Introduction

Social work which constitutes both a part of an academic discipline within the social sciences and a profession, studies human behaviour in a social environment. As a practice it involves individuals who work with other individuals, families, groups, organisations and communities in different settings. The ultimate goal of social work is to enhance the well-being and level of functioning for all people and to create positive social changes by improving social conditions and creating more humane practices and policies for vulnerable populations.¹ In recent years feminism has left its impact on social work theory and practice. As an ideology feminism seeks individual liberation through collective activity, embracing both personal and social change.² As Carolyn Morell had argued, the broad goal of feminism was not to limit the elimination of dominant-subordinate relationships between sex groups only but rather to dismantle all such permanent power hierarchies in which one category of humans dominate or control another category of humans.³ Feminist social work thus construed women’s well-being as its starting point, although it was not necessarily the end of its analyses; its final endeavour was to create egalitarian social relations as an integral part of practice.⁴ Feminist perspective of social work has therefore enabled the understandings of the public-private divide as the central point to redefine social problems. It involved inter alia, the encouragement of women to see private troubles


³ Ibid pp.147-148.

as public issues, or engage women in collective action to improve their position or assist women in overcoming isolation and create forms of practice that responded to women’s needs. To sum up, the goal of feminist social workers was to highlight the interdependent nature of the public and private domains, promoting egalitarian social relations amongst women. By creating awareness of gendered power relations among disadvantaged women, it sought to provide services that women needed most and promoted their careers in paid employment.

The Research Question and a review of historical literature

Toying with the idea of assessing the roles of some of the exceptional Bengali women who played a constructive role as social workers/activists in a tumultuous juncture of Indian history I opted to probe into the period between 1943 and 1975 as my area of research as researches relating to nineteenth century Bengal, quintessentially focussed on women’s education, and their role in the anti-colonial struggle. Likewise the feminist movement in the late 1970s had also received a fair deal of attention of the feminist scholars. But a gap in research existed for the period between 1943 and 1975, as not enough work had been produced on this area especially with regard to the constructive role played by women in the social sector. This was largely because women’s movement in India was in a dormant stage during this time. In recent years however, the book *Trauma and the Triumph: Gender and Partition in Eastern India*, vol.1 (Calcutta: Stree, 2003) edited by Jasodhara Bagchi and Subhoranjan Dasgupta, threw shafts of light to uncover the untold story of women during and after the Partition of India. Based on an open-ended approach, combining

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the humane dimension and gender sensitivity, they produced a highly attractive account of women as multiple sites of oppression during and after the Partition of Bengal in 1947. To uncover the variegated experiences of women, contributors of this volume had extensively used interviews, memoirs, diaries, creative texts and documentary evidences as their source materials. The volume also briefly touched upon the experiences of women social workers during partition by incorporating writings of Renuka Ray and Ashoka Gupta who shared some of their thoughts and experiences, which hitherto received scant attention. Mushirul Hasan’s edited work *Inventing Boundaries: Gender, Politics and the Partition of India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000) on the other hand presented a collection of essays on Partition, comprising writings of politicians, economists, and other eminent personalities. Questioning the traditional theories of Partition this volume focussed on the fact that one has to look beyond the major political actors of the 1930s and 1940s and that by doing so can one approach the history of the Partition in a more meaningful way taking into its fold the lives and experiences of the people. The editor emphasised that locating women at the centre of discussions around Partition would cast a different light on the subject. Urvashi Butalia and Ritu Menon too, had attempted to do the same through their heart-wrenching essays in the book. Extensively using personal interviews, oral narratives, autobiographies and memoirs they had thrown light on the fact that as women were considered to be the symbol of dignity of a family and community, the preservation of this dignity became the pretext for the mass-suicide and mass killings of women by their families. The authors highlighted the fact that while the tales of mass murder and suicides were hailed as heroic a silence prevailed on the experiences and trauma of the women abducted and raped during the
Partition. In an exhaustive volume *Women in modern India* (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 1996) Geraldine Forbes, traced the journey of Indian women from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. She had discussed women’s history under different categories like the reform movements in the nineteenth century, emergence of women’s organisations, women’s role in the nationalist movements and women’s work in colonial India. She also detailed on the turbulent 1940s referring it as the time of transition, and subsequently dealt with women in independent India right up to the 1980s. Forbes had touched upon themes like women’s role during the famine or the Tebhaga movement, the problems that women faced when they ventured into politics as also the contemporary women’s movement. Gargi Chakravarty’s book *Coming out of Partition: Refugee Women of Bengal* (New Delhi: Srishti Publishers, 2007) describes the journey of Bengali women when the very fabric of the society was shaken with the impact of the Partition of the Bengal province. Relying exclusively on oral narratives and published materials the author tried to construct a picture of refugee women’s grit to cope with the new situation. The author argued that when one talks about the gender dimension of Partition, one tends to deal essentially with the images of violence, rape, abduction etc. but one misses out the silent transformation of a woman’s life. Refugee women uprooted from the security of their homes, joined workforce to earn a living, thereby deleting to a certain extent the dividing line between the private and public domains. This, the author considers a new phenomenon in the journey of women’s search for identity. Archit Basu Guha-Choudhury in an article *Engendered Freedom: Partition and East Bengali Migrant Women* published in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.44, No.49 (Dec, 2009) has described that while the impact of Partition on refugee women in the aspect of rehabilitation and
compensation was negative, but when seen in the light of the increasing roles the refugee women took up in the political, social and economic spheres the impact of Partition on refugee women was certainly positive. Here the author also mentions briefly the experiences of women activists like Ashoka Gupta and Manikuntala Sen. The role of Communist party and Mahila Atmaraksha Samiti in articulating the demands of the refugee women had also been give some attention by the author.

I take the year 1943 as my entry point as, Bengal witnessed a devastating man-made famine in that year; and at the same time this moment of crisis also helped women to break the artificial barriers that society had imposed on them for long. It is true that educated women had started forming their own organisations from the late 19th century. But these organisations were guided by the ideology of social feminism which saw women as being different (if not morally superior) from men and as having different interests. They aimed at winning greater attention in protecting of women’s interests. Socialist feminist theory analyzed the connections between the oppression of women and other types of oppression common in society, such as racism and economic injustice.

However, socialist feminists did not recognize gender and only gender as the exclusive basis of all oppression. They wanted to integrate the recognition of sex discrimination with their work to achieve justice and equality for women, working classes, the poor and all humanity. Guided by this notion women’s organisations demanded rights for women such as the right to education, right to vote,

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eradication of social evils etc. in order to enable women to perform their traditional roles and fulfil their obligations within the family. It was Gandhi in the 20th century who assigned women a place in the nationalist movements. However, he was careful not to bring any drastic changes in family and social structure, even assuring the menfolk that the women would do nothing to sacrifice family honour and practice. But a transition came in the 1940s when political and socio-economic reasons produced a period of flux. On the one hand, India was unwillingly dragged into the Second World War; there was also a possibility of Japanese invasion. The situation aggravated when the British as part of its war policies started hoarding food grains. There was steep-rise in the price of essential commodities followed by the terrible food crisis that culminated in the worst man-made famine in 1943. On the political front Quit India movement and the Naval Mutiny made India’s position volatile. No doubt all these triggered off a transformation in women’s thought process as well. Women now started questioning the artificial demarcation of their spheres. In the context of Bengal, it was the famine which played an important role in bringing out this transformation. In the aftermath of this catastrophe woman especially the leftist women started venturing out in the countryside and started mixing freely with the ordinary rural women. The women also took recourse to newer methods of protests like street-corner meetings, prisoners’ release programme, hunger march etc. All these were an assault on the traditional respectable image of women. After the famine the terrible communal carnage in Noakhali in 1946 again put a challenge before women and the latter did not hesitate to probe into the interiors of the affected villages, and stay there in order to help restore communal peace, often risking their own lives.
Between the years 1947 and 1975 women had a herculean task before them. Age old feudal laws which had put women in chains required to be changed. The refugee problem that assumed an irreconcilable problem after the Independence of the India and the resettlement of the partitioned and truncated Bengal province needed to be addressed. In the post-partition dislocation of the province women in many cases became the breadwinners. Therefore women’s employment and their equal rights in workplaces became a major issue. Women activists had an uphill task of convincing the government of the need to provide equal opportunities for women and more importantly sensitize ordinary women about their rights. Issues like the procurement of food and education required immediate attention. True the women’s movement was in a dormant stage during this stage; nevertheless, women achieved some milestones, however, limited during this period. Lastly, the landmark report ‘Towards Equality’ in 1975 paved the way for the feminist movement in Bengal and India.

My thesis would focus on the contributions of some eminent Bengali women social workers and activists. My choice regarding these women was shaped by certain commonalities that they shared. They all belonged to well-educated, progressive and relatively well to do families. Their families did not discriminate against a girl-child – which was a rarity in early 20th century Bengal and India. They received equal treatment within the family and were fortunate enough to receive formal education. They were influenced by nationalist movement especially by the Gandhian movements as also the supreme sacrifices made by the revolutionaries. I have selected them as my research subject as all of them were educated women who also enjoyed the liberty of making their own choices in life. Belonging to affluent
families and being educated they could have opted for a more easygoing and comfortable life. Instead they charted a more unconventional path full of hardships and challenges – that made them truly extra-ordinary. Some of them concentrated on pure social work, while some of them became members of political parties, gained access to state assemblies and parliament where they raised poignant issues and fought tooth and nail in support of the relevant issues. Some also became ministers and had to work in a set-up which was predominantly masculine. So their path was full of thorns and they also had to fight patriarchy at every step to ensure that they were heard. So this thesis is an endeavour to look back and analyse the efforts of some eminent Bengali women social workers and activists, situating them and their journey towards creating a more just, un-exploitative and gender equal society.

Chapterization

My thesis will comprise six chapters with corresponding sub-sections, along with an introduction, conclusion, appendices and a bibliography.

Chapter I of my thesis will comprise four sub-sections. Sub-section one will highlight the relief measures offered by women social activists and workers during the Bengal Famine of 1943 and its aftermath. It will also address the role of women in rebuilding social life in the aftermath of the famine. The next two sub-sections will be devoted to the outbreak of communal riots in Noakhali in 1946 and the Partition and Refugee Rehabilitation problem in West Bengal respectively. The last sub-section will address the constructive role played by Leela Ray (Nag) in the aftermath of communal riots in Noakhali and in the Refugee Rehabilitation problem that took a gigantic shape in the newly created province of West Bengal. From
Chapter II onwards my focus will shift to some eminent women activists and social workers in order to assess their contributions in this field.

**Chapter II** will be focussed on Renuka Ray who opted for an unconventional path of social service; engaging in rural reconstruction based on Gandhian objectives, and aiming at all-round development of a group of villages. During the Quit India movement of 1942, she collected funds to look after the families of the jailed leaders. When women’s organisations started a countrywide agitation for a uniform code for women who had no protection under the law; Renuka was chosen as the spokeswomen to argue for women’s cause in the Central Assembly. During the Bengal famine of 1943, she visited the famine affected areas physically; and projected a graphic description of the famine before the members of the Assembly. During the 1946 Noakhali riots, following Gandhi’s instructions she organised women volunteers from the AIWC and other women’s organisations. In the post-independence period, she became a member of the Constituent Assembly where she expressed her views on the rescue and rehabilitation of abducted women and separate electorate for women.

As a Minister for Refugee Rehabilitation in West Bengal in Dr. B.C. Roy’s cabinet, she drew the attention of the central government to the necessity of forging proper schemes and basic arrangements prior to rehabilitation of the refugees outside West Bengal. Renuka abhorred the continuance of dowry, trafficking and other degrading customs in Indian society. This chapter will thus attempt to evaluate the manifold efforts of Renuka Ray in improving the condition of Indian women in general, and her role in foisting women’s identity in particular.

**Chapter III** aims at analysing the role of Phulrenu Guha, as a symbol of selfless social service. It examines her work as a social activist during the
Bengal famine, and the Calcutta riots of 1946 when she worked actively in the Ashutosh College camp. Phulrenu’s contributions towards making women self-reliant through the establishment of ‘Karma Kutir’ - a training centre for women in handicraft skills will also be addressed. Similarly, her leadership in the Indian Council for Child Welfare which looked after the neglected children, by providing them proper nutrition, health and education will also be assessed. Finally, her contribution, in chairing the Committee on the Status of Women in India which produced the landmark report ‘Towards Equality’ will be examined.

Chapter IV unfolds the achievements of Manikuntala Sen who occupied the center stage in Bengal during the 1940s and 1950s. Dedicated to communist ideals she was one of the founder members of the MARS. Her leading role in the relief operations during the famine and the communal riots, undertaken by the MARS will be discussed. In the post independence years, Manikuntala’s championing for the cause of women, vouching for equal pay for equal work, maternity benefit, and crèche facilities for the working women’s children will be analysed in the context of women’s employment which had become a major concern. Manikuntala’s role in the movement for the Hindu Code Bill and anti-dowry agitation will also be assessed. Manikuntala, remained a lone woman candidate from her party in the general elections of 1952 for two consecutive terms. This chapter will try to evaluate how far Manikuntala’s political empowerment helped her to attain her goals.

Chapter V deals with the activities of Ashoka Gupta who successfully balanced her personal and public life and contributed immensely towards social causes without ever receiving remuneration for it. The Bengal famine of 1943 saw the starting point of her career of social service; while the Noakhali riots of 1946
further expanded it. In the post independence years she plunged into refugee rehabilitation work. Ashoka featured as one of the members of the Committee drawn up for the Resettlement of the East Bengal Refugees to discuss and compare the situations in West Bengal and Punjab. She was instrumental in establishing Mahila Seva Samiti-a voluntary welfare organisation for women and Adi Buniyadi Vidyapith dedicated to the spread of education among girls belonging to the downtrodden section of the society. She was also quick to point out the gender bias in government’s rehabilitation policy and training programmes. This chapter would try to evaluate Ashoka Gupta’s contributions as a social worker.

The last chapter (VI) will focus on Renu Chakraborty, who inspired by communist ideals played a constructive role in the women’s movement. From her early days the twin objectives of fighting British Imperialism and standing for social justice of the toiling masses had remained intertwined in her mind. From the 1940s she started working among the rural women. After the 1943 famine she was in the forefront of the first ever Hunger March to the Assembly. She tried to convince the leadership to prioritize women’s issues along with political and economic issues. In independent India she became a member of the Lok Sabha and used this forum to argue for women’s equal rights and privileges. This chapter will try to evaluate the contributions of Renu Chakraborty as a politically empowered woman towards societal development and women’s uplift.

Methodology and Select Note on Primary Sources

My methodology has been empirical. For the preparation of this dissertation, I have relied extensively on women’s autobiographies, memoirs, their
private papers and their writings in different contemporary journals, periodicals and newspapers both in English and Bengali. Official proceedings like Legislative Debates, Constituent Assembly proceedings, Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha Debates and West Bengal Legislative Assembly Proceedings were also consulted. Archival sources in the form of Intelligence Branch, Special Branch and Home Political Files were also gone through. Secondary sources both in English and Bengali were also consulted. A detailed list of the sources consulted both primary and secondary are enclosed with the bibliography.