militant groups were at war with each other. So if I would say hello to a BLT boy in public and I knew that the NDFB(National Democratic Front of Bodoland) would think that are they supporting BLT. So I would basically look for an NDFB boy in the public and say hello to him.

MB: Just for the sake of this interview, the Bodo liberation tigers (blt) and the NDFB, what is the main difference between the two groups?

MS: The National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), basically earlier it was the BSF, the Bodoland Security Force formed by Brahma and ... I mean they were one group and they were quite powerful. I don't know but they say that there was attempt from the state, I mean India, that this group needed to be broken. So those (BSF) were the people who were supporting the Assam agitation initially. And then later said "divide Assam 50/50", asking for statehood. Then there was a divide between them and it so happened that BSF had more of Christians as leaders and more educated kind of background people. The whole imbroglio began with this division. There was BLT formed which more or less had this Hindu identity to it. More of the Brahmos. And the NDFB had more the Christians. Though they never put it on paper either as Christians or Hindu. But, they did have different issues. Like the NDFB wanted sovereignty from India

and the BLT wanted either a state or within the state the separate territorial council and that is how the BLT always has come forefront, had signed MOUs with the government, saying okay to BTC, whereas the NDFB has never supported.

MB: Thanks for that. This is information, I wanted to ask you, was there any space or role for women in these groups who were fighting for liberation or statehood or whatever. What did you feel about that at that time?

MS: You know, at that time and I have also written extensively about it. About how women's role in the movement is portrayed as very positive. Whenever there is a rally in Delhi or a rally anywhere. Our women are liberated, our women will fight for their own state etc. But within, if there is a rape within the community, there would be nobody to talk about it. People would not even let even let the rape be reported in the police station because it "doesn't happen in our community" or we will take care of matters, if there is a witch hunting. It happened during my time also so it is the student's union, very male dominated. Who would take care of these matters. And there is no need for the press or, because any issue would taint their community, it would show them in bad light.

MB: What do you mean by saying the students union *taking care* of the matter? What does that mean?

MS: Meaning, if there is an issue in my village, there is a meeting where the village has, what we would actually ideally wants decentralized law. But decentralized law in a patriarchal ideology is very dangerous. So you have women, I remember the case, a woman was pregnant and its: ok, now pay the fine. Actually, she was raped and now pay a fine to the village fund, so the village fund [will get] 5000 rupees with which they will eat a feast with that money and then marry the girl. So you know, this is the end of the matter. And the rapist will also listen because it's you know, you don't want to be ostracized from your community, so this is how [things go on]. You know, sometimes I'm always in a dilemma. Do you really decentralise, when we read law and law has been so patriarchal at times. Okay, decentralizing it would be better but there is a danger when the whole ideology there is so patriarchal that do you really decentralize. So I think I have bored you enough (laughs).

MB: This is a very serious matter actually because when we talk finally about representation of women, whether in a village authority or little above state level, you find these negative under-currents about women and at the same time you have students union and you know the local people saying that women are in the forefront.

MS: And women themselves are saying that we are in the forefront, so.

MB: So did you at any point find any woman, it's a difficult question in that sense, who could have imbibed something from you or somebody else and become a more radical person, did you find anyone who questioned that herself but preferred to keep quiet or did you find anybody who is very radical, and had a collective of women to fight this and questioned these young people and also these unions?

MS: Yes, there was this girl we had employed, I mean she was from the village and I think I influenced her deeply that she also got courage and cut her hair very short like me. And you know and it is her family that had the witch-hunting incident and she really wanted, she went to the police station and she reported and said this is not murder just like that and it was her sister-in-law, meaning elder brother's wife. So she was you know, totally like we would want to articulate injustice, she had gone to the police station etc, gave statements. And then one day I kept on calling her and she just did not take the phone and tried lot of attempts to meet her. So after two days she said that you don't come for some time to my house. Meaning there were talks. She is still working and she is still my very good friend but later she told me how these people came and told her, you keep shut or your entire family goes out, I mean the village people. So people would want to fight I think, for justice but there are factors also where they feel that this whole community issue where you have to maintain your community's name and uphold it somewhere. So that prevails I think. And they have to listen to the village elders.

MB: Let me ask you then, this question, because you have been at this for so long, while you were in TISS as well, you are out most of the time from the northeast, you must have known about women's movement and the kind of issues that they were bringing out. Did you feel that the women's movement ever had any influence in the northeast and if so how?

MS: Women's movement I have studied. I mean, as a part of the course and also like I said for field work, the whole thing was with a understanding that the personal is political I mean that is how the special cell came up also, so I have not seen a very organized movement, that would fit into the whole you know, if fitting in, kind of a thing, it might not fit in, but attempts of women wanting their freedom and you know and women questioning their roles etc, has been like I said in the beginning. My mother did not put sindoor, long time back. So there were always people, individuals or groups also, they have a group of women who meets, so there were always, I think, nobody would. There was resistance whether in Meghalaya or you know about the Khasi women etc people have questioned but not in a manner which the...I mean they might not had a slogan saying that personal is political or but there are attempts and I think it will be a good idea to document them someday.

MB: Sure. Do you have a sort of a vision, now of course you are completely in a different position but the field work you did, the experience that you have gathered, when we talk about women do you have any sort of a vision in mind or a strategy in mind which would get women to a wider platform to demand their entitlements or their rights or which would give them space to negotiate with the students, you know, when I say students I mean men in this very patriarchal domain. Do you have anything in mind which would make them question these people, make them question also on their own individuality, their mind?

MS: You know there are many points of intervention, I will never stop thinking about women and women issues, it is there in me, my heart beats there, so whatever I do, there always has to be women. Like now, I teach, whatever I am teaching there is always women brought in. There are many points of intervention, it depends on what each individual is capable of, you know, doing, like do you work on socialization of children

or do you work on school curriculum, or do you work on, you know, had it been possible (laughing) I would have worked on all. But now when I teach, I make conscious efforts and that is my strategy, that nobody goes out from my class without understanding women, so.

MB: What is your opinion about the current women's organizations that you find here in Assam? One knows about Mahila Samitis, one knows about ruling parties forming new mahila panchayats women and all and so many women's groups are here, welfare groups are there but do you have a sense of what is happening with women's organizations here and do you think they really question, do you think that they really assert themselves? Do you think that they can really address the issue of Assam which includes so many multi-cultural groups and ethnic groups?

MS: Correct. I would. There are a few organisations, like I would name Northeast Network. One or two more maybe who work seriously and with systematic understanding. Everyone is serious I am sure. And has good wishes for women. But to understand like I said, to understand oppression is one thing but to put it in a framework of understanding it and then to strategise is another thing. So suppose I said that this relationship with the man was not good. I understood the injustice or unfairness but I was not able to put it in a frame and that knowledge is required in women's groups here, whoever is working. That knowledge, as in, how do you strategise? Do you work on practical needs of women or do you work on strategic needs. You know, a little bit of professional understanding, also a training would help. Whatever good intentions, or you have the fire in the belly, to be directed to a more positive outcome.

MB: Women have very little space to address their issues. They have as groups and all that. But when it comes to issues of corruption, issues with the students union, normally they are very displeased with the students union, though we always praise them (laughs). They also don't question the state, they do not question the power structure at all. Do you think tools like RTI would ever help them? Because in my experience, hardly any women's issues have been questioned through the RTI. What is your feel in that?

MS: See, RTI, somebody can question some scheme. There is always this whole thing about women's issues and playing safe. I would say, play it safe. Like if you go to a community to do community development then, even in my case, one wanted to play it safe. Means that you do not bring out various issues. Because it is like Marx's- two antagonistic classes (economic class), gender brings in conflict with your immediate family. Or so it is two antagonistic classes of men and women. That thing prevents people from working. Someday, we need to risk it. How long do you play it safe? Like I said. Things have not changed, me giving birth to a son is...

MB: Do you think (you are much younger to me), but do you think the collaboration of the larger Indian women's movement with the women's movement here in the northeast, would create a new understanding? A new framework?

MS: I think we need to understand both. The northeast women might also want to understand what is happening. What has the women's movement been doing, and people from outside also need to understand women here. What is it that we have been

upto? Because people have been resisting here also. There has been always resistance and there has been history of struggles. So, the outside world also needs to be introduced to these new understandings. And of course we all need to support each other. All said and done, there has to be solidarity !

MB: Maybe the last question. There are so many different groups. You have Mahila Samity's. Various women's groups: we have Naga women's groups, you know, per state. And again we are divided on our issues of ethnicity etc. Whereas the common line that goes through all this is the issue of women's poverty, women's abuse. Do you feel that there is a very big difference in the needs of the indigenous women's group and the women's groups which came up from the freedom movement, like the Mahila Samity's of Assam.

MS: Acchha. The indigenous Mahila group? You wish to bridge both?

MB: Wishing to bridge itself is something different. But is there, do you think there are commonalities between them and do you think they can be a point where everybody can come together? Just on the issue of women itself.

MS: Of course. I feel that, you know once I made a comparison. I was in the village that time and fought very badly with the DC [District Commissioner] of Bongaigaon. He said, what is the issue, blah blah; our women are not like the women of Rajasthan; our women are not beaten. So I came home feeling frustrated that I could not answer, or respond more smartly. So I wrote: women in Rajasthan and women in Assam (laughs) and made a chart. And you see issues, at the end of it, it is the same issue. You might not have dowry but there are demands of dowry now in Assam. There are issues of birth control; there are issues of husband beating; husband not doing anything; women's work. If you compare women's work, a Rajasthani woman is working as much as a Bodo woman. And then there are differences, points of departure.

MB: Do you think because you find these commonalities, is it because of patriarchy or because of customary laws?

MB: It is because of patriarchy. Customary law emerges out of a patriarchal ideology, so who has made the customs?

MB: So thank you Meghali, I need to know your full name. I need to know your date of birth, I need to know what you are doing currently.

MS: I am Meghali Senapati, my year of birth is '75, that makes me 36-37 on 31st March. and presently I am an assistant professor in the Tata Institute of Social Sciences in Guwahati.

MB: So thank you very much. it was a pleasure talking to you.

DATE: FEBRUARY 2012
GUWAHATI, ASSAM.