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Santosh Kumari Gupta and the jute trade union movement of Bengal in the early 1920s- revisiting history

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Abstract

This paper has tried to place itself in the context of socio-political changes in the early 20th century colonial India when national consciousness was gaining momentum. A number of mass movements were initiated under the moderate and the extremist leaderships by the Indian National Congress. Efforts were made to organize the peasantry and the working class especially in Bengal and Maharashtra. The participation of a handful of women leaders in the working class movement was significant. My study is to focus on the leadership role played by Santosh Kumari Devi in the Bengal jute trade union movement in the early 1920s. The paper tries to analyse Santosh Kumari Gupta's role in the working class movement of Bengal especially among the jute workers soon after the formation of All India Trade Union Congress in 1920.

Keywords: Santosh Kumari Gupta, Jute trade union movement, Bengal, Gouripur Jute Mill, Naihati

Introduction

It was decided in the Manifesto of the All India Trade Union Congress in 1920 that a clarion call was to be given to the workers to get united. The AITUC also passed a resolution that women workers should be provided with some special accommodations. It was during this time a handful of women activists came to the forefront to champion the cause of the workers and lead the working class movement. Mass movements were also initiated under the moderate and the extremist leaderships by the Indian National Congress. Efforts were undertaken by the nationalists to organize the peasantry and the working class especially in Bengal and Maharashtra. The leadership given by Santosh Kumari Devi in the Bengal jute trade union movement in the early 1920s is significant. The paper tries to make an attempt to analyse Santosh Kumari Gupta's role in the working class movement of Bengal especially among the jute workers just after the formation of All India Trade Union Congress in 1920.

Historian Geraldine Forbes writes that the roles of women in the labour unions have been ignored by historians of the labour movement in India (Forbes-1998, 174)^[7]. According to Forbes, 'Nevertheless, women's presence in strikes and labor disturbances, as strike breakers and as labour leaders, was noted from the 1920s'. (Forbes-1998, 174)^[7]. Samita Sen in her 'Women and Labour in Colonial India - The Bengal Jute Industry' shows in the historiography of labour there is 'no gender –versus class debate because gender has been marginal to studies of class. The Bengal case runs true to this type in ignoring the role of women in labour movements' (Sen-1999, 213)^[8]. She is of opinion that even the past and the contemporary trade union activists tried to show that there were few women in the industry so as 'to justify any special effort to mobilize them'. The reason being they constituted a very small portion of the workforce, so they remained 'relatively unimportant to the unions' (Sen-1999, 214)^[8]. This was the reason why the 'issue of mobilization of women was peripheral to organized politics in Bengal'. It can be pointed that even strikes were described without referring women. In one article, 'Women's Strikes- Gender and Class in the Bengal Jute Industry- 1890-1940' in the edited book 'Women in History', Samita Sen argues that the 'dominating official sources generated by the state, the mill owners and trade unions' either 'ignore women or tend to portray them in negative terms'. (ed. Chanda, 2003, 66)^[3]. The union's 'disinterest in mobilizing women and their failure to appreciate the special difficulties within which women workers operated, sometimes created situations where

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workers could be induced or intimidated to break strikes and rejoin work' (Chanda ed, 2003,71) ^[4], thereby leading to 'disinclination on the part of women to participate in unions'(Chanda ed, 2003,73) ^[3]. This was the reason why there was 'remarkable absence of an emergence of leadership from within the working class'. Trade union leaders were mostly 'middle class idealists' who played 'primarily, mediating roles between the workers and management' (Chanda *et al.* ed., 2003, 78) ^[4]. However Samita Sen argues that although there was a general disinterest in mobilizing women, the trade unions could not altogether ignore them. And in order to mobilize working class women, Santosh Kumari was enlisted from among a 'middle class women activists'. Geraldine Forbes writes, that several women leaders came up notable among whom were 'Maniben Kara, Ushabhai Dange and Pravabati Bhore in Bombay and Santosh Kumari Devi and Pravabati Devi in Calcutta who became leaders of trade unions and represented both women and men to management'. (Forbes, 1998, 174) ^[7].

Manju Chattopadhyay, working extensively on Santosh Kumari writes that she was among the handful woman trade unionists of Bengal who although came from western educated upper caste mixed without any hesitation with the innumerable workers who were mostly poor and belonging to lower caste status or were Muslims. In the early twenties of the twentieth century there were strikes over issues like 'wages, the abolition of khoraki payment, dismissal of workers with union connections and the venality of the supervisors and sardars' (Sen, 1999, 218) ^[8]. Although serious efforts of unionization had begun, most of the unions were either short lived or less informed about. However, 'relatively stable union' in the early 1920s was the Gourepur Works Employees Association formed by Santosh Kumari Devi with the help of Bankim Mukherjee and Kalidas Bhattacharya.

In her book 'Sramiknetri Santosh Kumari' Manju Chattopadhyay writes that perhaps humanitarianism induced Santosh Kumari to join hands with the labour movements of the period. In one of her interviews, Santosh Kumari says, 'In my childhood I heard from my mother about the poverty stricken people of the country. Besides, I used to go to Kalighat with my mother. There I could see many thin, hungry, handicapped beggars and our eyes got soaked. I used to think, could not the common people be freed from their sufferings?'(Chattopadhyay, 1982, 16) ^[5]. In her unpublished work 'How I started the Labour Movement' Santosh Kumari writes, 'I went to almost all the jute mills at Naihati, Garifa, Halisahar, Bhatpara, Sodepur to organize the labourers. Over and above making team members of the jute workers' union, we set up night schools and even health centres for working women and children in some centres...Of course I worked there in the name of the Congress. My concept was that the Congress should come forward to organize the working class, so that the workers in their turn realized the importance of the Congress.' (Chattopadhyay, *Social Scientist*, Vol-12, 1984: 65) ^[10] She also noted how she got involved in the Gouripur Jute Mill strike near Naihati. The workers were no longer able to endure the tortures of the British landowners and their sardars. They started the strike with demands for rise in wages. Santosh Kumari extended leadership to them. After prolonged discussion with the mill-owners it was resolved that the workers would resume work only under certain

conditions- firstly, those who were imprisoned would be released and those who had been 'retrenched' would be allowed to join. Santosh Kumari was responsible for the formation of Gouripur Sramik Samiti in 1923.

The Labour Party MPs of England Thomas Johnston and John F. Syme officially visited the jute mills around Calcutta and they spoke highly of the work carried on by Santosh Kumari and her association which had conducted 9 strikes including one at Gouripur Mill. During this strike at the Gouripur Mill as is noted, about '3000 evicted labourers were fed with rice and housed at Santosh Kumari Gupta's mother's estate. 200 workers made a dramatic march of 32 miles to and from Calcutta to lay their grievances before the mill agents at the head office. Since this strike, Gouripur is declared to have the best working conditions and to pay the highest scale of wages' (Chanda *et al.* ed., 2003, 66-67) ^[4]. From 1922-1925, Santosh Kumari actively participated in a series of protest movements by the workers among which the one at the Hajinagar jute mill near Naihati is significant. Under her supervision the workers of Hajinagar formed a union. The Bengal Jute Workers' Association formed in 1925 was an amalgam of the Nuddea Mill Workers' Union and the Reliance Labour Union which started with Santosh Kumari's help. The association gave leadership to the first general strike in the jute industry in 1929 (Sen, 1999, 219) ^[8].

Samita Sen notes that Santosh Kumari Gupta 'in particular' was associated with the 'national movement, social welfare for women' as well as the 'working class movement' (Sen, 1999, 232) ^[8]. She had close links with Deshbandhu Chitta Ranjan Das and was a prominent member of the Swarajya Party.

One division of the Congress leadership of the period believed that the national movement would receive a blow if the working class movement was assimilated with that of the Congress. Even before from 1880-1905, during the period of 'economic nationalism' the Congress leadership did not take up the class demands of the peasantry or the working class' with the belief that 'while they were engaged in the struggle for getting economic justice and equality for the entire nation they should not take up the fight for justice and equality between classes.'(Bandyopadhyay, 2009, 21) ^[1]

Even Mahatma Gandhi believed that capital and labour should have a bond like a family. He even felt it 'terribly wrong' to use labour strikes for political interest (Bandyopadhyay 2006, 443) ^[2]. On the other hand a handful of members like C.R. Das believed that it would be more justifiable if the working class could be joined with the Indian National Congress thereby opening up avenues of class 'collaboration' rather than class struggle. At the initial part of her involvement with the working class Santosh Kumari believed that it was class collaboration rather than class struggle that was primarily needed. In her unpublished memoir, 'How I Started the Labour Movement', she wrote that along with other activists of the period she tried to amalgamate the wealthy and the working classes with a view that the working class movements would eventually move along constitutional lines, and would relate itself with the nationalist movement.

Soon however embryonic radical views appeared within a small group of 'Congress workers of the period' (*Social Scientist*, Vol 12, 1984, 65) ^[10] In a number of articles Santosh Kumari stated that class struggle was imminent. In one progressive journal Samhati Santosh Kumari wrote in

its first issue where she said: 'Friends, for a long time we wanted to bring out our own paper that would speak for the toiling masses. The name of the paper is 'Samhati' which means solidarity. This paper will try its utmost to achieve unity in our ranks'. (Social Scientist, Vol 12, 1984, 66) ^[10] While contributing another article she wrote- 'A great struggle is undergoing between the capitalist class and the working class throughout the world. The rich wants the poor labourers to live on bare subsistence, while they increase their wealth. On the other hand the working class wants their rights to be acknowledged and to live in society as proper human beings. Thus clash becomes inevitable... Although it is virtually impossible for the poor workers to win their rights by fighting with the rich and the powerful, but then what's the other way out? In order to ally with the powerful us ourselves need to be powerful' (Social Scientist, Vol 12, 1984, 67) ^[10]. She was confident that the jute workers in all parts of Bengal would respond to this clarion call. Regarding the role of the capitalists Santosh Kumari lamented, 'The capitalists of the world are trying their best to suppress the working class by all means, fair and foul. This is totally unjust and unfair, but not at all surprising' (Chattopadhyay, 1982, 30) ^[5].

Santosh Kumari repeatedly asserted that she did not believe in any 'ism'. Nonetheless her articles in Samhati and her own weekly organ Sramik show that she gradually moved towards the politics of class struggle. Sramik was published in 1924 as a weekly organ in Bengali, Hindi and Urdu. In one of its editorials Santosh Kumari wrote-The whole world has become sensitive today by the heart-rending sighs and the desperate cries of the country- of long oppressed peasants and workers. If we want to liberate them then many of the laws of the present society shall have to be destroyed and society shall have to be fundamentally restructured according to new ideals (Social Scientist, Vol 12, 1984, 68) ^[10]. Manju Chattopadhyay comments, 'In fact Sramik was one of the first Bengali journals that spoke though falteringly in terms of class struggle and socialism. Sramik stood as a bridge between the outlook of nationalist humanitarian pro-working class leaders like Santosh Kumari and the militant class approach of early communists'(Chanda *et al.* ed.,47).She played a significant role through her writings and activities in the awakening of the workers and earned the name of 'Mairam' among the working community. According to Manju Chattopadhyay, 'This was so perhaps because, in this period few persons stood by the oppressed and exploited working class'. So when leaders like Santosh Kumari with 'deep humanism and motherly sympathy for the exploited tried to organize the workers' such 'ready and overwhelming responses' could be found (Chanda *et al.*, 2003, 46) ^[3].

In regard to Santosh Kumari's being hailed as 'Mairam' by the workers has led to an analysis by Samita Sen different from that presented by Manju Chattopadhyay. This was in the sense that Santosh Kumari along with Pravabati Dasgupta 'had to develop, sustain and even justify their leadership in terms of a universal motherhood. They thus reinforced from above the traditional notions of motherhood'. As Jasodhara Bagchi says in 'Representing Nationalism: Ideology of Motherhood in Colonial Bengal' (Sen, 1999, 231) ^[8] that the mother image which was associated with 'power, strength and endurance' provided a way for 'seeking public activity as an extension of the familial role'.

Samita Sen argues that Santosh Kumari's involvement in this 'language of seva (care)' dominated over her 'language of class struggle' which was 'invoked by...associate male unionists'. This in turn, however, 'severely restricted', the leadership role of women, in the working class movements. Another argument put forward by Samita Sen is that neither Santosh Kumari nor the women leaders afterwards 'addressed women's specific problems'. According to her, 'gender issues were subsumed within the broader economic issues' (Sen, 1999, 231) ^[8]. Perhaps that's why she did not emerge as a spokesperson of the 'women workers in particular' (Sen, 1999:229) ^[8]. Manju Chattopadhyay from a different perspective argues that perhaps this was so since 'the entire working people' of the country 'men as well as women, lived and worked under such wretched conditions that the priority of the trade unionists was to fight for' the improvement of the 'entire working class' (Chanda *et al.* ed, 2003, 58) ^[4].

Conclusion

My understanding of the study is that there are certain areas of agreement among historians that the role played by working class women leaders like Santosh Kumari in the jute trade union movement of the early twenties was pioneering and 'legendary'. However, areas of disagreement by historians like Samita Sen helps in analyzing Santosh Kumari's role and what more could be contributed by charismatic woman labour union leaders like her among the workers in general and women workers in particular, under the given circumstances. Nonetheless it can be said that Santosh Kumari led the labour movement of Bengal under a colonial set up working amidst adversities and at a time when the trade union movement in Bengal as 'it has been argued' was suffering from a 'persistent weakness' although getting of 'ground in the 1920s'. Perhaps, her ideologies and actions can be placed in a phase of a 'transition', a transition which historian Ranajit Das Gupta says of 'the bhadralok or petty bourgeois intelligentsia from the social welfarist position through the moderate, accommodative approach of labour leaders...or intermittent involvement of nationalists' like Aswini Banerjee or C.R. Das in labour matters to 'the radical, Marxist or near Marxist position' of Muzaffar Ahmad, or Radharaman Mitra or Abul Rezzak Khan.(Das Gupta,1994,481) ^[6]. We can conclude with what Santosh Kumari wrote in Atmasakti-'All over the world today, a powerful movement is going on to improve the condition of the factory workers. It is the duty of every worker to participate in this movement in order to improve their own conditions and that of the country...We call upon the brothers and sisters in all the jute mills to organize such unions in their own factory, thus extending and consolidating the strength of their own class'(Social Scientist, Vol 12, 1984, 65) ^[10].

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