

Cycles of Sovereignty

By Zenki Collective





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A project that looks back at the role of a women's collective in the late 1990s to 2005 period.

The Tinsukia District Mohilla Committee was a collective of activists who created a women-only commune in Dirak – Xoonjaan, Kakopathar in the late 1990s. They took on an important role in their adopted village of Xoonjaan and the larger community with their activism against the state's human rights violations; mobilising and organising for peace, during a turbulent period in Kakopathar and Assam's recent past.

Xoonjan, incidentally, is also home to the legendary Moamaria Xatra that led a successful rebellion against the Ahom monarchy in the 18th century. Modern day Tinsukia district has been the hinterland of Assam's tea, oil and coal industry. For many rural communities in the district, it epitomises a colonial economy: impoverished indigenous communities, who have had to coexist with rich traders, planters and technocrats from outside their area. In the last quarter of the 20th century, the district saw the emergence of an armed movement to restore the political and economic balance in favour of indigenous communities. The movement has since been violently dealt with by the Indian army and other security agencies, including the police.

In 2005, the women were at the forefront of an important moment in the political history of contemporary Assam. They were instrumental in forging together an unlikely alliance of 28 ethnic, democratic and civil liberties organisations under the banner of the Peoples Committee for Peace Initiatives in Assam (PCPIA). In its short, unheralded life PCPIA was able to create a platform where groups and individuals were able to set aside their ethnic differences and misgivings, in order to pressurise the government and armed insurgents, to set aside the gun and talk about a peaceful political resolution to the conflicts in the region.

Their activism was fraught with tensions, as the authorities sought to implicate them in political conspiracies that were not of their making. Many of the women were incarcerated during this period.

The cycle and weaving become important symbols of their political activism: the cycle made them mobile and allowed them to travel to markets to sell the cloth they wove in the collective, as well as to organise political meetings all over Tinsukia and its adjoining districts.

They also set up a weaving centre in the precincts of the community's house, where they wove cloth to sell in the market, to finance the daily needs of the collective and their political activism. Much has changed in the political world in Assam since then. Rebels have become negotiators, dissidents have become businessmen and thus, the world of inversions has defined the lack of permanence in political life in the larger region called Northeast India. The women's collective in Dirak Xoonjan continues to engage in ethical, deeply involved politics at a time when it would be easier to morph into a non-governmental organisation with a log frame and funding plan.

This project celebrates their spirit of resistance and commitment to social and political change in their area.

Just before Magh Bihu in 2014, Dolly and Parismita visited Dirak Xoonjan to meet the women in the collective. These are edited excerpts of the transcripts of their conversations.



Conversation in Junali's courtyard, with Mamoni cradling her two month old baby

Mamoni: After forming the district committee in Sadiya, we formed the Tinsukia Mohilla Committee. It was me, Omio baideu and Reboti. We came to Xoonjaan in 1998. We started to talk to people in this village, doing meetings, mobilising around issues of mohilaa sa jagota, women's awareness ; talking to the people about our aims and objectives. In early 2000, we formed the office that you see now. The Xoonjaan Yuva Sangha gave us this land. We settled here and started weaving cloth and doing political work on women's issues...



We opened the weaving centre to be self reliant, stand up on our own, nijoswa bhabe swabilambi hobole. Initially, we wove clothes and sold them in the bazaar and did kheti, farming, to sustain ourselves.

We needed the profit for meetings, to run the commune, then for more thread - we would be about 20 - 25 women in the commune. There was dhan kheti and saak pasoli, we did everything. At home also, we did these things, but there, there were more people; fathers and brothers and all, here, we had to take the lead...

The early days, jotil poristhiti aasil, the situation was very difficult. The Army was everywhere. When someone left home in the morning, we weren't sure if they would return -



Modhu arrived at the hospital the next day. The two of us had spent two days there already. After two nights sitting on chairs, we were very sleep deprived, so we told Modhu, *you stay in the hospital for the night*. By then, our patient had been moved from the ICU to the ward. So Junali and I took a room in a nearby hotel to get some sleep and Modhu stayed on at the hospital.

Then the next morning, we hadn't even had a cup of tea, when Jonali said *lets go to the hospital early*. I was still in bed, I said *let me sleep a while*, but she wouldn't relent, she insisted, *let's go! We have to give breakfast to the patient as well –We'll all have tea together at the hospital*. Modhu was there, and the patient's mother too. I'd just finished my bath and was about to step out with my flask to get some tea to take with us, when there was a knock on the door. I opened the door slightly and saw the uniform through the crack. I immediately shut it, and told Jonali, *the police and army are here*.



Jonali said, *let them come, open the door.*

I opened the door, asking them, *who are you looking for?*

They started telling us ultra pulta things, *come to the thana, we need to talk to you.*

We said *no, say what you have to, here.*

They said, *that's not possible, you have to go to the thana.*

So we started arguing. There were police women with them. We were arguing, when I suddenly spotted this 'surrendered' right outside the hotel. So I yelled out to this fellow *why are you here?* He said, *oh, sir and all brought me here. Please don't hold it against me, I came with them, to show.*

The police were looking for me. *You are Reboti Khaklari, aren't you? We need to talk to you.*

I asked the rest of them not to go to the police station, but Jonali insisted, *I'll come with you, apunaak eri nidieu, I won't leave you.* Then the OC said, *All of you come!*



Momi was uncertain, should she go or not? She had just arrived yesterday, and there was the patient to think of. So I told them, *you can do what you want with the two of us, but let Momi stay.* They wouldn't let any one of us stay, they said they'd keep someone from the police with the patient.

Then I saw the SULFA again! I lost it, and began abusing him, yelling that he deserved a slap: *all those times, when you came to our commune, I gave you rice from my plate - we gave up our beds for you, when you boys came at night - and now you come to point us out to the police! You go around pointing out your old friends to the police! Unlike you guys, we never bit the bullet to swear to die for our cause, to bring swadhinata to our des, to become ULFA. We're the mohilla commitee, we didn't take the gun in our hands! We're the Mohilla committee and we'll continue our work!*

He said, *I don't know all this*, and fled!
I yelled back, *Oi ro ro*, wait! I ran down the stairs - the police wouldn't let us go, held us back - *Heet!*
I said, trying to run.

Omio: So I called them. The police had left by them but they heard the mobile ring and came back to take that away! In the meantime, I was getting worried because I'd been calling them, and different people would pick up the phone. Once a male voice then a female one, I began to 'doubt' that it was the police. Mamu and Mamoni were meanwhile, travelling from Tinsukia to Dibrugarh with the money. They had reached Chabua by then. So I called and asked them to return, to come back immediately: the others must have been picked up by the police.



My fear was that they'd take away the money. Mamoni and Mamu were not keen on returning. But I insisted, dom di, in anger: *come back. I borrowed 25 thousand from someone in Kakopathar, we cannot have the police take away the money!* Then I called a reporter from Dibrugarh, electronic media, *Pradip da, please call the police and inquire if our girls are in custody.* He then confirmed it, and put it out in the media.

But that's not all, then Mamu, the man she eventually married, and I - we went to give clothes to the patient. That's when Mamu went and fought with the police!

Junali: She asked them, *Aamar ULFA keite kot aase? Where are our ULFAs?* Paperot ULFA buli ulai gol, it had already come out in the papers that they were ULFA.

Omio: I fled, made the driver park the vehicle ahead of the hospital. We took a different road, then immediately informed the media and called for a press meet.

Reboti: Mamu came to the police station and was gorom, angry. *Where are the girls?* But they wouldn't take her to us – *taat aase, taat aase* - they sent her to four different places. Then finally someone pointed her in the right direction. That day the OC was not there, he had given responsibility to the traffic-in-charge, who was not a good man, bor mot garhi, bor phutoni - he was very arrogant. We were in Dibrugarh lock up then, Sadar thana. She came in, calling out, *Aamar ULFA kei jon kot? Where are our ULFA girls?* The traffic-in-charge got very angry and shouted at her, *what are you saying? I'll throw you out!* She retaliated, *I've come here with permission, how can you throw me out?*



You should ask us why we've come – and our girls are not ULFA, you know that! You've framed them as ULFA, ULFA sojaise.

The OC said, *Oi suwali, don't teach me things! Are you trying to teach me the law? Nonsense – and so on.*

Mamu was very angry at his language, *why are you using this obscene language and shouting, as a keeper of the law? What do you think? Are we not human beings? These girls who aren't ULFA, you've framed them as ULFA! Do you know where Paresh Barua lives? If you know so much, catch them. You can't catch them and instead you catch these ordinary girls, Mohilla committe girls, and frame them as ULFA!*

And then he shouted back, *Oi suwali, don't act too smart!*

What was it – yes – yes - he said, *bejjat korim buli.*

Omio: Yes, he then threatened her, *bejjat kori dim buli kole*.

Reboti: Mamu went and caught him, saying in English, *what is bejjat? Bejjat mane ki? Tell me what it means!* Meanwhile, the policeman's trying to run away, but Mamu won't let him – *what is bejjat*, she yells after him. *What does that mean? Are you threatening to rape me? Ordinary people who come to the police station, you behave like this with them!*

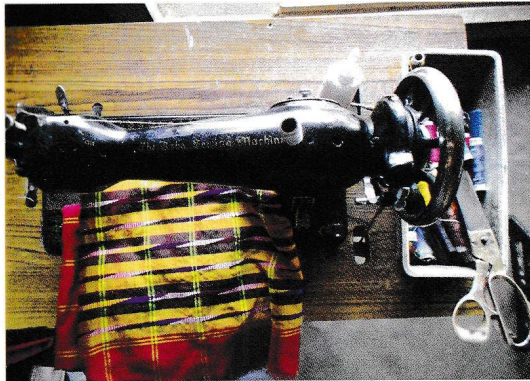
Jonali: She says, *I'll take off my clothes*.
What a scene it was!



Reboti: Mamu shouts, *Come come, bejjat korok – come and rape me* – And she's tugging at her churidar – lifting it up - and Junali and I are in the lock up. She is almost taking off her clothes in anger. I reached out to her through the prison rods and held her, *oh Mamu Mamu, please...*

I asked them to let us out, they wouldn't. I reached out to her churidar top and I held her through the bars of the lock up, held her down to the bars, pleading with her *please Mamu, calm down, be quiet*.

Jonali: The police are telling us, *please explain to her, please...* Mamu meanwhile cannot be stopped in her anger – *Nonsense! He has the gall to talk like this to me – as a keeper of the law, he's breaking it himself, what will happen to the rest?* She yelled a lot. The police were embarrassed so they got the policewomen and put Mamu in the lock up as well!



Even in the lockup, she wouldn't calm down – *I'll break the bars, don't hold me down*, she was shouting. This boy who had come with her, he tried as well, *O Mamu ba, please don't be angry, please calm down*, he came to try and pacify her. She turned to the police and yelled – *here, arrest him, arrest this one too, arrest us all*. The police began shouting, *catch them, catch them all!* We were trying to calm the situation, and the police shouting like this, wasn't helping. We called out to the police from the lock up, *why are you saying all this? More people will die, do you want that?* But they wouldn't listen to us.



We tried to tell them, *there's no point in keeping us in the lock up, there will be more protests, we aren't scared of being in jail*. Mamu was still shouting – *I'm not afraid of jail, but once I'm out, I'll find you! Kowt jaabi? Where will you run?*

Reboti: Then we were 5 of us?

Junali: No, no. Not five yet, we were four. We become five later when the sick one joined us.

Reboti: Yes, they had given a police rakhiya, attendant for the patient. We warned the owner of Sanjeevani Hospital, when he was bought to the station to identify us. We told him, *when we left the hospital, our girl was doing well*,



she was sitting up, drinking tea; if something happens to our girl, anything, you've had it.

He said, *should I discharge her?*

I was so angry, I replied, you dare do that! What are you saying. If after we've left her, by some chance, her condition should deteriorate or she should suddenly die, it will be your responsibility. And you can't discharge her before she recovers either! But we only paid half the bill. After the police put their attendant, we insisted the bill should be paid by them for the rest of the hospital stay! After that, she recovered somewhat. In fact, she knew the Sanjeevani malik. He told her, it's okay, you don't have to pay the rest of the money. Buy some good things to eat in jail, give your friends as well and build up your strength there. Your companions are all gorom, very angry.

After five days, we were shifted to the jail.

We had no other tension in jail except that we'd remember oh, we had the order for the gamoosas, and we were supposed to deliver them!

After coming out, we had to hurriedly finish them on the loom. There was no one left to weave that time – we were all in jail – Modhu, Junali, me – our girls, they weren't afraid of going to jail! But, yes, the weaving suffered!





The Zenki Collective evolved in 2013, when a few activists, artists, writers and researchers from Northeast India decided to combine their interest and inquisitiveness on matters pertaining to their region. The Collective is a platform where ideas, thoughts and reflections about politics, culture and life in the region can find a place for critical engagement.

The Collective fashions itself like the tree houses on the slope in jhum fields that overlook the valley.