

The Bengali Bhadramahila

—Forms of Organisation in the Early Twentieth Century



The Indian women's deputation to Mntague and Chelmsford, 1917, demanding the vote for women

These extracts from a dissertation by Indrani Chatterjee look at some of the forms of organisation that developed among women of the educated middle and upper classes in early twentieth century Bengal. This kind of organising helped women of the Bengali middle and upper classes to emerge from seclusion, to develop a life outside the family, and to identify themselves with social and political causes. The author is continuing her work in this area. The ideas expressed here are based on her work up to 1986.

THIS work concentrates on the *bhadramahila* in Bengal, accepting Borthwick's definition of them as "the mothers, wives and daughters of the many school masters, lawyers, doctors and government servants who made up the English-educated professional Bengali middle class or *bhadralok*."

Though the British parliament in 1919 left the question of women's vote to the

elected legislatures of India, in Bengal women got the vote only in 1925. Until 1931, a woman was qualified to vote only if she was the wife of a man who held property and was over 25, or if she was a holder of property in her own right. This left the women's electorate in the proportion of one woman to every 26 men in Bengal.

In 1931 the franchise sub-committee

of the Round Table Conference broadened the qualifications to include

**Bhadralok* in Bengali indicates the "respectable", the educated and cultured, that is the middle and upper classes, as distinguished from the *chhotolok*, the "small people" or the poorer, lower classes. *Bhadramahila* are the women of the *bhadralok*. The *bhadralok* played an important role in the nineteenth century cultural renaissance in Bengal and the social reform movements there which took up women's issues, amongst others.

literacy. It was estimated that 377,000 more women above the age of 21 would get the vote under this scheme and that the total number of women voters would be 1,500,000. But, as the figures for the 1937 elections showed, there were only 896,588 women enrolled as voters, of whom only 46,758 actually voted. Even when the right was granted to women to contest the Calcutta Corporation elections in 1933, the actuality of their experience contrasted with the notion of their empowerment.

As Jyotirmoyee Ganguli, one of the two successful women candidates, recounted, one elderly gentleman wanted to know "...will that woman sweep the roads and clean the drains that you have come brandishing the fact before me ?" This, she was sure, had never been asked of the male candidates, nor had they complied with such demands. Manikuntala Sen, too, recalled the allocation of a ticket to her by the Communist Party of India on the ground that they had no suitable male candidate for that region.

In the 1930s, women formed and joined different kinds of associations, all of which can be termed political. These were years of increased student unrest. As education became a transferred subject and opportunities increased, the avenues of employment failed to keep pace. Large sections of youth reverted to traditions of revolutionary terrorism. The traditional rivalry of the two principal terrorist groups, the Jugantar and Anushilan, was echoed in the rivalry between Subhash Bose and J.M. Sengupta in the Bengal Congress. The Gandhian call for civil disobedience found each of them setting up rival organisations to conduct the movement in Bengal, and wasting much energy in Calcutta corporation electioneering even at the height of the movement.

Gandhi's choice of salt brought the struggle into the home. His attack on liquor and foreign cloth and his avowal of *khadi* proved important for mobilisation of women. If jail going is any indication, many more women went to jail in this movement than had done so during the noncooperation movement of 1921-22. The

premium on visibility that the movement reinforced had gathered momentum from the turn of the century, through the spread of Western education and associational activity.

Higher Education

At this time, a more formal kind of education was becoming more and more accessible to the Bengali *bhadramahila* as the increased numbers of girls in secondary English schools and in colleges show. An official report commented : "...A curious development in the social usage, especially amongst the educated middle



A BENGALI GIRL STUDENT

Nineteenth century illustration by Herbert Johnson for a book by an English missionary

class Hindus, is that the possession of a University degree seems now to increase the eligibility of a girl for marriage." The drive for female education resulted in an increase of schools, but the direction of this change was evident from the fact that the rate of increase was greater for secondary English schools and colleges than the rate of increase in primary schools. It was also true that many more girls entered primary school than completed it.

The interest in women's higher education was contemporaneous with a heated debate over the curriculum for girls' education. All those who felt that girls should be compulsorily taught cooking, needle work and housewifery to bring their

education "closer to life" found in the government their champions. This entailed a heavier emphasis on humanities, arts and crafts than on the sciences. Even in 1936-37 there was "no well equipped laboratory in any Indian girls' school in Bengal."

Despite its limitations, women's education did take a significant step forward. That its importance was realised by women themselves is evident in the founding of women's educational associations. The Nari Shiksha Samiti started in 1919 with the object of imparting such education to girls and women as would make them "helpful wives and mothers and useful members of society and enable them to earn an honest living in case of need." Under the supervision of Abala Bose, it founded about 40 girls' schools in Calcutta by 1929, started a Hindu widows' home in 1922 called the Vidyasagar Bani Bhawan which trained widows as teachers or nurses, and opened an industrial school for women in 1926 called the Manila Shilpa Bhandar.

The Vidyasagar Bani Bhawan in 1928 put students of the two highest classes through a short intensive course of lessons in teaching. Then three of them were put in charge of three separate schools situated in the interior. This experiment was well spoken of by the assistant inspectress of schools, Dacca circle, after inspecting the schools.

One of these students, Shantilata Das, assessing her work in a predominantly Muslim village of Manickgunj district, Dacca, said: "The condition of those girls is very saddening. There is considerable enthusiasm to learn but...(the parents) constantly burden their daughters with housework and pay no heed to their education. Their only thought is to equip their daughters for marriage...as if that is the sole aim of a woman's life. If the girls sit down to study or mention the school, they are reprimanded with questions like : 'Are you going to become a *memsahib* ? Will you earn money by it ?' and sometimes they are beaten as well. The girls live in constant fear ; very often, they run away to school without even eating..." Her

colleague in the venture, Charubala Sarkar, did not find any substantial difference in attitude in a predominantly Baidya-Kayastha Hindu populated village. Nor, for that matter, did the third colleague, Indubala Gupta, in a Brahman dominated village.

It would seem that education for women retained its urban bias and that hostility to female education was not entirely absent from lives of women even in towns. Shova Ghosh, whose in-laws allowed her to continue her studies after marriage, recounted in her book *Aaj O Taru Picchu Dake*, 1981, her embarrassment in studying at home, lest people think “this housewife only sits with books in her hand and does not do any housework.... When the school coach used to come to the corner of the street and the coachman used to call ‘Gari aya baba’ and I used to cover my head with the end of my sari and board the bus, the windows of houses on both sides of the street would open and the neighbouring women would stare curiously at a housewife going to college...I realised that this society thought better if married women worked at home rather than study.”

The ideology of housewifisation attacked girls at an early age. The routine and rituals of housework in a big household, as recounted by some women in their autobiographies, seem to have been a time consuming process. The invisibility and lack of mobility implied in the keeping of *parda* was a major hurdle in the acquisition of education by women. Manikuntala Sen in her *Sediner Katha*, 1982, describes how when she studied in college, she sat behind a wooden partition in the classroom, and looked through a small hole to see the teacher. Even when in high school, she realised that girls could not walk around in public, not even to and from school. It was only when she came to Calcutta that she saw women move around unescorted in public transport. Shova, who travelled by tram to Bhowanipur with her husband, was warned by a relative that this was “unseemly” behaviour. Though she had

a harmonium and loved singing, she had to close the windows before singing, as it was considered “shameless.” Yet, the conventions governing *bhadramahila* behaviour were themselves in flux at this time, as is seen in controversies carried on in newspapers where some readers argued for abolition of the *parda* and criticised men for harassing women travelling by public transport.

“We will amass strength, stand on our own feet and in physical bravery and mental strength be equal to men.”

There was also an ongoing debate on women’s property rights, The general understanding seemed to be that dowry was a form of compensation for women’s lack of inheritance rights. But some voices were raised against dowry, Kamala Bose and Giribala Ray being the most vociferous. Kamala argued that “the majority of Bengalee fathers have no property or money at all to part with...Moreover, the money that is given as dowry does not go to the bride at all, in majority of cases it fills the pocket of her father-in-law.” Giribala Ray, the author, while protesting dowry system, advocated equal education for girls and boys.

Although a dominant theory at this time was that education would make women better wives and mothers, some argued against the view. Shanta Devi emphatically asserted that women were to be educated to take full responsibility for themselves. She decried the notion that “with marriage, all the problems of her life have been solved...A daughter may not marry at all; even if she does, she should be able to look after herself, choose her own profession and have mental and economic independence,” (*Bangalakshmi*, 1928)

The Idea Of Freedom

Education thus came to be viewed as a gateway to freedom or *swadhinata*. The

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understanding of this notion was crucial to the debate. Amiya Debi said : “... *swadhinata* cannot be given, it has to be taken by force. If women really want it, they have to agitate and fight for it themselves—it is only natural that men will want to obstruct them.” (*Bangalakshmi*, 1931) She compared the reforms carried out by the British

government to the measures taken by Indian men for women : “the givers of *swadhinata* do so only because they want slightly more refined and well mannered women... The responsibility for this *swadhinata* cannot be with well wishing men...If it does, then *adhinata* alone is strengthened.” (*Bijoli*, August 4; 1922).

Amiyabal Bandhopadhyay elaborated the point : “And no more do we want to be directed and controlled by someone else...After revolting against her husband too, a woman’s life can be meaningful, rejection of a tyrannical father’s dictates on marriage can still leave a daughter some respect, and a mother’s disregard of her son’s, control still leaves her venerable. We will be *swadhin*, we will amass strength, stand on our own feet and in physical bravery and mental strength we will be equal to men... We want to tear away this *mayajal* of *pativratya* and be fully human.” (*Bijoli*, August 11, 1922)

As Urmila Devi, one of the early women activists in Bengal, put it, *swaraj* meant self rule and *swadhinata* the “strength and power to fulfil all our needs ourselves.” It is not difficult, therefore, to understand the intimate connection they made between women’s rights and the national movement. Shantisudha Ghosh, in an article in *Banglar-Katha*, October 28, 1921, ridiculed those who called themselves freedom loving patriots but castigated women’s efforts to emancipate themselves: “Those who resist this agitation by saying it engenders conflict

between men and women and thus bodes immense ill for society—to them we can only reply that can well be said of the national movement also. The conflict between the Englishman and the Indian is proving harmful to both; two races of the world, instead of living peaceably, are immersed in severe fraternal strife—to be free from this, it would be best to

Many knowledgeable men (feel) that men...alone should determine the road which women should take. Here, we have only one question : When the English rulers continually repeat this on the issue of India's sovereignty, can any patriotic Indian believe or accept them ?”

At the core of this argument was the consciousness of the contradictions

the organisation of the Manila Samitis was an example. These organisations have been very little studied. It has been taken as self evident that they did not constitute political activity. Yet it is in such efforts by women to come to terms with public action that the search for political meaning should be undertaken.

The Mahila Samitis

The initiator of the movement to organise Mahila Samitis in Bengal was Saroj Nalini Dutt, wife of a civil servant. Shudha Mazumdar, one of Saroj's associates, gave a personalised account of the beginning of this social interaction amongst the “wives of the leading men of the town.” Its aim, according to her, was to “help foster a better understanding between them and break the monotony of their secluded lives. As women in those days rarely visited each other except on formal occasions such as births, deaths, marriages or when invited to religious ceremonies, social life was confined to these events mainly amongst one's own relations. Women of gentle birth rarely stirred out of their homes for any other purpose, and no matter how near their destination, they travelled in closed vehicles.”

It seems that these efforts of women to develop a kin devoid identity were not always favourably received by their families. As Shudha was to recount later: “Most of the local gentlemen...felt this new movement would be the death-knell of family life and that it foretold nothing but discord and disruption in their home. They were firmly convinced that the women would abandon their household duties, neglect husband and children, break away from the seclusion of their home and eventually, compete with them in their spheres, of work.” Indira Ghosh, member of the Malda Mahila Samiti, reported: “...some (men) remarked that new fashions, new dresses and new names would be ushered into society by these women's organisations and that the poor fathers and husbands would be at their wits' end to provide for the new luxuries demanded by the women.”



Women of Shantiniketan with Gandhiji, Kasturba and Tagore. Many Bengali women went to Shantinekta for an education in the arts and this traditions still continues.

ungrudgingly accept dependence upon the English ! But in the sphere of national politics, everyone clearly realises the invalidity of this logic.”

Shantisudha went on to argue, when it was suggested that instead of erecting the “flag of battle” against men, women should acquire their rights through debate and discussion : “Sovereignty is such a thing that nobody will voluntarily surrender it. *Swadhinata* is such a thing that cannot be attained by begging. It has to be grasped on the basis of one's own strength. This rule cannot be waived for men. Wishing to do good to woman, man has enclosed her within a small place and is ruling there as her ‘protector’...

implicit in applying different rules for the public and the private worlds. The issues of *shiksha* and *swadhinata* were centrally linked to the issue of what woman's sphere was, aptly expressed in the term “*ghare-baire*.”

The nationalist struggle sought to extend the private into the public by seeing the country as “home” and the people as “children” or “family” so that all social and political work could seem an extension of household work in which women could legitimately participate. The, metaphor of the extended family provided a guideline along which women were meant to act.

Yet women also made other efforts to extend the arena of their activities, of which

For many women, even the minimum wherewithal necessary for organisation was hard to come by. If the meeting happened to fall at the end of the month, which by all accounts it did, it proved to be a deterrent, since housewives could not afford the cost of hiring hackney carriages then. Nor could they provide a plentiful fare when their turns came to be hostess.

Women impelled themselves along by making a resource of ritual and tradition. For example, at Suri, the inauguration meeting of the Mahila Samiti saw the presence of many “orthodox ladies” despite the stout opposition of their menfolk. When they declined refreshments, (presumably prepared by the nontwiceborn) Saroj Nalini Dutt, a leading member, led them to a tent in a corner of the spacious ground, where her husband’s head clerk, an orthodox Brahman, had arranged sliced fruit, sweets and *sherbet*, all served in terracotta dishes. When they were convinced that the food had not been touched and thus contaminated either by Saroj Nalini or her servants, and that the Brahman clerk had observed all orthodox rules of cleanliness, they no longer hesitated to accept the hospitality provided ; it was a “victory scored over the orthodox section of the town.”

Similarly, in a confrontation between an old gentleman of Birbhum and Saroj Nalini, the latter is reported to have said : “...is it not a fact that even at the present time in Bengal, a housewife in referring to her work always speaks of her ‘*gharsansar*’ (*gltar-home; sansar-world*).' The answer was...in the affirmative. ‘This conclusively proves’, asserted Saroj Nalini, ‘that in the old times the woman’s legitimate sphere of work in our country was considered to be not the home alone but the world as well as the home...In the course of time the men of our country in their blind and shortsighted selfishness persuaded the women to believe that their world was synonymous with...the four walls of their homes and to confine their activities and

outlook ...The men have made a hopeless mess of everything. It is the women alone who can set things right now.’ ”

This appeal to tradition contrasted effectively with the content of the message. An elderly Hindu lady who had several daughters-in-law under her care was reported to have said to Saroj: “...I

and discussion” to looking outwards together. Thus, they began to make patchwork squares for Indian soldiers in the war to play *pachisi*, bundles of *nim* twigs to be used as toothbrushes by them, raising money for a female bed in the local hospital, then pressing for a lady doctor and getting one. Such activities



“A Calcutta Zenana”, nineteenth century illustration by Herbert Johnson for a book on Indian women by an English missionary women

prefer to remain within the sphere of my home and cannot go about the world leaving these things.” Saroj replied : “A woman can learn a great deal even while remaining within the sphere of home. That is exactly why a Mahila Samiti is needed. It will bring the knowledge of the sciences to the very doors of the women. It will also be a meeting-place of women and home-makers...a woman cannot shut herself off within the home....”

Originally characterised by the display and discussion of *saris* and ornaments, exchange of cooking recipes and designs for needlework, these meetings became slowly more organised. By 1920, a set of rules had been drafted in Bengali by the Birbhum Samiti, a minute book was prepared to jot down proceedings, and the members had moved from “display

established the credibility of the organisations and they began to be looked upon with respect.

Central Organisation

The idea of founding a central: organisation to coordinate the work of the small organisations already existing in the districts had taken shape in Saroj Nalini’s mind by 1921. As she said: “In Calcutta men and women get so absorbed with the city life that they forget the real country outside. The thought...of the miseries and pains of the thousands of villagers, of the suffering of the millions of women caused by social, economic, and physical wrongs, does not touch their hearts...a central Mahila Samiti to unite the whole womanhood of Bengal into a corporate life.”

As she envisaged it, this central

organisation was to give information on how to organise a Mahila Samiti, was to provide speakers, supply model rules and helpful literature, assist in securing expert demonstrators and lecturers with magic lantern slides and so on. But this central body was to leave the local Mahila Samitis entirely free to manage their own funds and undertake whatever work seemed best suited to the locality.

Saroj, who was also a member of the Bengal Presidency Council of Women (BCW), discussed her scheme with the vicepresident of the BCW, proposing that the latter take up the work of the central Mahila Samiti federation. However, the president of the BCW, Countess of Lytton, vetoed it. Saroj's husband, G.S. Dutt, too, has recorded his attempts to dissuade her from the task as he felt it was "too ambitious to put into effect without the support of some existing and influential organisation."

Saroj then proposed to Abala Bose, president of the Nari Shiksha Samiti, that this organisation take up the task. Abala Bose suggested that the Nari Shiksha Samiti could set up a new section for this work, which would be supervised by Saroj herself. Saroj consented, but before the scheme could become functional, she died, in January 1925. Her husband announced a donation amounting to Rs 5,000 for the founding of the central organisation.

On February 23, 1925, the Saroj Nalini Dutt Memorial Association (SNDMA) was formally constituted. The SNDMA charged a yearly fee of Rs 3 for affiliation of a local Mahila Samiti. Generally, each Mahila Samiti, in turn charged a subscription fee ranging from four annas to a rupee a year from each of its members.

The SNDMA grew rapidly. In 1925, there were only seven to eight Mahila Samitis affiliated to it, but by 1929, there were 240 such Samitis with a total membership of 4,640 women. It had also acquired a staff of 13 instructresses, who coordinated between it and the Samitis. And it had established the *Bangalakshmi* as its monthly organ, besides an

Industrial Training School at Calcutta which had 200 pupils by 1930, and a school of general nursing which had 30 pupils by the same year.

The SNDMA's methods of raising finances were rather ingenious. Besides the Rs 450 and Rs 650 per month conferred by the government of Bengal towards its rural programme and the industrial school respectively, and the Rs 500 per month received from the Calcutta Corporation, it also took to selling lotuses on a chosen day. By 1931, this practice was formalised to coincide with the death anniversary of Saroj Nalini — January 19. In that year, earnings from lotus sales were Rs 900.

Forms Of Activity

The association emphasised increasing women's self reliance through employment. The industrial school taught sewing, embroidery, lace making, carpet weaving, canework, drawing and music. Both schools were explicitly aimed at "finding a new avenue of employment for widows and distressed women of the *Bhadralok* class."

The industrial school organised annual exhibitions to sell the finished goods. The annual exhibition in January 1929 was noteworthy for the vow taken by all the attending women "not to buy their dresses

from the market during marriage and other ceremonies in their respective houses but to have these things made from the respective Mahila Samitis."

It is true that the concept of a wage earning woman as an independent entity in her own right was not formulated; but this avenue did bring some gains to a woman of the *bhadralok* who previously had not engaged in any commercial transaction. The lady from Salkia, Howrah, who, under the auspices of the local Manila Samiti, managed to earn Rs 115.56 during 1921-29, despite her heavy domestic work, is a case in point.

On March 7, 1930, the SNDMA also took over the Basantakumari Bidhbashram in Puri, which the wife of Sir P.C. Chatterjee had established with a building and a moderate financial endowment. Widows between the ages of 20 and 30 years, and without "encumbrances" could apply for a three year course in general education. No fee was charged, except from residential students who paid Rs 10 per month.

By 1930, many Mahila Samitis associated with the SNDMA had started using magic lantern shows for propaganda against diseases, for child and maternity welfare and introduced *zenana* schools and study circles. While the discussions



Delegates to the joint conference of the International Council of Women and the National Council of Women, Calcutta, 1936

at meetings of some of these Samitis centred around “home sanitation, better understanding of the economic and hygienic value of food, more scientific care of children”, that is, on making women better wives and mothers, they also sometimes aimed at making them better citizens. The secretaries of the Samitis at Bantra, Bally, Talla, Hooghly, Madaripur and Satsang reported in 1929 that their members were inducing the men to take up, in their spare hours, the work of village reconstruction by establishing cooperative societies.



Bengali nationalist leader Chiitranjan Das with his wife

Nationalist Awareness

An awareness of immediate environs was gradually aroused— an awareness that could, potentially, embrace remoter issues. Thus, it is not surprising to find members of the Samitis exhorting each other to spin at home, wear *khadi* and give up foreign clothes, at the same time that they started training in sword, *lathi* and dagger play. That the larger current in the country had not left them untouched was evident. The frequency with which Samitis were established in new regions was itself an indicator of heightened awareness in the post 1928 period.

Activists like Jyotirmoyee Ganguli were invited to address meetings of the

Thakurgaon and Balurghat Mahila Samitis ; the members of the latter were among the first to organise funds for the defence of the undertrial Meerut prisoners, at a time when the Bengal Pradesh Congress Committee itself was not doing much for this. In May 1930 the Balurghat Samiti handed over Rs 35 and five annas to the civil disobedience fund. The Samiti at Boalia, Rajshahi, resolved to raise funds for a memorial to Jatin Das, an undertrial in the Bengal Ordinance case, who died after 63 days of fasting in jail. The badges and flowers for the volunteers at the Rangpur session of the Bengal Provincial Conference were supplied by the Mulatola Mahila Samiti.

The links between local Congress committees and the Mahila Samitis in Bengal have not been studied at all. But the evidence of such links is irrefutable. Charuprava Sen, president of the Mahila Samiti at Rajbari, Faridpur, was a prominent Congress worker as well. In July 1930, she was served with summons for allegedly inciting the police to give up service. At Feni, the Mahila Samiti members met to bless the convicted young Congressmen with the traditional *khai, cliandan, dhan* and *durba*, before sending them off to jail ; the members had also taken a solemn vow not to use foreign cloth from that day. Suniti Bala Das, secretary of the Mahila Samiti at Chhotolekha, Karimganj, was invited by the Barlika Central Congress Committee to speak at one of its meetings.

One of the most prominent examples of the Mahila Samiti Congress connection was Ashalata Sen. Widowed at 22, she was inspired by her relatives to train in the *khadi* programme. In 1922, she, in cooperation with Sushila Sen, Giribala Devi, Sarama Gupta and Saraju Gupta, started the Gandharia

Mahila Samiti. In 1929, these friends opened a school for Harijarr children at a neighbouring village. When the salt *satyagraha* began, they organised the Satyagrahi Sevika Dal to mobilise women’s support for the movement in Dacca. The Gandharia Mahila Samiti was successful

enough to have required: banning in 1932, along with other organisations connected with civil disobedience. Ashalata knew she could not have come this far alone. While in prison in 1932-33, she wrote on her prison mates :

“Darkness piles upon darkness.
at dead of night
My fellow prisoners are all asleep
On hard beds, in soiled clothes,
lie rows of them,
The Lakshmis of so many
families in this prison today
I look at my prison mates this
dark night
And my heart fills with swelling
pride,
With a strange sorrowful happiness.”

Support Structures

It is interesting to speculate that many of the *bhadramahila* who joined the Gandhian movement had already had some experience of collective action—through the Mahila Samitis. The Mahila Samitis had developed into support structures that enabled members to act for the benefit of others. A report from the Talla Mahila Samiti said : “Previous to the formation of a Mahila Samiti at Talla, the women of this locality were entire strangers to one another, but as a result of the influence exerted by the Samiti, they have now become fast friends and they visit one another at frequent intervals. It is almost as if all of them have been joined into one great family. Members now help one another in times of danger and difficulties in their respective families.... Previously, it was an impossible thing for a lady to go outside the precincts of her home without a conveyance but such has been the influence of our Samiti in breaking down the old timidity and false sense of dignity that now most of us go to one another’s house by walking on foot.”

Shudha too recounted an incident which occurred at a women’s meeting in a village in Dacca in 1926. A very young widow approached Shudha and asked to retouch her vermilion. A world of sentiment enfolds the vermilion, and

the act of retouching it is a ritual blessing between married women alone. For a widow to have retouched another woman's vermilion was an unusual example of bonding.

It would be a mistake to dismiss the Mahila Samiti members as apolitical or as just lady social workers. The Samitis were the expression of two interwoven themes that of "the home and the world", and that of "coming together."

Even though the annual meetings of

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the SNDMA were glittering, aristocracy-bureaucracy studded events, one of its secretaries, Labanyalekha Chakravarty, addressing a Mahila Samiti at Jhenidah, Jessore, urged them not to "only spend their whole energies in the discharge of their domestic duties but to grow in mind and body as to build up a perfect womanhood for the physical, moral and economic emancipation of the country."

In their charitable work of helping sick and poor women, and arranging the marriages of daughters of poor widows, the Samitis sometimes acted in a manner which cut across class and community. At Barasat, the Samiti gave shelter to a "fallen woman of the untouchable class"; the members not only nursed her but arranged for her last rites. At Malda, when a fire burnt down many huts in the Mohammedan quarters, members of the Samiti, most of whom were Hindus, gave shelter to the women and children. The secretary of the Jaduboyra Samiti, a "high caste Brahman lady of orthodox family", set apart a well ventilated room in her house for poor women to give birth, and herself acted as midwife at the deliveries of several women of lower castes.

One also realises the importance of such a support structure from an autobiographical article on women school teachers in Bengal. Complaining about the isolation that was inherent in living in areas remote from Calcutta, the writer

concluded that every such teacher should become a member of a Mahila Samiti for companionship and mutual aid.

Terrorist Groups

In contrast, women (most of them were *bhadramahilas*) who joined revolutionary terrorist groups, which are more commonly acknowledged as "political", experienced greater isolation. Joining the group, they were inducted into activity, but this did not facilitate their developing links outside the family which could act as support

structures.

As Bina Das, the student who shot at Governor Jackson at the Senate Hall, Calcutta, in 1932, said: "I did not even know whether the group (with which she was associated) was big or small. Everything was covered over with deep secrecy and mystery; no questioning was allowed, personal questions were completely prohibited. The people Suhasini (Ganguli) took us to meet, their names too I was not permitted to know. One day, while Suhasini and I were travelling in a bus, my eyes fell on an envelope in her hand. Immediately, she put the envelope away. At first, I felt insulted—then I realised that this was the way I had to make myself strong."

Kamala Dasgupta, member of the Jugantar group responsible for the Dalhousie Square snooting and an associate of Bina, also had to struggle to come to terms with the loneliness of being a member of a secret organisation. Their emotional struggles with, and subsequent separation from, their families, compounded the feelings of loneliness. Both Bina and Kamala recorded instances of very painful struggles with their parents after they joined revolutionary organisations which made it imperative for them to move out of their homes into hostels in Calcutta.

The one surviving letter from Preetilata Waddedar to her mother, written the night before the raid on Pahartali European Club

in September 1932 also evokes the struggle this 21 year old woman had with herself and her family: "...Ma, please forgive me—I have pained you very deeply... You have wanted to reach out with love and gather me to your breast—I have snatched myself away—you have pleaded with me holding the food laden plate in your hand—I have turned my back on you and left. ...For two days, I have made you weep—your pitiful laments have not moved me from my chosen path. How could your Rani have been so heartless? Forgive me, mother! Please forgive me!"

This solitariness in action was perhaps more severe because of the collectivity that had preceded it. Most of these women had been members either of the Deepali Sangha or the Chhatri Sangha before they joined the revolutionary terrorist groups. The Deepali Sangha was begun by Leela Nag and 12 others in 1928 with the aim of spreading female education in Dacca. It soon claimed 12 primary schools, three high schools for girls, classes to prepare girls for matriculation, physical fitness classes, industrial training centres, a female students' association and, in 1930, a women's hostel in Calcutta.

The Sangha was originally closer to the Gandhian movement. In 1930, Leela, along with Renu Sen, Shakuntala Chowdhury and Bina Ray, organised the Dacca Mahila Satyagraha Samiti to manufacture salt and spread the Gandhian message through magic lantern shows. It also began *Jayashree*, a journal managed and produced by women for women. This organisation's contact with the revolutionary Shree Sangha began in 1924 when Leela Nag asked a former classmate for assistance with an industrial exhibition. When Anil Ray, one of the more prominent members of the Shree Sangha, was arrested in 1930, Leela took over the direction of the Sangha's activities until she too was arrested in 1931.

The Chhatri Sangha was formed in Calcutta in 1928 by Kalyani Das, Surama Mitra and Kamala Dasgupta. It organised study circles, literary clubs, cooperative

stores, libraries and a youth hostel. This too was associated with the Gandhian movement. In 1930, Kalyani led the Chhatri Sangha in a demonstration outside Bethune College and in picketing outside Presidency College. Kalyani was also a founding member of the Nari Satyagraha Samiti which organised the boycott of foreign clothes in Burrabazar.

The almost concurrent contact of these associations with both the Gandhian movement and the revolutionary terrorist groups is interesting. It is reflected in the lives of women like Bimal Protia Banerjee. While acting as joint secretary of the Nari Satyagraha Samiti in 1930-31, she also sold pictures of those killed in the Jalalabad shoot out, in order to raise money for the defence of the Chittagong armoury raiders. She was arrested in 1931 for her involvement in the Manicktola dacoity case. Though freed for lack of evidence, she was immediately rearrested as a detenu and imprisoned for six years.

Sisterhood In Jail

It is therefore significant that the revolutionary terrorist women wrote extensively about their experience in jails as a time of companionship, a place of collective resistance to an order which sought to strangle and crush their very impulse to life. Shanti Das in a chapter titled 'Making a nest in prison' in her book *Arun Bonhi* talked feelingly of some particular friendships formed in each jail—of Kalyani Das in the Presidency jail, of Charushila Devi at Midnapore and other *satyagrahi* women in Dacca. In each instance, she had felt that "no differences of opinion had come in the way of a meeting of hearts in prison."

It is also important that she saw this as the reason for her being shunted from jail to jail. Talking of her experience in Dacca jail, where many *satyagrahi* women had been imprisoned, she said ". Among them there were three or four of my age. In no time I became friends with them. The authorities grew suspicious, fearing that amongst them too I would sow the seed of bloody revolution ...That is why I could not stay at Dacca but was transferred to Rajshahi...."

Terrorist women wrote about their experience in Jail as a time of companionship, a place of collective resistance to an order which sought to crush them

Kamala too gave evidence of the authorities' attempts to segregate the Gandhian women from the terrorist women, of the ban on their interaction and the women's secret resistance to this in Presidency jail. Inmates of this latter, in fact, told Bina that their being together had stopped the authorities from inhumanly torturing any one of them. The defence of this togetherness surfaced clearly in Midnapore jail, where Shanti's friend, 15 year old Suniti Chowdhury was lodged as a Division III prisoner. When the Division II prisoners—among whom Shanti and Bina figured— were given their morning meal, the matron insisted on separating the three friends. A heated exchange followed. The three friends began a hunger strike, which was also joined by all the ordinary female convicts for one day. The strike, which aimed at removing the jailer and the matron, lasted for eight days. It ended only when the three friends were separated and sent to different jails.

Hijli jail in 1932 saw the meeting of many revolutionary women— Suhasini Ganguli, Prafullamoyee Brahmo who had introduced Shanti and Suniti to the Jugantar group in Comilla, Bina Das, Shanti Das, Kamala Dasgupta, Banalata Dasgupta, who had been arrested for owning a revolver while a resident of the Diocesan College hostel, and Kalpana Datta, amongst others. As Shanti saw it, "through discussions with each other, meeting, exchange of news and affections, we were building ourselves up for the next chapter of our freedom struggle.. But our discussions were not solely political, the creation daily of new sources of merriment was a special characteristic of our lives in Hijli. Song and poetry was never-ending. Whatever the confines of our lives, we would make it beautiful. Then alone would we take leave. That leave taking too would; be just as beautiful, just as sweet."

Some of these sources of collective merriment were the acting out of plays and dance-dramas, activating the planchette board, cooking competitions, gardening, playing cards, making toys out of flour and paint, especially on All Fools' Day, and ultimately collaborating in fooling the authorities in various ways. It was a battle of wits with the jail authorities. Their well organised guard system had to be beaten—that was the real fun. Once, Bonolata, Bina and Shanti planned to interchange places in each other's cells after lock up— Bonolota would take Shanti's place in the Division II cell and Shanti would escape to Bonolata's Grade I cell. Shanti feigned illness—the doctor was summoned and advised to sedate the patient. As soon as he left, Shanti went and hid herself in the common bathingroom, where Bina, Bonolata, Bimal and others took it in turns to come and shield her from the eyes of the wardens and sweepers. Under cover of darkness, Shanti then ran to Bonolata's room, lay down and covered herself up, leaving only her feet visible. When the deputy jailer and his assistants came to check at the usual hour, 'they failed to discover the trick since Kalyani, who was also in on the ruse, told them that the supposed Bonolata was ill and it was enough that her feet were visible. "All told, Hijli became a small scale Shantiniketan for us", felt Bina.

There were also some ritualistic ways in which this togetherness found expression. Bina remembered many years later that the day she was taken to court from Presidency jail, all her female ward companions had dressed her up. "The *khaddar* sari that my family had given, they draped around me. Some of the Gujarati girls put *kumkum* on my forehead, some of them took off their multicoloured bangles and covered my forearms. Whosoever had some choice tidbits fed

me that..." Another significant evidence of togetherness was in the ritual satisfaction of pregnancy cravings, called *shad*, while in jail. This particular ritual is the domain of married women with children— and is a clear expression of sisterhood whereby the mother-to-be is comforted by those who have already experienced the pain of childbirth. To have achieved this in jail, on whatever scale,

instrument of oppression ; it is also a source of genuine affection and nurture. This recreation of the traditions of female solidarity within an extended family was an attempt to resist the fragmentation and isolation that the punitive system was based on.

The extension of this domestic space also saw accompanying assertions of "femininity." At Midnapore, when Suniti

four year old Narayan, whose mother was in the jail hospital and father convicted to one month's imprisonment in Presidency jail, left on Bina and her prisonmates a lasting impact : "In the beginning, if Narayan touched us, we used to change our clothes, wash our hands with soap. But gradually, all that changed...He did not fear us a jot. One day, when I scolded him very loudly for some naughtiness, he suddenly turned around and scolded me for shouting...Every day he would sit beside us at mealtimes to eat with us...On the day of his leaving, we tried to feed him whatever we had, brought a newly stitched shirt for him to wear, combed his hair, powdered his face. Each one of us had some little gift for him..." Then there was the six month old Bablu who spent a year in jail with his mother. "For that little child, there was so much love—for him there would be new toys everyday; for him too there were so many endearments—some called him Babli, some Habla, some Sonar Bablu."

The presence of children might also, partially at least, have negated the division between "political" and "ordinary" women in prison. It was from amongst the latter that "political prisoners" were sometimes provided with personal attendants. This resulted, in some instances, in strong bonds being forged. Thus Bina protested against the *jamadarni* kicking 20 year old "Meher's Ma", who was being forced to work at the grinding stone despite high fever. Kamala Dasgupta too resisted the *jamadarni* beating up a very ill Phoolmani, who had to clean the toilets in prison. "We have mixed intimately with these murder convicts. Seen with our own eyes how perfectly ordinary they were. Just like us, they had their share of good and evil—affection, sympathy, caring, everything they had as well...They all go in a procession in front of my eyes. Shoharjan,.. Zohra...Sadiman, Naiman...Thapusher Ma..." Kamala's own interaction with these women left her unconvinced of their criminality; in fact, both Bina and she dreamt of a new world where "social



Women just released from jail, 1931

was no mean feat: it spelt a connectedness that made for the survival of women in terribly harsh conditions.

It also made for the extension of the domestic space to prison and converted prisonmates into members of a family. In the words of Bina: "During the first few months, jail did not seem like a jail. Some of our companions we addressed as *didi* (elder sister) some *boudi* (elder brother's wife), some *mashima* (mother's sister), some *thakurma* (grandmother). Their affection and caring covered the three of us like a shield. The most delicious food they kept for us, the best place in the room was kept for us to sleep in. Even a glass of water they did not permit us to pour for ourselves." A family is not just an

Chowdhury was made a Division III prisoner and was given jail dress to wear, Bina remembered that she had taken the scissors allotted to her for "sewing labour" and cut the coarse *kurta* given to Suniti into a more shapely blouse. It was confiscated by the jail superintendent for being "too fashionable." Similarly, Charushila's hunger strike in prison and Labanyaprova Datta's 14 day strike in 1932 in Presidency jail for the right to cook their widow's food separately, while reinforcing stereotypes of women, also expressed a desire to live on their own terms. This assertion of traditionally feminine roles thus also became a strongly political act.

This was enhanced by the advent of children, unlike men's quarters in jail. The

oppression and poverty” would not force women to come to jail.

There are very moving instances of women who stayed behind in prison, despite opportunities to leave. Mohini Devi, the oldest woman to be convicted in Bengal was reported to have resisted release because she thought her presence would bring some relief to other female prisoners. One of the hardest things to bear in Bina’s life was the loss of her friend, Bonolata, in prison. Beautiful, enthusiastic Bonolata, with an “extraordinary capacity to be happy”, fell ill. She was a detenu and could have been placed under house arrest, but she abjured all her privileges for the companionship of her friend. “If I leave once, God alone knows when I will see you again”, she told Bina. By the time she was persuaded to leave, it was too late. But she left behind a letter for Bina, a manifesto, of friendship, which went : “...Dearest friend, bid me farewell today. What I have received from you has filled my life completely. I have received everything— just how much cannot be measured. For you I leave behind the deepest heartfelt love. Now that the time has come to take leave, my eyes are filling with tears. But you, my friend, know the reason.”

By seeking to highlight women’s ways of surviving amidst bitterly harsh surroundings, I am not playing down the oppressive nature of these surroundings and forces. For their bitterness and harshness, living conditions in prison were perhaps unmatched. Besides the many humiliations and hurts inflicted on them— Shovarani Datta for example, was continuously hit on the head with heavy locks and reportedly went mad—the most galling characteristic of life in prison was its monotony. “(We) Do not like getting up in the morning, despite that we do...take the mound of cloth and with complete unwillingness throw ourselves in front of the sewing machine. Then the whole day long would be spent in cutting, folding, stitching the cloth. Even then it was not enough ; if there were a few less than the required number, the *babus* in the office

would demand to know why. Then would come the evening. We would hurriedly wash our hands and faces and sit down to eat from our *thalis*. After washing the utensils, we would just about start to stroll when the *jamadarni*’s loud call would be heard: ‘Come everybody, come for your lock up.’ This was our daytime, our evening and our night!” This long stretch of time saw not only the loss of their health— “the girls who had gone into jail had unbounded health, burning with enthusiasm and intelligence—one by one they emerged from prison, some moving towards death’s door on a stretcher, some clutching at the *jamadarni*’s hands for support...”, the loss of near and dear ones, but also the end of many “unfulfilled hopes, dreams and desires.”

Conclusion

In conclusion, one may say that education was one important force for improving the status of the Bengali *bhadramahila*. Their new self awareness manifested itself in their thinking, their expectations which rose—sometimes ahead of social practice, their many

associations for self improvement and charity, and their participation in various segments of the national movement.

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