

WOMEN AND ‘STRUGGLE FOR SOCIALISM’: THE COMMUNIST MOVEMENT IN BENGAL

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Abstract

In the communist movement in India, the role and position of women were generally neglected. Even adequate attention towards the women question was not paid within the communist party itself. However, it is clear from the present state of researches that the women played an extremely significant role in the popular protest movement organized by the communists. The women cadres of the Communist Party of India (CPI) sacrificed their lives and honour for the establishment of a better society. The peasant women as well as the upper class/caste women of the communist party stood in front of the battle against the repressive agencies of the state; they faced the extreme brutality of the state power more than their male counterpart. An analysis of the history of Bengal (and West Bengal) exhibits numerous examples of the advanced and decisive role of the women in building communist organization and protest movement even in most unconventional ways. However, the question remains unanswered whether the communist party was able to recognize, understand and internalize the revolutionary potentiality of the women or not. The present paper attempts to show that the CPI leadership in the context of Bengal's politics failed to grasp both the ingenuity of women involvement in the communist movement and the importance of gender question in the political-ideological perspectives.

Keywords

CPI, communist movement, women question, MARS, socialism

Introduction

The objective of the present paper is to understand the role and nature of women participation in the communist-led movement broadly in Bengal and West Bengal. The paper seeks to reopen the question regarding the status of women in the domain of *the political*: were the women ‘less than half of the sky’ even in the communist-led ‘struggle for socialism’? Could the women achieve the leadership position in the communist movement or struggle for socialism? Or did they only fill the position of lower and middle ranks of communist cadres in a ‘male dominated patriarchal party structure’, which was otherwise committed for socialism? Did the women have any independent voice in the decision-making process of the communist party? Did the communist party express any eagerness to pay attention to the ‘women question’ even in a *modest manner*? These are the very common questions of any democratic movement, which however could not be tackled comfortably.

The present paper does not propose to answer all questions related to these issues. Rather it aims to frame the pattern of references to which these *uncomfortable* questions could be *justifiably* traced,

positioned, contextualized and interrogated. It is an effort to locate the cracks in understanding, shifts in the modalities, configuration of hierarchy and dominance of exclusionary sense if any, in the question of the nature of women participation in the ‘struggle for socialism’ vis-à-vis the response (or lack of it) of the party in the domain of the organized left politics of West Bengal in the post-independence era.

Communism in West Bengal: Party Structure and ‘Struggle for Socialism’

Historically West Bengal is a fertile ground for development of radical political ideas since the time of independence. Even prior to 1947, the undivided Bengal witnessed articulation of working class consciousness, peasant movements, ‘middle class radicalism’ and progressive cultural movements. Recent researches show that Bengal witnessed significant deep rooted changes in the sphere of politics, economy and society between 1920 and 1947 (Bhattacharya, 2014). Apart from the development of nationalist politics and ‘communal ideology’, the left political influence was also active in the consciousness of some sections of the mass society. Though the activity of the Communist Party

of India (hereafter CPI) was rather limited in comparison with the Congress or the other political parties, the party workers as well as the leadership were committed, determined and methodical. While a good number of them were ex-revolutionaries, party members like Jyoti Basu belonged to the higher strata of the educated urban society. The communist workers were also active in the rural areas of the undivided Bengal in motivating the peasants in favour of the demand of *tebhaga*. The CPI was also deeply involved in multiple ways with the development of progressive cultural movements in the decade of 1930s and 1940s. The progressive cultural movement primarily influenced by the *idea of progress* and Marxism created a new orientation both in the field of literary creativity and domain of interpretative exploration (Pradhan, 1979, 1981; Das, 2003). It is argued that the forward-looking Bengali middle class started emphasizing the incorporation of human realities in the cultural creativities since 1920s. It eventually paved the way for the break-up with the archetypes of 19th century Bengal Renaissance, and even from the so-called tradition of Rabindranath. This broader shift was deeply associated with the growing solidarity of artists and writers. The profound socio-economic and political crises in Bengal (and eventually West Bengal) between 1939 and 1952 provided the impetus to the efflorescence of creativities (Gupta, 2009).

Current researches also show that the history and politics of West Bengal in the decades of 1950s and 1960s underwent significant political transformation. In the historical development of the state, the factors which contributed to the growth of complexities were the influx of refugees from East Pakistan and their broader assimilation with the left and communist politics (Chakrabarti, 1999; Chatterjee, 2011). The struggle of the refugees opened up new social, political and cultural dynamism in the post-1947 period; it also had deep impact on the mobility of the women in the public domain (Sen, 2003, pp. 183-184). Sekhar Bandyopadhyay recently argues that the historical development of south Asia between 1947 and 1952 has to be analysed in terms of decolonization (Bandyopadhyay, 2012). Broadly it was a transition period towards the establishment of a multi-party parliamentary democracy in the country.

The period immediately before and after of independence was a phase of political-ideological crisis in the communist movement of India (Basu, 2014-145; Basu, 2013-2014). During this period, the CPI underwent through phases of political transformation and strategy reformulation. Under the leadership of P.C. Joshi as the General Secretary of CPI, the communists offered policy of cooperation towards the Congress in 1946-47. However, this pacifist policy of cooperation pursued by Joshi, became a subject of debate and criticism within the party, and eventually contributed to the fall of Joshi within the party. In the second party congress of the CPI (1948), B.T. Ranadive replaced P.C. Joshi as the General Secretary of the party. The rise of Ranadive in the party structure signified the quick change in the party's political programme; it was noted that the CPI was now ready to give up the old policy of cooperation with the Congress and would adopt a more radical policy of confrontation with the Congress. In fact, Ranadive believed that the revolutionary situation was excellent in India and exploited sections of the population were waiting for the call of a revolution. This understanding led him to call for a socialist revolution in the country. However, in spite of efforts made by the CPI workers, the party failed to achieve any meaningful advancement in this regard. What is important for us is that a number of party workers, a majority of whom were women, faced brutal police oppression and sacrificed their lives. A quick review of the history of West Bengal during 1948-49 shows that both the urban and rural women became the targets of the state-sponsored repression mostly. The question remains still unanswered: how did the party leadership take it into their account? The 'smooth' incorporation of the CPI in the emerging parliamentary democracy in India in the decade of 1950s did not always ensure peace in the CPI's relation with the state machinery. The social and economic formations of the Bengali society under the chief minister-ship of Bidhan Chandra Ray was however comparatively smooth though the internal tension was there. This peaceful atmosphere was short lived; the decade of 1960s in the Indian history was full of popular agitation and unrest. The legitimacy of the Congress rule came to be seriously challenged. The crises of the ruling class and of existing political economy prepared the ground for

articulation of long-term social unrest in West Bengal as well as in the other parts of the country. The internal cohesion of the CPI was also in deep crisis during this period. The communist movement witnessed split of the CPI in 1964 and also of the CPIM in 1969 respectively. The birth of CPIM in 1964 and of CPIML in 1969 unleashed militancy in multiple forms including the Naxalite movement in the last half of the decade of 1960s and first half of the decade of 1970s. The repressive agencies of the state tackled the situation with iron hand, and again a number of women activists faced severe torture, sacrificed their life, and eventually the Naxalite movement was brutally suppressed. It is undeniably noticed that the women participated in the agitation, movement and even in violent confrontation with repressive agencies of the state whenever they got the opportunity. Their attempts were *inhumanly crushed*. If we broadly categorize this proactive participation of the women as 'struggle for socialism' following the 'party line', then the simple question would arise: what was the general outlook and approach of the communist party in recognizing the women's *possible role* in the left movement? The answer of this question is still hazy in the communist metanarrative. We will explore this issue later.

Let us look to the basic structure of the communist party for the understanding of the question. The communist party believed in 'democratic centralism' as the only guiding principle of managing the activities in terms of practicality. This Leninist principle would emphasize on two fundamental points: first 'freedom of discussion' and secondly 'unity of action'. The implication is that the all the party workers have every right to participate in the discussion and debates, but when a decision is taken, it is binding for the members to implement it unquestionably. This is very basic essence of the communist discipline (Lenin, 1967). Following this Leninist principle, the members of the CPI had to express their opinion only within the party, and to obey the decisions taken by the leadership. Therefore, it is very difficult for an outsider to get other voices, if any, within the party. The separate women voice was logically supposed to be subsumed within the party structure, thereby smoothening the functioning of discipline. So the source material for discontent voices is meagre in this regard. In order

to get out of this difficulty, we suggest to discuss the extent women participation in the communist-led movement on the one hand and the degree of participatory role of women in the decision making process of the communist party on the other hand. Only this comparative method could help us to construct the role of women in the communist movement in West Bengal from the fragments of data. In this context, we propose that the present paper will discuss the issue up to 1964. The logic behind this selection is that the year 1964 saw the division of the party. This particular year marked the end of any popular movement organized by undivided communist party in the country. So we will stop at 1964.

Women Participation in the 'Struggle for Socialism'

It is already noted by the scholars that women played significant role in the Congress-led nationalist movement prior to 1947. In his recent work, Sabyasachi Bhattacharya makes the following comment:

In the 1920s and 1930s, the participation of women in political activities brought into existence a new dimension of the role of women, chiefly the women who were *bhadramahila*. There were several ideological strands in the complex of ideas inspiring women's intervention in the public sphere and politics. Predictably, the Indian National Congress and the *biplabi* (militant nationalists) groups proved to be ideologically influential, followed later by Leftist ideologues of various hues, ranging from the mildly socialistic to the Communists of the International (Bhattacharya, 2014, p. 65).

It is clear that the women had started playing a very important role in the political activities of both the Congress and the CPI even before the coming of independence. However, the most striking point is that after 1947, there was an expansion of the social base of the women participation extremely significantly in the communist movement after 1947. This point needs a detailed discussion. From Sabyasachi Bhattacharya's analysis, it is clear that before the coming of independence the middle and upper class educated women or *bhadramahila* belonging to the upper caste groups of the Bengali society played certain role both in the nationalist and leftist movement. However, with the rise of an expanding agrarian politics in 1946 in the Bengal's

countryside the peasant women vehemently started participating in the *tebhaga* movement. This critical involvement of the women, particularly the lower caste peasant women, in the agrarian upsurge contributed to the development of a new paradigm in the history of Bengal, which became more visible in the post-1947 era. The most authoritative research of Adrienne Cooper shows that though women were more militant than men in the *tebhaga* movement, but 'they were generally excluded from the formal organization of the B.P.K.S. and Communist Party' (Cooper, 1988, pp. 269-270). It is also reminded that the peasant women fought not only for *tebhaga* but they also tried to stand against the patriarchal social domination during the movement (Chattopadhyay, 2006, pp. 101-115). In most of the cases of *tebhaga* movement, the peasant women belonged to the lower strata of the rural society in terms of caste and obviously of class.

This legacy was continued in the period immediately after independence. In 1948-49, the CPI and BPKS tried to reorganize the *tebhaga* movement in some districts of West Bengal. As a result, the peasant unrest started spreading in Hooghly, 24-Paraganas, Medinipur, Howrah etc. Like the earlier phase of the movement, the peasant women not only actively participated in the movement, they were also facing the most severe police repression and brutality. A number of peasant women sacrificed their lives. The violent approach of the state – a state which was supposed to be a product of the most profound anti-colonial struggle in the modern world (Chandra, 2008, 2012) – became perceptible in the agrarian fields of West Bengal. For example, on March 12, 1948 the police fired on the agitated peasantry in Bara (a village near Singur in the Hooghly district). Two peasants were died, and a number of local agitators including women and children were injured. On February 19, 1949 in Dubirberi – a small village of Polba police station in the same district – the peasants started agitation in demand of *tebhaga*. The peasant women actively participated in the movement. They were indeed the first line of resistance against the police. It made them the primary target of the police action. The police brutally killed six peasant women. These women again belonged to the lower strata of the society (Basu, 2015, pp. 107-108). The same type state sponsored brutality took place in the Kakdwip

areas of 24-Paraganas. In order to suppress the *tebhaga* movement, the police killed a number of peasant women. In fact, one of the basic differences between the *tebhaga* movement at Kakdwip and that of the Hooghly or Howrah regions was that the peasantry faced long-term police repression at Kakdwip because the *tebhaga* movement in this comparatively remote area of 24-Paraganas was able to challenge the state most effectively. It was an organized movement of the local leaders of the CPI; moreover, the communist workers found quick support from the peasantry. The extreme socioeconomic inequalities of the Sundarban areas gave birth to the development of a radical peasant movement here. So it was an interplay of 'communist organization' and 'peasant response' created the dynamics of the agrarian resistance to the state and its apparatuses. The state used the brutal forces of violence both extensively and intensively for a much longer time in the Kakdwip areas. Consequently, the women became the acknowledged victims of the intensification of repressive state forces in a frontier region of newly constituted West Bengal.

The state sponsored violence or repression against the popular mass movement was not confined to the rural landscape only. The most sophisticated urban centre like Kolkata also witnessed severe police action on behalf of the state. Here again the women party members of the CPI became the easiest target. On April 27, 1949 the police firing killed four women cadres of the party in the street of Kolkata (Basu, 2015, p. 114). The CPI tried to demonstrate protest against this repressive measure of the state, but it could not succeed. The present analysis shows that the incidences of violence against the rebel women who protested against the oppressive system or who fought for a greater cause of democratic emancipation were treated with iron hand by the state machinery. One estimate shows that during 1948-49 seventy two people were killed by the police, and out of this figure twenty-five were (almost 34 percent) peasant women who sacrificed their lives (Mukhopadhyay, 2005, pp. 101-102). The most notable point is that it was not done by an alien colonial state, but it was a state which was making promise of democracy before its citizens.

Communist Party and the Question of Women Emancipation

In theory, the CPI like other communist parties of the world held the view that the question of women emancipation should be considered as an integral part of the struggle for socialism. In other words, the unequal status of the women in a class society is a problem of class inequality, and it cannot be treated in isolation from the larger social reality. Only a socialist revolution could change the exploited condition of the women. Without going into the details, it may be mentioned at the very outset that it is the classical position of Marxism on the women question, and well accepted in the theory and practice of CPI.

However, this abstract proposition is though useful in understanding the nature of the communist approach to the women question, is not adequate to locate the *political position* of the women question in reality. Nor does it explain the role of women members in the decision making process of the communist party. For a proper understanding of our query, we may begin with the Fourth State Conference of the CPI held in Kolkata from October 4 to 6, 1947. The draft political report placed before the delegates did not mention the issues related to women question. A section in the report was devoted to the evaluation of *Tebhaga* movement. Though it analyzed some basic aspects of the movement including the weaknesses, it did not highlight the heroic role played by the peasant women at all in radicalizing the demand of *tebhaga*. There was no indication of the immense sacrifice of them during the *Tebhaga* movement in 1946-47 in the report (Majumdar and Dutta, 2010, pp. 90-150). If we turn our attention towards the reconstituted State Committee of CPI in the Fourth State Conference, the available data indicates that Manikuntala Sen was possibly inducted in the state committee of the CPI. She was probably the sole representative of the women members of the communist party in the West Bengal state committee.

We have already noted that the period between 1948 and 1950 witnessed the unquestionable sacrifices of both the rural and the urban women in West Bengal for the cause of struggle for *socialism*. This period of the communist movement in the country is known as 'Randhive period'. Later it came to be

characterized as the era of ultra-left deviation of the CPI. The party leadership in 1950s started reviewing the errors committed by the party leadership. This critical reassessment also highlighted the growing weaknesses of the women movement

– particularly the movement organized by the *MahilaAtmarakshaSamiti* (hereafter MARS) – during 1948-50 (Majumdar and Dutta, 2010, pp. 196-242). According to this review, the middle class women were the basic foundation of the women movement in Bengal. The party leadership decided to induct the working class women and the peasant women more and more in the organization of MARS, and tried to transform it into a militant body. But this decision proved to be counter-productive in terms of expansion of organization and also of transformation of its nature. Neither the expansion was made possible nor was the MARS converted into a militant organization of the laboring women. Probably, there was a gulf between the middle class women and laboring women in terms of attitude and mentality. The middle class women were not easily accommodated in the politics of laboring women. This erroneous ultra-leftist approach of the party leadership towards the women movement blocked the possibility of expansion of the organization like MARS in a very critical juncture of its history.

One of the probable reasons behind this sectarian approach in the political programme of the CPI was undoubtedly the ideological stance adopted in the Second Party Congress (February 28 – March 6, 1948). However, it is difficult to deny that the virtual absence of the women representation in the decision-making process of the party created the conditions of imposing such blinkered decision so comfortably.

In early 1950s, it became clear that the political programme adopted in the Second Party Congress was a complete failure in terms of party's organizational strength and mass acceptance. Consequently, there was a change in the party line, and the CPI adopted parliamentary politics instead of a 'revolutionary' one. This crucial change initiated the gradual incorporation of the CPI in the politics of nation-building through parliamentary democratic system and electoral politics in India. Moreover, the CPI started reconstituting its committees at various levels.

It is clear from the party documents that the CPI's attitude towards the women question suffered from triviality. The party in an important document, which was placed in the state conference of 1951 in west Bengal, was completely silent about the women movement (Majumdar and Dutta, 2010, pp. 498-520). It is surprising because during the so-called Ranadive period the women in general and the peasant women in particular made huge sacrifices for the party. The communist leadership was not very keen to incorporate this radical aspects of the women participation in the left movement in discussion and debates. In October, 1951 the all-India party congress of CPI adopted a new political programme. It mentioned a few sentence on the women question. This resolution was though general in nature, however it demanded the end of all sorts of inequality imposed on the Indian women (Majumdar and Dutta, 2010, pp. 522-537). It may also not be irrelevant to mention that the women did not have any significant induction in the party's decision-making body even after the end of the Ranadive era; nor did the MARS get any special attention from the party leadership for the promotion of the causes of women.

In 1952, the CPI decided to participate in the forthcoming general election. From the statistical data, it is clear that CPI had only one female representative in the state legislative assembly in 1952 (Manikuntala Sen), in 1957 (Manikuntala Sen) and in 1962 (IlaMitra). In 1967, the number of women representation on behalf of the CPI in the state assembly became two. In 1969, both the CPI and the CPIM each had two women representatives in the West Bengal State Assembly. Apart from this four women representatives of CPI and CPIM, the Socialist Unity Centre (SUC) – a small left party - also had one female representation in 1969. These figures shows that the women voice was nearly unheard in the communist organization as well as in the avenues of parliamentary democracy during the first three decades after independence.

‘An Unimaginative Outlook’? : A Critical Review of Women Organisation of the Communist Party

A close and penetrating reading of the Manikuntala Sen's(1910-1987) reminiscences ‘*Sediner Katha*’ helps us to reconstruct the dominant views of the communist party towards the women organisation

like MARS. The interrelationships between the party and its mass organisations were never precisely articulated in the communist theoretical literature. Moreover, the question of women organisation by no means appeared as a part of serious *political* exercises in the Indian communist movement. Manikuntala Sen's *Sediner Katha* has to be interpreted in this context.

Manikuntala Sen raises a number of issues in this regard – the nature of which was extremely critical – in her ‘*Sediner Katha*’. She admitted that a section of her colleagues in the party had strong reservation about the activities of the MARS. This conservative viewpoint of some sections of the CPI leadership found the ways that the MARS functioned as disparaging to the cause of ‘revolution’. Even they compared it with the activities of voluntary organisation like the Ramakrishna Mission. Such attitude tried to endorse that the organization like MARS failed to expedite the process of revolution. According to this view, the MARS was involved in some kind social service rather than political activities. Manikuntala Sen's writings clearly shows that such attitude could not however demoralize the women organisers, and their effort particularly in the slum areas was noticeable in developing a spirited organization and party base among the women belonging to the lowest strata (both in terms of class and caste) of the society (Sen, 2003, p. 97).

Time and again, Manikuntala Sen argued that the activities of MARS was above any narrow and sectarian party related activity; it was related to welfare of masses especially of the women and children. It was not simply a matter of communists or the party (Sen, 2003, p. 134). If we go deeper, we will find certain interesting points in this regard. It is true that the majority of the party leadership did not obviously subscribe to this attitude that the MARS was a voluntary organization like the Ramakrishna Mission! However, it is equally true that it was an *expressed position* of some of the powerful party members in the decades of 1940s or 1950s. The telling effect was that it was able to survive in the memory of Manikuntala Sen in 1979-80 when she began to write *Sediner Katha*. Besides, it is difficult to deny that the communist leadership did not take the policy and programme of MARS as a strategy of political mobilization. The communist approach was essentially dominated by

class line only. The middle class, working class and the peasantry were supposed to be the primary base of the CPI during the period under review. The CPI tried to achieve the aim of 'revolution' through the use of grand strategy of mobilising the above-mentioned social classes. Both the form and content of this strategy was not only Eurocentric but also patriarchal and male dominated. It may also be noted that neither the sacrifices of the women (in terms of class and caste, most of the women who sacrificed everything for the cause of the party belonged to the lower order of society) nor the spectacular and novel approaches of Manikuntala Sen and her associates towards the society were a matter of concern with discernible significance in the dominant communist political discourses.

The question of women and gender possibly suffered from an unimaginative outlook of the communist party thereby relegating it to a subsidiary or nearly marginal position. It was not appreciated by the communists that the MARS was able to develop a broad, humanist, egalitarian and socialist strategy towards the most oppressed sections of the society, who could not be comfortably accommodated within the paradigm of class politics of the CPI in a given historical conjuncture. The communist leadership failed to understand the immersed and sublime presence of the elements of radicalism in the approach of MARS towards the question of women emancipation and social transformation. This failure was sharply and unequivocally pronounced in the address of P. C. Joshi in the Sixth Conference of Bengal Provincial Krishak Sabha (May, 1943). In his address, Joshi blamed that the women activists of party could not properly and adequately interact with the peasant women, what they should have done. According to Manikuntala Sen's testimony, this view was expressed by Joshi in an open meeting very rudely. This sudden blow demoralised the women members of the party to a great extent, who worked within the peasant community throughout the year in spite of extreme difficulties. Even they wanted to protest against this allegation; but Manikuntala Sen as a sincere and obedient party member could not raise her voice against this unjust criticism following the Leninist notion of discipline. But she acknowledged that as a result of Joshi's address to the women workers of the party, there was strong feeling of depression

and alienation among them. Moreover, it stopped the development of women organisation and its internal dynamism for time being. Even Joshi repeated the same criticism in the meeting of the provincial committee at Kolkata. Kanak Mukherjee

– one of the most dedicated and leading women members - resigned from the post of whole-time party membership out of despair. She continued her activities as a general member of the party.

In the decade of 1980s when Manikuntala Sen was writing *Sediner Katha* after the almost forty years of this event, she critically raised one extremely significant point regarding the extent of the power of the party leadership. She came to the conclusion that no party leader should enjoy *unlimited power* over the party and its decision-making process, and such uncontrolled power would not always produce good results even for the party itself (Sen, 2003, pp. 146-147). It is indeed one of the central arguments regarding the extent of authority and of power of the highest party leadership by a former party member.

Manikuntala Sen's reminiscence allows the students of history and social sciences to reopen the question of party's approach towards the women in general and gender in particular. It is difficult to deny that the Indian communist movement being influenced by patriarchy lacked ideological clarity and radical wisdom in its understanding about the women participation in wider life of *the political*. That is why the CPI failed to appreciate the role of MARS and its political-organizational activities; it also explains the sudden dramatic outburst of P. C. Joshi accusing the women workers for their alleged failure to get assimilated in the peasant society. Indeed, the unjust criticism of Joshi was a reflection of supposedly superior position of the party leadership in the communist party on the one hand and also of the complete failure of the party itself to develop an alternative political-ideological programme for MARS on the other. Moreover, it indicates the sheer absence of an understanding of the party leadership regarding the multifarious social-political activities of the members of MARS in a very *difficult* political, economic and social situation.

Communist Women in Parliamentary Democracy

The dominance of patriarchy was continued in the party's decision and overall approach even in the

post-colonial period. The CPI decided to contest in the 100 seats of the first assembly election of West Bengal in 1952. In preparing the list of candidates, the party nominated Manikuntala Sen as the only women contestant from the Kalighat assembly seat; she was the sole candidate of the CPI in West Bengal in this election. The communist party found no other women members as eligible in this regard. It shocked Manikuntala Sen. Her conclusion was that the communist party considered its women members as utterly ineligible. The most interesting point is that the Kalighat assembly seat was allotted to Manikuntala Sen because there was hardly any contender for the seat within the party; nobody was interested to contest from this specific seat. The most probable reason of the absence of contenders for this particular seat was the prevailing general assumption within the CPI that there was very poor possibility of victory of the communist candidate at Kalighat assembly seat. This seat was left vacant by the communist party for the women members of the party without any discomfort. On the contrary, the male communist members of the CPI were ready to occupy those assembly seats for them where there was any trace of silver line of success. Even there was most unlikely but bitter struggle among the male communists over such seats. The result was that the women comrades of the party were deprived absolutely of a fair and natural representation in the historical context of the first general election of independent India in 1952. A close reading of Manikuntala Sen's *Sediner Katha* reveals that the party leadership did not even consider it as a gross injustice to the women comrades (Sen, 2003, pp. 222-223; Banerjee, 2012, p. 333; Election Results of West Bengal, 1995, p. 300). In the assembly election of 1957, Panskura West seat was given to Geeta Mukherjee apart from Manikuntala Sen at the Kalighat seat. It may also be noted that the CPI was able to win in 46 contesting in 103 assembly seats in 1957 election (Banerjee, 2012, p. 337-362; Election Results, 1995, 301). It indicates that though the CPI contested in additional 16 assembly seats in comparison with the 1952 election, the communist leadership did not earmark any proportional and progressive allotment of seats for the women party members. In the 1962 assembly election of West Bengal, the CPI gave nomination to three women party members, namely,

Manikuntala Sen (Kalighat), Ila Mitra (Manicktola) and Nirupama Chattopadhyay (Bagnan) while the party contested in 145 seats as against 103 seats in 1957. So again there was a gross mismatch and wide disparity between the contested seats and nomination of women members. Historically, the election of 1962 was important because it was the last participation of the undivided communist party in the general election of the country; the party was divided in 1964 with the formation of a new communist party, that is, the Communist Party of India (Marxist). It is clear from these elementary facts that the undivided communist party was not much serious about the real representation of the women members of the CPI in parliamentary democracy. The Indian women could not become a real partner of revolution envisaged by the communist leadership as there was deep-rooted difference between MARS and CPI regarding the idea of emancipation of women and society. Consequently, the idea of revolution was confined within the very structure of class.

Concluding Remarks

It is evident from this brief analysis that question of women movement did not have any significant theoretical position in the experiment of communist movement in West Bengal during the years after independence. What were the factors behind it? Was the CPI leadership not ready to accept the articulation of women question in their political discourse? Were they not *substantially conscious* in this regard? Would it be correct to safely assume that the women question, according to the communist leadership in Bengal, were well fitted into the fundamental category of 'base-superstructure complex, and therefore further initiative was unnecessary? It cannot be postulated that the CPI leadership was unaware of the importance of the women organization. The establishment of MARS was the indication of this fact. However, the establishment of MARS does not disapprove the proposition that the women question was not expressively incorporated in the *grand strategy of socialist revolution*. The probable reason behind this failure to acknowledge the independent voices of women is as follows: The communist belief in class struggle as *the only strategy* of achieving the goal of

socialism precluded the possibility of developing any broader, flexible and sensitive strategy of women emancipation. In other words, it was widely held that the establishment of a socialist state would bring solution of all sorts of inequality, including the unequal position of the women. It was also repeatedly proposed that the struggle for gender equality should be considered as an integral part of the strategy of class struggle. No separate theoretical exercise within the communist party is at all required for the women question. Even the most committed women workers believed in it.

As a result of this politico-theoretical exercises, the participation, involvement and sacrifices of women in the one of the most turmoil periods of the communist party after independence (during 1948-50) were not counted as markers of party building. The *participation and involvement of the women* in the mass activities were not indexed in the review process of the CPI. The party practically remained silent about the role of the women in the political programme apart from a few isolated comments. The female party members of the CPI were neither included in the decision-making process of the party nor were given scope in the electoral politics of the emerging political democracy of the state though they stood in the forefront of party formation during the period under review. It would not be an exaggeration to conclude that they were not the half of the sky of the communist world of West Bengal; *it seemed to have been less than that.*

End notes

1. By using the term 'struggle for socialism', we attempt to identify broadly the radical protest movements organized by the communists. It is a descriptive term; the aim is to incorporate even the 'fragments' within the very structure of the analysis.
2. In the refugee colonies, the social reality created conditions for the development of mobility among the women not only for the earning of livelihood, but also for participation in the women organisation.
3. V. I. Lenin, 'What is to be Done?', *Selected Works*. Vol. I (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1967). For a critical review of the Leninist position exemplified in *What is to be Done?*, see Lars T. Lih, *Lenin Rediscovered What is to be Done? in Context* (Delhi: Aakar Books, 2013). According to Lih, though the experts regard the *What is to be Done?* (WITBD) as the most authoritative sourcebook of Leninist principle of party organisation, they fail to understand the context of it. Lih reminds us that the WITBD was written in the large context of international social democracy and small context of the polemical infighting among Russian Social Democrats in late 1901. Without a clear idea of these perspectives, there are possibilities of misreading both Lenin and his WITBD.
4. Bipan Chandra, *The Writings of Bipan Chandra - The Making of Modern India* (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2012). Bipan Chandra and his associates argue that the Indian national movement was unique in nature. It stood for secularism, tolerance, rights of women, minorities, oppressed castes and other exploited sections of the society. This group of scholars finds hardly any contradiction with serious magnitude in the Indian national movement. However, the difficulty lies in comprehending this interpretation totally is that (i) it does not explicate the dissident and non-conformist other voices embedded within the India's struggle for independence and (ii) it fails to explain the ideological roots of absence of inclusive approach of the post-colonial state of India. For details of Bipan Chandra's position see, Bipan Chandra and et al, *India Since Independence* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2008).
5. The police firing killed Latika Sen, Gita Sarkar, Amiya Datta and Pratiba Ganguly apart from four others in the street of Kolkata on 27th April, 1949. It was a huge setback to the communist movement.
6. Kanak Mukherjee was one of the senior leaders of the leftist women movement in India. Politically she was a member of CPI and after the formation of CPIM she joined in the new party. She prepared a list of the martyre women from which it is seen that during 1949-50 the political resistant of the CPI was primarily confined to the districts of Howrah, Hooghly, 24-Paraganas and Kolkata. The sacrifice of the lives by the peasant women took place in these districts. For details see, Mukhopadhyay, *Narimukti Andolon O Amra*, 357-358.
7. There is a confusion regarding the inclusion of Manikuntala Sen in the state committee of CPI in 1947 after the Fourth State Conference. Jollymohan Kaul recollects it from his memory. For details see, Majumdar and Dutta (eds) *Banglar Communist Andoloner Itihas Anusandhan*. Vol. V (Kolkata: Manisha, 2010) 150. However if it is true, she was the sole women representative in the committee.
8. 'Self-criticism of the Bengal Provincial Committee

against the Sectarian Impetuous Line – 1950’ in Manju Kukar Majumdar and Bhanudeb Dutta (eds) *Banglar Communist Andolonon Itihas Anusandhan*. Vol. VI (Kolkata: Manisha, 2010) 196-242.

9. By using the term ‘laboring women’, we try to mean both the working class women and peasant women along with other categories of women who earn their livelihood through manual or physical work.
10. The title of the document is ‘Draft of the Report on the Condition of the Bengal’s Party after the Second Congress up to September 1951’. The document is available in the Majumdar and Dutta (eds) *Banglar Communist Andolonon Itihas Anusandhan*. Vol. VI, 498-520.
11. Though the document did not make any deliberation on the women question, it highlighted the issues related to the various mass fronts like peasant front, trade union front, cultural front and student front. The activities of the women front were supposed to be less important in this respect.
12. For details see, ‘The Political Programme of the Communist Party of India’ adopted in the All-India Party Conference held in October, 1951. The document is available in the Majumdar and Dutta (eds) *Banglar Communist Andolonon Itihas Anusandhan*. Vol. VI (Kolkata: Manisha, 2010) 522-537.
13. Dilip Banerjee. *Election Recorder - An Analytical Reference* (Kolkata: Star Publishing House, 2012) 888.
14. Manikuntala Sen was the one of the foremost women leaders of the communist party in Bengal. She also played important role in the political history of West Bengal till her self-withdrawal from politics in 1964 during the split of the CPI.
15. Sen, *Sediner Katha*, 222-223. The CPI contested in 87 seats in the first general election of West Bengal Assembly in 1952 and won 29 out of it securing 10.94 percent of total valid votes. Manikuntala Sen got 10,993 votes while his nearest rival Debabrata Mookerjee of Congress was able to secure 9404 votes. For details see, Dilip Banerjee, *Election Recorder – An Analytical Reference* (Kolkata: Star Publishing House, 2012) 333; *Election Results of West Bengal – Statistics and Analysis 1952-1991* (Calcutta: Communist Party of India [Marxist], West Bengal State Committee, 1995) 300.
16. It may be noted that the Renu Chakrabarty was the sole female candidate in the lok sabha elections of 1952, 1957 and 1962 on behalf of CPI in West Bengal.
17. For example, one may cite the reference of Kanak Mukherjee. In her *Narimukti Andolon O Amra*, she views that the democratic women movement is a

part of the larger mass movement of the exploited masses in the Indian social developmental pattern. For details see, Mukhopadhyay, *Narimukti Andolon O Amra*, 19-20. It is not a false premise of understanding. Women as a social category is not definitely alienated from the larger social context. But the question is more critical: should the women movement develop *relatively independent strategy* for empowerment and liberation of the vast sections the exploited women or they simply accept the hegemonic position of the party structure following the same pattern of movement practiced in other organizations? Should the women organizations act as a *wholly-owned subsidiary undertakings* of the parent body like communist party or they express autonomy in their attitudes and activities? In the Indian communist movement, it is generally seen that the communist party exercises strict control over the mass organizations. In general, the relative autonomous position of the mass organizations in relation to the communist party is not upheld. Therefore, it is not possible for the mass organizations to take independent initiative for the development of any strategy of its own.

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