Chapter: 3
Phulrenu Guha (1911-2006)

Phulrenu Guha was one of those rare personalities who devoted her entire life to the welfare of the society and especially towards the uplift and empowerment of the women in India. Her activities spread over both pre and post independent India, where she played a leading role in the Feminist as well as in the post-Feminist history.

3.1. Phulrenu’s growing years

Phulrenu was born on 13th August, 1911 in a progressive, educated family. Her father was Surendranath Dutta and mother Abalabala Dutta. Phulrenu had no brothers, but an elder sister named Swarnarenu, and a younger sister named Sudharenu. Her family was progressive enough, not to express any disappointment over the absence of a son. Phulrenu and her siblings were brought up in an enlightened environment. Her paternal family belonged to Batajore in Barisal, a district of erstwhile East Bengal. Phulrenu inherited a legacy of social service from her father’s family. Almost all the family members were dedicated to the welfare of the region as well as the people surrounding them. Her maternal grandfather Basanta Biswas also influenced her mind. Basanta Biswas was a famous lawyer who looked after the legal matters of all the leading zamindars. He had refused high posts in the government and in the Calcutta High Court. He was a moderate Congressman who represented Bengal in the first AICC conference in
Bombay in 1885. He was also the President of the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee between 1910 and 1920. Her maternal grandfather’s family too, had strong cultural connections and many eminent personalities from different spheres of life used to assemble there.

But it was her parents who had the greatest influence on her life. Her father, a Deputy Magistrate was a disciplined and forward looking man. When her father Surendranath Dutta decided to resign from service protesting against the government’s decision to partition Bengal, Ashwini Kumar Dutta, a revered figure in Barisal persuaded him not to do so. Her father’s rebellious nature was naturally disliked by the British Government and the result was that he had to accept difficult postings for a number of times. An honest and upright man to the core, he resisted compliance of any gifts from anyone which might amount to a bribe. Phulrenu admired her father’s honesty and progressiveness. She recalled that her father discontinued the practice of feeding people in accordance with their castes during the Durga Puja. Instead he initiated the practice of feeding all cutting across caste lines.¹ Even the Muslims were welcome in their house and they participated wholeheartedly in the Pujas. Punctuality was another quality that Phulrenu learned from her father and diligently followed it throughout her life. In his post retirement years, her father became engaged in different sorts of social welfare activities. For example, he promised to bear the expenses of six meritorious students from Brajomohan College in Barisal. Surendranath though quite inclined towards the Brahmo

¹ Phulrenu Guha, *Elomelo Mone Elo*, (Thoughts at Random, Phulrenu Guha’s autobiography in Bengali), (Kolkata: All India Council for Mass Education and Development, 1997) p.16. Henceforth to be cited as *Elomelo Mone Elo*. 
religion, was prudent enough not to accept it before the marriage of his three daughters, presumably, to avoid any social ban that society might impose upon his family in consequence. Phulrenu’s sister Sudharenu recalled that her father had received many marriage proposals for Phulrenu, but decided not to entertain them as he was not prepared to marry his daughter before she completed her education.²

Phulrenu’s mother Abalabala too, had a significant role in shaping infant Phulrenu’s mind by inculcating patriotism and zeal for social welfare and practicing it in her day to day life.³ Abalabala’s activities were not confined within the four walls of the family; she took great interest in external activities as well. After her father’s retirement Abalabala started working for organisations like Nari Mangal Samiti (Women’s Welfare Society) and the Red Cross. Along with Phulrenu’s maternal aunt and Snehalata Das, Abalabala went door to door for collecting donations.⁴ Abalabala kept Phulrenu updated by regular readings of the newspapers and listening to the radio. From her mother Phulrenu came to know of the past glories of her country and was inspired by a desire to serve her motherland and her society.⁵ Her mother’s practice of setting aside a handful of rice everyday for charity to Ramkrishna Mission inspired Phulrenu to do

² Dr. Phulrenu Guha: Profile in Perspective, (Kolkata: All India Women’s Conference, 2008) p.11. Henceforth to be cited as Dr. Phulrenu Guha: Profile in Perspective.


⁵ Sarvani Gooptu, “Phulrenu Dutta (Guha): her growing years and sources of inspiration,” published in Dr. Phulrenu Guha: Profile in Perspective, p.13.
something for the people. After 1947 her parents moved to a small house in Calcutta, and following Abalabala’s death the sale proceeds of this house were donated to the Ramkrishna Mission.

During her growing years, several schools and important personalities shaped her tender mind. She appeared for her Matriculation Examination, from Assam, since at that time, she was studying in a school based in Silchar. Earlier she had studied for a few years in the Gokhale Memorial Girls’ School and Brahmo Girls’ school at Calcutta. It was in Sylhet that she came in touch with many famous personalities like Sarojini Naidu, Bipin Chandra Pal, Acharya Prafullachandra Ray and Niharranjan Ray. While she was in Sylhet, Sarala Debi the renowned feminist of the 19th century came to visit her school. Sarala Debi’s rendition of the National anthem mesmerized the audience and left an indelible mark in her mind. Later on, Jyotirmoyee Ganguly, the principal of the Brahmo Girls’ school, fascinated her through her stories on India’s freedom struggle and the national movement. Phulrenu recalled how on the anniversary of Jallianwala Bagh massacre Jyotirmoyee had inspired her students to undertake a fast as a mark of protest against the incident. On her father’s insistence, she and her sisters started wearing Khadi by that time. When the Non-cooperation-Khilafat movement was launched, she was a student of Gokhale School; she responded to Deshbandhu C.R. Das’s call for boycott issued against the reception of the Prince of Wales. Her memories of Leela Dasgupta in

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6 *Elomelo Mone Elo*, p.11.


Sylhet were no less stirring. Phulrenu for example was enthused by Leela Dasgupta’s initiative of organising a poor fund for the needy students by holding annual exhibition sales of the handicrafts of the students.\(^9\)

Phulrenu passed her matriculation exams in 1927. In Calcutta she was admitted to the Diocesan College, from where she cleared her I.A. exams. But soon she enrolled herself in Brajomohan College in Barisal for her B.A. course. Barisal opened up a new window for Phulrenu; as it was in Barisal that devotion to God, one’s own motherland, and society were blended together through the various Ashrams, Sabhas, Sanghas and Mathas.\(^10\) Almost everyone in Barisal was inspired by Ashwini Kumar Dutta. Phulrenu was no exception. Women like Sabitri Dutta, who had been the first woman student of Brajomohan College and Santi Sudha Ghosh, the first woman Ishan scholar and a revolutionary associated with the Yugantar also left their respective marks on her young mind. Phulrenu was also indebted to Shankar Math in Barisal which mingled together religion with politics and provided a training ground for the Yugantar Party. Phulrenu wrote that after coming in touch with the leaders and workers of the Shankar Math her thought-power and mental strength increased manifold. This inspired her to complete her assignment with firmness, however, difficult it might seem.\(^11\) She became associated with the Yugantar Party. Her task was to copy different writings, provide

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\(^9\) Sarvani Gooptu, “Phulrenu Dutta (Guha): her growing years and sources of inspiration,” published in Dr. Phulrenu Guha: Profile in Perspective, p.18.

\(^10\) Ibid, p.18.

\(^11\) Elomelo Mone Elo, p.15.
shelter to the revolutionaries and to supply materials. During the Civil Disobedience Movement in Bengal women took a leading role and many of them were imprisoned. Phulrenu read about them in the newspapers. After completing her B.A she enrolled herself in Calcutta University in 1934 in Bengali. By this time she felt a magnetic pull towards Socialism and soon was inclined towards the Labour Party. No doubt, her deep engagement in politics worried her parents and at the advice of some of her father’s Muslim friends, her parents decided to send her abroad for higher studies. So she sailed for England in September, 1935 and enrolled herself in School of Oriental Studies at London.

3.2. Student life in abroad and the changes in her political thought

Phulrenu however, never lost her touch with her roots while she was in Britain. She regularly visited the Gower Street where letters and newspapers from India arrived regularly. From London she attended the Prague Conference of the Federation of Indian and Ceylonese students. While in abroad she took keen interest in Communism and she also met Ben Bradley, the Communist leader of Great Britain. After a year in London, she left for Paris, as according to her, the climate of London did not suit her. At Paris she became a member of the Executive Committee of the Indian Students Association. She completed her Ph.D. from Sobourne University and

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12 Elomelo Mone Elo, p.15.

13 Intelligence Branch File no.349/38 (1), Statement of Phulrenu Guha., West Bengal State Archives.

14 Ibid.
before sailing for India revisited London. She arrived in Calcutta in June, 1938 and was reported to have brought Rs.3000 from the Communist Party of Great Britain for the Communists working in India.

Back home, she renewed her connections with the Labour Party. It was decided that she would open a medical unit. Along with this there would be illiteracy eradication classes; which would act as a platform for connecting varied groups of people coming from different walks of life. She began her work with the Khidderpore dock area in Calcutta. She recalled that while doing this work she got the opportunity to visit a prostitute colony. Their exploitation and painful life moved her. This experience proved fruitful as in later life, she tried to work for the betterment of the prostitutes.\footnote{Elomelo Mone Elo, p.30.}

Along with her social service, Phulrenu also joined the women’s college as a teacher. Phulrenu’s zeal for the Communist agenda, also made her one of the trustworthy members upon whom was bestowed the task of running an illegal press secretly on behalf of the Labour Party for the sake of conducting its anti-war propaganda during the Second World War. The Intelligence branch reported that she was a member of the organising committee of the All India Women’s rally and conference held in Calcutta on the 10th and 11th January, 1942. These rallies and conferences had been organized largely to show solidarity with the women of the Soviet Union and for organising tangible aid to be sent to the people of the USSR.\footnote{Intelligence Branch File no. 349/38(1), Statement of Phulrenu Guha. West Bengal State Archive.} In a statement to the police on 29th January, 1942 she denied that she was a member of the Congress, neither did she ever hear the name of the
Bolshevik party of India and finally she had seen the name of the Communist Party only on paper.\textsuperscript{17} She told: ‘Up till this time of my life I have never taken any active part in any political activities.’\textsuperscript{18} Here S. Gooptu argued that a close reading of the deposition made it obvious that her only intention was to mislead and confuse her interrogators.\textsuperscript{19} Here Phulrenu had also given a hint about her social welfare activities. She told: ‘I am particularly interested in social welfare work.’\textsuperscript{20} The statement also revealed that as a member of the AIWC she was involved in welfare activities like literacy classes, serving in milk kitchen and clinics for the poor. Three such centres were organised by her were at Kasba, Hazra and Kidderpore in Calcutta. These centres were run with the help of the general funds of the AIWC and donations.\textsuperscript{21} She revealed her political belief through this statement. She said:

\begin{quote}
I am a socialist by conviction and as such I believe in a radical change in our society which is so different from those in European countries. By a radical change I mean the removal of ignorance and illiteracy, poverty and sickness.\textsuperscript{22}
\end{quote}

She further told her interrogators:

\begin{quote}
I believe in the violent overthrow of society and Government in so far as history has taught so. By that I do not mean that I do not like to see a change in society and Government if it is possible through non-violent methods.\textsuperscript{23}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{17} Intelligence Branch File no. 349/38(1), \textit{Statement of Phulrenu Guha}. West Bengal State Archive.

\textsuperscript{18} \textit{Ibid.}

\textsuperscript{19} Sarvani Gooptu, “Phulrenu Datta (Guha): her growing years and sources of inspiration,” In Dr. Phulrenu Guha: Profile in Perspective, pp15-16.

\textsuperscript{20} Intelligence Branch File no. 349/38(1), \textit{Statement of Phulrenu Guha}.

\textsuperscript{21} \textit{Ibid.}

\textsuperscript{22} \textit{Ibid.}
At this point she was full of admiration for Soviet Union because of its social, industrial and political achievements achieved within a short period. She also expressed her total disbelief in the Gandhian philosophy as she believed that it was full of contradictions.  

S. Gooptu argued:

She [Phulrenu] was never constricted by indoctrination to a particular strand of politics in her initial years. She could follow an ideology because she believed in it, could pursue it sincerely and also reject it and change to another when it failed to satisfy her.

It was while working for the anti-war movement during the Second World War that she first realized the value of Gandhi’s philosophy of non-violence. She began to believe that the goals of socialism which had attracted her so much could only be achieved if one follows Gandhi’s philosophy with sincerity. She also believed it was Gandhi alone who could decide the path to bring about rural reforms which were necessary to build a village based India. This belief prompted her to join the Congress. Till the twilight of her life she held the belief that one day Gandhi’s dream of socialism would be a reality and there would be no discriminations between human beings. For Phulrenu serving the country was similar to serving the society.

As a social activist she achieved many mile stones. During the Bengal famine of 1943 and the communal riots of 1946 she devoted all her energies

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23 Intelligence Branch File no.349/38(1), Statement of Phulrenu Guha. West Bengal State Archive.

24 Ibid.


26 Elomelo Mone Elo, p.84.

27 Ibid, p.84.
and efforts to provide relief to the affected people. After independence she worked in different committees. She was a member of the Rajya Sabha from 1964 to 70 and a minister from 1969 to 70. Later in the 1980s she became a member of the Lok Sabha after winning the Contai parliamentary seat. She established Karma Kutir to train women in handicrafts to make them self-reliant. For rehabilitating the refugees and other backward women she established the Association for Social Health and Moral Hygiene (ASHI). But her greatest contribution to women’s movement was preparing the Towards Equality Report which was considered to be a landmark in so far as women’s history was concerned. For her contribution to society Phulrenu was awarded the Padma Shree. She passed away in 2005 at ASHI which she herself had founded.

3.3. The famine and the riot

Phulrenu believed in serving the society which she equated with serving the nation. Therefore, upon her return from England in 1938 she immediately became a member of the AIWC, Calcutta. Soon after the Second World War started, Phulrenu wrote that when the Japanese forces started advancing towards the Bay of Bengal, the British government ordered the destruction of tons of rice in anticipation that if the Japanese managed to occupy India they would not be able to get hold of the food grains. Secondly, she noticed that at that time in the coastal regions of Noakhali women in large numbers were raped and many people were murdered.28 When the devastating famine erupted in 1943 she observed scenes which were unbelievable. She

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28 Elomelo Mone Elo, p.27.
witnessed what the pain of hunger could do to humanity. She wrote: ‘I have witnessed the scene of a hungry mother snatching food from the hands of her own child.’ During the famine the Calcutta branch of the AIWC opened one thousand milk distribution centres in Bengal and eleven children’s homes in Bengal. Phulrenu played a dominating role in this venture. Later ‘Save the Children’s Committee’ was formed consisting of these eleven centres. She was also a part of the AIWC team which visited famine affected Bankura in 1943. AIWC also undertook a campaign for supplying milk for children in all possible quantities. On 4th and 5th February, 1945 the AIWC decided to observe an All India Milk Day. On 4th February Phulrenu attended a meeting that was held to observe All India Milk Day where a resolution was moved to reserve milk for children, nursing expectant mothers and the sick. On the next day at a meeting held at the Commercial Museum Hall, Phulrenu along with Renu Chakraborty spoke about the necessity of government legislation banning the preparation of milk products and to import cattle. During this time Dr. Biresh Chandra Guha, the eminent scientist whom Phulrenu was to marry later on prepared a protein diet out of grass leaves, which Dr. Guha believed would help to eradicate hunger-deaths. But Phulrenu lamented, that this scheme had to be abandoned due to the negative attitude of the newspapers and journals. Phulrenu also reported that Dr. Guha prepared milk out of soya beans which would help feed impoverished

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29 Elomelo Mone Elo, p.39. Translation mine.

30 Special Branch File no.PY-660/45, West Bengal Police Archive.

31 Ibid.

32 Elomelo Mone Elo, p.41.
children.\textsuperscript{33} She noted with approval that during the famine years the government, with a view to introducing food rationing, had issued orders to the effect that during any social functions, only three kinds of food items could be arranged and served to the invited guests. She however, was surprised to see that even the rich families in Bombay also obeyed the rule.\textsuperscript{34}

On 17\textsuperscript{th} July, 1945 Phulrenu married Dr. Biresh Chandra Guha. As Dr. Guha had been a distant relative of Phulrenu and they had known each other right from their growing years. But it was during the year 1933 that they became close to each other through their involvement in political activities. Dr. Guha gave Phulrenu full support in all her endeavours. They were both committed to the welfare of the country and the society. Such was their commitment to the service of the society that they remained childless by choice. They felt that they would not be able to devote their unhindered time to the service of their country, if they had to raise a healthy child as well.\textsuperscript{35} She admitted that throughout her life she never faced any obstacle in her work because she was fortunate enough to have a partner like him. In this regard mention may be made of a novel practice that the couple observed at their home. Whoever came to their household to work as a domestic help, the couple took care to make some sort of an arrangement to educate him/her. Thus some of such people who had availed of this opportunity could ultimately get better employments in reputed organisations.

\textsuperscript{33} Elomelo Mone Elo, p.40.

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid, p.41.

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid, p.35.
Following the devastating famine, riots erupted in 1946 first in Calcutta followed by Noakhali. Phulrenu wrote that during the riots the two opposite sides of human reactions were let loose - on the one hand there were instances of friends stabbing brother-like friends belonging to other community, on the other hand, the two communities were also seen protecting each other often risking their own lives.\textsuperscript{36}

At that time in Calcutta a camp was started in Ashutosh College for the riot-affected people. Phulrenu was an active worker of this camp. She recalled that they gave shelter to many Muslims and made to wear clothes normally worn by the Hindus, in order to protect their identity.\textsuperscript{37}

When the devastating riots took place in Noakhali, Phulrenu rushed to the riot affected areas. She opened a camp in Lakhipur. She wrote: ‘The experience of camp life was quite varied. Here not only religious discrimination but caste differences had also secretly made a place.’\textsuperscript{38} For example she described an incident where in such a camp a woman made a great hue and cry because her puffed rice had been touched by someone belonging to an inferior caste.\textsuperscript{39} Such was the stronghold of caste system. Meanwhile the rescue and rehabilitation work was going on full swing and it required huge manpower. The \textit{Hindustan Standard}, a well known daily reported in its

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\textsuperscript{36}Elomelo Mone Elo, p.41.
\textsuperscript{37}Ibid, p.42.
\textsuperscript{38}Ibid, p.42, translation mine.
\textsuperscript{39}Ibid, p.42.
\end{flushright}
October 28th ’46 issue, that Phulrenu Guha as Joint Secretary of the AIWC, Calcutta Branch had issued the following appeal:

‘Volunteers of the AIWC are working at Sealdah Station to render assistance to the refugees coming from Noakhali, especially women’.

As one of the major responsibilities lay in interrogating and assisting women, the All India Women’s Conference appealed to all organisations Hindu and Muslim to allow women’s organisations to look after the welfare of women refugees, thereby avoiding unnecessary friction and ensuring greater comfort to the distressed.

Public spirited women of Calcutta especially their general members, were requested to volunteer their services at the office of the AIWC, Sealdah Station or contact the Joint Secretary anytime in the morning at 5, Janak Road. After working in Lakhipur Phulrenu went to Haimchar and stayed there for some time to establish a maternity home there. Towards the end of 1945 she was instrumental in establishing a children’s home on behalf of Save the Children Committee in Mahisadal. Phulrenu noted that in Noakhali women faced a lot of suffering- molestation, rape, forced conversion and marriages, though the scale and intensity of such atrocities was much greater in Punjab. One exceptional thing that requires special mentioning during this time at Noakhali was that though Phulrenu worked for quite a long time in Noakhali, she never participated in Gandhiji’s camp. She was much misunderstood for that. Phulrenu had clarified her stand in her autobiography saying that as there was no dearth of workers

40 Special Branch File no.PY-660/46, West Bengal Police Archive.

in Gandhiji’s camp, so she decided to throw her lot with smaller centres that required urgent attention with very few active workers to execute such tasks.42

3.4. Partition and refugee rehabilitation

The Partition of India in 1947 was a painful event for Phulrenu. Her birthplace Barisal became part of a foreign soil. She wrote:

The pain of partition cannot be forgotten. By one stroke of a pen my own land became a foreign nation. One cannot make others feel this pain.43

Looking back she felt that the root cause of partition was the erosion of fraternal feeling among the people of undivided Bengal.44 Hindus were largely to be blamed for this because of their attitude towards the Muslims. Phulrenu recalled that once a Muslim gentleman told her that if a pariah dog entered a Hindu household, the Hindus would throw away the drinking water stored in the earthen pitcher, but if a Muslim entered, not only the water, the whole earthen pitcher would be thrown away.45 Phulrenu personally did not experience such a happening as she belonged to a progressive family. Manikuntala Sen, also from Barisal had also mentioned similar incidents highlighting the cruel and conservative attitude of the Hindus towards the Muslims. Phulrenu was convinced that this sort of exploitation and disrespect were the most potential cause of partition.46 After

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42 Elomelo Mone Elo, p.44.


44 Rehabilitation, East and West, P.199.


the communal carnage in Noakhali and Bihar majority of the Indians had the misconception that partition would ensure peace and tranquility. Even Phulrenu was not an exception in this regard. She told:

... I was dead against Partition. But after what Suhrawardy did in Calcutta on August 16, 1946 (Direct Action Day) I felt that perhaps Partition would bring some good, at least some peace. Phulrenu admitted that she was wrong in her assumption and only Gandhi could correctly assess that Partition would not guarantee peace.

As mentioned earlier on the western side of India an initiative was undertaken both by the Government of India and Pakistan to bring back the abducted women to their own soil. Eminent social workers were involved in this effort and some of them like Mridula Sarabhai were in favour of forced repatriation. Phulrenu opposed such efforts of forced repatriation and told Mridula Sarabhai that

... the girls were leading a protected life there with their new families and children. After forcing them to forsake everything once again and bringing them here, would she be able to compensate their second loss? God knows, they may be forced to spend the rest of their lives in refugee camps. Nobody will volunteer to marry them, even their own families will not take them back... Man is not an inanimate object to be carried from one place and deposited in another, again and again. One should always look at the psychological aspect. She might be able to leave her husband, but what about her child? Any child is a part and parcel of herself, her very being, and reason for existence. She was in favour of repatriation of only those women who voluntarily wished to cross over to India.

47 Rehabilitation, East and West, p.198.

48 Ibid, p.198.

Soon after independence refugees started pouring into West Bengal from East Pakistan. Focussing on the uprooted refugees and their subsequent rehabilitation in the new land Phulrenu commented; lakhs and lakhs of people belonging to the minority community from East Pakistan arrived in Calcutta and 24 Parganas either on foot or by steamer, boat or train for the sake of safety. At this hour of crisis, Phulrenu plunged into relief work. She played a leading role in setting up the Kulti refugee colony. This area comprising of uncultivable fallow grass land belonged to Improvement Trust. It was through her tireless efforts that the land was made ready for rehabilitating the refugees. She succeeded in distributing homestead and agricultural lands among the uprooted people on a cooperative basis.

During this time a number of relief centres sprang up to work for the refugees. Phulrenu recalled that one day the then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru convened a meeting of these organisations at the Raj Bhavan. Phulrenu recalled that different organisations big and small numbering almost 350 attended this meeting. In that meeting Nehru suggested that for better co-ordination the organisations should work unitedly. Thus was born the United Council of Relief and Welfare (UCRW) with the aim of working unitedly for refugee rehabilitation. The then Governor of West Bengal, Dr. Kailashnath Katju became its President and Phulrenu became its Secretary. The two rooms of the Raj Bhavan’s stable became its office. The office used to remain open from morning

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50 Elomelo Mone Elo, p.2, translation mine.
51 Jasodhara Bagchi, “Dr. Phulrenu Guha,” published in Dr. Phulrenu Guha: A Profile in Perspective, p.84.
52 Elomelo Mone Elo, p.3.
till midnight. Phulrenu recalled that shiploads of milk as well as clothing used to arrive at this office and the workers had to unload and store all these relief materials. At that time UCRW had been instructed to issue sewing machines to some of the women’s organisations. Phulrenu found that some of the dress-materials sent by foreign donor nations were unsuitable for any use because they were too large. So, she employed the women’s organisations that were set up to help the refugees to alter these dresses so that they could be worn by the poor refugee children. It had become customary for the government to purchase clothes from others and distribute the same among the refugees. Phulrenu and other workers calculated that if they themselves could produce dresses it would cut down the prices. The government also provided doles to the refugees. Phulrenu however, found this damaging as it tended to kill the urge to work among the refugees and also eroded their self-respect. Therefore in place of doles the UCRW developed a work plan. According to this plan the refugee women would be engaged in tailoring and stitching clothes of all kinds and UCRW would pay them for their work. The UCRW would hand over the tailored materials to the Government and the latter would give UCRW in return, the amount of money incurred on it. This scheme helped many of the destitute refugee women to become self-reliant. Phulrenu argued:

This new system which opted for remuneration instead of dole enabled the poor refugees to rightfully acquire just recognition for their work while subsidies helped them to earn in a dignified and decent way.  

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53 Rehabilitation, East and West, p.196.

54 Ibid, p.197.
With Phulrenu as the secretary, an Education Committee was formed under the chairmanship of Arabindo Basu. Its primary objective was to provide educational facilities for those unfortunate students who had been forced to discontinue their studies owing to migration. The number of students who were scheduled to appear for their matriculation examination was quite large. As Secretary, she made arrangements for their food, tuition and accommodation in a basement of a under construction multi-storied building near Gariahat, Calcutta. Not only that, through the intervention of the Vice Chancellor of Calcutta University, Shri Sambhunath Banerjee a special Matriculation Examination could be organised for the refugee students. Phulrenu recalled that one such refugee boy stood second in the Matriculation examination in 1951.  

UCRW also ran a relief camp at the Sealdah station under the supervision of Mira Dutta Gupta to render assistance to the incoming refugees. She recalled that on one occasion, the Secretary of the then Food Minister, Mr, Basak had suddenly announced that the government would no longer be able to provide rice for relief. This announcement disappointed Phulrenu and she and other workers decided that they would no longer do relief work in the Sealdah station. It was only after Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy intervened that the issue was resolved and rice continued to be supplied by the Government as before. UCRW also started a medical unit under Dr. P.K. Chattopadhyay. Phulrenu was also instrumental in starting two maternity homes, one in

55 Elomelo Mone Elo, p.4.

56 Ibid, p.3.
Nakashipara and the other in Harthuba. The Nakashipara centre was eventually closed down but the Harthuba home continued and with time it became a full-fledged institution by extending its activities in other directions.  

There is no doubt that the East Bengalee refugees received a raw deal in the hands of the centre, when compared to West Pakistani refugees. Explaining the reasons behind such indifference, Phulrenu pointed out that as the migration in the West was accompanied by large scale and wanton massacre of innocents, this had left a stronger impact on the public mind. On the other hand, the East Bengalee refugees did not have to experience such inhuman violence immediately; on the contrary, one could only hear what had already happened behind one’s back. Phulrenu wrote:

. . . these two experiences had a different effect on the human consciousness and mind. In the East, it was more a case of slow poisoning and so its effect was not that immediate, whereas in the West they were forced to see everything with their own eyes-murder, rape, loot, arson. This is a very important factor that somehow accounts for the discrimination.

Secondly, she argued that most of the leaders in the East were located far from the centre of political power. Therefore they could not breathe down the central government’s neck and force them to render assistance. The third reason forwarded by her was that many refugee families after taking shelter in West Bengal continued to be in touch with their

57 Rehabilitation, East and West, pp.197-198.
58 Ibid, p.201.
59 Ibid, p.201.
60 Ibid, p.201.
61 Ibid, p.201.
relatives in East Pakistan. Phulrenu argued that through its espionage system - a legacy of the British the government of India was well informed of such connections.  

But in spite of all these reasons, her personal opinion was that blatant discrimination did take place. She raised her voice when she learnt that the Government of India had declared that since the displaced persons from East Pakistan did have property in their name, the question of compensation payable to them did not arise. In this context she told the members of the Rajya Sabha:

I would like the Finance Minister to find out the circumstances under which these people have had to leave East Pakistan, whether there was any scope for them to dispose off their property, whether they are Indian citizens now, whether they have any income from the property in East Pakistan, whether the property left by these people is enjoyed by the people of East Pakistan and the Government or by these people and whether this property is in their name in reality or in name only.

While molestation and rape of women took place in large scale on the western side of the border, her personal opinion was that in East Bengal not many rapes took place.

As West Bengal was a land hungry province schemes were undertaken to rehabilitate refugees in Dandakaranya and in the Andamans. But Phulrenu lamented the fact that largely because of communist party’s opposition the rehabilitation scheme in the Andamans could not be implemented successfully. Like Renuka Ray Phulrenu also believed that because of its physical similarities with erstwhile East Bengal

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62 Rehabilitation East and West, p.201.
63 Ibid, p.198.
65 Ibid, p.198.
the Andamans had the potential to be developed as the second East Bengal.\textsuperscript{66} She believed that the Communist party caused irreparable damage to the cause of the refugees by objecting the transfer of refugees in the Andamans.\textsuperscript{67} In the 1960s she toured the refugee settlements in the islands. She told:

We saw the various settlements set up by the refugees from East Bengal, saw how they had adapted marvelously to the new set-up . . . The children of the settlers studied in schools opened specially to cater to their needs. On the whole, East Bengalees led a happy and productive life. They informed us in one voice that their decision to migrate to the Andamans, rather than stay back in the refugee colonies in West Bengal, had enabled them to look forward to a better future.\textsuperscript{68}

Witnessing the refugees leading a satisfied life, she developed a life-long grudge against the communist party because if the refugees had migrated en masse, they would not have to face the hardships of living in refugee camps and the newly developed society and community in Andamans could have taken the shape of a resurgent East Bengal.\textsuperscript{69} As a woman she was proud of the struggle of the refugee women to move forward. In her own words:

Even after having lost everything, refugee women refused to end up on the losing side for a second time. Their struggle changed their lives. For the very first time they came out of the secluded precincts of their households . . . Actually, the sheer struggle for survival and the taste of freedom propelled them forward.\textsuperscript{70}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{66} Elomelo Mone Elo, p.2.
\item \textsuperscript{67} Rehabilitation, East and West, p.196.
\item \textsuperscript{68} Ibid, pp.195-196.
\item \textsuperscript{69} Ibid, p.196.
\item \textsuperscript{70} Ibid, p.202.
\end{itemize}
3.5. Phulrenu on women’s empowerment, job and other issues

As a woman Phulrenu was especially sensitive towards women’s issues. Throughout her life her goal was to work for the improvement of the status of women and setting them towards the path of self-reliance. During her growing years Phulrenu was inspired by different women at different stages of life. During her school days eminent personalities like Sarojini Naidu and Sarala Devi had influenced her young mind. When remaining indoors was a general custom that most women followed, Phulrenu’s mother proved an exception; thus during her growing years, Phulrenu never faced such limitations, and was even allowed to venture out of her household. She also recalled her Sona Jethima who had no education but played the role of Phulrenu’s protector when an arrest warrant was issued in her name.\footnote{Elomelo Mone Elo, p.15.} Phulrenu felt that women irrespective of their class enjoyed an inferior position in the society. When she was in Chandpur she had noticed that Pankajini Singha, president of Chandpur Mahila Samiti used to eat in her husband’s left-over plate.\footnote{Ibid, p.43.} This happened as for the past few decades, according to Phulrenu it was customary to store anything delicious entirely for the men folk of the house. The women were expected to eat the left-over in order to have a taste of the delicious food.\footnote{Ibid, p.43.}
Her associations with Labour Party of Bengal, brought her into close contact with the communists, but she disliked their lack of constructive approach towards the problem of the toiling masses especially women.\textsuperscript{74} She became aware of the discriminations and injustices meted out to women in workplaces especially to unorganised women labourers in both agriculture and industry. In a booklet entitled \textit{Bharatiya Arthanitite Narir Sthan} (Position of Women in Indian Economy) published in 1976, Phulrenu thoroughly discussed women’s role in different economic sectors. She divided Indian women into different categories: (1) women living below the poverty line implying mostly rural agricultural female labourers and marginalised agricultural labourers, (2) women working in industries as contractual and unskilled workers or women who had migrated to cities due to landlessness or due to break up of joint families or due to population growth and had been forced to live in the slums and work somehow to earn money, (3) above these women were those women whose earnings were not merely to fulfill basic necessities but also to provide some sort of security. These women were engaged either in white coloured jobs or were working as permanent or skilled labourers in industries or independent profession. (4) At the top of the ladder were placed those handful of women who were working in responsible posts or were engaged in

\textsuperscript{74} Amulya Kumar Chakraborty, ”Ideas and Activities of Dr. Phulrenu Guha,” published in \textit{Dr. Phulrenu Guha: Profile in Perspective}, p.93.
independent professions.\textsuperscript{75} She argued that in the 1970s only 13\% of women were working while 52\% of men were working.\textsuperscript{76}

In order to understand the problem of women’s employment she divided them into two sectors: organised and unorganised. She argued that according to the 1971 census 94\% of the women workers were engaged in the unorganised sector. In rural areas non-agricultural unorganised sector meant mainly the small scale handicrafts industry. She argued that here majority of the women worked as unsalaried workers in familial handicraft industry. As they worked to assist their men, they were not independent earners. Apart from this, such women had also to perform household chores. Women also helped their men engaged in agriculture. Those who had no option other than agriculture had to suffer in the lean seasons. Facing poverty some of them had to go out of their villages in search of work.\textsuperscript{77}

Women labourers employed in agriculture generally performed functions like sowing the seeds, watering or cutting the crops which were normally labeled as tasks scheduled for women, but nevertheless such tasks usually fetched lesser wages than that of men.\textsuperscript{78} Moreover agricultural labourers had little opportunity to organise themselves like that of the factory workers and another

\textsuperscript{75} Phulrenu Guha, \textit{Bharatiya Arthanitite Narir Sthan} (Position of Women in Indian Economy), (Calcutta: Rooplekha, 1976), \textit{Private papers of Phulrenu Guha}, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi, pp.2-3. Henceforth to be cited as \textit{Bharatiya Arthanitite Narir Sthan}.

\textsuperscript{76} Ibid, p.3.

\textsuperscript{77}Ibid, pp.5-6.

\textsuperscript{78}Ibid, p.9.
disadvantage was that most of the women were illiterate.\textsuperscript{79} Phulrenu argued that women preferred to work either within the village or in places which were daily commutable due to social, familial and psychological reasons. This was another problem of the agricultural women.

As the majority of women workers in unorganised sector were contractual labourers; the construction industry employed them as contractual workers. Phulrenu pointed out that women rarely received equal wages, as for some reason or the other their salaries were deducted. But in reality the tasks that the women performed were mostly exhaustive. Even underage girls were employed in this sector. The welfare measures guaranteed by the law such as the weekly day off or sick or maternity leave were hardly implemented.\textsuperscript{80} In the bidi industry she found that the employers had found a novel way to deny its women workers of the benefits that were granted to the workers of the heavy industry. The women were mostly given bidi leaves to work from their home. Phulrenu argued that in this way workers had little opportunity to organise themselves and the workers were also paid less wage.\textsuperscript{81} Similarly women who were working in incensed stick factories were paid 50p. per thousand sticks. The same task fetched them 40p. if done from home.\textsuperscript{82} She also noticed that women were gradually coming in large numbers to work in the tailoring industry which was more or less a male-

\textsuperscript{79}Bharatiya Arthanitite Narir Sthan, pp.8-9.

\textsuperscript{80}Ibid, p.12.

\textsuperscript{81}Ibid, p.12.

\textsuperscript{82}Ibid, p.13.
dominated industry up till then. The main advantage of this sector was that women in their convenient time could work and that too from their home. The women could sell their finished products either through direct contact with the shop-owners or through co-operatives, though in the latter case they received a poor wage.\textsuperscript{83} The women who were employed in fine embroidery were exploited badly by the middlemen. Apart from these sectors there were women in other sectors too, who worked for a low daily or monthly wage and in some cases such women were the breadwinners of the family. The conditions of the daily or casual workers were deplorable. They were deprived of all the measures guaranteed by the law.

Referring to the contemporary times she pointed out that a number of uneducated as well as less educated women were employed to perform household works or as caregivers for children or the sick in cities, industrial areas and small towns. Especially pathetic was the condition of these housemaids. They mostly lived in the slums and went to work leaving their children alone. They worked even for twelve hours a day. They had no legal guarantees with regard to their wages or leave.\textsuperscript{84}

Most of the women working in independent professions were engaged in the loom industry. It was in hand-driven loom that the majority of women generally worked. A number of women also earned a living by selling fruits, vegetables or fish and homemade products like pickle, jam, papad, dalmut (a tasty and spicy mixture of

\textsuperscript{83}Bharatiya Arthanitite Narir Sthan, p.13.

\textsuperscript{84}Ibid, pp14-15.
fried gram, salt and monkey-nuts) etc. Phulrenu argued that there were two main
difficulties confronting the women who were engaged in self-employed sectors. One was
the scarcity of capital and the other was lack of opportunities to sell the finished
products.\textsuperscript{85} In the Fifth Plan emphasis was laid on self-employed sectors for women. While
appreciating such efforts, Phulrenu reminded the government that it was essentially the
urban middle class women who took advantage of this opportunity. Therefore it was
extremely necessary to extend the employment opportunities to the uneducated rural
women.\textsuperscript{86}

As far as the organised sector was concerned, she argued that
1971 census revealed that only 6\% of women workers were employed in this sector. She
however agreed that one welcome development had already become evident: in
government undertakings women were employed in increasingly large numbers, a fact
that could be linked with the Constitutional guarantee of equal rights and opportunities
for women.\textsuperscript{87} In organised industrial sector women were employed in factories, mines and
plantations. Though the number of women workers had increased in coffee, rubber and
tea plantations, but in factories and mines especially in coal mines their number had
dwindled considerably. This was due to the labour welfare measures undertaken by the
government to protect the interests of the women. Implementation of the principle of
equal pay for equal work, structural changes of the industrial sector due to the

\textsuperscript{85}Bharatiya Arthanitite Narir Sthan, p.16.

\textsuperscript{86}Ibid, p.16.

\textsuperscript{87}Ibid, p.17.
introduction of new techniques also accounted for this change. Phulrenu pointed out that though the concept of equal wages had been accepted in principle, it was successfully implemented in very few areas. Moreover women were normally employed at the lowest grade as unskilled labour and opportunities for their promotion were negligible when compared to men. But one positive development was that in the new industrial sectors such as engineering, telecommunication, electronics and medicine educated women were increasingly employed as skilled workers and government organisations too played a leading role in recruiting women. But still in the Indian social set up it was widely believed that in industrial sectors majority of the tasks were unfit for women. Even the trade unions were not that eager to take up issues concerning the interests of the women workers.

After the Second World War grave economic crisis forced women to come out of their homes in search of work. Phulrenu was delighted to see that new avenues like administrative and clerical jobs were opened to women. After independence administrative services, foreign services and police services were opened to them. Phulrenu showed that women successfully grabbed this opportunity. In 1960 female and male ratio in these spheres was 1:81.6 and in 1972 it became 1:7.5. The two professions where women were coming in large numbers were medical and teaching. The teaching profession was convenient for women. Regarding the medical profession there were some

88 Bharatiya Arthanitite Narir Sthan, p.21.
89 Ibid, pp.22-23.
90 Ibid, p.25.
limitations. She pointed out that women doctors were mostly found in gynaecology and pediatrics. Moreover most of the women doctors were reluctant to go to the villages. A large number of women were practicing law but only a negligible number of them had become High Court Judges.\footnote{Bharatiya Arthanitite Narir Sthan, p.28.} Speaking of her contemporary times, Phulrenu observed that women were increasingly coming forward to work as paid social workers. But their salary structure was not at all impressive and they had limited scope of being promoted to respectable posts. She summed up the situation for women by saying that although employment opportunities for women had increased considerably, such increase was mainly visible in the lower grades. Very limited numbers of women were employed in high salaried or responsible posts. This according to her could be attributed to social prejudices as also the negative attitude on the part of the employers towards women’s power of judgment and capability.\footnote{Ibid, p.28.} Secondly, employment opportunities had increased primarily, for the educated women but on the contrary opportunities had become fewer for uneducated and less educated women.\footnote{Ibid, p.29.} She lamented that although employment opportunities had increased over the years, still women’s working power had not been utilized to its fullest capacity. This was partly due to the fact that women of many well-to-do families believed that it was derogatory for a woman to work for money. There were others who had the desire to work but were unable to find suitable jobs. She reminded the fact that almost every woman had household duties as well as the responsibilities of

\footnote{Bharatiya Arthanitite Narir Sthan, p.28.}
\footnote{Ibid, p.28.}
\footnote{Ibid, p.29.}
motherhood. As a result a woman was not always in a position to devote her entire time to outdoor jobs. Therefore there should be some provisions for part-time job or jobs which could be done from home.

To improve the employment scenario for women Phulrenu suggested some remedial measures. She argued that there should be elaborate arrangements for technical and work education for women. There should be provisions for first-hand learning not only in government organisations but also in private enterprises. For women who were working in self-employed schemes knowledge of the competitive market was a must. There should also be arrangements for crèche to look after the children of the working mother. Security and accommodation were two major constraints for the working women, notwithstanding service conditions, which were often not in the interests of the women. She also stressed on the fact that although the constitution had guaranteed equal rights for men and women, the latter was still lagging far behind. To remove the obstacles in the path of women’s progress the society must come forward. The nation could not progress without the combined effort of men and women.94

Economic self-reliance was the key to women’s progress and empowerment. Phulrenu’s endeavour to make women self-reliant through learning handicraft skills bore fruit when she founded the Karma Kutir. About its genesis Phulrenu recalled:

94Bharatiya Arthanitite Narir Sthan, p.37.
Probably in 1960 Kamala Devi became the Chairperson of the All India Handicraft Board. One day I told her that just like the handicraft training centres in Bombay and Hyderabad, why can’t we have a centre in Eastern India with the help of Handicraft Board. Almost as if to throw a challenge to me she said, “Yes, it can certainly come up in Calcutta, if you take responsibility.” As a result a big responsibility came upon me.95

Apart from Phulrenu other founder members were Pratibha Bose, Sudha Sen, Swarnarenu Ghosh, Panna Ray, Hena Sarkar and Amita Das. According to the constitution of Karma Kutir the two main objectives of the institution were:

(1) to promote and encourage advancement of literacy, cultural, political, scientific and technical education for dissemination of knowledge and

(2) to establish and maintain technical and handicrafts training for women, children and the handicapped.96

At first Katha and Dhakai work was started in Karma Kutir. Dhakai work however, could not be continued for long as it was strenuous for the eyes, but the Katha work continued. In order to make the women self-reliant after they received training at Karma Kutir, a production unit was started with two girls at the beginning and gradually it was expanded. The training instructors in Karma Kutir were all trained here. Phulrenu noted with satisfaction: ‘Now 400 girls work in Karma kutir and almost 200 girls take training every year.’97


97 Elomelo Mone Elo, p.48. Translation mine.
Initially women from Assam, Bihar, Orissa, Tripura and Manipur
took the training courses conducted by Karma Kutir. Phulrenu
recalled that when the Government of India started providing
grants then women from Sri Lanka, Nigeria and Mauritius
also started participating in the courses.98 After running the
training programme for seven years the Government of India
stopped the grant on the ground that henceforth the state
governments would have to bear the cost of the training of the
participants. Ultimately only the training programme financed
by the West Bengal government continued. One of the aims of
Karma Kutir was to encourage the women to form co-
operatives or self-help groups through which they could sell
their products. ‘Many trained women have joined the Self
Employment Centre located at Karma Kutir premises. Many
others have found gainful work at home or at business
establishments.’99 Karma Kutir also held regular exhibitions.
Various training programmes of the Karma Kutir also helped
to rehabilitate a number of displaced refugee women. Apart
from kantha work Karma Kutir also started training programmes in
batik work, tie and dye work, screen printing, cutting and
tailoring, beautician’s training, training in geriatric care, eco-
friendly bags, and articles of decorative and practical use.100

Apart from vocational training programmes Karma Kutir also
ran Balwadi creche for children. Phulrenu recalled that in
Contai and 24-Parganas Karma

98 Elomelo Mone Elo, p.48.


100 Ibid, p.53.
Kutir had centres. In Contai women stitched fishing nets and took part in tailoring. Through the initiative of Karma Kutir smokeless furnaces were also introduced.\textsuperscript{101} Karma kutir also started sensitization programmes for women to create awareness about the atrocities that usually took place against women and to teach them health-care issues like nutrition, family planning etc. During the Bangladesh Liberation war karma kutir started a sewing and education centre for the refugees. A camp was also started for women where para-military training was given to women. At least 200 women received training here. The Government of India provided funds for the programme.

As a Social welfare Minister Phulrenu also tried to address the women’s issues. As a young woman she had witnessed the miserable condition of the prostitutes. Therefore when she became a minister she took an initiative to start short-stay housing for them. No doubt, convincing her colleagues was quite an uphill task, but in the end she did come out successful and the Planning Commission agreed to implement such a housing scheme. She recalled that towards the end of the first year a survey was conducted, and when the results were positive, such short-stay housing schemes were executed in the different districts as well.\textsuperscript{102}

3.6. Women and social welfare activities

Phulrenu argued that in the post-independence period voluntary organisations had to play a key role in the task of national reconstruction. The

\textsuperscript{101} Elamelo Mone Elo, p.48.
\textsuperscript{102} Ibid, p.31.
thrust was of course on education, health, economic security, family welfare, maternity and family planning, problems of women and children, problems of the village and rural communities and the problem of providing means of livelihood to the handicapped etc.\textsuperscript{103} As government machinery could not reach out to each and every corner of society, the selfless and sympathetic attitude on the part of voluntary organisations appeared to be a necessity. It was equally necessary to co-ordinate the activities of different voluntary organisations. With this end in mind the Government of India sponsored the Central Social Welfare Board in 1953 during the First Five years Plan period to assist and strengthen the voluntary organisations in their various spheres of social activities.\textsuperscript{104} The welfare of women, children and the handicapped were to be the primary concerns of the Board. Phulrenu was secretary of the Social welfare Board in West Bengal. In her opinion the condensed course of Training for the adult women and \textit{Balwadi} were the two most successful programmes of the Board. About the benefit of the condensed course she wrote:

Many girls who could never think of having the chance of education in their advanced age, providing them with a means of earning or of getting the chance of taking specialised training in any field or of coming into contact with the bigger world; have had the opportunity through this programme not only to learn more but also to earn their own and their families’ livelihood and to have a broad view of the social and national life which would help them to build up a richer and healthier society. Passing the School Final or the Junior Secondary is in itself a step towards better field of occupation. Moreover, a spirit of freedom gets ground in the mind of the women admitted as trainees in this course who so long were to stay away behind the closed doors, and it goes a long way to make them useful to the family as well as to the society.\textsuperscript{105}


\textsuperscript{104} \textit{Ibid}, p.19.

\textsuperscript{105} \textit{Ibid}, p.23.
Regarding Balwadi she wrote that teaching included not only pre-primary education of the children in the rural areas but also looked after their health, recreation, manners and behaviour.\textsuperscript{106} She added that regular serving of tiffin and arrangement of games and sports were also responsible for the popularity and ready acceptance of such programmes in the villages.\textsuperscript{107} In some areas there were no schools and Balwadi started. Gradually schools began to be opened in these areas. Balwadi children were also admitted in the primary schools and they performed well. Another important task of the Board was to form an Implementation Committee comprising five centres in every district. A local voluntary organisation was entrusted with the job, after the selection of an area. For five of such centres there was one Gram Sevika, one mid-wife and one technical instructor.\textsuperscript{108} She recalled that finding efficient workers and then obtaining the consent of their families was indeed a difficult task.\textsuperscript{109} But one positive aspect was that in these tasks even women who had never crossed the threshold of their homes came forward. But she found that women workers often did not have a safe place to stay in the villages.\textsuperscript{110} Phulrenu was also instrumental in establishing I.C.V.S.R. The aim of this body was to involve the girls who had studied up to the seventh or eighth standards or to engage such children who roamed around the streets aimlessly in some kind of constructive work. It was decided

\textsuperscript{106} Phulrenu Guha, \textit{Women and Society}, p.23.

\textsuperscript{107} \textit{Ibid}, p.23.

\textsuperscript{108} \textit{Elomelo Mone Elo}, p.106.

\textsuperscript{109} \textit{Ibid}, p.107.

\textsuperscript{110} \textit{Ibid}, p.107.
that the village girls would be approached first, which would easily win over the co-operation of the rest of the villagers.\textsuperscript{111} But in reality Phulrenu found out that even the city girls were quite willing to join this sort of work. However, it was difficult for the urban women to create a congenial atmosphere in the villages.

Her firm belief was that reconstruction and reorganization of society could not be successfully achieved unless voluntary and state efforts were combined. But at the same time, she reiterated, there had to be a clear demarcation between the two- i.e., the relationship between the two should be healthy and full of reciprocal help and understanding.\textsuperscript{112} Secondly, she believed that voluntary organisations should be involved in the formulation of policies at all levels.\textsuperscript{113} Most importantly she believed that the status of the voluntary organisations should be duly recognised in order to derive the fullest success of all such programmes.\textsuperscript{114} The organisations were to be allowed more freedom of work and more security. In order to ensure best possible service to the society by them such institutions required to develop and improve.\textsuperscript{115} She criticised the government for not transferring statutory powers to the Social Welfare Boards. She pointed out that as the Boards were essentially run by non-official agencies and mostly by women, the government was rather hesitant to share powers particularly with non-

\textsuperscript{111} Elomelo Mone Elo, p.107.


\textsuperscript{113} \textit{Ibid}, p.24.

\textsuperscript{114} \textit{Ibid}, p.24.

\textsuperscript{115} \textit{Ibid}, p.24
officials and women. Phulrenu reminded the government that it was its duty to give proper status to the body in order to get more participation from non-official agencies, organisations and workers.\textsuperscript{116} She remarked: ‘It is no use asking for peoples’ participation without giving recognition to non-official workers.’\textsuperscript{117} When Phulrenu assumed the Social welfare Ministry, it raised special hopes among the workers who felt that the Board would obviously secure an official status. But in 1970 the Board was registered under the Company Act. This created a disappointment among its workers. Ashoka Gupta lamented that this step had hampered the flow and status of the Board. Phulrenu herself admitted that despite her presidetnship she could not do much for its permanence, nor appreciably improve the conditions and salaries of its workers.\textsuperscript{118}

Phulrenu believed that women were required to play a much more active role in national development. She suggested that in the field of education women could play their role in three ways: first, by educating themselves, secondly, by promoting educational programmes through voluntary educational organisations and thirdly, by encouraging their own children to work for the fulfillment of the educational requirements of the community.\textsuperscript{119} In the field of health services too, Phulrenu argued, women could play a vital role in not only providing the facilities to needy

\begin{footnotes}
\item[117] Ibid, p.3158.
\item[118] Phulrenu Guha: A Profile in Perspective, p.160
\item[119] Phulrenu Guha, Women and Society, p.40.
\end{footnotes}
women but also promoting the cause of small family as a norm. Women could also play a major role in the preventive side of health services. Lastly, she urged that the work of the Board was largely dependent on the contribution made by women. She repeated that the historical need for women’s welfare had been somewhat lessened, as women had been accorded with equal opportunities and greater attention. Now work needed to be carried on keeping in mind the welfare of the family.

Rehabilitating and restoring exploited women to the mainstream, and empowering them constituted the basic goals of Phulrenu’s life. It was with this aim in mind that Phulrenu in the 1960s established Association for Social Health and Moral Hygiene in Naktala, Calcutta. Her idea was to rehabilitate and restore those women to the mainstream of life, who had been exploited or were otherwise economically backward. She shared a common space with some likeminded founder members of this Association as Santi Gupta, Charushila Dhar, Hiranmoyi Ray, Mahamaya De Sarkar and others. The institution had a modest beginning in a room at the office of the Social welfare board at Free School Street, Calcutta. Phulrenu acknowledged the contribution of her two co-workers Amita Das Gupta and Dr. Maitreyi Basu behind the growth of the institution. From 1965 onwards this organisation started functioning as the West Bengal branch of the Association for Social Health in India (ASHI). The main aims

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123 *Elomelo Mone Elo*, p.88.
of this organisation were to prevent family crisis and violence, provide arrangements for physical and psychological treatment, and grant legal aid to women who were victims of trafficking and other social crimes. Offering shelter to the victimised women and imparting training to them so as to make them fit for winning their daily bread remained the corner stone of this institution; notwithstanding the ultimate aim of restoring them to the mainstreams of society.\textsuperscript{124} ASHI started Family Counselling section with the help of psychiatrists and counsellors. The aim was to find an amicable solution after mutual discussion. In some cases free legal aid was provided to needy women. Phulrenu recalled that ASHI conducted three surveys with monetary aid from the Government of India which was widely praised.\textsuperscript{125} ASHI also started homes outside Calcutta. In 1974 ASHI started its first short stay home Ashadeep at Bansdroni, Calcutta. Later, women between the ages of 15 and 35 years could stay at these homes up to three years. ASHI helped them to become self-reliant through trainings in sewing, tailoring, nursing, ayah, pathology, beautician course, canteen management etc. Arrangements were also made for Montessori and pre-primary teachers’ training. Girls also had the opportunity of conventional education through Rabindra Open University. For the entertainment and maintenance of the mental health of the home inmates Phulrenu encouraged programmes like celebration of Rabindra Jayanti, Diwali, Saraswati Pooja, picnic, sports, observing national days, exhibition of handicrafts etc. Phulrenu was also eager to start a

\textsuperscript{124} Sutapa Bhatta, “Phulrenu Guha O ASHI” (Phulrenu Guha and ASHI), published in Phulrenu Guha: A Profile in Perspective, p.161.

\textsuperscript{125} Elomelo Mone Elo, p.88.
Production Unit in ASHI which she could not achieve in her life time. But her able successors fulfilled her dream by inaugurating the Production Unit in 2007 after her death.

A sensitive mind like Phulrenu’s could not afford to ignore the problem of the aged, particularly when it was becoming an important issue in modern Indian society. As in the Western countries in India too, the necessity of providing care to the aged was increasingly felt. She wrote:

Those who can afford to pay enough, their case is different, but those who do not have enough money and property, we have to think specially about them. After educating their children and getting them married many parents do not have enough resources to afford expensive old age homes. She argued that for this section of aged people there should be some kind of arrangement for ensuring affordable homes. Phulrenu started such a home on behalf of ASHI-Asha Niketan in 1971. This was a home for women of low income group or women detached from their families. Medical facilities were also provided to them. There was an accommodation for thirty persons above the age of sixty. Apart from this there was also a women’s hostel for the low income group. A 24 hour helpline was also started in 2003.

Though Phulrenu worked lifelong for women’s empowerment, she was opposed to reservation of seats for women in municipalities or assemblies and parliament because she felt such reservations would not be of any help in increasing women’s participation. In her own words:

There is a possibility that reservation of seats will only help women of a particular class who are already privileged. It should be our aim to see that the masses of women of all classes

\footnote{Elomelo Mone Elo, p.31.}
become equal partners with men in all senses in society. Separate seats will weaken the position of women. They must come up on the strength of their own abilities and not through special provisions. It is only in this way that they will be in a better position vis-à-vis men and will be able to stand on their own as equal partners.\textsuperscript{127}

Apart from this she was apprehensive that reservation of seats for women would prompt other communities to demand reservation which would in the long run trigger separatist tendencies. She called upon the women leaders of the country and particularly women leaders who were already in positions of authority to endeavour to see that women in large numbers were given seats and also encouraged women’s participation.\textsuperscript{128} For her the sole criterion for selecting a representative was efficiency. She opined:

> It is not a question of representation of men or women. At the same time in any elected body, even if the proportion of men and women is unequal, this does not prevent the elected body from functioning effectively or efficiently and also representing the entire society.\textsuperscript{129}

She summed up the situation by arguing that reservation of seats for women would only reinforce the separate identity of women rather than promote their representation and integration with the rest of the society.\textsuperscript{130}

> A believer of equal rights for women she was delighted when the Hindu Marriage Act was passed in 1955 giving equal rights to women for divorce to end a failed marriage. But Phulrenu pointed out that certain loopholes in the law needed

\begin{footnotes}
\item[128] \textit{Ibid}, p.355.
\item[129] \textit{Ibid}, p.355.
\item[130] \textit{Ibid}, p.355.
\end{footnotes}
to be taken care of. She pointed out that the Hindu Marriage Code had given a right to either party to ask for the dissolution of marriage. She told in the Rajya Sabha:

. . . there are cases where the husband obtained a decree but never filed a petition for divorce even after two years. In such a case the wife has no right, according to law, to file a petition for divorce. It is a very peculiar and uneasy position, particularly for a woman.\textsuperscript{131}

She felt that the framers of the law must see to it that the person, irrespective of the fact whether he was man or woman, should not get the upper hand. Both parties should be on equal footing. Another loophole that she detected was that the Hindu Marriage Act had failed to provide full relief to the unhappy couples. She pointed out that most people found it difficult to go to the court. They were afraid of the lawyers. This was particularly true of women.\textsuperscript{132} She also noted that the Act, in its existing form allowed petition for judicial separation on some specific grounds as cruelty, adultery or some incurable diseases such as suffering from leprosy and venereal diseases or if the spouse was of unsound mind. But such charges had to be substantiated, and in the meantime counter charges could also come up at the court. In the process it was the women who suffered most. She told: ‘When something is said against her, whether it is right or wrong, people usually believe it and she suffers throughout her life because of that stigma.’\textsuperscript{133} Therefore she requested the Government to amend the law doing away such loopholes, so that it could offer better relief to unhappy married couples.

\textsuperscript{131} Rajya Sabha Debates, vol.50, nos.16-28, 1964, p.3425.


3.7. **Education, food and other key issues**

Education determines the progress of the society. But the scenario that prevailed in this sector was far from satisfactory. A vast majority of Indian population was still living in the darkness of illiteracy. In this context Phulrenu wrote: ‘I personally believe that illiteracy is not a detached problem because today if a child does not receive education, he/she will turn into an adult illiterate in future.’ She personally believed that unless education was free and compulsory the problem would remain the same. After independence though the government had paid attention to adult education, it had not yielded any expected result. ‘In my opinion, making an illiterate person to write his/her name is not adult education.’ In the beginning of the 1970s literacy movement started in full swing at the initiative of the West Bengal Literacy Eradication Committee. In all the sixteen districts of West Bengal including Darjeeling adult education campaign had started. For the Todo tribal people in Jalpaiguri separate primary books were prepared for adult education. Later on primers were prepared in Nepali and Manipuri language too. Phulrenu played a leading role in such ventures. During such literacy campaigns, Phulrenu attempted to infuse awareness among the people regarding their basic rights. For example, she tried to make ordinary people understand the importance of exercising

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134 Elomelo Mone Elo, p.113.

135 Ibid, p.113.

their voting rights. She also reminded the policy makers that in order to have a good standard of education in colleges, the primary and secondary education would have to be on a sound footing. On the floor of the Rajya Sabha she pointed out the pathetic condition prevailing at the school level. She told that many schools were established in small towns and sub-divisions but it was very difficult to get good qualified teachers particularly for technical and science courses. She further pointed out:

There are a number of instances where boxes containing equipment for science and technology courses could not be opened for a long time due to the absence of the teachers who can handle them. In India since the majority of the people lived in the villages, it was expedient that the policy makers should keep in mind the condition of the villages and plan accordingly. Regarding higher education in colleges she expressed her personal belief that the members of the managing committee should have the will to understand that education demanded some respect for the teachers as well. It was also pointed out that there was indiscipline and unrest among the students. In this regard Phulrenu argued that we must understand the hardships from which they suffer:

Among other things, they suffer from frustration. Most of the students from rural areas go to the affiliated colleges which are mostly situated in towns and cities and the universities are overwhelmingly situated in cities only, and when the students come from rural areas, they do not have any place to stay, and anybody will become indisciplined. . . There is no

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139 Ibid, p.358.

proper accommodation, no proper hostel. Many of them do not get even proper meals and mainly, I think, they have no proper contact with their teachers.\textsuperscript{141}

The high pupil-teacher ratio and lack of housing for teachers, she felt, stood in the way of developing a close bond between teachers and students. The poor facilities for vocational training along with the problem of students not qualifying for jobs, because of poor training, were other impediments that required closer scrutiny. That is why they flocked to colleges and the result was over-crowding at the colleges.\textsuperscript{142} This again, caused a fall in standards of education – quite contrary to what was expected at the college level. Moreover, she noticed that in order to accommodate students new colleges were being opened without any arrangement for laboratories and libraries. Therefore she urged the Honourable Minister of Education to ensure that when these new institutions of higher education were opened, they were provided with proper infrastructure. She emphasised that study tours should be an integral part of education. She told:

\begin{quote}
I very much feel that it is very necessary for our students to go round the country, to know the people and to know their own surroundings. Only then can we expect that our students will be good future citizens of India.\textsuperscript{143}
\end{quote}

While appreciating the fact that the Government of India had done a lot for the development of scientific and technological research in India she urged that much work still needed to be done in this direction. She told:

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\textsuperscript{141}Rajya Sabha Debates, vol.55, nos.32-36, 1966, p.5531.
\textsuperscript{142}Ibid, p.5531.
\end{flushright}
Resolutions may be passed, committees may be formed, more money may be allotted, but unless our attitude towards scientists and technologists is changed, I do not think we can expect very good results.\textsuperscript{144}

To promote scientific research she pointed out that in other countries industrialists had come forward to spend money on research. But in India she found that ‘. . . so far as the common people are concerned, we do not know how much money is spent by the industrialists on different field of research.’\textsuperscript{145} Universities should also be given a free hand in doing research work and good knowledgeable scientists and technologists should be attached to college and universities.\textsuperscript{146}

Poor pay scale of the teachers’ at all levels and their inferior status were issues that were highlighted in her speeches time and again. She felt that teachers in India were not given due respect. Drawing comparisons with other countries she pointed out that in the United Kingdom and Germany, though the teachers were not as well paid as in the U.S.S.R, they did enjoy a very high social status.\textsuperscript{147} But alas, in India teachers were not accorded a proper position. She told:

\begin{quote}
The administrator usually takes the upper hand over the teaching community because the power lies with the administrator. For sanction for educational equipment and books, the list has to be submitted by the teaching community to the administrators for approval. May I ask . . . who has the better knowledge in regard to books and educational equipment, the teacher or the administrator?\textsuperscript{148}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{144} \textit{Rajya Sabha Debates}, vol.47, no.1, 1966, p.1480.

\textsuperscript{145} \textit{Ibid}, p.1483.

\textsuperscript{146} \textit{Ibid}, pp.1481-1482.

\textsuperscript{147} \textit{Ibid}, vol.55, nos.32-36, 1966, p.5532.

\textsuperscript{148} \textit{Ibid}, vol.51, nos.1-17, 1965, p.3160.
She also opposed the idea of appointing retired judges as Vice-chancellors of universities on the ground that a Vice-chancellor’s job was not only administrative, but for proper handling of the students he required long-standing experience which could be achieved only through an intimate knowledge of and working among students. Poor scale of pay of Teachers’ was also a sphere which required immediate attention. She pointed out

\[\ldots\] unless we have a number of good teachers who can take up the teaching in the schools, we cannot expect good results. And to get good teachers, higher salaries have got to be fixed and paid. She reiterated the fact that a qualified person expected to earn the same salary as his friends were earning in other fields.

Unless the salaries of the teachers are attractive we cannot expect that bright young persons will join the secondary schools. Even if they join after some time they leave off the schools and go to other jobs.

Time and again she tried to convince the government that the precondition for producing good students was not entirely dependent on setting up of good technical institutes or providing university education. For that the country needed good teachers as well. Therefore the government must review its thinking and plan accordingly with regard to education and remuneration of the school and college teachers. To demand better pay for school teachers she worked for the All Bengal Teachers’ Association (ABTA) for quite some time and even took part in sit in demonstrations before the Raj Bhavan. When the

\[149\] *Raiya Sabha Debates*, vol.51, nos.1-17, 1965, p.3160.


West Bengal Board of Secondary Education was formed Phulrenu became one of its members. She was also a Chairperson of the Women’s sub-committee of the Board. But within few days the elected board was dissolved by the government. When the ABTA gradually became a wing of the communist party she left the organisation.

Phulrenu always championed the cause of the ordinary people. As the spokesperson of the rights of the farmers, she argued that as the Indian economy was predominantly agrarian, it was the farmers who were the key players of Indian economy. Therefore she argued in favour of a national food policy. The cultivators she claimed had to get seeds, fertilizers, manure etc. on time. Secondly, there should be irrigation facilities and small irrigation should be taken up with utmost earnestness. Thirdly the government had to see to it that the farmers were not forced to go the moneylenders and that they were able to get loans easily.\textsuperscript{153} She was a strong supporter of co-operative movement in India. About food scarcity her take was that in India increase in food production was not commensurate with the rate of birth. To increase food production she suggested the following measures:

1. As mere allocation of funds would not solve the food position, better organisational arrangements and better implementation of schemes should be given priority,

2. As Indian agriculture was dependent on nature, India would have to evolve other methods, by which the farmer could find an assured water supply for the fields,

(3) The banking system could offer advances or loans to the farmers which could be drawn up for the benefit of the agriculturists.

(4) Tillers of the soil should be made the owner of the land. He should be given due respect by the society,

(5) Researches done in the country should be promptly put to use,

(6) Steps should also be taken to provide improved agricultural tools to the peasants,

(7) Lastly, a machinery to look into schemes and judge its viability could be implemented.154

Phulrenu also raised her voice on issues like price-rise, food adulteration, and hoarding- which affected the common people most. In the Rajya Sabha, she pointed out that the Essential Commodities act was passed in 1955 to regulate the supply and distribution of essential commodities for the benefit of the people. But Phulrenu felt that the Act failed to provide consumers commodities at a standard quality and at reasonable rate. She complained that the consumers were being cheated in three ways, namely by way of high prices, bad quality and less weight.155 As food was one of the basic necessities of life, the government had to see to it that the food grains remained within the reach of the common people. For this, strict measures had to be undertaken against those traders, hoarders and blackmarketeers who were hoarding stocks of food.

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grains, thereby pushing up the prices. With a view to checking this, she suggested that the existing laws would require a change, and mobile courts could be set up for punishing anti-social elements.\textsuperscript{156} She suggested that the property earned by these anti-social elements should be confiscated as mere fines or short-term imprisonment were hardly any deterrents.\textsuperscript{157} She also pointed out that except in certain areas where rice, wheat and sugar were supplied through ration shops, the government had failed to control the essential prices. Austerity should also be practised in every way.\textsuperscript{158}

Food adulteration was another problem the country was facing. To check this problem she suggested that the Food Inspectors and their higher ups should be appointed after they had proved their integrity and sincerity.\textsuperscript{159} For punishing the offenders she felt that there should be punishment or imprisonment for more than six months along with a provision for confiscation of the profits they had unlawfully earned by way of fine.\textsuperscript{160} When the Supplementary Bill on Warehousing Corporations was brought in 1965 to include tobacco and lac which were exported, she supported the bill. At the same time she suggested some measures to better the situation. First, the rules to use the warehouses should be laid down in such a way so that the peasants could avail the service easily, secondly, all exportable commodities should be stored in the central warehousing

\textsuperscript{156}Rajya Sabha Debates, vol.57, nos.6-16, 1966, p.2576.
\textsuperscript{157}Ibid, pp.2576-2577.
\textsuperscript{158}Ibid, p.2578.
\textsuperscript{159}Ibid, vol.48, nos.1-8, 1964, p.1149.
\textsuperscript{160}Ibid, p.1150-1151.
so that the exporters were thwarted from exploiting the poor and simple peasants. Thirdly, three to four per cent of food grains were wasted everywhere because of lack of proper facilities for storage. Therefore proper care should be taken to see that the warehouses were water-proof and rat-proof and that they were constructed scientifically as soon as possible.\textsuperscript{161}

Indian Railways which catered to the interests of ordinary people also caught her attention. She felt that this sector was in urgent need of some improvements. The following were her suggestions: Her first, argument was that the number of third-class coaches should be increased, as they were very over-crowded. Secondly, sleeping accommodation should be increased in long distance second class passenger trains and care should be taken to check ticket less travelling. Catering service also needed drastic overhauling. She pointed out that poor quality food served in the trains with unclean forks, knives, spoons and napkins presented a sorry state of affairs. Food taken from the restaurant car to the compartment was normally uncovered and when it was covered it was invariably done with a dirty covering. The platforms with stray dogs feeding on the residue of the food from the trays that were left on the platform looked very dirty and unhealthy. She also suggested that unless the service conditions of the bearers of the restaurant cars were improved, the situation would not look up. On a positive note, she pointed out that the government had been trying to promote low income group people by helping them establish small industries. But Phulrenu found that

such endeavours might be lost under the existing system, as the Railway Ministry did not allow such people to start book stalls or other stalls in the railway platforms.\textsuperscript{162}

Moving on to the issue of family planning, which determined the welfare of the family particularly women, Phulrenu noted that in the villages people still wanted many children especially more children to work in the fields and to look after them in their old age.\textsuperscript{163} Besides because of poor healthcare rate of child-mortality was high. This factor also prompted them to opt for multiple children.\textsuperscript{164} Family planning, she felt, was mandatory for India to ensure unhindered progress. To control the size of the family she suggested that taxes might be imposed on a couple giving birth to the fourth or the fifth child.\textsuperscript{165} She also suggested that birth tax should be fixed for all whether they paid income tax or not. This was essential to check birth rate. She told:

Legislation is needed not only to have a balanced economy of our country but it is very much needed for unfortunate couples who have a number of children without proper arrangements for food and education. In this case, women suffer the most but this suffering mainly is due to ignorance and superstition. Some legislation is absolutely necessary to check the population, to have happiness in individual families, to have healthy and properly trained children, above all to have a prosperous India.\textsuperscript{166} In 1975 the practice of determining female fetus came into existence. Phulrenu noted that as a result of this, female foetuses were indiscriminately killed to check future expenses


\textsuperscript{163} Elomelo Mone Elo, p.121.

\textsuperscript{164} Ibid, p.121.


\textsuperscript{166} Ibid, p.2587.
incurred on a girl child. A disappointed Phulrenu wrote: ‘I don’t know when such apathy of society towards girls will come to an end.’

As children were the future citizens of a nation their welfare mattered a lot to Phulrenu. She was pained to see that child labour still existed in India. She visited the areas where Kashmiri shawls were manufactured in Kashmir. Here she saw that children were doing intricate embroidery work in small dark rooms with poor light. The work was strenuous for their eyes. Children were also employed in Benaras and in South India in Saree industry and also in bidi and match sticks factory. Phulrenu argued that they could be employed because they could be offered low wages. Besides the prevailing notion was that if one did not start doing fine embroidery from the childhood, one would not be able to become a proficient handicraftsman.

After independence and partition with heavy refugee influx many started living in unhygienic conditions. It was under these circumstances that several social activists including Phulrenu came forward to initiate a constructive action for furthering the cause of child welfare. This paved the genesis of Indian Council for Child Welfare which came into existence in 1950 under the presidentship Dr. H.C. Mukherjee, Governor of West Bengal. Its aim was to look after the neglected children, to arrange for their nutrition, health and education. She was instrumental in establishing mobile medical

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167 Elomelo Mone Elo, p.116.


centres in villages and suburbs through which child treatment centres could be organised.\textsuperscript{170} For the well-being of a child as nutrition was extremely necessary, Phulrenu started nutrition schemes in different suburbs, villages and coastal areas through donations and grants.\textsuperscript{171} To spread education among the children at the pre-primary stage, she concentrated on grooming instructors suitable for this stage. When she was the president of the Indian Council of Child Welfare, she organised a camp for the children of different states and S.C. and S.T. children for two-three weeks.\textsuperscript{172} She also felt that the children of poor families did not get ample opportunities for education. Therefore she started school health centres for the benefit of poor children.\textsuperscript{173} Besides this she also initiated story-telling centres to address the children fond of listening to stories twice or thrice a week.\textsuperscript{174}

In 1957 under Durgabai Deshmukh’s presidentship was formed the Committee for women’s education. Phulrenu was one of its members. This provided her with an opportunity to work amongst the people belonging to different strata of society. While working for this she realised why women in the villages and in the slums were unable to attend school. Mothers were preoccupied with household chores and elder girls had to look after their younger siblings and the cattle. Women lacked enough

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{170} Phulrenu Guha: A Profile in Perspective, p.133.
\textsuperscript{171} Ibid, p.133.
\textsuperscript{172} Elomelo Mone Elo, p.105.
\textsuperscript{173} Ibid, p.106.
\textsuperscript{174} Ibid, p.106.
\end{flushleft}
clothes to hide their shame, and their safety and security too posed a problem. All these factors were responsible for the poor attendance of girls in schools.\textsuperscript{175} Therefore the committee suggested that Balwadi and crèches were to be opened in schools or near schools, where girls in need of clothes were to be given clothes. Hostels should be attached to schools and accommodation should be provided for women workers working there.\textsuperscript{176} She also came to know that some village women were forced into prostitution in order to save their families from starvation. Such experiences convinced Phulrenu that unless the minimum arrangements were provided to feed people, this curse would not go.\textsuperscript{177}

3.8. Towards Equality: the landmark report

Phulrenu’s greatest contribution to women’s movement in India was chairing the Committee on the Status of Women in India which produced the landmark report ‘Towards Equality.’ This was a detailed study of the status of women in Indian society, polity and economy after 27 years of independence. But this landmark report was never referred to as the Phulrenu Guha Committee Report. It has been argued that that this document might never have seen the light of the day without Phulrenu’s

\textsuperscript{175}Elamelo Mone Elo, p.121.

\textsuperscript{176}Ibid, p.122.

\textsuperscript{177}Ibid, p.105.
critical intervention and her subsequent role in its formative period and eventful future.\textsuperscript{178} It was argued: ‘Very little was conveyed by Phulrenu herself. She never has been a self-publicist. Nor did she reap any personal benefits from the roles she played in the Committee in her subsequent career in formal politics.’\textsuperscript{179} After the UN General Assembly adopted the Declaration on Elimination of Discrimination against Women in 1962, it requested the Member-States to prepare reports on women’s status in different countries. Countries like the U.S.A, Canada responded promptly by appointing such commissions. But India did not. As a result it received a reminder to do the same as early as possible. It was then that the matter was placed before Phulrenu who fortunately was then the Minister-in-charge of Social welfare, then a part of the Ministry of Education and Social Welfare. Receiving the letter, she wrote a note stating that apart from the UN request it was high time to review the position of women and proposed constitution of a commission of enquiry. Such a review was absolutely necessary as up till then reviews had been done to enquire about the condition of the S.C, S.T and backward classes only, but not of women. The file then went to the then Prime Minister, Smt. Indira Gandhi. But nothing really happened for almost more than a year. After the 1971 general elections Phulrenu was no longer a minister, then someone suggested that a committee of enquiry should be formed with Phulrenu as the chair-person. The formation of the Committee was announced by a resolution of the Minister of Education and Social Welfare, Department of


\textsuperscript{179} \textit{Ibid}, p.11.
Social Welfare on 22\textsuperscript{nd} September, 1971. The terms of reference of the Committee were as follows:

(1) To examine the constitutional, legal and administrative provisions having a bearing on the social status of women, their education and employment,

(2) To assess the impact of these provisions during the last two decades on the status of women in the country, particularly in the rural sector and to suggest more effective programmes,

(3) To consider the development of education among women and determine the factors responsible for its slow progress in some areas and suggest remedial measures,

(4) To survey the problems of the working women including discrimination in employment and remuneration,

(5) To examine the status of women as housewives and mothers in the changing social pattern and their problems in the sphere of further education and employments,

(6) To undertake survey or case studies on the implications of the population policies and family planning programmes on the status of women,

(7) Finally, to suggest any other measures which would enable women to play their full and proper role in building up the nation.\textsuperscript{180}

\textsuperscript{180} Towards Equality, Introduction, p.12.
Unfortunately, as the government decided the names of the members, Phulrenu was not given a free hand; nor was she allowed to have a say in the composition of the original nine member committee.\textsuperscript{181} She was marginalised and reduced to powerlessness in guiding or directing the work of the Committee, her suggestions were also not recorded or ignored.\textsuperscript{182} She had to face hurdles in every step. Her suggestion that the ICSSR’s assistance be sought for was ignored on the ground that then ICSSR would be given credit of preparing the report. Research officers were not allowed to work as researchers. After much effort Phulrenu was able to induct some social scientists in the Committee. Thus Leela Dube and Vina Mazumdar came on board. Phulrenu also persuaded the Committee to accept the setting up of task forces.\textsuperscript{183} Six small Task Forces were appointed to study in depth the problems affecting women and to assess the changes in the fields of law, education, employment, other aspects of economic life, political participation and social life in general.\textsuperscript{184} It was also argued that the Secretariat had problems in organising the Committee’s tours to different states.\textsuperscript{185} As a result the Committee was able to visit only Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and Himachal Pradesh during the first two years. But gradually Phulrenu took command of the situation.


\textsuperscript{182} \textit{Ibid}, p.13.

\textsuperscript{183} \textit{Ibid}, p.14.

\textsuperscript{184} \textit{Towards Equality}, p.12.

She was instrumental in appointing Vina Mazumdar as Secretary of the Committee. ICSSR offered financial assistance. The Committee also appointed two Study groups of experts to advise the Committee on the general health problems that affect women’s socio-economic status and on the wide prevalence of the dowry system in India.\textsuperscript{186} Extensive tours were organised with the aim of talking to women of different backgrounds. Between October and December, 1973 the Committee toured Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal and the seven North-Eastern states. For better mixing with the ordinary village women the Committee members often spread over, and met women in small clusters.\textsuperscript{187} Phulrenu herself attended a number of tours. During such tours the members actually came to realise what was the ground reality. During a tour of Rajasthan Phulrenu apparently broke down and commented:

> All of them [women] have only one ambition—a secure marriage. This was not what we had in mind when we fought for equality during the Freedom Struggle! Where did we go wrong?\textsuperscript{188}

About the lull in the women’s movement after independence Phulrenu told Vina Mazumdar that ‘We never really got beyond the urban middle class at that time. You are raising issues that the earlier movement was not even aware of.’\textsuperscript{189} When the Committee had discussion with the Labour Ministry, Phulrenu pointed out that the Labour Ministry till

\textsuperscript{186} Towards Equality, p.12.


\textsuperscript{188} Ibid, pp.18-19.

\textsuperscript{189} Ibid, p.19.
then had no information about agricultural and other workers who comprised about 94% of the women work force. 190

The Committee concluded that women were still very far from enjoying the rights and opportunities guaranteed to them by the constitution. 191 The social laws which were enacted to mitigate the problems of women in their family life had remained unknown to large masses of women. Therefore the women’s organisations should come forward to mobilise public opinion against oppressive institutions like polygamy, dowry, and child marriage and to start a campaign to make women aware of their legal rights. It asked for the overhauling of the legal system. It demanded eradication of Polygamy in Muslim Law, enforcement of provision against bigamy under Hindu Marriage act, restraint on child marriages, registration of marriages, prevention of Dowry, improvement in Laws of Divorce, greater roles, rights and opportunities for economic participation for women. For the working women they demanded extension of maternity benefits to all women who were so far excluded, crèches for children, equal wages for children, integrated development of training and employment and part-time employment opportunities, formation of women’s wing in labour unions.

As education was one of the indicators of the advancement of society, it was necessary to assess the quantum of literates in a society. The Committee reviewed that a mere 10% of the total female population had received formal education


191 Towards Equality, p.359.
during the period of assessment. They recommended that co-education should be accepted as a long term policy, curriculum should be suitable for both sexes up to the tenth standard. After that girls should have complete freedom to choose vocational and technical courses according to local conditions, needs and aptitudes. For pre-school education the number of Balwadis should be increased in rural areas and in urban slums. For universalization of education for the age group between 6 and 14 years, primary schools should be established within walking distance from home. Residential schools, mobile schools should be started. Sex education should be introduced. Girls’ education should be free up to the secondary education. The Committee also stressed upon non-formal education and greater opportunities for women to actively participate in politics. It also examined in details policies and programmes for women’s welfare and development. The Central Social Welfare Board was to be reconstituted as a statutory and autonomous unit having a specialized agency.

Vina Mazumdar, Latika Sarkar and Kumud Sharma lamented the fact that the Towards Equality Report was never referred to as the Phulrenu Guha Committee Report despite the fact that the document spelt a disaster in Phulrenu’s future political career. They argued:

Though a loyalist of the ruling party, she was not even included as a member of the official delegation to the UN Conference in Mexico. The Report failed to find favour with the P.M and if it came a few months later, it would have been buried under the debris of the Emergency.\(^{192}\)

Bharati Ray argued: ‘It did require tremendous moral courage to produce a document that implied the total indifference of the Government to women’s position and condition.’

It was not easy to criticize a government run by a party of which she was a member.

The Indira Gandhi government approved the Report including all its recommendations. However, the Committee’s proposal to establish a National Commission of Women was not implemented until 1992. It failed to create an autonomous body, and was placed under the Ministry of Women and Child Welfare. West Bengal was the first state in the country to nominate a State Commission for women. Phulrenu was one of its members. However, under the law it was mandatory to frame rules within six months. Otherwise the Commission would become dysfunctional. But when rules were not framed within the stipulated time despite repeated reminders from Phulrenu, she resigned from the Commission. Bharati Ray argued that a two-fold movement began after the landmark report was published. ‘The activists in various fields took to protest movements, strikes, often violent encounters. The academics began what is known as Women’s studies.’

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3.9 Conclusion

Phulrenu was an epitome of self-less social service. She even donated her dwelling house to the Calcutta University for scientific research and moved to a rented flat. She spent her last few months in the home of ASHI which she had herself founded. In 1975 the Government of India awarded her Padma Shree for her outstanding contributions to society. In the decades of 1980s and 90s she remained busy. She was a member of the Lok Sabha from 1984-89 after winning the Contai Lok Sabha seat. In Contai she loved to work through women’s voluntary social welfare service organisations. In 1996 at the ripe age of 86 she became the Founder President of the Forum of Voluntary Organisations. She had the unique experience of working with big and small voluntary organisations as well as in government appointed committees. In spite of powerful positions and posts, she maintained her humility and simplicity and referred these positions and achievements as opportunities to know the lives of millions of Indian women.