Chapter: 4

Manikuntala Sen (1911-1987)

One of the pioneering women dedicated to communist ideals, occupying the center stage in Bengal during the 1940s to early 1960s and making herself almost a household name was Manikuntala Sen. She was an excellent orator and habituated in simple ways of living. In the words of Ranabir Samadder ‘. . . today it is hard to define Manikuntala in a unidimensional manner. She was a socially inspiring communist.’

4.1 Manikuntala Sen: Childhood days and the shaping of her mind

Manikuntala was born in Barisal, a water-bound district in erstwhile East Bengal, presently in Bangladesh sometime in 1911. (As the system of birth registration was not so popular or developed in Barisal, the exact date of birth of Manikuntala remains uncertain). Like many other families of the then Barisal, her family too was inspired by the three wise men of Barisal-Ashwini Kumar Datta, Kalish Chandra Pandit and Jagadish Acharya. Spiritualism appears to have been a common bond between them. Of the trio, Ashwini Kumar was a political thinker, philosopher, and ascetic, free from all kinds of prejudices. As Manikuntala grew up, she too came under the influence of his ascetic character. The second figure, Acharya Jagadish, was the principal of Brajomohan College, established by Ashwini Kumar. He used to run an ‘ashram’ (hermitage) which was also a students’ hostel. As a girl, Manikuntala often

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accompanied her mother and elder sisters to the prayer meetings that were held at this ashram in the evenings. The third figure Kalish Chandra Pandit, had become famous in Barisal for his philanthropic activities. He had an infirmary where the poor and the sick received medical attention. He had also trained a group of students who were sent door to door as volunteers to nurse cholera, typhoid, and small pox patients.

Manikuntala during her growing years was also influenced by Snehalata Das, the headmistress of her school and the sister of the famous Bengali poet Jibanananda Das because of her plain living and high thinking. During her girlhood days Barisal was also the centre of revolutionary activities. The Shankar Math was believed to be a centre of the Jugantar party, a revolutionary group in Bengal. Thus Manikuntala grew up amidst this spiritual-revolutionary milieu.

Manikuntala’s family was quite liberal and free from superstitions. At the same time there was also a religious atmosphere at her home. Her father Bilash Chandra was an estate manager and her mother was Khirodbala Sen. Her maternal grandfather was a generous man who used to maintain a shelter in his home where students and low paid workers were given meals twice a day. About her family she writes:

Our family was free of superstitions to a large extent. My father did not have any prejudices. My mother was a little bit fastidious but under our influence her attitude too changed.2

She noted that during her early years in Barisal the animosity between Hindus and the Muslims had not surfaced. Such was the atmosphere that her family did not hesitate to

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entrust a Muslim boatman to escort Manikuntala (then 16 or 17) back home.\textsuperscript{3} Her family maintained friendly relations with the Muslim vendors who used to rest in the kitchen porch of her home and her mother used to give them something to eat and drink. The vendors out of a sense of gratitude used to give them something from their wares in generous amount. But at the same time she observed with disgust that the attitude of a section of Hindu society towards the Muslims was quite harsh. She recounted an incident that took place in one of her relative’s apartment in order to highlight this attitude. She narrated that a poor Muslim vendor of firewood was soundly beaten up with shoes for entering the precincts of their relative’s house as he had allegedly polluted their kitchen. The poor man’s plea that even a street dog entered the passage according to its wishes went in vain.\textsuperscript{4}Added to this, was the exploitation of poor peasants who constituted about 80% of the total population by the predominantly Hindu landlords. Manikuntala herself heard many such tales of exploitation from her father and her maternal uncle who used to work in a landlord’s estate. One such story left a deep mark on Manikuntala’s mind. She wrote that once a landlord had encroached upon whatever little a peasant’s family possessed due to non-payment of rents. When the retinues sent by the landlord were about to take away a pot of molasses, that the peasant’s wife had kept aside for the children, the women cried and fell at their feet begging them to spare the pot. But the merciless

\textsuperscript{3}\textit{Sediner Katha}, p.7.

\textsuperscript{4}\textit{Ibid}, p.10.
men paid no heed to it.\textsuperscript{5} All such incidents forced her to write: ‘when their [poor Muslims] seething anger exploded, everyone was swept away. . .’\textsuperscript{6}

Manikuntala’s family was deeply religious. ‘Kali’ and ‘Krishna’ were regularly worshipped at her home. Her brother-in-law wished to found an ashram for men and women practising ‘brahmacharya’ that is, a life dedicated to the study of the Vedas and other scriptures with complete abstinence from sexual and worldly pleasure for a life of meditation. She writes “. . . he selected me as the future ‘ashramika’ (attendant) of that ashram.”\textsuperscript{7} Thereafter he used to keep a strict control on her movements and her thought process. She was not allowed to read novels and periodicals or visit any friend’s house or talk with her male friends. Even wearing a fine sari was considered a luxury. Manikuntala admitted that “under such strict control I sometimes used to fidget.”\textsuperscript{8} Sometimes such strict rule also wounded her self-respect. But at that point she expressed no objection as she was certain that one day she would become an ascetic. But as she grew up a dilemma arose within her. She was torn between a strong attraction to politics outside her home and strict religious impositions within. She also found it unjust to assume that a householder could not achieve reunion with God. On the outside world she was particularly moved by the sacrifices made by the revolutionaries. Gandhiji’s Civil Disobedience movement also impressed her. She questioned herself whether there was any conflict between religion and politics. But she found that those who were going to the gallows for the

\textsuperscript{5} Sediner Katha, p.11.
\textsuperscript{6} Ibid, p.11, translation mine.
\textsuperscript{7} Ibid, p. 24, translation mine.
\textsuperscript{8} Ibid, p.25, translation mine.
sake of their country were no less saintly.⁹ About Gandhi she felt that he was a saint as he was giving direction to the countrymen to achieve freedom.¹⁰

In the midst of all this Gandhi visited Barisal. During an open session of the Congress, Gandhiji gave a call to the fallen women to devote themselves to the service of the nation, and that in such circumstances he would take responsibility of their livelihood. Answering his call fifteen to twenty such women became Congress workers and some of them were rehabilitated in different spinning and Khadi centres. ‘The entire public atmosphere helped in shaping some sort of metamorphosis in Manikuntala’s thought process.’¹¹

At first she started visiting the Congress work centres. However, these failed to attract her much. During this time she also came into contact with Santi Sudha Ghosh, a revolutionary of Barisal associated with the Yugantar- a secret organisation in Bengal. But Santi Sudha’s arrest ruined her chances of joining the organisation. It was at this juncture that Manikuntala came in touch with Marxist literature under the influence of Amiya Dasgupta and Amrita Nag- her neighbours. But at first embracing the communist line of politics seemed almost out of question because Communism’s belief in ‘atheism’ was in direct contradiction to her deep religiosity and the religious injunctions imposed upon her which was difficult for her to ignore. But the book ‘ABC of Communism’ cleared her thought process. She writes:

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⁹Sediner Katha, p.25.

¹⁰Ibid, p.25.

It seemed I have found both religion and politics within it. To serve the oppressed people and to work for their emancipation—this is religion... Whether there is religion or not in any book—such hair-splitting argument, I usually avoided... I firmly believe that those who exploit people in the name of religion are the enemies of society. But that does not mean that God does not exist.\(^1\)

Ranabir Samadder argues here:

She is God fearing, God loving and purdah bound. But she is at the same time a nationalist too. Hence she takes to Marxism as a form of daridranarayan seva-service to the poor who are the manifestation of God. But she still requires a prop. The displacement cannot occur without help from an external agency—in this case her mother.\(^2\)

One day when her religiously devout mother confronted her by asking whether she had become a Communist, Manikuntala promised her that she would read the book to her mother and afterwards if she found it to be immoral, Manikuntala would listen to her. But after learning about the content of the book her mother commented:

God is in every living being, to serve living soul is the true religion. If this is your politics, then I do not have any objections to it. If you do this, then you yourself will be elevated and I shall also be delighted.\(^3\)

After her mother’s permission she started venturing out alone, exchanging books with her male friends. When she was thus busy with her readings of Communist literature, the police took her for questioning because of her acquaintance with Shanti Sudha Ghosh. She was, however, let off after questioning. Surprisingly her mother handled the situation calmly and faced her relatives who were visibly upset. Manikuntala herself felt guilty about the incident and even shied away from her relatives. ‘It is interesting to note that Manikuntala’s mother had no English education. She was

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\(^1\)Sediner Katha, p. 29, translation mine.


\(^3\)Sediner Katha, p.30, translation mine.
proficient in Sanskrit. Manikuntala was now no longer content with her readings of Communist literature alone. She was desperate to do something. On the other hand, she was still reluctant to let go her religious aspirations. Torn between the two she started spending sleepless nights. Again, her mother who witnessed her dilemma suggested her to go to Calcutta and complete her M.A. there. Thus began a new chapter in Manikuntala’s life.

4.2 In Calcutta: Caught between religion and politics

After coming to Calcutta Manikuntala first joined the Communist league of Soumen Tagore. But it was only in 1937-38 that she came into contact with the real Communist Party. But hair-splitting arguments on atheism and politics continued and such arguments irritated her. She wrote:

Is it not possible to make people understand the value of Communism through its economics, the new society that is to emerge under the leadership of working class, the new state and its stress for equal justice, equal rights and dignity, women’s emancipation and sincere concern for children?...I have done it all through my life.  

She repeatedly criticized the party of unnecessarily obstructing the passage of women from the religious to the political by excessively stressing values like atheism. During her whole life, Manikuntala encountered countless ordinary women who were interested in Communist line of politics but hesitated because they worshipped God at home. Manikuntala tried to make them easy by saying: ‘God is in your heart. You do


16 Sediner Katha, p. 40, translation mine.


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not believe in caste, nor do you treat humans as mean, untouchable. There is nothing wrong in it.\textsuperscript{18} Ranabir Samadder argued that Manikuntala believed that

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\ldots religious beliefs were not necessarily hindrances in the way of a women proceeding towards liberationist politics. Indeed, she was possibly suggesting through narrating her own experiences, that one helped the other.\textsuperscript{19}
\end{quote}

Manikuntala noted in her memoir that compared to Barisal a comparatively liberal atmosphere prevailed in Calcutta in so far as women were concerned. In Barisal the ‘purdah’ system was quite strong even during Manikuntala’s time. She recalled that her mother in order to go to a neighbour’s house had to cover her face with the veil and when no one was around she would run across the road, while her grandmother used a palanquin to cover even a distance of twenty yards.\textsuperscript{20} Manikuntala herself faced such restrictions during her school and college days. She wrote that during her girlhood days, when she was studying in upper classes she was no longer allowed to walk on the streets. They had to use horse-drawn carriages to reach school even though it was near their house.\textsuperscript{21} When she was in Brajomohan College in Barisal she and her friends had to sit separately behind a partition. But in Calcutta she saw that women were moving alone in buses, trams though their number was few. Even during that time the phenomenon of eve-teasing existed in Calcutta. Manikuntala herself had one or two such experiences.

After her induction into the party, she at first started working with the students’ wing which took her into the interiors of Bengal. She thereby got an

\textsuperscript{18}\textit{Sediner Katha}, p.40, translations mine.

\textsuperscript{19}Ranabir Samadder, \textit{A Biography of the Nation, 1947-1997}, p.249.

\textsuperscript{20}\textit{Sediner Katha}, p.31.

\textsuperscript{21}\textit{Ibid}, p.38.
opportunity to be an eye witness to the life of rural women in Bengal. She wrote about a prosperous village called ‘Banaripara’- which was a night’s boat journey from Barisal. This remote village had no provision for girls going to schools; nor did the women knew that girls in cities went to schools and that some of them even took up a professional career. In another instance Manikuntala mentioned a zamindar family where they had stayed for some time. There under the direct supervision of the master of the house they had been served various delicacies. But the mistress of the house was even denied the privilege of serving her guests. Manikuntala’s observation was that the distinction between a landlord’s family and a tenant’s family ended when the women’s question came to the fore because women of both sections had to endure the same restrictions imposed upon them by a patriarchal society.

Besides working for the Students’ Federation she also played a prominent role in the release of the prisoners’ programme. During this time Manikuntala keenly felt the need for a separate women’s organisation and under the advice of Sarojini Naidu she at first joined the AIWC. But within this organisation, her efforts to make the organization a mass based one did not bear fruit. World War II left her in the state of a dilemma, in so far as the stance of her party was concerned. For example, the approach of the party towards the war changed from ‘not a single man nor a single paisa for this war’ to ‘this war is a people’s war’ when Hitler invaded Soviet Union. Though she had difficulty in fathoming this change, nevertheless, she accepted the party line. Henceforth her task involved in organising anti-fascist campaigns and establishing Mahila Samitis (organisation for women) in different districts of Bengal. By this time the MARS had also come into existence. While working for the MARS,
Manikuntala received icy treatment from a section of the people in Calcutta. Often she and her team mates would have to face embarrassment when people refused to open their doors to them or throw vegetable peels on the women volunteers.

During the famine years she plunged into relief work. Manikuntala also started raising apolitical issues like wife-beating, polygamy or education for girls. The women fighters of Tebhaga movement had a special place in her heart. From the late 1940s riots, destitution of women, partition, displacement, refugee problem bothered her more than any political issue. In 1948 she was imprisoned first at the Midnapore jail and then at Presidency jail in Calcutta. During her imprisonment she undertook fast to protest against the ill-treatment meted out to jail inmates.

4.3 Manikuntala’s political activities in the post Independence period

In 1951-52 the Communist party of India decided to adopt the line of parliamentary politics. In the first general election of 1952 she won the Kalighat assembly seat. She repeated her performance in 1957 but lost in 1962. Alongside political issues she was equally involved with women’s issues like women’s right to employment, right to equal wages, maternity benefits, crèche facilities for the children of the working women etc. Manikuntala was at the forefront during the movement for the Hindu Code bill or the anti-dowry bill. She was equally involved with the teachers’ movement. In 1954 she along with others organised the provincial Mothers’ Conference, held as a prelude to the World Mothers’ Conference. She also
attended the World Mothers’ Conference at Louissane, followed by a visit to the Soviet Union. Unfortunately her party’s attitude towards women’s issues was not always to her liking.

From the middle of the 1950s rightist and leftist ways of thought started to surface within the party. Hair-splitting arguments took place on each and every issue. Gradually she felt that she was being side-lined within the party as a revisionist. The Sino-Indian war ultimately brought about the split between the party ranks; when the pro-Chinese and anti-Chinese wings became pronounced. She was devastated at this break and felt that she would not be able to associate herself with any of the two factions and withdrew from active political life. Thus a curtain was drawn in her public-political life.

But Manikuntala’s primary concern, her political career notwithstanding had always been to stress on social aspects and social issues. Hence an attempt to depict her active role on key social issues including the women’s issues becomes imperative.

4.4 Manikuntala on Social issues: Famine relief

The year 1943 was a significant year as far as Manikuntala’s public life was concerned. In 1942, the MARS had already been established in Calcutta. Manikuntala was a member of its executive council. In the same year the ban on the Communist party was lifted by the British government. The party now decided to organise its women front. The party nominated five women members from its provincial committee to strengthen the women’s movement in the whole province.
Manikuntala was one of them. She started touring different parts of Bengal. Her main task now was preaching anti-fascism, making speeches and organizing Mahila Samitis everywhere. During this time the Second World War was going on and a problem of terrible food scarcity erupted ultimately leading to the devastating famine in 1943. By this time Manikuntala had left her school job and had become a whole timer. She received a monthly allowance of Rs.20 and a monthly tram ticket for her subsistence. The famine ‘gave release to her social ethos and she jumped headlong into relief work to help the famine stricken people.’\textsuperscript{22} The devastation of the famine pained her and she wrote:

\begin{quote}
The cry- \textit{Phen Dao} (Give us rice water) of the peasants- producer of rice seemed very odd. Not only was this, one of the victims of hunger was the dignity of peasant women.\textsuperscript{23}
\end{quote}

The peasant women selling their dignity in return for a sari or a day’s food became rampant. In this context she wrote: ‘Witnessing such moral degradation in a country with such rich tradition made me feel guilty.’\textsuperscript{24} One day she stumbled over a corpse in a Calcutta street, she could not sleep that night. Now she devoted herself wholeheartedly to famine relief. At that time she was staying at Fern Road, Calcutta in a party commune. People from the rural areas used to crowd before the ration shops established then in Calcutta. One such shop was opened at Gariahat. Before dawn, the villagers used to arrive in Ballygunge station to buy rice. Manikuntala took the lead in order to ensure that every person got some amount of rice. Bani Dasgupta who used to work with her wrote:

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{22}Ranabir Samadder, \textit{A Biography of the Nation}, 1947-1997, p.251.
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{23}\textit{Sediner Katha}, p.68, translation mine.
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{24}\textit{Ibid}, p.68, translation mine.
\end{quote}
Manidi took us to the Gariahat market to take proper care of the famine stricken people. She supervised to make sure that those who stood in the line received their quota.\textsuperscript{25}

She also had to keep a watchful eye on young destitute women in order to protect them from pimps. With the help of some generous donations as well as their door to door campaign for help, they managed to start canteens to feed the destitutes. Such a canteen was started by Manikuntala at Garcha slum in Calcutta. Thus when they were serving the society, she and her co-workers were often half fed. Bani Dasgupta recalled an incident during a fair organised by MARS. There Manikuntala bought a small jar of jam, as they had nothing to eat at home. But somehow some rice and pulses were arranged and they cooked \textit{khichdi} using an old broken chair as fuel.\textsuperscript{26} But such hardships failed to daunt Manikuntala’s fighting spirit. Instead as Ranabir Samadder argued: ‘All these provided her intense emotional release, it was like some catharsis.’\textsuperscript{27} She wrote:

\begin{quote}
We have been to many movements and struggles during our party life. But the satisfaction we received in serving people half fed would not be had again.\textsuperscript{28}
\end{quote}

But feeding people on charity was not a long term solution. The situation demanded bringing down the price of rice and opening rice shops. The only way to achieve this was to organise protest movements. Thus came the idea of gheraoing the Assembly. Then the Bengal Premier, Fazlul Haque was a friend of Manikuntala’s grandfather and shared an affectionate relationship with her father. Using that familiarity, she managed to have some entry cards. The tram workers


\textsuperscript{26}\textit{Ibid}, p.307.

\textsuperscript{27}Ranabir Samadder, \textit{A Biography of the Nation}, 1947-1997, p. 251.

\textsuperscript{28}\textit{Sediner Katha}, p. 70, translation mine.
helped them by ferrying the workers without tickets and the guards at the two assembly gates fully opened the gates for them. The uniqueness of the protest as Manikuntala mentioned was that the women protesters by pointing to the coins tied to the end of their sari told the Bengal Premier and other members of the Assembly that they had not come to beg but to demand rice at a price they had been buying before hoarding and black marketing began. As has been mentioned earlier, the Premier was forced to distribute rice among the starving women. Manikuntala considers this as a significant step towards forcing the government to open more fair price shops. She writes:

Now we are accustomed in standing before the ration shops. But we should remember that it was the poor peasant women who were responsible for the opening of such shops.

She also used to write articles in Ghare- Baire- the monthly periodical of the MARS. About Ghare- Baire she writes:

We followed two principles. Only women would write in the magazine, boys’ writing were not to be accepted. The magazine was to be sold by the workers themselves and not by hawkers. This way we could maintain a direct contact with the readers.

Meanwhile Manikuntala also started visiting several districts. At Barisal, along with Monorama Guha, Manikuntala undertook to start a khichdi canteen which would provide food for approximately 300 women. They met the District Magistrate who agreed to donate Rs.100. As this amount was not sufficient they appealed to the business community for help. Many donated generously, but Manikuntala noted that

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29 Sediner Katha, p. 71.


31 Ibid, p.72.

32 Ibid, p. 75, translation mine.
one businessman refused to help on the ground that in such canteens Hindus and Muslims were fed together. Manikuntala wrote:

Those who used to come to the canteen, majority were Muslims, Hindu women used to cook and eat together with them. This may not happen in other times, but during famine, such differences hardly matter.33

The District Magistrate was quite impressed with their work and authorized the Barisal MARS to shoulder the responsibility of opening more such canteens with the help of the government. She and her co-workers maintained strict discipline. She recalled that once on their way to a village, they did not have the necessary boat fare. The male workers suggested that the same could be adjusted from the government fund, but the women refused. They were able to proceed only with the contributions of the local people. On behalf of the Communist party they used to run 400 such canteens in the whole district.

Manikuntala’s visit to Midnapore, hard hit by famine and epidemic revealed a horrifying tale. Here she saw the sight of foxes, dogs and vultures nibbling human corpses. There was none to cremate the dead bodies as the family members in most cases had fled. The children were dying too and were bereft of clothes. Even women were half naked. Here political issues were irrelevant because people had hardly anything to eat or hide their shame. She first asked the locals to make arrangements to cremate dead bodies so that the spread of diseases could be arrested. Next they prepared a list of the people starving and within three-four days were able to start a canteen. She admitted that cumbersome process of opening free kitchens delayed the relief work. The list of affected persons had to be approved by the D.M. and only then would relief materials arrive. But the voluntary organisations

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33Sediner Katha, p. 80, translation mine.
like the Ramkrishna Mission, Bharat Sevasram Sangha had their own relief materials at their disposal, rendering their services more effectively. In a letter dated 30.11.43 addressed to Shri Nikhil Chakraborty, People’s Relief Committee Office, Bowbazar, Calcutta Manikuntala pointed out that Sutahata, Nandigram and Mahisadal were so hard hit by Malaria that even the Relief Committees had removed themselves from the area. To tackle this problem she suggested the formation of a medical unit consisting of two or four doctors known to the party. She insisted that it should be attached to the Tamluk Sub divisional Relief Committee. Similar medical units were also to be formed in Ghatal and Sadar Subdivision. Manikuntala personally met the ordinary women and urged them to form their own organisation. She explained to them:

Women cannot go to the men’s organisation. So they were not able to know anything. This is not fair... The women also should have knowledge about issues like jobs, wages etc. If need arises, women should fight alongside with men [for their rights].

Burdwan was another district that she visited during this time and here her task was to open milk centres in famine stricken areas and to organise a women’s march to the Magistrate’s office with the demand to open rationing shops. Manikuntala observed that some Hindu families in Burdwan were much more conservative in their attitude than even the Muslims. She recalled a particular incident in this regard. Once when she and her comrades were on a door to door campaigning among the women in middle class neighbourhoods, the head of the family in one of the houses shooed them away

34 Intelligence Branch File No. 619/36, West Bengal State Archive.
35 Ibid.
36 Sediner Katha, p.91, translation mine.
by saying: “This is a respectable house. My wife would not talk with you.”\footnote{Sediner Katha, p. 100, translation mine.} This sort of reaction demonstrated that women like Manikuntala were not held in high esteem by a section of the society. In Burdwan Manikuntala and her colleagues organised a procession with women from both Hindu and Muslims communities, as well as poor and middle class women shouting anti-fascist and anti-war slogans. They were demanding food, clothes and milk. Such a procession was new in Burdwan. With the help of UNICEF, they were successful in opening up a milk centre. Gradually, they were able to start branches of MARS in the villages and within a year they were able to organise a Zila conference. So ordinary poor women were slowly coming out of their private domain.

4.5 Manikuntala and the MARS: An enduring relationship

Manikuntala had a unique ability of articulation. ‘As one of the Party’s best speakers and one of the best known leaders, she was in great demand all over.’\footnote{Jolly Mohan Kaul, In Search of a Better World: Memoirs, (Kolkata: Samya, 2010), p.312.} This took her to almost all districts of undivided Bengal and in many places a branch of the MARS sprang up with both peasant and middle class women belonging to both Hindu and Muslim communities. In Bankura she took part in organising a women’s conference in Town Hall where a resolution was adopted for equal wages for women labourers in Bidi factories. In Noakhali Manikuntala along with other comrades met the D.M. to start a shelter for destitute women. When such a shelter indeed started with government help, the MARS and Pankajini Devi of the Congress looked after it. At Pabna she met a young widow Maya who was around sixteen or seventeen...
years of age, who was served only vegetarian food and beaten up for going to the terrace with ruffed hair. Such a deplorable condition of a young girl saddened her. She also experienced the difficulties the women comrades faced while working in mofussil areas like gossiping about the childless status of a married woman worker.

About this time the new cultural movement started in music as also in theatre. Bijon Bhattacharjee’s *Nabanna* captured the tragedy of the Bengal Famine of 1943. Manikuntala herself played a small role of an old woman. Jolly Mohan Kaul saw the play and felt that Manikuntala played the role to perfection.\(^39\)

On 8\(^{th}\) May, 1943, the first regional conference of the MARS was organised in Calcutta at the Town Hall. She wrote: ‘In Bengal perhaps for the first time a women’s conference raised its voice against government created famine.’\(^40\) Resolutions were adopted regarding food crisis, development of handicrafts etc. A special charter was adopted regarding equal rights of men and women. These proposals were raised by Manikuntala along with other comrades.

During such district tours she started raising issues concerning women. Initially in such meetings Manikuntala had difficulty in starting a conversation with the women because their knowledge was limited to their village and their district. But gradually she started discussing with them issues like wife-beating, drinking habits of their men, education for girls etc. Regarding wife beating she was surprised to see that the elderly women supported it while the younger lot were somewhat scared to open their mouth in front of their elders. They however, confessed to her separately


\(^{40}\) *Sediner Katha*, p. 121, translation mine.
that they were opposed to it. But on the question of their men having country-liquor, they were united in their opposition, because excessive drinking led to wife-battering. Manikuntala recalled that when she talked about promulgating a law forbidding the same, it invoked laughter.\textsuperscript{41} She also recalled that when she asked them to unite with a view to demanding from the government the opening of schools for all- boys, girls, and housewives as well as for the adults they did not always believe her.\textsuperscript{42} But in spite of that Manikuntala sometimes managed to convince the women to submit to the government an application to open schools in their area. Once in a village she came across a girl, hardly six or seven years old, with a vermillion mark on her bald head, participating in a procession demanding food and milk for her children. When the procession was passing through her in laws’ area, someone pulled her veil down to her shoulder laying bare her back. As a result the girl fell down. Manikuntala commented: ‘The back may be bare, but her face must not be open.’\textsuperscript{43} The sight of such a small girl married convinced her the necessity of a law specifying the marriageable age of a girl.

Meanwhile in Midnapore the District Conference of the MARS was held at Tamluk on 19.3.44. Sucharita Das, sister of Jibananda Das and headmistress of Tamluk Girls’ School helped Manikuntala in this regard. The S.D.P.O, Tamluk reported on 22 April 1944 that the Tamluk Mahila Samiti, started in 1941, had been

\textsuperscript{41}Sediner Katha, p. 127.

\textsuperscript{42}Ibid, p. 127.

\textsuperscript{43}Ibid, p.129, translation mine.
inactive for a long time, had been revived by Manikuntala and had been recognised as a branch of the Bengal MARS.\footnote{Intelligence Branch File No.619/36, West Bengal State Archive.}

The second conference of the MARS was organised in Barisal from 4\textsuperscript{th} to 7\textsuperscript{th} May, 1944. While doing preparation for the conference she in a letter dated 18.4.44 to Latika Banerjee wrote that the police spies for collecting the movements of women should be punished.\footnote{Ibid.} The conference took place in Ashwini Kumar town hall which was almost in full capacity. In this conference, it was decided henceforth to induct the working class women in their organisation and also to extend its base among the peasant women. Constructive works like establishing destitute homes, work centres and adult education centres were to be given more scope.

During the famine many destitutes took shelter in the pavements of Calcutta. After the effects of the famine had subsided to a certain extent, and people had started returning to their villages, a section of the victims without any source of livelihood made pavements their permanent home. They depended largely on begging and some paltry jobs. She considered such footpath households as a curse. But she was in full praise for those hardworking rural women who used to come to Calcutta in the morning to sell vegetables or rice and return by the afternoon train. She considered them as new addition to the labour force. She also described the different welfare projects started by the MARS in the aftermath of the famine. Renu Chakraborty’s mother used to manage the milk canteen and the school started in the Dover Lane slum. Later a sewing class was started there. In Panchananatala slum, also,
school for children, adult education centres were opened. Similar centres were started in different slums in Calcutta. Manikuntala was called to famine affected Jessore and Khulna to organise all the branches and to form a district committee. In these districts Hindu and Muslim women used to work jointly. In Mymensingh district too, she played a leading role in opening a branch of the MARS.

4.6 The Netrokona Conference and the concept of Social politics

The Netrokona Conference of the All India Kisan Sabha . . . strengthened Manikuntala’s vision of ‘social’ politics.\(^{46}\) For its preparation she was sent to the Hazong tribal area to convince them to attend the conference. She was fascinated by the simple living of the Hazongs almost without any material desire. The Conference was significant in the sense that it was a sort of eye opener for her. She felt that the speeches of the educated urban leaders were too difficult and complicated for the ordinary peasant women to comprehend.\(^{47}\) But during this conference an unpleasant incident took place. In a public meeting senior party leader P.C.Joshi openly criticised middle class women workers like Manikuntala accusing them of not mixing with the peasant women in the desired way. Such rude criticism in a public meeting disheartened Manikuntala but her deep loyalty to the party prevented her from protesting against the leadership or their attitude nor did she throughout her entire public life ever raise the issue either in private or in a party forum. Only in her memoir did she mention the incident but by that time P.C.Joshi had already passed away. This sort of an incident compelled her to write that the unlimited power vested on the


\(^{47}\) *Sediner Katha*, p.144.
party’s supreme leadership seemed to be wrong as the outcome of such a practice might not always be good.\textsuperscript{48} Perhaps in a patriarchal setup of a party it was difficult for a woman to get full appreciation for her service.

Around this time she also started visiting the jute mills of Budge Budge to organise the working class women. This provided her an opportunity with the lives of this section of women. After meeting them she came to realise that these women were not at all aware of their basic rights-like equal wages for equal work, maternity allowance, and crèche facilities for their children etc. Her observation was that women were never given equal wages and their jobs were never made permanent to deprive them of their maternity allowance. There were few crèches but no mother availed their service as children were beaten up there rather than taken care of. So women had to keep their children within the factory amidst heavy pollution. Not only that, as majority of the women were engaged in the task of extracting jute fibres from the jute plants and the sewing of jute sacks, this sector was named as \textit{Magi Call}.\textsuperscript{49} Manikuntala was saddened by the use of such derogatory terms for describing women’s work and none was bothered to change that. In jute mill areas she noticed that men and women were living together without marital bliss. Such a setup was beneficial for both as the men did not have to take any responsibility of the women who were earning on their own. The women received protection from a male guardian which was preferable to living alone. Such unconventional relationship at first seemed awkward to her but she adjusted to it and wrote: ‘I never disrespected the

\textsuperscript{48} \textit{Sediner Katha}, P.147.

\textsuperscript{49} \textit{Ibid}, pp.152-153. (Here the word Magi was used as a slang which denoted a woman and kall meant a factory)
women workers of the jute-mill who were standing on their own feet and earning on
their own."\(^{50}\)

### 4.7 Tebhaga Movement and Manikuntala’s involvement

On the eve of the withdrawal of the British from India, the Tebhaga uprising—a major agrarian uprising took place in the districts of Mymansingh, Malda, Dinajpur, Rangpur, 24Parganas, Kakdwip, Jessore, Khulna and in some areas of Midnapore. It was a mass struggle among the sharecroppers to keep *tebhaga* i.e. two-thirds of the harvest. Manikuntala drew sustenance from the women fighters of Tebhaga.\(^{51}\) In fact the Communist party encouraged the rural women to enlist themselves in voluntary squads. But when the police atrocities reached its extreme point the male peasants were forced to go into hiding. It was at this point that the rural poor women became the principal fighting force of the movement. ‘It is widely recognised that the sounding of alarms was a specific contribution of women.’\(^{52}\) Manikuntala wrote that when the police approached, the women blew conch shells to alert the men who thereafter flew to the nearby jungles.\(^{53}\) Not only that, the women set up their own ‘Nari bahini’ (women’s army) to counter police atrocities using only common household instruments. In the words of Manikuntala:

> it was those women who maintained the connection with the leaders of the movement. The women fought face to face with the police. Whenever paddy in the

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\(^{50}\) *Sediner Katha*, p.155, translation mine.


\(^{53}\) *Sediner Katha*, p.162.
barn was set on fire, it was the women who plunged to extinguish it. They were beaten up, were tortured, yet whatever came in their hands they attacked with it—but never let the men come in front.\textsuperscript{54}

She herself visited Khapur area in Dinajpur where Rani Mitra was the leader. She toured with Rani and saw the places where poor peasants were killed by the police. In the context of the movement women like Manikuntala, ‘found their feminism largely irrelevant in the countryside.’\textsuperscript{55} Apart from economic exploitation, rural women were subjected to abuses and battering by their drunken husbands. There was also ‘horrendous sexual abuse of village women by the landlords.’\textsuperscript{56} On the party level Manikuntala along with Renu Chakraborty tried to convince their leaders that along with problems of economic exploitation and political oppression, women’s day to day problems also needed to be addressed. But male CPI leaders wanted women to be ‘good comrades’ and put the struggle above personal concerns.\textsuperscript{57} CPI women argued unsuccessfully for a programme that would encourage peasant women to defy their husbands.\textsuperscript{58} Not only that when the movement turned more militant, the Communist party unprepared for such an armed struggle withdrew from active leadership. But Manikuntala’s memoir hardly tells us anything about this aspect.

\textsuperscript{54} Sediner Katha, pp.162-163.


\textsuperscript{57}Geraldine Forbes, Women in modern India p.215.

\textsuperscript{58} \textit{Ibid}, p.215.
4.8 Freedom with Partition: The crusade for communal harmony

Meanwhile the possibility of country’s partition was increasing day by day. Manikuntala wrote: ‘I did not see Hindus-Muslims living as two communities in my Barisal.’\(^{59}\) She was haunted by the fact that her beloved Barisal would be lost forever to Pakistan if partition became a reality. Her greatest regret was that even her party accepted the partition on the basis of the Two Nation theory. She witnessed the ‘Great Calcutta Killing’ on 16\(^{th}\) August, 1946 and the subsequent devastation caused by it. The positive development that happened during these black days was the way in which a section of both the communities helped each other to take shelter in safer places. These humanitarian gestures, according to her, were the only hopes of light amidst the darkness.\(^{60}\) But she also witnessed scenarios just opposite of this. She described that the Muslim vendors who used to come from the villages to sell fish and vegetables in Gariahat market were killed by the Hindus when they had came to sell their wares after the riot. Even educated people did not hesitate to take part in the violence. She witnessed the killing of a Muslim egg seller by a group of Medical students who used to be her neighbours. Another strange aspect of the riot mentioned by her was that a section of the women did not prevent their men from committing violence but rather aided them. To highlight this attitude she mentioned about an incident that took place somewhere in Ballygunge when a man wearing lungi (a long loincloth worn by men) was suspected to be a Muslim. Manikuntala was stunned to see that women from upstairs were supplying sticks to the men of their

\(^{59}\) Sediner Katha, p.169.

\(^{60}\) Ibid, p.173.
house to beat the suspect. After the latter’s identity was established everything turned
to normalcy. This incident forced Manikuntala to write:

A hundred men were gathered to kill a single man. But how did the women instead
of preventing their husbands-sons in this matter, passing on sticks to them? Did the
insanity during riots put down mankind to such a low level? Did the natural tender-
heartedness of women vanish [in such a situation]?61

In Calcutta during riots two shelters were opened for riot affected people in Jashoda
Mansion and Kamala Girls’ School. Manikuntala was engaged in relief work in Jashoda
Mansion where on one side women and children and on the other side men were
given shelter.

In 1946 the devastating riot took place in Noakhali in East
Bengal. MARS decided to send a relief squad in riot affected areas. Manikuntala as one
of its members was sent to Chandpur to work in a women’s camp started by a religious
mission. She mentioned an incident that took place here which demonstrated the
conservative attitude of the Hindu society. She came across a Hindu child widow who
was in love with a Muslim boy and wanted to marry him. Even the girl’s brother had no
objection to it. But as the camp was started by a mission, the monks had serious
reservations about it and even went to the extent of suggesting that the girl should be
killed, cut into pieces and immersed into the water. Manikuntala and Maya Lahiri
failed to convince the girl to come to Calcutta where arrangements for her studies
could be made. At last the family members took her away. A disgusted Manikuntala
wrote:

In Hindu society who will marry a widowed girl? Under such circumstances if the girl
finds a respectable home-husband, what harm does it do to others? Which part of

61 Sediner Katha, p.175.
society falls off by this- that does not come to my head. This is our Hindu society. Yet we call other people communal.  

Manikuntala’s relief work was cut short by the death of one of her elder sisters in Calcutta and she had to go back.

When there was much communal tension between the two communities, a joint Shanti Sena front was organised with women from every party to maintain communal harmony. Such efforts continued even after independence was achieved. Manikuntala was quite active in this front also. A rally of women Shanti Senas on 20 September 1947 went in a procession from Wellington Square in Calcutta to Cornwallis Square and held a meeting there. Manikuntala along with Dr. Phulrenu Ghosh, Hazara Begum, and Bela Mitra delivered speeches in this meeting. In their speeches they all stressed on the need for organising Shanti Senas in every locality and maintaining peace in Calcutta. Again on 2 November 1947 at a meeting of the Central Shanti Sena Committee where Manikuntala was the President, resolutions were adopted urging the west Bengal Government to form ‘Mahalla’ committees in every locality to help the government in stopping black-market, in effecting equitable distribution of coal and punishing salami (advance) taking by the house owners.

During this time women also did their bit in maintaining communal harmony. Manikuntala’s concern for communal harmony finds a reference point when she penned an article titled Kolikatar Shanti Abhijane Mahilader Gourabannito Bhumika (Glorious Role of Women of Calcutta in Peace March), published in the newspaper

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62 Sediner Katha, p.178, translation mine.

63 Special Branch File No. S.P 706/47, 1947, West Bengal Police Archive.

64 Ibid.
Swadhinata dated 9 November 1947. This article narrated the resolve of Hindu and Muslim women for maintaining communal peace at any cost by working with each other in different social gatherings. She wrote: (a) In Shyambazar in Balaram Ghosh Street a social gathering of both Hindu-Muslim women was organised which was inaugurated by Mrs. Moumin, president of Muslim Mahila Samiti. Here the most crowded place was the food shop opened by Muslim women of Park Circus. (b) The Muslim women in Rajabazar slums who were in a terrified state were given assurance by the Hindu women of the same locality. (c) In the friendly gathering in Bani Bhavan organised by the Hindu women, Muslim women took part. Similarly in the Park Circus gathering Hindu women served food while the Muslim women pledged to protect Hindu life.  

4.9 Problems galore: A search for solutions

Manikuntala’s sensitive mind never failed to diagnose what could be a potential problem. During this time a cloth crisis gripped Bengal and Manikuntala was quick to react to this. She wrote an article titled Bastro Durbhikhe Banglar Nari Samaj (Women of Bengal in the Cloth Crisis) in Swadhinata dated 2.6.47. The major arguments that she made were as follows in her own words:

Due to severe scarcity of clothes there was long queue before control shops for a piece of cloth. As men had to go for work it was mostly the women with their children who had to stand in the line and sometimes even after waiting for 5-6 hours they had to return empty-handed. A few of them had also fallen ill after waiting for a long time in the heat. Scarcity of clothes had also compelled the men to go to their office daily in one cloth, while women of the house had to wear old ragged clothes and the old family members were forced to remain indoors without adequate clothing. 

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65 Swadhinata dated 9.11.47 (microfilm).  
66 Swadhinata dated 2.6.47 (microfilm).
After independence Manikuntala started participating in different protest marches. On 29\textsuperscript{th} January, 1948 at about 11 a.m. about 500 women assembled at Curzon Park under the leadership of Manikuntala and others with slogans viz. \textit{Pura Ration Dite Hob Naile Gadi Charte Hobe}(Give us full ration, otherwise you have to resign) etc.\textsuperscript{67} A deputation comprising Manikuntala, Renu Chakraborty, Aparna Sen met the Hon’ble Premier who assured them that the Ministry was trying its best to solve the problem and for the time being a quantity of rice could be distributed amongst the processionists at the Curzon park. The food minister also talked with them and satisfied with these measures the women left the Writers’ Building.\textsuperscript{68} Later when the Communist party was banned, she was arrested and sent to Presidency jail and was set free after three months.

After her release she was sent to Kharagpur with the instruction to make the proposed railway strike on 9\textsuperscript{th} March, 1949 a success. She went there in disguise of Bina Das. She was by then under police surveillance. While campaigning for the strike she realized that neither the middle class women nor were the working class in favour of such a strike. When she disclosed her apprehensions to the leaders in hiding, her suggestion was ignored and she was forced to toe the party line knowing fully well that this sort of protest lacked popular support. Not only that, she was asked to raise questions in the meeting of Jayprakash Narayan, opposed to the strike, with the assurance that as soon as women would start raising questions, men would do the same. But when Manikuntala and other women started interrupting him,

\textsuperscript{67} \textit{Special Branch File no. S.P 706/47, 1947, West Bengal Police Archive.}

\textsuperscript{68} \textit{Ibid.}
Jayprakash Narayan got irritated, and the volunteers encircled them and they were forced to leave. She wrote: ‘Not a single voice was raised from the men.’ Manikuntala felt betrayed and wrote: ‘Even after that the Comrades did not let me go.’ By that time the entire Kharagpur town was under military patrol and she was asked to distribute handbills and while doing that she was arrested once again on 8th March, 1949 and was sent to Midnapore Jail.

In jail she was at first treated as third division prisoner under trial as she did not give her actual name under the instruction of her male comrades. Here for the first time she came face to face with the exploitation of Santhal girls from different parts of North Bengal who were brought to jail on the charge of having Mahua (brewed liquor). What surprised Manikuntala most was the fact that although both men and women were accustomed to having this, it was only the women who were arrested because all the odd jobs in Midnapore jail like winnowing rice and pulses, cleaning the ladies courtyard or the drainage were performed by these hardworking Santhal girls. One day in protest against the ill treatment meted out to them by the head sweeper (female) the Santhal girls did all the tasks assigned to them but refused to have food. Manikuntala encouraged them and advised them to continue their fast until the concerned person expressed her regret. At last the jailor intervened and the head sweeper apologised. When Manikuntala became a member

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69 Sediner Katha, p.197, translation mine.

70 Ibid, p.197, translation mine.

71 Ibid, p.2.
of the assembly, later on, she highlighted the plight of the Santhal women in the floor of the House. On 19th July, 1952 in the Assembly, she pointed out that:

80 to 90% of the female inmates of Midnapore jail were Santhals and they were hard working and gentle in nature. But in jail, she pointed out, they were frequently beaten up and verbally abused. She reminded the members of the assembly that having brewed liquor was a habit of their class and they did not consider it a crime. So Manikuntala stressed that unless their culture was not changed, unless social reforms were not introduced this habit would not go and such cases would continue to happen. She also made the point that repeated arrests and confinement in jail gradually turned even a family woman into a criminal.72

From 28th April, 1949, Manikuntala and her comrades started hunger strike in protest against the police-firing on her party comrades in which some of her close comrades were killed. Now she gave her real name and was given the status of political prisoner. At the beginning they were having ghol (buttermilk), but were reproached for this by their male comrades and were instructed to have only salt and water. The fast ended after ten days. Again in the month of June, hunger strike began and during that fast Manikuntala fell seriously ill and after twenty three days the fast was withdrawn. But Manikuntala’s health continued to deteriorate and she was transferred to Presidency jail in Calcutta. Here she found comrades from different parts of Bengal for company. Discussions used to take place on various issues including the use of violence in the struggle between agricultural labourers and the jotedars (owners of a proprietary agricultural farm). On the issue of violent methods of protest Manikuntala mostly remained silent and gradually she was termed as a revisionist and the one who lacked initiative.73 On the party’s instructions, on one occasion, Manikuntala along with the other inmates resorted to stir up a direct conflict with the jail authorities. They


73 Sediner Katha, p.207.
snatched the keys and confined Mrs. Swinee, a prison official sympathetic to political
prisoners, in a room. They even threw whatever their hands could access at the
authorities. Manikuntala was confined to a cell with the insane persons for one day.
After that they once again resumed their fast and were instructed by their comrades
not to have even salt and water. Here Manikuntala writes:

I realized unless some people die in jail, perhaps nobody in the outer world will
become frenzy or no movement will take place, that is why such a directive came.\textsuperscript{74}

The government resorted to force-feeding. Meanwhile an ideological change took
place within the party and after 53 days, Manikuntala and her comrades withdrew
their fast without any conditions. At last after an appeal to the government for her
release she was liberated from the prison and became a free bird by the 1950s.

After her release she visited Barisal (then in Pakistan) to see
her mother who was in her deathbed. She saw a positive change in Barisal. She noticed
that Muslim girls in large numbers were going to schools and colleges, walking down
the streets without \textit{Burqa}, taking part in plays with boys and even learning music from
Hindu school teachers.\textsuperscript{75} After her return she started raising key issues on different
forums. In Burdwan on 6.9.51 in a meeting she dealt with the problem of acute
shortage of cloth, food and other basic necessities. The main points she highlighted
were the following:

1. High price of essential commodities were going beyond the reach of the ordinary
people, even milk for children had become unaffordable.

\textsuperscript{74} \textit{Sediner Katha}, p.212, translation mine.

\textsuperscript{75} \textit{Ibid}, p.217.
2. In India child labour was employed because it was cheap.

3. She also raised the issue of police inaction against big black marketers, while in contrast when a poor lady in order to feed her children tried to sell rice at a higher price than what was prevailing in the market, she was promptly arrested.\textsuperscript{76}

4.10 Contesting the first general election: an unequal battle

In February, 1952 the first general election was held. The Communist party decided to contest from 100 seats in the assembly. The patriarchal bias of the party became evident when among 100 seats, Manikuntala was the only woman who was given a nomination, that too from Kalighat which was considered to be a tough seat. Manikuntala’s reaction was: ‘Do the Communist Party find its women workers so unsuitable?’\textsuperscript{77} After lot of arguments it became clear that as in Kalighat the possibility of victory was considered to be low, no male candidate was willing to contest from that seat. So it went to Manikuntala. ‘The party was reluctant to give nomination to women in any other seat as there were many claimants.’\textsuperscript{78} Manikuntala’s experience clearly demonstrated that the Communist party clearly favoured its male members. ‘Even when women took as much part in political movements as men and faced police atrocities shoulder to shoulder with men there still remained traces of male chauvinism.’\textsuperscript{79}

\textsuperscript{76} \textit{Intelligence Branch, File No. 619/36}, West Bengal State Archive.

\textsuperscript{77} \textit{Sediner Katha}, p.222, translation mine.

\textsuperscript{78} \textit{Ibid}, pp.222-223, translation mine.

Election campaigning also gave her an opportunity to have varied experience. In Kalighat she visited slums as well as middle class areas. She also visited the prostitute colony in Kalighat. Manikuntala wrote that the prostitutes complained to them that the police used to harass them by frequently raiding their areas and putting them into lockup and then release them in return for money. Manikuntala could not offer any solutions to such problems. Instead she talked with them about their superstitions, the unjust social system and the government’s failure to better the life of women- i.e., reasons which she considered were largely responsible for their life of indignity. Her argument, however, found no support with them. As for Manikuntala she considered prostitution to be a curse of the capitalist world which had taken a fashionable name of call girl or Cabaret girl. Her firm belief was that only a socialist state would be able to provide alternative ways of livelihood, so that the poor women would not have to resort to sell their dignity. But she wondered: ‘When would these unfortunate girls of this country find that path? How many ages they will have to wait?’ She also came into contact with the poor but talented painters who were living in slums and on the road in a distressed state, while their hard work was the source of profit for many businessman. She also witnessed the extreme poverty in which the women tea garden workers were living. They did not even have proper clothes to hide their shame. Manikuntala admitted that when she

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80 Sediner Katha, p.290.
81 Ibid, p.290.
talked with them they looked at her with their vacant eyes.\textsuperscript{84} She also realised that caste identity carried more value than a candidate’s personal quality. Similarly people who were the inhabitants of Barisal but now settled in Kalighat promised to cast their vote in her favour because of their common place of birth. In spite of being given a tough seat she managed to win the seat in 1952. Manikuntala made no secrets about her hard earned membership of the Assembly. She wrote:

The assembly has some sort of infatuation, it also has certain pomp and grandeur. It feels like I have grown big. From this [feeling], it is very difficult to detach oneself.\textsuperscript{85}

4.11 Marriage and beyond

The year 1952 was also important as far as Manikuntala’s personal life was concerned. She married Jolly Mohan Kaul, a district party functionary, ten years younger than her. It was quite an unconventional and bold step considering her times. The Communist party, though advanced in many ways often reflected the cloistered Hindu middle class world.\textsuperscript{86} Manikuntala’s memoir is silent about this aspect of her life as also her party’s reaction to it. But Jolly Mohan Kaul’s memoir indicated that the going was not easy for the couple. He wrote: ‘. . . the opposition from a section of the leadership [to the marriage] was such that anyone else would have wilted under it.’\textsuperscript{87} He further wrote: Despite the attitude of her PC colleagues,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{84}Sediner Katha, p.228.
\item \textsuperscript{85} Ibid, p.229.
\item \textsuperscript{86} Ranabir Samadder, A Biography of the Nation, 1947-1997, p.254.
\item \textsuperscript{87} Jolly Mohan Kaul, In search of a Better world: Memoirs, pp.303-304.
\end{itemize}
Manikuntala stayed perfectly calm and composed... With a combined monthly income of Rs.145 they struggled hard to make a living. But it was due “. . . to the wonderful person named Manikuntala who managed ghare and baire (home and away), on next to nothing, we were able to survive on our meagre party wage.”

Henceforth she had to combine her party work, women’s movement as also her duties as a member of the assembly. Manikuntala discussed extensively about the way women should be organised to realise their demands as also the role of the women’s organisations in this regard. She argued that a grave economic crisis had forced not only the lower middle class women but also the middle class women to seek a source of employment. Also the refugee women’s jeopardised life could be put on track only through some sort of employment. So during this time employment for women became her key issue. Manikuntala wrote:

Just as making provisions for men’s employment is the duty of the government of the country, similarly it is also the duty of the government to create avenues for women’s employment . . . But if the government is indifferent about its responsibilities and duties with regard to women’s employment programme then it is the women who have to organise themselves in order to force the government to grant their demands . . . women have to join samiti due to this reason. Without samiti women could not be organised. If they are not organised then no movement will take place, without a movement it will be impossible to extract the demands regarding employment.

This she felt was extremely important as a political lesson and it had to be imparted to the women without which a women’s organisation would never become a mass-

89 Ibid, p.306.
organisation nor would it become a weapon of mass movement. She also admitted that it was not easy for a woman who had never crossed the boundaries of her private domain, to have faith in the strength of organised movement, nor was it a mean task to come out of their private world after overcoming the restrictions imposed by their family and society. In addition to taking the initiative to place demands before the government, the samiti could on its own, start some constructive programmes like sewing, pickle making which could be financed by subscriptions and donations from the people and the workers and those who were coming here to earn had to share the responsibility of running these centres.

Throughout the year she dealt with several social issues. On 6 April 1952 at the Physical Culture Institute she argued that she would press the government for the supply of free milk and the provision of free medical treatment for the poor and middle class people. Again on 18 April of the same year, at a meeting at the Deshbandhu Sishu Vidyalaya she felt that the government should either reduce the prices of the foodstuffs or remove the countrywide unemployment programme and urged the people especially the women to take out a big procession to the Assembly to compel the Ministry to reduce the prices of foodstuff. On 17 May ‘52 at Hrishikesh Park she pointed out that thousand and thousand acres of land lying barren and

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91 Letter dated 6.6.52(written in Bengali) by Manikuntala Sen to Mrs. Tulsi Bhattacharjee of Silchar, Special Branch File No. S-565/52/II. Translation mine. West Bengal Police Archive.

92 Ibid.

93 Ibid.

94 Special Branch File No. S-565/52.

95 Ibid.
millions of villagers including peasants were flocking to the city in search of food while on 21 May '52 she pointed out that the zamindars in order to earn more money had allowed saline water to pass and thereby rendered about 8 lacs of bighas of land unfit for cultivation.⁹⁶

At about the same time in the Assembly she raised two important issues—the complete disorganisation of the health care system and the exploitation of female jail inmates, poor condition of jail inmates and the need for jail reforms. On 17 July, 1952 she pointed out that the health care system especially in rural areas was in complete disarray. To highlight this she made the following points:

1. In West Bengal there were more than 34 thousand villages but the rural hospitals had almost no facilities, even the dispensaries had hardly any lifesaving drugs. Only 35 maternity and child care centers existed in rural areas. Because of such inadequate service rural people were forced to come to Calcutta for medical care, often selling or mortgaging whatever little property they had,

2. In the Calcutta Medical College number of doctors and nurses were inadequate. As a result the rural poor had to stand in a long queue often waiting for more than six to seven hours before their turn finally arrived,

3. The pupil nurses who were the backbone of any hospital service used to receive a monthly allowance of Rs. 35-45 and their working hours varied between 10-12 hours. Though there were not enough nurses in the hospitals, yet qualified nurses remained jobless,

⁹⁶ Special Branch File No. S-565/52. West Bengal Police Archive.
4. T.B. and leprosy treatment facilities were in a pathetic condition.  

During a discussion on Demand for Grants, on 19th July, 1952 she raised the following points:

1. Apart from political prisoners, the majority of women prisoners were illiterate who did not have any idea about where to lodge their complaints.

2. Reform Committee was almost non-existent, even the jail officials did not know the jail code head and heart. Under trial inmates were made to work in violation of the code.

3. In Midnapore jail hospital there was inadequate number of doctors and not a single nurse. There was no provision of a ‘special diet’ for the children of the convicts.

4. Poor almost starving women were arrested for rice smuggling when it was the cultured people of Calcutta who used to buy rice from them.

5. What was most important was urgent reforms and for that she suggested the formation of a non-official committee, comprising members of the opposition bench.  

Food problem continued to be the center of her attention. At a conference of the MARS held on 5 July 1952 at the Mahabodhi Society Hall in Calcutta she described the sufferings of the people in the scarcity areas and urged the women to unite for the realisation of the following demands:

(a) Reduction in the prices of wheat and rice,

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98 Ibid, pp.131-133.
(b) Introduction of rationing system all over West Bengal and increased rations for all,

(c) Supply of milk amongst children of five years and expectant mothers,

(d) Distribution of relief in the famine stricken areas,

(e) Distribution of land and agricultural implements among the peasants etc. In another meeting on 24.November’52 she criticised the government for poor mortality rate of new born babies and for turning down her request to open a few children’s home in Calcutta and accommodating about 10,000 children in the Government House.

4.12 The Refugee question and Manikuntala

The Partition of India in 1947 saw a massive exodus of Hindu minority community from East to West Bengal. Streams of refugees were coming to West Bengal from East Pakistan. As a person whose beloved Barisal was now in Pakistan, Manikuntala understood the feeling of loss that the refugees were going through. She felt that the refugees were treated as unwelcome guests in West Bengal. She admired the struggle of those refugees who struggled hard to build a small home for themselves instead of going to the various government camps. After clearing jungles, digging up the soil or filling up the marshy lands they managed to build small shelters for themselves and the government employed police and even

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99 *Special Branch File no. S-565/52. West Bengal Police Archive.*

100 *Ibid.*

101 *Sediner Katha, p.181.*
hooligans to evict them. She also observed that staying in camps for a long time and living in government doles destroyed the will of a section of the refugees to become self-reliant. Once when the refugees complained to her about the poor quality of rice and clothes given in doles, she suggested:

Demand work and take rice and clothes in return for that. Then if you feel that those things were of poor quality, then throw them at the face of those who are giving you these things.

But Manikuntala admitted that she failed to create such a consciousness among them. ‘Living in camps for a long time has rendered them into a dependent class and they lost their self-respect, this is a painful happening.’ On the other hand, she noticed, that the cultivating class did not lose their initiative and they continued to grow vegetables whenever they found a small patch of land in the camps and tried to augment their income by selling those vegetables. The East Bangalee refugee women had a special place in her heart because of the heroic way by which they took helm of their life and moved on. She writes: ‘Not only their lives- those women even steered their family in strong hands and in the process have forgotten to think about their own lives.’

In the assembly session of 4 July, 1952 she raised several poignant issues. Among these the issue of poor treatment facilities for children and

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102 Sediner Katha, p.181.
103 Ibid, p.182, translation mine.
104 Ibid, p.182, translation mine.
105 Ibid, p.182.
lack of employment opportunities for women also featured. The main points of her argument were the following:

(a) There were only 150 beds for children under twelve and they were given skimmed milk which was devoid of necessary fat.

(b) Unlike other countries, in India children were not given priority. Her suggestion was to introduce ‘priority card’ for the children in the rationing system and they were to be provided milk, eggs or butter through such arrangement.

(c) Mortality rate among refugee children was quite high. While in the Dhubulia government shelter 583 children had died in 1950 in the Maniktala government shelter in three months, 25 children had died within a week. In Kashipur transit camp in a week 75 children had died in average. This way, according to her, after the partition about two lakhs of children had to die.

(d) As the poor parents were unable to feed their children, the latter from the age of six or seven had to start working in tea gardens, colliery, soap factory, glass factory, restaurants and other places. She pointed out that these child labourers were exploited to their limits. For example, in tea gardens the children were given daily five annas as their wage and two paisa as D.A, there was nothing called labour law. In coal mines children were employed illegally.

(e) About women’s unemployment programme she argued that deep economic crisis had forced women both belonging to the middle class as well as uneducated women to look for a respectable source of income. But according to her many educated
women were still jobless, while uneducated women had simply no avenues for employment.

(f) Women were discriminated with regard to their wages. In factories women labourers received less salary than men for equal work. This was also true of government offices. In the education department, a lady inspector was paid less than her male colleagues.

(g) Women employees were often denied maternity benefits in some pretext or the other. She pointed out that even the government in order to deny the women of their maternity benefits had made it a rule that only unmarried women would be eligible for work at the Telephone sector.

(h) Lastly she pointed out there was an urgent necessity of crèches where working mothers could keep their children.\(^{107}\)

On 31 January 1953 Manikuntala attended the third Annual Conference of the District MARS at Jalpaiguri. Here she demanded that women should enjoy an equal status with men, more facilities should be extended for their education and employment. She also vouched for free medical treatment for children and maternity benefits for mothers.\(^{108}\)

In the same year on 12 February at the session of the West Bengal Assembly she accused the government for misusing The West Bengal Security Act, 1950, since women were being harassed and even the MARS was not

\(^{107}\) *Proceedings of the West Bengal Legislative Assembly*, vol.6 No.2, 1952, pp.260-261.

\(^{108}\) *Special Branch File no. S-565/53*. West Bengal Police Archive.
spared. She pointed out that through this Act, women from 13 to 60 years were being arrested on false charges and were confined without trial, though later on they were released as the charges against them were found to be baseless.\textsuperscript{109} She reiterated that in the past when the MARS was declared unlawful by this Act, the cooperative society of 200 women were forced to shut down and as a result 200 women were left jobless thereby losing their income.\textsuperscript{110} That is why she opposed the bill seeking an extension of the Act.

Manikuntala’s concern for the poor and the refugees was expressed once again, at a meeting organised by the Bagmari Bastuhara samiti on 7\textsuperscript{th} June, 1953. Here she argued that because of retrenchment and consequent unemployment and increased price of rice, poor people were either committing suicide or flocking to the cities and the government was indifferent to their problems.\textsuperscript{111} As the food crisis continued, Manikuntala at a meeting held at the Maidan on 22.8.53 on a party forum moved the following resolutions:

1. Rationed rice in Calcutta and the neighbouring areas should be supplied at the original rate of seven annas per seer,

2. No retrenchment of labour and other employees should be made and provisions for doles for the unemployed was to be ensured,

\textsuperscript{109} \textit{Proceedings of the West Bengal Legislative Assembly}, vol.7, no.1, 1953, p.727.

\textsuperscript{110} \textit{Ibid}, p.728.

\textsuperscript{111} \textit{Intelligence Branch File no. 619/36}. West Bengal State Archive.
3. Introduction of modified rationing in all areas where there was no statutory rationing and sale of rice at six annas per seer, equal amount of rice and wheat in equal proportions were to be given, one week's ration in three instalments instead of one, were to be ensured,

4. In distressed areas rice should be made available by the government at four annas per seer,

5. Able bodied unemployed in rural areas should be given employment at reasonable rates or in lieu of that adequate relief should be given,

6. Disabled and income less people should be granted adequate relief,

7. Provision of loans for those agriculturists who were in a position to repay after harvesting of crops,

8. Adequate relief for village artisans.\textsuperscript{112} These resolutions were put to vote and were unanimously passed.

The MARS decided to organise a central demonstration to gherao the Food Minister, Government of West Bengal with the demand for cheap ration and better quality rice on 21.9.53. Manikuntala was to lead from the front. In this regard copies of a printed Bengali leaflet-\textit{Khadya Sankate Ma-Boneder Kachhey Mahila Samitir Abedan} (An appeal by the Mahila Samiti to the mothers and sisters with regard to the food crisis) were circulated.\textsuperscript{113} Accordingly, on that date about 500 women from different parts of the city assembled at Wellington Square. Manikuntala

\textsuperscript{112} Intelligence Branch File no. 619/36. West Bengal State Archive.

\textsuperscript{113} Special Branch File no. S-565/53. West Bengal Police Archive.
read out a memorandum, addressed to the Food Minister and signed by Provabati Saraswati. It contained the following demands:

1. Better quality of rice @ Rs.7 per seer,

2. Rations at a cheaper rate,

3. Free distribution of milk to the poor children and

4. Employment for the refugees.¹¹⁴

Thereafter, a procession with banners carrying slogans proceeded towards the Food Department office at Free School Street and staged a demonstration, while a deputation which included Manikuntala Sen and Renu Chakraborty met the Dy. Director, who assured them that a committee would be setup to consider the memorandum.¹¹⁵

4.13 Manikuntala as a crusader of Women’s rights

Manikuntala through her relentless associations with the women came to know that ordinary women were tired of giving birth to many children. Women were eager to find a solution to this problem. But during that time neither the government had any family-planning programme nor did the radio or the newspapers carried any such propaganda in favour of it. Moreover, the Communist party did not support birth-control. But for the sake of the women, workers like Manikuntala had to think about this issue. In 1954 they organised a Regional Mothers’

¹¹⁴ *Special Branch* File no. S-565/53. West Bengal Police Archive.

Conference on behalf of the National Federation\textsuperscript{116} of women where demands were placed regarding maternity allowance, more maternity centres for women, increasing the number of beds in hospitals, crèche facilities for the children of working mothers etc. Women doctors stressed that one or two children were preferable to many children both from the point of view of economy and health. Interestingly, such an important issue, crucial to the well-being of the ordinary women, received no support from the party. Moreover, one party leader sarcastically commented: 'We should call this a birth-control conference rather than a mother's conference.'\textsuperscript{117} Manikuntala argued that the party was not happy with them but she felt that one could not close his/her eyes towards this issue and suggested that India could adopt the Chinese policy of financial assistance to small families.\textsuperscript{118}

The issue of Hindu Code Bill also came up during this period. The bill was particularly significant as far as women were concerned because the bill proposed to enhance the marriageable age of girls, abolish child marriage and polygamy, legalise inter-caste marriage, grant women the right to divorce and enjoy equal rights of girls in their parental property. After the bill was raised in the Parliament, it was sent to state assemblies for support. MARS decided to conduct small meetings to make people aware of the bill and also to start a signature campaign in support of the bill. While actively supporting this motion Manikuntala realized that a section of eminent persons like Dr. Shyamaprosad Mukherjee was opposed to the bill.

\textsuperscript{116} After the Second World War, the women of the war-affected countries formed this organisation with the aim of creating a war free world for the children. Its branch was also established in India.

\textsuperscript{117} Sediner Katha, p.254, translation mine.

\textsuperscript{118} Ibid, pp254-255.
Not only that, even some of the middle class families were reluctant to give the girls equal share in parental property. They were also apprehensive of the women’s right to divorce. Despite such opposition, MARS was able to carry on their signature campaign. In a gathering at the Vidyasagar College, on 8.8.54 Manikuntala argued that the bill was:

necessary for safeguarding the rights of women in India and in West Bengal, where womenfolk had to depend solely on men. Women were being oppressed by men. Government, by necessary legislation, must remove social evils and encroachment on women’s rights.\(^\text{119}\)

In the same meeting she criticised the Hindu Mahasabha, the Ram Rajya Parisad and some members of the Congress for opposing the bill and urged the audience to put their signatures in support of the bill.\(^\text{120}\) Shyamaprosad even went to the extent of disrupting a meeting in University Institute Hall where Sarojini Naidu was to be the main speaker.\(^\text{121}\) Even Jawaharlal Nehru had to apply the party whip to get the bill passed. Ultimately the bill was passed. But Manikuntala had doubts in her mind and wrote: “. . . is legal recognition sufficient to establish women in place of equal dignity?”\(^\text{122}\)

As women especially refugee women were coming out in search of jobs, employment opportunities for women became a burning issue and Manikuntala continued to address this issue. On 6.2.54, at an informal meeting at Biswanath Colony Park, she alleged that government had made no provision for

\(^{119}\text{Special Branch File no. S-565/54(iii). West Bengal Police Archive.}^{120}\text{Ibid.}^{121}\text{Sediner Katha, p.239.}^{122}\text{Ibid, p.240.}
women to eke out the earning of the male members of their family.\textsuperscript{123} In the Assembly, on 23\textsuperscript{rd} March, 1954, she pointed out the following:

1. Without adequate capital, raw materials and marketing, no cottage industries could survive. That is why, training centres in refugee camps like the Rupasree camp were forced to close down. Therefore, she urged the government to take responsibility of production and marketing of handicraft items.

2. Women were sacked indiscriminately as there was no such thing called service conditions, nor did women receive equal wages for equal work. Moreover, whenever they placed demands for maternity benefits, they were sacked.\textsuperscript{124} Again on 24\textsuperscript{th} March, 1954 while talking on The West Bengal Clinical Establishment (Amendment Bill), 1954 she pointed out that a number of women including the refugee women, were facing acute financial crisis and finding no other job, were forced to work in massage clinics and urged the government to treat them sympathetically and make arrangements for their rehabilitation.\textsuperscript{125} About maternity centres in rural areas, she pointed out the following:

1. There was a lack of adequate maternity centres in rural areas. Also very few women knew their existence. As a result most deliveries used to take place at home which according to her, was one of the reasons behind child mortality.

\textsuperscript{123} Intelligence Branch File no.619/36. West Bengal State Archive.


\textsuperscript{125} Ibid, p.176.
2. She also pointed out that the existing maternity centres had only two nurses and one mid-wife which was far from adequate. She urged the government to appoint more mid-wives in these centres and to impart training for such a job. In this way, the rural women would be able to get an avenue of employment.¹²⁶

In 1954 when there was devastating floods in North Bengal, she was asked to visit flood affected areas. In Cooch Bihar, Jolly M. Kaul pointed out that Manikuntala was asked to wade through waist deep flooded waters for quite a long distance to impress upon the people that her party was there in their period of crisis.¹²⁷ Such things did help the party to build a firm base in the district but it ruined Manikuntala’s health.¹²⁸ Regarding floods she pointed out in the assembly on 6 September, 1954 that:

Government relief was inadequate in flood affected areas and that the non-government organisations were facing obstacles when they went for relief work.¹²⁹

Moreover, the government did not do anything to prevent floods in the way of building dams.¹³⁰ Manikuntala’s suggestions to control floods, and organize flood relief were the following:

(a) the state government should demand more financial aid from the centre to tackle such a natural calamity, (b) to involve non-government organisations, as well as the people in relief work, (c) formation of an advisory board with official, non-official and

¹²⁸Ibid, p.313.
¹²⁹Ibid, p.663.
¹³⁰Ibid, p.663.
people from different parties, (d) to give priority to flood prevention schemes, and (e) to send a deputation of MLAs belonging to different parties to have first-hand account of the devastation.\textsuperscript{131}

In the beginning of 1955, she lashed out at the government for its poor rehabilitation policy. On 12\textsuperscript{th} February, 1955 she pointed out that a major part of the refugees, settled in government colonies, or through private settlement or Union Board scheme, have deserted their colonies due to the absence of proper source of livelihood conducive to earn money.\textsuperscript{132} She highlighted the following points to clarify her demands:

1. A major part of agriculturist families settled in Jalpaiguri and Midnapore had deserted because either the land they received was insufficient for the sustenance of a family, or the land was unsuitable for cultivation or there was no facility for supply of water in the land, 2. Non-agriculturist families were given Rs.500 for starting a new business; but as the amount was given in small instalments and the gap between two instalments was very high, so the money could not be properly utilised to start a business. 3. In rural areas, the infrastructure for cottage industries was destroyed to such an extent, that settlers found it extremely hard to start a new business. Moreover, as she mentioned earlier in the assembly, that without government help regarding supply of raw materials or marketing, such business ventures were bound to fail. So, the government expenditure in this regard was a mere wastage, (4) Of the 3,645 people who received some sort of technical education, only 1,352 had got some


\textsuperscript{132} Proceedings of the West Bengal Legislative Assembly, vol.11, no.1, 1955, p.222.
sort of employment, (5) the non-camp agriculturist refugees, she pointed out, were in
great distress as they received no help from the government. Also there was no effort
to regularise the squatters’ colonies, and (6) lastly she pointed out that 80,000 people
living in camps, were awaiting rehabilitation and they were made to dig soils on the
false premise that they would be given land. She also pointed out that whenever the
refugees vented out their grievances, their voices were suppressed.\textsuperscript{133} She accused
Renuka Ray, Minister of Rehabilitation, West Bengal, of falsely giving a colourful
picture of refugee rehabilitation and demanded her resignation.

In March, 1955 the National Federation of Indian women
decided to stage a demonstration of women belonging to different strata of the
society near the assembly house to place the demand for provision of wider scope of
employment of women before the Chief Minister, Dr. B. C. Roy. MARS collected a large
number of signatures from women in support of their demands. On 1 March, at about
2 p.m. women from the labour class, refugee women, slum dwellers as also middle
class housewives in and around Calcutta assembled at Wellington Square with their
festoons and placards.\textsuperscript{134} Here Manikutala criticised the callous attitude of the
government with regard to the question of finding alternative employment for
women.\textsuperscript{135} From there the women marched towards the assembly, but they were
stopped by the police in front of the Southern Gate of the Raj Bhavan. From there
Manikutala went to the assembly house with a memorandum on behalf of the West

\textsuperscript{133} Proceeding\textit{s} of the West Bengal Legislative Assembly, vol.11, no.1, 1955, pp.222-224.

\textsuperscript{134} \textit{Intelligence Branch File no. 619/36}. West Bengal State Archive.

\textsuperscript{135} \textit{Ibid.}
Bengal Committee of National Federation of Women, signed by 30,000 women, to the Deputy Speaker, Sri Ashutosh Mallick, who was then in the chair. The memorandum demanded increased opportunities for women in factories, opening of small scale industries and arranging for training through paid apprenticeship, adequate financing and offering protection to such industries from competition with foreign imported goods. The Hindustan Standard reported on 2.3.55 that among those women who signed the memorandum, there were women who did not have any sort of training, as well as women who knew basket or needle work or similar crafts and women with B.A. or M.A. degrees or with nursing or other diplomas. The newspaper further reported that though majority of the women were middle aged, there were also teenaged girls, as well as very old women forced to come out of their homes to seek work in face of dire economic necessity and many women who did not know any work, were prepared for any type of physical work.

On 25 and 26 February, 1956 at the open session of the Eighth provincial MARS conference Manikuntala once again raised a critical finger at the West Bengal government as the budget provided hardly offered any scope for the education and the betterment of the women and urged women to come forward and enlist themselves as members of the MARS to fight for their demands.

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137. Hindustan Standard (paper cutting), dated 2.3.55, Special Branch File no. S-565/55.
138. Ibid.
139. Intelligence Branch File no. 619/36. West Bengal State Archive.
4.14 Standing behind the cause of the Refugees

Meanwhile the refugee problem had assumed a serious magnitude. On 6 September, 1956, Manikuntala paid a visit to the refugees staying at the Sealdah Station and collected particulars of those refugees who were staying there for a long time and even advised those refugees who were unwilling to rehabilitate themselves outside West Bengal to remain firm in their resolve. On 13 May, 1957 at a meeting under the auspices of the Bastuhara Sangram Parisad Manikuntala criticised the government’s attitude towards the Bettiah refugees. In the assembly on 15 June, 1957 she pointed out that the funds allotted for refugee rehabilitation were spent in a wrong way. Her main points of argument were as follows:

The rehabilitation department had a number of tailoring and training institutes where the trainees were given Rs.15 per month. Since the government took no responsibility of providing them jobs after their training was over, the trainees remained jobless. Same was the situation with silk spinning centres which were quite expensive to start. She further pointed out that a MARS run spinning centre failed to receive any government help due to political reasons. In the Rupasree Pally camp, at least a thousand women were able to work, yet they were jobless. Similarly, in P.L and Transit Camps, government had no plans at all to provide them industrial jobs. On 11 July, 1957, on behalf of the refugees she demanded that the clause asking the refugees to pay to the owner compensation for unauthorized occupation should be omitted from

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140 Intelligence Branch File no. 619/36. West Bengal State Archive.

141 Ibid.

the proposed ‘The Rehabilitation of Displaced Persons and Eviction of Persons in unauthorized Occupation of Land (Amendment) Bill, 1957 because she felt that such a clause was unjust. As the refugees through their hard work and spending their own money had transformed the waste lands into land suitable for human settlement they should be given a fair deal.\textsuperscript{143}

She was quick to point out that the government could not provide house-building loans and the refugees living in dilapidated Corporation buildings, were not provided any alternative arrangements when those buildings were ordered to be demolished.\textsuperscript{144} She thus accused the government of deliberately delaying the process of regularising the colonies.\textsuperscript{145} She urged the government to take a humanitarian approach to solve the aforesaid problem. Echoing with the renowned social worker Ashoka Gupta, she too requested the government to view the refugee rehabilitation programme of West Bengal from a humane approach, which was so far lacking.

Manikuntala was against the policy of sending the refugees outside West Bengal. She felt that there was political reason behind such a policy. On 9.2.58 at a rally in Subodh Mallick Square, Calcutta, she declared that the government had decided to send the refugees to Dandakaranya because in the last general election the refugees did not cast their votes in favour of the Congress.\textsuperscript{146}

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\textsuperscript{143} \textit{Proceedings of the West Bengal Assembly}, vol.17, no, 3, 1957, pp.325-326.
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\textsuperscript{144} \textit{Ibid}, p.326.
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\textsuperscript{146} \textit{Intelligence Branch File No.619/36}. West Bengal State Archive.
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During the Assembly session of 10 June, 1958 she criticised the Rehabilitation Minister, Sri Prafulla Chandra Sen for deciding to send the refugees staying in the camps out of Bengal and to stop their cash doles on the pretext that they were earning money outside. With a view to highlighting the deplorable condition of the refugees in refugee colonies she underscored the following observations:

She narrated before the members of the West Bengal Legislative Assembly that 75% of the refugees in Taherpur colony were starving, while 250 refugees were earning livelihood as hawkers and 400 refugees were affected with Tuberculosis. Regarding women refugees she pointed out that 600 women in Taherpur colony had resorted to begging and a practice of immoral trafficking was going on with them while the condition of the women in Rupasree and Bhadrakali camp resembled that of a concentration camp. Here women were often beaten up. Protesting against such maltreatment, women in the Bhadrakali camp even resorted to a hunger strike. She further pointed out that 500 cultivating refugee families in Kulti were rehabilitated where land was unsuitable for cultivation, while in Taherpur almost Rs. 8, 65,000 were spent to construct a drain which in all possibilities would be washed away during the rainy season. With regard to Titagarh training centre, she pointed out that corrupt practices had led to the generation of false cash memos and uneconomic purchase, while almost 20 lakhs were spent to impart handicraft training to women. Since all avenues of employment failed the amount of money deployed on this project turned out to be a mere wastage.

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147 *Proceedings, of the West Bengal Assembly* vol.20, no.1, 1958, p.335.

Meanwhile, the food crisis grew acute and on 17.3.58 at a meeting convened at Hazra Park, Calcutta, Manikuntala held the Congress government responsible for the misery. By the month of June, in the same year, (4.6.58) a women’s rally under the auspices of different women’s organisations was organized at the Wellington Square to protest against the high prices of foodstuff and other essential commodities. A procession, led by Manikuntala and others, paraded different streets of Calcutta and shouted slogans as they approached the South Gate of the Raj Bhavan. At this juncture, they were intercepted by the police and stopped. Afterwards Manikuntala proceeded towards the Assembly and handed over a memorandum to the chief minister over the food issue. But Dr. Roy reportedly stated that it was not possible for him to sell rice at annas-\(\frac{1}{5}\) per seer but he agreed to meet the representatives of the demonstrators soon. Manikuntala also joined the conference of the Price Rise and Famine Resistance Committee (a united front of the major leftist parties) held on 31.8.58 at the Muslim Institute Hall, Calcutta and fully endorsed the resolution for organising strikes over the issue of food.

4.15 **Manikuntala fights against the custom of Dowry**

After Hindu Code bill, another evil system, the Dowry also needed to be addressed. The system had spread its roots from the upper strata of the society to the lowest. Women activists felt that a law prohibiting this cruel system

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149 *Intelligence Branch File no.619/36. West Bengal State Archive.*


was absolutely necessary. MARS undertook a number of meetings and signature campaigns in support of such a law. While doing this, Manikuntala observed that both in cities and villages, poor women, even the peasant women were opposed to any dowry prohibition law mainly out of fear that when their daughter could not be married without dowry, it was futile to support such a law.\textsuperscript{153} To her utter dismay, Manikuntala realized that this evil had not only turned many families into paupers in their attempt to marry their daughters, but had also caused an untold suffering to the girl who would become the bride. Manikuntala wrote that a girl’s educational qualification or her capability in household works carried no value, only the amount of gold or money given by her father decided her value.\textsuperscript{154} Whenever, the father refused to meet the demands of the groom’s family, the married girl was sent back and the groom was married again, violating the law. Manikuntala attended a number of meetings stressing the need for an anti dowry legislation. On 11.3.58 at the open session of the National Federation of Indian Women, of the West Bengal branch, she urged everyone to fight for the discontinuance of the dowry system and stressed on the necessity of enacting a law for this purpose.\textsuperscript{155} She also demanded that womenfolk should enjoy the same privileges as enjoyed by their male counterparts in every sphere.\textsuperscript{156} Again, on 3.12.60, at a meeting of the women members of the party, she reiterated the need for establishing an anti-dowry legislation.\textsuperscript{157} However she admitted that mere legal prohibition was not enough to stop the system. According to her, 

\textsuperscript{153} Sediner Katha, p.241.

\textsuperscript{154} Ibid, p.241.

\textsuperscript{155} Intelligence Branch File No.619/36. West Bengal State Archive.

\textsuperscript{156} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{157} Ibid.
unless women themselves organized a movement against this evil system, there was no chance of its discontinuance. She exhorted the women’s organisations to fight for the repression of this social disease as an integral part of their programme.

4.16 Vouching for reforms in the sphere of education

The realm of education too did not miss the probing mind of Manikuntala. Once again she became the spokesperson for the poor pay scale of the teachers’ and lack of scope of employment in present educational system. In the legislative assembly session of 11 July, 1958, she informed the house that starting from primary to higher education, the pupils found little opening, which had led to their desperation. Regarding the poor pay scale of the teachers’, she argued that as in a poor household, the women remained underfed, similarly in schools also, teachers were paid after all other expenses were met. But Manikuntala reminded the society that a teacher like others, had a household and children to maintain, he/she also had to buy essential goods at high prices, had to pay house-rent and to bear transport cost. That is why Manikuntala wholeheartedly supported the teachers when they resorted to hunger strike, in demand for a better pay. She even visited the hunger strikers a number of times. But the decision to involve the students in the teachers’ strike found no support from her, as she felt that this might somewhat

158 Sediner Katha, p.242.
161 Sediner Katha, p.246.
hamper teacher-student relationship.\textsuperscript{162} She was also not in favour of attaching teachers or nurses or hospital staffs with the trade union movement, as these were according to her, humanitarian services.\textsuperscript{163} In the assembly she blamed the government for failing to increase the scope of Adult Education, compulsory free primary education and free education for girls up to class-8.\textsuperscript{164} She also pointed out that the government had spent lakhs and lakhs of rupees in multipurpose schools, but, alas, there were no teachers or no syllabus for these schools.\textsuperscript{165} She also criticised the government’s decision to close the Urdu medium of instruction in Sakhwat Memorial School which had led to the reduction in the number of students in the school.\textsuperscript{166}

4.17 Articulating the need for housing and pure drinking water

In the Legislative assembly session of 19\textsuperscript{th} February, 1959, she raised the problem of housing and drinking water in Calcutta. She pointing out that a shelter and clean drinking water were increasingly becoming difficult to obtain in West Bengal.\textsuperscript{167} Here she also criticised the valuation system of Calcutta Corporation by which taxation of residential houses had been increased from 300\% to 400\%, but under the new system, the valuation of cinema halls had decreased and taxes for Burrarabazar houses were not increased as their rental basis could not be

\textsuperscript{162} \textit{Proceedings of the West Bengal Legislative Assembly} vol.20. no.1, 1958, p.249.

\textsuperscript{163} \textit{Ibid}, pp.249-250.

\textsuperscript{164} \textit{Ibid}, p.386.

\textsuperscript{165} \textit{Ibid}, p.387.

\textsuperscript{166} \textit{Ibid}, p.387.

\textsuperscript{167} \textit{Proceedings of the West Bengal Legislative Assembly}, vol.22, no.1, 1959, p.485.
ascertained.\textsuperscript{168} She recalled that in her own constituency, Kalighat she had encountered a number of people who possessed two roomed houses and used to let one of the rooms to sustain themselves. But such houses also came under the new valuation system.\textsuperscript{169} She wrote that once an old man came to her saying that a small prayer room had also been assessed as a room and that he had no other option but to sell his property and move to slums, as after paying taxes, it would be difficult to sustain his family with the remaining rental.\textsuperscript{170} Manikuntala felt helpless and noted that after a few years, these old houses would vanish and new houses would come up in their place.\textsuperscript{171} She also lamented the fact that new high rises were coming up in Calcutta, yet 51\% of Calcuttans still lived in Kuchcha (temporary) houses with their families in a 30sq.ft. room.\textsuperscript{172} Most of the families did not have access to clean drinking water. She pointed out that for every 500,000 families, there was one tube well and only lucky families had tap at their homes.\textsuperscript{173} She also pointed out that underground pipe was contaminated every year, but government was silent about this.\textsuperscript{174} She drew the attention of the house to some alarming facts and figures. For example, she cited that in Calcutta, there were still 50,000 service-latrines and 500 mile open drain, while the big government hospitals were so crowded that they resembled the Gariahat

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext{168}{\it Proceedings of the West Bengal Legislative Assembly}, vol.22, no.1, 1959, p.486.}
\footnotetext{169}{\it Sediner Katha}, p.292.}
\footnotetext{170}{\textit{Ibid}, p.293.}
\footnotetext{171}{\textit{Ibid}, p.293.}
\footnotetext{172}{\textit{Ibid}, p.487.}
\footnotetext{173}{\textit{Ibid}, p.487.}
\footnotetext{174}{\textit{Ibid}, p.487.}
\end{footnotes}
According to her Calcutta was expanding in an unplanned manner and an expert committee must be formed to look into the matter. On 7th March, 1960, she emphasized on the housing problem in Calcutta. She raised the following points to inform the house of the appalling condition of the housing facilities in Calcutta:

She highlighted the fact that the inhabitants living in Kuchcha houses had to use common bathrooms and taps in Calcutta.

Secondly, they had to live in a single room; their children did not have a playing area or a place to study. As a result the growing children spent most of their time in the pavements which was harmful for their mental and physical health. It was also inconvenient for the growing girls to live in one room with others. Although there was also a provision for loans for lower income groups but the condition for receiving such loans was so cumbersome that few people could avail that opportunity.

Finally, she expressed her anguish at the fact that even after the passage of the Slum Clearance Bill, only 896 tenements had been constructed and two and half lakhs slum dwellers were yet to be provided with housing facilities.\(^{176}\)

In 1959 she wrote an article in *Ghare-Baire (Agrahayan, 1366)*, entitled *Paschim Banga Sishu Ain-1959* (West Bengal Children’s Act). This Act dealt with the ways of handling the vagabond or neglected and delinquent children. The Act did make a number of provisions for such children, but Manikuntala felt that without addressing the reasons behind such delinquency on the part of the children, the

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\(^{175}\) *Proceedings of the West Bengal Assembly* vol.22, no.1, 1959, p.488.

measures were bound to fail. Manikuntala’s conclusions were based on several reasons:

First, she argued that due to acute economic crisis, many families failed to take proper care of their children. As a result, the risk of delinquency among these children was quite high.

Secondly, as primary education in West Bengal was not compulsory, a number of children were deprived even of elementary education and this hampered their mental health.

Thirdly, they did not have any access to sports or healthy entertainment. Many handicapped children were made into beggars.177 So, according to her, without eradicating such evils, the overall welfare of children was next to impossible. She also reminded her readers that before promulgating such a law the government could have consulted the NGOs and social activists working in the field of child welfare. Then only the Act would have become a real Child Welfare Act.178

4.18 Manikuntala on women’s inferior position and lack of opportunities

Meanwhile, she continued to address women’s issues through different forums. In the Legislative assembly on 2 March, 1960, for example, she pointed out that women were lagging far behind men in almost every sphere of activity. She argued:

177 Ghare-Baire, Baisakh to Chaitra, 1366(B.S), pp.579-580.

First, in the field of education due to lack of opportunity and the inability to bear the cost of education, women were far behind men, starting from secondary to higher level. Moreover, there was not a single technical school for girls in West Bengal.

Secondly, regarding employment, women had limited scope. Women with degrees were jobless, while housewives desiring to become ayah in hospitals, found no vacancy. Women were not favoured in factories, and most of the women lacked necessary qualification to work in schools. Therefore the only option left for women was to become a cook, but that too had become difficult if the women had children.

Thirdly, in rural areas, she pointed out, husking paddy was the sole source of income for the women, but they seemed to be losing even this opportunity in the face of industrialization. As a result, the widowed women with children and women without guardians were increasingly becoming dependent on government doles.

Fourthly, quoting a survey report of the Statistical Bureau in 1956, she pointed out that only ten percent of the women used to seek full time jobs and this could be done, according to her, if there was proper planning.179

Manikuntala did not fail to see the reasons retarding the limited scope of employment for women when she pointed out that as women lacked necessary technical education, they were unsuitable for cottage or heavy industries. The automated Telephone sector too fell out of their reach. The scope of nursing too was limited as the numbers of hospitals were not increasing. From 1957 onwards, the factories had stopped recruiting women employees for the sake of avoiding the

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responsibility of providing women employees with social securities. Manikuntala illustrated with statistics that the number of women workers had gone down from 57000 in 1947 to 37000 in 1957.

Cottage industries also presented a dismal picture. Cottage industries opened by the government failed to provide women any gainful employment as government took no responsibility for raw materials and marketing.\textsuperscript{180} If this was the scope of their employment, their working conditions figured no better. She pointed out that even in the Writers Building (State Secretariat) the women clerks did not have a separate room for refreshment.\textsuperscript{181} The condition of women employees in the government sector was problematic as the government sector did not have any crèche facilities for the children of their women employees. She felt that unless the government introduced such facilities, it would be difficult to compel the private organisations to do the same and urged the government to allot some funds to the schools for this purpose.\textsuperscript{182} She wrote that ‘due to scarcity of crèche and kindergartens in our country, a deficit might occur in the care of the children of the working mothers.’\textsuperscript{183} Maternity benefit was still denied to them and quoting a report of Economic and Social Status of Women in India(date not mentioned by her), women received less wages in equal work and called for a law to implement equal wage for

\textsuperscript{180} \textit{Proceedings of the West Bengal Assembly Proceedings, vol.25, no.1, 1960, pp.289-290.}

\textsuperscript{181} \textit{Ibid, p.290.}

\textsuperscript{182} \textit{Ibid, pp.290-291.}

\textsuperscript{183} \textit{Ibid, p.304.}
equal work. She also demanded the implementation of compulsory free primary education.

At the open session of the Jatiya Mahila Federation on 4 March, 1961 (comprising different women’s organisations in West Bengal), held at the Indian Association Hall, Manikuntala disclosed that a women’s library was being opened at Kalighat and urged the audience to open libraries in their respective localities and to demand more employment and education for women. The Commissioner of police, Calcutta reported this incident in his special note.

On 8 March, 1961 the National Federation of Women organised a march by the women members of the assembly to protest against the alleged injustice meted out to women in respect of employment and education. Accordingly, on that date a procession was organised at the Raja Subodh Mallick Square, carrying festoons and slogans. They were stopped near the Raj Bhavan on the Rani Rashmoni Avenue. From there, Manikuntala along with Sudha Roy went to the Assembly House to hand over a memorandum demanding employment and education for women to the Deputy Speaker, for its onward transmission to the Chief Minister.

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185 Intelligence Branch no.619/36. West Bengal State Archive.
186 Ibid.
187 Ibid.
As more and more women joined work, the coordination between their jobs and their household duties became a problem. Manikuntala dwelt with this aspect in her memoir. She wrote:

As our household was patriarchal, child rearing and other domestic chores were entirely the women’s responsibility. The same rule was applicable for working women also. Therefore a woman before going out for work had to finish all her household duties and after returning home in a state of fatigue, still had to complete her domestic duties.\textsuperscript{188}

As a working woman almost singlehandedly managed the entire household, some sort of deficiency was bound to happen in a working mother’s care to her child.\textsuperscript{189} She writes:

In our society husbands are used to receive care and wife is the care giver, this is the rule. Both will take care of each other or cooperate with each other; this is not to be the rule.\textsuperscript{190}

She felt that a fundamental change in a man’s attitude towards his wife is both difficult and time consuming.\textsuperscript{191} Moreover, she pointed out that a psychological imbalance might occur between a husband and wife if the latter was earning more.\textsuperscript{192}

To press the demand for women’s employment, a public meeting of women workers and service holders of different categories was held on 9.3.64 at the Monument Maidan, Calcutta, under the auspices of the West Bengal Committee of the National Federation of Indian Women. Here Manikuntala along with others explained the significance of the “International Women’s Day” and stressed the

\textsuperscript{188} Sediner Katha, p.304.

\textsuperscript{189} Ibid, p.304.

\textsuperscript{190} Ibid, p.308, translation mine.

\textsuperscript{191} Ibid, p.308.

\textsuperscript{192} Ibid, pp.304-305.
need to consolidate women’s power to fight for their demands in view of their social and economic necessity like working men.\textsuperscript{193} After the meeting Manikuntala along with others led a procession which was intercepted by the police, near the South Gate of the Raj Bhavan, from there they went to the Assembly House to hand over a 19 point memorandum to the Chief Minister of West Bengal. The memorandum highlighted the fact that

\ldots despite the equal status of men and women embodied in our constitution and the various maternity and social benefits incorporated in our labour laws, women have to suffer under serious difficulties and discriminations in the field of employment.\textsuperscript{194}

The opportunities for vocational training for women are extremely limited and there is no provision for technical training in girls’ school. The daily rising prices of food, clothes and other necessities of life combined with the absence of provision for cheap school meals and canteens at places of work, makes it impossible for working women to make both ends meet, and increase their worries as mothers and housewives. At the same time, this rising cost of living forces more and more women to come out in search of employment. Lack of crèches for the children of working mothers, the inadequate number of hostels for working women, the over-crowded transport conditions, these are some of the other serious problems faced by employed women, especially in the city of Calcutta. Manikuntala felt:

\begin{quote}
We feel that today the need to protect women, both as workers and mothers, to assure them full protection for motherhood as well as for the health and well-being of their children, is of the utmost urgency.\textsuperscript{195}
\end{quote}

Some of the demands put forward by the memorandum included:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{193} Intelligence File no. 619/36. West Bengal State Archive.
\item \textsuperscript{194} \textit{Ibid}.
\item \textsuperscript{195} \textit{Ibid}.
\end{itemize}
Security of service for women, reservation of a specified proportion of jobs for women in industries, more budget allotment for the broadening of scope of girls’ education at all levels. More opportunities for vocational and technical training, no discrimination against married women in the field of employment, equal pay for equal work for men and women, maternity and health benefits to women, crèches for the children of working mothers in different localities and wherever possible at places of work, government run hospitals for working women, increased training facilities for nurses, teachers in mofussil areas, setting up of a special women’s Advisory Board attached to the Ministry of Labour, to advise the government on problems concerning women workers. 196

4.19 Disillusionment with the Party

Towards the last part of her memoir, Manikuntala had left a message for women. She wrote that through law women had achieved a number of rights like equal wage, maternity allowance, equal rights in property, right to divorce etc. 197 But in spite of all these women still had to face certain restrictions imposed by their family and society. Proper child care system, essential for women’s liberation was still not made easily available by the government. 198 She mused:

To reach where we are today, it has taken more than hundred years. If another hundred years’ arduous endeavour is needed to reach the desired aim, then in that endeavour too, the womenfolk of this country will have to accomplish. It was they

196 Intelligence File No. 619/36. West Bengal State Archive.
197 Sediner Katha, p.306.
who have to demolish the incorrigibly reactionary institution in order to bring a non-exploitative, liberal, free socialist society.  

Meanwhile continuous bickering within the party from the mid-fifties had begun to irritate her. It took an extreme form in early sixties. Slowly Manikuntala was identified as ‘revisionist’ and was being side-lined within the party. Gradually her speech timings in the Assembly were being reduced in spite of the fact that she was an excellent orator. She herself wrote that from 1960-61 she was given only 7 minutes for her speeches.  

Courtesy normally shown towards a lady, was steadily decreasing among the party colleagues, lamented Manikuntala. She herself wrote about an incident to highlight this sort of an attitude. Once after an Assembly session, when there was water-logging after heavy rainfall, none of her colleagues offered to accommodate her in the party car.  

Manikuntala did not always bear silently her party colleagues’ indifferent attitude. On 17.8.52 at the Calcutta District Committee Office, she criticised Dr. Ranen Sen and Bankim Mukherjee for not giving her facilities in the Assembly to voice the demands of the women on the floor of the House and even said that these two party leaders did not take much interest in women’s affairs. In 1962 on the eve of the third general election, the party was on the verge of a split. Manikuntala was reluctant to fight elections largely due to this and also because, she felt that due to her varied commitments, she was unable to give adequate time to her constituency. Moreover, half of her party men were opposed to her candidature. So her chance of winning the seat was dim. But knowing all these, the party still selected her as

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199 Sediner Katha, p.309, translation mine.
200 Ibid, p.278.
201 Ibid, p.278.
202 Special Branch File no. 5-65/52(ii). West Bengal Police Archive.
candidate from Kalighat. As expected she was defeated and she wrote: ‘That night I slept peacefully.’

Throughout the intra-party conflict, she tried her best to resolve it so that it did not come in the way of Samiti’s work. On 16.12.1964 at an extended meeting of the Calcutta District Mahila Samiti, she gave a call to the Samiti members not to allow the ideological rift in the party creep into their organisation and urged them to work heart and soul for the improvement of the Samiti. She wrote that arguments also used to take place within the Samiti, but voting never took place. But the distance between the two factions was increasing day by day, ultimately resulting in the split of the party. Manikuntala wrote: ‘The ideal for which I once joined the party, that ideal I will no longer find in this fragmented party.’

Ranabir Samadder argued here that personal attacks by erstwhile comrades on Jolly Kaul (her husband) during the party split created revulsion in her regarding politics, political life, particularly party politics and party political life. But leaving the party, for which she had dedicated her life, was indeed a painful decision. Prof. Nirban Basu has argued that retirement of Manikuntala may be termed as a sort of silent protest against the injustices meted out to her by the society.

Withdrawal from politics also

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203 Sediner Katha. P.286, translation mine.

204 Intelligence Branch File No. 619/36. West Bengal State Archive.

205 Sediner Katha, pp.277-278.

206 Ibid, p.298.


208 Nirban Basu, One Century, Two Countries and Three Forgotten Heroic Women (Twentieth Century South Asia), p.483.
signalled the end of her work in Mahila Samiti, though many of her colleagues suggested, that she should continue her work in the Samiti, devoid of politics. But Manikuntala felt that after all these years of political life, it was simply not possible for her to work as an apolitical person in the Samiti.209

After her retirement, she and her husband had to go through tremendous economic hardship. They moved to Delhi for a brief period. Meanwhile years of hard life took a heavy toll on her health. In the 1950s when she visited almost every part of the province, she had been put up in the houses of the comrades where the living conditions were not always comfortable.210 Often her poor comrades could not offer her proper food. She had to use crowded public transports. After their return from Delhi, despite her ill health she worked at a Kindergarten school on a salary of Rs.200. It was only in 1967, when her husband got a job with IOL that their economic situation changed for the better.

4.20 Manikuntala the feminist

Ranabir Samadder argued that like Sarala Devi Choudhurani (the early 20th century feminist), Manikuntala never thought in terms of creating a rupture between home and the world.211 He finds it more surprising in case of Manikuntala because she wrote so much about the end of feudal oppression of women, or the debased and pauperised life of women during famine, yet she does not

209 Sediner Katha, p.300.


discuss the question of family and its possible role in preventing the entry of women in politics.\textsuperscript{212} This is perhaps because her home never created an obstacle to her entering public life. About the importance of home for a woman, she writes: ‘Which woman does not want to have a home, husband and child?’\textsuperscript{213} Srabashi Ghosh argued that political turmoil, war, famine and finally partition provided women the opportunity to assert and test their abilities, but in spite of that the age old subjugation caused women to waver.\textsuperscript{214} This was true even of Manikuntala who was no less active than her male comrades. Despite being such a prominent figure, Srabashi Ghosh argued Manikuntala also suffered from a lack of confidence, when she wrote with regard to programmes of mass-communication: ‘Something could have been achieved if men would have taken interest in such organisations. With our limited strength what we women could do?’\textsuperscript{215} Women like Manikuntala had to remove their doubts about their ability at every step.\textsuperscript{216} Manikuntala’s public life also proved that even after working shoulder to shoulder with men, even going to jail, men were still reluctant to treat women as their equal. As has been mentioned earlier that Manikuntala was forced to follow the party line during the Railway strike in 1949, her doubts that this sort of protest lacked popular support was comfortably ignored by her party leaders. Similarly her suggestion to follow the Italian Communist women’s method of work was ignored by her party. Manikuntala, being selected as the only woman candidate in 1952

\textsuperscript{212}Ranabir Samadder, \textit{A Biography of the Nation,} 1947-1997, p.260.

\textsuperscript{213} \textit{Sediner Katha,} p.291.


\textsuperscript{215} \textit{Ibid,} p.WS-94.

\textsuperscript{216} \textit{Ibid,} pp.WS-94-95.
elections clearly proved that gender-bias existed very much in the Communist party. She herself had doubts about how her party looked at the women’s issues. Again, she considered herself a failure with regard to the problems of the prostitutes. She wrote:

‘When I used to go there [prostitute colony in Kalighat], a thought came in my mind-what sort of message I have brought to them? What will I say to them?’ Her inability to do anything positive for them reminded her of Gandhiji’s meeting in Barisal when she was a young girl. She wrote:

... I am not a banyan tree like Gandhiji to give them [prostitutes] a call to leave this life of indignity and under my shadow I would be able to give them shelter.  

Another interesting point is that, she always opposed any attempt to rehabilitate refugees of East Bengal outside West Bengal. Because of scarcity of land, an attempt was made to rehabilitate the refugees in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Two of Manikuntala’s contemporary activists, namely, Renuka Ray who was the Minister of Rehabilitation in Dr. B.C.Roy’s cabinet and Dr. Phulrenu Guha, social activist and minister in Indira Gandhi’s cabinet strongly supported this scheme because the islands were sparsely populated and their physical features resembled that of riverine East Bengal. But the scheme could not be materialized due to Communist party’s vehement opposition. But we do not know Manikuntala’s personal opinion regarding this, as she was silent about this aspect in her memoir.

During her last years she devoted much of her time in reading spiritual literature and just before her death took diksha (initiation into

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217 Sediner Katha, p.290, translation mine.

218 Ibid, p.290, translation mine.
spiritual life) in Ramkrishna Mission. Ranabir Samadder commented: ‘Manikuntala’s journey started from religiosity and her life ended in a full circle.’

With regard to the question whether her life as a politician or her life as an activist especially with regard to women’s emancipation was more prominent, it can be safely argued that both of these went hand in hand in her life. She felt that socialism could contribute in a large way to women’s emancipation by establishing an exploitation free egalitarian society. That is why even after her disenchantment with the party, her faith in communism remained intact till her last breath. She can be termed as a feminist in the sense that she always championed women’s issues like their right to employment, equal wage for equal work, maternity allowance and other service conditions, and their right to education. She played a crucial role in bringing out the ordinary women out of their private domain in support of their demands at a time when the feminist movement had not yet made its headway in Bengal and India.