Chapter: 6

Renu Chakraborty (1917-1994)

Renu Chakraborty largely influenced by Communist ideals became one of the pioneering Bengali women playing a constructive role in the women’s movement and their social uplift. Born into a well-to-do and educated family, she was never afraid to face hardships. She firmly believed that women’s emancipation could be achieved if a society free from feudal oppression and exploitation could be established. In independent India she played an important role in almost all the key issues concerning women.

6.1. Her Growing Years

Renu was born in an affluent Brahmo family. Her father, Sadhan Chandra Ray, was the elder brother of Dr. Bidhan Chandra Ray. Her mother was Brahmodhi Devi. Renu’s family was influenced by nationalist ideals. Social activism was in her blood as her paternal grandmother, Aghorkamini Ray was a renowned social worker who played a leading role in female education. Her mother Brahmo Devi, too, was involved in various social welfare activities for women all through her life. These two women had a profound influence upon Renu which was later reflected in her body of work.

Renu during her growing years was very much influenced by Gandhian movements. It was under Gandhi, that a qualitative change had taken place in India’s freedom struggle. Gandhi’s call to defy British laws had no gender discrimination.
‘For the first time in the history of India, women stood shoulder to shoulder with men in the fight for freedom.’\footnote{Renu Chakraborty, Communists in Indian Women’s Movement, 1940-1950, (New Delhi: People’s Publishing House 1980), p.2. Henceforth to be cited as Communists in Indian Women’s Movement.} The courage with which Indian women took part in the nationalist struggle and even courted arrests, actually laid the foundation of a powerful women’s movement in the country. Renu wrote: ‘It was in this climate of freedom for womanhood that my generation was brought up in our country.’\footnote{Ibid, p.2.} As a young girl her memory was full of outstanding personalities like Sarala Devi Choudhurani, Annie Besant and Sarojini Naidu. The revolutionary women like Pritilata Waddedar, Bina Das, Shanti and Suniti also influenced her. These women, according to Renu, fought shoulder to shoulder with men, thereby asserting their equality with men; and through their sacrifice and even martyrdom in some cases contributed their might for the cause of the country’s liberation.\footnote{Ibid, p.2.} Growing up in such an environment, it was rather difficult for her not to do something.

She completed her schooling in Loreto House, Calcutta and passed her I.A examination from the Victoria College. For her higher studies she went to England and enrolled herself in the Cambridge University. It was during her stay in Cambridge, that she witnessed the bloody Fascist invasion of Checkoslavakia. As she was reared in the democratic values of the national movement in India, it was only natural for her to hate Fascist ideals of racial superiority and anti-Semitism. She particularly disliked

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item Ibid, p.2.
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Hitler’s dictum for women—“Kinder, Kirche, Kueche”—i.e. women were only to bear children, work in the kitchen and pray in the church.\(^4\) It was in 1938 in England, that she came under the influence of the famous communist leader, Rajani Palme Dutt and joined the Communist Party. It was also in England as a student that she first came to realize that the fight for India’s freedom should bring social justice for the downtrodden, poverty stricken and oppressed section of the country.\(^5\) She was influenced by personalities like John Strachey and realized that status quo of the society needed to be changed, so that the masses could enjoy the fruits of their labour. The masses had to be awakened in order to protect their own interests.\(^6\) In 1939 she returned to India and joined the Communist Party in India. She also became a professor of English at the Calcutta University.

6.2. **Beginning of a new chapter**

Back home, the twin objectives of fighting against British imperialism and standing for the social justice of the toiling masses became intertwined in her consciousness. She strongly felt that women could play a vital role in this task, as women constituted more than half the population. So if they joined forces anything could be achieved. But, Indian women, she noticed, was ‘. . . weighed down by the millstone of feudal backwardness. Ignorance, illiteracy, superstitions held them in an octopus grip.’\(^7\)

\(^4\) *Communists in Indian Women’s Movement*, p.4.

\(^5\) *Ibid*, p.5

\(^6\) *Ibid*, p.5.

\(^7\) *Ibid*, p.6.
They were married early and constant child-bearing without proper medical care and nutrition increased the rate of maternal and child mortality. They were economically dependent on men and feudal edicts kept them secluded in society. ‘Women themselves believed they were incapable of doing anything except bear children and that fate had ordained for them the deadening weight of domestic drudgery.’ Therefore, it was a challenge before her, to bring the women into the movement against the colonial rule as well as in the movement to establish a just social order. Therefore in India, she reflected, the struggle for women’s emancipation had a political and economic importance, even if the social demands of women had to be fulfilled.

After her return, in Bengal the movement for the release of prisoners was at its peak. Women of all political beliefs joined the movement and together they formed the Congress Mahila Sangha. Renu plunged into this movement. At this time, students were very active in this movement. It was at the end of 1939 that she attended the All India Students’ Federation (AISF)’s national conference. As women students actively took part in meetings and demonstrations throughout this movement, the need to organise girl students became a priority. But there were many hurdles in this path. First, the leadership of the students’ organisations were predominantly male and secondly, there were very few co-educational colleges, as parents were reluctant to send their daughters to predominantly men’s colleges. That is why the AISF decided to set up a Girl Students’ Committee. In 1940, the first ever all India meet of women students took place

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8*Communists in Indian Women’s Movement*, pp.6-7.

in Lucknow. Sarojini Naidu was the chief guest of the conference while Renu was the president. As president, she communicated to the audience of the menace of fascism, which was actually the extreme face of imperialism.\textsuperscript{10} Renu argued that in those days the girl students were the only educated cadres among the women and they never isolated themselves from the problems of the ordinary women.\textsuperscript{11} These young women were the main organisers of the women’s movement and according to Renu, the foundation stones of these women’s organisations were laid by these young militant students to a large extent.\textsuperscript{12}

During the early part of 1940, when World War II escalated to Asia, the Japanese forces started advancing towards the borders of India. In 1942 the Quit India movement was launched and almost immediately all the important leaders, including Gandhi were arrested by the British Government. In October, 1942 the Communist party in Bengal formed a Provincial Women’s Front. Renu was selected as one of its members. In December, 1942 Japan bombed Calcutta, This created a sort of panic among the people and they started evacuating to safer places in the villages and other smaller towns. Communist women now started their door to door campaign among women. They tried to convince the people that in order to defend their country as well as the honour of women, they had to build national unity and also secure the release of the national leaders. But the task ahead for the women volunteers was by no means an easy

\textsuperscript{10} Communists in Indian Women’s Movement, p.10.

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid, p.11.

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid, p.11.
one, as sharp social barriers stood against women volunteers moving freely among women who were steeped in conservatism.\textsuperscript{13} Often women volunteers faced awkward questions like ‘Are you married?’ or ‘Do you have children and husband?’\textsuperscript{14} Renu wrote that people ‘. . . thought us to be a peculiar type of women going all over the area from house to house, shamelessly talking to everybody.’\textsuperscript{15} Renu recalled that many were sympathetic to them as they raised issues which affected their daily life, but others shooed them away.\textsuperscript{16} ‘Menfolk made sarcastic remarks and asked their wives to stay away from us.’\textsuperscript{17} Inspite of such hostility women workers carried on their activities and gradually spread their roots.

Initially, workers like Renu found it difficult to draw together women for a meeting and more importantly to hold their attention for long. The workers then were few in numbers. Renu recalled that when a meeting was to be convened in a particular area, the workers went door to door more than once, and even to convince them to come to the meeting at the last minute. The women came with their kids and crying babies. Often, women lost interest in course of the meeting and started talking amongst themselves. Renu recalled that to counter this, the workers had to evolve the

\textsuperscript{13} Communists in Indian Women’s Movement, p.18.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid, p.18.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid, p.18.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid, p.18

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid, p.18.
method of simple dramas to carry their message through the visual world.\textsuperscript{18} The workers had to work out, what Renu termed as a multi-purpose project. She wrote:

We, the organisers, worked in a multi-purpose manner. We arranged the meeting place, did the propaganda for the meeting among the women, went around collecting them, spoke to them of the issues which were of importance, and last but not the least, acted for them, sang and danced for them, in order to convey what we were trying to say through a cultural form which caught their imagination.\textsuperscript{19}

Their hard work gradually paid off. Women began to start samitis in their areas and also moved into their own neighbourhood.

Around April, 1942, women workers like Kamala Chatterjee, Manikuntala Sen, Ela Reid and Renu met and felt the necessity of coordinating the activities of all the women’s organisations that were springing up in different parts of Bengal. It was then decided, that an organising committee of the Mahila Atmaraksha Samiti (Women’s Self-Defence League) would be established. Renu wrote: ‘. . . so the first seeds were sown, out of which was to sprout a big mass organisation, of women throughout Bengal’s districts.’\textsuperscript{20}

It was around this that time that the food crisis erupted leading to the devastating famine in 1943. Renu was actively involved in the relief and rehabilitation work undertaken by the MARS for the famine stricken people. In 1946 when the terrible communal riots started in Noakhali, Renu went there for relief work. After independence, in the first general election, in 1952, she won and became a member of the

\textsuperscript{18}Comunists in Indian Women’s Movement, p.19.

\textsuperscript{19}Ibid, pp.19-20.

\textsuperscript{20}Ibid, p.21.
Lok Sabha. She also managed to win the two subsequent elections in 1957 and 1962. In fact, in the 1962 elections, she received the highest number of votes from the Barrackpore industrial segment. In the Lok Sabha she became famous for her oratory. She played an important role in foisting the key issues both inside and outside the parliament like the Hindu Code Bill, refugee rehabilitation issue, anti-dowry bill, equal wages for equal work etc. She represented India in the World Women’s Conference held at Copenhagen. In 1955 Renu attended the World Mother’s Conference in Susan. In 1969, with Ajay Mukherjee as the Chief Minister, of West Bengal, Renu received the responsibility of handling the ministry of co-operative and social welfare for a very brief period. During the 1970s, due to a congenital physical problem, she became weak, and in 1973 had to undergo open-heart surgery. In 1992, she was in the forefront of the anti-communal march after the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodha. She breathed her last on 16th April, 1994.

6.3 The famine, the Tebhaga movement and the communal riots of 1946

During the early part of the 1940s, the Japanese forces started advancing towards the Indian borders. In order to safe-guard their empire in India, the British made Bengal their base of operations on the Assam-Burma front. When the Japanese army occupied Rangoon in March, 1942 rumours started floating that the cheap Burma rice would no longer be available. As a precautionary measure, the British destroyed all country-boats in the coastal areas. Agricultural activities were banned as
part of British defence preparations. All these led to an acute food shortage. When the Allied troops started arriving, airfields began to be constructed in the interior areas. The prices of rice began to rise abnormally, as the hoarders and black marketers started hoarding rice, and it nearly disappeared from circulation. Added to this, were the cases of atrocities on women by the British “tommies” and American GIS. But these cases never came into the limelight as there was strict war-time censorship. Reporting such atrocities Renu and other workers organized a signature campaign and sent a memorandum to the Viceroy. Renu witnessed the hazards of war during this time. She wrote:

In the building of airfields, villages were mown down and for the first time we witnessed what havoc bulldozers can create, in razing the huts to the ground. We rushed to some of the villages, trying to save the dwelling houses and to organise those affected to get compensation.  

Thus when the possibility of war was at the doorstep of India, all essential items vanished from the market. The villagers started trekking towards the city of Calcutta. Renu saw through her own eyes the nightmarish experience. In this crisis women like Renu came forward. One of their tasks was to help the women who were standing in the long queue for food in front of the control shops. Renu along with Manikuntala Sen was in the forefront of the first ever hunger march to the Assembly. This was organised at a time when marching to the Assembly was little known. Renu wrote: ‘The march was unique, a model of orderly organisation. Neither police, nor communist baiters, could do anything.

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21 Communists in Indian Women’s Movement, p.17.
The impact of this demonstration was tremendous.\textsuperscript{22} About the uniqueness of the demonstration she wrote:

For the first time a women’s organisation had taken to the path of agitation and that too in the form of a demonstration. It was following this that the Government started opening rice shops and gruel kitchens. Later rationing was introduced.\textsuperscript{23}

Following this, women organized hunger marches in different districts. Renu wrote:

Through these first direct actions, which for women of those days in the villages and among the urban poor, was a big step, the consciousness began to dawn that they could survive only through movements; and for movements to begin there must be collective organisation.\textsuperscript{24}

Rehabilitating the destitute women was another uphill task that the women workers took upon. When in 1944 MARS and other organisations joined hands to form the Nari Seva Sangha, Renu was one of the guiding force behind this initiative. The main work of NSS was to open homes and handicraft centres in different districts.

As soon as the effects of the famine had somewhat subsided, the sharecroppers in Bengal, rose in protest against an unjust system. This was known as the Tebhaga movement. The sharecroppers were hard hit by the famine. Many small peasants were forced to sell their land during the famine and thus there was an increase in the number of sharecroppers. A section of the jotdars (a big and rich farmer) accumulated huge money at their expense. From 1938 the Kishan Sabhas started propagating their aim to end the Zamindari system and to argue that Tebhaga i.e. two-

\textsuperscript{22} Communists in Indian Women Movement, pp.29-30.


\textsuperscript{24} Communists in Indian Women movement, pp.33-34.
thirds of the crops was to be given to the sharecroppers. In November, 1946 when the paddy was ready for harvesting, the movement started in a number of districts in Bengal. Renu wrote that the Tebhaga movement brought a rebirth for the rural women. ‘Brave kisan women became propagandists. They often led the men in the fight, and faced the goonda hirelings of the jotedars, saving their hard won crop.’ 25 The women became the principle force behind the movement. When the leaders became underground, and the repression became extreme, it was the women who arranged for their shelter, their succour and their security. 26 It was during this movement that women like Renu came to realize that rural women were subjected to physical abuse by their husbands. Their husbands used to drink too much, forcefully taking away the money, which their women had earned through petty trade. During the Tebhaga movement women started raising these issues before the party leaders. It was due to their pressure that a resolution was passed by which beating the wife was forbidden. At several places, women complained that their men in one pretext or the other took away the money that they earned from selling vegetables, grown in the backyard or goat or cow’s milk, eggs or fish. The party, Renu recalled had to pronounce the verdict that the money earned by the women was stree-dhan (money owned by women). 27 So in course of their economic struggle, rural women also came to learn how to fight for their rights and lead a life of dignity, and more

25 Communists in Indian Women’s Movement, p.87.
26 Ibid, p.94.
27 Ibid, p.89.
importantly, to fight for equality with men.\textsuperscript{28} Witnessing that the rural women were trying to come out of their shackles, Renu and Manikuntala Sen, who were close comrades, tried to convince their leaders that women’s problems needed to be addressed along with issues of economic exploitation. They suggested that meeting time needed to be convenient for the women. Renu also suggested if more and more women were to play a leading role, something needed to be done to free them from household work.\textsuperscript{29} Steps should also be taken to protect them from abusive husbands. But the party wanted to put the struggle above personal concerns.\textsuperscript{30} Nevertheless, as Renu argued

Kisan women rose from their age-old slumber to breathe the air of a new awakening. That awakening came to them through the great and glorious Tebhaga struggle of Bengal in 1946-47.\textsuperscript{31}

Meanwhile differences started cropping up between the communist women and the AIWC. In the AIWC there was a section of conservative women including princely women who believed that the organisation would have nothing to do with politics even if, that implied the politics of the freedom movement. On the other hand, there were nationalist minded women like Sarojini Naidu, Kamala Devi Chattopadhyay, Hansa Mehta, Aruna Asaf Ali who held a much more liberal view. As a result there was often a tussle while passing even a simple resolution.\textsuperscript{32} But Renu noted

\textsuperscript{28}Communists in Indian Women’s Movement, p.89.


\textsuperscript{30}Ibid, p.215.

\textsuperscript{31}Renu Chakraborty, “New Perspectives For Women’s Movement- After 25 years of Drift,” Link, p.95.

\textsuperscript{32}Ibid, p.177.
that both the conservative as well as the nationalistic minded women were opposed to the idea of opening up their doors to the commoners in general - i.e., working women, peasant women and agricultural women workers. As a result, the AIWC remained in the main a middle class organisation led by women of the intelligentsia, some of whom were distinguished. On the other hand, the communist women always wanted to bring common women into the orbit of the AIWC. The AIWC believed that social reform was to be attained within the system that prevailed. Renu agreed with the formulation that without freedom from imperialist subjugation and exploitation, there can be no real emancipation for women. As such, she felt, women would have to participate and be conscious of the importance of the movement for independence, - a fact opposed by a section of the feudal society, and women belonging to the upper strata of the affluent class. It was the Communist women who organised the South Calcutta Branch of the AIWC where housewives belonging to the middle and lower middle classes of the area actively took part in it. In 1944 women like Renu in order to expand the base of the AIWC attempted to lower the membership fee from Rs. 3 to four annas. But this was perceived as an attempt by the Communists to capture the organisation. As a result the proposal was defeated. Renu lamented the fact that the leaders of the AIWC never realized the fact that the real masses of Indian womanhood were in the villages, exploited and crushed

34 Ibid, p.177.
35 Communists in Indian Women’s Movement, p.199.
under feudal superstition, ground down by poverty. Renu admitted that the AIWC did some good works for the downtrodden women. But to organise these women and to fight against exploitation was considered a taboo. The status quo had to be maintained at any cost. As a result, a contradiction arose because of the AIWC’s fancy to carry out certain good things for the women and yet consider it a taboo to fight the vested interests. Renu has given an example to illustrate this fact. The AIWC had recommended that women should not be employed underground in the mines. As a consequence, women were retrenched but very few of them were given work over ground. Renu argued AIWC was helpless in this matter as they had no contact with the retrenched women and they were also not prepared to agitate on their behalf.

Meanwhile the communal tension between the Hindus and the Muslims were increasing day by day. On 16th August, 1946 Calcutta witnessed the horrific riot in which the two communities butchered each other. At first, the countryside was comparatively calm. But as soon as the news of the Calcutta carnage spread, communal violence erupted in Noakhali. Renu explained why the worst riots occurred in Noakhali. She wrote:

Noakhali had suffered much in the last few years. First came the war and in 1942 came the encampment of a large concentration of Allied forces. Noakhali was one of the worst sufferers of the so-called “Denial Policy” of the British whereby the villages were totally uprooted, being located on the coast. Military atrocities were horrifying. . . In 1943, the first signs of famine appeared in Noakhali. Rice began selling at Rs.30 a maund and the

37 Ibid, p.177.
38 Ibid, p.177.
rationing system broke down. At this time those who had got jobs arising out of the war, lost them, and without any means of subsistence, many turned bandits. So when the Muslim League in 1946 decided on “Direct Action” followed by riots in Calcutta, it did not take long for hell to be let loose in Noakhali. In the riot, she wrote, nothing was safe, neither women’s honour nor human life, nor the poor man’s hut. Renu’s little child was then just a year old. But that could not stop her. Along with Manikuntala Sen, Kamala Chatterjee, Bela Lahiri, Maya Lahiri, Ira Sanyal, Manoroma Bose and others Renu went to Noakhali for relief work. Renu went to Chandpur Branch of the AIWC. But the mistrust between the Communists and the AIWC was by then so strong that Renu felt that their presence was not to the liking of the AIWC members. They were not given any sort of cooperation. So, Renu and another co-worker decided to go to the interior on their own to distribute some packages of milk. In this context, Renu wrote: ‘We were not given any vehicle, although we found both Ashoka Gupta and Renuka Ray riding jeeps.’ So, they decided to go to Haimchar by foot, a British soldier with a gun accompanied them. She recalled that they saw that village after village was deserted; women told them that their children were forcibly taken away from them, converted and married to Muslims. Women were hesitant to talk about their molestation. The big marketing place was burnt down. After witnessing the devastation, she returned to Chandpur. Here a big camp was set up for women who were the victims of communal riot.

39 Communsists in Indian Women’s Movement, p.103.

40 Ibid, p. 102.

41 Ibid, p.105.
6.4. Renu fighting the feudal laws

As a woman Renu was eager to fight against the feudal laws and customs that had put women in chains. The saying in the scriptures: ‘A girl is subjected to the father as a child, her husband in youth, to her son in old age,’ according to Renu explained the humiliating status of women that had been handed down from feudal traditions.\textsuperscript{42} She wrote that in India strong vestiges of feudalism and its reactionary ideas had great hold on the minds of both men and women and nothing substantial could be achieved without a tremendous all-out campaign against feudalism.\textsuperscript{43}

Renu considered the evil of purdah and seclusion as the first two chains which had prevented women from participating in public life.\textsuperscript{44} Issues like ignorance, superstition, lack of education, women’s economic dependence on men, her inferior position in marriage, inheritance, the curse of dowry- all needed to be addressed. Women like Renu always favoured one universal code for the whole of India. But they had to drop this idea initially, as there was strong opposition to it. Instead, they decided to deal with the issues separately in the hope that uniformity would come step by step. The issues like Hindu Code on marriage, inheritance etc. was first taken up. In 1941 the government had appointed the Rao Committee to make necessary changes in Hindu laws with regard to marriage, inheritance etc. The AIWC with its full vigour opposed the

\textsuperscript{42} Communists in Indian Women’s Movement, p.185.


\textsuperscript{44} Communists in Indian Women’s Movement, p.186.
orthodox Hindu society. At the same time, it was necessary to have the support of ordinary women in villages and cities. The MARS started a signature campaign throughout Bengal. In October, 1944 a joint committee was formed with the MARS and the AIWC in Bengal to start a campaign in favour of the Rao Committee recommendations. Renu argued that as the village women were backward in their thinking, therefore, it was extremely necessary to explain to them the real need and aim for changing the laws of inheritance and marriage.45 But Renu in course of her work found that the orthodox women in urban society were also opposed to the changes, recommended by the Rao Committee. Therefore, communist women organised big and small meetings both in Calcutta and other areas. In one of such meetings organised at the Calcutta University Institute Hall, where Sarojini Naidu was to address, Renu observed that feudal ideas were still very strong even among the educated urban classes. She recalled that when Mrs. Naidu arrived at the venue, it was jam packed and even the entrance was crowded. Mrs. Naidu entered with great difficulty but when Manikuntala Sen took her to the dais, they saw that Dr. Shyamaprosad Mukherjee, Ramaprasad Mukherjee of the Hindu Mahasabha, Anurupa Devi, a writer of very orthodox views were already present. A major part of the audience comprised Non-Bengalees, including women who were brought from Barabazar, the trading centre of the Marwari community in Calcutta. Nobody offered a chair to Mrs. Naidu. However, she delivered her speech, but was heckled on the dais by the men and women in the audience; Mrs. Naidu too had to protest at the top of her voice. Later, it was learnt that the women were misguided by the conservatives by saying that a law was

45 *Communists in Indian Women’s Movement*, p. 189.
being made by the government by which women would be converted to Islam.\textsuperscript{46} Renu commented:

It was impossible to anticipate such low and lying propaganda by such well-known persons. It shows the great opposition that had to be encountered to get the Hindu Code passed.\textsuperscript{47}

Even Pandit Madan Mohan Malavya opposed the bill on the ground that it was contrary to the principles of and harmful to the Hindu society and therefore it should be dropped. In spite of such strong opposition, by the end of 1944 the signatures of 8000 men and women had been collected.\textsuperscript{48} Hindu laws could not be changed before independence, and it was in independent India that women activists had to raise the issue and Renu played an important role in it.

After 1947 many women activists thought that Hindu Code Bill would now be swiftly passed. In the Constituent Assembly the Bill was discussed, but it could not be passed in the four year tenure of the Assembly, mainly because of the opposition of the conservative members. After the first general election in 1952, the Hindu Code bill was presented in the Parliament in the form of two bills: (1) Special Marriage Bill and (2) Hindu Marriage and Divorce Bill. The aim of both of the bills was to introduce single marriage and to grant the right of divorce in some cases. Ordinarily, those who would marry in accordance with Hindu scriptures would be regulated by the Hindu Marriage Act; on the other hand those opting for a civil marriage would be guided by the

\textsuperscript{46}Communists in Indian Women’s Movement, pp.190-191.

\textsuperscript{47}Ibid, p.191.

\textsuperscript{48}Ibid, p.194.
Special Marriage Act. Under the Hindu Marriage Bill, both the bride and the groom would have to be Hindus, while under the Special Marriage Bill the marriage between the two communities was to be allowed.

The provision of divorce in the bills created a furor both inside and outside the Parliament. So, it was an uphill task to convince the conservative members as well as the public. Renu both in the Lok Sabha and in several meetings addressed the issue. To reach out to the women she discussed this issue in Ghare-Baire, the journal of the MARS. In the Lok Sabha, on 20th May, 1954, she told the members that it was a demeaning thing to assume that women were to run to the court as soon as they were granted the right of divorce. She told:

. . . when one enters marriage one should enter it with a full sense of responsibility both towards oneself and his partner and towards the children that one is hoping to bring into the world as well as society.49

But she argued that there might be some circumstances during which it would be much better for all concerned to part with honour and understanding.50 She appealed to the members of the House to think about the miserable condition that the Indian women were in. She told:

We know in our society a number of women who have been abandoned, others who have suffered and suffered indescribably and silently . . . young girls who, for no fault of theirs, almost in every case, have been abandoned after marriage by the choice of their parents.

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50 Ibid, p.7945.
They have no means of earning. They have to lead all their lives upon the sweet will of either the brother or some other relations.\(^{51}\)

She stressed the fact that it was for these types of helpless women that the Parliament should legislate. Moreover, she pointed out that women were conservative and home-builders. Their natural tendency was to cling to their homes and children. So, most of them would be hesitant to disrupt their family, even after enduring all sorts of harassment and torture and most importantly most of the women were financially dependent on their menfolk. Therefore, unless women became financially self-sufficient, unless they attained the right to inherit property, most of the women, in reality would not be in a position to take advantage of these social laws.\(^{52}\) Moreover, in some places in India, like Travancore, Cochin, Mysore and Madras Hindu women did enjoy the right to divorce, but that had not ruined the Hindu society in those areas.\(^{53}\) She also stressed the fact that children were the best fruits of a marriage. But when children were subjected to continuous bickering between the parents, when the children witnessed the daily harassment of their mothers in the hands of their fathers, when the environment was poisoned by deception, deceit and adultery, it was better to move away the children from such an environment.\(^{54}\) She believed that those who were misguiding people about these laws, were doing it because these laws had struck a blow at the roots of their prejudices\(^{55}\) Even the so-called educated


\(^{53}\) Ibid, p.255.

\(^{54}\) Ibid, p.255.

\(^{55}\) Ibid, p.255.
people had all sorts of misconceptions about the bill. Renu recalled that once in a small
town in Bengal, the head of the family informed that Hindu Code Bill supported marriage
between brothers and sisters.\textsuperscript{56} For divorce she preferred mutual consent. She told the
members of the house that it would be better to allow a couple to part with each other’s
company based on mutual consent. Only this could ensure peace with honour without
embittering relations any further when all efforts at reconciliation had failed.\textsuperscript{57} She also
felt that after separation of a couple, attempts should be made for reconciliation. But she
cautions the house that ‘. . . no court has a right to force restitution of conjugal rights,
whether it is by the man or woman does not matter.’\textsuperscript{58} Also, according to the bill a period
of three years would have to lapse before any divorce proceedings could start. Renu
admitted that a certain period must be given for reconciliation, but in some cases it
became almost impossible for the couple to live together. Therefore, she appealed to the
house that this clause should either be dropped or at least the period should be
reduced.\textsuperscript{59} The children born out of wed-lock should be given all the rights and a time-limit
should be given to the court for acting on such appeals.

Another aspect of the bill was the Special Marriage Bill which sought to
recognize the contractual form of marriage without the necessity of repudiating religion.

\textsuperscript{56} Renu Chakraborty, “Parliamente Bibaha Sankranta Bill Duti” (The Two Marriage Related Bills in the

\textsuperscript{57} \textit{Lok Sabha Debates}, vol.5, nos.61-74, 1954, p.7948.

\textsuperscript{58} \textit{Ibid}, p.7949.

\textsuperscript{59} \textit{Ibid}, p.7951.
She felt that such a law was an urgent necessity. She reiterated on the floor of the House on 16th December, 1953:

\[\text{The face of society changes. We regard society as dynamic and we recognise that through the ages society has changed and the super structure of society, i.e., the customs, have changed also.}\] \[60\]

Considering this, there should be a free choice of marriage and therefore, the contractual marriage enunciated in the bill must be supported. She implored:

\[\text{We are not going to allow such marriages to remain illegal. We have to think of the children that may come after them and we have to think of the happiness of those young men and women who are today reacting to certain new necessities of life.}\] \[61\]

Therefore a legislation was a must. But she felt that there were certain loopholes in the bill that had been enacted. Apart from the declaration of irreligiousness or repudiation of religion, the bill was based on the outdated Act of 1872. She felt that an outlook of double-standard had guided the framers of the bill. While accepting the idea of contractual marriage, different sorts of preventive measures were also suggested to prohibit people from utilizing this law. First, the bill asked them to deny their religion, secondly, the persons undergoing such marriage was to be declared an outcaste by declaring their severance from the joint family property, thirdly, the bill gave the parents the right to adopt according to Hindu law while the son was living and lastly, the men and women who would be married under the law had the right of adoption taken away from them.\[62\] Renu suggested that these measures would defeat the bill itself. Therefore, the

\[60\text{Lok Sabha Debates, vol, 3, nos.1-17, 1953, p.2317.}\]

\[61\text{Ibid, p.2318.}\]

\[62\text{Ibid, pp.2319-2320.}\]
clause about severance from joint family property should be entirely dropped. She also objected to the Bill being a legislation by reference. She felt that when time had changed, then they should definitely have a law in new form and not by reference. The interest of the children figured foremost in her mind. That is why she told the Lok Sabha:

\[
\ldots\text{there must be a water-tight guarantee for the legitimacy and the maintenance of children born of an earlier marriage, declared invalid by this Bill} \ldots\text{The economic stability of the children must also be ensured.}^{63}
\]

The Hindu Code Bill was ultimately passed in 1955 despite stiff opposition from a section of the society both inside and outside parliament. Though the Bill was not perfect, there is little doubt; with it the women activists did score a major victory over the age-old feudal laws.

Renu, a staunch supporter of a Uniform Civil Code, strongly vouched for the same in the Lok Sabha when she said:

\[
\text{We need a codified law, and a more progressive outlook regarding marriage as a contract, based on love, respect for each other, and the building up of a happy home for our children.}^{64}
\]

But, unfortunately, it was not implemented during her lifetime. The stronghold of religious orthodox opinion and the government’s fear to take up the issue definitely accounted for this impasse.\(^{65}\) She believed that a big educative campaign needed to be undertaken by the government, the political parties, women’s and other organisations to bring about the

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\(^{63}\) \textit{Lok Sabha Debates}, vol. 3, nos.1-17, 1953, p.2323.

\(^{64}\) ibid, p.2324.

desired change in the personal law especially of the minority community. Only legal steps could not fight religious fanaticism.

Closely associated with this issue was right of women to inherit their father’s property, as women were financially completely dependent on menfolk. Renu took up this issue vigorously in the parliament. To prevent the daughter from having a share in her father’s property, all sorts of arguments were raised as it was the exclusive right of the son to inherit the property of his father. It was argued that if a woman succeeded to her father’s property, then the Hindus would not be able to maintain “dharma”, nor could they carry on virtue or preserve their ancient inherited culture in proper plight. The issue of saving the joint family system was also one of the arguments put forward. Countering such arguments as that joint family property would be broken up if the daughter was given any share, Renu argued:

New concepts have arisen, new economic forces have come to play and new social ideas have come into play. Therefore, it is best that without gabling at people we should look upon this question from the point of view of whether it will help our society, whether it will help our men and women and whether it will help our family as a unit.

She also reminded the House that many of the joint family businesses had really been a cloak for evading income-tax. She pointed out that in Malabar women used to have equal rights on property and land. Renu pointed out that opposition to women’s right to

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68 Ibid, pp.7160-7162

69 Ibid, p.7162.
land came not only from men, but a section of women as well opposed it. For example, Uma Nehru, who had worked for the AIWC, felt that women should not have right over land. Also the amount that was being given to a daughter was lessened every day. The father of the joint family was given the right to will away even the ancestral property. This, according to Renu, was another measure by which a daughter could be deprived of even a small fraction of the ancestral property which was due to her. She pointed out that the concept of the nuclear family consisting of husband, wife and children was fast developing. Therefore, if the daughter inherited from her father, then that part would certainly contribute towards the welfare and well-being of the husband and the children. Certain members also put forward the argument that a widow, when remarried, became debased and lost her caste as well. In this context, Renu argued:

...although Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar passed the law for widow remarriage years and years ago in the face of tremendous opposition, even today the widow hesitates to remarry. She does not remarry because of social ostracisation. Even young girls do not remarry. We know the amount of prejudice against her being married. Therefore there should be no question if she inherits it absolutely.

She also pointed out that in India women as of then did not get the opportunities that were open to men; there was little chance of augmentation of her property. Also as the widows were the most helpless in Indian society, they should have the right to inherit twice or thrice.

71 Ibid, p.7163.
72 Ibid, p.7164.
73 Ibid, p.7277.
She considered the Hindu Succession Bill, in spite of its many loopholes, a step in the right direction. The Bill accepted the two important principles: (1) equal right of the daughters in inheritance and (2) absolute right to property. But to gain that right, women had to continue their struggle. She hoped that menfolk would realize that women would not just ruin the family and that things would not come to a dead end just because women were inheriting.\(^7\) She firmly believed that inheritance would not automatically lead to emancipation. For this other restrictions imposed on women should be removed.

During the year 1956, the Hindu Minority and Guardianship Bill came up for discussion in the Lok Sabha. This Bill dealt with the issue of upbringing the young minors. Renu considered this bill an important one as every effort was to be made to provide the minor child an environment of affection, understanding and well-being, so that he/she could flourish into a useful citizen of the country.\(^7\) With regard to the question of custody of the minor child, the Bill gave the mother custody of a minor till the age of five. But Renu disagreed with this clause and argued that the custody of a child should always be given to the mother until he/she becomes a major or at least up to the age of 14.\(^7\) Renu further pointed out that in some cases, the court had given the custody to the father as the mother was poorer and therefore unable to bring up the child according to the status to which he/she belonged, although the father was unfit to bring

\(^7\) *Lok Sabha Debates*, vol.4, nos.46-60, 1956, p. 7686.

\(^7\) *Lok Sabha Debates*, vol.6, nos.13-15, 1956, p.131.

\(^7\) *Ibid*, p.132.
up the child.\textsuperscript{77} Therefore, she felt that the same point had to be considered very seriously. In case of a minor married girl, her suggestion was that the husband or the father could jointly supervise her property, until she became a major.\textsuperscript{78} Renu also objected to the clause that a person would cease to be a natural guardian of a minor, if that person changed his/her religion. Renu found this clause irrational, as change in religion did not mean a change in one’s love and affection towards his/her child. In case of a father remarrying, the minor children of the first wife would be put under the guardianship of the maternal grandparents, as Renu argued, a child might be neglected by the stepmother.\textsuperscript{79} She also reminded the House to bring a change in adoption rules because as of then no female child could be adopted according to the Hindu Law.\textsuperscript{80}

6.5. Fighting for women’s equal rights

Women like Renu believed that the real emancipation of women could not come until they were able to participate in social production and come out of the confines of their homes and domestic drudgery.\textsuperscript{81} But the greatest impediment to their growth as individuals was the purdah system and their lack of education. Renu insisted that women could achieve their rights only through an organised movement. This

\begin{footnotes}
\item[77]Lok Sabha Debates, vol.6, nos.13-15, 1956, p.131.
\item[78]Ibid, p.133.
\item[79]Ibid, 1956, p.135.
\item[80]Ibid, p.131.
\item[81]Renu Chakraborty, “Communist Party and Status of Women,” New Age, p.11.
\end{footnotes}
way they would also be able to know their actual position. In 1952 she attended the Berlin Conference. Here she had talks with the responsible representatives of the Women’s International Democratic Federation. The latter agreed to receive one representative from the MARS and to give her the necessary training in children’s welfare and education work in Vienna.\textsuperscript{82} Criticizing the purdah system which had kept women in darkness, she urged that the ordinary women should throw off their veils and urged them to attend debating clubs, guided by the MARS in their respective localities.\textsuperscript{83} She tried to convince the women that in the past womenfolk in this country used to remain confined to their household duties and the men used to earn their livelihood. But in the present situation, the women should have to share the work of their husbands.\textsuperscript{84} Therefore, women must throw off their veils.

She also stressed the fact that women were being deprived of the facilities which men were getting such as equal wages for equal work etc. Renu felt that the state should provide special amenities to women in order to overcome their backwardness and to attain equality while at the same time discharging the double duty of worker and mother/housewife.\textsuperscript{85} Even the administration, while supporting the conventions of the ILO, flouted the principle of equal pay for equal work on the question

\textsuperscript{82} Special Branch File no. S-565/52(Ii). West Bengal Police Archive.

\textsuperscript{83} Intelligence Branch File no.397/39. West Bengal State Archive.

\textsuperscript{84} Ibid.

of minimum wages.\textsuperscript{86} Women who bore children and performed the double duty both at home and outside were denied minimum equal wage with men. She pointed out that a male agricultural labourer’s wage in itself was very low, but the wages of women were only 2/3 that of men.\textsuperscript{87} In some industries like bidi making and construction work women were paid unequal and miserable minimum wage. In tea plantations, she pointed out that in spite of the fact that women were the finest pickers, they were paid unequal wages.\textsuperscript{88} In a profitable industry like the cashew nut industry, 95\% of the labourers were women. When the cashew was fried, the fume that emanated was harmful for health. When the skin of the nut was peeled off, a juice came out from it which caused damage to the skin. The women employed in such a hazardous jobs, used to work for eight hours daily and received an average daily wage of eight annas only.\textsuperscript{89} Moreover, the nuts were weighed in such a way that the labourers got less than that was due to them as daily wage. Renu herself witnessed that many under-age girls and aged women were employed in this industry. They worked long hours amidst the poisonous air. In majority of the factories, there was no such thing as crèches for the children and in places where such facilities did exist, the amenities were very poor.\textsuperscript{90} Not only that, factory owners had started a novel way of exploiting the labourers. The owners sometimes closed down their factories for

\textsuperscript{86}Renu Chakraborty, “Communist Party and Status of Women,” \textit{New Age}, p.11.

\textsuperscript{87}\textit{Ibid}, p.11.

\textsuperscript{88}\textit{Ibid}, p.11.


\textsuperscript{90}\textit{Ibid}, p.5
two to three months. But according to the labour law, the owners were liable to give compensation to the workers for that period. That was why the owners tried to enlist the cashew-nut industry as a seasonal industry because in that case, the owners were not be liable to pay any compensation to the workers.  

Facing such exploitation, Renu found that the workers had started organising themselves against retrenchment and payment of less wages and for placing demands for such facilities as child-health care and crèche facilities. Discrimination also existed in other areas as well. She pointed out that the women workers of the Railways were deprived of passes. Not only that, according to a circular issued by the government, it was declared that the women employees of the Telephone Department would be granted maternity leave once in every three years.

In the late 1950s there was rapid decrease in the number of women employed in coal, jute, textile and other industries. She pointed out that the percentage of women, when compared with the total number of persons employed, was 16.95% in 1927, in 1949 it dropped to 11.33%. She further pointed out that for cotton mills the figure for women workers in 1927 was 19.4% but in 1950 it had fallen to 12.4%. In jute mills between 1947 and 1956 almost 20,000 women were eliminated. In coal mines between 1947 and 1956, 24,000 women had to face lay off. In plantations in Darjeeling and Assam, a substantial part of the labour force was women. Yet the percentage of

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92 Ibid, p.5.
93 Special Branch File no.5-565/54(ii). West Bengal Police Archive.
94 Lok Sabha Debates, vol.17, nos.61-64, 1958, p.14364.
women labour declined substantially. While it was 47.5% in 1948-49, it was only 47.2% in 1949-50.\textsuperscript{95} Renu took up this issue in the Lok Sabha and urged the members to scrutinize the reasons behind this decline. Many irrational arguments were put forward to explain such a decline. One such argument was that women were subsidiary earners. Therefore, in a situation where large number of men were unemployed, the subsidiary source of earning could be considered an unimportant factor. But Renu countered this argument by saying that in the context of rising prices, a man’s earning was not enough to sustain his family. Therefore, women had to come out of the confines of their homes to do jobs of the most un-remunerative kind. As they had neither skill nor education to supplement their husband’s income, they had no other alternative but accept such un-remunerative jobs. So Renu urged: ‘Until such time as there is a really fair wage, this question of women’s employment is as important as the question of men’s employment.’\textsuperscript{96}

Secondly, it was put forward that women were incapable of hard work. On the contrary, in reality, Renu pointed out, that the most hard-working and laborious tasks were performed by women in the majority of the jute and cotton mills, mica ores and iron ore mines. She herself had visited iron ore mines where men and women used to work as doubles. There she observed:

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\textsuperscript{95} Lok Sabha Debates, vol.17, nos.61-64, 1958, p.14365.

\textsuperscript{96} Ibid, p.14366.
. . .the man does the blasting, after the blasting is done, the entire work of carrying that heavy load of iron ore and manganese ore is left to the women with babies tied to their backs, . . .

In cotton and jute mills too, the women were engaged in strenuous work in certain departments. She also stressed the fact that it was the women who used to do the unskilled work.

Thirdly, it was also argued that women were engaged in manual labour and that they were incapable of handling the advanced techniques of machines which were introduced as a result of rationalisation. To this, Renu argued that in other countries women after they were given training were able to handle machines skillfully, particularly in spinning and other more technically advanced departments in the cotton textile mills. But she found it funny that in India the ‘. . . employers have come to the conclusion that our women are not able to do the most skilled jobs.’

Some of the labour laws, suggested by the ILO such as the maternity benefit laws, laws relating to work hours for women, laws instructing an employer to construct crèches and provide milk for the children and finally, laws allowing women with babies feeding time for their children had actually led to the retrenchment of women labour. Renu pointed out that in coal mines women were always employed as a source of cheap labour. But when the employers found that equal wages had to be paid

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97 *Lok Sabha Debates*, vol.17, nos.61-64, 1958, p.14368.

98 *Ibid*, p.14369

to the women as a result of some important labour tribunal awards in the textile, jute and coal industries, the employers started eliminating women workers. Similarly as soon as the Plantation Labour Act and the Mines Act stipulated that women employees had to be given maternity benefits and be provided with crèches, the employers started retrenching women workers. Renu lamented the fact that the labour laws had no provisions whereby security of services for women could be ensured. Therefore, she urged the government to take steps to implement the social laws, promulgated for the protection of the women workers and at the same time to ensure the security of service for the women.

In 1958 she took up the cause of women, employed in the bidi and manganese and iron ore industry. On 16\textsuperscript{th} August, on the floor of the House, she pointed out that women were employed in the bidi industry because they were cheap sources of labour. Actually, they were paid half the wages payable to men. In manganese and iron ore industry tribal and backward women were employed in large numbers because they were a source of unthinkably cheap labour. These women were employed in those areas where the trade union movement was non-existent and workers were not enlightened enough to enforce their protective claims. In these areas, Renu

\begin{footnotes}
\item[100] Lok Sabha Debates, vol.17, nos.61-64, 1958, pp.14370-14371.
\item[101] Ibid, p.14371.
\item[102] Lok Sabha Debates, vol.18, nos. 1-10, 1958, p.1215.
\item[103] Ibid, p.1216.
\end{footnotes}
pointed out, women workers were not provided with crèche facilities or good water.\textsuperscript{104}

She once again stressed the fact that because of protective laws, the employers were to provide certain amenities to women. To avoid this, the employers sacked women. It was because of this that some women organisations like the Bombay Council of Woman were not in favour of All India Maternity Benefit Law because if such a law was passed, the employers would no longer keep women. Renu argued that we have to realize that we have to ‘. . . protect both the children and the women, and also use them as participants in labour, participants in the production of wealth of the country.’\textsuperscript{105} She also pointed out that new avenues of employment had opened up largely for educated women. But a majority of women were illiterate and uneducated. They could not be taken into the profession of nursing or in the work of community development. Therefore, these uneducated women were finding it difficult to get work and the government must seriously think about it.\textsuperscript{106}

In 1959 Renu moved the Equal Remuneration Bill. In so far as the right to equal wages was concerned, Renu pointed out that it was only applicable in cases of skilled workers, educated workers and the professional classes. But the unskilled, uneducated women workers who were perhaps of the largest numbers, this principle was not applied, although it should have been so.\textsuperscript{107} Referring to the Darjeeling tea

\textsuperscript{104}Lok Sabha Debates, vol.18, nos. 1-10, 1958, p.1217.

\textsuperscript{105}Ibid, p.1218.

\textsuperscript{106}Ibid, p.1217.

\textsuperscript{107}Lok Sabha Debates, vol.32, nos.1-10, 1959, p.2598.
plantations, she argued that women were better pickers than men. Despite this, a difference was made between women and men as regards minimum wages.\textsuperscript{108} She suggested that differentiation could only be made according to the nature of the work, but the minimum wage must be the same and where the nature of the job was same, certainly equal wages should be paid.\textsuperscript{109} She alleged that the government had failed to give women workers any statutory protection. Whenever any attempt had been made to implement social laws or labour laws, this had led to a fall in the number of women workers. In her own words:

They [the employers] put the trigger at your chest and say, either you want employment or take away your social laws, if you want equal wages, we do not employ women.\textsuperscript{110}

Therefore she suggested that in the departments where women were traditionally employed, a certain percentage should be fixed who must be given employment.\textsuperscript{111} Another alternative suggested by her was that prior to retrenching a woman worker, the employer would have to file a show cause notice and ask for governmental permission in the matter. If only the case was found to be legitimate, then only the concerned woman could be retrenched.\textsuperscript{112}

\textsuperscript{108} \textit{Lok Sabha Debates}, vol.32, nos.1-10, 1959, p.2598.
\textsuperscript{109} \textit{Ibid}, pp.2598-2599.
\textsuperscript{110} \textit{Ibid}, p.2597.
\textsuperscript{111} \textit{Ibid}, p.2594.
\textsuperscript{112} \textit{Ibid}, p.2595.
Maternity benefit was another pertinent issue relating to women’s work. While speaking on the Maternity benefit Bill on 10th August, 1961, in the Lok Sabha, she pointed out that in recent years, in the traditional industries where women were employed, whenever any social measure was passed by the Government there had been an attack on the employment of women because women were always looked upon as a cheap source of labour. Therefore, she urged the government to take every precaution to ensure the passing of the Bill; otherwise, it would lead to a further lowering of the number of employed women. While supporting the bill, she found many loopholes in the bill. First, the bill would not cover those who were working in commercial establishments as clerks, in hospitals as nurses, in schools as teachers, although according to the survey undertaken by the Ministry of Labour, their number too was increasing. A large number of women were employed as casual and temporary workers in railways, iron ore and building industries. But they were outside the scope of the bill.113

Secondly, the women working in the seasonal factories like tobacco were not included in the bill.114 Thirdly, she welcomed the government’s decision to reduce the qualifying period from 240 to 160 days. But she argued that for the women who used to work in rather inclement weather, like the women in Darjeeling tea plantations or in mines, the qualifying period should have been reduced to 100 days.115 Fourthly, the bill fixed the minimum daily rate at Rs.1/- Renu considered it very low and

114 Ibid, p.1379.
115 Ibid, p.1380.
suggested that in order to guarantee some minimum health conditions for the child and the mother this rate was not enough and should be enhanced. Moreover, along with incentive bonus overtime earnings, night allowance and similar allowances should be included as these comprised her legitimate wages. She also wanted to increase the medical bonus from Rs.25/- to Rs.100/-. Referring to the tea gardens of Doors and interior iron ore and manganese ore mines, she said that in these areas hospitals or easily available medical facilities or medicines were almost non-existent.\textsuperscript{116} Therefore the medical bonus had to be increased.

Another loophole in the bill was that women could be dismissed on account of gross misconduct. But Renu argued that the term “gross misconduct” was a very vague term and cautioned the House that this would be seized by the employers to prevent women from getting maternity benefits. To prevent such a thing, she argued, that all such cases of dismissals would have to be referred to the Inspector and that the latter would have the power to reinstate the woman and pay her whatever benefit was due.\textsuperscript{117}

Renu was happy to note that after independence women workers had become conscious of their rights and had become the backbone of the trade union movement. But gender bias still existed even in the trade unions. Renu argued that very few women were in the leading positions. This was because majority of women

\textsuperscript{116}Lok Sabha Debates, vol.56, nos.1-10, 1961, pp.1383-84.

\textsuperscript{117}Ibid, pp.1384-85.
workers were illiterate. ‘They are still grounded down under the double yoke of exploitation in the plantations and factories and domestic drudgery.’\textsuperscript{118} Renu pointed out that in Italy and France liaison bodies had been set up between Trade Unions and the women’s organizations. While in Cuba a person in the highest directive body in the trade unions had been assigned to look after the special problems of the women workers, but at the same time it was stated clearly that all would bear the responsibility collectively.\textsuperscript{119} Renu lamented the fact that in India no such co-ordination had developed. ‘This leaves the militant working class women still shackled by feudal oppression, drudgery and victims of illiteracy.’\textsuperscript{120}

While presenting her views before the Committee on the Status of Women, she along with Vimla Farooqi supported the idea of reservation of certain percentage of jobs for women as they were prone to retrenchment by the employers.\textsuperscript{121} More amenities had to be provided for them to utilize the limited facilities available for them. She and Vimla suggested that in the cities working women urgently required working girls’ hostels where they could live cheaply. A whole network of crèches and \textit{balwadis} in the localities were also needed so that the working mothers could leave their children under some care.\textsuperscript{122} In rural areas there was a great need for free seasonal

\textsuperscript{118}Renu Chakraborty, “New Perspectives For Women’s Movement—After 25 Years of Drift,” \textit{Link}, p.179.

\textsuperscript{119} \textit{Ibid}, p.179.

\textsuperscript{120} \textit{Ibid}, p.179.

\textsuperscript{121} Renu Chakraborty, “Communist Party and Status of women,” \textit{New Age}, p.11.

\textsuperscript{122} \textit{Ibid}, p.11.
crèches for the women labouring in the agricultural sector. Trained mid-wife and a larger number of free maternity hospitals were also needed.123 Cheap, clean canteens where the family could have a simple meal was also necessary if women had to participate in any sort of activity in the evening. She wrote: ‘To be a domestic drudge is the most stultifying factor standing in the way of the emancipation of women.’124

6.6. Fight against dowry and immoral trafficking

Dowry was another instance of the feudal mentality of the Indian society. Renu considered dowry as a deep-rooted social evil from which even educated women could not escape. She wrote that the system had permeated to such an extent that even working women found that unless they offered dowry, it was not possible for them to get married.125 Though it was expected that through education the evil could be eradicated, the system did not go away immediately. For this a continuous struggle was necessary. Renu believed that the abolition of the system would safeguard the interests of a wealthy father’s daughter and would free a poor man’s daughter from the humiliation of not being able to give that much dowry.126

124 Ibid, p.11.
125 Lok Sabha Debates, vol.36, nos.11-20, 1959, p.3716.
In 1954 Renu moved the bill in the Lok Sabha. When the time for discussion arrived, then the Law Minister requested her to withdraw the bill with the assurance that the government would move the bill soon. Despite such an assurance, it took a long time to move the bill in the parliament. In 1958 different women’s organisations collected nearly 1800 signatures to bring forward such a bill. After it was moved in the parliament, the bill was sent to a Select Committee, headed by Renu. When the bill came up for discussion, she told the House:

...in a majority of cases, when a young bride goes to the house of the bridegroom, most of the property—money, cash, jewellery etc., is actually in the control of the father-in-law or somebody else in the husband’s family. Often times, the daughter-in-law is not even able to see the jewellery later on, if she needs it. As the children are born and as their education proceeds, I would like to provide for my daughters. I would like to help her at every stage. Why should there be this concept that only at the time of marriage, I will settle Rs.25,000 or Rs.50,000? The whole idea is that dowry is being extorted at the time of the marriage.\footnote{Lok Sabha Debates, vol.36, nos.11-20, 1959, p.3711.}

Pointing to the gender bias in the society she said that people used to insure for the education of the sons and for the dowry of the daughter at the time of marriage.\footnote{Ibid, p.3711.}

Actually it was a custom to humiliate the bride’s parents. While supporting the bill she argued that the clause “consideration for betrothal or marriage” in the bill would be taken advantage of and the offenders would be able to get away with. But still the clause was adopted as ‘...we do not want to legalize dowry up to a certain extent in any form.’\footnote{Ibid, p.3712.} In the original bill it was stated that gift worth Rs.2000 would not be counted as dowry. But when the bill was sent to the select committee the clause was dropped. Another thing

\footnote{Lok Sabha Debates, vol.36, nos.11-20, 1959, p.3711.}

\footnote{Ibid, p.3711.}

\footnote{Ibid, p.3712.}
that she pointed out was - in West Bengal, apart from cash and property the most prevalent form of dowry was the amount of gold given to the daughter. In the villages, she reiterated, the average middle class families gave dowry in the form of jewellery for the daughter.\textsuperscript{130} But she doubted whether this would be considered dowry under its present definition. The Select Committee decided that any dowry direct or indirect would be punishable and the guilty would be punished both with fine and imprisonment. A first class magistrate would be empowered to decide dowry cases. There was also a clause in the bill that cash, jewellery and other things could be offered by way of custom. But Renu found the clause dangerous because in the garb of a gift or a present the dowry system would be continued. When the bill went to Rajya Sabha the clause that the demand for dowry would be considered a punishable offence was dropped. Different women’s organisations protested against this and at last the demand for dowry was accepted as a punishable offence. But a condition was added that without prior consent from a person appointed by the State government such offences would not be accepted in the court. Renu protested against this amendment and argued that it would be cumbersome for the village people to involve themselves in court cases.\textsuperscript{131} The bill was passed with its many loopholes; but for the first time in India accepting and giving dowry was declared a punishable offence. But at the same time Renu reminded the House that all social laws

\textsuperscript{130}Lok Sabha Debates, vol.36, nos.11-20, 1959, p.3712.

unless they were backed by an awakened social conscience and a strong public opinion would remain infructuous to a very large extent.¹³²

Women especially from the poorer strata of the society were an easy prey to yet another social evil, i.e. immoral trafficking. Renu argued that poverty was the driving force behind women becoming the victims of immoral trafficking. It was thus imperative, that government would have to provide women a larger scope of employment in order to prevent women becoming pawn in other’s hands. The bill for suppression of immoral trafficking came up for discussion in 1956. Renu felt that the bill had many limitations but still chose to support it. She agreed with the basic points which were the tackling of poverty and opening up of employment and homes for women, and educating people in high moral standards.¹³³ But the most important thing, according to Renu, was to tighten the law so that evaders could be brought to book. She pointed out that the machinery through which trafficking could be checked though in a limited way would be the police. But the police itself was involved in corrupt practices. Often the women had to compromise with the police by offering them their bodies. Therefore she suggested ‘... complete re-orientation and building of special police squad for this work, who should be above corruption, and who should have the proper attitude towards these women.’¹³⁴ She emphasized that unless the police was given proper training to work with a spirit of

¹³² Lok Sabha Debates, vol.36, nos.11-20, 1959, p.3710.


persuasion and trying to bring the victims back to society, it would not be possible to achieve even the limited results out of the bill. \(^{135}\)

Secondly, she felt that association of women at every stage especially in the task of rescuing was very essential. For this, she suggested that women police should be attached with special police squad and they should be given training. \(^{136}\) She admitted that because of social restrictions it would not be perhaps possible in all states to implement this but in other states where it was possible the Central government must make arrangements to train up the police force.

About the protective homes her argument was that these should be really homes where women would be the main people who would be responsible for managing the internal affairs of the institutions. This according to her was very urgent as male superintendents of these homes used to abuse their positions. She cautioned: ‘Unless this is checked, these protective homes themselves might become again sources of evil.’ \(^{137}\) These homes should make arrangements for the economic rehabilitation of these women. She told:

Women do not have any profession in our country; they hardly know how to read and write. Therefore, if we really want to make the women equal citizens with us and bring them honourably back again to society, the main thing which we must do is to give them that training and it should be done in these institutions under the help and guidance of these women social workers, who should be in charge of these particular institutions. \(^{138}\)

\(^{135}\) Lok Sabha Debates, Vol.6, no.1-15, 1956, pp.1544-1545.

\(^{136}\) Ibid, p.1545

\(^{137}\) Ibid, p.1546.

\(^{138}\) Ibid, p.1546.
The social workers should have a sympathetic outlook towards the women. There should also be an adequate number of protective homes throughout India. Otherwise it would be passing a law to drive an evil underground.\textsuperscript{139} The bill was eventually passed by the parliament in 1956 and received the assent of the President on 30\textsuperscript{th} December, 1956. But the act could not stop the evil. In 1958 Renu pointed out that one of the major weaknesses of the Act was that individual prostitution remained unpunishable. As a result poor helpless girls continued to be exploited. She noticed that in Calcutta in small restaurants poor, young refugee girls were used as waitresses for the purpose of immoral traffic. But it was almost impossible to punish the offenders who took advantage of certain clauses of the Act. Secondly, the Act had laid stress on setting up protective homes and rehabilitation centres for the victims. But Renu pointed out that even after two and half years almost nothing had been done in this regard.\textsuperscript{140} As a result the very purpose of the Act had been defeated. She pointed out that in Delhi after the brothels were closed, the prostitutes, finding no other shelter migrated to Uttar Pradesh where no such act had been in force.\textsuperscript{141} As extensive powers had been handed over to the magistrates and the police, Renu suggested that women social workers and women with social consciousness should be made members of all the advisory committees. But Renu found that no work had been done in this direction up till then. She felt that lack of desire and faith was

\textsuperscript{139} \textit{Lok Sabha Debates}, vol.9, nos.1-15, 1956, p.1547.

\textsuperscript{140} \textit{Lok Sabha Debates}, vol.21, nos.31-35, 1958, p.8486.

\textsuperscript{141} \textit{Ibid}, pp.8486-8487.
something to worry about. She also alleged that a section of senior government officials were actually participating in the evil. This had actually paralysed the machinery of the government.142

6.7. The refugee problem: rehabilitation and food crisis

The refugee problem on the Eastern side of India was one of the most crucial social problems that emerged as a fall out of independence with the Partition of India. As a sensitive person, Renu could not keep herself aloof from the plight of the East Bengalee refugees. In full earnestness, she took up the cause of the East Bengalee refugees and vehemently registered her protest when she found that a central policy to tackle this problem was lacking.

The first drawback that she noticed was that the administrative machinery of the Rehabilitation Department both in the state and the centre were managed by persons who had little experience and ability to handle the situation. Even those people were inducted into the machinery who did not even speak the language of the refugees. She alleged that as not enough administrative men were employed along the vast border areas, not all the refugees could manage to arrange border slips. As a result, she pointed out, ‘. . . these people are lying on the platforms of Howrah and Sealdah and elsewhere in dire misery and suffering.’143 Secondly, in West Bengal most of the land that had been acquired were non-cultivable land. The Central policy by which

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143 Lok Sabha Debates, vol.6, no.8, 1952, p.2167.
land to the agricultural refugees was arranged was time consuming and faulty. The result was that at the end of 1952 agricultural refugees were still lying on the platforms of Sealdah and Howrah. The conditions of the middle-class refugees were also no better. They were left in transit camps in rain, in sun and in tattered tents without any help. Also, vocational training was useless unless there was adequate arrangement for marketing.

As mass killings and abduction of women of both communities took place on the western side during partition an initiative was undertaken by both the governments of India and Pakistan to rescue such abducted women and girls. On the Indian side prominent social workers like Mridula Sarabhai, Rameshwari Nehru were involved in this initiative. Renu supported such an endeavour but at the same time cautioned the members of the House that as this was a humane problem, one must have a humane approach towards it. Therefore she felt that it was necessary to take care of the fact that

...only those who really want to go back are allowed to go back and the rest, if they want to go back to the people who, unfortunately, at one stage abducted them but whom today they have begun to love or recognise as their relations, they should be allowed to do so. In this regard she also reminded the members about the conservative attitude of the society towards women. She told:

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144 Lok Sabha Debates, vol.6, no.8, 1952, p.2169.

145 Ibid, p.2169.

I know in our part of the world there have been many women who do not want to come back because they are afraid of Hindu society; they are afraid that the Hindu society may not take them back.\textsuperscript{147}

Therefore dealing with these women she urged, one had to adopt a humane approach.

On the eastern side refugee influx continued unabated. But in 1956 Renu pointed out that out of 36.85 lakh refugees, the bulk still remained to be rehabilitated. This was because both the central and the state government failed to act on a footing of national emergency. Moreover, refugees came from different strata of society and from different walks of life. There were women and children and physically disabled refugees too. There were rural and urban refugees. Thus, refugee problem was a complicated one. The problem further accentuated as West Bengal was a land-hungry province with a high density of population (mentioned earlier). Under these circumstances Renu felt, it was necessary, to integrate the needs of the refugees to the question of gainful occupation of the local population.\textsuperscript{148} But she found that the land acquisition policy of the Bengal government was erroneous. She accused the Bengal government of taking away lands from peasants owning small holdings and under cultivation in order to rehabilitate the East Bengalee refugees.\textsuperscript{149} This policy proved to be disastrous as it reduced the small peasants to penury, bringing hardships upon them. Secondly, as most of the lands which were taken away belonged to the minority community, it had the

\textsuperscript{147}Lok Sabha Debates, vol.7, no.15, 1952, p.2919.

\textsuperscript{148} Lok Sabha Debates, vol.3, nos.31-45, 1956, p.4027.

\textsuperscript{149} Renu Chakraborty’s letter (undated) to the then Union Minister of Rehabilitation, A.P.Jain, Intelligence Branch File no.397-39. West Bengal State Archive.
potential to increase the tension between the two communities.\textsuperscript{150} This policy had also led to a great deal of friction between the refugees and the people of West Bengal. Renu argued that without local co-operation, rehabilitation of the refugees would not be possible.\textsuperscript{151} She accused the West Bengal government of following a biased policy. She pointed out that huge areas of fallow land belonging to big landlords were spared while the lands owned by poor peasants were taken away.

The centre too followed a biased policy towards the East Bengalee refugees. She argued on the floor of the House that (1) West Pakistan refugees had a bigger compensation pool which the refugees from the East did not have. Despite this, Rs.174.14 crores minus the compensation pool had been spent on the West Pakistani refugees, while only Rs.86.59 crores had been spent on East Pakistani refugees. (2) With regard to grants Rs.81.22 crores were paid as grants despite having a compensation pool, while only Rs.36.56 crores was allotted as grants for the East Bengalee refugees. In 1955-56 when the influx was at its peak, on the eastern side the West got Rs.16.74 crores, but the East got only Rs.7.66 crores as their allocation. (3) The need of housing in West Bengal was extreme as refugees with their children were lying in Sealdah station platform and some of them for two months in a row. But here too, the policy of the Centre was

\textsuperscript{150} Renu Chakraborty’s letter (undated) to the then Union Minister of Rehabilitation, A.P. Jain, Intelligence Branch File no.397-39. West Bengal State Archive.

\textsuperscript{151} Lok Sabha Debates, vol.3, nos.31-45, 1956, p.4028.
wanting. For the West something like Rs.60.45 crores had been allotted for housing whereas for the East Bengalee refugees the figure was only Rs.22.64 crores.  

The central policy towards the East Bengalee refugees was also a mismanaged one. When a land was reclaimed it was necessary to consult the refugee organisations and local representatives. But this was never done causing a great deal of friction and bitterness. To give gainful employment to the refugees, a number of training cum production centres had come into existence. A large number of women received training in these production centres. But Renu pointed out that this sort of training was proving futile as the trainees were not able to find jobs.  

Therefore she suggested that it was extremely urgent to set up production and marketing centres. Another fault detected in the Central policy was the unnecessary delay caused by the administrative machinery. Loans were postponed, T.B. applications were received but generally took quite a long time to act upon the same; the net result was a delay in implementation of schemes even though they were duly sanctioned. There was also not the desired co-operation between the centre and the state.  

Renu also took up the cause to enroll the refugees who came after 1950 as voters. She argued that a number of big riots took place after 26 January, 1950 in East Pakistan. As a result the influx of refugees increased after that. The

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153 Ibid, p.4034.

Government of India had to make special efforts to include them as citizens, so that they could have the voting rights. As most of the refugees who came after 1950 were backward and sometimes illiterate peasants registering officers should have been given explicit instructions to help the refugees to register themselves.\textsuperscript{155} The registration process should have been a simple one. Renu pointed out that the registering authority was the Collector of Calcutta. But for an illiterate refugee who had found shelter in a remote place must have found it almost impossible to come to Alipur to register himself. To avoid this, she suggested that as many sub-registration offices as possible could be set up so that a large number of refugees could register themselves as voters.\textsuperscript{156} She reminded the government that it was the duty of the Government of India to help the refugees to become citizens of India.

She also vehemently opposed any attempt to evict those refugees who after finding no shelter had set up unauthorised settlements. She argued that municipal rules with regard to town-planning must be adhered to because of reasons of health and hygiene. But because of the rules . . . ‘it is not right that those people who have, after so much travel and suffering, got a shelter over their heads should again be evicted.’\textsuperscript{157} She appealed before the government that the refugees who came before 15 August, 1950 should have statutory protection and that their houses should be regularised.

\textsuperscript{155} Lok Sabha Debates, vol.8, nos.31-45, 1956, p.6149.

\textsuperscript{156} \textit{Ibid}, p.6150.

\textsuperscript{157} \textit{Lok Sabha Debates}, vol.19, nos.11-20, 1958, p.5007.
By the end of 1957 the Government of India announced that in future the fresh migrants would not be entitled to any assistance from the government unless they got migration certificates. Renu found this policy unjust. Among refugees who came after the borders were sealed, most of them were Santhals, agricultural labourers who were the most oppressed and suppressed classes. Secondly, it was rather difficult to obtain migration certificates. As a result it was not possible for the refugees to bring proper migration certificates. Moreover, migration certificates were an excuse to deprive the refugees of any state help because in the migration certificates the refugees were required to sign that they would not get a penny of help or rehabilitation benefit and unless they did it, migration certificates were not signed. Renu felt that it was unfair and demeaning to the refugees as on the sacrifices of these people was built the edifice of free India. She also pointed out that the Government of India was toeing a step-motherly attitude towards the East Bengalee refugees in sharp contrast to the Tibetan refugees. Renu questioned this sort of dual attitude and told the members of the Lok Sabha:

They [the Tibetan Refugees] are lazy people who do not do any work and yet get lakhs of rupees that are given to them, whereas we refuse to give succour and help to our own refugees, our own kith and kin. Refugees with great difficulty crossed over to India. Sometimes they came across with their babies in their arms and with no belongings, sometimes almost crawling to cross the

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158 *Lok Sabha Debates*, vol.5, nos.41-51, 1962, pp.12073-12074


It was deplorable she felt, that after facing so many and so much hardships, when they came they received no assistance at all.

Renu also criticized the Union Government’s decision to close down the camps. She argued that refugees were given a bad name alleging that they were inert and indifferent towards work asking for doles to survive. That is why the Government decided to close down the camps and only two months’ notice was given. Renu argued that even after the camps were closed refugees continued to live there around the camps and inside the barracks. They were partially rehabilitated, they were half-starved, yet the urge to live on had not died down.

The Dandakaranya Development scheme was envisaged to relocate the agriculturist refugees. But later the non-agriculturists were also forced to go there as their doles were stopped. Renu was not opposed to the idea of sending the refugees outside West Bengal. She believed that as citizens of India there should be equal opportunities of living in any part of India. But she opposed the schemes that were undertaken outside West Bengal on the ground that these schemes were all unsuccessful. In 1963-64 migrants started arriving in West Bengal by foot, by train and through the border stations. The Mana transit camp was created for 6000 to 10,000

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162 Ibid, p.12077.

people, but due to heavy influx of refugees 40,000 people had been sent.\textsuperscript{164} Therefore it would be wrong to ask the refugees to go there.

About the mismanagement of the Dandakaranya scheme she argued that Dandakaranya was a project which was meant mainly for the agriculturists. Only a small percentage was earmarked for non-agriculturists. Yet without any serious thought non-agriculturists too were sent there. Even lone women and children were not spared. The rehabilitation facilities for agriculturists were also not up to the mark. She told on the floor of the House:

\begin{quote}
The amount of ready agricultural land which can be distributed is about 4,000 to 5,000 acres. That means, at the rate of 10 acres per family. Now, if we are to get another 20 lakhs, out of which 15 lakhs will be cultivable from Madhya Pradesh, another 2000 can be rehabilitated. If that is the position, what shall we do with these 40,000 people who have come and many more who are being sent there?\textsuperscript{165}
\end{quote}

The success of the Dandakaranya scheme was dependent upon the question of water supply. Unfortunately, it was one of the major problems here. In this region the water went down below the surface very quickly. Even the proposed tube wells could not be reached even after going through hard rock.\textsuperscript{166} So this was an area, where there would be acute water shortage. There had been a proposal to build a dam at Umarkote in 1958, but the project lay still pending even in 1964. The condition of the Mana Camp had not changed between 1958 and 1964. Water was also scarce there. This was particularly

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\item \textsuperscript{164} \textit{Lok Sabha Debates}, vol.29, nos.41-50, 1964, p.9424.
\item \textsuperscript{165} \textit{Ibid}, p.9425.
\item \textsuperscript{166} \textit{Ibid}, p.9426.
\end{itemize}
miserable for the East Bengalee refugees as they came from a land of water.\textsuperscript{167} To improve the situation she suggested that the Chairperson of the DDA should have emergency powers to do what he thought was right and that there should be no dual authority.\textsuperscript{168}

The regularisation of the squatters’ colonies was not undertaken in a proper fashion. The \textit{Arpan Patras} (or the sanction documents) that were given to the refugees had no legal validity and that too was not given to everybody. The land was not properly plotted out. The quantum of compensation was so calculated that they were unable to pay. Moreover, most of these colonies were under-developed.\textsuperscript{169} The women in the permanent liability camps were living in deplorable condition. After the camps had been closed the women still lived on in tents. They had no source of livelihood. They were provided with a small ration for their subsistence. No permanent structures were provided to them as promised. They were given spinning jobs to run their livelihood but that fetched only Rs.3 for the entire month. For the grown up children of the lone women no arrangements for rehabilitation had been made.\textsuperscript{170} Renu lamented that in Titagarh Women’s camp and Cooper’s camp women were living a life of hell- latrines with no doors, leaking roofs, no opportunities for vocational education.\textsuperscript{171}

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\textsuperscript{167} \textit{Lok Sabha Debates}, vol.29, nos.41-50, 1964, p.9427.
\textsuperscript{168} \textit{Ibid}, p.9428.
\textsuperscript{169} \textit{Ibid}, pp.9430-9431.
\textsuperscript{170} \textit{Ibid}, pp.9432-9433.
\textsuperscript{171} \textit{Lok Sabha Debates}, vol.41, nos.31-40, 1965, p.8740.
\end{flushleft}
She also alleged that smallest budget was allotted for the education of the refugee children. Sometimes there were no blackboards, books and mats. The teacher-pupil ratio was high, the stipends for the hostels were niggardly and opportunities for technical education opportunities for technical education in outside institutions were inadequate.\textsuperscript{172} The condition of the non-agriculturist refugees was deplorable as many of them had no homestead even till 1965. In many of the homestead plots meant for non-agriculturists the project staff were living.\textsuperscript{173} She suggested that non-agriculturist families should be allotted plots in the suburban areas of Calcutta where they would be able to get jobs of some kind or the other.\textsuperscript{174} Only a few shops were allotted to them. Even that too was lying vacant because of high rents. In Calcutta refugee shopkeepers had built up little shacks by the side of the pavements. But they were pulled down to the ground because the roads were cluttered up. Renu suggested that they should be given some amenities to build shops in order to earn a living.\textsuperscript{175} The small scale industries were also running at heavy losses. She stressed the fact that the lands that were specified for the refugees were porous with no proper couture binding, terracing or leveling. As a result, large scale desertion took place.

As one of the basic necessities of life was food, Renu became an articulate speaker and activist demanding food for ordinary people. Just a few months

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\textsuperscript{172}Lok Sabha Debates, vol.41, nos.31-40, 1965, p.8737.
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\textsuperscript{173} Ibid, p.8737.
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\textsuperscript{174} Ibid, p.8742
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\textsuperscript{175} Ibid, p.8742.
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after independence, on 29 January, 1948 Renu led a procession of women, shouting slogans like *Pura Ration Dite Hobe Naile Gadi Charte Hobe* (Give us full ration or otherwise you have to quit) etc. and carrying posters demanding restoration of a cut in the quota of ration.176 The procession staged a demonstration before the Writers Building. On behalf of the protestors Renu met the premier and was assured by him that the Ministry would try its best to solve the problem.177

In the Lok Sabha she talked about the system of procurement of food grains. She alleged that the entire machinery of procurement was in the hands of such men who could be bought over very easily.178 As a result it was the poor who suffered. For example, in West Bengal, she noticed that a person who owned less than 15 *bighas* of land was not subjected to procurement, yet another person owning two or three *bighas* was subjected to procurement. Their paddy was forcibly taken away and no payment was made to them.179 Similarly, the producers of food grains were forced to sell their stock at a lower rate. She urged that it was only through proper implementation of the laws that the government would be able to control the prices of essential commodities. In 1959 the food crisis was acute in West Bengal. She pointed out that in spite of record production, there was scarcity, higher prices and greater starvation. She pointed out that in February, 1958 when the *amana* crop had gone to the market, the

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176 *Intelligence Branch File no.397-39*. West Bengal State Archive.


Central government had imposed a 25% levy. But this was done at a time when there was no surplus in the hands of the peasantry. Also, there was no floor price of paddy with the result that the poor peasantry had to sell the paddy at any price.\textsuperscript{180} Moreover, the atta (flour) that was sent for test relief went into the black market. As a result when the poorest of the poor agricultural labourers attempted to get atta, they found nothing.\textsuperscript{181} Under these circumstances, an agitation started in May, 1959 known as a de-hoarding operation. But this operation was repressed by the Preventive Detention Act – an act which was never applied against the hoarders. As India was an under-developed country, there always remained a chance of food shortage. To combat this, Renu favoured a policy by which during a period of shortage, equitable distribution could take place and there could be no undue price rise. She also criticized the Central government’s policy of giving more food to the area which was producing more food than a deficit area. She argued that in Calcutta, only 129 grams of rice per day was given, while in the municipalities of West Bengal 71 grams per day was issued to the people. The quantity of food grains dropped to zero for the landless labourers and peasants, in sharp contrast to 240 grams per day allotment in Vishakhapatnam, 200 per grams in Coimbatore and Madras and 143 grams in Delhi.\textsuperscript{182} In West Bengal rice production had gone down largely because a huge area was


\textsuperscript{181} Ibid, p.457.

\textsuperscript{182} Lok Sabha Debates, vol.60, nos.1-10, 1966, p.1529.
growing jute. Therefore, she urged the government to give a minimum of 7 ounces of rice to West Bengal.\footnote{Lok Sabha Debates, vol.60, nos.1-10, 1966, p.1533.}

6.8. Renu on education

Renu also focused on one of the most pertinent issues: Education which according to her decided the future of the citizens of a country. She was in favour of compulsory primary education in India – since in India poverty stood in the way of literacy. She found the situation prevailing in the educational sector rather disappointing. The constitution had laid down that free and compulsory primary education should be introduced and the Panel of the Planning Commission on education had set a target that this constitutional directive would be given effect to by 1965-66. The first plan targeted that 60% of the 6-11 age group would be brought under compulsory free primary education. But Renu found that in 1955-56 the achieved figure was only 51%.\footnote{Lok Sabha Debates, vol.40, nos.21-30, 1960, p.5926.} Despite this, during the second plan elementary education received a smaller allocation, not more than 41% of the total allocation on education.\footnote{Ibid, p.5925.} She also noticed that the condition of a large number of free primary schools, run by the Calcutta Corporation was deplorable. There was no infrastructure in those schools. Students used to sit on torn mats, basic facilities like chalk and blackboard were often non existant.\footnote{Lok Sabha Debates, vol.43, nos.51-60, 1960, p.14430.} On the other hand, there
were schools run by Missions and private trusts which provided far more superior quality of education. This way Renu argued, two different standards of education were being created with regard to primary education. Renu opposed such differentiation in standards and urged the government to bear the expenditure of upgrading the standards of free primary schools.\textsuperscript{187}

Renu also pointed out that in the villages there was a great demand for schools. But poverty was the main issue which stood in the way of children going to schools. The government had failed to provide jobs to all able-bodied individuals nor could the government ensure a fair minimum wage. In these families children were forced to work. They were exploited. In the villages children of the widows and agricultural and labourers were often let out to rich people, who employed them to look after the cattle throughout the day in lieu of some food and some yearly sum.\textsuperscript{188} In the cities boys belonging to the age group of 9-12 years were made to work in the restaurants. On principle Renu opposed child labour. But in reality when the State had failed to guarantee people jobs, the other alternative before these working children was to starve. Renu suggested that evening schools should be started for the benefit of such children. For the poorest of the poor children who were unable to afford long distance transport fees, Renu’s suggestion was that they should receive evening meals. She strongly felt that book stipend once a year could be offered to the lower income groups; and the

\textsuperscript{187}Lok Sabha Debates, vol.43, nos.51-60, 1960, p.14431.

\textsuperscript{188}Ibid, p.14433.
arrangement of mid-day meals could also be a right step towards improving the health of the school children.

Renu also found that the education amongst women had not made a desirable progress. She felt that the feudal outlook of prioritizing boys’ education still loomed large.\(^{189}\) Girls were also expected to look after their kid brothers and sisters and to help their mothers in household chores. That explained a large dropout of girls.\(^{190}\) She supported co-education as a principle but felt that while it was easier to implement it in the primary stages in the secondary stages there should be a provision for separate secondary schools for girls especially in backward areas where social customs still prevented growing girls from going to co-educational schools. Another urgent need she felt was the setting up of hostel facilities in secondary schools for girls living in far-flung areas. To encourage girls’ education under a certain age group, she advised, that a generous stipend to cover hostel, school and book expenses might serve the purpose.\(^{191}\) As raising the status of women was directly linked with the progress of education, so the girls lagging behind in this sphere, were to be assisted through a special incentive on the part of the government. She also advocated part time education for house-wives. She felt

\(^{189}\) ‘Communist Party and Status of Women’, *New Age*, p.11.

\(^{190}\) *Ibid*, p.11.

\(^{191}\) *Ibid*, p.11
that schools for adult women were few and she urged that in the literacy classes there should be provision for vocational training and earning.\textsuperscript{192}

She also believed that the pay of school teachers, especially the primary school teachers required improvement. Renu pointed out that in 1960 an untrained teacher in an elementary school was paid only Rs.25. But this paltry sum of Rs. 25 was not even the price of a maund of rice of the worst quality in West Bengal.\textsuperscript{193} She favoured the principle of an all India minimum wage instead. Not only were the teachers under-paid, they often did not get the salary on time. She suggested some additional amenities for such people like free medical treatment and free education for their children up to secondary and school level.\textsuperscript{194}

The scenario in higher education was also not encouraging either. In 1964 Renu pointed out that in India out of 45 crores of people, only 12.37 lakhs students were going for higher education.\textsuperscript{195} In India the principle was to restrict the number of students going up for higher education. She agreed with the concept that those who had not fared well might not go up for higher education. But in reality, there was no other alternative for such students. There were only some polytechnics and junior technical schools in big cities, where seats were limited but applicants were in

\textsuperscript{192}“Communist Party and Status of Women,” \textit{New Age}, p.11.

\textsuperscript{193} \textit{Lok Sabha Debates}, vol.40, nos.21-30, 1960, p.5927.

\textsuperscript{194} \textit{Ibid}, p.5928.

\textsuperscript{195} \textit{Lok Sabha Debates}, vol.36, nos.11-20, 1964, p.4170.
Therefore, in such a situation Renu found the principle of restricting the number of students going for higher education, unrealistic. Also, in the field of employment the main criterion still was a University degree. So, Renu argued that the question of having a degree was essential because of the whole economic system.\footnote{Lok Sabha Debates, vol.36, nos.11-20, 1964, p.4171.}

6.9. Other issues

Renu also stood for several other causes such as vouching for women superintendents in orphanages and other charitable homes. She argued that the basic criterion for granting recognition to a women’s hostel or a children’s home should be the appointment of women superintendents.\footnote{Ibid, p.4172.} In these homes minimum standards had to be complied with regard to education, sanitation, health and hygiene along with boarding, lodging facilities. Renu considered the question of education vital as in many institutions set up by the government for refugee women, the women were kept there for more than four or five years without any provision for any kind of education.\footnote{Lok Sabha Debates, vol.40, nos.21-30, 1960, p.6877.} She endorsed the view that women after receiving their training should be placed in homes and jobs which were secure.\footnote{Ibid, p.6880.}
The plight of the children who went begging and even maimed for this purpose moved her. She believed that to eradicate this problem the government should deal with deep poverty and unemployment that was prevailing in the country. Secondly, she pointed out that the whole system of giving alms was almost sanctified by religion.\textsuperscript{201} She supported the idea of children’s court to try the delinquent children but urged that apart from lawyers and magistrates, a large number of social workers especially women and psychologists should be attached to these courts. There should also be child guidance friends or child guidance clinics.\textsuperscript{202} There should also be sufficient number of special schools and homes for these children. Lastly, Renu attached special importance to after-care organisations. The children, she felt would need for a long time an after-care organisation to get guidance, help and affection.\textsuperscript{203} Before releasing the children the state should make some arrangements to enable them to earn for themselves a place of dignity in society.\textsuperscript{204}

When slum clearance schemes were undertaken in different states, Renu once again took up a constructive role. She urged that the poorest of the poor lived in the slums. Therefore when they were thrown out, care should be taken to find out the alternative place within the vicinity of their place of livelihood – this would enable them to carry out their usual avocations. She also raised the issue of clean drinking

\textsuperscript{201} \textit{Lok Sabha Debates}, vol.49, nos.21-30, 1960, p.7082.

\textsuperscript{202} \textit{Ibid}, pp.7083-7085.

\textsuperscript{203} \textit{Ibid}, p.7088.

\textsuperscript{204} \textit{Ibid}, p.7088.
water. With regard to Calcutta, she pointed out that in the slums of East Calcutta, Burrabazar and North Calcutta the people were in the grip of Cholera. Therefore the question of drainage, sewage should be given utmost importance. 205

As a person who believed in Communist ideals, she always stood up for the rights of the working classes. When workmen’s compensation amendment bill was brought up for discussion in the Parliament, she argued that the “no-work and no pay” was an outmoded idea and that it should be done away with. She argued when a labourer was incapacitated due to an accident, he was fully within his rights to claim full wages up to the time when the compensation was awarded; otherwise his full family would starve to death. 206 Since the compensation was often paid after long litigation; the person injured might face death in the interim period or might be in a state of indebtedness. Under such circumstances the entire money would become inadequate or meaningless. 207 She welcomed the Employees State Insurance Scheme but pointed out that it was a very restricted scheme as many industries like mines and plantation were exempted from this scheme. She criticized the withdrawal of lump sum grant of compensation in the amendment bill, though it was argued that there was a possibility, that a workman out of poverty might fritter away the amount of compensation. Renu felt that there should be some clause whereby, if necessary, a lump sum grant would be given


207 Ibid, p.1122.
so that it might help the workmen to rehabilitate by allowing him to buy a piece of land or setting up a small shop.\textsuperscript{208}

She also talked about the exploitation of the poor peasants by the rice mills in the countryside. In rural areas, in the absence of credit facilities for the peasants, the rice mills had become the centres both of credit and storage.\textsuperscript{209} She told: ‘. . . rice mills actually squeeze the peasantry and actually centralize the surplus grain.’\textsuperscript{210} It was also necessary to see to it that the rice mills did not indiscriminately supersede or displace the labouring people in the villages. In West Bengal especially in the Sundarbans, she pointed out that landless widowed women in order to sustain themselves and their children depended on hand pounding of rice. But rice mills were gradually displacing them. As in the rice mills husking was done cheaply, therefore it was not possible to prevent villagers from going to rice-mills. So Renu suggested that the government should guarantee that no further displacement would take place until alternative employment opportunities were provided and till that time the State should come forward to help the people to build up co-operatives.\textsuperscript{211} This was very urgent as the illiterate women knew nothing of the laws of the co-operatives and thus were prone to fall an easy prey to the clever evil doers within the village.\textsuperscript{212}

\textsuperscript{208} \textit{Lok Sabha Debates,} vol.9, nos.1-15, 1955, p.1127.

\textsuperscript{209} \textit{Lok Sabha Debates,} vol.16, nos.51-60, 1958, p.12673.

\textsuperscript{210} \textit{Ibid,} p.12674.

\textsuperscript{211} \textit{Ibid,} p.12676.

\textsuperscript{212} \textit{Ibid,} p.12677.
Speaking of the lack of employment opportunities in rural areas, Renu suggested, that Khadi could have been an option of employment in the countryside. But Renu pointed out that the Khadi did not have sufficient number of centres especially in the backward areas. With reference to Sundarbans, she pointed out that it had only one crop a year and was actually very poor and backward as far as industrialisation was concerned. Here, there were hardly any purchasing and training centres.²¹³ There was also no publicity or propaganda to help the individual spinners to sell their yarn. As a result, Renu pointed out, although large amounts of subsidy was given by the government, it ultimately was not helping those actually needy who wanted some sort of cottage industry employment.²¹⁴ Renu suggested that government should open purchasing and training centres in backward areas where women were eager for some form of employment. Regarding village industries, she pointed out that some sort of research was necessary to trap locally available resources to make people self-sufficient. For example, in the Sundarbans, certain gases and other material could be utilised to make useful things. But nothing had been done in this regard. New ways of developing industries must be made in the countryside.

²¹³ *Lok Sabha Debates*, vol.1, nos.2-15, 1956, p.1227

6.10 Conclusion

As an activist who always championed the cause of women especially working class women, Renu felt that the Communist women brought a new turn in Indian Women's movement. She wrote:

Most of the organisations of women comprised of the middle and upper-middle class and their membership was limited in numbers. For the first time the peasants, workers, the downtrodden in the bustees[slums] in urban areas, the agricultural labouring women, lower middle-class women, side by side with lower middle middle-class intellectuals and students-all converged into a massive stream. The women’s organisations became a big mass movement involving town and countryside.\(^{215}\)

The communist women by their actions questioned the very basis of a society founded on exploitation, inequality and indignity. After years of struggle women had achieved some milestones. New laws regarding marriage, divorce, inheritance had been enacted which had removed many inequalities that existed in society. But the achievements, Renu wrote, would be of little importance if millions of backward women in Indian villages remained in darkness and distress. Therefore, a national campaign had to be undertaken to eradicate illiteracy, dowry and other social evils. The government, political parties should support such a campaign. About politics she wrote:

Party politics may be shunned in mass organisations, but politics that touches women must be taken up with all firmness and with as much unity as possible. Only then can the millions of women in this vast country of 50 crores taste something of the political freedom that came in 1947.\(^{216}\)

With regard to reservation of seats for women in local bodies and legislatures, Renu argued that reservation would make no difference as in most places women who were

\(^{215}\) Communists in Indian women's Movement, p.227.

elected or who were nominated, in most cases had not come there on the basis of a
record of service and struggle in course of the uplift of women or of social work.\textsuperscript{217}

She further wrote:

\begin{quote}
No reservations can make the women take their adequate place in political life. They must prove themselves capable of sacrifice and struggle in their dedicated service to the people.\textsuperscript{218}
\end{quote}

She believed that the duty of the leaders of the women’s movement would be to build up unity of action and understanding to organise the ordinary Indian women. Only then could India win over the forces of exploitation and set the women towards the path of real emancipation.

\textsuperscript{217}“Communist Party and status Women,” \textit{New Age}, p.11.

\textsuperscript{218} \textit{Ibid}, p.11.