

The Women's Question in the Naxalite Movement in Bihar

Experiences of Women Leaders of
Nari Mukti Sangharsh Samiti (NMSS) and
Nari Mukti Sangh (NMS)

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Kusum Lata*

"[W]omen's question is on a treadmill rather than on a revolutionary track".

Leader of the Telangana Peasant Struggle¹

Introduction

The Naxalite movement (now Maoist), emerging from the peasant uprising from a small village called Naxalbari in West Bengal marks a turning point in India affecting the society and polity in an indelible way. It spread rapidly within a short span of time engulfing large parts of India. It spread to parts of Bihar after Ekwari village of Bhojpur district became synonymous to Naxalbari. Bihar has a vibrant history of peasant struggles. However, the Naxalite movement stands out as a landmark mobilising landless Dalit peasantry as the mainstay of armed struggle with the focal attention on 'land to the tiller' as part of the 'new democratic revolution'.² The peasant movements in Bihar prior to Naxalbari lacked an agenda of structural transformation of the feudal system and ignored the question of landless Dalit peasants focusing primarily on the middle peasantry. Limited academic work is undertaken to

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document the history of the Naxalite movement in Bihar (Bhatia, 2005³; Kunnath, 2012⁴; Louis, 2002⁵; Prasad, 2002⁶; Das, 1998⁷; Das, 1983⁸), compared to Bengal. In this dearth of literature, an analysis of women's experiences in Bihar's Naxalite movement is almost non-existent, with a few exceptions such as Kunnath (2012) whose anthropological work latently brings out the description of women's participation in the movement. Besides, there are a few studies on the Naxalite movement in Jharkhand such as Alpa Shah's *Nightmarch: Among India's Revolutionary Guerrillas* (2019)⁹ that discusses Adivasi women's participation, which is out of the purview of the current study as the status of women in the social structure of Adivasi communities of Jharkhand is different from the caste-ridden feudal society of Bihar. Any analysis of a social movement is incomplete if the most marginalised section of society is further marginalised in the process of history writing. It is not a coincidence that those scholars who have documented the history of the Naxalite movement, could not free themselves from androcentric lens, despite the fact that they were going off the mainstream. Women have participated in the Naxalite movement in various capacities from supporters to active members. Still a comprehensive analysis of their involvement and experiences is lacking in Bihar. At the most, women have appeared in quantitative terms of head counts rather than a qualitative account of their involvement. This requires a revisit to the history of the Naxalite movement through the labyrinth of women's experiences.

Women's involvement and experiences matter a great deal for the intensification and success of class struggle. If women's liberation is not possible without revolution, no revolutionary war can be waged against the state without a devoted understanding of women's multifaceted exploitation and conscious and sustained deliberations to develop mechanisms to not only promote women's active involvement but also ensuring that women remain in the Party for a sustained period. The women's question cannot be separated from class struggle or seen as an additional/missing element into it, but it is rather constitutive of class struggle. While historical marginalisation of women in society, including revolutionary parties, has led to the establishment of separate

women's organisations, nonetheless women's oppression cannot be addressed separately, though require special attention due to its pervasiveness and naturalness in all spheres of life. CPI (ML) People's War's (PW)¹⁰ document 'Our Approach to the Women's Question'¹¹ states that,

class oppression and patriarchy are interconnected. Patriarchy feeds on class oppression and class oppression derives its strength and sustenance, among others, from patriarchal oppression. At all points of time, this living interconnection must be grasped and it is thus a dialectical approach that constitutes the cornerstone of the Marxist perception on the women's question. (PW, 2001, p. 2)

PW theorises that if roots of patriarchy are in the family, "family itself is based on certain economic and social processes – it is based on the very economic structure of society . . . patriarchal relations are also economic relations" (ibid., p. 13). Thus, patriarchy is not seen as a superstructural phenomenon that can be eliminated with the changes in the economic structure. Patriarchal relations imply subordination of women to men economically, socially, politically and culturally. "The culture of patriarchy derives strength from the economic role of patriarchy and in turn it reinforces patriarchal relations in the economy" (ibid., p. 25). Further PW states, "since patriarchy is there in the base and the superstructure, the political struggle against patriarchy encompasses both these spheres" (ibid., p. 41).

India is defined by Maoists as 'semi-feudal semi-colonial' implying that feudal remnants still exist in class relations in India's agricultural economy as a consequence of which the household as a unit of production and consumption has not withered away completely and commodity production is still not dominant.

Feudalism remains the predominant social relations, capitalist relations have also spread and the two coexist. Hence in India both the feudal as well as the capitalist varieties of patriarchy are visible. However, they do not exist as separate entities. Just like other aspects of the semi-feudal semi-colonial structure, patriarchy exists in a combined form . . . The semi-feudal economy is the bastion for patriarchal oppression. . . [T]he landlord class cruelly exploits the labour of

landless and poor peasant women. Secondly, semi-feudal relations in agriculture perpetuate small-scale production. This provides the basis for the household economy, and therein for the continuation of the family as a unit of production as well as consumption. This erects the patriarchal family structure of subordination of women and children" (ibid., p. 11).

As a consequence of this, the authority of man in the family over woman's labour is a crucial aspect wherein woman's labour is an appendage to her husband and woman's social labour is an adjunct to her husband's labour implying that woman's labour in social production is not treated equally with men, consequently fight for equal wages for women was undertaken by Maoists extensively.

In this backdrop, the women's question within the Naxalite movement in Bihar is addressed through the theoretical framework of Maoists¹² using Party literature together with experiences of a few women leaders (now inactive) of two mass fronts of Naxalite groups in Bihar—*Nari Mukti Sangharsh Samiti* (NMSS) and *Nari Mukti Sangh* (NMS), documented through personal interactions in the year 2019. Urmila, Kavita and Savita were part of NMSS and Babli¹³ was in NMS. Discussions with two senior male leaders, Vinod and Devidas were also held. Vinod was in charge of NMS in the initial phase of its formation knowing the context of its emergence and Devidas was active in the *Mazdoor Kisan Sangram Samiti* (MKSS)¹⁴ during the 1980s. In addition to the personal interactions with the women leaders, this paper incorporates the previously documented experiences of women in the armed struggles in Telangana and Tebhaga with the understanding that there is a peculiar character of women's issues in armed struggles having a historical continuity as a leader of the Telangana peasant struggle said, "the women's question is on a treadmill rather than on a revolutionary track."¹⁵ So while the narratives of women leaders of NMSS and NMS build the foundation of the paper, for conceptual generalisations, women's experiences from other fraternal struggles are used to argue that women's issues cannot be relegated to experiential terrain, but should be addressed in the content and spirit of the popular slogan 'no revolution without women's liberation and no women liberation without revolution'. The continuity of some of

the concerns regarding women in the Naxalite movement in India highlights the reproduction of certain structural norms and values that need to be addressed theoretically rather than leaving them to pragmatic situations.

Mobilisation of Women in the Naxalite Movement

The status of women is inextricably linked with the way production is organised in any society, as Alexandra Kollontai (1977, p. 61) writes, "the conditions and forms of production have subjugated women throughout human history, and have gradually relegated them to the position of oppression and dependence in which most of them existed until now."¹⁶ Therefore, Party Unity (PU) and the Maoist Communist Centre of India (MCCI) mobilised women under the peasant organisations. Vinod shared that *Jab anti-feudalism sangharsh hue to usme mahilaon ka kafi yogdan raha. Pehle se nari sangathan ka koi conception nahin tha kyunki varg sangharsh me sab saath aayenge, sab ek saath kaam karenge aur samantwad ke khilaf mahila-purush us me bhag lenge yagi soch thi. Lekin mahila sangathan ki zarurat hai ye movement ke dauran hi leadership ko mahsus hua. Varg sangharsh ke sawal par kendrit karte hue mahila ke sare sawal hal nahin kiye ja sakte hain. Isliye Mahila sawal ek vishesh sawal hai. Varg se itar patriarchy ka bhi sawal hai Us se pehle mahilayen varg sangharsh me shamil rahin. Sangharsh me bhag lene se pitrasatta ka prabhav dekha gaya* (when anti-feudal struggles took place women contributed a lot in it. There was no conception of women's organisation because it was felt that men and women would join in the class struggle against feudalism. During the course of the struggle the leadership realised the need of a separate women's organisation. Women's issues cannot be resolved only by class struggle as women have specific questions. There is a question of patriarchy. Before this women were engaged in class struggle. During the course of the struggle patriarchy's impact was realised). It was found that issues such as wife-beating, abuse and humiliation of daughters-in-law and alcoholism were some of the issues peasant organisations were unable and unwilling to address (Pandey, 2019, p. 166).¹⁷ Ultimately, NMSS and NMS were formed with a theoretical understanding that women's emancipation is possible only through revolution. They identified the authority of

husbands along with the other forms of exploitation in semi-feudal semi-colonial mode of production in India. Women's exploitation is seen as rooted in the sexual division of labour that confines women to the household in patriarchy (NMS, 1996¹⁸; NMSS, 1999¹⁹).

The formation of separate women's organisations in the 1980s is not a Bihar specific phenomenon, as PW also formed a separate women's organisation in 1982.

The notion that prevailed initially was that women should be mobilised along with men and that there was no need to form separate organisations for women. The Indian situation reminds one of the situation in the pre-revolutionary China, when a debate cropped up sometime after the formation of the Communist Party of China in 1921 whether the CPC should recognise and support the existence of a separate women's movement to deal only with their specific demands or whether the women's question can be regarded as part and parcel of the broader question of fundamental social transformation. (Bhattacharyya, 2016, p. 278).

Even though the women's organisations were formed in the 1980s, the fight against sexual exploitation of Dalit women was prominent in the Naxalite groups. Sexual exploitation of Dalit landless peasant women was rampant in Bihar, increasing manifold with the formation of the Ranveer Sena and other caste militias. Dalit women have been working as agricultural labourers and constitute a significant number of landless labourers. If landless Dalit peasants are the bottom of the hierarchy in the society facing exploitation by feudal landlords, landless Dalit peasant women bear the double oppression from the feudal gentry as well as patriarchal family. In any case, their position as agricultural labourers made their condition vulnerable to sexual violence by *zamindars*. They were always seen as sexually available by the landed gentry. *Dola Pratha* is one of the most outrageous practices in central Bihar in which Dalit brides were forced to spend their first night after marriage with the landlord of the area. There are instances where if Dalit women did not vote for the landed upper caste men, they were raped. For example in August 2006, seven Dalit women were raped for not voting for the powerful landed upper caste men in Ramnagar-Gopalpur village, Lakhisarai.

They work along with the male peasants in the fields of landlords, but do not receive equal wages, against which women's mobilisation was vibrant. Women have fought militantly for their land rights and have faced brutal state repression, sexual violence being prominent. Their fight as a Naxalite invited sexual violence by police, caste militias and landlords. For instance, femicide was the most directly linked with the emergence of Naxalism. Femicide was the form of killing adopted by the Ranveer Sena in which they targeted women as they give birth to Naxalites. Ranveer Sena ran a campaign called 'killing the demon in the womb' in Jehanabad (Srivastava, 2007, p. 36).²⁰ It was not just a fight against caste militias, but a nexus of caste militias, landlords and police. Whenever any action against Bhoomi Sena²¹ was taken in retaliation, the police used to raid the villages in the name of combing operations instead of punishing the culprits. In this, women's condition was most vulnerable (Pandey, 2019, p. 167). They were brutally raped and killed in many massacres by caste militias such as Ranveer Sena in Gaya and Jehanabad in July 1992, April 1997 in Ekwari, Lakshmanpur-Jehanabad in December 1997 – it is an endless list (Srivastava, 2007, pp. 36-37).

The terror and violence of caste militias was challenged wherein rapists were punished in public by people in the leadership of the Naxalite squads that led to an end to the sexual exploitation of Dalit women (Sinha, 2002, p. 306).²² Kelkar argues that Naxalites were identified as those who fight against sexual exploitation with the last drop of blood (Kelkar, 1992, p.73).²³ The success of Naxalites in posing a threat to the feudal order can be ascertained with these words of the Superintendent of Police of Jehanabad, "in this area no one has the guts to touch a poor peasant woman, thanks to the work of the MKSS" (Sinha, 2002, p. 306). Sinha asserts that the persistent battle by Naxalite squads against the series of brutal killings of Dalit peasants and mass rape of Dalit women conducted by caste militias have heightened the gender consciousness and liberation of Dalit women from the exploitative character of 'social patriarchy' (ibid., p. 158, 306). *Jan Adalat* (an alternative judicial system of Naxalites) was a leading mechanism through which the gender consciousness was raised. *Jan Adalat* was organised at the village

and panchayat level, subsequently making village committees as the alternative centres of people's power. *Jan Adalats* were witnessing intense mass participation of women discussing judgement and its implementation. In one of the *Jan Adalats* in Panchgarha in 1994 a notorious and cruel criminal called Tetar Baigha who raped at least fifty women including a ten-year-old girl whom he mutilated with a razor was caught. According to a report about 400 women gathered in this *Jan Adalat* which was completely conducted by women. He was sentenced to death by the women who themselves carried out their judgement, showing the hatred they had for Tetar Baiga. Fifty four women took turns in beating him to death with *lathis*. Tetar Baigha had close links with the police due to which the police arrived and arrested many people after this sentence (Anonymous, p. 36).²⁴

Urmila said that *pitai ke dar se sab gunda log theek ho jata tha* (the fear of physical punishment kept the lumpens under control). She shared with amusement the instances of many *Jan Adalats* (an alternative judicial system of Naxalites) conducted by NMSS in which the perpetrators were punished. In one of the cases in Machchil village of Makhdumpur block a man who lived with a woman for years and had a child refused to marry her. When the woman approached NMSS, a *Jan Adalat* was called and it was decided that the man could not claim his innocence on the ground that it was not out of wedlock. The woman can claim all rights of a wife and the man has all obligations towards her as a husband. She emphasised that they used to undertake regular follow up of the decision and focus on the condition of women. In another instance in Machchil village a woman was harassed by an upper caste man after which the *Jan Adalat* was called and the culprit was beaten with slippers by the complainant woman. Urmila said that women from twelve villages participated in this. In Bhusainchank in Jehanabad, a woman was gang raped after which the *Jan Adalat* was called. Urmila said that in such instances NMSS called the *Jan Adalat* on its own. The rape survivor beat the rapist with slippers.

She said that the complainant women used to beat the perpetrators with slippers, *dumko* (sticks of palm tree). Urmila shared this information with a note of caution, i.e. until the complainant

woman beats the perpetrator, the women members of NMSS would never indulge in physically punishing the guilty as it may give an impression of injustice. She said that in the *Jan Adalat* it was really the people who used to decide the nature of punishment and the members of the Party never intervened until required otherwise. She said that at times people used to decide the punishment which may otherwise sound weird, but were important forms of punishment in the feudal system where *izzat* is crucial and any symbolic attack on *izzat* is unacceptable. For instance, she said that often a complainant used to ask for spit licking as the punishment, blackening the face, or shaving the head which may not appear as punishments if it is observed from outside, but is seen as an attack on *muchh ki shaan* (disgrace to masculine power) in Bihar. She reiterated that due to the decline of the Party, the instances of eve teasing or harassment which reduced have again surfaced on a massive scale and with a greater magnitude of brutality.

The institution of *Jan Adalat* was so powerful that some of the police officials and civil administrators, who served in Jehanabad and other areas where Naxalites' presence was strong, have commended it. For instance, Director General of Police, Vijay Pal Jain in an interview in 1994 said that *Jan Adalats* offer a quick and fair delivery of justice. A senior lawyer in the Patna High Court belonging to Jehanabad was of the opinion that the case related to property disputes and physical assaults shifted to *Jan Adalats* where they are settled and then the formal paper work is done at competent courts and offices (Sinha, 2002, pp. 310-311) Sinha discusses the gender implications of the impact of *Jan Adalat*. She discusses a massacre in Kansara village of Jehanabad in 1986 where economic blockade was imposed on the perpetrators of the massacres which continued for five years. During these five years no one from the neighbouring villages neither marry off their daughters in the accused families nor married their sons to the daughters of accused families to avoid the punishment from the *Jan Adalat*. Sinha states that this monitoring and executing agency of *Jan Adalat* had interesting implications for kinship relations, intra and inter-community caste networks (ibid., 2002, pp. 315-316).

Along with the *Jan Adalat*, many direct action campaigns were undertaken to mobilise Dalit women. For instance, Urmila mentioned campaigns against alcoholism as one of the significant issues mobilising women for direct actions. Urmila herself was part of many anti-alcoholism direct actions. Urmila and Devidas explained that the anti-liquor campaign took different forms under the leadership of NMSS and NMS. Along with the identification of liquor brewers and publicly shaming them, these radical women's organisations resorted to direct actions by breaking various *daaru bhattis* (liquor furnaces). Such direct action forced police and administration to give shelter to *daaru bhatti* owners. So it was not just a legal battle but direct actions that characterise the distinctiveness of NMSS and NMS. The direct actions exposed the feudal nexus of landlords and the state. It brought to the notice how the state safeguards interests of the landowners. These women's organisations faced brutal state repression for their militant struggles which further affected their day-to-day life. Urmila narrated with amusement several instances in which she participated in the breaking of *daaru bhatti*. She mentioned an incident of Kinjar Bazar in the Magadh zone of Bihar where NMSS and MKSP declared that if *daaru bhattis* are not closed then direct action will be taken after which *daaru bhattis* were broken and police did not dare to do anything. She said that no one had the courage to challenge women when they are breaking *daaru bhattis*, in fact, according to her, many more women used to join such activities without much effort to mobilise them.

Devidas said that instead of waiting for the *tadi* (toddy) to come to the brewers, they used to break *lagni* (the pot which is put on the tree from where the liquid for *tadi* is collected). He smiled and said, *na rahega baans na bajegi bansuri Na tadi niche aayegi na hi tadi bikegi* (to address the problem at its source the *lagni* itself is destroyed so that liquor cannot be prepared for sale). He also narrated another direct action. He said that in Palamu's forest there were about five thousand trees of *mahua* (the flower of the *mahua* tree is used in making liquor) which were under the control of big local landlords. *Mahua ke pedon par kabza karna bhi ek mahatvapoorna ladai thi jo kisi ne nahin ladi siwaye Naxalites ke* (to seize the forests

of *mahua* was an important fight waged by Naxalites only). So instead of articulating alcoholism as the individual male peasant's problem, the Naxalite groups were targeting the larger structural forces that were responsible for the production and distribution of liquor. Grabbing the control over *mahua* trees was just not only a fight against alcoholism, but also a fight against the feudal land relations. Keeping villagers in a constant state of drunkenness is a strategy used by landlords to prevent any agitation against the exploitation. In fact, by keeping the men in a drunken state, it becomes easy for the forest administration and local landlords to involve them in 'illegal' activities.

Bhoomi Dhakhal Andolan (land grab movement) brought many Dalit women into the fold of Naxalites. Devidas shared the strategies of the *Bhoomi Dhakhal Andolan*. He observed that the Naxalite groups seized the land by physically going there and putting up a flag. Raising a flag might appear as a symbolic gesture here, but the meaning behind it was very clear to the landlords. It indicated the presence and support of armed rebels. He said that in the tenure of ten years Naxalites seized almost seven thousand acres of land in Rohtas. In the whole of Bihar, according to him, approximately three lakhs acres of land were seized in a short span of time by Naxalites. Devidas said that women's role was crucial for *bhoomi dakhhal* campaigns where women used to be the first ones to seize the land by setting up *chulhas* (hearths) and carrying out other household activities.

Such assertion of women in claiming their right over land with their traditionally defined role exemplifies a case of political strategy where the gendered division of labour is used to build up women's political activism. Similarly, the female labour allocation in agriculture is used strategically to mobilise women for strike, hence making women's participation inevitable. For instance, the success of any strike was dependent on women as they are primarily located in *ropai* (paddy harvesting). The season of *ropai* used to be a time when the Party would give a call for strike for wage increase. Women used to be the prime constituents of this strike (*Mukti ke bahat*, 1993, p. 13).²⁵ This highlights an important area regarding women's economically productive work. There is

a need to revisit the argument that women's oppression in feudal families is rooted in their exclusion from participation in productive economic activities outside the home (which might be the case with upper caste women but not with Dalit landless peasant women). What is required is to address the notion that only those activities are seen as economically productive which are performed by men despite the fact that women perform a range of economic roles in agriculture considered 'secondary' and hence underestimated, devalued and invisibilised (Johnson, 1983, p.15).²⁶

Notwithstanding, women's mobilisation in the Naxalite movement in Bihar has shattered many feudal restrictions on women. Their participation ranged from active supporters to active members. Women's participation has been more active and direct rather than passive and indirect. They are not adjunct to the 'real' struggle. Their position as both object and subject of class struggle make struggle a living experience. They participated in large numbers and extended their support in various forms such as protecting their men from the state violence and repression, fighting back militantly with their 'homely' weapons, helping men to escape during police raids and snatching arms from police (*Mukti ke bahat*, 1993, p.13). PU's bi-monthly periodical *Sangrami Muktimarg* reports that women provided hideouts to squads and participated in the action against landlords. When men in the village were on the run from police, women used to be harassed on a regular basis by police. Police used to vandalise their livestock, mix ration with manure and ravage the house completely. Women have used all kinds of strategies – from behaving intelligently to acting stupidly to deceive police (ibid). They are called 'eyeballs of the village' (Uieke, 2019, p. 24)²⁷ as they minutely observed the movements of the landlords and informed squads based on which actions were taken. The arm training was provided only to squad women members, still women fought using all means against police. Those women who received armed training were given responsibilities to organise women and give them arm training for self-defence from landlords, caste militias and police (Pandey, 2019, p. 168).

Urmila said that the conviction of women was so high that they chose rape over revealing the names of the party comrades

when police used to raid their houses. She narrated an incident of Paryari village in Jehanabad where police raided and raped a woman in her house for not revealing the names of the party comrades. This kind of support by women has a long history for the armed movements in India. One of the documented accounts of the Telangana movement states, “the fear of rape and sexual torture did not deter women from keeping secrets and protecting the sangham and *dalam* members. There are instances when women were forced to give up their babies for the safety of the *dalams*. Women were couriers passing on secret messages, often disguised as boys. Almost the entire burden of finding shelters and running the dens in the city fell on women” (Lalita et al., 1989, p. 17).²⁸ They fought actively as part of the squad. They faced police brutality, Arwal massacre in 1986 being the most prominent in which police opened fire on protesting people in Arwal killing twenty-one people including women. Pandey cites an experience of a woman activist called Kalawati who went to participate in the protest organised by PU against the massacre. Kalawati says that in the protest police started a *lathi* charge. They pulled Kalawati’s child from her and threw the child in the gutter saying that this child will also grow up as a Naxalite. Kalawati somehow managed to save her child and then she decided that she would never take her child to any protest anywhere (Pandey, 2019, p. 166). This story highlights the spirit with which women were participating. Urmila herself mentioned that *maine Imamganj gaon me chaar thana ki police ka saamna kiya aur itna zabardast ladai ladi ki chaar thana ki police ko lautna pada. Lekin uske baad unhone aur zyada force manga liya aur phir ham par lathi charge kiya. Mujhe sir me danda mara jiski wajah se mere khoon behne laga. Mujhe aaj bhi us maar ki wajah se bahut dard hota hai sir me* (I have faced the police of four police stations and fought in such a manner that they were compelled to go back. But after that they deployed more police force and carried *lathi* charge on us. I was hit on my head and started bleeding. I still have the pain in my head due to that). Those women whose husbands were martyred, continued to fight against the state repression. This shows that the contingencies of the movement were giving new meanings to female militancy.

Women's Entry into *Sangathan*: A Subversive Potential to Patriarchy

"Revolutionary struggles in our country draw women of the most oppressed and downtrodden sections into their folds", but, "patriarchal values, religious and caste dogmas create pressures and constraints on women when they leave their homes to join political struggles" (CPI(ML) Party Unity, 1994, p. 10).²⁹ This concern raised in Party Unity, the organ of the PU speaks volumes about the pressures and pain women undergo for making a decision to join the *Sangathan* (literally means Party in Bihar). Women of different social backgrounds face formidable opposition of a differing form and intensity for joining the *Sangathan*. They are seen as 'deviants', violating societal norms and exercising freedom, strongly prohibited for them. Kavita noted, *Maine jab Party Unity 1983 ke aas-paas jab join karne ka faisla liya us waqt mere parivar aur pati ne object kiya. Mere join karne ke faisle ko lekar das gaon ke log baithe the* (When I decided to join Party Unity somewhere around 1983, my family and husband objected to it. There was a meeting of about ten villages to discuss the matter). Similarly, Urmila's father had thrown many tantrums when she showed her willingness to join NMSS, even though he himself was a member of CPI and later became close to Naxalites for reasons discussed later in the paper. The fact that both Kavita and Urmila were unmarried offers a different terrain for the women's question in the Naxalite movement. The sexuality of an unmarried woman is a matter requiring rigid controls, as Chakravarti argues that a menstruating unmarried girl is an object of 'moral panic', hence child marriages become crucial to channelise the sexual energy of women in the structure of Brahmanical patriarchy (Chakravarti, 1995, p. 2249).³⁰ Here in this case too, the fear of sexuality was a general perception among people that if unmarried women join Naxalite groups they may choose their own marriage partners. Apparently, the 'moral panic' operated within the *Sangathan* too. In an incident mentioned in Party Unity, when a young girl decided to join Party Unity's peasant organisation many village committees objected and threatened to leave the organisation if she joined (CPI (ML) Party Unity, 1994, p. 10).

Women's mobility in the feudal structure is restricted and any violation invites severe punishment. The forms of restrictions may differ according to the caste background, however, women's existence is defined in relation to male authority – father, husband and son in the family across caste hierarchy. A prominent activist of NMS, Dayamanti, in an interview points to the complexities of patriarchal oppression within families. She says that it is very difficult and full of danger to talk about women's freedom as the enemy lies within the family and not outside. It is comparatively easy to fight with the enemy outside but inside the family it is complex and full of challenges. Father, husband and son are the enemies inside. And that is the reason that the fight for women's liberation would be a prolonged fight as the question of women's slavery is an ancient one. The class divisions in society emerged with the sexual division. Therefore, the question of women's liberation is about liberated consciousness, struggle, culture and society which can be achieved only through class struggle. She asserts that women's liberation is rooted in communism (Anal, 2010, p. 24).³¹

The ideal traditional family in Bihar is patrilineal and patrilocal wherein women lack any right on property and have no authority to take independent decisions. Their political activity is seen as disruptive to the family, which means family and political responsibilities are seen as irreconcilable. The roots of such restrictions lie in the sexual division of labour. Women's unpaid household labour determines restrictions on her mobility. "The burden of household work and other domestic responsibility rests almost totally on the shoulders of women. Their gruelling day of endless chores and drudgery, tending children—and this apart from farm labour and other outside wage work—leaves little space for political activity" (CPI(ML) Party Unity, 1994, p. 10). The institution of marriage, regarded as one of the most sacrosanct institutions of the society, justify and naturalises the male control over women's labour, property, reproductive capacity and sexuality perpetuating women's economic dependence and enslavement. The very act of joining the *Sangathan* produces a subversive effect to the institutions of family and marriage irrespective of women's political consciousness as their conviction often emerges from the

subordination than an awareness of the nature of source of that subordination (Kannabiran and Lalitha, 2010, p. 187).³² Roy argues that women's participation in politics is largely determined by the pressures and pulls of their immediate contexts (Roy, 2009, p. 161).³³ Speaking in the context of women in the Telangana struggle, Kannabiran and Lalitha argue that the awakening consciousness of women cannot be seen as a direct result of their participation in the armed struggle, but their gradually increasing awareness is mediated by the socio-economic situation in which they are placed and by the very process through which they struggled (Kannabiran and Lalitha, 2010, p. 181).

Kavita joined PU in the backdrop of the oppression that she has faced inside and outside the family. She faced discrimination in the family for being the girl child, consequently starved too. She grew to dislike her father to the extent that she told him she did not want a husband like him and wanted only girl child who would be fed enough milk (as a girl child she was never given milk despite her fondness for it). When Kavita was approached by PU, during that time her family was desperately trying to arrange her marriage against her wish as she has openly confronted a notorious *zamindar*, Raja Yadav's brother for eve teasing and was then forced to live in an exile kind of condition for many months with her relatives under the fear of getting raped or murdered. Raja Yadav was known for massacres of Dalits in Jehanabad, though annihilated by Naxalites in later years. In one of the massacres, he killed six Dalits in Kariya Chatar village who were working as landless labourers in his land for demanding minimum wages.³⁴ He was also known for sexual violence of many Dalit women (Pandey, 2019, p. 155). Kavita's confrontation with the brother of such a mafia don created an uproar in her family and they decided to send her to a relative's place so that Raja Yadav could not trace her. They married her against her wishes, but before *gauna* (consummation of the marriage) she joined PU.

Babli reiterated the same—*mai ghar me jo daman ho raha tha us wajah se Sangathan me aayi* (I joined the movement because of the oppression in my family). Babli was living in an abusive marital relationship facing domestic violence from of her alcoholic husband

and was a mother of two children when she joined NMS in 2000 on the suggestions of a woman activist from her village. Her parents cried when they came to know that she was joining NMS. Since NMS was associated with MCCI, her parents accused her—*muri katwa ke saath chali gayi* (she has joined the party that physically annihilates individuals). She was very apprehensive of the *Sangathan* initially and was always concerned about her daughter. Despite her apprehensions she did not return as the world at home is far more oppressive and suffocating.

Marriage became the channel for Savita's entry into the *Sangathan*. Savita lost her husband within six months of marriage who died of cholera and her father was concerned about the future of his young widowed daughter to the extent of going against the societal norm of prohibition to widow remarriage. He shared his concern with PU members and requested them to look for a bridegroom from within the Party on the pretext that party members do not have inhibitions about widow remarriage. He was informed about a leader who was prepared to marry on the condition that his political activities would continue after marriage. Kavita's father agreed on this condition thinking that his daughter's future was secured with the piece of land owned by the bridegroom's family. The Party utilised this opportunity to bring Savita into political activism giving way to her political socialisation. Initially she worked part time, becoming a full timer at a later stage. Her story unravels a complex interplay of many dimensions of patriarchy. Firstly, she was driven into political activism using the very mechanisms of patriarchy where women are supposed to follow in the footsteps of their husbands, albeit her husband's political background impressed her. However, in her case, patriarchal norms were strategically used to bring her out of the confines of the family for the cause of revolution that changed her life drastically for good in her opinion. Moreover, she was highly influenced by the ideas of her husband. Thirdly, the feudal outlook against widow remarriage happened to be the 'fertile ground' for her exposure to the world of revolution.

Urmila commented on an important aspect. She said that unlike women who join out of conviction or compulsion, men joined out of their self-interest and fear as her father did. *Mahilaon ne apne man se*

join kiya, purush khastaur se upper caste log apne swarth se join kiye the. Wo apni zamin bachana chahte the. mere papa bhi apne swarth se aaye the, apni zameen bachane ke liye. Gents log apne swarth se hi aaye the – chahe apni dabangi dikhane ke liye, chahe upar jane ke liye (women joined the organisation out of their will and conviction, but men, especially from upper castes, joined out of their self-interest. They wanted to safeguard their land. My father also joined out of this interest. He wanted to save his land to be captured by Naxalites. Males join out of self-interest or to show their power). In this regard, Kannabiran and Lalitha would argue that the reasons for men are qualitatively different from the way in which it moved women. “While to the men the breakdown of feudal authority meant an end to extortion and compulsory free labour, to the women it added the promise of a life where there would be greater equality, both within and outside the home (Kannabiran and Lalitha, 2010, p. 182).

Urmila shared another observation about the resentment against women joining the *Sangathan* that emanates from her own experience. She said that there is a ‘stigma’ attached to Naxalites wherein it was believed by people that whoever, especially women, joins *Sangathan* will enter into inter-caste love marriage. The *Sangathan* was seen as promoting inter-caste love marriages and widow remarriages. Marriage reforms have been in the agenda of the Party. *Samuhik aur Janvadi Vivah Samaroh* (Collective and Democratic Marriage Ceremony) are often held by the Party where simple marriages are conducted with speeches and slogans against patriarchy, Brahmanism, dowry, female foeticide, etc.³⁵ If the inevitability of the marriage is not challenged within the Party, there is a conscious attempt on how marriages are conducted in a simple manner with the least possible expenditure. Occasions of marriage are seen as a platform to propagate new democratic culture and values through songs and speeches (Bhattacharyya, 2016, p. 313). The new democratic culture means conducting marriages without *tilak* (dowry) and Brahmanical rituals.

Urmila, born in a Bumihar caste, after joining NMSS opted for inter-caste love marriage with a Dalit man and faced tremendous pressure and life threat from her family, mainly the father. Her father was against the inter-caste marriage. Urmila shared that

people used to taunt her father. *Mere papa ko log kehte the ki aapne inka saath diya, aur inhi ki party ne inki beti ke saath ye kiya* (people used to taunt my father that he supported the party and allowed his daughter to work for them, but the same party deceived him by endorsing his daughter's inter-caste love marriage). Her father was vehemently against this and he even went to the extent of contracting the killing of his daughter and her lover, which was not successful. A worrying concern that emerges from her narrative was that at times party members are also complicit in such acts as in her case, it was a member of the party (she did not name him) who informed her father about her affair and explored all possibilities to prevent her marriage with him. After this information, Urmila's father literally house arrested her and she was not allowed to do any organisational activity. This informer used to tell her *tum humko rakhi bandhi ho, hamari laaj rakho* (I am like your brother. Please do not put me down). Later on when she complained about him to the party, he was punished.

Urmila's experience and observation highlight an important aspect of patriarchy, i.e. control of women's sexuality which is directly linked to the notions of honour and shame. In the Indian context, Brahmanical patriarchy organises the codes of women's sexuality. Caste endogamy is an essential element offering rules of marriage alliances, violation of which is severely punished to the extent of murder. In Urmila's case, *pratiloma marriage* (hypogamy), wherein an 'upper' caste woman marries a man of 'lower' caste, has generated an outcry. Woman's womb signifies the field and men are seen as providing the seed—the essence, quality of which determines the purity and quality of progeny. The caste purity of the future progeny is inevitable for patrilineal property inheritance, primarily land, which actually governs the norms of family, marriage and kinship (Dube, 1988, p. WS11).³⁶

This brings out an intricate relationship between caste, class and gender. In such a situation any transgression to caste endogamy is going to be dealt with violent forms as is exemplified in the folklore of Reshma-Chuharmal. The popular mythical folklore has many versions, all of them have a bone of contention between Bhumihars and Dalits (especially Dusadhs) and is said to have taken place

in the regions of Bhojpur and Magadh. In all the versions of the folklore, Reshma, a Bhumihar woman, transgresses the prescribed codes of sexuality and falls in love with Chuharmal, a man of Dusadh caste. Chuharmal is celebrated as a hero among Dalits and every year a fair is held in his memory in the Mokama region of Bihar where the folklore is enacted. If the story signifies resistance for Dalits against exploitation of Bhumihars, it brings shame and insult to Bhumihars to the extent of conducting caste atrocities and massacres. On June 19, 1978 one such massacre was occurred in Ekauni village of Aurangabad district of Bihar where an actor who was playing the role of Chuharmal in the folk theatre *nautanki* was shot dead by Bhumihars (Narayan, 2017).³⁷ Women's sexuality clearly appears here as a marker of *izzat* or honour for family, caste and community which is why all kinds of controls are exercised on women across castes with varying degrees. On the day of Urmila's marriage people from nearby villages gathered to witness the sight of an inter-caste marriage which was radical in its implications.

Along with the marriage reforms, the exigencies of the movement reconfigure the intimate lives of the members decisively. For instance, Savita referred to *purush sukh* in her discussion with me. *Purush sukh* connotes the gratifying conjugal life. Her concern reflects a significant aspect of the life of cadres in organisations associated with armed struggle. Though she was married, it was really difficult to meet her husband frequently due to security reasons. Savita used to meet her husband once in three or four months for a few hours that can hardly be counted as conjugality. This is not the story of just Savita, but all those who are associated with armed outfits. She added that he was very honest and never spent even a single penny of party funds for his own use. *Sangathan ke paise se wo kabhi bhi kuchh nahin dete the. Kehte the ki jo bhi kami ho wo sangathan me rakho. Hum vyaktigat paisa nahin denge. Kabhi ek rumaal bhi nahin diye* (He never used to buy anything out of the Sangathan's fund. He used to say that "you should discuss the matter in the for anything. I will not give you personal money". He never gifted even a handkerchief). She further added that when they were married, her father asked him about dowry which he refused. *Purane kapdon me hi manch par shadi kiye. Jo 1500 rupaye mere father ne diye the wo*

bhi cadre ke liye medicine kharid liye (he wore old clothes on the day of marriage. My father gave him Rs.1500 out of which he bought medicine for cadres.). She proudly explained that her husband was known for his selflessness. *To ye mehsoos hota tha ki humko vyaktigat roop se kuchh de nahin rahe hain, lekin wo rajnaitik jeevan me aur samaj kalyan me unki shahadat hui. Unhone samaj ke liye kurbani di* (I used to feel that if he is not giving me anything personally, but he was martyred for the cause of revolution). She has somehow resolved the lack of *purush sukh* in her life with the status of being a widow of a selfless comrade. She never remarried. When I asked about it she casually said that after the *shahadat* of her husband, she did not wish to remarry. The psychological pressure of receiving 'respect' as the widow of a martyred comrade seems to be operating at a subtle level. Although the party always encourages remarriage, at times the "recognition in the political sphere was . . . governed by women's . . . status . . . as wives or even widows of prominent male Naxalites" (Roy, 2012, p. 79).³⁸ Krishna Bandyopadhyay, a woman comrade from Bengal, aptly writes in her memoir, "at that time my work was to inspire other comrades as the widow of a martyr. Dron's death seemed to bring me a different kind of 'respect' within the party" (Bandyopadhyay, 2008, p. 94).³⁹ The very ideas of love, romance, intimacy are reconfigured here beyond the self-interest for the cause of revolution. Sacrificing personal happiness including love, eventually connoting sexual renunciation for the cause of revolution, is seen as the highest virtue. One can try to comprehend the 'sexual propriety' given the 'shifting sands of political contingency' still a healthy discussion needs to be initiated so as to challenge the feudal socialisation.

Exigencies of the Movement, Lived Experiences of Struggle and Sculpting Women's Subjectivities

Women might have been drawn into the movement to break themselves free from the economic exploitation, caste violence, sexual violence, domestic violence, domestic drudgery and many other forms of oppression without any political consciousness, their entry into the movement having a subversive potential to patriarchy generates a wholesale reconfiguration of women's subjectivity

as Sinha argues that joining the movement marks a deep sense of advancement in women's political consciousness and personal liberation (Sinha, 2002, p. 128). Kannabiran and Lalitha argue, "when we look at the way in which women generally perceived their own work, we find two marked trends. On the one hand, a kind of pride at their ability to travel alone, to travel at night, transport guns, arrange and run shelters, travel through forests and address meetings. Even where they were constantly expected to cook and provide food for the party comrades they seldom resented it. They probably shared the conviction that in a new society with the revolution, women would be emancipated as a matter of course" (Kannabiran and Lalitha, 2010, p. 189).

In my interactions with the women leaders, they mentioned political socialisation in the *Sangathan* which is liberating for them. Savita said that *shadi ke baad hi hum poorna roop se rajniti ke bare me jagruk hue hain* (after marriage only I became aware of political issues). In fact, she started teaching in a school which was established by the Party on a land captured from the Bumihars of the village. She chose *Sangathan* work over household work and became a whole timer. *Hamare sasural wale chahte the ki hum unki seva karoon isliye humne tay kiya ki main abhi part time hi kaam karoongi sangathan me. Lekin phir humne dekha ki mera ghar ka kaam disturb ho raha hai. Phir humne tay kar liya ki ghar ke log ghar ka kaam sambhale, hum poorna roop se sangathan ke liye samay denge* (my in-laws wanted me to take care of them so I decided to work part-time in the *Sangathan*. But then my household work was getting disturbed so I decided that I would become a whole timer in the *Sangathan*). Savita shared with joy and pride that after joining NMSS she learnt to give speeches – *dheere dheere mujhe manch par bolne ki aadat ho gayi* (gradually I became used to speaking on the dias). Babli shared a similar experience of gaining confidence to speak on issues of social concern in public gatherings. She said that once in a programme on Women's Day in Ranchi, she spoke from the stage. *Mahila diwas par maine ranchi me bhashan diya. Logon ne khub taliyan bajai* (I delivered a speech on Women' Day in Ranchi. People appreciated it). In an excitement she exclaimed that she responded to media on the questions related to operation green hunt.⁴⁰ With luminous eyes, she said that in one

of the programmes when she was invited on the stage to speak before a huge gathering of people, despite her nervousness, she requested the organisers to allow her to speak beyond the time limit as whatever she said was important and must be heard. The confidence of speaking in public gatherings may sound a trivial issue, but for these women this is an achievement. Dayamanti also began her narration by sharing her experience of preparing for a speech. She said that due to her illiteracy she used to prepare the points for her speech in her mind as she cannot write. While delivering her speech if she was interrupted she used to forget the points, hence in the beginning she would request the convener of the programme not to interrupt her (Anal, 2010, p. 24).

Patriarchy restricts women who are prohibited from speaking in public, especially before men and elders, and they are criminalised for expressing their ideas, the act of delivering speeches on matters of politics by itself becomes emancipatory sculpting the personalities of these women, now filled with confidence of speaking anywhere. Babli visited several states that gave her the exposure of meeting and interacting with people of different cultures. She strongly maintains that if she had not joined the *Sangathan*, she would have been living like many other women, a family oriented life that confines the worldview of women. She compared herself with her daughter who, according to her, is not *tez tarrar* (smart) like her. Her daughter is in an abusive marital relationship. Babli had also faced a similar experience in her marital life. According to Babli, *jis cheez ka hum virodh kiye, aaj meri beti wahi jhel rahi hai* (my daughter is facing the same abuse that I had resisted in my marital life). She gives the credit to the *Sangathan* for making her fearless and confident. Similarly, Urmila said that because of her organisational background, she is able to assert her freedom to an extent in her village. She said that it is still very difficult to wear *salwar-kurta* in Bihar, but she wears it without any social fear. Villagers ask her to resolve their matters as she has experience of conducting the *Jan Adalat*. They all acknowledged the fact that they enjoyed freedom when they were involved in Party work, but now they are confined to the family. Babli said *ghar me rahiyega to ghar hi me dimaag jayega* (if you are at home then your worldview is limited to the family only).

The women leaders were thrilled in recalling the moments of political activism because they thought that those were the finest moments of their lives when they used to mobilise women, travel across villages, deliver speeches, participate in *Jan Adalat*, organise protests, fight with police facing *lathi* charge, incarceration and annihilate class enemy (only in the case of Urmila who undertook squad training and joined them in one action). They were in pain because today they have lost all that freedom and excitement in life and are leading a confined life. Kavita expressed her pain in these words—*aaj mere paas sab kuchh hai. Apna ghar hai. Lekin phir bhi kuchh bhi apna nahin lagta. Mai is ghar me rahti to hoon lekin ek bojh ke saath. Mujhe ghar ki malkin jaisa nahin mahsoos hota* (today I have everything. I have my house. But still I do not feel that I own it). Urmila reiterates, *agar aaj party hoti to kya meri ye haalat hoti. Jab tak hum party me the to inhone mujh par kabhi haath nahin uthaya, lekin aaj main din-raat maar khati hoon* (Had I been in the Party I would not have been facing this today. Till the time we were active in the Party he never beat me. But today I am facing domestic violence on a daily basis). Urmila is living in an abusive marital relationship now with the man whom she married going against the collective will of the society and faced all hurdles. Urmila was delighted to mention that during a protest she fought with police and faced a brutal *lathi* charge in which she was severely injured on her head, the repercussions of which she is still facing on her body as discussed.

The painful experience of the brutal *lathi* charge and interminable effects on her health are unable to hide the amusement with which she talked about it. There was no element of victimhood in being beaten up by police, but a sense of pride. An extension of such a sense of achievement can be found in the narratives of being incarcerated. Babli and Urmila spoke about their incarceration joyfully. Being incarcerated cannot be seen as an enjoyable journey, but for these women, it appears that by incarceration their existence is acknowledged. They shared that incarceration has become a major threat for the activists, but at the same time they themselves were filled with pride for being jailed. Their amusement finds a resonance in an open letter written by a woman comrade from Bengal, Krishna Bandyopadhyay, about the prevailing patriarchy within the Naxalite

movement. While discussing how women provided care to the injured male cadres confining their roles to nursing and making women feel insignificant, Bandyopadhyay writes, “the enemy honoured us with the status of being their ‘enemy’. I won’t deny that being thus identified as an ‘enemy’ brought a sense of relief rather than produce a sense of fear— women could have enemies after all” (Bandyopadhyay, 2008, p.54). Bandyopadhyay’s revelation and Babli and Urmila’s joyous claim of being incarcerated can be read in the light of the feudal culture in which men fighting with women is seen as inferior and emasculated. Roy argues, “imprisonment (and torture) was central to female agency given that women had, at their disposal fewer modes of political subjectivity than men.” (Roy, 2012, p. 78)

In this regard, Roy highlights a salient aspect about female militancy in armed struggles. She argues that women activists unknowingly reinterpret the real and imagined worlds of female militancy by scripting a non-heroic idea of female militancy citing an instance of sexual violence committed to Radharani Adi, a woman protester from Nandigram who was raped. Adi in an open letter addressed to the people of Bengal wrote, “she had been sexually tortured and yet she would not feel her body has been defiled and that even after being ‘dishonoured’, she feels honoured to be fighting for her land” (ibid., p. 130). Roy says that “the instrumentality of sexual violence, governed by gendered relations of power, is resisted by these women as they deploy those very marks of violence to shame their attackers” (ibid., p. 129). Peasant women in Bihar have fought against the sexual violence subverting the codes of *izzat*. “Women activists’ militancy break free from conventional meanings of honour and shame by exposing the sexual violence committed against them in the public sphere instead of concealing it” (ibid., p. 125). Ironically, the radical literature in Bihar continues to use the expression *behan-beti ki izzat* to denote the sexploitation of women and *rakhail* (mistress) to denote the adulterous feudal conduct of landlords. The semiotics of these words lies in the patriarchal codes of shame and honour contained in the heroic narrative of suffering which are latently undermined by the non-heroic female militancy.

The internalisation of the theoretical ideas and the organisation's politics is a question that has left its imprint in the debate on theory versus practice among Marxists. These women are living testimonies of the manifestation of this theoretical debate. Since they are out of the organisation, they are struggling at their individual levels to practise what they have learnt in their political socialisation. When Savita was asked how organisational experience has transformed her personality, she said *hum aaj puja paath, andhvishwas nahin mante. Gaon ke log bhi puchhte hain ki puja-parva kyun nahin karte. Main unhe bolti hoon ki mere saath baithiye aur sabit kariye ki bhagwan hota hai. Aaj bhi hum vaidh ya andhvishwas ke bharose nahin rahte. Hum doctor ke paas jate hain. Ye sab sangathan ki wajah se hi hai* (I do not believe in superstition and rituals. People from my village come and ask about my belief in rituals and god. I ask them to sit with me and prove whether god exists. I believe in medical science and not superstition. I visit a doctor and not any local practitioner. This is all because of the organisation). She also said that despite her economic constraints she never visits the head of the village panchayat, *hum galat mukhiya ke paas arthik madad ke liye nahin jate hain kyunki wo sangathan ke cadre ka shahadat kiya tha. Wo us cadre ki patni ko nahin rahne nahin de raha hai. Hum garib rahenge lekin galat mukhiya ke darwaze par nahin jayenge. Wo bazar me aata hai hum haath bhi nahin uthate hain. Hum tay kar liye hain jab tak uske paas kursi rahega hum uske paas aarthik madad ke liye nahin jayenge* (I do not visit the local village head for economic help as he has murdered one of our cadres. He is now troubling the wife of the martyred cadre. I do not greet him when I meet him on the street. I will prefer to remain poor than going to him for economic help). Similarly, Kavita has mentioned that when she married her daughter, she refrained from participating in any rituals. All of them still believe in the armed revolution and shared their concerns over the decline of the Party in Bihar and the consequential rise of caste atrocities, women atrocities, and exploitation of landless labourers. Despite their family problems, they all have an enthusiasm to discuss political processes in India. Savita constantly referred that *ab logon ki mundi uthne lagi hai jabse sangathan kamzor pada. Aaj bhi log chah rahe hain ki sangathan khada ho jaye. Lekin bilai ke gale me ghanti kaun bandhe,*

isliye log chahte hain ki sangathan khada ho (with the decline of the *Sangathan* oppressive forces are again emerging). Urmila said that on the day of her marriage she broke many customs. First of all it was an inter-caste marriage, and then she did not apply *sindur* and wear a *mangalsutra* which is considered mandatory for married women. Now she feels apologetic that because of the pressure of society she has to follow these norms as she is presently inactive. She wanted to get rid of the constant questioning from her neighbourhood about not wearing the mandatory markers of being married, finally succumbing to those pressures. Kavita is facing another kind of complex situation. She is running a dairy business that she started with the assistance from the Party and her brother-in-law. She had to struggle to establish herself in this business. In the meantime, her husband was arrested and she had to struggle alone to raise her two daughters in the midst of constant police investigation. She is famous in her neighbourhood for not allowing police to enter her house. She shared that for a woman like her who has a history of working with a militant organisation, it is like walking on the edges of a sword. She has to maintain a fine balance of living in a society which is hostile to such women. Her economic independence could rescue her husband from incarceration of an indefinite period as she paid for the lawyer's fee when the Party could no more support him for a further legal battle. She observed that most of the incarcerated cadres are facing this discontinuation of support for a legal battle from the Party due to complex reasons. The decline of the Party's presence and the increasing state assault are held responsible for this. "It was as if the Party gave them a chance to make practical sense of whatever learning they had. It gave them the tools to understand their social reality and was a source of enormous strength and clarity. They felt that the struggle brought them wisdom, knowledge, clarity and enormous physical stamina." (Lalitha et al., 1989, p. 261)

If on one hand these rural women (most of the illiterate) feel a sense of achievement and confidence in matters which may sound trivial to men, the ideas governing the outlook towards women in the Party is that women lack the ability to take political decisions due to their illiteracy and rural background. MCCI in its organ

*Laal Chingaari*⁴¹ states that women lack the ability of building an organisation independently owing to the century-old tradition of dependency on men. It further adds that in the existing socio-economic structure women are unable to understand the meaning of organisation easily. These are seen as the prominent factors for not building up a strong women's movement along with many other reasons. Such ideas emerge in a scenario where women have joined the Naxalite movement after fighting with the family and society knowing well the consequences and the harsh life in the movement. As discussed above, women independently chose to put their lives into danger to safeguard comrades, they themselves chose to daringly face the brutality of police, and regardless of this women's capabilities are still defined through an androcentric perspective. They have capabilities which need to be defined not in relation to male capabilities/efficiencies, but in relation to how women are socialised in feudal norms. An analysis of women's capabilities and incapacities has to be carried vis-a-vis the norms prohibiting the development of an independent personality of women because of which matters which may sound trivial to men are considerably important for women. These seemingly trivial issues are crucial elements of the 'invisible battle'⁴² that women constantly fight. "Women activists have in their day-to-day activities – in talking to people, addressing meetings, political discussions, mobilising for programmes, organising activities or simply moving from one place to another confront patriarchal biases and preconceptions. This means at best not being taken seriously, undermined or relegated to the background." (CPI(ML) Party Unity, 1994, p. 11)

Conjugality: A Recourse to Family

Marriage and family as defining parameters of women's status guide not only their entry into the movement, but also their participation and retention. The issue of child rearing preventing full participation of women has remained a major question within the movement taking women activists away from the 'public' domain of politics to the 'private' realm of the family. Roy argues, "romantic liason and marital practices flourished in the course of the movement, the consequences of conjugality such as the begetting of children were

largely ignored . . . The normative utility of motherhood in party discourse did not extend to ‘real’ mothers of ‘flesh and blood’” (Roy, 2012, p. 86).

For Urmila and Kavita child rearing played a crucial role in becoming inactive in the *Sangathan*. To reduce the burden of child rearing on women activists, the Party has built up an alternative mechanism where women activists leave their children to the family of a supporter. Kavita too left her children with a family in a village so that she can continue her political work. But she developed mistrust on this mechanism due to a mishap with her daughter because of the negligence of the family where she left her daughters. She was about to be drowned in water. This made her furious and she decided to take care of her daughters on her own leaving political activism. Dayamanti said that she had to become inactive because of some family issues, especially raising children. Her husband died in 1993 after which she had to face many hardships alone. Further she added that women’s political life gets restricted due to the family responsibilities. Secondly, most of the women are illiterate and come from financially weak backgrounds due to which their consciousness is not fully developed and they are unable to deal with the family pressure. Finally they have to leave political organisations (Anal, 2010). Kavita reiterated that childrens’ rearing has been a major problem for women. And it is an issue for which no permanent solution in the Party could yet be formulated. The mechanism of leaving the children with the family of supporters is premised centrally on the availability of women’s labour in that family as men are not socialised to take care of children in society. To a certain extent it becomes an added burden on the woman of the supporters’ family.

The inevitability of having children after marriage was discussed in detail with Urmila. According to her it is essential to have children after marriage. She said that it is hard for her to imagine a childless marriage, *shaadi hui hai to bachcha to hoga hi* (if marriage has taken place the birth of a child is a must). Bhattacharyya says there have been instances in the Maoist party when female cadres have pressurised their husbands for children (Bhattacharyya, 2016, p. 318). Even Urmila affirmed that her husband was not willing to

have children, but she forced him to do so. This general perception is deeply ingrained in the psyche of women. "Women are still not able to transcend the limitations of family ideology" (Kannabiran, Volga and Kannabiran, 2004, p. 4876) in which child bearing is a vehicle for women's self-worth. The movement is still to develop a comprehensive outlook on this issue which is affecting the participation of women. PU identifies the hurdles that conjugality creates for women,

crucial here is the traditionally 'female' responsibility of child-rearing. This involves not only the practical tasks of feeding, cleaning but also the more intangible aspects of nurturing and caring. All of which is highly demanding on the physical and emotional resources of the woman. It is not enough simply to bring up children until they are able to fend for themselves but to be able to instil in them the values and political beliefs the mother is fighting for. Quite often the care of the child has to be left to a family member who does not share the same political understanding and possibly resents the burden. In the absence of such an option women find themselves inevitably cutting down their political involvement. Women activists have to contend with these contradictory pulls of their dual responsibility at both the practical level of time and effort and at an emotional level. CPI(ML) Party Unity, 1994, p. 10)

PU recognises that

ways of easing the burden of child rearing on women activists have to be worked out. While activists have to be educated about birth control measures, we also have to explore the option of activists and activist families having children and nurturing them along with their regular political activity. The first step of course is ensuring that arrangements are made to look after children during meetings and practical support in keeping the children in possible comfort while moving from village to village. Longer term, as more women cadres develop we may have to think of some other arrangements for looking after children of women activists. (ibid., p. 15)

In an attempt to question the lack of visibility for gender concerns on the party agenda, women's groups in Andhra Pradesh have raised the issue of mobile crèches and crèches in the neighbourhood in 2004 when a meeting between women's groups and the CPI (Maoist)

was organised (Kannabiran, Volga and Kannabiran, 2004). The complexity of the issue at hand needs more explorations. Although PW encouraged male members of Squad in Andhra Pradesh to go for vasectomy as squad members cannot afford to rear children due to the life threatening nature of their political task . If Andhra PW could favourably implement the policy of vasectomy for men, the Party in Bihar still lacks such a pro-women attempt. In my discussion with Urmila, she said that after a point her husband stopped using condoms due to which she conceived the second time and she was then not willing to abort it. Even though they are both inactive, the sensibility on such intimate matters is not contingent upon being politically active. The experience of the Telangana movement also showed that

[T]he areas that came into focus were those where a great deal of the politics of the women's question is actually located: the family, the policing of personal life and of sexuality, child bearing, nurturing, relationships (with men, with other women), the movement as a place of refuge, a sanctioned or legitimate opportunity for escape from the confinement of the family and of womanhood, the microdynamics of oppression and so on. (Lalitha et al., 1989, pp. 29-30)

With such a historicity of these matters, still “we do not find that there was an awareness of these gender specific areas as valid sites of political struggle” (Kannabiran and Lalitha, 2010, p. 187). In *Laal Chingaari*⁴³ it is stated that women are unable to devote much thought to the development of the *Sangathan* due to marriage, pregnancy and child rearing.

In the absence of a proper mechanism and to cater to the exigencies of the armed struggle, many women activists have decided not to conceive such as Sheeladi who was the President of NMS. Sheela (popularly known as Sheeladi) consciously decided not to give birth to a child after her marriage. She says the children of all comrades of the organisation are hers and it is her moral responsibility to take care of them. As a member of an organisation on which the state has imposed war, it is difficult for her to give birth to a child and take care of the child. It may restrict her political struggle and finally she will completely be

dissociated from political struggle. That is why she does not want to bear a child. For her the children born in the organisation in the course of our struggle are like her own children (Vishal, 2010, p. 6).⁴⁴ In my conversation with Urmila, the negation of conceiving appeared as a *tyag* (sacrifice) which is not possible for 'ordinary women', therefore activists like Sheeladi are revered. The Party also encourages that the whole timers should not consider the issue of bearing children as a personal matter, but in the interest of the revolutionary movement as there cannot be a separate private life for the whole timers who are prepared to sacrifice everything for the cause of revolution. Child bearing is not only a practical problem in acute adversity of the war, but there is also a sentimental attachment towards the child. Therefore, the Party took the stand that bearing children can be a major hurdle to one's role in the revolutionary movement and that whole timers should desist from bearing children, thereby vasectomy is promoted (Bhattacharyya, 2016, p. 320). While it is a welcome step that the issue of child rearing is dealt with as a political question than relegating it to the private sphere, a sustained participation of women can only be ensured if there is a comprehensive campaign on the ideas related to family, marriage and sexuality. "[H]istorical experience has demonstrated that while these issues do alleviate the condition of women they are ineffective in changing their status. The real measure of this status is the extent of the constraints exercised on their sexuality and reproduction. Comprehending this fully involves a radical questioning of the very structure of the family and nature of its oppression for women. It would also involve the recognition of the woman's right to choose between the family and political life; it would question the assumption that the onus of maintaining the family intact rested with the women—or indeed that the family had to be kept intact at any cost." (Lalitha et al., 1989, p. 269)

Conclusion

The narratives of the women leaders clearly show the Naxalites' contribution in waging a militant fight against sexexploitation, alleviating women from feudal constraints, sculpting of their subjectivities and a wholesale reconfiguration of gender relations.

They have participated as active agents of radical transformation strengthening class struggle. Their narratives highlight the fact that in a semi-feudal semi-colonial economy family, marriage and sexuality are as important sites of class struggle as women's exploitation in social production. These are not private affairs which may prove to be divisive for the class struggle if discussed politically. The authority of males in the family is an extension of the authority of the landlords that needs to be challenged at every step, within or outside the *Sangathan* in a semi-feudal semi-colonial mode of production as the household has still not lost its significance as a unit of production and commodity production is not dominating. This may be time-consuming and energy draining and appear to be delaying the class struggle, at times at the cost of losing the support of people, but challenge has to be borne for intensification of the class struggle. One has to make a choice between delaying and postponing the possibility of the class struggle. At the same time, a comprehensive understanding has to be developed on the gender relations, including the intimate space, in a semi-feudal semi-colonial economy.

Notes

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11. CPI (ML) People's War. (2001). *Our Approach to the Women's Question*. Retrieved from <http://bannedthought.net/India/CPI-ML-PW-Docs/PW-EducationalMaterials/Women'sQuestion-2001.pdf>.
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13. All the names of the members appearing in the paper are pseudonyms.
14. MKSS was the mass front of CPI (ML) Party Unity, renamed as Mazdoor Kisan Sangram Parishad (MKSP) after the ban in 1986.
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