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Mukulika Banerjee

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Self-Help, Natality and 'Civic Growth'

MUKULIKA BANERJEE

Anthropology, The London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK

ABSTRACT   *This paper examines the role that SHGs (self-help groups) have played in the creation of 'civic growth' and changing electoral politics in India. Based on ethnographic engagement in a village in West Bengal before and after the formation of these groups, the impact of the transformative effect of these groups on women is placed in a wider political context. The activity of the SHG enabled horizontal solidarities to emerge despite the vertical divisions in village society and successfully challenge the status quo. It builds on a growing literature on women's empowerment and capacity for collective action through SHGs to show that the notion of 'empowerment' can be extended to include the capability for active citizenship and skills in how to do politics, what Arendt calls 'natality'.*

KEYWORDS: Civic growth; citizenship; democracy; SHG; self-help; solidarity; village

On one of my trips that I regularly made to the villages of Madanpur and Chishti[1], I dropped in to Tinkari and Memdasi's home. I was very fond of the elderly couple and their adult children who lived with their own families in nearby huts. As always, their daughter-in-law made us black tea spiced with bay leaves while I caught up with news sitting with them in their open courtyard. The harvest had been good but cash was scarce, two of the toddlers were starting school, Tinkari's trade in poultry had been hit by the recent storms and the local Communist Party Comrade[2] continued to dominate village affairs through his authoritarian political activities. But then they added, that even though the Left Front government remained in power, the first rumblings of dissent against the Comrade's own actions were beginning to be heard. My ears pricked up at this last observation, for two reasons. First, because usually people were terrified of openly criticising the Comrade, for if any criticism reached his ears, there was severe retribution. But now, for the first time in over a decade that I had been visiting these villages, I was being told about his failings in a conversation even though we could be overheard by passers by. The second source of surprise was because the comments were made not by the elderly couple (who had spoken to me of the Comrade in hushed whispers during earlier trips) but from their daughter, Mala. So far, she had sat in companiable silence amidst our chatter, quietly braiding a child's hair. But when the Comrade's name came up, she looked up and calmly made some acerbic remarks about the Comrade's moral depravity and reported that everyone had had enough of him. As I listened to her talk, it struck me that it was the first time since I had known her

that I could see her face properly; in the past she had usually stayed in the shadows, leaving her parents and charismatic younger brother to talk to me. But now we conversed easily about what was happening as her wizened old mother smiled quietly at us.

Mala's transformation stayed with me and it was a few days later while chatting with another woman that I learnt about some new Self-Help Groups (SHGs) that had been formed in the village since my last visit. They were called *dols* (groups) and each of them received a small grant of five thousand rupees from the government with which to start a small business with the view to generating profits after repayment of the initial capital. Several such SHGs had been formed; Mala was the President of the one that had been the most successful.

Self-help Groups (SHG) exist in their thousands across West Bengal and South Asia, and indeed across the world and have had a transformative effect on women's lives in multiple ways. Academic literature from development economics, anthropology and gender studies have warned against the hidden neo-liberal logics of such 'empowerment' measures[3]. Microcredit and self-help groups have been criticised as 'a market-based solution to poverty' by which 'women are co-opted against their interests into consent to neoliberal capitalist ideological structures that are jointly orchestrated by collusion between government and international aid and development agencies' (John, 2005 in Sanyal, 2014, p. 130; Karim, 2011). Rather than empowering them, the critique goes, SHGs are a vehicle by which women are tied into coercive relations of debt, and their social capital – relationships with other women in the group – is exploited by micro credit programmes which have become little more than loan sharks. In her study of microfinance institutions in peri-urban West Bengal, Sohini Kar shows how the MFIs that are designed to empower poor women to start and sustain their own businesses, function by trapping them into networks of formal finance creating what she calls 'financialized poverty' (Kar, 2018). According to such critiques, women, even if they benefit through their participation in SHGs, nevertheless emerge as unwitting and hapless victims of processes beyond their control[4].

In contrast, others have argued for a more multi-dimensional and contextualised understanding of the potential of SHGs for giving a voice to women. Paromita Sanyal and Naila Kabeer for instance, draw on women's narratives to look beyond a compromise of women's 'autonomy' by neoliberal capitalist structures and take seriously instead the possibility suggested by Amartya Sen's 'capabilities approach'. Such an approach demonstrates that under certain circumstances, 'market-based ties and interactions can clearly contribute to fostering enabling forms of human freedom for populations that have been previously denied access to market-based institutions.' (Sanyal, 2014, p. 130). Kabeer reports, involvement in such activities gave women more 'agency' and this had a positive impact on not just individual women and decision-making within households but also on the general economic growth of a country (Kabeer, 2016). Agency was not read as some autonomous individual will or interior psychological state, but one that was shaped by factors that constituted an individual self in the first place. While structural inequalities (e.g. smaller landholdings, lower wages) lay behind gender disparities caused by lower returns on women's labour force participation, greater 'collective action by women, both through organisation and in alliance with other groups' sought to reverse this (Kabeer, 2016, p. 316–7). This is reiterated by Prillaman in a recent piece where she argues that the key to greater participation and political inclusion of women is not just their greater access to material resources, but access to 'networks of women they can leverage towards collective action' (Prillaman, 2021, p. 2). In support of a capability approach, Kabeer reports that women themselves claimed that far more than any economic benefits of SHGs, it was the resulting new 'communities of practice' that they enabled, that had a transformative potential (Kabeer, 2011). Building on this argument that SHGs enable new communities of practice among women, Sanyal draws on data and interviews with over four hundred women from fifty-nine microcredit groups across two districts in the state of West Bengal to show how participation in SHGs

resulted in greater collective action by women against issues that went beyond the remit of the SHG itself, such as domestic violence or liquor sales.

Building on the work of Kabeer, Sanyal, Rao, and others, in this paper, I propose to examine the implications of women's increased capabilities on a wider democratic culture and specifically, electoral politics. I define this newfound capacity through collective action as 'civic growth' which indicates the ability for political participation in a range of political processes, both inside and outside of electoral politics. Political participation is usually measured through membership of political parties and electoral activity such as voting and attendance at campaign rallies. According to these criteria, women in West Bengal have a high rate of political participation as they vote in higher numbers than the rest of India (84% voter turnout in the 2021 state assembly elections) and also report high attendance and political rallies and meetings (Lokniti data). Thus, the women of West Bengal emerged as good citizens who had high rates of political participation in election-related activities[5]. But what of political participation beyond electoral time? This would include activities through which women held elected officials to account, organised dissent against policies, made claims to their rights, organised themselves into groups, and so on, namely the activities of a more active citizenship[6]. Without a consideration of these activities beyond elections, democratic politics would remain the impoverished politics of just voting in elections and we would fail to connect electoral and inter-electoral temporalities. Recent research shows however that greater mobility and exposure, the right institutional interventions, participation in a wider range of economic and political activities all generated greater active citizenship in between elections (Auerbach & Kruks-Wisner, 2020; Kruks-Wisner 2018; Parthasarathy, Rao, & Palaniswamy, 2017).

In this paper, I expand on such a definition of active citizenship to include other types of political action in addition to claim making. To do this, I draw on an Arendtian definition of political action to indicate the coming together of citizens in solidarity and regardless of further outcomes, this very coming together in solidarity holds radical potentiality. This is what Dulhunty characterises as 'power with' in her recent study of SHGs in West Bengal to describe 'the collective power gained from relationships of trust and reciprocity' (Dulhunty, 2021, p. 726). Through the example of the Uttom Shoh Dol in my research village of Chishti, I will examine how the experience of belonging to an SHG gave women the 'power with' and capacity for collective action and the subsequent impact these had on the course of electoral politics in the village. I argue that the new 'communities of practice' and modes of collective action created by the SHG can be read as Arendtian arenas of 'political action' that were distinct from 'work' and 'labour' that women were otherwise engaged in. It was this action that created a new capacity for active citizenship. I conclude therefore that whether or not SHGs created economic growth, they certainly produced greater political participation even outside the formal political institutions of election and the state and thereby generated 'civic growth'. My work adds to the existing literature by assessing the impact of SHGs on 'civic growth' by drawing on Arendt's idea of collective action alongside Sen's capabilities approach. By doing so, I also draw attention to the need to view democracy both through its institutions and its culture, what B. R. Ambedkar, the Chair of the constitutional drafting committee called 'political democracy' as well as 'social democracy'. In any community, one way to study the juxtaposition of political democracy and social democracy, is to view electoral and non-electoral temporalities within the same spatial context. In such a study, it is possible to assess the forms of participation in two different modes – that is citizens as voters and citizens as participants in non-electoral social and political activities. By presenting my observations of a SHG made over a long period of time during which several elections were also held, I present such an account of participation by its citizens in both modes, electoral and non-electoral. In particular I will show the ways in which activities during the non-electoral period (formation of the SHG) had an impact on subsequent electoral results (the defeat of the Left Front in 2011).

My anthropological engagement with these villages began in 1998 and continues into the present; having been ethnographically present both before and after the emergence of these groups therefore allows me to place the impact of the SHGs in a long time frame. While most scholarly writing on SHGs is based on research explicitly designed to study them, my interest in the SHGs in these villages was part of a wider study of institutional democracy and democratic culture (see Banerjee, 2021). As a result, I learnt about the SHGs alongside other events and rituals and I had known the individuals who were involved in the SHGs long before the formation of these groups and afterward. I am therefore able to offer my own assessment of the effect of the SHGs on the women and on the village alongside those reported by the women themselves. I will present my own observations of how individuals appeared to have changed (as Mala had in the opening vignette) and the consequences of these changes on the wider politics of the village. Such an ethnographic perspective is uncommon in the existing literature, and deepens our understanding of the significance of such groups.

1. The context

The villages of Madanpur and Chishti are of modest size that could be traversed in under five minutes each to reach the green paddy fields that encircled them[7]. According to the 2011 census, their total population was 1300. Of these, over three quarters were Muslim belonging to all four castes of Syed, Shekh, Mughal and Pathan (in order of ritual hierarchy) and the rest were Hindus from the (Scheduled) Dom and Bagdi castes[8]. Houses belonging to all castes stood cheek by jowl and elite Syed homes stood in between other castes. The use of tanks or *pukurs* was also mixed and while everyone had a preference for which one they used for bathing and washing, their use was not determined by their caste identity[9].

At the turn of the century, the dominant occupation for both villages was paddy and wheat cultivation in the fields surrounding the villages. Traditionally, land belonging to the two villages was owned by the elite caste of Syeds, and the remaining Muslim castes of Shekhs, Pathans and Mughals along with the Hindu Doms and Bagdis, provided the labour. In Madanpur and Chishti, the land reforms of the 1980s Operation Barga, had been very rigorously imposed and had led to a dramatic redistribution in class and caste dynamics. This in turn had a palpable influence on not only cultivation but also on the nature of everyday life. The Comrade remained the largest landowner by successfully avoiding the effects of Operation Barga by getting rid of his sharecroppers before the reforms and thereby not losing his entitlement to them. And over the years he had in fact acquired more land and diversified into a variety of entrepreneurial activities of sand mining and hatcheries thereby increasing his wealth and widening the circle of those tied to him through obligation or loyalty. He acted as the crucial go-between between (Communist) Party and people and facilitated the government's responsiveness to voters. The local Pradhan was a member of the (Hindu) Dom caste who occupied a seat 'reserved' for lower castes in accordance with the West Bengal Panchayat Act 1992[10]. But while a low caste man officially held the post, the real power lay with the Comrade who unilaterally took all the decisions on behalf of the Party which the Pradhan was expected to rubber stamp[11]. The core of the Comrade's support came from loyalists who traded their support for benefits that he was able to accrue through his connections with the political establishment. The Comrade was therefore something of the local big man as described by anthropologists elsewhere in India but his particular brand of 'muscular politics' was also a direct result of the Left Front's reliance on a network of such comrades for assured electoral victory (see Michelutti et al, 2018; Price & Ruud, 2010).

As his 'political work' he embedded himself in the daily life of every household, considering no matter too small to escape his attention (Banerjee, 2010). He sidelined all others to appoint himself as sole judge and jury whose ruling on any issue was final and irrevocable. Thus, property matters, disputes between parents and children, or even the choice of groom for a young

woman, were all issues on which he legislated and mobilized supporters from across the two villages to support.[12] His punishments were arbitrary and it was the unpredictability of outcome that helped creating an atmosphere of anxiety and terror (*shontrash*). By behaving in this fashion, every dispute, genuine or contrived, became an occasion for the Comrade to entrench himself further in everyone's affairs, his capriciousness increased his hold over people and he could use them to needle his enemies and reward his supporters. So fearful were people that no one dared to openly challenge him nor dare to start a cell of another political party.

The women of Madanpur and Chishti were additionally vulnerable to the Comrade's gaze. He was the only man who had two wives, having abandoned his first wife and children (who continued to live in Madanpur) to set up home with his second wife in a sprawling compound at the entrance to Chishti. This gave him easy access to the highway for his motorcycle as he travelled across the region as president of the farmers' union to do 'party work'. But at night, he used the cover of darkness for his sexual liaisons with various women in Chishti. Every girl and woman in the village knew that responding favorably to the Comrade's attentions could radically usher in a prosperous future that would be otherwise impossible. His penumbra of supporters and allies were all men and while his message of rights and entitlements of poor citizens was intended for all, these were shared in impromptu gatherings at the roadside tea stall or in the courtyard of his house where no self-respecting woman could afford to be seen.

One day however, the Comrade overplayed his hand causing a grave scandal. In an affair between two young people when the young girl had become pregnant, he ruled that they should terminate the pregnancy, but marry. This judgement horrified the village and caused the scandal, for the lovers were related but belonged to different generations, and inter-generational marriage, especially on the matrilineal side, was taboo (*haram*). The Comrade's utter disrespect for this ethical red line and his subsequent efforts to diffuse the situation through further moves involving money and power games led to further scandal. It was during the years when this scandal unfolded however, that finally an alliance challenging the Comrade's power finally emerged[13]. This insurgent alliance was not a pre-existing faction, in fact many of its members even shared a history of enmity, but the need to censure the Comrade for having crossed all limits had brought them together. Over time it was this alliance that grew into a local cell of the rival political party, Trinamul Congress that eventually brought the 34-year tenure of the Left Front and its comrades to an end in the state of West Bengal. As I have argued elsewhere, big electoral changes against entrenched political forces such as the victory of Trinamul Congress in 2011, can take place only when political opposition towards the incumbent is cultivated at the micro level in between elections and expresses itself at the ballot box at the next election (Banerjee, 2008). In Madanpur and Chishti, as we shall see, the women of the villages played a key role in this huge electoral upset at the local level.

2. Self-help groups in Madanpur and Chishti

In an effort to divert attention from the scandal, the Comrade had introduced the SHG scheme to the village announcing that the women of the village should form groups for cooperative activities. The only condition imposed was that each group had to reflect social diversity and have at least one member from each of the village's castes (Hindu and Muslim)[14]. Every group was promised a grant of five thousand rupees with which to start a small business or activity. Members were required to attend Block level meetings, where similar groups from surrounding villages converged, so that women could be advised about best practices in child-rearing, including grooming and hygiene, and how to help with schooling – messages they could then take back to the village and disseminate among others. The groups were left to decide the particular activity of their group and a range of ideas were aired and discussed. Women identified issues that benefitted all e.g. the need for more latrines in the village, better immunisation records of children and so on. The discussions invariably led to an assessment of the Comrade's

performance because comparison with other villages revealed that theirs had done worse than many others. Thus, while the Comrade's ruse of introducing the SHGs had intended to deflect attention from the scandal, the deliberation of ideas created the opposite effect. Women chose to capitalize on skills they already possessed such as making and selling the ubiquitous Bengali snack, *mudi* (puffed rice) or threshing paddy by hand. The men, not to be outdone, also tried to form their own groups, but their vainglorious efforts remained unrealised as the outlay required for their schemes exceeded what had been made available as seed capital and none of them came to anything. The women's groups, on the other hand, took off. In this particular version of SHG, the women were spared the enforced financial inclusion of similar schemes elsewhere in India and there were no middle-class convenors and loan officers nor skills or vocational training alongside the provision of microcredit. Besides, attention here was not on financial savings and loans – obvious causes for mistrust even among friends, but instead on investment in a joint venture for modest returns.

3. The Uttom Shoh Dol

The group that outlasted all the others was called the Uttom Shoh Dol (Best Help Group)[15]. Their project was to produce the government sponsored free mid-day meal in the local primary school, a coveted prize that Mala Dom had played a significant role in winning. Mala was a low-caste Hindu woman was chosen as the President in a group of largely Muslim women mainly because she belonged to a political family. Her father Tinkari was the Comrade's erstwhile mentor but the Comrade had deliberately held him back to rise to prominence himself. Despite the Comrade's treachery, Mala's family always voted for the Communists because as Scheduled Caste Hindus, they recognized that they now led a life of unprecedented dignity and self-esteem, unimaginable a generation ago, and this was the result of communist politics. Bishwa, Mala's brother, was articulate and politically active in the penumbra around the Comrade but over time the family had gradually realized that he was never going to give Tinkari's son any prominence. Thus, when the opportunity of forming SHGs had arisen, there has been discussion in the family and sensing an opportunity, Mala had seized it. She went about inviting women to join, careful to include members from all the castes and emerged as a fairly natural choice as President[16] as Mala had more freedom and support at home than they had. In the weeks following my cup of tea at Mala's house I met the other women from her SHG, and they all shared a common transformation. Many now wore their saris in the formal 'city' style and sat straighter and taller, almost embodying the confidence that exposure to travel, business, and the company of strangers had brought. They seemed more able and determined to form and express friendships, finding more time to sit together, laugh and discuss ideas and anecdotes beyond those of hearth and home.

   The 'Best Help Group' led by Mala had first mover's advantage on the mid-day meal scheme. It was a valuable asset as the supplies for these meals for school children were guaranteed all year round and were not dependant on harvests or other factors. The women took possession of the delivery of raw materials and made arrangements to store it in a shed (paid for by the seed capital) on the Comrade's vast compound where there was space, but were careful to ensure that it was locked and accessible only to group members. They thus crossed the first hurdle of protecting the quality and quantity of the raw materials for the midday meal that was a frequent problem in all parts of India. They shared an understanding as mothers that they would not adulterate or pilfer rations meant for children. Each school day, two members of the Uttom Shoh group prepared the mid-day meal in a small thatch shelter adjacent to the school (which they built with the remaining balance) and served it to the children themselves. It was a beautifully simple idea, relying on their cooking skills and spreading the work across rotas so that each member cooked on only one day in the week. By aggregating their efforts and benefiting from economies of scale, State recognition and aid, they could ensure improved quality and

more varied and nutritious menus for all the children. After the initial investment in utensils and storage, they made a tiny profit of Rs 40 per month which they enthusiastically saved in a joint bank account. Every month, the group raised the bus fare for one of them to visit the local bank to deposit the money. They reinvested most of the profits into the meal, expanding the menu to include fruits and treats for the children.

As noted at the start, in all the hours that I had sat in her courtyard on previous visits chatting with her brother and parents, I had never heard a peep from Mala. She was usually present and possibly listening, but always hunched over silently cutting hay for cattle or weaving a mat. But during this visit, the transformation was noticeable. Mala had literally emerged from the shadows, more energized and alive adding to her family's account as she oiled and braided her niece's hair she now spoke confidently, making eye contact, and occasionally flashed a broad smile.

4. SHG and Arendtian 'action'

In her essay *The Human Condition* Hannah Arendt identifies three conditions that correspond to three kinds of human activities (*vita activa*): labour (for survival), work (for building and making) and action (Arendt, 1958). It is the last, that of 'action' that she identifies as politics, as activity that can create a new course of events. Plurality is an essential feature of 'Action' as it has to be performed in concert with others; action is therefore interpersonal but also public. The formation of Self-Help Groups, I argue, can be read as such action and one that stands in contrast to the normal conditions of women's lives that are dominated by 'labour' and 'work'. The organisation of the school mid-day meal in fact brought together all three kinds of human activities. At the heart of it was the skill of cooking food that women normally performed as 'labour' for the survival of their families. But this was also 'work' as it served not just their families but all the children of the village. Most crucially, it was also action as it was a collective project based on mutuality. As has been observed for a SHG in Rajasthan, women invested 'not only money but significant emotional energy in them' (Bowers, 2019, p. 108). No one stole rations, no one skived off their shift and each woman took her turn to visit the bank to deposit their collective savings. As Rebecca Bowers observed for the SHG she studied (called a *sangha* in Kannada) among women construction workers in the Indian city of Bangalore, the unity of the group was 'forged by the need to maintain harmonious kin relations and women's own pragmatic desires to ensure the fulfilment of their own projects of permanence, which in both instances, are closely aligned with the sangha's fate' (Bowers, 2019, p. 93). The mutual promises that the women of the Best help Group made to each other were based on their commitment to such a joint project of permanence on which the fate of the SHG depended. The *dol*, like Bowers's *sangha* 'provided women with a rare moment where time could be spent in a space outside of the home that was not the male dominated space … [and] members appeared to make the most of their time together there' (Bowers, 2019, p. 108). As Arendt puts it, the promises the women made to each other were the 'means for plural human beings to bind themselves through action, creating solidarities rather than discovering them on the more deterministic bases of pre-existing similarities' (Calhoun, 1997, p. 2). The solidarity that emerged was therefore a result of acting in concert with unrelated others to create a public good.

The Self-Help Group was thus a space of political action that created an altogether new kind of public action. This politics was the outcome of their identity as individual citizens and peers rather than shared kinship, employment networks, and caste. The women held their own weekly meetings in each member's home by turn, late in the evening when children were asleep and domestic chores done for the day. The enforced rotation of the venue of the weekly *dol* meetings across the homes of each member also broke the convention of low caste women always having to visit and never getting to host and that in itself created new kinds of sociality. As Kabeer noted, 'Alternative forms of association life … expand women's knowledge,

information and interactions with others, [and] allow a critical re-assessment of what was hith-erto accepted as the natural order of things and open up the possibility of alternative ways of living that were hitherto inconceivable (Kabeer, 1999 in Kabeer, 2011, p. 503).

This in itself was unique and contained within it a radical promise. As Bowers's close engage-ment with an SHG over several months shows, it was a very difficult task to create such hori-zontal mutual relations in the face of differences and pre-existing hierarchy and the painstaking processes that were required to sustain the solidarity and trust (Bowers, 2019). Such processes were true for the women of Madanpur and Chishti too and it was ultimately through their shared action, that they were able to create a uniquely different public arena of collaboration and mutuality. As Calhoun notes, the crucial lesson of reading Hannah Arendt is that 'public life is the *result* of Arendtian political action rather than its precondition' (Calhoun, 1997; emphasis added).

The impact of the SHG on their monetary income may have been limited, but the experience of producing such action had a direct impact on their human condition. As noted at the start of this paper, the Best Help Group had had a transformative effect not just on the meals for the children, but on the women cooking it. As Sanyal argues, 'Increase in agency begins with changes in less intractable capabilities, like increased self-awareness, and moves in a steady pro-gression to complex and more intractable arena of struggle and conflict, like domestic power, civic participation, and the ability to take part in collective action and protests' (Sanyal, 2014, p. 127).

For the first time since I had known her, Mala now made eye contact with me when she spoke, hesitated less when articulating her thoughts and even smiled more. This was also true of another member, a Shekh Muslim woman called Morjina. I had visited her house several times before but she seldom had much to say while I chatted with her children and helped them with homework. But on this trip, Morjina welcomed me enthusiastically as she offered me a cup of tea. As she squatted by her usual spot where she cooked on a single clay oven, her manner was altogether more confident and she even asked me about my own life. In a subtle reading of Arendt, Calhoun makes an observation that explains Morjina's altered manner: 'The plurality of participants, appearing precisely as different from each other, is a crucial spur to reflection on the identity of each and the significance of their interrelationships' (Calhoun, 1997, p. 24). It was as if her own political work with women she did not know, her engagement with the world outside of the context of home and hearth, labour, and work, had made her curious about the wider world she existed in.

It is important to recognise that in the past, in contexts such as the Gram Panchayat, women used to rarely speak, for under the Comrade's authoritarian rule, participation was futile. The work of the SHG on the other hand, required them to be creative, mobilize networks of neigh-bours and kin, overcome shyness and past animosities to start new conversations. The networks and social capital they gained from their participation also emboldened them to speak up at more overtly political arenas such as local assemblies or Gram Panchayats (Rao & Sanyal, 2018). In her recent monograph, Gabrielle Kruks–Wisner shows that such claim-making consti-tutes active citizenship and she investigates the conditions that facilitates its emergence. Her conclusions demonstrate that socio-economic standing of claimants is less important to claim-making than 'porosity' by which she means the exposure to people and places that an individual has. With greater porosity, people 'who move beyond tightly knit groups of kin, caste, neigh-bourhood, or village, gain exposure to broader sources of information and ideas as well as to a greater number and diversity of linkages to the state' (Kruks-Wisner, 2018, p. 211). Drawing on examples from across India her work shows that boundaries between, caste, occupation, and locality become porous with the changing rural political economy and also through 'institutional interventions such as the reservation of panchayat seats or targeted programming by NGOs that create spaces for traditionally marginalized groups to engage in multicaste and mixed-gender settings' (Kruks-Wisner, 2018, p. 211). She cites Drèze and Sen's findings in rural

Himachal Pradesh where 'women's economic engagement with markets and in the workforce enabled greater freedom of movement, thus also enabling more active engagement in local politics' (Kruks-Wisner, 2018, p. 213) as further evidence of her argument. In a recent article comparing urban and rural citizens Auerbach and Kruks-Wisner show that contrary to held stereotypes, rural citizens were likely to be more active citizens (Auerbach and Kruks-Wisner, 2020). The relative 'thickness' of the state in rural India they concluded, gave rise to greater public accountability by officials and consequent relatively higher 'political optimism' among rural citizens. As Parthasarathy et al. (2017) show through their assessment of a SHG programme in Tamil Nadu show, it nearly doubled the number women who come to the village council and boosted their frequency of speech by nearly 45 percent. While this may not have made officials more responsive it showed how even small interventions such as the setting up of SHGs can change social norms around gender.

The challenge of forming an SHG had ushered in an opportunity that required women to create an altogether new kind of 'group'. The process itself was intrinsically collective even before its purpose or goal was determined and Arendt in fact identifies this indeterminacy as one of its key features of 'action'. What makes 'action' political in her terms, is not so much what it achieves or 'makes', as much as the activity of coming together itself, of identifying common interests and shared goals by different individuals. This is the essence of political action for Arendt and the 'human capacity for freedom and its capacity for distinction' (Baehr, 2003, p. xxvii). Arendt's use of the word 'natality' to describe this unique human characteristic is particularly apposite here, as it is a feminine impulse (associated with giving birth) that brings into being a new mode of action. But as we have seen, this did not imply that it came automatically to women, instead they had to learn to act in new ways by putting aside differences and overcoming jealousies to identify a common agenda to make such (political) action possible. The case of the successful Best Help group confirmed that while the economic gains from membership of these groups was clearly trivial, the impact of creating an activity through cooperation and initiative, interacting with each other in roles other than as mother or wife, experiencing journeys on public buses, attending meetings outside the village, making trips to the bank, all of these generated new forms of confidence and sociality.

5. SHG and electoral politics

Research has shown that participation in the activities of an SHG were generative of qualities that enabled women in contexts beyond the SHG. In Madanpur and Chishti, events revealed how the process of trying to form SHGs had one significant, if unintended, consequence on the electoral politics in the village. The SHGs had equipped women with a new 'power with' (Dulhunty, 2021) and they also utilized it to challenge and articulate their views about the Comrade's moral transgressions[17]. Their voices strengthened a nascent anti-Comrade/anti-Left Front opinion that had just begun to coalesce around a young man from Chishti during the scandal and the support of a few men and many women gave him the courage to formally set up the local unit of the new opposition party Trinamool Congress that was challenging the Left Front hegemony at the state level. It was a small but significant shift in one setting, but the aggregate effect of thousands of such local shifts resulted in the political earthquake when the Left Front was finally routed in 2011 elections after thirty four years.

While the Comrade had proposed the idea of SHGs as a distraction from his own blunder in causing the scandal, their formation also made possible a new resolve among women to bury their differences and forgive erstwhile enemies in common purpose to hold the Comrade to account. He could not have anticipated this, but the SHG meetings became occasions when women met on equal terms, and gave them a forum to narrate their individual experiences at the hands of the Comrade and hear from others. As a result, views they had and had previously thought too dangerous to articulate now created what Sanyal calls 'subaltern counterpublics'

where 'women, who are gender-subordinated in a patriarchal system, gather together and engage in their own discursive exchanges' (Sanyal, 2014, p. 248).

And as the SHGs gained momentum the seeds of a collective discontent grew. The accounts of the Comrade's debauchery recounted within these new 'communities of practice' (Kabeer, 2016) outside of kinship, neighborhood, caste and occupational settings, had a much greater charge that gossip sessions with relatives in the past, and now their very articulation created recognition of shared values and solidarity among the women. As Max Gluckman noted about a Welsh village, gossip is a 'cultural technique' to identify moral boundaries (Gluckman, 1963, p. 313). Thus, while the shared activity of an SHG did not erase the differences based on age, caste or class, these were nevertheless suppressed to create a common ground of shared values and morality.

In resolving the scandal, debating the ethical implications of the Comrade's actions, a new alliance of actors took shape for the first time in Chishti. These were not a group of people who had come together before – and some of them even shared a history of enmity – but the need to settle the scandal in an ethical and transparent way had required them to rise above their own differences to ally with those with whom they were in agreement, on this issue at least. In this, the women had already demonstrated its possibility as each SHG had been formed by women from a variety of castes and kin backgrounds. The small and fledgling group of men suddenly found a wholly unexpected constituency of support in their own homes from their wives, sisters and daughters who had all been participants or observers of the new SHGs. The SHGs in the villages of Madanpur and Chishti had led to 'civic growth' based on new norms of mutuality and solidarity that crosscut the vertical cleavages between them and this allowed for a new critique of the status quo to emerge and ultimately led to a change in the elected representative at the next election.

6. Conclusion: the 'commons' as a site of counter politics

As noted at the start, this paper adds to a growing literature that examines the contribution women's SHGs make to political culture and empowerment by noting their impact on what I call 'civic growth'. The aim here is to look beyond the consequences of SHGs on 'economic growth' and the neo-liberal nets of debt and poverty that they are seen to create, to also assess the impact they have on women's political capabilities and on a wider political and electoral context. We have seen above how the creation of the Uttom Shoh Group in the villages of Madanpur and Chishti had a transformative effect on Mala and her colleagues. The solidarity of the group and the confidence it gave them, saw them transition from silently resenting the Comrade to actively challenging his authority.

The choice of the school mid-day meal as the object of their labour, work, and political action resonated with the logics of village commons. As outlined by Ostrom in her path breaking *Tragedy of the Commons*, the commons turned on self-regulating associational activity to manage property and produce collective goods (Ostrom, 1990). In Madanpur and Chishti too, while private cultivable lands were dominated by the social dynamics of caste and patronage, a more collective and collaborative register marked the commons. These different registers of the private vs. commons, personal vs. public, competitive vs. cooperative could be observed across other areas of social life[18]. Over time, the mid-day meal came to resemble other collective resources in the village such as water tanks and bamboo groves. While these common resources were legally owned by the high caste Syeds their maintenance was achieved collectively. The tanks were drained and cleaned collectively every few years even as the nutrient rich soil at the bottom of the tank was used to fertilise the lands of the Syeds who owned it. All children could play in the shade of the bamboo groves and when bamboo was needed to repair homes and animal shelters, anyone could take what they needed from the grove closest to their dwelling. These were the village 'commons' of Madanpur and Chishti and it required people to behave responsibly and act collectively in ways that were in marked contrast to how privately owned

agricultural land and livestock were managed. The school mid-day meal was such a syntagm of a village commons; it was paid for by the state, the materials were stored on the Comrade's property, but the tasty and nutritious meal itself was the result of cooperative action by a group of women whose main motivation was to ensure that all the children in the village, regardless of economic status could eat one healthy meal a day. Of course, the presence of collaboration in the commons did not erase the vertical hierarchy of caste and private ownership, but neither did the latter exhaust the possibility of the former. While caste and hierarchy dominated most social arrangements, an attentive ethnographer could also observe horizontal solidarities emerge in other settings where normal hierarchies were bracketed off and suspended temporarily. A small intervention such as making inter caste membership mandatory for SHGs had a huge impact in creating the possibility of social democracy in the way that the Indian Constitution had imagined for the new nation. And while the corrosive social divisions never went away, their temporary erasure in some settings of attempted fraternity continued to inflect social life beyond them. Without making the romantic and empirically inaccurate argument that a village is a harmonious community, it is nevertheless important to recognise that *both* the logic of vertical divisions as well as horizontal solidarities existed within it.

As we have seen in the case of the Uttom Shoh Dol, women had to find the courage and creativity to reach across traditional social divisions to find new collaborators. They had to invent new ways of interacting with each other, deliberating on all views before making decisions collectively. Pointing out the importance of these new skills to women's capabilities, in a recent study across four states, long time scholars of SHGs state that 'In rural India today, SHGs are the single most widespread associations in which women have easy access and acceptance. Our findings suggest that evaluating their performance only through income, consumption, and entrepreneurship metrics would be underestimating their potential for improving women's capabilities (Sen, 1993) and social change (Sanyal, Rao, & Prabhakar, 2019, p. 67) The political action of the SHG required them to behave and think differently than they would do in contexts defined by other identities. By doing so, the SHG enabled a space for important critiques of social relations and exchange because they successfully produced a common good that was based on a reparative logic that challenged the Comrade's agonistic one. The case of the SHG and the rejuvenated school mid-day meal presented here demonstrated that the maintenance and defence of any commons were productive sites for a different logic of political action, one that was reparative rather than agonistic. While the Comrade's politics was always marked by competition and fear, the women's group created political action through cooperation, solidarity, and happiness[19]. The Comrade needed to divide and rule through the politics of factionalism or *doladoli* (as described in Bailey 1969) whereas the women adopted the term for group (*dol*) to create a group solidarity.

As a consequence, they had a transformative effect on the politics of the village itself by providing support at a critical juncture to a nascent opposition. This allowed it to grow into a local until of the Trinamul Congress that successfully challenged the Left Front and its comrades at the 2011 elections. As Arendt noted, political action can be both world-making and self-making, and so a transformation in the women and their politics had an impact on other kinds of politics in the village. Through this process of 'civic growth' and 'democratic deepening' the women emerged as 'active citizens' who held those in power to account[20].

India's Constitution in 1950 proclaimed India to be both a democracy and republic, for it recognised that without republican values of active citizenship in between elections, democracy would remain a mechanical exercise of merely voting at elections. Ambedkar, who chaired the Drafting Committee of the Indian Constitution had warned that the formal proclamations of political equality in a democracy – 'one person one vote' – would remain meaningless if they were passively left to the law of procedure. Instead, such a goal of equality could only be achieved he argued, when active and vigilant citizens sought to ensure that 'each vote also had equal value'. Without this, there could be no 'social democracy', namely a democratic culture

that was based on fraternity and solidarity within the citizenry. Civic growth and active citizenship were therefore vital to achieve a wholesome and genuine democracy.

While the Left Front was ideologically committed to an emancipatory agenda for the agrarian proletariat, they did not tolerate citizens' interest in actively 'doing politics' or aspiring for influence, which was kept strictly as the preserve of a few trusted lieutenants. Active citizenship of the kind required by the spirit of republicanism was therefore aggressively constrained by closing off all avenues to political action, and political participation was confined only to elections. Under the Left Front, democracy itself became increasingly narrowly defined by electoral victories rather than the basic ideas of expression of dissent, peaceful challenges to the status quo, or political competition, all of which were fairly germane to any definition of democratic politics. As we have seen, the experience of forming the SHGs created the political capacity to convert such atomized, fearful, and silent resentment into an open but peaceful collective defiance.

To understand the turn of the electoral wheel in 2011, therefore, requires recognition of how citizens in a democracy act in between elections to create a new political consensus that challenges the status quo. The discussion of women's SHGs here show how 'civic growth' generated by SHGs gave women the capabilities to challenge the status quo and set in motion manoeuvres that sought to mobilize the opinion against him into a more overt political opposition.

The SHG provided the framework for such collective action that required that actors who would be fearless enough to voice their dissent publicly and who would also have the credibility to attract the support of others. As we have seen, women's SHGs had the potential to create such democratic culture. Craig Calhoun notes, 'Arendt is at pains to show that participation in public life can be itself a good, a source of pleasure and satisfaction' (Calhoun, 1997, p. 28). Mala's smile and confidence as she spoke to me on that trip was a testament to Arendt's observation.

Notes

1. These names are pseudonyms of two villages located in Birbhum district, West Bengal.
   I would like to thank the Economic and Social Research Council UK, British Academy, Nuffield Foundation, University College London and London School of Economics and Political Science for funding my research over a twenty-year period and innumerable research trips to West Bengal, that has allowed me to make the argument in this paper. I would like to thank Adam Auerbach, Biju Rao and Katy Gardner for excellent comments on earlier drafts of this paper. I also thank the Editor and two anonymous reviewers for this journal all of whom made very valuable comments that improved the clarity of the argument considerably. The data used in this paper are taken from my hand written fieldnotes. I will be happy to provide any additional information upon request as long as it does not violate confidentiality.
2. The Comrade was the local representative of the Left Front government that remained in power in West Bengal from 1977 to 2011 who drew his power from a formidable organisation over decades. As the man on the ground, he was the representative of the Party-State and his job was to implement its policies, increase its base of support and, most crucially, deliver votes to it during elections. In turn, his links to the Party provided advance information on available loans, and bureaucratic favours granting permits for his ventures to those he favoured.
3. See Bowers, 2019 Chapter IV for a critical reading and overview of this literature. See also Batliwala, 2007.
4. See also work of Juli Huang on neo liberal development and empowerment projects in Bangladesh (Huang, 2020) and Sharma, 2009. Based on her work in Italy, Andrea Muehlebach warns us to recognise that the 'moral neoliberal' characterised by love and commitment over remuneration should not be mistaken as radically different from the market neoliberal. She shows how both unemployed young and pensioners can be drafted by the state through a call for ethical citizenship and their love and care brought into the logic of the neoliberal state (Muehlebach, 2012).
5. Madanpur and Chishti with their average voter turnout rate of over 85% were a good representative of this trend.
6. These criteria of active citizenship are outlined by political philosophers such as Quentin Skinner while writing about republicanism in democratic politics (Skinner, 2006).
7. These villages were part of a randomised sample in 1998 for the National Election Study survey conducted by Lokniti. My findings about the nature of Muslim society and interaction between Hindu and Muslim groups

conforms to findings by Sanyal et al, 2015, Sanyal and Rao, 2018 and Dulhunty, 2021 whose work is also based in villages of West Bengal.

8. Caste practices in Muslim societies are similar to those of Hindu castes. While there is caste endogamy, hypergamy was accepted as elite Syed families accepted women in marriage from the Shekh caste below them. The rules of hospitality kept lower castes always in social debt to the upper castes.

9. This may have been the result of the absence of any upper caste Hindus and while some rules of caste endogamy and shared commensality within the upper caste Syeds was maintained, this exclusion did not extend to residence patterns.

10. Clause (4) of Article 243D of the Constitution ensured that one third of all seats would be reserved for Scheduled Castes; Doms were on that list and thus Nathu Dom was qualified. In West Bengal, 50% of all seats were also reserved for women.

11. This dominance of the Party and its comrades, was generally true across West Bengal during the Left Front years. (see Bhattacharya, 2016).

12. This was the characterised as the behaviour of a 'party state' by Bhattacharya, 2016.

13. A longer account of how this scandal was resolved and its impact on every day and electoral politics can be found in Chapter 3 of *Cultivating Democracy* (Banerjee, 2021).

14. This was a significant intervention by the Left Front government as SHGs in other states had become caste-based groups thereby making the possibility of social mixing impossible.

15. Other groups lasted as long as paddy could be husked and made into snacks. When that ran out, the groups also disbanded.

16. Sanyal also noted that Muslim women's full-fledged participation in the associational life of microcredit groups was hindered by more controlling gender norms and comparatively more stringent practices of female seclusion (Sanyal et al, 2015, p. 125). This may have been a supplementary factor for why a Hindu woman was chosen as president for a group composed mainly of Muslim women.

17. Distinguishing it from social capital that is 'more closely enshrined with capitalist notions of ambition, enterprise and social advancement' Dulhunty argues that 'Power with, is far more personal, psychological and is not enmeshed with neoliberalism.' (Sanyal et al, 2015, p. 730).

18. In her book *Shifting Landscapes*, Rita Brara proposed the commons as a 'counter-site' of the practices of the village residents (Brara, 2006, p. 238). She draws a contrast between two different kinds of sociality in a village that are generated by private property and the collective practices of managing the commons whereby the former is defined by individual property rights (e.g. 'X's fields') whereas the latter as belonging to the community (e.g. 'our well').

19. There were of course elements of both in the other e.g. the Comrade could be kind to an acolyte and women could be mean to each other, but the overall logic in each were different.

20. Patrick Heller also makes the argument that 'deepening democracy' is about greater participation in decision making and holding elected representative accountable. (Heller, 2019, p. 352)

Disclosure statement

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