INDIGENOUS WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY: A STUDY OF AGENCY AND GLOBAL NORMS IN LOCAL PEACE INITIATIVES

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the agency of indigenous women in local peacebuilding contexts of Northeast India by exploring their engagement with the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda. The central research question guiding this study is: How do global peace norms like the WPS agenda inform the ability of indigenous women to exercise agency in localizing and building peace? Using the theoretical framework of strategic essentialism, the study analyzes five peace congregations organized by indigenous women's groups between 2015 and 2024. Through thematic analysis of newspaper articles and archival documents from these organizations' websites, the research identifies key themes and patterns that align the activities and outcomes of these congregations with the WPS agenda. The findings reveal that indigenous women strategically mobilize their identities and cultural heritage to address local conflicts, enhance community resilience, and secure support from both local and global women's organizations. This strategic use of identity amplifies their agency and integrates global peace norms into local practices, fostering a more inclusive and sustainable peace process. By illuminating the voices and experiences of indigenous women in localizing global peace norms like the WPS agenda, this research contributes to the broader understanding of the intersection between global peace norms and grassroots activism.

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Introduction

Often called 'the land of seven sisters (and one brother),' the Northeast of India is a mosaic of ethnic, cultural, and linguistic heterogeneity, situated in a geopolitically sensitive locale bordered by several countries. Owing to this intrinsic diversity, the region has been marred by a history of ethnic conflicts, insurgencies, non-state armed violence, and overall socio-political unrest. Central to these conflicts is the isolation —both geographical and political— of the region from the rest of India. These conflicts and national dynamics have profound impacts on the lives of indigenous communities, particularly women, who often bear the brunt of violence and displacement. The complex dynamics of the region, therefore, provide a rich backdrop for examining the efforts of indigenous women, who have historically played crucial roles in advocating for peace, justice, and social change amidst persistent conflicts. Their involvement underscores the critical importance of incorporating gender-sensitive approaches in conflict resolution and peacebuilding strategies within this complex region.

The Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda, encapsulated in United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 and nine subsequent resolutions, underlines the imperative of women's participation in peace processes, and the incorporation of gender perspectives in all peace and security efforts, manifested by its 4 pillars— Prevention, Participation, Protection, and Relief and Recovery. However, the effective implementation of the WPS agenda requires localization to resonate with the specific needs and contexts of diverse communities. In Northeast India, indigenous women have been at the forefront of peacebuilding initiatives, navigating the intersection of global norms and local realities to advocate for sustainable peace and justice.

The existing literature on the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda predominantly focuses on global and regional implementations, often overlooking the nuanced ways in which

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these norms are adapted within specific local contexts marked by unique socio-political and cultural dynamics. Particularly underrepresented are studies that delve into how Indigenous women—whose identities are shaped by complex layers of cultural, ethnic, and gendered experiences—engage with global peace norms. Most research tends to either broadly address women's roles in peacebuilding without a distinct focus on Indigenous populations or discuss Indigenous issues without integrating gender perspectives. This lack of detailed analysis is especially pronounced in the context of Northeast India, a region characterized by its rich ethnic diversity and ongoing conflict, making it a critical site for examining the intersection of these factors. This study aims to fill this gap by exploring the unique ways in which Indigenous women in this region leverage their collective identity to localize and advance peace initiatives. The question central to this thesis is: ": How do global peace norms like the WPS agenda inform the ability of indigenous women to exercise agency in localizing and building peace?"

Utilizing detailed case studies of five peace congregations held between 2015 and 2024, the research uncovers how Indigenous women strategically mobilize a unified identity to address local conflicts and advocate for peace. The thematic analysis aligns the activities and outcomes of these congregations with the WPS agenda, demonstrating how these global norms are localized to fit the specific socio-political context of Northeast India. Through these case studies, this thesis aims to contribute to the broader discourse on women's agency in peacebuilding, and the effectiveness of the WPS agenda.

Central to this analysis is the concept of strategic essentialism, as theorized by Gayatri Spivak (1988). Strategic essentialism involves the conscious adoption of a unified identity by marginalized groups to advance specific political or social objectives. This theoretical framework provides a lens to understand how indigenous women in Northeast India mobilize their identities to gain visibility, influence policy, and assert their agency in peace processes.

By presenting a cohesive front, these women can more effectively engage with state and non-state actors, navigate complex socio-political dynamics, and secure resources and support for their initiatives.

This thesis is structured as follows – Chapter 1 initiates the discussion with a comprehensive yet brief contextualizing of what 'the Northeast' entails. The objective of this section is to situate the peacebuilding efforts of indigenous women in the context of Northeast India. This is followed by Chapter 2 which reviews existing literature on the WPS agenda, and feminist agency and its intersection with indigenous peacebuilding. Chapter 3 then delves into the theoretical framework of strategic essentialism to highlight why and how it fits the context of this analysis. Following this, the chapter provides more details on the methodology used to examine the peace congregations.

Chapter 4 undertakes a meticulous examination of the resolutions emanating from the peace congregations. This section employs a thematic approach based on deductive coding where I identified certain common patterns around which indigenous women mobilize for peace within the ambit of the peace congregations. Through this analysis, the chapter seeks to unravel how Indigenous women exercise agency in mobilizing under a unified identity to adapt global peace norms to their local contexts. Chapter 5 subsequently synthesizes the empirical findings within the framework of strategic essentialism. By doing so, it explores how Indigenous women strategically mobilize their Indigenous identities to localize and foster peace, examining how the WPS agenda informs their agency in doing so.

The concluding chapter summarizes the key findings, implications, and contributions of the study. It reiterates the significance of Indigenous women's agency in peacebuilding, underscores the importance of strategic essentialism, and offers concluding remarks on the transformative potential of integrating Indigenous perspectives into global peace frameworks.

Chapter 1. Contextualizing Peace Efforts in Northeast India: A Historical Perspective

This chapter provides a comprehensive overview of the historical and socio-political context of Northeast India, focusing on the unique ethnic identities and autonomy struggles that have defined the region. It sets the stage for understanding the emergence and significance of indigenous women's movements in peacebuilding. By examining the impact of colonial legacies, post-independence integration policies, and ongoing conflicts, the chapter contextualizes the proactive efforts of these women's groups.

To begin with, the Northeast of India entails eight distinct administrative units – the 7 'sister states' of Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Tripura, and one 'brother state' of Sikkim. The region is further divided into hills and valleys, with tribes such as the Nagas, Kukis, and Mizos inhabiting the hills historically named by the British colonizers as the Naga Hills, Lushai Hills, and Chin Hills, among others (Kotwal 2000). These tribes possess distinct languages, cultures, and social practices that differ significantly from the valley dwellers. According to Ziipao (2018), the geographical location and cultural configuration of these tribal societies align with James C. Scott's notion of Southeast Asia, where tribes like the Nagas, Mizos, and Garos occupy what he terms as non-state spaces or 'illegible spaces' from the perspective of the more centralized lowland states (Wouters 2012; Ziipao 2018). This term signifies regions that are difficult for state powers to control or integrate due to the autonomous nature of its inhabitants that coexist uneasily with their culturally distinct lowland neighbours (Ziipao 2018).

The history of this tribal distinction stretches back to colonial times; and the debate over tribal versus indigenous identities further complicates the region's social fabric, influencing issues of cultural preservation, legal rights, and political representation. During British colonial rule, the

Northeast was administered separately from the rest of India under policies like the Inner Line Permit (Sonowal 2023, 963), which restricted access to certain areas to protect the tribal cultures from outside influence. This administrative segregation reinforced the distinctiveness of the region's tribal populations, but it also laid the groundwork for later disputes over their status.

Post-independence, these distinctions became more pronounced as the Indian state sought to integrate these regions more fully into the national framework. The term "indigenous" in the global context often implies a status of pre-colonial sovereignty and a unique cultural heritage that predates the formation of the modern state (Srikanth 2014). For Northeast Indian tribals, claiming indigenous status is a way to assert their historical and cultural distinctiveness and to seek special protections for their land and cultural practices.

However, the Indian government has traditionally been cautious about using the term "indigenous" to describe any of its populations, preferring instead terms like "Scheduled Tribes" or "Adivasis"[1] (Karlsson 2010). This reluctance is partly due to the implications of sovereignty and self-determination that accompany the term "indigenous" under international law (Xaxa 1999), as articulated by instruments like the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP).

Moreover, the Indian state's efforts to integrate the Northeast into the national framework have been met with resistance from various ethnic groups who perceived these efforts as threats to their cultural and political autonomy. As argued by Banerjee (2016), the region's unique historical experience of semi-autonomy under British rule, combined with its distinct ethnic composition, meant that many indigenous communities were wary of losing their traditional

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[1] While the term literally translates to 'original dwellers' – the Indian administration uses 'Scheduled Tribes' and 'Adivasis' interchangeably thereby attributing the community a tribal status instead of an Indigenous one.

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ways of life and governance structures. This resistance to the 'imposed homogenization' (Sarmah, 2016), manifested in the form of insurgent movements, with groups such as the Naga National Council (NNC) and later the National Socialist Council of Nagalim (NSCN) leading armed struggles for independence or greater autonomy (Banerjee 2016).

The deployment of military force and the enactment of draconian laws such as the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA) of 1958, which grants the military sweeping powers to maintain public order, have further exacerbated the conflict (Nepram 2017). AFSPA's implementation in the Northeast has been widely criticized for human rights abuses, including arbitrary detentions, extrajudicial killings, and the suppression of political dissent. Such measures have deepened the alienation of the local population from the Indian state, fostering a climate of mistrust and resentment (Hans 2016).

Economic factors have also played a crucial role in the region's conflicts. Despite its rich natural resources, Northeast India remains one of the most underdeveloped parts of the country (Banerjee 2016). The lack of economic opportunities and infrastructure development has contributed to widespread poverty and unemployment, creating fertile ground for insurgent groups to recruit disaffected youth. Additionally, the exploitation of natural resources by external actors, often perceived as benefiting the central government more than the local communities, has led to further grievances and resistance (Hans 2016).

Ethnic tensions within the region have further complicated the conflict landscape. The Northeast is home to numerous ethnic groups, each with its own distinct identity and historical claims to land and resources (Nepram 2017). These groups often find themselves in competition for political power and economic resources, leading to inter-ethnic violence and insurgencies. For instance, the Naga-Kuki clashes in Manipur and the Bodo-Muslim conflict

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in Assam (Haokip 2013) are examples of how ethnic rivalries can escalate into violent confrontations, disrupting the social fabric and stability of the region.

Moreover, the strategic geographical location of Northeast India, sharing borders with several countries, has introduced external dimensions to the conflict. Cross-border insurgent activities, arms smuggling, and the influence of foreign intelligence agencies have added layers of complexity to the security situation. The porous borders with Myanmar, Bangladesh, and Bhutan have facilitated the movement of insurgent groups and the influx of illegal arms, complicating the efforts of the Indian government to maintain control and security in the region (Nepram 2020). It is also crucial to note here that this region shares 98% of its borders with neighbouring countries while only 2% of its borders connect to India, primarily through the narrow Siliguri Corridor, often referred to as the "Chicken Neck Corridor" (Ziipao 2018; Nepram 2020).

This geographical separation from the Indian mainland, the imposed homogeneity, and the interplay of these historical, socio-political, and economic factors has led to the physical and psychological isolation of the region. This has created a volatile environment in Northeast India, where conflicts are perpetuated by a combination of internal grievances and external influences. The failure to address the root causes of these conflicts, coupled with heavy-handed military responses, has perpetuated a cycle of violence and instability. Addressing these conflicts requires a nuanced approach that recognizes the unique historical and cultural context of the region, promotes inclusive development, and fosters genuine political dialogue aimed at achieving sustainable peace and autonomy for the indigenous communities.

It is amidst this backdrop that some indigenous women's groups in Northeast India have emerged as powerful advocates for peace and justice (Banerjee 2016). As this thesis argues, their peacebuilding efforts are not a response to the homogenizing tendencies of the

government but rather a proactive stance to address the root causes of conflict and promote sustainable peace. These women's groups navigate complex socio-political landscapes, using their unique position to foster dialogue and reconciliation among conflicting parties. They leverage their deep-rooted understanding of local customs and traditions, demonstrating that indigenous knowledge and practices are vital in crafting enduring solutions to the region's issues.

Furthermore, it is important to note that these groups refer to themselves as indigenous, embracing this identity to assert their historical and cultural distinctiveness. Consequently, this thesis also employs the term "indigenous" to honor and reflect the self-identification of these women. The objective here is not to homogenize Indigenous identities but to illustrate how indigenous women strategically utilize their nationally unrecognized yet unified indigeneity to their advantage. They exemplify a powerful collective force that challenges both external suppression and internal fragmentation, advocating for a peace that acknowledges and respects the diversity and autonomy of their communities. Through their initiatives, these indigenous women underscore the necessity of engaging with global peace norms alongside local efforts, highlighting that genuine peacebuilding must be inclusive, context-sensitive, and driven by those most affected by conflict.

In the realm of gender politics and peacebuilding, strategic essentialism has been a vital tool for women's groups globally. By emphasizing common experiences of oppression or victimization, these groups can present a united front that strengthens their bargaining power in political negotiations, such as peace talks. For example, women's organizations might emphasize shared experiences of gender-based violence during war to push for specific legal reforms or for greater representation in peace negotiations. This unified stance often makes it

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easier to draw attention to specific issues that are otherwise overlooked in male-dominated

processes.

Chapter 2. Reimagining Agency in Peacebuilding and the WPS Agenda: A Literature Review

The quest for peace is not a monolithic endeavour but a multifaceted journey shaped by diverse voices, experiences, and aspirations. At the intersection of global norms and local realities lies the agency of indigenous women, whose narratives of peacebuilding and conflict resolution often remain marginalized within mainstream IR discourse. This is further complicated (and informed) by the fact that they face intersecting forms of marginalization, based on both their regional and gendered identities.

Accordingly, this literature review aims to first situate the discussion in the framing and structure of the WPS agenda. It then delves into the concept of feminist agency in peacebuilding, examining how women actively contribute to conflict resolution and post-conflict reconstruction, highlighting the intersection of local peace efforts with the global framework, and implicitly linking local agency with indigenous agency. Further, by integrating feminist theories and indigenous peacebuilding practices, this review aims to provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the ways in which aligning with global peace norms can enhance indigenous agency.

2.1 WPS Agenda

The Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda, crystallized through United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325) and subsequent resolutions, marks a significant shift in international security discourse by acknowledging and promoting the critical role of women in peacebuilding and conflict resolution. Despite its global relevance, the adaptation and implementation of the WPS agenda within specific local contexts, especially among indigenous populations, remains underexplored. This literature review delves into the origins,

developments, and key thematic areas of the WPS agenda, highlighting the gaps in existing literature that this research aims to fill.

Over the past two decades, global peace and security governance has experienced a significant shift with the introduction and spread of new gender norms encapsulated in the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda. Formally adopted on 31st October 2000, the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325) on "Women, Peace, and Security," was ground-breaking as it was the first to explicitly call for women's participation and the inclusion of gender perspectives in peacebuilding, peacekeeping, conflict prevention, and post-conflict recovery (UNSC 2000). According to Cohn (2004), it represented a revolutionary step toward reimagining how security is understood, protected, and enforced.

The resolution opens with ten prefatory paragraphs and 18 provisions that relate to broad normative guidelines adopted by the international community via legal principles, human rights, and humanitarian law, as well as earlier UN resolutions, declarations, and publications. UNSCR 1325 and its follow-up resolutions, including UNSCR 1820, 1888, 1889, 1960, 2106, 2122, and 2242, form the core of the WPS agenda, emphasizing four main pillars: participation, protection, prevention, and relief and recovery (PeaceWomen).

These pillars address various aspects of gender-based and sexual violence, enhance women's representation in decision-making processes, safeguard their human rights, and address their needs in disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) programs. For example, as per Peace Women, within the UNSCR 1325, the participation pillar emphasizes the inclusion of women in peace and security decision-making processes, advocating for their involvement in conflict resolution, peace negotiations, and peace operations. The protection pillar focuses on safeguarding the rights of women and girls in emergency and humanitarian situations, with particular attention to preventing gender-based and sexual violence. The prevention pillar aims

to prevent conflict and all forms of violence against women and girls, incorporating gender considerations into conflict early warning systems. The relief and recovery pillar stresses the importance of integrating women's perspectives in peacebuilding processes, mandating the prosecution of those responsible for crimes against humanity and ensuring that refugee camps respect the special needs of women and girls (PeaceWomen).

Scholars like Cockburn (2012) posit that this resolution may be unique among Security Council Resolutions in that its foundational work was entirely undertaken by civil society and non-governmental organizations. She and various other scholars like Cohn (2004) contend that the WPS Agenda's contribution to women in conflict and post-conflict situations, along with its innovative nature, should not be underestimated. As Cohn notes, for women in war-torn countries, reference to Resolution 1325 offers numerous opportunities and promises for change. In this context, Aharoni (2014) argues that Resolution 1325, given its declarative nature, serves not only as a "regulative norm" but also as a "constitutive norm." As a regulative norm, it establishes recognized standards and constrains behaviours by setting expectations for how actors should conduct themselves concerning women's participation in peace and security matters. More importantly, as a constitutive norm, it shapes and defines the identities of the actors involved, such as civil society organizations and states, influencing how they perceive themselves and their roles within the context of peace and security (Aharoni 2014).

In this context, Shepherd (2018) argues that Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda has brought about the narrative shift from viewing women merely as victims of conflict to recognizing them as critical agents of change. This paradigm shift is crucial as it acknowledges the unique contributions and perspectives that women bring to the table, moving beyond their historical portrayal and empowering them to take on leadership roles in the quest for sustainable peace and security.

However, despite its normative nature, the implementation of the WPS agenda has been uneven across different regions and contexts. While there has been significant progress in some areas, challenges remain in translating the principles of the WPS agenda into tangible outcomes on the ground. Scholars (Egnell, Hojem, and Berts 2014; Hudson 2010) have highlighted various factors that influence the effectiveness of the WPS agenda, including political will, availability of resources, and the presence of robust institutional frameworks. Despite the significant hope placed in the WPS agenda's ability to address gendered exclusions, discrimination, and violence generated by conflicts, many argue that it has not been as transformational as originally envisioned (Shepherd 2016; Basu 2016; Basu et al. 2020). The lack of transformative impact, as argued by David and True (2019), could be linked to the inherent challenges of engaging with patriarchal normative frameworks while working to transform these same institutions to alter gendered power relations. This requires balancing local-level initiatives, often led by women, with engagement at international and national levels, dominated by elite men (David and True 2019).

Its national engagement is further complicated by the legal basis of the WPS agenda, with ongoing debate about whether these resolutions are legally binding. Shepherd (2011) suggests that Resolution 1325 is binding for UN Charter signatories, warranting political analysis. However, Willett (2010), and Tryggestad (2009) argue otherwise, noting the absence of legal sanctions if the WPS agenda is not implemented, leading to perceptions of UN ineffectiveness. A central instrument specified in Resolution 1325 and reiterated in subsequent resolutions is the National Action Plan (NAP) which serves as a central mechanism for implementing the WPS agenda. NAPs aim to translate the global commitments of the WPS agenda into actionable national policies and practices, fostering gender-inclusive peace and security measures. For over a decade, the efforts of civil society and the UN system have centered on encouraging

nation-states to adopt NAPs to address the various 'pillars' of 1325. However, as Aroussi (2017) puts it, they may be unsuitable for states with limited resources or weak institutions.

George and Shepherd (2016) point out that the success of NAPs is often contingent on the political will and resources allocated by national governments. In some cases, NAPs have led to significant advancements in women's participation in peace processes and the protection of their rights. However, in other instances, the plans remain largely symbolic, with little practical impact due to insufficient implementation mechanisms and lack of accountability. Basu has also pointed out that Within South Asia alone, Nepal and Sri Lanka have spearheaded the region's commitment to the agenda (PeaceWomen). India's engagement with the WPS agenda, however, exhibits reservations or conflicting priorities posing challenges to a comprehensive understanding of its position.

Existing literature (Banerjee 2016; Banerjee 2020; Khullar 2020; Tamang 2020) suggests that this ambiguity underscores the need for further inquiry into the underlying factors shaping India's approach to the WPS agenda. Banerjee (2020) contends that UNSCR 1325 has "failed to empower Indian women." He also notes that the Government of India refuses to officially recognize armed conflicts that characterize India. According to Khullar (2020), this reluctance by the state can be attributed to sovereignty concerns. Dipti Tamang's (2020) analysis complements this perspective by highlighting the Indian state's silence toward both the existence of internal conflicts and the gendered dynamics within these conflicts.

Therefore, Rajagopalan (2016) argues that while NAPs are a common method for implementing the WPS agenda, they should not be the only approach. It is in this context that A. Upadhyaya (2021) argues that the absence of an institutional framework for women's representation often triggers the demand for implementing the WPS through peace

congregations. This contextual adaptation allows for a richer and more nuanced understanding of the agenda's potential and its practical implications in diverse environments.

This adaptability is particularly crucial when considering the roles of indigenous women in peacebuilding. Empirical studies highlight the importance of integrating indigenous knowledge and practices into the WPS agenda. For instance, research in Latin America and Africa has shown that indigenous women play crucial roles in mediating conflicts, promoting social cohesion, and advocating for human rights within their communities (Manchanda 2020; Tripp, Ferree, and Ewig 2013). However, these studies often lack a comprehensive analysis of how the WPS agenda can be localized to support and enhance indigenous women's peacebuilding efforts. By examining the contextual adaptations made by women's organizations and local civil society groups, we can better understand how the WPS agenda can be effectively integrated into the unique socio-political landscapes of indigenous communities. This approach not only enriches the existing knowledge on women's activism but also calls for a broader engagement with the WPS agenda that transcends the boundaries of formal national policies and action plans.

2.2 Feminist and Local Agency in Peacebuilding

Peacebuilding is an essential process aimed at establishing durable peace by addressing the root causes of conflict and fostering reconciliation and sustainable development. As defined by the United Nations, peacebuilding involves a range of measures targeted at reducing the risk of lapsing or relapsing into conflict by strengthening national capacities at all levels for conflict management and laying the foundations for sustainable peace and development (United Nations Peacebuilding Support Office 2010). The concept of agency is central to understanding how different actors contribute to peacebuilding efforts.

Agency is a multifaceted concept that encompasses the ability to make decisions, take action, and influence outcomes (Hancock 2016). It is often discussed in relation to structure, highlighting the dynamic interplay between individual capabilities and structural constraints (Jary and Jary 1991; Hancock 2016). Anthony Giddens' structuration theory posits that agency and structure are interdependent; structures provide the conditions for agency, while agency reproduces and transforms structures (Giddens 1984 in Lamsel 2012). This duality is crucial in peacebuilding, where individuals and groups navigate existing social and political frameworks to initiate change.

2.2.1 Feminist Perspectives on Agency

In feminist theory, agency generally refers to the capacity of individuals, particularly women, to act autonomously and make choices within the constraints of societal structures (McNay 2013). Key theorists such as Judith Butler and Nancy Fraser have contributed significantly to the understanding of feminist agency. Butler (2010) introduces the notion of performativity, suggesting that agency arises through repeated actions that challenge normative gender roles. Fraser (2008), on the other hand, emphasizes the importance of recognition and redistribution in enabling women's agency within a framework of social justice. Additionally, feminist scholars highlight the intersectionality of agency, recognizing that women's experiences and capacities for action are shaped by multiple, intersecting identities, including race, class, ethnicity, and sexuality (Crenshaw 1989).

Similarly, Cockburn (2010) explores how feminist peace movements challenge militarism and promote alternative security frameworks that prioritize human security over state security. These movements demonstrate the transformative potential of women's agency in peacebuilding by advocating for systemic changes that address the root causes of conflict. Building on this perspective, Asha Hans emphasizes the critical need to shift from state-centric

security models to those that prioritize human security, arguing that such a shift allows for a more inclusive approach that addresses the actual needs and vulnerabilities of populations, particularly women (Hans 2010). This approach aligns with feminist peacebuilding efforts that seek to redefine security beyond military terms to include economic, social, and environmental dimensions.

2.2.2 Indigenous Perspectives on Agency

Indigenous agency, in contrast, is often articulated in relation to collective rights and self-determination. Scholars such as Linda Tuhiwai Smith and Glen Coulthard emphasize the importance of reclaiming indigenous knowledge, practices, and governance systems as forms of resistance to colonialism and means of asserting sovereignty. Smith (1999) advocates for decolonizing methodologies that prioritize indigenous worldviews and voices. Coulthard (2014), drawing on Fanon, argues that indigenous agency involves rejecting the politics of recognition offered by the colonial state and fostering a politics of resurgence that revitalizes indigenous cultural and political practices.

Indigenous agency is thus deeply connected to the land, community, and cultural continuity. It is collective rather than individualistic, emphasizing the importance of relationality and reciprocity in sustaining indigenous ways of life (Holder and Corntassel 2002). This collective dimension of agency is crucial for understanding how indigenous women mobilize within their communities and in broader political arenas.

2.2.3 Intersection of Feminist and Indigenous Agency

The intersection of feminist and indigenous agency reveals both synergies and tensions. Feminist agency's focus on individual rights and autonomy can sometimes clash with the collective orientation of indigenous agency. However, indigenous feminist scholars have

argued for a more integrated approach that recognizes the collective dimensions of agency while also addressing gender-specific forms of oppression within indigenous communities (Green, 2007; Arvin, Tuck, & Morrill, 2013).

For example, Kim Anderson (2000) discusses how indigenous women negotiate their roles within their communities and the broader feminist movement, emphasizing the need to address both gender and colonial oppression. Anderson argues that indigenous women's agency is about balancing these dual commitments and advocating for change within both indigenous and feminist contexts (Anderson, 2000).

The WPS agenda, particularly through UNSCR 1325, provides a critical framework for understanding how feminist and indigenous agencies intersect in peacebuilding. UNSCR 1325 emphasizes the importance of women's participation in peacebuilding and decision-making processes. Indigenous women leverage this framework to articulate their demands for inclusion, using the global norms of the WPS agenda to legitimize their claims and enhance their political efficacy. This interplay between global peacebuilding norms and local practices is a critical area of study, particularly in understanding how frameworks like the WPS agenda are localized. Localization refers to the adaptation of global norms to fit local contexts (Singh 2017). This process is crucial for ensuring the relevance and effectiveness of international peacebuilding initiatives. Studies by Richmond and Mac Ginty argue that for peacebuilding efforts to be sustainable, local actors must adapt and take ownership of global norms (Richmond 2011; Mac Ginty 2011). This involves translating abstract principles into concrete actions that resonate with local values and practices.

It is important to distinguish localization from the adoption of National Action Plans (NAPs). While NAPs are official state-level policy documents designed to implement global norms such as the WPS agenda within a national framework, localization goes beyond this by actively

engaging local communities in the adaptation process (Haastrup and Hagen 2020). Localization involves translating abstract principles into concrete actions that resonate with local values and practices, thereby ensuring that international peacebuilding efforts are grounded in the specific cultural and social realities of the communities involved (Funk and Said 2010).

Studies by Richmond (2011) and Mac Ginty (2011) argue that for peacebuilding efforts to be sustainable, local actors must adapt and take ownership of global norms This involves more than merely implementing NAPs; it requires a deep engagement with local practices and perspectives to ensure that global norms are not just adopted superficially but are genuinely integrated into the local context (Singh 2017). Research by Hellmüller and Swaine highlights the challenges of localizing global norms, such as resistance from local power holders, cultural misunderstandings, and the risk of superficial implementation. These studies stress the need for genuine engagement with local communities and the incorporation of their perspectives in peacebuilding processes (Hellmüller 2018; Swaine 2015). Unlike NAPs, which are often top-down initiatives, localization demands a bottom-up approach where local knowledge, traditions, and needs are prioritized and incorporated into peacebuilding strategies.

Overall, this nuanced understanding of agency, informed by feminist and indigenous perspectives, underscores the importance of inclusive and culturally resonant peacebuilding initiatives. By recognizing and integrating the diverse forms of agency and the complex interplay between global norms and local practices, peacebuilding efforts can become more sustainable and effective in addressing the root causes of conflict and fostering long-lasting peace and development.

Chapter 3. Locating Agency within a Homogenized Identity

3.1 Understanding Strategic Essentialism

Strategic essentialism, first conceptualized by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in 1988, has become a pivotal theoretical framework within postcolonial and feminist studies. Spivak introduced this concept to describe how marginalized groups, such as subalterns, could adopt a unified, essentialist identity to enhance their political leverage against dominant power structures (1988). This strategy is rooted in the understanding that while these identities are socially constructed and internally diverse, presenting a simplified and cohesive front can be an effective means of mobilization and resistance. This theoretical framework is particularly relevant for examining the interaction between the WPS agenda and the indigenous women's peace movement in Northeast India. By strategically essentializing their identities as that of a collective 'indigenous' unit, indigenous women can navigate their complex sociopolitical landscape, amplify their voices, and legitimize their demands for inclusion and protection in peace processes. This chapter explores the theoretical underpinnings of strategic essentialism, its application in feminist contexts, and its relevance to peace congregations. The analysis in the subsequent chapters will demonstrate how the indigenous women's peace movement in Northeast India employs strategic essentialism to align with (or diverge from) the WPS agenda, thereby enhancing their agency in localizing and fostering peace.

The theoretical concept of essentialism is central to understanding the identity dynamics within marginalized groups, particularly ethnic minorities. Essentialism posits that there are intrinsic and immutable differences between social groups based on characteristics such as race, class, gender, and sexuality (Gelman 2003). This belief system, though challenged by numerous

social theorists who argue against its validity and highlight its ideological underpinnings (Smedley and Smedley 2005), remains influential in shaping social identities.

For ethnic minorities, this creates a complex predicament. On one hand, these groups must actively contest essentialist beliefs that often serve to uphold the power and interests of dominant social groups (Mahalingam 2007). These essentialist views can perpetuate stereotypes and reinforce social hierarchies that marginalize minority communities. However, on the other hand, Spivak (1988) argues that while essentialism is inherently reductive and problematic, there are moments when marginalized groups can temporarily adopt an essentialist identity to rally support and assert their political claims. This temporary adoption of a broader identity is what she calls strategic essentialism.

Kamenou (2020) builds on Spivak's framework by emphasizing that while strategic essentialism can help marginalized groups gain political recognition and agency, it also maintains the flexibility to evolve into anti-essentialist strategies. This adaptability is crucial for fostering a more inclusive and dynamic political activism that transcends rigid identity categories and addresses broader social injustices. Kamenou's conceptualization underscores the pragmatic and transformative potential of strategic essentialism, suggesting that it not only empowers marginalized groups but also encourages continuous negotiation and redefinition of objectives to adapt to changing political landscapes (Kamenou 2020).

In the context of Northeast India, the indigenous women's peace movement exemplifies this strategic use of essentialism. By aligning with the WPS agenda, these women adopt essentialist identities to rally support, assert their political claims, and navigate the complex sociopolitical environment. As this thesis argues, this strategic embrace of essentialism allows them to construct a positive self-identity, foster solidarity, and drive collective action within their

community. Moreover, it empowers them to challenge dominant narratives and assert their cultural and social significance.

This dual necessity of resisting and utilizing essentialism is critical in the formation of group identities among marginalized populations. It underscores the strategic decisions these groups must make in navigating their social realities. The ability to leverage essentialist identities strategically can empower ethnic minorities, enabling them to challenge dominant narratives while affirming their own cultural and social significance (Spivak,1988).

Making a note of these insights, strategic essentialism offers a valuable theoretical tool for analyzing the indigenous women's peace movement in Northeast India. This framework highlights the pragmatic and adaptive strategies these women employ to enhance their agency, align with international peace agendas, and foster localized peace efforts. The analysis in the subsequent chapters will demonstrate how the indigenous women's peace movement employs strategic essentialism to align with (or diverge from) the WPS agenda, thereby enhancing their agency in localizing and fostering peace.

3.2 Methodology

3.2.1 Research Design

This thesis adopts a qualitative research design to examine the intersection of the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda and the agency of indigenous women in Northeast India through the lens of strategic essentialism. The study focuses on five peace congregations held between 2015 and 2024 by indigenous women's organizations in the region. These congregations serve as the primary sites for data collection and analysis, providing rich, contextual insights into the strategies and experiences of these women. The qualitative

approach allows for an in-depth exploration of the nuanced ways in which indigenous women mobilize, advocate, and resist within their socio-political contexts.

3.2.2 Data Collection

Data collection for this thesis involved sourcing primary data from newspaper articles, organizational archives, and publications by participating women's groups. These sources were selected to provide a comprehensive view of the peace congregations and the broader context in which they occur.

The Peace Congregations

The five peace congregations held between 2015 and 2024 are central to this study. These congregations, organized by indigenous women's groups across Northeast India, serve as pivotal forums for discussing and addressing issues related to peace, security, and women's rights. Each congregation brought together women from diverse tribes and communities, facilitating a space for sharing experiences, building solidarity, and formulating collective strategies.

1. Northeast India Women Peace Congregation 2015: The first congregation in 2015 marked the beginning of a formalized collective effort by indigenous women to address the pervasive conflicts and militarization in the region. This project was supported by the European Union (EU) and Welthungerhilfe (WHH- a committee originally set up by UN Food and Agricultural Organization, 1962), and implemented by Control Arms Foundation of India (CAFI), its sister organizations Manipur Women Gun Survivors Network and Northeast India Women Initiative for Peace (NEIWIP).

2. Northeast India Women Peace Congregation 2016: Building on the momentum of the inaugural event, this congregation featured sessions on the historical and contemporary struggles of indigenous women, emphasizing the need for unity across different tribes

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and regions to foster peace and security. It was during this project that the indigenous women came up with a 20-point resolution called the Assam Declaration on Women, Peace and Security. Also supported by the EU and WHH, this congregation had additional local partners such as Char and Rural Development Society, Doctors for You, as well as CAFI, MWGSN, and NEIWIP.

3. Third Northeast India Indigenous Women Peace Congregation 2020: The 2020 congregation centered on the theme "Working Towards Our Collective Peace, Justice and Our Rights" This event highlighted successful peace initiatives led by women and advocated for greater representation of women in formal peace negotiations. This event was organized by the MWGSN, NEIWIP and Global Alliance of Indigenous Peoples, Gender Justice and Peace (GAIGAP).

4. Fourth Northeast India Women Peace Congregation 2023: This congregation addressed the impacts of laws like AFSPA and advocating for legal reforms and better protection mechanisms for women. It included testimonies from women affected by militarization and gender-based violence, linking these issues to global human rights standards. This was held in the backdrop of increased ethnic tensions and violence in Manipur. This was also organized by MWGSN and NEIWIP.

5. Fifth Northeast India Women Peace Congregation 2024: The most recent congregation in April 2024 synthesized the themes of solidarity, participation, and protection, reflecting on the progress made and the challenges that remain. It was also organized by MWGSN and NEIWIP.

3.2.3 Limitations

It is important to note that while these resolutions provide valuable insights into the peacebuilding strategies of indigenous women, the dataset is not exhaustive. This study relies on publicly available documents, which may not capture the full range of activities,

discussions, and perspectives present in the congregations. The resolutions primarily reflect formal agreements and do not fully encompass the broader grassroots-level discourses from which they emerge.

While these documents include relevant speeches by indigenous leaders and community members, it is crucial not to homogenize these experiences. The resolutions and accompanying materials represent collective efforts to localize broader peace initiatives in the region by mobilizing as a single unit. This focus on formal resolutions means that the study might miss informal and less documented aspects of the peacebuilding processes, such as spontaneous discussions and unrecorded community actions.

Therefore, readers should be mindful that the data presented here provides a structured view of indigenous women's peacebuilding efforts, primarily through the lens of formal agreements and documented speeches, rather than a comprehensive account of all grassroots activities and perspectives.

3.2.4 Analytical Framework

The analytical framework for this thesis is grounded in the concept of strategic essentialism and the thematic analysis of the peace congregations. The primary goal is to examine the conjunctions between the agency of indigenous women and the WPS agenda as reflected in the congregations. To this end, I identified themes of solidarity, participation and inclusion, and protection of women's rights from the congregations' discussions, resolutions, and publications based on recurring themes and patterns.

Solidarity as a means of Conflict Prevention: This theme examines how indigenous women build and maintain solidarity across diverse tribes and communities, using their collective identity to strengthen their advocacy. The analysis focuses on the ways in which solidarity is

expressed and mobilized during the congregations, and how it contributes to their collective agency.

Advocacy for Inclusion and Meaningful Participation: This theme explores the efforts to increase the participation and inclusion of women in peace processes and decision-making. The analysis considers the strategies used to advocate for women's representation and the impacts of these efforts on local and national policies.

Protection of Women's Rights and Cultures in Northeast India: This theme addresses the protection of women's rights within the context of conflict and militarization. The analysis examines how indigenous women use their collective identity to advocate for legal reforms, highlight human rights abuses, and seek justice and accountability.

3.2.5 Data Analysis

Data analysis follows a thematic approach, which is well-suited for identifying patterns and themes within qualitative data. The process begins with data familiarization, where the researcher immerses themselves in the collected data by reading and re-reading the documents. This initial stage is crucial for gaining a deep understanding of the content and context.

The research question—: How do global peace norms like the WPS agenda inform the ability of indigenous women to exercise agency in localizing and building peace? — is intricately answered through the lens of strategic essentialism. This thesis argues that global peace norms, such as those outlined in the WPS agenda, significantly inform and enhance the agency of indigenous women in Northeast India, but only as long as these women strategically essentialize their identities to align with the framework of the WPS agenda.

By adopting a unified identity, indigenous women can more effectively align their localized struggles with the global norms and principles established by the WPS agenda. This alignment

allows them to draw on the legitimacy and support of international human rights standards, thereby amplifying their voices and increasing their influence. When combined with feminist theories and the practical application of peacebuilding strategies, the strategic essentialism of their identities significantly enhances their capacity to advocate for their rights and achieve meaningful reforms.

This approach underscores that the agency of indigenous women is maximized when their advocacy is informed by and aligned with global peace norms. By framing their local struggles within the broader context of the WPS agenda, these women can leverage international support to address systemic issues such as militarization, gender-based violence, and socio-economic marginalization. The integration of feminist theories and praxis of peacebuilding further enriches their strategies, ensuring that their efforts are not only contextually relevant but also globally resonant.

Chapter 4. Deconstructing Peace: An Analysis of Peace Localization Efforts

In Northeast India, indigenous women have become crucial figures in grassroots peace initiatives, leveraging their cultural knowledge and communal connections to foster reconciliation and mitigate conflict. This chapter examines how locally-led peace congregations in this specific context mobilize women around themes of solidarity, inclusion, and demilitarization to address their unique challenges and promote sustainable peace.

As this thesis proceeds to show, the peace congregations draw on the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda, particularly United Nations Security Council Resolutions 1325, 1820, 1889, and 2122. These resolutions emphasize the importance of women's participation in peace processes, the need to address sexual violence, and the integration of socio-economic dimensions into peacebuilding efforts. By building on shared experiences and historical legacies of peace movements, these gatherings create dynamic platforms for advocacy and action. The narratives and resolutions from these congregations highlight the importance of unity and comprehensive peacebuilding efforts in advancing the cause of peace and security in the region. Through their collective efforts, indigenous women in Northeast India continue to navigate and transform the socio-political landscape, asserting their rights and contributing to more inclusive and effective peace processes.

4.1 Solidarity as a means of conflict prevention

Throughout the peace congregations in Northeast India, one of the most prevalent themes has been mobilizing around shared experiences and fostering solidarity among Indigenous women. The inaugural peace congregation in 2015 featured a compelling speech by Binalakshmi Nepram, the founder of the Manipur Women Gun Survivors Network (MWGSN). Nepram's

speech highlighted the stark realities faced by Northeast India, a region where, as she pointed out, 272 ethnic tribes coexist with 72 armed insurgent groups and over 300,000 armed forces personnel. This context of pervasive militarization and conflict provides a crucial backdrop for integrating the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda into the discussions, offering a framework for understanding and addressing the unique challenges faced by indigenous women.

Nepram's speech (2015) poignantly connected these lived experiences to the opening statement of UNSCR 1325, which acknowledges that women disproportionately bear the brunt of escalating conflicts, facing economic hardships, displacement, and sexual violence. By drawing on this connection, Nepram and other leaders at the peace congregations underscored the relevance of the WPS agenda in addressing the multifaceted ways conflicts impact indigenous women. These gatherings provided women from all eight states of the Northeast a platform to voice their concerns, facilitating a more comprehensive articulation of their demands through collective mobilization.

The speeches and narratives presented at these congregations reveal that the shared experiences of indigenous women in Northeast India are deeply rooted in a history of ethnic strife, political instability, and socio-economic disenfranchisement, that can only be resolved if done as a collective. This is particularly important because the region has hitherto been a hotspot for various forms of armed conflict involving multiple insurgent groups, state security forces, and inter-ethnic clashes. This constant state of unrest has led to widespread displacement, with many communities being uprooted from their ancestral lands, losing their homes and means of livelihood. Economic marginalization is rampant, as traditional forms of income are disrupted by conflict, and women often bear the brunt of these economic hardships.

The collective approach adopted in these congregations reflects the essential role of solidarity in conflicts that disproportionately affect women. For instance, the President of the Kuki Women Union, Manipur (2015), Rose Mangsi emphasized that peace in the region cannot be achieved by any single community alone. She recounted the ethnic crisis between the Nagas and Kukis in 1993, where the Kuki Women Union and the Naga Women Union collaborated to foster peace between the two tribes in Manipur. Highlighting the importance of unity among different communities, her appeal to all women leaders gathered at the peace congregation to join hands and work together for peace in the Northeast and the entire nation of India exemplifies the agency of women in driving collective action and solidarity.

Similarly, during the fifth congregation, Ms. Sangeeta Barooah Pisharoty, a renowned journalist from Assam, emphasized the importance of connecting and making collective efforts for peace and reconciliation (2024). She urged all women to listen to each other without being judgemental. She also made a profound suggestion for everyone to wear each other's weave to connect with one another. This symbolizes the deep cultural and emotional bonds that can be fostered through shared experiences and solidarity.

Additionally, the militarization of the region has led to an increase in instances of sexual violence. Women in militarized zones frequently face threats of violence, including rape and assault, both from insurgent groups and sometimes, as in the case of Northeast India, from state security forces. These experiences create a pervasive atmosphere of fear and insecurity, profoundly impacting the physical and psychological well-being of all women in the region. This is true especially because armed violence is not uniform across all states in the Northeast, however, the fear it creates permeates state borders. By mobilizing around their shared experiences of marginalization and conflict, indigenous women in Northeast India create a unified voice that amplifies their specific needs and demands.

In this context, during a peace appeal at the fourth peace congregation in 2023, the indigenous women pushed for "a process of truth-telling, learning each other's histories, stories, and struggles. (2023)" This emphasis on mutual understanding and historical reconciliation was also a focal point of the first and second peace congregations, where the audience consisted of women survivors who shared their stories of displacement due to armed conflicts, economic disenfranchisement, and rampant sexual violence. These narratives serve as powerful tools to build solidarity and highlight the urgent need for policies that address these issues.

The resolutions passed during these congregations also consistently emphasize mobilizing around shared experiences. For instance, the Second Peace Congregation in 2016 passed a 20-point resolution, known as the 'Assam Declaration' for Women, Peace, and Security. The very first point appeals to all ethnic groups to "rise above the greater common goal of peace and prosperity. (Assam Declaration 2016)." This congregation also called for all women to work on a shared vision through networking and interacting with other workers at regional, national, and international levels. It pushed for the establishment of a Northeast Women Forum for Peace and Mediation (NEWFPM). While the primary aim of this forum is to provide social and economic support to survivors, it also calls for "teaming up with supportive men" and other genders to fight human rights violations against all people. These resolutions underscore the importance of mobilizing in the name of solidarity and community.

An analysis of the fifth congregation further highlights the intergenerational solidarity and alignment with older peace movements, further strengthening the narrative of unity and shared experiences. The resolutions from the fifth congregation explicitly acknowledge the work done by the strong Indigenous women who led conflict resolution, peace negotiation, and humanitarian efforts in the previous four Northeast India Women Peace Congregations held in 2015, 2016, 2020, and 2023. This recognition, in addition to the recognition of the historical

contributions of Indigenous women's non-violent peace movement in the region, underscores the need for continued solidarity among women across the eight states of Northeast India. The resolutions emphasize the importance of Indigenous ways of healing, justice, and conflict-resolution mechanisms to address conflicts by involving the Indigenous Peoples of Northeast India.

Additionally, the resolutions acknowledge the ongoing engineered violent conflicts in the region, which have devastating impacts on communities, especially the poorest, the marginalized, and those living in border zones where homes have been burnt and thousands displaced. This recognition of the persistent violence and its effects further galvanizes the need for collective action and solidarity among indigenous women not just in the region but all across the world.

Further, by forming alliances with global feminist and indigenous rights organizations, indigenous women in Northeast India amplify their voices and gain international backing for their demands. This global solidarity is crucial for holding local authorities accountable and ensuring that the issues faced by indigenous women are recognized and addressed at all levels. In this context, the fact that the first three congregations were backed by extensive international support exemplifies the strategic alliances formed to amplify their collective voice. These congregations focused on creating networks of support and advocacy that bridge local and global efforts, passing resolutions that emphasized the need for gender perspectives in peace negotiations, economic empowerment programs, and stronger legal frameworks to protect women from sexual violence.

In conclusion, the peace congregations of indigenous women in Northeast India have demonstrated the powerful role of the WPS agenda in mobilizing solidarity and addressing the unique challenges faced by these women. By building on shared experiences and historical

legacies of peace movements, these congregations have created a dynamic platform for advocacy and action. The resolutions and narratives emerging from these gatherings highlight the importance of unity, mutual understanding, and global alliances in advancing the cause of peace and security in the region. Through their collective efforts, indigenous women in Northeast India continue to navigate and transform the socio-political landscape, asserting their rights and contributing to more inclusive and effective peace processes.

4.2 Advocacy for Inclusion and Meaningful Participation

Despite their historic contributions to non-violent peace movements, Indigenous women in Northeast India face systemic exclusion from formal peace negotiations and decision-making bodies, largely due to entrenched patriarchal norms, socio-political marginalization, and the predominance of male-centric governance structures. The theme of inclusion and participation, therefore, becomes crucial in peace congregations, serving as a platform for these women to voice their experiences and demands.

The Third Northeast India Indigenous Women Peace Congregation is a prime example, bringing together over 51 indigenous scholars, practitioners, and activists to discuss the critical roles women play in peacebuilding and the necessity of their inclusion in formal processes. Despite their substantial grassroots contributions, indigenous women remain sidelined in official peace talks and policy-making forums, underscoring a critical disjunction between global peace norms and local realities. In her inaugural speech, Binalakshmi Nepram referenced the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325, which emphasizes increasing women's representation and inclusion in decision-making bodies and peace processes. She highlighted that, until 2020, there had been seventeen peace talks in Northeast India, with only one woman participating, starkly illustrating the systemic exclusion indigenous women face despite international commitments to gender inclusion in peace processes.

In response to this systemic exclusion, indigenous women leaders have demonstrated significant agency through mobilization and advocacy. As discussed in the previous section, peace congregations serve as platforms for collective action, enabling them to consolidate their efforts, share strategies, and amplify their voices. This collective mobilization enhances their political efficacy and visibility. The third peace congregation (2020) explicitly called for the inclusion of women in all peace talks, asserting that "no peace without women of Northeast India" is possible. This powerful declaration reflects the collective resolve to challenge exclusionary practices and assert their agency. By framing their demands within the context of global norms, such as UNSCR 1325, which advocates for the increased participation of women in peace and security efforts, they align their local struggles with internationally recognized standards, thereby strengthening their advocacy efforts.

Accordingly, a consistent and recurring resolution in all peace congregations has been the invocation of the need to increase women's participation in peace talks and decision-making processes. For instance, resolutions from the first congregation called for more women in peace processes and the judiciary, police forces, and economic decision-making processes. As such, they also highlighted the significance of indigenous women taking the initiative to draft a National Action Plan (NAP) for the WPS agenda in India. This draft NAP was then submitted to the relevant ministries within the government of India for implementation.

This theme of inclusion has been maintained throughout the congregations, with indigenous women consistently pushing for inclusion and meaningful participation in not just peace processes but also political bodies. The second peace congregation, in particular, spearheaded the writing of a draft manifesto for Women in Political Decision Making: Effort for All India Women Political Party (AIWPP). These concrete efforts towards their meaningful integration

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into national politics have the potential to be a crucial step towards their overall national integration.

Additionally, the peace congregations have called for inclusion through gender budgeting to ensure adequate resources are set aside for women. They have also advocated for an inclusive national curriculum that incorporates the history of Northeast India, peace scholarships for the children and youth of the region, and recognition of the contributions of women in cultural and social processes and institutions. The push for a State Diversity Policy as well as a National Diversity Policy aims to foster a renewed understanding of all indigenous groups in the region.

Furthermore, the congregations have consistently called for anti-racial laws with the second peace congregation also pushing for the implementation of the Bezbaruah Committee Report. The Bezbaruah Committee, set up by the Indian government in 2014, aimed to address the concerns of people from Northeast India who face racial discrimination and violence in other parts of the country. The recommendations of this committee include measures for legal protection, awareness campaigns, and educational initiatives to combat racial discrimination (SOURCE). However, the full implementation of these recommendations has been slow and inconsistent. The peace congregations have highlighted the importance of implementing these recommendations to ensure the safety and dignity of Northeast Indians, particularly women, who are often the targets of racial violence. This call for the implementation of the Bezbaruah Committee Report is a crucial component of the indigenous women's advocacy, aligning with the WPS agenda's goal of addressing and preventing violence against women in all its forms.

Through these various initiatives and advocacies, indigenous women in Northeast India are leveraging the principles of the WPS agenda, particularly ones aligning with the pillar of participation, to mobilize for peace and inclusion. This alignment not only strengthens their advocacy efforts but also underscores the critical need for their inclusion in formal peace

processes. The consistent and sustained efforts of these women in the peace congregations highlight the importance of their participation in peacebuilding and decision-making, thereby challenging the entrenched patriarchal norms and socio-political marginalization that have historically excluded them. Their collective resolve and advocacy for inclusion are essential for achieving sustainable peace and security in the region.

4.3 Disarmament and Protection of Women's Rights

A persistent theme throughout the peace congregations in Northeast India has been the protection of women's rights and cultural heritage. This advocacy has been both robust and consistent, with women from all eight states voicing the critical importance of disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR)—a comprehensive peacebuilding tactic explicitly highlighted in the WPS agenda. Focusing on disarmament and post-conflict recovery, these resolutions underscore DDR's effectiveness in safeguarding women's rights and fostering sustainable peace.

Central to the congregations' efforts is the call for the repeal of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) 1958, and the protection of human rights. The implementation of AFSPA has resulted in numerous human rights abuses, disproportionately affecting indigenous women and communities in Northeast India. Consequently, the repeal of AFSPA has become a cornerstone of advocacy during these peace congregations, reflecting the urgent need to dismantle repressive legal structures that facilitate human rights abuses in the region.

The repeated calls for the repeal of AFSPA underscore the law's detrimental impact on the lives of indigenous women and the broader community. The presence of AFSPA fosters an environment of fear and impunity, undermining efforts to disarm and demobilize armed groups. Therefore, the removal of AFSPA is viewed as essential for demilitarization and the protection

of human rights, aligning with the WPS agenda's emphasis on safeguarding civilians and preventing conflict-related sexual violence (Resolutions 1325, 1820, 1888).

The peace congregations have provided a platform for both leaders and victims of armed conflict to share their experiences and perspectives on AFSPA. In this context, Ibetombi, Chairperson of the Manipur State Women Commission, emphasized the necessity of collective action in achieving disarmament and peace in Manipur and the broader Northeast region. She stressed that the repeal of AFSPA is a shared aspiration, crucial for facilitating the disarmament process. She pointed out that states where AFSPA has been temporarily or permanently lifted have experienced improved peace and stability, despite resistance from various quarters. Her remarks underscore the positive outcomes of demilitarization and the potential for peace when oppressive laws like AFSPA are removed.

Similarly, Valley Rose, a journalist and survivor of armed conflict, recounted her harrowing experience of a military attack on her village and her subsequent life as a refugee. Her narrative underscored the deep-seated violence perpetuated by militarization and highlighted the human cost of AFSPA. These personal accounts illustrate the profound impact of AFSPA on the lives of indigenous women and underscore the necessity of collective, inclusive efforts to dismantle militarization.

In addition to personal narratives, the peace congregations have consistently passed resolutions addressing the urgent need for DDR as part of their broader strategy to protect women's rights and promote peace. A few resolutions (2015 and 2016) explicitly acknowledged the detrimental effects of transnational criminal networks involved in narcotics production, trafficking, gun-running, and human trafficking. These activities contribute to ongoing conflict and instability, complicating efforts to achieve lasting peace. By addressing these issues, the congregations align with the WPS agenda's comprehensive approach to security, which includes tackling the

root causes of conflict and promoting the protection of women's rights (UNSCR 1888). The emphasis on demilitarization and de-weaponization, including the removal of cluster bombs and small arms, also underscores the need to address immediate threats to civilian safety.

The establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission is another crucial component of the DDR process. This commission is supposed to be aimed at investigating past human rights violations, including acts of genocide and ethnic cleansing, providing a platform for truth-telling and accountability (2023). Addressing historical grievances is essential for achieving lasting peace and reconciliation, aligning with the WPS agenda's focus on transitional justice and the need to address the root causes of conflict (UNSCR 2467).

Furthermore, the peace congregations emphasize reallocating resources spent on militarization and counter-insurgency operations towards health, education, and environmental protection. This approach illustrates a vision for a more just and sustainable future, highlighting the intersection of environmental and human rights. This aligns with the WPS agenda's recognition of the importance of addressing the socio-economic dimensions of conflict and promoting sustainable development as part of peacebuilding efforts (UNSCR 2122).

Addressing the rising threats and attacks against indigenous women, women human rights defenders, and the media is another critical aspect of the peace congregations' resolutions. Emphasizing the need to protect freedom of expression, the congregations recognize the vital role of free and independent media in a robust democracy. This broader commitment to human rights and democratic principles highlights the importance of safeguarding these freedoms to ensure a just society.

The emphasis on economic empowerment and assistance to survivors of violence is particularly relevant to the WPS agenda's stress on survivor-centric peacebuilding. UNSCR 1889 and UNSCR 2106, for example, call for the participation and support of women in post-conflict

recovery and emphasize the need to address the specific needs of women and girls affected by conflict. By focusing on these aspects, the peace congregations are implementing a survivor-centric approach to DDR, ensuring that the specific needs of women and girls are met and that they are empowered to contribute to peacebuilding efforts.

Survivor-centric peacebuilding involves not only addressing immediate needs but also ensuring long-term support and opportunities for economic independence. The peace congregations' resolutions advocate for comprehensive support systems, including vocational training, education, and economic opportunities, to help survivors rebuild their lives. This approach aligns with the WPS agenda's recognition that sustainable peace requires the active participation and empowerment of women who have been affected by conflict (UNSCR 1325).

In conclusion, the peace congregations of indigenous women in Northeast India have effectively utilized the WPS agenda to advocate for the repeal of AFSPA, protect human rights, and promote comprehensive DDR processes. Their activities demonstrate how important it is for indigenous women to lead peacebuilding efforts and make sure that their perspectives are heard throughout the process. By their activism and deeds, they are demonstrating the transformative power of inclusive and gender-responsive approaches to peace and security, as well as furthering their own rights and the larger objectives of the WPS agenda.

Chapter 5. Indigenous Women at the Forefront: Mobilizing as a Unified Identity

5.1 Leveraging Essentialist Constructs for Agency

As discussed in chapter two, strategic essentialism, a concept introduced by postcolonial theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988), refers to the deliberate and tactical use of a simplified, unified group identity to achieve specific political or social objectives. This strategy involves temporarily downplaying internal differences within a group to present a cohesive front that can more effectively engage with and influence external audiences, such as policymakers, international organizations, and the broader public. While this approach can risk oversimplifying the complex and diverse realities within the group, it can also be a powerful tool for marginalized communities to amplify their voices and advance their agendas in a world where visibility and coherence often equate to political power.

The necessity for indigenous women in Northeast India to localize the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda themselves stems from India's longstanding refusal to formally acknowledge and address the unique and multifaceted conflicts within its borders, particularly in the Northeast region. Because India has long refused to legally acknowledge and solve the distinct and complex conflicts within its boundaries, especially in the Northeast, indigenous women in Northeast India feel compelled to localise the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda themselves. The Indian government has frequently referred to these areas as 'disturbed areas,[2]' justifying heavy militarization and the imposition of harsh laws like the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA), rather than acknowledging these issues as domestic conflicts

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[2] The term "disturbed areas" is used by the Indian government to refer to regions where there is significant insurgency or internal conflict, which necessitates the deployment of armed forces and the enforcement of special laws such as AFSPA. See https://www.mha.gov.in/sites/default/files/armed_forces_special_powers_act1958.pdf.

requiring nuanced and comprehensive solutions. The militaristic approach combined with a culture of denial has produced an environment in which women's voices and other marginalized communities' concerns are routinely disregarded.

India's resistance to adopting a National Action Plan (NAP) for the implementation of UNSCR 1325 exacerbates the situation further. An NAP would formalize commitments to enhance women's roles in peace and security and provide structured support for addressing gender-specific impacts of conflict (Hamilton, Naam, and Shepherd 2020); in the absence of an NAP, there is no formal mechanism to ensure that the principles of the WPS agenda are systematically applied to local contexts, leaving a significant gap that needs to be filled by grassroots initiatives.

In this context, the localization, as differentiated from the adoption of a NAP (Haastrup and Hagen 2020), of the WPS agenda by Indigenous women through peace congregations becomes crucial and an act of empowerment. These women recognize that the global framework of UNSCR 1325 provides a valuable tool for advocating for their rights and for addressing the specific impacts of conflict on women. By localizing the WPS agenda, they adapt its principles to reflect their lived realities, ensuring that their unique challenges are acknowledged and addressed. This process involves reinterpreting global norms to fit local contexts, thereby making them relevant and actionable within their specific socio-political landscape. They do this by bringing together women from different tribes and regions and establishing a forum for the exchange of individual and communal experiences. Individual tales are interwoven into larger narratives during these congregations, which influence the decisions and conclusions made by that peace congregation.

The collective identity of Indigenous women has been a critical facilitator in integrating the WPS agenda into local practices. This identity, forged through shared histories of

marginalization, conflict, and resilience, allows these women to present a united front in their advocacy efforts. By emphasizing their collective experiences, they create a powerful narrative that underscores the necessity of including their voices in peace and security discussions.

One of the most significant ways in which this collective identity is utilized is through peace congregations. These are meetings that bring together women from different tribes and regions to talk about their experiences, document, and track abuses, and create group demands. The peace congregations provide a forum where people's unique tales of adversity and resilience can be interwoven to highlight how systemic the problems they confront are. Subsequently, both domestically and globally, policy changes are promoted using this shared story. For instance, during these congregations, women share personal testimonies of violence and displacement, such as the story of Valley Rose linking these experiences to the broader principles of the WPS agenda. This strategic framing as a collective, therefore, not only highlights the local impact of policies like AFSPA but also aligns their struggle with global human rights standards, thereby garnering wider support and attention.

The use of collective identity as a strategic tool also extends to their interactions with various stakeholders. In engagements with local and national governments, international organizations, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), presenting a unified identity enhances the credibility and impact of their advocacy. For example, when advocating for the inclusion of women in peace negotiations, Indigenous women emphasize the effectiveness of female-led peace initiatives by showcasing successful examples from their communities, such as local ceasefires and inter-tribal dialogues. A pertinent case in point being the 1993 ethnic crisis between Naga's and Kuki's, as mentioned by Rose Mangsi (First Peace Congregation Report 2015). By presenting these successes as part of a collective effort, they argue that women's participation is not just a matter of equity but also a practical necessity for sustainable peace.

This approach helps to break down patriarchal barriers that have historically excluded women from peace processes, demonstrating the tangible benefits of their involvement.

The strategic deployment of collective identity also involves navigating the complex dynamics of internal diversity. While presenting a unified front externally, Indigenous women recognize and manage the diverse experiences and perspectives within their communities. By avoiding the possible traps of essentialism that could erase important differences, this internal management makes sure the movement stays inclusive and representative. In peace congregations, for example, voices from different tribes and areas are sought after so that the collective story represents the diversity and complexity of their experiences. This is especially visible when Indigenous women from relatively peaceful states of the Northeast get a platform to advocate for peace and inclusion as a collective demand. The fact that the Indian government homogenizes them as a single administrative unit, in this case, is responsible for binding them together. Their (mis)treatment as a single whole gives them a common cause to unite and mobilize. By offering a unified but diversified front that is more resilient and adaptable to many circumstances, this nuanced strategy in the peace congregations improves their advocacy.

This collective narrative becomes a powerful tool for advocacy, as it highlights the widespread impact of policies like the AFSPA, which has been linked to numerous human rights abuses. By documenting and disseminating these stories, Indigenous women not only raise awareness about their plight but also build a solid foundation for political and legal challenges against repressive state policies.

In addition to advocacy, Indigenous women have reclaimed their agency through grassroots initiatives that address their communities' socio-economic needs. For instance, in response to the economic disruptions caused by conflict and militarization, many women have organized cooperatives and self-help groups that provide financial support and vocational training. One

notable example of this is the micro-financing initiatives spearheaded by the Manipur Women's Gun Survivors Network (MWGSN). MWGSN has established several micro-financing programs aimed at empowering indigenous women economically. These programs offer small loans to women to start their own businesses, thereby fostering economic independence and resilience. These initiatives not only empower women economically but also foster a sense of solidarity and mutual support within the community (MWGSN website). By taking control of their economic futures, Indigenous women assert their agency and challenge the structural inequalities that have long kept them marginalized.

Moreover, cultural resistance plays a significant role in their reclamation of agency. Indigenous women actively work to preserve and promote their cultural heritage through festivals, traditional crafts, and storytelling. This is also aptly represented through various inaugural dances and musical performances at the start of the congregations. These cultural practices are not only expressions of identity but also acts of resistance against cultural erasure and assimilation. By maintaining their cultural distinctiveness, these women assert their right to exist and thrive on their terms, thereby resisting the homogenizing pressures of mainstream Indian society.

5.2 Theoretical Integration and Praxis

The integration of strategic essentialism with the WPS agenda in the context of indigenous women in Northeast India highlights the dynamic interplay between local realities and global frameworks. This approach not only enhances their agency and influence but also demonstrates the transformative potential of marginalized communities to advocate for their rights and contribute to sustainable peacebuilding.

Indigenous women effectively utilise the advantages of both international frameworks, such as the WPS agenda, and indigenous peacebuilding techniques to further their advocacy and accomplish their objectives.

While the WPS agenda gives a global platform for advocating for systemic changes and enforcing accountability, traditional peacebuilding initiatives anchored in cultural traditions and social structures offer a robust foundation for local peacebuilding. This tactical use of a collective identity allows them to articulate their demands more clearly and persuasively, drawing on the legitimacy of global norms to amplify their voices. By aligning their local struggles with the WPS agenda, these women can attract international support and thereby increase pressure on the Indian government to implement reforms and ensure that their specific needs and experiences are addressed within broader peacebuilding efforts.

Therefore, the research underscores that global peace norms, particularly the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda, play a pivotal role in informing and enhancing the agency of indigenous women in Northeast India. This agency is significantly amplified when indigenous women strategically essentialize their identities to align with the framework of the WPS agenda. By presenting a unified front through strategic essentialism, these women effectively leverage the global norms of the WPS agenda to address their unique challenges and advocate for their rights. This alignment not only facilitates the adaptation of international frameworks to local contexts but also ensures that the specific needs and experiences of indigenous women are acknowledged and addressed within broader peacebuilding efforts.

The relationship between the WPS agenda and strategic essentialism, in conjunction with feminist theories and peacebuilding techniques, enhances the potential for indigenous women to exercise agency. With this strategy, they can leverage both local and international techniques to strengthen their advocacy and accomplish their objectives. When these components are

combined, it creates a transformative potential that enables indigenous women to take an active role in peacebuilding and stand up for their rights, which in turn promotes long-term security and peace in their communities.

Conclusion

This thesis has investigated the dynamic interplay between global peace norms, specifically the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda, and Indigenous women's localized peacebuilding initiatives in Northeast India. Through detailed case studies of five peace congregations held between 2015 and 2024, this research has shed light on the critical role that Indigenous women play in advocating for peace, justice, and social change amidst the persistent conflicts and socio-political challenges in this geopolitically sensitive region.

The study emphasises the need of include gender-sensitive techniques in conflict resolution and peacebuilding strategies. Indigenous women have successfully localized the ideas of the WPS agenda to meet their own unique difficulties by drawing on their collective identity and shared experiences. This localization process entails altering global norms to reflect the distinctive sociopolitical and cultural realities of Northeast India, making them more relevant and actionable within their communities.One of the key findings of this thesis is the significant impact of strategic essentialism on the agency of indigenous women. By consciously adopting a unified identity, these women have been able to present a cohesive front that enhances their visibility and influence in peace processes. This strategic use of collective identity allows them to effectively engage with state and non-state actors, navigate complex socio-political landscapes, and secure resources and support for their initiatives. In doing this, the peace congregations have served as pivotal forums for fostering solidarity, advocating for inclusion, and protecting women's rights, illustrating the power of collective action in advancing the WPS agenda.

The thematic analysis of the peace congregations reveals that solidarity, participation, and protection are central themes around which indigenous women mobilize for peace. Solidarity,

as a means of conflict prevention, emphasizes the importance of building and maintaining unity across diverse tribes and communities. The advocacy for inclusion and meaningful participation highlights the need for increased representation of women in peace processes and decision-making bodies. The protection of women's rights and disarmament underscores the necessity of addressing the root causes of conflict, advocating for legal reforms, and ensuring justice and accountability.

This thesis also highlights the transformative potential of integrating indigenous perspectives into global peace frameworks. By aligning their localized struggles with the WPS agenda, indigenous women in Northeast India have been able to draw on the legitimacy and support of international human rights standards. This alignment not only amplifies their voices but also facilitates the adaptation of international frameworks to local contexts, ensuring that their specific needs and experiences are acknowledged and addressed within broader peacebuilding efforts.

The thesis therefore successfully answers the question "How do global norms like the WPS agenda inform the ability of indigenous women to exercise agency in localizing and building peace?" It does so by finding out how each theme teased out in the analysis of the peace congregations aligns with the WPS agenda, and then studying how they interact. In conducting the analysis, I found out that the WPS agenda does enhance the agency of Indigenous women in mobilizing for peace by giving them a platform and voice for advocacy, only as long as they strategically employ a collective identity. This collective identity, while inherently essentialist and therefore risking homogenization, serves as a practical means to navigate the existing socio-political landscape. Indigenous women lobby for concrete reforms to their inclusion in formal peace processes and decision-making bodies by framing their advocacy within the WPS

agenda. This approach enables them to exercise agency and demand their rights in a manner consistent with global peace principles.

Future research can greatly benefit from the findings of this thesis, as it opens several avenues for deeper investigation into the intersection of global norms and local practices in peacebuilding. One critical area for further exploration is the impact of strategic essentialism on different marginalized groups beyond Indigenous women in Northeast India. Comparative studies involving other regions and communities that employ similar strategies could provide valuable insights into the effectiveness and limitations of this approach across diverse contexts.

As this thesis argues, there is a pressing need to integrate gender perspectives more comprehensively into studies of Indigenous issues. Most existing research either broadly addresses women's roles in peacebuilding without a distinct focus on Indigenous populations or discusses Indigenous issues without integrating gender perspectives. This gap is especially pronounced in regions like Northeast India, which are characterized by rich ethnic diversity and ongoing conflict. Addressing this gap will contribute to a more holistic understanding of the interplay between gender, ethnicity, and conflict, providing a more nuanced basis for policy and practice in peacebuilding.

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