

Report on the Panel Discussion on Women in Movement: West Bengal

The Panel discussion on *Women in Movement: West Bengal* was held on 19 September, 2016 as a part of CRG-RLS project on Popular Movements in West Bengal and Bihar. The School of Women's studies, Jadavpur University also collaborated with CRG and RLS for this programme. The venue was Anita Banerjee Hall at Jadavpur University.

The discussion was moderated by Indu Agnihotri. The speakers for the day were: Mallarika Sinha Roy, Panchali Ray, Iina Sen, and Sujato Bhadra.

Mallarika Sinha Roy initiated the discussion. She highlighted that there have been a recent spurt of discussion about gender issues, particularly women's issues in popular media, policy studies and development debates. Planners and economists have started being concerned about issues of gender. Noted personalities like Amitabh Bacchan has also began to participate in the ongoing trend through mediums like letters to their granddaughters. Even the police has started writing 'survivors' rather than 'victims' in cases related to rape. However, 'Feminism' is still an uncomfortable term with the middle/upper class of the society.

It is important to understand the genealogy of the recent gender discourses as well as how contemporary politics is addressing the questions of gender/women. The massive public reaction and outrage after the 'Nirbhaya' case in Delhi started a wave of gender specific discourse which connected emotion with actions. The means to achieve goals became emotionally charged. This was a landmark moment to which many of the contemporary debates/movements and policies are linked.

In this context she revisited her own research on the questions of gender in Naxalbari Movement. The metaphor of magic becomes an important prism of analysis, as to many women participants of the movement, it was "magical moments" of their lives. However, "magic" might not always have positive connotations and their male comrades did not always have radical outlook on issues of gender. Here it becomes important to understand women in movement specifically, apart from women's movement in general. Gender is a necessary analytical category to understand political movements and politics. The perception of difference between men and women needs to be critically examined.

Iina Sen focused on the figure of Lila Mazumdar to understand the space and scope of women in left radical politics like Naxal Movement. Lila Mazumdar, the wife of legendary leader Charu Mazumdar had a shadowy presence in the Naxalite movement. She was an active member of the communist party and played an active role in the Tebhaga movement in Bengal prior to independence. She came from an enlightened family where members participated in diverse political activities. As a member of the Communist Party of India (CPI), Lila worked in the districts of Jalpaiguri and Rangpur. She was keen to form a new model of education. Later she became an insurance agent as she couldn't take up teaching job due to being on the police lookout list.

The CPI was split in 1964 and in 1967 it was further divided to form CPI(Marxist-Leninist). Lila Mazumdar didn't take membership of the CPI(Marxist-Leninist) and gradually became marginal figure in the politics. Lila was active in the party activities till the second split in 1967 as a member of the Darjeeling district committee. Lila had to take charge of the family when Charu Mazumdar was arrested. All the properties in the name of Charu Mazumdar were taken away under the 'enemy property act'.

Lila believed in and practiced in socialism as she distributed the family lands in the name of the tillers. Lila had several differences with Charu regarding his political line, especially with regards to students leaving educational institutes to join the Naxalbari movement. However Lila made sure that their own children were continued with their education. This became a source of contention. Supervision of Lila enabled their daughter Anita to pass the medical entrance exam in turbulent times

Lila, a prominent face of left politics of a time, gradually moved away from the limelight and became the principal bread earner of her family in absence of her husband. Many other women in left politics have moved away from their political lives and had focused on family/ became spiritual or had focused on earning for their families. They have been largely forgotten by the chroniclers of their politics. The reasons for such exclusion and gradual disappearances need to be understood for a better better understanding of how left politics addresses the issues of gender inside the party structure and outside it.

Panchali Ray

The complex links between women and the nation has occupied much academic attention, particularly for feminist scholars. Women provide legitimacy to the political projects of the nation in particular social and historical contexts. This presentation focused on the contradictions between the women's movements in conflict zones (Manipur), particularly mother's movements and feminist ideologies and practices to argue for coalitions rather than identities, struggles rather than shared oppression. Drawing from the nude protests of twelve members of the Meira Paibis at the Kangla fort in 2004, Irom Sharmila Chanus's breaking of her 16 year fast and its consequent backlash from those fighting for Manipuri nationalism and Mahasweta Devis' fictional character, Dopdi/Draupadi, the presentation argued against conflating femininity with feminism. On the contrary, rather than focusing on congealed universal narratives of victimhood, it could possibly be more productive for feminist politics to locate multiple- singular moments that displace norms.

In drawing parallels between the different ways women have responded to sexual violence and state repression, the paper raised more questions than answers: can popular movements be feminist in terms of challenging fundamentally patriarchy's agenda for women. Can women function within broader movements in languages that are completely new, without drawing on existing patriarchal constructions of ideal femininity? Will this new language eat into their popular base, as members will refuse to challenge the norms of 'reproductive heteronormativity' that almost always inflect and saturate mass movements? Will popular movements remain popular or will it dwindle down to very few men and some women who identify themselves as feminists? Without trying to posit a binary, the paper asks whether popular movements can be feminist or if they are feminist, do they then remain popular?

Sujato Bhadra – As a human rights activist Bhadra expressed his displeasure with the current trends in the feminist movements. No one, he pointed out, that none of the women's organisation has raised the issue of women with kids are being detained after the Khagragarh incident in West Bengal. Similarly, there has been no consistent feminist movement against state/ police atrocities on women in disturbed areas like Kashmir. Parents of disappeared people are asking for collective justice, from Kashmir to Argentina. Feminist scholars hardly write about such issues, The brutality of army actions which led to the 16 year long fast of

Manorama in Manipur reminds us of the inexcusable execution of state's power. In Kashmir we are seeing that children of suspected terrorists are ostracized from school.

The colonial British administration made laws like AFSPA, which were further made punitive in nature by Jawaharlal Nehru during his tenure as India's prime minister. Such draconian laws have perpetuated gross violation of human rights and women's rights. Unfortunately no women organization is covering these issues. Nirbhaya's offenders were given capital punishment by the same state which conducts similar acts in other parts of the nation in the name of law and order. The way the mainstream left parties have dealt with the gender questions is also often deplorable. Singur, Nandigram and Haripur had shown how women came forward in resistance of land acquisition. But the CPI(M) projected these women in negative light and cooked wrong narratives about Tapasi Malik's rape. In JNU, Bonojyotsna raised the issue of patriarchy within the Maoist ranks. Feminist scholars should address these issues.