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# Marxism and the Struggle for Women's Emancipation

## INTRODUCTION

The struggle for and the road to women's emancipation depends on the nature of the State and the specific correlation of class forces in any given society.<sup>1</sup> Which are the forces responsible for the unequal status of women, the violence against women, the daily humiliations and creation of multiple barriers in women's struggles for freedom? Such identification is essential for the development of a strategy to achieve women's emancipation. Equally important is the need to identify friends, not in a personal sense, but in a class framework, to gather allies towards this aim. For communists in India working among the mass of women, such a fundamental programmatic understanding is required to inform our day to day work.

At the same time the international situation with the aggressive hegemonic role of imperialism against national sovereignty and basic democratic rights of peoples across the world has a deep impact on country-based struggles for equality and justice. Imperialist-driven globalisation processes which determine global policies are destroying the processes of democracy in sovereign countries.

Imperialism and neo-liberal policies driven by it have destroyed millions of lives across the globe and in particular have subordinated and subjugated women in new forms of exploitation and oppression. All-pervasive market cultures have tended to further the commodification of women's bodies. In social life, violence against women has increased globally. The most shocking trend is the huge increase in the trafficking of women both for cheap female labour and for sexual exploitation. Indeed trafficking constitutes one of the fastest growing "industries" in the world.

At the political and cultural level too the right wing offensive globally has encouraged chauvinistic, racist and sectarian politics which now dominate large parts of the globe. This rightward shift has serious implications for women's struggles for emancipation. In India we are up against fascistic forces patronised by the central Government whose main mobilisation is on the basis of majoritarian religious sectarianism, termed as "communalism" in India. These forces have a specific agenda to turn India into a theocratic State, a "Hindu Rashtra," which is not only against the religious minorities, who are admittedly the main target, but also are highly anti-women and anti-poor in their world view.

In such a situation, Communist work among women has to link the international struggle against imperialism with the national struggle for economic and social justice and for Socialism.

This article is divided into three parts. (1) Theoretical framework, (2) Women's status in India, and (3) Party work.

## SECTION 1: ROOTS OF WOMEN'S SUBORDINATION

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<sup>1</sup> Paper submitted on behalf of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) to the *International Communist Review*, Communist Party of Greece (KKE) in October 2017.

The CPI(M) upholds the Marxist understanding of the roots of women's subordination. The analysis made in the seminal work by Engels *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* of the dialectical links between development of productive forces, control over the means of production and evolving social relations including between men and women and the institution of the family, are key to the understanding of women's subordination in class societies. It is not necessary here to reproduce the main stages of the development of human societies through the stages of primitive communism to advanced capitalism nor the changing form of the family and patriarchal subordination. These are well explained by Engels, the essence of which is reflected in an important document of the CPI(M) entitled *On Party's Perspective on Women's Issues and Tasks* (December 2005).

Studies of the development of society in India, broadly substantiate Engels's analysis though with some very important differences both in the development of slave societies and in the features of feudalism. One of the specific features in India is in the development of the birth based hierarchical caste system with the weight of religious sanction. This system, which remains, through the centuries, as a destructive cancer in Indian society, not only enabled a much more intensified appropriation of the surplus value of the working "untouchables" but to a great extent became intertwined with the development of classes in Indian society. Women's subordination in India is intrinsically linked to the creation and existence of the caste system.

It is important to note that the Party document referred to above sees women's secondary status as being intrinsic to the capitalist system. In capitalist society although the development of the productive forces has created the means to eliminate the unequal division of labour between men and women, the intrinsic nature and contradictions within the capitalist system itself prevent it from doing so. Capitalism, by employing women in large-scale industry, broke the cycle of isolation and dependence they suffered from during feudal times. However, the conditions under which women work supposedly as "free workers" remain unequal for the mass of women.

Capitalism has coopted and strengthened male supremacist cultures and practices. Such a framework sanctions wage differentiation between working men and women, thus allowing an intensified rate of extraction of surplus value from a sizable section of the work force who are female. Women also add to the reserve army of the unemployed that keeps general wages down.

#### *Family, reproduction of labour and domestic work*

One of the institutions in class society that reflect the unequal relations of men and women is that of the family. As Engels wrote, "The overthrow of mother-right (in deciding the descent of the progeny), was the *world historic defeat of the female sex*. The man seized the reins in the house also, the woman was enthralled, the slave of man's lust, a mere instrument for breeding children". He analysed the power relations within the family thus: "The modern individual family is based on the open or disguised enslavement of woman: and modern society is the mass composed solely of individual families as its molecules." He went on to emphasise that "The first premise for the emancipation of women is the re-introduction of the entire female sex into public industry, and this again demands that the quality possessed by the individual family of being the economic unit of society be abolished."

In India too, the development of modern industry through the processes of capitalist development and also the accelerated processes of urbanization, particularly in the last two decades, led to a change in the forms of family under feudalism which had been based mainly on the need for provision of agricultural services and comprising a much wider concept of family than the typical nuclear family of developed capitalism. The joint family system with property held in the name of the male head of family has been the most common form of the patriarchal family though there are exceptions specific to castes

and regions in some parts of South India and the north-east which show the existence of matrilineal families. With rapid urbanization and the expansion of capitalism in rural India, families in India have also undergone changes with the emergence of nuclear families, although unlike in most western countries, in India it is common for parents to live with their adult sons and their families.

An important aspect of the sex-based division of labour in capitalist society is the role of women of working class families in the reproduction of labour power through unaccounted domestic tasks performed by them. In general even in the most advanced capitalist societies women bear a disproportionate share of domestic work. Even though this may be perceived as a “private” matter, objectively it is a requirement of capitalist society. As Marx showed, the wage earned by the worker is equivalent not to the value he or she produces, but only to the sum of the values of commodities required to maintain him or her and to reproduce labour power. The amount of time the worker spends in a working day to produce the value of his or her means of subsistence was defined as necessary labour by Marx and the value produced over and above that was called surplus labour. The domestic tasks performed by women is an invisible component of necessary labour and helps keep the costs of the means of subsistence of the worker down.

The processes of globalisation and privatisation have only intensified this process. As sex-based division of labour gets reinvented in new forms and the State retreats from its minimum responsibilities in the provision of welfare measures, the privatization of essential family and child care services and the increasing costs mean that women have to shoulder greater burdens in domestic work and family care. In a sense, women’s domestic work subsidizes the capitalist state.

### *Patriarchal ideologies*

At the same time, even though in all epochs and stages of human development following the primitive stages of “mother right” societies, the vast mass of people did not own any private property to bequeath as inheritance, the ideologies of male-supremacy and women’s subordination became dominant ideologies, perpetuated and propagated by the ruling classes for their own interests. Thus along with the struggle for a change in material conditions, Marxism places great emphasis on the sustained struggle against ideas and ideologies which propagate women’s subordination and which act as a major barrier to the achievement of women’s emancipation.

In contrast to feminist theories of social analysis we do not see patriarchy as an autonomous system unconnected to the basic economic structure of a given society. However it is equally true that mechanical interpretations of Marxism which posit women’s sex based oppression as part of a “superstructural” problem that disappears as soon as the base structure is changed, is theoretically flawed and practically damaging to communist efforts to build mass movements of women.

In the Indian context, patriarchal ideas are promoted and co-opted not only by capitalism but also by the caste system. Therefore, here the ideological struggle is equally against caste-based ideologies.

### *Socialism the goal*

We believe both in theory and practice, as shown in the historic examples of socialist societies, that it is only a socialist society which can provide the material basis for women’s emancipation through social ownership of the means of production and the elimination of the profit motive based on private property. This will enable the introduction of women into the sphere of socially productive labour on an equal footing with men. It is only under socialism and economic planning and priorities for the use of national resources that public bodies at different levels can provide the essential requirements for child care, for socialization of domestic responsibilities to eradicate the unequal division of labour, to

establish equality within families and between men and women, and to ensure women's equal participation in public life. At the same time, the political will and commitment of the working class State to consciously fight the ideological and cultural framework of male supremacy is equally important if not critical.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and East European Socialist countries, the success of the counter revolution because of the deviations from Marxism-Leninism, its concepts and practices by the then leaderships of those countries cannot detract from the reality of women's unprecedented advances in those Socialist countries. Women in those countries achieved rights and benefits that are unprecedented and the records established then are unmatched today even in the most so-called advanced capitalist country.

Capitalism is not the end of history. It is important theoretically and in practical work to put forward the Socialist vision and goals as far as the goal of women's emancipation is concerned and that of the elimination of the subordination of women.

## SECTION 2: THE INDIAN STATE, GOVERNMENT POLICIES AND WOMEN'S STATUS

Capitalist development in independent India was undertaken without completing the basic tasks of the democratic revolution, i.e., the eradication of pre-capitalist relations centring on the land question. Following the defeat of the colonial power the State was taken over by the Indian ruling classes. The bourgeoisie struck an alliance with the landlords and as a result refused to undertake basic land reforms by which the semi-feudal fetters on the productive forces could be eliminated. This compromise with the feudal forces determined the nature of the Indian State which we characterize as a bourgeois-landlord state led by the big bourgeoisie with increasing collaboration with foreign capital.

The CPI(M) categorises the present stage of revolution as the people's democratic revolution whose axis is the agrarian revolution. The achievement of this task also requires sweeping measures to reform the social system through which remnants of pre-capitalist and feudal society keep vast rural areas tied to backwardness hampering the mobilization of forces for the agrarian revolution. Two such issues linked to the agrarian revolution are: first, the continuation of the caste system that further oppresses and subordinates a vast section of the basic classes who belong to the scheduled castes and second, the subordinate role of women and the operation of systemic discrimination.

Even in the highly advanced capitalist countries where historically capitalism developed after the destruction of feudal fetters by bourgeois democratic revolutions under the leadership of the bourgeoisie, the status of women remains inferior to that of men. This is because the intrinsic nature of capitalism is such that it cannot create the material conditions necessary for women's equality and emancipation. On the contrary, it builds and utilizes oppressions that are a legacy of pre-capitalist societies for its own benefit. In countries like India, where the bourgeoisie did not carry out even such bourgeois democratic revolutions as was witnessed in the advanced countries, the position of women is even worse. We see the course of the Indian revolution, starting with the people's democratic stage of the revolution under the leadership of the working class, towards the Socialist revolution. Of course, as history teaches us, there is no "Chinese wall" that separates the two stages of the revolution. In characterising the stage as the People's democratic revolution, the classes which have intrinsic contradictions with the present characterisation of the State as given above, should be won over as allies including the peasantry, the middle classes and sections of the bourgeoisie. The class character of the Indian State, also determines the way communists in India work among different social sections, including women.

### *Political Context*

It is also to be noted that the two major ruling class parties in India are the Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP) and the Congress party. Both are committed to neo-liberal policies and to subverting the national interests to serve corporate power. Both the parties are united in their commitment to making India a junior partner of the United States of America as they are in their pursuit of neo-liberal policies. But there is a difference. In India's political vocabulary the opposite of secularism is communalism. The BJP is a highly communal party. It is the political wing of a fascistic organisation called the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh (RSS) which calls itself a cultural organisation whose formation in 1926 was inspired by Mussolini and Hitler. It works towards its agenda of converting India into a theocratic State based on its toxic ideology of Hindutva. In 2014, the Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP) won the general elections. Although it got just 31 per cent of the vote share, because of the flawed first past the post electoral system in India it won a disproportionate number of seats and is leading the Government with a single party majority. It has also won several provincial elections in this period.

In the last three years of BJP rule, inequalities in India have seen a huge increase with 1 per cent of the richest sections of the population controlling 58 per cent of the national wealth, a ten percentage point increase. Workers' rights have been under severe attack. With its single party majority the BJP can push through anti-worker and anti-peasant policies with greater ferocity than the previous Government headed by the Congress party which was responsible for framing the policies in the first place.

In furtherance of its highly communal agenda, it has unleashed a wave of violent incidents through its affiliated organisations against minorities particularly the Muslim minority. It has demonstrated its contempt for democracy and democratic rights, equating all dissent as anti-national. It has started a most vindictive campaign using agencies of the State against its opponents.

Many of its leaders, including the Prime Minister have been in the past full-time activists of the RSS and owe allegiance to its ideology of Hindutva. This organisation has never accepted the democratic and secular principles outlined in the Constitution of India. It believes in the ancient "Hindu text" called the Manu Smriti. This contains the most obnoxious and condemnable guidelines against women and the oppressed castes.

Communists are politically and ideologically one of the main targets of attack by the Government and the RSS. There are two provincial Governments being run by the CPI(M) in Kerala and Tripura. These Governments in spite of the lack of resources have been pursuing policies which are pro-people and specifically which are pro-woman also. These two Governments are being particularly targeted by the Government at the Centre run by the BJP.

The struggles being fought by communists in the present political context are to defeat the communal BJP Government and its neo-liberal, pro-corporate policies and its highly reactionary social policies. Women in large numbers are participating in agitations against this Government.

Special mention must be made of the violence being faced by communist members and sympathisers in the province of Bengal. Here, after the opportunist alliance of all anti-communist forces managed the defeat of the Communist-led Government in 2011, a wave of terror and violence has been unleashed on communists and supporters by a regional party called the Trinamool Congress using the power of the Government and police against communists. Several women communists have been martyred. Women have been threatened with rape publicly, several women supporters of the Party have been sexually assaulted as a warning to leave the party, homes have been burnt and looted, thousands have been displaced due to State planned terror. Women communists in Bengal have also been in the forefront of the fight back, the resistance, displaying inspiring examples of courage and commitment. Mass movements are being organised against this reactionary State Government headed

by the Trinamool Congress. Ironically, the leader of this violent party of anti-communists and anti-socials is a woman.

### *Three Aspects of Subordination of Women*

Keeping in view the stage of the revolution, namely the People's Democratic stage, and therefore a need for an approach to include women of those classes who will be allies of the working class for revolutionary change, the CPI(M) has evolved a broader understanding of how to build women's unity for the People's Democratic revolution.

Women do not constitute a homogenous group. The subordination of women by the State led by the big bourgeoisie, and the policies followed by successive Governments representing the interests of the ruling classes can be broadly seen at three different levels. (1) The class-based exploitation of women who belong to the working classes and the rural poor; (2) the discrimination against women as far as her rights as a citizen are concerned; and (3) the oppression of women as women. In this analysis and work communists have been giving special attention to the organisation and mobilisation specifically of young women workers and young women in general.

### *Women and class*

As communists the primary concern and focus is on the status of the woman worker in both urban and rural India and the fight for her rights. The main concentration of communist work is among these sections of women.

A working class woman is doubly exploited, facing class exploitation, as well as sex-based oppression. Class exploitation is intensified due to her gender, and she is more vulnerable to gender oppression because she is poor. In addition if a woman worker also belongs to the so-called lower castes, in particular if she belongs to the scheduled untouchable castes, she faces exploitation with a triple burden of class, gender and caste. These are aspects to understanding the status of women workers which are not separate but linked to each other. Thus when working class issues are taken up by organisations of the working class led by communists the specific issues that a working woman faces as a woman, as a worker, as a member of an oppressed caste, must form an important part of the joint struggle of all workers, male, female or transgender and across caste. As one of our foremost communist leaders Com. B.T. Ranadive had said, "Marx said workers of the world unite, he did not say male workers of the world unite!" And we can add "nor did he say male, upper caste workers of the world unite."

Women's wages are less than male wages, the gap ranging from twenty to thirty per cent. The gap in wage differences for scheduled caste women who constitute 70 per cent of rural women workers, is even higher.

The most striking feature of the world of women and work in India today is that women are being pushed out of the workforce as the first victims of joblessness. Women's labour participation, that is the percentage of women in the working age group of 15+ has come down from 43 per cent a decade ago to just 27 per cent now, mainly because of the huge decrease in rural women workers. The Indian economy is marked by acute rural distress in which major sections of the peasantry are hit, comprising those with small landholdings and also those with middle size land holdings. This has also had a cascading impact on rural landless workers a large number of whom are women.

At the same time, Adivasi or tribal communities, those who live in remote, hilly mineral rich areas are facing mass displacement because of Government policies of reckless opening up of all these areas for mining by foreign and domestic corporates. Tribal women in particular are the worst affected.

Women are being forced increasingly into contract and casual work with its attendant low wages, insecurity of service and dismal work conditions including increased vulnerability to sexual harassment. More women are being forced into the unorganized sector and in home-based work at extremely low piece rates. 52 per cent of women are self-employed. Only around 8 per cent women are working in the formal sector. Low wages, poor social security and irregular work for women are common features of the labour market. This is reflected in the fact that the only two sectors where women have found increasing employment are the backbreaking construction work and also as domestic workers. Around five million women are employed by Government in the major social sector Government schemes as crèche workers, workers in provision of mid-day meals in schools as well as health workers. However they are not paid a minimum wage but just an honorarium. Some of the largest working women's mobilisations have been led by these "scheme workers" fighting for recognition as Government employees.

Economic independence is a pre-requisite for women's advancement and in this context the growing unemployment among the ranks of the female work force has a specific dimension. The policies of neo-liberalism have greatly undermined the economic status of women. The retreat of the government from welfare responsibilities and cuts in social sector spending have hit women hard and they have to spend longer hours in non-productive work.

Communists are working among urban and rural women workers at different levels, through trade unions, through peasant and agricultural workers organisations and through women's organisations. At present the reach of communist work through these various organisations as well as directly through the Party would be to around eight million women workers. This includes poor women peasants who along with working on their own land also work as daily workers during a part of the year, a requirement for family survival.

### *Women as Citizens*

The conceptualisation of communist work on citizenship rights of women is premised on the reality that there is rank, though often neglected, discrimination against poorer sections of women in the sphere of equal citizenship rights. On issues such as the right to food, the right to education, the right to health, the right to affordable housing, to water and sanitation, it is mainly the poorer sections of women, including homemakers in workers families who are the most affected. Female issues of citizenship rights, opens a further front of battle against the State and Government policies, drawing in larger sections of poor women.

Further, there are many issues of citizenship which hold relevance for middle-class women. To take one example, communist women have been in the forefront of the struggle for increasing women's representation in elected decision-making institutions such as Parliament and provincial legislatures. India has a rich experience in the effectiveness of reservations in seats for women. India has a three tier system of elected local bodies in rural areas, called panchayats . Fifty per cent of all seats are reserved for women among which there is a reservation specifically for scheduled caste and scheduled tribe women and in some provinces for women of other oppressed castes, the term used is 'other backward castes.' Although there was strong opposition to women's reserved seats, the experience of two decades shows that it has, in the main, been a positive and significant step forward for women. Women have broken many social barriers in orthodox and conservative bastions in rural India and have made a place for women at the grassroots level in public life. India now has around one and a half million women elected into panchayat institutions. It is true that women of all classes, including women of the rural elite, get the benefit of such reservations. However, in a country where strong feudal prejudices

still influence public life where the presence of women has no social sanction, reservations and the enthusiastic participation of women in the political process constitutes a welcome social advance. Currently, there are big mobilisations of women for extending reservation for women to one third of the seats in Parliament and provincial legislatures. India has a low 12 per cent representation of women in Parliament and an average of just 9 per cent in state legislatures.

Another most important area of struggle is among girl students for equal rights to education, to scholarships, to space in hostels and so on. Neo-liberal policies have specifically reduced budgetary allocations to public education. India has a low allocation of just 4-5 per cent of the GDP for education. Governments are giving concessions to private educational institutions from the level of nursery and primary schools to institutions of higher education turning education into a highly profit making industry. At a time when women's literacy is low – the all-India average literacy rate for females is only 64 per cent (male literacy 80 per cent), and for adults in the age group 15+ it is 59 per cent and 78 per cent for women and men respectively. With cuts in education budgets including for adult literacy programmes, the situation is quite grim. Literacy rates for Dalit and Adivasi women are even worse.

Communists working among women in multiple fora such as in locality-based citizens groups, in senior citizens organisations, in platforms working for reservations for women in parliament and provincial assemblies, in student organisations and college and university unions, have a positive experience in being able to reach out to wider sections of the female population whose increased participation in struggles for equal citizenship substantiate the importance of the analysis.

#### *Caste as an instrument of women's subordination*

The caste system like the iron bars of a prison not only constitutes the most resilient framework against any change in the lower status of women, the caste system itself is a most crucial instrument in creating that status. The significant and inalienable factor of the caste system is the system of hierarchies it establishes between different castes, in which women are considered uniformly the lowest in each caste. The so-called "blood purity" conditions intrinsic to the hierarchies imposed by upper caste men set out a strict code of conduct for women, and, based on the control of a woman's sexuality, drastically subordinated the status of women within that particular caste, and were consciously followed by the castes downward throughout society. It is also true that the strength of the caste structures that subordinate women are inversely in proportion to the distance between that particular caste and the highest link in the hierarchy, although for various reasons the more democratic relations within the lower castes are also getting eroded.

The right to choose their own partners circumscribed by caste boundaries, results in 'honour killings' sanctioned by caste panchayats. In caste conflicts, women from the lower castes become the special targets of humiliation and violence from the dominant castes. This is a direct assault on the minimum human right for self-choice partners. It is noteworthy that among political parties, it is only the CPI(M) that has taken an unequivocal position against such honour crimes and against those caste-based institutions which promote and patronize such crimes. Many communist women who have fought against caste-based diktats have faced threats and intimidation.

Dalit women face the brunt of caste oppression by the upper castes, men and women. Dalit women are not only the objects of sexual exploitation by upper caste men, but also a source of free or cheap labour for the ruling classes. The caste system, as with gender oppression, legitimises free/cheap labour of Dalits. Dalit women are burdened with three inequalities – by virtue of their class since most Dalit women belong to the exploited classes, caste and gender. In the Indian context, women's emancipation is linked with the uprooting of the ideological as well as material basis of caste structures and for the



elimination of the caste system.

### *Struggles for democracy and secular principles*

The struggle for democracy and democratic rights has gained increasing importance in the current political situation prevailing in India. One of the biggest challenges is the all out assault on secular principles and specific attacks on Muslim women and women of other minorities. Draconian legislations have been adopted which criminalise the eating of beef and the slaughter of cows can get you a life term sentence of imprisonment in some regions of India. In eight provinces conversion to any religion of your choice is under strict regulation targeting conversion to Christianity. Women are being divided in the name of religion. India is seeing a revival of religious ritualisation accompanied by an increase in superstitions and obscurantist practices, in many areas because of State patronage. These impact women of different communities the most. In a country which is considered deeply influenced by religion, the proliferation of 'godmen and women' cult figures with huge followings, including among the working masses, is a very big challenge to communist work.

In such a situation the combination of class struggle against neo-liberal policies, along with the struggle for secular and democratic principles is the key to build people's unity and women's unity against all such efforts. Without building unity on the basic livelihood and right to life issues facing the mass of women, the challenge posed by the divisive politics of the present regime cannot be challenged and defeated.

### *Women as women*

In capitalist societies there are issues that impact women across classes providing a space for a broader intervention. One such issue is that of increasing sexual violence. There is ferment among the mass of women against sexual violence against women. Poor women, Dalit women, working women are the most vulnerable to class- and caste-based sexual assault. Neo-liberal policies and market cultures which strengthen existing patriarchal practices have led to a huge increase in such violence. India has seen some of the largest women's mobilisations which have also had a political impact, on issues concerning violence against women, against increasing numbers of sexual assault, with around 35,000 cases of rape registered with the police in the year 2015.

Domestic violence is another area of intervention. There has been a backlash from conservative forces against the increasing assertion of women within violent marriages against violence. Dominant prevailing cultures promoted by those in power promote the ideal Hindu family where the duty of the wife is to adjust to such incidents of violence, bring up their children according to traditions determined by religious texts which subordinate girls and women to strict regulations and so on.

Among all cognizable cases of crimes against women, rape constitutes 10 per cent of registered cases and cases of 'cruelty to wives' constitute 35 per cent.

Communists have been very active in the struggles against violence against women. In the political atmosphere prevailing, women in general see communists as being staunch supporters of women's rights and struggles for justice.

### *Alternative policies through communist-led provincial governments*

Apart from general struggles, campaigns and interventions, the Party has effectively utilized its leadership in provincial Governments to enact policies that enhance women's status as opposed to anti-women policies followed by the Central Government. At present, Communists are leading Governments in the two States (provinces) of Kerala and Tripura. Earlier communists had been elected for six

consecutive terms in West Bengal and were in office till 2011. Policies followed include social sector schemes for women, more intervention in budgetary allocations, protections of employment against privatization, initiatives to build women's cooperatives to enhance livelihoods. In particular, allocations and programmes for Dalit and tribal sections including land distribution to landless families is an important programme. Earlier, the Communist-led Government in West Bengal and supported communist-led militant land struggles and enacted the most radical land reform programme in the country, including giving joint land titles to women and to female-headed families.

Communists in Parliament, men and women members and those elected to State assemblies have also played an important role in taking forward the demands of women's movements in the parliamentary sphere.

In general, we have tried to link our focus on mass struggles of the working people to our work in the parliamentary field. Our focus continues to be building mass struggles and the independent base of the Party among women, while expanding our parliamentary and electoral interventions.

### SECTION 3: CPI(M)'S ROLE

The history of the Party is closely linked with the initiatives taken by the Party at different times to mobilize and fight for women as part of the larger struggle against capitalism. In addition, the Party has played an important role in social reform movements challenging retrograde practices in the name of tradition and culture. Communist women in the freedom struggle played the most glorious role in fighting the British colonial rulers and at the same time mobilizing the poorest sections of women for their rights and for socialism. It is the founders and leaders of the party who both in their theoretical work and in their practice have been the champions of women's rights. It is their untiring and sustained work guided by an emancipatory vision that has brought millions of women into communist-led movements.

The CPI(M) sees the task of mobilizing the mass of women as a strategic task.

The Party document of 2005 puts it this way: "The identification and removal of weaknesses that prevent this mobilization are necessary for the fulfilment of the goals of the people's democratic revolution. The CPI(M) has identified broadly three main areas where attention has to be paid to improve our work among women. (1) Mobilisation by the Party and other mass organizations on issues concerning women. (2) More efforts to bring women into the Party and increasing their responsibilities, increasing intervention and mobilization of women in mass organisations led by the Party. (3) Eradication of wrong trends within the Party concerning women's issues."

#### *Expanding Party mobilisation on women's issues*

There is a big increase in the participation of women in class struggles as well as in mobilizations on democratic issues. It is necessary for the Party to give special attention to such participation of women and to see how it can be enhanced. Since women face different levels of exploitation and oppression it is necessary for the Party to directly take up issues facing women on the Party platform. At the same time mass organizations in which Party members work must also take up issues of specific concern to women within the social group so mobilised as well as on general issues concerning women.

While urging Communists to understand the importance of working among women and taking up the issues that affect them, Lenin wrote: "Mobilisation of the female masses, carried out with a clear understanding of principles and on a firm organizational basis, is a vital question for the Communist parties and their victories. (Many) do not realize that developing and leading such a mass movement is

an important part of all Party activity, as much as half of all the Party work . . . . They regard agitation and propaganda among women and the task of rousing and revolutionizing them as of secondary importance, as the job of just the communist women. This is wrong, fundamentally wrong . . . . It is equality of women reversed.” The women’s question is a political question that needs to be addressed by the entire Party.

The Party’s main work is among the basic classes and the Party gives priority to organizing the poor exploited sections of our society. It is necessary while taking up the class issues of women of these sections that the Party and mass organizations under its leadership must also identify, and address, the issues of gender oppression, in other words all the problems arising out of the double burden that this section of women face. At the same time, it is necessary to take up issues of social oppression of different sections of women. Party leaders have to lead campaigns against the social oppression of women, speak on these topics while addressing general political gatherings and public meetings and not consider this ‘non-political’ or feel that such issues can only be taken up by women.

### *Women in the Party*

At present the CPI(M) has around 1.1 million members of whom 16 per cent, over 150,000, are women. In the organizational plenum held in December 2015 a decision was taken to encourage more women participating in mass movements to join the Party. A target of 25 per cent has been set for the next two years.

As far as the number of women in Party committees at various levels is concerned, the Party has given guidelines to consciously fight discrimination in the composition of members in various committees. There is an increase in the number of women in decision-making committees in the Party, starting from the local committee to the central committee and the Polit Bureau although there is need for more rapid improvement.

### *Communists and Rectification*

The Party has also led rectification movements within the Party at all levels to eliminate bourgeois values and often paternalistic and patronizing behavior towards women. Communists have to set an example by their own attitudes and behaviour. Writing about the need for reform within the Bolshevik party Lenin wrote: “What is at the bottom of the incorrect attitude (of some sections within the Party)? In the final analysis, it is an underestimation of women and their accomplishments. That’s just what it is!”

While taking into account the level of social consciousness in the society we live and work in, it is important for Communists not to compromise with trends of social conservatism that hamper women’s increased participation in public life on an equal footing with men. Communist families should discourage conformity to stereotypical roles expected of women, particularly newly-wed women, of head covering, taking to the *purda*, of shouldering the main burdens of domestic responsibility, etc., or of discrimination between sons and daughters. Party members should set an example within their own homes also. There should be a conscious effort to set standards of communist morality and ethics in relations within families.

Party members and especially leaders should encourage women family members to be politically active in whatever way is best suited to them. It should not be the case, as sometimes happens that Party members discourage their wives from joining political work on the plea that “at least one of us should stay at home.”

Communists have to uphold democratic practices like registration of marriage within their own

families, equal treatment to daughters and sons within the family, eschewing of rituals and religious ceremonies many of which have an anti-woman and casteist bias. There have been many examples of two active comrades in the Party deciding to get married of their own choice. In some cases the marriage then becomes a barrier for the woman's advance because once married she is expected to play the role of a housewife giving up her political life. By not intervening, the Party actually loses a talented and committed cadre apart from the negative impact on the woman herself.

The Party has to make conscious efforts to root out alien patriarchal notions about women and women's role within the family and in public life. Setting examples in personal life also will be of immense help in fulfilling the political task of mobilizing larger sections of women.

#### CONCLUSION

The Programme of the CPI(M) states that for the complete and thoroughgoing fulfilment of the basic tasks of the Indian revolution, in the present stage it is essential to replace the present bourgeois-landlord State headed by the big bourgeoisie by a State of People's Democracy led by the working class. The nature of our revolution in the present stage is essentially anti-feudal, anti-imperialist, anti-monopoly and democratic. This stage of Indian revolution requires the mobilization and participation of all those sections that are oppressed and exploited. Amongst them stand a majority of the female population as workers, as women and as citizens. Throughout the course of history, in every movement where the masses have moved to eliminate and destroy the systems that oppress them, women have been equal participants of the revolutionary movement for change. As Lenin has said: "No movement of the oppressed can succeed unless it has in its ranks the vast mass of oppressed women"; and again: "The proletariat cannot achieve complete liberty until it has won complete liberty for women."

It is the duty of all Communists, men and women, to unitedly resist the multifaceted attacks on women's rights, to help the struggle for women's emancipation and to draw in and develop the advanced sections amongst them into the Party with equal status and responsibilities.