Chapter III

Representation of Women in the State Legislative Assembly: Role of the Communist Parties of India

The Communist Parties have a historical presence in India. India started occupying an important position among the leaders of the International Communist Movement since the October Revolution in Russia.\(^1\) Since then there has been a profound presence of communist ideology though initially amongst a handful of middle class intellectuals who came in contact with communist thought of Soviet Union and even at times trained there.\(^2\) With the dominating role of the Indian National Congress the role of the so called communist leaders during the period following the First World War struggled hard to accommodate the ideology in the country. The first communist conference in India was held on December 26, 1925 and hence it can be said that it is that day that the party was formally formed.\(^3\) The party published its first constitution only towards the end of 1926.\(^4\) The party was declared illegal in 1935. But it started functioning legally from July 1942. Since the time it formally started functioning till the present times, the importance and the contribution of the party in the country is an established truth. India has been one of the major countries where communist parties exist and where the traditions of the left movement are still a vital force. Briefing on the nature of the communist parties, they mostly rely on mass organizations, fronts and movements. Communist parties are the classic example of parties based on ideology. The party based on the communist ideology believes in eliminating the system of social and class exploitation which has kept the largest mass of humanity in any single country in the thrall of oppression. Their origins lie in the Marxist-Leninist ideology and the

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international effect of the Russian Revolution 1917. History well reads of the efforts put forward by the communist party towards the marginalized sections of the society. The party programme of the present CPI lays sown that the earlier Indian communist “were inevitably attracted towards the scientific revolutionary ideology of Marxism and the lessons of the Russian revolution, which had a special message for the people of the colonial countries.” The communist parties primarily aimed at working and voicing out the concerns and issues of the workers, peasants, and farmers and even for every oppressed section of the society. The party in its programme points at a positive attitude towards those sections of the society who has been oppressed and deprived of their rights for centuries. It aims for complete social equality and justice. And for achieving the same, the party adopted the principle of democratic centralism and unification of all progressive forces for the achievement of a socialistic state. The country has witnessed the contribution of the party during various crises at different stages of political development. But it needs to be mentioned that the overall performance of the party has not been without severe criticism at various stages of political development of the country. The criticism besides the most debated issue of its electoral success, the party has also come under scanner for its strategy towards the marginalised sections, like the women. The chapter intends to look into the stance of the party on the issue. Before doing the same it would be convenient to mention that, the discussion on the role of the communist party would entail a separate discussion of both the parties, the communist party of India (CPI) and the Communist Party of India (Marxist). This will facilitate a clearer picture, though the origin of both the parties has been the same.

The Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) started working in an independent manner from 1964, after its split over certain political issues and developments in the International communist movement. Subsequently much later, there were again other parties who vowed some form of Marxism but they could not play any substantial role like the above mentioned parties. When there is a discussion on the communist parties in India, we are mostly talking about the parliamentary communist parties such as the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and the Communist Party of India (CPI). With the kind of a party system that is in practice in India, for any party, including the communist parties of India, electoral success is an undeniable necessity. But the question which often arises is the ‘efficiency’ of the party so far fighting the electoral battles is concerned. In India the criticism labeled against the party has been both for compromising its ideology and at the same time not recognizing as its priority on issues as women. The struggle in this case has continued since decades now. According to Chester Bowels in India the communist party in order to maintain their voting strength was seen to compromise their doctrine and hence support for several nationalist causes as Goa and Kashmir. On similar lines, they are often accused of being opportunist and to strengthen their base and scope used to join hands with anti socialist parties, join hands with communal parties like the Akali Dal of Punjab, Muslim League of Kerela, going against the ethics of coalition and even creating chaos and stormy situation when it was in opposition to topple down the government in power. The success of the party since the first general elections in the country where the party emerged as a serious challenge to the powerful Congress party was not because of the contestants but more because of its capacity to

7 There are parties like the CPI (ML) which claims to contribute and develop the Marxist tradition is often challenged by the CPI and the CPI (M) to have the only responsibility to do so leading in conflict between them.
get a strong foothold in some of the strategic regions of the country. In a number of occasions communist party could be a part of the government through coalition. This achievement did not stay for a long time, in fact it was showing a sharp downwards trend. This has been not only in the general elections but also in the state elections held periodically. The party has its branches in almost all the states of the country. But the power of the party organisation is different from one state to another. It has its strong hold only in states like Kerala, Tripura, West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh and Assam. The party till the recent times has not been successful at occupying seats of most of the states, except the above mentioned few where its strength has been attempted to be kept intact.

The party’s stance on the backward, marginalized, dominated and downtrodden classes of society has been the cornerstone of its dominant ideology. Women form integrally a larger section of the marginalised and the oppressed. Any attempt to understand the party’s point of view on women for the period under study, it is imperative to what had the party undertook since its initial days of formation. If one analyse the growth of the party in the country it is evident that the role of women during the formative years of the party as well as towards its growth has been of immense significance. Staunch women supporters’ efforts made the party firmly rooted in the nation. The support of women across the country towards the party, as being active members in the party and even giving an ‘outside’ support has been often a matter of debate for the feminist in India. The role of women who were ‘revolutionary’ during the freedom struggle often took part in the violent activities later. The role of the so called communist women in the nationalist struggle was indispensable. The communists women during the 1940’s were more ‘audacious’ than they seem to be today with handling both the public and the private world, realising the inherent contradictions of

both these spheres. The inevitable consequence of such activity indicated the ability of such group of women to carry out a struggle. Abhilasha Kumari and Sabina Kidwai present in a detail manner the role of the party both before and after the split of the party in 1964 on the question of women. Briefing it, what could be seen is the reality that though with credentials to boast of, the ‘intermixing’ of the two ideologies, Marxism and feminism is still fraught with many difficulties. Independence was achieved by the joint efforts of both men and women, so it would also expected that both alike would be benefitted from it. But that was far from happening. Though freedom was achieved from the British Raj, they were still enslaved to inequality. Continuing from the past where women’s condition was appalling, in every sphere remains the same even today.

With the involvement so emphatic, the role of the Communist Parties would certainly be a point of analysis so far as their point of view on women is concerned. One important way of recognising the efforts that was put by women of the country during the period of development of the party would probably be to incorporate aims, goals and strategy for all round development of women in the country in its party programme and election manifesto. In response to the women question, the Communist Parties came up with their independent women’s organisation which is to address the cause of women in the country. Though autonomous in their way, yet the role of the parent party is very much visible. Besides many points that the communist parties take up as its perspective on women issues, political representation can definitely be argued as one of the most important one. But how far the parties have been able to respond to the same through its women’s organisation remains a paramount question. The women organisation of both the parties is mass based organisations. Proper functioning of these organisations is

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extremely crucial for the success of the party. The question of the party’s role in the question of women will be discussed in the following, from the point of view of both the parties in the state of Assam.

Role of The Communist Party of India (Marxist) on Women Question in Assam:

There are confusions on the exact date of the formation of the party in Assam, as there were consecutive meetings of the communist leaders in Assam in the December of 1942 and 1943, the times when some of the meetings had the final word of forming the party. Nevertheless, the emergence of the Communist Party in Assam can be said to be formally traced to 26th January 1943 at Golaghat by the representatives of the party. The party was headed comrade Jadu Saikia. Simultaneously the party was also formed in Surma and the Barak Valley. In this way the party spread its influence throughout the state. The emergence of the party in the state has been historical. The state seems to have been relatively less receptive to the idea of communism. The most striking feature of the party which helped gained momentum is the issues on which it talked about. Assam being agriculture based economy; the party could positively spread its hold. Influenced by the activities of the other states, Assam leaders too initiated and helped in the formation of various groups like that of the farmers, students and the working class. It needs to be mentioned here, that the role played by the students, farmers and the working class has remained noteworthy. As for example, the movement by the railway employees of Dibrugarh, the refinery movement of Digboi, the Agrain movement by etc. contributed to the growth of the Communist ideology in the state during the initial days. In all these movements this could be clearly seen that the lead was taken by the Communist Party. From time and again the party has raised its voice for many matters especially affecting the common mass and the working class in particular.

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19 Ibid.
20 Ibid., p. 27.
Attempts as such seem to continue even in a more considerable manner. In Assam too the few conforming to the communism believed in the origins which lie in the Marxist-Leninist ideology and the international effect of the Russian Revolution 1917. Like in the rest of the country, the party in Assam too had the contribution of women towards its growth and development. Initially the activities of the members who confirmed to the communist ideology remained strong, yet the concrete form of the party as a political party came in much later. The activities from the workers and employees of the companies and the industrial workers, the farmers along with the presence of a strong youth marked the communist party. Women had led struggles during the period of early formation of the party. The issues taken up were more of general in nature, concerning the entire state or the nation. Women centric issues were not taken up exclusively then. Hence, the participation of women towards issues can be said to be not ‘women specific’. Feminist argued that the Marxists does not deal with women’s issues from a distinct perspective and takes an overall perspective without taking into account the ‘specificity’ of gender into account. This often leads to a half hearted explanation of women’s issues. So far in case of Assam, example abounds on association of women in Communist led movements. The women in the state were influenced by the exemplary work carried out by women at the national level. Women rendered full help towards the present development of the party. So also have been the intellectuals, the educated elites and the progressive minded people who supported the ideology of the party to take forward the cause of a class less and a society free from any kind of discrimination. The role of the above mentioned groups has been noteworthy. In order to carry out their ideology the supporters of the party carried out their plans based on the lines of revolution, protests, mass organisations, movements etc. The party since its inception has primarily focussed in supporting the marginalised and the weak. And women form a

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major component of this section. They suffer the dual oppression in terms of their gender as well as their class. This reality is often overlooked by the political parties.

Now the role of the party has to be understood in the backdrop of the kind of problems the state of Assam has experienced after independence. The formation of the party in the state has been late compared to other states where the history of the communist party has been strong like that of Tripura and West Bengal. It was only during the period 1938-39 that some form of communist groups started forming in the Guwahati, Dibrugarh, Jorhat, Goalpara and Nowgoan. Tracing the participation of women in the party it could be seen that the participation of women in the party was confined to only the educated elite women who joined the party either on their own though very rarely, or with their husbands who were supporters of the party. It is important to mention this because the participation of women in Indian politics has to be seen from the point of view of the most common form of involvement through their male connections that already seems to be in the political sphere. Such a way of making into politics seems to have raised a number of questions on a woman’s individual capacity to make a difference in politics for women.

The experiences of the women Communist workers whose long association and leading role in the stages of the party’s development is very essential for analyzing the role of party in case of women and even vice versa. Few can be said to be an exception as like well known and veteran Communist worker, Hena Bora, who during her interview, narrated on her association with the communist party in West Bengal and then in Assam after she got married to Phani Bora who too was a well known and active Communist worker. Drawing from the past she exclaimed that unlike in West Bengal where the party has strong roots, the party had to be organized with much hard work.

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22 Hemen Das, *op. cit*, p.17.
23 Hena Bora was the veteran and well known Communist leader of the undivided Communist party and even continued to be part of both the parties till her death on 16.09.2013. The contribution of Hena Bora to the party is highly acknowledged by the Communist leaders of Assam.
and dedication in Assam. Talking on the role of women in the party she mentioned strongly that the party was the only party which thought of the deprived and the marginalized section and most importantly of women who face multiple oppressions. But she also decried the spilt of the party and claimed to have worked effortlessly towards the unification of the two parties but much in vain. The veteran praised on the efforts of the women’s wing of the party on especially arousing the rights of women in the state and raising voice for framing necessary laws so far as landed property was concerned along with many other issues.  

Lauding on the activities carried out by the party for women in particular, Hena Bora lamented at the same time the inability of the party in the its electoral success. It seemed that women of the state who are in majority from the agrarian background needs to be mobilised for a better understanding of their rights and liberties. Such attempts were claimed to be undertaken by the party as viewed by Bora because of her long association with the party from the nascent stage. The party had seen women very few women at the lead during its initial stage. The few who took the lead were responsible were not only burdened by the responsibility of carrying out the activities of the party but also had the ‘moral’ responsibility of carrying out activities for women in the state in view of the condition of women. A similar view was expressed by one of the senior women communist leader of the state, Regina Khatoon who also held many positions in the state party for a long time. According to the former leader, the party is the only political party in the state which thinks of an egalitarian society to be brought about by socialism in the state along with eradication of discrimination existing in the present state against women.

On being questioned about the total absence of women from the party in the state legislature, it was viewed that there are primarily two reasons for it, one the idea of electoral politics which is not going parallel with the ideology which is leading to the

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24 Excerpt from interview with Hena Bora on 21.01.2012.
25 Interview was carried out with Regina Khatoon on 12.12.2012.
poor show of the part at the elections and secondly, lack of women in the ‘pool’ of candidates for contesting elections. Because of the deeply ingrained idea of politics being a dirty game and also as a men’s sphere, dissuades women from entering politics as a whole. It needs a mention that the lives of the Communist women form an important source of analyzing the way the Communist Parties have responded to the question of women. The fact that ‘family’ is the basic unit of understanding any phenomenon cannot be ignored.

While the ‘patriarchal’ nature of the Marxist ideology is refuted as much as possible by the Marxist, it becomes essential to have an observation on the way the Communist members conduct the ‘real’ lives and hence deal with the public private dichotomy which has been evaded by the Marxists often. This can be related to the fact that most of the Communist women leaders have had joined the party after getting married, presumably on the initiation of the spouses or in some cases like that of Hena Bora who was associated with the communist party and propagated the ideology before she got married and the leader went on to say that there was an ‘advantage’ of being together in the same party in so far as working for the development of the party. The participation of women in the initial stage of the party was to make the party a formidable one in the state and this task was carried out through meetings, deliberations and holding rallies, and hence made the various sections conscious of the ideology. Hemen Das in his book reflected clearly the efforts that were taken by the early communist leaders in making the roots of the party strong in the state. Even in the subsequent times, like during the Assam movement, women from the communist party participated in large numbers and led the movement. But yet, the women leaders interviewed opined that though the leadership remained in the hands of the male leaders, the efforts of the women leaders who led women in small groups across the state was

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26 Excerpt from the interview with Hena Bora and Regina Khatoon.
27 Hemen, op. cit.
never recognised. What stood out the women from the party from the women of other parties was the ‘fearless’ attitude of these women who not only took the lead but also the ones who volunteered for various activities in the party. This has been reiterated by Hena Bora who was associated with the party since its nascent stage. The opinion reflected that women during those days had a revolutionary fervour in them which often at times led them into troubles like getting arrested for their violent activities or ‘going underground’. But it did not deter them to carry forward the ideology. It has been observed over the years that the activities of the women’s wing has been credible so far as raising awareness in every aspect of social, economic, political and especially basic rights among the women folk especially in the villages is concerned. It is the peasant women, the agricultural worker of the village who is worst exploited and the most neglected one. But who are supposed to take up their causes? The Communist party claims to be the party which speaks for the peasant women who again seems to have distinct issues and problems. It is often seen that the women who are largely engaged in agriculture loses out on their share of benefit. This is partially because of the ignorance of those women to accrue their labour from the output. Though this might look mundane, but can be of significance so far as understanding the ideology and implementing the same is concerned.

**CPI (M) and the AIDWA/Gonotantrik Mahila Samiti:** The relationship between the CPI and the woman organisation which is supported by the party seems to be an indirect one. The party report ‘On Party’s Perspective on Women’s Issues and Tasks’ is a valuable Document which elaborately dealt with the stand of the party on women’s question. The report dealt the issue from various perspectives. it discussed the women’s question in relation with Marxism, the roots of women’s subordination, women’s

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28 As understood from the views given by the interviewees.
29 “On Party’s Perspective on Women’s Issues and Tasks” adopted by the Central Committee, 2005, Communist Party of India (Marxist).
exploitation in a capitalist society, specification of problems in the context of women in India, oppression through caste, fundamentalism, communalism etc are some of the areas where in depth analysis is made. The report as dealt with the role of the party from a critical point of view laying increasing emphasis on ways to motivate women to join the party and increase the number of women cadres. Chapter V clause 5.13 deals with the party’s programme on women’s issue, while at the same time played down on the need to reform any inequality existing in social relations within the family. As like any other political party, the communist parties, did not have a woman’s wing of its own. Before the spilt the women who had leftist inkling came together to work both for the party and women of the state. There was a single united effort by women who supported Marxist ideology. It was only much later, after the split of the main party that independent women’s organisation came into existence which in a way supported their respective parties.

As in case of CPI (M) at the centre, a woman’s organisation in the name of All India Democratic Women’s Association (AIDWA) came to be reformed in 1981 at Madras (now Chennai). The AIDWA is an independent organisation which is affiliated to the left but cannot be called as the women’s wing of the CPI (M). The members of the organisation may or may not be party members and hence many of them are drawn directly. It seems that the organisation on the whole follows a left ideology and attempts to attract women to the left front. It was in 1981 that seven women members from the Assam unit of the party participated in the Central meeting of the AIWDA and it was consequently that meetings were held to form one such organisation in Assam. Initially it was in the Kamrup district in the same year that steering committee for setting up an organisation was discussed and which later came to be formed as the

31 Abhilasha Kumari, *op. cit.*, p.165.
32 *Ibid*.
33 *Ibid*.
Assam, Gonotantrik Mahila Samiti in 1982. The first state level convention of the organisation came to be held in Guwahati in 1984 to deal with the various issues confronting the women of the state. Though there have been a number of small women organisations in Assam during that time, yet it was more in a scattered manner, and this situation facilitated the Samiti to come together. Since then the role of the organisation is seen to continue its struggle for a democratic and progressive society for women. The organisation has its own constitution, programme and flag. It operates at the state, Zilla and Mahkuma and even at then micro level of an area. The organisation expanded with the inclusion of the various committees in the local and district level. Women of the organisation showcased exemplary unity and successful role in incidents like the 1974 strike in the railways which happened in Sarbhog and Pandu area of Kamrup. It is an independent organisation as opined by the secretary of the organisation, Madhuri Devi who in some ways has been associated with the party for almost three decades. Like the AIDWA, it is also a mass based organisation and cannot be said to be the women’s wing of the party. According to Madhuri Devi the strength of the organisation has been on a rise combating difficult situation which is affecting the enthusiasm of the organisation. The organisation seems to have been working autonomously though the support of the parent party. The point of criticism which often seems to be pointed out to such women’s organisation or wing’s has been the question of autonomy of these women’s organisations. In case of Communist Party this question also seems inevitable. The women’s wing claims to work as an independent organisation and states that it is not subservient to the party. The women leaders’ interviewed opined that the

34 Gonotantra Homan Adhikar Narimukti, Gonotantrik Mahila Samiti Silver Jubilee, Convention,10 September 2006, p.3.
36 Gonotantrik Mahila Samiti Silver jubilee, op. cit.,p.3.
38 Gonotantrik Mahila Samiti Silver Jubilee, op. cit.,p.4.
39 Madhuri Devi, former Secretary of the women’s wing of the party.
40 Excerpt from the interview conducted with Madhuri Devi on 27.12.2012.
organisation has the liberty to work on its own. Moreover the women cadres of the party will only work taking ahead the ideology and at the same time work for the women. And in any kind of disagreement which arises between the organisation and the party is solved amicably keeping the priority of the party intact.\footnote{Ibid.} This indicated the implicit truth of working ‘under’ the direction of the party. Besides, many points in the agenda, one aspect which the communist parties have only ‘included’ is that of the aspect of women’s representation in the decision making bodies like the legislature.\footnote{Constitution of the Communist Party of India (Marxist).} This inclusion had come after much struggle as opined by the interviewees and also because of the euphoria created by the Indian Women’s Movement during the late 1970’s and early 1980’s. In criticism to the party’s role on women Amrita Basu\footnote{As quoted in Abhilasha Kumari, \textit{op. cit.},p.145.} opined that the party stand has been weak in so far as women’s political participation is concerned with no significant example either at the Vidhan Sabha, Panchayat or even at the politburo level. She explained on the unchanging nature of the party when it comes to giving representation of women and states that the party shows that as there has been no change in the situation of women even after the country had a woman Prime Minister and hence legitimising that a woman’s interest need not be represented by a woman.\footnote{Ibid.,p.146.} These kind of notions only reinforced the under representation of women in the country and the state. For the CPI (M) electoral success was achieved in the year 1978 and in 1983 elections. The first non congress government was formed with the coming of the Janta Party and the Communist Party of India extended outside support to form a coalition government in the state. The party had sent 11 members of the party as representatives to the legislature. But among these 11 members there were no women who could win seats in the state legislature. After their term the party since then has been failing to win any seats in the state. Meaning there were no women representatives
either. But this does not evade us from making an understanding of the relationship between the failure of the party in the electoral success and the question of women’s political representation. The Assam unit of the party came out with similar efforts as like the Central body in December 2005, on women in the form of a 40 page Document. The Document contained the issue of women from various perspective. The role of women in the party, the organizing principle in various units of the country, atrocities meted out to women in various froms, the reasons for the sub ordination of women etc. has been extensively dealt with. and the In addition to the above mentioned women leaders the fourth women leader interviewed was Seema Biswas.\(^{45}\) She opined that because of their long association with the organisation insightful thoughts were revealed. Despite the much claimed fact of the party being responsive to the marginalized, which women fall in greater number, the party seems to continuing in its failing efforts in case of women’s representation in the State Assembly. Now as discussed in the previous chapter regarding the gate keeping activities of the political parties, here too similar questions arise. The women leaders interviewed from the party had a unanimous opinion in this matter. They seem to point out a number of factors which are said to be major reasons for the aspect of women’s representation to become a point of ‘failure’ for the party. Firstly, the patriarchal nature of the male political leaders, but in an ‘implicit manner’ stands as a major obstacle towards women’s participation in the election race. It is opined that like any other political party there are very few women at the higher level of party organisation. Being at the executive body not only gives the ‘confidence’ to the women members but also encourages to shoulder greater responsibility like being a representative, as the women member in course of a long period with the party learns the dynamics of politics. But this is often seen to be challenged by a ‘crafty’ act of the male leaders of the party, which the interviewees

\(^{45}\) Seema Biswas is the present Secretary of the women’s wing.
mention in a ‘faint’ manner. Secondly, the eagerness of women to join the party or for that matter the Communist Parties depends to a great extent on the electoral success of the party in the state. After all for political parties winning seats is the most important medium for bringing about change and development. Because of the repeated failure of the party to occupy seats in the assembly elections, the voters lose interest in the party, except few who understands the ‘ideology’ and supports the same irrespective of its failure or success. And women seem to be one among such few.  

It is imperative to mention here that women from the working or the peasantry class are often semi literate who is mostly seen to rely on ‘benefits’ than understanding an ‘ideology’. Thirdly, the intellectual burden of the party seems to work against the part so far as elections are concerned. According to C. P Bhambri, “the greatest drawback of the Indian socialist Movement has been its primary and exclusive concern with the politics of elections.” However strong an ideology the fact that the party has failed to realise and implement the same has become a reality for the left front. This seems also to be the case with the party at the national level. The Marxist literature available for understanding the ideology has remained confined to the small group of middle class intelligentsia. It is on them that entire interpretation of the ideology to the people at the rural and semi urban areas relies. The socialist movement which has the working and the lower middle class as its main support is not taken into regard as members neither in the top or bottom of the party. This in other way brings in the question of a ‘proper’ understanding of not only the ideology but also relating it with the problems, issues of a particular region or area affecting the people. The idea of women’s representation has to deal with such similar issues to become a reality under the party.

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46 As opined by the women leaders of the party.
47 As opined by Madhuri Devi as an experience gathered when the organization carries out its meetings and workshops in various villages of the state.
48 C. P Bhambri, op. cit.,p.66.
49 Ibid.,p.61.
For a deeper understanding of the problem, the activities undertaken by Gonotantrik Mahila Samiti would be beneficial. The wing periodically holds its daily meetings, discussions on what needs to be done about the various issues confronting the state. It is also important to understand the kind of discussions that goes on in the meetings of the women’s organisations. The interviewed members\(^{50}\) stated that general, executive and meetings with the parent party are also an important activity for a proper communication between the women’s wing and the parent to carry out decisions on various issues. This relationship is pertinent for a more detailed understanding of women’s under representation. The AIDWA calls in for support of women’s cause but it also cautions against “party less and above party” feminist organisations.\(^{51}\) This shows the non acceptance of the organisation’s unlike the feminist one that the patriarchal system of society is not responsible for exploitation of women. At the central level of the AIDWA, specific women’s issues\(^{52}\) are discussed in these meetings including discussions on how to lead the party towards the fulfilment of the goals. As for the Gonotantrik Mahila Samiti (GMS) the organisation hold its meetings in different districts of the state\(^{53}\) to take note of the area specific problems and conveying the same to the higher bodies like the AIDWA depending on the gravity of the issue and even to the party at the state level. They not only hold discussions but also carry out demonstrations, rallies and protests.\(^{54}\) According to Hajrah Begum, the Communist women were in the forefront of mighty campaign for lowering food prices and essential commodities.\(^{55}\) The party in Assam called for an Assam bandh for the Dhemaji blast

\(^{50}\) Four women leaders including of the party who are also members of the party were interviewed on 27.12.20012, 25.05.2012, 28.12.2012.

\(^{51}\) Abhilasha, \textit{op.cit.}, p.150.

\(^{52}\) Discussions carried out primarily deals with the kind of exploitation, violence and discrimination that women in the state have been facing with. Besides, the conventions and meetings stressed on the about the labour issue among working women, schedule caste and tribes, the minorities and ethnic violence etc.

\(^{53}\) Ganasktiki, 15.06.1984,p.5.

\(^{54}\) The Kamrup unit of the Samiti consisting of around 200 women members took out a silent protest to the Deputy Commissioner’s office against the rising fuel price on 10\(^{th}\) March 1986.

\(^{55}\) Hajrah, \textit{op.cit.}, p.6.
and criticised it as an act of cowardice and savagery.\textsuperscript{56} In such similar ways the party and the women’s organisations makes clear of its stance on various issues. The women’s wing of the party boasts of being an active body carrying out various activities. One example can be said to be when the AIDWA extended help to flood victims of the devastating flood of September 1984\textsuperscript{57}. Similar such activities were carried out even later as opined by Madhuri Devi, who expressed that it was she who led a team for such activities. But mere activities at the party level in the state cannot justify being a supplement to the absence of women from the act of political representation. Besides, the role of the party too has been seen to be slack in promoting women for representation. This can be justified from the minuscule number of women in the executive body of the party. While the composition of the women’s wing is decided every three years by the central body of the AIWDA, yet in the state level, very few women can be actually seen at the party hierarchy. But the reason for this was said to be more on the inability of women to get involved in the party than the ‘patriarchal’ nature of the party. The Marxists, both the male and interestingly the women leaders too have often denied the patriarchal nature ingrained in it. It has been strongly resented by the party that they are failing in mainstreaming gender concerns.

The mouthpiece of the women’s wing ‘Awaz’ which is a monthly magazine started around 1977 is said to be an opportunity to women to express their issues, concerns and expectations from the society on their concerns. A medium as such raises awareness on various issues like the present state of politics which is detrimental to the unity of the country, issues like violence against women and duties of women towards the progress of society etc.\textsuperscript{58} The views presented there have not been confined to the women from the party alone but even from different ideological background. The

\textsuperscript{56} Ganasakti, 9.11.1984.
\textsuperscript{57} Ganasakti, 09.1.1984.
\textsuperscript{58} Awaz, October 2013.
attempt of this endeavour has been primarily to express the issues that women in the state have been facing along with having an opinion on varied issues.\textsuperscript{59} – Another crucial aspect which can be related to the aspect of the inadequate representation of women by the party is the overall ‘position’ of the party in the state and also of its different wings which works together to make the party strong. The impression that can be drawn from the interviewed is that encouraging women to participate in politics in an effective manner has become a challenge. Though attempts have been continuous yet, mobilizing the women especially at the grass root level is said to be a difficult task. The difficulty which arises often is said to be a gap between understanding the ideology and implementing the same among the working class. This has been one of the major obstacles. Moreover, with competition among political parties, tempting these voters efficiently through economic power has become a norm. The consequence most often results in getting sucked in the trap with little understanding of the complexity of the problem for a petty bargain which will not serve the purpose of the working class, the peasantry, rural agriculturist or even the middle class amongst whom differentiation has deepened. Under such scenario, any support to the party or the women’s organisation has come in a restricted manner.\textsuperscript{60} What draws attention is that the activities carried out by the organisation has remained ‘inside’ the party. But again it needs to be mentioned that analysis of activities inside the party, in form of meetings and discussions cannot be ignored because it is in the party that issues like which member would run for seats in elections is discussed. It is noteworthy that the activities taken up by the party towards women issues have been at a great extent, albeit it’s continual failure in the elections in the state. When questioned on the activities of the women’s wing, it was seen that there was not only a very disciplined but action oriented plan towards the various issues related to women that the party undertook from time to time. The organisation at the

\textsuperscript{59} As opined by Regina Khatoon.
\textsuperscript{60} As opined by Hena Bora.
state level is also supported by the central body, the AIDWA. The party talked of giving equal pay for equal work for women, removal of all restrictions in respect of employment, giving adequate financial allocation and extra facilities for education of women and to raise the status of women assumed prime importance.\footnote{Hajra, \textit{op.cit.},p.16.} Promises as such seem to have continued but what could be seen is the non implementation of the same in terms of policies as the parties has been failing to win seats in the elections. The Communist Parties boast of them being the only political party that has left “a mark on the civil and democratic rights and gender relations.”\footnote{Peter Ronald De Souza, “The Communist Parties in India” in Peter Ronald De Souza and E. Sridharan (eds.) \textit{India’s Political Parties}, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2006,p.237.} Stating this positive activity by the party is but contrasted by what the party could not achieve in the gender aspect by stating that the party could not succeed in breaking the nexus between patriarchy and caste.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}} The party which had eventually incorporated the issue of women is seen to be silent on the layers of differences which exist in terms of women as a group and other categories. The problems confronted by peasant women will definitely be different from working class women, urban or rural. Most often the party is seen expressing their views explicitly on tribal and the minority groups but very few has been discussed on the issue of women in these minority groups and the position of women in the smaller communities. Because in Assam with the growth of identity politics, many smaller groups has been asserting their rights. Women from these communities also form a vulnerable section. Most of these communities based in the rural areas are often seen to be illiterate or less literate and needs to be educated or to be made aware of their rights. The Communist Parties are especially seen carrying out awareness programmes on the issues in various parts of the state. In a similar manner the women leaders agreed on carrying out such programmes for the development and empowerment of women in both the urban and rural women. Much ignored question is the non homogeneous nature

\footnotetext[61]{Hajra, \textit{op.cit.},p.16.}
\footnotetext[63]{\textit{Ibid.}}
of women in the state, which the party has not looked into. The urban rural divide, the
differences between communities, the economic position of women from various strata
of society, whether economic participation facilitates emancipation from other shackles
of oppression etc needs to be looked into which has party has neither seen to discuss nor
deal in its manifesto elaborately.

**Election Manifesto’s from 1975-2006 of CPI (M):** An elaborate party perspective on
women’s issues and tasks reveals a coherent opinion so far the matter goes. There are
important references in the party programme both at the Central and the State level
identifying the struggle against gender oppression. The CPI (M) as its organizational
tasks lays down that in order to ‘activise, strengthen and expand the party there is a need
to enroll more women, promote them and train them into leadership. 64 It states in clear
terms that the party intends to recruit more women into the party develop them as
Communists, increase their responsibilities, and also ensure that they are placed well in
the party. 65 A positive indication is that the party mentions in clear terms that the
existing wrong trends in the party should be eradicated so far as women’s issues are
concerned. The formation of the AIDWA was because of the “growing revolutionary
urge” within the democratic women’s movement.66 And if we carefully look at the
Constitution of the AIDWA, we could see the intent of the organisation who lays down
clearly the tasks of women’s uplifment in their own hands through making it a broad
based organisation. As in the case of Assam, the women’s wing was formed during the
same time. As from the manifestos of the CPI (M) the issue of women came later in the
discussion. Women were a mere mention in the manifestos without any planned strategy
or even in identification of the groups to be benefited by their strategy. Emphasis was
laid more in the ‘way’ of achieving the goal of socialism, rather evading how this would

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64 https://sites.google.com/a/communistparty.in/cpi/brief-history-of-cpi.
65 Party Programme of the Communist Party of India(Marxist).
66 Abhilasha Kumari, *op. cit.*, p.149.
be achieved in case of women and whether women would form a part of the struggle to achieve or not. The basic ideology of the party lacks coherency in so far as woman question is concerned. They did not feel it necessary to include matters like domestic violence or dowry, and hence were underplayed it as “non-class” issue. But this idea was given a contest and efforts were made to not only include but also implement the various strategies to ameliorate the condition of women at the grass root level. The left government is argued to have played a pioneering role in the inclusion of women in the village Panchayat and organizes women in self help groups to secure themselves economically and socially. But a reciprocating role has not been seen at the state level in the state assembly elections. There is a total absence of women representatives from the party despite the fact that the party has included in its programme as well as in its manifesto the aim to serve the women in the state. There is no denial of the fact that the participation of women in the party has been reasonable. But this form of participation has not progressed to representative at decision making bodies.

From 1983 the party has been at the opposition. It is important to mention here that the role of opposition in the State Assembly has been a complicated one. This has been so more so for the party keeping its ideology and the problems of the state. The point to be made here is the solution of certain problems from the perspective of the ideology. And as facts has revealed the party has been strong as an opposition party. The party since its inception has been critical of the congress and the AGP so far its activities are concerned. Moreover one most critical area where the party has been forceful is the question of the ‘imperialistic’ designs of the Congress party. The spates of violence which the state underwent were responded vehemently by the party. The killing of innocent people in the state from time to time, mostly children and women which is a

67 CPI (M) “On Party’s Perspective on women’s Issues and Tasks” op. cit., p.20.
68 As mentioned in the election manifesto of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), 2006, p.3.
69 Ibid.
70 Ibid., p.5.
known fact has been responded heavily by the party along with mentioning in point number twelve on atrocities inflicted on women for dowry, kidnapping etc. Not only this, the party when in the legislature formed a resilient opposition criticising the parties in power. It formed stable coalition governments and through the various means like the legislature, mass media and public platforms pressurized the government to adopt pro people policies. It would be incorrect to ignore their contribution at the social, political and economic sphere during critical phases of state development. But its electoral success remains still questioned despite its heavy ideological baggage especially in Assam, where events have been critical and often resulting in violence. The role of the communist parties in providing the panacea still remains a question. The role of the party as the opposition party has to be understood in the context of the history the party has in the country. The party seems to have emphasized on the important role of the state branches and the district councils which are the carrier of information at the grass root level, which otherwise affects election at the local and the regional level.

**Role of CPI in Assam:** After the split of the party, the Communist Party of India (CPI) started functioning as an independent party. The party adopted its independent strategy to deal with issues of national and state importance. It cannot be denied that the party shares a common history as the Communist Party of India (M) and hence can be said to be old and a prominent party. The role of the party will be analyzed after its split in 1964. The party in an independent manner has its own constitution, programme and symbol. Though the modus operandi is different compared to other Communist Parties, the role of the party in India and in Assam in particular can be said to be a constructive one. Based on similar lines of the party at the central level, the party claims to be the party of the “Indian workers, peasants, toiling people in general, youth, students, men and women, intelligentsia and others devoted to the cause of overcoming imperialism

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71 Ibid., p.11.
72 Party Programme, *op. cit.*
and capitalism and ushering in socialism.” This indicates an all inclusive idea for a more progressive democratic society. The worker peasant unity forms an important aspect of the communist goal. The CPI as an independent political party too has been participating in the electoral politics with very little success till date. Both the Communist Parties have accepted electoral politics and adopted it as principle strategy for gaining political power. Like any other leftist political party, the question of electoral politics is often seen to be underplayed by the CPI. This can be justified by the minimal or almost no presence of representatives in the Assam Legislative Assembly after 2001, the period the electoral success of the both the Communist Parties has showed a sharp decline. During the period of its hay days, especially during the late 1970’s spreading till late 1990’s though the party was not being able to form government on its own strength, yet the party could send a handful of representatives. The picture has been disturbing.

In the context of the study, the role of the party is imperative to be looked into. As the party talked in terms of a struggle from all the marginalised sections of society, women cannot be ignored therefore. The central body of the party claimed that it was the first political party who pioneered the celebration of 8th March as the women’s day much before it was declared by the United Nations as the International Women’s day in 1975. The elections manifesto’s, reports and interviewees with the women leaders of the party forms crucial source to understand the role of the party on women question. If we look at the statistics from 1978 to 2006, on the performance of the party in elections, the party could send only 14 representatives to the Assam state legislature. And most importantly there have been no women from the party who represented the party in the

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Assam State Legislative Assembly. The reasons need to be looked into. This is also because of the fact that the left parties claims to be the only party who speaks for establishing a truly socialist state with mass participation of all the classes of people who believes in a truly democratic development. Moreover the party also lays down its organisational structure to be based on “democratic centralism, i.e. centralism based on vibrant inner party democracy, its units at different levels, its rank and file members and activists closely linked with the masses and carrying forward the revolutionary fighting tradition of our people shall stand with the people for the attainment of these objectives.” But it is found that even at the party’s executive body of the state unit of CPI there is only one woman. 76 The party which has its units in other districts has its own structure functions under the state unit.

**Election Manifesto from 1975-2006 of CPI:** The role of the party on women can be gauged from the election manifesto’s which lays down its intention and program for the women. To analyze the response of the party towards the women issue, the election manifestos provide an efficient instrument. But the point of difficulty creeps in analyzing when there is just ‘a sentence’ in point 19, mention about the need of women’s equality and framing of laws for the same. 77 Similar idea has been put forward by Soma Marik when she talked of mention of women just once in the matter of ‘protection’ in a page long summary of the achievements of the left front. 78 The party in one of its report 79 mentioned the inadequacy of women representation both at the party level, local bodies as well as in the state and the national assembly along with mentioning is chief concern of the congress held on the sharp decline of the party in the electoral performance in the states. To arrest the problem of women’s under

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76 Asomi Gogoi is the only woman member in the executive body of the party in the present day.
77 Election Manifesto, 2001,p.4.
representation the women department of the party had prepared a detailed document on the same which should be properly implemented. Moreover, at the national level, the women department of the party completed a cadre met and prepared a document both in Hindi and English on the party’s work among women.\(^{80}\) The report was crucial so far as the woman question in the country was concerned. Because such efforts gives a direction to the mass organisations like the women’s organisation NIFW and its concern at the state level to generate the level of awareness for participation. The report laid down in an explicit manner its failure of not getting enough women in the party, getting seats in the local Panchayat elections even after elections and entrusted the responsibility to the state units for adequate representation of women in the State assembly elections and in the Parliament.\(^{81}\) The party since its inception has been attending to the various problems confronting the state. But it was much later that the question of women to make its mention in the manifestos of the party. As for example the election manifesto of the 1996 State Assembly elections in its first page mentioned of the atrocities inflicted to women and children and killing of innocent people during the AGP rule.\(^{82}\) Even in the election manifesto of 2001 mention has been made of the need for changes for women and to eradicate any kind of discrimination.\(^{83}\) There is a dual oppression inflicted on them. The party intends to strengthen women, by organizing women through mass activities, and veto any kind of oppression inflicted on them. The party in its manifestos emphasized on promoting women for representation and it should not be only for the sake of representation, rather there should be commitment towards the fulfilment of genuine results.\(^{84}\) What can be seen from the manifesto of the party is the aspect of political representation for women is a mere

\(^{80}\) Ibid.
\(^{81}\) Ibid.
\(^{82}\) Election Manifesto of the Indian Communist Party. 1996.
\(^{84}\) Ibid.
mention and hence there is no special emphasis on the same. The other issues such as that of the centre state relations, integration of the North Eastern states for socio political and economic development etc seems to be discussed in a broader manner than the women issue. In a way, the question of women seems to have been included for a mere purpose of ‘mentioning’ it. There is no corresponding relation between the aims of the party with the participation of women in the party and even on any attempt for representing them to the decision making bodies. The presence of a woman’s organisation which the party supports seems to be a failing justification for supporting women issue.

**CPI and NFIW/Asom Mahila Sangha:** At the national level it is the National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW) which is also an independent mass organisation. It does not come directly under the party and disagrees to the fact of being called as the women’s wing of the CPI. The members of the organisation also at times work for the party. At the regional level, it came to be known as the Asam Mahila Sangha. The organisation took its present formal shape in 1971. It needs to be understood that the women members of the leftist organisations were also members of the women’s movement that was slowly shaping since the independence days. Women’s participation in the freedom struggle also made them aware of ‘their’ situation, issues and problems. The issues or the agenda was not against men. In fact ‘their’ issues got subsumed under the larger cause of national struggle. In spite of this what resulted was a kind of awareness that there were problems specific to women and which led to the formation of many women’s groups or small organisations all over the country and even in Assam. The women of the state was formally organised and mobilized for the first time by Chandra Prava Sailkiani, a freedom fighter and social worker through ‘Asom Mahila Samiti’, first of its kind which had great influence later on. In a similar way, women

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85 Ibid.
with a leftist bent of mind, who were a part of the trade union, farmers association came together in to form Asam Mahila Sangha. The organisation was led by veteran women leaders like Hena Bora, Priti Baru, Kamla Majumdar, Nilima Dutta, Kiran Kalita to name a few. The primary aims and goals of the organisation as bring about social and economic changes through political changes, equality between men and women in every sphere, removal of discrimination. The organisation received the recognition of NFIW long back which gave impetus to the organisation to work better. It is seen to work for the women movement in the country with other progressive forces in the country. As said above that there was no women representatives from the party, interview was conducted with two senior women leaders of the party Asomi Gogoi and Priti Baruah who held various important posts in the party and Asomi Gogoi is also in the present executive body of the CPI besides holding an influential position in the Asom Mahila Sangha. She went on to opine that though the organisation is overlooked by NFIW yet the specific problems typical to the women of the state is attempted to be carefully dealt with. The issues which are emphasized by the organisation and on the basis of which struggle is carried out are like reservation of jobs for women in the public and private bodies, 33% reservation of seats in the representative bodies like the parliament and the state assembly, proper implementation of the welfare policies of the government, proper wages to women for their labour, property laws for women, proper implementation of policies and programmes for mother and children, proper interpretation and implementation of laws concerning the rights of women etc. Priti Baruah in her interview dwelled on the ways the party work was carried out with earnest communist fervour rather than emphasizing on acquiring seats in the elections.

88 Interview with Asomi Gogoi was conducted on 25.01.2012.
89 Priti Baruah has been associated with the party since the early 70’s and since then along with Hena Bora had advocated for women’s right in the state along with being an experienced member of the party for many decades. Interview with her was conducted on 26.01.2012.
90 Excerpt from the interview with Asomi Gogoi.
She went on to say that the women workers though at the forefront were few and particularly belonged to the educated middle class, yet they attempted to understand the problems of women from various sections of the society with sincere efforts unlike the divide between women which has become broader among women and no attempt is made by the party to narrow down the same. On the aspect of political representation, she pointed out to the changing nature of politics to work as a deterrent to women joining politics.\textsuperscript{91} The interviewees showed that despite various obstacles in the region, the organisation has been successful in carrying out its ideology through attempts like the ‘Raj Bhawan Abhijan’\textsuperscript{92}. Because of its link with the International Communist Movement, the organisation even attempted to draw ideas and reciprocate the same for a better understanding of the problems. Efforts were taken by the party in earlier years to even send party members for study tour and refresher courses to communist countries for expanding knowledge and implementing the same in the country.\textsuperscript{93} The report laid down this fact that reading habit has gone down alarmingly in the recent times at different levels.\textsuperscript{94} The conferences and the conventions of the organisation is held annually\textsuperscript{95} within the state wherein women leaders of the districts participate informing of the specific problems confronted by women in specific in the districts and even at the Zilla’s like the one held in Guwahati\textsuperscript{96} where the required role of the organisation or the party to be played in this regard is discussed. Even separate conventions are held by the women workers union which enables the working class women to specifically deal with their issues.\textsuperscript{97} The party does not only concentrate with the units already formed in the state but works for creating new units of the organisation\textsuperscript{98} . These are some of the efforts

\textsuperscript{91} Excerpt from the interview with Priti Baruah.
\textsuperscript{92} Janamat, 28.06.1976.p.6.
\textsuperscript{93} Excerpt from the interview conducted with Asomi Gogoi.
\textsuperscript{94} Organisation report, \textit{op. cit.}
\textsuperscript{95} Janamat, 01.11.1976.
\textsuperscript{96} Janamat,01.02.2005.
\textsuperscript{97} Janamat, 1.11.05.
\textsuperscript{98} The organization formed a new unit in Sotia on 19.06.1986, Janamat, 09.07.1986, p.5.
that the party with the organisation undertakes for advancing the ideology amongst the people of the state. But of course such activity is seen to be more at the national level than at the state level. It is laid down in the programme of the party that there is a need of active state units which otherwise often leads to in adequate attention to the local and the grass root issues hence leading to less interest in the elections to the local bodies.  

99 The party in its various ways strongly stated the need of strengthening of the party’s strength at the grass roots. The organisation holds its meetings once in three years at the conference level and even yearly. The discussions carried out ranges from the problems faced by women in the state to the ways of making the communist ideology work for the people in the state. On being questioned on the democratic organisation of the party the women members opined that “it exist only in principle” and not in practice. 100 As the programme contains the provision of having internal party democracy with its members in rank and files being closer to the masses, yet this is hardly seen in practice.

The party which is for the working class and the masses actually is not composed of the same. the members who constitute the party or even the women’s organisation belongs to the middle class because of which they seem to fail at being connected to the problems confronted by people at the grass roots. Similarly the masses also turn sceptical of extending their support to the leaders who do not belong to ‘them’. Identifying with the voter is essential. This problem of composition of the active members or functionaries has become a continual problem since the days of the inception of the party. The members are not drawn from the peasant or the working class rather is a group of middle class intelligentsia. 101 This poses as an obstacle not only towards reaching out to the target group but also the expansion of the ideology takes a back seat. What rest on the party leaders is to simplify the ideology and at the

99 Organisation Report, op. cit.
100 Excerpt from the interview conducted with Asomi Gogoi.
same time implying the electoral benefits the party would be giving out on winning the elections. Therefore what can be seen is the ideology vis-à-vis electoral politics, which has been one major aspect that the communist party has not been able to bridge down. Now and then the party claims that the ideology they hold can bring about real changes in the society. Whether the issue is of the illegal migrant, language, law and order situation farmer or student issue, the party claims that it has well attended to it from time to time. But these aspects have remained confined to the level of party meetings alone, which seems inadequate if concrete steps needs to be taken. As the number of women members is less in the executive body, it is highly probable that there will be no discussion on the women’s perspective on the issues being discussed. This happens because of the failure to understand that each problem affects women in a different way. Besides the above mentioned efforts of the organisation to work for women, the mouthpiece of the organisation which is known as ‘Hongho Barta’ is again one of the most resourceful medium to know the experiences of women. It comes out once in a year. The articles ranged from discussing issues like domestic violence, the political role of women in the state, children welfare and poems etc revealing the thoughts of women and promoting new ideas and efforts. The diversity of issues published facilitates a more in depth analysis of the actual situation that women experiences. The weekly newspaper ‘Janamat’ is an influential carrier of the party’s stand on various issues. Even the activities carried out by the Asom Mahila Sangha in the state, its meetings in the various districts etc are a regular feature in the paper. This in a way helps people know the women’s organisation goals that it seeks to carry out.

**Consequence of the Split:** If a proper evaluation of the party is to be made on the question of women, there is a need to critically look into its idea behind the issue. When

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102 *Janamat*, 25.12.1979. The issue of illegal migrants has been one of the most thoroughly discussed issues in the party and the even published numerous times in the party’s newspaper *Janamat*.  
103 *Janamat*, 22.02.1965.
it comes to the question of winning seats at the elections, both the parties CPI and the CPI (M) has not been a success story. One major reason for this can be said to the weakening left front in the country which is also seen at the state level. The spilt of the party which has brought in an impasse in the progress of the ideology is felt hard in the recent times which the interviewed members of both the parties have admitted. According to B. D. S, “the spectacle of utter decadence which the communist movement presents today is mainly the result of the disunity.” Achin Vanaik opines that the uneasy and suspicious relationship between the left parties and the social movements has been the greatest failure in India. Similar situation seems to continue even today and the status quo on the ‘failure’ of the party is maintained. It is not so important that we dwell into the reasons for the split instead look at the consequences and the role of women in this regard. The interviewed women leaders of both the parties have a common view surprisingly. Believing it to be unnecessary and unyielding rather divisive to the growth and success of the Communist Movement in the country as well as in the state, the women leaders claimed to have always worked for the unification of the parties. As like during the days after the independence of the country, the NFIW has been the only women’s organisation which have been working for both the rural and the urban women. This was much in contrast to the then existing organisations which had the participation of the educated urban middle class women. Accepting the truth of the spilt, the women organisations, keeping their differences intact still came together in many occasions. This in a way facilitated an easier understanding for the voters, but also lays down a probability of the parties once gain working in a united manner as one. This situation of disunity between the other Communist Parties from the CPI, the parent body, being also the largest one, has hit the state more. The party vows to work for the

unequal development of certain regions of the country and Assam being an example for a long time now. The party in its manifestos discussed the issues of illegal migrants, tribal issues, development of the backward classes and the harijans, democratic socialism, development issues, and among many the need of establishing social justice for women. In one of the news given by the party, the organization laid down that the women are the most affected victims of religious, communal violence and social and military turmoil. Some of the problems are specific to the state. In order to solve the problems, the parties should give the voters the conviction of them being able to solve the problems. But in the midst of controversies surrounding the left role in the state, it seems difficult to reach to a consensus of the problems. If seems incomprehensible when the parties give the voters a difficult choice to make during the elections when the ultimate goal of all the Communist Parties is establishing a socialist state. It seems to be a confusing situation for the masses. Many times judging the party through its ideology seems difficult. Yet, women members from both the parties claim to have been in continuous effort for the unification of both the parties. This in a way shows the realisation of the consequences of the parties split. The interviewed members who in unanimity support the idea of unity of the parties, justify the future of both the parties coming together and having a united left front one day by opining the exercises they carries out on occasions like they did during the famine of 1965. This act of unity by the women’s organisations, the Asom Mahila Sangha and the Gonatantrik Mahila Samitiis seen on occasions like the International Women’s Day, any major incident of violence against women etc. these efforts reiterate the need of the left parties coming together. The contribution of women even in this activity is significant. The interviewees opined that the specific problems faced by women in the state due to

107 All the women leaders of both the parties opined this.
violence, killings, ethnicity, land problems etc. needs special attention and the help of the party is also required.

**Marxism and Women:** From the above discussion what can be inferred is the intricate relationship between Marxism and Feminism which has led to numerous problems. As seen above, though different in its strategy, both the parties draw its ideology from the single source of Marxism. This makes it necessary that we look into what has been the relation between Marxism and Feminism. This might help for a clearer evaluation of the problem under study.

Any understanding of the role of the Communist Parties in regard to the women question first has to be understood in the ideology that it believes in. The question of women was not well attended by countries supporting any ideology until recent times. The same was with India, when during the 1970’s and the early 1980’s saw an upsurge for it. It needs to be mentioned here that the idea of Marxism in India has its own difficult dimensions till date. The method which the Communist Party intends to employ to solve general as well as the women issues is again fraught with difficulties. Before dwelling into it, it is pertinent to undertake an analysis of the idea put forward by Marx on the issue of women. What can be seen from the Marxist literature is the ‘isolated’ manner of dealing the issue. As for example, Marx seems to have recognised only that kind of labour which resulted in a wage and leads to visible output in a material sense.\(^\text{108}\) This brings in question of the ‘domestic’ labour which is carried out in the private sphere and hence ‘invisible’ or not leading to any production of ‘wage’ for the labour. This is supposed to be the traditional understanding of labour in the context of women. With the growing awareness in accepting this kind of an idea, feminist started objecting it and similar such issues. This led to a confrontation between

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Marxism and feminism. This confrontation is well brought out by J.E Engle\textsuperscript{109} when she explicitly deals with the problem with the two. For the same she dwelled into the work of Catherine Mackinnon’s work which she argues is one of a piece which forms as a dialogue between Feminism and Marxism. She went on to show how and why Marxism and Feminism is in conflict with each other. She stated that though both of the ideologies aims at studying the common problem of oppression and end exploitation yet their aspects are different. The problem is argued to arise also because of the fact that “Marx was not a feminist”\textsuperscript{110} and he could not see the problems from a woman’s point of view. Marxism seems to be unrelenting at accepting issues like exploitation of women ‘by a man’ much contrary to the Marxist thinking that it is exploitation of man by man. The author concludes by stating that the attempt made by Mackinnon was difficult. The thinker in her later work started concentrating with the contradiction between patriarchy and feminism of the Third World countries which seems to be “gendered female.”\textsuperscript{111} The Marxist Feminist being often similar to the male Marxist is of the opinion that there is no specificity involved so far as problems of women go. Rather the problems confronted by men and women are same and there is no ‘different angle’ to women’s problem. This has led to Marxist women activists to take a narrow look at the problems. In a way the combination between the two ideologies is turning tough. As for example in matters like the public private divide which comes out of the sexual division of labour is one such problematic area. While the Marxist thinkers like Marx and Engels accepted such division to be natural and reinforced in their writings a number of times has come to be practiced. For the Marxist ideology emancipation of women means freeing women from drudgery of domestic work which needs

\textsuperscript{110} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 82.
\textsuperscript{111} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 94.
This leads to an understanding that the kitchen is and ‘should be’ the primary concern of women. There is a contradiction when the CPI talks in its programme of discouraging conformity to stereotypical roles of women like Shouldering the burden of domestic responsibility etc. while the ideology it supports talks completely the opposite. The key issues on which Marxism and Feminism have been in contestation are on areas like production, reproduction, sexuality and children etc. These are intricately related and in depth understanding of women in a specific context from the point of view of a woman is called in for. But the opposition to this very important aspect of understanding an issue being a woman is essential for the women’s organisation. This might call in for a contestation with the Marxist ideology, but the challenge remains. Challenging a dominant rigid notion of the public private divide women has come to enter different filed of activity, especially joining the work force, exploitation had taken new forms. Lower wages for women for being labour to be easily found, inadequate laws protecting women in the unorganised sector, inadequate laws for women at the workplace etc are some of the shortcomings that women has to face in spite of being employed. It needs no exaggeration when said that even in these aspects too there are considerable dynamics that needs to be dwelled into. It is no more the question of women getting having economic power instead it is about the equality that needs to be looked into. Thinkers I. Young, Nancy Folbre, Mary O’ Brein and Ann Ferguson etc dwelled into the Marxist interpretation of women in an extensive manner and came out of interesting interpretations. Unless and until the understanding of women’s issue is included in the bigger and broader aspect of class struggle, changes

112 Abhilasha Kumari, op. cit., p.137.
113 Ibid.
114 On party’s Perspectives, op. cit., p.27.
116 As quoted in Linda Nicholson, op. cit., p.27.
can hardly be brought in. Moreover the struggle has to be undertaken keeping in mind the Indian context and Assam in particular where diversity exists and differences varied.

Women’s struggle hence has to be considered as a democratic struggle and most importantly the acceptance of the truth that emancipation of women would lead to emancipation of the mankind from the chains of drudgery and not actually the vice versa the efforts to bring in changes has to be brought in with the united efforts of both the party and the women’s organisations of the Communist Parties. From the electoral point of view, the CPI (M) has taken a lead under the period of study, but if a proper analysis is to be made of the activities of the women’s organisations, it can be safely be argued that compared to other parties under study, the AGP and the Indian National Congress, the women’s organisations of both the parties proves to be immensely active. The way the parties have been disciplined in conducting its meetings and most importantly its role as an opposition party watching over the activities of the party in rule cannot be ignored. The women leaders of the organisations have been very vocal and demonstrative in their conduct with the issues of women in the state. But what is revealed is the ‘implicit’ acceptance of the patriarchal nature of the political leaders which restricts the women leaders to rise up the ladder of success. The goal of women’s representation seems to be a distant goal with the continuous poor performance of both the political parties. So far as the issue of political representation is concerned the left front has failed to put concerted efforts towards making it as the priority. It has safely put the women question at the back burner and subsumed under the ‘bigger’ issues of class struggle where women do not feature. Much needs to be also done for making women’s political representation the most essential goal for emancipating women from the present problems. Before this, the Marxist women too needs to realise that there is a prior need of a reinterpretation of Marxist ideology towards the women question and which needs to be dealt with consideration of region, class, tribe, economic diversity,
political cleavages so on and so forth. The tasks have to be taken up both by the political parties and the women’s organisation. As an organizational task, the party encourages on including more women into leadership position and promoting women for representation which in reality is yet to be realised. This is indicative of the party’s inability to make the women’s issue a part of the democratic struggle towards achieving its goal. The fact that the women’s organisation which has been successful in carrying out numerous activities from time to time in the state has been confined to the level of the party itself and have failed to at the same time change the nature of activities within the party itself leading to underplaying of the importance of an effective act like political representation. The party needs to reinvent itself and suit itself to the changing times and implement the ideology with a fresh outlook.