

Full Length Research Paper

Voices, positions and empowerment: Women in the Kolkata urban context

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Interest in the urban space as distinct from the rural is an offshoot of the continuing concern with the city, as a necessary corollary of the postmodern debates. However the question, has the city attaining to its exclusivity, or its distinctness, which it was supposed to attain still remains a problematic area, the argument has to be addressed anew from the perspective of various socio-political and geo-specific contexts. It is with this concern that we reflect upon the gendered being in the urban space; has the gendered subject been able to reflect any traces of this exclusivity, which the modernity coterminous with the urban space is supposed to project? By referring to exclusivity, we mainly refer to the acceptable indicators of modernity/urbanity, requisite amounts of empowerment, visible through physical representation and oral/written communication. It was Manuel Castells who demolished such assumptions, way back in the seventies of the twentieth century, that the 'exclusive' urban phenomena was merely an expression of the 'capitalist domination' ensuing from the mode of production. In other words, he sees an essentialist connection between the two spaces, the urban and the rural, existing and substantiating each other. The article enters into this urban-rural continuum, and examines how far the urban by adopting its exclusivity empowers the gendered subject. We are encountering three problematic issues, when we talk in terms of gender, (the first issue), in the urban space (the second issue), and we locate both into a specific geo-physical space of Kolkata (the third issue). Discussions on the gendered subject became fashionable since the twentieth century; however, its contextualization in the urban space as a distinct spatial concern is distinctly a very recent phenomenon. The city of Kolkata, on the other hand, draws attention because despite its history of liberal democratic reforms, on analysis however, much of its liberality is subsumed under an all pervasive bounded rational space. Each of the three issues therefore has possibilities of positive or even subversive impact. An interface between the three issues, therefore, offers interesting insights for study.

Key words: Empowerment, women, Kolkata, urban, rural.

INTRODUCTION

Gender, being a constructed relationship between men and women like any other constructed form has had to appropriate rules of the setting in which it is reenacted and recreated. These rules structure the roles that people inhabit and assign opportunities for activity, movement, empowerment and expression according to one's sex. The determining factor of rules or the setting becomes important in cities, since group membership is defined in this space. Thus, how the economy is organized, democratic politics regulated, social interactions mediated, culture produced and space exploited has profoundly different meanings for men and women. We may refer to

Pierre Bourdieu's notion of the 'field and habitat' that he uses in his *A Reflexive Sociology* for instance. Each individual reflects the "acquired predispositions" of her habitus and that constitutes her field of actions. The habitus is a resultant of socialization, of political ideology, of the environment. So the freedom of the individual essential in the 'urban' space is subsumed by acquired traits and attitudes. This argument may be a definite substantiation of Manuel Castells, who, as indicated above, also sees the absence of freedoms supposedly resulting from modernity, in the urban space. Yet, when we interpret gender roles in this frame of reference while we see

that activities of the city indeed too often ratify familiar gendered scenarios, we also find they may provide opportunities to resist the beaten track.

The paper looks at gender in the urban space and identifies three types of constructions of gendered roles. These instances represent the varied locales and the varied forms in which the construction of gendered roles may take place. First, the constructions through interface with societal norms; second, as exhibited through organs associated with the political process; and third, as constructed by self endeavour. The paper is structured into three sections. One can use innumerable dependent variables to assess the nature of construction of the role of women by society; for our purpose, just two have been chosen: construction of women's roles in the church and the academe may typify the societal configuration of gendered roles. So the issue addressed in this section will be: what are the experiences generated in these spheres, does the specified geographical space bear out the symptoms of 'urbanity' so far as women are concerned? To capture the ideologically oriented groups affiliating with the state power and their response towards women, in section two, we look at a selection of the print media published by such groups/political parties. To gauge how far the women in the urban space are actually able to negotiate their subalternity, we once again turn to a selection of the print media published by organizations that are purportedly 'women' organizations and enjoy varying degrees of autonomy. For each of these we use primary data obtained from the urban space. All the three sections of our analysis veer around one basic issue, the question of empowerment, how do women fare when subjected to the intervening influence of each of the independent variables identified above?

KOLKATA: THE URBAN BACKDROP

A brief account of the urban space known as Kolkata, is necessary before we look at our primary data. Kolkata (known as Calcutta till recently) has undergone certain clear phases of growth into a metropolitan complex. The most significant phases that have impacted upon its socio-economic, cultural and political profile are: the partition of Bengal (1905); the independence of the country (1947) Bangladesh War of independence (1971); and finally the onset of liberalization and the entry of the world market. All these events on the one hand sullied its slowly emanating 'urban' image; and on the other heightened to almost institutional levels the revolutionary potential that had already been rooted in the region, as a result of the widespread growth of education and social reforms all through the nineteenth century. These events also witnessed huge population displacements, refugees, impoverished ruralites, and the plain fortune seeker found these moments opportune to relocate to the emerging

eastern metropolis of India. This to all intents did not allow the pure urban form to develop. On the other hand, the gross inability of the administrative structure to address the issues of growing poverty and political non-representation of all the classes fuelled collective action, either as direct political agitation, or through written protest. Women were very much a part of the entire process of specific shaping of the culture of the city. Innumerable books guide attention towards the growth of the city, specifically addressing our query whether Kolkata can project a specific and exclusive urbanity. To all intents it cannot, since its composition, its representative character and its spirit of agitations both verbal and written reflect a continuing pre-modernity, not visible in other metropolises in like measure. Nisith Ranjan Ray's *The Profile of a City* (1986); Asok Kumar Ray's *Storm Centres of Revolution Calcutta and Chandernagore, 1902 – 1918* (2001); Gokul Chandra Das's *The Regional History and Culture of the Twenty Four Parganas (in Bengali)* (2004); are a few of the researched works that help substantiate the above. As stated, women were a part of this intense effusion of alignment for the disrupted security of rural life and its relocation into the bizarre urban space. Quite obviously it was the well-ensconced middle and upper class women who ventured to project the plight of the disaffected.

A quick perusal of works such as Barbara Southard's *The Women's Movement and Colonial Politics in Bengal 1921-1936* (1995); or even the earlier work by Meredith Borthwick (1984) *The Changing Role of Women in Bengal, 1849-1905* provide detailed documentation of the growth of women's consciousness and its expression through collective action in favour of empowerment of women in the region. Initially the venture was confined to the middle and upper classes, however, the inter war years saw the proliferation of the leftist ideology and its penetration into the ranks of the lower classes as well. Literary manifestations of the women's voice had started much earlier at the individual level, infact since the latter half of the nineteenth century. Women's occupation of the public space as part of collectives and bringing out publications in support of their demands or as expression of their interest occurred simultaneously with the emergence of significant organizations in the post world war period. However, both the actions at the collective organizational level and the publication level received a boost during the emergence of the radical phase of the women's movement since the nineteen eighties. We examine some of these writings published from the urban space in the second and third sections of the paper.

GENDER AND ITS INTERFACE WITH SOCIETAL NORMS

Women in the church and the academe

In West Bengal the number of Christians is slightly above

2% of the population and women constitute roughly fifty percent of the same. The urban scene does not reflect anything different from the situation that has been widely challenged by women's activism relating to the church elsewhere. We refer to a representative sample survey that reflects the picture as clearly as possible. Of the total number of Bengali Christian women attending the church:

- 12% participate in all India Christian Women's organizations
- 22% involve in activities of the local Pastorate committee
- 26% involve in Sunday school activities
- 32% involve in Social work
- 30% involved in Evangelical work
- 36% participate in the Women's Sundays organized by their church
- 46% are involved with *mahila samitis* or women's groups of the church

The categories are overlapping and do not really add up to 100%. However what is observable is 'mahila/women's samitis' register the largest numbers of those active in the church. These are undoubtedly the unproblematic 'safe' locales, ensconced comfortably within the precincts of the patronizing church, areas not involved with the decision making in the church. The activity within the church is not carried over to the wider, secular nonreligious space where denial of equality is contested, hegemony subverted, the continued invisibility of justice towards women questioned, in other words where the rights based debate is actually fraught. Their emergence in the collectivized public realm is never as 'Christian women' but is too often lost in the welter of other identities; if at all any attempts are made to emerge into the public sphere. But as often is the case, these women never, use any other modes of collective representation in the public space. It is comfortable to be lodged in sundry occupations' surrounding the church, after all that represents their identity. So the need to question the singular all-encompassing identity, emanating from the church is never felt, its patriarchy never recognized.

A related variable, 'perceptions of insecurity among the Bengali Christian women' further helps to explicate the point mentioned. Relating this notion to various age groups one observes that of the total sample 64% felt insecure in their daily interactions in the wider non-Christian space. This perception was maximal for the age group 35 - 44 years olds, followed by the 25 - 34 year group. The oldest group had no such qualms at all. This perception can be explained in two ways, this age group does not have active involvement with the organized-unorganized space, and secondly, the notion of insecurity is a contemporary development that affects the younger lot, in the wake of recent communal uprisings in the public space (Gonsalvez, Susmita, 2003).

The above drives home the point that the urban space becomes the repository of and subsequently manifests the amount of confidence or positive capacity that one has achieved from the requisite reflected collective identity. In the absence of the same or in the case of entrenchment within closeted identities, perceptions of trepidation, insecurity or incapacity is common. This relates directly to the perception how much one can impact upon or mould public opinion. Our data relates specifically to the urban space, in the rural areas, the perception of insecurity for the Christian community has never been reflected in like manner in the region. The community identity has always been more localized; feelings are freely aired in the public space primarily because residences even though arranged along community lines yet, local traditions and political affiliations cut across community lines. The 'gendered' being reflects the perceptions of the locality along with that of the community. Empowerment is a function of the criteria of security, perceived at the individual and community levels, the absence of the same in one sphere acts as a disabling factor even though Christian women as a whole are recognized for their honesty, sincerity and hard work.

The academic space is also a highly contested urban space, the higher the levels the more problematic the entry. We have not observed the Christian woman making any separate significant impact in this space, there are only three Christian women including myself at the University post-graduate teaching space of Kolkata urban area, and a complete absence of Christian men, even though a miniscule number of Christian men may be there at the Bachelor's level. Our concern being with the gendered subject in this paper, we are not concerned with the nature and amount of impact on academic policy, which any way is minimalist, rather the opportunities or lack of the same to enter into policy making realms that higher academics affords is investigated.

The Humanities Departments of Calcutta University since the late seventies of the last century have reflected an overwhelming female student presence compared to male students. While this may be a common feature cutting across academic departments in different regions of the country, it becomes a point of concern when the ratio of male to female is compared at the teaching levels. No indication of the urban equalizing principal is manifested. The departments despite reflecting systematic better performance of the girl students compared to the boys are negatively positioned so far as recruitment and more specifically promotions are concerned. A bird's eye view of the scale of disproportion existing at this level shows: till the past ten years the ratio between male and female teaching staff in the departments was as imbalanced as 90:10%. However, consistent pressures applied by the Women's Studies Department have brought some change and today at least in terms of total numbers the genders are balanced in the humanities departments,

though not so in the science, technology and medical teaching departments. The gender imbalance is particularly glaring, in the top echelons, namely in the Associate/Professor/Reader and Professor posts. Here the data shows the complete dominance of the male in all the departments. The ratio is as bad as 90% male professors' to 10% female professors, all committees, like wise reflect this intensely imbalanced ratio among the genders. Reasons of late entry of females to academics and its delayed impact do not hold since the pass percentages of females in almost all higher academic levels far surpass that of males over the last twenty years, how does one countenance their invisibility in the higher academic teaching posts? The urban space and its commensurate sphere of academics do not allow empowerment of the female without subversion.

This brief analysis of women's position in at least two types of institutionalized urban spaces in the city of Kolkata only substantiates existing information, regarding similarly placed women elsewhere in the urban context of the country. We shift to another independent variable in the second section a perusal of women's writing as reflected in journals that function as mouthpieces of various organizations affiliated to groups that claim an independent 'nonpolitical existence'.

WOMEN AND THEIR 'AUTONOMOUS' PUBLICATIONS

The second variable chosen for analysis relates to *self-endeavour*, we address the question how far women through this method are able to impact upon the visible public space in the urban arena. Two lines of analysis may be followed here: the nature of the movements engaged in by the women as part of various organizations and secondly the nature of their writings as organizational literature. Both these constitute important tools of analysis so far as perceptions of the urban space are concerned. In all the cases we found the literature was a reflection of organizational ideology and inclination. *Self-endeavour* refers to those who have an autonomous space, and reflect this independence in their literature.

We look at a selection of such print media below. The journals, tabloids, newsletters, and magazines selected would conform to the autonomous women's organizational literature. There are innumerable such existing in the urban space yet we have selected just a few for analytical purposes: *Manabi*; *Ahalya*; *Sayakbarta*; *Pratibidhan* and *Prayas* (all in Bengali) may be taken as appropriately representing the free media that maximally reflect women's concerns, operating from the urban space of Kolkata. While perusing the content of their writings we can form, to large extent opinions about the degree of autonomy actually existing, the larger question, the nature of empowerment reflected in the writings can

also be addressed.

Manabi (the female), edited by Sutapa Dewanji is published by the Gana Unnayan Parishad (People's Development Council) and has been in circulation since 1995. The latter is a fairly large and active Non-governmental organization catering to multifarious needs of the people. A bird's eye view of the journal shows while the foundation of specific concern for women-related issues are dealt with, yet, the stance is definitely all-encompassing rather than women-specific. The October 2001-March 2002 issue for instance had a number of articles launching scathing criticism against the undemocratic laws prevailing in the country including West Bengal. The Central Government's POTA (Prevention of Terrorism Act) TADA (Terrorists and Anti- Disruptive Activities Act); the Maharashtra Government's Organized Crime Act, 1999, and the West Bengal Government's POCA, 2001 (*Manabi*, Sujato Bhadra, "POTA and POCA: Two sides of the same coin" Oct 2001- March 2002). The plea by the author was for reinstalling the democratic atmosphere by revoking the act. Displaced hutment dwellers also found special mention in the issue. So the generalist perspective of *Manabi* was visible rather than specific women's concern. So *Manabi* as the social implication of the term also typified, meant speaking on behalf of all disaffected people not women alone. This was reflected in providing a platform to all such people. Miratun Nahar's article entitled "Abhay Prithivi Ke debe Aaj?" (Who will provide assurances for a fearless world?). The article was meant to reflect the plight of the Muslims in the April-June issue of 2002 again gives an instance of reflection of generalist concerns of all the underprivileged. The reader response shown in the letters to the editor reflected the popularity of the journal among the ruralites. The contents did not reflect the stance of a woman's mouthpiece.

We briefly refer to certain other journals/tabloids in the same genre. *Ahalya* (named after a female historical character who was known for her fierce independent spirit and actions in traditional society) claimed to be the mouthpiece of the samaj (community) of women, and its self-defining epithets were independence, dignity and equal rights. Its stance was more forthrightly critical of the government's policies relating to women. In publication since the 1980s, it completed its silver jubilee in the year 2008. The editorials regularly carried scathing attacks on the continuing crimes against women (a child bride of 7 months enters wedlock) in the region, which had seen the presence of luminaries such as Vidyasagar and Raja Rammohan Roy. Reforms were neither widespread nor uniform. The independent spirit of the journal was visible yet; irregular publications and narrow circulation did not make such writings as powerful as they perhaps had the potential to be.

Prayas (*Attempt*) was the mouthpiece of *Swayam* (self-endeavour), again a non-governmental organization ori-

ented towards the prevention of exploitation against women. The organization is known for its open access to women, unhindered discussions, and facilities for police aid, legal counselling, medical aid, and provisions for training women and addressing issues of unemployment as well. The format of the journal reflects an appropriate forum for women. Songs, poems, narratives of women in discomfort, and various other types of self-compositions, apart from topical discussions are included in each issue. Most of these are allegorical, intended to draw attention through such attempts to parallels between the plight of women narrated in ancient folklore and the contemporary world. Its compass is definitely wider and deeper than the other journals for women, including within it women-specific information on shelters for those in need. What is most attractive about *Prayas* is the attempt to enter into the private space of the Bengali women, thus review of good movies, plays, other performances and happenings of interest to the urban women is also focused upon. The editorial through varying tones in different issues tries to emphasize that *Prayas* is the instrument of women's protest. The women will not succumb to any force whatever the circumstances, the writings of women will move along with gusto.

A brief reference to another tabloid, a 6 page one entitled *Sayakbarta (Information about the sword or the arrow)*. This is the mouthpiece of the organization Sanaap, also an NGO, and in publication since 2002. The format of the tabloid and contents bear similarity with *Prayas*, an additional emphasis being laid here on cartoons as a method of depicting possibilities or the denial of empowerment in different contexts for women.

2007-2008 was an exceptionally volatile period for the perceptive urban dweller, more so the women of Kolkata. Modernity and its concomitant variable of human rights seemed to have been obliterated in a frenzied effort exerted by the regional power structure to resort to a long delayed programme of rapid industrialization. This effectively meant rapid take over of specified land, in many cases from farmers tilling three crops per year (since the specified areas were most appropriately positioned for swift transformation into industrial base) in lieu of compensation to the farming community. In an area undergoing rapid transformation, experience indicates the government intentions are not always carried out with the same seriousness when it comes to devolution of resources. Bureaucratic red-tapism, cadre mismanagement at the grassroots level, may account for the inordinate slowing down of necessary disbursements. The whole of West Bengal was caught up in this unhappy scenario throughout the indicated period. The situation went out of hand, when rural women along with their men resorted to long-drawn agitations. Girls such as Tapashi Mallick had to lay down their lives (she was raped and murdered) for protesting against the misrule that ensued in the villages that were most affected due to the take

over of land. This period like never before witnessed a huge outpouring of women's wrath both in written and visible collective form. All the journals referred to above brought out issues highlighting in scathing terms the gross injustice perpetrated on the villagers and the concomitant violence on the women's bodies. There was a fearless outpouring of wrath from the pen of the women at the lop-sided and unplanned foray into industrialization. This spontaneous expression of empathy was indeed unparalleled; women of Bengal in contemporary times had been alleged with possessing the same perpetual ennuï that affected their male counter parts. But the Singur, Nandigram episodes (the villages, where the resistance to take over was most visible) dispelled this notion once and for all. By any account the visible protest launched by the women in the urban space surpassed that attempted by the men folk. The writings in the autonomous journals bore added proof of the intensity perceived at the state-led violence against innocent ruralites.

The above perhaps refurbishes with added depth that the space between the rural and the urban is a constructed one, to be demolished when ever the need arises; moreover, it is the urban that can most affectively represent the cause of the rural, the latter due to innumerable inbuilt structural limitations being unable to effectively represent their cause.

The above depicts at length the type of writing projected by journals' emphasizing the independent voice of the women in Kolkata.

WOMEN AND THE 'AFFILIATED' PUBLICATIONS

In the third section we attempt an analysis of writings of women in a different category of journals altogether. This is the collective women's voice in print, in journals that are linked to political parties/ party based organizations. The prominent ones were *Ek Sathe, (Together)* the mouthpiece of the West Bengal Democratic Women's Association or the Women's wing of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) ed. by Shyamoli Gupta; *Chalar Pathe (On the Move)* the mouthpiece of the National Federation of India the women's wing of the CPI; and the journal published by the State Commission for Women, *Nari Kantho, (The Women's Voice)*. A fourth journal is *Pratibidhan (restitution)*, the women's journal of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist).

The first two party-based women's journals do not reflect any separate identity apart from the political organizations under whose auspices they have come into existence. Pre-election issues for instance carried forceful editorials to vote for the left. The works done by the left combination of political parties that currently dominate the political space in the region of West Bengal, such as improvement of slums, development of the rural areas through attention on tourism, health, transport; construction of houses, roads, primary education and so on were

focused upon. We did not find any critique of the left policies with respect to its precipitous industrial programme, which has been plaguing the state since the last year. Similarly, certain notorious criminal cases registered against left candidates, such as rape, that had been creating headlines in all the other media received no mention at all. The tendency was to blame the emergent global enterprise, which violated culture and material well-being (various issues of the journal). Malini Bhattacharya, a member of the National Commission for Women, and a left representative in the National Parliament, categorically alluded to lack of specific proof of the alleged rape of Tapasi Mallick, who led the anti-industrialization programme at Nandigram, by the CPM cadres (Referred to above). Thus even denying eyewitness reports.

The party based organs attempted to straddle the two worlds, the public and the private, trying to mould and shape opinion equally in both. Thus explicit depiction of the culture of the region through songs, poems and discussions on contemporary theatre formed part of the writings. This was an attempt to encapsulate the women's voice, even though within limited parameters.

Nari kanto (Women's Voice) concentrates on categorizing the innumerable activities done by the State Women's Commission. Glancing through the journal we realized two basic issues, in the context of the developing world, one, the essentialist role played by the state in developmental activities cannot be overruled. It is the state alone with its immense infrastructure that can construct and implement inclusive policies and programmes for all marginalized sectors, including women. Secondly, it is in line with such home truths that the inter-national women's movement has undergone shifts in its alignments. Quite distinct from its earlier autonomous stance, the realization today is that for women-centric goals alliance with the state becomes an imperative fact.

The fourth journal, *Pratibidhan* (Restitution) belongs to the ultra left party the Communist Party of India- Marxist Leninist. It is currently in its eighteenth year of publication. Its tone and projection is drastically different from the three depicted above. Quite understandably so, since it belongs to the women's wing (Indian Progressive Women's Association) of a party that not only represents the extreme radical wing among the left-inclined political parties in the region, but also the fact that its anti-systemic stance prevails upon the women supporters as well to be openly critical of state policies. We find the same fearless tone as that projected by the autonomous women's journals. The Singur Nandigram episode saw the publication of a special issue categorizing quite comprehensively the full repertoire of women's agitation at the perceived carnage enacted on poor farming communities in the name of industrialization. Another organization the *Nari Nirjatan Pratirodh Mancha* (Front Against Exploitation of Women) put together Herculean efforts to

meticulously record from scratch everything that occurred relating to the Singur episode. Their publication was entitled *Capturing the Voices of Women of Singur, before and after land acquisition* a report (January 2007). This is a compendium of letters written by various women's organizations addressing the gross irregularities in the land transactions, letters of individual women expressing solidarity with the affected people in the villages and finally interviews of the victims. Never before had civil society, in this case largely consisting of the females in the urban space registered their protest in such profound manner. Before we end, it is necessary to say a few words about what normally constitutes the content of these journals in their regular issues.

It is only since the nineteen eighties that a sharpened feminist consciousness has resorted to the regular use of the print media for exposition of the women's plight. Earlier the trend was to focus on the lack of a political platform or voice, but gradually the print space has been taken over by issues that encapsulate femininity, space of the female as a rights bearing person. It is in this context that we find a merging of the earlier distinctions between the 'constructed' urban space and the rural arena.

CONCLUSION

We have concentrated our attention on the collective print world of the women in the urban space, along with two brief expositions on the kinds of positions they occupy in various institutions in the urban space, to decipher the extent of their autonomous functioning and consequently the nature of their empowerment in Kolkata. Undoubtedly there are innumerable other independent variables that allow a specific impression about the context of the urban women. However, the historical context of Bengal, the contribution of its women to the literary output since the nineteenth century, initially in a covert manner and subsequently more openly perhaps provided them with a more liberal start than women elsewhere in India. The space given to them for expression in the print media received indulgent support from the upper middle class males primarily because the literate female in renaissance Bengal contributed to the male pride. She was also the antidote to the constructed British imagery of the depravity of the Indian in colonial India. However, what was marginally visible then and becomes forcibly visible in the contemporary situation is the clear demarcation of the field or boundary within which collective print media can function. This translates into the boundedness of the concept of autonomy and its concomitant empowerment as well. Individual enterprise accords voice but has no strength in actual accrual of power in any context; it is in this sense that engagement with a collectivity becomes important for the urban women. It is in this context that Pierre Bourdieu's 'field' and 'habitus' also become useful points of analysis. If strong ideological situations govern

the women's voice, it becomes difficult to 'break free' and voice the need of real empowerment, this is so whether in a religious institution; or even while analyzing reality through the print media. While completely autonomous institutions or print media are difficult to find, yet, the absence of strong ideological overtones provide the incentive for factual unbiased expositions, needed for real empowerment.

A final observation can be drawn from the paper presented above. There is no real distinction between the urban and the rural space so far as the typification or the symbolism surrounding the woman is concerned. The patriarchal dominance visible in the rural space is carried over into the urban sphere as well, no amount of liberal democratic transformation successfully countenances that, since it holistically penetrates the church, the academe as well as the collective sphere of organizations, such parameters definitely do not allow full fledged flowering of the female power despite the possibilities of the same. We have referred to the possibilities of subversive impact in the urban space of Kolkata, wrought through the interface of the city with the gendered being. Such subversion of defined roles is a rarity, unless the woman aligns with a collective having a significant male presence as well. In other words, the left strategy in Bengal has never envisaged a singular space for women; they are included in its all-comprehensive design. The autonomous movement did create an impact in the late 1940s, but is submerged in the welter of highly politicized spaces and issues today. The church, which is our immediate concern, does not give me any significant hope for enabling an independent voice of the Christian woman. Individually her merits may be acclaimed, but collectively as Christian woman they lack space and voice both in the church and outside it. Finally the paper has highlighted a situation far removed from the southern context of Madurai where the seminar of the Urban Anglican network was held and eventually situates the rest of the papers as well. The most significant parallel for the Madurai and the Kolkata context is the situation of contest, of struggle. The Kolkata scenario is presented in representative form, that can easily replicate the stringencies faced and enacted by women in the urban space of the southern region, if not in like manner but can have close similarity (Revised version of the paper presented at the Urban Anglican Network Seminar held in Madurai, in January 2008)

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