Kanak Mukherjee

Kanak Mukherjee (1921-2005)

Women of Struggle, Women in Struggle

Women and Secularism, a book by vice president of AIDWA in Tamil Nadu Mythili Sivaraman. Both the text and illustration address the importance of secularism for women's rights.

The twentieth century was marked by national liberation struggles that emerged in Africa and Asia, as well as in Latin America where neo-colonial structures had subordinated the formally independent countries. The achievements of the Russian Revolution in 1917 inspired the peasantry and the working class across the Global South. The fight for equality and liberation under the leadership of working people are ongoing in the anti-imperialist struggles of our time. Women, in a myriad of ways, powerfully shaped and continue to shape all of these struggles.

In the *Women of Struggle, Women in Struggle* series of Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research, we will present the stories of women in struggle who contributed not only to the wider arena of politics, but who also pioneered the establishment of women's organisations, opening up paths of feminist resistance and struggle throughout the twentieth century.

Praxis, as a knowledge of theory and of organisational methods of struggle as they change and respond to history, gives sustenance to ongoing struggles to face oppression. As militants, we study the diverse organisational methods of these women not only to better understand their political contributions, but also to inspire us as we build the organisations necessary for our fight against oppression and exploitation today.

In this second study, we discuss the life and legacy of **Kanak Mukherjee**, a fighter for the people and people's struggles who was born in undivided Bengal, India, in 1921. The rich trajectory of her activism teaches us about the history of women organising in local, national, and international struggles that linked women's rights to anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist struggles throughout the twentieth century. In Mukherjee's own words: 'We cannot see the question of women's rights in isolation. The roots of women's subjugation and the discriminations against them lie in class exploitation'.

A Lifelong Commitment to Activism

Kanak Mukherjee was born Kanak Dasgupta in 1921 in Benda, a small locality in the Jessore district of east Bengal, India (now part of Bangladesh), to an educated nationalist family. She entered the Freedom Movement at the age of ten when she joined the Salt Satyagraha agitation with her family. The entire nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century in India were brimming with social reform movements where debates on gender and the issues of women's rights were at the centre stage. The province of Bengal was an epicentre of such activities. This clearly had a strong impression on Kanak's young mind, as she was deeply moved by and sympathetic towards many of her very close relatives who became widows at a very early age. In her autobiography, she recalls the agony of one of her cousins who was essentially forced to live the life of a recluse.**[1]** This was perhaps Kanak's earliest conscious encounter with patriarchy operating under the garb of tradition and religion.

Kanak also participated in the more clandestine anti-colonial movements that sought to directly oppose the British occupation of India. Her brother and cousin, members of an armed revolutionary organisation, hid their weaponry in the house. As a child, Kanak sometimes kept watch for authorities while they held meetings. During this period, women moved from being supporters of anti-colonial sabotage activities to becoming key members in various forms of militant direct action, from transporting weapons to distributing pamphlets, writing articles, and becoming active participants. There were many clandestine armed groups, such as Yugantar and Anushilan Samiti, which were active in Bengal in the first quarter of the twentieth

century. Their members mainly came from the ranks of urban, educated, and unemployed youth – including unmarried young women – and they mostly carried out isolated killings of colonial British officers. Gradually realising both the limitation of these kinds of activities to effectively fight colonialism and the need for wider mass action, many of the members of these groups joined the budding communist movement in India in the decades following its formation in 1920.

While Kanak was in middle school, she joined underground communist study circles to read and discuss core Marxist texts. In an interview conducted in 2001, she reflected on the struggle to gain her political education:

> There was the period of the underground Party – *ki kosto amader korte hoyechhe ma* ('what pains we had to take, mother'). These days you get all kinds of political literature, in English and Bengali, in huge numbers, you get so many daily papers, so many meetings, so many public speeches – you have such opportunities for increasing your political consciousness. For us, they gave us one *Communist Manifesto,* which you had to keep hidden… that was in English, and I was then in class eight or nine… Deep at night, when others were asleep, I would read the *Manifesto* by the light of a lamp, and with a dictionary by my side.**[2]**

In 1937, Mukherjee joined Bethune College in Calcutta (now Kolkata), part of the University of Calcutta. Like many of the communist women leaders from this period, she began by working through communist mass organisations, such as the All India Students' Federation (AISF). This was the path for both Renu Chakravartti and Kanak Mukherjee. In 1938, at the age of seventeen, Mukherjee joined the Communist Party of India (CPI), becoming one of its first women members in Bengal. Renu Chakravartti, another early member of the CPI who was only four years older than her, recounted her impression of Mukherjee during this time as 'a tiny, thin, live-wire girl'.**[3]** She was also the only woman on the executive board of the Bengal Provincial Students' Federation. Apart from the working-class movement, left-leaning women's and students' mass organisations were the two most significant political forces that contributed to the anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggle.

Communist women such as Latika Sen, Manikuntala Sen, and Kalpana Dutta Joshi would later take leadership in building the women's mass movement. Though there was a rise in women's participation in public life in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, joining politics and becoming a full-time activist was not easy for women, nor was it well accepted by family members. Shyamoli Gupta, the state secretary of the West Bengal Democratic Women's Association and editor of *Eksathe*, a journal started by Mukherjee, said that this complexity was prominent in Mukherjee's own life. Despite the lack of family support, Mukherjee continued her political activism out of her sheer conviction and indomitable commitment to revolutionary working-class politics.**[4]**

Communist and mass movements that were sympathetic to the cause of the working class and peasantry experienced substantial growth during the 1920s and 1930s. Calcutta, as one of the prime colonial metropolises of the British Empire, saw a huge influx of migrants from across the country. People belonging to varied ethnic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds came to the city in search of jobs, higher education, political activism, and intellectual pursuits. For two decades, the city witnessed what has been termed a 'strike wave' due to strong trade union and militant working-class resistance, especially after the First World War. The rise in prices for basic goods, massive unemployment, poor living conditions of the propertyless, rampant racism, and social alienation gave these strikes a wider dimension.**[5]** Mukherjee arrived in this vibrant city not only in pursuit of higher education, but also to be part of the wider anti-colonial working-class struggle.

Along with continuing her work organising students in Bengal, Kanak would volunteer with the literacy campaign undertaken by trade union leaders in Kashipur, one of the industrial pockets where these migrant labourers lived. in order to teach migrant labourers to read and write in their own language.

The cover of an All India Democratic Women's Association pamphlet in Tamil Nadu from the late 1980s. The organisation has long been fighting dowry murders by burning, which are often falsely blamed on kerosine stove explosions. The text reads 'We are Being Consumed by Fire, Let the Volcano Erupt!'

Living in Calcutta was not easy for political activists – especially for communists. Much of the Communist Party's work was underground. Landowners would not allow communists to rent from them once they learned of their party affiliation/membership; many party workers, both male and female, lived in the houses of party sympathisers. With colonial masters constantly hunting for them, their stay was never without incident, and they frequently had to move. This harassment was extended to those who gave refuge to communists. As a result, communes developed to provide stable living conditions for party cadres.**[6]**

Like many communists in that era, Kanak lived in the houses of active party workers after reaching Calcutta. She later moved to a commune in central Calcutta where she would meet Muzaffar Ahmad ('Kakababu'), one of the stalwart leaders of the communist movement in India. Kakababu looked after the young entrants in the party; his warmth easily drew in those around him. Very soon, a relationship of comradely affection grew between Kakababu and Kanak.

Kanak was heartbroken when she had to take a job as a schoolteacher to support her family, thinking that she was compromising her political commitment by not being able to give as much time to political work. She broke down into tears in front of Kakababu, who consoled her by saying that she was not withdrawing from political activism due to her economic hardship and family responsibility. She should not feel bad about it, Kakababu told her; it is never an either-or situation for a communist. This relationship of fondness, care, and mutual respect between Kanak and Kakababu continued till his death.**[7]**

Kanak lived in a communist commune with her husband, Saroj Mukherjee, a communist activist whom she first met in 1939 while they were both underground, as well as another married couple – each of whom had their own room – and four or five unmarried women and men who lived in the other two gender-segregated rooms. Mukherjee wrote about the positive role of communes in her memoir, *Mone Mone* ('In Memory'): 'The atmosphere of joint life in our commune was quite warm… We who were married did not feel any unease at living with others while living a conjugal life'.**[8]** Mukherjee's memories counter the dominant narratives that speculate that these unconventional households were rife with petty jealousies and infidelity.

The Women's Movement in India

The tired yet persistent question of whether communist and leftist women's groups are part of the wider feminist movement should finally be put to rest. Women in communist movements have long had explicit feminist demands for women's equality economically, politically, and socially. They have sought leadership by and for women. Leftist women have pushed all progressive movements to support women's rights, from peasant movements to Dalit (oppressed caste) movements and Adivasi (indigenous peoples') movements. They have built strong ties between these movements and coalitional feminist campaigns for women's equal franchise, property rights, and the right to divorce. In the case of India during this period, this solidarity

moved in both directions: communist women activists shifted the terms both of communist organising methods and leadership and of the Indian women's movements' class and caste bias against women from agricultural classes, working classes, and Adivasi and Dalit communities. If the farmers and working-class women and men were to support women's rights, the women's movement had to widen its demands to include all women's needs, not just those of middle-class and elite women.

In 1927, the Congress Party formed a women's organisation, the All India Women's Conference (AIWC). However, the AIWC did not organise women from marginalised communities to join their movement and fight for their own rights or shape their own demands. By design, AIWC members primarily belonged to princely families allied with the British and *zamindari* (large landowner) families. Many prominent communist leaders, such as Manikuntala Sen, Phulrenu Guha, and Renu Chakravartti, were initially part of the AIWC. However, they soon realised that the marginalised sectors of women – those belonging to the peasantry and the lower ranks of the society – had no membership or representation in the organisation, nor were their class interests reflected in its demands. Above all, there was no attempt to radically alter the fundamental patriarchal structure of society.

Youth and Student Organising

By the late 1930s, girls in middle school and young women attending college played a vital role in the freedom movement in India. Renu Chakravartti recounts the reasons that spurred Mukherjee to create the *Chhatri Sangh* or Girl's Students' Association (GSA), a branch of the All India Students' Federation of India (AISF):

> When in 1938 the agitation for the release of the Andaman prisoners reached its peak, women students in larger numbers participated in the huge meetings and demonstrations that the students held throughout the country. It was at this stage that the need for organising the girl students was felt. But they had not come in large numbers into an organisation like the AISF where the predominant membership was of men students. The social taboos were still strong.**[9]**

The GSA sought to counter the social disapproval of young women working with young men in the same organisation and to make it possible for young women not just to join mass protests, but to play an active role in building the movement. They sought to use a gender-segregated organisational form to break down social taboos of young women mixing with young men on equal terms. To this end, the GSA developed young women's leadership skills of public speaking, organising public meetings, and navigating the tactics and strategies of radical anti-colonial politics. They also developed different methods for organising, as well as different campaigns, and took leadership in projects to organise women from primarily indigenous regions of Bengal, including peasant women. The effects of these young women entering nationalist politics on the cusp of the Second World War fuelled some of the country's most radical anti-imperialist movements.

This report, 'The Brutal Killing of Manjolai Tea Garden Workers', was published by AIDWA in Tamil Nadu following workers' demands for better wages and housing accommodations, as well as maternity leave, and the subsequent murder of seventeen workers in 1999 at the hands of the police.

In January 1940, Mukherjee and other leaders held the first national conference for the All India GSAs in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh. The conference focused on demands for equitable divorce rights, the abolition of polygamy, and free education for girls.**[10]** At the conference, Mukherjee spoke in favour of the Hindu Code Bill, which would guarantee women's rights in personal laws. Sarojini Naidu, a nationalist feminist leader in the independence movement, was the guest of honour; 'Join with the young students', she said, 'and bring fresh blood into the mainstream of the battle for freedom!'.**[11]** After the conference in Lucknow, the student leaders toured the country to expand the GSA, from Madras (now Chennai) to Bombay (now Mumbai) to Punjab. Large numbers of young women attended GSA regional and national conferences, drawing the attention and ire of the imperialist British government on the eve of their entry into the Second World War.

The Imperialists' War

British authorities repeatedly arrested Mukherjee from 1939-1942 for opposing what Indian communists argued was an imperialists' war. In 1940, she was arrested with her sister and her niece. Though she was released after seven days in prison due to a lack of evidence, the colonial police issued a special order against her that forced her to leave Calcutta within twenty-four hours of her release and refrain from visiting the industrial areas of the city and the adjacent Howrah district. She moved to Jamshedpur, where she continued her activism, was arrested again, and was then banned from this city as well. In Barisal, her next residence, she was also arrested and banned from re-entry. At this point, as a full-time worker for the CPI, she went underground, moving from house to house for safety.

In July 1942, the British colonial state lifted the ban against the CPI that had lasted for nine years, from 1934 to 1942. In October 1942, Mukherjee returned to Calcutta to resume her political work, shifting the focus of her activism to women's political organising. In this context, she continued to agitate against British imperialism and fascism.

The Bengal Famine and Mahila Atma Raksha Samiti

The decade of the 1940s was perhaps the most eventful and turbulent phase in pre-independence India, especially in Bengal. The great Bengal famine of 1943 (known as *tettalisher mannantor* in Bangla), the horrific communal**[12]** riot of 1946, and the partition of Bengal along religious lines suddenly brought the cruel and hateful tendencies of the human psyche into broad daylight. The Bengal famine of 1943 resulted in large-scale poverty and mass starvation in the countryside. The accompanying epidemics, such as cholera, malaria, and smallpox wiped out a large section of the rural population. An acute labour shortage in Bengal in the agrarian sector forced men to migrate to distant places in search of a livelihood. The women and children who survived became vulnerable in myriad ways, including rampant human trafficking, as the famine unleashed massive gender-based violence and sexual assault on women.

It was in this context that the Mahila Atma Raksha Samiti ('Women's Self Defence Committee' or MARS)

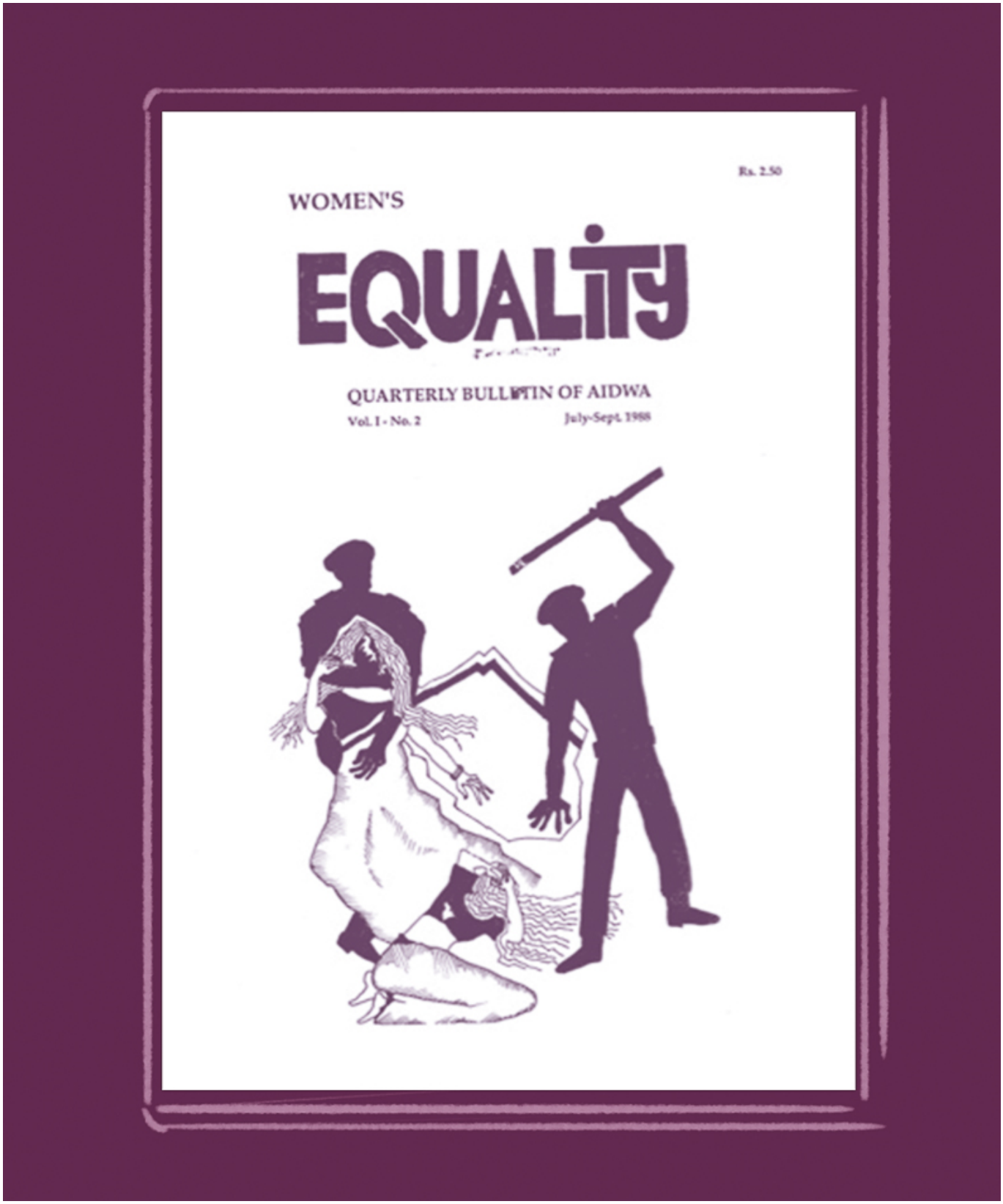
was formed on 13 April 1942 during an anti-fascism convention held by women in Calcutta. Mukherjee was among the founding members of MARS and was on its organising committee. During this period, she wrote numerous, hard-hitting newspaper articles about the effects of the famine on rural, poor women.

MARS filled the vacuum left by an indifferent colonial state and directly addressed the devastating effects of the famine by carrying out large-scale relief work. During the famine of 1942-1943 and throughout the Second World War, the British military prioritised allocating food for their troops rather than ordinary people, a choice precipitated by the halting of rice imports from Japanese-occupied Burma. MARS organised against distributors who were hoarding grain for greater profits.

MARS' role during the Bengal famine catapulted the organisation to the frontlines of the freedom movement. During this time, hungry people poured into the streets of Calcutta from surrounding areas in search of food. MARS members decided to work alongside women in urban slums and rural areas, as well as with the middle class. Often, the members of MARS would stand beside the queue of food distribution to ensure that young women were not groped or kidnapped as they waited in line. These most vulnerable sectors of women emerged as the core members of MARS and would later play a key role in expanding and strengthening the women's movement in India. The fight for rights and dignity, and an end to sexual assault remains among the most central issues today in Indian society.

Mukherjee witnessed the impacts of the famine first-hand and discussed the struggle and desperation of women during this time. In one instance, she saw a mother sell her seven-year-old daughter for a small amount of grain, which she received two months after selling her. In another instance, she witnessed a young woman enter the quarters of US soldiers after receiving a meagre ration from the food distribution centre.**[13]** During this time of great distress, the exploitation of women escalated, as many entered sex work to survive. Soldiers, as well as landlords and others, brutally channeled the desperation of the population by sexually assaulting women. Mukherjee, as a journalist and as an activist, raised awareness about these rape crimes as well as many poor women's lack of employment opportunities other than sex work.

Mukherjee was integral to a coalitional campaign to link the rural and urban organising of communist and nationalist women in a united effort to fight the starvation and sex trafficking of dispossessed women and girls. As a member of the organising committee of MARS, she travelled throughout rural Bengal to organise women to fight for basic necessities and to fight against colonialism and imperialism. She went to the tea plantation sector of north Bengal and Dooars in the Rangpur district of present-day Bangladesh, which suffered from acute poverty and distress due to massive colonial exploitation.



AIDWA's quarterly English-language journal, *Women's Equality*, vol.1, no. 2 (July–September 1988)

She described the devastation caused by the famine as well as MARS' response:

> In October 1943, the man-made Famine in Bengal started. The members of MARS plunged into the work of relief and rehabilitation. The experience of those days was harrowing; we saw women with children dying on the Calcutta streets. Starving village women were brought to the city by touts [traffickers] and sold off as prostitutes. The word 'Kalobajar' [black market] was introduced for the first time in our vocabulary. The rape of village women by European and American soldiers was also not unknown. Thus, while we supported the war against fascism at the international level, our anger and hatred against British imperialism that was creating famine and causing endless suffering to our people remained as strong as ever. In this period and immediately afterwards, we concentrated our attention on setting up rehabilitation centres in the districts for women who were the victims of famine or communal riots. MARS played a central role in social rehabilitation.**[14]**

MARS combined internationalism and anti-colonial nationalism with local campaigns, such as an early campaign led by MARS that publicised the rape of Bengali women by Allied soldiers stationed in Bengal. These campaigns marked a radical call to action that advocated for women's defence of the nation against military attacks and against colonialism while simultaneously fighting for women's self-defence against the sexual violence that accompanied military and colonial occupation.

Partition and the Communal Riots

In 1946, women's suffering once again came into the spotlight during the communal riots. Large-scale violence across the state was spurred by the British partition of Bengal, which was divided along largely religious lines. In Calcutta alone, the death toll neared 4,000 people over the course of three days. The widespread sexual assault of women during the riots took a horrific turn in rural Bengal, especially in the Noakhali area. Even with its limited strength, the Communist Party was at the forefront of the campaign against any kind of communal divide, urging for peace. It is because of the communists' campaign that some of the trade unions, such as the railway workers' and tram workers' union, showed remarkable working-class solidarity and physically confronted rioters in some areas of Calcutta.

Both during the riots and the famine, MARS played a major role by campaigning against communal polarisation amongst rural women. A joint relief committee was formed, as was done during the famine. MARS volunteers were sent to rural Bengal along with the AIWC, travelling on foot from one village to another and distributing milk and other basic supplies to villages such as Chandpur and Haimchar. The impact of the famine, communal riots, and the partition of 1947 on the most vulnerable sections of women of Indian society has remained an important lesson for the women's movement.

Bowbazar Street and the Crackdown on Communists

India's independence in 1947 did not end the persecution of communists. On 27 April 1949, MARS organised a gathering in Calcutta to demand the unconditional release of all political prisoners who remained

in jail even after the ban against the CPI had been lifted in 1942. This marked a sad but memorable day for the history of the women's movement in India. After the convention, the attendees marched towards Bowbazar Street but were soon stopped by the police. During the clash, the police opened fire under the orders of West Bengal's Congress government. Communist leaders Latika Sen, Pratibha Ganguly, Gita Sarkar, and Amiya Dutta, who played a major role in building the women's movement in India, died on the spot. Yamuna Das Mahato was taken to a hospital, where she later died of related injuries. Kanak Mukherjee spent many days in jail, during which time she was separated from her young son.

In jail, the women went on an indefinite hunger strike, demanding their release and the release of other political prisoners. Though suppressing the feeling of tremendous hunger was often difficult, Kanak recalled the determination and energy of some of the younger women who were in the same jail:

> These young schoolgirls – Mamata, Nirupama, Usha, Arati Chaya … during their hunger strike were simultaneously singing, dancing, merry making and also studying with great enthusiasm. For a while Mamata shared the same cell with me. The hungrier we were, the louder her revolutionary songs would be. We would often chatter 'Oh! I wasted that delicious food once or this is my favourite dish'. Eventually we 'banned' any discussion on food. **[15]**

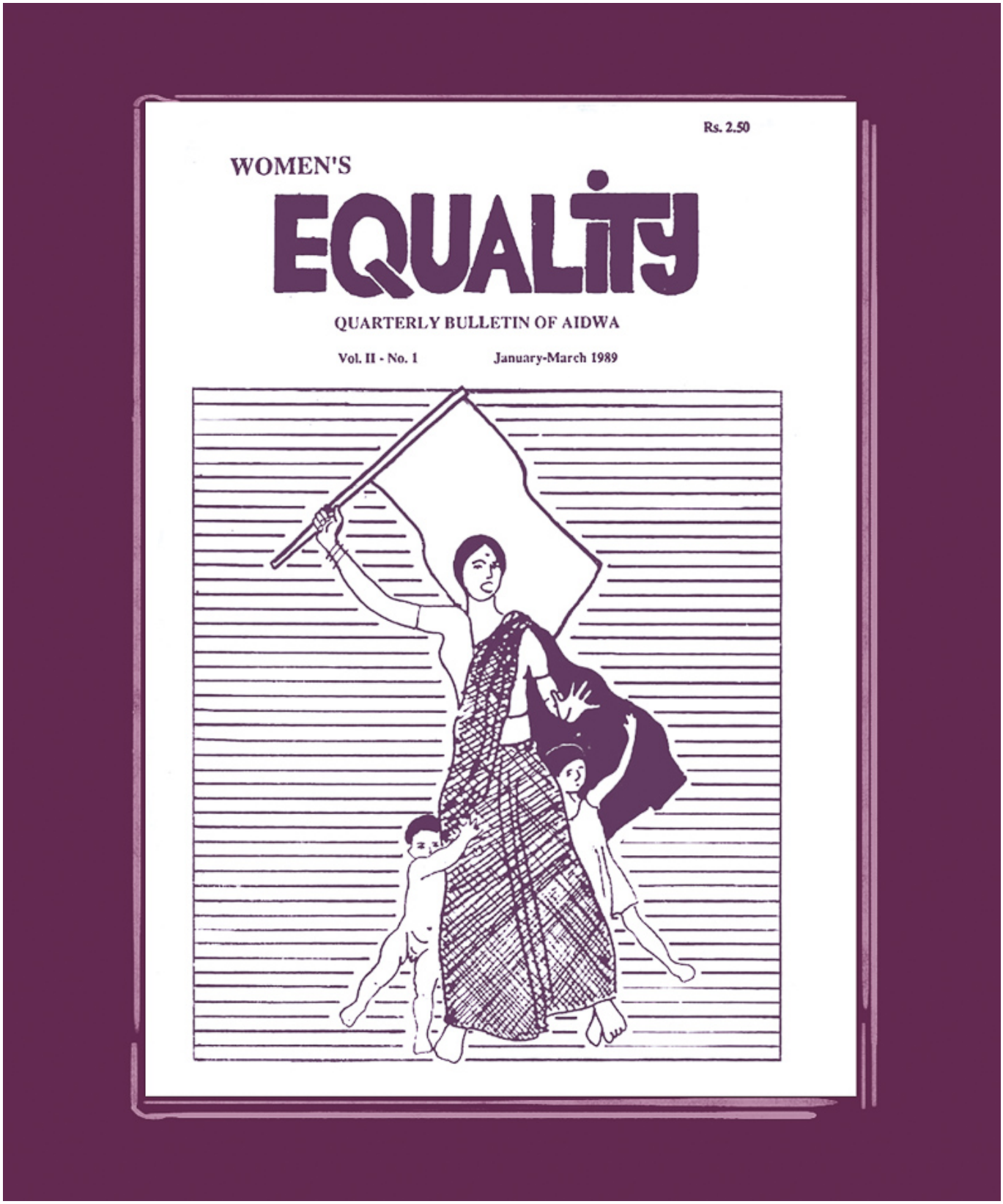
Refugee Organising

The decade of the 1950s marked another chapter of struggle in the history of Bengal's communist movement. A wave of refugees from then-East Bengal (now Bangladesh) began to migrate to West Bengal after the partition, leaving behind all their possessions, houses, and land. These migrants resettled themselves across West Bengal. Calcutta, the state capital, received a huge influx of people who were living in squatter settlements – some of which were located near the holiday abodes of the city's elite – where they were subjected to wretched living conditions.

At around the same time, the city corporation – under the leadership of the Congress Party – unleashed a constant onslaught of stringent bills and ordinances with the intention of disfranchising the urban poor and safeguarding the property interests of the traditional elites. Bengal's state government was not only unwilling to provide the refugees with any permanent rehabilitation, such as housing; it was also openly hostile to their presence and often used the police force to suppress the refugees' demands. With the backing of the Congress Party, goons unleashed terror on the refugees.

In the face of state-sanctioned terror, the communists organised among the refugees to raise their demands. As a result, many new refugee settlements came into existence as the communists, many of whom were migrant refugees themselves, fought for the refugees' rights and livelihood. Kanak's brothers migrated to one such refugee settlement in Calcutta, where they lived together with Kanak, her son, and her ill brother-in-law while Saroj Mukherjee was still living underground.

The movement for refugees' rights was among many landmark battles fought by the communists during that period, alongside others such as the movement against tram fare and the women-led movement to increase state assistance for refugee women. It is in this context that many women leaders from these refugee settlements contested and won seats in the first general election of independent India.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WOMEN'S

EQUALITY

QUARTERLY BULLETIN OF AIDWA

Vol. II - No. 1 January-March 1989

Women's Equality, vol. 2 no. 1 (January–March 1989)

The Formation of the All India Democratic Women's Association

In 1954, Mukherjee helped found the National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW), an organisation affiliated with the Communist Party of India that drew together leftist feminist groups from states across India. In June 1954, their founding conference in Calcutta brought together 602 delegates representing the larger membership of over 129,000 women from fourteen states across India.

In 1964, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPI(M) was formed following a split in the Communist Party of India or CPI. For a long time, an ideological fight had been developing within the Party around the debate on revisionist tendencies and the true struggle for the emancipation of the working class on the basis of Marxist principles; Mukherjee was one of the leaders of the women's movement in India who fought against revisionist tendencies.**[16]** Such debates had an impact on the women's movement, and many fearless and strong leaders – such as Manikuntala Sen – left the CPI during this time. These were tumultuous years in West Bengal.

Despite the split in the Communist Party, and despite internal ideological debates, NFIW remained intact till the 1970s. In March 1970, a leftist women's organisation affiliated with the CPI(M) was formed. It was called the Paschimbanga Ganatantrik Mahila Samiti ('West Bengal Democratic Women's Association').

In June 1975, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi declared a nationwide state of emergency (often referred to as the Emergency) that suspended a wide range of civil liberties and made protests illegal. While most communists went underground during this period, they did not stop organising. Mukherjee continued to build the newly formed Paschimbanga Ganatantrik Mahila Samiti alongside other women comrades and joined the state committee of the CPI(M) in West Bengal in 1978 after the Emergency ended. She served as a member of the Party's central committee from 1989 to 1998.

In 1981, the All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA), a mass women's organisation linked to the CPI(M), was founded; within its first year, it reached a membership of 590,000 women. From its early years, AIDWA developed a firm ideological and organisational foundation; it emphasised the linkage between socio-economic structures such as class, caste, and religion with the gender question, and at the same time organised women from across class lines and from all communities into a disciplined mass organisation. AIDWA sought to organise large numbers of poor and working-class women throughout India and to create a bridge for radical middle-class women to join their struggle. AIDWA's core struggles centred around India's most marginalised groups of women, a consequence of the organisation's class approach to struggles.

Mukherjee served as the vice-president of AIDWA from 1981 to 1999. Through her organising and her writing, she insisted on the importance of placing feminist struggles within the context of a broader class struggle. As she wrote in her pamphlet about women's emancipation, 'We cannot see the question of women's rights in isolation. The roots of women's subjugation and the discriminations against them lie in class exploitation'.**[17]** She was also central to developing AIDWA's constitution, which states that:

> As the oppression of Indian women is an integral part of the exploitation of the Indian people in general, and the struggle for women's emancipation is inseparably connected with the struggles of the workers, peasants, youth and all other sections of oppressed toiling masses of the people waged for their

> common interests and to bring about a radical change in our socio-economic set-up, the All India Democratic Women's Association extends its full co-operation with all these progressive and democratic sections of the people.**[18]**

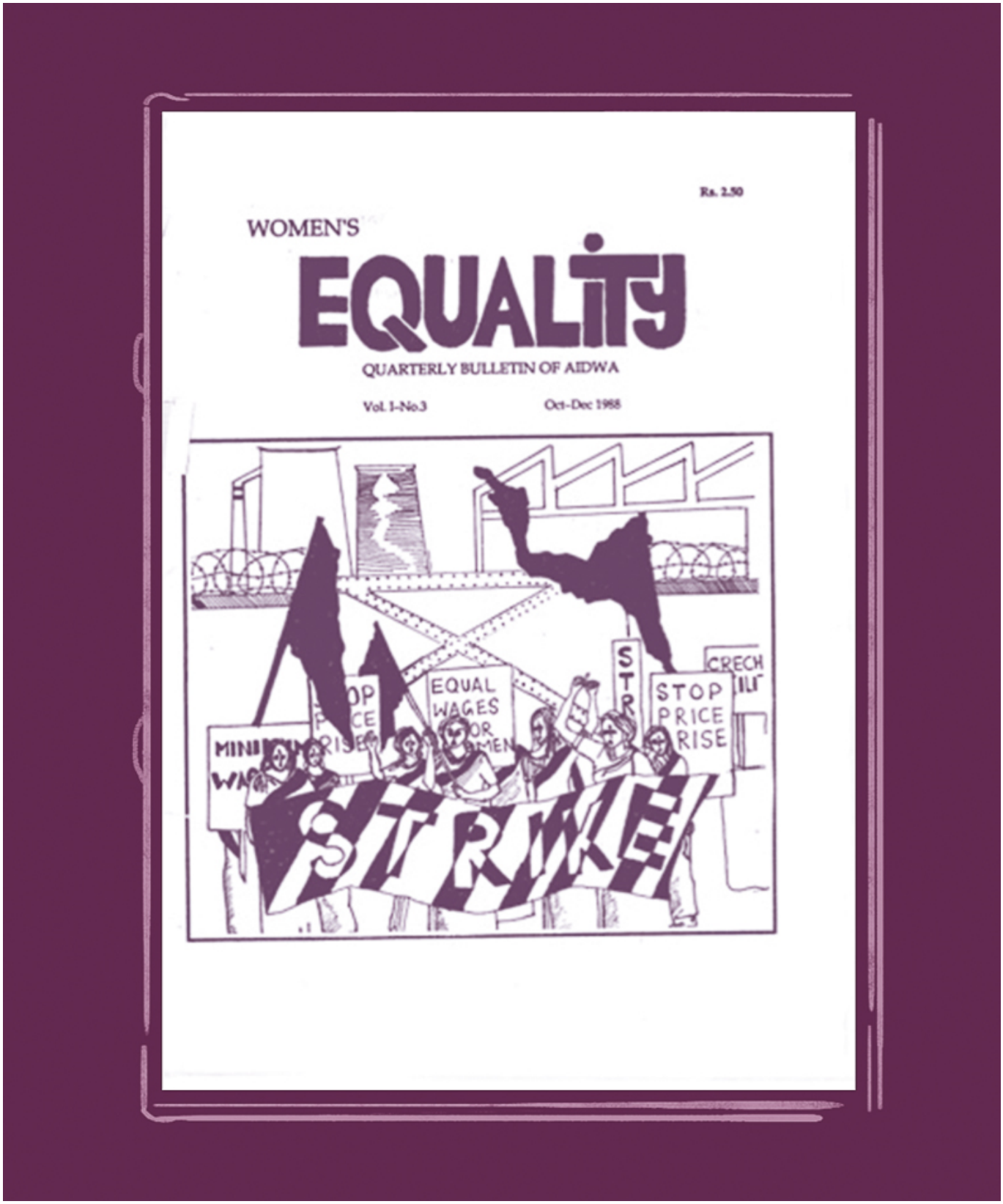
AIDWA's organising methods during the 1980s were centred on running coalitional campaigns with other women's groups and with allied organisations of left-wing youth, students, peasants, workers, and agricultural workers' unions. The organisation was widely known for its uncompromising stance on dowry murders, in which young women are murdered or driven to suicide by their husbands and in-laws over disputes regarding their dowry. This campaign fought to create better laws to protect women and to guarantee them economic independence by providing better material support and therefore enabling them to leave abusive marriages.

AIDWA also fought against dowry murders by organising women, including mothers-in-law, and by using their fraternal organisations such as trade unions and farmers' unions to fight for women's right to live without violence. The AIDWA activists led neighbourhood campaigns in their units across the country to pressure all families to end the practice of dowry and to treat daughters-in-law with dignity. AIDWA activists became known for their fearlessness, for fighting powerful people and institutions, and for their dogged pursuit of justice.

What made AIDWA unique in the Indian women's movement during the 1980s was the attention that it gave to rural women. By 1984, most of the proliferating sections of the Indian women's movement were ignoring rural women's visions for a better future. Pamphlets like Kamla Bhasin and Nighat Said Khan's *Some Questions on Feminism and its Relevance in South Asia* (1986) contain almost no mention of the differences that separate women across South Asia. A secular feminism that imagined unified solidarity across women throughout South Asia was unsustainable without addressing the power of the Hindu majority in India, along with other power imbalances of caste, class, and region.

From the 1940s, Mukherjee saw clearly how rural areas were severely impacted by religious fundamentalism and its divisions. Religious fundamentalism divided women along the lines of religious identity. The communist approach in India was to inculcate class unity in the fight against communalism and fascism. No true mass feminist movement could emerge in India unless it addressed the many divides exacerbated by the ruling class such as divides along the lines of caste and religion.

In New Delhi, AIDWA – alongside seven other national women's groups – organised the first massive demonstrations in 1993 against the Congress government-abetted communal actions. This included the destruction of the Babri Masjid mosque, which Hindu fundamentalists claimed was built on a temple dedicated to the Hindu god Ram. AIDWA and other groups built a multi-religious coalition of activists committed to fighting for a secular social fabric. AIDWA members also organised a joint delegation of national women's organisations to create an unbiased assessment of the anti-Muslim violence.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Vol. I-No.3 Oct-Dec 1988

Women's Equality vol. 1 no. 3 (October–December 1988)

AIDWA's Strategy of Inter-Sectoral Organising

Over the span of forty years, with the leadership of women like Mukherjee, AIDWA built a cross-class movement among rural and urban working-class women and progressive middle-class women. The organisation fought for working-class women's emancipation not as an undifferentiated mass of women facing the same sites of exploitation and oppression, but in their full complexity as agricultural waged workers, as indigenous women, as Dalit women, and as Muslim women.

In Mukherjee's public life, she developed and extended this vision through her work as a member of the Rajya Sabha, the upper house of India's bicameral legislature, and as an alderwoman in Calcutta. She also took up editorial responsibility for the magazine *Ghare-Baire*, where she was the editor from 1957-1967, and the Bengali-language journal *Eksathe*, where she became the founding editor in 1968, and which would later become AIDWA's bangla journal. Through her work as an editor, she made sure that the lives of working women were at the heart of these publications.

Mukherjee remained a communist and women's activist until her death in 2005, at which point AIDWA had over 10 million members. She shared AIDWA's hard-fought strategies to organise rural women against the patriarchal gender relations that infused caste oppression and religious communalism in the face of rising neoliberal scarcity. Mukherjee set an example that remains important today as a tireless fighter for working-class urban and rural women across all sectors of society, religions, and ethnicities.

Third AIDWA Conference in West Bengal, 9-12 October 1990. Kanak is standing second from the right in the front row, in white, with other participants of the conference.

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Notes

[1] Sarkar, *Kanak Mukherjee*, 16-18.

[2] Nag, interview, 2001, cited in Marik, 2013.

[3] Chakravartti, *Communists in Indian Women's Movement.*

[4] Sarkar, *Kanak Mukherjee*, 50.

[5] Chattopadhyay, *An Early Communist,* 50-88.

[6] Sengupta, 1957.

[7] Sarkar, *Kanak Mukherjee*.

[8] Marik, 'Breaking Through a Double Invisibility', 93.

[9] Chakravartti, *Communists in Indian Women's Movement*, 9.

[10] Bhattacharya, 'An Interview with Kanak Mukherjee', 29.

[11] Chakravartti, *Communists in Indian Women's Movement*, 10.

[12] Communalism in South Asia refers to the idea that religious communities are political communities with secular interests that are opposed to each other. Political parties that subscribe to the worldview of communalism are called communal parties; terms like 'communal violence' and 'communal riots' are used to refer to clashes between people belonging to different religious communities in the context of an atmosphere charged with communalism.

[13] Sarkar, *Kanak Mukherjee*.

[14] Bhattacharya, 'An Interview with Kanak Mukherjee'.

[15] Sarkar, *Kanak Mukherjee*, our translation.

[16] Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research, *One Hundred Years of the Communist Movement in India*

[17] Mukherjee, *Women's Emancipation Movement in India*.

[18] AIDWA, *Aims and Objects Programme*, 1981.