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Solidarities in and through Resistance: Rethinking Alliance-building through Protests in Plantations in India

Supurna Banerjee

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INSTITUTE OF DEVELOPMENT STUDIES KOLKATA

DD 27/D, Sector I, Salt Lake, Kolkata 700 064

Phone : +91 33 2321-3120/21 Fax : +91 33 2321-3119

E-mail : idsk@idskmail.com, Website: www.idsk.edu.in

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Supurna Banerjee[1]

Abstract: Popular resistance to the failure of the state has concentrated on grassroots initiative for struggles against state repression and other forms of dispossession. They remain different from electoral and legislative politics which has relegated large sections of the people outside the process of power. Looking at motivations and subjectivities of the participants in a movement this article follows a body of work which provides textured analysis of structures of movement at the centre of protest of the poor. Through ethnography of three protests in tea plantations in Dooars India, I look at solidarities which are formed through resistance and/or resistances which are made possible through solidarities. I ask how alliances are formed. Who owns protest movements? Dooars had a long history of workers' movements and a brief history of this in the first section provides the context through which we can trace continuities and changes. This is followed by an analysis of three protests which demonstrates how organization of protests and its internal dynamics shape not just claims-making but also the very contours of participation. In looking at movements and its internal dynamics, the paper will interrogate solidarities and seek to understand its implications for mobilization and finally activism.

Keywords: resistance, solidarity, movement, workers, tea plantations

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1. Assistant Professor, IDSK

Protest movements in the global South are mostly a response to and resistance against the neo-liberal state, its market and the consequent inequality it unleashes. Indeed, in countries like India the claim to state provisioning serves as the moral economy of rights for the dispossessed. Popular resistance to the failure of the state has concentrated on grassroots initiative for struggles against state repression and other forms of dispossession. In the last couple of decades these are being seen as an attempt at redefining politics at a time when substantial efforts are being made to narrow its range. They remain different from electoral and legislative politics which has relegated large sections of the people outside the process of power (Kothari, 1988:46). Rather than focusing on the bigger frame of political economy, directing our lenses on the smaller platform of such grassroots protest provides an opportunity to understand structures of resistance—its limitations and possibilities. Through looking at motivations and subjectivities of the participants in a movement this article follows a body of work which provides textured analysis of structures of movement at the centre of protest of the poor (Baviskar,2004; Nielsen, 2010; Levien, 2018). The contours of such protests, its roadblocks, both internal and external not only provide us insights into ways in which responses negotiate and are dealt with by the largely anti-poor neoliberal state, but also to really understand the possibilities and limitations of solidarities that emerge or are organized through such protests (Nielsen, 2010; Chandra, 2013).

Through ethnography of three protests in tea plantations in Dooars India, I look at solidarities which are formed through resistance and/or resistances which are made possible through solidarities. I ask how alliances are formed. Who owns protest movements? Dooars had a long history of workers' movements and a brief history of this in the first section provides the context through which we can trace continuities and changes. This is followed by an analysis of three protests which demonstrates how organization of protests and its internal dynamics shape not just claims-making but also the very contours of participation. In

looking at movements and its internal dynamics, the paper will interrogate solidarities and seek to understand its implications for mobilization and finally activism.

Methodology[2]

This paper is based on ethnography and oral histories in tea plantations in Dooars primarily with the women workers. Focused in a tea plantation called Kaalka, I also did some work in the neighbouring plantations Raagini, Disha and Naamchi. The ethnography is located in the immediate post-crisis period of 2010-13 when the plantations had reopened but still required state support for functioning. This area was an especially crisis-ridden area of Dooars where many of the plantations had faced closure. Kaalka itself was closed for ten years from 2000 and reopened in August 2010. While the analysis of the first protest is based on ethnographic evidence, the next two are based on extensive oral histories with the participants and other workers. I tried to talk to as many sections of people as possible to get a holistic sense of the protests and their implications. Having negotiated with the crisis and government aid programmes makes the workers and organizations in Kaalka area more aware and in constant negotiation with the state. While the bulk of the fieldwork was conducted by 2013, conversations with the research participants continued for long following that.

Context

History of labour protests in Dooars

Dooars, located at the foothills of Himalayas in the state of West Bengal, is one of India's main tea growing regions. The tea plantations of Dooars had a very specific history of resistance and we see evidence of workers' agitations even before organised trade union movement comes into effect. Dasgupta (1986) notes that as early as 1916 Oraon workers in

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2. While some of the ethnographic incidents in this paper have also been used in my monograph *Agency and Activism in India: Nurturing Resistance in Tea Plantations*, the framing and analytical insights are completely different and not reproduced in any way.

Dooars were involved in a resistance which while influenced by the Tana Bhagat movement in Jharkhand[3] took overt political and anti-colonial tone in its expression. This agitation, however, remained invisible to the nationalist movement emerging in Jalpaiguri which was premised on a strict separation between the nationalist politics of the Bengali *bhadralok* and tribal anti-imperialist cultural movements (Ghosal, 2016). Organised labour movements in Dooars (as well as Darjeeling) began around the late 1930s with the Communist party organising the workers. This was an important period in the growth of working class politics in Dooars (Dasgupta, 1989; Xaxa, 1997). In early 1946 the Bengal Assam Rail Road union organised workers of Dooars for the first time for collective action (Bhowmik, 1981). This support was instrumental in the growth of trade union movement in Dooars. In 1946-47 the labourers organised by the Communist party took part in the Food Movement and Tebhaga movement. The political claims-making thus challenged the erstwhile portrayal of their resistance primarily in cultural and religious terms.

The industrial relations while retaining some aspects of paternalism began to be largely mediated through the trade unions. As Xaxa (1997) notes the grinding poverty, rising expense and lack of sufficient wages prevalent in the tea plantations provided a ready ground for the Communist party to organise the workers. The other leftist parties like Forward Bloc and Revolutionary Socialist Party too were active. The Congress too became active in the area as they saw an opportunity to exert influence in India's developing working class. It was however the left parties and their radical politics which clashed more with the planters whereas the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC), the Congress' trade union showed reluctance to clash with this class (Bhowmik, 1981; Dasgupta, 1989). The energy of labour politics

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3. The Tana Bhagat movement (1914-1919) was a tribal uprising of a section of Tana Bhagats and Oraons under the leadership of Jatra Oraon in Chotanagpur. The Tana Bhagats opposed the taxes imposed on them by the British and staged a civil disobedience opposing the zamindars, the banias or moneylenders, the missionaries,Muslims and the British state (Kumar, 2008).

was echoed in the larger political space when in 1946, Ratanlal Brahman, an important trade unionist of Communist Party of India (CPI) was elected in the Darjeeling labour constituency. The Zilla Cha Bagan Mazdoor union (District Tea Plantations Workers' union) was formed in 13 tea gardens during this period. The trade unions thus emerged as important political actors in North Bengal. Focussing on better wages and other facilities the trade unions along with their workers fought for this as matter of rights both through wage negotiations and agitations.

That the labour movement had gained momentum became evident when in the early 1950s police fired on a group of workers from Margaret Hope tea plantation in Darjeeling agitating for better wages, housing and the like, killing 6 of them (The Telegraph, 13.06.04). This led to a region-wide strike bringing the entire tea production to a stop and pushing the central government to intervene. The plantation labour standing committee was set up which brought the Plantation Labour Act of 1951 into effect. This act was of crucial importance to the history of resistance of workers in the tea plantations as not only did it codify wages and working conditions as a matter of rights, it acknowledged the labourers as right bearing working class rather than coolies. This was also a great vindication for the role of trade unions, especially left trade unions, in labour politics of North Bengal.

From the middle of 1960s, the labour unrest in Dooars tea gardens were consistently volatile with political claims-making enacted through strikes, blockades and the like. The coalition United Front government too seemed to give the labour movement some support. The 1977 election of Left Front government, a coalition of Marxist and other socialist parties, showed a continuation of support towards demands of labour. The second term of the government from 1982, however, saw some changes in the attitude of the government, discouraging labour strikes for potentially vitiating the atmosphere for prospective investors.

The long history of trade union activism in the region, suffered a steady decline in the post liberalization period especially from the early 2000s (Raman, 2010). This paper will show that trade

unions still continued to organise around issues of wage and bonus (as was evident in the massive wage strikes in 2005), but the agitations were less frequent in nature. It is beyond the scope of this paper to reflect at length on the reasons for decline in the trade union movement in this region. But to contextualise the arguments I make later in the paper it is necessary to critically interrogate the decline of left trade unionism as well as to place it within the context of dominance of global capital.

The climate of crisis in the tea plantations (Raman, 2010; Banerjee, 2017) coupled with increased competition from small tea growers (Ghosal 2016) resulted into a push for casualization of a workforce so far holding onto a secured albeit low paid job. Further the closure and threat of closure of the plantations greatly curtailed the bargaining power of the workers and their unions even for their rightful wages, bonus etc. In my earlier work (Banerjee, 2017) I had shown how instead of articulating demands as matter of rights the trade unions are largely limited to negotiations for their mere survival. As Ghoshal (2016: 62) notes, the restructuring of the political economy of tea plantations through proliferation of small tea growers enjoying state subsidies and incentives further weakened the trade union movement which was structured around the infrastructure of traditional tea plantations.

The massive strikes in July 2005 shut down the entire region of Dooars with the participation of all workers and the major trade unions (Bhowmik, 2005). In the midst of the crisis this was indeed remarkable. At the same time the 2005 strikes brought out the contradictions which had so far been lying under the surface in the rhetoric and action of the left government. In the tripartite agreement that followed, the government while mediating proposed an increase which was closer to the proposal of the planters' association rather than of the striking workers and their unions. Even this meagre increase agreed upon on paper was wilfully neglected by most of the tea plantations to which the state seemed to turn a blind eye (Bhowmik, 2005). In spite of rhetorical assurance unfortunately the duplicity of

the Left Front government was re-enacted by the incumbent Trinamool Congress government too when it came to power in 2011. Further, the shifting of the site of the wage negotiations to Siliguri by dissociating the momentum of the movement from the moment of negotiations further curtailed the bargaining tactics that trade unions had in their disposal (Ghosal, 2016).

Limitations of left trade unionism

The trade union movement while hampered by the onslaught of capitalism has also been curtailed by its structural limits. The sustained dominance of left trade unions aided by a left government at the state had resulted into a patronage structure where trade union leadership could use their power to browbeat the workers (Banerjee, 2017). The hierarchical structure of the workforce of the tea plantations and its correspondence with the trade union hierarchies resulted into what Chatterjee (2003:143) called postcolonial labour elite. Accounts of workers reveal their misgivings about the leadership of the trade union including even suspicion of complicity with the management. Further the trade unions affiliated to political parties led to them adjusting their movements in relation to their party's policies (Ghosal, 2016). While the Congress trade unions were always closer to the management, the left trade unions enjoyed a repute of militancy and radicalism. With the Left Front government, however, this underwent a shift. The trade unions affiliated to CPIM and RSP recast the relations between workers' representatives and management into one of convenience and mutual interests (Ghoshal, 2016: 72).

The crisis of 2000s brought this change out into the open when the trade unions instead of acting as representatives of the workers' grievances often functioned as state agencies in quelling agitations. The alienation of the left trade unions was further facilitated by their composition. The left trade union trajectory unfortunately demonstrated a middle class, educated largely Bengali leadership who were often not even from the tea plantations rather than throwing up leaders from the most

exploited of the workers. This aspect of identity and a resultant hierarchy will become relevant in later analysis of the protests.

The distinct history of tea plantations of North Bengal makes it a heterogeneous site with politically layered terrain. The majority of the workforce was recruited from the tribal population of Central India who was impoverished and provided a catchment area of cheap labor (Bhowmik, 1981). These workers originally known as the *madesias* call themselves *adivasi* (original inhabitants). The tea plantations of Dooars also employed sizeable number of Nepali workers who were called *paharis*. These two ethnic groups formed the bulk of the workforce. The questions of identity, long submerged under left hegemony though never dying down, have re-emerged in the present political climate.

The clashes between the Gorkha Jan Mukti Morcha and Adivasi Vikash Parishad have resulted into cleavages in the labour community between the Nepali and Adivasi workers (Banerjee, 2017). While a straightforward equating between the crisis in the plantations and the re-emergence of the Gorkhaland movement might be simplistic, it can be argued with some certainty that the continued immiseration of the workers coupled with lack of redressal by mainstream labour unions and the state fed into the renewed imagination of a Gorkha identity. The rise of the GJMM and ethnic cleavages also pointed to the failure of the left trade unions to address the question of identity. Elsewhere I have spoken about how the CPIM became identified as the party of the Bengalis by both the Adivasi and Nepali workers (Banerjee, 2015). While the rise of the two ethnic movements seemed to bring to the forefront more local leaders and questions that had hitherto not been asked, Besky (2013) notes that the potential that this showed of the gap between the ‘plantation and movement’ closing, was not realised. The modes of political protest found expression exclusively in cultural idioms of attire and dances and economic questions inherent to their labour were invisibilised (Besky, 2013: 149).

Crisis and its management

The tea plantations of Bengal and Assam were in the throes of a crisis from the beginnings of 2000s. The decade from 2000 to 2010 saw closure of many of the tea plantations in the area and curtailed functioning in others. Both exogenous and endogenous factors were behind the crisis in the plantations. The crisis in Dooars tea plantations was both a product of wider global phenomena and immediate local factors like mismanagement, corruption, lack of investment in the plantations (Banerjee, 2017). The crisis has to be understood as fallout of neo-liberal processes of globalization contextualized within the local history of varying phases of incorporation, accumulation/dispossession and shifting relations of production[4]. The government of West Bengal as well as the central government provided a semblance of protection to the workers of the closed gardens. This included commitment to providing Financial Assistance to Workers in Locked-Out Industries (FAWLOI) which as the name suggests is a monthly allowance to the workers[5], Antyodaya Anna Yojna (AAY)[6] which provided for subsidized food grains.

4. The 2015-17 also saw closure of other plantations but that is beyond the scope of this paper.

5. FAWLOI was introduced in 1998 by the Government of West Bengal to provide financial assistance to workers in closed down industrial units. Initially the financial assistance under the scheme was Rs 500/- per month per worker. Presently the enhanced rate of financial assistance is Rs 1500/- per month per head. Since the year 2007, the beneficiaries have been provided one time Eid/Puja ex-gratia, which has subsequently been enhanced to Rs 1500/-per beneficiary from the year 2011. See http://wb.gov.in/portal/WBLabour/LabourDir/

6. AAY (Destitute Welfare Food Scheme) was launched in 2000 by the Government of India to ensure food security for all. It contemplates identification of one crore families out of the number of BPL families who would be provided food grains at the rate of 35 Kg per family per month. The food grains will be issued by the Government of India @ Rs.2/- per Kg for wheat and Rs. 3/- per Kg for rice. The Government of India suggests that in view of abject poverty of this group of beneficiaries, the state government may ensure that the end retail price is retained at Rs.2/-per Kg for wheat and Rs.3/- per Kg. for rice. See http://www.karmayog.org/publicdistributionsystem/publicdistributionsystem_2619.htm. Accessed on 14.07.2010.

Organizing protests, Embedding hierarchies?

In this section I focus on three protests with different organizational structures and scales. Mapping the ways in which mobilization of workforce plays out in the three contexts, the section provides an insight into how modes of organization shapes participation in specific ways and creates (or constrains) solidarities.

Wage agitation and trade unionism

Given the centrality of trade unions in workers' movements in tea plantation, the first vignette looks at workers' participation in trade union movements. The plantation sector in India is among its lowest paid formal sector employment[7]. The demand to increase the cash component of wages has been a constant demand by trade unions in the region over the years. The wages for the plantations are fixed through industry wide tripartite agreement (between the state, industry and labour) and were binding on all the plantations under its purview. The movements for wage increase tend to gather momentum before the tripartite agreement to mount pressure on the state and industry to accede to the demands of the labour, as was also evident in 2011-12. The agitations organised by the trade unions, sometimes in specific gardens, sometimes across regions and sometimes in the entire district used blockades, rallies and strikes as tools of protests.

Conversations with trade union activists suggested that such agitations were not just organized movements but considered professional activism which required specialized knowledge.

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7. According to the Plantation Labour Act the company was to provide for ration, fuelwood, living quarters etc. which were all added as the non-cash component of the wage. Therefore the cash component of the wage fixed at Rs. 67/day (till 2014) was much lower than the minimum wage in other formal sectors. The 2015 tripartite fixed this wage at Rs. 132.50. The struggle discussed here is in relation to this wage negotiation. https://www.telegraphindia.com/1170127/jsp/bengal/story_132547.jsp. With a view to bring about a further wage raise in the tripartite agreement in 2017 a joint Forum of all the trade unions were formed to launch a unified movement in this direction.

> The agitation for the increase in wages is not a very simple ad-hoc movement. It is not just about blockading and shouting slogans. There are calculations and strategies which need to be applied. You have to make a realistic demand for wage increase. Firstly you do not want to demand an amount which will lead to the crisis of the company, so you need to have a sense of the financial status of the company. Also the management will never accept whatever amount you demand so you have to hike the amount such that it is realistic but a cutback to that is still enough to ensure reasonable benefits for the worker. Can you imagine an ordinary worker being able to do all this? No. The wage movements are thus controlled centrally and then played out across the different plantations. There is complex planning involved. (RSP branch secretary, Kaalka)

This claim to expertise by trade unionists automatically naturalizes a hierarchy between rank and file in such organisations. Chakrabarty (1984: 143) in his work on jute mills points out a *babu-coolie* relationship which emerges among the usually Bengali trade union leaders and the migrant workers which naturalizes the flow of order. While the semiotics of domination and subordination in the tea plantations between the tribal workers and usually the non-tea plantation Bengali leadership at the unit level might be different; the manner of speaking, dressing, body-language reproduces a *babu-coolie* hierarchy between the workers and their representative trade union leadership. A sense of ownership is often embedded in assuming such leadership positions.

In spite of a long history of being claims-making subjects, the workers were a mass to be mobilized in support of the various actions.

> Sana: There will be no work tomorrow in our division. We will blockade the factory. If you stay on at this time you will see a lot of protests like this. It is about increasing our daily wage. If we don't demand it, no one will give

it to us on a plate. This is what our leaders say. I think that is true. For us poor people, no one cares. They will not give an inch if they can avoid it.

[The blockade, however, lasts for only two hours, after which the workers are asked by the union leaders to resume work]

I: This was a short blockade, wasn't it? I had thought there will be work stoppage for the whole day.

S: Who knows what they plan. Our job is to follow their (trade union's) command. We do like they say. If we ask too many questions they become impatient.

Asha: Yes. The union leaders always do the negotiations. They have that clout, you see. If we want to go and make demands, why will the management listen to us? It is for us to make noise so that the demands they start becomes deafening. But the direction will always have to come from the leaders.

The leaders as professional activists need the noise made by the mass for their demands to be taken seriously, but retain the authority to frame these demands. Chakrabarty (1984) argued that organizational logic of trade unionism especially of the left, implicitly or explicitly, foregrounded workers' lack of political education. The figure of ignorant worker mentioned in the interview above as well as implicitly accepted by women like Sana and Asha has thus emerged as central to explanation of limitations of working class organizations. Further, the nature of this *babu-coolie* dynamics was not only based on class but intersected with ethnic (Bengali vs tribal or Nepali) and gender identities.

Throughout my fieldwork it was evident that not only was the central leadership male but the organizing bodies within the plantations responsible for its immediate logistics were also men. The women, the more numerous of the workforce, were mainly the mass who legitimized the intent of the protest by showing up. In the tea plantations in North Bengal, in spite of high unionization, the proportion of women in leadership positions is

abysmally low (Sarkar and Bhowmik, 1998). This masculinization of organized protests seemed to devalue the women's potential to contribute to agitation apart from forming the numbers.

> Anand: These women are all fools (*buddhu*). You can't give them any work outside the house, and they have no head (*matha*) for politics. So no point in speaking to them!
> Usha (A's wife): Yes we are guided by the men. That is how it should be. Everyone has their own roles. Ours is to follow the more experienced. (When I had asked Usha for an interview about a strike)

While this view seemed to enjoy certain legitimacy, there were also contestations around this perception of the women as passive followers as will be seen.

That the task of organizing is entirely premised on availability of certain forms of knowledge not accessible to the workers reduces trade union organizations to simply political educators without developing reciprocal relations of consciousness (Chakrabarty, 1984: 130-31). In societies, like the tea plantations, entangled in various pre-capitalist relationships, this conversely curtails forming working class solidarities across different ethnic groups. The mobilizations premised on political affiliations frequently built on ethnic identities. While trade unions like CITU, the INTUC and other mainstream parties drew largely on a mixed support base (though with more support of one ethnic community than the other), the ethnic parties like the Adivasi Bikash Parishad (ABVP) and Gorkhaland Jana Mukti Morcha (GJMM) were sharply divided in their ethnic composition. It was not the shared identity of workers with the same paltry wage that determined their identification with the movement but rather their ethnic affiliations. The role assigned to poor and non-elite sections of society is to be governed and to suffer from poor governance. They react, in the end, in primordial ways, turning to identities of caste and religion to reject the state and its failure to represent them or to give them what they need (Ray and Katzenstein, 2005). Baviskar (2004: 126-27) holds that to privilege people's own understanding of what is important, such splits and

feuds should not be neglected in the analysis. The embedded antagonisms and solidarities shape and are shaped by local politics and provide the context in which such politics takes place, mutually conditioning each other. This often is utilized by organizers of movements to solidify their support base.

The wage movement illustrated the fragmented nature of the worker identity both in the perception of those participating in the strike and also the leadership. Some of these constraints can be understood through considering the magnitude of the mass movement. Given the limitations of such mass movements, the trade unions often are unable to address localized problems. In such instances of failure of trade union to organize collective actions, they have been replaced by localized responses from civil society organizations mainly in the form of the burgeoning number of NGOs active in the region since the crisis in 2000.

Building solidarity networks: Civil society organizations

Barot (2004) holds that NGOs provide social actors in civil society an opportunity and opening for a renewed engagement in redistributive politics. Located at the margins, these organizations become crucial standpoints for struggles, for altering the terms of public debate and management of economic and social life thus empowering communities (Kudva, 2005: 234). Svatantra was an important NGO active in the Kaalka region for a long time though it became focal from the 2000s with the crisis in the tea plantations and the resultant closures. Having had ties with radical left politics, Svatantra functioned with a rights framework. It aimed to empower the workers through movements against the state and its injustices. The agitation discussed here was led by Svatantra and provides us interesting insights into how hierarchies play out in such scenarios and influence solidarities. As a part of sustenance for workers in closed tea plantations the National Rural Employment Generation Scheme (NREGA[8])

8. NREGA is a Government of India welfare scheme to provide for enhancement of livelihood security of the households in rural areas of the country by providing at least one hundred days of guaranteed

was very central as a source of livelihood. During the period of closure, the workers or members of their families applied for jobs under this scheme to the *panchayat*. In this particular instance the *panchayat* dismissed the claim of the applicants from Kaalka saying that they do not have jobs available.

> When the *panchayat* turned us away some of us went to Shiva and told him about this. He then asked the leaders (of Svatantra) for advice. They told him that if they cannot give jobs within a certain period, they are bound by law to give unemployment benefits to the applicants (for two weeks). (Rustam, Kaalka, fieldnotes)

Shiva, the son of a worker in Kaalka, was the nodal person running the organization in the area. He and few others then mobilized the workers and went to the *panchayat* to submit a deputation demanding either job allocation or unemployment benefit.

> Seeing we knew our rights, the members could not do anything. They told us to come the next day and then began our hide and seek for almost 6-7 weeks. We took turns and went but they did not accept our deputation. The villagers were also losing hope. Then we sent the deputation through registered post and tricked them into signing the receipt of the deputation...But it was a long road even after that. They found one delaying tactic after another for 3 months. Finally, we had a meeting. Bhavanibabu and Tarunbabu (the leaders of Svatantra) were also there. They supported our decision to take action and we all planned it. Next day, we took the villagers who had applied for the job and blockaded the *panchayat* office, locking the *panchayat* members inside. The *pradhan* (head of the *panchayat*) was not there. It was only after he had given a signed assurance of giving us all jobs or benefits within 7 days that we let them

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wage employment in every financial year to every household whose adult member volunteer to do unskilled manual work. http://nrega.nic.in/netnrega/home.aspx.

> go.(Kaalka, 05.06.11, group discussion by Shiva, Rustam, Avinash, Shonali, Chameli and Chandni). (Banerjee, 2017: 162-63)

The NREGA movement was a grand success for Svatantra and mobilized the workers to move for their rights. While the workers' participation in agitation was articulated on more equal terms, there was a clear leadership structure here too. Interestingly the organizational structure of Svatantra in its composition was not that different from trade union leadership being helmed by Bengali, middle-class, usually upper caste educated men. Having been active participants in radical Left politics in their youth, they had the expertise and skills to lead such worker movements. While the top crop of leaders sought to create a second rung indigenous leadership from the plantations, final decisions were hardly made without consulting them. This movement, however, drew on the energy of the participants and in a lot of ways it was their anger, desperation which took the movement forward. The work of these activists altered to some extent the workers' perceptions of risks and potential of collective actions. Further through their access to outside resources and networks, they provided a semblance of protection to the workers.

The participation structure of protest had important implications for the question of alliance building in grassroots movements. Baviskar (2004:106-07) argues how relations in participating communities, in her case Adivasis, contain contradictions which emanate many of the tensions of daily life while at the same time also shaping the politics of the community. Extensive conversations and close observations in this case too revealed fault-lines in the organic nature of this movement.

> We (Chandni and her group of friends) were there right from the beginning. As I was studying in school I also could help with writing the deputation. We put a lot of energy into this. But you know, at some point we felt that we were not so central to the movement. Shiva *bhaiya* (elder brother) would always communicate directions to the boys and our job was to follow them. It was disappointing in a lot of

ways. But since the movement was bigger than individuals we kept quiet. But that hurt remains. (Chandni, Kaalka)

The young girls complained to us that Shiva does not give them any important work. I have been part of Svatantra for so long, when Shiva was a little boy. I have learnt a lot from this organization. And one important lesson I learnt was that planning is seen as the domain of the men. Even if you are very good, resilient, intelligent, Tarunbabu and the others will never choose you to lead. You are the support structure, to shout slogans but not to compose them. I told the girls this is the way it is. (Lachmi, Kaalka)

Chandni, daughter of a plantation worker, was an active participant in the movement and felt slighted at the differential treatment. Lachmi's experience had made her accept the gendered division of the organizational structure, a reality which disturbed Chandni and other younger women. Can women be leaders in such movements or are they just a means to a political end? Bandopadhyay (2008) in her reflection on participation in the radical politics of the Naxalite movement confesses her disappointment about the reproduction of gender hierarchy within a movement which was looking to reimagine the class hierarchy of the extant society. The patriarchal leadership structure of organizations has been evident in the work of other women activists too where the specific roles assigned to the women always fell back upon gendered perceptions.

The organizational structure and everyday workings of Svatantra, in spite of unity of purpose illustrates how social hierarchies tend to be replicated in organizational structures. While in the case of the trade unions this is quite easily observable, in the case of smaller organizations like Svatantra this remains couched in the language of inclusion. The gendered hierarchy of the organization was unacknowledged and played out in practice as a default.

The women are the heart and the soul of this movement. How can you ignore the women while organizing in tea plantations? They are the most numerous. Also having

> women protestors in the frontline is an old and very clever tactic. The police are usually careful about hitting a woman. It is the women in the movement who protect us. (Bhavanibabu, Kaalka)

The inviolability of the women's body served as a protective shield for the movement, whose violation in any form had the potential for moral outrage. Placing the women in the front of marches, blockades etc. in this movement were the reproduction of the norm of enabling the men, where the women were allocated frontline for their gendered bodies but not as leaders. Leadership, decision making and shaping organized protest was a default masculine category. Much like the trade union movement, though different in its articulation and belief, the second rung of male leadership of this organization showed that the gendered forms of participation had become discursive and structural.

Affect as solidarity: beyond the public registers of protest

In one of the neighbouring plantations of Kaalka, Naamchi, the trade unions had called a strike regarding non-payment of bonus[9] to the workers. As it was peak season the manager was impatient to break the strike which had been on for a week. He put pressure on the workers through non-payment of wages. Agitated about the non-receipt of wages, a group of workers had gone to the office to demand the wages. In the argument that followed one of the women, Shaanu, allegedly abused the manager calling him *haraami* (a Hindi cussword). The manager, beside himself with rage, kicked the woman on her stomach. The woman was pregnant and had a miscarriage and suffered injuries herself. This incident led to a severe backlash and gradually went on to become a rallying point for the workers. Interestingly the protests were not organized by any political party or civil society organization but started by four women and built upon through their social networks. This protest was

9. The bonus is a sum of money paid by the company to its workers annually on the basis of profits and productivity of the company.

an organized action. The terms through which it was organized have, however, been usually outside the realm of public registers of what constitutes political and political protests.

The four women at the forefront of the movement, Lachmi (Adivasi), Paanita (Nepali) (Kaalka), Kamal (Nepali) (Naamchi) and Lalita (Adivasi) (Ragini) were all originally from Kaalka and childhood friends (also with the injured woman Shaanu) but were now scattered in the neighbouring plantations primarily through marriage. How were four women living in different plantations and of different ethnicity origin able to start a movement which was quite remarkable in its scale and continuity?

> What could we do? Keep quiet while the unions kept debating and submitting deputations? 'After all she called him *haraami* in front of everyone', they said. We realized that the unions will do nothing. They were satisfied asking for compensation! How can you compensate the death of a child through money? She is our friend. We decided we could not keep quiet. (Group discussion with Lachmi, Lalita, and Paanita)

The anger that the women felt came from the injustice of the situation and the strong ties of affect that they had with Shaanu. They also asked Svatantra for help. While Svatantra promised to extend logistical support they did not want to do anything overtly since the trade unions were involved. Movement organizations had their separate fields of operation and to avoid antagonism they tried to keep away from stepping on each other's toes thus limiting possibilities of coalition between these different establishments.

So far in their experience, political registers of protests originated from the organized structures of institutions like trade unions and civil society organizations. While the women were not passive recipients, their resistance seemed to emulate more closely Scott's modes of weapons of the weak (Scott, 1985). In this case, however, without the fall back structures the women had to dig deep and reaffirm trust in themselves.

> We had long conversations among ourselves and with elders like Bandhaindidi. ‘What could a handful of women like us do? What do we have?’ We became very depressed thinking of Shaanu and how this deed was to go unpunished. Bandhaindidi told us of one incident where she and her *saathis* (Nepali word for friends) had beaten up her sister’s abusive husband. It was then we thought that, ‘Like Bandhaindidi had her *saathis*, we also have each other. That is our strength; that is our organization.’ (Panita)

Like the word *sangtin* used by Nagar et al (2006:ix-x) in their work, *saathi* is not just about friendship, it is about a fellow traveller—a term of solidarity, reciprocity, of enduring friendship among women which cuts across (in this case) caste, ethnicity and location within the hierarchical world of the plantation society. The first task was to talk to other women, convey their anger and create a support base. There were long conversations and meetings that they held making use of their social networks. Their stories and efforts illustrated that often more than institutional channels, friendships offered entry points to get ordinary people involved.

> When we started organizing the women around this incident, we faced backlash from the unions. They warned us off, telling us not to interfere as they were already ‘dealing with it’. So first we used to meet in stealth. In Bandhaindidi’s house, in Bari’s house and the men did not pay heed to these. ‘These were women discussing womanly affairs’, they dismissed. But as our support grew, we became braver. We said why will we hide? We are not doing anything wrong. A month had already passed since the incident but the unions had clearly not been able to do anything. It was our turn now. (Kamal)

The shrinking of democratic spaces of protest can be discernible not only in the ways the state reacts to protests but in the perception of exclusive ownership of protests by some institutions, like the trade unions. The women here made use of the

stereotyped perceptions about their activities to organize, build networks and create solidarities. The opposition of the unions enabled them to sharpen their politics and also ask questions which went beyond the immediacy of the singular incident.

The solidarity created was not only through a common identity of motherhood but a shared sense of destiny, a destiny of being victims, of being collateral damage.

> It moved us to think of the unborn child inside her, murdered for no fault of theirs. But it was not only about being mothers, it was our fate as women. Our suffering is a given. Bandhaindidi spent her entire life being beaten up by a drunken husband. Why? Lachmi has to work so hard to support her family that all her blood has dried up, she is ill all the time. But there is no concern. These are never the cause of struggles. No the unions and parties dismiss this as 'everyday concerns'. Why? Are we not humans? (Sandhya, Adivasi, Kaalkafieldnotes)

While Sandhya and others like her might have felt the first sense of sympathy through a shared identity of motherhood, their conversations and resistance also led them to understand and collaborate with each other as poor working class women with shared life experiences of domestic violence, backbreaking poverty—issues which had become so banal that they did not feature in registers of protests. The agitation was fuelled on a high degree of emotional investment through which it was possible to think of this as a process of collective empowerment. The need to articulate and perform their emotions of anger, empathy and resistance were articulated as the politics of the protest. This emotionality was full of cognitive elements—it was the collective emotional and political journey of these women who had chosen to reflect and struggle together as 'sister-activists' in the movement for redressal of the multiple forms of violence in their lives (Nagar et.al., 2006). In finding this sisterhood these women were able to crosscut the ethnic divide which regulated a significant part of their lives. Their lived experiences as poor women vulnerable to violence in the family,

from the management and the state, led them to build a coalition across intersectional identities through their shared interest.

Mohanty (2006) argues that solidarity is achieved through an active engagement with diversity rather than being defined homogenously by neediness or powerlessness. In this protest we see that while it was this extreme sense of violation which created dialogues across the communities, the solidarity was weaved into the movement through accepting and productively making use of difference rather than downplaying it. The plays, dramas, demonstrations, street corners employed as forms of protest made use of the distinct history of tea plantation workers, cited different Adivasi or Nepali leaders of the plantations, made reference to the distinct Adivasi or Nepali history and cultural symbols.

The protest did not remain confined to the violence against one woman. Though the protestors demanded dismissal of the manager, their demands were not just addressed to the management of Naamchi plantation but raised questions to the state. The violation of the woman's body through attacking it became the symbol of the vulnerability and exploitation of the workers in general and women workers in particular. Drawing on narratives of forced migration, duping by the state and little improvement in their working conditions under the post-colonial state, the protest historicized their exploitation and constructed a frame which became larger than an incident of individualized assault. While the frontliners in the protest were all women, the protest was registered and articulated as women and as workers. It was not enough to hold the management accountable but to critique the state. The neo-liberal state had sided with the industry and taken away from the workers the semblance of state protection.

> All the time these gardens were closed, the management ran away stealing our dues, what did the state do? Nothing. It was giving us charity, not our rights and for that too we had to fight every step of the way. Not only can it not protect us from our hunger but also cannot protect

> our bodies. The government has to answer, has to take responsibility to deal with such miscreants. (Bandhain, Adivasi)

Mitchell (2011: 471) argues that democracy in India can be understood, by exploring the everyday practices which broadcast political messages and place them within their historical genealogies. In pegging the state as answerable, the protestors did not just claim personhood but in fact citizenship framing their demands within the moral economy of rights. We will come back to this point in the next section.

This was also evident in the modes of the protest. The women's involvement in various organized actions of the trade unions and/or Svatantra gave them a working knowledge of laws and a sense of legality and illegality. Participating in these movements familiarized them with tools of activism—writing deputations, blockades, strikes, rallies and the like. They used these tools of political protest not only with the management, but also by blockading police stations and Block Development Office in their demand that the incident be taken up by the state. In addition there were street plays and songs sung in rallies. The women felt that these forms gave them a scope of self-expression and owning the protest in specific ways. Symbols such as these are collective means of emotional communication and formalizing shared feelings into articulate form of politics (Barkar, 2001: 9). But these emotions don't exist outside their content; rather in this case they exist because of it. Such public forms of protest through their binding quality embody a promise of solidarity.

Expectedly a protest against a powerful institution like the state also meant backlash. With the realization by the state that the aim of the protest was no longer about this single act of punishing the manager but larger questions of violence and exploitation expressed through blockades of police stations and BDO offices, it initiated a counter-attack. There were *lathi* charges, threatening and some of the women like Lachmi even had to spend a night in the lockup.

> But we were not scared. Every time the police hit us, we arrived with bigger and bigger groups. The more violent the state became the more support swelled for us. What started as a movement by a handful of women was soon joined by more women and men too. The newspapers supported us. Soon it was becoming difficult for the unions too to threaten us publicly. Some even helped by offering advice. The movement was now bigger than ourselves and there could be no looking back. (Lachmi)

The disciplining mechanisms that the state tends to employ to protect its interests have usually been successful in keeping the poor and the marginalized in their place but there are moments when such coercion fuels further protest. Naamchi was such an instance. With the protests showing no signs of abating and gaining support from the population outside the tea plantations, the administration responded with a compromise. It presided upon the company to dismiss the management and promised to bear the entire medical expense of the afflicted woman. While at some level this was a victory for the protestors it was also a clever strategy by the state to take the wind out of the sail of the protest. Basu (1987:666) identifies central challenge of grassroots movements is their relation with the state, by accepting some of the demands of the movement; the state might initially seem to legitimize the movement while subsequently eroding its strength.

Postscript to the protest

In the way the women remembered these protests and spoke about them there was alternation of fear, laughter, despair, optimism, panic and resolve. Through all these moments emerged new ideas, new promises and strengthening of their solidarities.

> Lalita: At that time there was great celebration. We were all very happy. Even the unions congratulated us.
> Panita: Yes we went around the streets distributing sweets and hugging each other. But years down the line we sometimes think, what has really changed? Nothing if we

are honest. The bigger questions we asked were cleverly avoided. We still don't get our wages on time, there is still violence.

Sandhya: When I think like this I feel too sad. It seems like a waste. But then I think of these women with me—my friends, my sisters and the battle we fought together. (Group discussion)

Many of the women had troubled domestic lives. Panita's husband was alcoholic and spent all his money in drinking, Lalita's husband had left her when her daughter was born and she was the sole bread earner in her family of elderly parents and two children. Lachmi was ill and had been hospitalized twice during the time I was there for over-exertion and lack of nutrition. Kamal was a widow and was at that time facing tremendous opposition and violence from her son for her decision to marry a second time. Such troubles were the lot of many of the other women in the plantations. The protest did not change these everyday lived realities of the women. While some resisted others remained resigned to their fate subscribing to more stealthy forms of disruption. Nagar (2000:348) talks about the limitations of any vision of empowerment that does not address the continuous devaluation and disempowerment of women within their homes and communities. But the lived experiences of these women seem to suggest that empowerment is often an experience of disjuncture. While there was an absence of volatile acts of resistance conflating this with absence of agency is inaccurate. Their agency could not be understood through protests alone, rather the women handled and perceived their situation in different ways and agency was accordingly played out in diverse manners, some of which often even upheld the status quo (Jeffery and Jeffery, 1996: 16-19).

The comradeship in the movement gave them a support network, a group of friends.

We try to meet once a week in the evening to discuss the problems of the women. This is not like the Svatantra meets with their formal structures, but informal discussions

> where women come from the different plantations and discuss their issues. It is a space where women can talk freely, share their trouble and get some support. Some come here and cry, they release all the tears stored through days and years. (Lalita)

The formation of this support-group like space was an effort to sustain the camaraderie, the solidarity that protesting together had given these women. It was not able (and probably not intended) to reverse the hierarchical social norms which operated in the plantations. But what it allowed the women was a safe space to share their troubles. While it did not necessarily make the women activists in their own lives, very often it made them better managers of their troubles. All the meetings were not well attended, the numbers varied but this was a semi-public domain that the women created and held on to where they could critically reflect on questions of violence, poverty and the like which had so far been subscribed to the private realm of the home.

Discussion—politics of movements

The ethnographies of the three protests do not intend to suggest a binary between organization and spontaneity. All the three had elements of spontaneity (evident in a day long strike being called off after a few hours by the trade unions) and organization. Rather the internal dynamics of the protest or the politics of the protest movements give us a scope to think through various modes of organizing solidarity. Works on internal politics of social movements (e.g. Baviskar,2004; Nielsen, 2010; Youngblood, 2016) illustrate that the formation of political subjectivity is a complex and often a contradictory exercise.

Friendship as solidarity

While existing scholarship on social movements attribute successful cooperation to shared interests, identities or opportunities, they often fall short as they do not take into account the relations of domination and hierarchy which are present within these groups thus obfuscating the development of shared interests (Weldon, 2006:56). The overemphasis on

ideological consensus and loyal body of participants which Youngblood (2016:4-6) terms as fallacy of solidarity might lead our analysis to miss or underestimate the political subjectivity and rationality of the movement's actual participants, the least empowered whose views might well be at odd with the neat version that the movement portrays. The understanding of progressive solidification in a movement based on an a priori assumption that successful social mobilization corresponds with maximized shared identity among the movements' participants (Youngblood, 2016: 6) drowns out those voices which speak of dissonance or of alienation as was evident in the ways the women workers articulated their participation in the first two organized movement. Hollinger (2006, 25-26) further argues that identity is not automatic to solidarity and sometimes not even central; solidarity is more in the nature of 'willed affiliation'. Rather than belonging to a community by virtue of identity, solidarity therefore is built on some degree of conscious commitment. Solidarity is thus agential. The specific traits of solidarity cannot be understood if we conflate it with possession of identity traits through which one belongs to a community (Hollinger, 2006). It was the act of friendship which created solidarity rather than the passivity of belonging to a community of women and labourers. Solidarity therefore needs to be reinscribed through everyday commitments and cannot be considered as automatic to organizational principles. The Naamchi protest seems to emerge from a common context of affect and injury which led the protesting women to make a common cause of their injured womanhood and exploited labour by deciding to be *saathis* in a long and arduous struggle. At the same time it is difficult to ascertain whether these voices did drown out the discordant expressions within the movement which my narrative fails to capture.

In my analysis of solidarity as one of the key lenses to read the protest—the organizational solidarity of the first two protests contrasted sharply with affect-based solidarity emerging out of a lived relation of friendship. The intention here is not to vilify organizational protests. It is doubtless that the trade unionists

as well as leaders of Svatantra were possibly committed to developing agendas beneficial to the workers. But their translation in everyday life instead of being mediated through foregrounding an organic leadership was actualized through a hierarchical system of status and power which mapped onto existing ethnic, gender and class stratifications.

On the other hand friendships, especially female friendships, have been usually subscribed to the arena of leisure. What friendships look like in a state of economic insecurity and restrictive social norms where friends often took on support roles based on affect and shared reality has hardly been talked about outside the feminist literature. For these women it was a way to forge new relationships with themselves and their communities, independent of men and/or family. It was these friendships that explained solidarity between women of different caste, religion and political affiliation. These friendships gave the women the courage and resource to negotiate their everyday reality. Foucault (1994) notes how friendship performs distinct activist project by entailing localized resistance to social normalization. By disconnecting themselves from totalizing and normalizing systems of power relationships that govern social connections, it creates marginal spaces where novel relations can be constructed. For the women embedded within the patriarchal home and work structure, with dependence subscribed on their husbands, fathers and managers as protectors and providers, this creation of alternate network of support outside familial networks was in itself subversion of social normalization and creation of a collaborative new subjectivities. Not all of the friendships between these women can be understood as political but through maintaining solidarity, challenging prevailing norms, these friendships need to be examined for their potential to resist the neoliberal economic system's colonization of our lives (Shepard, 2015).

While the subversive potential of friendship has been highlighted, there is a need to guard against romanticization of friendships. Politics of friendship, like all other social relationships is not

simple. Friendships between these women too could be hierarchical. It was possible that some women had assumed some sort of leadership in their support network. My fieldwork did not reveal any obvious trend of such hierarchies. While there were disagreements and falling out, there did not seem to be an obvious order. The women did not define their friendships or subscribe rules to these. It was maybe this ambiguity that enabled them to remain easy. By being disconnected from the most totalizing and normalizing systems of power relationships, these relations were instead characterized by dynamic and unstable power relations (Foucault, 1994). Discussions and disagreements happened together. The collective memory of the movement helped to sustain a sense of joint responsibility.

Building subjectivity

Curtailing women from decision making roles in popular movements, unfortunately have a long trajectory in South Asia (e.g. Goodwin, 1997; Roy, 2012 etc.). Movements such as the left trade unionism or the Naxalite movement produced its particular notion of masculinity and femininity, where the 'male revolutionary subjectivity' was idealized, and women participants 'struggled to inhabit' this subjectivity (Roy 2012: 72-3). The inherent patriarchy as well as middle class of the leadership structure makes solidarity possible only in a hierarchical form. By aligning with a middle-class, patriarchal system the political agency of those falling outside it is rendered invisible. But the women workers were not passive recipients. They used their experience in shaping resistance both within and outside these organizations and in the political as well as the domestic space. It is here that I argue (following Nagar et al, 2006; Chandra, 2013) that organic modes of solidarity creation need to be more centrally included within the social movement literature. As the Naamchi protest illustrates, protest movements can be based on social relationships which are simultaneously constituted by 'meaning, scarcity and by power' (Sewell, 1993: 34). The protest which quickly took the shape of a movement did not begin with a clear materialist concern but in course of time became a

critique of the non-democratic anti-poor state that the workers were living in.

This brings us to the question of the relation between the post-colonial state and the tribal working class subject. As poor, marginalized primitives in a modern state, the tribal (in this case the Nepali workers image too extend to being considered tribal) is a subject of intervention—either as victims in need of protection or as savages in need of civilization (Chandra, 2013:53). The leadership of organizations working for workers' welfare and rights, be it trade unions or CSOs, are therefore naturally vested in the hands of outsiders more capable of providing guidance. The self-making of subjectivity is not a possibility recognized by the state or by its saviour institutions. When a group of such tribal women workers, however, challenge the state, not only do they counter this perception but stake claims to agentive political subjectivity.

Towards a Conclusion

With the loss of state protection there has been increased impoverishment undercutting the survival strategies of marginal groups evident through eviction for developmental projects (Baviskar, 2004; Chandra, 2013), land acquisition (Nielsen, 2010; Levien, 2018). While they gave rise to experiences of exclusion, disempowerment and immiseration, at the same time they gave rise to new forms of popular protest (Motta and Nielsen, 2011:11-12). Social movement literature has usually focussed on how professional activists create networks and coalitions to strengthen movements. My paper suggests how activists are also produced by movements. Collective actions energized through affective bonds often achieve ends which institutional social arrangements are constrained from striving for. Here I have argued that activism is a lived experience beyond the binary of women as activists and/or victims. Instead of being framed by pre-existing, fully formed political ideals, the politics is developed through engagement in particular projects that often follows complex, multiple and even contradictory articulations. As is evident friendships inform such movements, infusing them with

the social capital necessary to resist the normative economic and social foundations of their reality. I argue that social movements are able to weave a more solid network of support when it is based on love, care and connection. The protest eventually seemed to enjoy an indirect support of the other organizations as indicated in the section above thus opening possibilities of alliance building. I conclude here with a brief quote by a CITU activist in Dooars.

> We did not think they will get this far. How to imagine that a handful of women can shed their fear and fight? But fight they did, like wounded tigers. There were defects in their methods, all that can be a matter of discussion but there was also a lot to learn. The women of these plantations in their fight for their friend showed us what it meant to be comrades.

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3. *The Winding Road Toward Equality for Women in the United States* by Diane P. Wood, June 2008.
4. *Compassion : Human and Animal* by Martha C. Nussbaum, July 2008.
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6. *Inequality: Reflections on a Silent Pandemic* by Ashwani Saith, December 2009.
7. *A Study in Development by Dispossession* by Amit Bhaduri, March 2015.

WORKING PAPERS

1. *Primary Education among Low Income Muslims in Kolkata: Slum Dwellers of Park Circus* by Zakir Husain, July 2004.
2. *Impact of District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) on Primary Education: A study of South 24 Parganas* by Suman Ray, July 2004.
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5. *Transfer of Technology and Production of Steel in India*, An interview of Anil Chandra Banerjee by Amiya Kumar Bagchi, December 2013.

BOOKS

1 *Economy and the Quality of Life - Essays in Memory of Ashok Rudra*, Amiya Kumar Bagchi, Manabendu Chattopadhyay and Ratan Khasnabis (editors), Kolkata, Dasgupta & Co.,2003.

2 *The Developmental State in History and in the Twentieth Century,* Amiya Kumar Bagchi, Regency Publications, New Delhi, 2004.

3 *Pliable Pupils and Sufficient Self –Directors: Narratives of Female Education by Five British Women Writers*, 1778-1814 Barnita Bagchi, Tulika, New Delhi, 2004.

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5 *Maladies, Preventives and Curatives: Debates in public health in India*, Amiya Kumar Bagchi and Krishna Soman (editors), Tulika, New Delhi, 2005.

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8 Translation with an introduction of Rokeya S. Hossain: *Sultana's Dream and Padmarag,* Barnita Bagchi, Penguin Modern Classics, 2005.

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17 *Rabindranath: Bakpati Biswamana***,** Volume 2, Sudhir Chakravarti (editor), Rabindranath Tagore Centre for Human Development Studies, 2011.

18 *Rabindranath: Bakpati Biswamana***,** Volume1**,** Sudhir Chakravarti**,** Rabindranath Tagore Centre for Human Development Studies, 2011.

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