

## **ROLE OF MAHILA ATMA RAKSHA SAMITY IN THE ANTI-FASCIST MOVEMENT DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR.**

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### **ABSTRACT**

During the Second World War, Mahila Atma Raksha Samity was formed in undivided Bengal to protect women and children from the scourge of Fascist War. It was a successful initiative of Communist and leftist groups to unite, first, the urban students, and then, the educated urban ladies. Joytirmoyee Ganguly, Renu Chakraborty, Mani Kuntala Sen were the founder members of this samity. Its' main objective was the protection of women and children from the destructive effects of war. Besides, the Samity wanted to make the people politically conscious. But it is important to note that it was basically an organisation of urban lower middle class women and women from the poor section of society. The Samity has little influence on the village area, although a considerable part of rural Bengal had interested the activity of this samity.

**Keywords:** Anti – Fascist, Atma Raksha, Second World War, Organisation.

In 1930's, the Communist Party of India began to develop rapidly in undivided Bengal. A couple of years later student's Front was established under the Patronage of the party. In December, 1935 Bangiya Pradeshik Chattra league' was established in Calcutta under the Secretaryship of Biswanath Mukherjee and All India Students Conference was organised in Lakhnow city next year. All India Students Federation (A.I.S.F.) came into existence in this conference which encouraged Bengal Communist's to unify different leftist students groups for the formation of 'Bangiya Pradeshik Chattra Federation'. The Federation came into being in a meeting at Shradha Nanda Park in Calcutta whose founder President was K.M. Ahmed and Kalipada Mukherjee was elected its founder General Secretary<sup>1</sup>. Simultaneously, efforts were underway to form a girls students organisation and ultimately the efforts were Materialized in 1939 with formation of girls students association. The Girls Students Association had played a very important role in the establishment of 'Mahila Atma Raksha Samity' during the Second World War.

The Girls Students Association was formed in undivided Bengal, the initiative taken by the Communists but other leftist female workers were also organised under this

association. Kanak Dasgupta was its founder General Secretary<sup>2</sup>. Besides, other prominent members were Shanti Sarkar, Kalyani Mukherjee, Chinu Ghosh, Preeti Lahiri from Communist Party, Uma Ghosh, Gita Banerjee from Labour Party, Anima Banerjee from Congress Socialist Party, Sova Majumder from M. N. Roy group and many others. The Association became popular and was developed rapidly with the voluntary participation of girls students of the urban areas. Meanwhile girls students association was also formed in Mumbai and Punjab under the leadership of Nargis Batliwala and Perin Varucha. After the out break of the Second World War in September 1939

the girls students units organised protest against the Fascist wave of Hitler's Germany and Mussolini's Italy. In 1940. All India girls students conference was held in Lakhnow in which Sarojini Naidu was present as the Chief Guest and the conference was presided over by Renu Roy (Chakraborty), The conference, in its resolution, vehemently protest against the destructive war waged by the Fascist countries<sup>3</sup>.

During the Second half of 1930's, a strong Anti – Fascist sentiment was evident among the Indian intellectuals and Bengal was on the forefront. The 'National Front', a Journal of the Communist Party of India (C.P.I.) Published an editorial in which World War II was described as the 'Imperialist War'. The slogan of the CPI during these war days was 'Na ek pai – na ek bhi' (Neither a pie, nor a brother). But in June, 1941, when Nazi Germany attacked Soviet Union. The situation was dramatically changed. In the eyes of the CPI the World War II was changed into an anti – Fascist – War and the Party called for a 'Peoples War' against fascism.

In undivided Bengal, a number of movements were organised by the leftist mass organisation during those war time days. Students of Calcutta University and some Calcutta based College initiated Youth Cultural Institute (Y.C.I.) A part from this a number of anti – war association war formed, such as, 'Soviet Suhrid Samity', Anti Fascist writers and Artists Forum', I.P.T.A. etc. Soviet Suhrid Samity expressed its solidarity with the war – stricken Soviet People and Manikuntala Sen, Meera Dutta Gupta, Stella Brown among others were the members of this Samity. This friendship organisation had undertaken campaign India – wide with meeting, documentation, seminar, drawing room discussion, poster exhibition etc. The aim of their initiative was to express support and solidarity with the Soviet People and oppose fascism<sup>4</sup>. It is important to note that the C.P.I. was banned in 1934 and most of the top leaders of the party went to underground to avoid arrest. But in 1942 the banishment was lifted by the Government and Party became active openly. The directives of the party to its members during those

days was protect the People, to observe National Defence week, Defence of the Country, organise Anti – Fascist Movement, build up Women’s defence group etc.

It was a time when the people of Kolkata was scared about Fascist bombing on the City and the female members of the C.P.I. came forward to protect the people from Japanese Ariel attack. For this reason they formed Janaraksha Committee, Self Defence Committee etc. There were atleast 150 Janaraksha Committee in different residential areas of Kolkata. Besides, Food committee, Relief committee, Many volunteers groups were also formed. At the same time full Fledged campaign was on. Glorious role of the Soviet women in their Patriotic War against Fascism and the llegendary stories of the Chinese women in their struggle for Independence had inspired Indian Communist women. An Essay by Madam San – yat. Sain ‘China Meyeder Swadhinata Sangram (Bengali transtated) Inspired Indian women and guerrilla warfare of the Chinese women against Japanese aggression encouraged them to organise movement against fascism.

In this historical situation, an Anti – Fascist Conference was held in 7<sup>th</sup> September 1941 by the Woman Workers which gave birth to ‘Fasci – Birodhi Sangha’. On 13<sup>th</sup> April 1942 an open conference was held at the University Institute Library hall, Calcutta. Though it was a leftist woman organisations meeting, but a number of women intellectuals from others ideological back ground, joined this meeting, Mahila Atma Raksha Samity was formed in this meetings with Ela Reid as its convenor.

Others members of the executive body were Jyotirmoyee Ganguly, Sakina Begum, Renu Chakraborty, Sudha Roy, Manikuntala Sen, Nazimunnesa ahamed, Beatrice Terran, Aparna Sen and Phularenu Dutta<sup>6</sup>. Pronati Dey emphasised in this meetings that women should stand soulder to soulder with man in this anti–fascist war. Following resolutions were taken in this meeting :-

01. To take initiative for making the common people of India Politically conscious.
02. For the protection of Public interest women organisation should be Powerfull. In office, factory and in battle field, women should be always beside man.
03. Women should be taught self defence tactics.
04. There should be a friendly relationship of the people of India with Indians soldiers<sup>7</sup>.

It is to be noticed that newly formed Mahila Atma Raksha Samity (MARS) demanded unconditional withdrawal of cases from the leaders arrested on Political reason.

Simultaneously, the M.A.R.S. Strengthen its campaign against Fascism and initiated Door to Door Campaign to develop public opinion on this. In 1943, it was found that the membership of this Samity reached at 40,000 and its organisation spread over 27 districts<sup>8</sup>. The Samity's activity was prominent in Dinajpur, Rangpur, Dhaka, Moimonsingha, Cittagaon, Khulna and Barishal District of the Eastern Part of Bengal which was followed later on other district of East Bengal. The support base of the Samity was primarily women coming from lower Middle class and poor sections of society<sup>9</sup>.

During the stormy days of the World War II the MARS directed their struggle towards the achievement of freedom from imperialist war, on the one hand and to protect fellow country men from International Fascism. Formation of area wise volunteer team in Calcutta adjacent areas, strengthening of campaign machinery in the districts, arrangement of First-aid in time of injury caused by the bombing etc. Were the efforts initiated by M.A.R.S. during those days. It was the MARS which was successful to organise women of different shades irrespective of their cast, creed, religion and political ideology. Renu Chakraborty, Manikuntala Sen, Kamala Chatterjee Kanak Dasgupta and Juin Basu led the MARS successfully to organise constructive programme. MARS was struggled during those days for the formation of National Government and pleaded for National unity.

It is important to note that at this stage of '**Peoples War**' a Number of Significant issue came up :

01. Demand for unconditional withdrawal of case from the detained National leaders.
02. The Samity in its meeting, imparted self defence tractics to women members, so that they can Protect them selves during war.
03. Formation of Public opinion against Fascist War in Districts through meeting demonstration etc.
04. Samity's activity basically influenced the women who are mainly urban dwellers, rather than women belonging to peasant and workers family<sup>10</sup>.

It is thus, evident from the above discussion that the MARS had organised movement against Fascist War during World War. It is to be mentioned in this context that the All India Women Conference (AIWC), which was the women's front of the Indian National Congress was basically an organisation of women coming from upper middle class and rich families. Sarojini Naidu, Renuka Roy, Priences Amrit Kaur and others were from affluent family. But the bases of Membership of MARS were women coming from

Lower Middle class and Poor families and Marginalised Women. No doubt MARS, as an Women's organisation was successful to arrange poor and Marginalised women in Bengal against fascism in Second World War<sup>12</sup>.

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