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Human Security Discourse and Security Concerns of Women in North East India

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Abstract:
In the contemporary security discourse there has been a growing tendency to dismiss traditional security discourse as insensitive towards the security concern of women and instead the concept of 'human security' is increasingly being looked at as more effective means to address the security concerns of women. The present paper, however, argues that the concept of human security like it's the traditional formulation treats the problem of security as gender neutral issue and as a result fails to take into account the specific challenges and needs to address women security concerns particularly in the context of societies like North East India and therefore suggest that there is need for developing a more gender friendly security discourse to meet the security concerns of women.

Keywords: Traditional Security, Human Security, Structural Violence

1. Introduction

The traditional power centric notion of security is today widely being discarded as insensitive to security concern of women. It is argued that such security discourse is premised upon masculine values, aspirations and interests and therefore does not and cannot accommodate the security needs of women. Compared to such view of security, the human security model is seen as more compatible with security concern of women. The compatibility between human security and women is based on the fact that there is congruence between basic concept of human security and feminine values, aspirations and interests. However, the concept of human security like it's the traditional formulation treats the problem of security as gender neutral issue and as a result fails to take into account the specific challenges and needs to address women security concerns. For instance, the human security approach ignores the problem of structural discrimination which is a major source of violence against women. In the context of North East, the domination of traditional security concern has for long overshadowed the security concern of women. And in this regard the attempt to move away from state centric security discourse to human security concern can be considered as welcome departure. However, the idea of human security will be able to address the security of women in North East India only when it develops gendered sensitivity in terms of gendered understanding of security. Against this background the present paper first seek to highlight the inadequacies of the traditional notion of security to address security concern of women. In the second section of the paper an attempt will be made to explore the relationship between human security and women security. And finally the present paper intends to locate the women security concerns in the existing security discourse of North East.

Of late, the traditional notion of security has been confronted with growing cynicism for its narrow and exclusive nature. The traditional notion of security is state centric in the sense that here state is the main reference point both as a victim that needs to be protected and as agent that guarantees security to the individuals. Such notion of security is premised upon power politics model first developed by Thomas Hobbes. Hobbes assumed individuals to be selfish and power hungry that necessitated the formation of a political authority which would protect the individuals from each other. However, formation of such authority while solved the problem of internal security, it created another type of security problem i.e., security of the states. Since the state, that was created through the Hobbesian analogy of social contract, were not one but many, now these states have to come to experience the same type of insecurity that the individuals were subjected to before the creation of the states. Following this logic realists and neo realists have focussed excessively on the security of the states. And behind such obsession with state security lies the understanding that the presence of a state would automatically ensure individuals security and what remains to be achieved is the protection of states from the aggression of another states. This explains the centrality of state in the traditional discourse of state both as agent of security provider and victim of insecurity.

Such notion of security, however, has failed to address the security concern of people in general and of women in particular. The traditional notion of security acknowledges only political source to insecurity and consider state as the ultimate solution of all security problems of people. Both these assumptions are today being questioned. While political threats remain important source of security challenges for people, there are other important sources of insecurity like economic, social, cultural threats that seriously jeopardize the security of people. Further with the growing proliferation of intra-state conflict, states no longer remain the guarantor of individual security and quite often turn into perpetrator of violence against individual.

The traditional discourse on security is particularly seen as inadequate to address the security concern of women. There are both epistemological and ontological reasons for this. Epistemologically the traditional concept of security is partial-drawn upon primarily from male values, beliefs, ideas and interests. Generally war, aggression, power, patriotism, nationalism etc are regarded as masculine values, whereas love, care, nurture etc are treated as feminine values. Thus the traditional concept of security which insists that state should be protected against the aggression of other states by means of power reflects a male image of security. Viewed from the perspective of women, therefore, the security scenario of states may appear altogether different and may present a more peaceful and cooperative picture of inter-state relations. In this regard one can mention that Morganthau's political man is social construct which is based on a partial representation of human nature. As it is interestingly being asked where the women were in Hobbes' state of nature; presumably they must have been involved in reproduction and child rearing, rather than warfare, if life was to go on for more than one generation. Ontologically also the traditional concept of security does not accommodate entire security concern of women. The traditional notion of security treats men and women as similar while trying to arrange security for them. However, women because of their vulnerability to some specific kind of violence demands separate and specific security arrangement. The traditional notion of security emphasizes the need for protecting people from military threat. However, security of people, particularly of women, does not depend only on political or military security and demands security from various social, cultural and economic threats. In this regard women are, because of their present societal location, are more vulnerable to such non military security threats. It is this failure of traditional notion of security to threat security as gendered concept, makes it unhelpful to address the security concerns of women. And this takes us to the idea of 'human security' as a more comprehensive formulation of the notion of security that can more effectively handle the security concerns of people and more particularly of women.

2. Human Security and Women- Compatibility and Conflict

The closing decades of last century have witnessed lot of enthusiasm over the concept of human security as more comprehensive and people centric concept of human security. Under the human security concept individuals are the reference point as it tries to define security not in terms of security of states but in reference to the people. This shift from state to people in security discourse is the result of two factors. First is the growing realization that there may be conflict between state security and security of people or security of states may not necessarily mean security of people. Second is the acknowledgement of the fact that security of people also depend on security from non military threats such as poverty, disease and environmental degradation etc. In response to this realization in 1994, the Human Development Report for the first time acknowledges the need to advance the idea of Human Security. The report argues "the concept of security has for too long been interpreted narrowly: as security of territory from external aggression or as protection of national interests in foreign policy or as global security from the threat of nuclear holocaust....forgotten were the legitimate concerns of ordinary people who sought security in their daily lives". It thus criticizes the existing approach to security and proposes an alternative concept of security that emphasizes on the welfare of the people. The report also identifies seven specific elements that human security should comprise of such as economic security, food security, health security, environmental security, personal security, community security and political security to make it more welfare oriented concept.

It is this emphasis on the welfare of people makes the human security approach more compatible with the security concerns of women. In fact, it is argued that both share certain commonality of focus. It is important to note here that women are usually more vulnerable to the threats emanating from social and economic deprivations. Women all around the world, because of their social and economic marginality, generally suffer from non fulfilment of basic needs of life. For this very reason women are interested in reformulating the concept of national security in favour of making it an instrument for ensuring satisfaction of basic material needs essential for sustaining life. This is also the concern that human security approach emphasizes as opposed to the militaristic notion of security. Human Security approach, therefore, because of its insistence on securing freedom from want, has the potentiality to provide relief to women in addressing their security concerns. Moreover, women are generally engaged in task like providing food, giving shelter, taking care and nursing etc and this life sustaining role of women can also supplement the human security approach. The complementary nature of human security concern and role of women can be observed in two other areas- development and environment. So far the development model is technologically complex public sphere activity usually undertaken by man and has failed to provide the large majority of people the basic needs of life. So there is a need to redefine development strategies in a manner that it become more conducive to satisfy the basic needs of people and can incorporate women's participations. In response to the emerging environmental concern all around the world, there has been a growing recognition of the fact that there is a close relation between environment and women. For instance, in the introduction to her book ' The Death of Nature', Merchant suggests that, 'women and nature have an age old association-an affiliation that has persisted throughout culture, language and history'. Women see nature as a living non-hierarchical entity in which each part is mutually dependent on the whole and stress the need for living in equilibrium with nature rather than dominating it. Such environmental perspective bear by women can help the human security approach to address its environmental concern.

Despite these common ground both human security approach and women security concern, one can identify some areas of disconnection between the two. Such disjuncture basically emanates from the tendency of human security approach to treat security as gendered neutral term. While both men and women equally suffer from war, violence, hunger, disease etc, there are certain factors that specifically affect the security of women. In this regard one can mention the problem of structural violence based on gender differences. Structural violence refers to those violences which are embedded in the structure of society itself and consists of inegalitarian and discriminatory practices. Such structural violence generally operates in society along the lines of race, religion, age, economic status and gender etc.

Women are particularly victim of such structural violence. Most of the societies practice some policies and practices that are discriminatory against the women. For example, women are denied the equal opportunity to life in terms of access to education, work, employment, health etc. This often results in the social, political and economic marginalization of women. Domestic violence, female infanticide, chronic malnutrition etc are some of the example of extreme manifestation of structural violence against women. It is significant to observe that quite often such discriminatory practices against women are condoned by societal and cultural values of the societies. The patriarchal structure of our societal and cultural set up generally works towards dispriviledgement of women. It is because of this fact, structural violence against women are quite often not the result of conscious designed but inherent in the societal practices itself and therefore, routine, silent and unnoticed.

3. Security concern in North East-Imperative for a Gendered Discourse
The state centric security concern has dominated the security discourse in North East India. This is primarily because of the fact that the region has been home to number of separatist movement and ethnic conflict based on ethno-national consideration for quite long period of time. As a result the predominant security concern in this region has been to ward off such separatist movements and resolve ethnic conflicts to ensure political security of both state and individuals. This has often invited for military repression on the part of the states with the result of militarization of the region.   In any conflict situation women, because of their dependent status, suffer more than the men. Women generally do not participate in conflict directly but nevertheless they are subjected to severe mental and physical harassment. When a man dies in a conflict, a woman suffers as widow, a mother lost her son and a daughter becomes fatherless. Further in such conflict situation women often fall prey to rape, molestation and other form of harassment. In case of North East also women have been the worst victim of this prolongs conflict that has affected the region. Due to the insurgency movements and military operation to suppress such movement thousands of women in North East have been rendered helpless and shelter less and significant numbers of women have suffered from rape, molestation and other such mental and physical assault. Such traditional security discourse cantered around the security of individuals and state has adversely affected the security concerns of women in North East India. In such scenario human security approach may appear as an attractive alternative approach to address the security concern of women in North East India. It is significant to note here that threat to security of women in North East not only emanates from various form of conflict but also due to the poor socio-economic conditions that the women of North East India are subjected to. In terms of most of most of the socio-economic indicators such as access to health, education, employment etc, the position of women in North East India are among the most unfortunate lot within India. Security of women in North East India therefore demands urgent improvement of these socio-economic conditions of women through human security approach. However, at the same time it must be emphasized that while human security approach may contribute towards addressing some security concern of women, but it cannot be sufficient condition for ensuring security of women in North East India. This is primarily because of two reasons. First, given the peculiar politico-economic condition of North East India, sate remains here the only means to improve the socio-economic conditions of women. Second, is the presence of 'structural violence' in terms of discriminatory and unegalitarian practice against the women in North East India which the human security approach cannot address.

4. Conclusion
In view of these it can be argued that while there are certain commonalities between human security approach and women security, human security approach also suffers from certain limitations in addressing the security concerns of women. This is particularly so in case of societies like North east India where the societal structure itself results in violence against the women. Therefore in North East India human security discourse at best can supplement the women security discourse but cannot replace it and hence there is a need to treat women security discourse as separate and independent discourse.

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