

Conclusion

Within the specific context of Bengal, over a tumultuous juncture of Indian history characterised by the Bengal Famine of 1943, the Partition of the country in 1947 and the communal violence that it unleashed before and after Independence, and finally the refugee problem and their rehabilitation - this dissertation attempted to assess and evaluate the roles of some of the exceptional Bengali women who played constructive roles as social workers/activists during this time.

There is little doubt that women strove hard to bring about positive changes in society during the period between 1943 and 1975, although their achievements remained largely unobserved. Women started addressing issues concerning society as a whole and women in particular. In Bengal, women experienced twin roles - that of victims and activists during the famine of 1943. By breaking the age old societal barriers women especially the leftist women started venturing out in the countryside, moving and mixing freely with the ordinary rural women. They began to realise that apart from hunger and poverty women were subjected to other forms of social abuses caused by the excessive drinking of their husbands, physical abuses inflicted on them and most importantly the near absolute lack of educational facilities for them. So, the women social workers felt that in order to bring about positive changes in society women needed to be emancipated from this state of affairs. Women activists also succeeded in putting together newer methods of protest like *gherao*, hunger march etc. However, this sort of actions did not always conform to the traditional feminine imagery of women and therefore society did not always judge them fairly. They were sometimes subjected to ridicule and harsh comments. More importantly, communist women by penetrating into the countryside and slum areas of Calcutta and by taking into membership peasant and working class women succeeded

in bridging the gap between privileged and the so called non-privileged women. They through constant propaganda also started making women conscious of their own rights, as the first-ever hunger march demonstrated.

Assessing the lived experiences of the women under my discussion, certain commonalities can be easily perceived. All these women were feminists as they believed in the equality of men and women and vouched for the fact that women should be given equal opportunities to develop their own potentials. However, it must be mentioned that though they were always concerned about the degraded position of women in the Indian society and the absolute lack of opportunities to improve their condition yet, their activities were never restricted to issues concerning women only. Issues relating to the welfare of the society in general appealed to their sensitive minds. That is why we find that all of them contributed towards the cause of refugee rehabilitation in post-partition West Bengal. Similarly, the two crucial issues - education and food also received utmost attention from them.

Their life-journey also demonstrated that they were in a position to enjoy a greater extent of liberty than what the Indian society generally permitted to women. Apart from Ashoka Gupta all other women chose their own life-partners – a fact not so common in the then Indian society. All these women had accommodating spouses who shared their zeal to serve the society. Family was of utmost importance to them. Ashoka Gupta's life-journey demonstrated that she successfully balanced home and a busy public life. She was also fortunate to have a supportive mother-in-law who wholeheartedly supported Ashoka's unconventional path. Renuka Ray's active life also became a role model for the wives of the civil servants. It demonstrated that how woman could enjoy a separate identity of her own

without disturbing her marriage. Another common trait of these women was that they were honest enough to admit their failures or limitations. Manikuntala Sen admitted that she failed to do anything to solve the problems of the prostitutes. Similarly Ashoka Gupta also felt helpless when she failed to do anything substantial for the abducted and tortured women during the Noakhali riots. Renuka Ray felt that she could not work in her full potential as Refugee and Rehabilitation Minister in West Bengal and therefore decided to resign. Renu Chakraborty played an active role in the Lok Sabha in changing feudal laws which had put women in chains; helped in the enacting of laws for the eradication of social evils and thereby attempted to establish equal rights for women. But she admitted that the bills that the parliament finally passed were not always commensurate to the form that they desired. Their work was largely unremunerative.

While fighting for the women's rights they themselves had to break many barriers. Even after proving their mettle they were more often than not ignored by their male compatriots. Manikuntala Sen is a glaring example of this gender discrimination. Although she played a leading role in augmenting the base of her party in rural Bengal, toiling on meagre party allowances, commuting in public transport, and often living on insufficient food that took a heavy toll on her health, yet, she was sidelined within her party. Her efficiency notwithstanding, she was offered a ticket in the Assembly elections of 1952 only when no other male contenders could be found available for that seat. In the assembly she raised poignant issues especially concerning women. Yet, gradually her speech-timing were reduced. Her husband, Jolly Mohan Kaul was subjected to personal attack. Similarly Renuka Ray was able to rise above petty party-politics while criticising the central policy towards the East Bengalee

refugees; although it was formulated by her own party. She had to pay a price for this as she was denied re-nomination although she worked hard for her constituency. Nor was Phulrenu Guha given a free hand in preparing the draft of the Report titled Towards Equality at the initial stages; she exhibited tremendous courage to highlight her own party's indifference towards the women's issues. So, their experiences showed that men were still reluctant to treat women as their equals.

Though they themselves were empowered but like any other women they also had to work within an environment which was largely male dominated. Renu Chakraborty used her stint in the Lok Sabha to raise issues that were a hindrance to women's emancipation. Women like her had to cross many obstacles to bring about positive changes in the women's world. She had to encounter many irrational questions coming from the conservative section of society, in order to convince them of the need to introduce changes in the existing laws on marriage, inheritance, and wages for the working class women and more importantly enact new laws to tackle dowry and immoral trafficking. Her experience demonstrated how indifferent and insensitive Indian society was towards women's problems.

Women despite the uninspiring socio-political environment, and hindrances at every step, nevertheless performed onerous social tasks to the best of their abilities. Leela Ray(Nag) for example, gave her heart and soul in organising the East Bengal Minority Welfare Central Committee but in later stages new leaders did not assign her due respect which hurt her deeply. Multitasked Renuka Ray carried forward the legacy of social service from her grandmother. Her observation was that women should be given the opportunities to develop their personality but men and women should be complimentary to one other. Manikuntala

Sen's greatest contribution was spreading the roots of MARS that took a leading role in enabling ordinary women cross the threshold of their domestic world and fight for their rights in the remotest corners of Bengal. Ashoka Gupta's life exemplified how a woman could contribute immensely towards different social causes without craving for any remuneration or position. She was a role model for those who would like to opt for self-less social service. While deliberating on the refugee policy she believed that women were yet to utilise their full potential in politics because women were being discriminated against and were offered less important portfolios. She was a champion of women's financial freedom and believed that it was one of the preconditions of women's liberation. Phulrenu Guha became a symbol of selfless social service by donating even her own dwelling house for the cause of social service. By establishing Karma Kutir she contributed immensely towards self-dependence and empowerment of ordinary women. Renu Chakraborty played a leading role in fighting for the equal rights of working class women who faced maximum exploitation.

Having analysed the activities of these extraordinary women the question that naturally follows is that whether these women complied with the feminist theory of social work and practice through their work or not. As feminism presupposes the destruction of all existing power-hierarchies exerting control of one section of people over the other, it is imperative that the roles and activities of women so far analysed should have to be contextualised in the backdrop of feministic discourse. The women under my discussion, were aware of the fact that women were completely under patriarchal control right from their growing years and that they had hardly any separate identity of their own. Therefore, all of them desired to create a society where women would be freed from such an inferior status and would be

provided with equal opportunities to develop their own self. In order to establish an egalitarian society it was necessary to establish a society where man and woman would be treated equally and would be provided equal opportunities. Renuka Ray specifically argued that both man and woman had many things to learn from each other; therefore their relationship should be complimentary to one another.

The concept of feminist social work in theory and practice presupposes the well-being of women as its starting point, though it does not necessarily take into account women's work as its end. The women under my consideration focussed their primary attention on the welfare and uplift of women. But they never limited their activities to those issues that concerned women only. Therefore, they also directed their efforts towards issues like the problem of refugee rehabilitation, or the procurement of food and education which concerned all. They were equally enthusiastic about providing educational opportunities for the less privileged class and even extending the same to the rural areas; they invested their full energies on the task of creating proper infrastructure in government schools or for combating rising food prices etc.

Feminist social work in practice also stresses on the identification of private troubles as public issues. The women under discussion also believed that reform should start from the inner walls of the home because discrimination starts within the home. Renuka Ray had observed that women were discriminated from birth and that in most of the cases the mothers were responsible for this. Similarly, Phulrenu Guha had observed that delicious food items were reserved exclusively for the male members of the house and women were to eat from the left-over plates of their men. Similarly Manikuntala Sen had observed that women

were deprived of the right to serve their guests. She in course of her rural tours discovered that in most of the villages there were no schools for girls. Young widows were still compelled to eat vegetarian food only or were beaten up for going to the terrace in ruffed hair in compliance with certain prevailing prejudices. Almost all these women raised their voices against the abuses that were sprouting within the four walls of the home. They realised that women were subjected to physical abuse, in rural areas when their husbands used drank too much and even took away the money that the women earned through petty trade. These women were much moved by the cases of dowry deaths. Women like Manikuntala Sen and Renu Chakraborty in course of their rural tours came to realise that apart from economic exploitation women also needed to be rescued from these domestic abuses. But the patriarchal bias of the political party to which they belonged, prevented them from achieving success in this regard. Ashoka Gupta also observed that in the male-dominated society the use of brutal force to compel submission from the wives had a social sanction behind it. That is why the victims often hesitated to come out of an abusive marriage because society was largely indifferent towards these private affairs. The activists felt that no emancipation of women could be achieved if inequalities existing within the private domain were not addressed. As creation of an egalitarian society was one of the aims of the feminist social workers, the women under discussion were in favour of reforming the marriage laws, laws regarding inheritance and abolishing social evils like dowry. These they felt were symbols of unequal, unjust social order. The women activists worked hard to bring about some positive changes in these laws.

One of the aims of feminist social work practice was to sensitise women of the gendered power relations which had put women into a

disadvantageous position. Leftist women had to encounter great difficulties while arousing awareness among ordinary women regarding the widely prevalent domination of men in all aspects of society. Sometimes their efforts even evoked laughter. There were many misconceptions amongst women regarding the changes that were proposed in the existing Hindu law of marriage. A section of women were even opposed to the proposed changes in the laws of marriage and inheritance. Women activists had to conduct door to door meetings or organise small meetings so as to convince the women of the need to implement these laws without which equality of any sort could not be established. Leftist women like Manikuntala Sen tried hard to convince the ordinary rural women to form their own organisations; which could enable them to become self-reliant in the long run. The activists also felt that there should be unison to avoid duplication of their efforts.

The social activists so far examined also reiterated and underlined the need to provide certain facilities or emergency services for the women. In India women had to bear the stress of repeated child-birth and that too without proper medical facility. This caused premature ageing of the women. The social activists therefore insisted that the government should make provisions for adequate number of maternity centres. As malnutrition and mortality rates were high among women, the activists emphasised on the necessity of forging proper family planning programmes which could guarantee the well-being of the women. Sometimes their efforts in this direction were subjects of sarcasm as Manikuntala Sen's experience had manifested. Another aspect that all of them had highlighted was a lack of education among ordinary women which affected their growth. So, they urged the

government to set up adult education centres in order to help women become conscious citizens.

These efforts notwithstanding, the feminist social workers also foresaw the need to assist women's career in paid professions. The activists were aware of the fact that working women were in a disadvantageous position. They were subjected to discriminations not only in private sector, but also in governmental sectors. Thus in order to ensure her legitimate promotion woman was often expected to outdo the efficiency of her male compatriots. Manikuntala Sen throughout her life encouraged women to join women's organisations with a view to exerting pressure on the government for making adequate provisions for the employment of women. Even the employers were reluctant to employ women because the latter had to be given maternity benefits. Equal wage for equal work was another issue that these women activists vouched for. Renu Chakraborty, for example fought energetically for the working class women who were never paid equal wages; as they were always considered a cheap source of labour. At the time of retrenchment the axe usually fell on the women because the employers were reluctant to provide them maternity benefits. Women like Renu Chakraborty had to face many irrational and disrespectful arguments about women's work when she took up the cause of working class women. They all pointed out that even in politics women were not given their due position.

To sum up, it can be argued that working in a male dominated environment these women were able to bring some positive changes in society. Instead of being a silent spectator in a period of turmoil, they chose to be on the side of the less privileged. All of them voiced their opinions regarding the feudal laws and other biased social laws that loomed large in Indian society. It can be said

that these women through their actions laid the foundations for a strong feminist movement in India.