



Women in the Bengal Revolutionary Movement (1902-1935)

by

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Dubbed as ‘terrorism’ by some historians, the Bengal revolutionary movement made its appearance in the early days of the present century. In this article I have tried to analyse the nature of women’s involvement in this movement as well as their own perceptions of the role women played. In its nascent form, the revolutionary movement received active support from a woman - Sarala Ghosal (Devi). It also owed its inspiration to Sister Nivedita who, however, did not join the movement.

Sarala Devi

Often introduced as Rabindranath’s niece, Sarala deserves attention in her own right. Her mother, Swarnakumari Devi, was the first woman delegate to a Congress session (1899). Swarnakumari also edited the Bengali monthly, *Bharati*; Sarala also was its editor for a while.

In 1902, the year which saw the birth of *Anushilan Samiti*, Bengal’s earliest revolutionary group, Sarala set up a gymnasium at 26 Ballyganj Circular Road in South Calcutta. The movement

was preceded by the formation of gymnasiums and other centres of physical training (*lathi and dagger play*) at several places. These centres later developed into secret revolutionary groups.

Sarala’s centre must have attracted wide attention because Jatin Banerjee, Aurobindo’s emissary from Baroda, met her on his arrival in Calcutta. Aurobindo, then settled in Baroda, had sent Banerjee with the object of forming a secret group in Bengal.

In 1902 Sarala Devi also introduced *Birastami*, a ritualistic initiation ceremony with religious overtones, and started *Pratapaditya Utsav* in 1903 on the lines of *Shivaji Utsav* introduced by B. G. Tilak in Maharashtra. She also played an instrumental role in the formation of *Suhrid Samiti* in 1900. This was a new revolutionary organisation based at Mymensingh (now in Bangladesh).

Sarala, however, differed with Jatin Banerjee and other organisers over the question of dacoity as a fundraising means and kept away from *Anushilan*

Samiti.¹ This is probably the reason why intelligence reports on secret societies during this period make little mention of her role. One list² of clubs and samitis connected with the Swadeshi movement (1905-11) includes Sarala Devi’s ‘Fencing Club’, obviously a reference to her Ballyganj gymnasium. Sarala’s association with the movement actually ended with her marriage in 1905 to Rambhaji Dutta, a Punjabi Arya Samajist. After marriage Sarala left Bengal; however, she continued with her social activities and set up *Bharat Stri Maha Mandal* around 1910-11 to spread education among women.

One reason for Sarala’s interest in revolutionary politics is revealed in a quote from her memoir *Jivaner Jharapata*. What pained her most was the ‘cowardice- the blot on Bengal’s forehead’. Hers was an attempt to ‘wipe it off’ (p. 136). Sarala during this time wrote a hard-hitting article *Bilati Ghusi Banam Deshi Kil* (Foreign Blows vs Native Fists, *Bharati/Asar* 131Ob, June-July 1903). In the article she gave an account of various cases of Indians’

humiliation at the hands of Britishers and urged the youth to come to blows with the *sahibs* to “counter the insult with their own hands.”

She dwells on her differences with Rabindranath Tagore over some issues but says little about the hurdles she had to overcome in the process of establishing herself as an independent thinking woman. She rather surprises us by asserting that a childless woman should accept her husband’s second marriage since that is the “culture of Hindu women.”³

Sarala in her memoir alleges that her activities were jeered at in some Bengali papers (pp.127-29). But there was the other side also. In 1903, when Sarala took to the streets to collect funds in aid of the widow of a *punkha* coolie brutally kicked to death by an Englishman, *Bengali* (28 Nov. 1903), edited by renowned Congress leader S.N. Banerjee, felicitously commented: “The Indian ideal of womanhood is at once an elevating and inspiring one, and fortunately it is not extinct yet.”

Reverence and Distance

The first phase of the Bengal revolutionary movement (1902-15) was generally marked by an absence of women’s participation even though the ideological foundation of the movement was embodied in the image of a mother goddess, as found in the celebrated *Bande Mataram* composed in 1881 by novelist Bankim Chandra Chatterjee. Later, Aurobindo also contributed to this concept. His *Bhawani Mandir* pamphlet (1905) enjoined: “We cannot get strength unless we adore the mother of strength.” And Bhawani for him was “the embodiment of Infinite Energy.”⁴

Reverence for women permeated the entire ideology of the movement. But alongside it, male celibacy (*brahmacharyaism*) was also prescribed as the ideal of a revolutionary’s life. The leaders would discourage young cadres from mixing with women. Aurobindo expelled Jatin Banerjee, his follower and one of the chief organisers of the movement, from

the party on the charge of having a relation with a woman.⁵ According to Trailokyanath Chakravarty, a leader of the Dhaka *Anushilan Samiti*, there were some attempts to recruit young girls at the initial stage but later the plan was dropped.⁶

Nanibala - Dukaribala

Nanibala Devi, widowed in her early life, dared to communicate information to a political prisoner by meeting him in jail posing as his wife in 1915. She later sheltered some young activists connected with the celebrated German Plot mooted by Jyotindranath Mukherjee (Bagha Jyoti), the legendary martyr in the Balasore battle (September 1915). Nanibala was finally arrested and in jail she had to suffer inhuman physical torture (powdered



Nanibala Devi

chilly was pushed into her private organ). She, however, did not give in and put up with imprisonment for about four years. Nanibala was probably the first woman state prisoner held under Regulation III of 1818.⁷ Dukaribala Devi, a housewife from Rirbhum, courted imprisonment (1917-18) on being held on charges of keeping arms in her custody. Dukaribala’s political experience, writes her son, helped her get rid of all caste prejudices. A Brahmin housewife, she would allow ‘untouchables’ to enter her kitchen and face a lot of public criticism for this. She, however, showed no sign of protest against her husband’s second and third marriages (after the second wife’s death). She was on good terms with her

third co-wife all along.⁸

Another housewife who also suffered imprisonment during 1917 was Sindhubala Devi. She was arrested following a police raid on her house in search of her husband.

In some cases women discarded by society as ‘fallen’ also helped the activists in one way or another. In 1907, when the police mercilessly attacked a group of Swadeshi volunteers in a north Calcutta street, prostitutes retaliated by throwing stones at the police from rooftops.⁹ Kshudiram Basu, one of the first Bengal martyrs, being deserted by his family received shelter in one such woman’s house.¹⁰ Numerous other incidents of this sort remain undocumented.

Girls joining ‘Corps’

Women’s participation increased in the second phase of the movement in the late 1920s. Young girls, mostly from better-off families, now took part in ‘actions’ and began to stir the nation with their exploits. They had before them the examples of large scale participation of women in the Non Cooperation (1921) and Civil Disobedience (1930) movements. They personally saw or heard of women joining in *satyagraha*, burning foreign clothes, boldly defying law in the Calcutta streets, fighting with the mounted police and facing physical assaults.¹¹

Young girls, mostly good students, refused to remain content with their studies and began to establish contact with secret groups. Kalyani Das, elder sister of Bina Das, started a women students’ organisation- *Chatri Sangha* at Bethune College. Lila Ray also set up *Dipali Sangha*, a similar organisation at Dhaka. The Calcutta girls made their debut in politics by joining Volunteer Corps under the stewardship of Subhas Chandra Bose during the Calcutta Congress of 1928. Dressed in uniforms after the military fashion, girls ushered in a new chapter of women’s participation in the freedom struggle.

Chatri Sangha developed a close

link with Dinesh Majumdar, a very able organiser of revolutionary activities in Calcutta in the early 1930s. Majumdar, who later died a martyr, would train young girls in physical exercise and lathi play.¹² Girls were now challenging the conventional values. Kamala Dasgupta narrates in her memoir how she accompanied Dinesh Majumdar to a secret spot in the Botanical Gardens to discuss important matters.¹³ In the Chattogram group of Chittagong Armoury Raid fame, leader Surya Sen better known as *Mastarda* would always encourage young girls to join the movement and had as his lieutenants Kalpana Datta and Pritilata Waddeder. Girls would spend nights in the hideouts and share all the strains of a revolutionary's life. Parul Mukherjee, a Kumilla girl, was in charge of a house at Titagarh (North 24-Parganas) in which some revolutionary fugitives who had escaped from jail were sheltered.

Girls in Action

Until the beginning of the 1930s women did not take part in any revolutionary actions. In May 1931, however, Shanti Ghosh and Suniti Choudhury, two Kumilla girls, flatly asked Subhas Chandra Bose whether he would like to see women in action. Bose, who had come to Kumilla to attend a student's conference, agreed after a brief hesitation. Inspired by this, Prafulla Brahma, leader of the Kumilla girls, prevailed upon their *dadas* to give them arms and finally Shanti and Suniti made history by killing Magistrate Stevens on Dec. 14, 1931.¹⁴

The incident was strongly condemned by a section of Congress leaders and intellectuals. *Pravasi*, a Bengali monthly (Paus 1338b Jan. 1932) wrote: "The country is in a miserable state; even girls are engaging in killing." Bina Das' abortive attempt on Governor Jackson followed (Feb. 6, 1932). Bina herself later said, "My object was to die and if to die, die nobly fighting against this despotic system of government."¹⁵

Pritilata, whom Surya Sen directed to lead an attack on a European club,

wrote in her diary that *Masterda* put the "mantle of leadership" on her to "let the English learn and the world take notice that women of our country are no longer lagging behind." She conducted the raid successfully and then committed suicide. The leaflet found on her body ended with these sentences: "I earnestly hope that our sisters would no longer nurse the view that they are weak. Armed women of India will demolish thousand hurdles, disregard thousand dangers and join the rebellion and the armed struggle for freedom and will prepare themselves for it. With this hope in my heart I am proceeding today for self-immolation."¹⁶



Pritilata Waddeder

Thanks to a number of memoirs written by the women revolutionaries, we have more information about the role of women in the second phase of the movement than in the earlier period. But the memoirs do not always satisfy our specific queries about what these revolutionaries thought about women's rights.

Bina Das, for example, reveals her independent thinking when she criticises the communists for their over-dependence on the U.S.S.R. and charges the Congress with betraying an ambivalent attitude towards the heroic mass upsurge of 1942.¹⁷ But she says very little about how she perceived her role as a woman. Shanti Ghosh (Das) devotes a whole chapter to her dilemmas concerning God which would

often disturb her in jail.¹⁸ Kamala Dasgupta and Kalyani Das concentrate on their political life; Kalpana Datta wrote short life-sketches of the Chattogram revolutionaries. Neither wrote anything concerning women.

The memoirs give a detailed account of prison life. They describe how the women prisoners fought to be able to wear saris instead of short frocks; how they stood against the bad treatment of the matrons; how they would spend some of their time enacting Tagore plays and chanting songs and poems. However, they do not deal with questions about women in society. Before setting out to explore the reason for this absence of involvement, we need to mention two exceptions, Shantisudha Ghosh and Bimpalpratibha Devi.

Shantisudha

A brilliant student of mathematics, and later a college teacher, Shantisudha was arrested inside the college on November 11, 1933 in connection with a dacoity case. Otherwise a less known figure, her boldly independent thinking, reflected in *Nari*, her collection of essays show her to be an important historical source.

Shantisudha says in no uncertain terms that "women have nothing to boast of in the glorious tradition of Indian philosophy. They have nothing to do with the elevated thoughts contained in the *shastras*."¹⁹ The rebel in her speaks out often. For example, she writes: "Women will give fitting reply to these *shastras* and *samhitas* if they burn these texts just as the Harijans of Nasik have set fire to *Manusamhita*." (p. 17). She espouses the right to divorce and economic independence of women and wonders "if a married woman is to put *sindur*, wear *noa* and *shanka*, put *ghomta* round her face to prove that she is the wife of someone, why shouldn't a husband also use something as the symbol of his husbandhood?" (PP85,37-38). "Wife is treated as husband's property. Hence the need for shanka-sindur the trade

mark.”(p40).

What led Shantisudha to take such a radical view of women’s freedom? Does she owe it to her political experience? Shantisudha, now 83, only smiles. She had nothing more to say than what she had already written, she told this writer when they met on April 30,1989.

Bimalpratibha

Bimalpratibha Devi, wife of Dr. Charuchandra Banerjee, a physician, belonged to a very conservative and aristocratic Brahmin family in Calcutta. She had to get over a lot of hurdles to come out in the streets to serve the country’s cause and actually left her husband and her in-laws’ family in the process.

Bimalpratibha joined the Non Cooperation movement before marriage under her father’s influence and later acted as volunteer during the Calcutta Congress (1928). She also became close to Subhas Chandra Bose during this time.

Defying her in-laws’ objections she actively joined politics and became the leading organiser of Nari Satyagraha Samiti in Calcutta during 1930. On June 22, 1930 the Samiti took out a historic procession in the Calcutta streets in defiance of Section 144 and took the police by surprise. Bimalpratibha was arrested and put behind bars for about six months.

On October 2, 1931, she was arrested again in connection with a ‘dacoity’ at a farm at Canal West Road in East Calcutta. She accompanied five revolutionary activists in her family car and sped off with them after the dacoity. But on the way they all got arrested and were later tried by a special tribunal. The deputy commissioner of police, Special Branch, dubbed Bimalpratibha as the “brain of the party.”²⁰ She was however acquitted of the charge but rearrested and held as a ‘detenue’ for six years.

According to one of her colleagues, she confronted a lot of public criticism- if not calumny - when she left her

husband and daughter to live with a young man.²¹ She also proved different when she took an interest in socialism and joined the workers’ movement in the late 1930s on her release.

Her novel *Natun Diner Alo (Light of the New Days)*²² which she wrote during 1933 while in Hijli detention camp at Medinipur provides insight into her evolution. Dedicated to the ‘oppressed proletariat’, the novel delineates the transformation of Surupa, housewife of a rich family, into an individual who begins to realise the significance of workers’ movements. With her husband



Shantisudha Ghosh

abroad pursuing higher studies, Surupa comes into contact with Ramen, a working class organiser. Under his influence she finds “a new meaning of life”. She gradually gets attracted to Marxism and begins to criticise the Congress leadership for “upholding non-violence but helping perpetuate class division based on violence.” (p.93). She dubs the housewives of rich families as “dolls to decorate the household” (p. 103) and emphasises that “a woman should first try to become a human being - then wife or mother.” (pp.32-33). Commenting on her brother-in-law’s relation with a Marathi woman, Surupa even supports living together without marriage.

As a novel *Natun Diner Alo* has many shortcomings. For example, the author gives no explanation for Surupa’s conflict with her husband and

oversimplifies the story by projecting the husband as a very reasonable man who accepts the Surupa-Ramen relationship without any suspicion.

Position Within the Party

Women revolutionaries joined the movement mostly as cadres. They were motivated more by a revolutionary impulse than by any cogent political thinking. While this was also true of the male rank and file, women were definitely subordinate within the revolutionary organisations. According to Ujjala Majumdar (Rakshit Ray), they were only assigned to perform the specific duties allotted to them and had little scope for participating in planning major actions or strategies. Tales of female heroism do exist though. Ujjala, at great risk, carried arms to Darjeeling in connection with an attempt on the life of Governor Anderson in 1934; but she had little knowledge about the actual plot. Parul Mukherjee, who was brought from an eastern Bengal district to take charge of a hideout at Titagarh, near Calcutta also knew little of what was planned or attempted.

Other than Pritilata, none of the women revolutionaries led any organised action. Their activities consisted mainly in storing arms, carrying secret information and arranging shelter for fugitive comrades. Shanti and Suniti and Bina Das did, however, carry out individual and small group ‘actions’. As their memoirs reveal, what propelled them was the youthful urge to make history at the risk of their lives. Bina Das, who had knowledge of how to handle a gun, attempted to kill the Governor at a Calcutta University convocation simply because Shanti and Suniti’s examples made her restive and the state ruthlessness “upset my whole being.” After her arrest, she stated in court, “I would go mad if I could not find relief in death. I only sought the way to death by offering myself at the feet of my country.” Kamala Dasgupta in her memoir *Rakter Akshare* (pp. 53-58), reminisces that Bina one day told her

that she needed a revolver because “I wish to attempt on the Governor.” When Kamala warned her of the consequences, Bina smilingly retorted: “I don’t mind being hanged. And if I am sentenced to life imprisonment, I shall spend the days teaching girls like Shanti and Sunili.” Bina’s was a rather impulsive decision and as she later admitted, “an outrage to my nature.” Shanti and Suniti’s objective was to show the country that women could also use arms. Still in their early teens, they were too young to view politics in its broader perspective. They silently put up with physical torture at the time of arrest because, writes Shanti Ghosh (Das), they knew that their “mission is over” as the magistrate had been killed. (*Arun Banhi*, pp. 16-17).

Their outlook had its roots in the ideology of the movement, which asserted that the country’s torpidity could only be eliminated by individual acts of bravery. The best proof of bravery, it was believed, lay in killing government officials. This ideology would also set the greatest store by self-immolation, in the belief that “by laying down our lives we shall enliven the nation.” For example Jatin Das committed self-immolation on the 64th day of his hunger strike in prison.

Women revolutionaries, as their memoirs bear out, had little role to play in decision-making. There was little intimacy among the revolutionaries. The three major groups- *Anushilan*, *Jugantar* and B.V.- were at loggerheads with each other. The leaders were not always free from sectarianism. Women revolutionaries would also become divided along group lines and this factionalism sometimes affected their mutual relationship. Ujjala Rakshit Ray, Shanti Das and Pratibha Roychoudhury lament this unhappy trend of the movement. “We would often feel ashamed at this,” writes Shanti. Ujjala, however, asserts that while the leaders failed, ordinary members, especially the women, often cut across group differences. While admitting this to me

in an interview, Ujjala perhaps had in mind her own experience of having been provided shelter by Shovarani Datta who belonged to another group. Both were later arrested together.

Accounts of prison life in their memoirs give proof of cordial relationship among women prisoners from different groups. Within the four walls of the prison they seemed to have formed a sanctuary of their own.

Post-Independence Period

Some of the women revolutionaries such as Bina Das, Lila Ray and Ujjala



Suhasini Ganguly

Rakshit Ray, in their later years, chose their spouses from among their comrades: Kalpana Datta married P.C. Joshi, once the secretary of the undivided Communist Party of India. Others such as Suhasini Ganguly, Parul Mukherjee and Kamala Dasgupta, remained unmarried. Their post-revolutionary careers also found expression in different directions. Suhasini, Kalpana and Kamala Mukherjee joined the Communist Party; Pratibha Roychoudhury became a member of the Republican Socialist Party. Shanti Das joined the Congress after a brief association with the CPI. Bina Das and Kamala Dasgupta developed a close link with the Congress. Both of them accompanied Gandhiji on his historic visit to Noakhali, an eastern Bengal district, after the 1946 riots. Some of the women revolutionaries took part in the 1942 Quit India movement.

Most of the women revolutionaries who had made their debut in politics in the late 1920s or early 1930s continued with their socio-political activities in some form or the other until Independence. Suhashini Ganguly was attached to the women’s front of the CPI. Kalpana Datta engaged in relief work after the 1943 famine. Bimalpratibha Devi got in touch with working class movements, and in the late 40s, played a major role in the release of political prisoners. Shanti Das, before joining the Congress, took an interest in trade union activities. Bina Das became the secretary of the South Calcutta Congress Committee. Of the other prominent figures, Parul Mukherjee, Shantisudha Ghosh and Ujjala Rakshit Ray, however, retired from public life.

Both the movement for the release of political prisoners and the 1943 famine brought together Congress and communist workers on the same platform. Former women revolutionaries now belonging to different parties joined hands with each other for the common cause. Some of them belonging to the Congress had already set up *Congress Mahila Sangha* and brought out a women’s journal *Mandira*, under the editorship of Kamala Mukherjee, and then under Kamala Dasgupta. The communist group would later start a journal *Ghare Baire*.

But a large section of the women revolutionaries became a shadow of their former politically active selves in the post-Independence period. The communists like Suhasini, Kalpana Dutta and Kamala Mukherjee remained active. Shanti Das not only remained active in politics, she became a member of the Legislative Council in the 1950s. Bina Das also maintained an active life for some time. Bina had been involved in the historic youth upsurge in Calcutta (November 1945) for the release of the INA prisoners. While the senior Congress leaders vacillated, Bina Das along with Jyotirmoyee Ganguly

remained with the agitating youths for the entire campaign. In her memoir *Srinkhal Jhankar* (pp. 146-48) Bina has described the movement as “unprecedented.” The entire Calcutta first “seemed to have gone mad,” she writes. Bina in her later life engaged mainly in social work whereas Kamala Dasgupta concentrated on literary activities. Her *Swadhinata Sangrame Banglar Nari* stands out as a valuable account of Bengali women’s role in the Indian freedom struggle.

That the women revolutionaries could not sustain their political life for long does not mean that their interest in politics was shortlived. Talking to some of the surviving revolutionaries one gets the impression that they simply could not adjust to the politics of the post -1947 period. Those who joined the CPI did get a new lease of life under the impact of its ideology, yet others within and outside the Congress bloc began to feel a sort of ideological void. It was too hard for them to accept the manipulative politics pursued by the Congress. Neither could they feel at home in the complexities of parliamentary politics. As Ujjala Rakshit Ray remorsefully recalls, they found themselves “unfit” in the new political setup. A feeling that “our sacrifice has not been properly valued” also pained them. Shantisudha Ghosh and Pratibha Roychoudhury also shared this sentiment.

The Other Fetters

Reflections on women’s status in the 19th and early 20th century Bengali literature were mainly by male authors. They were marked by a Victorian morality. This literature was more interested in focussing on a woman’s chastity than on her freedom as an individual human being. This literature must have had some impact on women revolutionary workers. The revolutionary novel *Pather Debi* and works of Sarat Chattopadhyay, Bengal’s most popular novelist and a favourite of the revolutionaries, also contributed



Kalpana Datta

to the conservative trend by equating chastity with freedom. In any case, given the structure of a typical political party (all the more so with an underground terrorist party), an individual member had very little freedom to express his/her view. Both Bina Das and Kamala Dasgupta tacitly criticise this ‘party culture.’ According to Kamala, they were not free to mix with each other beyond party needs. Bina writes: “Everything remained enshrouded in a pall of mystery. There was no freedom to question.”²³

Interestingly however, some of the issues found their way to a section of the journal published by revolutionaries themselves. *Shakha*, brought out by a group which opposed the Non Cooperation movement, would regularly publish a column titled *Meyeder Katha (Women about themselves)*. In the 20 Chaitra, 1328b issue Asrumati Devi questioned whether women in the present political circumstances should remain confined to their homes. Again in the 8 Shrawana 1329 issue Amiya Devi cautioned women: “Don’t resist men who help you. But don’t depend too much on them. At the root of their help lies their vested interests.”

However revolutionary literature, in general, did not attach importance to women’s issues. Awareness of the phenomenon that women are doubly oppressed in society was absent.

Patriotism had definitely the better of gender questions. According to Kamala Mukherjee (Chatterjee), they were aware of social evils like dowry but did not think seriously about these issues, because “we were then after only one goal- the country’s freedom.”²⁴

Wedded to the cause of freedom for their country they fought foreign rule and *purdah* in their private lives. However, they could not conceive of women’s rights as a component of their political movement.

To be fair to them, such an awareness was rare at that time in any political movement.

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