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<i>Editor's Note</i>	3
PRABHAT PATNAIK Globalization and the Abridgement of Freedom	8
ARCHANA PRASAD Feminism and Class Consciousness: Reflections from the Early Years of the Communist Movements	25
ÁLVARO GARCÍA LINERA 'In Moments of Crisis, Behind Every Moderate Liberal, There's a Fascist': An interview with Álvaro García Linera by Elodie Descamps and Tarik Bouafia	42
COMMUNIST PARTY OF INDIA Draft Platform of Action, 1930	58

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Theoretical Quarterly of the Communist Party of India (Marxist)

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ARCHANA PRASAD

Feminism and Class Consciousness

Reflections from the Early Years of the Communist Movements

This essay discusses the interface of the development of the communist movement with the women's struggle for their own emancipation through participation in struggles for freedom from both class oppression and patriarchy. However, as it has been pointed out by several scholars and frontline activists, the anti-patriarchal character of class struggles is not an automatic but an organized process of influencing the process of class formation. By the same measure all movements for women's rights may not necessarily be anti-capitalist; rather they may have limited goals of achieving women's social and political rights within the capitalist system. The transformative aspect of women's movements and class struggles, thus, depends on its ideological moorings and the manner in which the relationship between capitalism and patriarchy is understood.

In this essay, I explore the proposition that the formation of the Communist Party was a significant moment in the struggle for women's emancipation. Women who participated in communist-led struggles were motivated to break out from the conventional sexual division of labour. Their influence on the strategies of the movement provided complex ways of understanding the

interlinkages between anti-patriarchal and class consciousness. Given this context it is pertinent to ask the questions: What has the long history of the communist movement contributed to the continuing struggles for the liberation of women in India? Does an anti-patriarchal project necessarily have to be an anti-capitalist project also; and if so, where do women figure in the emancipatory vision of Indian communism? The answers to these questions are central to resolving the contemporary theoretical and ideological dilemmas that arise out of the debates between Marxist feminists and the 'autonomous' women's movement. The first part of this essay outlines some of these debates and evaluates them in the context of the relationship between production and social reproduction in processes of capitalist accumulation. The second section provides a brief sketch of the role of women in the early years of the communist movement. The third section deals specifically with the perspective of the relationship between class-based movements and the building of an anti-patriarchal consciousness.

I

It is well known, patriarchal authority and institutions are essential in maintaining and enhancing the rate of accumulation under capitalism. Patriarchy structures social relations through the traditional sexual division of labour which subsidizes the larger circuit of production where the unaccounted and unrecognized work of women becomes a part of the extraction of surplus value. From this standpoint, there is a direct link between patriarchal authority and the oppression of workers within the larger system of surplus production. Therefore, the process of class formation is itself gendered because the interaction between capital and labour relies on the unpaid work of women, which forms the foundation of social reproduction. Further, the lesser participation of women workers in paid work is influenced by the structure of the family

that emerges with the penetration of capitalism. The debate on *housewifization* effectively pointed towards the role of private property in the confinement of women in the domestic sphere (Federici 2004; Mies 1986). In this sense the increasing burden of work on women, in terms of unpaid labour for social reproduction and discriminatory low wage work, are part of the same extractive process of surplus value generation. In other words, patriarchy is an essential part of the reproduction of social relations without which the processes of economic extraction cannot be maintained and enhanced. Therefore, the asymmetrical link between women's unpaid and paid labour is a result of the structural contradictions between capital labour and its manifestation in different systemic manifestations. This perspective also explains the concentration of women in specific strata of the most oppressed segment of the working class because of the systemic discrimination they face within larger processes of accumulation.

Such an understanding is quite different from the one professed by many accomplished feminist scholars. As one influential book on the subject put it: 'A feminist perspective recognizes that the hierarchical organizing of the world around gender is key to maintaining social order; that to live lives marked "male" and "female" is to live different realities. But simultaneously, to be a feminist is to imagine occupying the marginal, relatively powerless position with reference to every dominant framework that swallows up the space at the centre' (Menon 2012, p. viii). In such an analysis, gender (that is the social reproduction of a 'male' as 'man' and of a 'female' as a 'woman') is seen as a structuring feature of the systemic inequalities that place women in relations of oppression. Hence, the relationships of gender are outside the circuit of capitalist oppression and social relations of production. All forms of oppression become identified with sexual positioning rather than the status of the 'woman' within the larger political economy. In such a positioning, 'class and capitalism' occupy a secondary position: women are considered a 'community' (Devika

2016) who are ready be mobilized through 'empowerment' programmes. However, the feminist critique of such programmes posits 'male feminism' against 'female feminism', where male leadership of anti-patriarchal movements is seen as suppressing the 'agency' and leadership of women (Devika 2018). However, such a perspective ignores the role of the wider democratic movement in developing the capacity of the women to resist patriarchy.

A further feminist position develops from the theoretical critique, which posits the labour theory of value against the stigma theory of work. Within this perspective, the sexual division of labour is a result of the 'stigma' attached to women's work and is to be located in practices of social discrimination rather than the tendency of surplus extraction. It is argued that there is a need to bring in the feminist lens when the domestic sphere is under consideration, but also the dimensions of caste, practices of untouchability and untouchable labour. It is also argued that 'the labour theory of value stands in conflict with a caste-structured society (John 2017). John's central argument is that women's labour is stigmatized and should not be 'valorized as value'. Instead it should be seen as something that can only be captured by a post-Marxist theory of 'intersectionality', where different layers of subordination intertwine with each other to subject women in a particular form of labour (John 2013; 2017). The concept of 'value' as used by John and other feminists is conceptually inadequate because it separates social production/reproduction from the extraction of surplus value. It interprets the labour theory of value as 'economically reductionist' and attributes a super-structural to the value of labour. It does not locate the degradation of labour in the processes of capitalist accumulation and does not analyse 'stigma' attached to unpaid labour as a result of capital's immanent tendency of systemic discrimination in the domestic and non-domestic spheres. By ignoring this fact and creating a division between domestic and non-domestic, this perspective falls into the liberal public/private trap; thereby virtually ignoring the role

of patriarchy in accentuating social and systemic discrimination which is endemic to capitalism.

Given the limitations of the prevailing theoretical frameworks, it is pertinent to turn to contemporary Marxist feminist literature to analyse the complex interrelationship between class formation and social discrimination. One common way of mapping this relationship is by exploring the processes of social reproduction (Vogel 2013; Bhattacharya 2017) in its broadest possible sense. Thus, social reproduction is dependent not only on unpaid family labour, but also on other hierarchical social institutions (such as caste), customs and morality that can neither be substituted, nor be equated with social class. At best patriarchal, caste and community hierarchies can mediate the way in which classes are formed by reinforcing social and economic domination. In other words, social hierarchies are necessary to maintain the capitalist system; they are also remoulded to suit the different stages of capitalist accumulation which is reflected in the different manifestations of patriarchy in diverse social settings (Prasad 2016). For example, many feminist tropes often argued that women's access to paid work was limited by social and cultural norms that prevailed in the family. But historical trends reveal that Dalit and Adivasi women faced no such constraints to go out and work, rather their work participation rates were higher than any other social group. Yet this did not break the back of patriarchy, rather power of male dominance and power was evident in the public sphere through increased unpaid work and sexual exploitation. Social hierarchies breached private morality to express the domination of classes and social groups owning and controlling the means of production. Seen within this context, the presence of certain caste and other social groups at the high table of capitalist accumulation occurred due to material, ideological and social domination. This process is described by Marx in his ethnological notebooks (Kradner 1974, p. 54), wherein he shows that institutions of the past get shorn of their materiality, and are ensconced and reconfigured in the

present. Critiquing Morgan, Marx argues in the following way: ‘family of classical antiquity is the miniature of the society, but rests in its monogamous form, upon social institutions which are external to the kin group . . .’ and therefore the ‘antagonisms within the family’ are generated by forces outside the family or within the society (Kradler 1974, p. 18). Patriarchy also needs to be identified as one of the antagonisms that emerges and develops with the historical development of class contradictions (Federici 2004). The concept is also expanded by Marx himself where he identified the ownership of property as giving birth to ‘latent slavery’ within the family (Marx 1845). In this sense the question of class (which is tied with ownership), is central to the way in which patriarchy is historicized and explained by socialist and Marxist feminists. Therein lie the difference between communist ideologues for women’s liberation and other ‘feminists’.

II

An early history of the communist movement shows that united Communist Party of India played an important role in building the foundations of anti-patriarchal struggles. In doing this it was influenced by the consolidation of the International Socialist Women’s Conferences on the one hand, and important voices of women leaders from the Communist International on the other hand. From the beginning of the twentieth century women leaders and activists of the communist movement spoke about the importance of taking the development of class consciousness into account when analysing the impact of capitalism on women workers. As Alexandra Kollontai, remarked in her speech to the First International Socialist Women’s Conference (1907):

The whole bourgeois world listened . . . But most of all it was angered by the bold voices of the female proletariat. However radical were the speeches pronounced by the men, whatever ‘mad’ resolutions

they might adopt, the bourgeoisie always consoled itself with the thought that it still had one tested method at its disposal: break the resistance of the 'hotheads' by replacing them with submissive female workers. And now a new surprise: from all over the world women representatives of the working class are gathering in order to forge by their united efforts a new weapon with which to fight the world hostile to the proletariat. The daring of women has exceeded all expectations: yesterday's silent slave is now a courageous fighter for the liberation of the working class. (Kollontai 1907)

The quotation above shows that the unity between men and women workers was considered necessary to build a larger working-class movement. Further, it was felt that this unity could only be forged if the communist party itself adopted an ideological position against the slavery of women within the household. 'Communist women' clearly distinguished themselves from other feminist groups, were fighting exclusively for women's political and economic rights. As Clara Zetkin wrote in 1922, communists must work among women for a double goal; first to integrate women 'ideologically and organizationally with the Communist International' and second, drawing ordinary women into all the struggles of the proletariat. She further wrote,

One thing has been clearly established. However much communist work among women must be firmly linked ideologically and organically to the life of each party, we nonetheless need special bodies to carry out this work. Of course communist work among women must be not women's business, but the business of the totality, of the Communist party of each country, of the Communist International. But if we wish to achieve this goal, it is necessary that party committees be available everywhere to carry out and lead communist work among women in a unified and methodical manner and maintain the focus on this goal. (Zetkin 1922)

Thus, for Zetkin, unlike other feminists, a communist woman should conceive of herself as a leader and activist of the larger struggle for a non-capitalist egalitarian society. At the same time, communist activists and leaders at all levels should be wedded to anti-patriarchal ideologies to forge the widest possible unity amongst all segments of the working classes. Hence, women of all sections must be approached, and every barrier must be broken.

Since the perspective elucidated above was developed by the time of the formation of the Communist Party of India, it is not surprising that such thinking informed the political practice of the early communists, even though there was no formal document in which it was stated. Working under the broad umbrella of the nationalist struggle, the communists articulated the aspirations of and attempted to organize workers. There was an active participation of women workers in early strikes in both rural and urban India. The formation of women's committees in many class and mass organizations helped the communists to reach out to ordinary working-class families by the early 1940s. Amongst the earliest of these were the Mahila Atmaraksha Samiti (Bengal), Self Defence League (Punjab), Mahila Sanghams (Andhra and Maharashtra), All Kerala Women's Associations and other such small organizations which worked with girl students. These organizations created the support base and foundation for the expansion of the influence of the communists in many remote rural areas, and at homesteads, even in places where women had been influenced by conventional nationalism. Communist women worked amongst their sisters as also among other working classes. As Bani Dasgupta of the Mahila Atmaraksha Samiti in Bengal stated in one interview:

In those days the Communist Party had the courage to call us out of home, to say those who cannot work and stay at home, come out. Committee membership expanded seven times in order to enable women who came out to find a dependable place. [This is apparently

a reference to the local MARS organization, whose formation was kept at a sort of preparatory committee stage so that more women could be drawn in.] But the communes saved us. I will never forget that the Communist Party was at the foundation of my standing straight. (Quoted in Marik [2013, p. 111])

The communes which were established by the Party were meant to forge a new kind of family, which aimed to give women activists a dignified life and a free atmosphere to exercise their independence. The bonding amongst activists was developed through the inculcation of a common political vision. Though it is true that in many situations, even within the commune, communist women activists battled the conventional sexual division of labour, the wider movement and its ideology also provided women activists a platform to develop their own leadership (Loomba 2019). This was accompanied by an underlying philosophy which posited the 'new morality' of the commune against bourgeois morality. As Sundarayya explained, Party committees were 'guided by the principles of equality between men and women, their right to choose their own partners and their right to divorce and to remarry . . . It contributed to a better development of a people's movement and of social relations' (Sundarayya 1972, p. 263). This morality followed the principle that there should be no concept of private property in commune living; and that there should be common responsibility for parenthood within all communes. Thus, the idea of motherhood itself underwent a significant change with the notion of collective responsibility over children. This has been explained very well by Alexandra Kollontai in the context of Russia when she states that:

The woman who takes up the struggle for the liberation of the working class must learn to understand that there is no more room for the old proprietary attitude which says: 'These are my children, I owe them all my maternal solicitude and affection; those are your

children, they are no concern of mine and I don't care if they go hungry and cold—I have no time for other children.' The worker-mother must learn not to differentiate between yours and mine; she must remember that there are only our children, the children of Russia's communist workers. (Kollantai 1977)

Several writers have stated that this understanding was reflected in the commune and it helped communist women to participate in class-based struggles. One of the telling examples is that of Ushatai Dange (a well-known trade unionist in the united Communist Party) who recounts that in May 1929 she gave birth to her daughter, Roza, and was forced to come out of maternity care due to the ongoing Bombay mill strike (1929). She recalls that her daughter was looked after by all the other striking mothers and therefore acquired several mothers and a larger family (Loomba 2019, p. 166). The examples above show that breaking the shackles of the traditional family was meant to be a desired consequence of communist practice and the foundations of the communist movement could not be built without achieving this goal. A partial success of this strategy is evident from the fact that revolt against traditional family structures became the foundation of the activism of many communist women.

As seen in the emerging women's leadership of class-based struggles in the first quarter of the twentieth century, the women's capacity to overcome the constraints that they faced in their own lives led to the engendering of the class organizations. For example, Ushatai Dange who led the Bombay mill strike (1929), and the 'general strike' of the Travancore Labour Association (1938) under the leadership of C.O. Ponnamma, made maternity benefit for women workers one of the main demands because of the active participation of women (Velayudhan 1983). The leadership abilities of women were in full evidence with sterling examples like that of the legendary Ahilya Rangnekar who was the pioneer organizer of the Mahila Shramik Sangh in Mumbai.

Other examples include the heroic struggle of the Warli Adivasis in the 1940s led by Godavari Parulekar, who went on to become the president of the All India Kisan Sabha; the militant actions of women in the Chittagong Armoury Raid led by Kalpana Dutta and Pritilata, or Ila Mitra who led the Santal revolt at Nachole (East Bengal) during the Tebhaga struggle (Panjabi 2017). Among scores of others, these instances highlighted the way in which women from the peasant and working classes had influenced the course of working-class struggles.

An interesting point to note here is that the question of anti-patriarchal social reform was not entirely ignored. For example, youth girls of Andhra Mahasabha (a precursor to the Telangana struggle) actively participated in campaigns to promote girls' education and ban child marriages (Sundarayya 1972). A similar pattern was also evident in Alleppey where boys and girls joined efforts to break caste barriers and propagate anti-patriarchal values (Velayudhan 1983). Apart from the anti-patriarchal content in terms of social reform, the women also organized themselves to free the 'keeps' of landlords and oppose sexual violence such as rapes, abductions, etc. These instances were witnessed and recorded in almost all militant struggles where women formed squads to protect comrades and women. In some cases women even spearheaded the occupation of landlords' lands, forest plots, etc., as in the case of the Warli struggles (Velayudhan 1983; Sundarayya 1972; Prasad 2017). Thus, women comrades performed a diverse array of important tasks which also expanded their own influence to strengthen the anti-patriarchal content of the communist movement.

III

In the light of the discussion above, a logical question to ask is: Are communist movements, whose goal is social transformation and redistribution of wealth, inherently anti-capitalist in character? An

attempt to answer this question has been made by Maria Mies, stated in her succinct analysis:

[W]e should no longer look at the sexual division of labour as a problem related to the family only, but rather as a structural problem of a whole society. The hierarchical division of labour between men and women and its dynamics form an integral part of the dominant production relations, that is, the class relations of a particular epoch and society, and of the broader national and international divisions of labour. (Mies 1986, p. 49)

In this analysis patriarchy is a social form that is inherently embedded in relations of class oppression; a fact that was aptly illustrated by both Engels and Marx in their own writings. As Engels himself had elucidated, private property pre-dated capitalism and therefore the form of control over private property also structured the character of patriarchy.

It is instructive that the fangs of patriarchy have been laid bare through practice of struggle of early communist led movements in India. One of the most apt examples of this is the '*Lagna Gadi*' movement in Thane district. As some veterans explain, the *lagna gadi* tradition was the worst kind of class-based oppression of the upper class/caste landlords; here, the wives of peasants were kept as slaves because the peasant had become indebted at the time of marriage. The main goal of the movement was to free these women and involved physical entry into the houses of the landlords. This was a remarkable movement from the past century or more, which demolished such an unjust social practice, where patriarchy was the foundation of class struggle (Prasad 2017, p. 27). The embeddedness of patriarchy in class relations is further described by Godavari Parulekar; she writes,

[L]andlords considered their tenants wives and the wives of their debt-slaves to be their own private property. They firmly believed

that they had the hereditary right to enjoy these women whenever it pleased them to do so. It was a common thing for them to make obscene remarks to the women who worked for them, to touch them, pinch them, push them, and get them alone unto the corners to molest them . . . The landlords and the forest contractors always used these women for their sexual lust. So common a feature were the illicit relations between the landlords and the adivasi women that a special name had come to be given to their progeny. They were called the Watla, a special caste. This name was applied not only to the progeny of non-Hindu landlords, but also to the Hindu landlords, who made numerous contributions to this race of Watlas. (Parulekar 1975, p. 47)

The most interesting aspect of this exposition is that it shows how class oppression influenced the formation of a new caste. This means that the transformation of the patriarchal caste structure was itself a manifestation of different methods of class oppression. There are many such illustrations of the use of patriarchal institutions as the harbingers of class domination. By implication, women belonged to the most oppressed classes, as their proletarianization took place, both at home and in the public sphere. Hence the women's question has been closely linked to the 'labour question' in Marxist writings (Kollontai [1946] 2017; Federici 2004).

The relationship between class and patriarchy could also be seen in operation at times when the bourgeois state carried out brutal repression of resistance. Rape and violence against women was used as a strategy to break resistance; women activists defied, defended and braved the oppression of the class State. A typical example is given by Sundarayya:

In Garla a girl of 15 years was caught and questioned: Who is this man who is running away? (He was an important comrade taking shelter in the house.) She immediately replied he is my husband, that

he had become afraid seeing the police and so was running away. The police evidently did not believe her story, beat her and raped her, but she refused to give out any secrets and stuck to her story. (Sundarayya 1972, p. 255)

In another example, Ila Mitra recalled an instance of her time in jail, where she was continuously reminded that she was a Santal and that she was also a woman (Panjabi 2017, pp. 200–01). There are also numerous illustrations of women forming self-defence squads and protecting men cadres from the police in the Warli struggle in the mid-1940s. As one account shows, in order to avoid arrest men used to hide from the police in the hills and forests during day time, while women combated the police and faced harassment. They also secretly informed the men about the whereabouts of the police and even misled the police. Most importantly, they bore and fought the atrocities of the landlords and the police (Prasad 2017, p. 37). This engendering of class oppression often reconfigured patriarchal authority and influenced the character of the early class struggles.

The feminist critique categorizing the communist emancipatory vision as patriarchal (see for example Panjabi [2017]), ignores the implications of the above mentioned historical narratives. It is evident that the space for women's activism increased because the 'personal' became 'political' and the boundaries between the 'public' and the 'private' were blurred through communist-led struggles. This enabled women to expand their spaces and overcome their limitations, even though they continued to struggle for greater space (see, for example, Loomba [2019]). Autobiographies of communist women also allude to the shackles that were put on them when they became communists, forcing them to break out of their traditional families. In these cases the commune and the movement became their family and allowed them to have their 'independent' identity and space (Marik

2013). The active participation of communist women in the All India Women's Conference from the early 1940s onwards and the formation of the National Federation of Indian Women in 1953 reflected the growing influence of communists in the women's movement. It also put pressure on the leadership of the Party to increasingly include women's demands within larger framework of class struggles, especially regarding equal wages, childcare and maternity benefits (Armstrong 2013, pp. 30–34). The presence of separate women's fronts continues to perform these tasks.

This, however, does not imply that no challenges exist within communist organizations. Communist theorists need to use the tools of contemporary Marxist theory to explore the dialectical interaction between vertical hierarchies (like class) and horizontally arranged factors (like patriarchy and caste) within the capitalist structure. Here the idea of social reproduction itself needs further exploration, in order to explain the systemic discrimination that engenders the formation of classes. But the populist contemporary theory of 'intersectionality' is inadequate to deal with this problem because it sees patriarchy outside the circuit of social production (for a defence of 'intersectionality' see John [2014]). In contrast, contemporary developments in Marxist theory have provided tools to explore this relationship in more complex ways because they locate patriarchy in the interface between material and super-structural realms (see for instance Vogel [2013]; Bhattacharya 2017). The development of theoretical analysis on these lines can provide greater clarity on the ways in which the formation and reproduction of classes is influenced by patriarchy and other social institutions. Such an exercise also has the potential of reconciling the differences between the 'radical' and 'socialist/Marxist' feminists so that joint struggles can be deepened against capitalism.

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