

Leftist Women of Bengal & their Movement Struggle for Socio-Economic Upliftment (1947-59): A Review

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Abstract: After India's Independence (1947), the Mahila Atma Raksha Samiti (MARS) of provincial Bengal was divided into two parts. The larger part remained in the East Bengal whereas the shorter part remained in the West Bengal. The MARS of West Bengal again started to be fragmented on the question of principles. Even in this crisis the MARS continued its assemblies and social activities. The refugee problem became the vital issue after the Division and Independence of India in 1947. The foremost crises that the refugees faced were the problems of food and shelter. The leftist women came forward to help those refugees. The most important events of Bengal were the Tebhaga Movement. The leftist women association ensured a leading part to promote these movements. The leftist women association projected some activities for social welfare. Such as- the abolition of Zamindari system, to bring every family under the facility of ration system, solves the problem of food and cloth or the basic needs, establishing of school to educate the girls and the women of families of labourers. It may be said that from 1947 to 1959, the leftist women association tried hard to gain social justice and to earn different demands from the Government.

Key Words: Leftist women, refugee, tebhaga movement, zamindari system.

1. INTRODUCTION:

At the time of independence in 1947, Women Self-defense league was active women association. This league was formed in 1942 and continued their demanding for Self-defense of Women demand for food, serve the poor and helpless, and propagate for small scale industries and opening of alms-house. After the independence, the situation changed and Bengal Provincial Women Self-defense league was divided into two. The larger part remained in Bangladesh. In West Bengal the Self-defense league started to be divided on account of principles and ideals. When the British Govt. left India many women wanted to stop their activities. But the others wanted to go against the faults of the newly formed Govt. So, usually, the Self-defense league was divided.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

This present paper has no book published and no research work has yet been done on the ideas, activities and movements by women of Bengal inspired by communist ideology. 'Nari Mukti Andolan O Amra' of Kanak Mukherjee, 'Rajniti O Narishakti' of Kalyani Bandopadhyay, 'Samatar Dike Andolane Nari' of Shashwati Ghosh – social and economical condition of Bengali Women is discussed in these books. But the role of leftist women was not analysed particularly in these books.

3. OBJECTIVES OF THIS STUDY:

The present work has been undertaken for a number of reasons. Firstly, I have tried to do my best to find leftist Women's contributions in the areas. Perhaps the findings will be essential to form a disciplined. Secondly, this study is with deal with socio- economic conditions of the state and political scenario of the staid period. Thirdly, this work will be helpful to understand the circumstances for the present condition of women in Bengal.

4. FINDINGS OF THE STUDY:

The main problem immediately after the independence was problem of landless or refugee. Almost 70 lakh refugees came to West Bengal in two phases [1]. Their basic problems were of food and shelter. Then, many refugee colonies were formed in East, North and South Kolkata [2]. The leftist women made their zonal offices in the colonies by the name of Women Self-defense league. The main concerns of Refugee problem were economic problem of the families and socio-economic condition of the women like rice, cloth, and job problems. Many refugee women came forward to join the women league to get respite of their problems and later on they became worthy women leaders [3].

Farmer's Movement and Leftist Women:

An important incident after the independence was Peasant Movement. The women of the peasant families came forward to take part in the movement activity [4]. The leftist women with the Women Self-defense League played a vital role to lead the movement of the village women. The important leaders were-Ila Mitra of Nachol, Shephali Nandi of Kamakapur, Kanthamani Barman of Thakurgaon, Bimala Maji of Medinipur, Kalyani Dasgupta of Jalpaiguri and Lila Samad, Rani Mitra of Dinajpur and Beena Guha, Alaka Majumdar, Tripti Mitra, Lili Dey, Reba Roy, Rani Mukherjee of Rangpur and many others. On 30th October, 1948 in a meeting under the leadership of Bimala Maji at Balathakuria in Nandigram, how they would step formed against the police attack was discussed [5]. On 19th March, 1948 almost 250 women and 100 men went to Royters Building and requested the Home Minister how the police tortured on the farmers of Bara Kamalpur [6]. The women communist leaders guided them. In February of 1948 the women leader of Medinipur, Usha Chakraborty held a meeting for the dismissing Zamindari System[7]. On 9th March, 1948, Bimala Maji held a meeting in Tamluk demanding to abolish Zamindari system without any compensation[8]. On 29th March, 1947, Bhakti Ghosh the leader of Bankura held a meeting in the union office of Biri industry with the agitated farmers[9].

Women in protest against the increase of Tram Fare :

An important incident after the general election in India in 1952 was the increase of tram fare. The leftist women played a vital role in this concern. In 1953 when Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy was the Chief Minister, the tram fare increased 1 paisa for the second class passenger[10]. The women started to raise their voice against the rise or increase of fare. To make meeting in localities, publish report against the torture of the police, to release the arrested were the main demands of the women. They women self-defense committee protested and wanted opinion of the common people. From the Magazine "Ghare Bahire" it was known in an essay by Prabha Chatterjee that 12 years old boy was injured by the firing of the police, the hand of the boy had to cut to protect him from infection. A 24 years young man, the Sannasi Sardar died being hurt by bullet and Bhabani Prasad, the only son of a widow mother was also died by the firing of police. The leftist women leaders met the family members[11]. A procession issued by Suresh Banerjee taking the college students that marched along Wellington Square to Dharmatala. Many women took part in this procession[12].

The movement against the joining of Bengal and Bihar and the leftist women:

Around 1956, an agitation started to come out as a protest against the unification of Bengal and Bihar. Srikrishna Singh, Chief Minister of Bihar and Bidhan Chandra Roy wanted to unite Bengal and Bihar. The leftist women association played a vital role to go against this idea[13]. Many women were arrested for civil disobedience as a protest. They were led by Kiranshashi Guha, Shantisudha Sengupta, Gouri Dasgupta and others. Mukta Kumar, secretary of Hoogly district women self-defense league sent a letter to Bela Lahiri on 12th March, 1956. She informed about the civil disobedience in his districts. On 15th March a group of women showed agitation in different offices of Kolkata[14]. From writing by Kanak Mukherjee were collected against the union of Bengal and Bihar. In the meeting of 26th and 27th February, 1956 in the 8th meeting of women self defences league in Chandannagar, the agitation against the decision of Government was the main concern[15]. In 1957, in the second general election a few women candidates were called to compete the election. They wanted to support the left front parties in election. Mrinal Kanti Basu held a meeting in Monument Ground and almost 10 thousand people gathered[16]. In this meeting Anila Devi a member of women league delivered lecture expressing grief on the law of individual rights. In this meeting two issues were accepted as agenda.

Leftist women in releasing the arrested:

An important incident after independence was struggle for releasing the arrested. In 1948, in a special law the West Bengal Government declared women self-defense league and other 6 associations as illegal. Many magazines like "Ghare Bahire", "Jaya", "Muktir Pathe Nari" were declared as illegal and were confiscated. Many women leaders and members of women association were arrested and put arrested on 08.03.1949, Kamala Mukherjee on 02.03 .1949, Asha Samanta on 20.11.1948, Usha Chakraborty on 29.04.1949[17]. The arrested fasted for 54 days due to the iltreatment in jail. The Government declared 144 laws to stop the meeting outside jail. The women self- defense league decided to observe protest day on 27th April, 1949[18]. Four leftist women Latika Sen, Pratibha Roychowdhury, Geeta Sarkar, Amiya Dutta and a student Biman Banerjee died by the police firing as they led the procession disobeying 144 laws. As a protest the politically arrested fasted for 10 days. In the fifth meeting of 1949 the women league discussed for releasing the arrested. The committee formed by the mothers of the arrested (political) came forward to support the women league.

Steps for spreading education among women:

For the progress of the women Geeta Mukherjee opened a school in Bajbaj. It was basically for the women of workers and illiterate families. Another school was opened for the workers so that the women may learn after working hours.

Many educational camps were opened to spread the agenda of the national and international aspects and to make the women conscious. A reference of such camp was found in Bagnan, Howrah on 5th and 6th November in 1953[19]. Renu Chakraborty, Bela Lahiri, Geeta Mukherjee, Pankaj Achariya imported lessons there. Another educational camp was arranged in Tamluk on 9th and 10th November in 1953. 26 women took part in the camp. The teachers were Geeta Mukherjee and Pankaj Achariya[20]. Beside importing education the leftist women divided different activities on even in the district different leaders committee. According police file, the charge of 24th Paragana was ordered to Bela Lahiri and Geeta Mukherjee[21].

The leftist women and the Hindu Marriage Act and Dowry:

The leftist women appealed time and again to the Government, opposing the oppression on women and to achieve their rights. From the police file it was known that in the 7th meeting of women self-defense league decided to propagate against dowry system and the Hindu Marriage act and they actualised their decision. On 19th July, 1954, Nirmala Sanyal, the secretary of Medinipur women self-defense league, sent a letter to Bela Lahiri. There we have the reference of 2 meetings in Tamluk town and 5 meetings in villages on the issue of Hindu Marriage act. From the file of Nadia police super it is gotten that almost about Hindu Marriage code. On 24th August, 1954, Anusua Ganchand and Hazra Begum sent a letter to Bela Lahiri for sending signature in support of Marriage law[22]. In support of Hindu Marriage law, the women of Bengal collected 35,000 signatures.

5. CONCLUSION:

It may be said that from 1947 to 1959, the leftist women association tried hard to gain social justice and to earn different demands from the government. In the mean time, they continued their act of revolutionary campaign and enlarged their association. Though the leftist women association took part in different national and international assemblies, their unity was bit by bit weakening as it was evident from the report of the 8th general assembly of the leftist women.

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