

Women and Left Radicalism in India: Feminist Critiques from within¹

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Abstract

The paper historically engages with the Feminist critiques of Left Radicalism in India – its theory-strategies-praxis as interpreted during the 1970s. It reads into two essays, “Choltey Choltey” (Trans. In the Course of the Journey) (1994) and “Naxalbari Politics: A Feminist Narrative” (2008), written by erstwhile Left Radical activists, Joya Mitra and Krishna Bandyopadhyay, respectively. Two strands of criticism from the texts are identified – social and political. The social critique illuminates the paradoxical results of the interface between emergent socially progressive rhetoric of Left Radicals on one hand and predominant patriarchal modes of life on the other. The political critique engages with the fundamental theoretical-strategic blunder of Left Radical leadership in their political understanding. It led to widespread violence, inter-party killings and counter-state repression during the seventies, thereby historically signifying the decade as a decade of disorder and mayhem instead of the original idea of marking it to be a decade of liberation. This paper argues that both these critiques discursively serve to contribute to the body of feminist scholarship existing on wide-ranging issues in India and also assert the urgency of deeper democratization of Indian socio-political formations.

Keywords- Feminism, Gender, Patriarchy, Left-Radicalism, Naxalite, India

INTRODUCTION

A considerable body of historical accounts, ideological examinations and political assessments of Left Radical ideology in India that has manifested itself through the Naxalite or Maoist political movement already exists. Meanwhile, the publication of experiential voices from within the movement that had begun in the early seventies has accelerated the publication frequency and volume after 2000 C.E. They add value to a nuanced and detailed understanding of the

movement’s philosophy-theory-praxis. Most importantly, they provide across cultures a micro-historic view of the everyday lives of those who were directly or indirectly affected by it. “Choltey Choltey” (Trans. In the Course of the Journey) (1994) was published in an edited anthology titled *SheiDasak* (Trans. that Decade) (1994) that comprises of memorial essays of select participants in Left Radical activities during the seventies. Parts of Krishna Bandyopadhyay’s essay were first published in a Bengali magazine

KhojAkhon (Trans. The Present Search), in May 2001 as part of the 'Juddha o Nari' (War & Women) issue. It was later translated into English by Sarmistha Dutta Gupta and Simantini Gupta.

CRITIQUE OF PATRIARCHY WITHIN LEFT RADICAL MOVEMENT

Sinha Roy (2011) [1] and Roy (2012) [2] have made significant pioneering interventions in the field of studies on Left Radicalism in India from the socio-academic framework of Feminism and Gender Studies. Following an interview-based ethnographic methodology, both uncover a substantial volume of oral testimonials of women hailing from diverse socio-economic strata who got involved in varying capacities and due to different reasons in Left Radical politics. During the course of the interviews and conversations, these women tried to recollect their experiences from the repository of cultural memory. Roy and Sinha Roy classify these experiences within a broader perspective of identity-based category – the experiences are specifically oriented towards the fact of being women. This paper does not follow an ethnographic approach but rather that of a combination of Intellectual-Social History to extract the specific feminist critiques that the two Hindu upper castes, educated-elite women, publicly articulate in print regarding Left Radicalism in India.

The 'Personal and Political' in Joya Mitra's Life

Mitra (1994) is one of the foremost written critical records of the patriarchal thoughts and behaviour displayed by some participants of the Naxalbari Movement, few of whom were quite close to her. Joya Mitra writes uninhibitedly about her husband, Kalyansubrata Roy, who played a crucial role in

her life as a mentor-teacher introducing the Left Radical progressive ideas about gender equity in socio-political spheres of life. Yet, post their marriage, Roy started to display a completely contrasting mentality – his actions show a paradoxical divorce from the rhetoric that he claimed to believe.

Roy was older than Mitra by about fifteen years. Hence, their marriage was opposed by Mitra's family. Joya Mitra was attracted to Roy's radical progressive thoughts & ideas, ended up marrying him at eighteen. However, post marriage, her preconceived notions began altering – "within about a month or two I could understand that the notions of socialism were different for married men and bachelors" (Mitra 148) [3]. Mitra further realized that "Women's inability to cook or handle regular family affairs cannot be substituted by their desire to pursue knowledge acquisition" (148). The difference between being a woman and a wife became clear to Mitra when she encountered sharp recurrent questions regarding mixing with other men, and her consent was not sought while planning for a child (148). Mitra's role during crucial political meetings at home was domesticated, only restricted to "making tea and preparing food" (148). "Mostly, no one bothered to ask for my opinions" (148); rarely, if asked anything, the responses were given by Roy on her behalf (148). The gaps in swearing allegiance to Communist theories and their practice in real life were increasingly getting revealed.

Mitra endured jibes from her husband due to her collaborative efforts of publishing a Bengali journal Kormi (Worker), along with another man named Kanchan. She faced a barrage of questions – "Why did this person come to you? What was

that person talking about? They do not come to me for understanding politics, why do they come to you?” (149). Mitra felt suffocated with Roy’s didactic approach to formal Left Radical theoretical discourse. It lacked humane sensitivity and therefore appeared uninteresting to the listeners. She also found such conversations to be bereft of mutual affection and respect; rather, they became monologues.

When Joya Mitra gave birth to a daughter, Roy refused to take parental responsibility since “assuming responsibilities for one’s wife and child reflect archaic social values” (152). After childbirth, Mitra, occupied by “thoughts of self-establishment” (152), wished to get rid of the identity as “someone’s wife,” secured a teaching job in a school and gravitated towards an independent life. Mitra decided to legally divorce Kalyansubrata Roy, who initially congratulated her for displaying an independent spirit. But, the very next day met her mother and complained about her sharing a house with another comrade (159). These are definite patriarchal and male chauvinist features that were exhibited by other activists as well. One such individual had met Mitra’s mother to provide unsolicited advice about her daughter’s future life and her well-being.

Aspirations and Failures in the Life of Krishna Bandyopadhyay

Krishna Bandyopadhyay’s essay points at the incomprehensibility within Left Radical circles on the concept of gender equality and gender sensitization. Bandyopadhyay rationalizes, “It is impossible for a person to hold back all negative traits and bring in only the good. Everyone carries both good and evil traits” (Bandyopadhyay 52) [4]. Her principal disappointment with Naxalbari

Movement lies in the silence of CPI (M-L) on the role and function of women in revolutionary politics. Bandyopadhyay notes that “So many women joined the movement, but on the party’s part there was no actual directive as to what their role was expected to be” (54). Bandyopadhyay regrets that “... my party had never considered seriously, far less taken any stand whatsoever, on women’s liberation” (53).

Bandyopadhyay situates her initial attraction and later participation in the Naxalite Movement in the uneven familial context that unconsciously regularly reproduced patriarchy, marginalized and humiliated gender equalizing efforts. Indignities at home shaped her adolescence with a sense of incompleteness out of falling short of certain standards set by masculine members of the family, be it the cousin brothers or the uncles. Bandyopadhyay writes, “... I felt that as a girl I had to go out and do something. The festering wounds of humiliation experienced since childhood never let me be at peace” (53). Naturally, with a feeling of having been wrongfully side-lined, she veered towards Left politics as an alternative, gradually foraying into the public sphere of ideology and politics. Bandyopadhyay pens down the intellectual-ideological influences and sums up her subjective shift:

We read about the women of the working class – this was the first time I observed that people were thinking about women. Several new stories and songs, and poems were being composed. I felt I had found my way at last. And gradually, I became more and more involved in the “most worthwhile cause” of that time (53).

However, after joining the movement, Bandyopadhyay realized that women were not given any major political task. Their roles were mostly domestic – offering shelters to activists and leaders, serving them tea and food at regular intervals, nursing their injuries and wounds, and taking care of them with a maternal or sisterly instinct. The political activist's role was also restricted in working as 'couriers' conveying secret messages. Bandyopadhyay writes about feeling increasingly irrelevant compared to the other male activists, ". . . we wanted to play an active part in the movement. Our male counterparts were doing such a variety of things. We were suffering from a great sense of ignominy" (54). Bandyopadhyay was reminded of an aunt who had internalized patriarchy and had become one of its agents. The worldview shared by some of the progressive members was similar to that of her aunt. She remembers:

We began to feel very insignificant. Was there really much difference between my pishima [aunt] and these people? If there wasn't, then what was the point in continuing with them? I might as well have stayed at home as the docile, well-behaved girl of the family. These thoughts immediately sparked a struggle within me. I had to try and forge a path for myself. (54)

The stories of Nirmala Krishnamurti, Sampurna and Saraswati Amma & other men and women of the then Andhra Pradesh (now Telangana) who fought against the state administration, courted arrested or became martyrs, inspired Bandyopadhyay and the likes. Some women had left homes to work in the villages without official instruction from the party leadership. Bandyopadhyay aspired to be in that league where

she could experience that her participation positively contributed towards the growth of the movement by slowly changing the lives of people and finally, together with many others, effected a historic, revolutionary transformation. So, when her partner, poet Dronacharya Ghosh asked her to join him in a village, she was overjoyed. Earlier, along with others, she had pulled off a 'cultural action during a centenary school program located in Hooghly district. Bandyopadhyay and others infiltrated the school crowd, recited radical poetry, conducted sloganeering, and saw that the program ended with celebrating both Lenin and Gandhi. According to Bandyopadhyay, the unendorsed act drew criticism from the local party committee since the group acted autonomously. There was no report about the incident in any media or even the party mouthpiece.

In the village, Bandyopadhyay realized the gendered idea of violence during her interactions with another woman from a peasant family who clearly told her, "I can't speak for the men, but let me tell you one thing, we women cannot go around and kill someone just like that" (55). When Bandyopadhyay tried to reason with her, pointing towards the preparations that would ensue before the action, she further asked Bandyopadhyay, "tell me truthfully – do you think you will actually be able to kill someone?" (55) And the latter had no answer.

Bandyopadhyay also deconstructed a falsified claim that sought to relate sacrificing carnal desires and abstinence with the dedication & intensity of revolutionary spirit. During a moment of sexual urge, she was politely rebuked by her partner, who consciously harboured no such feelings and sensations. Such an idea of romance

and sex, separated from politics, was founded upon notions of moral purity and a mechanical outlook towards politics and romance itself, as Bandyopadhyay came to understand.

Bandyopadhyay realises, “how devoid of humanity my colleagues had been, my compatriots who had put their life on the line and declared war on the State” (56). After Dronacharya’s custodial death, Krishna Bandyopadhyay was bestowed with “a new status” (57) – his widow – within CPI (M-L). The party could not accept her second relationship, and some made unpleasant comments about her life choices. The expectation of these party members from her was exactly in conjunction with that of a widow in a patriarchal society; Bandyopadhyay felt that she would have to spend her life being known as Martyr Dronacharya Ghosh’s widow. She further highlights the failure of a section among Left Radicals in engaging with gender and issues related to it. The members appeared defensive in their approach and often discursively obscured the issue behind the veils of the ‘class perspective’. According to Bandyopadhyay, that was “an extremely mechanical response” (57) towards allegations of sexual and gender harassment, which she, along with other women, encountered from few male counterparts during their days of activism.

Bandyopadhyay questions “. . . were these men, who were the most progressive members of their society, able to treat equally those who had joined them in this declaration of war? Were they able to give an equal measure of respect to their fellow women compatriots?” (59). She strongly feels that women do not have equal position “at home or in the world at large” (59). There were new sets of social expectations from the Left Radicals, which

were not fulfilled, and egalitarian social formations remain far from being achieved. After a point, Bandyopadhyay quit political activism. Over time she has introspected, realized that maybe everyone missed an opportunity of creating a gender-egalitarian, participatory framework in the public sphere and regretfully accepts, “But today I feel that if all of us had continued and sustained it, we women would have stood side by side with the men and had an equal say in decision making. Perhaps the history of the Naxalbari movement would have been written differently then.” (59) The essay, however, ends on an optimistic note with a dedication: . . . to those women of the next generation who will play an active role in political struggles, not just for the liberation of humankind in general, but also for the liberation of women in particular. In spite of all the bloodshed, disappointments and failures, I still dream of a liberated society where someday women will claim half the sky. (53)

CRITIQUE OF VIOLENCE

Both Joya Mitra and Krishna Bandyopadhyay have pressed specific criticisms on the Naxalite leadership pertaining to the theoretical understanding of Left Radicalism. Mitra subjects her husband to critical investigation to surmise, “Kalyan Roy believed an incorrect theoretical principle to be true leading to bringing forth many young men and women at the fore of torture, but he never kept himself outside its fold” (Mitra 147).

Krishna Bandyopadhyay found some Naxalites to be “intoxicated with the idea of constantly finishing people” (Bandyopadhyay 58) at the slightest pretext. From political-ideological and gender perspectives, she criticized the strategy of annihilation for leading to indiscriminate violence.

Regarding the claim of the Naxalite leadership about unmaking of the existent historical foundations through a revolutionary transformation to be affected by a protracted armed struggle, she opines that “just killing off a handful of landowners and landlords” (58) was not the solution. The questions that CPI (M-L) wanted to address were “genuine questions, which could never be answered with any short-cut approaches” (52). The Naxalite leadership blundered by rhetorically setting a time limit within which the entire transformative process needed completion. The long-term ideals were ignored in favour of “short-term success” (52). Consequently, many workers and leaders lost their lives. Bandyopadhyay feels that “it was so important for these selfless and extremely courageous people to have carried on living in our society” (53).

During her stay in the village with Dronacharya Ghosh, she felt that the strategy of annihilation was forcibly imposed on the villagers by the leadership. She claims of not meeting anyone who thought and believed that it would liberate them from oppression (55). She failed to convince Ghosh then; had it been otherwise, activists like Ghosh have been alive (54). She was not “comfortable with the idea of such annihilation action” (55), just like the woman in the village who had become her friend could not see herself, primarily as a woman, going around killing class enemies (55). According to her, a section of women and men among the Left Radicals appeared nihilistically besotted with the annihilation line. To invoke the annihilation line and violence was more of a habit than a necessity after a certain point in time. She further questions the ideological endorsement by the leadership of

urban actions during the seventies that lacked consent from women who were involved in the party. Again, questions regarding the socio-cultural-historical national foundations were justified, but the people were “unable to think things through” (53). Bandyopadhyay feels that with hurried acts of burning educational institutions and beheading of statues, “we too lost the right to hold up our heads” (53). She criticizes CPI (M-L) for its choices which “ultimately left no room for women’s decision-making” (53). Bandyopadhyay raises an ethical question – “As workers in this movement, we certainly cannot shrug off the responsibility of what happened, but did we really have any major role to play? (53) –it demands fair-introspective responses from political and broader social circles.

CONCLUSION: FROM LEFT RADICALISM TO CIVIL SOCIETY MOVEMENT

Left Radicalism brought to light in front of the Indian State a wide range of structural oppressive forms in agrarian and socio-economic sectors and subjected citizens to different types of inequalities. It further articulated an urgent need to transform these exploitative forms in the coming days democratically. While Left Radicals attempted to chart a Socialist future, the impact of the decade-long events and occurrences on the people’s minds as well as the response of the Indian State led the social, economic and political order towards a capitalist trajectory. The initial radical attack on the State establishment by the Naxalites proved futile. Following the devastating humane costs resulted by Left Radicalism in the seventies, a substantial number of like-minded individuals in the following decades began to explore the Gramscian idea of ‘War of Position’ instead of the

‘War of Movement or Manoeuvre’. According to Italian Marxist political activist, thinker and theorist Antonio Gramsci, ‘War of Position’ involves sets of coordinated or otherwise, wide-ranging activities limited in scope voluntarily by agents in the networks of civil society, trade union and other relatively autonomous zones of formal activism, that are aimed progressively to achieve specific broader political goals. These comprise of intellectual, cultural, legal debates and contestations, minor conflicts often with the power regimes of State dispensation and are complementary to a more direct struggle to transform systemic establishment through centralized attacks on the State power, which is called ‘War of Movement or Manoeuvre’ (Forgacs 222-230) [5].

The individuals networked among each other in the sphere of civil society to constitute organized platforms appropriate for articulating specific questions, concerns and anxieties. Mitra and Bandyopadhyay both belonged to the historical category of “The New Man” or its gender-neutral synonym, “New Revolutionary Personality” (Dasgupta 1920-1927) [6]. Post their political and personal experiences through the seventies, they acquired new professional and social engagements and shifted from Left Radicalism to civil society activities.

Consequently, the mode of self-expression changed as well – the intellectual act of writing memorial, experiential narratives is an essential signifier of this shift. It also clearly illustrates, explains the internal psychological, external socio-political journey from being political selves to reinventing their selfhoods as intellectuals engaged in social and cultural reformative activism.

Mitra (1994) and Bandyopadhyay (2008) document questions along with concerns which they experientially felt the need to share from gendered subjective positions within socio-political matrices enmeshed by a specific ideology. However, issues related to matters of making individual choices and assertions in socio-familial spheres transcend real politics to overlap with the wider gendered–feminist phenomenology. Some of these are reflected in contemporary popular strands of gender and feminist studies across higher education institutions in India. Keeping in mind the power structures that determine the strategies of negotiating institutional academic freedom and institutional, ideological contestations, the two essays, the writers’ intellectual engagement with specific experiences, knowledge production, bridge the existing gaps between institutional gender-feminist scholarship and gender-feminist discourses outside the institution. That helps in opening a gateway to adopting effective inclusive approaches for examining ‘emergent discourses’ as understood by Welsh Marxist theoreticians and critics within the given disciplinary domain. Williams meant ‘emergent’ as the “new meanings and values, new practices, new relationships and kinds of relationship” that “are continually being created . . . emergent in the strict sense, rather than merely novel” (Williams 123)[7]. These, in turn, would probably be able to explain the factors responsible for causing similar or disparate experiences of women across the country, explore means of addressing and redressing their grievances as well. Apart from the social and institutional-epistemic significance, both these texts impress upon readers the need to culturally democratize social relations in India without which ideas and concepts like

equality, egalitarianism, and social justice would remain restricted to given categories, thus lacking a much-needed practice in the regular-everyday framework.

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