

Understanding women's mobilization in the Chittagong Hill Tracts struggle. The case of Mahila Samiti¹

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The politicization and mobilization of women in a society does not occur in a vacuum. In most colonized countries the process is linked with national liberation movements. The experience is similar for internally colonized societies like the Chittagong Hill Tracts region of Bangladesh. The rise of Parbotya Chattogram Mahila Shamiti (MS, The Chittagong Hill Tracts Women's Association) here is intrinsically related to their struggle for self-determination.

Nationalist movements are often accused of dwelling upon gender essentialism or stereotypes as part of their attempt to reinvent/rekindle 'traditional' culture, heritage and a sense of a peoplehood to activate cultural resistance (Fox 1996: 37). Many have argued that this process creates new bondage for women (Chatterjee 1989, Fox 1996, Katrak 1992). As opposed to this view there are others who have tried to identify the subtle complexities of the issue where at times the liberatory and derogatory aspects of nationalism are interwoven, depending on the context and kind of the movement (Basu and Roy 1990, Forbes 1981, Fox 1996) . This paper aims to explore this issue and the agency of hill women in the CHT by investigating their mobilization under the organization of Mahila Samiti. This necessitates knowing what caused

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them to organize, what kind of activities they performed, and how they articulated women's issues and national issues. In order to understand the basic issue of women's gender based mobilization, it is important to note that mobilizing women on the basis of their gender identity appears to be more persuasive and more successful than other ways of mobilization at that particular juncture of history in terms of "generating popular support or eliciting a response from political authorities" (Baldez 2002: 16).

The struggle in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, which is home to thirteen different ethnic indigenous groups, is based upon ethnic identity politics. The erosion of traditional indigenous patterns of self-rule, culture, language and economic deprivation has been instrumental in creating grievances among the *adibasis* (original inhabitants) of the CHT over time. The unique geographical location (hilly, densely forested), land pattern (high, non-fertile), agriculture (shifting cultivation), and indigenous ethnic composition have made the region substantially different from other parts of the country. A structure of non-formal, self-governing systems traditionally existed in the hill tracts which maintained autonomy from the power of the centre over a long period (Interview with Brauns and Loffer 1990). It was in 1860 that the British colonizers first formally annexed the area. Despite annexation, a degree of autonomy was still maintained through promulgating special laws and regulations.

The first direct and large-scale state intervention in the region came after 1947 during Pakistani colonial rule. In its effort to exploit natural and economic resources from East Bengal, the Pakistani rulers began to intercede into the CHT. The 1962 Constitution of Pakistan changed the status of the region from an excluded area to a 'tribal area,' despite strong protests from the hill leaders. The building of the Kaptai hydro-dam in 1962 was the next major step of state intervention that had a far-reaching impact on the region and the lives of its people as will be discussed later. The present form of politicization in the region began at this point and continued even after the independence of Bangladesh in 1971. From the very beginning, the ruling Bengali elites attempted deliberately to construct a homogenous image of Bangladesh. The 1972 Constitution of Bangladesh did not even recognize the existence of any indigenous groups in the

country. Thus, the hegemonic Bengali nationalist ideology, along with subsequent militarization and desecularisation of national politics and state oppression, intensified the CHT crisis leading it into a fully-fledged guerrilla struggle in the early 1970s. However, although a Peace Accord had been signed in 1977 bringing an official end to the two decades of bloody conflict, the non implementation of the accord has become the new of sources of grievance and conflict. Moreover, the precarious nature of the accord has led to internal division among the hill people. The critics of the accord have developed a new organization, the United Peoples Democratic Front (UPDF) and vows to materialize their demand of full autonomy.

In such a conflictual situation, hill women understandably constitute the most vulnerable group. They become prey of multi-dimensional marginalization in terms of ethnicity, religion, class and gender. It is the only region in the country where the majority of the population is non-Bengali and non-Muslim and therefore a minority in terms of both ethnicity and religion.² Economically they belong to the poorest section of the country. Being female members of such a vulnerable group, the CHT women stand out as the most marginalised in the society as in their case gender is contributing to further marginalisation. All the thirteen different ethnic groups residing in the CHT are by and large patriarchal. Even though the public-private dichotomy is not very sharp in these societies as women usually take part in outside economic activities alongside men, they have very little access to decision-making roles especially in the formal political arena. The formation of MS, the first political organization of hill women, was especially significant in this context. The organization became the agent of politicizing women and giving them a voice through their participation in the national movement.

The study has essentially derived from my desire to hear the voices of hill women that remain largely unrepresented and unheard. In so doing, I have privileged the category of women and in the absence of adequate secondary materials pertaining to the topic, I have primarily drawn on data from in-depth intensive interviews with the activists especially with female activists and some organizational documents that have been collected through the fieldwork conducted in the

² Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity and Animism are the faiths practiced by the most of the people in the region (Gain 2000:8)

CHT during the period of May 2003 to September 2003. The study basically covers the pre-Accord period, starting from the context of women's mobilization in the 1960s and early 70s.

Factors of mobilization

As mentioned, long oppression provoked the indigenous hill community, who constitute less than 1% of the total population, to eventually take up arms under the banner of Parbotyo Chatyogram Jano Sanghati Samiti (PCJSS, JSS / The CHT Peoples Solidarity Association) and its armed wing Shanti Bahini (SB / Peace Force). MS came into being in 1975 as a direct auxiliary body of JSS and became the first political organization for women in the region. But the politicization of hill women did not begin just with the emergence of MS: it had its roots in the national politics and the regional politics of the 1960s and the early 70s. A number of young women emerged as serious, committed activists imbued with the spirit of nationalism in this phase to take up future leadership. Several structural, political, ideological/organizational and personal factors were involved in this process which was not fundamentally different from the factors that motivated men, as Kampwirth (2002) observed in the cases of women's participation in Latin American (Nicaragua, El Salvador, Chiapas, Cuba) movements. I will however specifically focus on the aspects which had particular significance for women's mobilization at that time and concentrate on perception and experiences of the women.

Identity crisis

The process of the creation of 'otherness' (politically, culturally, socially) through a series of socio-political manipulations, from the British period onwards has caused greater alienation of the hill people from the mainstream society. The colonial construct of indigenous people as 'primitive' (*adim*) and uncivilized (*aasyovyvo*) persisted and was reinforced in many ways throughout the successive political regimes of Pakistan and Bangladesh. The partition of India in 1947 was a problematic event for the hill people. Since the division of the country was fundamentally based on religion, the *adibasis*³ of the hill region who were mostly non-Muslims strongly pleaded to be merged with India instead of Pakistan. But their demand was not met and the CHT was placed under the newly formed state of Pakistan. Hill people were often accused as pro-Indian because of their demand (Mohsin 2000:61). Similarly during the independence

³ A native Bengali term meaning original inhabitants.

struggle of Bangladesh, the hill people were marginalized. The war was generally waged in the name of Bangali language, culture and to protect Bangali interests against the West Pakistanis. Although no attempts were made to incorporate ethnic minorities, many hill people directly participated in the struggle and helped the freedom fighters. Nevertheless their contribution was not acknowledged. Instead hill people were generally stigmatized as pro-Pakistani/Pakistani collaborators and targeted by the freedom fighters as the then Chakma Raja Tridiv Roy⁴ personally supported the Pakistan Government (Mohsin 2003:61). Women's testimonies further reveal the dilemma they faced by being caught in between the two belligerent parties and being victimized by both. They were scared of both the *pathans* (the Pakistani force) and *muktibahini* (freedom fighters) as *pathans* used to come in search of *muktibahini*, whereas *muktibahini* would come to find traitors. Women's role and sacrifice in general in the liberation struggle is neglected, while not surprisingly hill women's sacrifice and suffering is completely ignored, although about 400-500 hill women are known to have been violated during that period (Mohsin 2003:60, 62). Mohini Tripura recounted her story of rape by the Pakistani army for the first time in public more than three decades after the incident and bore the brunt alone without having any mental or material support, although many people were aware of it (for details see, Mohsin 2003: 62-64). The silencing of Mohini's sad story is typical of the patriarchal social construct where raped women are usually stigmatized and silenced. But for activist Jyotiprava, it was the *muktibahini* who did most of the torturing:

We had to flee from home when the *Muktibahini* were returning back from India in December (1971) on the eve of victory day. We all went into hiding in the jungle in that cold wintertime except Ma (Mother). Ma did not want to leave. *Muktibahini* came to our house and pointed out guns and a knife at her and asked our, especially my brothers', whereabouts. They were searching for collaborators with Pakistan. One day, I spent the whole night alone in a cremation ground. It was so scary! In the morning while coming out from the jungle, I was about to fall in front of the *Muktibahini* but narrowly escaped.

⁴ The traditional chief of Chakma Circle (an administrative unit) which is mostly comprised of the Chakma people, the largest indigenous community of the hill tracts.

Jyotiprava's story was similar to many others which suggest that the birth of the new country only brought new fears for the *paharis*⁵ instead of new hopes. In like manner, another middle aged female informant, whom I call Minoti Chakma, says:

We are always enemies. In the British period we were *aasovyo* (uncivilized), *borbor* (barbarian), in Pakistan period we were pro-Indian, pro-Bengali, and now in Bangladesh again we are either pro-Indian (because of Shanti Bahini) or pro-Pakistani when it comes to the question of our role in the Independence struggle. Can we ever be just what we are and get justice?

It is clear from Minoti's assertion that the creation of otherness is indeed politically motivated to perpetrate and sustain discrimination against the hill people. This process of alienation and othering led to a severe identity crisis among the *paharis* over time, making identity based mobilization inevitable.

Kaptai Dam: 'The Death Trap'

The most devastating structural crisis that exacerbated greater political mobilization in its present form in the hill tracts was the building of the Kaptai hydro-dam in 1962 by the Government of Pakistan. It rendered about 100,000 people homeless, evicting them from their homelands overnight. About 40,000 became refugees in India and 40% of the best cultivable lands were submerged (Guhathakurta 2000:93). The consequences were so far-reaching that a whole generation had to grow up in the shadow of the adversities caused by it. Since then the dam has been known as 'death trap' among the *paharis*. Not many studies are available on the displacement caused by Kaptai dam and people's struggle for resettlement and their coping mechanisms. Consequently, we lack a detailed account. Nonetheless the majority of the families of the women I interviewed were victims of the devastating impact of the Kaptai dam. Women's sufferings in this context were severe as any increase in family adversity usually means an increase of women's suffering and sacrifice. One woman (Interview with Minoti Chakma 15/06/03) narrated how her mother used to starve in order to feed the children and the others in the family properly when they did not have enough to eat. To many of them, like Jarita Chakma, the memories of those days of tormenting crisis are still fresh. Jarita was

⁵ A Bengali term for the people who lives in the hill. The term is used both by the hill people and Bengalis to commonly identify all the ethnic indigenous groups living in the hill tracts.

then only a student in the first grade, but she still remembers how bewildered she was seeing the suffering of people:

So many people were drowned and dislocated overnight..... I could still see how women with bamboo baskets (*turong*) full of belongings on their head, carrying infants in their arms, and men with kids in their arms, and sacks of belongings (*jhuli*) on their shoulders were proceeding along the jungle paths towards an uncertain destiny! This picture has left a deep mark in my mind forever!

Jarita's expression reflects the feelings of many others who grew up at that time. The Kaptai dam means to them a saga of losing home/homeland, a point of departure after which life had never been the same. Evidently it was a turning point in the history of the CHT.

Expansion of education

The mass discontent generated by the Kaptai Dam provided CHT leadership with a greater opportunity to consolidate a mass mobilization. The demand for education generally increased in this context, because people needed alternative sources of income to survive after the loss of land, the primary means of living, due to the effect of the dam. The CHT leaders, who were primarily inspired by socialist/leftist ideology, were prudent and skillful enough to take measures to expand education for both practical and political purposes (Interview with Shantu Larma 14/05/03). The practical purpose was to increase the number of educated people for the benefit of their own survival, and also to raise the consciousness of the people who would be politically active and aware against all kinds of domination and discrimination. A literacy program was already underway since the early 1950s mostly among the Chakmas, the majority community of the hill tracts. The two proponents of this program were Krishno Kishor Larma and Chittyo Kishor Larma. Eleven High schools and one College were established in the CHT between 1951 and 1970. Seven out of the eleven High schools and the college were located in Rangamati (Ishaq 1971: 199) which was predominantly a Chakma area. As a result, there was a considerable rise in Chakma literacy rate (50% by 1970) creating a politically conscious educated class among them (Mohsin 2002: 47).

The education program of the 60s was politically motivated and taken up as a phase of political groundwork for greater future mobilization. As a result, a good number of educated political activists voluntarily chose to be teachers and stay in the villages to motivate young people and build a support base (Interview with Shantu Larma 14/05/03). The objectives of the program were to increase the number of educated people for their own benefit as well as to promote the movement that

needed educated, conscious political workers. Education was also used as a tool to raise general awareness among the *paharis* about all kinds of oppression and exploitation, both external and internal, by the ruling classes. Thus they criticized not only historical domination of the hill people by outside forces, but also the feudal social structure within the hill tracts which was essentially patriarchal. It does not take a great effort to realize that the program would have significant impact on the lives of hill women (Interview with Rupayon Dewan 16/06/03, Shantu Larma 14/05/03).

The proponents of the program were particularly keen on female education and put special emphasis on motivating society in favor of it. It served two purposes: it undermined against the feudal-patriarchal social structure and became a way to recruit female students. Students are generally considered the most progressive and conscious force in a society and naturally they were seen as potential recruits for the growing movement in the CHT. One way to ensure students', especially female students', participation was to promote their education. Usually the patriarchal social structure of the hill societies gave sons educational preference over daughters. Against this backdrop, creating a favorable atmosphere towards female education no doubt needed hard work. As Santu Larma puts it "we even had to go door to door to convince people to send their girls to schools." Consequently there was gradually a good turn out of female students, somewhere between one-fourth and one-third. Moreover the pro-education social attitude developed after the Kaptai Dam obviously had a positive impact on women's education too (Interview with Shantu Larma 14/05/03). Given the political fervor behind the program, the classroom lessons often went beyond textbook education to address social and political issues, e.g. the rights and sufferings of hill people, their culture, heritage, social system and injustice, especially women's subordination in the society and the like. Special efforts were made to make women aware of the social discrimination against them alongside the issues of national struggle and ethnic domination. The discussions were not only confined within the classes. Santu Larma asserted that while serving as a teacher he used to have separate discussions outside class with the female students on many occasions on socio-political issues. Many of them followed him to participate in political demonstrations and meetings in those days. The memories of those days are so vibrant that one of his students, who is now a government official in a city, still remembers how Santu Larma as a teacher influenced and inspired her to attend political meetings and programs (Interview with Shantu Larma 14/05/03). In this way a number of young women, particularly female students were drawn into politics alongside men at this time.

Personal factors

The factors mentioned above are not enough to explain why so many women, despite being affected by structural and political factors were left out of the growing women's mobilization. Personal backgrounds of the activist women are important to explain this as they provide information why those individuals were motivated to participate in politics (Kampwirth 2002: 37) as opposed to those who did not. Those who eventually became involved with politics had early exposure to either politics or injustice in many ways. It could be the influence of family member(s), relatives, close friends and teachers, or early affiliation to political and social networks, or the memories/experience of injustice or inequalities. Those who did not join despite experiencing identity crisis or having education might not have had these exposures or the degree might have varied.

One classic example of family influence was Jyotiprava Larma (alias Minu Larma). Her interest in politics stemmed from her family background and upbringing. She was the oldest sister of Manobendro Narayan Larma (MNL), Shuvendu Shekhar Larma, and Santu Larma (SL) who are the leading figures of the movement. Her uncle Krishna Kishor Chakma and father Chittyo Kishor Chakma were pioneers of the literacy movement of the 50s. Naturally hers was a comparatively liberal and enlightened family. She therefore had the privilege and opportunity to be trained in and participate in the on-going political process with family support. The thoughts and activities of her younger brother Manju (nick named MNL) exerted a great influence in Minu's life. She closely watched how seriously Manju was concerned with the discrimination and the misery of the paharis, their ethnic and national rights, and discriminatory social practices within the hill society, its 'backwardness', and unequal treatment of women. The problematic construction of the society thus was gradually unfolding in front of her. In addition, the hardships experienced by her family following the construction of the Kaptai dam were so profound that she came to believe in the justification of a greater social and political movement (Interview with Jyotiprava Larma 12/06/03). Equally Joyshree was influenced by her sister-in-law, Nibedita Dewan, who was actively involved with Pahari Chhatra Shamiti (PCS/ Pahari Hill Students' Association) politics and was drawn into it when she was a student in class eight or nine in 1968/1969 (Interview with Joyshree Dewan 10/06/03) while Jarita was directly inspired by MNL's speeches during the election year of 1970. Bitter childhood memories of the effect of the Kaptai dam also motivated her to enter politics in search of justice (Interview with Jarita Chakma 13/06/03).

On the other hand, Deepti Chakma had a very different but similarly compelling story in connection with her participation in politics. Her schoolteacher father who was a strong supporter

of the growing movement of the CHT initially influenced her. She too became involved with her school PCS branch. But with the increasing militarization in the region since 1974/1975 onwards, Deepti eventually became the target of a military lieutenant who made her life difficult by following her wherever she went. She thinks the reason could be either her alleged involvement with PCS politics or just to harass her. Not only her, but also many other *pahari* girls, Deepti asserted, were also harassed by the army and security personnel. She even had to drop her studies in fear of being abducted and was forced to stay out of the house at a time when her father was arrested in connection with his involvement with the movement. Unable to lead a normal life, Deepti later joined MS (Interview with Deepti Chakma 10/06/03).

The developments in the 60s and the early 70s thus created necessary time and space for the emergence of a group of politically aware and active women who took up leadership in the next phase. Mostly male relatives, friends and neighbours were their primary source of influence and inspiration. For many of them there were family pressures not to be involved in political activities. Yet that pressure was likely to be less when they were mainly inspired and recruited by family members or close friends and associates. These women had opportunities to gain at least a certain degree of education and political exposure and were no doubt strong and brave enough to come out, overcoming the fear of any political and social backlash. Evidently, women's activism at this stage was not as much a product of the women's cause as it was of nationalist feelings. Discriminatory social practices against women were touched upon by the leaders while critiquing the feudal social structure as a way to encourage and legitimize women's participation, but women's issues were yet to appear on the political agenda.

The emergence of Mohila Shamiti (MS)

Most of the early MS activists had their initial political training through organizations like PCS and Jubo Shomiti (Youth Association). PCS was the most active political platform in the hill tracts since its inception in 1957. It had branches throughout the educational institutions in the region (Interview with Minu Pru Marma, 16.06.03). Students from grade six onwards were entitled and encouraged to be members. It thus became the recruiting and breeding ground of young members and future leaders for the movement. Minu Pru Marma, a high school teacher who presided over the first council of MS in 1975, was one of the earliest activists to become involved in student politics with PCS as early as a student of eighth or ninth grade in the mid 1960s. She was a member of PCS at her school along with some other girls. Likewise, Nibedita Dewan, Joyshree Dewan, Juthika Chakma, Deepti Chakma were

active in PCS, while Jarita Chakma asserted that she was Assistant General Secretary of one Thana⁶ committee of Jubo Samiti.

By the late 60s, young women's activist enthusiasm had grown to the extent that there was an attempt to form a women's organization around 1967-69 (date could not be confirmed) even prior to the establishment of PCJSS in 1972. Preparatory work was done in connection to the formation of the organization.⁷ Pankojini Chakma and Taposhi Chakma were the leading figures. Both of them were then students. Presumably, this early organization was intended to be a platform for the female students who were working with the PCS. However, the attempt did not succeed (Interview with Santu Larma, 14.05.03). Following Baldez (2002) we may attribute this failure to wrong timing when partisan realignment was yet to begin.

In this phase women also participated actively in the Election Conducting Committee (ECC) of 1969-70. The committee was set up in connection to the up-coming national election in 1970 where MNL was running as an independent candidate. Santu Larma asserted that ECC in fact was a political body under the guise of accomplishing election-related tasks, as it was difficult during those days of military rule in Pakistan to launch a direct political party. It was only after the independence of Bangladesh that JSS became a fully-fledged political party in the CHT in 1972. The first female member of JSS was Madhobilata Chakma in 1973. Madhobilata, although only a general member of JSS, had a very close connection with the party leadership at the organizing level and was given the task of recruiting new members. She worked ardently to target both men and women (Interview with Madhobilata Chakma 07/06/03). Basanti Dewan, Padma Devi Chakma and some other women became JSS members later (Interview with Rupayon Dewan 16/06/03).

Nevertheless it was evident by 1975 that an armed struggle was imminent in the region. Shanti Bahini (SB), the armed wing was already formed (1973) and had started limited scale actions. The situation prompted the need to unite hill people from all sections of life in favor of the

⁶ Thana is an administrative unit based on the area that a police station covers.

⁷ Santu Larma called the organization Mahila Shamiti. But from other sources it is known as Nari Shamiti.

movement. Since women constituted almost half of the *pahari* population in the CHT, their cooperation was therefore deemed as necessary as men's. The decision to establish a women's wing of the party came against this backdrop. The purpose was two-fold: to provide already active women with a platform of their own; and to mobilize more women behind the struggle. A convening committee was formed initially in February 21, 1975 (Interview with Joyshree Dewan 10/06/03). The initiative came from the male leaders of JSS. Santu Larm, then field commander and the current chief of the party, in conjunction with Madhobilata, who was then a member of JSS, undertook the preparatory tasks which ultimately culminated in the formation of the MS. Later in August 10, 1975, in the first council of the organization an elected committee took over. The committee was headed by Madhobilata as President, whereas Minu Pru Marma along with five others shared the post of vice-president, and Joyshree Dewan and Deepti Chakma respectively became the General Secretary and Organising Secretary (Report 1975 1975).

MS thus came to existence as an auxiliary body of JSS. It was obvious then that MS's independently operating power would be somewhat restricted and its policy and programs would be largely determined by the central party. MS' manifesto and Regulation of 1975 which set out the detailed guidelines of organizational features, form of operation and principles, were in fact primarily devised by JSS's central leadership. This formed the basis of MS's relationship with JSS and its ideological approach. However, instead of direct control, the preferred mode of maintaining the relationship was getting and providing feedback when necessary and assisting each other's work.

Organizational approach: Articulation of women's interests and national interests

The political ideology of MS was predicated upon a broad left approach, similar to the line of the Central party. The 1975 Manifesto of MS outlined the key premises of this approach. It identified the ruling class, imperialism, feudalism and capitalism as responsible for the exploitation and oppression of the hill people. It viewed the Bangladesh Government as a crony of these forces and prioritized the need for national struggle as the hill society was still colonized due to the aggressive Bengali nationalist policy pursued by the ruling elites. Patriarchy, the root cause of women's subordination was also regarded an integral component of feudalism that is reinforced through imperialism and bureaucratic capitalism. The local feudal, patriarchal social structure and the global capitalist and imperialist forces are both identified as at work in exploiting women. Consequently, hill women are faced with state oppression, feudal-patriarchal oppression and

economic oppression. Women therefore need to take part in the struggle to free the society from these forces so as to free themselves and all others who are exploited and dominated (Mahila Shamitir Ishtehar 1975). This typical Marxist-Socialist theorization of social struggles tends to prioritize the class struggle and in this context the national liberation struggle as it was considered that hill people were still colonised. The need to liberate women is acknowledged but viewed as an integral part of the struggle to liberate the nation and establish a classless society.

This problematic is further compounded by the discourse of nationalism. Women's paradoxical relationship with ethnic identity based nationalism is well discussed in feminist works (Afshar 1996, Alexander and Mohanty 1997, C. Kaplan and et al. 1999, Charles and Hintjens 1998, Yuval-Davis 1993, Yuval-Davis and Anthias 1989). It is held that woman's subordination is embedded even in the apparently innocent discourse of nationalism, which highlights women's stereotypical role as cultural marker, biological reproducer, and signifier of ethnic/national difference, but at the same time calls upon women to participate in the struggle and thereby opens up 'atypical' public political space for them.

MS as an organization shows this ambivalence. The priority of national struggle has overshadowed women's issues to the extent that not a single objective is targeted to women-specific interests in the MS Regulation of 1975, while they were urged to participate in the struggle for self-determination⁸ (Mahila Shamitir Upobidhi 1975). Furthermore, there is no mention about the precise forms of women's participation or how to bring about a social change where women's interest will supposedly be ensured (Mahila Shamitir Ishtehar 1975).

It seems MS activists internalized these concepts. They acknowledged hill women's subordinated role, but regarded the national question as pivotal and believed that the resolution of the issue would offer a better basis for dealing with women's rights, although would not result in to a society free of gender discrimination. Jarita asserted, "Once we achieve our national freedom then we will be able to fight for women's rights." For Tipoti, national struggle was a matter of dignity

⁸ The stated objective was doing away with the feudal-patriarchal system and ideology, and all forms of oppression and exploitations by the Bangladesh Government, a crony of imperialism, feudalism and bureaucratic capitalism, through the national liberation struggle with the aim of establishing a national state based on peoples' democracy (*Janaganotantrik*)

as human being as Bangalis did not even treat them as human. The question of rights as woman comes next for her. On the other hand, the issue is much broader to Madhobilata. She thinks the success of the self-determination movement of *jumma*⁹ people would not necessarily bring *jumma* women's freedom in society. For this to be achieved, a class and exploitation free society has to be established and that not in only in the CHT but across the world: "I will not live to see this I know, but I believe one day the world will be free from all kinds of discrimination . . .now we are working towards it. . . . and it will continue even after the struggle for freedom." Their notion of womanhood also changed in this context. Performing conventional duties is not perceived as enough for a woman to be a 'proper woman': she is expected to contribute to the struggle for her community (Interview with Jarita Chakma 12/06/03, Interview with Jarita Chakma 13/06/03, Madhobilata Chakma 07/06/03, Minoti Chakma 15/06/03). A balance between political and 'apolitical' roles is suggested here. Thus national struggle is also regarded by these women as a priority if women's rights are to be achieved. But none of them believed that women's equal rights would be achieved without another struggle, again problematizing the relationship between socialism, nationalism and women's issue and suggesting that they did not accept and internalize those conceptions without reservation.

However, at the practical level, women's gender-based mobilization was not possible without addressing some practical gender interests of village women, such as promoting educational, cultural, health care facilities and overall well-being of village women; resolving the problems of misunderstanding and arguments/fights between women in the villages; and resisting collectively the torture and injustice against women by men (Mahila Shamitir Upobidhi 1975) The rhetoric of class struggle or national struggle alone could not serve the purpose of mobilizing women unless some of women's gender related interests were addressed. However, a balance between the national need, women's need and social norms had to be maintained so as not to upset the existing social system.

⁹ The word *Jumma* is derived from the word *Jum-chash* meaning shifting cultivation. The people who practice it are locally known as *Jumia* or *Jumma*. The concept of *Jumma* acted as a unifying criterion to hold together the thirteen different ethnic groups to a common cause, whose language, culture, religious practice otherwise were considerably different from each other (Van-Schendel 1995).

Again, this is a characteristic pattern of nationalist discourse. Accordingly the language MS used as a strategy to motivate women, i.e. that women's social and educational progress is needed as it would give the nation capable mothers and wives (Interview with Joyshree Dewan 10/06/03) was evidently tapping into women's conventional role as mother and caregiver and 'political outsider' (Baldez 2002). At that moment that seemed the best way to appeal to women at the grass-root level to attain their support and participation. This is a dilemma that is constantly reflected in different stages of MS activities and would be apparent as well from its major initiatives of resistance.

Shifting Images of MS: From arms training to *Panchayat*¹⁰ management

MS's resistance politics was generally contained within organizing, mobilizing and managing different affairs, rather than going into 'big actions' as SB did, earning fame by fighting against the 'enemy'. In one way it was limited, but in another way, these were the activities that formed the basis on which the greater resistance politics was built. Furthermore, MS activities underwent considerable transformation, adjusting with the changed need and situation, and moving from militancy of arms training to management of *panchayat*. In the first two years MS built up an organizational base at the grass root level. But with the growing SB actions and increased army surveillance around 1977, carrying out normal activities became difficult for MS workers (Interview with Chandra Shekhar Chakma 10/06/03, Deepti Chakma 10/06/03, Juthika Chakma 7/06/03, Madhobilata Chakma 07/06/03). Although MS did not start as a clandestine organization, discussions with MS activists reveal that they had to combine both overt and covert modes of functioning from early on. Being unable to undertake the usual mode of operation at this phase, MS started working mostly underground. A number of them then underwent arms training and intensive political training. It was in fact the central party policy to combine military and political trainings together as they were considered to be complementary. Men also received similar trainings but had more intensive arms training.

¹⁰ *Panchayat* is a traditional village administrative unit existed in different parts in the Sub-continent.

Arms Training

The nature of the arms training for MS activists was primarily for self-defense as asserted by both the JSS and MS leaders. The training started in January 25, 1977 in a remote, almost inaccessible secret camp of JSS/SB located in a deep forest. It went for about one month and about 60 –65 activists in total received the training in two batches. Each batch comprised 30-35 people. The training was of limited scale and consisted of two parts: practice and theory. In practical training the participants were taught elementary military skills like positioning, camouflaging, concealment, targeting, covering, advancing, reversing, firing, the use of light arms and the techniques of making explosives. The theoretical training was composed of crafts and kinds of war and arms, their uses and so on. The trainees had to take tests for both the theory and practical training. The training was conducted by the chief arms trainers of SB, Buro Ostad (old/elderly guru) and Boli Ostad (Interview with Chandra Shekhar Chakma 10/06/03, Deepti Chakma 10/06/03, Jarita Chakma 12/06/03, Juthika Chakma 7/06/03, Madhobilata Chakma 07/06/03). Male and female trainees lived in nearby barracks but had separate courses. Men's training was more rigorous and heavier than women's.

The training, however, did not enlist women as combatants nor were they provided with arms for self-protection in the face of army raids, or any unwanted attacks by the army or Bengalis. So, the intention was rather to prepare women for future need of the struggle. This very nature of the training evokes the recurrent concern of discussions on women's role in armed guerrilla struggle that they are mostly accommodated in such groups in auxiliary, secondary roles (Goldstein 1993: 474)It is argued that the notion of women as weak, passive and peaceful works here, when true heroism in popular discourse of war lies in fighting and martyrdom. In response to my query about this matter I was given several situational explanations which did not differ much between male and female leaders of JSS and MS. In sum they were firstly that the social condition of the hill tracts was not ready to accept women in such role. Secondly, women's participation in the fighting was not necessary for that moment as the struggle in the CHT was not as extensive as in China or Vietnam where it became necessary. Had it continued longer, women might have had to fight too. Finally it was considered that at that moment organizing mass women in favour of the movement was more important for MS activists than to fight (Interview with Chandra Shekhar Chakma 10/06/03, Deepti Chakma 10/06/03, Madhobilata Chakma 07/06/03, Rupayon Dewan 16/06/03, Shantu Larma 14/05/03). Women were seemed to be quite ready to fight if needed but remained content with the given role. The JSS leadership was open to that too depending on

future need as mentioned above. However, it raises the old suspicion of MS's dependency on JSS and the problematic of the way 'need' was constructed. This is not to belittle the positive intention of the JSS leadership not to put women in danger or to glorify armed role. It is only to problematize how the hegemonic social process created certain needs and intentions and limit women's freedom of choice and how the social division of roles operates advertently or inadvertently even within the very conflictual situation and radical discourse of guerrilla struggle. The concern strengthens when the list of martyrs prepared by the JSS is found to lack any female martyrs as there was no female combatant died in the battle despite their strong roles and casualties in many ways.

Despite the inherent limitations, women's arms training was socially significant. In a way it broke conventional social construction of women's image attired in local or ethnic costume as they had a special uniform for the training consisting of pants and shirts (Interview with Deepti Chakma 10/06/03, Jarita Chakma 12/06/03, Jarita Chakma 13/06/03). This was the first time these women wore something other than their usual dresses of *pinon-khadi*¹¹ or sari (traditional Bengali women's dress). Wearing the uniform for the first time was an awesome experience for many of them as it gave them feelings of strength and determination that were unprecedented. Almost the same feelings appeared when they first took up arms in their hands (Interview with Deepti Chakma 10/06/03, Jarita Chakma 13/06/03, Juthika Chakma 7/06/03, Madhobilata Chakma 07/06/03). It is indeed a process that transformed these women from ordinary *pahari* girls into strong armed members of a guerrilla group with firm dedication and devotion to their national cause. Although this outer transformation was not permanent, the feelings remained an integral part of their self-being, making them different from other *pahari* women and even from the other non-trained members of MS.

Political Training

¹¹ Traditional *pahari* dress for women. It is a kind of two-part dress: a piece of knee-length cloth is wrapped around the waist and there is a blouse for the top which is wrapped around with a scarf-like piece of fabric with similar motifs/ design to cover the chest.

As mentioned, military training was accompanied by political training either earlier or later.¹² Political training was complementary to arms training so that the greater purpose of liberating people through arms struggle remained the ultimate goal. This meant, in another words, to prevent a situation where arms training without proper political knowledge and vision ends up in mere violence.

There were about 65 women in the first batch of political trainees. Trainers were from the JSS's main body¹³ (Interview with Deepti Chakma 10/06/03, Jarita Chakma 12/06/03). The syllabus and reading materials suggest that the training was designed according to the party's leftist/socialist line of thought. It included topics ranging from political ideologies, socio-economic systems, women's issues and exemplary world revolutions, to the history, heritage and culture and tradition of the CHT. The participants were taught an array of themes like Marxism/Leninism, class politics, feudal and capitalist socio-economic systems, feudal, bourgeois and 'progressive' way of thought and the party's outlook in this regard, its principles and strategy, women's issues, revolutionary struggles in various countries and women's role there etc (Interview with Chandra Shekhar Chakma 10/06/03, Deepti Chakma 10/06/03). Their reading lists also included classical Bengali books on elementary politics and economics,¹⁴ biographies of great personalities like Lenin, Rabindranath Tagore, stories of Russian and Chinese revolutions and so on (Jarita, Juthika and Deepti). Initially the participants found it hard to understand these complicated issues as they were just then stepping on to the political domain, but gradually they began to comprehend and their interest grew (Interview with Deepti Chakma 10/06/03). They even ventured out to read fictions like *Tania*, Maxim Gorky's *Mother* which they recall were very inspirational for them (Interview with Deepti Chakma 10/06/03, Jarita Chakma 13/06/03). Male activists also received political training based on the same syllabus but separately (Interview with Chandra Shekhar Chakma 10/06/03). The reasons for separate training for the males and females could be multiple. First, gender segregation is maintained from the point of view of the conventional social segregation of spaces between men and women. Due to this social

¹² According to Jarita Chakma political training was given before the arms training. But Deepti Chakma contends that they stayed one month longer after the arms training for political training.

¹³ They included Lakshmi Prasad Chakma, Ambar Chakma, Sukanta Chakma, Ashok Chakma and so on.

¹⁴ *Chhotoder Rajneeti* and *Chhotoder Aarthaneeti*.

convention, women might find themselves more comfortable and easy in having separate classes. Moreover, they had different level and way of understanding than men which could have influenced the arrangement of the training. This training had significant impact in changing the perception and worldview of these women. They learned to question and understand the discriminatory social process and its hegemony based upon class politics. None of the women I talked to believed in religion. Some of them take part in religious ceremonies as a social activity, but they no longer believed it. In their understanding for human beings humanity should be the only religion (Interview with Deepti Chakma 10/06/03, Jarita Chakma 13/06/03, Joyshree Dewan 10/06/03, Jyotiprava Larma 12/06/03, Madhobilata Chakma 07/06/03). They acknowledge this is quite unusual for women in their society.

However, MS's growing militancy did not long go unnoticed by the army and administration. Soon the army began its crackdown and violence against women considerably increased from 1977/78 onwards. A number of MS members were detained, tortured and forced to surrender. In some cases their families, especially young female members, were targeted or picked up by the security forces to put pressure on the activists to surrender. For example, MS member Meena Tripura's younger sister Chirotika Tripura (aged 8 or 9) was picked up by the army to force Meena to surrender. Even then Meena did not surrender despite her family's insistence, but could not return to MS's activities once when she went to home because of illness (Interview with Jarita Chakma 13/06/03, Madhobilata Chakma 07/06/03). Eventually the families were becoming unwilling to let their daughters participate in the risky business of MS that could put the whole family in danger. Some members, like Shefalata Chakma, Director of one Zone, and president of one village committee, were arrested and severely tortured (Madhobilata Chakma 07/06/03)¹⁵ Meena Consequently, quite a few, even those who took arms training, had to surrender. Against this backdrop MS activities decreased considerably and prompted the central party to halt its activities.

Emergence of Mahila Panchayat (MP)

¹⁵ While referring to the growing army pressure on MS activists Madhobilata Chakma mentioned these instances but could not confirm their names except Shefalata.

The formation of MP was derived from practical concerns in the face of growing army repression both against the activists and their families. The families of the party workers were taking refuge in the jungles or crossing the Indian border for safety to avoid army reprisals. Sometime, the families were split and scattered and often without means or resources to survive or meet their basic needs. This situation provoked the central party to extend assistance so that the workers could concentrate on party work without being burdened by family responsibilities. In doing this the party was also driven by the desire to make families remain supportive and sympathetic towards the party even in the situation of crisis like this (Interview with Joyshree Dewan 10/06/03, Shantu Larma 14/05/03). JSS already had introduced the village *panchayat* system across the CHT in order to regulate and coordinate village affairs which was the support base of the struggle. Similarly Mahila Panchayat was formed to assist and coordinate these distressed activists' families by helping them run their day-to-day affairs. MS was given the task of developing MP¹⁶ and it reorganized itself accordingly. MP thus exemplified a new strategy of survival of women's activism as well in the changed context defying the armed authority of the state. But the central committee of MS continued to exist, maintaining liaisons between the party and *panchayat*. MP was considered an intermediary or transitory body as it was expected that MS would be reorganised in its conceived form once the suitable condition is restored. And we have seen the reformation of MS since the Peace Accord in 1997. In this discussion, I will first look at its functions and then its significance.

MPs were located throughout the CHT dispersely and some even were across the border in safe places. Each MP consisted of about 20-25 workers families who were placed (Interview with

¹⁶ Opinions regarding MP's time of inception vary considerably. Madhobilata and Juthika opined that it started sometime between 1980-84 especially after the end of the internal party feud known as 'civil war' (*grihajudha*) in 1983. Deepti Chakma stated it as 1978-79, whereas Jarita categorically mentioned the events of 1986-87 when a new 17 members central committee of MS was elected again with Madhobilata as president and Jyotiprava as vice-president along with some other new faces and with the presence of almost 300 workers, and after that new activities began under Mahila Panchayat. Chandra Sekhar Chakma, who by virtue of working in the central office of JSS at that time was aware of MS's activities, and thinks that it would be around 1978-79. Even the Regulation of MP does not mention anything about it.

Deepti Chakma 10/06/03, Joyshree Dewan 10/06/03, Shantu Larma 14/05/03) under the management of *panchayat* committees. A *panchayat* committee, comprising 3 to 7 members depending on the numbers of the member families, was proposed by the Family Welfare Department of the party and endorsed by the adult members of the member families (Mahila Panchayat Bidhi: 2). It is not certain how much independent policy making power the *panchayat* committee had, but there were about 30-35 MPs in total whose structural patterns and policies were by and large similar—which suggests a centrally formulated, regulated policy formulations. Yet the specific needs of a particular *panchayat* might have been raised and decided by the committee in deliberation with the party. Sometimes, non-activist families living in the same area were also incorporated in the *panchayat* system (Interview with Madhobilata Chakma 07/06/03). In most cases MS activists were in the charge of leading the committee and *panchayat* in general. However, they also included ordinary women from the member families. Membership was open to adult female family members. The duties of MP were basically to manage the livelihood, health, education of the families, maintain inter-familial relationships, plan their overall development, make them aware of party ideals and principles and so on (Mahila Panchayat Bidhi: 1-2). Since the *panchayats* were located in interior unknown locations, for convenience of identification MPs were given names like Surma, Progoti, Sandhani, Moitree etc.

MP had the judiciary power to try members of the families, regardless of gender, for offences like theft, fighting, anti-social activities, alcohol addiction and selling, appropriation of funds, killing, spying, conspiracy or any anti-party activities (Mahila Panchayat Bidhi) . There were many instances of men being tried by women members of MP. Even SB members or JSS members while visiting their families on leave¹⁷ were not exempted from MP's jurisdiction. They had to report to the MP committee first, registering their arrival and duration of stay. There were even instances that they were tried and punished for misdemeanors like fighting, wife beating and so on (Interview with Joyshree Dewan 10/06/03, Rupayon Dewan 16/06/03, Shantu Larma 14/05/03)

Providing basic education for the children of member families was one prominent task of MP. In most cases these families spent their lives in exile for a long time like 10 years or even more and

¹⁷ Shanti Bahini or JSS members could take leave for a month in a year.

had no means to obtain educational facilities for their children who were born or grew up there. Without party support this whole generation would have grown up illiterate (Jarita Chakma 13/06/03). Each MP had its own primary school (up to grade 5) whereas high schools (grade six to ten) were placed directly under party supervision. Usually educated MS members and educated women of the member families served as teachers voluntarily. But if there were not enough educated members in a MP, they were hired from other village *panchayats* or refugee camps for a small remuneration.

MP was also engaged in a wide range of income generation activities. There were both collective and individual systems of production. Rice, sugarcane, cotton, fruits, vegetables were produced, and poultry, cattle and fish were raised for their own consumption and also for sale. The money earned through collective production was deposited in the *panchayat* fund, which was then used to run the schools, provide medical facilities and to help families in times of need. Individual earnings were usually spent on individual family expenses, but if the earning was ostensibly more than enough, a part of it had to be donated to the collective fund of MP. Other than membership fees, MP's fund raising process involved a system of collecting and encouraging individual habits of savings, a system of *mushti chaul* (rice in a fist). Under this system member women were required to save a fistful of rice every time she cooks or once a day or a week or whatever is convenient for her and donate the money or the rice in MP's collective fund. This was indeed a very pragmatic approach for women because they find saving rice was easier for them rather than saving hard cash. Financially, *panchayats* thus managed to run mostly independently except for some grants from the central party. In return they extended logistic support to the party. There were waist loom projects for women to produce daily wear, like *gamcha* (kind of towel), *lungi* (daily wear for men), *pinon-khadi*, etc. to meet the needs of the member-families and especially to supply the party activists and guerrillas. MPs provided the guerrillas and party workers with safe shelters when needed; they treated them when they were ill or wounded; and they arranged political meetings, and discussion classes where along with women, men who wished could and were encouraged to participate to disseminate party ideals/objectives and generate support for the struggle. The central committee of MS was in overall charge of monitoring MP's activities (Mahila Panchayat Bidhi: 2)

The significance of MP is that it exemplified the strategy of survival and accommodation of women's political activism in a crisis situation. This move of changing roles on the part of the MS in the changed context was indeed a realistic approach. But in many ways it was a

reversal of women's activism from direct political roles to indirect, passive political roles; from arms militancy to managing the affairs of families. In so doing they were on the one hand performing 'revolutionary' duties, and the on other hand reproducing the same genre of politics where men were set free for more 'pro-active' roles and women took a 'politico-familial' role. It was like an extension of women's roles in the household management in a larger context.

Women's traditional skill at household affairs was drawn on here to pose an effective resistance to the counter-insurgency. Nevertheless, in some ways this managerial experience was novel for women as it was a public administrative affair and it involved most ordinary women in participating in *panchayat* management, thus exposing them to 'public politics'. Some of them, like Notun Mala (Interview with Notunmala Chakma 14/06/06), who was looking after a large waist-loom project, eventually became serious activists and for her it was an empowering experience. As for the struggle, MP's contribution was extremely crucial for its survival as apart from setting men free to fight and providing material support to the party, the MP system integrated whole families of activists into the cause of the struggle, in a way that was utterly necessary for the sustenance of the struggle. Male leaders of JSS/SB acknowledged it and valued highly women's role in running MPs. This system continued to exist until the peace accord of 1997.

Conclusion

As evident from the discussion above the role and mobilization of women was to protest and voice concern against the structure of domination. Evidently women's mobilization here was not as much a product of gender issue as it was of the experience of ethnic discrimination. Although women's subordination was embedded in this multi-layered structure of domination, in which ethnic domination or class domination was only a part, MS did not view the struggle to liberate women as separate from the struggle to liberate the greater society because the politics they were drawn into was largely dictated and mediated by men's discourse of nationalism. The underlying socialist/nationalist ideologies behind the mobilization were not gender-neutral, as we have already seen. But on the personal level the MS activists showed reservations and skepticism about the typical interpretations of these ideologies with regard to gender issues. Although there was ambivalence in their perceptions, one should not completely ignore its significance, as it was largely the product of their own understanding. The paradoxes of nationalism were compounded by the fact that organizing this way for these women was on the one hand itself an act of transgression of the existing social norms and patterns that conventionally did not accommodate

public-political roles for women, and on the other hand these acts at times required them to evoke and perform gender stereotyped roles. Participating in the movement was based upon their own decisions because of the discrimination and injustice they experienced personally. And they negotiated their own space wherever possible, contesting the conventional kinship politics and patriarchy.

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