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"Here and There, A Story of Women's Internationalism, 1948-1953"¹
Elisabeth Armstrong

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Gita Bannerji was an exceptional activist: an early fighter for communism when the movement was still in its first decades. She was young. A woman. To join the movement in the late 1930s, she gave up an entire lifetime of comfort and ease. Gita Banerji began organizing from an early age. She joined the Communist Party of India through its cover: the Workers Party.² When in college, she joined the Chhatri Sangh, the leftist women's student organization linked to the larger All India Federation of Students. In addition, Gita was one of the founding members of the famed leftist women's organization, the Mahila Atmaraksha Samiti, translated as 'women's self-respect' and more commonly, 'women's self-defense' organization.³

Bannerji was from the enfranchised middle class in Bengal, India. Her family was Brahmin and valued education for girls and boys. She went to college, studied, and learned. But she took a conscious chance and was not *of* the middle class. Their goals were not hers, not necessarily. For parts of her life, she lived and organized among the mill workers and the very poor in the Bengal Delta, a marshy region that had minimal desalinated land for farming, and endless mosquitoes as vectors for malaria and other mundane, deadly diseases.⁴ The district was also a hotbed of radicalism since the turn of the century.⁵

Gita Bannerji was also ordinary, utterly ordinary. She studied the same scholarly texts as others – novels, mathematics, science and geography in school. Marx, too, probably the *Communist Manifesto* since the Bengali translation was passed hand to hand throughout the region at this time.⁶ Study circles shared this and other Marxist books, always by candlelight, at night, in secret, alongside one's comrades. Her communist analysis of colonialism meant she must understand its origins and purpose for capitalism, not simply as a geo-political or historical aggression. She had to understand the larger schemes that crafted the local manifestations in Kolkata, in Bengal and in India. There was a world outside this colony that Gita also must understand in relation to her own conditions. Other colonizers, other colonized. The end of colonialism for communists demanded a scooping together of all those

¹ Parts of this essay were published elsewhere, in Elisabeth Armstrong, "Gita, Betty and the Women's International Democratic Federation, An Internationalist Love Story," in Tony Pecinovsky (ed.) *Faith in the Masses* (New York: International Publishers, 2021): 313-336.

² Renu Chakkravartty. *Communists in Indian Women's Movement*. (New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1980).

³ Manikuntala Sen, *In Search of Freedom: An Unfinished Journey*. (Kolkata: Stree, 2001).

⁴ Gita Bannerji's letters to US communist Betty Millard describes the years after her return from Europe while living in the rural area of Budge Budge. Elizabeth Millard papers, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College. Hereafter cited as Millard papers, SSC.

⁵ Suchetana Chattopadhyay, *An Early Communist: Muzaffar Ahmad in Calcutta 1913-1929*. New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2011.

⁶ Soma Marik, "Breaking Through a Double Invisibility: The Communist Women of Bengal, 1939-1948." *Critical Asian Studies*. 45:1 (2013): 79-118.

struggles, all those particularities chipped away and cast aside by capitalism. Gita studied but also became one of these fragments once she cast her solidarity with the working classes, organizing with the labor unions formed in the jute mills and coal factories that studded the Houghly River.⁷

Gita joined the struggle at an exceptional time. Another imperialist war emanated from Europe's continent fueled by land acquisition and genocide. As with the global war at the beginning of the twentieth century, this one fought for turf in Europe and around the world, but mostly for raw capital that solidified imperial pre-eminence within global capitalism. The bereft in the colonies during this battle of hubris was not the middle class, nor was it the gentry. Farmers, artisans, fisherfolk, craftspeople, weavers, brickmakers, miners, jute workers, market women, food sellers, folk singers, goat herders, painters, potters, iron smelters, forest dwellers suffered most from the wrath of world wars. Their livelihoods were swept away by the ravenous needs of war in Europe. All foodstuffs from the colonies moved North by dictat, not by chance or the invisible hand of supply and demand.⁸ All boats, even small wooden crafts for the Bengal Delta byways were commandeered by the overlords.⁹ When starvation struck in Bengal, it seemed sudden to some, chalked up to a regionally bad harvest, a hoarding of grain reserves. But famine struck colonized swaths of the world at the same time: Senegal, Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco faced unprecedented food shortages during the war. In Bengal, an onslaught of destitute people flooded into the cities in 1943 and 1944. People like Gita, who sought to listen to the lives, wants, needs and desires of the workers knew its onset was jumpstarted by war, and the military bases mushrooming along the borders of Burma and across the colonized territories of world.¹⁰ War exacerbated endemic want that defined ordinary people's place in the hierarchy of needs. Starvation for Bengal's rural masses began before the poor rice harvest late in 1942. That harvest was the trigger, not the cause. The tinder, not the gun.

Gita joined the struggle at an ordinary time. The anti-imperialist movement enjoyed long shadows into the nineteenth century. Women had participated in sabotage, assassination and revolution for many decades, not only in Bengal, but there too.¹¹ There were many clandestine armed groups, such as Yugantar and Anushilan Samiti, which were active in Bengal in the first quarter of the twentieth century.¹² Their members mainly came from the ranks of urban, educated, and unemployed youth – including unmarried young women – and they mostly carried out isolated killings of colonial British officers.

⁷ Chakkravartty, 1980.

⁸ Yasmine Khan. "Sex in an Imperial War Zone: Transnational Encounters in Second World War India," *History Workshop Journal* 73, no. 1 (2012): 240–58; Madhusree Mukerjee, *Churchill's Secret War: The British Empire and the Ravaging of India during World War II* (Chennai: Tranquebar, 2010).

⁹ Peter Custers, *Women in the Tebhaga Uprising: Rural Poor Women and Revolutionary Leadership (1946-47)*. (Kolkata: Naya Prokash, 1987); Sunil Sen, *The Working Women and Popular Movements in Bengal: from the Gandhi Era to the Present Day*. (Kolkata: K.P. Bagchi & Co, 1985).

¹⁰ Albani Lahiri, *Postwar Revolt of the Rural Poor in Bengal: Memoirs of a Communist Activist* (Kolkata: Seagull Books, 2001).

¹¹ Malini Bhattacharya and Abhijit Sen (eds.), *Talking of Power: Early Writings of Bengali Women from the Mid 19th Century to the Beginning of the 20th Century*. (Kolkata: Stree, 2003).

¹² Parvathi Menon. *Breaking Barriers: Stories of Twelve Women*. (New Delhi: Leftword Books, 2005).

In the early 1940s, Bannerji joined the workers' movement to listen to the workers' wants and to make manifest their needs and desires. From this commitment to the working class and peasantry, Gita sought to end colonialism as the engine of capitalism. In the Marxist analysis of Gita and her comrades, colonialism was a tool for capitalism; one answer to the system's contradictions of supply and demand, overproduction and underconsumption. Colonialism was integral part to capitalism, and not simply a coercive system of unequal governance by a white supremacist foreign hand. Instead, colonialism fed the ravenous maw of capitalism by creating new markets, new workers, and thus additional surplus value, additional profit wrung from labor exacted to make its wheels go round.

Colonialism referred to the outside control of colony trade: the raw materials shorn from the continent, of timber, of cotton, of tea shipped wholesale to Britain. Anticolonial movements of all stripes in the 1940s agreed, that must end. In addition, the captive markets of India and other colonized lands must cease. Indians could produce their own cloth and make their own salt free of British taxation. Nationalist movements agreed: until British occupation, the people of the subcontinent had done so.¹³ The anticolonial movements that Gita swam in demanded a more risky politics of refusal. These movements sought to throw a spanner in the engines of capitalism itself. Organizing the industrial workers of jute mills and coal mines alongside the landless agricultural workers and small landholding peasants was critical to this vision.

To listen to the workers, as communist and labor movements sought to do, complicated the knowledge of ledgers and accounts, taxes and accruals in the hands of educated middle class Indians. To listen to the workers during the 1940s was not an act alone, it had to be learned – first, by spending time and energy alongside working class people. It meant turning one's middle class gifts to other ends than a smooth transition from colonial governance to a nationalist one. The system itself needed new logics, new beneficiaries, and most of all new horizons.

Industrial capitalism of the nineteenth century demanded everything the world had to give. Ships and railroads required unending old-growth forests. Factories required fuel dug from every wellspring of the earth. Weapons of greater range and destruction needed ever more complex natural resources, combined in chemically innovative ways. Gold was still valuable. Jewels still glittered. Land still measured the worth of a sovereign. But in industrial capitalism, mobility of things was the key to ever-expanding riches. The colonialism that Gita sought to end was in transition in the 1940s. The tools that served industrial capitalism were transmogrifying to better feed finance capitalism.

Colonialism of industrial capitalism anchored the monopoly over the raw materials, production and markets of things sold for profit. Gita and her comrades developed theories about colonialism under finance capitalism that sought to monopolize the production and circulation of financial instruments themselves.¹⁴ Capital as investment in a country or region

¹³ Sumit and Tanika Sarkar, *Women and Social Reform in Modern India: A Reader*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008).

¹⁴ E.M.S. Namboodiripad, *A History of Indian Freedom Struggle*. (Trivandrum: Social Scientist Press, 1986). These speeches and writings by a leading communist theorists and activists throughout the latter half of the twentieth

became even more scarce in newly independent nations after the formal end to colonial domination. The need to understand this new order within capitalism fell heaviest on the shoulders of Gita and her comrades for a simple reason. Their movements of people faced the blunt end of capitalism's spasms first.

The source of value in industrial capitalism was the labor of workers wrenched from their bodies. Finance capitalism, as with industrial capitalism, still relied on the expropriation of labor value away from the workers and farmers who did the work. But finance capitalism was more efficient at peeling away the layers of profit from the middle-dealers, and at congealing those profits to the very few at the top. The monopoly over land and industry as the means of production congealed with the monopoly over capital itself.

With a war raging across the globe, anticolonial movements of workers and farmers, like Gita's asked what this transition from industrial capitalism to finance capitalism meant for colonialism. At face value, their answer seemed simple: colonialism as they knew it was dead, but to bury it, not so easy.¹⁵ In finance capitalism, profits were seemingly airlifted from the workers' backs, an endless theft, more invisible than Adam Smith's benign hand of the market. The market of finance capital never came to town to ply its wares, neither collateralized debt obligations nor leveraged buy-out deals. It never bothered to make or sell anything of use to the populace. Finance capital saw no need for investment to build trade infrastructure or to maintain order by expensive military conquest in the colonies. The trickle-down grift of finance capitalism was debt combined with the one-way flight of capital to the old imperial centers. Imperial tribute, or colonies' payments to their sovereign ended; but the ownership of key industries remained in the pockets of former colonizers, as did industry profits.¹⁶

At local levels, the time-worn lenders' tricks of balloon interest rates and the promise of easy money to pay for basic needs only grew more essential to cover medicine, food, education and shelter. Workers and farmers competed with all the workers of the world for their wage rates and agricultural produce prices. Old collectivities of peasant and working-class survival sought to harness their techniques of shared-fund circles, one small-bore attempt to hold onto any and all means of production, whether plow, land, livestock, or loom. Revolution and the refusal to give up the lion's share of their work was another increasingly critical method. Gita Bannerji, as a member of the radical women's movement in Bengal and the Communist Party of India faced old tragedies in a new context. One result was an upheaval in their strategies for radical social transformation.

Kolkata, India e³ Budapest, Hungary, 1948

century, E.M.S. Namboodiripad was first published in Malayalam in 1977, and translated into English for publication in 1986. The articles were originally published in serialized form from the 1950s to the 1970s in *New Age Monthly*. Also, see his book, *Economics and Politics of India's Socialist Pattern* for analysis directly after Indian independence in 1947.

¹⁵ Elisabeth Armstrong, "Peace and the Barrel of the Gun in the Internationalist Women's Movement, 1945-9" *Meridians*. 18:2(2019): 261-277.

¹⁶ One of the best resources for the analysis emerging from the Communist Party of India during this period is in the collection of CPI reports and speeches. M.B. Rao (ed.), *Documents of the History of the Communist Party of India, Volume VII, 1948-50*. (New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1976).

In 1948, Kolkata was a city in foment that seeded revolt spilling beyond the confines of independent India to revolutionary movements across Asia. The World Federation of Democratic Youth held their Asian convention in Kolkata in February, 1948. Students from Indonesia, Vietnam, Myanmar and elsewhere demanded an independence not just from colonial occupation, but from capitalism itself.¹⁷ The militant position held by Indonesian young people sprang from betrayal: their new republic faced bombing by the Dutch.¹⁸ The experiences of the Vietnamese participants mirrored their own. Entrenched in an insurgency to regain their recently declared independence, Vietnamese delegates told the story of French colonial refusal to let go and the Euro-American henchmen that supported them.¹⁹

The Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF) members had similar plans for an internationalist conference for anti-imperialist women that Gita had helped to foster. They first sought to hold the Asian Women's Conference in Kolkata in November of 1948, but their plans had fallen through. Nehru's Congress Party members agreed – another anti-colonial conference would be too disturbing to the status quo.²⁰ The new government, they believed, was too fragile to withstand a sustained contest of its leadership. By March, 1948, the Congress Party banned the Communist Party of India. Leaders went underground, but continued to meet. As in colonial times, jails became cells for organizing as much as confinement.

A year later, Gita Bannerji's leftist women's movement in West Bengal linked to the CPI, the Mahila Atmaraksha Samiti (MARS) was also banned and its members moved into hiding. Regional and national leaders were imprisoned or driven underground, moving constantly from house to house to escape arrest. The rural movement integral to MARS' activism called Tebhaga was also on the government's watchlist. In the Tebhaga movement, waged farmworkers and small-landholding peasant women and men sought basic human rights: fair land practices, and an end to the feudal tributes of forced labor (*begar*) and the sexual control of rural women. Violent police repression, that included widespread rape of rural women, sought to crush the uprising that united peasants and agricultural workers of all backgrounds, Muslims and Hindus, *adivasi* (indigenous peoples) and Dalits (oppressed castes).²¹

MARS, Bengal's member organization in WIDF, developed powerful strategies to organize the "*sarbahara*" – or 'those who've lost everything.' Members of MARS mobilized mass public protests of women seeking redress on their own behalf.²² They built leadership at local and regional levels among the most oppressed women. They developed the signature petition to

¹⁷ Larisa Efimova, "Did the Soviet Union Instruct Southeast Asian Communists to Revolt? New Russian Evidence on the Calcutta Youth Conference of February, 1948," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 40:3(2009): 449-469.

¹⁸ Sugiono, "Report of the Indonesian Delegation," 1948, International Union of Students, CIA documents, RDP80-00926A000900010002-1.

¹⁹ Ruth McVey, "The Calcutta Conference and the Southeast Asian Uprisings," Interim Report Series, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 1958.

²⁰ Elisabeth Armstrong, "Before Bandung: The Anti-Imperialist Women's Movement in Asia and the Women's International Democratic Federation," *Signs* 41, no. 2 (2016): 305-332.

²¹ Adrienne Cooper, *Sharecropping and Sharecroppers' Struggles in Bengal, 1930-1950*. Kolkata: K.P.Bagchi, 1988.

²² Chakravorty, 1980.

represent the numbers of women who supported their demands and give heft to cross-class campaigns.²³ Perhaps most revolutionary of all, they listened to dispossessed women.

Rural landless women and urban, resettled refugees from India's partition violence were two central bases for MARS' membership. Demands for affordable food, clothing and housing combined with a focus on women's economic independence to imagine women's future independence from need. MARS propaganda – its songs, plays, pamphlets and speeches, explained women's basic survival issues through an analysis of regional class conflict and capitalism's global imperial war.

Radical women developed powerful tools of protest during the British occupation of India and they further honed their methods during the early years of India's independence under the Congress Party. The story of Pratibha Ganguly and her comrades has the contours of their struggle archetype: the mass protest of women in public. One afternoon in April, 1949 the members of MARS gathered with their children in Kolkata.²⁴ They used a technique they'd mobilized during the famine in 1942, one that forced the colonial government to address widespread hunger, homelessness and unemployment. A large group of women marched peacefully in public streets to government offices. Their demands in 1949 also mirrored their demands in 1942, these mass protests of women addressed the state: for civil liberties and livelihood support. They demanded the release of political prisoners, many of whom had been imprisoned without charges, and basic amenities of food, clothing and work.

In 1942, they faced the British colonial government. In 1949, they addressed the ruling Congress Party government. This time, instead of being beaten, jailed and roughly dispersed as happened in 1942, the police fired on the protest and killed five people: four women and one child. Pratibha Ganguly was one of the women who died. The novelty of women's public protest shifted from a shocking sight of women filling the streets to a body count. Women protested their living conditions of impoverishment, and demanded their rights as citizens (not subjects) of India, and they were killed. After this police shooting, MARS was banned by the Congress government for their activism, and the women of MARS blended into their surroundings to carry on organizing in secret.

Bannerji took a slightly different route from many of her comrades, and flew as one of two Indian delegates to WIDF's 2nd Congress held in Budapest, Hungary, in December, 1948. She didn't return to Kolkata until 1951. After the conference in Budapest, she traveled to Paris to work at the central offices of WIDF in Paris. Bannerji, alongside the Secretary of WIDF from the People's Republic of China, Lu Cui and the French communist Simone Bertrand, shouldered much of the logistics, outreach and communication for WIDF's mandate to support women's anticolonial organizing. Lu Cui's work involved considerable travel to colonized regions of the world to develop WIDF's contacts with local organizers, and support their activism. Between 1949 and 1951, Gita mostly traveled within in Europe with some notable exceptions. As her letters attest, she, quite literally in some cases, represented the anticolonial struggles around the world to internationalist allies.

²³ Manikuntala Sen, *In Search of Freedom: An Unfinished Journey*. (Kolkata: Stree, 2001).

²⁴ Sonali Satpathi, "Mobilizing Women: The Experience of the Left in West Bengal, 1947-1964," PhD, History, University of Calcutta, 2013.

Primitive Accumulation

By the end of 1948, when Bannerji arrived, the central offices of the Women's International Democratic Federation had been running for three years. Its official membership was ninety-one million women. Located in Paris, the post-war global city for antifascist organizing, its staff enjoyed support from the pro-communist government. By 1950, France's central government had changed, their welcome worn thin. Eugenie Cotton, president of WIDF, also worked to found the World Peace Council. Cotton was arrested for advocating that women should tear up their sons' enlistment papers to fight against the Vietnamese liberation movement. As Adeline Broussan detailed in her essay for this volume, "Resistantes Against the Colonial Order," through what she calls "grassroots diplomacy" at WIDF gatherings, Vietnamese women radicalized French communist women.²⁵ Their radicalization also galvanized the major shift within the French Communist Party to denounce French colonialism in absolute terms. But the consolidation of anti-colonialism at the French imperial center came with a cost. By January, 1951, the WIDF offices moved to Berlin – the Berlin of the state-socialist German Democratic Republic, where they stayed until 1991.

"It seems they are quite the aristocracy over there in Berlin," Gita wrote on July 1st, 1954.²⁶ She wrote her letter to another staff member from these early years: Betty Millard, a communist party member in the United States, who worked alongside her in Paris from 1949 to 1951. Gita worked as part of WIDF's Anticolonial International Preparatory Committee to support women's organizations in colonized regions of the world. Betty was the editor of the CPUSA journal *New Masses* for four years before arriving in Paris. She now edited the English-language edition of its *Information Bulletin* that publicized international, regional and national campaigns for women's emancipation. Like Gita, Betty also solidified the international outreach by the organization, and gathered information about ongoing local campaigns of its member organizations for the *Bulletin* and solidarity campaigns.

"But we may be pleased to remember that we did the primitive accumulation part," Gita wrote. "Now we are again engaged in primitive accumulation."²⁷ Gita's primitive accumulation, along the grain of Rosa Luxemburg's use of the term, described the process of creating value from something in its raw, unrealized form. In jest, Gita flipped the term on its head. Rather than referring to the profits capitalism requires from commodifying non-capitalist land, resources, and labor, Gita imagined a communist primitive accumulation that built valuable revolutionary movements from peoples' scattered struggles against their oppression. Left feminist activism, that created movements in Budapest, Paris, Kolkata, Beijing and New York, to name just a few locations, built the women's movement in these years.

While in Paris, Gita played a key role organizing the 1949 Asian Women's Conference, held in Beijing. Their primitive accumulation plumbed the soil of internationalism after the

²⁵ Adeline Broussan, "Resistantes Against the Colonial Order: Women's Grassroots Diplomacy During the French War in Vietnam (1945-1954) in *Other Bandungs* volume.

²⁶ Gita Bannerji, Letter to Betty Millard, July 1, 1954. Millard Collection, SSC.

²⁷ Ibid.

destruction of a planetary war. They strengthened old values of common worth, not as a hidden ore below humanity's surface, but as an affirmed commonality of vision and purpose. Even in the years when WIDF was welcome in Paris, this work was hardscrabble in the wreckage that a fascist war left behind: of broken lives, destroyed communities, betrayal and ongoing colonial occupation.

In 1950, Gita was part of the team that coordinated WIDF's first international campaign for peace in Korea. She attended campaign organizational meetings across Europe. Betty wrote press releases and speeches. WIDF framed the campaign in two ways. First, WIDF described women's activism as it forged a solidarity against US-led imperialist aggression, led by women from Korea, but also women from other colonized countries. Second, WIDF framed the campaign as a maternalist fight led by all women from imperialist and colonized nations against the use of their sons and husbands as cannon-fodder for war. The World Peace Council, co-founded in 1947 by WIDF members, joined their campaign against the NATO forces and US military attack on North Korea to demand peace, self-determination, and an end to American occupation of the region.²⁸

The first UN-backed invasion began in April, 1950 when the United States launched a military response in alliance with the South Korean government on North Korea that continued for the next three years.²⁹ The alacrity of American support for the South Korean government surprised the North Korean military. The sheer force of American support for South Korea was overwhelming, including military ships, airpower, troops and military expertise. The early speed of North Korean forces in occupying parts of South Korea, including Seoul, was quickly halted and pushed back by the end of 1950.³⁰

By the end of the conflict, over 3 million Koreans were killed; it is estimated that at least 2 million were civilian deaths.³¹ In North Korea alone, civilians were half of the two million people killed. Over these three years, American planes dropped 635,000 tons of bombs and 32,557 tons of napalm on the country.³² By 1952, no military targets remained, but the onslaught continued until 1953. The WIDF campaign against the Korean War spanned women's activism around the world to frame peace as a women's issue. In the words of historian Suzy Kim, "socialist internationalism in the context of a global peace movement facilitated a productive understanding of *difference* – whether gendered, racial, ethnic, national or any other – toward a 'transversal' politics of solidarity as seen during the Korean War."³³

In 1951, Gita returned to India and the activism of the Mahila Atmaraksha Samiti (MARS). As she joked to Betty, their work of primitive accumulation in Paris gave organizational form to shared ideals and disparate contexts around the world. Organizing to build socialism, with women's equality and justice at the heart of this vision, simply continued after they returned

²⁸ Suzy Kim, *Everyday Life in the North Korean Revolution, 1945-1950*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013).

²⁹ Bruce Cumings, *The Korean War*. (New York: Modern Library Chronicles Book, 2010).

³⁰ Shen, Zhihua. *Mao, Stalin and the Korean War: Trilateral communist relations in the 1950s*. (New York, Routledge, 2012).

³¹ Kwan, Heonik. *After the Korean War*. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

³² Kim, 2013.

³³ Suzy Kim, "The Origins of Cold War Feminism During the Korean War," *Gender and History*. 31:2(July 2019): 461.

to their homes of origin. Gita and Betty wrote letters to each other for decades after spending those two years in Paris building WIDF together. In no small part, due to their countries' anti-communist clampdown, they never met again.

Gita's letter to Betty written in 1954 spurs two questions for this essay. How do you build a feminist people's movement for revolution grounded in a nation-state that doesn't want you there? And how do you build this movement alongside someone who's halfway around the world? Movement-building – or in Bannerji's terms, primitive accumulation – developed during the forties and fifties through WIDF's centrifugal energy of an international organization. The creativity and vitality did not come from the central offices in Paris, but from the varied struggles waged in colonized, postcolonial and imperial contexts. International organizations like WIDF meant little without the bullets taken by its members, and the campaigns launched by its affiliated women's groups that they won and lost and won again.

Budapest, Hungary, 1948 e' Beijing, People's Republic of China, 1949

Gita and Betty first met in 1948 at WIDF's Second International Women's Congress held in Budapest, Hungary. The Congress in Budapest brought members to assess their activism since founding three years earlier. The decision to focus on women's anticolonial activism in 1946 expanded their founding commitment to anti-fascism.³⁴ WIDF explicitly added anti-racism and anti-colonialism to its commitment to fighting fascism. Women from the US delegation and women from the Indian, Vietnamese, Moroccan, Algerian and Chinese delegations sought this clarity from WIDF's inception. They gained solidarity for their demand from African American activists who made sure anti-racism was another explicit goal. In this sense, they adhered to a definition of fascism honed in the 1930s.

Marxist theorist R. Palme Dutt, a member of the Communist Party of Great Britain, defined fascism as an integral ideology of capitalism.³⁵ Fascism maintained capitalism in the face of revolutionary upheaval. It intensified the dictatorship of capitalism and the repression of the working class. Fascism also concentrated each imperialist block into a single economic and political unity. War only solidified the antagonisms and contradictions within imperialism. Dutt also characterized fascism as a movement through its actors: "Fascism, in short, is a movement of mixed elements dominantly petit bourgeois, but also slum proletarian and demoralized working class, financed and directed by finance capital, by the big industrialists, landlords and financiers, to defeat the working-class revolution and smash the working class organization."³⁶ What made fascism specific, in Dutt's analysis, was the willingness to use violence and illegal methods for capitalist ends.

³⁴ "The Situation of Women in Colonies, Discussions on Racial Discrimination," *Bulletin d'Information*. 9-10(Octobre-Novembre, 1946): 7. Vivian Carter Mason, the US representative to WIDF from the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW), Jeanne Merens, a communist and founder of the Algerian Women's Union and Jai Kishore Handoo, member of the Women's Committee of India League in London developed early materials for the WIDF executive committee meeting focused on anti-colonialism and anti-racism.

³⁵ R. Palme Dutt, *Fascism and Social Revolution*. (San Francisco: Proletarian Publisher, 1934): 92.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 102.

WIDF members from around the world sharpened a gendered and racialized analysis of fascism during these heady years from 1945 to the mid-1950s. They mobilized women's socially-dominant role as mothers and maternalist rhetoric to attack fascism. But anti-fascism in their publications also emphasized women's willingness to fight, physically and militarily, against fascist violence. WIDF's public materials used the terms of maternalism not as a biological destiny, but as a social role that anti-fascist, anti-racist and anti-colonial women shaped rather than simply inhabited. The campaigns WIDF led, for example, in Netherlands against loading weapons shipments to arm the Dutch counterinsurgency in Indonesia, placed women on the frontlines of violent police repression.

In Budapest, delegates honed their analysis of imperialism in the current geopolitical configuration. Cai Chang, a vice-president of WIDF and leading member of the communist women's movement in China described the US consolidation of power after 1945. Cai described the growing complexity of imperialism in her speech, between the older colonial nations and the rise of an American-led financial imperialism marked by the dominance of the dollar and Wall Street. Both forms of imperialism agreed on military solutions to "wiping out every movement for national liberation." Cai reminded her audience that the United States was the true victor of World War II, gaining a hegemony won through its capital reconstruction loans to Europe and England. She linked movements in Africa, including labor struggles in the Gold Coast, to those in Asia, citing the oil workers' strikes in Iran. She spoke about the food shortages in China that led to peasant uprisings against the Guomindang, and the starvation in India that fueled peasant resistance to large landowners in Bengal. All of these struggles included women workers on the land and in factories, exploited even more intensively than men by even lower wages and even longer hours. While Cai spoke about the exploitation of both women and men, her focus on women's lives in colonialism was clear: working women's demands should ground anticolonial demands, as the floor to change the oppressive living conditions for all.

The intensity of working class, rural and urban organizing, alongside alliances with the progressive middle classes, finally gave the anti-colonial movement around the world the strength it needed to win. Colonial powers' use of violent force to retain colonial territories continued unabated after the war, if not fiercer than before. Economies of the Netherlands, England and France still relied upon colonies' wealth in resources, labor and captive consumer markets – perhaps even more desperately in the war's aftermath. But brute force, and bad-faith agreements to share power no longer sufficed to hold onto power. The united front from below, one that linked landless agricultural workers to small farmers and the urban proletariat to intellectuals and progressive middle-class people, created the unity that anticolonial resistance needed to win. Cai's analysis ended with three goals of women's ongoing praxis: peace, self-determination, and a democracy that eradicated poverty and starvation to provide "the freedom to live under human conditions."

Gita contributed to the central document presented at the 1948 conference, "The Women of Asia and Africa."³⁷ The report began with a quotation from the United Nations Charter, Article 73 about "non-self-governing territories" that affirmed "that the interests of the

³⁷ WIDF Preparatory Committee for the Conference of the Women of Asia, *The Women of Asia and Africa*. (Budapest: WIDF, 1948).

inhabitants of these territories are paramount, and accept as a sacred trust the obligation to promote to the utmost, within the system of international peace and security established by the present Charter, the well-being of the inhabitants of these territories," with cultural rights and self-government upheld. The photo after this declaration showed the severed heads of anticolonial insurgents on stakes. Underneath was the caption, "Here is how the colonialist countries respect the charter of the United Nations which they signed."³⁸

The report mentioned the invitation from MARS to hold the Asian Women's Conference in Kolkata, India and its impossibility. A few months after the Budapest conference in 1949, the leaders of the All China Democratic Women's Federation and the Chinese Communist Party invited WIDF to hold the Asian Women's Conference in Beijing, People's Republic of China. Held in December, 1949, Gita was on the Asian Women's Conference organizing committee, spending over a month in China beforehand to prepare for the gathering. She also attended as a delegate. Due to the hostile political climate in India, she used a pseudonym, Mira Mitra, for her speech about children's conditions in India.

Notably, the 1949 Asian Women's Conference consolidated a militant, two-part strategy for women's internationalism in the fight against fascism.³⁹ The conference resolutions drafted two parts to this strategy, one for women from colonized (and recently independent) countries, and one for women from imperialist nations. In Asia, Africa and parts of Latin America and the Caribbean, women fought imperialism and feudalism with renewed unity in their struggles. To do so, they should organize "the masses of women, help to educate them and defend their basic rights!"⁴⁰ For women in imperialist countries, their activism should be rooted in an ethical and personal refusal to be accomplices in murder: "Do not permit our sons to kill each other! Stop colonial wars! Insist that your governments recall the troops from Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaya, Korea."⁴¹ This linked strategy mobilized rather than ignored or universalized the differences in women's activism around the world. Internationalist women shared their commitments to anti-fascism, anti-white supremacy and anti-colonialism; but their conditions of struggle were specific. This strategy dispensed with allies in struggle to create accomplices in the fight against colonialism, fascism and racism.

In her diary about the Asian Women's Conference, Betty jotted notes about the film shot during the six days of the conference. On December 17, 1949, Millard described a "...chilly film taken to replace those burned up. Will falsify history considerably – will convey impression the Presidium listened to speakers which was seldom the case. Will also seem the very gay conference since we found our own histrionics amusing..."⁴² Two films were created about the conference: one by the Chinese and one by the Russians. However, the footage taken over the six days of the conference burned. The day after the conference ended, it was hastily re-shot. A letter by Gita to Betty provided a more light-hearted assessment of the two films. She described watching the Russian version in Budapest, Hungary almost a year after the conference. "Yesterday I went to a movie to find you in various moods – mostly laughing.

³⁸ Ibid, 5.

³⁹ Elisabeth Armstrong, 2019.

⁴⁰ "To Our Sisters, the Women of the Countries of Asia." *Information Bulletin*. 4:7(1950): 9.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Millard papers, SSC.

It was the Soviet version of the Asian Women's Conference...on the whole it was better than the Chinese version and the particular attraction was the Iranian and Indian delegates shouting "Van Sui" which I recognized very much."⁴³

International conferences, like the ones held in Budapest and Beijing, allowed local leaders from around the world to discover for themselves the complex linkages between women's struggles around the world. Each meeting was filled with women's conjunctural analyses of their countries. These reports developed a shared understanding of how to understand the events of the day. Regional gatherings, like the one held in Beijing, also allowed WIDF to build allied women's organizations where they barely existed before, such as in Thailand and Malaysia. In other cases, it fostered the consolidation of myriad women's groups from different localities into a national organization, such as in Indonesia and Vietnam. But the simple enjoyment of each other's company, of finding the languages to communicate was also political.

Paris, France & Warsaw, Poland, 1950-1951

Gita and Betty became close while working together in Paris. They shared a wry sense of humor and a keen eye for the absurd. Gita attended the WIDF executive committee meetings in Berlin held in February, 1951 where they decided to send an investigative team to Korea. On March 5, 1951 Gita wrote to Betty about a train journey she took with the East German contingent from Berlin, GDR to Warsaw, Poland to attend a WIDF-sponsored rally for peace, as part of the "Hands Off Korea" campaign. Gita was sure her adventure would make Betty "green with envy" as she sat in Paris editing the *Bulletin Anglais*:

I never knew the German women possessed as loud voices as the Bengalis and Americans or could speed up their speech like the French. Four of those German women – extremely friendly and delightful --- four among the 91 million front ranks, kept up a non-stop conversation for 4 hours while the rather bewildered Bengali – also a front member of a more colonial order tried to catch a bit of sleep... At the stroke of twelve, suddenly the noise increased a thousandfold and in spite of the gradually developing deafness of the Bengali type, her eardrums seemed to be on the bursting point!

Gita's inability to rest on the overnight journey was compounded when five other men entered the compartment carrying bottles of vodka to jumpstart a party.

Peeping through a buttonhole, I beheld the following spectacle: in front of me (the compartment by the way, was 6 x 3 feet in size) a pug-nosed, bald-headed, perpetually smiling man; next to him one of the 91 millions (a member of WIDF), squeezed like a tomato in a sandwich; next, another stub-nosed, toothbrush-moustache, bald-headed Pole holding a vodka bottle near Elli's unwilling mouth...⁴⁴ They pushed me and thrust the vodka bottle to my horrified mouth, making me reflect a little bit on the inferiority of the European civilization!! I shouted "Dormir" in pure French because I couldn't

⁴³ Letter from Gita Bannerji to Betty Millard, Budapest, September 4, 1950, Millard papers, SSC.

⁴⁴ Elli Schmidt, President of the Democratic Union of German Women.

really remember any other language and shut my eyes as tightly as possible. In a little while the room became dead quiet and a load fell on my side. "Hai ah" I shouted and found this giant, bald-head sleeping comfortably on my side smelling of vodka and on hearing me shout punched me affectionately!

The train journey ended with Gita's glasses broken after wrestling to avoid a hug.

On arriving, one of the toothbrush types thought of making up with an Asiatic type by asking for my Mao Tse Tung badge, which I immediately gave him, fearing being vodka sprinkled. With the greatest passion he threw his arms around me and in the process of his trying to launch a toothbrush kiss and me trying to avoid it, a "crack" was heard leaving my spectacles a little damaged which resulted in the blindness of my right eye... Well, Bettuska, would you every again travel by plane? I would never. Life would be much uninteresting in contrast in such 12 hours – wouldn't it?!!

Bannerji's racialization of her journey multiplied and refracted through her telling: to be a "Bengali type" sent up ethnic codes of regionalized India. These regional types are colonial, since they were constructed and mobilized in the divide-and-conquer techniques honed by the British, as well as national, since they continued to have characteristic typecasting within India after independence. The "Asiatic type" she references carries a racism that crosses the globe and does not rely on overt colonialism for its violence. "European civilization," while intrinsic to the colonial rationalization of manifest destiny, in Bannerji's story is synonymous with alcoholic sexual harassment endemic to colonizing countries. The cacophony of languages with exclamations in French and Hindi, embedded in German, Polish, and English, adds yet another layer of humor through discomfort. Her final riposte, of always traveling by train, never plane, embeds a class analysis in her tale. The bourgeois manners of plane travel would have shut down the possibility of mayhem altogether. The humor of Bannerji's storytelling to Millard relied upon a shared critique of colonialism and male supremacism, without a doubt. But her humorous indirection also relied on a deeper level of intimacy; one of shared sensibility and knowledge that the humor in its anti-imperialist complexity would be understood.

Hands Off Korea campaign, 1950-1953

With her vision blurred in her right eye and a perpetual wink to gain some vision in her left eye, the Congress for Peace began. The international peace movement against the bombing of Korea by US and NATO forces was the central topic. Gita described her role as one "of a more colonial order" through the parochial but deeply felt solidarity of WIDF's Polish delegates:

In the meantime, all the Polish women present at the Congress wanted me to be a Korean. This led to many tears and embraces, very touching, but it left me a bit shy on account of taking all the courageous fight of the Koreans on me.

This form of parochial solidarity was not Gita's first experience with it. A year earlier Gita added a personal note to Betty that she attached to a WIDF report she wrote from Budapest, Hungary.

You may call me an imposter or whatever you like but the fact is that the Hungarians insist on my being a Korean and I like it or not I am a Korean in Budapest. But thanks to the People's government I have not yet encountered the inevitable questions in regard to jungles – snakes and tigers. It is wonderful to see how much they are propagating for Korea. Everywhere, in streets, in colleges, in cinemas one would find “HANDS OFF KOREA” posters. I wish Pak Den Ai [Pak Chong-ae] and the other Korean comrades could see all of this. (September 6, 1950)

Betty wrote to her mother about meeting Pak Chong-ae, a committed anti-colonial leader in North Korea who was the chair of the Democratic Women's Union of Korea and served on the WIDF Executive Council since 1948. “I have a Korean friend, Pak Den Ai, when I first met her in Budapest we could only smile and shake hands and talk sign language – by the time we met in Peking I had learned a few words of Russian and she of English – now in Helsinki we know a little more and we're old friends.”⁴⁵ They first met in Budapest at WIDF's second international congress, then renewed their friendship on the train from Moscow on their way to the Asian Women's Conference in Beijing the following year.

By 1951, these interpersonal linkages proved pivotal in the campaign to oppose the NATO and American military campaign against Korea. At the invitation of Pak Chong-ae and the Korean Women's Democratic Union in January 1951 to witness the carpet bombing and ground troop assault, a WIDF fact-finding delegation of twenty-one women from eighteen countries traveled to North Korea in May, 1951. They filmed what they saw and the women they met. Their report, *We Accuse!* was issued in five languages, English, French, Russian, Chinese and Korean. As the campaign rippled outward, it was translated into twenty languages.⁴⁶ *We Accuse* galvanized women's organizations around the world to oppose the US military occupation of Korea.

In Beijing, at the Asian Women's Conference in December, 1949, Pak Chong-ae described South Korea as a site of occupation with its American-backed strongman, Syngman Rhee. She explained the imperial significance of Korea for US domination of the Asian region beyond Japan. Korea's importance intensified after the Communist Party of China defeated the Guomindang in China's civil war. Her report described the US occupation by proxy:

Our partisan units (in South Korea), fully supported by the people gave won brilliant victories in battle. That is not all. The inner organization of Syngman Rhee's puppet army has begun to disintegrate. Opposing the traitorous policy of SYNGMANN RHEE (sic), soldiers have courageously revolted, and joined the people, fighting with the guerillas.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Betty Millard, letter to her mother (copy), April 2, 1950, Millard collection, SSC.

⁴⁶ “We Accuse! Report of the Commission of the Women's International Democratic Federation in Korea, May 16 to 27, 1951. (Berlin: WIDF, 1951).

⁴⁷ Pak Chong-ae, “With the total support of the peoples... We are fighting to unify our entire land under the People's Republic of Korea,” *Information Bulletin* Special Issue (April 1950):37,47.

North Korea and South Korea became separate states in 1948. Border skirmishes began with the formation of border along the 38th parallel north. Women and men joined the self-defense units in North Korea that fought off cross-border skirmishes, as well as looting and arson of food supplies.⁴⁸ Suzy Kim described the frustration of people living along the border. “One peasant woman in her late forties complained that the guard units had no countermeasure despite the kidnapping, claiming she would join them ‘if they would be willing to go kill ‘em.’”⁴⁹ WIDF’s multiple international conferences, the meetings that delegates held with local clubs after they returned home, and the publication of WIDF’s conference reports allowed internationalist women to frame their knowledge of the world from the perspective of leftist women’s struggles. Korea as a theater of war was not a conflict of Soviet aggression, nor of North Korean intractability as US media portrayed it. Pak Chong-ae’s analysis provided a very different understanding from a North Korean communist feminist. The war began with imperialist occupation (by the United States) of Korea by a proxy government (led by Syngman Rhee) at the very moment that the Japanese occupation of Korea ended. In Pak Chong-ae’s formulation, North Koreans, and some South Koreans fought an anti-imperialist war that sought to end the neocolonial occupation of the region by the United States.

We Accuse, WIDF’s report, detailed with devastating specificity how American and UN forces tortured eleven year-old girls, buried the people of entire villages alive, and raped women until they died.⁵⁰ They submitted their report, with its graphic and well-documented testimony of chemical and biological warfare, to the United Nations. As a result of their opposition to the Korean War, they lost their consultative status to the UN, a status not returned until 1967.⁵¹ The women who visited war sites, spoke to women and wrote the report lost their jobs, faced other retribution such as imprisonment, but no one recanted the truth of their findings. *We Accuse* fueled the global peace campaign to rally against the war crimes committed in Korea in contravention of the Hague and Geneva conventions.

“Hands Off Korea!” read the posters on the streets of Hungary and Poland. “Germany No Second Korea!” was one slogan in East Germany. Another poster was more visceral: “Vermin Infestation. Korea is a warning! Fight for peace against the criminals of humanity.”⁵² Giant fleas with the faces of Truman, Churchill and Adenauer crawled toward the poster’s viewer. The name of the campaign in the Soviet Union was “Struggle for Peace!” Millions of signatures were collected on petitions against the Korean War around the world. American women launched a letter writing campaign to President Truman demanding the release of WIDF’s report to the American public.⁵³

⁴⁸ Kim, 2013.

⁴⁹ Kim, 2013, 243.

⁵⁰ “We Accuse! Report of the Commission of the Women’s International Democratic Federation in Korea, May 16 to 27, 1951. (Berlin: WIDF, 1951).

⁵¹ Taewoo Kim, “Frustrated Peace: Investigatory Activities by the Commission of the Women’s International Democratic Federation (WIDF) in North Korea During the Korean War.” *Singkyun Journal of East Asian Studies*. 20:1 (April 2020): 84.

⁵² Hong, Young-Sun. *Cold War Germany, the Third World, and the Global Humanitarian Regime*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 54.

⁵³ Many of the members of CAW reconfigured as part of American Women for Peace to maintain their activism during the McCarthy period. Their newsletter, *The Peacemaker*, dedicated one issue to the WIDF contingent that toured Korea and reported on the carnage. In “Negro G.I.s Question Korea,” demanded an end to racist wars in Asia and Africa. “We think that we Negroes, who are asked to fight wars in Asia and Europe but who are not

International Women's Day became the touchpoint for anti-imperialism in the women's movement beginning in the late 1940s in the US. By contrast, Gita's organization revived International Women's Day within India even earlier, in 1943. Claudia Jones, the chair of the CPUSA Women's Commission, and close comrade of Betty Millard wrote numerous articles against the bombardment of Korea in her column "Half the World" in the *Daily Worker*. The US government arrested her three times between 1950 and 1951; under the Smith Act (the Alien Registration Act) and the McCarran Act, that required communist organizations to register with the US Attorney General.⁵⁴ Her speech "International Women's Day and the Struggle for Peace" was the reason for her first arrest.⁵⁵ In 1953, Claudia Jones contested her imprisonment to the US Court:

Will you measure, for example, as worthy of one year's sentence, my passionate adherence to the idea of fighting for full unequivocal equality for my people, the Negro people, which as a Communist I believe can only be achieved allied to the cause of the working class? A year for another vital Communist belief that the bestial Korean war is an unjust war? Or my belief that peaceful coexistence can be achieved and peace won if struggled for?⁵⁶

Internationalism during this period was a praxis that had two terrains, one imperialist and the other under imperial domination. Both espoused shared ideals and picked a fight. This praxis asked every activist to choose a side: in favor of imperialist occupation and war, or against.

Budge Budge, South 24 Parganas, 1951

Gita returned to a vastly different nation in 1951. The communist party was no longer underground. Women energized by the struggles in the 1940s gained some victories in the 1950s. When they fought alongside peasant men during the much-celebrated Tebhaga movement, they began with a demand for more grain from their harvest. They then pursued their rights to the land they sowed.⁵⁷ Peasant women activists joined the communist party and peasant organizations linked to the communists. They made manifest demands that communists before them may have heard, but let wait for another day. Peasant women demanded an end to the interpersonal violence that structured their pinched horizons. Gargi Chakravartty described the direct criticisms of the CPI lodged by members of MARS in 1952:

free at home should have our say before it is too late. If enough of us can get together, we believe we will get our peace and freedom too." The editorial stated: "We who are aware of the effects of these things, and who love our country look with horror on the death and misery which has resulted from our war policy. We cry out." "Editorial: U.S. Bankrupt Policy," *The Peacemaker*, 2:8(September 1951) in Elizabeth Millard papers, SSC collection, Smith College, Northampton, MA.

⁵⁴ Denise Lynn, "Claudia Jones Against the Korean War," *Black Perspectives*, September 23, 2019. <https://www.aaihs.org/claudia-jones-against-the-korean-war/>, last accessed June 13, 2020.

⁵⁵ Claudia Jones, "International Women's Day and the Struggle for Peace," *Political Affairs*, 29:3(1950): 32-45.

⁵⁶ Claudia Jones, "Speech to the Court, February, 1953," *Thirteen Communists Speak in Court*. (New York: New Century Publications, 1953): 121.

⁵⁷ Bratati Hore, "Role Played by the Peasant Women in the Tebhaga Movement: Problem of Political Theorization," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*. 50(1989): 547-553.

At a meeting, sometime in November 1952, Communist women discussed threadbare, the politburo's document on "Task on the Women's Front." While appreciating the call for a separate broad-based, multi-class organization of women for equal rights, they disagreed with the Party for not addressing the issue of the "double yoke of oppression." They expressed their resentment that the Party document had failed to link the social with the economic demands of women. They were critical about the Party's formulations regarding working-class women as they did not address gender inequality.⁵⁸

As Chakravartty describes, organized peasant women added another dimension of patriarchal violence into the frontlines of communist struggles. Violence was not entirely at the hand of the state, they said, but also embedded itself in the patriarchal relations that gave husbands and parents-in-law control over the movement and actions of women. Additionally, peasant women successfully argued they should have the right to their own earnings unconditionally. Land to the those who worked on it. Fruits of labor to the worker. If the peasant family was the only unit to measure justice; peasant women working every day of their lives would see little of it. Women's rights within these families, they argued, required enumeration, attention and organization woven into communist mores. These lessons came from struggles that had heavy costs.

Yet Gita also returned to a nation where little had changed since 1948. Even with communists living above ground, they faced unending harassment from the police. Communist women fighting for basic justice issues for the most vulnerable people in their localities faced more subtle, but just as wrenching pressures. The social boycott was one popular velvet hammer wielded against women activists, for daring to move more freely in and out of homes, for demanding an audience at the local police stations, for listening to women's stories, and for addressing groups in public places. The old trope of honor as a cudgel used against women placed suspicion on their service. These whisper campaigns jeopardized these women's ability to buy food from local merchants, or kerosene for their stoves, or any of the other small necessities of life. Gossip and personal slander that impugned their morality were a nuisance. Social boycotts, however, could mean expulsion from a neighborhood and disruption of movement building.

Gita moved to the rural heartland of militant jute mill workers, an area called Budge Budge in South 24 Parganas and plunged into peasant and workers' struggles through organizing rural women. Upper caste, college educated organizers like Gita learned the lives of the rural poor, living alongside the rural poor. Their choices were not temporary ones. They did not spend a little time in one place before moving to another. Brahmin caste status was largely lost in the process, since the work and contact with the rural poor of diverse caste and religious backgrounds had cultural consequences. Her comrade Pratibha Ganguly had been a beloved communist organizer in Budge Budge, trudging daily through the marshy ground of rural localities even during heavy monsoon rains to talk with peasant women. Between 1947 and

⁵⁸ Gargi Chakravartty, "Emergence of Mahila Atma Raksha Samiti in the Forties – Calcutta Chapter," in *The Story Decades: Calcutta*. Edited by Tanika Sarkar and Sekhar Bendyopadhyay (New Delhi: Social Science Press, 2015): 202.

1951, eleven thousand peasants and activists had been arrested in 24 South Parganas alone.⁵⁹ When Ganguly was killed by the police in the women's march for peace and rights in 1949, she left tracks and networks that Bannerji followed.

Every day of her work in Budge Budge held long-standing difficulties. Health – of simple dysentery and endemic malaria – were life-threatening when food and basic medicines, even topical antibiotics were so scarce. In her letters to Betty Millard, she described the need for quinine, or thanked Betty for the latest supplies sent. She organized along the grain of communist tradition: provide relief for daily needs and build the means for women to determine their own demands. With one other woman from South 24 Parganas, Bannerji opened a school in Ganguly's name for women and girls. At first the school failed, since both the Muslim and Hindu women in the area said they were too busy to attend. They did not think that the school met their needs. Even after scouring the region, only two women joined the school. In response, they developed specialized outreach methods for women of different ages: literacy for girls and young women, skilled work like midwifery, sewing and handicrafts for women, and organizing training for older women whose children had grown.

By 1953, the school had gained the enthusiasm of women, young and old, who enrolled their daughters. Older women used their organizing skills to open new MARS chapters across the region. Middle-aged women opened women's work cooperatives, and schools. Young women created groups for teen girls (*Kishore babinis*). The membership of MARS burgeoned in West Bengal, through its proliferation of schools, job-training sites, and self-help initiatives. They still fought for women's right to live free from violence. They still confronted the state for its neglect. But they also built the strength of women to live independently in the process. Bannerji's school in Budge Budge became a model for radical women's education and proliferated across West Bengal.

Internationalism

The train journey from Berlin to Warsaw returned in Gita's letters, this time through the lens of nostalgia. In her first letter to Betty after landing in Kolkata, she announced her sudden marriage to a well-known revolutionary poet and communist Subhas Mukhyopadhyay. "I am so anxious to know your reactions on this. Subhas (my husband) felt a bit jealous of you when I told him how all of you kissed me on all occasions and even men with moustaches embraced me."⁶⁰ The love within the movement, and its showering of affection, wanted and undesired, stayed uppermost in Gita's memories of this time.

She also returned to what she calls the glamour of WIDF. Gita's passport was seized by the government as soon as she returned – as was Betty's in the US. In 1953 she wrote to Betty during WIDF's Third International Women's Congress held in Copenhagen, Denmark. Neither could attend, but each of their national delegations at the massive women's conference were large and enthusiastic:

⁵⁹ Statistics are from the CPI newspaper *Swadhinata Patrika* cited in Satpathi "Mobilizing Women: The experience of the Left in West Bengal, 1947-61," PhD. Dissertation, Calcutta University, 2013, 202.

⁶⁰Gita Bannerji, letter to Betty Millard, October 24, 1951, Millard collection, SSC.

I feel a pang near my heart remembering the good old days. Remember being photographed in Berlin every two minutes? Imagine the Congress in Denmark. Click, click – click, click – the cameras go. I am here in this remote jungle in a hut beside a ditch. You are somewhere in Latin America may be.⁶¹

Internationalism is a lofty invocation. Unlike imperialism, with the class-targeted hardships of scarcity, it's harder to see the increments of international solidarity: of relationships, affection, laughter and shared ideals. As Rachel Leow and Su Lin Lewis emphasize in their scholarship about activism in Asia during the early and mid 1950s, even in avowedly leftist spaces, the visions for socialism were wide-ranging, fluid and under construction by Asian activists across the region.⁶² It's also difficult to imagine how to put solidarity with women across the globe into practice. In West Bengal, in 1953, leftist women distributed petitions for peace across the state and collected thousands of signatures. A symbolic gesture against the Korean War, against ongoing colonial occupation and counterinsurgency. But each signature by a rural woman had education behind it: discussions about the struggles for anti-imperialist peace and the fights waged by women against imperialism around the world. Each signature was also a celebration of the fight for literacy won by that woman. Each signature provided a material record of her place in this wider collectivity that dared to imagine what the world could be.

⁶¹ Gita Bannerji, letter to Betty Millard, June 6, 1953, Millard collection, SSC.

⁶² Su Lin Lewis, "Asian Socialism and the Forgotten Architects of Post-Colonial Freedom, 1952-1956" and Rachel Leow, "A Missing Peace: The Asia-Pacific Peace Conference in Beijing, 1952 and the Emotional Making of Third World Internationalism" in this volume.