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Contemporary South Asia

### **Buddha and Nilima: the city after communism**

The political culture of Kolkata has been characterized by its fiercely partisan nature. The scope for political engagement and activism has been determined by parties, which have exerted a strong, sometimes suffocating influence over the social life of the city's neighbourhoods or *para*. The Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPI(M) was able to build up a strong party apparatus during the thirty-four years in which it was the leading coalition partner of the state's Left Front coalition government (1977-2011).<sup>1</sup> However, the Trinamool Congress (TMC) has wasted little time in attacking the CPI(M)'s deep-rooted dominance and consolidating its own party structures which have reshaped politics from the grassroots up since defeating the Left in the 2011 state election. The immediate post-Left period has therefore seen intensified violence and polarisation along party lines, in which the political aspirations of those activists and voters associated with the communist government remain in large part frustrated. Those who grew up with the CPI(M) in power, imbibing its ideological and cultural values, now live in the shadow of its rule.

While economic liberalisation in 1991 ended the project of Nehruvian socialism in India, the continued Left rule in West Bengal marked a different and somewhat paradoxical trajectory of economic, political, and social transition. In its 34-year rule, the Left Front initially prioritized agrarian society, implementing land reforms and consolidating agrarian support (Kohli 2012). West Bengal—with increased labour activism—lost its industrial edge, facing a subsequent downturn in the overall economy, as well as chronic un- and under-employment in the city (see Corbridge and Harriss 2000; Fernandes 1997; Roy 2002). The fault lines that emerged in the Left Front's evolving 'government as practice' (Bhattacharyya 2016) included some economic policies that arguably undermined the ideological discourses which the party itself had carefully cultivated. Ironically, the CPI(M)'s attempts to liberalise, particularly through land acquisition for Special Economic Zones, created ample space for the Trinamool Congress to launch a counter-hegemonic protest

movement around land rights and state brutality that garnered support amongst the Left's former support bases: small landholders in the villages and the urban *bhadralok* intelligentsia (see Bo Nielsen 2009; Majumdar 2018; Patnaik 2007). This socio-economic context has come to affect the ways in which the general voting populace understand the promises of left-wing politics, whilst opening up new spaces of political thought beyond the nexus of parties and political society.

The growth of the communist movement was underpinned by a strong social dimension, in which whole villages, neighbourhoods, and families were marked by their allegiance to the party. The communist and socialist parties built up a strong urban base by providing political representation for Hindu refugees from East Pakistan, who had been demanding adequate rehabilitation measures since the early 1950s (Chakrabarti 1991). Sudipta Kaviraj reflected on his own upbringing amongst the city's communist *bhadralok* in the late twentieth century: 'I was a communist by caste – that is, born into a communist family, and therefore expected by communists and others alike to act in a perfectly casteist fashion – to have the same occupation as my fathers, and the same opinions.' (2014: 380) This social dimension to Bengal's communist culture created several generations of committed activists and supporters and thus established a powerful hegemony for left-wing ideas, even as this inheritance became stifling over time.

The collapse of the Left Front in 2011 can be seen as a kind of post-socialist transition in West Bengal (see Chari and Verdery 2009; Rogers 2010). The analytical framework of post-socialism has been developed largely with regards to those Eastern European and Central Asian countries which were born out of the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991. There are some crucial differences here: The Left Front was a state-level government elected in a multi-party democracy, and was never able to institute a planned economy in West Bengal. Nonetheless, as in other post-socialist contexts, young people raised in the political culture of the Left Front "lost futures for which they had been preparing themselves" (Ghodsee 2011, 13). These committed activists have found it difficult to abandon a party which not only gave expression to their political values but also inculcated them in forms of sociality rooted in the social life of the neighbourhood and the

family, but they must fit into a new social and political order, while struggling to retain their communist ethos. Some people have stuck to “doing party” (*party kora*) for better or worse; whilst former comrades may have shifted towards the new power bases of the TMC or BJP, or even away from politics, such activists remain ideologically committed to communism even at the party’s nadir. However, the situation has also contributed to a broader disillusionment with cadre-driven, ideologically inflected politics, and a renewed tendency within the activist culture of the urban middle classes towards civil society and technocratic solutions to problems of inequity.

The following pair of ethnographic “characters” were from lower middle-class communist families; their formative years and political horizons shaped by the Left Front regime. Buddhadeb was born in Bangladesh, coming to Kolkata in his childhood, and was now a member of the CPI(M) based in the former “red bastion” of Jadavpur. Two images of the typical Kolkata communist prevail in popular discourse: the *babu*, an austere, cultured ideologue in spotless white *panjabi-dhuti*, often drinking cups of tea in the state party office on Alimuddin Street (Dasgupta 2014); and the *dada*, a grassroots strongman who can marshal the votes on election day and secure access to key resources (Banerjee 2010). Buddha was wholly neither of these types; if anything, he worked to reconcile the pragmatism of being a mid-level “party man” engaged in organizational work with *bhadralok* cultural aspirations. He remains a dedicated local committee leader of the CPI(M) despite the dangers involved in his work, hoping that the party one day returns to power, whilst maintaining other forms of cultural and linguistic activism tied to his upbringing in Bangladesh: notably around secularism and the Bengali language struggle.

Meanwhile, Nilima is a young woman from a Leftist family employed by a microfinance institution (MFI). Her upbringing in communist party politics now conflicts with a thoroughly neoliberal workplace, and she must navigate the intersectional identities of class and gender. The Left has produced a complicated set of gender politics; or as Tanika Sarkar (1991) has argued, while offering liberatory politics to tribal and peasant women, the Left has remained ambivalent about middle-class women. Thus, “reaching out for self-fulfilment or self-expression is ruled out

[for middle-class women], perhaps because it is too close to the standard Indian Left translation of ‘bourgeois individualism’ as self-centeredness or selfishness” (Sarkar 1991, 217). Shaped by Kolkata’s unique “*bhadralok* patriarchy” (Roy and Qayum 2009), educated lower-middle class women such as Nilima struggle to conform to both the radical promise of the Left Front, and oppressive gender norms. Nilima’s political values were shaped in many ways by her upbringing in a communist family, but also take a direction of their own: she does not follow her father into politics, despite the opportunity to do so. Neither Buddha nor Nilima are totally bound to their inherited political influences, nor are they able to abandon the commitments that have been fostered through their association with Leftist society since childhood.

These two political subjects thus offer a window onto the city after communism. Both Buddha and Nilima’s lives remain shaped by communist rule: by nostalgia for an imperfect past, and frustration with an unravelling future. While Buddha remains committed to the party, Nilima is less sure about its role and indeed future, even as she celebrates its ideological premise. Their communist socialization is built upon by a deeply-felt commitment to left-wing values, which become clear through their forms of everyday resistance to norms and the extent to which they could face disapproval or even violence in attempting to live out those subjectivities. However, their commitments exist in the aftermath of the Left Front lead to a sense of suspended or even lost futures. Somewhat ironically, both Buddha and Nilima’s response to the waning powers of the CPM have been depoliticised: while Buddha turns to cultural practices as a space to recoup his sense of loss, Nilima turns to work in the neoliberal world of microfinance, though with limited success. In that sense, their political vocations cannot be totally extricated from the political economy in which they find themselves. The challenges of Kolkata’s post-communist political landscape emerge in what follows through the intimate and everyday dimensions of these biographies.

## Buddha

A large white plaster bust of Rabindranath Tagore stood, proud and out of place, in one corner of Buddha's bedroom in the small two-room house that he shared with his mother in a suburb of South Kolkata. Tagore watched us from this corner as Buddha's mother served us a heavy lunch of fried *tangra* and *rui*<sup>2</sup>, heaps of rice and vegetables, ending with a mug of sour mango – a traditional cooling remedy for the summer heat. That sweltering lunchtime in 2015 was my first encounter with Buddhadeb Ghosh, the forty-year-old secretary of the CPI(M) local committee in Ganguly Bagan.<sup>3</sup> He picked me up from the main road on his motorbike and took me to meet the local comrades, who were sat around in the party office smoking and dissecting a morning of door-to-door campaigning in the lead-up to a municipal election, before we went to his house for lunch. I asked him about the conspicuous bearded bust in the corner. He told me that he had tried to install the Tagore image in a children's park in 2011, just before the party dramatically fell from power. The bust silently testified to the sudden end of thirty-four years of unbroken rule. "Tagore is sleeping here now," he told me with a smile.

Buddha was born into a political family in the district town of Barisal in Bangladesh in 1975. His *dadu* (great-uncle) Debendranath Ghosh had been an anticolonial revolutionary in Anushilan Samiti, imprisoned for a total of twenty-seven years in British colonial jails, a socialist MP for the Hindu constituency of Barisal in the 1950s, and mentored young men who later became leaders in the Left Front government in West Bengal. Buddha used to attend his *dadu's* political rallies and took part in extracurricular cultural organisations that aimed to foster left-wing values and scientific consciousness through activities such as artistic competitions and *ex tempore* debates. He did not realise at the time that these were fronts for the Communist Party of Bangladesh: "They didn't want to politicise this type of children's organisation. They said it is only to promote patriotism, only to promote rationalism, only to promote anti-communalism. To respect *Muktijuddho* [the Bangladesh Liberation War.] The Communist Party didn't directly intervene." This model of cultural fronts with "no party flag" would later inform Buddha's own cultural

activism. Buddha's mother decided to take her youngest son and his sister across the border in the early 1990s, in search of a life free from anti-Hindu communal violence. They stayed in a religious ashram and relatives' houses before eventually acquiring the plot of land in a neighbourhood south of Jadavpur – an area densely populated with Hindu refugees from East Bengal (now Bangladesh) and their descendants. Many of the refugees had come in the 1950s, reluctantly turning their back on East Bengal, whereas Buddha continued to cultivate an active relationship with political activists on the other side of the border, visiting his brothers in Bangladesh at least once a year.

Buddha therefore had a sense of political vocation from early in life that was further fostered in the political environment of Kolkata in the Left Front period. He studied Bengali literature at Calcutta University and was a secretary of the Students Federation of India, the CPI(M)'s student wing, participating in a movement to erect a memorial to the Language Martyrs of Bangladesh which has since become the Left's focal point for commemorations of 21st February - International Mother Language Day. After completing his studies in Bengali Literature, he transferred his party membership to his locality, a part of the city that had long been the Left's stronghold in the city.<sup>4</sup> However, his career as a party man matured within the context of the defeat of the Left Front in 2011. This is how he recalled the historic election:

It was understood by us that our mass influence was decreasing. Nandigram issue, Singur issue, 14 March, and so on.<sup>5</sup> Anti-incumbency factor, because of thirty-four years of ruling West Bengal. But there was a little belief that party may overcome the crisis. We never feel that [the Chief Minister] Buddhadeb Bhattacharya may be defeated in Jadavpur constituency. It was a huge shock for us.

Counting started, our counting agents go inside the counting room. I was in our Ganguly Bagan party office. TV is showing results: CPI(M) *pichhone*, Trinamool *egije*. [CPI(M) is behind, Trinamool ahead.] Morning shows the day. We understand what is

going on. Party instructed me to leave Jadavpur. To go underground. Party instructed many followers. They were crying inside the party office.

I did not eat rice that day.

This frank assessment of the defeat evokes the fear that came with the end of decades of unquestionable dominance. Buddha told me about the comrades who were attacked by Trinamool cadre and had to go to hospital. He described how a gang came to his house looking for him, but his mother said that he had not been home in a week. He was hiding in a nearby safe house, receiving calls from across the local party network asking for help. Buddha was instructed by a more senior party leader to go into hiding but not to leave his locality, for he may never be able to return. He became local secretary a year or two after the defeat.

The political landscape of the city after the Left Front was marked by a new kind of fear amongst the communists, not only the fear of physical attacks and even fatalities but an existential anxiety around the future of Bengali communism. Buddha's experiences told of the violence of the churning period of partisan conflict when one very powerful electoral machine, the CPI(M), ceded much of its control over neighbourhood territory and social life to the TMC. Both he and his mother were assaulted on their doorstep in the Lok Sabha elections of 2014, and Buddha was staying in a safe house at nights when I first met him during the 2015 municipal elections. One morning, I had arranged to follow the rally of the CPI(M) councillor candidate for the ward which coincided with Buddha's local committee. I arrived at the party office ten minutes too late, and another party member took me on bike to catch up with the rally. However, on the way we were stopped in the street and told to turn towards the police station. The rally had been pelted with stones and brickbats, and two comrades including the candidate had been sent to hospital. The bike spun around, and we were on our way to meet the comrades at Patuli police station. Buddha led the delegation to submit a First Information Report (FIR), whilst local women comrades sat in the middle of the road, blocking traffic until the police had accepted the FIR. Senior party

leaders arrived on the scene with journalists, and after accepting the FIR, the police escorted the crowd in an angry procession back to the party office. These kinds of incidents brought out Buddha the consummate party man, able to shout slogans until his voice was hoarse.

Whilst partisan tensions were palpable throughout the year, violence peaked at election times and the rest of the year was relatively peaceful. Buddha would invariably stop at the Jadavpur Coffee House on the way between his salaried job at the nearby campus and his evening's duties at the party office a short motorbike ride to the south. The Coffee House was a hub of leftist chatter up a narrow staircase near the Lenin statue in Jadavpur's bustling market area and transport hub. Buddha and I would meet there regularly, and we often ended up in a group discussion (*adda*) with students, writers, filmmakers and party men. Buddha would usually arrive late, put down his motorcycle helmet and hang his *jhola* (fabric book bag) from a chair. The turbaned waiters would serve us the small black coffees with glasses of cloudy water, which we gulped down. Buddha then doled out the coffees into even smaller portions in the empty water glasses. By splitting the coffees this way, we were able to go several rounds before stepping out into the bustling Jadavpur night, adequately caffeinated to navigate the commuter crowds. Buddha would sometimes ask me a profound question – something like, “what is your impression of the CPI(M)-Congress alliance?” He then proceeded to narrow his eyes as I tried to answer, until we all realized that he was drifting off to sleep. I later learnt that he suffered from sleep apnea, but I never quite shook the impression that he was exhausted from the hours that he gave to the party. That said, there was some truth in my initial impression. “You know what his issue [*roga*] is?” one of his closest friends in the party once asked me. “He thinks that by helping everyone, he will become great.” This meant that he was answering his mobile phone at all hours of the night, managing the local party work.

Cultural activism has always been an important part of the Bengali communist movement strategy towards social transformation, even if such work has often been side-lined by the political (and, more specifically, electoral) goals of the party itself. Whilst grassroots organizing took up most of Buddha's time, he was more concerned that I attend his cultural programmes. In 2016, he



organized a performance by Udichi Shilpi Goshti, a secularist cultural organization from Bangladesh in which his siblings were involved, on a stage along the main road at Ganguly Bagan's bazar area.

I came to know that they were coming to West Bengal for a programme, in another area, and I contacted them to perform in our area, our locality, because I believe politics is not just *inquilab zindabad*... you have a vast cultural sense, you have a national mind, you have to protest against religious fanaticism, and so on.

The Hindi slogan *inquilab zindabad*, which translates as “long live the revolution,” evokes the sound and fury of rallies, strikes and protests. By contrast, Udichi's performance was a “no flag” event labelled as cultural protest (*sangskritik protibad*) against religious fundamentalism. The open-air stage along with rows of red plastic chairs claimed a whole lane from the north-south flows of traffic. People craned their necks out of passing buses and autos to catch a glimpse of the drama on the stage. Udichi re-enacted a narrative of national emancipation that went from anticolonial revolutionaries such as Surya Sen through inter-communal riots and culminating in Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Bangladeshi's independence. This narrative contrasted religious conflict with secular nationalism, and Baul performers stood for Bengal's tradition of inter-communal harmony. At the end of the event, the Udichi performers presented Buddha with a framed embroidered scene (*nokshakata*) of a Bengali village. When he was asked to stand for a photo with the performers, he held the frame up so that it covered his face, to everyone's protests. This was a typical act of self-effacement for a man who tirelessly organized events and tried to bring people together, but generally shunned the limelight.

Whilst many of my interlocutors from East Bengali refugee families seemed to have little interest in the affairs of Bangladesh, the partition border was not closed for Buddha in the way that it had been so for the earlier generations of refugees. He brought the cultural politics of

Bangladesh into the heart of the erstwhile refugee colonies, and thus articulated an international, secularist and anti-communal outlook that was in keeping with the Left's ideological discourses. Buddha would have been part of a Hindu minority in Bangladesh, and therefore felt the importance of political secularism in ways distinct from his comrades who had grown up in Hindu-majority India. He said, "Many people in Kolkata think that Bangladesh is where Muslim fundamentalists live. But that is not true..." Underscoring the shared experiences of the two nation-states, he said, "So I wanted to represent this, you see they are Muslim but they oppose Muslim fundamentalism. You may be Hindu but you have to oppose the BJP, the RSS." This message tackled the steady rise of votes for the BJP in West Bengal elections, whilst evoking a much broader idea of society as being founded on secular principles of inclusion and pluralism that was understood by many as typically Bengali. This also implicitly suggested that the Left parties were the party which represented these cultural values (and indeed the Left has been seen as a party of Bengalis within the broader Indian political context). Buddha was unable to attend the annual conference of the cultural organization because of upcoming elections, which greatly troubled him: "Still today, I have a dilemma *je*, what will be my main motto? To become a cultural organiser or to become a political organiser? Still the dilemma is going on."

Buddha's most recent cultural project has been organizing Mongol Shobhajatra, a celebratory procession for Bengali New Year (*Pobela Boishakh*), which normally falls on 14<sup>th</sup> April.<sup>6</sup> Mongol Shobhajatra has been performed in Dhaka and other major cities of Bangladesh every year since the 1990s, and was added to the UNESCO list of intangible heritage in 2016.<sup>7</sup> Buddha's brothers have been involved in organizing this festival in Barisal, and from 2017 Buddha himself helped to establish the festival on his side of the border. He was instrumental in the first Mongol Shobhajatra in Jadavpur in 2017. The catalyst for organizing this event were processions for Ram Navami that started taking place in the state at around the same time, in which men and children paraded brandishing swords. The processions for Ram Navami were sponsored by the Trinamool Congress and the BJP, and sometimes clashed violently. The Mongol Shobhajatra, a secular

alternative to these martial displays, was repeated in 2018 with the addition of another procession in Baharampur – the capital of Muslim-majority Murshidabad district – and the processions continued to proliferate in 2019. The aim of the organizing committee was to have a procession in every district of West Bengal within five years.

The Mongol Shobhajatra organizing committee brought together party members, supporters, and others, but it had no official links to the CPI(M). Therefore, the procession could propagate a secular agenda without becoming either subordinated to the party's culture or falling prey to a lingering sense of mistrust against the communists. The organizers gathered for weeks in advance in a park to construct and paint elephant masks, horse costumes, and a huge owl which would be paraded down the main road. They also held public organizing meetings in an auditorium named the *Lalon Chaitanya Manch*, named for two anti-caste, anti-communal devotional figures from Bengali religious traditions: Lalon Fakir and Sri Chaitanya. The parade itself was accompanied by performers such as men on stilts, tribal dancers, Baul performers and actors dressed up as Rabindranath Tagore. Buddha told me: "What is the main theme, main philosophy behind this Mongol Shobhajatra? There are two themes. One is harmony, *sompriti*. And another is our *bangali osamprodayik chetona*, secular Bengali consciousness." Mongol Shobhajatra provided a non-religious, non-partisan public platform which allowed Hindus and Muslims to celebrate "Bengali-ness" at a moment when they felt their secular cultural identity under threat. Similarly, party men expressed concerns around young people losing their proficiency in Bengali language, and this was particularly acute for Buddha, who felt the inheritance of the Bangladeshi language struggle. Moreover, Mongol Shobhajatra was an autonomous space from party politics, even as it embodied a performance of secular, progressive, left-wing cultural values.

It is perhaps no accident that the kind of cultural politics which Buddha avidly supports are flourishing after the end of the Left Front. The bust of Rabindranath Tagore still watches from the corner of Buddha's room. Buddha had commissioned two images of the poet, standing for secular, progressive *bhadralok* culture, to be installed on vested land in the final years of the Left

Front. This, he claimed, was to demarcate the land for a children's park and thus prevent real estate promoters from taking the land for apartments. One of these busts was installed in 2011, and has since been walled in to allow construction work to take place on the plot. However, the second bust was left "sleeping" in Buddha's small house after the electoral defeat. Tagore, as a statue left in the corner of a room, embodied the ways in which party politics – regardless of the party – consumed any sense of political vocation. Tagore was thus a reminder of defeat, but the idea that he may "awaken" suggested a glimmer of hope for the future.

Nonetheless, the strain of reconciling his communist values with the demands of a tense partisan landscape was written on his face. Buddha believed that politics involved more than shouting *inquilab zindabad*, but his political career had been channelled through the structures, networks and culture of the party, at whatever cost to his own well-being. Buddha was committed to expressing his political values through the party, which sometimes forced him to focus on securing votes at great personal risk. However, the need to persuade voters to support the Left once more after their humiliating defeat in 2011 gave a new value to the kind of ideological and cultural work which was Buddha's driving political vocation.

The Left's remaining bastions turned into battlegrounds after 2011, and the party cadre in the ensuing years seemed despondent and hopeless. However, CPI(M) candidate Sujjan Chakraborty was elected as the MLA of Jadavpur in 2016, in a campaign managed in part by Buddha and the other comrades at the Ganguly Bagan office. This coup, along with a perception of dissatisfaction with the TMC and BJP amongst the public and an adjustment to their role as a party of opposition, led to an upswing in the cadre's mood in the following years. That said, the sense of existential threat had not yet subsided. In our most recent meeting in December 2018, Buddha told me: "I don't know, if you come after one year, or after two years... I don't know if I will be alive or not. Who knows. But I am not anxious about that."

## Nilima

In the northwest of Kolkata, the city meets the village, and the old meets the new. Between the Salt Lake Township and the city's airport is a bustling stretch of urban space. The densely packed older parts of town lie one side of the arterial VIP Road—including the colonial ruins of Robert Clive's house—while on the other side, the city is slowly pushing into what was once farmlands. Rising alongside *bustees* are towering new property developments, as city's poor and middle class vie for space in the city. Nestled in this bustling part of the city is the branch office of a microfinance institution (MFI) that I call DENA.<sup>1</sup>

It was my first morning to visit the branch office, with the rather cursory directions from the head office. Market vendors, mostly selling vegetables, had started to settle down along the two sides of the road. Eventually—after some confusion—I came to the unmarked building. From the outside, it looked like a regular residential home. Inside, however, in what would have been space for a living room, was a makeshift office. The room was sparsely outfitted with a long table that took up most of the space, and a desk with a computer at one end. The branch manager, on her phone, nodded to me and indicated for me to sit down. A young woman, already seated at the long table, was in the middle of her breakfast of *roti* and *dal*, while flipping through a Bengali magazine. She appeared to be in her early twenties, with her long hair pinned into a neat and substantial bun at the back of her head. Dressed in a colourful *salwar kameez*, she had a small streak of vermillion on the parting of her hair and red and white *shanka pola* (conch shell and coral bangles) adorned her wrists, signifying her status as a married woman. “Have you eaten?” she asked. On hearing that I had, she returned her attentions to the magazine.

This young woman was Nilima. As I would later learn, she was one of the four loan officers who worked in this particular branch office. Working at a branch office meant that she also lived there for six days of the week, sharing a room with the branch manager, the only other woman in

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<sup>1</sup> Between 2009 and 2011, I conducted 14 months of fieldwork in Kolkata on commercial microfinance.

the office, and going home on Saturday afternoons for one night. After the first brief meeting with her, her story cropped up again when talking to Sandeep, the loan officer I was accompanying to group meetings for the day. Sandeep was talking about his reservations about continuing to work at DENA, explaining:

There is someone—a woman—at the office who is married and has a child. But her husband lives somewhere else, and she has to leave her child with her parents to come for work. In our Indian culture, this isn't really acceptable; that a woman has to leave her husband and child to work.

For Sandeep, who was unmarried at the time, work in microfinance could not continue once he had a family. That is, the MFI's stipulation of living in the in the branch office six days a week was not compatible with home life. Further, in Sandeep's moral view, this woman—Nilima—had broken the taboos of wifely and motherly obligations to work outside of the household. Nilima, it seemed, was somewhat unusual in the world of microfinance work.

Over the course of fieldwork, my arrival at the branch office—a little before 7:30AM when the loan officers would set out for the day—almost always coincided with breakfast. Thus, on my following visit, I found Nilima eating rice and mashed potatoes [*aloo makha*], scolding the male loan officers for eating what she deemed were undercooked *parathas*. As I waited for the loan officers to finish their breakfast, I asked Nilima how long she had been at the office. “About a year,” she replied. “It makes me the senior officer here,” she explained. “I've been here even longer than Putul madam [the branch manager]. It's time for me to move on,” she concluded in a tone that suggested frustration. That afternoon, returning to the office after accompanying another loan officer on group meetings, I found Nilima already back and sitting down with an elderly borrower. They were discussing problems the group was having with another borrower, who had not been repaying her loan. “Please speak to her [the defaulting borrower],” Nilima pleaded to the elderly

woman before her. “She listens to you, so please try to resolve the issues. My father died just six days ago, and I’m already back here trying to fix this situation. My promotion is being held back because of this!”

Nilima—like many of the MFI staff—relied on emotional and affective pressures to encourage repayment of loans. Here, she called on the elderly woman not only to recognize and empathize with the pain of a bereaved daughter, but also of a woman whose promotion and professional success was being constrained. Yet for Nilima, the recent loss of her father also marked a loss in her political life. As a stalwart of the CPI(M), her father had instilled in his daughter a commitment to equality and to challenging authority. In my conversations with Nilima, it seemed like she was caught between two worlds: the promises of neoliberal microfinance and those of leftist politics. Throughout my encounters with Nilima, this sense of being stuck, of being held back, was one that she would return to often. Nilima’s sense of being stuck simultaneously reflected the promises and failures of the three decades of Communist rule in West Bengal as well as the neoliberal offerings of the present.

A few weeks later, as the loan officers gathered in the morning, Nilima read the day’s newspaper. Flipping through she commented on violence that had broken out in a suburban college. “My brother went there” she said. “I’ve taken an exam there” said another loan officer. “Something to do with Trinamool [Congress Party]” said Nilima. “Of course,” retorted Putul, rolling her eyes. “You know, people want me to stand [for politics] after my father died” said Nilima, glancing up from the paper. “Don’t even!” exclaimed Putul, alarmed at the possibility of politics entering her workspace. “I’m not interested—I don’t really care for the Party [CPI(M)]” explained Nilima. “Not like my sister. She’s dedicated. But my relatives want me to—my maternal uncles [*mama*] keep asking why I don’t want to stand. My husband wants me to stand too.” Without waiting much for an answer, Nilima continued:

My father was a big party man. When he died, everybody came to the funeral. You know, nobody could tell we were Hindustani [i.e., non-Bengali, from Bihar or Uttar Pradesh] from looking at our house. My mother's Bengali, so everything in the house was Bengali. My father was a really hot-tempered man. When he was a boy, he used to go to the same school as a rich boy, who would come to school every day on a horse. He used to pick on the poor kids too. One day, when he was going by on his horse, picking on the other boys, my father stopped him and beat him up. Having beat up the rich boy, he knew he couldn't stay in the village, so from there he ran straight away to his *mashi's* [maternal aunt] house, and he stayed there afterwards. He was a really hot-tempered man.

Nilima reminisced fondly about her father. Growing up, party politics had suffused her home, with her father, sister, and uncles all deeply committed to the CPM. Nilima, however, was more conflicted about her relationship to the political life of her family. On the one hand, she seemed proud that her uncles pressed her to join politics; on the other, she was hesitant to commit, noting her lack of attachment to the Party. At the same time, she remains deeply influenced by her father's ability to stand up to the wealthy, as reflected in the narrative of his childhood fight. She saw in him a commitment to ideas of equality and standing up to injustice.

Finishing her story about her father, Nilima suddenly turned her attention to me: "If you don't mind my asking—you're coming here, does the head office pay or do you pay for yourself?" she asked bluntly. Perhaps she was suddenly aware of the ways in which office politics and hierarchies might work out with the presence of an outsider who had been introduced from the head office. I explained that I was financially supported by my university and external funders rather than by the head office, and reiterated that I was not affiliated to or obligated to report anything to DENA's head office. "Are there others like you?" she asked. I responded that there were perhaps other researchers from different places—though I was unaware of any at the time—



but that I was the only one from my university. Nilima's interrogation only ended with Putul calling me to head out with her and another loan officer for the morning.

Compared to the rich bully of her father's childhood, Nilima encountered a different kind of hierarchy: middle management. Her sudden concern about my role in the branch office reflected her repeated complaint that the middle management failed to acknowledge her position and efforts. She narrated her encounter with the middle management on another occasion. We were discussing the upcoming holiday that was marked on the calendar, and how it would affect my scheduled visit. As talk turned to gossip, Nilima began to recount her experience of being in the branch office on one such holiday.

"Someone had to be at the office," Nilima explained to me, "so I had come in. I had the key for the *tala* (padlock), but when I got here, I found that someone had bolted the door from the inside!" It was starting to get late, and with no way of getting in, Nilima tried to call the then-branch manager and other branch office staff from her mobile phone, but she could not get through to anyone. As she stood outside the locked office, starting to panic, she saw the Regional Manager (RM) of DENA and his wife go by on a rickshaw. Seeing her, he stopped to ask what was wrong. "At first, I thought my problem was solved and that he would offer to let me stay with them for the night." Although the RM was angry at her being locked out, he made no such offer to let her stay. "He said he couldn't take the risk, and I was left on my own. His wife was with him, so I don't know why he couldn't have let me stay!" she exclaimed. Finally, she got hold of her husband, who said that she should contact some friends who lived somewhat nearby. Reaching them, they told her to wait, and that they would come and get her so that she could spend the night with them.

On the one hand, Nilima was genuinely afraid that she would be without a place to stay for the night. On the other, the expectation that the Regional Manager would automatically offer her a place to stay seemed somewhat unreasonable. For Nilima, the stakes were clear: she was in distress, her employer or manager was in a place to offer assistance, but he had declined. In her

assessment, there was no reason that he should not do so; with his wife present, there would be no suggestion of indiscretions. Rather, the encounter added to her sense of being judged by the management, and of being seen as a risky woman because of her choice to work after marriage and having children. The sense of respect or lack thereof from the MFI management struck Nilima in ways that were distinct from her colleagues. In part, her political upbringing had shaped her understanding of relationship of labour and management.

The fuller picture of Nilima's feelings about DENA's management came about in one of my last visits to the branch office. "You can go with her today," said Putul, the Branch Manager, nodding toward Nilima. It was the last morning that I would be accompanying the loan officers from this particular branch office of a microfinance institution that I call DENA. I had chatted with Nilima on earlier visits to the branch office, and even though Nilima had volunteered a number of times for me to accompany her, I had previously—at the direction of the branch manager—only accompanied the other loan officers on their regular rounds to collect loan repayments. Nilima smiled, grabbing the black shoulder bag that contained her ledger to document the loan repayments. "*Cholun!*" [Let's go!] she said, ushering me out of the branch office.

As we headed to the first group meeting of the day, I asked Nilima about her time at DENA. Nilima said that she had grown up "close to here," in Kolkata's twin city of Howrah on the west bank of the Hooghly river. She was always careful to distinguish her own urban upbringing from that of the majority of MFI staff who hailed from, "far away;" that is, from small towns and villages. Before joining DENA, Nilima had done Bangla honours at university. She had read about this job at DENA in a newspaper and had decided to apply without having any real idea about what the job would entail. She had applied mainly because she had needed a job and money—though she was reticent to give details of this need. Having been accepted, she started her training at the current branch office, and when her training was complete, she was requested to go back to the same office.

Describing her experiences at DENA, Nilima explained how when she had first started, she did not know how to ride a bicycle, let alone know her way around this part of the city. “I would often get lost [getting to group meetings],” she laughed, “and so I started writing down landmarks—a tree here, a sign there—to help me find my way around.” Since she had been at the branch office when it first opened, she had been involved in spreading the word about DENA and forming the first borrower groups in the neighborhood. Now that they had established groups, they no longer had to go around forming new groups in the same way: they did not have to go to people; women would come to them to ask to create a new group. “When I started, I had no idea what to do. I would sometimes go and just sit by the pond, head in my hand, with no idea what to do. But just sitting there, I started to meet women who would come there to work [e.g., wash clothes in the pond], and I would tell them about DENA. Work now is a lot easier,” she said, a little wryly, “you just have to go around and collect money, but you don’t have to build groups [from scratch].”

I asked Nilima what she liked most about this job, and she responded immediately that she liked to go and meet people from the [slum] neighborhood. “There is little chance otherwise to go and meet such people, and I like hearing from them. Moreover,” she continued, “the pay might not be so good in the job, but the respect [*shomman*] from the women is high.” Nilima enjoyed the parts of her work that required engaging people and forming groups. Yet, she also found a degree of tedium in the new routines that simply required her to go and collect money. While there was no television in the branch office, Nilima had cultivated relations with borrowers that allowed her to go and watch the nightly serials at their houses. Even as she built these relationships, however, Nilima was also careful to distinguish her own class background from those of the borrowers. Her statement that working in microfinance enabled her to “meet such people,” she was indexing the poverty of borrowers, over her own lower middle-class background. Simultaneously, as noted earlier, she distinguished her urban background from that of other loan officers, suggesting their naiveté in contrast to her ability to navigate the city. Such differences for

Nilima were important to mark, yet she also felt that distinction of class constraining her own mobility.

As I asked questions, Nilima again asked me what my relationship was with the head office. I explained that I was a researcher, and anything she told me would be anonymized, and that I was not reporting back to the head office about any staff. Reassured, Nilima explained:

There are some things that you experience as a “lady” [English], and I can say this to you as another lady. It’s difficult sometimes to be a woman going alone to some of the neighborhoods. But what is worse is how you are perceived by [middle] management at the office. It’s hard to get a promotion. People just assume that if you are a woman and you have to work, then you must be from a bad background. It’s different if you’re very rich [*baraloke*] or very poor [*garib*]. Then you can work and nobody will say or think anything.

Defying the normative expectations of serving in the domestic sphere, however, had not led to singular success in her career. Rather, Nilima felt that she was being punished by the middle-class management for her choices. For Nilima, her choice to work, especially as a married mother, rendered her suspect, in particular because of her middle-class background. That is, while poor women would be expected to work outside of the house to help the family’s income, and rich, educated women would be able to work, particularly in safe office spaces, women like Nilima were seen to be transgressing gendered spaces and practices. To Nilima, it felt like the middle management of DENA were refusing her promotion on the basis that she *shouldn’t* be working in such conditions, and if she was, there must be something wrong with her. Whether or not these claims are true—and despite three decades of Left politics in West Bengal—Nilima felt the social pressures of choosing employment over homemaking.

When I last met Nilima, she told me that she was planning on taking exams to qualify as a teacher. With Indian microfinance in the middle of a crisis and uncertainty in the sector and the

demands of the job that kept her from her young family, Nilima had decided to try to move to something else. With her education, she wanted to teach Bengali. She explained: “Before coming to this job, I had, for some time, taught in a prison. My father had been progressive and had encouraged me to do things like that, and I had enjoyed it.” While Nilima never overcame her sense of being stuck or held back in the MFI, deciding ultimately to leave the company, it was the longer influence of her father—the party man—that shaped her path. Though unable to overcome the prejudices against the working woman, Nilima found inspiration in the work that had been promoted by her progressive father.

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<sup>1</sup> The CPI(M) was the leading partner of the Left Front coalition government, along with the Communist Party of India (CPI), Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP) and the All India Forward Bloc. Although these parties once had strong local rivalries, the CPI(M) was able to eclipse its smaller coalition partners and consolidate its own dominance. Those who remain with the smaller parties often do so out of long-lasting allegiances based on family ties or local patterns of influence.

<sup>2</sup> Two kinds of fish commonly served in Bengali meals.

<sup>3</sup> Ganguly Bagan is a neighbourhood on the main road that runs southward from Jadavpur to Garia, an area which was settled by East Bengali Hindu refugees in the early 1950s.

<sup>4</sup> The Left parties had helped to coordinate and lead the refugee movement in the 1950s (Chakrabarti 1990), and the refugee colonies of Jadavpur benefited in return from the election of the Left Front through municipal incorporation and gradual rights to their land. This meant that the local population were still largely sympathetic to the Left parties.

<sup>5</sup> These were widely-supported farmer protests against land acquisition in rural West Bengal to build Special Economic Zones, in which state police fired on protestors.

<sup>6</sup> *Mongol Shobhajatra* literally translates to procession of auspiciousness or well-being.

<sup>7</sup> Although Bangladesh was declared a secular state in 1971, its president Hussain Mohammed Ershad declared Islam to be the state religion in 1989. This provoked a massive mobilization to strengthen secular identity that manifested in the procession designed to celebrate a secular Bengal.