

Syncretic Socialism in Post-Colonial West Bengal: Mobilizing and Disciplining Women for a '*Sustha*' Nation-State

by

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Abstract

The discourse of equality, emancipation and dignity for women does not necessarily lead to the formation of an emancipated female subject, but often ends up supporting structures and practices against which the struggle was begun. The thesis develops this argument through a close reading of the textual discourse of the socialist women's mass organization, the Paschim Banga Ganatantrik Mahilaa Samity (PBGMS). The PBGMS is the largest state unit of the All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA), which in turn is affiliated with the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M), the largest communist party in India. While the PBGMS relentlessly fights for women's rights in public life, an examination of its published materials suggests that its ultimate aim to create a *sustha* (normal) nation-state, a cohesive society and a happy family turn these rights into new shackles for women. In particular, through a close reading of its publications – including pedagogical booklets, editorials, essays, poems, travelogues and fictional narratives from the periodical *Eksathe* – the thesis explores how the PBGMS views women instrumentally as reproductive and socializing agents for the supply of future sources of productive labor and as productive beings to act as a reserve force of labor. While comparisons can be made with other countries in the socialist world, in particular China and the USSR, this thesis focuses on PBGMS textual discourse within the specific social and political history of India, in particular Bengal. Through its selective appropriation and use of ideologies from both traditional cultural resources and modern political philosophies, the organization produces a 'syncretic' variety of socialism. In particular, by discursively unifying diverse beliefs and tenets the organization ironically produces a narrow nation-state centred orthodoxy rather than a dynamic heterodoxy and pluralism. This research attempts to answer the question: In what ways does the textual discourse of this communist party affiliated women's

mass organization, in pursuit of building a *sustha* socialist nation-state, attempt to discipline the political constituency of women? Although the political party and its mass organization aim to mobilize women by appealing to their equality and emancipation, this mobilization also seeks to constrain women's subjectivity and curtail the scope of their emancipation.

Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Table of Contents	iv
Acknowledgements	vi
Dedication.....	vii
Introduction	1
<i>Communist party ideology in post-colonial India.....</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>Textually mediated communist discourse: Research focus and analytical tools.....</i>	<i>17</i>
Chapter One: A Genealogy of the Politicization of Women in Bengal	40
<i>The bhadramahilaa steps out of the antahpur</i>	<i>43</i>
<i>The Sushilaa archetype</i>	<i>50</i>
<i>The bhadramahilaa's own voice</i>	<i>54</i>
<i>The politics of the ghar (home) and the baahir (world).....</i>	<i>61</i>
<i>The emergence of mass-based women's organizations.....</i>	<i>69</i>
<i>Women for a sustha nation state.....</i>	<i>80</i>
Chapter Two: Simple Solutions through Socialism	86
<i>Teaching socialism to women</i>	<i>90</i>
<i>The apparatus of socialism and womanhood in the service of the biopolitics</i>	<i>99</i>
<i>Family as the fulcrum of the state.....</i>	<i>109</i>
<i>Power in exchange for freedom.....</i>	<i>119</i>
Chapter Three: Macro-Motherhood and Social Eugenics in the Name of a 'Sustha' Nation-State	130
<i>Social eugenics through state selection.....</i>	<i>131</i>
<i>Macro-Motherhood and the ethic of tyaag</i>	<i>144</i>
<i>Class, morality, citizenship and rape.....</i>	<i>155</i>
Chapter Four: Three Interlocked Issues: Body, Sexuality and Cultural Degeneration	161
<i>The dress code and the female body.....</i>	<i>162</i>
<i>A 19th century flashback.....</i>	<i>169</i>
<i>History repeats itself.....</i>	<i>177</i>
<i>The right of the left.....</i>	<i>183</i>
<i>Cultural degeneration, sex and sexuality.....</i>	<i>187</i>
<i>'I am a woman' for building the state (rashtra).....</i>	<i>199</i>
Chapter Five: Sukhee Grihokon and Selfless Women	204
<i>The everyday world of peasant wives.....</i>	<i>207</i>
<i>Textual strategies, ideologies and utopias</i>	<i>213</i>
<i>Mrinal speaks in a different voice.....</i>	<i>222</i>
<i>The search for an alternative subjectivity.....</i>	<i>225</i>

Conclusion.....	229
Bibliography.....	245
Appendices	258
<i>Appendix A.....</i>	<i>258</i>
<i>Appendix B.....</i>	<i>259</i>
<i>Appendix C.....</i>	<i>262</i>

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Dedication

For Bobby

Introduction

Communist party ideology in post-colonial India

On January 26, 2009 India entered the sixtieth year of its political status as a secular democratic Republic. On this day, the Communist Party of India-Marxist's (CPI-M) political periodical *People's Democracy* published an editorial:

We, the people gave ourselves this Constitution after a very intense debate in the Constituent Assembly for more than three years. The first clause of the first article of the Constitution states: 'India, that is, Bharat shall be a Union of States'... The word 'Bharat' has many sources of origin. One of them traces to the son of Dushyant and Shakuntalaa in Kalidasa's epic play in verse... [and] there is an interesting conceptual interpretation of 'Bharat'. According to this, the name emerges from the confluence of 'Bha', Bhavam, i.e., expression of character; 'Ra', Ragam, i.e., melody of the tune; and 'Ta', Thalam, i.e., rhythm. 'Bharat', therefore, is the character that arises from the harmonious melody and rhythm of a celestial musical composition.¹ In many senses, such an interpretation captures the rich mosaic of Indian diversity and states emphatically that the organic unity within this diversity is the harmony of India. If, however, this fine balance within our rich diversity is disturbed then instead of having a harmony we shall end up having a cacophony. As we move into the sixtieth year... the strains of cacophony are growing louder. Communalism and terrorism, growing and feeding each other, chauvinistic and separatist tendencies raising their ugly head, Left adventurist violent activities unleashed by various streams of the naxalites are one aspect of such cacophony. Another relates to the widening hiatus between the 'shining' and 'suffering' India... This, combined with the strains of social oppression and injustice, threaten to tear asunder our social fabric... [India is] coming perilously close to fostering the seeds of disintegration. The challenge in this sixtieth year is, therefore, whether we are able to *convert this growing cacophony*

¹ It is to be noted that the writer confuses his/her sources: Kalidasa's *Abhijnanasakuntalam* is not an epic but a drama; Dushyanta and Shakuntalaa's son Bharat/Bhaarat, the putative progenitor of the people inhabiting India, is not the same as Bharata, the author of the earliest musicological and dramaturgical text of India, the *Natyasastra*.

into a melodious harmony. The trajectory of economic policies needs to shift sharply in favour of improving people's welfare... Secondly, *the unity and integrity of India, which is non-negotiable*, can be maintained only when we fiercely safeguard our political and economic sovereignty and pursue an independent foreign policy defining our relations with the world with dignity. Thirdly, India's social harmony can be safeguarded only by strengthening the bonds of commonality that runs through our rich diversity and not by imposing uniformity, like all varieties of communalism and fundamentalism seek to do, upon this diversity... We, therefore, have to brace ourselves for mightier struggles to forge such an alternative through people's movements. It is through the process of strengthening by way of such struggles that we will move towards the final solution—the socialist Republic of India—for establishing a harmonious melody of existence for our country and its people. (*People's Democracy*, January 25, 2009; my emphasis)

In this thesis I analyze communist party discourses which convey ideas which are not unlike those expressed in the passage quoted above. My focus is on texts published by an affiliated women's mass organization of the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M), the Paschim Banga Ganatantrik Mahilaa Samity (PBGMS), which in English would be translated as 'West Bengal Democratic Women's Association'. These texts are socially significant for what they say about socialist nationalism in post-colonial India. The publications I have selected, which for the most part are not available to English-only readers, are the source of textually-mediated discourses about 'socialist womanhood'. I engage with such texts to delineate the various tropes and discourses that seek to discipline women by tying nationalism, in particular cultural nationalism, to female bodies in order to produce disciplined and utilizable daughters, wives and mothers for a socialist nation-state. I explore how these textually-mediated discourses aim to mobilize women by appealing to their desire for equality and emancipation but also seek to constrain women's subjectivity and to curtail the scope of their emancipation. In particular, I examine how PBGMS publications which include pedagogical booklets, editorials, essays,

poems, travelogues and fictional narratives from the periodical *Eksathe* (Together), articulate communist ideology in this post-colonial developing country.

But first I will contextualize CPI-M ideology of post-colonial nation-statehood with respect to the party's theory of the state, state-formation and role of state apparatuses. This discussion will help us locate the party's textually-mediated discourses on disciplining and mobilizing women in the broader political project of 'post-colonial nationalist socialism'. Let us now take a close look how the editorial which I quoted from the *People's Democracy* expresses this project. 'We the people' appeals to a discursively constructed solidarity. Through this linguistic utterance the editorial attempts to constitute a national 'we group'. It constructs an Indian national identity that is characterized by 'unity in diversity'. The text refuses to recognize differences (dissonance). It presents a nationalist mythology behind the word 'Bharat' (the traditional Hindu name for India): a melodious and harmonious 'celestial musical composition'. Resorting to a mythological interpretation consecrates the idea of the 'Indian nation' and elevates that idea to an ethereal realm that demands awe and respect from every Indian. The allusion is palpable in the text—anyone who does not accept the truth claims of the editorial is positioned outside the box of 'Indianness'. The text can also be seen as a manifestation of power since it indirectly justifies and legitimizes the mobilization of the state apparatus to maintain the unity and integrity of the country, a cherished ideal of the party. The editorial articulates these goals using linguistic means, beginning with the inclusive word 'we'. The textual strategy of using semantically loaded metaphors such as melody, harmony and cacophony also serves the purpose of the editorial.

The editorial interprets any challenge to the national unity and integrity of India as something undesirable and unpleasant, a cacophony. Moreover, it appeals to the readers to take

up the responsibility of converting ‘the growing cacophony into a melodious harmony’. Through the evocation of the imagined and melodious spirit of a ‘united’ Bharat/India, readers are called to transform their differences and dissidences into commonalities and loyalties for the sake of national unity and integrity.

The editorial identifies some thorny issues that are threatening to destabilize the ‘social fabric’ of India. It calls for safeguarding people’s welfare by building a strong state that would also protect them from capitalist and imperialist exploitation. Furthermore, it envisions a telos, ‘the final solution’, of making India a socialist Republic which will be characterized by an organic unity amidst its rich diversity. The editorial’s communist principles are made apparent when it states that this Republic will be led by a working-class coalition.

The concept of ‘unity in diversity’ has been a fundamental building block of India’s nationalist discourse and historiography. In his seminal work *The Discovery of India* first published in 1946, Jawaharlal Nehru² begins from the premise that India’s ethnic, linguistic and religious diversity is evident. But he wants to establish and defend the subcontinent’s unity in this work (Nehru 1989: 61). Earlier, Nehru wrote: “An all-India political unity was not possible in the past. What is far more important for us is to see what other more basic unifying or separatist features there were in Indian life. This will help us to understand the present and shape the future. Superficial observers of India, accustomed to the standardization which modern industry has brought about in the West, are apt to be impressed too much by the variety and diversity of India. They miss the unity of India; and yet the tremendous and fundamental fact of India is her essential unity throughout the ages” (Nehru 1938: 233).

² Nehru was the first Prime Minister of independent India. He was an important leader in the country’s anti-colonial movement and worked in close contact with Gandhi.

Like Nehru, the *People's Democracy* editorial also defends and celebrates India's unity in diversity. It envisions the future socialist Republic of India as a finely tuned and balanced harmony—a state of perfection and wholeness—without any dissonance. This state of perfection is also viewed as the 'final solution', as if this solution is eternal and everlasting. Overall, the editorial is utopian in nature; that is, it attempts to transcend the present and is geared towards a future. It claims that this state of harmony will ensure the sovereign integrity of the country. Since 1947, this is not the first time that the CPI-M has called for the safeguarding of India's unity amidst its rich diversity. But it is significant that the editorial is advocating this project on the eve of a major national event, the celebration of India's Republic day. In 2009, the CPI-M has pledged to play the leadership role in forging a third front against the two major all-India parties, the Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the upcoming Loksabhaa (central/federal) election. Over the years, as the CPI-M won electoral seats and formed governments in the states of Kerala, Tripura and West Bengal, it has increasingly framed its political vision within the structure of a strong Indian nation-state. This is clearly reflected in the editorial's strict voice: 'the unity and integrity of India is non-negotiable'. This idea of unity and integrity based on a socialist state structure is also set down in the constitution of the CPI-M: "The CPI-M shall bear true faith and allegiance to the Constitution of India as by law established and to the principles of socialism, secularism and democracy, and would uphold the sovereignty, unity and integrity of India" (Communist Party of India-Marxist Constitution & The Rules Under the Constitution Adopted By the Eighth Congress, Cochin, December 23-29, 1968).

But if we look at the history of the mainstream communist party in India, we see that the party did not always speak in such a strict voice on national unity and integrity. In August 1942,

the Communist Party of India (CPI)³ adopted the ‘Adhikari thesis’ on Pakistan and India’s national unity.⁴ This began with an emphasis on India as a multilingual and therefore multinational country. The CPI leadership argued that this necessitated, as in the Soviet Union, the recognition of a right of secession which would permit the formation of a genuinely democratic and voluntary federation. At the same time, the party adopted the concept of Muslim nationalities such as Sindhis, Baluchis, Punjabi Muslims and Pathans (Sarkar 1983: 411-412). This shows how a mainstream Indian communist party such as the CPI-M has taken a one hundred and eighty degree turn on the issue of India’s territorial sovereignty and integrity. From the recognition of a right of secession, the communist party has drifted quite far to assert with absolute certitude that the unity and integrity of India is ‘non-negotiable’. Ironically, the CPI was once accused of being unpatriotic for raising the slogan ‘*yeh azadi jhuta hain* (this freedom is a farce) on the eve of India’s ‘tryst with destiny’ in August 1947. It is quite evident that the standpoint of the two mainstream communist parties (the CPI and the CPI-M) on national sovereignty and territorial integrity has changed over the years.

The editorial’s concern over secessionist forces threatening India’s territorial integrity shows the strong nationalist nature of the CPI-M. The editorial’s emphasis on ‘harmony and commonality’ is a case in point. This emphasis does not leave any space for dissonance and dissent if a community finds that differences are more predominant than commonalities, and to overcome oppression it has to uphold differences and secede. The editorial does not consider this last situation, and therefore it can pronounce nonchalantly that the unity and integrity of India is ‘non-negotiable’. What the editorial leaves unsaid is that the unity and integrity of India is to be maintained through the apparatus of the state. The role of the state is symptomatically absent in

³ In 1964, the CPI-M was formed by breaking away from the CPI. More details on this split are in chapters one and two. In this thesis, I have designated both the CPI and the CPI-M as mainstream communist parties in India.

⁴ Dr. Gangadhar M. Adhikary was a prominent leader of the early communist movement in India.

the text because it is obvious, taken for granted, and hence remains un-written. The apparatus of the Indian state through its various ideological and repressive institutions such as the education system and the army protects the ‘non-negotiable’ unity and integrity of the country.

Existing research shows that when a communist movement assumes state power in former colonies and semi-colonies, Marxism turns nationalistic (Seth 1995: 232). The ‘actually existing’ communist governments in most post-colonial countries such as Vietnam and China have emphasized the role of a strong state for the nationalization of core economic sectors, the modernization and development of the country, and the formation of anti-imperialist alliances in Africa and Asia. But Lenin’s *State and Revolution* (1918), a canonical text for Indian and other communists across the world, offers a critique of the parliamentary system and the modern representative state. Lenin wrote this book in August and September of 1917, in the midst of the revolutionary process in Russia. Lucio Colletti points out that unlike most of his other works, Lenin’s *State and Revolution* is more contemplative in character (Colletti 1972: 226).

In *State and Revolution*, Lenin states that the state machine must be destroyed because the bourgeois state depends on the separation and alienation of power from the masses. In capitalist society, democracy is always restricted by capitalist exploitation. A socialist revolution that maintained this type of state would actually keep alive the separation between the masses and power, their dependence and subordination (<http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/staterev/>). The core theme of Lenin’s *State and Revolution* is that socialism will usher in “the destruction of the diaphragm that separates the working classes from power, the emancipation and self-determination of the former, the transmission of power directly into the hands of the people” (Colletti 1972: 221). According to Lenin, the aim of the socialist revolution is not to transfer the bureaucratic-military machine

from one hand to the other but to transfer power directly into the hands of the people; and this last act can be realized if the state machine is destroyed. Thus the destruction of the old machine of the state is *the destruction of the limits imposed on democracy by the bourgeois State – it is the passage from a restricted democracy to full democracy*. For Lenin, the revolution is not simply the transfer of power from one class to another; it is also the passage from one type of power to another. The working class that seizes power is the working class that governs itself (Colletti 1972: 221-222).

A contemporary of Lenin, Karl Kautsky, had a different viewpoint on the question of the state under socialism. Kautsky wanted the seizure of power but not the destruction of the state. For him, the seizure of power does not mean the construction of new power, but the promotion to the use of the old power of the political personnel *who represent the working class, but are not themselves the working class*. In contrast, Lenin understood socialism as the self-government of the masses; socialism will erase the borderline between governors and governed. For Kautsky, socialism is the management of power in the name of the masses; the difference between governors and governed will always remain (Colletti 1972: 222). Kautsky's idea of state and power contained the seed of the concept of 'a state indifferent in class character'. Here the state is conceived as *a technical or neutral instrument that can perform good or ill* according to who controls it. Kautsky's theory of the simple seizure without the destruction and transformation of power is the basis of an interclass theory of the state. In the interclass theory of the state *the leaders of social democratic bureaucracy are believed to serve the interests of the whole society, the common interest* (Colletti 1972: 222-223). Kautsky's aim was the conquest of state power by winning a majority in parliament and by raising parliament to the rank of master of the government. The parliament is viewed as independent of classes and history. Colletti argues that

Kaustky is inattentive to the fact that the parliamentary regime might be connected to the fundamental class structure of bourgeois society. In fact, Kautsky's theory turns Marx's critique of the modern representative state upside down (Colletti 1972: 223).

In contrast, Lenin's critique of the parliamentary system is a critique of the anti-democratic nature of parliament. Lenin advocates for a fuller and hence qualitatively different democracy, the democracy of the soviets, the democracy that deserves the name of socialist democracy. In his theses on bourgeois democracy and the proletarian dictatorship presented to the First Congress of the Communist International (March 4, 1919), Lenin wrote: "Soviet power, that is, the dictatorship of the proletariat, is conceived of in a way that binds the laboring masses to the governmental apparatus. The same aim is intended in the fusion of the legislative and executive power in the soviet organization of the state as well as the replacement of territorial election districts by the units of work such as the factories and the shops" (<http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1919/mar/comintern.htm#s1>). Colletti argues that Lenin's way of thinking is quite rigorous, so that the latter unhesitatingly concludes that "the socialist state itself in so far as socialism still has need of a state, is a remnant of the bourgeois state. For Lenin, the state does not wither away because the bourgeois right is protected, that is the principle of 'to each according to his labour rather than according to his needs'. This principle sanctifies social inequality and the bourgeois right is enforced by the apparatus of the modern bourgeois state" (Colletti 1972: 225).

Colletti observes that in Lenin's *State and Revolution*, "the level of development of socialism is measured by the level of development of democracy... Communism is not the Volga-Don canal plus the State. It is not 'swathes of forest windbreaks' plus the police, concentration camps and bureaucratic omnipotence. Lenin has a different idea. But precisely

because this idea is still today only an idea, we should reject all taboos and speak frankly... We only have to look around today to see [that] the relation between [Lenin's] idea of socialism and socialism as it exists is not much different from the relationship between the Sermon on the Mount and the Vatican... The countries we call socialist are only socialist metaphorically... They are countries where all the principal means of production have been nationalized and are state-owned, but not socialized... Socialism is not a national process but a world process... Communism, said Marx, cannot exist as a local event: 'The proletariat can thus only exist on the world-historical plane, just as communism, its activity, can only have a world-historical existence' " (Colletti 1972: 226-227).

The *People's Democracy* editorial (January 25, 2009) views the formation of a socialist republic as a local event hemmed by the border of the Indian territory: "It is through the process of strengthening by way of such struggles that we will move towards the final solution—the socialist Republic of India—for establishing a harmonious melody of existence for our country and its people". For the CPI-M, the search for a modern Indian state ends with the creation of a secular state-led economy, where the state will take care of its citizens' needs and aspirations through the formation of 'secular democracy, federalism, economic self-reliance and social justice': "It is customary that on this occasion every year the Indian people resolve to consolidate the gains made so far and to advance their struggles for a better life in the future. This is also an occasion to declare the redoubling of the resolve to strengthen republican values in the country. This necessarily means the strengthening of the foundation pillars of our Constitution viz., secular democracy, federalism, economic self-reliance and social justice" (*People's Democracy*, January 29, 2006).

For the CPI-M to attain these positive features of modern democracy, the state should play the most important role regardless of who governs the state. The state assumes a reified role as an autonomous body which stands for a harmonious society. Here the various institutions and the constitution of the state play a pivotal role in creating a modern Indian society. “Indian ruling classes take secularism to mean equal treatment of all religions by the state. This is inadequate, as in the Indian context some are more equal than the others. Further, in a situation where there is an overwhelming majority of one denomination amid various relatively small minorities, equal treatment for all necessarily gravitates towards a preferential treatment of the majority. The protection of minority rights requires a special extra effort by the state. This cannot be left to be exercised by the subjective articulation of a particular government. It will have to be institutionalized” (*People’s Democracy*, January 30, 2005). *The CPI-M conceives the modern state as an instrument to realize the goals of a secular democracy. Equality, social justice, development and the anti-imperialist movement are the prerogatives of the state.* To understand the CPI-M’s ideology on the role of the Indian state in providing justice and equality to the people, one has to historicize the role played by the nationalist bourgeoisie in bringing modernity into post-colonial societies like India.

Unlike in Europe, due to the presence of a weak bourgeoisie the state in many post-colonial societies plays an important role in safeguarding national interests and in building a self-reliant economy. This is true of many states across Africa (e.g. Algeria) and Asia (China and Vietnam). Even in capitalist states like South Korea and Brazil, “the state often has a large stake in capital formation” (Bardhan 1984: 36). There have been attempts by political economists to understand the nature of these states by going beyond the classification of the state as ruled by a particular class or performing the functionalist role as an autonomous body. Pranab Bardhan, in

The Political Economy of Development in India, points out that the society-centered theories of politics and government of the orthodox Marxists as well as the liberal-pluralists and structural-functionalists have managed to keep our eyes averted from what Skocpol (1982) calls ‘the explanatory centrality of states as potent and autonomous organizational actors’. There are serious constraints posed by the imperatives of the dominant proprietary class, but to focus exclusively on them is to ignore the wide range of choices in goal formation, agenda setting and policy execution that the state leadership usually has. It also ignores the powerful impulses shaping policies and actions that are generated within the state, fuelled not merely by motives of self-aggrandizement but quite often also by what Miliband (1983) calls its ‘conception of the national interest’ (Bardhan 1984: 33-34). The role of the Indian state was no different role in the first thirty years after independence, though on a smaller scale compared to countries like China, in promoting its national interests through a non-aligned movement, planned economy and functional democracy.

At the time of India’s independence, “civil society was already dominated by a relatively overdeveloped state (overdeveloped in relation to the economic structure)” (Bardhan 1983: 37). After 1947, the state’s dominance only increased: “Over the last three decades the state has accumulated powers of direct ownership and control in the economy to an extent unparalleled in Indian history, both in the spheres of circulation (banking, credit, transport, distribution and foreign trade) and of production, directly manufacturing much of basic and capital goods, owning more than 60 per cent of all productive capital in the industrial sector, running eight of the top ten industrial units in the country, directly employing two-thirds of all workers in the organized sector, holding through nationalized financial institutions more than 25% of paid-up capital of joint stock companies in the private sector,... regulating patterns of private investment

to industrial product level and choice of technology extending to scale, location and import-content” (Bardhan 1984: 37-38). These facts show the depth and the extent of the Indian state’s hold over the country’s economy in the early post-colonial years.

Since 1947, the Indian state has attempted to play the role of an agent of progressive change in an economically backward country and nascent democracy. Sudipta Kaviraj observes that the state is utterly central to the story of modernity in India: “[It is] not merely that the state is one of the institutions that modernity brings with it, but all institutions in a sense come through the state and its selective mediation” (Kaviraj 2002: 141). The modern state along with democracy and nationalism are three important aspects of political modernity. Unlike in the West, due to India’s history of colonization, political modernity has evolved in a particular way in the country. The European experience is theorized, among many others, by Marx and Weber: “What we describe as modernity is a single, homogeneous process and can be traced to a single causal principle. In the case of Marx, it is the rise of capitalist commodity production; for Weber [it is] a more abstract principle of the rationalization of the world. It is acknowledged that modernity has various distinct aspects: the rise of a capitalist industrial economy, the growth of modern state institutions and resultant transformations in the nature of social power, the emergence of democracy, the decline of the community and the rise of [a] strong individualistic social conduct, the decline of religion and the secularization of ethics” (Kaviraj 2002:137). Kaviraj points out that these two versions of modernity cannot be applied in an unrevised way to a non-Western society like India. To him, the definition of modernity as a single process of rationalization of the social world and the functionalist model of modernity—that is, as modernity spreads from the Western metropolitan centers to other parts of the world, it tends to produce societies similar to those of the modern West—requires some revision (Kaviraj 2002:

138). Kaviraj cites the example of British rule in India and the way it introduced modernity in India. This process of introduction was quite different from the European experience.

The East India Company initially entered India without a direct confrontation with the Mughal imperial authority. In the end, the British dispensed with the titular authority of the Mughal emperors after the revolt of 1857. Political control over Bengal, which served as the platform for colonial expansion into other parts of India, was achieved without official assumption of sovereign authority. Since traditional Indian society was not organized around the power of the state, the British administration in Bengal could start as a revenue collecting body and gradually extend its control over most other spheres of social life without explicitly overcoming the political authority of the Mughal empire (Kaviraj 2002:142).

However, once they anchored in India, the British introduced two rather different types of ideas and practices: (a) the idea of state sovereignty; and (b) the idea of ‘spheres’ of social life, only one of which was ‘political’. It should be noted that the second idea somewhat contradicts the first. Kaviraj points out that both of these ideas were fundamentally different from the conceptual schema governing traditional Indian social life. After British power was consolidated, it was forcefully used to create a replica of the kind of state authority that by this time ruled Europe. But there is a difference in the Indian case. “In colonial India, the process of state formation was executed in an entirely literal sense. That is, the complex of institutional mechanisms called the state was in fact ‘formed’, in fact literally brought into existence” (Kaviraj, 2002:143). Thus, the Indian state formation was qualitatively different from the experiences of Western state formation. The peculiarity continued in the post- colonial period when India was transformed from a state into a nation-state.

One example of this distinctiveness is evident in the issue of secularism. Whereas in the West the secular character of the society is more or less a settled issue, in India it is still challenged from various quarters where religion is mixed with politics. The hegemony of modernity, particularly the implementation of secular ideas, has not been total. Here the state can play an important role to guarantee constitutional rights of the citizens: “Hence the need to strictly adhere to the definition of secularism as the separation of religion from state and politics. At the same time, the state must scrupulously adhere to guaranteeing the right to every citizen to choose and propagate his/her religion or remain agnostic or atheist” (*People’s Democracy*, January 30, 2005). The state for the CPI-M plays the role of a guarantor or ombudsman without which the Indian republic and its constitution will become dysfunctional and the dream of a nation-state based on economic development, equality and self reliance will end in ‘cacophony’. The CPI-M believes that to ensure that the state performs its progressive functions, people’s movements are essential. The aim is to create a progressive Indian state with the help of people’s movements. “Thus, given the present opportunity the Indian people have created, like we gave ourselves [with] the constitution, the consolidation of the republic must be urgently and systematically undertaken. People’s movements must be built to ensure this. Squandering this opportunity would mean an abdication of our responsibility—a grave anti-patriotic act in today’s context” (*People’s Democracy*, January 30, 2005).

Kaviraj points out that in the early post-colonial period, Indian politics had two major strands of egalitarian politics—communist radicalism and Nehruvian reformism: “What was common between communists and the radical liberals was the Enlightenment ideal of equality, and a shared belief that the *instrumentality of the modern state was the primary and the only historically adequate instrument to achieve this end*. What was different between them was their

difference in moral optimism and cognitive techniques” (Kaviraj 2007: 20; my emphasis).

Kaviraj further notes that one of the main areas of difference is the way liberal reformist politics in independent India has offered a different translation of the ideal of equality. This implied that the political ideals had to first go through a process of abstraction from their specific European historical structure into a general principle, in order to be adapted into the relevant form demanded by a non-European history: “There is no doubt that this rendering of the principle of equality was less radical than the communist version. It accepted its restriction of the principle of equality to the political sphere and avoided, at least for a time, the more morally magnificent ambition of ending all inequality in society” (Kaviraj 2007:21).

Unlike the Nehruvian principle of formal political equality, the concept of equality for the Indian communists is more inclusive: “In all its activities the Party is guided by the philosophy and principles of Marxism-Leninism which show to the toiling masses the ‘correct’ way to the ending of exploitation of man by man: their complete emancipation” (The CPI-M Constitution & The Rules Under the Constitution Adopted By the Eighth Congress, Cochin, December 23-29, 1968). The CPI-M actively pursues the development of a robust socialist nation-state, a state that will act as an instrument for delivering equality, social justice and economic development, and for fighting imperialist forces. This is a common feature of most socialist and communist parties which came to power in developing post-colonial countries of Asia and Africa. A strong state has been used as a tool for development, the nationalization of the economy, as well as in more recent times for the implementation neo-liberal economic reforms (e.g. the Chinese Communist Party in China and the CPI-M in West Bengal).⁵

⁵ In West Bengal, a case in point is the CPI-M led state government’s move to acquire agricultural land undemocratically and forcefully in order to develop special economic zones where global capital can operate with minimum hindrance from the country’s labor laws, custom duties, and income and excise taxes. Since 2007, the people’s movement to reclaim agricultural land in West Bengal’s Nandigram and Singur has attracted attention from

Textually mediated communist discourse: Research focus and analytical tools

In his book *In Theory*, Aijaz Ahmad observes that in most versions of the Three Worlds Theory⁶, the agency of major transformations (e.g. for democratic rights, for socialist revolution, for the emancipation of women and the anti-imperialist struggle) is said to reside in the nation-state itself. In particular, the nation-states of the developing third-world countries are supposed to collaboratively compete with the states of technologically advanced countries:

In the developing countries, the national bourgeoisie had consolidated and there emerged a strong state sector. An ideological formation which redefined anti-imperialism not as a socialist project to be realized by the mass movements of the popular classes but as a developmentalist project to be realized by the weaker states of the national bourgeoisie in the course of their collaborative competition with the more powerful states of advanced capital *served the interest both of making the mass movements subservient to the national bourgeois state and of strengthening the negotiating positions of that type of state in relation to the states and corporate entities of advanced capital*. It was this sectoral competition between backward and advanced capitals, realized differentially in the world, owing partly to colonial history itself, which was now advocated as the kernel of anti-imperialist struggles, while the national-bourgeois state was itself recognized as representing the masses... This was in some crucial ways an extension, into the post-colonial phase, of the dominance the national bourgeoisie had been able to establish over most of the anti-colonial movements in the colonial period itself (Ahmad 1994: 293; my emphasis).

various quarters both within and outside India. The peasants and the landless agricultural workers are resisting their virtual eviction. The CPI-M led West Bengal state government is using an archaic Land Acquisition Act, which allows the state to acquire any land for public purposes on payment of inadequate compensation, even when the owner may not be willing to part with the plot of land. The acquired land is expected to be handed over to private corporations at a subsidized rate. In the last few years, this kind of capitalist expansion led by global capital has motivated many other state governments in India to displace peasants from agricultural land. The bizarre aspect of this land acquisition move in West Bengal is that the CPI-M had once demanded land reforms that were expected to give security of tenure to the actual cultivators, although there was never any legal step adopted to give land to the tiller. The CPI-M and the CPI-M led West Bengal state government are now advocating for the displacement and dispossession of peasants (Basu 2007: 1281).

⁶ A fundamental postulate of this theory is that the world is hierarchically divided into the capitalist first world, the socialist second world and the post-colonial third world countries.

Ahmad's observation on the national bourgeoisie's role in building a strong nation-state in post-colonial countries has one important example in the Indian National Congress. The national bourgeoisie-led states are mainly concerned with granting people formal political equality and engendering economic development. But the effort to build a strong nation-state is not unique to the national bourgeoisie in the developing countries. I would say that in countries where the socialist and the communist parties came to power through mass movements after decolonization, these parties formed a strong single-party ruled state. For example, in Vietnam, Algeria and China, the communist and socialist parties played the role of the national bourgeoisie in creating a robust anti-imperialist state. These single-party ruled states brought in sweeping economic reforms. But unlike the national bourgeois-led state, these states had a socialist agenda of bringing more all-encompassing equality and social justice to the people.

In India, the CPI-M endorses the ideology that a strong nation-state can act as an instrument to realize progressive initiatives such as the nationalization of economic resources and state-led planned development. At a broad level, my research is concerned with the CPI-M's efforts towards building a robust socialist nation-state and the impact the project has on the party's relationship with its various political constituencies, such as workers, peasants, women, religious minorities and *dalits*⁷. Specifically, I focus on how the party negotiates its macro-agenda of forming a strong nation-state with the heterogeneous lived experiences and subjectivities of these political constituencies which often come into conflict with and pose questions to the homogenized and rigid frames of a socialist nation-state. In this thesis, I focus on one such political constituency—women.

⁷ The *dalits* are people born into the so-called 'untouchable' castes. In recent years, the *dalit* politics has attained interesting complexity in states such as Uttar Pradesh where a *dalit*-centric party like Bahujan Samaaj Party has tried to expand its political constituency among the North Indian upper castes.

My research poses the following question: In what ways does the discourse of a communist party-affiliated women's mass organization, with its aim to build a robust socialist nation-state, advance the project of disciplining the political constituency of women? In the thesis, I find that this disciplining in the name of a strong and *sustha* (normal) nation-state constrains women's subjectivity and curtails their liberation within the structures of production, reproduction, sexuality and socialization. I contend that this discourse of discipline and control serves the biopolitical project of a socialist nation-state. In this study, I also explore how a communist women's mass organization selectively appropriates and employs ideologies from traditional cultural resources to discipline women. These ideologies are often gendered in character. By trying to reconcile modern socialist principles with some traditional gendered ideologies, the communist party-affiliated women's mass organizations discursively produce what I call a 'syncretic' variety of socialism.

To answer this research question I focus on the specific case of the CPI-M and its women's mass organization, the Paschim Banga Ganatantrik Mahilaa Samity (West Bengal Democratic Women's Association) (PBGMS) in the state of West Bengal, India. In particular, I undertake a close reading of a variety of texts published by the PBGMS. The PBGMS is the largest state-level (provincial) women's organization in India. In 2007, the PBGMS had 5.3 million women as members (*The Political Organizational Report*, CPI-M, 2007). The PBGMS was founded in 1971. It is also the largest (contributing more than 50% members) state unit of the federal (national) body, the All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA) headquartered in New Delhi. The AIDWA and its various state units such as the PBGMS are affiliated to the largest Communist Party in India, the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M).

I have selected to study the specific case of the PBGMS due to the significant fact that the CPI-M has been in power in West Bengal for the last three decades. The people of West Bengal have voted the party to power six times. The influence and impact of the party and its mass organizations such as the PBGMS have been long and deeply rooted in the state. Other factors which have propelled me to select the specific case of the PBGMS are my long association with the state of West Bengal and my linguistic ability in Bengali/Baanglaa. Most of the PBGMS texts, which constitute the empirical focus of this study, are written in the Bengali language.

My empirical focus is on publications by or relating to this socialist women's mass organization. In most modern social organizations, communication is textually mediated (Smith 1993: 210) and the PBGMS's mode of communication is no exception. In the case of communist and socialist parties and their mass organizations such texts include books, pamphlets, periodicals, organizational reports, constitutions, draft proposals presented at meetings, posters, published speeches, statements given to the mass media and the organization's press releases. These texts outline their political theory, pedagogy, program and their standpoint on contemporary socio-political issues, and are part of their political struggle to communicate with their members and the population at large. Thus, specifically in the case of communist and socialist women's mass organizations such as the PBGMS, the communication is textually mediated in an especially important way.

I focus on texts produced by the PBGMS as my primary data source since these texts communicate various modes of disciplining and mobilizing in the name of the 'ruling apparatus'—the socialist nation-state. In this thesis, I treat the PBGMS texts which express various modes of disciplining and mobilizing as 'discourses' and specifically as 'textually-

mediated discourses'. In the Foucauldian sense, I view discourse as a strategic field, a weapon of power and control, of subjection, qualification and disqualification. The PBGMS textual discourses articulate the 'will to discipline and mobilize' the political constituency of women for the purpose building a robust nation-state.

The PBGMS textual discourses embody and reproduce ideologies. Ideologies are not always expressed discursively, but discourses can be viewed as the communicative practices through which ideologies are expressed and employed. I show how the PBGMS textual discourses embody ideologies, such as nationalism, *maai-baap* developmental-statism⁸, motherhood and *tyaag* (sacrifice), *sustha* (normal) desire, tasteful (*ruchisheel*) dress, the socialist Sushilaa archetype of 'good womanhood', the selfless woman and *sukhee grihokon* (happy family), and social eugenics, which together are assumed to be universal and normal (*sustha*). As in Foucault's work, I am concerned with how discourse articulates relations of power.⁹

In this thesis, I view ideologies as codes that structure textual discourses. I endorse Dorothy Smith's viewpoint that discourse can develop the existing ideologies of society by providing a method which transposes a local event (for example, the state verdict on capital punishment for a rape and murder offender) into a conceptual category (such as social eugenics in the name of a *sustha* nation-state) (Smith 1993: 214-215). I consider ideologies as a set of ideas that are based on selected belief systems which in turn draw upon lived experiences of the material world. Ideologies are social in nature and they are shared. Hence, ideologies are

⁸ Developmental-statism implies the ideology that the state is 'only' an agent of progress, protection and development—essentially a well-intentioned 'do-gooder'. Here, I use the Hindi idiomatic phrase '*maai-baap*' (mother-father) to foreground the paternalistic-maternalistic nature of this ideology. My inspiration comes from the use of this phrase in the everyday language of Hindi speakers, particularly in North India, who label the Indian government as '*maai-baap*', who can protect the masses against oppressions.

⁹ As I point out later on, in my view Foucault's theory of discourse actually complements the Althusserian way of viewing ideology as operating through various institutions or state apparatuses which maintain existing exploitative and oppressive relations. For Althusser, ideology is associated with oppressive rather than mainly disciplinary power. In any case, both discourses and ideologies articulate power dynamics in society.

employed by various groups, such as political parties and professional associations, which define the identity of a group. Thus, ideologies are not simply the personal beliefs of individuals. Nor do I use the term ideology as a synonym for ‘false consciousness’. Ideologies are not always negative; they can be positive and emancipatory, as in the cases of ideologies promoting anti-casteism, anti-racism, socialism and feminism.

It should be noted that ideologies are more than mere shared beliefs such as a common social knowledge. Rather, ideologies are fundamentally political in nature and are accompanied by various interests and intentions. Ideologies are capable of organizing (mobilizing) and controlling (disciplining) social perception, thought and practice. For instance, the Hindu fundamentalist (*Hindutva*) ideology may influence people’s attitude and practice towards Muslim minorities in India. Thus, ideologies can influence social practices. Although ideologies operate at the level of cognition and thought, they can influence an individual or a collective to act, speak and write in a particular way. At the same time, this cognition arises from and gives expression to a lived experience and a subject position. Thus, ideologies have a concrete material basis.¹⁰

In this thesis, I analyze the PBGMS textual discourse to untangle and expose various ideological codes that structure this discourse. I show that the PBGMS textual discourse actively marshals both modern ideologies (developmental-statism, social eugenics and nationalism) and traditional ideologies (the Sushilaa archetype, *tyaag* and macro-motherhood) in order to realize its ‘will to discipline and mobilize’ the political constituency of women. In this connection, I use the concept of ‘syncretism’ to characterize the PBGMS textual discourse.

¹⁰ The sociologist Daniel Bell announced the ‘end of ideology’ in the second half of the last century. In contrast, I think that there are definite manifestations of ideologies in our social cognition and practices. Ideologies are part and parcel of our everyday world.

The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) describes the word ‘syncretic’ as “characterized by syncretism; aiming at a union or reconciliation of diverse beliefs, practices, or systems”. In Europe, syncretism is often traced back to the confrontation of religious and philosophical thought systems especially in the middle ages. The OED describes syncretism as “[an] attempted union or reconciliation of diverse or opposite tenets or practices, especially in philosophy or religion”; “[used] almost always in a derogatory sense”. However, syncretism, especially in the context of South Asian religious and philosophical thought (such as the *Bhakti* and the Sufi philosophies of Kabir and Laalan Fakir)¹¹ has distinctively progressive, pluralist, heterodox and secular¹² connotations. However, here I use the word ‘syncretism’ in a political sense to signify how the PBGMS textual discourse combines ideologies from both the Indian cultural tradition (such as the Gaandhaaree metaphor for socially responsible macro-motherhood drawn from the Hindu epic *The Mahabharata*) and modern European and post-colonial Indian political ideologies (e.g. nationalism, socialism and *maai-baap* developmental-statism). In my analysis, I argue that this *syncretic socialism* of the PBGMS does not produce a dynamic pluralism but rather a static singularism of the ‘will to mobilize and discipline’ women in the name of a strong state.

In this thesis, I employ a number of perspectives and concepts which are eclectically drawn from various theoretical traditions. I have made the selection on the basis of what I found to be most suitable for the purpose of analyzing my empirical questions:

¹¹ Kabir was a fifteenth century mystic poet and spiritual thinker from North India. One of his famous saying is: I am at once the child of Allah and Ram’. Laalan Fakir was a mystic poet and spiritual philosopher who lived during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in colonial Bengal. One of his poems has these lines: The circumcision makes a man a Muslim, then how do you identify a Muslim woman? A male Brahmin wears the sacred thread, then how do you identify a Brahmin woman?

¹² Here I use the term ‘secular’ in the predominant Indian sense of tolerance of many religions and of non-communal principles and practices.

(a) *The Marxist theoretical tradition*: In this work, I critically analyze the fault lines (such as various forms of inequality and other social contradictions) which characterize the spheres of politics and culture in contemporary West Bengal. I have learned from Marx that a sociologist needs to emphasize the historical specificity of an empirical question.¹³ In this thesis, I have kept my concern with the historical specificity of the PBGMS textual discourses to the fore. I argue that a focus on social inequality based on income, education and access to cultural goods endows the analysis of social relations with a richer perspective. In this thesis, I am concerned with the textually mediated discourses of domination (such as discipline and mobilization) which in the last instance is produced by the unequal social relations in a post-colonial country.

In particular, in Chapters One, Three, Four and Five I analyze the complexity and the cleavage produced by the *bhadralok/bhadramahilaa* (educated and upper caste middle income groups)¹⁴ character of the writers of the textual discourses under analysis. In my analysis, I try to explore how gender questions are also class and status-group questions. I find that there is a strong tendency in these discourses to present the ideology of the dominant group (comprised of the *bhadraloks* and *bhadramahilas*), such as ‘what is *sustha* (normal)’, as the common and the ideal interest of all the members of society. Here, my inspiration is drawn from Marx’s *The German Ideology*.¹⁵ In addition, it is evident in Chapter Two where I discuss the ‘apparatus of

¹³ In 1877, Marx wrote in a (draft) letter to Mikhailovsky: “[The relation of classes, the constitution and role of classes in the Third World and so on remain as a challenge to rigorous research]...they will not be resolved by the *pass-partout* of a historical-philosophical theory but by an analysis in each separate case of the empirically given circumstances” (Marx cited in Bottomore: 1985: 77).

¹⁴ The *bhadraloks* typically owned land and/or worked in the British colonial administration. A more detailed history of the *bhadralok* social category is elaborated in Chapter One. Here, it is important to note that the *bhadralok* social category, in particular the *bhadraloks* who had land interests (the *zamindars* or landlords and the absentee landlords) had an antagonistic and exploitative relationship with the peasants. This category of landed interests came into existence via the British colonial policy of rent collection that was instituted by the Permanent Settlement Act of 1793 in Bengal.

¹⁵ “For each new class which puts itself in the place of one ruling before it is compelled, merely in order to carry through its aim, to present its interest as the common interest of all members of the society, that is, expressed in ideal form; it has to give its ideas the form of universality, and present them as the only rational, universally valid ones (Marx and Engels 1976: 60).

socialism and womanhood' that Marx's theory on the exploitative nature of capitalist relations of production is relevant for understanding how women are discursively constituted as the reserve army of labor to serve the economic need of a post-colonial nation-state. As further discussed below, I use the Marxist-Feminist Juliet Mitchell's theory of the structures of women's oppression under modern socialist and capitalist systems to identify the distinctively gendered dimension of mobilizing and disciplining women as reproductive and productive bodies for building a post-colonial socialist nation-state. I draw upon the Marxist sociologist Althusser's theory of the oppressive nature of ideological state apparatuses in Chapter Four. Althusser is the most noted Marxist theorist who has theorized the oppressive nature of the modern state and its ideological apparatuses through which individuals are interpellated as subjects. I employ Althusser's theory of the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) to analyze the case of the gendered and disciplinary dress code for female college students and female school teachers in West Bengal. Here, the educational institution acts as an ISA, and the PBGMS being affiliated to the party (CPI-M) which leads the West Bengal state government, is found to endorse the gendered dress code. In Chapter Five, I make use of the Marxist literary critic Jameson's formulation that 'literature is a socially symbolic act' - that is literature can present and conceal the inequalities and social contradictions that characterize society and fictional narratives may envision a utopian world where social contradictions have been erased. This utopian element in a fictional text has a political edge and this edge is relevant for transformative politics.

(b) *The Materialist-Feminist theoretical tradition*: Materialist feminist theory is largely derived from a socialist feminist framework and the former has a strong relationship to Marxist theories of history and ideology. This theoretical tradition has its primary concern with issues gendered ideology and how they are historically and materially situated. But what distinguishes materialist

feminist theory is its emphasis on the analysis of language and culture. Thus, it approaches discourse as a question of social relations which are grounded in the material conditions of a society. These material conditions are examined in relation to the actual lives of women. In Chapters One, Three, Four and Five I focus empirically on autobiographies of women political activists, women's writings and the everyday gendered issues from women's lived experiences such as domestic labor, motherhood, dress and gendered cultural nationalism, the over-sexualization of female bodies, and sexual violence. The materialist feminist theory views social conditions of gender as historically situated and hence subject to transformation. This underscoring of history in materialist feminist theory directs us to the idea of an 'active subject' who can effect change by turning her marginalization into empowerment. From a materialist feminist perspective a subject can act autonomously. In particular, I have learned from materialist feminists such as Rosemary Hennessey and Michele Barrett how society and culture overemphasize the role of women in the social institutions of family, domesticity and motherhood and how gendered discourses propagate a woman's narrow individualization by the state and the family (Hennessey and Ingraham 1997: 1-13). In this work, I take the standpoint that gender (in the sense that one is not born a woman but becomes a woman) and the gender-embodied material experiences of women (such as reproduction, motherhood and socialization) shape women's subject position.

In particular, in Chapter Three I explore how the 'ethic of *tyaag* (sacrifice) and the concept of macro-motherhood' deployed by the PBGMS textual discourse reinforce the gendered ideology of motherhood in the name of building a *sustha* (normal) and strong nation-state. In Chapter Two, I draw from Juliet Mitchell's theory that in modern industrial societies, women are oppressed by the four social structures and functions of production, sexuality, reproduction and

socialization. Here I use Mitchell's formulation to critically analyze how 'the apparatus of socialism and womanhood' is constructed in the PBGMS textual discourse. The feminist historiography on modern India, such as the works by Tanika Sarkar, Sibaji Bandyopadhyay and Mrinalini Sinha has particularly influenced my analysis of the nineteenth century 'Indian women's question' in the colonial context.

(c) *The Foucauldian theoretical tradition:* Inspired by Foucault, I understand the modern state as an instrument of discipline and power.¹⁶ Foucault shows that since the eighteenth century, particularly in Western Europe, the modern bourgeois state has administered and controlled human bodies and their materiality, their energies and pleasures to serve the interest of an emerging state and capitalist economic system. *However, this control by the modern state of various population groups (such as women, insane people and the working class) is also complemented at the social level by the operation of 'bio-power'.* The state itself operates in a bio-political mode through such policies as birth control, eugenics and public hygiene in order to efficiently utilize various groups of the population to serve the economic system of industrial capitalism. Here I also employ Foucault's notion that disciplinary power is present at every level

¹⁶ In this regard, Foucault is undoubtedly indebted to his mentor Althusser. Althusser's thesis on the 'ideological state apparatuses' clearly indicate that widely dispersed forms of power are organized by the modern state. Foucault's contribution is that he examined the mechanisms of power in their complexity and nuanced detail in order to explore the 'micro-powers' operating in society. But like Althusser (and to an extent Marx), Foucault's analysis gives a lot of significance to how the modern state organizes power, in particular bio-power. I find that there are more convergences, albeit unformulated, between Marx and Foucault than what Foucault himself would like to admit. For example, in his *History of Sexuality I: An Introduction*, Foucault states: "The primary hypocrisy [is that] of the bourgeoisie which denies its own sexuality, and the secondary hypocrisy [is that] of the proletariat which in turn rejects its sexuality by accepting the *dominant ideology*...Bio-power was without question an indispensable element in the development of capitalism; the latter would not be possible without the controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production and the adjustment of the phenomena of population to economic processes...The development of the great instruments of the state, as institutions of power, ensured the maintenance of production relations...The adjustment of the accumulation of men to that of capital, the joining of the growth of human groups to the expansion of productive forces and the differential allocation of profit, were made possible by the exercise of bio-power in its many forms and modes of application" (Foucault 1990: 127 and 141; my emphasis). Perhaps Foucault wanted to distance himself from the 'official' Marxism as practiced by the French Communist Party and Stalinism. Foucault once remarked that in reaction against the vogue of citing Marx in every footnote, he was careful to avoid that practice (Foucault 1998: 458).

of the social body and utilized by diverse institutions such as the family and educational institutions (Foucault 1990: 141). In Chapter Two, in order to better understand a particular aspect of PBGMS textual discourse, I formulate a concept of ‘the apparatus of socialism and womanhood’. This concept is modeled on the Foucauldian notion of ‘the apparatus of sexuality’. Throughout this thesis I show how PBGMS textual discourse deploys the conceptual category of ‘*sustha*’ (normal) to discipline women’s bodies, taste, desire and women’s subjectivity. My analysis shows that the deployment of *sustha* in various contexts, particularly in the context of sexuality and the institution of family, serves the biopolitical interest of a socialist nation-state.

In the thesis, I use the word ‘subjectivity’ to imply that individuals can become subjects or attain their subjectivities through their critical consciousness and critical practices, especially through resistance and struggle. Here, I am inspired by the Foucauldian notion of the subject—that is, to be a (free and autonomous) subject is to be connected to one’s unique identity through self-knowledge or consciousness (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983: 212). For Foucault subjectivity is attained through a subject’s subjection or subjugation to power, that is when a subject is subjugated to others through social and political control. Thus, Foucault observes that the political formation of subjectivity may also involve a refusal to be individualized (subjected to and subjugated) by the state and that “we have to promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of this kind of individuality that has been imposed on us for several centuries” (Foucault 2003a: 134). In Chapter Five, to analyze the phenomenon of ‘becoming an alternative subjectivity’, I use this idea to argue that the new female subject can reject the party’s attempts to individualize her as a woman. Although she cannot fully know what kind of formation this new subjectivity will take, she at least knows that she does not want to be ‘individualized’ (subjected and subjugated) by the state, the political party and society.

Finally, drawing inspiration from Foucault, I have paid attention to the contingency of history. In particular, in Chapter One I try to bring forth this contingent nature of history in the context the politicization of women in Bengal.

(d) Post-colonial studies: In this thesis, I have also borrowed ideas about ‘colonial modernity’ and the nature of a ‘post-colonial nation-state’ from South Asia-focused post-colonial studies, in particular works done in the fields of history, anthropology, sociology and political science. I have been inspired by the works of Ranajit Guha, Sumit Sarkar, Partha Chatterjee, Sudipto Kaviraj and Aijaz Ahmad. The subaltern historiography of India has complicated the earlier one-dimensional political binary assumed in nationalist historiography between the British colonial ruler and the Indian colonial subject. Drawing upon research on colonial and post-colonial India, subaltern historiography shows that in fact plural and heterogeneous interests, antagonisms, and conflicts exist between various political constituencies.

While many of the literatures mentioned under these four headings (i.e. the Marxist, the Materialist Feminist, the Foucauldian and the Post-Colonial theoretical traditions) have often been in intellectual conflict with one another, I try to emphasize how they complement rather than contradict one another in the particular context of understanding the relationship between a communist party and the post-colonial nation-state. As discussed above, I find that there is a significant convergence between Marx, Althusser and Foucault, and the feminist and post-colonial scholars who have been influenced by them. This convergence can be used in a productive way to analyze the nature of a post-colonial nation-state and its economic system which is primarily driven by the logic of capital accumulation. In particular, Althusser and Foucault are relevant to an analysis of how in a communist party ruled state, such as West

Bengal, the political party becomes merged with the state and the civil society in a way that renders dissent and democratic demands deemed unacceptable.¹⁷

As already mentioned I explore how the PBGMS's textual discourse aims to discipline and mobilize the political constituency of women in the name of a socialist nation-state. My primary sources are texts published by the organization, in particular the organization's pedagogical booklets, their periodical *Eksathe* (Together), the organizational reports, the proposals presented at the PBGMS state (West Bengal) conferences and the AIDWA national conferences, published speeches by the PBGMS ideologues, the organization's press releases, and official statements given to the mass media on some key public events. Most of these texts are written in the Bengali/Baanglaa language by women ideologues, women leaders and members of the PBGMS. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations of Bengali/Baanglaa texts are my own.

Twenty two thousand copies of *Eksathe* are circulated every month in West Bengal (*The Political Organizational Report*, CPI-M, 2007). Since 1968, it is being published every month from Calcutta. The periodical strengthens and expands the reach of the PBGMS (Mukhopadhyay 2003a). *Eksathe* publishes political and cultural essays, short stories, poems, travelogues and key national and international news.

The five pedagogical booklets written by the PBGMS chief ideologue Kanak Mukhopadhyay were first published in the decades of the 1970s and early 1980s. These booklets are still in print and they are concerned about the organization's theoretical understanding of socialism and women's movement.

¹⁷ To take just one example, in 2008 during the Nandigram People's movement to reclaim agricultural land in West Bengal, it was often hard to distinguish whether the chief minister Mr. Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee was making public statements as the leader of the political party, the CPI-M or as the head of the West Bengal state. In particular, this confusion became most pronounced when the state police used repressive force against the peasants and landless agricultural workers resisting the land grabbing move of the West Bengal government.

I have selected from the foregoing range of texts produced by the PBGMS in view of the themes that I explore in the five chapters of the thesis. While mining through the texts, I identified two broad themes – the *sustha* femininity and the socialist Sushilaa archetype. These themes occur repeatedly in a homogeneous manner in the textual discourse of the PBGMS. I do not approach the texts in a chronological or a comprehensive manner; but I have taken care to select texts from various time periods spanning the last three decades (the 1970s to the present)¹⁸. In the course of analysis, I developed a tripartite scheme to categorize the PBGMS's textual discourse:

I. *The political discourse*: Under this rubric, I analyze the PBGMS's official political discourse through a close reading of the organization's pedagogical booklets (e.g. *Marxism and Emancipation of Women* (1996[1976]) and *A Few Words about Women's Movement* (2004[1986])) and some political essays published in PBGMS anthologies on politics. My second chapter, titled "Simple Solutions Through Socialism", analyzes this political discourse. This discourse is overtly concerned with the political themes of socialism and the women's movement.

II. *The everyday discourse*: Here the focus is on the PBGMS's responses to everyday events from Indian women's lived experiences, such as violence against women, the gendered notion of decency and dress, women's sexuality and the gendered notion of commodification and objectification of women's bodies in capitalist culture. Various responses from the PBGMS in the form of essays, editorials and letters to the editor are found in *Eksathe*. I also use the organization's responses on the events as found in print media in the form of statements and press releases. In this thesis the third and the fourth chapters focus on the everyday discourse.

¹⁸ The political party CPI-M came to power in West Bengal in 1977 and the PBGMS is affiliated to this political party.

III. *The cultural discourse*: In the fifth chapter, I focus on literary and creative writing, such as short stories and travelogues published in *Eksathe*. I categorize these writings as the organization's cultural (in the sense of creative) discourse. These writings are contributed by PBGMS members. I conduct a 'political' reading of this discourse, since I see literature and other forms of creative writing as 'socially symbolic acts'. I have selected two short stories and a travelogue for analysis on the basis of the thematic unity of the 'symbolic' (and implicitly political) ideas that they articulate.

It should be noted that I use the above three categories for analytical convenience only. I do not imply that in a cultural discourse there is no politics, or that the political discourse is completely bereft of the utopian imagination that is usually found in literature. Instead of homogenizing the differences between these texts by treating them all alike, my aim is rather to underscore their diversity and multiplicity while also identifying the common ideological codes they articulate.

I view textual discourse as an important data source for sociological research. In this sense, I am inspired by the ethnomethodological tradition in sociology as found in the works of Dorothy Smith. I have approached the analysis of the textual discourses under study at three levels. To begin with, I have closely examined the usage of language in these textual discourses to delineate to what effect they are used. In particular, I have looked out for semantically loaded words (e.g. *tyaag*, *ruchisheel* and *sustha*), emotionally charged metaphors (e.g. the imagery of cancerous body parts, surgery and the mother figure of Gaandhaaree), and politically motivated ideals (e.g. the *sukhee grihokon* happy home) and historical archetypes (e.g. the Sushilaa archetype of 'good womanhood').

Second, I have identified the ideological codes that structure these textual discourses. Thus I view (textually mediated) language as a communicative device through which ideologies are disseminated. It should be noted that language and not just values and ideas can also structure an ideology. I analyze how the ideologies found in these textual discourses are based on some ‘naturalized’ and ‘normalized’ assumptions about gender, sexuality, class, age, family and crime. I try to show how these ideological codes advocate the interest of the ruling apparatus (the state) and perpetuate normative (supposedly universal) ideas in order to influence social practices. Through this method of analysis, I also attempt to show that the Foucauldian notion of the operation of power through discourse enriches the Althusserian proposition that ideologies perpetuate oppressive power dynamics between individuals and the state apparatus. Throughout this thesis I try to show how ideologies (e.g. nationalism, the *sustha* nation-state, the Sushilaa archetype of ‘good womanhood’, and macro-motherhood) are articulated in the PBGMS’s textual discourse in an attempt to justify and realize the interests of the ruling apparatus.

Third, in my analysis I have paid attention to the socio-political, historical and organizational contexts in which these textual discourses are embedded. To this end I have employed the method of genealogy to analyze the various strands that constitute these textual discourses. In this thesis, I have used the term genealogy in a dual sense. First I have used ‘genealogy’ as a conceptual category to trace out certain lines of association between particular discourses and ideas which are spread over different historical periods (e.g. the nineteenth-century Sushilaa archetype and the PBGMS discourse on women for a *sustha* socialist nation-state). Second, I have used ‘genealogy’ in a Foucauldian sense as a method to recover ‘subjugated voices’. In particular, in Chapter One I foreground women’s voices (autobiographies

of women political activists) and provide a critical analysis of the discourse produced by ‘politicized’ women in Bengal.

In this work, I position myself as a reflexive analyst. I consider how texts are made alive by a reader’s interpretation and the reader’s subject position will be inscribed in her/his interpretation. I view working with texts as enriching and liberating since I can use and experiment with different conceptual tools and epistemologies drawn from the ‘West’ and the ‘East’. To this extent, I myself resist being disciplined by the protocols of an academic discipline.

The thesis is divided into five chapters followed by a conclusion. In Chapter One, “The Genealogy of the Politicization of Women in Bengal”, I trace the genealogy of the PBGMS and the politicization of Bengali women through the late nineteenth-century social reform movements concerning women, the emergence of the late nineteenth-century social category *bhadramahilaa* (educated upper-caste and upper/middle-class women), the Sushilaa archetype (the ideal Hindu wife and mother in a colony), the early twentieth-century participation of women (mostly middle class and upper caste) in anti-colonial movements, women’s participation in the armed anti-colonial struggle in Bengal, the 1940s women’s organizations (e.g. the *Mahila Atmarakha Samity*) in Bengal, and the formation of communist party-affiliated women’s organizations during the 1950s and 1970s. In short, I explore the genealogical anchorage of the PBGMS discourse in the political and social history of Bengal. Here I begin to map out certain lines of affiliation between specific nineteenth-century discourses on women in Bengal and the promotion of ‘women for a *sustha* socialist nation state’ in PBGMS discourse. These lines of affiliation are further exposed and analyzed in Chapters Three, Four and Five, where I deconstruct the everyday and the cultural discourses produced by the PBGMS.

In Chapter Two, “Simple Solutions Through Socialism”, I undertake a close reading of the PBGMS’s pedagogical booklets and political essays to examine their basic discourse on socialism and women. I pay special attention to their grand formula ‘socialism will free women’. I identify which variables from a woman’s lived experience are evoked (work in social production, motherhood, citizenship in a nation-state) in this formula to produce the simple equation ‘Socialism = Women’s Emancipation’. Following this, I consider how this simple equation becomes complex and imperfect when we introduce other variables from a woman’s life. Thus I ask: Which aspects of a woman’s life experiences are rendered invisible by the PBGMS, and why? Through my analysis, I identify the presence of an *apparatus of socialism and womanhood* in the PBGMS’s political discourse, the aim of which is to discipline and mobilize women in the name of a strong socialist nation-state. In chapters three and four, I demonstrate how the political discourse discussed here, in particular the notion of the apparatus of socialism and womanhood serving the biopolitics of the state and the normative theme of ‘*sustha*’, inscribe the official discourse of the PBGMS concerning some incidents relating to women in West Bengal.

In Chapter Three, “Macro-Motherhood and Social Eugenics in the Name of a ‘*Sustha*’ Nation-State”, I deconstruct the textual discourse of the PBGMS surrounding an incident of sexual violence, the rape and murder of a middle-class adolescent girl by a lower-class man, that took place in Calcutta in 1990. I analyze an editorial from *Eksathe* for this purpose. I show how the body and identity of the mother of the offender is used to construct an argument in favor of capital punishment. Through an equalizing move in which the mother of the offender is equated with the imagined macro-mother of the entire country, the editorial marshals a rationale for social eugenics in the interests of preserving and defending a *sustha* (normal) society and nation.

Moreover, the editorial innovatively combines the modernist discourses of bio-politics, evolution, and national sovereignty with the traditional discourse of selfless motherhood from the Hindu epic *The Mahabharata* in order to reinforce its argument for capital punishment.

I end this chapter by presenting the PBGMS's official statement on an incident of gang rape of three refugee lower-class women from Bangladesh in 1990. I juxtapose this statement with the editorial which argues for capital punishment for the rape and murder of a middle-class woman by a lower-class man. This juxtaposition reveals that to the PBGMS the sexual morality, class, and citizenship status of women make them qualified to seek justice for the violence committed against them from the Indian state. Thus, I ask the question: Is the PBGMS's understanding of violence against women, a central women's and feminist issue in the Indian context, circumscribed and stifled by the organization's will to political power and its desire to rule a disciplined and secure Indian nation state?

In Chapter Four, "Three Interlocked Issues: Body, Sexuality and Cultural Degeneration", I analyze how the three interlocked issues of women's body, sexuality and cultural decadence under the influence of Western capitalism and globalization are discursively constituted in PBGMS writings. The 1993 controversy and debate surrounding a female college student's 'indecent' dress in Calcutta constitute my entry point. Drawing upon the PBGMS's published discourse on this issue, the organization's views on the female body and sexuality are presented and analyzed. Following this I closely examine two essays from *Eksathe* on the supposed impact of globalization, consumerism, and the 'Western import' of lesbian longing on Indian women and family. I explore the ways in which the four issues concerning the decency of a woman's dress, her body, her sexuality, and her sanctified location in the family are significantly

connected with the PBGMS textual discourse on ‘the apparatus of socialism and womanhood’ and the theme of ‘*sustha*’.

Finally, in Chapter Five, “*Sukhee Grihokon* and Selfless Women”, I employ Frederic Jameson’s concept of ‘literature as a socially symbolic act’ to ‘politically’ interpret two short stories and a travelogue from Eksathe. In particular, I pay attention to the subtexts embedded within these three narratives. These subtexts express the inner conflicts of the female protagonists through their lived experiences within the institution of the family. The macro-environment of a developing nation-state encompasses their lived experiences. The inner conflicts often express the female protagonists’ desire and anxiety about their modern lived experiences. Here, I explore the association between the sanctity of the *sukhee grihakon* (happy home) and the unity of the Indian nation state.

In Chapter Five, I also show that in these narratives, particularly in the travelogue, the nineteenth-century Sushilaa archetype reappears in a slightly metamorphosed way as the socialist Sushilaa archetype. But I argue that the Sushilaa archetype does not go uncontested. To substantiate my claim, I present and analyze a Bengali short story written by Rabindranath Tagore. I show that the female protagonist (Mrinal) in this narrative embodies ‘an alternative subjectivity’; that is, alternative to the Suhsila subjectivity. Unlike the Sushilaa archetype of ‘good womanhood’, Mrinal rejects society’s attempt to individualize her as a woman. In search of a new subjectivity, she liberates herself from the gendered signs and institutions of ‘good womanhood’ constructed by her society. I use Mrinal’s story to point out that for (Sushilaa) women, the search for an alternative subjectivity could begin by refusing to be individualized (subjected to and subjugated) by the family, the political party and the nation-state.

I conclude the thesis by discussing some fundamental questions regarding the nature of socialism as practiced in post-colonial countries and the relationship between the communist party and the post-colonial nation-state. I consider how the communist party aims to utilize its political constituency of women in order to serve its biopolitical projects and capital accumulation needs, and how it formulates the rich complexity of nationalist, socialist and gendered discourses to advance the political agenda of a rapidly developing post-colonial nation-state. My analysis of the communist party's textual discourse shows that the CPI-M perceives the nation-state as the natural scale of capital accumulation, and as the institutional mechanism to triumph over the problem of the low level of India's productive forces in order to bring forth the socialist transformation of the country. The party's political ideology is framed by the fundamental reality of the post-colonial nation-state. The CPI-M and its mass organizations, such as the PBGMS, act as ideological apparatuses of the Indian nation-state in order to promote various national interests, such as capital accumulation and the country's internal and external security. This thesis identifies how the national interest of capital accumulation is connected with the need to build a disciplined and *sustha* nation-state, where various productive and reproductive population groups in India can be controlled to work in the interests of capital accumulation.

In particular, I examine how a communist party's textually mediated discourse aims to *mobilize and discipline* women for the cause of building a *sustha* socialist nation-state. The control and mobilization of women's labor, sexuality and fertility serve the biopolitical project of the state and this biopolitical project ultimately serves the nation-state's need for capital accumulation. I argue that PBGMS textual discourse on 'equality for women at home and outside' has a logic of power and discipline of its own which serves to mobilize women for

building a *sustha* nation state. This textual discourse is characterized by what I call ‘syncretic socialism’ which selectively appropriates gendered ideologies from an ‘elite cultural discourse’ and modern political ideologies. The deployment of a discourse of ‘syncretic socialism’ in PBGMS texts is aimed at producing a singular nation-state-centered ‘will to mobilize and discipline’ women in the name of a *sustha* nation-state. By drawing upon selected perspectives from Marxist, Materialist-Feminist, and Foucauldian theory, and from post-colonial studies, I have questioned here the organization’s promotion of ‘equality’, ‘happy family’, and the ‘*sustha* culture, society and nation-state’. My analysis of PBGMS textual discourse concerning women shows that the organization’s demand for equality goes hand in hand with a strict adherence to women’s (traditional) role as the lynch-pin of family unity, piety and morality. The aspiration to rule over a *sustha* nation-state prompts the party, through its mass organization, to simultaneously mobilize and discipline women in such a manner that the moral and economic foundation of the Indian nation-state is not uprooted by (un)womanly desires and aspirations which are ab-normal (*a-sustha*), troublesome and unhealthy. My thesis shows how PBGMS textual discourse articulates the ways in which *sustha* families managed by *sustha* women are considered to be building blocks for the *sustha* socialist nation-state.

Chapter One

A Genealogy of the Politicization of Women in Bengal

It is the politics immanent in history and the history indispensable for politics (Foucault 1990a: 12).

I for one have no patience with those who say we shall not be fit for political reform until we reform our social system. I fail to see any connection between the two...Are we not fit [for political reform] because our widows remain unmarried and our girls are given in marriage earlier than in other countries? Because our wives and daughters do not drive about with us visiting our friends? Because we do not send our daughters to Oxford and Cambridge? (Ambedkar 2003: 190)¹⁹

Fortunately for the middle classes, Vivekananda, Bankimchandra and Rabindranath's contributions have nurtured us and continue to sustain us. We remain immersed in the culture they left us; we do not keep track of what lies below (Manikuntala Sen 2001: 287-288).

Je raandhe se chulo baandhe (A woman who cooks, also braids her hair) (A Bengali proverb).²⁰

The highest compliment for a Bengali woman is 'she is so educated, so accomplished, yet so homely'. Long live gharoaa (homebody)! (Chatterjee 2000: 322).²¹

In this chapter, I take a long view of and a close look at the history of the politicization of Bengali women in order to trace the intellectual and political genealogy of the discourse of the PBGMS. The politicization began in the nineteenth century through the *bhadralok* and the colonial state-initiated social reform movements concerning women. Later, this move engendered numerous social, political, and cultural phenomena such as the emergence of the late nineteenth-century social category *bhadramahilaa*, the propagation of the *Sushilaa* archetype as

¹⁹An excerpt from W.C. Bonnerji's speech delivered in 1892 at Allahabad as president of the eighth session of the Congress party.

²⁰An everyday Bengali proverb which sounds innocuous but in fact contains deep-rooted gender logic. The proverb is meant for women who traditionally cook and keep long hair which needs to be braided. The braided hair makes a woman's appearance clean and organized, and perhaps the braided look is also aesthetically pleasing. Thus, the moral of the proverb is that even though a woman is busy with housework she should not become careless about her appearance. Of course, there is a class bias in the message. At the general level, the lesson imparted by this proverb is that women should readily carry the double burden of domestic and non-domestic chores. This is somewhat akin to the lesson about the virtues of modern day multi-tasking with a distinct gender twist to it.

²¹Note that Chatterjee sarcastically uses the remark 'Long live *gharoaa*!' here. The word *gharoaa*, often translated as homely in Bengali, implies 'familial, homebody or domestic' as used in British English. The word 'homely' is not employed here as 'plain' as used in American English.

the ideal woman of colonial modernity, the early twentieth-century participation of women in nationalist movements, and middle class women's increased visibility in the public sphere under Gandhi-led mass movements. The 1940s in Bengal saw the emergence of the first mass based women's organization, the Mahilaa Atmaraksha Samity (MARS). The MARS was the precursor of later communist women's mass fronts such as the Ganatantrik Mahilaa Samity (GMS, affiliated with the Communist Party of India or CPI), and the Paschim Banga Ganatantrik Mahilaa Samity (PBGMS, affiliated with the Communist Party of India - Marxist or CPI-M). In this chapter, I attempt to trace the genealogical lineage of the PBGMS discourse in this history. For example the theme of '*sustha*' (the state of being normal) and the communist Sushilaa archetype, which are explored in detail in the following four chapters, have a root in the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century history of Bengal. In these chapters I often travel back and forth between colonial and contemporary Bengal as is required for the purpose of my analysis. It should be noted that the meaning of the Bengali word *sustha* can include healthy, free from disease, the state of being normal, untroubled and peaceful. On the basis of my overall analysis of the PBGMS discourse, I find the word 'normal' corresponds best with the way '*sustha*' is used in the discourse. Since the process of discipline and mobilization is a subtext in the discourse, the often repeated epithet '*sustha*' implies the state of being 'normal'. It should be noted that something which is normal can be easily controlled and purposefully utilized.

In this thesis in general, and in this chapter in particular, I use the term genealogy in a dual sense. First, I use it as a conceptual approach to map out certain lines of association between particular discourses and ideas (e.g. the nineteenth-century Sushilaa archetype and the PBGMS discourse on 'women for a *sustha* socialist nation state'), instead of recounting the entire socio-political history of nineteenth-century Bengal. Thus, I set the stage here to analyze in detail in

later chapters how certain elements of nineteenth-century *bhadralok* and *bhadramahilaa* discourse on women are present in a slightly metamorphosed way in the socialist discourse produced by the PBGMS. Secondly, in a Foucauldian way I use genealogy as a method to recover ‘subjugated voices and repressed knowledge(s)’. In this way, I foreground women’s voices and provide a critical analysis of the discourse produced by ‘politicized’ women in Bengal.

At this juncture, it is necessary to provide a brief note on the Bengali word *bhadralok*, as the *bhadralok* have played a significant role in the project of recasting women in colonial Bengal. Following this we will delve into the genealogy of the ‘politicization of Bengali women’. ‘*Bhadralok*’ literally means a respectable (*bhadra*) man (*lok*). The word *bhadra*, derived from Sanskrit, originally denoted many values including property, particularly homestead property. It was also used to refer to behaviorally refined people. In nineteenth-century Bengal, *bhadralok* referred to a social category embracing different strata of upper-, middle-, and lower middle-income groups, landed interests and administrative employees and professionals. The outward manifestations of the *bhadralok* included residence in a *puccaa* (made of brick and cement) house, careful attention to one’s sartorial style in public, use of chaste Bengali language, and a noticeable knowledge of the English language and manners (Banerjee 1989: 54). The historian Sumit Sarkar provides a comprehensive account of the category *bhadralok*. Sarkar notes that the *bhadraloks* (the plural form) were predominantly Hindu. This group of men, who created the modern and the so-called ‘renaissance’ culture of Bengal, were overwhelmingly from the upper castes (Vaidya, Braahmana, and Kaayastha), even if on occasion reformist or iconoclastic. In its own perception this group was middle class (*madhyashreni*, *madhyabitta*). The *bhadraloks* were situated below the aristocracy of *dewans*

and *baaniyas* (the native merchants and traders who made a fortune during the East India Company's reign in Bengal) but above the lesser folk who had to soil their hands with manual labour in urban and rural Bengal and who were more than often either lower caste or Bengali Muslim (Sarkar, 2000:168-169). Ishwarchandra Gupta (1812-1859) defined the *bhadralok* category as distinct from both the luxury and corruption of old-style *baabus* (usually constituted by the native merchants and big landlords) and the superstitious ways of the uneducated masses (Sarkar 2000: 169). More recent research shows that the *bhadralok* world was internally fragmented on the basis of English education, urban location, and income (Sarkar 2000: 171-172). Thus, a *bhadralok* petty clerk in the colonial administration and a school teacher in rural Bengal were different in wealth, status and education from a lawyer, a civil servant, or a medical doctor *bhadralok* in colonial Calcutta. However, the key to *bhadralok* status was education, and in the context of a colonial economy and polity in Bengal it was English education which opened up employment opportunities in the colonial administration and enterprises. The *bhadraloks* played an important role in foregrounding 'the women's question' in anti-colonial nationalist discourse and in modern Bengali literature. The women's question in colonial India is a fascinating subject. Below, I provide an overview of how this question was handled in various discourses in colonial Bengal.

The bhadramahilaa steps out of the antahpur

In colonial Bengal, the women's question increasingly became the locus of debate, discussion, and social reform among the Bengali *bhadraloks*, Christian missionaries, and the colonial state from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. Bengal was not atypical in this regard, since similar debates were also animating the public sphere of the Western Indian state of

Maharashtra. From 1860 onwards, a number of educated Bengali women increasingly participated in the public discourse concerning women through their writings, particularly in the Bengali-language women's magazines and periodicals. One such early discourse was Kailashbashini Debi's *Hindu Mahilaaganer Heenabastha* (The Hindu Women's Deplorable State), in which she wrote that Hindu women have suffered more than anyone else in the world (Sarkar 2001: 47). The unjust and oppressive upper-caste Hindu social customs such as the *satee*, girl child marriage, male polygamy, the double standard on chastity, the widow marriage taboo, patrilocal marriage,²² women's seclusion in the inner quarter (*antahpur* or *andarmahal*), and their lack of education were the themes of intense public discourse. Some of these misogynist customs were the upshot of a social system based on a specific kind of Hindu patriarchy called Brahmanical patriarchy, in which upper-caste women are regarded as gateways into the caste system (Chakravarti 2003: 34-36).

The theme of *streeswadinataa* (women's freedom) often appeared in the public discourse produced by the *bhadralok* in the native press, modern Bengali literature,²³ Bengali theatre and satire,²⁴ and educated women's writings.²⁵ The discourse primarily focused on the need for re-casting the Bengali woman as the new woman (*nobina*) in contrast to the traditional woman (*praachinaa*). In the late-nineteenth century, the Bengali novelist and essayist Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay used the words *nobina* and *praachinaa* in an essay titled 'Praachinaa

²² The pain of patrilocal marriage and women's lack of education are preponderant themes in nineteenth-century Bengali women's writings. For instance, Rashsundari Debi's autobiography *Amar Jeeban* (My Life) published in 1876 paints a painful scene of how a little girl was brutally uprooted from her family after marriage and placed in an unknown family of her in-laws.

²³ The writings of Bengali literary stalwarts such as Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, Saratchandra Chattopadhyay, and Rabindranath Tagore particularly played a significant role in engendering a literary humanist critique of the women's question among the educated Bengalis.

²⁴ Particularly noteworthy were the satires produced by the pen of Amritlal Basu.

²⁵ What began with a few autobiographies left by usually self-educated nineteenth-century Bengali women such as Rashsundari Devi, Nistarini Devi and Krishnabhabini Dashi later turned into a new genre of Bengali women's writings in women's magazines such as *Bamabodhini Patrika*, *Janmabhum*, *Paricharika*, and *Bangamohila*.

Ebong Nabinaa'. Here, Chattopadhyay criticized Bengali men who wanted to reform and improve the condition of Bengali women for scheming to improve their own lives by making women appropriately molded to fit men's modernized views and expectations on marriage and family (Chakraborty 1995: 32; Sarkar 2001: 151). In fact, Bankim was a pioneer, particularly in such early writings as the essay 'Samya (The Equality)', where he critically interrogated the hierarchies of caste, gender and class among the Hindus. In addition, in his early novels such as *Bishabrikhsa* and *Durgeshnandini* we find an interesting binary separation between an assertive and matured woman and a weak-willed, tradition-bound child wife. In his early liberal phase, Bankim initiated the process of auto-critique by the *bhadralok* regarding the women's question through his literary works. This tradition of literary humanism in Bengal was pioneered by him, which later found successors in male writers such as Saratchandra Chattopadhyay and Rabindranath Tagore.

The scholarship on nineteenth-century Bengal shows that the Bengali *bhadralok* initiated the process of remaking and recasting women in his community (Sangari and Vaid 1993). In general terms, a female relative of the *bhadralok* was the *bhadramahilaa*, and together they constituted an important locus of the ethical and intellectual critique and social reform in the nineteenth century. For instance, Sumanta Banerjee delineates the ways in which the new woman, the Bengali *bhadramahilaa* of the late-nineteenth century and early-twentieth century, was carefully demarcated. Her production as an ideal Bengali Hindu woman was constituted by the *bhadramahilaa*'s separation from the immodest and individualistic English *memsahib* in India, and from the company and cultural mores of the lower-class (*chotolok*) women such as the maidservants, the cleaners (*methraanee*), the prostitutes, the Vaisnav singers, and other unsavory characters (Banerjee 1993). The Bengali word *chotolok* refers to a person of lower order who

lacks the characteristics of cultural refinement and respectability that are typical of a *bhadralok*. The caste-class dimension, educational status, and the nature of labour are encoded in the word *chotolok*. Thus, a *chotolok* is illiterate, rude, speaks in coarse language, engages in manual labour, and more often than not hails from a lower class and caste background.

An interesting philological point should be noted here. The gender of the *bhadra* (respectable) person is indicated by the Bengali words *lok* (man) and *mahilaa* (woman). So, while the female equivalent of the *bhadralok* is the *bhadramahilaa*, there does not seem to be any word which denotes the female equivalent of the word *chotolok* (*choto* = low or petty; *lok* = man) either in conversational or literary Bengali. In fact, there is no such word as *chotomahilaa* in the Samsad Bengali-English Dictionary. The dictionary describes the word *chotolok* as “a rude or uncivil person; a person belonging to a socially depressed class” (Samsad Bengali-English Dictionary, 2000). The first point to note is that the absence of the category of caste in this description indicates the caste blindness of the compilers of this dictionary. Secondly, the inclusion of the word *bhadramahilaa* in the dictionary and the absence of the word *chotomohila* in the Bengali lexicon indicate that the category of *bhadramahilaa* with all its significations was produced in the late-nineteenth-century historical context of Bengal. As indicated above, the men began the process of ‘recasting our women’ through women’s education, lobbying for social reform laws such as the Satee Regulation Act (1829), and the Widow Remarriage Act (1856). There was no parallel recasting of the female equivalent of the *chotolok*.

An exercise of self-reflexivity was initiated by the *bhadraloks* when East India Company’s officials, Anglo-Indian administrators,²⁶ and Christian missionary commentators viewed the deplorable condition of Indian women, especially concerning their seclusion and

²⁶ The British nationals who lived and worked in colonial India were called Anglo-Indians.

illiteracy, *kulin*²⁷ polygamy, child marriage, the widow marriage taboo, ascetic widowhood, and *satee* as symptomatic of India's civilizational backwardness. In his *History of British India* (1816), James Mill proclaimed this gender-indexed civilization thesis quite strongly. The concern with *streeswadhinataa* (women's freedom) was also generated as the *bhadralok* was introduced to European literature and political theory, which included the discourses on equality and women's rights. As Sumit Sarkar points out, "John Stuart Mill's *Subjection of Women* found many eager readers in Bengal" (Sarkar 2003: 162). It should be noted that in Bengal as elsewhere in India, the patriarchal social customs were mostly confined to upper caste communities.²⁸ Sekhar Bandyopadhyay's research on caste and gender in colonial Bengal shows that often 'sanskritizing' and upwardly mobile intermediate- (e.g. the Namasudras of East Bengal) and lower-caste groups reproduced some of the upper-caste and Brahmanical gender codes and re-grafted the modernist concepts of genteel and chaste womanhood into their own discourse of progress. In fact, there was a greater tendency towards an inverse relationship between a caste's social mobility and the status of women (Bandyopadhyay, Sekhar 2004: 189, 190).

Many *bhadraloks* came to reflect upon and evaluate the gender ideology and norms of their own society. This reflection was also partially instigated by the close encounter with the acute suffering of their mothers, wives and sisters. The autobiographies of a number of male

²⁷ The *kulin* system constitutes a hierarchy within Bengali upper castes (namely, Braahmanas and Kaayasthas). A literal translation of the word *kulin* means of aristocratic and noble descent, the premier among lineages and often associated with ritual and spiritual purity. As with hypergamous castes elsewhere in India, *kulin* polygamy resulted in an excess of unmarried women and parents did not find it demeaning to marry their daughters, often nominally, to married elderly *kulin* men. These men often demanded exorbitant sums of money from distressed parents 'burdened' with marriageable daughters. In this kind of arbitrary system of marriage, monetary exchange and caste purity hinged on the existence of upper caste women, and the latter were treated as useful chattel (Karlekar, 1995:135, 139, and 154).

²⁸ As mentioned earlier, the concept of Brahmanical patriarchy is useful here to understand how the control over the body and sexuality of upper-caste women was important for maintaining the status quo of caste hierarchy, and exploitative caste- and gender-based labour relations (Chakravarti, 2003: 25-36).

reformers bear testimony to this. At the same time, some men reacted with defensiveness to the colonial and liberal *bhadralok*'s criticisms, and vilified the *nabinaa* woman through numerous farces, plays, and other forms of cultural production. Tanika Sarkar designates these men as Hindu revivalist-nationalists (Sarkar 2001: 7-8). Although, the liberal-reformer *bhadraloks* articulated the necessity for reforming the condition of women, there was ample ambivalence among the reformers, and a chasm existed between the theoretical commitment to social reforms and their implementation in practice. Sumit Sarkar points out that this tension was also in part due to fierce opposition from orthodox Hindu elements, particularly the revivalist-nationalists (Sarkar 2000: 216-281).

The male efforts at domestic reform involved some changes in familial arrangements, though generally without upsetting the woman's subordination to her husband and in-laws (Chakraborty 1995: 83-159, and 160-195; Sarkar 1994: 103-112). The reforms prioritized the sanitization of women's 'vulgar' language²⁹, companionship in marriage, restraint in the discussion of sexual and bodily matters, English modes of housekeeping and child-rearing, gender based education, and partial exposure to the public world outside the inner quarter or *antahpur*. It should be noted that this project of recasting the Bengali Hindu women manifested caste and nationalist dimensions. These *bhadralok* efforts were combined with a commitment to redefining the role of the *bhadramahilaa*, making her into a suitably refined and educated helpmate of the *bhadralok* and an efficient mother of his children. Thus, in 1842 a young Madhusudan Dutt, not yet the iconoclast poet of the 'Bengal Renaissance', was awarded a gold medal by the Hindu college authorities for his essay on the merits of female education. As Dutt wrote, "...it is needless to dwell upon the numerous benefits a child may derive from an

²⁹ Kumari Saudamini, an educated *bhadramahilaa*, wrote in 1872, "However one should converse in such a way that it does not give rise to any untoward [bad/sexual] thoughts in the minds of [the male] interlocutors" (Bannerji 2001: 80).

educated nurse...extensive dissemination of knowledge amongst women is the surest way that leads a nation to civilization and refinement” (Bandyopadhyay 1994: 21). In the same vein, Henry Vivian Derozio, the leader of the Young Bengal group, wrote a decade earlier in 1832 that “the obvious moral being: for codes of modernity to infiltrate and seep into the consciousness of people long sunk in ignorance, for the sure and sharp ray of light to dispel the dismal gloom of darkness, knowledge has to filter down to the women: *what wonder then, that the character of a nation would depend so intimately on the character of its women*” (Bandyopadhyay 1994: 24; my emphasis). In the words of another contemporary *bhadralok*, Koylaschunder Bose, “she must be refined, reorganized, recast, regenerated..... Educated our women will certainly become more amiable and high-principled, more faithful and devoted to our service, *but will by no means rebel against the sense of their rightful guardians*” (Bandyopadhyay 1994: 39; my emphasis).

A typical Bengali woman from the *bhadralok* household was not simply an object of compassion. She was also perceived as superstitious, quarrelsome, ignorant, and vulgar. Thus, her re-definition entailed not just the positive modes of educational instruction and increased mobility in non-domestic arenas, but also her segregation from the women of the lower orders (caste and class) and their culture, now seen as disreputable, and obscene (Bannejee, 1989). The new woman was targeted by a number of domestic manuals, women’s magazines (such as *Bamabodhini Patrika*, *Paricharika*, and *Abalabandhab*), and other inspirational and pedagogical materials. The authors were mostly men. These Bengali language texts were made available by a cheap, popular, and newly available Bengali print culture (Sarkar 2000: 172-173).

The Sushilaa archetype

One such pedagogical text was *Sushilaar Upakhyān* (The Tale of Sushilaa) written for young girls and published by Bangabhasanubadak Samaaj (The Association for Bengali Language Translation). Among others, Debendranath Tagore was an illustrious patron of this association. He was a pioneer in the initiation of the Hindu religious reform movement and the foundation of the Brhamo Samaaj in Bengal. The members of Braahma Samaaj pioneered the social reform movement on women's issues. However, the Braahma Samaaj movement was largely an urban *bhadralok* phenomenon, and it often showed little interest in dismantling the caste hierarchy ingrained in Hindu religion. "As Debendranath Tagore reminded Rajnarayan Bose in a letter of January 1854, the Braahma attack was fundamentally on idolatry, and not caste, and no serious attempt was made to emulate Christian missionary welfare cum conversion work among the untouchables or tribals" (Sarkar 2003: 163).

Sushilaar Upakhyān was authored by Madhusudan Mukhopadhyaya in 1856. From this text emerges an archetype of *nabinaa bhadramahilaa* who bears the name Sushilaa. The Bengali word *sushilaa* means a woman possessing good nature and good character, or a woman who is gentle and well behaved. Sushilaa is the chief protagonist of the text. The narrative³⁰ shows how, through the careful tutelage of one European and the other Bengali Hindu teacher, Sushilaa turns out to be an exemplary student, a perfect *nobina*. Her mother makes Sushilaa aware that playing with dolls is not an end in itself. This feminine game prepares young girls to take up their pre-set familial roles in the future. Sushilaa's father also makes it clear that he is sending Sushilaa to school to make a capable housewife out of her. Sushilaa's favorite subject is *Dharmashastra*

³⁰ My analysis of this pedagogical narrative is drawn from Sibaji Badyopadhyay (Bandypadhyay 1994).

shlokas (verses), which are codes of conduct for an ideal Hindu daughter, wife, and mother.

Thus, in the text both games and studies are geared to minimize the tension that may arise out of a women's conscious or unconscious refusal to perform according to pre-set social roles (Bandyopadhyay, 1994: 27-28). In this tale, Sushilaa acts as a role model for other girls in her village. She chastises these girls who indulge in idle gossip and finally succeeds in removing the lowly instincts of these girls. Later, Sushilaa marries a *bhadralok*, Chandrakumar, who works as a clerk in the colonial administration. Sushilaa is endowed with normative feminine virtues. She is undemanding and demure, and hence she does not face any problem with her husband or in-laws. Sushilaa bears three sons for her husband. Note that she does not burden him with daughters. She also dies before her husband. The story provides a further legitimization of a traditional upper-caste Hindu notion, derived from *Manusamhita*, that a virtuous woman dies before her husband and must wait patiently in the *pati-lok* for him to join her (Bandyopadhyay, 1994: 30).

In this text, there is an episode where Sushilaa encounters a foul-mouthed fisherwoman who, while complaining about her miserable marital life and alcoholic husband, uses abusive language. Initially, Sushilaa is perplexed by the 'unwifely' behavior and coarse utterances of this woman who is from a lower class and caste (*chotolok*) origin. To reform the fisherwoman, Sushilaa recites the *shlokas* regarding *streedharma* (a Hindu wife's duties) from various *shastras* (traditional brahmanical texts regarding moral and social education). After being chastised, the nameless fisherwoman is metamorphosed. She now understands the intricate conjugal relationship, abandons her coarse speech, and addresses her husband with pathos and in a chaste language ornamented with Sanskrit hyperbole. This has a miraculous effect on the husband who

is transformed into an ideal householder and gives up alcohol. The neighbors begin to look up to them as *bhadralok* (Bandyopadhyay, 1994: 32).

In the narrative, what distinguishes Sushilaa from other docile and devoted wives is the way she brings up her sons. She was trained through books published by the Bengal Family Library that children and their whims need to be controlled. Thus, her literacy is a key to her role-playing as an ideal mother. Being educated, Sushilaa knows that instead of crude corporal punishments, children should be disciplined through discourse, using ready-made words which are less harsh but more effective. The first book she gives to her sons is Iswarchandra Vidyasagar's *Barnaparichay* (1855). This book is the most influential primer that celebrates the docile, easily tractable, bookish, and virtuous boys typified by the character Gopal (Bandyopadhyay, 1994: 32). Gopal is constituted by his 'other'—the quarrelsome, unruly Rakhal, who does not study and is seen as a veritable threat to society. Thus, in *Sushilaar Upakhyān* comes a moment when we see how a *nabinaa bhadramahilaa* is put to use to the spiritual manufacturing of the ideal *bhadralok*, the archetypal Gopal. Sushilaa's eldest son grows up to become a school teacher, a *bhadralok* profession. Later, Chandrakumar's British boss and his wife are charmed by Sushilaa's education and social awareness. The wife is particularly impressed by Sushilaa's service for the improvement of the uneducated and ignorant women of British India. In fact, the English woman requests her husband to promote Chandrakumar to the post of Deputy Magistrate. The British boss interviews Chandrakumar and, charmed by his good command over English, promotes him. During this interview, the British boss, a judge in the colonial judiciary, realizes that it would be a sound policy if high official posts are exclusively reserved for male natives whose wives are as advanced as Sushilaa. Thus, Sushilaa emerges as an accomplished woman who has diligently fulfilled her womanly duties. "On becoming the wife

of a deputy magistrate and the mother of a schoolmaster, Sushilaa fulfills her appointed destiny: she is raised to the status of a full-fledged *bhadramahilaa*—the consort and nurse of worthy and respectable [*bhadralok*] members of the tertiary sector” (Bandyopadhyay, 1994: 33).

As pointed out by Sumit Sarkar, the primary impulse which guided the nineteenth-century male initiatives on women’s freedom was more protectionist than egalitarian (Sarkar, 2000: 276). It can be added that a utilitarian interest was also present in this impulse. In fact, in an earlier essay Sumit Sarkar confirms this utilitarian motive. He argues that these reformers were primarily concerned with modifying relationships within their own families and sought only limited and controlled emancipation of their women (Sarkar 1994: 106-107), and thus the concentration of reform attempts on the women’s question had a personal dimension. The translation of Western ideals of equality and democracy into real mass movements was far more difficult for a colonial intelligentsia drawn mostly from the upper castes, distant from the masses, and dependent for their jobs and landed interests on the colonial system (Sarkar 1994: 106). If we revisit Dutt, Derizio, and Bose’s statements regarding the rationale for recasting ‘our women’, we find how well Sushilaa fits the archetype of the perfect *nabinaa bhadramahilaa*. Let us name this archetype ‘the Sushilaa archetype’, and later in chapter five we will attempt to find whether a new variant of this archetype is present in the PBGMS discourse.

There was a limitation to the male-initiated social reforms concerning women. The limitation becomes most glaring if we take a closer look at the widow remarriage movement. In the late-nineteenth century, Chandicharan Sen, a Braahma *munsef* working at Krishnanagar (Bengal), remarked that ninety-nine percent of Hindu widows were unchaste. In 1888, the novelist Bankimchandra retorted with his characteristic sarcasm: Why should the solitary one be left out by Sen? Iswarchandra Vidyasagar’s widow marriage reform initiative was a product of

both his humanist side, which was moved by the plight of the Hindu widows, particularly the child widows, and his traditional self, which was disgusted by the high incidence of illegitimate sexual relationships between young Hindu widows and their male family members, and by foeticides (Chaudhuri 1968: 92, 98; Sen 2003: 42). More importantly, we should underscore how Vidyasagar left untouched the problem of the inhuman austerity imposed on the widow who did not marry or on the ones who were older (Sarkar 1994:112). Vidyasagar's widow remarriage initiative hardly met with success and he died a disheartened man. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay argues that the relative failure of widow remarriage cannot be explained solely by the structural weaknesses of the reformist effort. One needs to take into account also the power of tradition that refused to be reformed as embodied in hierarchies of caste and gender that were interlocked, since caste purity depended in large part on the strict regulation of marriage and female sexuality. These were consolidated in some ways under British rule but certainly did not originate from colonialism. The brahmanical ideology of discipline and public control over private life had penetrated deep into the so-called popular Hinduism of Bengal well before the British presence. In fact, turn-of-the-century census reports show that a number of middle and lower castes also did not practice widow remarriage (Bandyopadhyay 1995: 9-14).

The bhadramahilaa's own voice

Until now, only the male discourse on 'recasting our women' has been discussed. Let us now turn to the discourse produced by the Bengali *bhadramahilaa* on the 'women's question'. Although a minority with respect to the nineteenth-century female population of Bengal, some *bhadramahilaas* took the initiative to read and write, moderately questioning oppressive social customs and urging reforms through their writings in women's magazines, periodicals, and

autobiographies. Towards the end of the third quarter of the nineteenth century, the products of Bethune school (Calcutta), other women's educational institutions and different forms of *zenana* teaching (either through private coaching by husbands or through trained women teachers) were making their presence felt in the Bengali cultural field. About 190 women authors from 1856 to 1910 produced some 400 works including poems, novels, plays, essays, and autobiographies. In this period, some 21 periodicals with which women were associated editorially and which were primarily devoted to women's issues were in circulation in Bengal (Banerjee, 1993: 160). It should be noted that the *bhadramahilaa*'s commitment to reform was usually a riskier proposition than that of her male partner, since unlike him she had no means of escape from the orthodox ambience of the household in which she lived (Borthwick 1984: 44). Among the *bhadramahilaas*, reform came earliest to the Braahma³¹ women, since social reforms and the 'recasting women' project were mostly initiated by male Braahma reformers (Borthwick, 1984: 54). Liberal-minded male Braahmas took the lead in moderating female seclusion, educating women, raising the marriage age for girls and boys, and allowing a limited degree of choice in selecting marriage partners. Some of these initiatives found literary expression in Rabindranath Tagore's works such as *Nashta Neer*, *Streer Patra* (discussed in Chapter Five), *Aparichitaa*, *Goraa*, *Chaturanga*, and *Ghare Baire*.

These reforms were coupled with modest forms of dress and a cultured and puritanical code of behavior that marked the distinguished braahma women from orthodox Hindu women. Sumit Sarkar observes that among the Braahmas, *streeswadhinataa* (women's freedom) was

³¹ The Braahma religion, a reformed Hindu sect founded by Rammohan Roy in the 1830s, professed monotheism and criticized idolatry. The Braahmas were both praised and denounced by the orthodox and revivalist Hindus for their liberal, modern attitude towards women and their emulation of Western lifestyles. However, the Braahma reform movement was circumscribed in a crucial respect: the Braahmas did not make any serious attempt to attack the caste system. Most of them were *bhadraloks*, which explains why their reform initiatives were mainly focused on upper caste social evils such as the *satee*, child marriage and the widow marriage taboo (Sarkar, 1994: 103-112).

usually combined with a strong emphasis on puritanical norms and restraints and this more often than not had a patriarchal aspect. In Bengal, the term ‘Braahma’ eventually became almost a synonym for prudishness, although partially this prudishness was likely a defense mechanism for a reform movement which often incurred the charge of licentiousness from orthodox Hindus (Sarkar 2003: 165-166). In particular, the cultural code that distinguished the *bhadramahilaa* was her use of language. The earthy dialect, laced with the witty idioms, often with sexual overtones, that marked the sayings of the unreformed woman or *praachinaa*, was replaced by chaste Bengali words and expressions. Nirad C. Chaudhuri observes that in the late-nineteenth-century Bengali literature, the writers increasingly expressed heterosexual love in non-physical forms (*dehanirapeksha*). He refers to a short story written by Pramathanath Roy Chowdhury that was published in 1901 in the periodical *Pradeep*. The narrative is about a poet’s love for his childhood female friend. In the story, there is a sequence where the heroine corrects and sanitizes the hero’s love poems by replacing at every place the phrase *deher milan* (the union of bodies) by *antarer milan* (the union of minds) (Chaudhuri 1968: 55-56).³²

The *bhadramahilaa* writers often borrowed metaphors and images from the Sanskrit classics. In their works, there is often an emphasis on the distant, the romantic, and the ethereal. One notable women’s periodical, *Bamabodhini Patrika*, emphasized the need for gentle and tender education for girls. The women’s magazines stressed that the course, untutored expletives and expressions that their readers, the *bhadramahilaas*, shared with the ‘women of the streets’

³² The move towards the sanitization of the Bengali language was begun by the intelligentsia, and particularly by the novelist Bankimchandra through his literary journal *Bangadarshan*. The journal harshly reviewed literary works by budding Bengali writers who used ‘distasteful’ allusions. In 1880, Haraprasad Shastri enthusiastically wrote about a Bengali periodical that was founded by the Derozians Pearychand Mitra and Radhanath Sikdar in 1854: “Earlier [before *Mashik Patrika*, the periodical] books were written in Bengali prose, their contents either drawn from Sanskrit texts, or law, or they were plays and novels. They were of such ugly taste that they definitely could not be given to women. This magazine was published so that women could read it; it was for their amusement; it was full of good advice, conducive to fostering happiness in their mind and body” (Shastri cited in Nirad C. Chaudhuri, 1968:144).

need to be expurgated from their vocabulary (Banerjee 1993: 161, 163, and 167). Sambuddha Chakraborty's close analysis of *bhadramahilaa* writings reveals that like the discourse of their liberal-minded male counterparts it was ridden with self-contradiction. Though acknowledging the need for introducing women's education, reforming the conjugal relationship, and changing oppressive social customs, the *bhadramahilaas* often imposed some limits to such emancipation. They emphasized that educated women should not neglect housework, childcare, and respect for their husbands and in-laws. Especially among elderly women writers there was an anxiety that education among women may bring about *paaribaarik bishrinkhala* (the family disorder). In the *bhadramahilaa* discourse, there was an attempt to construct the *bhadramahilaa* as an idealized figure of Indian/Bengali rather than English modernity. Thus, many *bhadramahilaa* writers opined that the new woman should not blindly ape the English and abandon her native customs and practices (Chakraborty 1995: 212-213). Perhaps this stance is not unusual as the *bhadramahilaa*'s everyday environment was still saturated with various forms of gendered ideology and Hindu orthodoxy. Besides, her location in the economic and political climate of colonial domination and nascent nationalism may provide a partial explanation. Often a strong nationalist and utilitarian logic animated the *bhadramahilaa* discourse on *streetswadhinataa*. Around 1865, Kamini Dutta wrote in *Bamabodhini Patrika* that to improve Bengal and India, the country's women have to be educated along with their men folk (Chakraborty 1995: 212).

One recurring topic found in the *bhadramahilaa* writings is the conjugal relationship. A close scrutiny of the discourse evinces that the emphasis was on making wives appropriate for the educated and modern *bhadraloks*. It did not argue that wives should be equally treated in marital relationships and that they need education in their own right (Chakraborty 1995: 113). As discussed earlier, a similar kind of logic was also present when male reformers were arguing for

women's education. As a nineteenth-century *bhadralok* joke put it, 'we have to educate our wives, since they serve us green coconut water (*daaber jal*) if we ask for soda!' The *bhadramahilaa* was often instructed through women's periodicals to reform her behavior, but the primary aim for all these changes was her husband's improvement (Chakraborty 1995: 113). Another aspect of this reformed conjugal relationship was the puritanical way of looking at sex. An essay titled "An Ideal Wife" in *Bambodhini Patrika* counselled: "A good wife (*supatnee*) should not get her husband addicted to lowly pleasures (sex) but should take care so that the husband aims for higher ideals...if you love your husband and you are an ideal wife, do not care about your own pleasure and pain" (Chakraborty 1995: 114). In the second half of the nineteenth century, many brahma social reformers enthusiastically promoted puritanical values in the conduct of social and family life. At one level, this was a reaction against the prostitution and alcohol addiction of *nouveau riche* natives (commonly called *baabus*) who prospered as *zamindars* (landlords) and middlemen under the East Indian Company's rule in the first half of the nineteenth century. At another level, the braahmas were inspired by the Victorian morality and puritanical values introduced to them through English education and literature (Chakraborty 1995: 115 and *passim*). As a result, these male reformers placed a major emphasis on reforming and strengthening conjugal and family relationships.

The educated *bhadraloks* increasingly felt the need for companionship in marriage and for educated and refined wives. The *bhadramahilaa* writers also shared this enthusiasm for reforming conjugal relationships and, like their husbands, put the onus mostly on women. The discourse on reforming the conjugal relationship in a nineteenth-century women's periodical ran as follows: "To say the least, only women are responsible for keeping the family happy. The social disorder is mainly due to a lack of the education in virtues (*satshikshaa*) among women. A

woman who does not have the love for God (*ishvarprem*) and purity, who is materialistic (*saansaarik bilaasitaa*) and possesses the despicable nature (*jaghanya bhaab*) that seeks sensual pleasure and displays pride (*indriyasukhabhilaas abhimaanadi*), even if she is devoted to her husband she is not suitable to be called a chaste women (*sei naaree patiparayana hoileo satee nam grahan-er konorup upajukto nahe*)” (Chakraborty 1995: 114-115). Chakraborty argues that a new notion of *sateetva* (chastity) was introduced by these *bhadramahilaa* writers by adding the quality of ‘denial of pleasure’ to the existing Hindu norms of women’s chastity and *streedharma* (a wife’s duty). Even in the *bhadralok* discourse there was an indication that sex in a conjugal relationship was part of a duty, and that a wife should be devoid of sexual desire (*saririk sprihasunya*). Ishanchandra Basu advised *bhadramahilaas*: “Do not use your husband only for your own pleasure, do not think about your husband only to satisfy your own desire” (Basu 1807: 4, cited in Chakraborty 1995: 115). The presence of body and sexual matters in women’s speech and writing was also proscribed (Chakraborty 1995: 115). We know about this trend towards the sanitization of women’s popular culture and language to produce the *bhadramahilaa* from Sumanta Banerjee’s historical research as well (Banerjee 1989 and 1993). Note that even in a socially-approved monogamous relationship, sex was seen as a mere duty. Thus, sexual desire and the autonomous sexuality of the *bhadramahilaa* were devalorized in this discourse. This desexualization of the *bhadramahilaa* was perceived as a sign of her respectability as well. That is, it constituted them in contradistinction to women from the lower order (*chotolok*). Partially in this nineteenth-century discourse, women became bodies and minds for the ceaseless reproduction of social norms and the structures of class, status, cultural identity, and caste. Throughout this thesis, and particularly in chapters four and five, I examine the extent to which this vintage *bhadramahilaa* distinctiveness is reproduced in the PBGMS discourse.

Overall, nineteenth-century social reforms were limited to a minority section of Bengali Hindu women and were often directed at upper-caste oppressive social customs involving women. In the nineteenth century, among the Bengali Muslim community the project of ‘recasting our women’ began somewhat late and in a limited way due to specific historical and political circumstances that obviously cannot be discussed here. It should be noted that it is difficult to categorize the reformed Hindu *bhadramahilaas* as elites, particularly if we position them in their contemporary context. From their own writings we know that these women were struggling to become literate, questioning unjust customs such as women’s seclusion (*abarodh prathaa*), patrilocal marriage, child marriage, male polygamy (*kulin prathaa*) and ascetic widowhood.³³ Thus, we have to keep in mind that though privileged in certain aspects with respect to women from the lower class and caste positions, in pre-reform days a woman from the upper caste and an upper- or middle-class family had to bear the brunt of being an index of gender-based caste and class respectability. They were burdened with Hindu social customs which were at times akin to misogyny. According to Uma Chakravarty, the stringent control of high-caste women’s sexuality through practices such as endogamy, hypergamy (*anuloma vivaha*)³⁴, child marriage and the taboo on widow marriage helped to maintain caste inequality and hierarchy (Chakravarty 2003: 25-36).³⁵

It is myopic to dismiss the nineteenth-century Bengali women’s discourse as an elite discourse. The argument is best confirmed by the case of Haimavati Sen. As Geraldine Forbes

³³ The autobiographies left by some Bengali women such as Rashsundari Debi’s *Amar Jeeban* (1864) and Nistarini Debi’s *Sekeley Katha* (1916) discuss many everyday customs and practices that oppressed and entrapped women’s lives in upper caste households.

³⁴ A Sanskrit term meaning a marital union between a lower caste woman and an upper caste man.

³⁵ A popular Bengali folk poem/song from Laalan Fakir illustrates the gender dimension of a brahmanical privilege: *Baman chini poite praman, bamni chini ki prokare?* (The male Brahmin is identified by the sacred thread, then how do you identify the female Brahmin?). The twice-born (*dvija*) status and ritual purity of a Brahmin is indicated by the sacred thread (*poite*). Customarily, only male brahmins wear the thread which allows them to perform religious rituals.

writes, Sen was a child widow who was thrown out of both her brother's home and her in-law's home. That she finally became a medical doctor trained in the vernacular system and then wrote her memoir makes her part of an elite group, since she obtained higher education and a profession and wrote about her life. But it was not her middle-class and upper-caste status that gave her this chance. Sen achieved this by sheer force of will that resisted social prescription against women's education, particularly 'masculine' education for a profession such as medicine (Forbes 2004: 6). In Bengal, there were countless satires, limericks, and graphic illustrations produced by the nineteenth-century print culture that derided educated women for turning 'masculine' and neglecting their 'feminine' duties.

It should be noted that the nineteenth-century social reforms in Bengal did not revolutionize the Hindu patriarchal structure or radically democratize women's emancipation across caste and class boundaries. Gayatri Spivak critically observes that the subject formation of the colonized woman was not touched by the British and the liberal *bhadralok*-initiated social reforms (Spivak 1988). In certain ways, these reforms reinvented new forms of patriarchal control in their efforts to recast the new woman, and in the next section this reinvention will be discussed in detail. Nevertheless, several seeds for further and future interrogation of gendered norms and patriarchal structures were sown in nineteenth-century Bengal. Whatever their limitations, these early acts of sowing are in no way insignificant if we take a long view of Indian women's history.

The politics of the *ghar* (home) and the *baahir* (world)

Meredith Borthwick observes that the emerging bhadramahilaa class of educated middle-class women was the key to women's modernization in late nineteenth-century Bengal

(Borthwick 1984). This modernization took an interesting turn in the early-twentieth century. In 1905, Bengal witnessed a new phase of anti-colonial agitation and militant nationalism. The Swadeshi movement (1905-1908) was initiated by the Hindu nationalists following Lord Curzon's announcement that Bengal would be partitioned for the colonial state's administrative convenience. Previously, from the 1880s onwards there was a gradual rise in Hindu revivalist nationalism, especially over the Age of Consent Act (1891).³⁶ In addition, the native liberal reformers saw the racist face of the colonial state when a truncated Illbert Bill (1883) only gave native magistrates partial jurisdiction over white British subjects living in India. The liberal hope in an 'enlightened and progressive' British rule had to be rethought, and shortly afterwards the Indian National Congress was formed in 1885. In the midst of this political turmoil, nationalist thought gave an interesting discursive twist to the women's question.

Partha Chatterjee has elaborated on this discursive twist in much detail (Chatterjee 1989). He argues that Indian nationalism resolved the women's question in complete accordance with its preferred goals. He finds that the gendered construction of (male) nationalist discourse was anchored in a binary framework of public and private domains. In this discourse, the Indian nation was located in the inner domain of the spirit which became the site of early nationalist resistance. Since this inner spiritual domain was symbolized by women, a new (nationalist) patriarchy drew the contours of this essentially cultural resistance against colonial domination with ideas about Hindu womanhood as its primary instrument. It is striking how much of the literature on women in the nineteenth century was obsessively focused on the theme of the threat of the westernization of newly-educated Bengali women. The concern was that the educated and

³⁶ The Age of Consent Act (1891) raised the legitimate age of (marital and sexual) consent from ten to twelve. This Act degenerated into a fierce battle between the revivalist-nationalists and the colonial state for control of Indian women's sexuality (Forbes 2004: 31).

westernized woman cared little about the well-being of the home and family. A few lines from one of Iswarchandra Gupta's numerous satirical verses will illustrate this concern:

Ebar A B sikhe bibi seje
Gorer mathe haowa khabe
Ar ki era saji haate
Saaj sejutir vrata gabe

(She will learn English and become a new woman
She will freely roam around in public places
Will they ever be like the women of the bygone era
And sing the traditional *vrata* songs)³⁷

The nationalist discourse, particularly from the mid-nineteenth century, formulated the spiritual private domain as a native alternative to western science and materialism. Chatterjee delineates a series of binaries between male versus female, inner (*ghar*) versus outer (*baahir*), and material versus spiritual in this discourse. The nascent nationalist thought among the *bhadraloks* attempted to define the social and moral principles for locating the position of Hindu women in the modern world of the nation.

Formal education for women was acceptable even to Hindu revivalist-nationalists, and it became as already discussed the prime requirement for becoming a *bhadramahilaa*. But the strong caveat in both the male and female discourse was that the newly acquired cultural refinement and education should not jeopardize her modesty (*lajjaashilataa*), and her place at home (*ghar*). As a noted Hindu revivalist wrote: "In the Arya system there is a preponderance of spiritualism, in the European system a preponderance of materialism. In the Arya system, the wife is a goddess. In the European system, she is a partner and companion" (Bhudev Mukhopadhyay, cited in Chatterjee 2003: 179). The *ghar* (home) became the primary site for

³⁷ My translation and transcreation; the traditional *vrata* songs were sung by Hindu women for the well-being of their husbands and families. The custom of keeping *vratas* (vows) was a part of the women's popular culture (Banerjee 1993).

articulating the spiritual quality of the national culture, and the new woman had to bear the burden of preserving and nurturing this quality. The external situation of modern educated life may change, but the new woman must never lose her essentially spiritual (i.e. feminine) virtues and become westernized. The essential difference between the social and cultural roles of men and women in terms of material and spiritual virtues must be never challenged. In the modern world of the Indian nation, a marked distinction should be maintained in the degree and manner of the westernization of women (Chatterjee 2003: 179). The cultural value of the nation and its women should remain insulated from the corrupting influence of western materialist culture. This is a form of reinvented colonial modernity and patriarchy. Chatterjee argues that the new patriarchy advocated by the nationalist ideology bestowed upon women the ‘honour’ of a new social responsibility. In addition, this discourse bound women to a new and seemingly legitimate subordination by dovetailing the task of women’s emancipation with the historical telos of a sovereign Indian nation.

The nationalist construction of reform, as the project of both political emancipation and self-emancipation of women in which both men and women must participate, partly explains why the early *bhadramahilaas* themselves enthusiastically disseminated the nationalist idea of the new woman who is *modern yet modest*. As Radharani Lahiri wrote in 1875, “Of all the subjects that women might learn, housework is the most important... Whatever knowledge she may acquire, she cannot claim any reputation unless she is proficient in housework” (cited in Sangari, Kumkum and Sudesh Vaid 1993: 247). Once the essential femininity was maintained in terms of culturally visible ‘spiritual’ qualities (e.g. dress and demeanor), the new woman could step out of the home.³⁸ This new patriarchy, which the nationalist discourse attempted to hegemonize, distinguished itself from the West as well as from the subordinate Indian masses

³⁸ In chapter four, this discourse will be revisited through the PBGMS discourse on female teacher’s dress.

who were still culturally incapable of appreciating the virtues of emancipation (Chatterjee 2003: 182-184 and 187).

Moreover, the existential context of nationalist politics gave a radical turn to this new patriarchy. Tanika Sarkar's excellent research on the Hindu nationalist iconography shows that the nationalist resolution of the women's question was executed by transforming women from an index of social pathology, as articulated in the liberal-reformist discourse, to an icon of spiritual and national superiority. This transformation was anchored in the mythical image of a spiritually empowered woman who was *satee-lakshmi*, that is, embodying the virtues of nurture, chastity, and prosperity. She was made into the symbol of the health of the Hindu community and by extension the Indian nation. The iconic stature undermined the critical reflection on women's actual social condition. The reinvented tradition disembodied from the precarious everyday social reality found fulfillment in the aesthetic domain of the image of *Bharat Mata* (Mother India) (Sarkar 2001: 250-267). The nationalist iconography drew upon the Hindu cult of the mother goddess and deified the woman, who would now attain her greatest feat as the Motherland (Bagchi 1990: 65-71). Particularly during the Swadeshi movement (1905-1908), this iconography reached a new literary height in Bengal. The irony of the peculiar subjectivity of the colonized woman should be underscored here. She is the object of colonial historiography and a subject of anti-colonial insurgency, and in both these ideological constructions of gender the male is the dominant (Spivak 1988: 287).

Later, when Gandhi emerged in the national scene of anti-colonial mass movements, he made an innovative political use of the Seetaa-savitree³⁹ archetype (namely, the spiritual qualities of self-sacrifice, devotion to husband, chastity, benevolence, and religiosity) which facilitated the new woman's participation in the nationalist movement in the public domain

³⁹ Sita and Savitri are idealized female figures from the Hindu epic and the puranic mythology respectively.

without undermining her 'feminine virtues'. The Seetaa-savitree archetype served to desexualize the new woman when she participated in the nationalist politics. In a way, this made women's participation in the nationalist politics more acceptable to traditional patriarchal values. The woman and her sexuality were rendered safe. A number of feminist historians argue that in a circuitous way this facilitated the first generation of political women to step out of their homes facing relatively less resistance from their family members (Ray 2005; Sarkar 2005; Thapar-Björkert 2006). Recent feminist readings of Gandhi's discourse observe that Gandhi feminized the nationalist struggle by asking men to emulate the ideal Hindu widow who learned to find happiness in suffering and accepted suffering as sacred (Kishwar 1999: 212). Gandhi viewed Hindu widowhood as 'voluntary enlightened widowhood', where the widow makes the sacrifice of her own interests and pleasures, and this is her own voluntary choice. Earlier, as discussed above, the nineteenth-century Hindu revivalist literature had created the romanticized figure of a spiritual 'our woman'. Gandhi asked his countrymen to idealize this widowhood from the inner world and make self-sacrifice as a moral and empathetic being for the cause of the nation. In fact, Gandhi through his life and work exemplified this model of a self-renouncing political and public figure. Tagore honoured him with the title of *Mahatma* (the great soul). The popular discourse often described him as a *sannyasee* (an ascetic mendicant) who renounced the pleasure principle to reach a higher goal.

But a question obviously haunts the 'spiritual construction of our women': Was the Hindu widow entirely a free subject when she made that 'voluntary and enlightened' choice? Or, was it more out of a lack of available options within the structure of a patriarchal family, community, religion, and society? Moreover, there still remains another question which has a far-reaching consequence in Indian history. The nationalist construction of Indian womanhood

was premised on a Hindu image. Both Gyanendra Pandey and Joya Chatterji contend that the use of Hindu religious imagery and symbolism in the nationalist discourse resulted in normalizing the Hindu culture as the national culture (Pandey 1990; Chatterji 1994).⁴⁰ In short to a considerable extent the politics of the outer (*baahir*) world, nationalism, left the politics of the inner (*ghar*) world, the patriarchal structure of family, marriage and sexuality, unquestioned by valorizing the spiritual, ethical, empowered, and Hinduized icon of the mother-woman and the Seetaa-savitree archetype. In India, the nationalist ideology privileged the politics of anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism over the politics of women's emancipation from the native patriarchy. A remark made by Nehru, the first Prime Minister of post-colonial India, is pertinent here. In 1936, he noted that both the British government as well as the Indian National Congress (INC) was reluctant to popularize the Sarda Act (1929), which aimed to legally prohibit premature marriages among Hindus, particularly the practice of marrying off infant girls to adult and older men. Nehru attributed *the reluctance on the part of the Congress to the disease of nationalism*, apprehending that matters would not really change even after the transfer of power to Indians (Sen 2003: 44). In many other countries, drawing cultural distinctiveness from nationalism has been an exercise full of ambiguities, particularly in the case of the 'women's question' (Sinha 2006)

Indian nationalism preserved the differences between the sexes but this produced points of rupture that later paved the way for Indian women to demand their 'rights as women'.⁴¹ In fact, in the context of the Sarda Act, the first generation of Indian feminists grew impatient with the nationalist leadership's sentimentalized invocation of a glorified Hindu woman (Sinha 1999:

⁴⁰ Gandhi's political utopia of a *Ramrajya*, the kingdom of the Hindu epic hero Rama from *Ramayana*, is a case in point.

⁴¹ Note that a paradox is involved here. Women demand equality with men but the demand is premised on difference. But I would argue that acknowledging *the difference of circumstance* which arises out of different histories and material situations of men and women can help us to deal with this paradoxical issue.

217). A close reading of the debates over the Sarda Bill and the Hindu Law Committee⁴² between the All India Women's Conference (AIWC)⁴³ and the Congress leadership reveal that the organized women's movement gathered momentum in the 1920s and 1930s. Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, an AIWC leader and a disciple of Gandhi disagreed with him over his standpoint that women should not spend their energy on the question of their legal status within the Hindu family (and thereby cooperate with the Hindu Law Committee when the Congress had launched the civil disobedience movement), but concentrate instead on more pressing matters. Vilasini Shenai, an AIWC member, observed that the struggle for women's equality was on par with, if not more important than, the struggle for Indian freedom (Ray and Basu 1990: 49-50). Mrinalini Sinha observes that the result of these dissident voices from the first generation of politically organized women was the abstract construction of the normative citizen subject. This subject was conceived as existing above all divisions of class, caste, race and religion. Sinha argues that this self-representation by middle class women paved the way for the women's rights movement in India (Sinha 1999: 218). Unlike the British-and *bhadralok*-initiated nineteenth-century social reforms, the subject formation of women in the early twentieth century was stirred by these dissident self-representations, and the women themselves recognized their agency.

To present further evidence, I conclude this section by citing two female voices from the late colonial and early post-colonial periods. In 1931, Susmita Debi wrote in the political women's periodical *Jayasree*: "All the energies of women, their intellect, their strength, their skill are devoted to cater to the comforts of men. Men have been so used to receiving attention and care from the women that they, the men, have come to regard such services as justifiable

⁴² This committee was appointed by the British government to review the diverse body of Hindu Family laws under the chairmanship of B.N. Rau. This was a precursor to the Hindu Code Bill that was tabled in the Indian Parliament during the 1950s under Nehru and Ambedkar's stewardship.

⁴³ The AIWC was formed in 1927 at a meeting in Poona (Forbes 2004: 79).

dues. So much so that men consider their needs as a priority in relation to others” (Debi 1931, cited in Ray 2001: 92). The second voice is that of Saralabala Sarkar. In 1954, in the face of Hindu Mahasabha’s opposition to the Hindu woman’s right to divorce under the proposed Hindu Code Bill, Saralabala Sarkar wrote: “But why should the burden of sacredness fall on women alone? Men following scriptural injunctions uttered the same verses that women did at the time of marriage. But until not so long ago they practiced polygamy and still reserve the right to do so... To think that society would be beset with numerous problems if divorce was instituted was a fallacy, and if that does happen it will be the fruit of already existing social maladies. If divorce law leads many couples to the break up then we must conclude that our family life was poisoned to begin with and this condition does not bode well for a happy, strong, family unit. So, under certain given conditions to make provision for divorce will actually benefit our social lot” (Sarkar 1954, cited in Majumdar 2003: 34-35). Thus, in the first half of the twentieth century some distinctively feminist voices had started interrogating the politics of the home and demystifying the Seeta-savitree archetype. The same period witnessed the gradual growth of mass based women’s organizations in India.

The emergence of mass-based women’s organizations

In the history of women in anti-colonial struggle, the 1930s saw an interesting turn in Bengal. A number of young women joined the militant nationalist movement and carried out armed struggle along with men. Bina Das, Shanti Ghosh, Suniti Chowdhury, Pritilata Waddedar, and Kalpana Dutta were among these women who lived in disguise, learned how to shoot, drive cars, and make bombs, thereby challenging the existing norm of ‘feminine respectability’.

Tanika Sarkar observes that even though these women could wrench themselves away from

domestic and feminine mores, their understanding of their social situations changed little and they did not translate political comradeship into the transformation of gender norms (Sarkar 2005: 555). In Bengal, the tradition of militant nationalism partly explains the successful inroads that communist ideology had made among the Bengali nationalists and intellectuals. Like their male counterparts, many militant-nationalist (*biplabee*) women were jailed for their revolutionary activities, read Marxist and socialist literature in prison and joined the left-leaning student organizations and later the Communist Party of India (CPI) in Bengal.

These women understood women's liberation as a part of class struggle and the anti-imperialist movement. The political necessity to engage with the toiling mass of women, particularly peasants and workers, was foregrounded in their discourse. This was a major point of departure from the previous discourse produced by women from organizations such as the AIWC. In the words of Renu Chakravartty, a leading communist woman activist from Bengal:

The urge to awaken the masses to fight British imperialism as an essential prerequisite of victory had become a part of my consciousness. Not only the fight against the British, but also the fight for the establishment of social justice for the vast masses of our toiling people faced with the scourge of poverty, ignorance and want. These objectives, intertwined, were before me. In this task women would have an important part to play... Yet when I looked round ... ignorance, illiteracy, superstitions held them [women] in an octopus grip... To me therefore, it seemed a challenging task to bring women into the movement for the struggle against colonial bondage as well as to make them conscious of the need to establish socialism, if women were to gain real emancipation... In our country, the struggle for women's emancipation had a political and economic importance, even if the social demands of women had to be fulfilled... If the happiness and dignity of women were to be won and the security of the life of their children and their families were to be ensured, they must win this struggle. Women's liberation could not be separated from the struggle of the toiling people for a better life. This understanding brought me into the communist movement and this is what was

imparted to me and to communist women by the Communist Party [of India].
(Chakravartty 1980: 6-7)

Manikuntala Sen was another prominent communist woman activist and organizer in the early days of the communist movement in Bengal. In her autobiography she notes: ‘...It was through politics that I had established links with the ordinary people of Bengal, observed their joys and sorrows, their daily grind...I want to let the ones who live, speak through my pen. And if in doing so we can catch a glimpse of the women’s awakening in contemporary Bengal, so much better’ (Manikuntala Sen 2001: 3). In the early communist discourse, women’s emancipation was an integral part of the struggle towards socialism and the fight against British imperialism.

In Bengal, MARS (Mahila Atmaraksha Samity or the Women’s Self-Defence League) was the first mass-based women’s organization. MARS was formed in 1942 under the active leadership of Manikuntala Sen and Renu Chakravartty who had links with the CPI. Both Sen and Chakravartty observe that there was a need to organize the numerous party-initiated local women’s associations (*mahilaa samity*) under a provincial women’s organization (Chakravartty 1980: 21; Manikuntala Sen 2001: 73-76). During this period, the CPI wanted to disseminate communist ideas at every level of society. Since the late 1930s, a number of mass organizations with strong communist party leanings were formed at the national level.⁴⁴ These mass organizations were responsible for launching a broad-based communist movement in India. However, the formation of MARS was also entwined with a concrete socio-economic crisis in Bengal. In Bengal, the decade of the 1940s was ridden with crisis, deprivation, hunger, and destitution. The man-made Bengal famine (1943-44) and the food crisis, the general climate of the Second World War, the Quit India movement, and the anti-fascist movement created an

⁴⁴ These were All India Kishaan (Farmer’s) Sabha (Association), Indian People’s Theatre Association, All India Progressive Writer’s Association, and the All India Students Federation.

atmosphere of calamity. MARS became actively involved in these national and international issues by involving even non-communist women and preparing a common program acceptable to all. The three primary planks of this program were: (1) the defense of the country; (2) the release of political prisoners and formation of a national government; and (3) saving Bengal's population, particularly women and children, from starvation and death (Chaudhuri 2000: 312).

Note that all three demands concerned the politics of the outer world that is nationalism, anti-colonial agitation, the British-led Second World War, and the specific crisis of a famine-stricken province where women were the chief victims of destitution and hunger-driven prostitution. As Manikuntala Sen stated in her interview to Tripti Chaudhuri: The famine not only killed 3.5 million people but also killed the ideas of social morality and promoted trading in immoral traffic (Chaudhuri 2000: 314). MARS was particularly active in providing food and shelter to these destitute women. According to Chaudhuri, MARS became a humanitarian organization carrying out relief work among the famine- and epidemic-stricken people in 1943 and 1944. The organization ran gruel kitchens, milk distribution and childcare centers in the famine affected areas of rural Bengal. In the first provincial conference of MARS (May 7, 1943), fifty percent of the delegates were peasant and working-class women (Chaudhuri 2000: 313). MARS was successful in mobilizing women, particularly rural women, to demand their basic rights to food and dignity from the government. As Manikuntala Sen recollects: "My purpose behind these district [rural] tours was to ensure that relief activities were started all over as a prelude to our first conference of the MARS. This would, it was expected, strengthen the movement for political rights and for food supply and help spread the network of branches of the samity as extensively as possible" (Manikuntala Sen 2001: 104). In 1943, MARS successfully organized many hunger marches in which rural and urban women demanded the right to food.

One such historic march took place on March 8, 1943, when MARS led five thousand women marched to the legislative assembly in Calcutta demanding more fair-price ration shops for better food distribution. To an extent, this political stirring of rural women later contributed towards the success of the Tebhaga movement (1946-1947) in which peasant women played an active role.

For our purposes, it is important to note that unlike the earlier organizations such as the AIWC, MARS was essentially mass based and had a communist orientation in its broader political perspective. Manikuntala Sen, a leading founding member of MARS, reminisces: “We felt that the AIWC would not suffice anymore. We would form our own organization primarily with middle-class and lower middle-class, working and peasant women. We would also try to include upper-class women; indeed why shouldn’t they be our partners in this task of fighting for women’s rights? After all they too were deprived of the rights of suffrage, and in spite of being the wives of rich husbands, they would have to stand side by side with the rest of the womankind in order to achieve this right” (Manikuntala Sen 2001: 74). Although Sen never identifies herself as a feminist in her autobiography, in this discourse there is an indication of a feminist consciousness that is acutely aware of women’s secondary location within a class and that women’s exploitation has a different dimension irrespective of their class location. In famine relief efforts, the AIWC and the MARS worked closely for a brief period. But differences arose when the AIWC leadership wanted to keep the membership restricted by retaining three rupees as the annual membership fee. The MARS leadership disagreed because unlike the AIWC it wanted to reach out to the poor masses of women. Thus, it kept the annual membership fee lower to make MARS a mass based women’s front (Chaudhuri 2000: 311). In the words of Manikuntala Sen: “Our membership fee was 1 anna... It was our policy to keep the subscription [membership fee] low to enable the maximum number of women to participate” (Manikuntala

Sen 2001: 119). In this light, MARS was the precursor of later mass-based communist women's organizations such as the Paschim Banga Mahilaa Samity (PBMS) and the Paschin Banga Ganatantrik Mahilaa Samity (PBGMS) in Bengal. In fact, the PBMS the women's mass front of the CPI was created simply by renaming MARS in 1959. Later, in 1971, the PBGMS was formed as the women's mass front of the CPI-M by splitting from the PBMS. Earlier, the CPI-M was formed in 1964 by splitting from the CPI on the grounds of political difference.⁴⁵ It should be noted that in all these women's mass organizations, the top leadership was most often constituted by educated middle-class women engaged in white collar jobs such as teaching.

Let us now take a close look at the ideology on which some specific demands of MARS were premised. In the second MARS conference, the second proposal accepted was the rehabilitation of poor destitute women affected by the famine in order to ensure that they do not get involved in dishonest occupations (*osot upaye jibika uparjan*) (Mukhopadhyay 1993: 82). There is no doubt that MARS carried out outstanding relief work among the women victims of the famine. However, the question remains: Why would a women's organization use the language of patriarchy in its description of prostitution? Does it indicate that the ideological impulse was more protectionist and paternal than egalitarian? Two common slogans that reverberated in Calcutta during the hunger marches organized by MARS were '*maryaadaa rakshaarthe* (for the protection of [women's] honour)', and '*paribar o griher swarthe oikyabodhho hon* (unite in the name of the family and home)' (Marik 2001: 139). These slogans indicate that women's sexuality was considered honourable when practiced within the safe confines of the family and home. More importantly, the woman is not seen as a being and a person in this discourse. She is seen through her location within the institution of family. The influence of the CPI discourse on MARS should be noted here. Soma Marik observes that during

⁴⁵ The strife was over the USSR line versus the People's Republic of China line.

the 1940s the party did not recognize that a class can be internally fractured by the question of gender. August Bebel's observation that within the family structure men are bourgeois and women are workers did not find much recognition in the political classes organized by the CPI (Marik 2001: 138). Class struggle was understood in an impersonal way by many communist male and female ideologues. This kept the personal strictly separated from the political. For instance, Manikuntala Sen's three hundred page autobiography hardly ever discusses her personal life as an adult woman – her intimacy with a fellow comrade and later husband Jolly Kaul, her marriage to Kaul, or her family life.

The non-politicization of the home (the institutions of family and marriage) limited the party discourse, particularly with respect to the question of patriarchy. As noted earlier, the three primary demands of the MARS concerned the politics of the outside world.⁴⁶ Indeed, the party encouraged women to take up political work and to work outside the confines of the home, thereby challenging the existing gender norms. However, the party discourse never challenged the gender ideology embedded in the family, and understood that a woman's family life was primary (Marik 2001: 138). In the CPI publication, *Janayudha*, a MARS organized women's conference was described as follows: "The Bengali women are not lagging behind; in the struggle against Fascism they have come forward to stand beside their husbands and sons" (*Janayudha* May 1, 1942; cited in Mukhopadhyay 1993: 33). Furthermore, as Kanak Mukhopadhyay, an early communist activist recalls in her book *Naareemukti Aandolan O Amra* (1993), "On April 13, 1942 we met at the Calcutta University Institute Library Hall to discuss anti-fascist resistance where Pranati Dey said that like China and Russia, Indian women should stand beside their men to protect the country (*desh*) and home (*griharaksha*)"

⁴⁶ In later years, MARS campaigned for the Hindu Code Bill, which involved the politics of the home i.e. reforming the institutions of Hindu marriage and family to make them gender sensitive. But these demands were only secondary and contingent when compared to the principal demands with which MARS started its political work.

(Mukhopadhyay 1993: 34). The Bengali communist discourse seems to have imbibed the patriarchal dictum that a woman should be known by the identities of her husband and son, and instead of having an autonomous identity her existence should be built around the patriarchal structures of the nation, home and family.

Even during the Tebhaga movement in Bengal (1946-1947), the questions of patriarchy and gender within a class were not taken up seriously. The CPI members and its mass organizations were actively involved in this peasant uprising against the feudal exploitation of peasants. It has been well documented that during the Tebhaga movement, the communist party leadership refused to intervene in the oppressive domestic behavior of male comrades, even though peasant women activists brought up these issues for redress (Samita Sen 2001: 275). In 1976, in an interview with Geraldine Forbes, Manikuntala Sen noted that often women activists like her would try to highlight women's specific problems to the communist party leadership. These activists voiced their demands such as the need to free the peasant women from household work so that they could actively participate in the movement, and the fight against the high preponderance of domestic violence in peasant households. But male CPI leaders wanted peasant women to be 'good comrades' and put the struggle above personal concerns. CPI women argued in vain for a program that would encourage peasant women to defy their husbands (Forbes 2004: 215). The politics of the home was left unchallenged by the party leadership. In his work on the Tebhaga movement, Peter Custers shows that peasant women activists became very prominent when, at peak points in the history of the repression, the male activists went into hiding or were imprisoned, but that prominence waned when the party leadership reasserted its control (Custers 1987). From other parts of India, similar stories emerge. The experience of communist women activists from the Telengana People's movement is somewhat similar. Stree Shakti Sangathan's

We Were Making History: Women in the Telengana Uprising (1989) is a landmark book that meticulously documents the oral history from surviving women activists of the Telengana uprising (1946-1951). It shows that the communist party pushed women back into a purely domestic existence the moment the struggle was terminated. A schizophrenic vision seems to have guided party perspectives on gender. The party expected women to revolutionize all social norms to join a mass movement and become comrades-in-arms, and then to return to domesticity afterwards. The communist party often acted as a family, allotting proper duties to its women activists, depending upon family needs (Sarkar 2005: 557-558).

Soma Marik observes that the early communist discourse and activities in Bengal reveal the existence of an internal *party patriarchy*. This internal patriarchy has often been justified with an appeal to historicism by the Party ideologues (Marik 2001: 140). The autobiography of Manikuntala Sen recounts a candid vignette concerning this internal patriarchy. Sen, a founding member of the MARS, was also an active member of the CPI who later contested and won assembly seats through party nomination. In the late 1960s she left the party, disenchanted by the internal feud that led to the splitting of the CPI and creation of the CPI-M in 1964. In her autobiography, Sen recollects some sensitive incidents that show the problematic gender discourse of the party and its internal patriarchy. I will present these incidents in chronological order as they appear in her autobiography. The autobiography was first published in 1982 in the Bengali language as *Shediner Katha*, then in English translation in 2001:

A general body meeting had been called... this kind of meeting [is generally] held with party members. But this GB [meeting] was almost like a public meeting... [The party leader] P.C. Joshi [began by conveying gratitude and thanks to the town people who helped to organize the peasant's conference, then] suddenly began to criticize the women members severely... We had worked so hard for the conference for such a long time, what grave mistake could we have committed? Even if we were in the wrong couldn't he

have just called us and spoken to us less publicly? Why were we being criticized before the people of Netrokona?... The accusation, roughly was against us middle class women who were present there. Our fault apparently was that we had not mixed with the peasant women the way we should have. We might have been in the wrong. But he made many other complaints which I would not like to mention. We listened to this hard criticism for about an hour with our heads bent. [Some women members sitting behind me] asked me to protest. But I did not stand up to do so because I had been taught to accept whatever the party leader told me and not to protest... I don't know why he belittled us like that... It now seems to me that the unlimited power which the topmost leader of the Party enjoys is not desirable; and the consequence could be serious. We know the extent of damage that misuse of power could cause; the Soviet Union and China provide painful lessons. After the incident at Netrokona... I was constantly troubled by feelings of guilt and had doubts about working for the Party. (Manikuntala Sen 2001: 145-146)

On the eve of elections, it was decided that we would contest for some hundred seats... I had disagreements with the leaders about a particular issue. Why was I alone to be nominated as the sole representative of women among those 100 seats? Anila, Pankaj, Kanak why couldn't they be nominated? ... Did the Communist Party consider its female workers to be so unworthy? After arguing my point, I found out that since the other parties in our Left Front had not put forth any claims for the Kalighat seat, it was open to the Party to put up a candidate there. Thus it was thrust on me. The Party was totally unwilling to let women representatives stand for any of the other seats because there were a very large number of hopeful male candidates. I disliked what was happening. (Manikuntala Sen 2001: 219)

I am not talking about today but 1954-1955. At every neighbourhood samity, at the end of a session, women would come up to Renuka or to me and say, 'there must be a solution, we cannot carry on like this... We cannot manage so many children, our bodies are wearing out'. Everything was said in a hush-hush way. There was then an absence of any talk on birth control or family planning... Moreover the Party did not approve of contraception or family planning. It was not seen as a problem by Communists but as a

throwback to Malthus' theory, which was unacceptable to them. From an economic standpoint, the party opinion was that population constituted the wealth of the country. If it could be utilized properly, the country's production would increase and the economy would grow stronger... After hearing what had taken place at [the first provincial mother's] conference, and especially the speeches, one of the [male] party leaders commented, 'This could have been called a birth-control conference instead of a mothers' conference'... We had to respond to the pressures of real life. I still do not know for certain what the party leadership thought of birth control... In reality, the only way ahead for our country was to campaign for extending all kinds of support for birth control. (Sen 2001: 251-252)

These recollections by Manikuntala Sen reveal a reflexive and critical consciousness trying to grapple with the existing gender reality and the communist party's gender insensitivity. Sen was a dedicated party worker who led an austere life. For instance, she writes: "[While working in the rural belt of Tamluk subdivision] I had stopped using soap or toothpaste and toothbrush. This was because boys and girls who stood by the side of the pond observed these little luxuries which could embarrass me. I felt that they might consider me an outsider and had thus given up [those little luxuries]" (Manikuntala Sen 2001: 93). This honest dedication to the cause, often inducing her to make personal sacrifices (*tyaag*) also led to her later disenchantment with the party. In the last chapter of her autobiography, Sen makes a remark which shows her deep sensitivity to the internal fracturing of a class by patriarchy: "Even if a man is not a *zamindar* [landlord], he had one subject, his wife, and this was true of the poorest" (Manikuntala Sen 2001: 301).

About the early communist women activists in India and particularly Bengal, Tanika Sarkar observes that women entered the communist party in large numbers. But they were rarely in leading, decision-making positions or in commanding organizational ones. In the long term,

the most serious form of gender blindness for the CPI with a strong theoretical bent was that women were neither given systematic or serious theoretical training, nor were they at all expected to provide theoretical leadership. This condemned them to auxiliary capacities. The feminist criticism of the party's gender blindness is entirely valid, but it is not the whole story. For many communist women activists, their political engagement revolutionized their social existence. For instance, the communist-leaning Students' Federation (in Bengal) in the early forties was regarded as a haven for rebellious young women who ran away from home to avoid arranged matches (Sarkar 2005: 557, 558).

Women for a *sustha* nation state

In order to illustrate the above genealogy in the PBGMS discourse traced above, I will conclude by providing a close reading of an essay by the chief ideologue of the organization Kanak Mukhopadhyay. The essay, titled "Apasanskriti rodhe naaree Samaajer daitwa" (The responsibility of women's society in resisting debased culture), was originally published in 1977, the same year CPI-M-led Left Front government came to power in West Bengal. The essay is primarily concerned with the issue of cultural debasement and degeneration (*apasanskriti*) under the influence of the corrupting force of capitalism, the degrading U.S. culture, and the bourgeois intellectuals. The cultural degeneration obstructs the 'normal, tasteful culture (*sustha*, *ruchisheel sanskriti*)' and its manifestations are the following: obscene posters, tasteless dress, pulp literature (*Battalar* novel)⁴⁷, low-quality cinema, theatre, song and dance, and advertisements showing sexual perversion. Besides, cultural degeneration degrades the mind (*monke niche tene*

⁴⁷ The Battala press from Calcutta produces cheap vernacular texts which are often pornographic in nature. This print culture was denounced by the high culture of *bhadralok* community in the nineteenth century. For details see *Power in Print: Popular Publishing and the Politics of Language and Culture in a Colonial Society* (2006) by Anindita Ghosh.

namay), and pushes people towards anti-social activities which obstruct the progress of society towards socialism. Young men and women are the chief targets of this cultural degeneration. They get engaged in dishonest professions, sexual perversions in the name of free love (*swadhin premer name jyono bikriti*), and blindly ape the U.S. culture. This cultural degeneration brings forth political and social crisis (*sankot*) (Mukhopadhyay 2002: 163-164). In the rest of the essay, Mukhopadhyay articulates women's special responsibility in the struggle against cultural degeneration. She writes:

The principal theme in cultural degeneration is women's bodies and sexual perversion involving women... without women's degradation, and humiliation cultural degeneration cannot crystallize in any country, we know this from our general experience... In a class-divided society, *wealth and women (artha o naaree)*, are the two chief enticements that drive young men towards degeneration. These enticements make the society *polluted and diseased*, the young men become resistant to the [class] struggle... and bourgeois rulers remain in power by using these instruments. To discuss women's role in the fight against cultural degeneration we have to remember this basic fact... Engels said: The first premise for the emancipation of women is the reintroduction of the entire female sex into public industry. But in a class divided society...where unemployment is ever growing among the [male] workers, peasants, and the middle class, *there is no question that women should be brought into social production*. Only in a socialist society, after the demise of class exploitation can women become fully independent and socially emancipated...What are women's responsibilities in resisting cultural degeneration?... [Women have to] build resistance against cultural degeneration to create *a normal, beautiful public culture (sustha, sundar ganasanskriti)*... [Women] should revolt against the spread of sexual perversion that goes in the name of free and open culture. Women have to become conscious that *their bodies are made the locus of this cultural degeneration*... Films, theatres, posters, and advertisements should be used to resist the humiliation of women. All conscious people should participate in this struggle. But women have to take up a special responsibility... The woman who is humiliated through cultural degeneration *is the icon (prateek) of the whole society*;

through her a society's perspective on women is constituted... Besides, in society *women have a special responsibility as the community of mothers (maatrijaati hishabe)*... A mother not only feeds her child, she also builds his/her mental structure (*manashik gathan*). Mothers invest tremendous affection and make enormous sacrifice to raise a child. If that child gets involved in the bourgeois orchestrated cultural degeneration and gets addicted to women and alcohol, *then the mother suffers from grief, insult, and embarrassment*. Mothers have to influence their sons and daughters by inculcating in them the normal values of life (*sustha jeebanbodh*), the humane values (*manabik mulyobodh*), and insulation against cultural degeneration... A normal public culture (*sustha ganasanskriti*) does not degrade human beings... Unless a socialist society is established women will not be fully emancipated, they will not achieve their full status in the cultural sphere... The socialist ideas, the revolutionary consciousness will propel us towards an advanced, progressive culture and resist cultural degeneration... As half of humanity, as part of the exploited masses, and *as mothers and sisters* women have to consciously come forward in this struggle against cultural degeneration. (Mukhopadhyay 2002: 164-172; my emphasis)

First, let us note that in a characteristically orthodox Marxist way, Mukhopadhyay conceives culture to be socially functional in paving the way towards a socialist future. An 'art for art's sake' attitude is not visible in this cognitive horizon. A distinct logic of social progress and historicism is present which is drawn from the Western socialist political literature. But more importantly, for the purpose of this thesis, in this discourse women are conceived as victims who are acted upon by a corrupt culture, and their bodies become the locus of cultural degeneration. A problematic aspect of Mukhopadhyay's conceptualization of female sexuality is blatant when she states, 'In a class divided society, wealth and women (*artha o naaree*), are the two chief enticements that drive young men towards degeneration. These enticements make the society polluted and diseased'. Here, the patriarchal language and logic are employed to

conceptualize women and their sexuality. This conceptualization has a deep lineage in Hindu religion and culture. In fact, in the nineteenth-century discourse of the Hindu seer Ramakrishna this theme is reiterated. In chapter four we will see how this vintage theme of the polluting *kaminee o kaanchan* (women and wealth) is used in PBGMS discourse. It is interesting to note that a women's mass organization is reiterating a patriarchal argument.

Next, the discourse modifies Engels' argument and states that Indian women should not immediately join the sphere of social production to become emancipated. They have to wait since in India there are countless unemployed men among the middle and working classes. It becomes evident that women are primarily conceived as familial beings, and not as economic beings, in the way men are principally conceived. In fact, in the last line, Mukhopadhyay addresses women not as comrades or women but in familial kinship terms as 'mothers and sisters'. While addressing women in such familial terms is not apparently offensive, the question remains: Why in the corpus of the PBGMS discourse are men not addressed in similar terms as fathers and brothers?⁴⁸ It seems that for the PBGMS, a woman's location within the institution of the family, that is, in her roles as mother, wife and sister, predominantly determines her identity.

Earlier, we saw that the 1940s communist discourse conceived women in such familial terms. I argue that a latent patriarchal ideology is at work when women are addressed as mothers and sisters, even though this appears as just another cultural convention. The ideology involves de-eroticizing women in the interest of making them 'safe'. But why would a socialist women's organization reproduce this ideology? Does the party and its mass organization benefit in some way if women are primarily conceived through their familial roles? These questions are partially answered in the rest of Mukhopadhyay's essay. 'In society women have a special responsibility

⁴⁸ My exposure to the Calcutta streets in the 1990s also confirm that in the PBGMS organized mass meetings and rallies women are addressed as mothers and sisters. Amrita Basu also notes this point (Basu 1992).

as the community of mothers (*maatrijaati hishabe*); so as good mothers they are responsible for raising their children so that they remain insulated from the cultural degeneration and contribute to a normal and beautiful public culture which will pave the way towards a socialist future.

Women's embodied existence as mothers is underscored in this discourse. For this embodied existence, a woman has to bear the chief onus of building a strong socialist society (the Indian nation state) by raising 'normal' (*sustha*) children endowed with normal values of life (*sustha jeebanbodh*). The nineteenth-century Sushilaa archetype reappears here but in a different guise. Instead, of the dutiful wife and the caring mother of aspiring male colonial subjects, the communist Sushilaa has to dedicate her life to building a strong socialist nation state through her children by endowing them with the normative value system. As Mukhopadhyay further states, 'The woman who is humiliated through the cultural degeneration is the icon (*prateek*) of the whole society'. This assertion is reminiscent of the nineteenth-century nationalist discourse which conceived the Indian woman as the repository of the emerging nation's culture and civilization. This iconization burdens women, and in chapter four this theme will be analyzed in detail using the PBGMS discourse on women's dress. On the other hand, the communist Sushilaa archetype will be further developed in chapter five where I analyze an ethnographic report published in the PBGMS periodical *Eksathe*.

This chapter has set up the historical background of the politicization of women in Bengal. Here, I have also begun to trace certain lines of affiliation between specific nineteenth-century discourses on women in Bengal and the idea of 'women for a *sustha* socialist nation state' in the PBGMS discourse. These lines of affiliation will be further exposed and analyzed in chapters three, four and five, where I deconstruct the everyday and the imaginative discourses produced by the PBGMS. In chapter one I have traced the genealogical root of the PBGMS

discourse in the history of politicization of women in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century India. In the next chapter, my focus is on the mass organization's official political discourse as found in its pedagogical booklets and essays. I present and analyze here the political discourse of the PBGMS on socialism and women.

But before moving to the next chapter, let me present here a song penned by Kanak Mukhopadhyay. This song cogently exposes the image of a dutiful communist worker-mother, the communist Sushilaa. She efficiently straddles her role as a factory worker and a housewife. This Hindi-language song was written in 1943 to disseminate the message of communism among women jute mill workers who were usually Hindi speaking migrant laborers from Bihar:

*Age bari ja, maiji, age bari ja
Karkhana mein majdurni, ghar mein tu hain ma
Ek haath se karkhana mein paida barahna
Dusre haath se maiji, tumhar gharko samhalna.*

(Move ahead mother, move ahead
A worker at the factory, you are a mother at home
With one hand you increase the factory production
With your second hand mother, manage your home)
(Mukhopadhyay 1993: 54)

Chapter Two

Simple Solutions through Socialism

The 20th century is coming to an end. Already there have been many changes in the world history. After the Second World War, socialism has been established in the world's largest country, China, and some other countries. Today in one third of the world – in socialist countries women have attained equal rights...social, economic and political – in all spheres due to equal opportunity; women in the socialist countries are moving ahead (Kanak Mukhopadhyay, 1996: 39; my translation).

Let us prove that the Soviet woman is capable, that the wife of a leader of industry can fight for socialism side by side with her husband...Let us justify the hopes of those who rely on us...The Soviet mother knows that her child will not be fresh factory- and cannon-fodder for the capitalists but that she is giving to humanity a new builder of the rational and beautiful life, a future fighter for Communism. This knowledge to her is a great source of joy and pride. In the Soviet Union it earns the mother respect and honour (Schlesinger, 1949: 250 and 310).

Population control is extremely important for economic development. And for the sake of this population control, women's health has to be prioritized. Also, we have to remember that we need a balanced national health policy, if we have to organize the future society well with a controlled population. The health policy can only be formulated by prioritizing women's and children's health (Eksathe June 1978: 35; my translation).

In this chapter, I examine the PBGMS's political discourse on socialism and women through a close reading of its *Shikshaa Series* (Education Series) booklets. Throughout this chapter I refer to the five booklets' first edition dates and the reprint dates of the volumes that I use to show the consistency of the PBGMS position over a period of nearly three decades. The five booklets under analysis are: *Marxbad O Naareemukti* (Marxism and Emancipation of Women) (1996 [1975]), *Naaree Aandolaner Koekta Kotha* (A Few Words about Women's Movement) (2004 [1986]), *Antarjatik Naaree Aandolaner Dhara* (Trends in International Women's Movement) (2001a [1977]), *Bharater Naaree Aandolaner Dhara* (Trends in Women's Movement in India) (2001b [1985]) and *Naaree Aandolan O Amader Kaaj* (Women's Movement and Our Work) (2003 [1985]). "The five-volume series is meant for women participating in [the]

democratic women's movement in the cities and villages. The PBGMS conceived the series to assist women in developing perceptions and ideas (*dhyaan-dhaaranaa*) about the democratic women's movement" (Mukhopadhyay 1996 [1975]: 3). The target readers are the PBGMS members and sympathizers who are already participating in the 'democratic women's movement'. The booklets are intended to 'develop' the political understanding of these women participants of the movement. The ultimate agenda of the series is to convert conscious and disciplined members of the PBGMS into party comrades. Kanak Mukhopadhyay authored all the five booklets. She is one of the prominent women leaders and ideologues of the PBGMS both at the state (provincial) and the central (national) levels of the mass organization and the CPI-M, and had a long stint as the editor of the periodical *Eksathe*. She had a long history of working as a dedicated party worker (initially with the CPI and later with the CPI-M) in West Bengal. She rose to the position of a central committee member of India's largest left party, the CPI-M. Overall, she is a well-regarded figure among the PBGMS members. In this sense, Mukhopadhyay is a prominent representative of the PBGMS discourse on socialism and women's movement.

The *Shikshaa Series* can be seen as a part of the genre of 'pedagogical literature' written by the leaders of the communist parties of various countries. This literature is one of the instruments for attracting future party cadres. It also provides the ideological orientation of 'revolutionary ideas' to the masses. Two typical examples are Lenin's *What is to be Done* (1902) and *Left-Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder* (1920). Lenin used both tracts to counter 'revisionism' in the revolutionary struggle for creating a proletarian state.

The basic ideological standpoint of the PBGMS on women's liberation is developed in each of the five booklets. Each booklet is around thirty five to forty pages in length and first

published in the period between 1975 and 1985. The booklets are written in Bengali/Baanglaa. The series is not only about women's oppression. It also locates the solution to the question of women's oppression within the broader political objective of the CPI-M. The CPI-M's ultimate aim is to create a socialist state through a combination of parliamentary and non-parliamentary struggles. The *Shikshaa Series* booklets belong to the tradition of communist literature which combines theory with practice. These booklets are essentially sectarian in content as they try to justify a 'correct' political position with respect to the party's (CPI-M) political line.

In this chapter a good deal of my discussion contains a comparative component, particularly with reference to the ideologies, practices and experiences of socialism in the Soviet Union and China. The history of socialism in both these countries has a global significance. This history has an explicit effect on the mainstream left parties (the CPI and the CPI-M) in India. Through this comparative component, I show that there existed a diversity of socialist debates around 'the women's question' and the revolutionary project of socialism. In fact, historically speaking there were moments of progress and regression in the practice of socialism and women's liberation in these countries. But the PBGMS discourse almost completely ignores the critical tradition within socialist discourse on 'the women's question'. Instead it posits a monolithic view of sexuality, marriage and family. In the PBGMS discourse women exist for the family and the family exists for women. In other words, women are seen as mothers, workers, citizens and reserve labour who can make biological, emotional, economic and political contributions in the name of a *sustha* family and a *sustha* socialist nation state.

I find the theory of the structures and functions of women's oppression as developed by Juliet Mitchell in her classic work titled *Women the Longest Revolution* useful to examine the political discourse of the PBGMS on women and socialism. Mitchell points out that classical

socialist thinkers such as Marx, Engels and Bebel put an over-emphasis on the economic factors behind women's oppression. The framework of these classical discussions is 'an evolutionist one' which fails to visualize a convincing image of the future, beyond asserting that socialism will bring about the liberation of women as 'one of its constituent moments' (Mitchell 1984: 26).

In contrast, Mitchell argues that women's condition is differentiated by four structures which together form a complex unity of women's oppression. She rejects the ideas that "women's condition can be deduced derivatively from the economy or equated symbolically with society" (Mitchell 1984: 26). Instead, Mitchell points out that women's oppressive situation should be viewed as a unity of four structures (sexuality, reproduction socialization of children, hemmed by the economic sphere of production) and that the variations of women's condition in history will be the upshot of different combinations of these elements. In this way, she debunks the ideologies which naturalize women's condition. These separate structures may have reached a 'different moment' at particular junctures of history, but the unity of women's oppression at one particular historical moment is 'always overdetermined'. Mitchell differentiates these four structures and shows how they are 'overdetermined'.

With Mitchell's analysis in the background, I show that although Mukhopadhyay acknowledges distinctions between at least three of these structures (production, reproduction and socialization), she still naturalizes women's structural and functional location within the family and views the four structures as constituting a rigid monolithic unit. I note this theoretical distinction between classical socialist writers and Mukhopadhyay on the condition of women's oppression.

To better understand the PBGMS political discourse, I employ here the concept of ‘the apparatus of socialism and womanhood’. This concept is modelled on the Foucauldian notion of ‘the apparatus of sexuality’ (Foucault 1990: 135-159). Secondly, I use Foucault’s theorization of the modern state’s biopolitical projects to analyze Mukhopadhyay’s discourse on women’s role in building a *sustha* family, society and socialist nation state. To complement my arguments, I refer to the biopolitical character of the policies of the socialist state in the USSR and PRC.

Overall, my aim in this chapter is to analyze the political discourse of the PBGMS to show how a *sustha* state cannot exist without the family and women playing their ‘natural’ and normal (*sustha*) role within the family. *Even though this discourse envisions a socialist state where women enjoy equality of work and wage, this equality never transgresses the traditional structures of women’s oppression. To realize the biopolitical goal of a ‘sustha’ socialist state, women need to be mobilized and disciplined through the apparatus of socialism and womanhood.* A simplistic solution to women’s oppression is offered by the PBGMS in the form of socialism, without paying attention to the differentiated but complex unity of family and economic structures which perpetuate women’s oppressed situation.

Teaching socialism to women

In June 1975 Paschim Banga Ganatantrik Mahilaa Samity (PBGMS) published a pedagogical booklet titled *Marxbad O Naareemukti* (Marxism and Emancipation of Women). This is the first in a series of five educational booklets on socialism and women’s issues. As noted above the series is called the ‘*Shikshaa Series*’ (education series) and all are written in Bengali (Baanglaa). Only the first booklet *Marxbad O Naareemukti* is also published in English with the title *Marxism and Emancipation of Women*. The series has gone through many reprints

since it “has become very popular among activists of democratic women’s movements as well as readers with an interest on women’s movement” (Mukhopadhyay 2001b [1985]: 3). This line appears in the foreword to all five booklets.

The series tells us about the PBGMS’s theoretical position on the nature of women’s oppression and how the struggle for a socialist society under the communist party leadership can free women from age-old economic and social discrimination. Mukhopadhyay presents the basic Marxist approach to women’s liberation: the struggle for women’s liberation is inextricably linked with the struggle against a society based on class exploitation (Mukhopadhyay 1996 [1975]: 39). Mukhopadhyay’s theory of women’s oppression is premised on a general Marxist framework and a specific idea influenced by the Bengal renaissance concerning ‘the question of women’ in the Indian context. While concepts of class and socialism are fundamental to her political theory, she writes within the liberal intellectual and cultural tradition of the works of nineteenth-century Bengali social reformers such as Vidyasagar and Rammohan Roy. In Chapter One, I discussed the role of Bengal renaissance thinkers in the social reform movement concerning women. Male reformers such as Roy and Vidyasagar fought for women’s education and the abolition of social customs that promoted gender inequality within upper-caste Hindu society. Mukhopadhyay inherits this Bengal renaissance tradition while augmenting it with Marxist ideas of class inequality and exploitation.

According to Mukhopadhyay, “when women from all sections in a classless and non-exploitative society will be able to participate equally in social production, and when all employable men and women will have jobs with an equal opportunity to participate in the systems of education and culture, only then will equality between women and men be established in all spheres of life. We want to project this as the aim of all women”

(Mukhopadhyay 2004[1986]: 13). For Mukhopadhyay, women's struggle for equality is primarily a struggle for the establishment of a socialist state which will end all forms of oppression. In the second booklet, titled *Naaree Andoloner Koyeti Katha* (A Few Words about Women's Movement), Mukhopadhyay says, "We want a social system where there is no class difference (*shrenibhed*) between the rich and poor. One class will not exploit the other class. Everyone will have equal rights. There will be no discrimination between women and men. Women will really enjoy equal rights with men in every sphere...Is it possible to have this in the present society? It is certainly not. In a class-divided society it is not possible to have equal rights and equal opportunities for all. That is why we need scientific socialism" (Mukhopadhyay 2004[1986]: 9).

Mukhopadhyay sees the women's movement as an integral part of a class movement in which bourgeois women do not feel comfortable with working-class women's demand for an equitable and just society. As a Marxist, Mukhopadhyay does not think that there is any inherent antagonism between men and women within the working class: "First we have to say that the women's movement is not against men. It is against the social system which keeps women dependent...It is against the feudal-capitalist society's capitalists and landlords... Generally speaking all men are not responsible for the class-divided social system which keeps women under men's control" (Mukhopadhyay 2004[1986]: 25). For her, women's struggle for equality is not against men but it is part of the fight against class exploitation. She assumes that there is no antagonism between male and female working class comrades who are fighting against class exploitation.

As a communist, Mukhopadhyay argues that social cohesion within a class is essential in achieving a unified working class of men and women to fight the system of class exploitation.

We will see later that the starting point in Mukhopadhyay's political vision of the social cohesion of the oppressed extends to inter- and intra-class relationships among individuals and the family, the state and society. To this extent, the idea of social cohesion disregards the various fault lines that exist within the hierarchical institutions of family, party and the state.

Mukhopadhyay's idea of gender cohesion within a class is not shared by all women activists and ideologues of other South Asian communist parties. For instance, Hisila Yami (who writes under the pseudonym Parvati), a central committee member and the head of The Women's Department of Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist), narrates how difficult it is for women comrades to attain equal status in the party and how they have to work very hard to fight against 'conservative communists':

For communist women, it is not enough to participate in class struggle, inner-party struggle, and inner-struggle. Often they may remain in the minority even if they belong to the majority line within the party. And because they are the product of this patriarchal structure, hence their inner struggle consists in not only struggle against themselves as individuals but also [in] struggle against the effect of patriarchal values on them, such as fatalistic tendency, inferiority complex, guilt syndrome, victim syndrome, etc. They have to face an even more complex struggle if they happen to be single, divorced or married more than once. This is well documented in Alexandra Kollontai's collection of articles. In fact she represents the best example of revolt against such marriages. She left her first husband and child in order to concentrate more on revolutionary work, and then later she left her second (communist) husband on the ground of his stereotyped expectation of the marriage alliance. And because of her rebellion against conventional marriages she not only faced difficulties with the bourgeois society but from conservative communists as well (<http://www.monthlyreview.org/0203parvati.htm>).

Similar views are recounted by Krishna Bandyopadhyay, an ex-member of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) (CPI-ML) in West Bengal. In the 1960s and 1970s, she was active in the Naxalite armed uprising against the Indian state. In Bandyopadhyay's words, "The

communist party [of India] was formed in the second decade of the twentieth century. But never in the party has a woman received the same status and respect as a man. The Naxalites left the older parties in order to come together and set up the CPI-ML with a new outlook... Women too came forward to join a movement that was so full of promise. Taken up with fighting against a system, I never realised [that I was entering] the realm of a completely different [gender] struggle. At that time I did not appreciate how necessary this struggle was. But today I feel that if all of us had continued and sustained it, we women would have stood side by side with the men and had an equal say in decision making. Perhaps the history of the Naxalbari movement would have been written differently then” (Bandyopadhyay 2008: 59). Parvati and Bandyopadhyay’s remarks demonstrate that there is male domination within the party. But Mukhopadhyay assumes that there is no antagonism between male and female working class comrades who are fighting against class exploitation. To her, a socialist society without class contradictions will make men and women equal. Socialism is the solution to inequities between men and women. Mukhopadhyay seems to think that there will be no power imbalance between men and women, once socialism replaces capitalism. In short, Parvati’s and Bandyopadhyay’s critical remarks lead us to the perception that silence on a woman ideologue’s part on such a fundamental gender issue is a crucial mechanism in bolstering discipline among women members along the ‘party line’.

Overall, Mukhopadhyay does not see that the relationship between socialism and women’s liberation has myriad complexities. However, writing in the post-USSR era, Brinda Karat has addressed these complexities in her book *Survival and Emancipation*, published in 2005. It should be noted that Karat is a CPI-M member and now a prominent leader of the party. From 1993 to 2004, she was the general secretary of the All India Democratic Women’s

Association (AIDWA), the central national-level counterpart of the regional mass organization the PBGMS. At present, Karat is a politburo member (the highest executive body) of the CPI-M. Karat's book is theoretical in nature and written in the English language. It is meant for women members and sympathizers with a good grasp over the language and a higher educational attainment. In India, knowledge of English language has a class character. As already discussed in chapter one, this 'class character' has a root in the colonial education policy. Even now, the upwardly mobile urban middle class, which is predominantly upper caste(s) as well, is more proficient in the English language. In short, unlike Mukhopadhyay's booklets written in Bengali, Karat's book is demonstrably meant for upper echelon party members and leaders. The reach of the message in Karat's book is limited and most likely will never reach the grassroots members and leaders unless translated into more 'mass' languages of India. But it is important to bring this book under discussion since unlike Mukhopadhyay, Karat attempts to grapple with the uneasy relationship between socialism and women's cause which is a central focus of this chapter.

Karat's views evince how at the theoretical level the AIDWA recognizes the complex relationship between the working class struggle and the women's movement. In this regard, Karat's understanding is not as simplistic as that of Mukhopadhyay. Karat writes: "Marxist theory holds that the abolition of private property and the establishment of a socialist society are essential requirements for women's emancipation from her unequal status" (Karat 2005: 36). In the essay, "Socialism and Women's Emancipation", Karat tries to come to terms with multiple identities with respect to class. "Marxism does recognize different identities. But it believes that the identity which is crucial for existence itself, i.e. class identity, in the ultimate analysis, is the primary identity which influences the formation of other identities. This does not mean that

oppressive social relations which arise out of non-class identities should not be recognized and included in strategies for social change. Only someone with an extremely mechanical understanding of Marxist theory would assert that the ‘class’ approach theoretically precludes an understanding of other conflicts. In practice there may be many valid critiques of Marxist [theory] based movements for social change for ignoring non-class identities. But the solution would be the change of practice, not that of the theory itself. It is only socialist theory which to paraphrase Marx, not only interprets the world of gender oppression, but points to the way to change it” (Karat 2005: 39).

Even though, Karat ends in a doctrinal way, she acknowledges that there are forms of inequality which are not based on class. Though Karat theoretically underscores the idea of ‘changing practice’, her general political practice is not very different from Mukhopadhyay’s, as both belong to the same political party, the CPI-M. This party operates on the principle of democratic centralism, which implies that whatever the differences among the party members, ultimately the party will have only one viewpoint on an issue. In addition, the party does not allow for the formation of factions within the organization based on different opinions on an issue. Thus, Karat’s slight but significant theoretical difference with Mukhopadhyay on the question of non-class identities and oppressions does not translate into political practice. This will be demonstrated in chapters three and four when we will find that Karat has never spoken out against the party line of preserving a *sustha* society and culture at the cost of women’s subjectivity.

Mukhopadhyay’s simple and linear theory of women’s freedom originates from a political understanding in which the Communist Party acts on behalf of the masses and captures state power without destroying the existing power locations of a pre-socialist society. The party

makes use of different power centers and institutions, such as the bureaucracy, the army, the police, heterosexual marriage and family and the school, to create a strong one-party ruled nation state, thereby ensuring a strong and stable hierarchy of power relations. The party does not destroy the ideological moorings of various identities and power relations that had previously existed. It simply adds the socialist idea of equality to existing identities such as gender. In fact, traditional identities become an instrument for controlling the masses in the interest of the growth of the national economy and the nation-state. The best example of this strategy is the way in which women, as mothers, became one of the chief instruments of nation building in the U.S.S.R. In the mid 1930s, the motherhood propaganda of the Communist Party was used to address the labour shortage in the economy by asking women to have more children. “A woman without children merits our pity, for she does not know the full joy of life. Our Soviet women, full-blooded citizens of the freest country in the world, have been given the bliss of motherhood. We must safeguard our families and raise and rear healthy Soviet heroes” (Schlesinger 1949: 254).

A reverse policy is seen in China. The Chinese Communist Party demands that women should have fewer children in an already over-populated country on the assumption that population control would make the Chinese economic reforms work more efficiently. “A stable nuclear family, maintained by women who are at the same time available for paid labour as the developing economy requires, has proven historically the most efficient form of social and personal organization to achieve such a controlled empowerment of individuals—with one requirement: that nuclear families be induced to restrict the number of their children. But given China’s population problems, the restriction needs to be drastic: preferably to one child per family” (Young 1989: 245). Young further points out that for families to be satisfied with one

child, the status of women must become nearly equal to that of men, otherwise the traditional preference for 'high status' sons continues. The socialist state has often controlled reproduction, sexuality and home to further its own interest. "Contemporary Chinese and Cuban women seem to work in the home almost as much as contemporary capitalist women do, and they seem to have far less sexual and reproductive freedom than capitalist women do" (Tong 1998: 118).

The PBGMS claims to fight for women's equality—cultural as well as economic—in family and society. But a close look at the organization's political discourse reveals that the stereotypical identities and ideologies associated with women are not challenged. The PBGMS simply adds the concept of economic equality to the existing ways of understanding women's role in the institutions of marriage and family and women's structural location with regard to sexuality, reproduction and the socialization of children in the family. In booklet five, *Naaree Aandolan O Amader Kaaj* [Women's Movement and Our Work], Mukhopadhyay states that the structure of the family is such that women have to bear the burden of family (*paaribaarik*) work. Thus, compared to men it is difficult for women to come out of the home and take part in the [socialist] movement and work for the PBGMS. "They can come out to do outside work after they fulfill their household tasks. Despite many obstructions, our women workers have organized so many great movements" (Mukhopadhyay 2003[1985]: 27). Mukhopadhyay goes on to quote Lenin to support her claim that men should cooperate with women to lessen the latter's household chores: "In this kind of situation, extra responsibilities rest on men. If consciously men do not change their habit and *help women*, it is difficult for women to work for the movement... If women remain unconscious and backward, they hold back men at every step. Men lose their productivity. So men and women should move forward together. No one should leave the other behind... The personal relationship between men and women will be enriched

and it will set a higher standard for their children” (Mukhopadhyay 2003[1985]: 27; emphasis added). We find that Mukhopadhyay asks men *to help and not share* household work with women. She also thinks that if women are not politically conscious they may undermine men’s social and political activities. In Mukhopadhyay’s view, “if we closely look at the social aspect of women’s liberation, we will see that women’s liberation means men’s liberation. If a woman becomes independent and self-reliant, she will not be a burden on men” (Mukhopadhyay 2004[1986]: 22). Thus she justifies the issue of women’s liberation by arguing that it will help reduce *men’s burden*.

A predominant feature in this discourse is that Mukhopadhyay never visualizes women’s location outside the institutions of family, marriage and motherhood. In her writings, women are not unmarried or divorced or separated or deserted or widows or lesbians; nor do they exist without a husband and children. Mukhopadhyay does not see that ‘helping’ women with their household chores will not fundamentally alter the structure of family where men, women and children are located in a hierarchy of power relationships.

The apparatus of socialism and womanhood in the service of the biopolitics

In a section titled ‘*Naareera Maatrijaati*’ (Women are Mothers) in booklet five, Mukhopadhyay points out: “The utmost influence of the mother is on the future generation. As mothers and housewives (*paribarer grihini*) they have to fulfill an important social responsibility. To a large extent, the health, education and mental growth of children depend on mothers” (Mukhopadhyay 2003[1985]: 16). She further notes that since the role of women as mothers is so important, one of the social duties of the women’s movement is to look after the education and health of women and children. At the same time, a woman’s responsibility does

not end when she gives birth to a child; a new responsibility begins, which is to rear the child in the best possible way. But Mukhopadhyay also points out that both father and mother have to participate jointly in deciding the future of their children. In a feudal patriarchal society, it is always assumed that the future of children will be decided by men and that women will simply take care of the daily household chores. She thinks that “[t]his assumption is dangerous and it creates obstruction in the progress of society” (Mukhopadhyay 2003[1985]: 17) and so men and women should jointly decide the future of their children.

However, a Foucauldian reading of this discourse will show that Mukhopadhyay’s aim is not exactly the empowerment of women. In *The History of Sexuality I*, Foucault uses the concept of ‘apparatus’ (*dispositif*)⁴⁹, “a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of *discourses*, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions...The apparatus itself is the system of relations that can be established between these [heterogeneous] elements...Thus, a particular discourse can figure at one time as the programme of an institution, and at another it can function as a means of justifying or masking a practice which itself remains silent, or as a secondary re-interpretation of this practice ...I understand the term ‘apparatus’ a sort of ...formation which has its major function at a given historical moment that of responding to an urgent need. The apparatus thus has a dominant strategic function” (Foucault 1980: 194-195). Foucault applies this concept of apparatus to examine how ‘sexuality’ was deployed in eighteenth-century bourgeois society in Western Europe to organize human bodies and their materiality, energies and pleasures to serve the interest of an emerging nation-state and capitalist economic system.

⁴⁹ It should be noted that ‘dispositif’ can also imply ‘device’ and so it is used by Foucault as a substitute for the more static and somewhat unitary concept of ‘structure’.

Mukhopadhyay's prescription concerning women's responsibility in children's upbringing articulates the apparatus of *socialism and womanhood*, the other constituent elements of which are the communist mass organization (e.g. the PBGMS), the party, the state, family, marriage, liberal gender roles, social progress, healthy children, happy and efficient spouses and a developed and strong nation-state. Many of these elements are the normative and ideal features of a typical middle-class Indian family. Mukhopadhyay's idea of 'social cohesion' discussed above is vital if all these heterogeneous elements are to work effectively towards the efficient functioning of the apparatus of *socialism and womanhood*. Thus, for a woman to work more efficiently in social production outside the home, the liberalization of traditional gender roles is essential. But Mukhopadhyay never disturbs the basic cohesion that holds the elements of the apparatus together. For instance, she never says that women will help men in housework and women will become the primary breadwinner. The apparatus of socialism and womanhood primarily identifies women in the context of family. While women must have husbands and children, men are not primarily identified in terms of their family as fathers and husbands. In Mukhopadhyay's discourse, a woman's identity is steadfastly tied to her family.

The apparatus of socialism and womanhood encourages women to play the decisive role in children's upbringing in serving the state's interest. Women's empowerment by the socialist apparatus might strategically require varying numbers of healthy, educated and efficient members of the work force to run the economic engine. Mukhopadhyay's discourse aims to support the state project of achieving its goal of economic progress. The apparatus of *socialism and womanhood* will help the envisioned socialist state to effectively control the socialist family where men and women jointly participate in social and domestic production. In the earlier 'feudal-patriarchal' system there is a distinct gender-based division of labour for rearing

children which Mukhopadhyay is critical of. In a modern socialist state women directly participate in the social production process. They are no longer limited to their roles in reproduction and housework. Women emerge from the confines of the home to participate with men in social production. In this changed situation, the apparatus of *socialism and womanhood* helps to maintain the basic discipline and social cohesion that ties women and men to the institutions and discourses of family, marriage, reproduction, motherhood, social production, the state and social progress.

It is important to note that in the entire *Shikshaa Series*, Mukhopadhyay never mentions or imagines women who are not married and who do not live in a typical family with a husband and children. It seems that the institutions of marriage and family are compulsory for women in Mukhopadhyay's discourse. In addition, she reminds her readers that women are essentially mothers (*naareera matrijaati*) and the "motherly instinct for women is the emperor of all instincts" (Mukhopadhyay 2001: 224)⁵⁰. Mukhopadhyay never minimizes women's role in reproduction from the perspective of social responsibility. She states: "From practical experience a mother should understand that the protection of her health and the need for birth control (*janma niyantran*) for her family and society are her very important *social responsibilities*" (Mukhopadhyay 2003[1985]: 17; emphasis added).

Mukhopadhyay's discourse articulates an aspect of what Foucault conceptualizes as the 'biopolitical' project of the state. In his lectures at the College de France (1975-76), Foucault introduces this concept. He notes that biopolitics, a modern technology of state power, is "a set of processes such as the ratio of births to deaths, the rate of reproduction, the fertility of a population and so on" which originated in Europe in the second half of the eighteenth century. This biopolitics was executed by the state through medical policing and Social Darwinism

⁵⁰ Mukhopadhyay uses this phrase in English in the essay.

(Foucault 2003: 243-245 and 276). Later, in his *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault shows that ‘human sexuality’ is the key object of state power to realize its biopolitical projects over a population. The deployment of sexuality is an “indispensable element in the development of capitalism...[and] the adjustment of the phenomena of population to economic processes...the investment of the body, its valorization, and the distributive management of its forces were at the same time indispensable” (Foucault 1990: 140-141). This is the background which makes sex an important political and state concern. “On the one hand it was tied to the disciplines of the body [the anatomo-politics]...the economy of energies. On the other hand, it was applied to the regulation of populations [the biopolitics]...” (Foucault 1990: 145-146). Therefore sex is connected to both the species body (the population) and the physical body (the individual). At the species level, sex becomes the “the theme of political operations, economic interventions (through incitements to or curbs on procreation) and ideological campaigns for raising standards of morality and responsibility: “it was put forward as the index of a society’s strength, revealing of both its political energy and biological vigor...[it is meant for] disciplining the body and ...regulating populations” (Foucault 1990: 146).

It is obvious that because of their reproductive capacity, women’s bodies and sexuality are significant sites for the operation of the state’s biopolitical projects. Foucault analyzes how the disciplinary technique of the medicalization (particularly hysterization) of women’s bodies was carried out in the eighteenth century *in the name of the responsibility they owed to the health of their children, the solidity of the family institution, and the safeguarding of society* (Foucault 1990: 146-147). Along the same line of argument, we can say that women’s bodies and sexuality are targets for the operation of both disciplinary power and bio-power. In particular, through the state policies on birth controls and women’s health the biopolitical

project is clearly in operation: women's bodies need to be cared for since they are intimately associated with the health and proper socialization of children (the future workers and citizens), and with the safeguarding of macro social and economic interests. Foucault points out that through the deployment of the 'hysterization [sexualization] of women's bodies' the female body is "ordered wholly in terms of the functions of reproduction and [kept] in constant agitation through the effects of that function" (Foucault 1990: 153). Women's bodies and sexuality have to be made socially functional to safeguard family and state's biopolitical interests.

For the state's biopolitical project, sexuality, gender roles, marriage, family, and motherhood are not simply objects of social policy but the essential instruments through which the policy is expressed and enforced. We have already discussed some examples of the socialist state's biopolitical projects in the Soviet Russia and China. In West Bengal the PBGMS is an extension of the Communist Party (CPI-M), which aspires to capture the Indian state power in the future. In this light, the PBGMS discourse articulates and mediates the normalizing elements in the apparatus of *socialism and womanhood* which disciplines women to serve the state's biopolitical projects: "Population control is extremely important for economic development. And for the sake of this population control, women's health has to be prioritized. Also, we have to remember that we need a balanced national health policy, if we are to organize the future society well by having a controlled population" (*Eksathe* June 1978: 35; my translation). The biopolitical logic in the discourse on women's health is clearly evident here.

So far we have seen that Mukhopadhyay provides a concrete step to achieve women's emancipation, namely, that men should share housework with women so that women can participate in the process of social production outside the home. There are two other steps in her

theory of women's emancipation: first, that men should make women politically conscious so that the latter can understand why men and women should take part in the communist movement; and second, that men and women should understand each other's problems. She thinks that these three steps will result in a happy and *sustha* (normal) family which works towards a strong and stable socialist state. As she writes in booklet two, "in a family, if men and women both understand each other's problems, if they become politically conscious and true partners through life's joys and sorrows...happiness will be felt" (Mukhopadhyay 2004[1986]: 21). For Mukhopadhyay family life can be transformed if both husband and wife change their old attitudes. It should be noted that this change is limited to the realm of the superstructure (attitude), but the fundamental substructure of the family where women experience exploitation (sexuality, reproduction and socialization) is never fully examined or questioned by Mukhopadhyay. She encourages women's equal participation in the process of social production (the economic sphere) outside the home by advocating a change in men's attitudes.

Mukhopadhyay's political concerns are not with the basic family structure or with how a biological fact is reified in the ideology of motherhood through cultural practices. She is concerned rather with how economic equality allows women to contribute to social production and becomes valuable as men are for society. But she does not disturb the gendered ideologies which celebrate motherly care as a social and supreme act and women's primary responsibility in housework and child care. Her analysis never questions the ideologies which cement the three structures (sexuality, reproduction and socialization) of women's exploitation in the institution of the family.

Mukhopadhyay adds the new public responsibility of social production to women's domestic, familial, reproductive and socialization roles. She does not recommend fundamental

changes to the three structures of women's oppression. Mukhopadhyay's new socialist woman is envisaged as a keen multi-tasker. She efficiently manages the home (housework, family affairs, reproduction and socialization of children) and the world (social production and socialist movement). This reminds us of Mukhopadhyay's poem (*Age bari ja maiji...tumhar gharko samhalna*) about a dutiful communist worker-mother discussed in Chapter One. In Chapter Five, I provide a close reading of an ethnographic report in *Eksathe* which shows how Mukhopadhyay's conceptualization of this new socialist woman translates into real life in the form of a peasant housewife who is also a PBGMS activist. Taking cues from the nineteenth-century discourse on the ideal woman Sushilaa, I have named this socialist mother-worker-activist model the communist Sushilaa archetype.

Mukhopadhyay's ideas discussed above provide an interesting perspective for comparing the PBGMS and the Chinese Communist Party (CPC). In her essay "Chicken Little in China: Woman After the Cultural Revolution", Marilyn Young argues that the liberals and Chinese Marxists have one common point: their belief in human agency that social change can be the product of the transformation of attitudes. "If then the definition of the problem facing women is that they are seen as women, the solutions seem fairly evident. At the level of material reality, of course, they will continue to bear and rear children and be responsible for their usual chores. At the ideological level, however, this implicit aspect of their identity can be put aside. In the public realm they are to be seen as men. Standing in the way, however, are 'feudal attitudes' that restrict women's movements and participation in the world of work and politics and bourgeois attitudes that lead women selfishly to focus on their own small family responsibilities. With sufficient effort, both attitudes can be overcome and the path cleared for the new woman, a kind of socialist androgyne; for public purposes a man, at home a loving wife and mother; genderless

in public, chaste wife and selfless mother in private” (Young1989: 236). Thus, there is a parallel between Mukhopadhyay’s communist mother-worker and this new (Chinese) woman who is an efficient multi-tasker in both public and private spheres.

In the *Shikshaa Series*, Mukhopadhyay’s ideal communist woman is unwaveringly familial and maternal as well as engaged in the public realm of social production and the socialist movement. It is surprising that though the series went through several editions and reprints since the 1980s, Mukhopadhyay never revised her basic theory of women and socialism based on what occurred in Eastern Europe and the U.S.S.R. At the same time, she does not claim, as does Marxist feminist Lindsey German, that the ‘socialist countries’ were never actually socialist and so women never enjoyed complete freedom (German, <http://www.isj.org.uk/?id=240>). The mass uprisings against the communist parties in Soviet Russia and Eastern bloc countries did not force the PBGMS to confront the experience of these ex-socialist countries, where women in large numbers participated in order to dislodge the rule of the communist parties.

The emancipated situation of women in the U.S.S.R. often features in Mukhopadhyay’s political discourse. However, in the five booklets she never mentions that the situation of women in that country underwent regression under the Stalinist regime. Wendy Zeva Goldman points out that the Bolshevik commitment to women’s liberation throughout the 1920s was genuine and persistent. But in 1930, the communist party abolished the Zhenotdel⁵¹ and began to retreat from its earlier vision. New repressive laws stressing family responsibility were passed to control the unprecedented social dislocation resulting from Stalin’s drive to collectivize agriculture and industrialize the economy. In 1936, a new law made divorce very difficult to

⁵¹ In 1919 Alexandra Kollontai and Inessa Armand established the Zhenotdel, the first government department for women to improve the condition of women’s lives in the Soviet Union.

obtain, prohibited abortion and provided aid to women with many children. The early socialist belief in the withering away of the family was labeled ‘petty bourgeois’ and the ‘strong socialist family’ was upheld as a proper model for social relations (Goldman 1989: 76-77). In 1934, homosexuality was made a criminal offence, punishable with up to eight years’ imprisonment, and a nationwide campaign was launched against sexual promiscuity, quick and easy marriage and adultery (Cliff 1984: 149). The debates over family law were halted as the “free-thinking jurists of the 1920s were compelled to parrot set phrases in support of the new law... The irony, and, ultimately, the tragedy of the Soviet attempt to liberate women is that conditions had changed sufficiently by the 1930s to permit the realization of the vision that jurists and activists defended so stubbornly in the 1920s. Yet by this time the orientation of the party had also changed, and a new mixture of political repression, criminal sanctions, and traditional values took the place of democratic debate, humanist concerns, and social experimentation. The great potential of the socialist experiment, as evoked by the Women’s Congress in 1927, was never realized” (Goldman 1989: 76-77).

In spite of these historical developments, the PBGMS political discourse as espoused by the *Shikshaa Series* remains comfortably committed to the dogma that women’s emancipation is part and parcel of socialism. “In socialist countries there is no discrimination between men and women... There is respect and dignity in women’s lives. They are all educated and employed. Driven by hunger, women do not engage in the despicable profession of prostitution... In these countries women and men are viewed in equal terms. In socialist countries women enjoy equal legal and economic rights. Women are independent in these countries” (Mukhopadhyay 2004[1986]: 10-11). These statements show how the socialist policies on women in other countries are unquestioningly idolized by the PBGMS in its political discourse.

Family as the fulcrum of the state

In Mukhopadhyay's political discourse on women's liberation and socialism, there is no discussion of how women's oppression arises from sexual practices and their relationship with the family structure. She simply mentions that unless women are freed from the burden of housework they cannot participate in social production and hence they cannot be emancipated. She does not explore how sexuality, reproduction and the socialization of children are structures within the monogamous nuclear family that constricts women's subjectivity. For Mukhopadhyay, a woman's primary identity is that of a mother, but a man's primary identity is not that of a father.

In the five booklets, Mukhopadhyay often quotes Lenin to describe the relationship between women and family in bourgeois society. "They [women] have to stay confined within the family as family-slaves (*paaribaarik daashee*)" (Mukhopadhyay 2003: 14). Mukhopadhyay points out the exploitative character of the traditional family by invoking Lenin and writes that women in a class-divided feudal-capitalist⁵² society live a life of bondage. Mukhopadhyay stresses the need to fight various kinds of discrimination which operate at the levels of the family and the state in India, such as dowry, the absence of a uniform civil code for all religious communities, wage inequality and domestic violence. Quoting Lenin, she states that the family oppresses women, but she does not examine the structure of the family that treats women as slaves. The following critical questions never emerge in her discourse: Will the family lose its oppressive character once the state becomes classless and provide economic equality to women?

⁵² In its political literature, the CPI-M characterizes the Indian society as feudal-capitalist. Marx and Engels theorized that capitalism will replace feudalism, but Mukhopadhyay, following other twentieth century Marxist ideologues (e.g. Lenin), has to explain the fact that in many countries feudalism and capitalism may co-exist and reinforce one another. Social historians such as Sumit Sarkar point out that in post-1947 India, the political alliance between the indigenous bourgeoisie and big farmers had an imperious influence on the governance of post-colonial India (Sarkar 1983).

Is there any need for the family in a socialist society? What is the relationship between monogamy and gender inequality? Is it possible that women will not attain equality within the family even if there is economic equality in a socialist society?

To seek an answer to why she does not raise these questions, we need to understand Mukhopadhyay's position regarding the evolution of sexual practices and family from the perspective of Marxist theoretical discourse. In booklet one, *Marxism and Emancipation of Women*, she states that the bourgeoisie formally recognizes equality between men and women in marriage. Each has equal rights to independently and freely enter into a marriage contract and divorce if desired. "But the female sex because of their economic dependence could not avail the benefit of this equal right. Just as the employer and the worker could enter freely in to an agreement, but if the employer breached the agreement the worker could not fight for it for want of means; similarly women could not get the benefit of the legal rights because the objective conditions were unfavourable for them. Men being the sole breadwinner enjoyed supremacy in the family" (Mukhopadhyay 2003a: 28). Next, Mukhopadhyay quotes from Engels' *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884) to support her claim that the man has to be the breadwinner of the family, at least among the propertied classes, and this gives him a dominant position which requires no special legal privileges. "In the family he is the bourgeois, the wife represents the proletariat" (Mukhopadhyay 2003a: 28).

Mukhopadhyay goes on to quote from *The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844* by Engels to discuss the nature of the bourgeois family. "The bourgeoisie has taken away from the family its sentimental veil, and has reduced the family relation to a mere money relation" (Mukhopadhyay 2003a: 29). Next she quotes from *The Communist Manifesto* on the nature bourgeois marriage: "But you communists would introduce a community of women,

screams the whole bourgeoisie in chorus. The bourgeois sees in his wife a mere instrument of production. He hears that the instruments of production are to be exploited in common, and naturally can come to no other conclusion than that the lot of being common to all will likewise fall to women...Our bourgeois, not content with having the wives and daughters of their proletarians at their disposal, not to speak of common prostitutes, take the greatest pleasure in seducing each other's wives. Bourgeois marriage in reality is a system of wives in common" (Marx and Engels quoted in Mukhopadhyay 2003a: 29). Mukhopadhyay does not comment on any of these ideas from Marx and Engels, but implicitly accepts them as given.

Mukhopadhyay points out that bourgeois claims about monogamy and the individual family system are hollow. The Marxist analysis of history shows that until women fully enter into social production, they will not have equal rights: "Again, if women come out for work, domestic work and child rearing will suffer. This will shake the very foundation of the modern family system, as the family rests entirely on the foundation of women's slavery. With the advancement of civilization in the present age the system of monogamy has greatly improved, but women's slavery has not been removed" (Mukhopadhyay 2003a:30). Mukhopadhyay comes to the following conclusion: "That is why Marx and Engels have pointed out that after the abolition of the capitalist system, some of the characteristics of the present system of monogamy will disappear. If a man and a woman both participate in social production, if their conjugal relation[ship] becomes absolutely free, if women become free from economic servitude, then the man-woman relation[ship] will cease to be one of master and slave"(Mukhopadhyay 2003a: 30).

Mukhopadhyay's conclusion provokes the following question: When men and women enjoy full conjugal liberty and economic equality, will that mean that women, like men, will no longer be primarily identified by their 'family status'? Will the ideology that a woman's *natural*

vocation is to bear and socialize children and maintain the household cease to exist? This ideology also understands a woman's *natural vocation* as a complement to a man's *natural role* in production. As Juliet Mitchell writes: "The fundamental characteristic of the present system of marriage and family in our society its monolithism. There is only one institutionalized form of intersexual or intergenerational relationship possible. It is that or nothing... For all human experience shows that intersexual and intergenerational relationships are infinitely various... while the institutionalized expression of them in our capitalist society is utterly simple and rigid. It is the poverty and simplicity of the institutions in this area of life which are such oppressions. Any society will require some institutionalized and social recognition of personal relationships. But there is absolutely no reason why there should be only one legitimized form—and a multitude of unlegitimized experience. Socialism should properly mean not the abolition of the family, but the diversification of the socially acknowledged relationships which are today forcibly and rigidly compressed into it. This would mean a plural range of institutions—where the family is only one, and its abolition implies none... Socialism will be a process of change, of becoming. A fixed image of the future is in the worst sense ahistorical" (Mitchell 1984: 53-54).

In contrast to Mitchell's pluralist idea of social relationships, marriage and family, Mukhopadhyay has an inflexible, monolithic and fixed notion of sexuality, marriage and family. Her standpoint is marked by a strong sense of certitude about these institutions: "Needless to say, monogamy is the most developed system of marriage, but [this should be understood as] monogamy in the real sense; that is to say, the system would have equal application in the case of both men and women. It is through the establishment of equal rights for men and women that monogamy could ensure the highest form of conjugal life" (Mukhopadhyay 2003a: 20).

In the entire *Shikshaa Series*, the closest Mukhopadhyay comes to directly grappling with the issue of women's institutionalized sexuality within marriage and family is when she quotes from Engels' *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*: "When the fact is accepted that the family has passed through four successive forms, and is now a fifth, the question at once arises whether this form can be permanent in the future. *The only answer that can be given is that it must advance as society advances, and change as society changes, even as it has done in the past. It is the creation of the social system, and will reflect its culture.* As the monogamian [sic] family has improved greatly since the commencement of civilization, and very sensibly in modern times, it is at least supposable that it is capable of still further improvement until the equality of sexes is attained. Should the monogamian [sic] family in the distant future fail to answer the requirements of society, *it is impossible to predict the nature of its successor*" (Engels cited in Mukhopadhyay 2003a: 30; my emphasis).

For Engels, monogamy may not be the only form of sexual union that will persist indefinitely in society. Although he believes that sexual equality can be attained in a monogamous family relationship, he does not think that as society evolves monogamy will remain the only kind of relationship or that this form of relationship is the best. So what are the possibilities? Like a typical nineteenth-century 'scientific theoretician', Engels does not speculate. But at the same time he does not eulogize the monogamous family relationship. Engels looks at it from the perspective of 'historical advancement', an objective standpoint based on the 'scientific study of society', rather than from a *moral standpoint*. Of course, Engels can be repudiated for historicism, but on moral grounds he does not show any preference for monogamy. Engels writes that "free and easy practices between men and women" became an important issue in the 1880s during the period of rising radical ideas. "It is a curious fact that

with every great revolutionary movement the question of ‘free love’ comes into the foreground. With one set of people, a revolutionary progress, as a shaking off of old traditional fetters, [is] no longer necessary; with others as a welcome doctrine, comfortably covering all sorts of free and easy practices between men and women” (Engels, ‘The Book of Revelation’ in *Progress*, Vol. II, 1883 cited in Hill 1972: 247).

Engels’ position is certainly a big leap forward in the European nineteenth century’s moral and puritanical views. Earlier, Marx pointed out that “Marriage ...is incontestably a form of exclusive private property” (Marx, *Private Property and Communism* 1844, cited in Mitchell 1984: 35). The legacy of this unconventional and critical view in Marxist theory continued for generations, and after the 1917 Russian revolution there continued to be many debates on family, marriage and sexuality. In addition, many progressive laws, such as taking homosexuality off the criminal code, were passed in Soviet Russia following the October revolution.

However, for Mukhopadhyay the existence of the monogamous family is not only historically inevitable but also morally superior to previous relationships, so long as it applies to both men and women: “Monogamy was a matter of fact, applicable to women alone and not to men. Servitude for the woman, her total surrender to and complete dependence on men, was institutionalized through the introduction of monogamy. The histories of the most civilized and developed nations... illustrate the truth of it. In actual fact, the system of monogamy did not develop out of individual passion or love. It was introduced to ensure a man’s right to property and his authority over women. This system was not the result of men and women’s attraction for each other or their longing for being united permanently. Monogamy rather revealed the inner contradiction between men and women—a contradiction which did not exist in the primitive age

when private ownership was unknown. But again, the introduction of the system of monogamy also marked the social advancement and heralded the age of civilization. *Needless to say, monogamy is the most developed system of marriage... It is through establishment of equal rights for men and women that monogamy could ensure highest form of conjugal life*" (Mukhopadhyay 2003a: 20; my emphasis).

Since heterosexual monogamy is so important for Mukhopadhyay, it is understandable that there is complete silence in the five booklets on alternative sexualities and sexual practices that could challenge this 'highest form of conjugal life'. For Mukhopadhyay, women's emancipation is perfectly possible within the institutions of family and marriage under the socialist economic system. "*Needless to say, as the economic infrastructure changes, the look of the family will gradually change. The establishment of men and women's equal right, equal responsibility and an equal and exploitation-free life will build up a new, beautiful and happy familial relationship (sundar, sukhee nutan paaribaarik samparka)*" (Mukhopadhyay 2004[1986]: 24; my emphasis). By using the expression 'needless to say', she indicates her strong certitude concerning the natural basis of family life under socialism. Moreover, what is obvious is that Mukhopadhyay's new kind of family is a heterosexual monogamous family, where "...if husband-wife or brother-sister or mother-son think likewise in the struggle for life then everything will be beautiful (*sundar*) and normal (*swaabhabik*)" (Mukhopadhyay 2004[1986]: 21).

In the initial period of the Russian revolution, there were many debates on how the bourgeois family oppresses women through relationships of sex and marriage. The ideologues and leaders of the revolution tried to grapple with the question of the future role of the family under the socialist regime. One important discussion took place between Clara Zetkin and Lenin.

Zetkin has recorded their discussion, which took place in the autumn of 1920, in “Lenin on the Women’s Question”. If one reads through the conversation, one can understand that a level of openness operated in the initial days of the revolution. At one point in the discussion, Lenin says, “I was told that the question of sex and marriage is the main subject dealt with in the reading and discussion evenings of women comrades. They are the chief subject of interest, of political instruction and education. I could scarcely believe my ears when I heard it. The first country of proletarian dictatorship surrounded by the counter-revolutionaries of the whole world, the situation in Germany itself requires the greatest possible concentration of all proletarian, revolutionary forces to defeat the ever-growing and ever-increasing counter-revolution. But working women comrades discuss sexual problems and the question of forms of marriage in the past, present and future. They think it [is] their most important duty to enlighten proletarian women on these subjects. The most widely read brochure is, I believe, the pamphlet of a young Viennese woman comrade on the sexual problem. What a waste!”

[<http://www.marxists.org/archive/zetkin/1920/lenin/zetkin1.htm>].

Zetkin argues that under the impact of the revolution the “old social ties are entangling and breaking, there are the tendencies towards new ideological relationships between men and women. The interest shown in these questions is an expression of the need for enlightenment and reorientation. It also indicates a reaction against the falseness and hypocrisy of bourgeois society. Forms of marriage and of the family, in their historical development and dependence upon economic life, are calculated to destroy the superstition existing in the minds of working women concerning the eternal character of bourgeois society. A critical, historical attitude to those problems must lead to a ruthless examination of bourgeois society, to a disclosure of its

real nature and effects, including condemnation of its sexual morality and falseness”

[<http://www.marxists.org/archive/zetkin/1920/lenin/zetkin1.htm>]

The discussion between Zetkin and Lenin reveals that there was not one hegemonic view on the issues of love, marriage and family among the communists of Soviet Union in the early years of revolution. The most interesting is the view expressed by Alexandra Kollontai. She was one of the leaders of the Russian revolution who became the first woman elected to the Party Central Committee. In an essay titled “Theses on Communist Morality in the Sphere of Marital Relations” (1921) Kollontai writes: “The sexual act must be seen not as something shameful and sinful but as something which is as natural as the other needs of [a] healthy organism such as hunger and thirst. Such phenomena cannot be judged as moral or immoral. The satisfaction of healthy and natural instincts only ceases to be normal when the boundaries of hygiene are overstepped” (Kollontai 1977: 229).

It is said that Kollontai believed that the satisfaction of one's sexual desire should be as simple as getting a glass of water. But many believe that her original understanding of sexuality as a human instinct as natural as hunger or thirst has been twisted to create the famous rhetorical ‘glass of water theory’⁵³. In fact, it is said (although there is no direct evidence) that Lenin was criticizing Kollontai when he told Zetkin: “This glass of water theory has made our young people mad, quite mad. It has proved fatal to many young boys and girls. Its adherents maintain that it is Marxist. But thanks for such Marxism which directly and immediately attributes all phenomena and changes in the ideological superstructure of society to its economic basis! Matters aren’t quite as simple as that. A certain Frederick Engels pointed that out a long time

⁵³ It should be noted that ‘the glass of water theory’ and Kollontai’s remark on the ‘healthy and natural instinct which does not cross the borderline of hygiene’ seem to substantiate the idea of a ‘natural sexuality’ which I, using Mitchell and Foucault, interrogate in the interests of women’s emancipation.

ago with regard to historical materialism”

[<http://www.marxists.org/archive/zetkin/1920/lenin/zetkin1.htm>].

The reason I bring up Zetkin’s conversation with Lenin and Kollontai’s thoughts on sex is to show the difference in thought that existed in the Soviet communist party regarding sex, marriage and family. This could be one of the reasons why in the initial period following the 1917 revolution, Russian women and men were granted rights by the state which only a few democratic capitalist countries achieved in the next three decades. “The Russian Revolution produced a quite different experience. In the Soviet Union in the 1920s, advanced social legislation aimed at liberating women, above all, in the field of sexuality: divorce was made free and automatic for either partner, thus effectively liquidating marriage; illegitimacy was abolished, abortion was free, etc.” (Mitchell 1984: 44).

In Mukhopadhyay’s political discourse there is no critical discussion of questions of women’s sexuality and reproduction within the institutions of marriage and family. To her, the family is the primary sphere for women, although they also have the right and obligation to work in social production. Women’s role in the family as the homemaker, mother and the socializing agent for children is exalted as the ideal. An efficient worker-mother woman is viewed as an ideal, and she makes a useful contribution to the upkeep of her family, the state and its economy. “As mothers and homemakers, women have a very important (*atantya gurutwapurna*) social responsibility... It is not only for a humane cause but from the practical viewpoint of social need that maternal health should be protected... A mother’s responsibility does not end by just birthing the child, she also has a new responsibility after that; she has to bring up the child as a capable person... From practical experience mothers have to understand that taking care of their health, [and] birth control for the need of family and society, are their

vital social duties” (Mukhopadhyay 2003[1985]: 16-17). In booklet five, Mukhopadhyay considers women’s role (*bhuumikaa*) in society from five points of view: women make up half of the society; women are mothers (*naareera matrijaati*); women are part of the working mass; women are citizens; and women are the biggest reserve force (*mojud shakti*) of workers. Thus, women are seen as mothers, workers, citizens and reserve labour. In the PBGMS discourse women exist to make a biological, physical, emotional, economic and political contribution to the family, society, the state and its economy. Mukhopadhyay’s political discourse does not allow them to possess a subjectivity that allows women to exist, work and create for themselves, for their self-attainment and self-realization. *Women are viewed as a useful appendage for the systems of family and the state.* Mukhopadhyay paints the image of an efficient and dutiful mother-worker-citizen who makes a useful contribution to the family and the socialist state and economy by creating a space characterized by ‘eternal happiness, beauty and prosperity’, and above all ‘normalcy’.

Power in exchange for freedom

In the entire *Shikshaa Series*, the socialist society is never separated from the socialist state. The words state and society are often used interchangeably by Mukhopadhyay: “Today, at the end of the twentieth century, in one third of the world *socialism has been established* where women have attained full freedom; there is neither any revolutionary significance nor does it usher in any progress when bourgeois parliaments or the United Nations formally acknowledge the equality of men and women and accept women’s demand for employment” (Mukhopadhyay 2001: 42; my emphasis). The phrase ‘socialism has been established’ does not specify whether Mukhopadhyay implies a socialist state or society. Mukhopadhyay treats the state and society synonymously. This is consistent with a unique theoretical ambiguity that plagues the socialist-

communist ideological tradition. This tradition developed from the political practice of the 1930s in the Soviet Union and continued through the next four decades in various parts of the world where 'socialist states' were created and ruled by communist parties in the name of the masses. The capture of state power by the revolutionary Soviet army in association with various communist parties in the Eastern bloc led to the creation of socialist states. The creation of socialist states was deemed to entail the establishment of socialist societies. Does the capturing of state power by the communist party usher in socialism in every nook and corner of the society and establish socialist democracy?

Lucio Colletti in his study on Lenin's *State and Revolution* shows that the problem lies in understanding the meaning of socialist democracy. While discussing the difference between Kautsky and Lenin on the concept of state power, Colletti points out that "despite its rigid class standpoint, Kautsky's idea of power already contained the germ of all his subsequent developments. The State that must not be destroyed but which can be taken over and turned to one's own ends, the military-bureaucratic machine that is not to be dismantled but transferred 'from one hand to another', is already in an embryonic form, a State 'indifferent' in class nature: it is a technical or 'neutral' instrument, a mere means that can do good or ill, according to who controls it and uses it... The theory of the simple seizure, without at the same time the destruction-transformation of power, contains the germ of an interclass theory of the State" (Colletti 1972: 222). Like other Indian communists, Mukhopadhyay belongs to the 'socialist' tradition which believes that the revolutionaries will take over state power and use the existing institutions of the state to develop and modernize the country. The state's 'military bureaucratic' machine never loses its power of dominance. Rather, as before, this machine remains the cornerstone of power. "For the latter [Kautsky], socialism is the management of power in the

name of the masses. For Lenin, the socialist revolution has to destroy the old State because it must destroy the difference between governors and governed itself. For Kautsky, the State and its bureaucratic apparatus is not to be destroyed, because bureaucracy (i.e. the difference between governors and governed), cannot be suppressed and will always survive. For Lenin, the revolution is the end of all masters; for Kautsky, it is merely the arrival of a new master” (Colletti 1972: 222).

Colletti uses Lenin’s *State and Revolution* as a theoretical tool to understand what socialism stands for and the conditions needed to establish socialist democracy in a country. In 1956, Colletti left the Italian Communist Party “disaffected by the failure of any democratization within the USSR” (Anderson 1976: 42). For Mukhopadhyay, the foundation of socialist society does not depend on the condition of the destruction of the old state. A military victory is enough to establish socialism in a country. “Comrade Stalin gave a clarion call, ‘raise the victory flag over Berlin’. The victory flag was raised on the eighth of May, 1945. And victory day was celebrated on the ninth of May, 1945. This victory established the socialist bloc. In nine East European countries socialism was established” (Mukhopadhyay 2002a: 31).

In the PBGMS discourse, the establishment of a socialist society will help women to come out of their homes and join social production. The state will take care of women’s everyday household chores through state-sponsored community kitchens and crèches. Women will not have to bear the burden of a double shift. In socialism, women will have equal rights with men. “In a classless, exploitation-free society when women can participate with men in social production, education and culture, only then will women attain equality with men at every level” (Mukhopadhyay 2004[1986]: 13). However, history will not support Mukhopadhyay’s claim. In the Soviet Union, “[u]nder Stalin the gains for women went into reverse, with attacks

on abortion rights, the ending of many socialized functions of the family, and the practice of awarding medals to mothers of large families. All this went alongside economic, political and social retreat throughout Russia” (German, 2007:179).

In fact, seldom in the PBGMS political literature has there been any substantial and serious discussion of the role of women in the ‘socialist societies’ and of whether women have been treated differently by the socialist state in comparison to absolutist, fascist and bourgeois states. One exception is Brinda Karat, a leader and ideologue of AIDWA (All India Democratic Women’s Association, the national level women’s mass organization of the CPI-M, and the parent body of the PBGMS) who tries to explain what went wrong in the socialist states. In this context, she asks some questions regarding the relationship between socialism and women’s liberation: “New questions have emerged for women’s movements as a result of the socialist experiences. For instance, can gender oppression/discrimination be removed automatically through the changes of material conditions? Do people change their attitudes automatically once the economic basis of socialism is established? Does the Marxist understanding of how consciousness reflects being mean that it is predetermined that consciousness changes? Is the intervention of the socialist state a sufficient guarantee for equality in social interaction? (Karat 2005: 43-44). Karat’s answer is that “in understanding and dealing with the question of gender and oppression, we also need to avoid mechanical interpretations of being and consciousness, of structure and superstructure, of a determinist approach which holds that all change in the consciousness of a human being is the automatic/natural/logical outcome of the changes in material basis” (Karat 2005: 45). Karat calls for a rejection of the mechanistic approach to the structure-superstructure concept in Marxist theory. “In fact the wider aspects of class oppression reflected in dominant class ideologies must be fought, not just as an academic issue or as

‘campaign points’, but in the shape of concrete issues which must also enable the oppressed classes to find and develop alternative cultures” (Karat 2005: 45).

Indeed, these are self-reflexive words from Karat. But her assumption remains that Soviet Russia was socialist and the main political problem lies in managing the superstructure which could alter the consciousness of being. The issue with the socialist countries was that “...the state intervention was not matched by the necessary ideological initiatives to change the way men act” (Karat 2005: 44). Why is this? “With the general erosion of the commitment to socialist theory by ruling communist parties in many of these countries over a period of time, the conscious ideological and cultural struggle against patriarchal attitudes, which were the hallmark of the early years of the Bolshevik revolution, all but disappeared. By the 1980s, women’s duties to the family were recognized by law, although there were some debates on those issues in the sixties and seventies. The advantages of the socialist state-initiated reform were also circumscribed by the weak and slow development of the concept of individual rights and freedoms. It increasingly appeared that everything was imposed from the top. The Bolshevik concept of democracy had been eroded. All this had its impact on gender relations” (Karat 2005: 44-45). To an extent, Karat acknowledges that there were moments of regression in the USSR.

However, Karat does not explain and discuss in historical terms how the erosion of the Bolshevik concept of democracy began. In the last three decades a number of research works have shown that in the socialist states, women did not attain liberation, as communist parties would have had one believe. Even in 1986 when Mukhopadhyay revised booklet two of the *Shikshaa Series*, she wrote without ambivalence that “socialism has been established in countries like the Soviet Union, China etc. which make up one third of the world...In socialist countries there is no inequality between men and women. Everyone gets equal opportunities and

benefits in education, employment, social, familial and economic areas. Women enjoy equal respect. They don't suffer from illiteracy and unemployment. No woman has to lead a despicable life by earning money through prostitution" (Mukhopadhyay 2004[1986]: 10). But in 1979 when Mukhopadhyay went to Poland as part of the Indian parliamentary delegation, she saw prostitution in that socialist country. This incident is mentioned in her autobiography, which was serially published in *Eksathe* between 2005 and 2007: "Here [an elite hotel] for eminent international guests there are arrangements to hire girls. What an outrageous thing, shameful prostitution in a socialist country! But why?" (Mukhopadhyay 2005: 31) Mukhopadhyay was told that women work as prostitutes to earn some extra money and to get luxury gifts from international clients and have a better lifestyle. As Mukhopadhyay sadly remarks: "I was disillusioned by this level of consciousness of women in a socialist country" (Mukhopadhyay 2005: 31).

Mukhopadhyay never mentions in the *Shikshaa Series* that socialism did not always end gender- and sex-based discrimination in the socialist countries. Evidence shows that women in socialist countries did not enjoy equality with men. More often they had to bear the brunt of the socialist state's accumulative drive for rapid industrialization and economic development. Under Stalin's leadership in the 1930s, new repressive laws were enforced which stressed the family and familial responsibility: "In 1936, a new law made divorce much more difficult to obtain, increased the punishment for non-alimony to two years in prison, prohibited abortion... The 'strong, socialist family' was widely extolled as a proper model for social relations" (Goldman 1989: 76).

Marx writes: "It goes without saying that the proletarian, i.e. the man who, being without capital and rent lives purely by labour, and by a one-sided, abstract labour, is considered by

political economy only as a worker. Political economy can therefore advance the proposition that the proletarian, the same as any horse, must get as much as will enable him to work. It does not consider him when he is not working as a human being; but leaves such consideration to criminal law, to doctors, to religion, to the statistical tables, to politics and to the poor house overseer” (Marx 1982: 24). In the entire PBGMS education series, women like these workers never attain the status of subjects. They are persons whose subjectivity is anchored to a reference point such as the state and family. Woman is not considered as a person with a subjectivity that can be detached from the institution of family. As writer of the series, Kanak Mukhopadhyay does not view women as conscious and dynamic beings on whom contradictory family customs, mores, norms, duties and state policies are imposed. The dutiful and efficient woman who simultaneously plays the roles of a mother, wife, worker, political activist and citizen is the ideal woman in her discourse. Mukhopadhyay understands women through the categories of mother, wife, and worker. They are not viewed as ‘persons’ with a self-determining subjectivity except in so far as they are wedded to the institutions of the family and the state.

The categories of ‘mother, wife and worker’ indicate that women should act as productive beings to serve various institutions of the state and society. A male worker might also be understood through such functionally useful categories. However, even if the man is biologically destined to reproduce and attain the status of a father, his status as a father is never a primary identity. The case is just the opposite for women in the PBGMS discourse. Unlike the woman, the man’s fatherhood and his familial role are never over-emphasized as his core identity and subjectivity.

The PBGMS political discourse does not see that a woman's freedom is circumscribed by institutional needs and does not always depend on her choice. For women, freedom is limited by the degree of welfare and progress a state and society want to achieve at a particular moment in history. The 'progressive agenda' of the State determines the degree and quality of women's freedom. In booklet two, Mukhopadhyay charts the demand for rights that a women's democratic organization should fight for. At the same time, she cautions that the demand for rights is not unconditional. First, irrespective of their positions in society, citizens of a country should enjoy equal rights. "As a common citizen, irrespective of being a man or woman, everybody should have the individual freedom [and] right to live independently, to get education and to earn a living. Everybody should have the equal opportunity for education, health, civilization and culture. Everybody should have the right to establish one's life. Men and women should have the equal right to marry and divorce according to one's wish. Everybody should have the right to develop one's family and social life in normal [*susthabhaabe*] and independent [*swaadhinbhaabe*] way" (Mukhopadhyay 2004[1986]: 28).

But the citizen's rights are not unlimited. The rights are circumscribed by the norms and ethics of a society. As Mukhopadhyay notes, "needless to say this right does not mean wantonness [*swecchaachaar*]. The concept of individual freedom is based on socially accepted values [*samaajer sweekrita mulyabodh*] and benevolent ethics [*kalyaanmukhee naitikataa*]" (Mukhopadhyay , 2004[1986]: 28). Mukhopadhyay's argument against individual rights that transgress and violate something inherently good and benevolent [*kalyaanmukhee*] in society has a traditional and regressive character to it. Over the ages, this kind of argument has been used against men and women who are identified as symbols of waywardness. Mukhopadhyay views virtues like social goodness and benevolence as disciplinary mechanisms which ensure a better

control over populations and institutions. Mukhopadhyay's discourse on women and socialism does provide a space for women and endows them with certain rights. But an important question remains: Do these new rights impose a different kind of bondage and discipline on women in the name of progressive socialism?

“When I was a young woman, I joined the Young Communist League and for the first time began to realize why I was a second-class citizen. However, the Communist Party warned, ‘Enough said. You will get your freedom after the revolution. The woman question, you know, is a secondary question.’ CPers (communist party members) told me that the electrical workers, the steel workers and the auto workers were ‘in our pocket,’ and would shortly be organized, and when that happened, ‘the workers’ would lead the revolution and we women would be liberated too” (Martin 1978). Gloria Martin was a leader of the Freedom Socialist Party in the USA and she was a political bridge between the old and the new Left. Like the CPers, Mukhopadhyay wants women's rights to be on par with men's, but they have to wait for a communist party-led revolution. In the *Shikshaa Series*, women's struggle is not seen as an expression of their own independent identity. A woman's identity and subjectivity are always expressed through her family, her child and her husband. In this sense Mukhopadhyay carries on the legacy of nineteenth-century social reformers who tried to ‘civilize’ women through education but ultimately bound them in the confines of the home. For Mukhopadhyay, a woman is not a free subject or an autonomous self in society; rather, she has to prove constantly that she is a responsible worker-mother-wife-citizen who is committed to building a *sustha* nation-state and family. In the PBGMS education series, the development and maintenance of a normal [*sushtha*] and beautiful [*sundar*] family and in turn society is always a woman's primary responsibility.

Marx writes in *Capital I*, “since the labourer exists for the process of production and not the process of production for the labourer, that fact is a pestiferous source of corruption and slavery” (Marx 1961: 394). In the PBGMS political discourse, the woman exists for the maintenance of the processes of reproduction, socialization, sexuality and production to serve the state and family. And the state and family do not exist for the woman. Her multifarious contributions make the family happy, the social production efficient and the nation-state steadily moves on the path of all-around development. In booklet five, Mukhopadhyay quotes from Stalin’s report presented at the 17th Party Congress in 1934: “Women constitute half of our country. They represent a huge force of workers. They are responsible for rearing up our country’s children, our descendents; the future of this country is brought up by women. *That is why we cannot keep this huge force of workers shrouded in darkness and ignorance. That is why the growth of working women’s efficiency and the promotion of women into leadership positions will undoubtedly imply social progress and we have to welcome it*” (Stalin cited in Mukhopadhyay 2003[1985]: 6; my emphasis). It was under Stalin’s regime that the official journal of the Commissariat of Justice wrote in 1939: “*The State cannot exist without the family. Marriage is a positive value for the Socialist Soviet State only if the partners see in it a lifelong union. So-called free love is a bourgeois invention and has nothing in common with the principles of conduct of a Soviet citizen. Moreover, marriage receives its full value for the State only if there is progeny, and the consorts experience the highest happiness of parenthood*” (Mitchell 1984: 44; my emphasis).

In the PBGMS education series, Mukhopadhyay creates the vision of a socialist state with happy families where women enjoy equality with men, but this equality never fully transgresses the existing traditional social norms and oppressive structures and functions. The

various and possible alternatives to these norms are never recognized nor imagined in the education series, lest the agenda of a disciplinary socialist state be undermined. To run the state efficiently, the women and their families need to be controlled through the apparatus of socialism and womanhood.

Having discussed ‘the political discourse’ of the PBGMS in this chapter, in the following two chapters I focus on ‘the everyday discourse’ produced by the mass organization. I demonstrate how the political discourse discussed here, in particular the notion of the apparatus of socialism and womanhood serving the biopolitics of the state and the normative theme of ‘*sustha*’, plays a significant role in the official discursive practice of the PBGMS regarding some incidents that are integral to the lived experiences of Indian women.

Chapter Three

Macro-Motherhood and Social Eugenics in the Name of a ‘Sustha’ Nation-State

“I am surprised and astounded by the strange anxiety shown by a handful of people to pardon and keep alive an ugly, abominable, stigma like Dhananjoy....Dhananjoy has no right to live...Dhananjoy is a stigma, a non-human, so there is no question of human rights...Greetings to our honourable chief minister....who has strongly voiced his support for Dhananjoy’s death sentence...If there could be a harsher punishment I would go for that” (Eksathe letter to the editor, August 2004: 53-54).

“To hang [Dhananjoy] is not to take revenge but to punish; it’s a surgery to remove a brute [narapashu] who has tasted young and delicate female flesh [kachi naareemanhsa]” (Aajkaal editorial, June 26, 2004).

“In the land of Brahmanical civilization, where women are created to beget sons, the enormous devotion for the mother image should be a research subject” (Sen 2004 [1978]: 88).⁵⁴

“According to the Skandapurana, a prostitute belongs to a separate caste: if a man of the same or superior caste enjoys her, he is not to be punished, provided she is not another’s concubine” (Bhattacharji 1994: 79).

In this chapter, I deconstruct the official discourse of the PBGMS concerning an incident of sexual violence, specifically the rape and murder of an upper middle-class girl by a lower-class man. The tragic incident took place in Calcutta in the 1990s. The offender was later hanged in 2004. An *Eksathe* editorial will be the focus of my analysis. My close scrutiny of this editorial will show how the mother of the offender is strategically treated as a symbolic figure to construct an argument in favor of capital punishment. The aim of this editorial is to influence the readers, as members of civil society, to support the verdict of the Indian state to hang the offender. The editorial constructs the death sentence as an act of universally benevolent social eugenics

⁵⁴ The expression ‘women are created to beget sons’ [*putrarthe kriyate bharya*] is a well-circulated Bengali proverb. This proverb can be traced back to a Sanskrit verse in *The Naradasmṛiti* (12.19), *apatyartham striyah sristah*. *The Naradasmṛiti* is a Hindu law book dealing with codes of conduct in everyday life. It was written around 100-300 century c.e. Thanks to Mandakranta Bose who helped me to locate this verse in *The Naradasmṛiti*.

executed by the Indian state. Through an imaginative leap, using cultural resources such as the Indian epic *The Mahabharata* and the ethic of *tyaag*, the mother of the offender is equated with the larger-than-life mother of the entire society and nation state, which I term the ‘macro-mother’. The figure of the macro-mother is invoked to rationalize a program of social eugenics in the name of a secure and *sustha* (normal and healthy) nation state. I end this chapter by juxtaposing the PBGMS’s official statement on an incident involving the gang rape of three refugee women from Bangladesh with this editorial, which defends capital punishment for the rape and murder of an adolescent girl. This juxtaposition reveals that, to the PBGMS, sexual morality, class, and citizenship status qualify women to seek justice from the Indian state for sexual violence committed against them. Therefore, I ask: Is the PBGMS’s understanding of violence against women, a central concern for women’s and feminist movements in India, circumscribed and stifled by their political desire to assume power over a disciplined and secure Indian nation state?⁵⁵ At a more general level, my aim in this chapter is to demonstrate how the apparatus of socialism and womanhood, particularly the ideology of motherhood operating within this discourse, is utilized to serve the biopolitical project of the state. Secondly, I show how the normative theme of ‘*sustha*’ is featured overtly in the editorial to justify the biopolitics of the state.

Social eugenics through state selection

In March 1990, Dhananjoy Chatterjee, an elevator operator in an upper middle-class apartment building in Calcutta, was accused of raping and murdering Hetal Parekh, a 14-year-old girl who was a resident of that building. The Alipore Sessions Court (the lower court) found him

⁵⁵ I use ‘women’s’ as a separate label from ‘feminist’, since in the Indian context, organizations such as the PBGMS and AIDWA distinguish themselves as women’s organizations in contrast to feminist organizations.

guilty and ordered Dhananjoy Chatterjee to life imprisonment for rape and the death sentence for murder. The sentence was upheld both by the Calcutta High Court and the Supreme Court of India. The Governor of West Bengal rejected the plea for mercy filed by the convict's relatives. In February 1994, Chatterjee obtained an interim stay from the High Court. In September 2003, his petition for the commutation of his sentence, owing to the delay in its execution, was quashed by the Calcutta High Court, and Dhananjoy Chatterjee appealed to the Supreme Court of India. In February 2004, the Supreme Court referred his mercy petition to the Governor for reconsideration. The Governor once again rejected the petition. Following this, a note was sent from the Union Home Ministry asking the West Bengal State government to postpone the hanging until President A.P.J. Abdul Kalam gave his opinion on a mercy petition filed by Chatterjee's family and several human rights organizations. When the President's office sought the West Bengal state government's view on the matter, the CPI-M-led Left Front government made it clear that it fully supported the death sentence. As the Chief Minister Mr. Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee stated: "The government and I are in favor of the death sentence in this particular case. The Centre has been informed of this. The message should go loud and clear to the perpetrators of such crime" (*Frontline* 2004). Brinda Karat, the head of AIDWA, also stated her support for Dhananjoy's execution: "We do not support the death sentence for rape but in this case the association thinks that capital punishment is the right punishment for the murderer's horrible, brutal and ghoulish [*paishaachik*] act" (Karat 2004: 38). In July 2004, the Home Ministry recommended Dhananjoy Chatterjee's execution to the President. The President refused clemency to Chatterjee and later on August fourteenth Chatterjee was hanged.

In 2003 and 2004, before Dhananjoy Chatterjee's execution, several pieces were published in the public sphere debating whether capital punishment should be served to him. In

Calcutta, debates were also organized in public spaces by various groups either supporting or protesting against the death sentence. The general disposition of middle-class Calcuttans as evinced by letters to newspapers and newspaper articles was that the death sentence was appropriate for such a heinous crime. Meera Bhattacharjee, the West Bengal Chief Minister's wife and member of the PBGMS, opined that no mercy should be shown to Dhananjoy Chatterjee. Speaking at a public debate, she made an emotional plea: "I have come here as a woman and the mother of a daughter. I know what the parents of Hetal Parekh have been going through for the past 14 years." Teary-eyed, she recounted in graphic detail how the girl was mercilessly battered and raped and finally strangled with the rope of a swing that broke her voice box. "Can you still have thoughts of forgiving him?" (*Frontline* 2004).

However, alternative voices were also heard in the intellectual circles of the city. For instance, author-cum-activist Mahasweta Devi questioned the rationale behind Chatterjee's death sentence by arguing, "We cannot bring down the crime rate by awarding capital punishment. Dhananjoy should be given an opportunity to reform himself" (*Frontline* 2004). While the debate was raging in the public sphere, *Eksathe* in its August 2004 issue published an editorial supporting capital punishment for Chatterjee. The editorial titled "Sei Putra Duryodhanee Tyaag Koro Aaj (Sacrifice That Son Duryodhana Today)", opens as follows:

A person cannot survive if *the cancer-afflicted part of his body is not removed*. Likewise, *society cannot survive and advance without killing its enemy*. Society has many kinds of enemies. Within this category falls a person who has completely turned into a brute or a beast of a man [*narapashu*] by abandoning his humaneness. It's a separate question why in human society a brute such as Dhananjoy could grow up. If it had not happened it would have been better. *It's better if a fatal disease does not enter our body*. It ought to be learned how a body can be kept free of disease [*rogamuktato*]. But when in personal life or social life an ultimate danger strikes, we have to free ourselves from that. We have

to be merciless to Dhananjoy by thinking about the present society and future generations. Can any normal [*sustha*] person forgive an inhuman person who murdered Hetal, raped her, and tore a *soft body* into pieces? Since Dhananjoy cannot be forgiven, many years ago the Supreme Court has served the ultimate punishment for the ultimate crime which is in vogue in our country, and ordered that he should be hanged. The offender sought mercy from the President twice in vain. Why did the case drag on for fourteen years and again mercy is being sought? Some of our so-called intellectuals and one international organization are behind this. *Is this not an attempt to belittle the world's largest democracy, our civilization, culture, social and moral values, our constitution? ...* To date, most countries like ours serve the death penalty for committing the ultimate crime... Thus, Dhananjoy has to be hanged for committing such *ultimate* [*charam*] *crimes* such as rape and murder; he cannot be pardoned. (*Eksathe* editorial, August 2004: 9; my emphasis)

The editorial uses a medical trope to describe society, crime, and the criminal. The society is personified and endowed with a physical body. The health and well being of that social body is under threat from a fatal disease—cancer. The convict Dhananjoy is viewed as the cancerous part of the social body. This diseased part of the body needs to be surgically removed to guarantee society's well-being. Thus, Dhananjoy has to be eliminated from society—he should be hanged. The death sentence is the surgery which will remove the cancerous growth from the body. Otherwise, the disease may spread to the rest of the body. Dhananjoy may harm others. The exemplary punishment of eliminating Dhananjoy is also viewed as prevention against a future cancerous growth, the production of another brute [*narapashu*]. Interestingly, the editorial equates sexual violence to a female body with violence to the social body: 'but when in personal life or social life an ultimate danger strikes *we* have to free ourselves from that'. The female body is invested with the significance of the social body, the society and the nation-state. The logic of the nation-state is explicit in the way the editorial defends the sanctity of the Indian

constitution, Indian democracy, and the verdict given by the Indian judiciary to hang Dhananjoy. Overall, insofar as the medical trope is used to identify which lives are worth living and which are not with respect to the prevention of disease and the death of the virus, it is concerned with the life of the masses.

In post-colonial India, Indian women are constitutionally recognized as citizens bearing equal rights. Of course, there are numerous gaps between these official rights and their actual implementation. While their condition is not the same today as in the nineteenth century, when women did not have equal rights either inside or outside the home, close scrutiny of this editorial shows Indian women, or more precisely their bodies, are still burdened with the onus of being the emblem of a *sustha* [normal] nation-state with all its political and cultural implications. In a way, this association is reminiscent of the Hindu revivalist nationalism that animated debates on social reform initiatives such as the Age of Consent Act (1891) in late colonial India. Conservative nationalists and Hindu revivalists opposed this reform regarding the oppressive Hindu custom of non-consensual marriage of infant girls on the grounds that the custom expresses Hindu cultural identity, and it is prescribed by Hindu scriptures (Sarkar 2001: 228). The Hindu woman's body is not free, but it is ruled by 'our customs', and 'our scriptures' (Sarkar 2001: 202). Later, *bhadramahilaa* writings from Bengal represented the chaste body of an Indian woman as the hallmark of her distinction from her Western sisters: "*Kintu sei America ramani Samaaj, Bharat satee-r kache paibek laj*" [But that American women's community, will be embarrassed or belittled by the chaste Indian woman] (Chakraborty 1995: 220). The Hindu preacher and nationalist Swami Vivekananda notes the basic differences between women's roles in India and in the West: "In India, the mother is the centre of the family and our highest ideal. She is to us the representative of God, as God is the mother of the Universe" (Swami

Vivekananda cited in Ray 2005: xlv). In Bengali literature from about the 1880s to the days of Gandhian mass movements, a constant preoccupation with the figure of women dominate the conceptualization of India. The ideal patriot is invested with feminine qualities, and the familial domain is reconceived in terms of the nationalist enterprise (Sarkar 2001: 250). Later, Gandhi's ideal *satyagraha*⁵⁶ is also endowed with the 'feminine virtues' of patience, self-sacrifice, and passive resistance⁵⁷. The Hindu woman's body and her familial role as a patient and self-sacrificing mother became signified in the revivalist, and nationalist discourses in colonial India. The moral-ethical category of 'Hindu women's chastity' was thoroughly politicized during the colonial period.

But unlike the gendered Hindu anti-colonial nationalist ideology that animates these late colonial discourses, the ideology inscribed in the *Eksathe* editorial expresses the gendered secular nationalism of the Indian nation-state. Otherwise, why would the violence to Hetal's body, a female (and particularly an adolescent girl) body, be equated with violence to the social body of India? The imaginative leap employed here is made possible by the ideology of gendered secular nationalism. Conversely, the chaste body of an Indian woman signifies a secure India, a sanctified nation-state. It should also be noted that the editorial equates the rape of a woman with homicide since it designates both as ultimate [*charam*] crimes. In an implicit way, the editorial views a raped woman as akin to a dead woman. The 'chaste and pure' female body becomes signified as her life. In an inverse way, the sexualization overdetermines the female body in this discourse: Dhananjoy Chatterjee 'murdered Hetal, raped her, and tore a *soft body* into pieces'. This phrase indicates how the PBGMS's periodical (*Eksathe*) views female sexuality and rape. In this view, the sexual purity of the female body is transformed into the icon

⁵⁶ *Satyagraha* mean firmness in adhering to truth. It can also mean the use of 'soul force' (Gandhi 1997: 88-99).

⁵⁷ Ashis Nandy conceptualizes Gandhi as a figure of 'dissident androgyny' who challenged the colonial ideology of 'hyper-masculinity' as represented by the Anglo-Indian writer Rudyard Kipling (Nandy 1983).

of her personhood, subjectivity, and life. This over-signified way of viewing the female body's sexual sanctity constitutes the ideological premise of the gendered notion prevalent in India that 'our women represent our family's honour'. This particular notion can be traced back to Hindu patriarchy: "Among the Hindus, unchastity on the part of the husband is certainly a culpable offence but they set much higher value on female chastity; its erosion would lead to the loss of family honour, the growth of half-castes and the destruction of ancestral rites" (Sarkar 2001: 208). A verse from the Hindu classic *The Bhagavadgita* maintains a similar notion: "Where impiety rules, the women are corrupted; with the women corrupted, even caste is endangered" (*The Bhagavadgita* 1965: 13).

It can be argued that, implicitly, the editorial scales up the association between women's sexual sanctity and the family's honour to the imagined familial community of the Indian nation state. In this context, let us recollect what 'the father of the nation' Gandhi had to say about women who were raped during the communal riots and pre-partition violence at Noakhali (now in Bangladesh) in 1946. He regarded rape as a fate worse than death for a woman (Sarkar 2005: 551). For now, let us remember that the editorial equates an injury to the sexual sanctity of a woman with an injury to the social body of the Indian nation-state.

Recall that Dhananjoy is designated as a cancerous part of the social body which needs to be (surgically) removed. He is viewed as a fatal disease which should not be allowed to enter 'our body', and to survive in society. We know from medical science that cancer has genetic and perhaps behavioral or environmental origins and not a strictly social origin. Ironically, by using the metaphor of cancer, the *Eksathe* editorial understands crime as natural or genetic and not as socially produced. A discourse of naturalism is employed by the editorial. More importantly, it should be noted that this discourse on crime appears in a socialist women's magazine. Published

by the PBGMS, *Eksathe* is described in its own pages as “a women’s progressive cultural monthly periodical and the official publication of the PBGMS”.⁵⁸

The editorial identifies Dhananjoy as an enemy of society, a *narapashu* (a brute): ‘society cannot survive and advance without killing its enemy’. It sounds the clarion call that ‘our society’ must be defended against such an enemy by eliminating him. An evolutionary logic animates this discourse. The society cannot survive and progress without killing Dhananjoy. The elimination of this enemy will make the society healthier (*rogamuktato*, or free of disease), increase its longevity, and contribute towards its advancement to a higher stage. The trope of natural selection is employed to justify the killing of ‘the other’, the inferior, the beastly and lowly *narapashu* Dhananjoy. But instead of human genes, in Dhananjoy’s case this selection is orchestrated by the state. *The state selects who is not fit for survival in the nation state*. The Indian state and its judiciary have given the verdict that Dhananjoy should be hanged for committing a heinous crime. The *Eksathe* editorial stands by this process of *social eugenics through state selection*. It justifies this social eugenics in the name of a ‘*sustha*’ (normal and healthy) nation state: ‘Can any *sustha* [normal] person forgive an inhuman person who murdered Hetal, raped her, and tore a *soft body* into pieces?’ A *sustha* nation-state, composed of *sustha* people, cannot pardon the convict. Therefore, Dhananjoy’s death sentence is justified for the sake of a *sustha* nation-state. It should also be noted that I use the category ‘nation-state’ to mean a post-colonial nationalist state that is produced by colonial rule and which carries over many of its structural characteristics but is legitimized by a nationalist ideology (Kaviraj, 2001: 314).

To further explore the discourse of social eugenics, Foucault’s lecture collection titled “*Society Must be Defended*” is useful. Foucault’s insights shed some new light on how the

⁵⁸ This descriptor can be found in all issues of the periodical *Eksathe*.

PBGMS reinforces the political authority of the nation-state by eliminating a dangerous citizen, the criminal who is a social enemy. In these 1976 lectures given at the College de France, Foucault argues that in a normalizing society the killing of the other, the abnormal, the degenerate by the state is made acceptable. The state here functions in the mode of 'biopower'. In this mode, the state's elimination of a person is acceptable if the person is deemed a biological threat to the population and if that elimination improves the species (Foucault 2003: 255-257). The biopower mode of operation of the Indian state is well represented in this editorial when it argues that 'we have to be merciless to Dhananjoy in thinking about the present society and future generations'. In this context, let us note how the editorial reverses the usual order of terms for rhetorical purpose. In all the reports, the crime committed by Dhananjoy is described as 'rape and murder'. Whereas, at one point, the editorial persuasively asks: 'Can any normal person [*sustha maanush*] forgive an inhuman who murdered Hetal, raped her, and tore a soft body into pieces?' Why is the murder mentioned before the rape here in this *Eksathe* editorial? Is it to make the crime look more macabre, the criminal more animalistic, a non-human life-form, a monster whose act is absolutely unpardonable? I would argue that the reversal in order is strategically and rhetorically employed to justify the killing of Dhananjoy, the capital punishment ordered by the state, and ultimately the Indian state's use of biopower to eliminate its 'dangerous and brute' social enemies. In keeping with these rhetorical purposes, the editorial graphically describes Hetal as a 'soft body' torn apart by Dhananjoy. The victim's young age and plausible 'virginity' seem to authorize the use of this descriptor.

With reference to the historical context of Europe, Foucault argues that the biopolitics of the modern state involves medical policing and Social Darwinism to maintain racial purity (e.g. Nazism) and ideological orthodoxy (e.g. Stalinism) (Foucault 2003: 277). He further notes that in

state-led biopolitics, the fact that the other (the degenerate or the abnormal) dies or is killed does not simply mean we can live on in a safe way. In fact, *the death of the other, the abnormal and the inferior is something that will make life in general, the population and the society, healthier and purer* (Foucault 2003: 255). In a normalizing society, when the state functions in the mode of biopower, the murderous function of the state is justified (Foucault 2003: 256). In the biopower mode, power is situated and exercised at the level of life, the species and the population. Commenting on eighteenth-century western-European political history, Foucault notes: “Together with war, [the death penalty] was for a long time the other form of the right of the sword; it constituted the reply of the sovereign to those who attacked his will, his law...[one has to be capable of killing in order to continue living]” (Foucault 1990: 137-138). As the sovereign power started taking interest in administering life, it became difficult to apply the death penalty. Foucault points out that capital punishment had to be maintained by invoking less the enormity of the crime itself than the *monstrosity of the criminal* and the well-being of society.

Earlier, the sovereign exercised his right of life predominantly by exercising his right to kill—the right to take life or let live⁵⁹. Foucault observes that later there was a definite shift in these mechanisms of power. The new power is not just characterized by ‘deduction’ but invests itself in reinforcing, monitoring, optimizing and organizing lives under its dominion. At the same time, the right of death aligned itself with the needs of a life-administering power and redefined itself accordingly: “This death that was based on the right of the sovereign is now manifested as simply the reverse of the right of the social body to ensure, maintain, or develop its life”

⁵⁹ Noting his difference from Hobbes, Foucault states that this is a specific right that became manifest with the formation of the modern juridical being, the sovereign. In contrast, Hobbes views this as the transfer to the prince of the natural right possessed by every individual to defend his life even if it meant the physical elimination of others (Foucault 1990: 135).

(Foucault 1990: 136). In this way, this death has a positive and progressive influence on life and the entire society is mobilized for the purpose of killing in the name of the well-being of the social body. Foucault states that the notion that one has to be capable of killing in order to continue living “has become the principle that defines the strategy of states” (Foucault 1990: 137). At stake here is the biological existence of a population and not the juridical existence of sovereignty. Later, Foucault insightfully observes that bio-power became an indispensable constituent element in the development of capitalism since the latter system requires the controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production and the adjustment of the phenomena of population to the requirements of economic processes (Foucault 1990: 141).

By representing Dhananjoy as the brute (*narapashu*) and the victim as a ‘soft body’, the editorial makes capital punishment acceptable since it will result in the elimination of the ‘unwanted’ degenerate and thus in the improvement and progress of the population, society and species. According to the editorial, capital punishment has a positive and progressive influence on life and hence the entire society is mobilized for the purpose of killing in the name of the well-being of the social body. This will make the society ‘universally benevolent’ (*saarbajaneen kalyaanmay samaaj*). The editorial appeals to its readers to stand by the state’s exercise of biopower and to support the verdict for Dhananjoy’s death sentence. As discussed in the introduction, the state in post-colonial India is viewed as the agency of progress, modernization, development and social welfare. The death sentence served by the state is viewed by the editorial as an effort towards the safeguarding of society and the improvement of the social life of the population. In this way, the elimination of the unhealthy (cancerous), abnormal brute is a contribution to the process of ‘social eugenics’ that makes the society safe, normal, healthy, untroubled—or in other words, *sustha*.

At the same time, the editorial defends the Indian Supreme Court's verdict by invoking a strange mélange of cultural nationalism, civilizational pride, 'nation-statism', and the sanctity of 'our values': 'Is this not an attempt to belittle the world's largest democracy, our civilization, culture, social and moral values, our constitution?' The Indian nation-state, particularly its constitution, the Indian civilization, its culture and moral values, are essentialized by being elevated to an ethereal level and ultimately sanctified. The entire discourse operates within the confines of the nation state. The secular democratic Indian nation-state acts as a border beyond which the PBGMS political imagination cannot travel. This boundary is evident in the CPI-M's political discourse as well, in particular the party's stand on the demand for a separate Gorkhaland. The Gorkhaland movement demands the secession of Gorkha populated areas of Northern West Bengal from the existing state of West Bengal (Meena and Bhattacharjee 2008: 15-16). Sanjay Seth's work has shown that when a communist movement assumes state power, Marxism turns nationalistic in former colonies and semi-colonies (Seth 1995: 232). In West Bengal, the CPI-M led left front government has been in power for the past three decades.

Before moving to a consideration of the broader implications of this discourse on the project of nation-state building, let us note two points. First, the editorial suggests that there might be a social cause behind the production of a brute such as Dhananjay: 'It is a separate question why in human society such a brute as Dhananjay could grow up?' Rather than develop this perspective, the editorial hastily makes a normative comment: 'If it had not happened it would have been better'. Although the editorial appears in a socialist women's magazine—'socialism will bring women's emancipation' is the common tag line in *Eksathe's* pages—and although this magazine is the official publication of the PBGMS, the socialist feminist logic of understanding sexual violence as part of the asymmetry of patriarchal power relations is

conspicuously absent. A symptomatic reading of this absence suggests that to the editors of *Eksathe*, order and normalcy in the nation-state and the maintenance of national sovereignty are more important than a thorough questioning of the gendered nature of sexual violence and its roots in patriarchy.

Secondly, the editorial states: ‘when in personal life or social life an ultimate danger strikes, we have to free ourselves from that’. Hetal’s rape and murder, a personal tragedy to Hetal and her upper middle-class family, is endowed with a larger significance through the identification of Dhananjay as an ultimate threat to social life and order. Here, the personal turns political, but in the interests of the nation-state. Interestingly, the same socio-political logic is absent when Dhananjay is viewed as a brute, an enemy to society, as if he is ‘naturally’ disposed to those qualities and his criminality. The editorial neglects any consideration of how Dhananjay and his acts also have a social origin, a gendered origin, and a class origin. Although a Brahmin by caste, Dhananjay Chatterjee, the elevator operator, hailed from a lower-class rural background. He held a blue-collar job in the informal sector. The class connection of crime and punishment, and the patriarchal root of sexual violence, are symptomatically missing in this editorial. A remark by Justice C. J. Bhagwati’s, the ex-Chief Justice of the Indian Supreme Court, is apposite in this context. At a discussion forum in 1982, he said, "Capital punishment has a class complexion and is imposed randomly and disproportionately on the poor and uneducated" (<http://www.legalservicesindia.com/articles/dp.htm>). The editorial’s erasure of the class complexion of crime and punishment is also pertinent to the PBGMS’s representation of the gang rape of three Bangladeshi refugee women discussed below.

Macro-Motherhood and the ethic of *tyaag*

Let us go back to the title of the editorial, “Sei Putra Duryodhanæ Tyaag Koro Aaj (Sacrifice That Son Duryodhana Today)”. This title is a line borrowed from the poem “Gaandhaareer Aabedan” (Gaandhaaree’s Appeal), written by Rabindranath Tagore in Bangaabda 1338 (Tagore 1338 Bangaabda: 375). This poem is loosely based on an episode from the epic *The Mahabharata*. In this poem, Gaandhaaree, the mother of Duryodhana and other Kauravas, is appealing to her husband Dhritaraastra to abandon their son Duryodhana. Duryodhana’s wicked misdeed is the rationale behind Gaandhaaree’s appeal. This son is responsible for attempting to disrobe Draupadee, a metaphor for sexual assault, in front of a royal court full of people. Draupadee is the common wife of the five Paandavas. In addition, Duryodhana is a war-monger. He is instigating his cousins, the Paandavas, to fight the Kauravas over the control of the royal kingdom. Gaandhaaree the mother, having already hardened her mind, has restrained her maternal affect for her son. And now she is appealing to her husband to abandon their fallen son as well. Renouncing the wicked son will bring forth a greater good, social well-being, and peaceful co-existence between the Paandavas and the Kauravas. In the sentence which provides the title to Tagore’s poem, ‘*Sei putra Duryodhanæ tyaag koro aaj*’, the word *tyaag* is the key for understanding the ethical bedrock on which Gaandhaaree’s appeal stands. *Tyaag* means renunciation, sacrifice, giving away in benevolence; and *tyaag koro*, the verb form, implies the act of renouncing. A derivative of *tyaag* is *tyagee*, which refers to a person who is self-denying and renounces his/her interests and pleasures (Samsad Bengali to English Dictionary, 2000). Even though the wicked Duryodhana is Dhritaraastra’s and Gaandhaaree’s own son, they should sacrifice their self-interest and renounce this son for the sake of a benevolent and peaceful social order. The ethic of *tyaag*, the principle of sacrificing

one's own blood⁶⁰ for the greater good, is also present in the Hindu text *The Bhagavadgita*, which constitutes a part of *The Mahabharata*. The text is written in a dialogic mode in which Arjuna asks questions and Krishna answers them. Krishna invokes the ethical principle of *tyaag* to persuade the dejected Arjuna to kill his own family, the Kauravas, in the epic battle of Kurekshetra. For instance, in the final chapter, "The Way of Salvation", Krishna advises Arjuna: "But the selfless man of clear vision, though he kills does not really kill—for he is not tainted by his action" (*The Bhagavadgita* 1965: 100). I use the word ethic in the phrase 'the ethic of *tyaag*' to mean the moral principle that influences a person's behavior.

The second half of the editorial implicitly invokes the ethic of *tyaag* and the ideology of sanctified motherhood explicitly animates this section:

But what about Dhananjoy's mother who gave birth to him? What about his wife, son, and family? Are we not thinking about them? Yes we are... A mother is like the mother Earth [*dharitri jananee*]; a child grows up in her lap. If that child is inhuman, tarnishes the mother's womb, then her pain is most acute. *A mother has to look at Hetal's mother, society's hundred thousand mothers, and innumerable children; she has to think about the grand honour of motherhood, the noble social responsibility [maatriter brihatoro maryaadaa, mahattoro Samaajik dayityer katha bhabte hobe]*... Today we have many such unfortunate mothers like Dhananjoy's mother, whose offspring have brought disgrace [*kalankito*] to the sacred mother's womb [*pabitra maatri garva*]... Women are co-fighters not only in the struggle for women's emancipation but they also fight against all kinds of social oppression. So, they have to become socially conscious. They have to safeguard their children so that none of them turn into another Dhananjoy...

Gaandhaaree's firm voice said: Renounce that son Duryodhana today. This is the voice of a universally benevolent eternal mother [*saarbajaneen kalyaanmay saswatjananeer kanthha*]. This voice crosses the border of the clan and is assimilated with the collective

⁶⁰ An interesting parallel emerges here between the sacrifice of one's own blood and the sacrifice of one's nation's blood by sending men and women to win battles for the modern state. Thus, Foucault's thesis on bio-power has an archaic root in the classical text *The Bhagavatgita*.

[*goshtir shimana chhariye somoshtir modhye mile jawar kanthhaswar*]. Come *mothers and sisters*, let us join our voices to this noble voice and move towards a universally benevolent society [*saarbajaneen kalyaanmay Samaaj*]. (*Eksathe* editorial, August 2004, 9; my emphasis)

In this second half, the editorial suddenly turns empathetic towards Dhananjoy's family, and particularly his mother. But with equal suddenness this empathy evaporates. The vacuum created is occupied by an ideology of motherhood, which at times appears as the apotheosis of motherhood ('universally benevolent eternal mother'). First, the metaphor of mother earth [*dharitri jananee*] is used to describe the general character of motherhood. This metaphor of the earth as the universal mother has a deep-rooted cultural genealogy in India. In the first hymn of Book XII of the *Atharvaveda*, there is a long verse, "Bhumisukta", dedicated to the earth [*bhumi* or land] which is represented as a mother who provides and sustains. The Sanskrit literature scholar Sukumari Bhattacharji observes that "[t]he *Bhumisukta* for the first time describes land as land, and not as *prithivi*, the planet Earth, but the mother earth on which rustle the golden ears of barley, wheat and rice, [and] with which mother *Bhumi* succours her children" (Bhattacharji 2001: 51). The earth is poetically described as the physical and spiritual mother of all. Bhattacharji points out that *The Bhumisukta* apotheosizes this mother into a glorious Demeter, Majestic goddess. The "Bhumisukta" of the *Atharvaveda* is the precursor of the epic-puranic Prima Dea, such as Durgaa, Kaalee, and Shaakambharee. This poetic rendition of the earth is explained as evidence of the gradual transformation of the nomadic and pastoral Indo-Aryan tribes into an agrarian people. For these people, the miracle of the harvest signifies the deep untapped sources of hidden creative power in the womb of the earth (Bhattacharji 2001: 43, 52 and 53).

But a complex patriarchal ideology is also inscribed in this deified personification of the earth with the allegory of ‘the woman [who] was the field, and the man [who] sowed the seed in her’ that occurs in the *Atharvaveda*, IX:32. The land and the seed belong to the man in this predominantly patriarchal agrarian society. “Manu is quite brutally explicit about it: of the seed and the womb, the seed is superior and creatures of life assume the qualities of the seed” (Bhattacharji 1994: 28). Thus, a mother like Mother Earth purportedly carries the seed in a passive way. She cannot claim the offspring of her womb as her own; the lineage is determined by the father. Yet motherhood is increasingly glorified. Sukumari Bhattacharji argues that this glorification provides an emotional and ideational compensation for the (biological) reality, which in most cases was imposed upon the woman in ancient India (Bhattacharji 1994: 29-30). However, this woman could derive some gratification emotionally through the social recognition of her fertility, and derivatively by way of her auspiciousness (Bhattacharji 1994: 31).

This exaltation of motherhood can be found in Victorian England as well. As Nancy Chodorow observes, the Victorians often rationalized this felt power by diluting womanhood in to the more self-sacrificial and digestible holiness of motherhood (Chodorow 1978, 94). The paradox of the glorification of the mother which coexists with actual social indifference to the mother in ancient India is explained by Bhattacharji as the elevation of motherhood to an abstraction. She observes that in ancient India, the woman was reared in an ethos that taught her that potentially she was always a mother. In agriculture, there were rites for tending the field—*pumsavana* and *simantonnayana*—yet in neither is there a prayer for the pregnant woman’s health, happiness and long life. “A girl was trained to be a good wife and a good mother and was blessed with the motherhood of sons” (Bhattacharji 1994: 34, 36 and 16). The editorial’s description of the genus ‘mother’ as ‘*dharitri jananee*’ is laden with meanings embedded in

gender relations and patriarchy. Since this editorial is located in India and written for a socialist women's magazine, the motif of the 'woman as Mother Earth' evokes a discourse which has long been criticized by feminist scholars from India. In India, the glorification of motherhood is a means to make motherhood culturally and politically acceptable. "Our field studies on the actual experience of motherhood across classes show the total lack of power for the woman concerned over decisions concerning fertility. Both infertility and failure to produce sons incur penalties" (Krishnaraj 1995: 36).

In the editorial, the glorification of motherhood is developed further on to describe how a mother's womb, although a biological organ, is a 'sacred womb' whose purity is disgraced by her offspring's misdeed. Thus, in a classic patriarchal way, the subject-position of the woman is confined to her motherhood: 'If that child is inhuman, tarnishes the mother's womb, then her pain is most acute.' By turning the profane womb into a sacred object, motherhood is elevated to an ethereal realm and the purity of that womb is profaned by the son's crime. Thus, the mother is tangentially held responsible for her offspring's criminal act. An underlying theme of 'good motherhood' pervades this editorial: 'They have to safeguard their children so that none of them turn into another Dhananjay'. This good motherhood ensures that the child will never 'tarnish his/her mother's womb'. A similar sentiment is echoed in an essay in *Eksathe* on the many tasks of motherhood: "The mother who can balance both the housework and outside work [*ghar o bairer kaaj*], directs the child in the right path, gives it appropriate freedom, plays the correct role in the [communist] movement, and remains clear in her conscience, is the one who fulfills her obligation [*daayabaddhataa*] to the child and the society" (Dasgupta October 1995: 106)⁶¹. Therefore, a good mother, who is represented here as a skilful multi-tasker, not only produces a good child, she also fulfills her social function of birthing and rearing good citizens for a good

⁶¹ The gender of the child is not specified, so I have used 'it' instead of him/her.

society, or more precisely, for a good and *sustha* nation state. Thus, good motherhood leads to good and *sustha* nationhood. The ideology that animates the editorial's lofty pronouncement that motherhood is 'the noble social responsibility' is also echoed in this 1995 *Eksathe* essay.

At another level, the mother is held responsible for redeeming her son's misdeed through her self-sacrifice for the greater good of society, the collective cause. The editorial persuades Dhananjoy's mother to accept her son's death sentence so that she can do justice to 'the grand honour of motherhood, the noble social responsibility'. She should accept her son's state-sanctioned killing, and demonstrate her 'socially responsible motherhood'. By consenting to the killing of the social enemy, Dhananjoy's mother should exercise her social consciousness and demonstrate her nobility. This exercise does not come easily. It requires the mother to sacrifice her narrow self-interest in keeping her son alive. In this way, a safe and secured society ('a universally benevolent society') free of its social enemy is made possible by a mother's sacrifice. Her renunciation requires her to dissolve her self-interest into the society's collective interest: 'This voice crosses the border of the clan and is assimilated with the collective'.

In this discourse, motherhood is attributed with enormous social dignity and responsibility. More importantly, it has a social and public character. I have named this ideological code 'macro-motherhood'. This macro-motherhood is glorified; it has the ability to bring forth 'a universally benevolent society'. Perhaps, it has a magical quality as well. Macro-motherhood is not confined within the four walls of the domestic sphere. It is made to travel out to a larger social space, and be part of the social sphere, the collective order and the nation state. This motherhood conscientiously carries forward the agenda of the Indian nation-state which wants to defend itself from disorder, abnormality, and the social enemy. More precisely, following the general tenor of PBGMS discourse, the nation-state aspires to become *sustha*.

The editorial persuades Dhananjay's mother to feel inspired by the character of Gaandhaaree from the epic *The Mahabharata*. Gaandhaaree is glorified as 'the universally benevolent eternal mother', who could renounce her evil son Duryodhana by exercising the ethical principle of *tyaag* (sacrifice). Gaandhaaree could justifiably reconcile the opposing moral claims of maternal affect and social conscience. In the same vein, Dhananjay's mother should resolve the moral dilemma of the tension between her self-interest, her maternal love, and the law of the Indian nation-state. She has to invoke the ethic of *tyaag*, sacrifice her son, and reinstate the collective interest of the nation-state. If we recollect Tagore's poem from which the editorial borrowed its title, it seems here that Gaandhaaree's role is played by the editorial, which persuades Dhananjay's mother to renounce her son. In the poem, Gaandhaaree was appealing to her husband Dhritaraashtra to renounce their son⁶².

The editorial privileges the state's rule of law and the ethics of the nation-state, a European principle which is a legacy of colonial modernity. But more importantly, this privileging is made possible by invoking the ethic of *tyaag* (sacrifice) for the greater good, an indigenous principle, embedded in the vintage wisdom of *The Bhagavatgita*. The syncretic character of the editorial's discourse is clearly evident here. To this existing discursive syncretism, the editorial adds the socialist discourse on women's emancipation in order to reinforce its argument: 'Women are co-fighters not only in the struggle for women's emancipation but they also fight against all kinds of social oppression'. In this discourse, the ideology of motherhood and the ethic of *tyaag* complements the PBGMS's 'apparatus of socialism and womanhood' to justify the exercise of the Indian state's bio-power.

⁶² This discourse is reminiscent of the moral dialectics between blood ties and the law of the state in the Greek tragedy *Antigone* by Sophocles. Hegel's reading of this tragedy in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* leads him to proclaim that in the conflict between family law (the irrational particular), and state law (the rational universal), the universality and neutrality of the ethic should be upheld in the reconciliation (Hegel 1977).

The ethic of *tyaag*, or more concretely the principle of sacrifice of one's own blood for the greater good of society, animates the philosophical dialogic between Arjuna and Krishna in the battle field of Kurukshetra. It should be noted that the ethical principle of *tyaag* can be located in the discourse of a number of anti-colonial nationalists and freedom fighters in twentieth-century Bengal, such as Subhas Chandra Bose and Aurobindo Ghosh. In an insightful reading of Bose's autobiography, *An Indian Pilgrim*, Ranajit Guha observes that the figure of an ethical individual is at the core of Bose's nationalism. This individual's highest principled act is the making of *tyaag* or sacrifice. *Tyaag* is the ethic of overcoming the opposition which stands in the way of becoming. This ethic of *tyaag* works closely with the principles of *sevaa* (service) and *shraddhaa* (respect) in Bose's philosophy of nationalism. Thus, a movement of individuation ran parallel to the mass campaigns of the national era (Guha 2002: 17-20). The sacrifice of self-interest removes obstacles on the path of service to the nation in the struggle towards national independence.

The editorial encourages Dhananjoy's mother to exercise the ethical principle of *tyaag* by sacrificing her son in order to serve the Indian nation state and to uphold its constitutional and judicial sovereignty. This sacrifice will bring forth a 'universally benevolent society'. A *sustha* [normal] nation-state is made possible by eliminating an abnormal element, the social enemy. The editorial invokes the ethic of *tyaag*, and the moral figure of the 'universally benevolent eternal mother' Gaandhaaree, to inspire Dhananjoy's mother to renounce her son. Actually, this invocation attempts to influence the readers, members of West Bengal's civil society, to support a program of social eugenics. In the ultimate analysis, the mother's sacrifice serves the biopolitical project of the nation-state. The woman in post-colonial India, constitutionally an equal rights-bearing citizen, is pursued by the editorial to think and act as an eternally giving and

dutiful 'citizen-mother'. What the Indian nation state bestows with its right hand (rights), is taken away by its left hand (civil society's organizations) by privileging the socially responsible sacrifice of an 'eternal mother' over the citizen's rights.

The citizen-mother ultimately serves a system regulated through the biopower of the nation-state. The nation-state's political projects include such tactics as population control through family planning policy, the recruitment of young and able-bodied Indians to defend the national border and capital punishment to free the nation-state of its enemies. The *Eksathe* editorial constructs the citizen-mother as the symbolic sentinel of the Indian nation state, of its constitutional sovereignty and its biopolitical system. Her ethical sacrifice, her macro-motherhood, ensures India's safety and security.

It should be noted that the discourse of self-sacrificing national motherhood can be traced back to India's anti-colonial nationalism. This discourse was responsible for regulating as well as providing women with limited freedom within and exposure to the political sphere (Sarkar 2005). Since the early twentieth century, Indian nationalists often employed a discourse of gendered cultural nationalism by symbolizing India as 'Mother India'. This representation is often expressed through gendered language and metaphor, as in countless female personifications of the nation such as Marianna (France) and Germania (Germany). In colonial Bengal, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's song "Bande Maatarm" (Hail the Mother) became a nationalist mantra. The cult of "*Bharat Mata*" or Mother India was an invented tradition to serve the anti-colonial nationalist cause. The country was sanctified and feminized; India was glorified as the *Deshmata*: 'Our mother is now in the hands of the foreigner' (Sarkar 2001: 253).

In Bengal, the cardinal religious cult of the mother goddess facilitated the success of this imagine of India as the mother goddess, *Bharat Mata*. Tanika Sarkar argues that this male

cultural construction is the product of a process of deification. Moreover, the ideological feminization of the country has a colonial existential root in Bengal. Tanika Sarkar argues that the British Empire, symbolized by the lion, had often represented itself in virile, masculine terms.⁶³ The common British derision against the Bengali *bhadralok* and *baboo* was that, unlike the manly public-school educated British administrator, and unlike the masculine Indian martial races, especially the North Indian Jats and Punjabis, the Bengali *baboo* was an effeminate and weak creature. Therefore, Bengali nationalists embracing an oppositional ideology defiantly worshipped the female principle. On a more psychoanalytical level, Ashis Nandy argues that anti-colonial nationalist leaders such as Gandhi embodied a dissident androgyny to challenge the hegemony of colonial ‘hyper-masculinity’ as represented by Bankim, Vivekananda, Churchill, Macaulay, Kipling and the early Aurobindo Ghosh (Nandy 1983).

This feminization marks a point of departure in political consciousness (Sarkar 2001: 251). As noted earlier, in the cultural history of Bengal and other parts of India, there is a strong tradition of representing women as mothers, and particularly apotheosized mothers. This ascribed deification is employed to neutralize and sublimate the heterosexual male gaze and desire.⁶⁴ Later, the early twentieth century’s hardened nationalism in Bengal converted the victimized Hindu woman as constructed by colonial administration, Christian missionary and Hindu reformists, to a new symbol of superiority. This superior woman was essentially a chaste mother icon. As noted above, the Hindu nationalist and religious preacher Vivekananda said that in India a woman is the mother; in the West, her main function is as the wife (Ray 2005, xlvii).

⁶³ The metaphor of ‘the rape of Bengal’ to describe the East India Company and later the British Empire which orchestrated destruction of the native handloom industry, forced cultivation of the cash crop indigo for international trade interest, unjust land revenue system under the Permanent Settlement Act (1793), and man-made famines during colonial period, was commonly used by various commentators and writers (e.g. the works on colonial India’s economy by R. P. Datta and Dadabhai Naoroji). The masculine-feminine binary code is operational in this representation of colonization. Marx also used this metaphor in his articles written for the American newspaper *The New York Tribune*.

⁶⁴ See the discussion on the nineteenth-century Hindu oracle Ramakrishna in chapter four.

The discourse of mainstream Indian nationalism, particularly in its Gandhian version, produced the figure of the modern Indian woman as the unique signifier of Indianness and of Indian culture's absolute superiority and difference from the West. The employment of the cult of *Bharat Mata*, and the later feminization of anti-colonial activism through the Gandhian principle of *Sataygraha*, constrained women while providing them with limited freedom and selfhood (Sarkar 2005). Later, in the organized women's movement of the early twentieth century, we find that women's rights discourse was framed through the binary codes of self-interested and self-sacrificing Indian womanhood. This framing is also evident in the discourses of women authors and among the members of the Indian parliament on the Hindu Code Bill, particularly the reforms concerning the Hindu woman's rights to property and divorce (Som 2007 and Majumdar 2003).

This historical detour is illuminating for understanding how the PBGMS's discourse draws upon deeply entrenched cultural traditions of Bengal concerning womanhood and motherhood. Cultural and nationalist traditions which construct motherhood more as a personality (nurturing, self-sacrificing, accepting and giving) than as a biological entity often foreclose any self-critical exploration of actual conditions (Bhattacharji 1994; Sarkar 2001). However, in colonial Bengal there were exceptions such as Tagore, whose short stories and novels often proposed strong auto-critique of the *bhadralok* on the women's question. In post-colonial Bengal, writers such as Mahasweta Devi often challenge the popular icon of domesticated middle-class women by including militant and unchaste subaltern (lower-class, *aadivaasee*, and *dalit*) women characters in their literary works. The tradition of collapsing womanhood into motherhood served the nationalist purpose in colonial India. The PBGMS reiterates this tradition and a gendered ideology which reinforces Hindu patriarchy (Bhattacharji

1994). The reworking of this old cultural tradition in secular and socialist terms serves the biopolitical interest of the nation-state. The editorial brings the ‘apparatus of socialism and womanhood’ to work in tandem with the ideology of ‘macro-motherhood’ to execute the biopolitical project of social eugenics in the name of building a *sustha* nation state.

The editorial ends by addressing women as ‘mothers and sisters’, a common way of addressing women participants at CPI-M- and PBGMS-led political rallies in West Bengal. This way of addressing women in political rallies was customary during the Congress-led nationalist movements. But why would a socialist women’s organization address its women members not as comrades or as women but in kinship and familial terms? Does the fact that the PBGMS cannot imagine its women members outside these familial ties show that its ideologues have internalized a patriarchal ideology which collapses ‘non-familial’ womanhood into ‘familial and domesticated’ motherhood and sisterhood? As Tanika Sarkar points out, Durgaa is the most popular form in which the mother goddess is worshipped in Bengal. There is a strange mismatch between how she looks and what she does. Durgaa is supposedly a warrior goddess who has killed the terrible demon Mahishasura. Yet the icons portray a smiling, matronly, conventional beauty, a married woman, a mother of four children visiting her natal home—the archetypal mother-woman, fundamentally at odds with the dying demon at her feet and the weapons in her ten hands. In this juxtaposition of varied images, a trace of the victorious strength (*shakti*) is overpowered by the superimposed image of a domesticated and gentle femininity (Sarkar 2001, 256).

Class, morality, citizenship and rape

Before concluding, I want to look at a second incident that occurred on July 17, 1990. On that day, seven women living in shanties near the Birati railway station in North 24 Parganas (an

adjoining district close to Calcutta) were raped by a group of young men. Three women among them were repeatedly gang-raped. The incident was the outcome of a local inter-gang rivalry. The raped women had come from Bangladesh only a few months before along with their families. They had constructed small shanties near the railway station and stayed there. The women worked as maids at different middle-class houses in the locality (*The Statesman* July 19 and 20 1990). These raped women were poor refugees who did not have citizenship status in India, lived in squalor, and worked as ill-paid maid servants. Their destitute status made them more prone to take up under-paid exploitative jobs.

Three among these raped women had lodged a First Information Report (FIR) at the local police station. Following this incident, Shyamali Gupta, then the general secretary of the PBGMS and a leading ideologue of the organization, gave her official statement in the CPI-M's political periodical *People's Democracy*. This periodical is published every week from New Delhi:

A section of the Calcutta press and discredited Congress (I) [Indira] are again busy in capitalizing on an unfortunate event to direct their tirade against the left front. On the night of July 17 between one and three, a group of anti-socials attacked and raped Sabitri Das, Reba Sen and Shanti Sen, three women who stayed in *unauthorized hutments along the railway tracks* of Birati railway station. Although they, [like] so many women of that area—including Shanti Das, the *mistress* of a notorious anti-social—were involved in *foul professions* and such *honeymooning* of these women with the anti-socials is an open secret, that day's event appeared to be a sequel to the rivalry between these anti-socials with that of Pradip Sarkar, *of whom Sabitri Das was a mistress...* Smuggling of Bangladeshi goods and illicit liquor, gambling, anti-social activities involving *the refugees from Bangladesh* and camping along the railway tracks are a protracted phenomenon against which alarm has been repeatedly raised by the local left front parties. The DYFI [Democratic Youth Federation of India] and SFI [Student Federation of India] have repeatedly demolished liquor shops. But they have grown again... The

PBGMS organized a protest rally on July 20 in which the leaders led a women's procession and a deputation to the local police station. (Gupta, *People's Democracy* July 29, 1990; my emphasis)

Shyamali Gupta's description of the incident of gang rape and of the raped women reveals that she views rape as a problem of state law and order. She does not view rape to be rooted in asymmetrical relations of patriarchy and power. Anti-socials rape women which the state and its legal institutions should handle. Gupta's statement indirectly reiterates a sexist notion that a rape ceases to be a rape or sexual violence if it is perpetrated against certain categories of women who have low 'sexual morality': prostitutes. The words 'foul profession', an allusion to prostitution, suggests that these women are unclean and polluted. Gupta also underscores the 'immoral and illegitimate', socially unacceptable character of the relationships of these women with 'anti-socials' with the words 'honeymooning' and 'mistress'. The use of the word 'honeymooning' is particularly significant. It refers to a sex-based relationship with a man. In addition, in this particular case the sexual partners are not socially and legally sanctioned spouses. Both these facts seem to be disgraceful to Gupta. Gupta also foregrounds the raped women's status as illegal refugees and lower-class women ('unauthorized hutments'). In short, Gupta views the raped women as sexual and moral deviants, lower class, engaged in illegal professions such as smuggling and prostitution, and illegal migrants from Bangladesh. Reading against the grain, we can say that for Gupta women should bear proper citizenship, class, occupational, and moral qualifications in order to be recognized as legitimate victims of rape.

Now, if we pay attention to the dates, we will see that both the Birati gang-rape incident and Hetal Parekh's rape and murder took place in the year 1990. In one case, three lower-class non-citizens or illegal migrants were gang-raped. These women either worked as maid-servants

or as prostitutes. In the other case, an upper middle-class woman was raped and murdered. In the first case, the official PBGMS discourse does not evince much empathy, perhaps because the victims did not have proper legal, sexual, moral and economic status. By contrast, in Hetal's case, the editorial in the PBGMS's periodical *Eksathe* is highly sympathetic towards Hetal and her family. She is described in the editorial as having a 'soft body' which was torn into pieces by the inhuman Dhananjoy. The 'soft body' alludes to Hetal's age (she was an adolescent girl), perhaps her sexual status as a virgin, and to her (upper middle) class. It is worth noting that in patriarchal cultures, 'girlhood' is signified as the repository of the virginity, purity and honour of the father/patriarchal family. It seems Hetal's girlhood derives more patriarchy-drenched sympathy than the gang rape of non-virgin and unchaste adult women.

The juxtaposition of these two discourses on sexual violence from the PBGMS reveals an interesting pattern. The PBGMS discourse on rape, sexual violence, the female body, and sexuality are circumscribed by ideologies of class, citizenship, and sexual morality. Is the PBGMS's understanding of violence against women, a central issue in the Indian context, bounded by its political agenda to sustain the status quo and assume power? In addition, the leaders and ideologues of the PBGMS who produce these discourses are disproportionately *bhadramahilaas*, that is, university-educated, middle-class, upper-caste women, engaged in white-collar professions. It is no wonder that PBGMS discourse on issues such as rape, motherhood, and prostitution is delimited by a *bhadramahilaa* perspective, a specific middle-class bias.

This chapter has focused on how an *Eksathe* editorial combines the modernist discourses of biopolitics, medicine, social evolution, and the socialist nation-state with the discourses of *tyaag* (sacrifice) and of 'macro-motherhood' from traditional cultural resources in order to

reinforce an argument for *social eugenics through state selection*. In this way, the PBGMS periodical *Eksathe* attempts to influence its readers, predominantly women members of West Bengal's civil society, to internalize the logic of a progressive socialist nation-state and its concomitant biopolitics. Secondly, we have seen that the PBGMS discourse on sexual violence and the female body is narrowly constricted by ideologies of class, citizenship, and sexual morality. In this context, I pose two questions which I address in my conclusion: Does the PBGMS discourse go beyond the binary codes of self-interest versus self-sacrifice in understanding women's rights and women's subjectivity? Can the PBGMS, the CPI-M's mass organization, address questions regarding women's subjectivity and the asymmetry of gendered power relations when women are primarily viewed as another demographic category to be mobilized in order to keep the party in power and the nation-state secured?

In the light of this chapter's discussion, it should be noted that a democratic liberal state does provide space for women and other subaltern groups with relatively more freedom than in earlier times. But there is a constant dialectic and struggle for space between various oppressed and subaltern groups in India and the dominant groups and their hegemonic ideologies (such as patriarchy, casteism, capitalism, developmentalism and biopolitics). In this struggle for space, the Indian nation-state may not always play the role of an impartial adjudicator. Moreover, a political party and its mass organization may protect the interests of the nation-state and uphold other hegemonic ideologies, rather than protect the interests of the subaltern. These bodies from a country's civil society play significant roles in subaltern struggles for space. They may push forward as well as pull back the aspirations of various subaltern groups in order to safeguard their own power interests. The analysis of the PBGMS discourse surrounding the incidents of

sexual and state violence suggests what is at stake in this incessant struggle and contested role-playing.

Chapter Four

Three Interlocked Issues: Body, Sexuality and Cultural Degeneration

Our decision to wear the native [desi] saalwaar-kaameez is based on the fact that it is just another traditional Indian dress, like the saaree. Needless to point out, there is hardly anything radical or distastefully modern in our action (The Telegraph, letter to the editor, August 31 2007).⁶⁵

Most educated women, and it is not an exaggeration to claim about 99 percent, do not consider gowns as tasteful as saarees (Jyotirmoyee Gangopadhyay cited in Bannerji 2001: 94).

Scantly clad bathing beauties in soap and shampoo advertisements not only degrade women, they are also inimical to the sustha thinking of the entire nation (Tania Chakraborty, Eksathe December 1992: 31).

Having sex with a man or with a woman other than vaginally are punishable offences (Kautilya 1992: 485).

Sexual crime, rape, and homosexuality happen regularly in the U.S. army (Rekha Goswami, Eksathe October 1995: 112).

In the previous three chapters we have seen how in the PBGMS discourse the ‘apparatus of socialism and womanhood’ works in conjunction with the ideology of ‘macro-motherhood’ in the name of building a *sustha* socialist nation-state. In this chapter, the theme of *sustha* is again central to the analysis of ‘the everyday discourse’ of the PBGMS. Here, I focus on the organization’s discursive practice around particular aspects of *sustha* culture, a key concern in the PBGMS’s discourse on women’s liberation through socialism. I show how women’s bodies, sexuality and supposed cultural ‘degeneration (*apasanskriti*)’ are interlocked in this discourse, and how this undermines women’s subjectivity.

Since I focus on the PBGMS discourse around an incident drawn from women’s lived experience, I refer to the empirical content of this chapter as an instance of ‘everyday discourse’. My entry point will be the 1993 controversy and debate surrounding what many considered to be a female college student’s ‘immodest’ and ‘distasteful’ dress in Calcutta. To provide a genealogy

⁶⁵ The letter is written by a female school teacher.

of the discourse of ‘tasteful, modern, yet modest’ dress in Bengal, I take a short detour to the nineteenth century. Then, with reference to PBGMS discourse concerning the female teacher’s dress, I analyze how the female body and female attire are viewed. I also provide a comparative perspective by presenting the position of India’s political ‘right’ on the question of women’s dress in public. Finally, I turn to the PBGMS discourse on cultural degeneration, sex, and sexuality. Through this discourse, I explore how a ‘normal’ sexuality and ‘disciplined’ family life is deemed important for a *sustha* (normal) culture and a *sustha* nation state. I conclude this chapter with a poem from *Eksathe*. This poem succinctly summarizes the basic ideology of the PBGMS on how women’s bodies and sexuality should incorporate the ‘normal’ desire of procreative sex. The normal Indian women, possessing normal desire, will reproduce future citizens of the nation-state (*aaagaamee diner raashtrik*). Thus, a *sustha* nation-state is founded on bodies of normal women with normal desire and having modest taste (*ruchi*). These normal women endorse the patriarchal institutions and contribute to the biopolitical project of the state. As an organization of India’s civil society which safeguards the nation state’s interests, the PBGMS ensures that everything and everybody remains *sustha* (normal). My analyses of an incident concerning women’s dress and my examination of the official discourse of the PBGMS on women’s dress, sexuality and culture show how *sustha* as a political trope operates by setting traps to capture anything which is ‘*a-sustha*’ (abnormal) and ‘*apasanskriti*’ (cultural degeneration).

The dress code and the female body

Before August 3, 1993, it may have been inconceivable that a student wearing *saalwaar kaameez* to a college in Calcutta would open up a Pandora’s box containing the moral economy

of women's respectability and modesty. The controversy arose when a second year undergraduate female student incurred the wrath of Asutosh College principal Dr. Subhankar Chakraborty for wearing the *saalwaar kaameez*. This South Calcutta undergraduate College is affiliated with University of Calcutta. "The same afternoon, the principal summoned all Bengali female students of his college to his room and made some of them say that they preferred the *saaree* to any other dress. He also said that he would be firm in his stand and maintain that the *saaree* is the 'only acceptable and respectable form of dress' for Bengali female students" (*The Statesman*, August 4, 1993; my emphasis). Later, in an interview with journalists, Dr. Chakraborty said that "the college did not follow a rigid dress code but at the beginning of every session the authorities appealed to the [female] students to wear the *saaree* and *if necessary the saalwaar kaameez*. Following this, on August 5 many female students defiantly came to the college wearing *saalwaar kaameez*. This display of rebellion was received with much consternation by the Student Federation of India, the student's wing of CPI -M" (*The Telegraph*, August 6, 1993, my emphasis).

When the Vice Chancellor of Calcutta University came out with a statement defending the female student, Dr. Chakraborty had to beat a hasty retreat. "I have nothing against the *saalwaar kaameez*. It is not a *saalwaar kaameez* versus *saaree* issue. The issue is that of *whether one should dress decently or indecently in a co-educational college*" (*The Telegraph*, August 7, 1993; my emphasis). Members of teacher's council of the college claimed that their opinion was not considered before imposing the unwritten ban on the *saalwaar kaameez*. Later, the principal added that the report, which appeared in the CPI-M run daily newspaper *Ganashakti* [People's Power], can be considered as expressing his own views (*The Telegraph*, August 7, 1993). Here, it should be noted that the principal's allegiance to the party is well known. In fact, in the 1999

Lok sabhaa (Federal) election, he was the CPI-M candidate from Calcutta South constituency.

Dr. Chakraborty further said that he had received calls from principals of several *mofussil* [small town] colleges who had all voiced their support for him (*The Telegraph*, August 6, 1993). Here is the quote from the *Ganashakti* report, which the principal endorses as his own position:

The principal said that in the last ten years some discipline could be brought into the college. The credit goes to male and female students, teachers and non-teaching staff. *Since this college has co-education*, we keep an eye on various issues for which we have been praised by both students and their parents. For the last ten years we have appealed to students before the beginning of every academic year that they should dress in a decent/tasteful [*ruchisheel*] manner. We also say, *dress helps in forming taste* [*ruchi*], and *taste helps in bringing discipline* [*shrinkhalataa*]. ... While making such appeals we also tell female students to try to wear *saaree* when attending the college. If necessary, you can wear *saalwaar kaameez dupattaa*. But see that in no way your dress is *unpleasant* to look at [*drishtikatu*]. Our appeal has borne fruit. From the beginning, Shalini Mukherjee's [the student at the centre of controversy] dress evoked anger/excitement [*ushmaa*] among many... By distorting our appeal that one should not transgress the boundary of decency [*shaalinataa*] when attending college, the discipline and reputation of the college is being tarnished. (*Ganashakti*, August 4, 1993; my emphasis)

First, I will make some clarifications about the dress *saalwaar kaameez*, which has incited so many arguments and counter-arguments in the public sphere of West Bengal. This dress is often associated with North India (e.g. the Punjabi suit). Today, *saalwaar kaameez* is worn both in formal and casual occasions and enjoys enormous popularity among women in urban India. Class is not a major factor among women choosing this dress, since one can find young domestic maids in Indian cities wearing *saalwaar kaameez* when they go to work in middle-class households. In North Indian states such as Punjab, Haryana and Himachal Pradesh, this dress is also popular among rural women. The dress consists of two parts: the *saalwaar* is a

loose pajama like trousers and the *kaameez* is a long shirt or tunic. Often but not always, a *dupattaa*, which is like a long scarf, is worn around the neck with the *saalwaar kaameez*. Sometimes married women, especially in North India, cover their heads with the *dupattaa*. Others wear the *dupattaa* mostly around the neck as a scarf, or over the shoulders. The different ways in which the *dupattaa* is worn indicate its primary purpose to act as an extra covering over the area of the breasts.

Some critical words and phrases in the principal's statements indicate distinct Bengali cultural codes regarding women's dress. As the report notes, Dr. Chakraborty 'also said that he would be firm in his stand and maintain that the *saaree* is the 'only acceptable and respectable form of dress for Bengali female students.' Dr. Chakraborty goes on to insist that 'it is not a *saalwaar kaameez* versus *saaree* issue. The issue is at of whether one should dress decently or indecently in a co-educational college'. This second point raises a question concerning what it means for a female student to dress decently in a co-education college. The subtext is that female students should be extra careful about their dress in a co-educational setting where there is no formal sex-based segregation. But why is this the case? Does it mean that male students would get sexually excited if a female student were to wear an 'indecent' dress? The principal indicates as much in his statement: 'Shalini Mukherjee's dress invoked anger/excitement [*ushmaa*] among many'. The Bengali word *ushmaa* can mean both anger and excitement. Implicit in this statement is that an indecent manner of dress may result in some male students being unable to restrain their sexual urges and would react inappropriately to these visual cues. But more profound questions must also be posed: what constitutes an indecent dress? How is it defined? Who defines it and for whom?

Before attempting to answer these questions, let me undertake a closer scrutiny of the statements made by the principal. This approach will help us to understand the ideological premise upon which he builds his arguments:

- (1) The *saaree* is the ‘only acceptable and respectable form of dress’ for Bengali female students.
- (2) The college did not follow a rigid dress code, but at the beginning of every session the authorities appealed to the [female] students to wear the *saaree* and ‘if necessary’ the *saalwaar kaameez*.
- (3) The principal has nothing against the *saalwaar kaameez*. “It is not a *saalwaar kaameez* versus *saaree* issue”. The issue is whether one should dress decently or indecently in a co-educational college.
- (4) Female students should try to wear the *saaree* when attending the college. But if necessary, they can wear *saalwaar kaameez dupattaa*. But in no way should the dress be unpleasant to look at [*drishtikatu*].
- (5) Finally, dress helps in forming personal taste [*ruchi*] and taste helps in ensuing social discipline [*shrinkhalataa*].

The first four statements indicate that the non-observance of an ethno-normative dress code—that Bengali female students should wear *saarees*—is deemed indecent and distasteful. More importantly, since the college is co-educational, an ‘indecently’ dressed female student might (sexually) excite male students. The onus seems to lie squarely on female students to follow the dress code, and thus to prevent the occurrence of any untoward incident in the college. The word *shaalinataa* is the first key to understand the normative mode in which the argument is

constructed. *Shaalinataa* can mean decency or modesty. It is derived from the adjective *shaalin*, which means ‘observant of the rules of decorum’ (Samsad Bengali-English Dictionary, 2000). The Bengali word includes the sense of the English word ‘decorum’, which can mean both ‘correctness’ and ‘good manners’. Thus, by saying ‘our appeal is that one should not transgress the boundary of decency (*shaalinataa*) when attending college’, the principal is implicitly arguing that the cultural and institutional norm of wearing the *saaree*, and hence appearing decent and modest, *should be* observed by female students.

Two words in the fifth sentence of the principal’s statement, taste [*ruchi*] and discipline [*shrinkhalataa*], provide the second and third keys for unlocking the ideological code of ‘Bengali women’s dress’. Taste [*ruchi*] here refers specifically to a style of dress, and in the fifth sentence, a tasteful [*ruchisheel*] dress is explicitly linked to the need to bring discipline [*shrinkhalataa*]. Since the word *ruchisheel*, which I have translated as tasteful, also includes the sense of decent or elegant (Samsad Bengali-English Dictionary, 2000), a tasteful dress is one that is decent and elegant. Now, elegance and decency are relative to culture, class, and gender. In the Indian context, caste is also a factor here. Since the accepted norms of decency and elegance are most often decided by people who are relatively powerful, it is often the upper and middle class who set the dress norm. It is often male and female members of the middle class who judge what constitutes decent dress for a woman. The fifth sentence thus reflects the ideologies of class and gender, or in the context of West Bengal, a specifically *bhadralok* mentality of the speaker is reflected here. In the next section, I will explain this *bhadralok* mentality and trace its genealogy to colonial Bengal.

But how does the wearer of a tasteful and decent dress embody discipline? And how does the bodily discipline of the female subject play a role in forging institutional discipline? The

decent and tasteful manners of dress contribute to the constitution of a docile and obedient body. This docile body conforms to cultural norms and contributes toward maintaining discipline at the institutional level. A ‘decent’ dress secures discipline through the docile body of the female subject who wears that dress.

The principal advises Bengali female students to wear the *saaree* and ‘if required’ the *saalwaar*. Thus, the *saaree* is more acceptable than the *saalwaar kaameez*, scoring higher than the *saalwaar kaameez* when measured by the Bengali yardstick of decency and tastefulness. In homogenizing ‘taste’ through the Bengali cultural code of women’s dress, the principal views the *saaree* as an unambiguously decent dress. On the other hand, the *saalwaar kaameez* seems to occupy the ambiguous zone between decency and indecency. The plausible reason seems to be that by virtue of being an ‘authentic’ Bengali dress, the *saaree* is unambiguous, while the *saalwaar kaameez* (a non-Bengali dress) does not enjoy such a clear status. The phrase, ‘if necessary, you can wear *saalwaar kaameez dupattaa*’ suggests that wearing *saalwaar kaameez dupattaa* may be a necessary but not a sufficient condition for looking decent and modest.

It is significant that the principal uses the words ‘*saalwaar kaameez dupattaa*’ and not just ‘*saalwaar kaameez*’ in his statement. The *dupattaa* is a long scarf primarily which acts as an extra covering over the region of the chest where the breasts are situated. By mentioning *dupattaa* in the context of *ushmaa* (implicitly meaning excitement), he expresses an anxiety regarding the need to (extra-)cover a sexualized female body part. Recall that the female student who incurred the wrath of the college principal for wearing the *saalwaar kaameez* was not wearing a *dupattaa* (*The Statesman*, August 4, 1993). For this reason her dress was deemed immodest, and distasteful. In playing the role of the moral police, the principal has the authority to declare that a sexual (female) body part, such as breasts, should be covered with as much

clothing as possible. Even the visible contours of this body part should be minimized by a *dupattaa* worn over a body clad with a *saalwaar kaameez*. Otherwise, this under-covered sexual body part may incite inappropriate thoughts and actions. The principal fears that such a situation will undermine the institutional discipline of the college; that is, its role as an ideological state apparatus churning out docile and disciplined students, the future citizens of the Indian nation-state. Let me conclude this section by foregrounding the analytical questions raised by the phrase ‘dress helps in forming taste and taste helps in bringing discipline’. How is the Bengali cultural code of ‘tasteful’ dress ideologically connected with a code of gendered decency? If we insert the word ‘woman’ in the above phrase, the lens of gender provides an analytical focus for the question. After all, the whole controversy concerns a female student’s dress. What cultural and structural patterns are privileged and normalized by the taste, modesty and discipline conveyed through dress? Here, a flashback is useful in untangling this knot.

A 19th century flashback

In his *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of Prison*, Foucault observes that, as effects of historically situated discursive practices, standards of decency, bodily display, and normative sexual behaviour are neither universal nor timeless (Foucault 1979). His historical work on the institutions of the prison and the clinic in Western Europe show how bodies are regulated by networks of power. In the name of reason or normality, certain institutions are able to exercise power on and through groups of individuals by regulating established ways of being, acting or speaking (Foucault 1991: 17). Keeping Foucault’s formulation in mind, let us recollect a particular history concerning women’s dress in colonial Bengal.

As I noted in chapter one, in the second half of the nineteenth century, the Bengali *bhadraloks* initiated efforts to reform the role and status of their women, and consequently a new category of women, *bhadramahilaa*, emerged. In the words of nineteenth-century *bhadralok* Koylaschunder Bose, “she must be refined, reorganized, recast, regenerated” (Sangari and Vaid 1993: 1). One concern in these productions of *bhadramahilaa* was the reform of women’s traditional dress. This traditional dress was a single-piece *saaree*, without a blouse or petticoat. With the easing of *abarodh prathaa* (sex-based seclusion), both *bhadraloks* and *bhadramahilaas* felt the need to reform this traditional dress. In 1864, an editorial in the women’s magazine *Bamabodhini Patrika* stated, “As long as the minds of men and women do not become *pure*, it will not be advisable to let them [women] out in this dangerous society... To bring women out in the open, the first requirement is to make them change their uncouth dress and [to] steady their fragile minds by religious advice...” (Banerjee 1993: 169; my emphasis).

The sartorial reform was part of the project of recasting the new woman, *nabinaa*, in colonial Bengal. Note that an explicit anxiety in the tone of the editorial is suggested in its protectionist rhetoric and prescriptions: they must ‘change their uncouth dress’, ‘steady their fragile minds by religious advice’, and ‘as long as the minds of men and women do not become pure, it will not be advisable to let them [women] out in this dangerous society’. The public sphere is assumed to be dangerous, and unless the *bhadramahilaa*’s body is properly clothed, and her fragile mind is sanitized with religious preaching, she should not venture out of the inner quarter (*antahpur*). Since this advice comes from the *bhadralok/bhadramahilaa* social group, predominantly composed of upper castes, the religious preaching they advocate would be drawn from the Brahmanical tradition. It should be noted that Brahmanical scriptures and texts promote a particular kind of patriarchy, a Brahmanical patriarchy, which is characterized by a basic

contempt towards women and lower castes, and in which upper-caste women are treated as gateways to the caste system (Chakravarti 2003: 34-35). For example, a late medieval text from the southern state of Kerala states, “As for the wives of the *braahmans* and other *dvijas* [twice-born castes], let the rule of chastity stand in regard to them; with other [women] residents let there be no rule of chastity” (Chakravarty 2003: 85). A stringent chastity norm for upper-caste women already existed in the Brahmanical tradition, since these women and their bodies were gateways to the hierarchized caste system.

Under the British influence in colonial Bengal, coats and trousers were introduced to native men and petticoats, bodices, and jackets to native women. Initially, foreign attire was limited to the elite echelon of society. In 1901, Hemantakumari Chaudhuri, a *bhadramahilaa*, published the essay ‘*Mahilaar Paricchad*’ [Women’s Dress] in the women’s magazine *Antahpur* [Inner Quarter]. She wrote, “Clothes are what we wear to cover the body and to preserve modesty... The Almighty has made women *forever* lovers of beauty and *modest* by nature... [A]t present many have begun to understand that the custom of wearing only a single thin *saaree* is in bad taste, and it is a cause of happiness that this *evil* habit is gradually disappearing... It is impossible to move about freely in front of everyone on all occasions wearing a single piece of cloth to preserve one’s modesty” (Chaudhuri 2003: 88 – 91; my emphasis). Chaudhuri goes on to argue that there is a need for a common dress for Bengali women that would be neat, healthy, and modest. She points out, “Many [Bengali women] abandon the *saaree* to wear the gown for the sake of convenience in moving about out of doors. At present, women in England are agitating over the issue of whether their traditional dress [gown] is injurious to their health... This is caused by the tight lacing of the corsets... to keep their waists slim and their back straight... It is regrettable that while we have benefited by learning the use of jackets, chemises and other

such garments from the English ladies, we are on the other hand harming ourselves, and our health is declining by adopting their unhealthy or unsightly apparel [gowns] because we are enamored by these opulent, yet unsuitable clothes” (Chaudhuri 2003: 91- 92). Chaudhuri concludes that the Parsee way of wearing the *saaree* might be considered as common dress for Bengali women. But before that practice is adopted one must consider whether the Parsee way of wearing the *saaree* is free from the faults of opulence and *foreignness*, and whether it can be worn by women of all classes (Chaudhuri 2003: 92).⁶⁶

Let me highlight the qualities emphasized by Chaudhuri’s comments on Bengali female dress. The dress should be modest, indigenous (non-foreign), non-opulent, neat, healthy, and endowed with propriety (Chaudhuri 2003: 92-93). Concern for modesty, propriety, affordability, and health are enmeshed with a sense of cultural identity and nationalism, the nativeness of the dress. Since all these qualities are to be expressed through a woman’s reformed dress, the Bengali woman’s body and the covering on that body, her dress, become sites for the construction of Bengali cultural identity and nationality. The properly dressed woman, a woman clad in a *saaree*, becomes the symbol of Bengali cultural authenticity. Covered in this reformed style of dress, the woman’s body attains a new sign-value which embodies the Bengali cultural identity and nationalism. Through this process of objectification, a woman’s body attired in a culturally and nationally authentic dress is turned into a sign, a meaningful object, and her subjectivity is now closely bound up with that sign-object. Female (self-determining) subjectivity and agency at least with respect to comfort with her dress and her own decision to adorn herself in a specific way are thereby marginalized.

⁶⁶ In the late nineteenth century, the Parsee way of wearing the *saaree* over a petticoat and with a long-sleeved blouse was adapted by Jnanadanandini Devi, a woman from the elite and well known Tagore family in Calcutta. After coming in contact with Parsee women in Bombay, Devi popularized the Parsee way among Bengali women. Today this style of wearing saaree has gained widespread acceptance all over India as the dress for the modern Indian women (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003: 93).

Himani Bannerji points out that nineteenth-century essays and tracts on women's attire primarily emphasized appropriate feminine behavior and decorum. In these writings, words such as *sabhyataa* [civility], *shobhanataa* [propriety/decency], and *lajjaa* [shame/modesty] occur many times. The notions of shame and modesty [*lajjaa*] are linked with refinement (Bannerji 2001, 78-79). The *Brhamo Samaaj* initiatives on women's emancipation, combined with Victorian codes of femininity accessed through English education, played a role in these nineteenth-century reforms. The sartorial reform was part of the civilizing and sanitizing process that contributed to the production of the *bhadramahilaa*. The newly recast woman (*nabinaa*), the *bhadramahilaa*, had to carry the double onus of Hindu tradition (*streedharma*, or an upper-caste woman's duty) and colonial modernity (the ideal of genteel womanhood) (Bandyopadhyay 1994, 36-39). The reformed dress distinguished the *bhadramahilaa*, and this distinction was bound within a class-caste-gender-based moral economy of Bengali Hindu society coming to terms with colonial modernity.

The *bhadramahilaa* emerged from the *antahpur* (inner quarter) in her new attire, a move that facilitated her limited access to the public world. At the same time, the *bhadralok* and *bhadramahilaa* discourses attempted to ensure that this new dress did not become too foreign, immodest, provocative, and threatening to Hindu patriarchal values. Thus, through the new dress, new forms of bodily discipline were internalized by the *bhadramahilaa*. This discipline symbolized her class, caste, educational, regional, and cultural distinctions. The *bhadramahilaa's* new dress classified and distinguished her from her non-*bhadramahilaa* sisters, including *praachinaa* [traditional] and *chotolok* [lower class and caste]) women. The late nineteenth-century production of *bhadramahilaa* was constituted by the *bhadramahilaa's* modern yet modest dress, her literacy, her limited access to the public sphere, as well as her

sanitized language and demeanor. This *bhadramahilaa* model was primarily produced at the elite and liberal echelons of the Bengali Hindu community. The liberal elements in this model were preemptively disciplined to ensure that they would not be transformed into forms of radicalism that would threaten the Hindu patriarchy. The reformed dress code was a part and parcel of this preemptive measure. The nineteenth-century discourse on women's dress in colonial India supports the claim that there was an attempt to make women into docile subjects of the emerging nation-state.

It is important to note that the college principal, Dr. Chakraborty, is an archetypal *bhadralok*. His education (a doctoral degree in Bengali literature), occupation (principal of post-secondary educational institution), upper middle-class and upper-caste background bear testimony to this fact. His reaction to a female student's 'indecent' dress—the 'non-Bengali' *saalwaar kaameez*, a foreign attire from a Bengali provincial perspective—should be viewed in the light of this historical *bhadralok/bhadramahilaa* project of producing 'properly' attired Bengali women bearing cultural authenticity. As Soudamini Khastagiri wrote in 1872 in the women's magazine *Bamabodhini Patrika*, "Even when the attires of the English, or Northern or Western Indians or the Muslims or the Chinese may be beautiful, *Bengali women should not wear them*. The duty consists of wearing clothing which shows one's national culture, covers one's body fully and which indicates instantly one is a woman of Bengal" (Bannerji 2001, 94-95; my emphasis). Let us again recount Dr. Chakraborty's standpoint that the *saaree* is the 'only acceptable and respectable form of dress' for *Bengali female students* (*The Statesman*, August 4, 1993; my emphasis). In the discursive practices of Khastagiri and Chakraborty, the Bengali woman's *saaree*-clad body attains the sign value of gendered cultural authenticity. Now, if we revisit the questions I raised in the context of the principal's statements, a pattern emerges which

has a distinct genealogy. A *bhadramahilaa*'s dress is the hallmark of her cultural refinement and her social origin. This dress is tasteful and modest, and distinguishes her position in the class- and caste-based patriarchal order. Her freedom of movement is bound by new codes of decency and tasteful dress. Her participation in the public sphere (for example, in higher education at an undergraduate college) becomes more acceptable when she carefully observes the sartorial code.

Thus, the principal's remark—'dress helps in forming taste and taste helps in bringing discipline'—can be genealogically traced back to the *bhadralok/bhadramahilaa* discourse on *streeswadhinataa* (women's freedom). Here, freedom was granted but within a distinct disciplinary boundary. Women's education followed a utilitarian logic of producing companion wives and good mothers (Chakraborty 1995; Bandyopadhyay 1994). After all, the women's reform movement in Bengal and elsewhere (e.g. Maharashtra) was initiated by native men. The colonial discourse of civilized white men saving vulnerable brown women from uncivilized brown men further complicated this picture. For instance, studies on subaltern groups, such as *dalits* in colonial India, show how an alien colonial state less invested in normative social prescriptions than native elites may pursue a politics of divide-and-rule with various Indian social forces (Sarkar 2005, 560). In colonial India, the brown woman was the site on which colonial, missionary, Hindu reformist (*Braahma* and *Arya Samaaj*), and orthodox Brahmanical discourses struggled with one another (Spivak 1988; Mani 1998). The emancipatory project of 'recasting our women' erected new boundaries, and the Hindu patriarchy was reconstituted and reformulated (Sangari and Vaid 1993, 1-26; Banerjee 1993; Bandyopadhyay 1994). The boundaries undermined the expression of women's subjectivity. Later, nationalist mass movements advanced measures to ensure that the basic gendered social order of Hindu patriarchy remain unchallenged (Som 2007: 243-244).

In post-colonial India, this strategy was again echoed in legislative debate on the Hindu Code Bill. The radical reforms regarding Hindu marriage, divorce, and Hindu women's property rights were vociferously opposed by right-wing *Hindu Mahasabha* members and Congress old guards. Ultimately, only a diluted version of a truncated Hindu Code could be passed in the Indian parliament (Som, 2007). However, one cannot deny the limited gains accessed by Indian women as a result of the nineteenth-century social reform movements promoted by colonial modernity, by the politicization of women in the twentieth-century and their participation in the nationalist mass movement, and by the post-colonial Indian state's liberal legislation regarding women's rights.

The principal upholds a *bhadramahilaa* dress code characterized by moral and cultural strictures which reflect the values of class, caste, institutional and gender privilege. In arguing that '[b]y distorting our appeal that one should not transgress the boundary of decency/modesty [*shaalinataa*] when attending college, the discipline and reputation of the college is being tarnished', he places the onus of maintaining the reputation of the academic institute disproportionately on women who are expected to dress decently and maintain the gendered morality and culture of the institution. In the context of post-colonial India, the college and the principal are part of a particular ideological state apparatus (ISA), the educational institution⁶⁷. The controversy over Shalini's dress reflects the tension-ridden process of interpellating women to act as gendered subjects in the public sphere of a college. By acting as an ISA, the educational institution contributes toward the maintenance of a disciplined society and state. This ordered and predictably functioning state is made possible, among other ways, by disciplined female subjects who dress 'decently' and who thereby embody historically rooted moral and cultural

⁶⁷ Here, I borrow Althusser's formulation on the Ideological State Apparatus and the Repressive State Apparatus (Althusser 1971).

norms. The power (in the sense of domination) of the ISA mediated by the *bhadralok* dress code operates at the level of the female body to discipline and optimize its (cultural) symbolic capability, making it docile and useful for the smooth operation of the instruments of the state as an institution of disciplinary power⁶⁸: ‘dress helps in forming taste and taste helps in bringing discipline’.

Let us note that the sartorial stricture is overtly gendered. It expresses patriarchal anxiety over a woman’s body and her freedom concerning how to clothe herself. The dress discourse from Bengal reiterates that ‘properly’ clothed women’s bodies should bear the motif of a national/regional culture and sexual morality. Male bodies and their clothing are conspicuously absent in this discursive practice. Their bodies seem to be de-sexualized, except implicitly when in the presence of ‘provocatively dressed women’, non-signified, and therefore not made responsible to carry the emblem of culture and sexual morality. When the telescope of the ‘sociological imagination’ is turned to an apparently distant corner of a South Calcutta college, a ‘decently’ dressed woman can be seen to reflect the disciplined morality needed for the realization of an ordered and smoothly-running Indian state. The agenda of a *sustha* (normal and untroubled) society and a *sustha* nation-state is grafted on to her body through the cultural prosthesis of ‘decent’ dress.

History repeats itself

Just over a decade after the Asutosh college controversy, an essay on women’s dress appeared in the August 2004 issue of *Eksathe*. Prompted by an incident reported in the Bengali

⁶⁸ Foucault maintains that disciplinary power is present at every level of the social body and utilized by diverse institutions such as the family, the school, the army and individual medicine (Foucault 1990: 141). Here, Foucault’s ideas on disciplinary power exercised by institutions expand upon Althusser’s theory of the ISA and the RSA.

newspaper *Ananda Bazar Patrika* (ABP) on July 22, 2004, Banani Biswas wrote this essay, titled “Poshaak Bhaavanaa” (Thoughts about Dress). Biswas writes regularly for *Eksathe*. She is also a member of its editorial board. The ABP report stated that a female school teacher in West Bengal was directed by school authorities to wear the *saaree* and not the *saalwaar kaameez* at work. The teacher refused to reveal her identity. She alleged that the school authorities would not allow her to sign the attendance register and did not pay her salary for two months. These punitive measures were due to her sartorial choice. The teacher’s point was that she found it more convenient to wear the *saalwaar kaameez* to work since to reach the school she has to travel a long distance by public transport. When the case went to the West Bengal Women’s Commission, its verdict upheld the teacher’s decision to wear the *saalwaar kaameez* to work. However, the newspaper report pointed out that in 90% government aided (public) schools in West Bengal, wearing the *saalwaar kaameez* to work is perceived as an offence (ABP, July 22, 2004). More recently, similar incidents where female school teachers were harassed by school authorities and parent’s associations for wearing the *saalwaar kaameez* to work were reported in and around Calcutta (ABP, July 28, 2007; *The Telegraph*, August 31, 2007). The pertinence of Biswas’s thoughts on female school teacher’s attire needs no more emphasis. First, I will quote at length from Biswas’s essay:

Dress makes a person beautiful. It is necessary [*prayojaniya*] to learn the skill/artistry [*kaushala*] of making use of dress. If this skill/artistry is misused, even beautiful dress can make men and women look ungraceful [*asundar*]. Personality is expressed through dress... During the Bengal Renaissance, women from the Tagore family started the trend of wearing a blouse and petticoat with the *saaree*. It became popular because that dress [*saaree-blouse-petticoat*] was decent/graceful [*shobhon*] and contemporary women felt comfortable [*Swaacchandya*] in it... The dress has to suit the surroundings [*paribesh*]... There is no controversy between the *saaree* and the *saalwaar*

kaameez. The controversy is created when one ignores the *surroundings*. One has to maintain modesty in one's dress. Women do not look beautiful by exposing their bodies. One should not dress in such a way that creates *discomfort among those around her*. If an adult woman wears an immodest dress it is seen to be odd by those around her. In the name of modernity, will our society cast off the screen of modesty [*shaalinataa*] and comfortably accept the fact that male and female students can wear T-shirts sporting messages such as 'I love you', 'I am for you' and Bermuda shorts to colleges and universities? Is this decent? In the name of freedom, can an adult wear any kind of dress to colleges and universities? Should one not think of dressing modestly as a student? In non-educational institutions, people may not remark on the ground that it's a personal issue, even if one's dress looks odd...

Recently from a report in *Ananda Bazar Patrika* (22nd July), I came to know that a female teacher has appealed to the school authority to come to work in *saalwaar kaameez*. But we have to think that *a very strong [ugra] display of freedom of choice is making them [the wearers of the dress] self-centered*. The significance of the surroundings is disregarded. *This is dangerous...* The schools are generally understood as centers of moulding [*gara*] human beings... In this context there is a need to regulate the dress of male and female teachers [*shikshak o shikshikaa*]... The teaching community is responsible for creating social values. In the name of comfort, wearing immodest clothes destroys social values... A male and female teacher's dress and behavior should engender *respect* in a student's mind... Besides, the school environment should be kept pleasant [*manoram*]. *It is not right to defile that [environment] by raising an undesirable issue [abaanchhita bishay]...* The teaching community from this state [West Bengal] will lose its reputation.

We cannot ignore *the social demand on modesty by arguing for convenience*. Society demands that our dress should be consistent with the surroundings. This demand is denied by conspirators who debase social values [*Samaajik mulyabodh*]... The RSS with a feudal perspective tried to impose a dress code for women. We from the PBGMS protested. The idea of a female dress code is retrogressive and feudal. The choice of a dress is personal but it can never be *immodest and odd*... One has to *restrain* one's choice of dress. We should not forget about the surroundings. We must always remember that

society has accepted changes in women's dress as these changes accompanied women's emancipation. So far, women have balanced modesty and comfort when they dress. *In the future, the same will happen.* (Biswas 2004, 65-66; my emphasis)

At most places in this essay Biswas neutralizes the gender of the teacher by using the words *sikshak o shikshikaa* (male and female teachers). However, the essay is primarily concerned with the appropriate dress for female school teachers. Ironically, the linguistic gender neutralization employed by Biswas is symptomatic of the gendered subtext of the essay which she attempts to hedge. The essay has a distinctive tone of instruction ('one has to *restrain* one's choice of dress') and certitude ('in future the same will happen'). It instructs female teachers to dress modestly, and in a way that is consistent with the surroundings (*paribesh*), the school environment. Here, the consistency of modest dress implies following the established convention of a female teacher's dress; otherwise, the discipline and orderliness of the institution will be endangered. A tone of anxiety in this short essay is evident in Biswas's argument that schoolteachers mould future generations and inculcate existing social values in children. Thus, teachers should dress in a way that represents those values. The dress controversy exemplifies the social values that a person should follow with respect to social norms and institutional conventions. By dressing in the conventional manner, the teachers, particularly female teachers, should reflect that social value. The role of teachers in the ISA of the educational institution is underscored here. Biswas says that 'there is a need to regulate the dress of male and female teachers', but in the rest of the essay she only discusses the female teacher's dress. Although she is writing in a women's magazine, Biswas does not ponder why the female teacher's dress forms the core of this controversy. As in the Asutosh College case, in Biswas's discourse women's attire attains the sign-values of modesty, institutional discipline and reputation. In a way, these

ideological equivalences bring female modesty and chastity in alignment with family honour and prestige.

In this essay, the most interesting argument put forward is that ‘we cannot ignore the social demand on modesty by arguing for convenience’. Biswas’s unreflexive support for the social convention of wearing the *saaree* is implicit here. She prioritizes the social norm and undermines the subjectivity of the female teacher who finds it more convenient to wear the *saalwaar kaameez* at work. As discussed earlier, the cultural and social norm upholding women’s modesty through the *saaree* is rooted in a gendered notion of cultural identity and social morality. Biswas’s discourse turns women teachers into objects upon which society, through the ISA of the school and ultimately the state, acts. Biswas does not pay attention to the female teacher’s subjective understanding and action (‘she finds it more convenient to wear *saalwaar kaameez* to work since to reach the school she has to travel a long distance by public transport’). The teacher’s subjectivity is denied: ‘It is not right to defile that [environment] by raising an undesirable issue [*obanchhito bishoi*]’.

Moreover, the essay never raises the question of why women teachers in particular should bear the onus of appearing modest and meeting social demands. These culturally rooted gender issues are not allowed to surface in the discourse, since Biswas is evidently more concerned about preserving the social order, institutional discipline, and cultural convention. Her essay encourages its female readers to act as gendered subjects and to submerge their subjectivities under these social demands. The central agenda for Biswas is the maintenance of the status quo. She writes, ‘society has accepted changes in women’s dress as these changes accompanied women’s emancipation. So far, women have balanced modesty and comfort when they dress. In future, the same will happen’. Biswas remains silent about why the *saalwaar kaameez* is less

modest than the *saaree*. It is evident that Biswas is anxious about changes initiated by subjects whose subjective understandings contravene convention. She seems to believe in gradual change that comes through social evolution while maintaining social acceptability. Biswas is convinced that gradual change in women's dress is inevitable. In this discourse, individual subjects are reduced to objects upon which social forces act in a predictable manner and gradual changes are introduced which do not radically subvert established conventions. As knowing subjects who can initiate change, women are curiously missing in this discourse. Consequently, Biswas fails to pay attention to the female teacher's standpoint on dressing conveniently.

Biswas is an ideologue of the PBGMS and she is writing this essay in the PBGMS's official periodical, *Eksathe*. As a mass organization of the CPI-M, a political party which is in power in West Bengal, the PBGMS is part of West Bengal's state-controlled civil society. Biswas's essay shows that allegiance to the party and the state works toward the maintenance of social order in general, and the hegemony of gendered conventions in particular. Even though a women's organization, the PBGMS in the last instance becomes disciplinary and repressive for women through its discourse, in so far as the state's interest in keeping the ISA functioning smoothly is prioritized over the interest of female subjects. Thus, Biswas discounts the action of women as knowing subjects, vilifying their choice of dress as an example of the dangerous display of strong (*ugra*) self interest. By this account the PBGMS carries forward the agenda of a *sustha* (normal and untroubled) society and nation-state. Cultural conventions are preferred since they keep everything pleasant (*manoram*), predictable and disciplined. A system that follows an order and remains predictable is undoubtedly easier to control. For the sake of that ordered system, the PBGMS can turn a blind eye to gendered ideologies of dress, culture and morality.

Once more, a social demand is grafted on a woman's body through the ideology of 'decent' dress. Indeed, history repeats itself.

The right of the left

Towards the end of the essay, Biswas tries to distinguish her 'leftist' political position by noting that 'the RSS with a feudal perspective tried to impose a dress code for women. We from the PBGMS protested. The idea of a female dress code is retrogressive and feudal. The choice of a dress is personal but it can never be *immodest and odd*... One has to *restrain* one's choice of dress. We should not forget about the surroundings' (Biswas 2004: 66; my emphasis). Here, Biswas is differentiating the 'leftist' PBGMS standpoint on 'dressing modestly' from the 'rightist' *Rashtriya Sawamsevak Sangh* (RSS) insistence on a dress code for Indian (specifically Hindu) women. The RSS is a right-wing Hindu nationalist organization which espouses the ideology of *Hindutva*. In a broad way, this ideology believes in the inherent superiority of Brahmanical Hinduism. The ideology supports the project of building a 'Hindu India' and often designates Indian Muslims and Christians as foreigners. The RSS provides the ideological support to the Hindu nationalist political party, the *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP).

To examine the claim made by Biswas on the difference between PBGMS's view and that of the RSS, let us examine an interview. In 1998, Abhilasha Kumari and Sabina Kidwai interviewed Sushma Swaraj, who was then the Information and Broadcasting minister and a BJP spokesperson. The interview primarily focuses on various issues pertaining to women, culture, media and politics in India (Kumari and Kidwai 1998: 103-110). Swaraj started her political career as a member of the RSS, and became active in student politics through the *Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad* (ABVP), the student's wing of the BJP. Swaraj remarks that in

ABVP, “we followed the inculcation of the RSS ideology of patriotism and nationalism” (Kumari and Kidwai 1998: 104).

In the course of this interview, Swaraj points out that women’s empowerment must take place in keeping with Indian tradition. In her electoral campaigns, Indian tradition and culture provided a major plank for an emphasis on ‘Indian’ family, traditions and morality. For instance, Swaraj argues that the spread of AIDS in India is the result of Indians turning their back on ‘our glorious heritage’. Consequently, it is necessary for Indians to go back to their traditional culture and to make morality a part of the school curriculum, in addition to increasing the vigilance in screening blood banks and government spending on health. On the other hand, the introduction of sex education in schools teaches children the use of condoms, which in itself is an invitation to indulge in sex. As the information and broadcasting (I and B) cabinet minister, Swaraj made it clear that she was in favour of a media that would stand against corruption and be free from vulgarity. As an I and B minister, she also gave some official statements that a female news-reader on the national television channel, *Doordarshan*, who wears semi-transparent clothes, should dress much more circumspectly. Swaraj said, “I never talked about dress code for news-readers... I said that *Doordarshan* must give better programs than others. Only then will parental censorship have any meaning. *Doordharshan* should not ape the Western media and *forget our traditions*... A woman has the space to decide what she wears, but when she comes on TV she is in a public space. She has to adopt a code of conduct. In her personal life, a woman can wear or not wear anything, it is *her husband’s wish*... But if she comes on TV she has to subscribe to a dress code” (Kumari and Kidwai 1998: 105-108; my emphasis).

Now, if we compare the discursive practices of Biswas and Swaraj, the key word ‘Indian’ differentiates their discourses on women’s dress. Swaraj’s discourse prioritizes Indian (read

Hindu) tradition when discussing women's dress, women's empowerment, and human sexuality. In contrast, Biswas foregrounds the demands of society and social values. But note that the mere insertion of the words Indian, Bengali or Hindu to qualify social values and social demands would render their discourses virtually indistinguishable. Since Biswas writes from West Bengal (India), the social values she prioritizes are obviously Indian/Bengali social values. It is redundant to say that 'social values' are simply 'social values'. Social values have a cultural, national, and religious genealogy which is implicitly invoked at the very beginning of Biswas's discourse. She recounts the glorious tradition of women from 'the Tagore family'. These women, who were distinctively *bhadramahilaas*, introduced the modern yet modest way of wearing the *saaree*.

The *bhadramahilaa*/Hindu/Indian underpinnings of Biswas's views on 'social values' become evident here. The insertion of a few words makes the Indian left's (PBGMS) position on women's dress, morality and modesty akin to the Indian right's (RSS/BJP) position. Both positions burden women with the onus of preserving Indian morality and tradition through their 'decent' dress. The RSS and the BJP appeal to the rationale of 'Hindu/Indian tradition'. In keeping with its communist commitment, the PBGMS simply secularizes that tradition, and uses the epithet of 'social' to qualify values and demands. The missing word Indian/Bengali/Hindu from Biswas's discourse is acutely symptomatic of how the PBGMS ideology regarding women's dress is essentially *bhadramahilaash*—Bengali, Hindu and Indian. Both Swaraj and Biswas want to sanitize and civilize a necessary 'evil'; namely, that a woman's body is endowed with a dangerous sexuality. The controversy about women's dress in the public sphere (school, college and mass media) is concerned with the sexualized nature of women's bodies, and how to keep that 'evil' under control and cover. As in the nineteenth-century *bhadramahilaa* discourse

on dress in women's magazines, the PBGMS (a constituent body of West Bengal's civil society) attempts to create the correct and safe social and sexual moral code for women in public spaces. A 'shaalin' dress provides a means to reach that state of correct morality. The dress becomes an insignia of virtue or vice, reflecting a woman's sexual morality.

It should be noted that both Biswas and Swaraj miss the gendered character of a heteronormative and patriarchal culture in which women's bodies tend to be over-sexualized while men's bodies are under-sexualized. A woman's body signifies danger, enticement and fear for men. This body needs covering and often extra-covering, as in the use of a *dupattaa*. In this context, it is relevant to cite the late nineteenth-century Bengali Hindu oracle Ramakrishna, a religious icon for middle- and lower middle-income *bhadraloks* and *bhadramahilaas*. The three evils of modern life are lust as embodied in *kaminee* (women), *kaanchan* (gold), and *dashya* (slavery) of a salaried job. For this saint, other than the mother icon, women represent the threat of *kaminee*, lust incarnate (Sarkar 2000, 289-290).⁶⁹ Reading against the grain, we can say that there is a solution to this first evil *kaminee* through motherhood. In a mother's body, lust has been neutralized; it exudes maternal affect and invites paternalism. The body of the mother is desexualized, made benign and socially functional. This last point about the functional body and the PBGMS discourse will be discussed in more detail in the concluding section of this chapter. But before moving to the next section let us note that, the PBGMS discourse articulates culturally and historically rooted gender ideologies. It seems that read from certain perspectives, Ramakrishna's discourse on women is somewhat congruent with that of the PBGMS. What I am calling the 'syncretic socialism' of the PBGMS is once more evident here.

⁶⁹ Note that the temptations of *kaminee* and *kaanchan* are vintage themes that can be located in classical Sanskrit texts. But the novelty of Ramakrishna is that he links these age old evils with ill-paid salaried jobs in the racialized context of colonial capitalism in nineteenth-century Calcutta (Sarkar 2000).

Cultural degeneration, sex and sexuality

Cultural degeneration is a topic that regularly features in *Eksathe* articles and editorials. This issue is also consistently discussed in PBGMS documents on political policies and proposals. One such important document is the PBGMS draft proposal prepared for its state conferences every three years. Let us look at one such draft proposal from the year 1993, when the conference took place at the University Institute Hall in Calcutta. The topics discussed range from the central government's neo-liberal economic policy to West Bengal's land reform and panchayat system. However, here I will only focus on a particular section from that document titled "Apasanskriti O Samaajik Abakshay-er Birudhhe" (Against Cultural Degeneration and Social Decadence).

The central argument can be summarized as follows. The growing influence of western capitalism, the downfall of the USSR and Indian government's economic liberalization policies are engendering cultural degeneration and social decadence in urban and rural West Bengal. This degeneration is particularly harmful for women and children. A woman's honour and her role in production are endangered. Cultural degeneration and social decadence are destroying the discipline (*shrinkhala*) of family life. The mass media under the control of central government is not interested in raising '*sustha*' (normal) cultural consciousness. The draft proposal further points out: "The national television telecasts advertisements showing women's bodies, violent and sexual films, fashion parades, rock and roll music and televised Hindu epics instigate fundamentalism... Privatization of television and radio will enhance this process of cultural degeneration and social decadence" (PBGMS Draft Proposal 1993: 24-26). Instead of increasing investment in basic necessities such as food, shelter and education, cultural degeneration is being instigated. At this hour of crisis, "culture should be turned into a tool for class struggle".

Television and radio programs should focus on folk culture, secularism, education, and the problems of backward groups. “Literature, theatre, and music should foreground *women in proper (yogya) roles*. Children’s education, and literature should inculcate young minds with social values, nationalism, and secularism in a ‘*sustha*’ way”. Small-scale cultural programs in neighborhoods should uphold innocent folk culture portraying *integrated lives of men, women and children*, and Hindu-Muslim friendship. These innocent and idyllic values of life (*jeebanbodh*) will resist cultural degeneration and social decadence. And before that, one should insulate one’s mind with an oppositional doctrine. During socialist state building in the USSR, Soviet women wore red headscarves projecting an aestheticized image of women working in social production. “In today’s violent, crime-prone and imperialist world that promotes degenerate culture (*apasanskriti*) and social decadence, *we women should take up the responsibility* of building a ‘*sustha*’, promising cultural world on the basis of democratic, socialist, and scientific resources” (PBGMS Draft Proposal 1993: 24-26, my emphasis).

The trope of *sustha* (normal) returns in this discourse on cultural degeneration. The discourse can be deconstructed at multiple levels, but I will limit my critical reading to the instrumental use of women in *sustha* cultural regeneration. PBGMS’s fundamental fear is that a degenerate culture is undermining the discipline of family life. Thus, *sustha* culture plays a role in the sustenance of a disciplined (normal or, *sustha*) family. Revealing (female) bodies in commercials and fashion shows, sexually explicit and violent films, rock music and Hindu fundamentalism are all aspects of this decadence. The modern and urban mass medium of television spreads this perversion. The West also plays a role in this cultural perversion through rock music and capitalism. In an orthodox communist way, the PBGMS wants to turn culture into an instrument of class struggle and women are envisioned to play a role in it. The absolute

opposite of the debased culture is the *sustha* culture which portrays women in proper (*yogya*) roles. The nature of this proper role is indicated in the expression ‘innocent folk culture portraying integrated lives of men, women and children’, referring to women’s familial roles in an ideal family set in an idyllic rural India. Women’s roles in family are foregrounded in this PBGMS discourse. This domesticated and familial woman is represented as the opposite of the scantily clad fashion model who walks the runway in urban India. The folk and the rural are romantically represented as innocent and insulated from Western and urban cultural perversion. The PBGMS’s envisioned *sustha* culture portrays an image of the happy family, where relationships are ‘integrated’ rather than antagonistic. Thus, the genuine expression of a *sustha* culture is a regulated and disciplined (*sustha*) family, where women are securely rooted.

A simple equation is formulated: *sustha* culture is equal to *sustha* family life. In this *sustha* cultural environment, women are not commodified and objectified by perverted market forces. The discourse provides an historical example. The Soviet women who came out of their homes to work in Soviet Russia’s social production made an aesthetic statement by wearing red head scarves. To the PBGMS this is also fashion, but not perverted capitalist fashion, since these Soviet women were not commodified by capitalism. They also challenged the traditional ideology that women should be confined to the domestic sphere. But is the PBGMS missing something here? If the market commodifies women’s bodies in commercials, the Soviet state commands and instrumentally utilizes Soviet women’s labour for rapid state-led industrialization. In one, the market is the subject which objectifies women by stripping them of their clothes. In the other, the state and its ‘command economy’ objectify women for economic development. The difference is that unlike the market, the state might appear relatively less

predatory and more paternalistic.⁷⁰ But it should be noted that the Soviet ‘command economy’ practiced one form of ‘primitive accumulation of capital’ to appropriate resources from the agricultural sector to advance industrial growth through state planning. In Marx’s theory of the primitive accumulation of capital, labour is not free to sell itself to the market. The demand of the Soviet ‘command economy’ imposed a number of constraints on women, in particular on their bodies. I discussed these issues in chapter two. Instead of the market, the biopolitics of a state-led ‘command economy’ can objectify and instrumentally utilize women’s bodies in a variety of ways.⁷¹

The PBGMS discourse on culture is wedded to the logic of building a *sustha* Indian nation-state, housing a *sustha* culture which espouses family values, nationalism and secularism. To build this *sustha* culture based on scientific socialism and democracy, PBGMS mobilizes women at the political and cultural levels. Here too women are used in an instrumental way as objects for the work of a *sustha* nation-state. This work can take various forms: to remain firmly secured in idyllic families and to play familial roles; to come out of homes and to work in state driven social production; or to increase or decrease family size for a balanced national population. For instance, a PBGMS comment on women’s health and family welfare runs as follows: “Population control is extremely important for economic development. And for the sake of this population control, women’s health has to be prioritized. Also, we have to remember that we need a balanced [*susham*] national health policy, if we want to have a well-organized future society with a controlled population. The health policy can only be formulated by prioritizing

⁷⁰ For the sake of the present argument, I am suspending the feminist critique of representing women as cultural dopes.

⁷¹ Men were also not spared by the demand of the ‘command economy’. But in case of women, because of their reproductive capacity, the demand is predominantly centred in their ‘reproductive and maternal’ bodies. Their bodies become the site on which the state exercises its biopolitics. I have discussed these issues in more detail in chapter two and three.

women's and children's health (*Eksathe*, June, 1978: 35). The nation-state's objectification of women's bodies and procreative abilities is clearly evident here. The biopolitical programs of the Indian nation-state are accepted and represented in this PBGMS discourse. Ironically, the women's mass organization, the PBGMS, likewise objectifies women to serve the Indian nation state.

Since the draft proposal on culture vehemently attacks capitalism for commodifying women, let us take a closer look at the PBGMS's discourse on the commodification of women. In an *Eksathe* essay, the following comment appears: "Capitalists buy and sell the poor, vulnerable and greedy classes, particularly unemployed young men and *helpless women* of that class. Men are used for murder and rape. And *women are used as commodities*. In capitalism, *women's bodies are valued more than women's labour*. The society becomes dehumanized and unprincipled" (Mukherjee, November 2005: 19; my emphasis). The author is obviously alluding to the objectification of female bodies in a market-driven culture industry, particularly through advertising and entertainment. Reading against the grain, we find that in this discourse, women's work through the explicit use of their bodies is not conceived as labour: 'In capitalism, women's bodies are valued more than women's labour'. The author overlooks how in capitalism farm work and housework, sex work and the catwalk, although glamorized, involve the hard labour of sweat and blood. By devaluing female bodily labour in this way, the PBGMS views the body with an anxious and guilt-ridden lens. As discussed in chapter one, the late nineteenth-century *bhadramahilaa* culture was characterized by the use of a sanitized and chaste language which eliminated references to the body, sex and bodily functions. This distinguished the *bhadramahilaa* from her traditional and lower-order sisters, whose language was uncivilized, sensuous and bawdy (Banerjee 1993: 127-179). In addition, the purposeful screening out of

direct references to sex and the body marked the writings of educated *bhadramahilaas*, particularly the *Braahma bhadramahilaas* in women's magazines. Even when writing on conjugal relationships, this screen was discreetly maintained by *bhadramahilaa* writers (Chakraborty 1995, 102-103). The English-educated *bhadraloks* who initiated the project of 'recasting our women' were influenced by Victorian morality through the reading of English literature. This influence of Victorian morality played a role in the *bhadramahilaa*'s anxiety over her body.

The reference to the body provides a direct link to the PBGMS's stand on sex. The analysis of the PBGMS draft proposal on culture asserts that sexually explicit material is one of the prime contributors to India's cultural degeneration and social decadence. In *Eksathe*'s essays and in PBGMS pedagogical booklets and pamphlets, sex does not feature as a topic in its own right. But sex is infrequently evoked in its adjective form as 'sexual' before words such as education, disease, crime and perversion. Moreover, the light in which sex is cast is not bright. For example: "The dissemination of correct and scientific sex education will preserve health [*swaasthya*], self-restraint [*samyam*], and social discipline [*Samaajik srinkhala*]" (*Eksathe*, June, 1978: 33); and, "The decadence in capitalist society is pervasive; as a result, morality and social norms have become flexible. That is why young men and women have intense sexual urges" (*Eksathe*, June, 1978: 32). At times, sex makes an appearance as perversion and as destructive in *Eksathe*'s fiction, when plots involve a deviant husband who engages in an 'extra-marital' affair (a point I discuss in the next chapter which particularly focuses on *Eksathe* fiction).

In an essay titled "Prasanga Mohila Patrika" (On Bengali Women's Magazines) from June 1989, *Eksathe* has something pertinent to say on the topic of sex. Krishna Mukherjee writes that 'modern' women's magazines such as *Sananda* and *Manorama* often discuss sexual

problems between men and women. These discussions do not analyze the socio-economic basis of sexual problems. Sexual problems cannot be solved by keeping other social problems intact. “Some of the topics discussed in these magazines are, ‘Does marriage obstruct love?’, ‘Is non-marital cohabitation bad?’, ‘Can one be happy in a non-marital relationship?’ Sexual problems are as important as problems of livelihood. But what kind of sexual problems are they foregrounding?... They [these magazines] want to establish the concept of ‘live-together’ [living-together] by writing on upper-class bourgeois lifestyles, and illegitimate cohabitation by celebrities. The sexual life choice of a financially independent man and woman cannot be the discussion topic for *ordinary women*” (Mukherjee 1989: 38). The essay then moves on to the topic of marriage and dowry, and women’s problems within the family. The writer advises that the right to divorce can be *only implemented* when both the husband and wife are economically independent (Mukherjee 1989: 38; my emphasis). A deconstructive reading of the above discourse shows that sex is only conceivable within the institutional crucibles of marriage and family. Non-marital cohabitation is seen as a bourgeois indulgence and conspiracy which cannot be allowed in society.

Mukherjee underscores the sanctity of legitimate marriage and family by emphasizing its significance for ‘ordinary women’. She duly acknowledges the existence of problems such as dowry and domestic violence. But the last point made by Mukherjee on divorce is crucial. She implicitly advises that women should not think of divorce as a solution to marital problems. ‘The right to divorce can *only be implemented* when both the husband and wife are economically independent’. Now, working-class women (e.g. a brick kiln worker, a domestic servant, or a vegetable vendor) are economically independent. They earn their livelihood. Are they present in any way in this discourse? Or, does the writer implicitly consider only high profile, upper-class

celebrities as economically independent women? Or, is this advice meant for middle-class and lower middle-class Bengali women who are not always financially independent? Actually, there is a strong middle-class as well as *bhadramahilaa* bias in this discourse. Let us not forget the fact that ‘a divorced woman’ is a stigma for this class, as Bengali literature and popular culture bear sufficient testimony. This last point will be further substantiated in the next chapter when I deconstruct an *Eksathe* short story where the protagonist is a divorced woman. Most importantly, by implying that divorce should not be seen as a solution to marital problems by ‘ordinary women’, Mukherjee underscores the sanctity of the institutions of marriage and family. This view is further emphasized when she writes anxiously, ‘But what kind of sexual problems are they foregrounding?... they want to establish the concept of live-together [living-together]’. Mukherjee claims that her advice is meant for ‘ordinary women’, for whom non-marital cohabitation, sex, and divorce are not issues worth discussion in a women’s magazine. She writes, “as a women’s magazine, *Eksathe* is absolutely different from these [bourgeois] magazines” (Mukherjee 1989: 39). Ironically, the writer’s *bhadramahilaa* (middle-class and upper-caste) background is made explicit in this discourse on sex, marriage and divorce. She seems to be oblivious to the fact that among dalit, Vaishnavites, and lower-class communities in India, non-marital cohabitation is not rare. In fact, the subaltern discourse on sex and sexuality is more explicit than the *bhadralok/bhadramahilaa* discourse on these issues. This sanitizing move can be traced back to nineteenth-century Bengal as I have discussed in Chapter One. With respect to the present and the PBGMS discourse on sex, there should be a rationale for this anxiety about non-marital cohabitation. Why sex does not feature as a topic in its own right? Why is sex seen in a negative light? Why does the author sanctify marriage and family? These

puzzles can be solved somewhat if we closely scrutinize the PBGMS discourse on homosexuality.

It should be noted that homosexuality in particular, like sex in general, does not feature as an independent topic in *Eksathe*. When homosexuality makes a guest appearance, it is pronounced in the same breath as rape and sexual offence. It is stigmatized and criminalized. For instance, in an essay on the ills of capitalism and imperialism, Rekha Goswami writes, “sexual crime, rape, and homosexuality happen regularly in the US army” (Goswami 1995: 112). In this essay, the U.S. is vilified as a dark zone where capitalism has made hedonism, AIDS, family breakdown, drug addiction, sexual violence, juvenile delinquency, and mental degeneration pervasive. In rhetorical language reminiscent of Marx and Engels in *The Communist Manifesto*, U.S. capitalism is visualized as a rotting (*pachaagalaa*) human body.

Goswami’s grim portrayal of the U.S. offers a useful link to an essay written by Krishna Mukherjee in the November 2005 issue of *Eksathe*. The essay, “Naareemukti Bishoye Du-char Katha” (A Few Words on Women’s Emancipation), is an historical assessment of the women’s movement. Using Engels’ thesis on the origin of women’s subjugation, Mukherjee briefly highlights the achievements of the women’s right movement in the West. Simone de Beauvoir’s work is briefly discussed with an emphasis on her existentialism. However, for our purpose, what is significant is the second half of the essay. In this part, Mukherjee spends a substantial number of words on homosexuality. Like Goswami’s essay, social decadence in the West is a core theme here. Allow me to first quote from it at length:

Even today, women have not achieved complete freedom, because men can sexually oppress women. Even within the family women can face sexual oppression from men. So one section of *women are demanding social recognition of homosexuality*... Western feminists—who believe that women’s emancipation implies emancipation from men—

have started voicing this demand too. If we analyze *the socio-economic origin of this demand*, we see that in capitalist countries, individualism has reached such an extreme point that human beings are very lonely. They are located in isolated islands. They are *losing their natural feelings...* There is money as well as consumerism and hedonism. But people do not support one another. If there are many people around you, you can call someone your brother, sister, wife, or girlfriend. But a lonely, alienated, arrogant, and hedonist person is left with nothing other than sex, different kinds of sexual practices. A human being needs another human being to feel complete. Capitalism reinforces individualism by luring people with hedonism. *If homosexuality becomes acceptable, [pro]creation [shrishti] will come to an end in this world. The world cannot progress on the path of self-gratification. A principle which is against the species cannot be made universal. A mother will always love her child, a man will always attract a woman, whether you name it affection, or love, or sex, or even oppression.* What women can obtain is the freedom of choice: The choice that is born through *mixing with everyone* in this society *needs to be kept alive...* *Emancipation for women does not mean that they are free from social obligation [dyaybaddhata].* Freeing oneself from reproduction, child care, familial, and social duties does not mean women's emancipation. No person can avoid social problems and in a united way, men and women should work towards a society free from exploitation... *The inevitability of the man-woman relationship* initiates the fraternity [*saubhraatitya*] between a man and a woman. But a subjugated woman cannot get into a relationship of fraternity. So, both women and men should work towards freeing women from familial, social, economic and political slavery. As part of a total social transformation, women's emancipation should be viewed as the emancipation of an entire human society. A fraternal relationship can only take place between free human beings. (Mukherjee, November, 2005: 18-19; my emphasis)

What is the essence of this anxiety-ridden discourse on homosexuality? Homosexuality is represented here as the telltale sign of social crisis and moral disorder, and lesbian longing is a Western-feminist invention. Mukherjee seems to ignore that female sexual bonding is not so foreign even to 'ancient' India. In Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, the issue of lesbian longing is

referred to twice in the context of the ‘defloration’ of a woman by another woman (Kautilya 1992: 485). Mukherjee locates homosexuality’s ‘occidental’ origin in extreme individualistic lifestyles and their resulting loneliness. Hedonistic consumerism is also responsible. Western feminists promote lesbianism out of sheer frustration with men and with oppressive heterosexual relationships. In this discourse, same-sex attraction is not deemed a natural feeling. In fact, panic is writ large in Mukherjee’s discursive practice. Homosexuality will make human species extinct, social progress will come to an end. Same-sex relationships are fixated on sexual gratification without being procreative and socially responsible. Mukherjee constructs its binary opposite, heterosexuality, as natural, inevitable and social. Through this construction, the social corollaries of heterosexuality, such as (heterosexual) marriage, family, reproduction and motherhood, are explicitly naturalized and implicitly consecrated. These institutions are socially functional and ensure the inevitable progress of history. Even oppressive heterosexual relationships are considered natural and therefore acceptable: ‘a man will always attract a woman, whether you name it affection, or love, or sex, or even oppression’.

In Mukherjee’s discourse, the ‘social’ is assigned primacy over the ‘sexual’. In particular, sexuality that is not socially obligated (for reproduction) is dismissed. After establishing lesbianism as foreign, unnatural, and socially irresponsible, Mukherjee reminds her women readers what they should not forget to do. Women should dutifully carry out their social obligations of marriage, reproduction, and child care. Emancipation from these social duties is not women’s emancipation. To fulfill these obligations, women need men by their side, since men are not eternal enemies, as conceived by lesbians and some Western feminists. Men and women should work in fraternal alliance toward total social transformation and for human emancipation, of which women’s emancipation is a part. Towards this end, Mukherjee turns the

‘natural’ heterosexual relationship between men and women in to a desexualized, sentimental and familial fraternity [*saubhraatritya*]. In a way it is comical, since fraternity (*saubhraatritya*) signifies brotherly bonding. The Bengali word *bhraataa* (*sou-bhraat-titya*) means brother. In a strange way, the ‘natural’ erotic becomes non-erotic, and even de-gendered. A symptomatic reading of the essay also shows that by degendering the relationship between siblings, it unconsciously keeps the male predominant and the female repressed.

There are not one but two kinds of phobia in this discourse—homophobia and sex-phobia. In both these phobias, the common factor is fear of self-gratification through non-procreative sex. Both these phobias are symptoms of Mukherjee’s strong belief in the sanctity and social functionality of heterosexual marriage and family. These socially functional institutions serve the human species, human society, socialist revolution, and ultimately the nation-state. As I have argued in previous chapters, in modern post-colonial India, what is meant by the ‘social’ is actually the ‘Indian nation-state’. For PBGMS, a mass organization of a political party, the logic of the nation-state is assumed to determine everything, including sexuality, in the last instance. The essay implicitly states that sexuality has to be compulsorily socially functional. Human freedom, so much sought after in the essay, is taken away in the last instance in the service of the cause of building a nation-state. The ethical backbone of this nation-state is constituted by the sanctified and *sustha* (normal) institutions of marriage and family.

In this discourse, both homo- and heterosexuality lose their subjective agency and are transformed into objects on which the state acts. In this process of objectification, the nation-state’s civil society plays a key role through the political party and its mass organizations. In addition, by identifying homosexuality (and specifically lesbianism) as of foreign origin,

Mukherjee's 'left' discourse on sexuality comes close to the 'right' discourse on the same issue. Let us recall what Sushma Swaraj had to say about AIDS as a 'gay disease' in popular imagination. As a BJP spokesperson, Swaraj said that AIDS is spread in India when Indians turn their back on their glorious heritage (Kumari and Kidwai 1998: 105-106). The 'purity' of Indian nationhood makes the two different political minds, the left and the right, meet under the signpost of homosexuality.

'I am a woman' for building the state (*rashtra*)

I will conclude this chapter by presenting a poem titled *Naareebadee* (Feminist) from *Eksathe's* December 2005 issue (Ghosh 2005: 49; my emphasis), and provide a brief deconstruction that resonates with the analysis I have discussed in this chapter so far and to anticipate my analysis of literary texts in the following chapter.

Feminist (*Naareebadee*)

By Kakoli Ghosh

I am a feminist
I do not care for any covering [*abaron*] of this world
I am a commodity in the advertising world
I sell myself at the bikini market
Pornography is my youth.

We do not want to be mothers
Motherhood is very troublesome [*birambana*].
For a crying child in a foreign land I go out wearing Bermuda shorts
The child at home sucks its thin thumb with granny by its side.⁷²

Modernism; very outdated, I am a postmodern woman
My boyhood [*chelebel*] becomes girlhood [*meyebela*]⁷³

⁷² The sex of the child is unspecified. So, I have used 'it' and not 'his/her'

In our thoughts and conscience
All husbands are womanizers – all fathers kill women [*naareeghaatak*]
We want to be free – we scream ‘we want freedom’
But that freedom does not get beyond the beautiful spring [*basanta bahaar*]
That freedom is measured by how often you change your bedmate
Unknowingly we get killed every time we do this.

I am a woman; but men are not my enemies
My father has brought me to this world
This vast sky is from him
My body should become a mother –
My womb should birth children
Not clones but human boys and girls
Should be born out of our wombs
O our future, our children
Should become men and women in their bodies
Should become persons in mind
Should not lament before the dead time
The dawn should bring forth
The future members of the state [*aagaamee diner raashtrikder*].

Motherhood might be a creative and unique experience for women worth praising. However, Kakoli Ghosh’s poem in *Eksathe* is not a mere poetic rendition of her own pleasurable experience of motherhood. Women, wombs and motherhood are distinctively political in “Naareebadee”. Motherhood is treated with a sense of compulsion. In this poem, women are *only mothers* and they are not *also mothers*. This motherhood is socially functional motherhood. Now, this poem can be deconstructed at various levels. However, as mentioned earlier, I will limit my scrutiny to a few critical points that resonate with the focus of this chapter. Ghosh’s basic message is loud and clear. Women should bring forth children for the Indian nation state (*aagaamee diner raashtrikder*). Her body (womb) should be dedicated to build the future of this

⁷³ The reference is to an autobiographical work by the Bangladeshi feminist writer Taslima Nasreen, *Amar Meyebela* (My Girlhood) (1999). In everyday Bengali language, chele-bela (boy-hood) is often used in a gender neutral way to mean child-hood (*choto-bela*). In fact, the word *meve-bela* (girl-hood) is rare in usage. Nasreen uses the word *Meyebela* to underscore her criticism of this linguistic andro-centrism. Kakoli Ghosh expresses sarcasm about this feminist critique.

nation state. The bridge between her womb and the Indian state, the sanctity of heterosexual marriage and family, is made obvious by the conspicuous absence of the two words—marriage and family—in this poem. Most importantly, the glorification of the ‘mother woman’, whose womb is dedicated to the building of a nation-state, is achieved by constructing her ‘other’, the ‘non-mother feminist’. Ghosh’s feminist is *sui generis*.

Needless to say, this process of othering homogenizes the category feminist and collapses all substantive differences that characterize liberal, Marxist, socialist, postcolonial, or radical feminists. In an oblique way, Ghosh suggests that this feminist is from the West (‘for a crying child in a foreign land I go out wearing Bermuda shorts’). The feminist is castigated for being sexual and non-procreative, for watching pornography, wearing Bermuda shorts that show her legs, and for frequently changing sexual partners. Two lines from a nineteenth-century poem by Sumati Majumder can show us the cultural and genealogical roots of this trope of ‘othering’ Western women. The poem was published in the women’s magazine *Bamabodhini Patrika* in 1893 (Chakraborty 1995, 220). Majumder’s poem is about the progress made by American women in various fronts and the grim condition of Indian women in contrast. But on one count, the Indian woman’s moral superiority is established over her American sister through her chaste body:

*Kintu Sei America[r] Ramani Samaaj
Bharat Satee-r Kache Paibek Laj*

[But that American women’s community
Will be embarrassed/belittled by the chaste Indian woman]

In both the twentieth-century and the nineteenth-century poems, the common thread is the rigid boundary drawn between ‘our women’ and ‘their women’, between proper women and improper women. The first term in each pair is obviously privileged. Ghosh does not use ‘Indian’

before her ‘woman’, but ‘our’ implies that she means Indian women. The nationalist ideology is inscribed in both these poetic renderings. Moreover, in Ghosh’s poem, the deepest fault line that divides the vilified ‘feminist’ from the glorified ‘(Indian) woman’ takes the form of a womb. One womb is responsible and helps in building the Indian nation-state. In contrast, the feminist womb is irresponsible. Ghosh constructs the glorified woman as lacking non-procreative (non-functional) sexuality. She does not engage in recreational sex. In contrast to the feminist, only procreative sex characterizes her sexuality. In a way, the latter is desexualized.

Do we see much difference between the ideology inscribed in this poem, and the propaganda of the Stalinist USSR, where Soviet women were praised and awarded for reproducing more children for the sake of a rapid state-capital led industrialization; or of the People’s Republic of China where women were rebuked and punished for having more than one child to control China’s demographic explosion and underdevelopment? The common denominator of these disparate discourses is a form of biopolitics. As already discussed in chapter two, this biopolitics is promoted by communist parties in the name of developing and industrializing a socialist or post-colonial nation-state. Here, women are reduced to wombs when they are not already reduced to working hands, and thereby turned from subjects to objects—objects of the state’s biopolitics. The state acts on these objectified female bodies as the subject. As Foucault notes in his analysis of psychiatrization of perversions, “in the socialization of procreative behavior ‘sex’ was described as being caught between a law of reality (economic necessity being its most abrupt and immediate form) and an economy of pleasure which was always attempting to circumvent that law” (Foucault 1990a: 154). The PBGMS discourse on socially functional female sexuality, homosexuality, motherhood ‘Western’ feminism and

‘illegitimate’ sex constantly attempts to prevent the economy of pleasure from upstaging the law of reality in building a *sustha* nation-state.

The party and its women’s mass organization facilitate the role played by the state in laying down the ‘law of reality’. In sum, the combination of a *shaalin* dress, a *sustha* woman, a *sustha* sexuality, a *sustha* culture, and a *sustha* family is the *sustha* nation state. In this long chain of variables, the state of being *sustha* or normal is the common factor. Before turning to the next chapter, let us remember that by conforming to a type or standard, by becoming regular, usual, typical, ordinary and conventional, a normal being signifies a predictable, and hence controllable and utilizable human being.

In this chapter I have examined how the PBGMS’s discourse on *sustha* culture is a key concern in the ‘apparatus of socialism and womanhood’. I have also shown that women’s bodies, sexuality and cultural degeneration (*apasanskriti*) are interlocked in this apparatus to produce another set of discourses on ‘normal’ women with ‘normal’ desires and modest taste, whose subjectivity suffers in the name of a *sustha* nation-state and *sustha* culture. The biopolitical project involved here concerns equating dress with the female body so that the wearer of the dress is depersonalized and robbed of self-determining subjectivity by being treated as an object.

Chapter Five

Sukhee Grihokon and Selfless Women

I resented seeing Nature and History confused at every turn, and I wanted to track down, in the decorative display of what goes without saying, the ideological abuse which, in my view, is hidden there
(Barthes 1972: 11).

The mother who balances both housework and outside work, directs the child in the right path and gives him/her appropriate freedom, carries out her role in the correct way, remains clear in her conscience as the one who can fulfill her duty towards her child and society. The task is not so hard, not so distant, if one has sincere moral ideals, correct values about life, and if one can be selfless and not avaricious
(Dasgupta 1995: 106)

The indication of a society's moral value, and the foundation of a sustha (normal), sundar (beautiful), and humane family life, is women's honour and respectability. Without respect and faith in the man-woman relationship, family and social life cannot become swaabhabik (natural) (Eksathe editorial, December, 1996: 7).

In this chapter, I turn to the cultural discourse of the PBGMS as expressed in its periodical *Eksathe*. I will analyze a short travelogue and two short stories. In every issue of the periodical, at least two to three short stories are published. The purpose is twofold: first, to meet the demand of readers looking for literary texts and thereby make the periodical more attractive; and second, the short stories are used to deliver the message that the search for a strong modern nation-state is not superficial, but a natural necessity. The texts are usually contributed by PBGMS members. I will focus on these narratives to examine their manifest messages and their subtexts, which express the inner conflicts of the female protagonists through their lived experiences within the institution of the family. The macro-environment of a developing nation-state encompasses their lived experiences. The inner conflicts often express the female protagonists' desire and anxiety about their modern lived experiences.

Drawing inspiration from Fredric Jameson, I view ‘narrative as a socially symbolic act’. Jameson argues for the prioritizing of the political interpretation of literary texts. He conceives of the political perspective not as some supplementary method, not as an optional auxiliary to other interpretive methods current today—the psychoanalytic, the stylistic, the ethical, the structural—but rather as the absolute horizon of all reading and all interpretation (Jameson 1981: 17). In this chapter, I will offer a political interpretation of the three cultural texts from *Eksathe*.

The imaginary quality of fiction can express the will of subjected people to document their domination and resistance. In fact, literature is a potent device to present life’s exploitative experiences and emancipatory possibilities. This exercise will delineate the nature of subjectivities embodied by the female protagonists. In the previous chapters, I have shown how the PBGMS discourse subjects women to the discipline of a *sustha* nation-state. Here, I will use the two short stories and the travelogue to unpack the politics embedded in these ostensibly non-political texts. The identification of these politics will shed more light on the PBGMS discourse on women.

Thus in this chapter I am concerned with exposing the political unconscious of ostensibly non-political texts. I try to show that each of these texts conveys a certain political truth. *In addition it should be noted that here and throughout the thesis, I am not trying to generalize about ‘actual women’s subjectivity’ simply on the basis of reading these fictional and factual texts published by the PBGMS.* The three texts I have selected form a purposive sample because they exemplify a problematic. These texts have two patterns in common. First, the narratives are located in a scenario where the society is in the process of becoming ‘modern’ and the predominant features of modernity are gradually showing their impact. The authors of these narratives invite the modern ways of life. But at the same time, they try to underscore that the

traditional gendered signs and institutions are still relevant and should be upheld to maintain social cohesion. Secondly, these texts, in particular the travelogue, present the nineteenth-century Sushilaa archetype in a new guise, the Socialist Sushilaa archetype. The subjectivity expressed through this archetype is securely linked with the institutions of marriage, family, motherhood and social production. The Socialist Sushilaa makes everyone happy and she is successful in building a *sukhee grihokon* (happy home). Through the analysis of the travelogue, I will show that the PBGMS cultural discourse upholds the Socialist Sushilaa archetype in the name of building a *sustha* nation-state.

However, the Sushilaa archetype does not go uncontested. It is challenged by the advent of bourgeois modernity whose core constituents are individualization, Westernization and rationalization. The PBGMS cultural discourse views bourgeois modernity as a Western import, which in the Indian context is mediated by the colonial experience, where the local (the traditional) is subservient to the centre (modernity). Thus, there is an effort by the PBGMS to demarcate a space for the local so that it can create its own sphere of dominance and rival the centre (bourgeois modernity). To make the local strong, people and especially women should first be disciplined and tethered to social institutions. Women can go out to work with men and fight for equality of work and wage, but they should never leave their traditional ‘centre’—the home (*grihokon*). The subtext in the PBGMS cultural discourse is: Even when women go out to participate in social production, they should make every effort to build a *sukhee grihokon* (happy home) by providing cohesion within the institutions of marriage and family, and ultimately society.

But there can be an alternative to the Sushilaa subjectivity. This subjectivity, or at least the search for this alternative subjectivity can be found in another short story—the early

twentieth-century Bengali short story “*Streer Pratra*” by Rabindranath Tagore. I analyze this text to show how the protagonist Mrinal leaves gendered attachments which represent ‘good womanhood’ or the Sushilaa archetype to seek her own subjectivity. At the same time, Mrinal rejects society’s attempt to individualize her as a woman. In search for a new subjectivity, she liberates herself from the gendered signs and institutions of ‘good womanhood’ constructed by her society.

I will begin with a close reading of the short travelogue. This text is written in a factual mode of reportage by an urban PBGMS member about two women in a peasant household in rural West Bengal. Next, I will analyze the two short narratives. My aim is to show how these three texts converge at certain ideological points, and the identification of these points is crucial to understand the nature of the PBGMS discourse on women’s subjectivity.

The everyday world of peasant wives

In a short travelogue, Bina Roy recounts her visit to a model village in Barghashipur, located close to the port town of Haldia, a rapidly industrializing centre in the southern part of West Bengal. Haldia is often represented as the success story of the Left Front government’s reign in West Bengal. From the very beginning, Roy makes it clear: “This report is for fellow urban women who know little about the status of women in rural areas... I will mainly talk about the women in a peasant family. I lived with this family and observed these women from morning until night” (Roy 2004:70). Roy spends a few paragraphs on the infrastructural development witnessed by Haldia town and the surrounding villages in recent years. The Haldia Development Authority has developed some villages as model villages. These model villages each have a bank, a post office, and a community centre. The model village where Roy stayed had *puccaa*

(black-topped) road, electricity, a tube well, piped water, sanitary toilets, primary and secondary schools, and playgrounds. After this, Roy moves to address her main subject matter: the two women in the peasant family.

This joint family consists of a widow and her two sons. One son works in a factory at Haldia, and the other manages the family's farming activities (*chaasher kaaj*). Both are married and have wives and children. The children are all boys. The wife of the elder brother is Kajol, and Protima is the wife of the younger brother. As Roy recounts, every morning Kajol wakes up around 4 a.m. and becomes busy with the preparation of breakfast for her husband and brother-in-law. Protima assists her. Since this is the harvest season, both the brothers go to the farm to harvest the rice paddy, and there are two agricultural laborers to assist them. Meanwhile, Kajol starts fetching water for cooking and bathing. Sometimes, the laborers are not available. Then Kajol accompanies the brothers to the farm. She assists them in cutting and husking the paddy. Next she prepares cow fodder from rice straw and put them in the cow shed. Following this chore, Kajol prepares the weekly stock of puffed rice which is a staple snack and stockpiles some rice for the family's consumption in the rice storage. Meanwhile, Protima is busy cooking the family meal and getting the five boys ready for school. In between these tasks, she also looks after her mother-in-law and cleans the house. "I observed that both these housewives have very good rapport with other women in the neighbourhood. They are always ready to help their neighbours in any adverse situation. Later, I came to learn that Kajol is the chairperson of the PBGMS unit in the Barghashipur area. She also runs a literacy centre for adult women to impart basic skills of reading and writing. This centre meets in Kajol's courtyard... The experience [from this visit] is very valuable to me. The tiled roof and *kaachaa* [built with mud and bamboo] double-storied house has electricity. In every household women are engaged in domestic chores

as well as agricultural work. It seems that the whole village is like a big joint family in which everybody shares the joys and sorrows of life. I found that the key to the success of this model village is the development work done by the local panchayat... I was surprised to see how the town of Haldia has developed. It has all the modern amenities... I want this report on the social life in a model village to reach the readers of *Eksathe*” (Roy 2004: 71).

A picture-perfect rural family is painted in this brief account. The epic imagery here is of ceaseless contentment and happiness. The author zooms in on a model joint family and the everyday life of two peasant wives. In this family, all the characters are happy, since the wives keep everybody happy with their efficiency, hard work, the provision of amenities, and their non-complaining demeanor. They also demonstrate social amicability and social responsibility. For instance, Kajol leads the local PBGMS and runs the literacy centre. These contributions keep the neighbourhood happy and the village steadily moves forward on the path of development. Overall, both Kajol and Protima are skilled multi-taskers. They efficiently manage various tasks with enthusiasm. Most importantly, they are never stressed out, they never complain, and they are not frustrated with too many tasks. Roy unambivalently mentions that ‘in every household women are engaged in domestic chores as well as agricultural work’. The double burden of housework and agricultural work that peasant women bear does not appear problematic to Roy’s observant eyes.

From Roy’s report it becomes clear that Kajol and Protima happily do every task for the upkeep of the family and the village. Their work makes their family happy and the village well developed. Thus it contributes to the upkeep of the nation-state. It seems both the women fulfill the traditional *streedharma*: they are efficient in housework, they take care of their mother-in-law, they give birth to sons, they engage in outdoor agricultural activities to help their husbands,

and they are involved in social development through community work. Above all, they create happiness all around them by their affable nature. Can we here visualize the nineteenth-century ‘Sushilaa archetype’ in a new guise? The nineteenth-century ‘Sushilaa archetype’ discussed in chapter one refers to the archetypal *nabinaa*, an accomplished woman who diligently fulfilled her wifely duties. She is the perfect wife and the perfect mother. Sushilaa took the initiative to educate her illiterate sisters, and sanitized the indecent language of a *chotolok* woman, the fisherwoman. She was well versed in the traditional Hindu *streedharma*, and practised it with utmost sincerity.

The contemporary Sushilaa archetype as exemplified particularly by Kajol has two added characteristics. Since this new Sushilaa is also the local leader of the CPI-M-affiliated PBGMS, we can call her ‘Socialist Sushilaa’. Kajol also runs an adult literacy centre from home. This literacy program operates under the aegis of the federal and state governments. Thus, the socialist Sushilaa is a pillar of strength in three respects: as an embodiment of the traditional *streedharma*, as a carrier of post-colonial responsibility towards nation building, and as a member of a modern mass-based women’s organization committed to ushering in socialism. In spite of these differences, like the old archetype, the new Sushilaa’s life and work are dedicated to the happiness of the family, the village, the society, and the nation-state. The equation is simple: a normative and efficient wife and mother fosters a happy family, develops the village community and supports a happy and strong nation state made up of able and disciplined citizens who contribute to a *sustha* (normal) society. Here, the not-so-apparent aphorism is that what is good for the nation and for the family is automatically good for the woman. Roy’s account of the everyday world of the model peasant wife expresses the bedrock upon which the peaceful existence of the *sukhee grihakon* (happy household) is erected. This ideal family with the model

wife is the lowest common denominator of the model village which is on the path of rapid development under the aegis of the state and its agencies. The *sukhee grihakon* is the essential component of a much larger structure—a strong and developing nation-state.

Roy never mentions if the two women find it difficult to manage so many tasks. She does not write on the level of education attained by these women, or the whereabouts of their native villages. The identity of the two women is steadfastly absorbed into their marital identity. There is no ‘past’ to this identity. Unlike the nineteenth-century dissident housewife Rassundari Debi, they never complain about the endless drudgery of housework (Sarkar 2001: 95). In Roy’s account, normative gender roles act as the ideological lynchpin which sustains the (utopian) image of a happy peasant household. However, in this process, Roy unintentionally suppresses the political and the critical subjectivity of the female protagonists. The author seems to be oblivious to these women’s gendered everyday worlds.

To Roy, this everyday world is as good as it appears. She mythologizes the everyday worlds of Kajol and Protima in so far as everything appears to be forever settled and without contradictions. In her representation of the two women’s everyday world, Roy transforms the gendered social constructs into natural constructs. There is no predicament evident in Roy’s account of the gendered role played by Kajol and Protima in the process of economic production, national development and biological reproduction, both at the micro-level of the family and at the macro-level of the Indian nation-state. In her discourse, Roy raises the socially constructed gendered role to the status of a natural thing in and of itself. The women are never exasperated by the endless contributions they make towards the maintenance of their family, village community, civil society and the nation-state. In fact, to a critical pair of eyes they might appear as somewhat unreal, unusually happy, and complacent with their material circumstances. In

Roland Barthes' terms, we can say that Roy's travel report makes the *myth* of women's gendered productive and reproductive roles in the family and the nation-state, the *sukhee grihokon* and the selfless woman, assume the appearance of a general, neutral, dehistoricized and depoliticized sign (Barthes 1972: 109-159). Roy's representation makes the *myth* appear dematerialized by completely missing how this gendered role within the family maintains the oppressive structures of a disciplinary patriarchy and nation-state. By assuring the complicity and docility of all women, author and reader included, the myth of a happy peasant household with efficient multi-tasking wives serves to smooth out existing gender contradictions. And yet, the institutions of family and the nation-state, with their interlinked paraphernalia of production and reproduction, thrive precisely on these contradictions.

Roy's travelogue seems to romanticize and idealize rural women and their everyday world. As I note above, Roy begins her account by stating that 'this reportage is for urban women like us who know so little about the status of women in rural areas'. Here, the observer is an educated, urban woman of middle-class origin who prepares this travelogue for urban middle-class women readers. Thus, this travelogue written in a reportage mode is by an urban middle-class woman, addressing the urban middle-class readers of *Eksathe*, but it is about the everyday world of rural (peasant) women. By drawing on the idealist convention of myth, this realist discourse (in the sense of a 'report') discourse of Roy develops a distinctively imaginative quality. The textual representation of two peasant women by an urban woman presents only 'a half of the picture', by drawing upon the utopian imagery of happy peasant families. This imagery finds expression in Roy's 'imagined' rural idyll, which is accentuated to perfection by the figures of two perfect peasant wives.

Textual strategies, ideologies and utopias

I will now turn to the fiction from *Eksathe*. Like Bengali literature in general, the short stories in *Eksathe* are written by the middle class, for middle-class readers, but not always about the middle class. In my survey of *Eksathe* issues, I found that most of these narratives are concerned with the lives of middle-class women in the institutions of family and marriage. These stories are most often about crisis situations in a married woman's life. To scrutinize how these narratives portray and resolve the crises, I have selected two short stories for a close reading. The first story titled "*Sarbajayee*" (The Champion) was published in *Eksathe*'s December 2006 issue. The author is Nibedita Chakraborty. The second narrative by Krishna Basu is titled "*MaanusherNoon*" (Human Worth) and came out in the periodical's October 2005 issue.

The storyline of the first narrative focuses on Bandana, the fourth child in a middle-class family. She is married to Sudhanshu Dutta Chowdhury, a marriage arranged by her parents. Bandana's husband has a well-paid job, the regional manager of a bank. After a few years, they have a daughter and build a house. Over time, Bandana becomes unhappy with the marriage. Sudhanshu often has sexual relationships with other women. While Bandana does not accept this waywardness, she does not file for divorce. She focuses all her attention on her daughter and goes to a nursing school. Very soon, Bandana and Sudhanshu amicably separate, and Bandana becomes the matron of a reputed nursing home (a private hospital). After their separation, Bandana does not keep in touch with her husband. She decides not to divorce Sudhanshu for two reasons: her marital status will act as a kind of protective armor (*rakshaa kabach*)⁷⁴, and it will augur well for her daughter's future.

⁷⁴ The narrative does not specify what she needs to be protected from. But one can read it as protection against the social stigma associated with divorced women.

Bandana devotes her entire life to bringing up her daughter. Bandana knows that it is hard to predict whether a girl will have a happy married life and future, so she does everything she can to give her daughter every possible means for happiness and fulfillment. As a young girl, the daughter is demanding, and at school she has numerous friends. Often, Bandana goes beyond her physical limit to make her daughter happy. She comes back from work tired and prepares food for her daughter's friends who visit her. "Bandana silently accepted everything just for her daughter, since she had faced cruel behavior from her husband and the ultimate disgrace for a woman [namely, separation]" (Chakraborty 2006: 42). But then things become more difficult for her. Although Bandana leads an ascetic life (*sannyasinee-er jeeban*), her daughter takes after her father. The daughter believes in Western values, she does not want to marry, and she is willful and wanton (*swecchaacharinee*). She finishes an M.A. degree in English and joins a private company as a receptionist. She starts returning late from work and often goes on official tours with her male colleagues. Bandana tries to dissuade her daughter from this wanton life but in vain. Bandana becomes more and more depressed, and blames herself for her daughter's wayward life. She tries hard to find out what went wrong with her daughter's upbringing. Meanwhile, the mother finds out that she has a fatal disease. She decides not to undergo a proper treatment, as she does not want to live long, which seems consistent with her character of self-sacrifice and self-denial. The daughter is kept in darkness about her mother's disease. Bandana keeps working and wishes that her life will end soon. The world around her becomes murky.

Suddenly, a ray of hope emerges on the horizon in the form of Dr. Suvojit Ghosh. Suvojit is a junior doctor at the nursing home. He is soft-spoken, hard working, and very bright. Bandana wonders why her daughter does not have an eye for such a man. Suvojit develops a deep respect

for Bandana. He is impressed by her efficiency, strong personality, and affectionate nature. Suvojit comes to know that Bandana is suffering from a fatal disease, but she is neglectful about it and will only live for a few more months. Suvojit rebukes her for being so careless. Bandana replies: “This is not suicide, this is self-attainment; I wished this for long. I have seen the world. No one’s life depends on me now” (Chakraborty 2006: 42). In an effort to save Bandana, Suvojit contacts her daughter and tells her about the fatal disease. Bandana’s daughter feels guilty. She returns home, embraces Bandana, and cries out: “Why did you punish me? Give me another chance? I will be your daughter. I have left everything, even my job” (Chakraborty 2006: 43). Bandana comes to know that Suvojit has been in touch with her for the past few days. He has told her about Bandana’s acute depression and its root. This statement seems to have brought about her daughter’s self-purification (*aatmashudhhi*). The daughter realizes that not Western values, but traditional Indian values of affection (*aantarikataa*) and motherly love/loving care (*mamataa*) can sustain life. The narrative ends with the scene of Bandana being taken to the hospital for surgery. As she climbs into the car, she turns her head and sees that Suvojit and her daughter are looking into each other’s eyes. A forgiving smile arches Bandana’s lips. The smile is that of a champion (*sarbajayee*), the word which gives the story its title.

The second narrative concerns a young woman of middle-class background named Sharoni. She works as a high school teacher and has a talent for reciting Bengali poems. She meets a good looking young man named Ronit at *Kabitayan*, a recitation club. Ronit has a well-paid job. Quite inevitably, they fall in love and after a brief courtship get married. Ronit proposes to conceive a child during their honeymoon. He says that it is better to have the first child early on while Sharoni is still young. He reasons that a late first pregnancy might lead to medical complications. But Sharoni wants to wait. She points out that these days nobody wants a second

or a third child. Ronit says that a single child often feels lonely, so it is better to have more than one. Sharoni realizes that Ronit is more pragmatic than she had previously thought. After marriage Sharoni continues to visit the recitation club but Ronit does not. Tensions soon arise between them. Ronit asserts that since Sharoni is now married she cannot devote time to the club: "If you are so fond of culture, why did you marry and think of setting up a household? ... Life before and after marriage are completely different things" (Basu 2005: 191). Sharoni gives in and soon she becomes pregnant. She stops visiting the recitation club. Ronit looks very happy. Sharoni feels very hurt, but she adjusts. Soon Sharoni gives birth to a daughter. After a while, her maternity leave comes to an end, and she returns to work. Ronit hires an educated babysitter, Maya, from an agency to make things comfortable for her. Maya turns out to be an efficient babysitter and Sharoni feels relieved to be back in school. As life moves on, Sharoni realizes that she hardly has any time to herself. Her time is divided between her teaching job, childcare, and housework. Sharoni wonders why she has not touched a poetry book for such a long time even though recitation was once her heart and soul. She makes up her mind to start revisiting the recitation club once her daughter grows up a little.

A year goes by, and a serious crisis arises in the relationship. One day, Sharoni returns home early from work and finds, to her utter disbelief, Ronit and the babysitter, Maya, in a compromising position. Both Ronit and Maya go out of the house in quick succession. Sharoni almost breaks down but somehow regains her composure. That evening she takes her daughter and goes to her parents' place. She candidly discusses the whole affair with her mother Sarbani. Sarbani patiently listens and then says: Why are you suffering so much? Has any man ever been faithful to his wife? What you have discovered remains unknown to most wives. Sharoni angrily says that she has left everything and most importantly her recitation for Ronit's family (*sansaar*),

but Sarbani reminds her that it is Sahroni's family too. Sharoni returns home and plans to have it out with Ronit that night. Ronit returns home and Sharoni bluntly asks: "Do you want me to stay with you? ... I left everything for you. I left the world of recitation. I just work at the school so that *your* [Ronit's] family runs smoothly... What relationship do you have with Maya?" (Basu 2005: 192) Ronit expresses complete surprise and denies having any relationship with Maya. After more altercations, he loses his temper and pushes Sharoni off a chair. She breaks down and Ronit goes into the bedroom. The next morning, Ronit apologizes for his rudeness but still denies the relationship with Maya. He accuses Sharoni of becoming obsessively suspicious.

Sharoni does not retort. She delves into a deep internal soliloquy: Women like her are so helpless. They have to work, bring up children, do household chores, lead a domestic life, and socialize with relatives. Without a maid, they have to remain absent from work. Then their employers become disappointed and express dissatisfaction. These women suffer from a constant sense of guilt that they are not doing justice to anyone. She reaches for the phone and tries to get a new babysitter from the agency. Then she phones her best friend Nandini who is also her colleague. Nandini is very modern (*ati aadhunik*); she is educated and has a lot of self-esteem. She is intelligent, well read, and practical. Nandini advises her that everything depends on what Sharoni wants. Sharoni weakly replies: "What should I want? I have such a small child. I have to bring her up. Why will my daughter suffer for Ronit's misdeeds?" (Basu 2005: 197) Sharoni decides to ask Sarbani (Sharoni's mother) to babysit for some time. Sarbani readily accepts. From the next day onward, Sharoni drops off her daughter at Sarbani's place before going to work.

Life moves on and Sharoni never raises the subject of Maya to Ronit. After a while, Ronit proposes to Sharoni that he wants to have another child. This enrages her and she speaks out:

“What do you want? I am having trouble raising one child, and you are thinking of another? Today, my recitation, my cultural interests are all gone. Do you want me to leave my job now?” Ronit loses his temper too and retorts back: “Listen, one who cooks also braids her hair (*je raandhe se chulo baandhe*)⁷⁵. There are many women who are more talented than you. They pursue their talents, work for a living, as well as raise children. It’s your incompetence that you cannot manage everything. If you were intelligent you could have managed everything” (Basu 2005: 200). Sharoni starts to feel helpless. She decides that after returning from work, she will give free recitation lessons to the neighborhood kids. She employs a cook to lighten her domestic responsibilities. Meanwhile, Ronit’s distant widowed aunt, who has no one in the world, moves in with Sharoni and Ronit to look after their daughter. The story ends with the following scene. It is nine on a Saturday night. Sharoni’s recitation students have left for their homes. Sharoni softly recites a line from a Bengali poem—“the humans have killed the most, still how far can I go leaving them (*Maanushei merechhe beshi, tabu maanushke chhere ar kotodur jabo*)?” The doorbell rings. It is Ronit. He is returning home from spending time with his friends after work. Sharoni opens the door wearing a smile on her face and moves aside.

First let us note that in the first narrative the daughter remains nameless. All other characters are named. The daughter does not initially follow the socially and culturally approved norms of womanly behavior. She is represented as a non-Sushilaa. She appears to us as subverting those norms by her ‘Western’ waywardness. She has a hedonist (modern) lifestyle compared to her mother’s ascetic (traditional) mode of living. The narrative hints that she may be engaging in pre-marital sex: ‘she often goes on official tours with her male colleagues’. This nameless subversive woman character is ultimately reformed and neutralized in the narrative. In

⁷⁵ As I note in chapter one, this is an everyday Bengali proverb which suggests that a woman should readily multitask.

a time-honoured textual strategy which delegitimizes the subversive woman by ‘taming’, assimilating or eliminating her, the daughter undergoes ‘self-purification’ and learns to value ‘Indian womanly values’. She leaves the receptionist job which her mother disapproved of, as it required an unmarried woman to go on office tours accompanied by her male colleagues, a subversion of traditional womanly behavioral norms. Realizing her mother’s social and moral dilemmas, the daughter blames herself and becomes normative and socially acceptable by giving up her job. She turns into a Sushilaa. At the end, the story suggests that the doctor and the daughter are in love and may even marry soon, allowing her to become a happy housewife who is capable of building a happy home—in other words, a perfect Sushilaa.

Here, the narrative sets closure on the expression of a woman’s selfhood through her productive work, and her choice of a career. The woman has to find fulfillment as a housewife, married to a man in a well-paid and respectable profession. Her selfhood will arise from her marital status. She will become respectable by virtue of her marriage to a respectable man. She has to appear respectable to her mother and to society. So, she has to leave the receptionist’s job which is indirectly deemed as ‘not so respectable’ by the *bhadralok/bhadramahilaa* gender code of ‘respectability’. Interestingly, the protagonist Bandana shares all these values and espouses these viewpoints. She does not divorce her husband, and reasons that her marital status will act as a protective armor (*raksha kabachh*). Bandana implies that her ‘still married status’ is more secure and socially approved than the status of a divorced woman. The stigma attached to divorced women can be illustrated through countless cultural references found in popular literature and films in India. Bandana also reasons that she does not divorce Sudhanshu for her daughter’s sake. Her decision underscores the significance of the patriarchal norm of operating in society with the paternal identity. She is apprehensive that without the father’s identity, her

daughter's life will be difficult. Even though Bandana is dissatisfied with her own marriage, she unhesitatingly believes that a marriage and a husband can provide women with social approval, security and ultimate happiness.

Bandana also contrasts her post-separation ascetic life with her daughter's wayward life. Even though she breaks up with her husband, Bandana scrupulously upholds the traditional *streedharma* of chastity. The narrative leaves no room for Bandana's own desire, but only for the stringent adherence to social norms. We again see a Sushilaa. Even though she did not love her ex-husband, Bandana never marries again or forges another relationship with a man. In addition, Bandana laments that her daughter has not been inspired by her exemplary ascetic life. Instead, the daughter is Westernized and wayward, a woman with desire. The failure which results from raising a child as a single mother is made apparent in the narrative. In fact, Bandana blames herself for this failure and makes attempts at self-destruction.

The author's characterization of Bandana is steadfastly normative and affirmative. The title of the short story suggests that Bandana is a champion (*sarbajayee*). She gets what she believes in. However, her belief is strictly bound to the normative framework set by her society. She is not challenging or going beyond it to any great extent. In the narrative, the socially approved norms of femininity are neither breached nor even encouraged to be breached. In the final analysis, Bandana upholds the patriarchal ideologies which discourage women's selfhood if the latter challenges the sanctity of the institutions of patriarchal marriage and family. Ultimately, Bandana aspires for a happy married life for her daughter. The blissful last image of her daughter's future marriage to the doctor and living happily ever after is the utopian aspect of this narrative affectionately upheld by Bandana.

If we look at the second narrative, Sharoni continues in a loveless marriage for the sake of her young daughter. Like the first narrative, the husband's extra-marital relationship is primarily responsible for the crack in the marriage. We also find that Ronit is quite insensitive about Sharoni's independent thought and action. Sharoni does not evince the courage of Bandana. Even though Sharoni has a moderately paid high school teacher's job, unlike Bandana, she is not confident in bringing up her child on her own. Sharoni remains unhappy but she does not seek separation or divorce. She submits to the social norm of valuing paternal identity and patriarchy. As a consolation she creates a space for expressing her creative self—the recitation school for children. The last scene shows that she pretends to be happy and simply carries on. The social stigma associated with divorced women, single mothers and children without paternal identity, is reinforced through these textual strategies. Once more, the authorial intention does not show signs of alternative imaginings which challenge patriarchal norms set by society. By deciding to continue in the unhappy marital relationship, Sharoni upholds the patriarchal ideologies through her practice. In the final analysis, she is unhappy and without a liberated subjectivity in her current material circumstance. She attempts to create a space to express her creative self and to be happy. Sharoni constructs an impractical scheme to improve her unhappy material situation. She does not seem to have the courage and alternative thinking to leave the 'unhappy home'. Rather, she accepts the role of an unhappy (yet responsible) Sushilaa.

Are the imaginative utopias constructed by the two authors actually realist dystopias where women lead unhappy, dependent and dehumanized lives? In both the narratives, a particular structure of man-woman relationship is pressed into service as a regular motif. The man first 'betrays' the woman, the woman sacrifices her subjectivity to remain socially acceptable and, to avoid social stigma, the woman becomes selfless for the upkeep of the family.

She remains unhappy and undermines any assertion of her subjectivity that could radically challenge the structure and ideology of patriarchy, the family stability and social cohesion. Both Bandana and Sharoni accept the dominance of the patriarchal ideology over their lives and subjectivities in the name of upholding the values of a stable family and marriage. These values accord security and social approval to women. In other words, they endorse the core ideological code of patriarchy that constitutes the Sushilaa archetype.

Mrinal speaks in a different voice

Here it is worthwhile to note that in the modern Bengali literary tradition there are instances in which the woman protagonist clearly voices her dissent against the patriarchal ideology, and moreover makes a direct attempt to end women's exploitation in the traditional institutions of marriage and family. One such instance is provided by Rabindranath Tagore's short story "*Streer Patra*" (The Wife's Letter) (1914).⁷⁶ The narrative is written in the form of a letter which Mrinal, the protagonist, is writing to her husband. The letter narrates the journey of Mrinal as a young girl in a lower middle-class family (her father was a small-time village priest) in rural Bengal, to become *mejoubou* (the wife of the second brother or the second daughter-in-law in a Bengali Hindu joint family) of a middle-class patriarchal Hindu joint family in Calcutta, and to finally being 'herself'. The patrilocal and patrilineal kinship structure of the upper-caste Hindu joint family she marries into is based on the norm of common residence and common kitchen. Bindu, a poor orphan girl and a distant relative comes to the joint family seeking shelter from her cousin's (paternal uncle's son) oppression. Later, she acts as a catalyst in the disquieting and poignant process of Mrinal's search for an autonomous self. The story provides a space for

⁷⁶ Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) was an eminent literary figure in Bengal and India. Tagore's literary works include novels, poems, short stories, plays, songs and essays.

the development of Mrinal's antagonism, criticism and opposition against the Hindu patriarchal family values and customs, particularly dowry, and for the expression of her eventual autonomy and (supposed) self-realization. Thus “*Streer Patra*” is an excellent example of how a cultural artifact such as a work of literature can embody a critique of the established order.

Let me quote here some of Mrinal's words which reflect her rebellious self against the Hindu patriarchal family ideology and androcentric values:

Mrinal is a girl, so she survived. If she had been a boy she could not have been saved ... *Jamraaj*⁷⁷ only steals things which are precious (Tagore 1978[1914]: 247).

That I was intelligent annoyed you time and again... [M]y mother was always worried about my intelligence, for it is disastrous for a woman to possess intelligence. A woman must live by prescribed norms. When she tries to use her rational mind, she is sure to stumble and be damned (Ibid., 248).

When self esteem declines, disrespect does not seem at all unjust... [A] woman is ashamed of feeling sad" (Ibid., 249).

But I would not return again to that house of yours... I have seen Bindu. I have known the status of women in the family. I have no need to return (Ibid., 260).

At one point, Mrinal sarcastically points out that her identity was merely based on her relations to other family members as *mejobou*. The conjugal relationship is circumscribed by patriarchal values and Hindu joint family norms. Mrinal is only known as *mejobou*, but not as Mrinal; that is why as a poet she remains unknown to her husband even after more than a decade of conjugal life.

I wrote poetry in secret... [T]here was my freedom, there was my true self... [Y]ou have not discovered in all these fifteen years that I am a poet. (Ibid., 248-249).

[Bindu] is greater than her own unfortunate life... she has become great by her death... in death she is everlasting. (Ibid., 260)

⁷⁷ Jamraaj or Yama is the god of death in Hindu mythology.

In “*Streer Patra*”, Bindu is forcefully married off to an insane man by Mrinal’s in-laws. Since she is an orphan, she is unable to provide dowry. Moreover, she was sheltered by Mrinal’s family. Consequently, the convenient way to ‘get rid of’ a dependent adolescent girl is to get her married to a non-marriageable insane man. The unhappy child bride Bindu commits suicide. Mrinal sarcastically writes in her letter that Bindu is emancipated from her oppressions, although only in death. Bindu's emancipation is tragic and sardonic. But even in the defeat of life by death, there is a sense of victory, of liberation from repressive society. Bindu, through her suicide, acts as a catalyst for the emergence of Mrinal's liberated subjectivity. This subjectivity is freed from her gendered institutional location. The sheer pain of Bindu's death and Mrinal's failure to protect the girl from a non-consensual unhappy marriage and eventual suicide makes Mrinal deeply realize the injustices and irrationalities of Hindu patriarchal social norms and values. It also gives Mrinal the courage to reinvent and assert her selfhood, to free herself from her conjugal relationship, the patriarchal joint family, from being *mejobou*, and reemerge as a new and 'true' Mrinal. She decides to leave her husband’s home and live an independent life. The narrative articulates elements of opposition against the status quo of Hindu patriarchy. Mrinal gives realization to the most impossible possibility of her time—independently deciding to break the bond of the so-called indissoluble Hindu marriage. Indeed, Mrinal is an alternative voice. Nevertheless, let us also note the presence of an irony here. The lower-class orphan Bindu had to die for the middle-class literate *bhadramahilaa* Mrinal to 'free herself' and be ‘reborn’. This narrative twist reinforces the class ideology and social hierarchy of Bengal.

The search for an alternative subjectivity

It should be noted that I do not intend here to set what has come to be canonized as ‘high literature’ against some lower form of ‘popular fiction’. The centrality of the writing/speaking woman in each of the three short stories is significant for my purposes. Mrinal clearly has the courage to write to her husband: "But I would not return again to that house of yours... I have seen Bindu. I have known the status of women in the family. I have no need to return" (Tagore 1978[1914]: 260). Unlike Mrinal, neither Bandana nor Sharoni could evince such a strong critique and take such a radical step against the patriarchal family ideology and structure. In the second narrative, the female protagonist Sharoni selects the security of a loveless marriage over the stigma and responsibility of a divorced or separated single motherhood. In the first story, Bandana evinces limited courage and resistance by separating from her husband, getting trained in nursing, becoming economically self-reliant and single-handedly raising her daughter. Nevertheless, quite akin to Sharoni, she does not challenge the social stigma associated with divorce and separation. Bandana could not muster the courage to divorce her husband. To her the married status of a woman translates into social security and approval. This is reflected in Bandana’s perception of her nameless and non-Sushilaa daughter. Both the female protagonists prefer to remain normative and socially approved in a rather unambivalent way. In addition, Bandana makes every effort to ‘reform’ her Westernized and wayward daughter into a Sushilaa. In both these narratives, the gendered nature of the contradictions that form the bedrock of the patriarchal family remain unquestioned.

“*Streer Patra*” belongs to the narrative tradition of liberal thinking on women’s issues in India. The story is set in early twentieth-century Bengal. This liberal tradition founded the basis for equal constitutional rights for women. But Bandana and Sharoni fails to inherit the proto-

feminist position of Mrinal to express their subjectivity. Perhaps this reflects the PBGMS's and the mainstream Indian left's failure to radicalize and transform women's situation in a more fundamental way, preferring instead to keep women bound to the agenda of building a *sukhee grihokon* (happy family), a cohesive society and a *sustha* (normal) nation-state.

In the case of the travelogue, the author's distinctly unambivalent representation of the two peasant wives and their work screens out the gender contradictions that constitute a patriarchal family, a capitalist economy and a nation-state. The state and its economy heavily rely on such a family as the current source of unpaid labour, and the future source of surplus value and the next generation of disciplined citizens and workers. The family also provides much of the ideological cement that sustains the capitalist state and economy. In Roy's account, the selfless, ever so efficient, non-complaining peasant wives form the backbone of the happy peasant household, the prospering village community and the developing nation-state. The points of ideological convergence between the stories and the travelogue consistent in how they reinforce of the normative ideologies of a sacrosanct patriarchal family and the gendered (Sushilaa) role of women within and outside the family. Production, sexuality, reproduction and socialization are the four axes along which 'women in family' remain precariously balanced. The PBGMS cultural discourse does not agitate this balance in the name of the social cohesion that will forge a strong nation-state.

The normative and cohesive families primarily constituted by normative and non-subversive women are the microcosms of a cohesive and disciplinary socialist nation-state which disallows any space for dissidence and anarchy. Thus, women play a crucial role in the formation of a cohesive family and a strong socialist nation-state where everyone and everything remain disciplined, well-oiled and useful for the smooth operation of the political and economic mega-

machines. In the final analysis, we witness that in the PBGMS cultural discourse, women remain objects serving the family, society and the nation-state. They sacrifice their subjectivity for the sake of a happy family and a happy nation-state. An editorial from *Eksathe* states: “The indication of a society’s moral value, and the foundation of a ‘sustha’ (normal), *sundar* (beautiful), and humane family life is women’s honour and respectability. Without respect and faith in man-woman relationship, family and social life cannot become *swaabhabik* (natural)” (*Eksathe* editorial, December, 1996: 7). Overall, the message delivered by the cultural discourse is clear: the search for a stable family, a cohesive society and a strong modern nation-state is not trivial but a natural (*swaabhabik*) necessity.

But in what way does Mrinal’s subjectivity present an alternative imagining to the PBGMS cultural discourse? Mrinal does not know what kind of formation her new subjectivity will take. Although she is aware of what she does not want to be, she does not know what she wants to be. Mrinal leaves her home in search of her alternative subjectivity. This leads her to draw inspiration from the life of Mirabai, a Bhakti⁷⁸ woman devotee and a spiritual seer. Mrinal’s refuge to ‘private spiritualism’ is what Jameson terms as one of the “blind zones in which the individual subject seeks refuge, in pursuit of a purely individual, a merely psychological, project of salvation” (Jameson 1981: 20). But the subject formation of an individual is basically a political process: “The only effective liberation from such constraint begins with the recognition that there is nothing that is not social and historical – indeed, that everything is ‘in the last analysis’ political” (Jameson 1981: 20). One of the indications of the content of this new subject formation is provided by Foucault, who argues that the political formation of subjectivity is also a refusal of being individualized by the state. “We have to

⁷⁸ The Bhakti religious movement emerged in parts of medieval India as a critique to orthodox Hinduism. The movement rejected Brahmanical ritualism, the caste hierarchy and to an extent Hindu gender norms to promote the philosophy of direct communion with the male god (usually Krishna) through devotional love.

promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of this kind of individuality that has been imposed on us for several centuries” (Foucault 2003a: 134). In “*Streer Patra*”, Mrinal refused to be individualized by the patriarchal family. Whereas Mrinal most clearly represents a ‘self-determining’ subjectivity, Bandana and Sharoni stand for the denial of self-determining subjectivity. For the protagonists in the PBGMS cultural discourse, the search for an alternative subjectivity could begin by refusing to be individualized by the family and the nation-state.

Conclusion

To practice criticism demands not only a liberation of thought, but also an intellectual activity that makes conflicts visible through the action of theory. If transformation is to be achieved, it can only be realized in a permanent state of criticism (Foucault 1990a:152).

We have to remember that the key to a planned development is a planned family (Basu October, 2004: 64).

When a backward country is trying to build socialism, it is natural that during the long initial period its productive forces will not be up to the level of those in developed capitalist countries and that it will not be able to eliminate poverty completely. Accordingly, in building socialism we must do all we can to develop the productive forces and gradually eliminate poverty, constantly raising the people's living standards. Otherwise, how will socialism be able to triumph over capitalism? (Deng Xiaoping, cited in Yechury 1999)

As Aijaz Ahmad observes, “the socialist project is essentially universalist in character, and socialism, even as a transitional mode, cannot exist except on a transnational basis; yet the *struggle* for even the prospect of that transition presumes a national basis, in so far as the already existing structures of the nation-state are a fundamental reality of the very terrain on which actual class conflicts take place” (Ahmad 1994: 317-318; emphasis in original). Here Ahmad reiterates that socialism is as an alternative practice to capitalism. Like capitalism, socialism cannot exist without being global. But what Ahmad does not explore is how in a post-colonial society like India, the homogenized and rigid framework of the nation-state, as deployed by the CPI-M, might confine the struggle for socialism within the hardened boundary of the nation-state. As I already discussed in the introduction, the CPI-M endorses the ideology that a strong nation-state can act as an instrument of socio-economic development and progress. This endorsement has a historical origin in India’s colonial past and the country’s anti-colonial struggles. The dominant nationalist argument against colonialism emerged in India during the late nineteenth century. Manu Goswami points out that a distinctive political economy of

nationhood was forged during a specific historical conjuncture characterized by the intensification of colonial socio-economic domination, devastating famines, deepening impoverishment, high inflation, and the sharpening of the lived unevenness of colonial space-time. Thus, the authors of Indian economics, an anti-colonial disciplinary formation rooted in the everyday experience of colonial unevenness, poisted *the nation as the natural scale of capital accumulation* and the institutional means of overcoming the problem of colonial unevenness. They did so through an engagement with the problem of unevenness on multiple spatial scales and in political, economic and social spheres (Goswami 2005: 211).⁷⁹

Besides, the anti-imperial communist standpoint (that is imperialism as the highest stage of capitalism)⁸⁰, the CPI-M has inherited the foregoing intellectual and political tradition from India's anti-colonial nationalist past. The CPI-M aspires to build a single party ruled socialist Indian nation-state and it perceives the nation-state as the natural scale of capital accumulation and the institutional mechanism to overcome the problem of India's underdevelopment and its low level of productive forces. In recent times, the CPI-M has often tried to learn from an actually existing form of socialism, the socialism as practised in China: "It needs to be noted that every socialist revolution, based on a concrete analysis of concrete conditions, worked out its approach towards developing rapidly the productive forces. ...To a certain extent, what we find in the post-reform socialist China is a reflection of the theoretical positions Lenin had taken regarding state capitalism. *The main question involved is that of increasing the productive forces in a backward economy to a level that can sustain large-scale socialist construction*" (Yechury 1999; my emphasis). Yechury, a high ranking CPI-M ideologue and party official, emphasizes that in an economically backward country the state has to play the pivotal role of developing the

⁷⁹ In his celebrated 'drain thesis', Dadabhai Naoroji emphasized the extractive relationship between Britain and India. This thesis inverted the claims of progress generated by the British colonial state (Goswami 2005: 211).

⁸⁰ The idea comes from Lenin's celebrated work *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1916).

productive forces. So the state also has to take a keen interest in the process of capital accumulation, since the latter is the first stage of the development of productive forces.⁸¹ The CPI-M subscribes to the view that in a developing country such as India, where productive forces are underdeveloped, the state has to play the pivotal role of capital accumulation in order to develop the productive forces and bring forth the socialist transformation of the country.

Since 1947, the nation-state is a fundamental political and economic reality in post-colonial India. The CPI-M's political ideology is framed by this fundamental reality of the post-colonial Indian nation-state. As I have discussed in the introduction, the editorials from the CPI-M's periodical *People's Democracy* substantiate the foregoing argument. For instance, the editorial I quoted from at the beginning of this thesis pronounces nonchalantly that the unity and integrity of India is 'non-negotiable' (*People's Democracy*, January 25, 2009). The editorial leaves unsaid that the unity and integrity of India is to be maintained through the apparatus of the state. The political party CPI-M and its mass organizations such as the PBGMS are part of India's civil society. These political groups from the country's civil society can act as the Indian nation-state's ideological apparatuses to promote various national interests, such as capital accumulation and the country's internal and external security.⁸² If we look at India's national interest of capital accumulation, we can identify that there is a need to build a disciplined and

⁸¹ In fact, the process of capital accumulation by the state in a post-colonial developing country like India could take place in the cruel form of 'the primitive accumulation of capital'. See the next footnote for the elaboration of this point.

⁸² In 2007, Tata Motors had reached an agreement with the CPI-M led state government in West Bengal to set up a car-manufacturing unit at Singur. The land earmarked for the project is very fertile and produces multiple crops. The peasants and landless agricultural workers vehemently opposed the government's plan to acquire their lands for handing over to the corporation. What followed bears an eerie similarity to Marx's formulation of the process of 'primitive accumulation of capital'. The state government used its repressive apparatus to intimidate the organisation formed by the peasants to resist the attempts of the government to evict them from their land. At the same time, a number of CPI-M affiliated mass organisations were deployed to "explain" to the peasants that the compensation money being offered was more than sufficient compensation. In other words, these organisations were being deployed to carry out the task of cultural [ideological] transformation – from a holistic culture of land and ecology to the commodity culture that is consistent with the needs of global capital (Basu 2007: 1283-1284).

sustha nation-state, where various productive and reproductive population groups can be controlled to work in the interests of India's capital accumulation. In this thesis, I have focused on one such population group, that is, women. In particular, I have explored and analyzed how a communist party's textually mediated discourse aims to mobilize and discipline women for the cause building a *sustha* socialist nation-state. The control and mobilization of women's labor ('*mojud shakti*' or reserve force of labor), sexuality and fertility ('*naareera maatrijaati*' or women are a mother's community; women should bring forth the future members of the state or '*aagaami diner raashtrikder*') serve the biopolitical project of the state. The biopolitical project ultimately serves the nation-state's need for capital accumulation. In my view, biopolitics in a post-colonial developing country is not only concerned with the 'population as a political and scientific problem site', but it is also about the 'population as an economic problem site'. The control and mobilization of an economically backward country's population is intimately and ultimately connected to the nation-state's drive for capital accumulation.

In a post-colonial developing country, where the state's capital accumulation plays an important role in its socio-economic development, the project of 'equality' is substantially curtailed by the logic of development and growth. The capital accumulation needs of a post-colonial nation-state demand curtailment of the freedom of its constitutive population groups, one of them being 'women'. The socialist struggle for developing the productive forces in a post-colonial developing country involves the formation and mobilization of a disciplined and *sustha* (normal) citizen, in particular a *sustha* female citizen. The socialist nation-state's struggle to accumulate capital, to develop its productive forces, and to usher in socialist transformation appears as rational and progressive. But behind the meta-narrative of progress lies many micro-narratives of control, discipline, normatization and mobilization. The normalization (articulated

through the discourse of '*sustha*') aims to control 'dis-order' and maximize the productive/reproductive forces of the population, in particular women, in order to serve the nation-state's need for capital accumulation. My thesis attempts to study the complex linkages between the questions of post-colonial nationalism, post-colonial socialism and gender equality in a post-colonial developing country like India.

In this thesis, I have shown the various textually mediated ways in which a communist party affiliated women's mass organization, in pursuit of building a socialist nation-state, attempts to discipline and mobilize its political constituency of women. The textual discourse of the party uses the ideology of 'equality' to organize, mould and utilize women in the name of the development of the nation-state. For example, I show how a socialist mass organization's rallying point on 'equality for men and women in the workplace and within the family' can ultimately benefit the nation-state's need for capital accumulation by efficiently 'managing' the state's production and reproduction requirements. In PBGMS textual discourse, 'equality' is deployed to control women's labor within and outside the family. To be sure, it becomes convenient for a nation-state to mobilise women under the guise of 'economic equality'. If there are no traditional fetters working against women who go out of the home to work, their entry into the sphere of social production fulfills the nation-state's need for a reserve force of labour ('*mojud shakti*'). At the same time, the discourse expresses an ideology of equality which is definitely more advanced than the ideology of 'formal political equality' as espoused by the national bourgeoisie in post-colonial countries like India.

My thesis contends that PBGMS textual discourse on 'equality for women at home and outside' has a logic of power and discipline of its own which serves to mobilize women in the name of a '*sustha*' nation-state. The aspiration to build a 'normal (*sustha*)' socialist nation-state

drives the organization to deploy the ideologies of ‘*sustha*’, ‘*tyaag*’, ‘macro-motherhood’, ‘social eugenics’ and ‘the socialist Sushilaa archetype’ in their published texts. This discourse draws upon certain gendered ideologies concerning women, such as the Gaandhaaree metaphor for socially responsible ‘macro-motherhood’, the ethic of *tyaag* for the greater good, and ‘the Sushilaa archetype’ of good womanhood, from India’s cultural tradition, and it combines these traditional gendered ideologies with some modern political ideologies, such as socialism, nationalism, state-driven developmentalism. The upshot of this *mélange* of ideologies in the PBGMS textual discourse is what I have termed a ‘syncretic socialism’. Here it should be noted that *the PBGMS selectively appropriates* traditional gendered ideologies from India’s past which serve the purpose of (re)producing normalized (*sustha*), disciplined and mobilizable women. In colonial and pre-colonial India, the status of women has varied widely, from a position of relative authority and freedom to one of utter subservience. The historian of caste Sekahar Bandyopadhyay points out that the absence of women’s freedom was more a problem for the high caste women following a Brahminical gender code⁸³, than it was for the lower castes and untouchables (*dalits*), for whom the existential compulsion and demand for productive labor broke the barriers of unfreedom that enchained their caste ‘superiors’. The colonial teleological construction of the ‘women’s question’ and the maladies of the upper castes were stereotyped as the problems of Indian womanhood in general. Notwithstanding the compassion of the individual male reformers from the social category of *bhadralok*, the 19th century social reforms concerning women were largely attempts by the Hindu high caste patriarchy to reclaim their control over the private space, to seize the initiative to reform it, and thereby to live up to the standards of rationality prescribed by the colonial modernizing project (Bandyopadhyay 2004: 143).

⁸³ As women were the conduits (as reproducing bodies) of the bodily purity of the caste, some Brahmanical texts prescribed pre-puberty marriage and emphasized the ban on inter-caste marriage (Bandyopadhyay 2004: 147). This is arguably a form of ‘caste eugenics’ which centres on the control of the bodies of upper caste women.

Inheriting this intellectual and historical legacy from 19th century ‘Bengal Renaissance’, PBGMS textual discourse never draws inspiration from India’s lower caste communities, among whom the gender norms were relatively relaxed and egalitarian.⁸⁴ In this sense, the discourse shows some typical characteristics of the *bhadralok/bhadramahilaa* modernity which did not draw inspiration regarding ‘gender equality’ from the ‘lower’ caste communities of Indian society in order to reform the upper caste Hindu patriarchy. Rather, the *bhadralok* modernity always looked towards the European Enlightenment and the Victorian ideal of companionate marriage to derive inspiration. The textual discourse of the socialist PBGMS is ‘selectively’ syncretic about what it borrows from the country’s cultural and social tradition. In fact, the nature of that borrowing reveals the dominant *bhadralok/bhadramahilaa* characteristics of the textual discourse. Thus, like the *bhadralok* discourse on gender reform and modernity, the PBGMS textual discourse is largely ‘Eurocentric’ and it remains oblivious to the relatively gender-neutral ‘lower’ caste cultural and social practices in India and Bengal.

I identify and analyze these traditional and modern ideological codes that structure the PBGMS textual discourse on socialism and womanhood and argue that this form of ‘syncretic socialism’ does not produce a dynamic pluralism and heterogeneity. Rather, the ‘syncretic socialism’ of the PBGMS produces a nation-state centric singularism of the ‘will to mobilize and discipline’ women in the name of building a *sustha* socialist nation-state. The deployments of

⁸⁴ For instance, in Bengal until the late 19th century, lower caste groups unlike the three upper caste groups practiced various types of widow remarriage. Not burdened by the compulsions of maintaining ‘bodily purity’, the Kahar (an untouchable agricultural laboring community) women were more forthright in expressing their physical passion, enjoyed more freedom in matters of marriage and divorce, extramarital affairs were permissible within limits, widow remarriage and *sanga* (second marriage) between Kahar men and women remained an accepted form of union even in the first half of the 20th century. But it should be noted that Kahar women were sexually exploited by upper caste men in the village on a regular basis and Kahar men held their women responsible for such ‘transgressions’, rather than raising their fingers against the powerful upper caste men. In the early 20th century some of the upwardly mobile middle and lower castes (e.g. the Namasudras and Rajbanshis), seeking social status, started to follow a stricter gender codes by regularizing marriage rituals and norms, and by prohibiting divorce (Bandyopadhyay 2004: 152 and 155).

these selective traditional-cultural and modern-political ideological codes serve the aim to discipline women in order to turn them into ‘functional’ women within and outside the family who espouse a ‘*sustha*’ desire, a ‘*sustha*’ set of values and above all lead a ‘*sustha*’ way of productive/reproductive life that serves the project of building a *sustha* nation-state. Overall, the deployment of a discourse of ‘syncretic socialism’ in PBGMS texts serves the aim of controlling and mobilizing women with an ‘elite-culture’s’ gendered ideological codes for the purpose of building a *sustha* nation-state.

I am not arguing that the PBGMS’s struggle against gender inequality is unreal or insincere. Obviously, in the realm of everyday politics, the PBGMS is fighting for a more democratic society for women across class, community and caste boundaries. The PBGMS is a more mass-based organization than city-based autonomous women’s organizations in India. But using perspectives from Marxism (e.g. the process of capital accumulation by the state for the development of productive forces), Materialist-Feminism (e.g. the oppression of women by the structures of production, reproduction, sexuality and socialization in both capitalist and socialist social systems) and Foucauldian theory (e.g. the modern state’s deployment of bio-power to control and regulate the population in order to meet its biopolitical needs of maximizing the (re)-productive forces of the population), I have questioned here the organization’s promotion of ‘equality’, ‘happy family’ and the ‘*sustha* nation-state, culture and society’. In particular, I have paid attention to the post-colonial situatedness of this textual discourse. In a post-colonial and developing country, a strong family becomes crucial for building a strong nation-state. As Biman Basu, an important ideologue of the CPI-M observes: “We have to remember that the key to a planned development is a planned family” (Basu, October, 2004: 64).⁸⁵ Christine Riddiough has

⁸⁵ In a similar vein, we find that under Stalin’s regime the official journal of the Commissariat of Justice wrote in 1939: “The State cannot exist without the family” (quoted in Mitchell 1984: 44).

pointed out that the basic unit of civil society is the family and its underlying ideological basis is a certain form of puritanism. In the case of the PBGMS, this puritanism consists of chaste womanhood, dutiful motherhood and ascetic widowhood, which I have exemplified in my analysis of the fictional narratives from *Eksathe*. Riddiough writes:

We can use Gramsci's civil society concept to connect feminism and socialism through an analysis of the role of the family and its relationship to capitalism, the oppression of women, and the oppression of gay people. The family, like society as a whole, contains contradictions. In earlier systems, it was an important part of the production process, but with the rise of capitalism, the focus was on the individual workers. The family unit adapted to this situation and in a capitalist economy [it] serves the ruling class in other ways. *Rather than act as a part of the production process, the family acts as a part of civil society.* The family is the site of child bearing and rearing and it is the chief consumer unit of society. In these roles it is responsible for the reproduction of workers (as Engels suggests in *The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State*), including particularly the reproduction of ideology. The family teaches us our first lessons in ruling class ideology and it also lends legitimacy to other institutions of civil society. It is through our families that we first learn religion, that we are taught to be good citizens, from which we are sent out to school. (Riddiough 1986: 80)

We have to remember that the socialist PBGMS does not disqualify women from the public sphere or from attaining equality. The PBGMS relentlessly fights for women's equal rights. It encourages women to join the spheres of social production and public life. *But these women are expected to join the public sphere and the social production as 'women'.* This ideology becomes apparent in my discussion of the standpoint of the PBGMS on the dress code of female teachers. In addition, in recent times the PBGMS-initiated Women's Self-help groups have been found to reinforce gendered roles and norms, such as the double burden of housework and 'productive'

work, even though these groups help rural women to join social production and earn some income (Bhattacharya, September 11, 2008). The PBGMS also views women as an embodiment of sexual morality and chastity, as we can see from the short stories from *Eksathe*, and family piety, as is clear from the selfless and multi-tasking peasant wives from the travelogue from *Eksathe*. Throughout this thesis, I show that the importance of family for building a ‘*sustha*’ socialist nation-state is inscribed within the textual discourse of the organization.

From where did the ‘socialist’ PBGMS inherit the legacy of treating the family and women’s role within it as sacrosanct and ethical? What is the connection between the sanctity of the happy family and the sacrosanct Indian nation-state and the utopian socialist state?

According to Lindsey German,

[The family’s] existence depends upon two fundamental factors, although there are many subsidiary things involved as well. First we have to look at the economic interests of capital in maintaining the family. The role the family plays in reproducing the existing workforce and the next generation of workers has been amply documented. *The existence of the family wage (even if today it barely covers the reproduction of the family and needs to be supplemented by state benefits and by women’s mainly part-time work) and unpaid labour in the home allow the costs of reproduction to be borne very cheaply.* If the system were capable of sustained economic expansion over many decades, then, hypothetically, the economic functions of the family could be replaced by other mechanisms. As Irene Bruegel has demonstrated conclusively, it would be possible for the system to increase total surplus value if most (if not all) housework and child care were carried out by capitalistically organized paid labour, ‘freeing’ all women to produce value and surplus value for capital. But to reorganize reproduction in this way would involve massive expenditure on investment in new childcare facilities and probably a complete restructuring of the housing stock. This is not something which is going to be undertaken in the present crisis-ridden phase of the system—especially since the reserve army of the unemployed is amply large enough for the system’s likely labour needs. And so women are left with the responsibility for childbirth and childcare. This above all

explains why the family and women's oppression continue. Women's roles as mothers and child-rearers structure their whole lives. Part-time working is a product of their role as mothers. Unequal and generally low pay is a product of them not being considered as breadwinners. From the beginning of their lives in capitalist society, the assumption is that they are going to be something different from men. Their pinnacle of achievement is presented as motherhood and marriage (German 1981: <http://www.isj.org.uk/?id=240>; my emphasis).

If in the capitalist system, the economy plays an important role to keep the family alive as a 'functional' institution, in the PBGMS's vision of a socialist state, the family's *raison d'être* is more than economic. Both in advanced capitalist and actually existing socialist societies, the control and management of various population groups to maintain the process of social production are equally important. The institution of family is the site where the state's bio-power can be efficiently applied to control and organize the productive and reproductive capabilities of the population. The institution of family can produce disciplined and normalized individuals who can work for the maximization of the state's productive forces. The control of the family is the key to the development of a nation-state's productive forces and the state's need for capital accumulation. The family is the most effective site at which the dual components of the nation-state's bio-power, that is, anatomo-politics (at the level of individual bodies) and biopolitics (at the level of a population), can operate.

Now, in a capitalist democratic society, this power dynamic between the state and the family has a diffuse character because there are other forces, such as a strong civil society and the market, which also act upon the family in different ways. But in actually existing socialist societies, the power dynamic between the state and the family is more concentrated in nature since there are virtually no civil society institutions or market forces. In actually existing socialist

countries, the state's control over the family is more direct.⁸⁶ The socialist state's direct responsibility for capital accumulation makes it 'more directly interested' in controlling and mobilizing the institution of family. That is why, in socialist textual discourse such as that of the PBGMS, the concern with the idea of a '*sustha*' family managed by a '*sustha*' wife-cum-mother is of utmost significance. The '*sustha*' family exists to discipline and normalize its members (through the deployment of '*sustha*' ideologies) in order to serve the interests of the capital accumulation of the nation-state.⁸⁷

Interestingly, although the PBGMS's parent party the CPI-M is still not in power as the single party ruling over a 'socialist India', the party and its mass organizations are anxious about the socialist future of India. While German shows the economic reasons for the family's importance for a capitalist state, there are also non-economic reasons for the family's continued relevance to a socialist state in the textual discourse of the PBGMS in India. Here we have to enquire: What is the lynch-pin of the moral structure called the family? Whose body, decency, and sexuality constitute the kernel of morality, honour and ontology, and the existential logic of the family? The analysis of the PBGMS's textual discourse shows that the woman as a wife and as a mother is that lynch-pin. If this woman is 'immoral', practices 'non-*sustha* sexuality' and does not embrace marriage, motherhood, and ascetic widowhood, the moral structure and the existential logic of the family is imperiled. Consequently, the ethical root of the modern nation-state is uprooted. *The foundation of the disciplinary and capital accumulating society becomes fractured*, and this gives rise to an uncontrollable, unpredictable and chaotic situation.

⁸⁶ China's one child policy is a case in point.

⁸⁷ As noted in chapter two, in the post-Lenin Soviet Union and in post-war Eastern Europe the family's sacrosanct role was upheld for the sake of a more efficient state accumulation of capital.

But why should the PBGMS (and the CPI-M) be anxious about such a chaos? What would they lose or gain? Why are some ‘chaotic situations’ (e.g. divorce, same-sex union, non-ascetic widowhood, and the non-institutional practice of female sexuality) unconceivable or unimaginable in PBGMS textual discourse? I argue that since the CPI-M and its mass organizations (e.g. the PBGMS) want to assume power over the Indian state, the preservation of the sanctified family and the normalized roles women play roles as wives, mothers, social producers, citizens and reserve workers is of utmost significance to them.

The PBGMS resists the forces of capitalism and imperialism but at the same time it struggles for a disciplined, secure and normal (*sustha*) nation-state. This state will play a pivotal role in accumulating capital under one-party rule, and in building a strong socialist nation. I have used the concept of *the apparatus of socialism and womanhood* to identify how the PBGMS’s demand for women’s equality goes hand in hand with a strict adherence to women’s (traditional) role as the lynch-pin of family unity, piety and morality. Through the apparatus of socialism and womanhood, the PBGMS wants to establish women’s equal rights without fundamentally transforming the traditional role of women within the family as an ethical, dutiful, pious and chaste wife-cum-mother. Most importantly, in order to serve the post-colonial nation state’s interest to accumulate capital, this apparatus does not prevent women from participating in the production process both at home and outside it.

My thesis shows that the PBGMS, and in turn the mainstream Indian left’s textual discourse on women’s emancipation is circumscribed by two assumptions: (a) a well-knit and sanctified heterosexual family forms the (reproductive-cum-productive) bedrock of a strong socialist nation-state; and (b) women’s special role in the family is above all as a moral, pious and dutiful wife-cum-mother entity. The PBGMS ideologues frequently claim that their

discourse on women is a radical break from the feudal and bourgeois notions of the 'women's question'. I argue that their discourse is ultimately a new shackle that tames a woman's drive to find a more independent and emancipated space in society. In the end, civil society institutions such as the political party (e.g. the CPI-M) and the party affiliated women's mass organization (e.g. the PBGMS) want to 'capture state power'. This will to power and desire to rule drive the party and its mass organizations to delimit their political vision, horizon and program within the hardened and homogenized paradigm of a strong nation-state. The desire to rule over a *sustha* (normal) nation-state prompts the party, through its mass organization, to simultaneously *discipline and mobilize* women in such a manner that the moral and economic foundation of the Indian nation-state (i.e. the happy family) is not uprooted by '(un)womanly' desires and aspirations which are ab-normal (*a-sustha*), troublesome and unhealthy. This simultaneous process, the double act of mobilization and discipline, is a secure path to reach the political goal of 'capturing state power' and ruling over a normal (*sustha*) nation-state.

To visually illustrate this double act of mobilization and discipline, I want to conclude by projecting the image of *Ratha Yatra*. *Ratha* (Chariot) *Yatra* (Journey) is an annual Hindu festival celebrating Lord Jagannath's (an incarnation of the male deity Krishna) journey from one destination to another. Jagannath, along with his two siblings, make this journey by riding huge chariots pulled through public streets by millions of devotees (*bhaktas*). Using long and thick ropes, devotees pull the sacred *ratha*. Without the hard work of these devotees, Jagannath's *ratha* will not move an inch and he cannot complete his desired journey. The devotees remain disciplined in their movement while they pull at the rope so that the *ratha* moves in the prescribed and desired direction. They also possess enormous devotion (*bhakti*) and faith in order to become mobilized for the cause of Jagannath's journey, and appease the Lord to receive his

divine blessings. In light of the arguments made in this thesis, I visualize the consecrated Indian nation-state as Lord Jagannath on his sacred *ratha*. The imagined spirit of India as a nation is Lord Jagannath, a larger than life being. The enormous *ratha* (chariot) that he rides can be imagined as the state machinery (the apparatus) which keeps the Indian nation moving from an ‘underdeveloped’ condition to a developed and socialist nation-state.

Since 1947, the Indian nation-state has been making the epic journey on the path of economic and political development. It is moving from an exploited, underdeveloped and colonial situation to a developed, democratic and post-colonial condition. The journey can be made possible if its citizens, who originate from a multitude of structural locations, such as *aadivaasees* (the indigenous people), *dalits* (the untouchables), women, workers, and peasants, are mobilized to pull the mammoth *ratha*, the Indian nation-state. Through this process of mobilizing in the name of a ‘*sustha*’ nation-state, the process of disciplining the diverse, ‘divisive’ and ‘disorderly’ political, cultural, economic, and libidinal desires of these groups is accomplished by various civil society bodies, such as the political party and its mass organizations. This effort ensures that the party can successfully realize its desire to rule over a normal, untroubled, secure, and peaceful nation-state. This security and this normalcy (*susthataa*) are deemed imperative since the Indian nation-state is steadily traversing the path of development by developing its productive forces and accumulating capital. A ‘wrong’ pull towards a non-prescribed direction can obstruct that journey. Hence, a *sustha* family having *sustha* women and *sustha* men are imperative for building a *sustha* Indian nation-state.

As Sumit Sarkar points out, “in the defence of national sovereignty against global imperialism, secular political nationalism might be at times a necessary fall-back position. But there remains a need, simultaneously, to look beyond the parameters of ‘statist’ and ‘culturalist’

nationalisms alike...to move towards socially radical and internationalist values appropriate to our vastly transformed time (Sarkar 2002: 9). In this thesis, I have tried to present how a socialist women's organization's textual discourse on socialism and women's emancipation is circumscribed by the hardened parameters of the nation-state, and a selective appropriation of gendered ideologies from an 'elite cultural discourse'. This textual discourse is characterized by 'syncretic socialism' which aims to mobilize and discipline women's labor, sexuality and fertility for the purpose of building a *sustha* socialist nation-state.

Rabindranath Tagore writes in a poem: *Nikhiler aalo puurba aakaashe jolilo punyodine / Eksaathe jaaraa cholibe taahaaraa sokolere 'nik chine'* (The universe's light burns in the eastern sky on the auspicious day / Let those who'll walk together 'recognize' each other). The 'syncretic socialism' expressed in the PBGMS's textual discourse attempts to control the light, the light that could create the condition for the recognition of heterogeneous faces. It attempts to persuade everyone that in order to reach the 'final' destination of a '*sustha*' socialist Indian nation-state, each must walk together (*eksaathe*) with a homogeneous (normalized) face.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Abbreviations:

ABP	<i>Ananda Bazar Patrika</i>
ABVP	Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (All India Student Association)
AIDWA	All India Democratic Women's Association
AIWC	All India Women's Conference
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party (Indian People's Party)
CPI	Communist Party of India
CPI-M	Communist Party of India- Marxist
ISA	Ideological State Apparatus
MARS	Mahilaa Atmaraksha Samiti (Women's Association for Self-defense)
PBGMS	Paschim Banga Ganatantrik Mahilaa Samity (West Bengal Democratic Women's Association)
PRC	The People's Republic of China
RSS	Rashtriya Svayamsevak Sangh
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

Appendix B

Note on Transliteration:

There are no fixed rules for romanizing words in Bengali/Baanglaa, whose sounds are different from Sanskrit and Hindi. I have loosely followed the transliteration convention for Sanskrit without impeding the text with diacritic marks. In the following transliteration scheme Bengali consonants remain problematic, but vowels are reasonably faithfully rendered.

Vowels:

Short a - a

Long a - aa

Short i - i

Long i - ee

Short u - u

Long u - uu

e - e

ai - ai

o - o

au - au

Consonants:

Gutturals Ka

Kha

Ga

	Gha
Palatals	Ch
	Chh
	Ja
	Jha
Linguals	Ta
	Tha
	Da
	Dha
Dentals	Ta
	Tha
	Da
	Dha
Labials	Pa
	Pha
	Ba
	Bha
	Ma
Semi-vowels	Ya (Palatal)
	Ra (Lingual)
	La (Dental)
	Va (Dental and Labial)
Sibilants	Sha (Palatal)

	Sha (Lingual)
	Sa (Dental)
Aspirate	Ha
	Ksha
Nasals	Na (Guttural)
	Na (Palatal)
	Na (Lingual)
	Na (Dental)
	Ma (Labials)

Appendix C

Glossary of terms in Bengali:

Abaanchhita bishay	undesirable issue
Abakshay	degeneration
Abarodh	seclusion [also, blockade—not used in this sense here]
Aabedan	appeal
Aadhunik	modern
Abhimaan	pride
Aadivaasee	original inhabitant
Aagaamee	future
<i>Aajkaal</i>	a Bengali daily newspaper
<i>Ananada Bazar Patrika</i>	a Bengali daily newspaper
Andarmahal	inner quarters
Aandolan	movement
Antahpur	inner quarters
Antarer milan	union of minds
Aantarikataa	sincerity
Anuloma vivaha	a Sanskrit term meaning a marriage between a lower caste woman and an upper caste man
Apasanskriti	debased culture
Arjuna	a Pandava brother, one of the heroes in the <i>Mahabharata</i>
Artha	wealth
<i>Arthashastra</i>	a 2 nd c. Sanskrit work by Kautilya on statecraft and economics
<i>Arya Samaaj</i>	a Hindu religious sect
Asundar	not beautiful/ungraceful
A-sustha	diseased, unhealthy, abnormal
<i>Atharvaveda</i>	fourth book of the Vedas
Aatmashuddhi	self purification

Baabu	native merchant, big landlord; a term of respectful address to a man; in British English it denotes a native clerk
Baahir/baair	outer
Bande-Maataram	Hail the Mother (land) — India's nationalist slogan
Baandhe	braids [generally means, "to tie"]
Bangaabda	The Bengali calendar
<i>Bangadarshan</i>	19 th century Bengali literary journal
Baaniya	merchant
Bhadra	respectable
Bhadralok	an educated, upper-caste, upper and middle class man
Bhadramahilaa	an educated, upper-caste, upper and middle class woman
<i>Bhagavadgita</i>	sacred text of the Hindus, a section of the <i>Mahabharata</i>
Bhakta	devotee
Bhakti	devotion
Bharata/Bharat	the putative progenitor of the people inhabiting India; the first Indian writer (2 nd -4 th BC) on drama and music
Bharat	India
Bharat-mata	Mother India
Bhaava/Bhavam	emotion
Bhaavanaa	thought
Bhumikaa	introduction, role
Bhumisukta/Bhummisuktaa	hymn offered to the earth
Biplabee	militant-nationalist, revolutionary
Biruddha	against
Bishrinkhala	disorder
Braahmana	(ritually) uppermost caste in India
Braahma	a religious sect – derived from the Hindu faith
Bhraataa	brother
Chaasher	related to agriculture
Chotolok	lower class, illiterate, rude, uncivilized
Chul	hair

Daaber jal	green coconut water
Dalit	untouchable, lower caste
Daasya/dashya	slavery
Daayabaddhataa	obligation
Dehanirapeksha	independent of the body, platonic
Deher milan	union of bodies
Desh	country
Desh-maataa/Deshmata	country as mother
Dewan	property manager of a feudal lord—a position of power and prestige
<i>Dhramashastras</i>	Hindu Scriptures in Sanskrit on codes of conduct
Dhritaraastra	a character in the epic <i>The Mahabharata</i> ; father of Duryodhana and husband of Gaandhaaree
Dharitri	the earth
Dhyaan-dhaaranaa	perceptions and ideas
Doordarshan	Indian national TV authority
Dupattaa	a long scarf which is used with saalwaar kaameez, a Hindi word
Durgaa	a Hindu female deity; mother goddess
Duryodhana	Son of Gaandhaaree who is instrumental in waging the great war depicted in <i>The Mahabharata</i>
Draupadee	wife to the five Pandava brothers
Drishtikatu	unpleasant to sight
Dushyanta	legendary king in the tales of <i>The Mahabharata</i> , father of Bharata, the putative progenitor of the inhabitants of India
Dvija	twice-born castes (the three upper castes)
<i>Eksathe</i>	a monthly women's periodical published by the PBGMS
Ganasanskriti	public culture
<i>Ganashakti</i>	a Bengali daily newspaper published by the CPI-M
Gaandhaaree	mother of Duryodhana and wife of Dhritaraastra
Ghar	home
Gharoaa	homebody, domestic

Gopal	name of baby Krishna, model for an ideal boy
Griha	home
Grihakon	home, family
Hindu Mahasabha	a Hindu sectarian political party
Hindutva	the principles of Hindu fundamentalism
Indriyasukhabhilaas	seeking sensual pleasure
Ishvarprem	love of god
Jaghanya bhaab	despicable nature
Jananee	mother
Janma niyantran	birth control
Jeeban	life
Jeebanbodh	perception of life
<i>Kabitayan</i>	lit: House of Poetry, name of a recitation club
Kaachaa	house built with bamboo and mud
Kaaj	work, job, activity
Kaalee	a Hindu female deity; mother goddess
Kalyaanmay	filled with benevolence
Kalyaanmukhee	designed for benevolent results
Kaminee	woman
Kaameez	a long shirt
Kaanchan	gold, wealth
Kaayastha	one of the three upper castes in Bengal and North India
Kaurava	set of cousins who fought an unjust war against the Paandavas over inheritance in <i>The Mahabharata</i>
Kaushala	skill/artistry
Kautilya	2 nd century Sanskrit author of <i>Arthashastra</i> on statecraft and economics
Kishaan	farmer
Krishna	a male Hindu deity; Vishnu's incarnate
Kulin	the highest sub-caste in each of the three Bengali upper castes
Kurukshetra	the site of <i>The Mahabharata</i> war

Lajjaa	shame/modesty
Lajjaashilataa	modesty
Lok	man, place
Lok Sabhaa	the Indian parliament
Madhyabitta	middle class
Madhyashreni	middle class
<i>The Mahabharata</i>	an Indian epic
Mahilaa	a mature (and respectable) woman
Maai-baap	Mother and Father
Mamataa	loving care and affection
<i>Manusamhita</i>	A 2 nd century Hindu text on codes of conduct
<i>MaanusherNoon</i>	Human Worth, title of a short story in <i>Eksathe</i>
Maanush	human being
Manoram	pleasant
<i>Manorama</i>	a women's magazine in Bengali
Maryaadaa	honour
Masik patrikaa	monthly journal
Maatri	mother
Maatrijaati	community of mothers as a category
Mejobou	the wife of the second son/brother
Memsahib	western white woman
Methraanee	a cleaning woman
Mofussil	provincial town
Mojud	reserve, a Hindi word
Mukti	freedom, emancipation
Mulyabodh	sense of values
Munsef	a middle-rank district official
Nabinaa	a modern woman
Naitikataa	morality
Narapashu	a beast of a man
Naaree	a woman

Naareebadee	a feminist
Pachaagalaa	rotting
Paribarar grihinee	wives and mothers who manage the home
Paishaachik	ghoulish
Paaribaarik	family related
Paaribaarik daashee	a female slave to the family
Paribesh	surroundings; environment
Paricchad	dress
Patilok	a place where husbands live
Praativraatya	devotion to husband
Praachin	traditional, old
Praachinaa	a traditional woman
Prayojaniya	necessary
Paandavas	the set of cousins who fought the war against Kauravas over inheritance in the <i>Mahabharata</i> (137)
Poshaak	dress
Prathaa	custom
Prateek	icon
Puccaa	made of brick and cement or concrete
Pumsavana	a Sanskrit term: a ritual for a pregnant woman praying for a son
Putra	son
Raaga	melody
Rakshaa kabach	protective armour
Rakshaarthe	to protect
Raandhe	cooks
Raashtrik	future members of the state, citizens
Ratha	chariot
Rogamukta	free of disease
Ruchi	taste
Ruchisheel	tasteful
Sabhaa	association

Sabhyataa	civility
Saalwaar	a long loose pants
Samaaj	society
Saamajik	social
Samity/Samiti	association
Samparka	relationship
Samyam	restraint
<i>Sananda</i>	a women's magazine in Bengali
Sankat	crisis
Sannyaasee	renunciate
Sannyaasinee	female renunciate
Sansaar	the mundane world, family
Saansaarik bilaasitaa	material luxury
Sarbajaneen	universal
Sarbajayee	champion
Saaree	dress worn by Indian women: a 6 yard long material draped around the body
Satee	literally, a chaste woman; the acquired meaning is, a woman who dies on her husband's funeral pyre
Satee-Lakshmee	emblem of chastity and prosperity
Sateetva	chastity
Satyaagraha	adherence to truth
Saubhraatritya	fraternity
Sevaa	service
Shaakambharee	mother goddess
Shakti	power, force; mother goddess
Shakuntalaa	mother of Bharata, wife of king Dushyanta
Shaalini	decent
Shaalinataa	decency, decorum
<i>Shastra</i>	Hindu scripture in Sanskrit
Shloka	verse

Shobhan/Shobhanataa	propriety/decency
Shraddhaa	respect
Shrenibhed	class difference
Shikshaa	education
Shikshak	male teacher
Shikshikaa	female teacher
Simantonayana	Sanskrit term, a ritual for a pregnant woman praying for her husband's longevity
Seetaa-Savitree	women from Hindu epics representing total devotion to their husbands
Shrinkhalaa/ Shrinkhalataa	discipline
Streedharma	Hindu wife's duties
Streewadhinataa	women's freedom
<i>Streer Patra</i>	<i>A wife's Letter</i> , a short story by Rabindranath Tagore
Sukhee	happy
Sundar	beautiful
Supatnee	a good wife
Sushilaa	a demure, well-behaved woman
Susham	balanced
Sustha	healthy, normal
Susthataa	normalcy, state of good health
Swaabhabik	natural, normal
Swaacchandya	comfortable
Swadeshi (movement)	Freedom (movement)
Swaadhinbhaabe	independently
Swaraj/Swaraaj	self government
Swaasthya	health
Swechaachaar	wantonness
Swechaachaarinee	wanton woman
Sweekrita	accepted
Taala	rhythm

Tyaag	sacrifice, renunciation
Tyaagee	a person who renounces
Ugra	strong
Ushmaa	anger/ excitement
Vaidya	one of the three Bengali upper castes
Vrata	vow
Yamraaj/Jamraaj	god of death
Yaatraa	journey
Yogya	proper
Zamindar	landlord
Zenana	Urdu word for women; women's secluded quarters