

Communist Party in West Bengal and Some Gendered Paradoxes

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It would, perhaps, not be a hyperbole to argue that Marxism and Feminism as emancipatory theories shares some striking similarities that placed them close to each other, in so far as, elimination of oppression and creation of a discrimination free world is concerned. If the first tradition aimed to build up a classless society, the second essentially desired for a society free from patriarchal prejudices. In their extensive analysis to reach for the ascribed goal, the two sustained within its fold diverse views, thereby providing for a more meaningful intellectual exercise in changing the world without affecting the principles that are primary to each of them. One such fundamental proposition for the Marxist is that of equality which the present paper is likely to take up for introspection and analyse how it deviated in its perception to gender.

Classical Marxism with some of its intrinsic conceptual elements like dialectical materialism, historical materialism, base-superstructure, etc. as developed within its fold through which it tends to justify its theoretical inevitability, indicates its intimacy with science of society and cites a valid reason for its positivist position. Essentially, as a product of enlightenment and thereby of modernity, Marxism projected its logical arguments as the only universal expression of emancipation. This eventually earned its deterministic outlook and responsible for the transformation of theory into a dogma. A single outcry against the tradition is viewed with utter suspicion and dismissed thereby, confirming the post modern allegations of totalitarian implications. Consequently, voices of the repressed and marginalized are silenced thereby, vulgarizing the essence of democracy. This becomes more evident with the functioning of the communist party in which a strong party hierarchy with decision flowing from top to bottom talks more of centralism and less of democracy. This

adversely affects its core principles like that of equality. The objective of the present paper is to reveal the gender inequality existing within the communist party of West Bengal from its inception till party bifurcation in 1964. The study further aims to divulge the underneath experiences of the women members of the communist party in West Bengal, as expressed in personal interviews and autobiographies and tends to make a humble attempt in redefining the conventional understandings of what particular historical processes have entailed and thereby questioning the politics of knowledge production.

A study on the women communists in Bengal can be best understood through their mass organization known as Mahila Atmaraksa Samiti. As an important auxiliary to the communist party, the Mahila Atmaraksa Samiti (henceforth MARS) was formed with an endeavour to mobilize the women of the then Bengali society. Born in the year 1942, till the late 1960s, the history of MARS traverses through different phases; each phase being different from the others as far as mode of operation is concerned with which the character of the organization also underwent a change. This change is, however, to a great extent conditioned not only by the arisen situation of the time but also due to the changes taking place time and again in its leadership. For a communist party a change in leadership essentially resulted in a change in the party strategy. Frequent changes in the strategy sometimes create confusion and inhibition in the minds of the ordinary members which ultimately hampers the smooth functioning of the mass organization.¹In the initial years it was clear enough that MARS sought to mobilize women for the nationalist struggle and for this purpose they encourage women to adopt the techniques of self-defence. For instance, Nibedita Nag, a veteran communist member, who had herself admitted in a personal interview at her Park Circus residence that she used to learn '*lathikhela*' (a form of Indianised Marshal Art with a stick often used for self-defence) and '*chhorakhela*' (same done with a sword).² The spirit was to draw those women who were inspired by revolutionary activity and hence, unable to walk along

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with the ideas of Indian National Congress. However, it must be mentioned herethat the communist party never took the women's mass organization seriously at least for the initial few years, since its inception.³ This in turn enabled the leadership of MARS to enjoy a certain degree of autonomy so far as in arranging programmes of the organization. As such it held out a number of programmes in which the senior members of the Indian National Congress were invited as guests of honour or nominated as Presidents of the programmes and even conferences. The senior members like Mrs. Nellie Sengupta, Sarojini Naidu, Indira Devi Choudhurani and many more too extended their cooperation for the success of their constructive work.⁴This indicates that somewhere their feminine identity coexisted which did not restrict, rather motivated, them to organize a broader platform for women irrespective of party affiliations. But such a liberal spirit did not last long and it evaporated gradually after Independence when the communist party too thought of regulating the activities of its mass organizations, including MARS. In fact, party regimentation seemed to be more with the total control of mass organizations.

Nature of Assignments for Women Members

The attitudes of the leadership within the communist party towards women are perhaps best understood through the kinds of work assigned to the women members of the organization. Works related to social service, including charitable functions, relief work like opening of gruel kitchens during famines, nursing and assisting the male comrades when sick or in distress, mobilizing women members for the organization were mainly their sole responsibility. So, the very nature of their assignments leaves no doubt that they were required to play the auxiliary role which was essentially constructed keeping in parity with the existing social norms. Hence, their role was basically traditional, secondary and hardly any seemed to have contributed positively in the formulation of policies or offered any concrete suggestion on it. It seems that the communist party did not take their women members into confidence and entrust onto them with responsibilities which happens to be of paramount importance to the organization. A classical illustration in this regard can be traced in the autobiography of Manikuntala Sen, in which, it was shared that during the time of general election of 1952, the communist party of West Bengal was also guided by similar feeling while nominating candidates as election contestants.⁵She herself admitted that she was not the only women member of the party to contest election but she was asked to contest from a constituency which was declined by other male members of the party since the possibility of victory from

there was almost grim. Sen's account had particularly raised a vital question regarding how women were viewed by the party leadership and how, despite official viewpoint, the party leadership hesitates when it comes to actual entrusting of political responsibilities or of sharing of power with the female comrades in reality. This clearly indicates how the patriarchal prejudices marked the viewpoint of members within the party.

Retaining Unity at the Cost of Sexual Inequality

Overstreet and Windmiller, in the introduction to their book, have highlighted the problems related to the study of party literatures.⁶ They have rightly suggested how it is so very difficult to analyse the party's real motive behind a policy since it tends to conceal a greater part of it and whatever literatures are available, they tend to misguide the researcher with its political jargon and an existing gap in its implementation. This is true for communist party all over the world. In the name of strong party discipline, what it has actually given rise to is lack of transparency in the functioning of the organization.

This is true for both male and female members of communist party. But despite such internal limitation, the party always seeks to portray itself as homogeneous unity sharing identical interests. The obligation to represent its solidarity before the world sometimes demands the organizations to conceal its differences. Gender issues, thus, get entrapped in the situation. In fact, the party's deduction of explaining everything, including women's issues, in terms of class has resulted into narrow reductionism. It thereby fails miserably to reach to a nearer solution to the problem.

In most cases of conversational personal interview, the women members refused to give their opinion freely unless they were assured and convinced enough that it is for the sake of a better study of the party. This refusal is not always out of fear or compulsion but a feeling of confusion as whether it is correct to talk negative about their own organization since it is almost an extended family to them. Will not then their act be regarded as a deceit or an act of mistrust? Amrita Basu's article has wonderfully related the party's principle of democratic centralism to the Bengali Hindu family.⁷ According to her like the Communist Party of India (Marxist), the Bengali Hindu family is organized along strictly hierarchical lines: the men who occupy its highest rungs exercise the most power (Basu, 2000). Yet the family, like the Party, mystifies such inequality and projects itself as a solidaristic unit whose members share identical interests. "Democratic centralist principles in the home fortify the CPI'M in the world, at the cost of perpetuating sexual inequality."⁸Basu helps us to justify why the women communists were so

hesitant to speak about the differences in their interview. This further shows that a slight deviation from the official “class” analysis (which the party strongly uphold) of the doctrine might probably result in claiming oneself more deviated and distracted from the original discourse and thereby definitely proving oneself less of a Marxist. Thus, even the loosest forms of Marxism have seemed to suggest that “in the last analysis” class and capitalism are more fundamental than gender and patriarchy.⁹ So the final goal is to achieve unity even though it is achieved at the cost of sexual inequality.

Reluctance to Raise Gender Issue

Though MARS was active around property rights for Hindu women following in the footsteps of the All India Women’s Conference yet there is no doubt that it has failed to raise issues which in essence affect particularly the women of the region. Issues like abolition of wife-beating practice, political participation of women, and monetary rights of women received scant attention in their agendas. The form of social oppression against women, which turned out to be serious in rural and semi urban areas, was the problem of wife-beating. Sometimes it became so acute that the struggle against wife-beating in some areas at least was taken up rather early by local branches of MARS. In Midnapore, for example, even while the shadow of famine was still looming large, the battle against wife-beating was fought simultaneously with the performance of rehabilitation work. The women’s committee (Mahila Samiti) itself sat in judgment and took up the role of the arbitrator as stated by Bimala Maji.¹⁰In fact, the women even had to fight patriarchal behaviour inside the Communist Party itself. In a well-known incident, during a General Body meeting of the Communist Party in Dinajpur, the wife of a local party committee member is said to have suddenly interrupted the secretary’s speech, exclaiming: “Comrade, is there any law that says you can beat your wife. Why should my man beat me? I want a decision on this.”¹¹Such reported incident was no exception but formed part of a pattern of allegations faced by the party committees in many areas. This is what forced the Communist Party to proclaim a ‘law’ against ‘wife-beating’. Again regarding debates over women’s labour, a matter which was discussed in detailed in Chapter four was hardly touched upon by the Women Communists of Bengal. Although both Lenin and Mao recognized that rural poor women are doubly exploited, in their social analysis neither women’s production nor the economic exploitation they are subjected to are sufficiently highlighted. This problem lies at the roots of traditional class analysis, as a review of the debate on household labour by the Marxist

Feminist author Gail Omvedthas laid bare.¹² Omvedt points out, except for a few short passages, Marx in his monumental work *Das Capital* barely touched on the question of household labour. This perhaps indicates that in practice the Communist Party has contributed to the perpetuations of patriarchal myths by continuing to neglect women’s labour.

Furthermore, interesting is the fact that none of the above stated gender-related issue got a priority or a place in the then political Report of the Party. In fact, the report was silent on the struggles which village women were waging to get entrance to political meetings, nor were such crucial questions like the practice of wife-beating and women’s monetary rights brought up.¹³

Predominance of the Middle Class

The activities of MARS were heavily centred on Calcutta. From its very formations its activities had accommodated much of the demand of the middle-class women in the city. Even some of the rehabilitation projects it had jointly taken up with Nari Seva Sangh include the production of handicrafts and homemade items were mainly made by women of middle class families of rural and urban areas. Though several social projects namely providing elementary education to the slum dwellers of Calcutta were taken but those were a handful in number and did not continue for a longer period of time. Though efforts to mobilize women of rural areas was taken as a serious drive by the women’s organization of the Communist Party but it could not reach the female agricultural labourers and workers at the grassroot level. As such MARS played almost relatively insignificant role in organizing peasant women during the militant Tebhaga movement. Thus, when women spontaneously protested sexual harassment both by landlords and by their own husbands, MARS was a passive spectator to these activities.

Even the strategy and techniques adopted by MARS members to mobilize women like *prabhat pheri*,¹⁴street play, songs and dance performed by IPTA cadres—all reflects the cultural forms of middle-class values. They were more appealing and acceptable to the urban and semi-urban based comparatively well-to-do section of the society. The lyrics, the dialect, the forms and the presentation in no way reflected the values of the female downtrodden. As such it won’t be wrong to state that members of MARS were to a large extent alienated from the women down below.

Perhaps not very consciously or intentionally, it had upheld middle class conceptions of women’s roles and thereby had distanced itself from the rural poor. Further by encouraging home-based income generation projects like emphasizing on stitching, sewing, preparing home-

made products like pickles, fried items, etc. it upheld the values and norms of a particular strata of society.

Accordingly it can be said that the focus on a few particular classes becomes more visible when one goes through their only magazine called *GhareBaire*. In almost all its issues there were some regular columns like how to cook, how to stitch, *ChalarPathe* highlighting on women who had achieved success and so on.¹⁵ All these features indicate that they were meant for women who had stayed back at home in urban, semi-urban and part of well affluent rural population. This shows how values of predominant section of society was never challenged and at the same time how incorporating the values of rural poor were not taken seriously by the women members of the Communist Party.

Leadership

This is, perhaps, an arena which has discredited the Communist Party most. Despite its rhetoric claim to support the ending of women's oppression in principle, its manifestation in the decision-making body could hardly be felt. It took almost more than 80 years to have a women representative in Polit Bureau of CPI (M) which happened to be the highest rung in the hierarchy. The only name of a women member in the State Committee of the Undivided Communist Party which could be traced in the year 1952 was Manikuntala Sen.¹⁶ The conditions till 1964 was perhaps more dismal than ever.¹⁷ Even the number of women candidates of the party in 1952, 1957 and 1962 State General Assembly Elections was miserable. It does not even touch a two digit figure. It was Manikuntala Sen alone in 1952 and 1957 who was elected, while Ila Mitra replaced her in 1962.

In fact the Communist party's attitudes were riddled with contradictions and those contradictions are hardly explained. First there is the contradiction between the political interest women showed and their sharing in people's power. At the red flag demonstrations, women's presence was huge. Yet this keen interest in politics was not reflected in the new structure of power. So women clearly did not have an equal voice.¹⁸

Second, though some women were recruited to do political work yet their work went unnoticed and unrecognized by the party leadership. Neither the members nor the mass organization ever questioned the low rate of women representation in the decision-making body.

Thirdly, what makes the leadership problem even more confusing was when the reason of women's low consciousness was held responsible and highlighted by party comrades for negligible representation in the higher step of the power structure. Most of the women

members who were interviewed also uttered similar logic but none seemed to be eager in expressing an elaborate explanation over the issue.¹⁹ Again, party's reluctance in imparting political education to women members does not seem to be adequate. The fact that women are generally exclusively responsible for housework and child care has seriously constrained their political activism. As such women's political consciousness lagged far behind than that of men, for women had so little time to devote to reading, study groups and party activity. Hence, most of them were not in a position to utilize party policy. Furthermore, interesting to note is the fact that women of rural poor women at the grassroot level, who had proved themselves to lead the movement of Tebhaga at a time when the male comrades had absconded to hideouts, but couldn't make any effective impact upon the power structure. In fact despite women's demonstrated capacity and determination on the one side and the status they could obtain in the movement on the other. Hard evidence suggests that women's equal participation was neither achieved nor targeted. This indicates that the party did not learn to rely on and build up the leadership of the doubly oppressed.

Antipathy to women's political representation is further evidenced by the fact that few women are included in the upper echelons of CPI's Leadership. Apart from Renu Chakravarty, Manikuntala Sen, Kanak Mukherjee and Gita Mukherjee, there was hardly any other name which could have been prominent enough or given a thought by the party leadership as potential member to be included in the State Council. Thus, its conservative attitude regarding the role of gender has, thereby, failed to ensure a wider representation.

Persistent Patriarchal Prejudice

Despite several structural and situational constraints, it cannot be undermined that the existing patriarchal prejudices of the members within the communist party to a great extent can be held to be responsible for the persistent patriarchal prejudices. Though the first generation of Bengali Communist women took the radical step of severing ties with their parents, broke away with and rejected traditional practices like arranged marriages, lavish weddings and dowry and religious ceremonies, yet somewhere they sought protection from the male comrades. Most of them married communist men so that they could continue their political life along with their familial life. Their husbands encouraged them to be politically active but women were primarily responsible for housework and child care. Whenever the Party wanted to ensure more number of cadres in order to make their political struggle more effective,

they encouraged women's participation and till then the women members, to a certain extent, led an egalitarian life in the Party communes. But situation changes when party comparatively reaches a stable position and orients its policies more towards electoral success. The evils of power politics gradually began to be crept in, which pushed away the women members to the back seat. The patriarchal values seemed to be more visible when local party cadres openly opposed women's candidacy.²⁰ The party too showed its conservative tendency in including its women cadres.²¹ Furthermore, the mass organization of women since the mid-1950s began to be used more for electoral mobilization and was hardly given a priority at the time of formation of cabinet or distribution of important department of ministries to its women members.

However, it must be noted that such conservative attitude did not become apparent once the Left Front Government was formed. In fact, it existed among ordinary male members from the very beginning. There was a time in the late 1940s when the older generation of male peasants did not like the idea of their women attending Kisan Sabha meetings. But it was the women who retorted against it arguing that since they can sow or harvest in the fields along with other male members, their demands in attending the meetings should not be objected on any ground. Sometimes even male opponents tried to uphold *purdah* rules. But soon they were dissuaded by the others and decided by the majority that meeting would be held in the evening so that women would be able to join.²²

Interestingly, when it was relief and rehabilitation work women were encouraged by the party since it goes well with the essence of the existing social norms of the society but when it comes down to revolutionary struggle, their inclusion was not acceptable to the party leadership. Such a feeling was revealing during Telengana's last and toughest phase. For, when after the Union's Army intervention the guerrilla squads were forced to withdraw from the Telengana plains, most women were simply not allowed to take part in the strategic retreat. It is openly acknowledged that "the party admitted only a very few women into the forest areas, even fewer into the guerrilla squads contrary to women's demands."²³ This further endorsed that patriarchal ideas are entrenched in the tradition and theories of liberation movements themselves.

Again, what is even more interesting, is that be it Assembly or political meetings, even the smallest of the gender-related issues, which were raised, were brought up by women members themselves. So, gender-related issues to be raised by the women members alone, was something almost an unwritten rule of the

organization thereby endorsing the existing patriarchal prejudices within the party. In fact, sometimes it seems that women who became prominent in the party had been so due to their individual capabilities but the party hardly trained them (that is through party classes) or made any effort to bring them to the forefront. So, the party did not take any separate initiative both theoretically and practically preparing them for their role. But whenever women realized the need for female volunteers in the organization, they gladly extended their co-operation expecting least in return from the organization. This on the one hand, shows party's indifference over gender issues till 1964 but on the other it also shows the amount of dedication of the earlier generation of women comrades towards their organization. They regarded the Communist Party of India as the major front of opposition to women's oppression and that is why perhaps chose to remain silent on party's neglect of gender issues. Further, their emotional bonding with the Party was so much so that they even regarded it as a crime to speak against it.

So, there exists a paradox. The essence behind raising gender oriented issues by women themselves was, perhaps, in viewing them as a separate category, which was unacceptable to the communist ideology since its orthodox position tends to view the issue of women's, subordination through the lens of 'class analysis'. It is often argued that women are best to explain their state of oppression. The Party encouraged women to give speeches at public rallies, since "they can best describe the oppression faced by women."²⁴ What is important to note here is that apparently it might seem that there lies no problem if gender issues were raised by women members of the party but in reality casting aside the gender issues to the domain of women alone results in limiting the activities of women members to that of centring around gender issues and hence, the members loses their credibility to speak over general issues thereby being further marginalized within the organization. What holds our attention to the fact is that the Communist ideology tends to view the issue of women's subordination through the lens of 'class analysis' and regarded such issues as not only trivial but had in reality tried to conceal its actual position over it, by officially not raising it. Thus, its claim to restore equality as a principle created a paradox over gender issues and similarly assertion for an egalitarian society turned out to be a myth. So, the Marxists' claim to support the ending of women's oppression in principle, had actually resulted in many cases in which male members, out of patriarchal prejudices, have contributed to that oppression in practice through their personal and political behaviour. Further, Marxism as an ideology claims to be universal. Nothing seems to escape its strong logical structure. A women activist of the Communist

movement, thereby, being influenced greatly by such structure, holds onto her faith of overcoming all obstacles, with the ushering in of a socialist society. If one notes the principles through which the communist parties work at the organizational level, one realizes how it helps to give birth to such faiths. The strong party hierarchy, with decision flowing from top to bottom, talks more of centralism and less of democracy. Being nurtured in such political environment, for long, gradually destroys one's own individuality since the party's priority over the decision in almost all cases happened to be binding, even if it goes against the individual decision. No wonder, in doing so the discipline within the party is retained but at the cost of its members turning subservient to the official dictum of the organization.²⁵ In her memoirs, Manikuntala Sen touches over the issue in a very gentle and mild way. Once being tuned to such a system of functioning, the member carries out the command of the organization but expresses her incapability to judge the decision with her individual rationality. It creates double jeopardy for the communist women of Bengal. Since having been born as women, they were unable to free themselves entirely from the clutches of social norms, taboos and customs which to a large extent control and restrict their lives, thereby disabling them to take decisions. Even their independent judgment to join the communist party or to some extent their effort in breaking the social norms marked their actions as radical. Yet, the party by appearing as an extended family to them also gradually manages to establish its patriarchal prejudices upon them. So, their journey seems to be from one set-up of arrangements to another, in which instead of the head of the family (in most cases the senior adult male member) the party leadership takes the decision on their behalf. Hence, such organizational decision on her behalf seeks to control all spheres of their life, including their personal affair. Sandhya Chatterjee was asked by the party to discontinue her studies in medical sciences at Calcutta. Later, she was even asked to give up her teaching job outside the state despite the fact she was facing severe financial crisis.²⁶

To conclude, it may be suggested that the existing gender inequality within the party organs were, perhaps, not unknown to the women comrades, yet their ideological commitments enriched them to search for a solution where both gender and commitments towards their organization could be compatible with each other, thereby leading to a more co-existential harmony. That is why, despite their unrecognized struggles and sacrifices, the first generation women members of the communist party, in most cases, never expressed their grievances either against the Party or of their past sacrifices.

Notes

1. For instance, the change in party policy taking place from Ranadive's adventurist line to that of Joshi's mass line.
2. Nag, Nibedita, interview (Calcutta, April 10, 2011).
3. Roy, Subodh, ed. December, 1999 *Communism in India: Unpublished Documents 1935-1945*, NBA Pvt. Ltd., Kolkata, p. 304.
4. Mukherjee, Kanak. *Narimukti Andolon O Amra*, Eksathe: Kolkata, 2005.
5. Sen, Manikuntala, *Sediner Katha*, Nabapatra Prakashan, Kolkata, 1982, p. 78.
6. Overstreet, G. D. and Windmiller, M., *Communism in India*, The Perennial Press: Bombay, 1960.
7. Basu, Amrita, 2000 'Democratic Centralism in the Home and the World: Bengali Women and the Communist Movement', in Kruks, S. Rapp, R. and Young, M.B. (ed). *Promissory Notes*, New York, p. 217.
8. *Op. cit.*, Basu, 2000 p. 215.
9. Bryson, Valerie, 1999, *Feminist Debate, Issues of Theory and Political Practice*, Macmillan Press, Hampshire, p. 21.
10. Custers, Peter, 1987, *Women in the Tebhaga Uprising: Rural Poor Women and Revolutionary Leadership (1946-47)*, Naya Prakash, Calcutta, p. 176
11. Chakravarty, Renu, *Communists in Indian Women's Movement-1940 to 1950*, People's Publishing House Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 1980, p. 188.
12. Omvedt, Gail, "Household, Labour, Marxism and Patriarchy", *Frontier*, June 11, 1983.
13. *Op. cit.*, Custers, Peter, 1987, p. 179.
14. Morning musical groups quite popular in those days.
15. These were the regular columns of *Ghare Baire*.
16. Mukherjee, Kanak, "Ek Netrir Uttaran O Biday", ed by Chakraborty, Shayamal, *Amader Purboshurira*, Calcutta: National Book Agency Pvt. Ltd., 2005, p. 126. However, the information was not given in the main article but in an editorial Biographical note found at the top of the article.
17. *A Report of the Party's State Conference* which was held at Burdwan in 1964 shows the names of 25 State Executive Council members (out of 101 members) with Manikuntala Sen as the sole women member.
18. *Op. cit.*, Custers, Peter, 1987, p. 190.
19. *Op. cit.*, Basu, Amrita, 2000, p. 221.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 224.
21. *Op. cit.*, Sen, Manikuntala, 1982.
22. *Op. cit.*, Custers, Peter, 1987, p. 172.
23. Published interview of Reddy in Custers, Peter, 1987, *op. cit.*, p. 191.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 188.
25. Often the members utter the same logical argument in the same language using almost similar words like a mechanical doll. *Op. cit.* Sen, 1982, *Sediner Katha*.
26. Chatterjee, Sandhya, interview (Chandannagar, November 8, 2011).

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