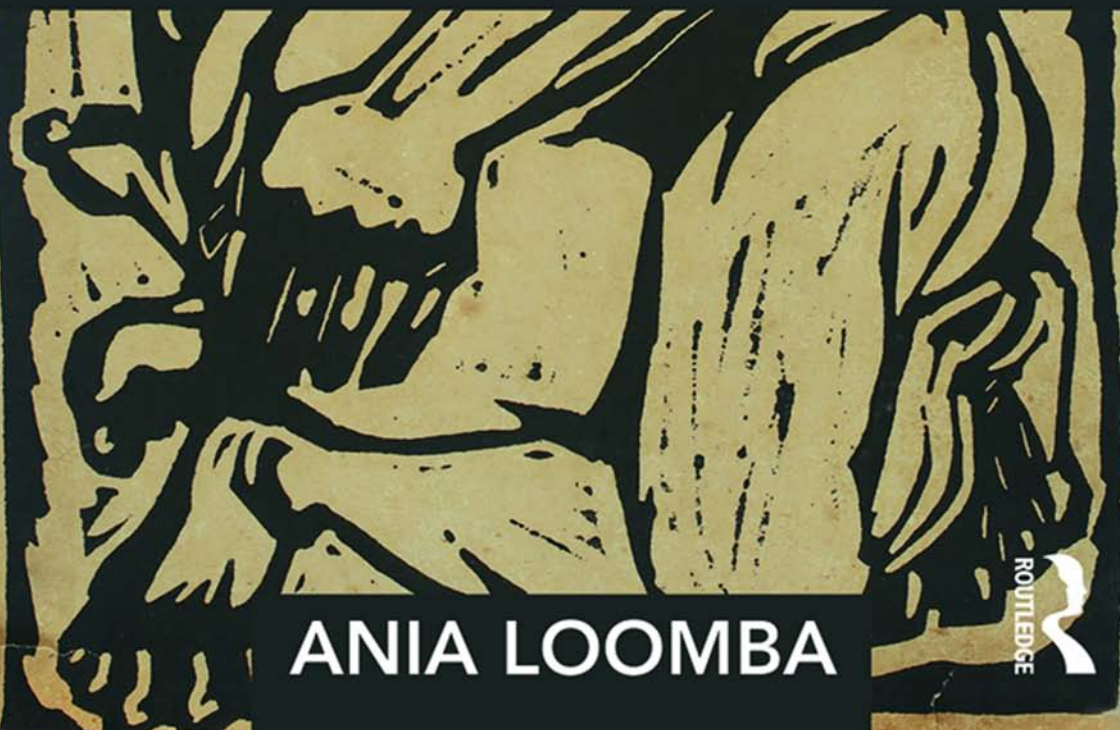




REVOLUTIONARY DESIRES

WOMEN, COMMUNISM, AND FEMINISM IN INDIA



ANIA LOOMBA

ROUTLEDGE

REVOLUTIONARY DESIRES

Revolutionary Desires examines the lives and subjectivities of militant-nationalist and communist women in India from the late 1920s, shortly after the communist movement took root, to the 1960s, when it fractured. This close study demonstrates how India's revolutionary women shaped a new female – and in some cases feminist – political subject in the twentieth century, in collaboration and contestation with Indian nationalist, liberal-feminist, and European left-wing models of womanhood.

Through a wide range of writings by, and about, revolutionary and communist women, including memoirs, autobiographies, novels, party documents, and interviews, Ania Loomba traces the experiences of these women, showing how they were constrained by, but also questioned, the gendered norms of Indian political culture. A collection of carefully restored photographs is dispersed throughout the book, helping to evoke the texture of these women's political experiences, both public and private.

Revolutionary Desires is an original and important intervention into a neglected area of leftist and feminist politics in India by a major voice in feminist studies.

Ania Loomba is the Catherine Bryson Professor of English at the University of Pennsylvania. She has published widely on early modern literature, histories of race and colonialism, postcolonial studies, feminist theory, and contemporary Indian literature and culture. Her publications include *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (2005) and *Shakespeare, Race, and Colonialism* (2002), as well as the edited collections *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond* (2005), *South Asian Feminisms* (2012), and *Rethinking Feminism in Early Modern Studies* (2016).

‘In this inimitable feminist history of Indian women rebels and revolutionaries, Ania Loomba turns her well-trained eye on a shamefully under-written history of radical political desire in all its gendered forms. These pages are literally bursting with stories of militant and communist women who were nothing but trouble in and for modern Indian history.’

Antoinette M. Burton, Catherine C. and Bruce A. Bastian Professor of Global and Transnational Studies, University of Illinois, USA



FIGURE 0.1 Chittaprosad, 'Liberty'

(Courtesy: The Osian's Archive and Art Collection)

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Women, Communism, and
Feminism in India

Ania Loomba

First published 2019
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Loomba, Ania, author.

Title: Revolutionary desires: women, communism, and feminism in India/
Ania Loomba.

Description: London; New York: Routledge, 2019. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018009040 | ISBN 9780815381730 (hbk : alk. paper) | ISBN 9780815381747 (pbk : alk. paper) | ISBN 9781351209717 (ebk)

Subjects: LCSH: Women communists—India—Biography. | Communism—India—History—20th century. | Feminism—India—History—20th century.

Classification: LCC JQ298.C6 L66 2019 | DDC 324.254/07509252—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018009040>

ISBN: 978-0-8153-8173-0 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-0-8153-8174-7 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-351-20971-7 (ebk)

Typeset in Bembo

by Sunrise Setting Ltd, Brixham, UK

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book has been a long time in the making and has gathered more debts than I can acknowledge fully. Conversations with Tanika Sarkar and Anu Arunima about our mothers seeded it. Dormant for many years, it was revived through chats with Phil Bonner, Neeladri Bhattacharya, Raka Ray, Prabhu Mohapatra, and Suvritta Khatri. But it was my mother Primla Loomba who made it possible to get it actually going. It continued to shift and take shape, through solidarity, conversations, and venues for discussion variously provided by Janaki Nair, Ayesha Kidwai, Antoinette Burton, Mrinalini Sinha, Sanjay Kak, David Eng, Sumit Sarkar, Simona Sawhney, Auritro Mazumdar, Firdous Azim, Anjali Arondekar, Rajarshi Dasgupta, and Nivedita Menon. P. K. Datta gave me a book that changed the course of the project. Tanika Sarkar's own work, sharing of materials, and solid support have been very important to me throughout the years. Of course, none of it would have been possible without my conversations with Sheila Didi, Sarla Sharma, Bani Dasgupta, Perin Romesh Chandra, Shaukat Kaifi, Parvathi Krishnan, Murtazai Shakeel, Primla Loomba and, above all, Rani Ray. Thank you all!

The enthusiasm and criticism of audiences at many venues in India, the US and Bangladesh spurred me on and gave me hope. From the beginning, Anand plied me with materials and photographs. Kama McLean generously shared archival sources, scholarly and feedback, as did Parama Roy and Rohit De. Thanks too to Rahul Diddi and Surinna Diddi, Shabana Azmi, Suneet Puri, Amita Puri, Manini Chatterjee, Sumangala Damodaran and Ram Rahman. Kaustubh Naik, Rupali Bansode, Milind Ranade, and Rani Ray helped with translations. So many images in this book were hard to trace, clean up and reproduce, and I am deeply grateful to Gargi Chakravarty, Ashok, Kaushik Ramswamy, Anand, Neeladri Bhattacharya, Sanjay Kak, Aastha Dang, K. Anuradha, Rahul Verma and Narasaiah Inugurthi. My students at Penn have helped me work out many ideas, in the classroom and beyond. Meghna

Chandra's assistance helped start the project, and Vikrant Dadawala's drew it to a close. Above all, Ajay Batra's editorial skills rescued me from many an error.

Through these years, I have been sustained in more ways than one by Shalini Advani, Sunita Thakur and Urvi Puri. I am lucky to have a family where ideas and food generate equal passion: Tariq Thachil and Piyali Bhattacharya have shared my excitement, soothed my despair, and generously dispensed advice, criticism, and hugs as needed. Suvir Kaul alone is responsible for my completing this book, for reminding me what was at stake in writing it, and for keeping me going in this as in every other venture in our lives.

This book is dedicated to revolutionary women – past, present and future.



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INTRODUCTION

In Amrit Rai's 1952 Hindi novel *Beej* (Seed), a communist woman called Parvati Krishnaswamy makes a brief but remarkable appearance. It is ten o'clock at night, and the rain is pelting down outside the home of Pramila, a desperately unhappy young woman who, abandoned by her lover, is contemplating suicide. In a conventional society where marriages are usually arranged and take place within approved caste and kinship networks, to be abandoned by a lover is both a social and emotional disaster. Pramila did not know Parvati well when they were at college, but now Parvati spends four hours comforting and counselling Pramila before stepping out again into the rain. As Pramila later recounts, not only did Parvati restore 'my lost confidence in life' but she also inspired her by painting the picture of a new world in which patriarchal oppression would be dismantled (Rai 261).¹ In that brave new world, 'professional philanderers' (Parvati uses the term in English) like Pramila's ex-lover would be punished more harshly than thieves and murderers because 'in that classless society in which all will be equal [. . .] first of all men and women will be equal' (262). But Parvati warns Pramila that women would have to fight hard to bring that society into being; indeed, 'all the oppressed people will have to fight, and women, being the most oppressed, should lead that fight'. Pramila is not only deeply moved by Parvati's reaching out to her – 'After all, why did she come [. . .] so late at night, alone, in the rain? What brought her to me if not humanitarianism?' – but impressed by the choices Parvati has made in her own life:

Where does she get her inspiration from? She was such a clever girl, why did she adopt such a hard life? A life of daily visits to worker's bastis [tenements] writing their missives, reading the newspapers out to them, sitting for hours amidst their squalor, their filthy children and filthy wives; then going away to far-off rural areas where there is no modern convenience, but, on the contrary, illness and one disease after another [. . .] above all there is famine [. . .] dry

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lakes, dry wells, shrivelled trees, destroyed crops, shrivelled cattle, shrivelled children [. . .] the black hungry offspring of a black hungry land [. . .] why does Parvati like to live among them and like them? [. . .] She could have been a lecturer in any college, or a barrister?

(260–61)

Parvati's act of reaching out to Pramila, of counselling her and comforting her, what Pramila calls 'humanitarianism', might be thought of as feminist solidarity, if one was to use a vocabulary unknown to either Rai or communists of his time, including the women among them. Parvati is not alone; similar female figures, middle-class communist women who are deeply sensitive to women's oppression, appear in other fictions of the period.

Some, but not all, histories of Indian feminism acknowledge the work done by communist women in organizing labouring women; in forming the first women's organizations that would include poorer women, both urban and rural; and in fighting for women's rights to divorce, and property.² Qualifying these histories, however, is the commonplace assumption that such women relegated women's oppression to a second-order problem that would automatically vanish after the advent of socialism. This assumption is not entirely mistaken. The relationship between communist organizations and women's struggles the world over has been both intense and rocky. Scholars and activists alike have noted how Marxist movements and ideas opened up new spaces for women's political participation as well as personal emancipation but also foreclosed many. But if there is something similar in how women inhabited different Marxist organizations across the world, and how they experienced and contributed to the conversations and tensions between women's emancipation and social transformation, there is also a lot that is distinct and particular to each social and cultural ethos. In India, for instance, socialism and communism were from the very beginning intertwined with nationalism and anti-colonialism, which is hardly surprising in a colonized country. While the relationship between communism and nationalism has been widely examined, as has that between feminism and nationalism, the intersections between Marxism and feminism, especially as they were experienced by women and embodied in their lives, have barely begun to be explored.

Revolutionary Desires examines the lives and subjectivities of revolutionary and communist women of different classes in India from the late 1920s, shortly after the communist movement took root in India, to the 1960s, when it fractured. By 'revolutionary women', I mean those who were part of the militant and nationalist underground movements of the 1920s and 1930s, many of whom joined communist or socialist parties later. The communist women I deal with here belonged to the Communist Party of India (CPI) before it split into two in 1964.³ (Although all the events and histories alluded to in this book cannot be explained and glossed in detail, a timeline is provided in Appendix 1, with brief notes on key histories in Appendix 2.) Unlike Parvati in *Beej*, most of them were not able to seamlessly knit together their commitment to India's freedom, to a classless society, and to gender equality. These

were theoretically complementary ideals, but in practice they could only be inhabited unevenly, for reasons that this book will explore. As I will argue, it is precisely this unevenness that is important for the many-stranded histories of feminism in India.

The lives of Indian communists, as Nalini Taneja has noted, 'have been ignored not only by the mainstream nationalist historians and the latter-day historians of the 'subaltern' and 'post-colonial' variety, but also studiously avoided by the major Left historians themselves'. With some notable exceptions, this is even more true of communist women's lives, especially in the period covered by this book. When stories of communist women have been narrated, it is often to enumerate and extoll their public achievements, with little consideration of their everyday lives, particularly their domestic or emotional lives, or the debates that might have arisen within the organizations as a result of women's participation. This neglect is all the more striking because communist and other radical women in India did produce many personal narratives – autobiographies, memoirs, fragmentary accounts. Though fewer in number than those of their male comrades, and though many were not published, these narratives have been read perfunctorily and simply mined for facts about the political movements in which the women participated. In recent years, short recollections of Party leaders, as well as interviews with them, have been anthologized, sometimes at the behest of the Communist Parties themselves. But these too are produced in order to illustrate Party histories, not personal ones.⁴

Feminist scholars, it is true, have tried to explore alternative histories of left movements in India, largely through oral histories. The 1989 book, *We Were Making History*, was pioneering in recording and analysing women's memories of their participation in the Telangana uprising.⁵ More recent feminist scholarship has interrogated women's experiences of the Tebhaga, Warli, and Naxalite uprisings (see Appendix 2 for a note on these movements).⁶ Whereas these books focus on extraordinary or charged moments of rebellion, I am interested in exploring the more routine experiences of revolutionary women of different class and regional backgrounds, with a view to understanding the place of gender in the culture of communism (and indeed the place of communism in the cultures of feminism) in India.

To this end, *Revolutionary Desires* examines a range of writings by and about radical and communist women: memoirs, autobiographies, novels, Party documents, and newspaper articles, as well as interviews conducted by myself and others. Some of these women were famous, others obscure, and most identified as Marxist and were members of the Communist Party of India (CPI) or the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPM). None would have called themselves feminist. They all came to political consciousness fighting against British imperialism. A large number died with their partisan faith intact, many changed and grew with the movement, a few grew disillusioned with or became critical of the Party, and only a tiny percentage expressed their criticisms. All of them were extraordinary in making unexpected choices and going where their mothers could not have imagined, even if these journeys were to be seen later as incomplete by their daughters, among whom I count myself. My aim, however, is not to offer a new or alternative history of progressive and communist women's participation in politics. Rather, I want to trace their

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experiences, through their own voices and memories where possible, in the hope that they will help us understand how these women shaped a new female – and in some cases feminist – political subject in India, in collaboration and contestation with Indian nationalist, liberal-feminist, and European left-wing models of womanhood.

Although the women who populate this book come from a range of geographic, religious, class and educational backgrounds, they do not encompass the diversity of Indian radical and communist women, partly because of the very particular genesis of this project. Like many inquiries into the past, mine has been impelled by my own life and upbringing. Both my parents were devoted communists, although until my father died in 1973, my mother did not have much time for political party work. She was too busy raising my sister and me and earning a living by teaching in a school, which we could therefore attend for free. Both my parents came from well-off backgrounds, and their political choices led them to live lives that were quite different from those of their own families.

To be raised by communists in India (or indeed in most parts of the world) was to inhabit a bifurcated world, or to learn to speak two languages.⁷ We could not afford the same material comforts as our classmates or cousins, but our parents always saw to it that we had enough books. Material shortcomings were compensated for by the assurance of having a powerful ideal to work towards, nothing short of world transformation. The fact that my mother was the breadwinner, and my father a full-time political activist, also set us apart from every other family we knew. And yet, in many ways, the division of domestic labour was not that different, with my mother largely responsible for the everyday running of our lives. My sister and I were conscious of being raised as few others of our friends and peers were, with an enviable freedom denied to most young women in our India. But we often remarked that our friends would be able to talk to their mothers about boyfriends and sex, heart-break and hope, in a way that we could not, perhaps because such a focus on the personal was seen as an unwelcome diversion from the struggles that really mattered. In later years, I brought this up with friends whose mothers were also part of the left movement. It seemed that their mothers, too, shared that particular quality of being at once supportive of and detached from us, radical in their attitudes to gender and yet curiously puritan. Our mothers – leftists who came of age in the crucible of anti-colonial nationalism – set themselves proudly apart from the usual narratives of wifedom and coupledness. Perhaps because of this, they did not always confront or critique the ways in which their lives had not broken away from these conventional narratives.

This contradiction was often exacerbated by the culture of ‘whole-timers’, or ‘professional revolutionaries’ as Lenin called them. In India, this created a cadre of people who became entirely dependent, economically and politically, upon the Party, and who were thus vulnerable to its dictates. It also placed enormous – indeed impossible – demands on them as they had to live and work on a Party wage that could barely pay for their transport and tea. A huge disparity was visible between those comrades who truly gave up whatever they might have inherited from their families, and lived nearly ascetic lives, and others who despite the profession of such sacrifice,

had resources that enabled them to survive the travails of a whole-timer with much greater ease and dignity. The stories I trace in the book make clear that women faced a special burden in whole-timer households. Usually, like my mother, they were the ones who took jobs to enable the political work of their husbands, or, if both were full time functionaries of the Party, then they had to make other critical and often painful decisions, such as not having children. Either way, as subsequent chapters show, it deeply affected relationships between husbands and wives, and attitudes to coupledom as well as to masculinity and femininity.

Like many other Party children, I had a love–hate relationship with my parents’ professed ideals. It was only when, at 17, I lost my father that I was propelled into a more direct connection with left politics, working first in the students’ front and later in the women’s front of the CPI. By that time, in the mid 1970s, the women’s movement in India had entered a new phase, articulating the need to address domestic violence against women, female sexual rights, and women’s autonomy as issues distinct from questions of poverty and class stratification. Older communist women were confronted by a different vocabulary that sometimes puzzled them, and of which they sometimes disapproved. Many of them reached out to younger women, however, joining them in public campaigns over these issues and contributing their rich experience while expanding their own political horizons. Still, many others staunchly proclaimed that they could never be ‘feminists’ even as their own lives could be read as blazing new trails for women and politics in India. There were some, like my mother, who could do both at once, forging important conversations between the Party women and younger feminists while still maintaining:

Ours is not a feminist movement. Our fight is not directed against men but against the social, economic and political institutions that exploit both men and women. Our programme of attaining for our women full human dignity and winning for them their rights as mothers, workers and citizens, is inseparable from the struggle of our toiling people for democracy, secularism, socialism and peace.

(Primla Loomba; quoted in Chakravartty and Chotani xii)

While the linking of women’s issues with questions of social justice in general has been a hallmark of not just Marxist but also many anti-colonial struggles, formulations like this one were aimed specifically at the newer feminist vocabularies, which were understood as bourgeois in their insistence that gender could not be subordinated to class.

Communist women across generations were partly reacting to the reverse caricature – that of the left movement as completely gender-blind – which also gained currency as the new feminist movements grew. In India, both positions seemed especially reductive, since on the one hand there were no women’s groups that discounted poverty or advocated female separatism, and, on the other hand, the left had in fact been central to the history of women’s rights in India. And in practice, women’s groups across these divides came together on crucial issues, including

dowry and rape, to launch the new wave of women's movements in the 1970s. But the history I want to trace is not just an intellectual one. Even as left-wing women were at the forefront of many struggles for gender equality – and indeed one could argue, as I will in this book, that many of them *were* feminists whether or not they identified as such – by the time I was politically active, most of them did not address the deeply gendered nature of their own organizations, or the conservative attitudes of their cadres, thus replicating patterns towards which they felt discomfort or frustration.

Like many women of my generation, I was transformed by experience working with the anti-dowry and anti-rape campaigns in Delhi, organizing demonstrations, going to police stations to argue about the registration of dowry murders, as well as by cases of sexual harassment. Many of these activities were undertaken on behalf of the National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW) in which CPI women worked, even though it was not officially the Party's women's front. Occasionally I wrote for *New Age*, the CPI paper, on questions of women and gender. The editor was a friend of mine, and he hinted that he had gotten into trouble for publishing a piece in which I had argued that party members should neither give nor take dowry. This is in fact what we were asking college students to pledge. But the unofficial wisdom in the Party was that while certainly communists should not *take* dowry when their sons married, it was impossible for them not to *give* it because their daughters would then remain unmarried! Many comrades accused me of being unreasonable when I argued that their daughters could find grooms on their own, or that it might even be better for them to remain unmarried. I was being 'overly idealistic', I was told. It was futile to argue that, surely, some idealism about gender relations was not misplaced in a party which declared that people should not be attached to property, or land, or religion.

There were many occasions that reminded me – and others like me – that despite regularly extolling the achievements of women under socialism, many older male comrades (and some women too) remained extraordinarily attached to the prototype of a modest and well-behaved Indian woman. After a class on Marxist philosophy for example, I happened to take a cigarette from a fellow student. Our teacher, like most male comrades at the time, smoked heavily but he was shocked at my action, and had no qualms in telling me that it was a horrible sight to see me smoke. When I pointed out that he was smoking himself, he said that a cigarette was as incongruous with my 'innocent face' as a beard would be. In other words, smoking threatened to render me masculine. But at the same time, excessive displays of femininity were also frowned upon. Another Party leader, one who had been a rebel against party hierarchy and conservatism in his own time, gravely told me that my silver jewellery made me look like a 'South Sea islander'. A friend was reprimanded because her sleeveless sari blouse had exposed her armpit when she raised her arm to give the 'red salute'.

Then there was the question of culture. For several years, I worked in the cultural squad of the All India Students' Federation and we tried to revive some of the old music of the 1940s that had been popularized by the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) in its heyday, including the songs of Bhupen Hazarika,

Faiz Ahmed Faiz, and Makhdoom Mohiuddin.⁸ We sang at demonstrations and rallies, at trade union and workers meetings and Party events, occasionally travelling out of the city. Although such activities were regarded as ‘lightweight’ by the Party bosses, our music always aroused nostalgia among many of the older comrades. They spoke of those golden years during the 1940s and 1950s when famous writers and musicians were part of the left movement. My mother could recite various songs and *nazms* that were written by communist and progressive poets during the Bengal Famine, or the Telangana uprising, as well as lyrics from communist dramatist Sheila Bhatia’s musical *Heer Ranjha*. All the Party ‘aunties’ I knew said they had acted and sung and danced, in public meetings and rallies, and ordinary folk had thronged in their hundreds to hear them. During the years of the Bengal Famine, in particular, they said, music and theatre were integral to Party work. Indeed, accounts of the left movement have credited it, and particularly the women within it, with developing music and theatre as a form of political outreach (Chakravarty, *Communists* 157–60). But this past didn’t seem to have any bearing upon how Party leaders thought about culture in the 1970s. I was specifically told that, as my father’s daughter, I should concentrate on ‘real’ politics instead of wasting my time in this *naach-gana* (dancing and singing).

What had happened to so drastically change attitudes to literature and culture? Relatedly, what had happened to the culture of the movement itself? At one level, the women of my mother’s generation appeared feisty and fun-loving; they had also acted in unconventional ways and had chosen their own partners, often across religious and regional divides. Like my mother, many came from affluent families and had studied at good universities. Long-term commitment to party life, however, required these women to navigate a different matrix of constraints, which put their radical tendencies to the test. They had given up an inheritance of comfort to live simple, often spartan lives, in less than comfortable homes (though they didn’t usually socialize across class divides). Others had gone even further, moving to villages or industrial areas in order to live alongside the workers they organized. Some of these hardships had inevitably bred a valorization of asceticism, a kind of strictness with respect to appearance, clothing, and possessions that was both admirable and frustrating. Growing up, I had overheard snippets of conversations about aspects of their lives that are never written about. I heard about the *farzi shadis* or contract marriages, wherein women were enjoined to marry particular men by the Party, or simply entered arrangements to ‘protect’ themselves from the dangers of being single, often when they were underground while the Party was banned. I had heard about how they danced with abandon on the tables in the Party communes, and about love affairs and sexual tensions within their community. Over time, however, so thoroughly were these issues exorcised from discussion that it began to seem to me that I had imagined these conversations from many years ago. As I grew up, it appeared that the Party women I knew had drawn a *lakshman-rekha* – an un-crossable line – around their own choices, regarding it as dangerous and unseemly for women to go still further. Almost to the last woman, they disavowed feminism as bourgeois and Western, and some of them made shockingly homophobic statements. Although they did not consider it necessary for women to either marry or have children,

the monogamous nuclear family remained an implicit ideal. My mother, too, inhabited this mixture of radicalism and prudishness. While enormously supportive of women who broke the bounds of convention, she was unable to talk about emotion or sexuality with her daughters. She expected them to be strong and independent women, and indeed helped them become so, but always with a sense that female strength demanded putting one's emotional self in cold storage.

How does one get to the other side of this type of silence? Jo Stanley, working in the British context, found that communist life-stories, written and oral, often tend to suppress the personal because

much Communist autobiography is written by men who carry the burden symbolised by being shaven and wearing a clean ironed shirt; they write as people who felt they had to act as an example for others and a credit to the party. It was not and is not done in a metaphorical mix of old work trousers, dressing-gown, shorts and favourite fancy dress. The guard cannot be let down.

(60)

In contrast to memoirs, Stanley suggests that fiction can be an especially useful way of accessing the personal that is excluded in such narratives. Commenting on the relative absence of memoirs by women, she also contends that women, 'as the emotionally literate sex, are more likely to talk about our personal life than men, but are less likely to be published or interviewed' (62). The memoirs of communist women, then, ought to be far more revealing than those of men. But this is certainly not always true. For example, Bengali communist Manikuntala Sen's autobiography *Shediner Katha* (the English version is called *In Search of Freedom: An Unfinished Journey*), has not a single sentence about her married life with another Party comrade, Jolly Kaul, but Kaul's own memoir, *In Search of a Better World* (written in English), spends many chapters on their marriage, domesticity and relationship. The difference may stem from Manikuntala's being a more important and visible leader within the Communist Party or from the fact that Kaul wrote his story nearly 30 years after his wife told hers, well after he had left the Party. But Manikuntala's book comes much closer to the tradition of communist autobiography that Stanley identifies: that of the 'starched shirt' – or shall we call it the starched sari?

I will return to Manikuntala Sen and Jolly Kaul's narratives in later chapters, but my point here is that in writing, as in life, gender is refracted through status, in this case within the Party and in public, as well as through class, especially in India where the Party's members ranged from English-speaking, foreign-educated youth to mill workers and poor peasants. Kavita Panjabi has also identified key differences between the ways in which urban and rural, middle-class and peasant activists of the Tebhaga movement chose to talk about themselves. The urban women tended to talk about their early life experiences, their education, and how they grew to political consciousness; peasant women, by contrast, did not have any elaborate narratives of education, childhood and development. Their stories began with their involvement in the movement and tended to be more 'non-linear, episodic, and imagistic'

(‘Testimony’ 250). It would not be unfair to conjecture that middle- and upper-class women would also be more tight-lipped when it came to talking about their personal lives. In a parallel instance, while describing the British left, Jo Stanley writes:

I have been party to hours of pub gossip about what is not on the official agenda, particularly dysfunctional families, adultery and homo-sexuality. As a woman and latterly as a counsellor I have heard – absolutely without a tape recorder – deeply personal even ‘shocking’ information that is excluded from more presentable Socialist autobiographical narratives. I think this kind of history matters and want it included, so that fuller histories exist for posterity.

(61)

Yes, this history matters, but how does one recover it if those who lived it do not share, or do so very circumspectly?

Because these contradictions shaped my own life so intimately, I began to think of interviewing some of the women I had known as a young girl, and of asking them to reflect on these silences. I had planned to speak to women I had personally known, thinking that familiarity would facilitate open conversations and that it would be productive to interweave their memories of left culture and gender with my own from a much later period. I talked about this with friends and family for quite a few years, starting in earnest only when my mother reminded me that most such women were dead or very old, or ill and unable to talk. I had better get to it fast, she advised, or there would be no one left. I should note that throughout the years that I have been gathering material to write this book, she has been simultaneously supportive and puzzled, by my efforts, her range of reactions encapsulating precisely the contradictions that impelled me to embark upon it in the first place. Moreover, as I started to write, it became clear to me that I myself shared some of the same inhibitions I sensed in my mother and her comrades. I found it very hard to talk about myself, even as my own life as a Party child enabled me to explore particular aspects of revolutionary and communist lives and narratives.

I found too that the snippets of gossipy memories I heard as a young girl were not only occasional but also pertained to issues that could not be easily discussed, even in interviews, even after so many years. In some cases, the women I spoke to asked me not to publish what they had said. Sometimes they were too old to speak at length, or preoccupied with their own problems at the time. Indeed, I learnt as much about what it feels like to grow old as a radical woman in India, as I did about women’s politics or sexuality. But however incomplete, these conversations directed me to memoirs and autobiographies that communist women had written, some of which had been published, others not. Some were written in languages that I did not know and that I could access only by working with translators. These life-stories in turn led me in turn to novels and other writings that thickened and complicated the autobiographical narratives. These multiple materials, I believe, help us understand ‘communist self-fashioning’ in modern India.

Rajarshi Dasgupta uses this evocative phrase in his account of the ‘making of a communist ethos’ – an account that included ‘everyday attitudes to morality, exercises of power, moments of domination and calculations of usefulness with regard to the larger social world’ (71). The British social historian Raphael Samuel also addresses such self-fashioning in his memoir of growing up within the fold of the Communist Party. Samuel writes of the compelling need for communists to create a complete social identity, one that transcended the limits of class, gender, and nationality:

Like practising Catholics or Orthodox Jews, we lived in a little private world of our own. [. . .] Like Freemasons we knew intuitively when someone was ‘one of us’ and we were equally quick to spot that folk devil of the socialist imagination, a ‘careerist’, a species being of whom I am, to this day, wary. [. . .] Communists were a ‘peculiar’ people and as the Cold War drew in, they reverted to the status of pariahs. But it seems to me that we had more in common with the national culture than we realized at the time. [. . .] Above all, we shared with other formations in Britain, a patriarchal system of authority, in which people looked upwards rather than downwards for their cues, and where authority expected to be automatically obeyed.

(12–13)

Samuel’s remarks are pertinent for the Indian context – Indian communists also attempted to create an alternative and holistic world that nevertheless ‘had more in common with the national culture’ than they would admit.

Dasgupta criticizes the dominant narrative about Indian communism that circulates among communists themselves, one that suggests that the movement was healthy and strong in the past and then it subsequently deteriorated, partly because of communists’ own complicity with the existing power structures and ideologies. Against such nostalgia, Dasgupta suggests that it is important to scrutinize the early years of the Party to understand how the ideals of communism that were advanced then were responsible for long-lived habits of thought and behaviour, and indeed for the social conservatism and complicity with power that many commentators see in the later years of the communist movement in India (68). *Revolutionary Desires* argues that gender relations were absolutely central to such communist self-fashioning and that they allow us to trace continuity as well as change within the movement. Further, while Dasgupta concentrates on Bengal, my own explorations include other locales – Punjab and the United Provinces, Maharashtra, Andhra, and Delhi – in order to enable reflection upon the creation of a larger ‘national’ communist culture. An exclusive focus on particular regions has been the hallmark of existing scholarship on revolutionary and communist movements. In moving away from such exclusivity, I wish to suggest the need to think about a pan-Indian communist ethos.

I must offer a word of caution here. The feminist dictum ‘the personal is political’ was coined to challenge the privileging of organized or public action and to insist that acts relegated to the domestic and private are crucial to destabilizing and changing

the social order. In that sense, its most radical thrust was to question the conceptual bifurcation of these two spheres. However, many strands of feminist scholarship, in describing the 'private' domain excluded by a narrowly understood 'public sphere', have ended up treating the two as distinct. The bifurcation of private and public – a benchmark of liberal thought – is only deepened if we do not also simultaneously insist that the political is also deeply personal. And vice versa. As Nivedita Menon puts it, 'the existence of a private realm is dependent on the very discourse which posits its distinction from the public. The 'private', already deeply penetrated by the 'public', is in fact constructed and maintained by it' ('Abortion' 117). Paradoxically, then, when certain Marxist ideologues or organizations claimed that it was 'bourgeois' to pay attention to personal lives, they were endorsing a very liberal – and bourgeois – division of the individual and the collective.

Moreover, it is possible to simply reverse the bias of mainstream political and historical analysis and privilege 'the private' to the point where we neglect or downplay the importance of women's activities in the public sphere. Tanika Sarkar argues that this is precisely what has happened in recent scholarship on India. On the one hand, as she points out, 'the domestic and the private were reinterpreted as realms of autonomy, self-making'; but on the other hand, 'women's actual, intentional political work as world-transformative and self-transformational activity' has been understood as a sphere in which women are largely manipulated or marginalized by men ('Political Women' 541). This is why, she suggests, 'those movements which don't have an explicitly feminist agenda have not been taken seriously by feminists after the first generation of feminist scholars' (545). The communist movement in particular has suffered from this scholarly bias, partly because several recent studies have shown how it marginalized women, and partly because communist scholarship itself has ignored:

the social and political intricacies of communist lives in historical works, autobiographies and biographies – in a virtually exclusive preoccupation with party programmes and lines. Even thick descriptions of their political experience as a part of their everyday lives have hardly been studied. Communist women have thus been doubly marginalized: in Communist and in feminist histories.

(557)

As a result, the 'highly radical refashioning of communist domesticities, familial worlds, gender relations' has been obscured from view (557).

It is precisely this radical refashioning that I examine in this book, tracing both those moments which suggest a reshaping of norms and practices as well as those which show the enduring capacity of conventions to limit change. I also want to keep in view the fact that all such attempts to refashion the domestic and the worldly worked against the powerful traditional bifurcation of the public and the private domains. This is after all the divide that in the first place denied or limited the political

participation of Indian women, as well as shaped the social terrain on which Indian Marxists lived and worked.

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Communist self-fashioning did not take place in an ideological or social space of its own. Especially when it came to questions of gender and sexuality, communists were as deeply influenced by nationalist ideas and practices as they were by Marxist or revolutionary ones; indeed, the former provided the lens through which they viewed and appropriated the latter. As we know, male nationalists insisted on the divide between a public sphere in which they could meet and best colonial officials, and a private sphere of religion, culture, and domesticity that was to remain immune to any colonial intervention. Women activists both contested this division and were trapped within it. Partly because women's emancipation in India was, as in large parts of the colonized world, intertwined complexly with the struggle for independence, feminist scholarship on India has always been sharply conscious of the historical connections between women's personal, sexual, and political freedoms and the larger structures of social power. It has traced how, from the late nineteenth century onward, Indian women offered critiques of their subordination and, later, fought to change their place at home and in the world, while actively participating in movements for social and anti-colonial emancipation.

However, the question of women's emancipation often gets subsumed into a discussion of these other movements or histories. This trend has been bolstered by an influential strand of (largely male) scholarship that positions women not as active participants in nationalist debates about freedom, but rather as the *grounds* of such debates. So thoroughly were women shaped by these debates, these writers imply, that they could only visualize their freedom in terms set by men. Particularly important here is Partha Chatterjee's influential account of 'the women's question' in Indian nationalism, which focuses on the dilemma of male nationalists who had to deal with increasing pressure from British colonists to reform the status of women. How could they do so without also relinquishing control of the family and women to their colonial masters? Chatterjee suggests that Indian nationalists resolved the problem by positing a division between an external 'material' world where they could adopt the attributes which had given Europeans global dominance ('science, technology, rational forms of economic organization, modern methods of statecraft') and an inner spiritual-cultural domain of the 'home' (which included women, domesticity, and religion) that was understood as superior to Western forms, and where nothing would be conceded to the colonizers (244). Nationalists asserted their power by claiming that indigenous 'cultural' and religious traditions were sacrosanct, and that Indian men alone could decide what reforms and changes could take place in this domain. This included the sphere of women's education and their status in society, both of which the British had criticized as backward. Reformed but contained, the Indian woman was thus a joint upon which nationalist thought pivoted.

As feminist scholars have pointed out, Chatterjee's argument focuses on male nationalist anxieties about cultural identity. When he does turn to women, Chatterjee finds that their "autonomous subjectivity" is to be found in the domestic archives of home rather than 'the external domain of political conflict' (Gopal 61–62).⁹ Dipesh Chakrabarty's equally influential argument about the difficulty of writing an authentically Indian history also pivots around the Hindu woman and her attachments to a reformed yet essentially Indian home. In 'Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History', Chakrabarty suggests that Western ideas of progress, which insisted on the 'backwardness' of Indian women and the Indian family, were so pervasive among the colonized that we cannot easily find historical evidence of any Indian thought that stood outside their restrictive logic. But he locates a resistant consciousness at work in some women's accounts of the superiority of the extended Hindu family. These accounts suggested that, in distinction to Western women's embrace of a shameless individualism and self-indulgence, 'freedom' for Indian women lay in embracing a Hindu model of modesty and in wifely service to the extended family, as well as contentment with very little. Chakrabarty insists that these women's arguments for a home-grown Hindu upper-caste patriarchy indicate not an atavistic nativism but a political consciousness that escapes or resists the emancipatory logic of Western Enlightenment thought.

Certain nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Bengali texts seem to corroborate the overlapping patterns outlined by Chatterjee and Chakrabarty. For example, Shanti, a radiant and militant young woman who leaves her home to join the rebels, is at the heart of *Anandmath* (1882), Bankimchandra's enormously popular novel depicting a Hindu mendicant-led rebellion against Muslim rulers. When Shanti absconds, she does so not to claim equality with men in the public world, but rather to enable her husband Jibananda to fight freely without being torn between his duty to the cause and his desire for her. She insists that once she joins the rebellion, she is no longer a woman but a chaste warrior. This means that Jibananda can now live and fight alongside her and yet not break his vow of renouncing all family ties, especially conjugal ones. By shedding her womanliness, she can actually play the role of the perfect Hindu wife: 'My husband is great to me, but my duty is greater than him, and his duty is greater than my duty' (Chatterji 202).

Shanti is no ordinary woman; she becomes a goddess. Even the monk who has decreed the ascetic code for male warriors is in awe of her, admitting, 'So far I have called only our country Mother. [. . .] Now I call you Mother too.' Shanti thus articulates a version of the 'freedom in obedience' that Chakrabarty locates in Bengali housewives ('Postcoloniality' 14). The novel also suggests a division between the inner and outer world that resonates with Chatterjee's argument about the rhetorical forms of Indian nationalism. The *sanyasi* rebellion in which Shanti and Jibananda participate is aimed at creating a Hindu nation; in order to achieve this, the novel suggests, the *sanyasis* must mobilize the Hindu populace, which has been long suppressed by Muslim rulers. Although these rulers are backed by the British, the colonizers are actually not the real enemies of Hindus; instead, they possess the 'outward knowledge' that Hindus must acquire in order to 'reinstate [. . .] the true

Hindu rule of life' (Chatterji 229). But it is important to note that, whereas Chatterjee analyses the philosophy of *liberal* nationalism, *Anandmath* indicates the making of a stridently militant and *illiberal* Hindu nationalism. The novel alerts us to the intricate relationship between these two conceptions of the nation, and reminds us that the image of the ideal Hindu woman was in fact central to *both*. Despite their debates about the extent to which Hindu women and families were to be modernized, there were striking similarities between orthodox Hindu nationalism and liberal nationalism (which was also predominantly high-caste and Hindu).¹⁰

Further, it was colonial law that had laid the grounds for the public/private distinction by moulding the public sphere according to European legal mores while emphasizing religion and custom as the basis for personal law. In this way, *colonial policies* created the grounds for the indigenous patriarchal position that women, family, and culture were off-limits to the colonizers (O'Hanlon 51). Thus both liberal and illiberal nationalists were arguably simply reacting to colonial distinctions, rather than carving out a new strategy in dividing the home from the world. When it came to women, colonial and indigenous patriarchal positions mirrored one another – the ideal of a woman who is devoted to family and hearth was as much Victorian as it was Hindu (Borthwick 55–56). Women were quick to point out that the rhetoric of cultural and religious difference that Indian men used was belied by the collaboration between nationalists of all stripes and the British.

As early as 1882, Tarabai Shinde, in a book called *A Comparison Between Women and Men* (written in Marathi), had exposed the overlap between the older conservative attitudes to women and the positions of the new reformers. She, like other women, also pointed out that Indian men mirrored and mimicked colonizers despite their strenuous claims to difference:

You keep on trying to be just like them, yet you go on about them not putting their hands in our religion! [. . .] You turn yourselves into real live sahibs . . . then you turn around and claim you're great defenders of dharma! Aren't you even a bit ashamed of saying it?

(O'Hanlon 52–53)

Tarabai suggested that the increasing restrictions on women, such as the disapproval of widow remarriage, were a sign of the intensification of indigenous patriarchy, and that they were spreading even among groups that did not adhere to them previously. 'Far from seeing the home and family as some sacrosanct domain', Rosalind O'Hanlon notes, Tarabai 'positively demanded state intervention to make it easier for women to live and marry independently, and to punish men who corrupt the innocent' (32, 53). Many other women made similar demands, both as individuals and, later, through public campaigns.

In a famous 1887 case, Rukhmabai, an educated daughter of a Bombay doctor, refused to cohabit with the much older man to whom she had been married as a child. In her appeal to the government, she asked Queen Victoria to amend Indian law and render child marriages illegal. Her husband sued her on the grounds that she was his

rightful property, but lost the case under civil law. However, the Chief Justice bowed to the conservative demand that she be tried under Hindu law, and finally Rukhmabai was ordered to go and live with her husband. (It is worth pointing out, though, that Rukhmabai eventually qualified as a doctor in London, and became one of the earliest practising woman doctors in India). In a book called *The High Caste-Hindu Woman* (1888), Pandita Ramabai, scholar, educationist and reformer, charged that the case revealed a functional alliance between the colonial government and Indian men in questions involving women. Ramabai was championed by Jyotirao Phule, the anti-caste thinker and activist, who suggested that high-caste women were as victimised by the caste order as lower-castes and untouchables (O'Hanlon 18–19). Thus, much of the discourse that some scholars take as representative of a pan-Indian nationalism was actually a very particular high-caste male variety. In 1910, a distinguished courtesan and woman of letters called Bangalore Nagaratnamma reprinted an epic poem in Telugu, *Radhika Santwanam*, which had been written in the late eighteenth century by another courtesan, Muddupalani. There was a furore – Indian men protested the publication, saying that the poem was overtly sexual. In turn, the British courts banned the poem. Although the ban was lifted after Independence in 1947, the text continued to be ‘decreed out of existence ideologically’ (Tharu and Lalita 160–61).

Far from just writers and reformers acting individually, the earliest women's campaigns also, as Mrinalini Sinha has shown, ‘challenged the division of home and world by exposing the reluctance of both the imperial state and male nationalists to “reform” women's positions’ (623).¹¹ Their efforts showed that nationalists had thus not ‘resolved’ the women's question, as Chatterjee would have it, but rather had used ‘the glorified femininity of women’ as ‘the ground on which to render *their* [i.e. the women's] political demands illegitimate’ (Nair 61). Indian women's struggles against indigenous and colonial patriarchies remind us that the division between home and the world, or private and public, was invoked to constrain female activity, and invoked most stridently when such a division was challenged or unstable. For this reason, it has shaped the terms of women's entry into the public sphere from the late nineteenth century to, arguably, the present day. Because the idealized images of femininity in the discourses of reformists, conservatives and colonialists alike pivoted upon a division between the home and the world, women who threatened the divide – by earning a living, by participating in politics, or simply for pleasure – faced the charge of immorality.

Therefore, all political movements and leaders that sought to include women had to deal with, modify, or appropriate existing ideas of public and private spheres. The most influential, and most widely examined by scholars, was Gandhi's redefinition of the boundaries of home. There is a vast literature on the complex and often contradictory demands Gandhi made upon women, and I will not dwell on these here, beyond emphasizing that Gandhi's ability to bring women out into the public sphere depended upon his reshaping the ideal of a good Hindu wife and mother.¹² Gandhi insisted that women had an obligation to attend to the good of society as a whole rather than only to their families and homes. At first suggesting that women should

strengthen the nation within the spatial confines of their homes, Gandhi eventually called upon them to come out in large numbers, to picket shops selling liquor and to join in the salt *satyagraha* and other campaigns. However, he was especially careful to frame his campaign as preserving the patriarchal family: women campaigners were the new Sitas, out to destroy Ravana while remaining faithful to Ram (Kumar 83). An ideal of the strong but non-confrontational woman shaped Gandhi's vision of non-violent resistance. For him, the poet Mirabai embodies such an ideal, being a woman who, according to legend, rejected marriage and domesticity for a higher cause (devotion to the god Krishna), but by dint of her chastity and virtue converted her detractors (including her husband) into believers. Like Mirabai, women could venture forth while still remaining within the bounds of decorous femininity.

Just as women's struggles for reform of the family led to intense political battles in the public sphere, their participation in nationalist mobilizations could, conversely, arouse domestic and familial crises. Gandhi was at pains to contain such crises, emphasizing that the gendered division of labour within the family was proper to its smooth functioning, even when women served the nationalist cause: it was 'degrading both for men and woman that women should be called upon or induced to forsake the hearth and shoulder the rifle for the protection of that hearth. It is a reversion to barbarity' (quoted in Kishwar 1699). Sucheta Kriplani, a well-known Congress leader, credited 'Gandhi's personality' with ensuring that 'when women came out and worked in the political field, their family members knew that they were quite secure, they were protected' (quoted in Forbes 125–26). For Gandhi, female strength lay in woman's sexual restraint, as well as in her ability to resist male lust, even within marriage (and if necessary, like Mirabai, to break marital and domestic ties to guard her purity). The ideal woman, of course, like the ideal man, would renounce sexual activity altogether, as did Sucheta and her husband J. B. Kriplani. (The always irreverent Urdu writer Saadat Hasan Manto was to satirize the ethos of chastity within Gandhi's movement in his searing short story 'Rubber'.) Satyagrahis should also embrace poverty; Gandhi appealed to women in particular to cast off ornaments that were 'an offence to the eye', for in 'this country of semi-starvation of millions', a woman's best ornaments were her virtue and modesty (quoted in Kishwar 1696).

Gandhi's insistence that nationalist women were in fact 'good' women answered accusations that women who came out onto the streets were 'street women', either literally or metaphorically. There was a context for such reassurance: in 1934, Cornelia Sorabji, social reformer and the first woman advocate in India, had claimed that women were pulled out of rescue homes to join the Congress's civil disobedience movement and that 'in the Punjab, 90 per cent of the women arrested for political crimes and offences are prostitutes' (74). Sorabji was deploying this analogy between acceptable politics and acceptable gender roles to attack Gandhi, but he used the same equation to great advantage to legitimize his own politics and delegitimize other forms of protest. Unsurprisingly, he was 'almost hysterical with rage' when prostitutes were actually drawn into the movement in Bengal: such women were worse than thieves, he wrote, because they 'stole the virtue of society' (Kumar 83–84).

Gandhi also used the comparison between non-normative sexualities and deviant politics to disparage women in revolutionary movements who were, in his view, abnormal and 'unsexed' (Forbes 155).

Partly because Gandhian nationalism powerfully shaped political culture at large, there was pressure upon *all* politically active men and women to espouse this downplaying of the sexually active self, even if they did not follow it to the letter.¹³ Even before Gandhi came onto the political scene, of course, the ideals of sexual renunciation and political devotion were tightly braided, and therefore, many women appropriated the discourse of glorified Hindu femininity for their own purposes. For example, revolutionary-nationalist women in Bengal in the 1920s invoked the figure of Shanti in *Anandmath* as they demanded to be let into militant organizations that embraced the creed of male asceticism. (It is to be noted that they were all upper-caste and Hindu themselves). Most of them did not contest asceticism as an ideal; in fact, they insisted that that they too could embrace it. But there were dissident voices among them that mocked this creed while also critiquing existing norms of marriage.

In the early revolutionary movements, resistance largely took the form of militant and spectacular actions, from train robberies and shootings to the hurling of bombs – actions that confirm rather than challenge established forms of heroism. In her study of Naxalite women, Mallarika Sinha Roy suggests that

in communist writings, gender ambivalent notions of courage and activism emerge [. . .] female bodies also come to represent qualities of masculine activism. Revolutionary women, who are lauded for their courage and resourcefulness, become de facto 'men', and they are also implicitly turned into absolute markers of chaste femininity.

(25)

But surely when 'female bodies also come to represent masculine activism' the result is not only 'gender ambivalent notions of courage and activism', but also, more fundamentally, a confirmation of gender binaries. When strong women are turned into 'de facto men', the equation of courage and activism with action and manliness is emphasized. Paradoxically, in a sense, Gandhi's refashioning of his own body and his constant referencing of female strength undercut this equation of masculinity and power, and were in one sense more unorthodox.

Further, as Suruchi Thapar-Bjorkert points out, the 'equation of political activity with the public sphere' was enshrined in the historiography of the nationalist movement, thus ensuring that 'the nationalist contributions women made from within the domestic sphere were silenced' (43). To offer an alternative perspective on nationalist affiliation, Thapar-Bjorkert interviewed middle-class women who were far more bound by domestic roles than elite women, but who nevertheless had strong affinities with the nationalist movement. They expressed these affinities in a multitude of ways, including by passing on nationalist ideals to their children even when the rest of the family did not hold these views. But sometimes even the respondents

themselves ‘believed that if they had not stepped out of their homes in the public domain, “they were not nationalist”’ (45).

Valuable as this work is in making visible previously neglected methods and subjects of political action, it can, ironically, serve to reinforce the divide between the public and the private, the political and the domestic.¹⁴ Not only can the two not be theoretically demarcated, as I have already pointed out, but women’s political activities spanned both domains, especially when they were part of underground movements. Political activities were carried out under cover of domesticity, which thus became an arena of political activity in itself. Revolutionary and communist women play-acted as the wives, aunts, and sisters of their male comrades and they regularly hid firearms and bombs in public as well as private spaces. Indeed, mainstream nationalism could itself be a kind of disguise; Thapar-Bjorkert herself found many middle-class women whom she had taken to be Gandhian nationalists, but who were actually affiliated with the more radical underground groups:

Raj Kumari Gupta initially told me that she worked for the Congress Party and was involved with non-violent activities such as spinning the charkha (spinning wheel) and propagating the Gandhian ideology. However, as the interview progressed and there was growing trust, she revealed that she had undertaken revolutionary work and was part of the team associated with the Kakori conspiracy case. [. . .] She and her associates would hide ammunition in their undergarments and wear khadi (spun cotton cloth and symbolic of Gandhi’s nonviolent ideology) clothes to cover them. She said that ‘our real work was violent but our garb was non-violence’.

(43)

While Gupta says she only *pretended* to be Gandhian while actually being a revolutionary, women (and men) could in fact move between the revolutionary groups, the Congress Socialists, Subhas Chandra Bose’s Forward Bloc, and the Communist Party – as much as between domestic and public spaces – as they searched for the best way to articulate their anti-imperialist nationalism.¹⁵

I have suggested that because women’s political activities often blurred the borders between home and the world, whatever their political affiliations, they had to contend with Gandhi’s simultaneous reconstruction and re-entrenchment of existing gender norms. As this book will detail, revolutionaries and communists also shared the common sense about politically active women and the ideal political subject that resulted from this contention. A large number of communists shared Gandhian attitudes to material possessions, even though they sprang from a different philosophy.¹⁶ They were at pains to embrace lives of simplicity and hardship. In a country as poor as India, this is not hard to understand. But these attitudes could also harden into a suspicion of all pleasure, including sexual pleasure, and result in a moral puritanism. Thus, asceticism, as well as a revolutionary body capable of staunchly withstanding hardship and suffering, were ideals shared by communists and Gandhians alike. The details of these bodies could differ considerably, however: whereas Gandhi projected

a quasi-effeminate, emaciated physical self, many revolutionary groups trained their members to develop physically fit and militant bodies. Several followed Vivekananda's advice to young men: 'You will be nearer heaven through football than through the study of the Gita' (quoted in Laushey 3). Latter-day communists were inheritors of both traditions which, despite their divergences, could overlap when it came to the question of a renunciation of physical comforts and denial of pleasure. It is important to understand the extent to which communists shared this Gandhian ethos, as well as the extent to which even their own departures from the norm were still defined by it.

In some respects, this ethos dovetailed curiously with the image of women and sexuality within European Marxist movements, even though at first glance the image of a simple khadi sari-clad female revolutionary seems very different from that of a gun-toting, trouser-wearing Soviet fighter. But the two co-existed in a very peculiar fashion among the Indian left. One point of intersection was the idea, extolled in both traditions, of motherhood as a source of revolutionary understanding and action. Time and again, Indian revolutionaries drew parallels between the mother in Gorky's novel of that name and a local woman drawn into action by her position as mother. Moreover, many European revolutionaries also extolled the renunciation of personal comforts, including romance and even sexuality, in order to more efficiently serve the larger cause.

Abhilasha Kumari and Sabina Kidwai suggest that even as communist women challenged the class assumptions and biases of the Congress women, they imbibed some of their attitudes:

The much-admired role models of the time were often women who contributed substantially to the national movement but never questioned conventional cultural roles; as a result, the euphoria and romance of the freedom struggle prevented the Communist women from radicalizing the struggle in their own interest.

(144)

This view needs to be both extended and complicated. To be sure, communist women and men inherited, and inhabited, the powerful patriarchal division between private and public worlds that colonial rulers and upper-class, upper-caste nationalist men had collaboratively entrenched. However, as *Revolutionary Desires* will show, communist women also challenged this divide. *Their* romance of the freedom struggle also included visions quite radically different from those of the mainstream nationalist women. Inspired by such visions, they often explored, or at least imagined, alternative models of inhabiting personal relationships, the bonds of parenthood, conjugality, and friendship. By paying attention to these attempts and desires, however partial, unrealized, or even compromised they might have been, we can better understand the connections between radical and feminist histories in India.

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Given their deep imprint on the cultural and political landscape of the country, underground militant-nationalist groups in India had rather short lives. Their most

active phase lasted about a decade from the mid 1920s to the mid 1930s. These groups are an important element of the complex heritage of the Indian left, even though there have been consistent attempts to appropriate them into a liberal-nationalist or right-wing Hindu political tradition. Although the *political* connections between nationalist-revolutionaries and communists have been widely examined, the overlaps – and differences – between their attitudes to domesticity, renunciation, sexuality, and the family have received very little attention. Chapter 1, ‘The romance of revolution,’ and Chapter 2, ‘Love in the time of revolution’ examine women revolutionaries in Bengal and Punjab respectively. Both chapters place real-life women alongside literary representations, but they also differ methodologically in that the first chapter draws upon the lives, memoirs, and utterances of many revolutionary women, whereas the second one concentrates on the life of a single woman.

Most of the scholarship on women revolutionaries concentrates on Bengal, where women joined revolutionary groups in much larger numbers than elsewhere. Because the revolutionary tradition has been assimilated into mainstream nationalism, much of this writing has tended to be hagiographic. In recent years, though, feminist scholars have offered nuanced readings of revolutionary women’s lives and have begun to estimate the psychological costs of underground life and of the ethos of heroic sacrifice that these women unevenly embraced. Here, I estimate the weight of their presence in a society where the very language of politics was highly gendered by juxtaposing the lives, and where possible the self-expression, of revolutionary women such as Kalpana Dutt, Pritilata Waddedar, Bina Das, and Kamala Das with two powerful and influential literary portrayals of them. One such portrayal is Sarat Chandra Chatterjee’s proscribed novel *Pather Dabi* (The Right of Way), which was formative for many of the young revolutionaries in Bengal – for men as for women. Like Bankim’s *Anandmath* and *Devi Chaudhurani*, it featured women as active revolutionaries, but it also marked a departure from these earlier novels, which were markedly Hindu in their vision of the nation. The romance of revolution created in *Pather Dabi* is, I argue, prescient about the gender dynamics of revolutionary organizations of the time. On the other hand, one of the most damning accounts of sexual politics within the revolutionary underground was Rabindranath Tagore’s *Char Adhyay* (Four Chapters). I trace how it portrays romantic love as both transcending political affiliations and being compromised by them. In both novels, we see that even when male writers place women at the centre of their own discussions of revolutionary politics, they remain concerned primarily with male psychology and subjectivity. Together, these contrasting visions of radical life indicate how the gendered mores of different kinds of Indian nationalism both seeped into, and were contested by, the values and actions of revolutionary nationalists in Bengal.

Despite being proscribed by the British government, the confession of Bina Das, who shot at a British administrator at a Calcutta University function, circulated in Punjab and the United Provinces. This is not surprising, given that there were not only practical but also deep emotional connections and overlaps between revolutionaries in different locations, connections that have yet to be fully explored

because the scholarly tendency is to study each region in isolation from the other. Moreover, in contrast to revolutionary women in Bengal, their counterparts in Punjab have received very little attention. While the most important militant group, the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association (HSRA), was explicitly left-leaning and therefore quite different from the Bengali underground, women occupied analogous places in each. The HSRA faced a major crisis when its leader, Chandrashekhar Azad, ordered that his comrade, Yashpal, be put to death for his relationship with 17-year-old Prakashvati Kapur. The comrades who agreed with this decision felt that there was no place for love affairs within the organization, but others did not entirely agree. As I show in Chapter 2, this incident, alongside attitudes to women and sexuality more generally, provided the vocabulary through which HSRA comrades expressed their differences with one another. They also reverberated in several Hindi memoirs and novels, including Yashpal's autobiography *Sinhavalokan* (A Lion's Eye View), his famous first novel *Dada Kamred* (Brother Comrade), the poet Harivansh Rai Bachchan's autobiography *Kya Bhooloon Kya Yaad Karoon* (What Should I Remember and What Forget), and, finally, Prakashvati's own memoir *Lahore Se Lucknow Tak* (From Lahore to Lucknow). I trace how the event and its afterlives shed light on contemporaneous debates about the proper place and attributes of political women. *Dada Kamred* is notably avant-garde, not only in explicitly taking on these issues, but also in weaving them into an argument that revolutionary change needs to extend beyond the sphere of economics and politics, into the arenas of gender and familial relations, sexuality, intimacy, and personal freedom.

Writing in the 1940s, Yashpal was convinced that the Communist Party was fostering new and open kinds of personal relations. Within the Soviet Union, Alexandra Kollontai's view that conjugal and familial relationships in a communist society needed to be overhauled had sparked off intense debates through the 1920s and 1930s. Her opinions often circulated in distorted form internationally, leading to suppositions in India that communists believed in free love. Tracing some of these debates, Chapter 3, entitled 'Commune-ism', explores how Indian communists explored alternative models of inhabiting personal relationships – parenthood, conjugality, and friendship – in communes that were set up all over the country when the Communist Party was legalized in 1942 during the Second World War. The Party was declared legal by the colonial authorities when it argued that a broad united front needed to be created in the war against fascism, a policy that I discuss in detail later. A word of clarification is in order here – although I discuss the militant national-revolutionaries first and the Communist Party later, it is not the case that the latter followed the former in temporal terms. There are divergent narratives about the founding of the Communist Party of India. According to the Communist Party of India (CPI), the organization was founded in Kanpur in 1925, and it grew out of the trade union movement.¹⁷ But the CPI (Marxist) or CPM, which split from the CPI in 1964, maintains that the Party was formed five years earlier in Tashkent by a group that included M. N. Roy, who had earlier been involved with the revolutionary group Anushilan in Bengal, and who was also one of the founders of the Communist Party of Mexico. At least one person, Shaukat Usmani, was present at both Tashkent

and Kanpur, underlining the fact that there were no clear-cut divisions between these groups. Colonial authorities were terrified that Marxism would take hold among Indian nationalists, and often suspected connections between revolutionaries and the communists even when there were none. They had proscribed Marxist literature, which used to be smuggled into the country, sometimes by British communists who established underground connections with their counterparts in India.¹⁸ Communists were arrested and tried under various ‘conspiracy cases’ which paradoxically had the effect of making them, and communist beliefs in general, more visible to the Indian populace at large. Some of this history will become evident in later chapters of this book, but for now I only want to point out that, for many years of its existence, the Communist Party, like the revolutionary groups, had to operate underground.

In the underground phase, but especially once the Party was legalized, there were formal and de facto communes in which men and women lived together in ways that departed radically from the values of the conservative families from which most of them came. In particular, I consider the Bombay Commune, drawing upon its descriptions in Communist autobiographies and memoirs, including those of Shaukat Azmi, Usha Verma, A. S. R. Chari, and Victor Kiernan, and in interviews given to me by several women activists. I examine the different ways in which the communists visualized marriage and coupledom and reconfigured – as well as replicated – existing mores of the family. The chapter ends with a discussion of Yashpal’s remarkable Hindi novel *Manushya Ke Roop* (Forms of Humankind), the only literary work I have come across which discusses the commune in some detail. The boundaries between the personal and the political were redrawn in the communes of course, but they were also interrogated within communist families outside the commune. Sometimes the refashioning of private and political spaces was heady and liberating for women; at other times, it could result in despair and misery because it placed particular burdens upon them, as I discuss throughout this book.

A path-breaking attempt to chart such refashioning and reckon its costs is a book I mentioned earlier, *We Were Making History*, for which Stree Shakti Sanghatana, a feminist collective, interviewed women who had participated in the Telangana uprisings in Andhra in 1947. The interviews recorded both their nostalgia for ‘that magic time’ when they perceived themselves to be central to the armed struggles and their ideal of remaking the social order, as well as their deep resentment that, after the movement was called off, they were caused to retreat into the very roles that the movement had allowed them to transgress.¹⁹ The women express their differences with and even anger towards their families and the Party, but also note the ways in which the latter facilitated their charting of new paths and lives. Janaki Nair rightly points out that the Telangana struggle was not a feminist movement, and that it is the ‘post hoc feminist interrogation’ that ‘produced a feminist recollection of that magic time, a reconstruction of the movement understood through the lens of gender’ (62). She also notes that a later volume, Parvathi Menon’s *Breaking Barriers*, re-appropriates these Telangana memories, as for instance when it places a new interview with one of the women featured in *We Were Making History* alongside interviews with present-day women leaders of the Communist Party of India (Marxist).²⁰ Predictably, Nair

notes, the new interview has ‘none of the humour, the critical edge, or the reflexivity of the earlier testimony’, and instead the radical ‘voices [of the Telangana fighters] are subordinated to the imperatives of writing a heroic account of their achievements’ (63).

This sanctioned solemnity of tone is partially shared by older books such as Renu Chakravartty’s *Communists in the Indian Women’s Movement*, published in 1980, which did, however, break new ground by documenting the work of women within the Communist Party. Whereas *We Were Making History* is a feminist analysis of a communist uprising and highlights tensions between women and the Party, *Communists in the Indian Women’s Movement* tries to show how in India the emancipation of women and the communist movement are historically, even necessarily, connected. As the title makes clear, Chakravartty lays claim on the women’s movement on behalf of communists. As early reviews by communist women attest, this was an unusual move for the time. One such reviewer found Chakravartty’s title

bewildering. [. . .] An Indian Women’s movement? Has there been one? Or does the author perhaps mean women in the Indian Communist movement? The confusion arises because she uses a term, ‘women’s movement’, which has certain specific implications in the Western context. [. . .] However, her pioneering effort in collecting a vast body of informative material which has never been put together before, indirectly makes us see that the term might be used with a somewhat different connotation in the Indian context.

(Bhattacharya 20)

For another reviewer, the book was significant because it calls attention to a ‘new feature’ of contemporary women’s movements; that is, ‘the demand for “autonomous” women’s organizations being made by bourgeois “women’s rights” groups and many social scientists’ (Velayudhan 60). The implication is that were it not for these claims, there would be no need to connect communist and women’s movements.

Although Chakravartty downplays the tensions between female cadres and male leaders, or between women on the question of gender roles within the Party, her book does make several important claims about the foundational role played by communist women both in organizing women-only actions of different kinds, and in extending the reach of women’s groups and organizations to poorer women, peasant women, and working-class women. Despite her repetition of Party rhetoric about how women fought ‘side by side with men’ in various important movements, she traces a parallel history of communist women’s organizing against hunger, against bondage and sexual slavery (she calls them ‘feudal laws and customs’), and against colonialism (*Communists* 216, Chapter 13 *passim*). Missing from *Communists in the Indian Women’s Movement*, however, are precisely the nuances that *We Were Making History* tried to locate – that is, a reckoning of radical thought and action not just in the public sphere, but also within the confines of existing forms of domesticity.

Not far from the Bombay Commune was a world that was both connected to and far removed from it: Girangaon, or the textile mill district in Bombay. Here, a very different kind of female revolutionary was being honed. Chakravartty acknowledges (as do later labour and feminist historians), the remarkable work of Ushabai Dange and Parvatibai Bhore, two leaders of the mill workers in Bombay. Both women wrote their memoirs (in Marathi), each of which lays bare the personal costs of their political lives. In Chapter 4, 'The political is personal', I discuss both books – Ushabai Dange's *Pan Aikta Kaun* (Who Listens to Me) and Parvatibai Bhore *Eka Ranaraginichi Hakikat* (The Reality of One Fighter's Life). Ushabai, who married the controversial CPI leader S. A. Dange, narrates her dramatic journey from child widow to a leader of workers, dwelling on her marriage, political consciousness, motherhood, and her worldly desires and fears. The title of the book is also its recurring refrain: 'Who listens to me?' Ushabai is bitterly frank about the costs of her life with Dange, her constantly thwarted craving for greater companionship and her feelings of being abandoned by him at key moments of her life. The larger collectivity of women workers husbanded her, she writes, but that only highlighted the lack of a husband. Ushabai was clear that her marriage and coupledom did not replicate outdated bourgeois norms, but rather followed from radical action on her part and Dange's. This meant that she also believed communes were not the way to reform the family, and that they were essentially the experiments of elite women and men.

If Ushabai Dange's book illustrates the dictum that the personal is inescapably political, Parvatibai Bhore's memoir illuminates the corollary – that political consciousness is rooted in the most deeply personal part of one's being. Bhore was the only woman union leader of the Bombay textile mills who came from the working class herself. This virtually unknown book is also the most eloquent account of both domestic servitude and the freedom offered by political participation. Parvatibai's fight against her patriarchal family propelled and shaped her desperate desire to become part of a larger collectivity – not of women, but of the working class fighting against imperial rule and capitalist domination. Conversely, her political work gave her the vocabulary to understand how domestic servitude was naturalized in the family. Both Ushabai and Parvatibai also narrate how they felt browbeaten, harassed, or marginalized by upper-class Party members. Their memoirs, like some of the other stories included in other chapters, show that despite talk of declassing, and despite the inter-class mingling that took place in communes, class continued to both structure Party hierarchy and deeply fracture female solidarities.

Although the significant contributions of communist activists have not been accorded appropriate space in accounts of Indian feminism, in recent years Marxist and communist writers have come to occupy a pride of place there. Literary-critical scholarship has shown how radical writers like Rasheed Jehan and Ismat Chughtai (along with their male counterparts in the Progressive Writers' Association) contested conventional notions of both freedom and gender relations.²¹ Rasheed Jehan was a doctor and a member of the Communist Party, and her fiction was banned by the colonial government. Ismat Chughtai admired Jehan and looked up to her as a model, but she was not a formal member of the Party. She too had to defend herself