

### Political Subjectivity and Revolutionary Motherhood:

A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF SURJEET KAUR

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*This article traces some aspects of activist and educator, Surjeet Kaur’s life trajectory. Kaur was an active member of the Communist Party of India (CPI) as well as the National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW). From 1981-83, Kaur was in East Berlin as a Representative of the Asian Commission of the WIDF (Women’s International Democratic Federation). This diversity of life experiences allowed for the crafting of networks with fellow activists within India as well as those from African and Asian contexts. The article is a biographical sketch and relies on the narrative and memories of Kaur’s daughter, Roly Jha, who accompanied her mother as a minor on her first trip ever to the GDR.*

The Women’s International Democratic Federation (WIDF) was an international women’s organization established in 1945 after World War II, which primarily concerned itself with issues such as world peace, dealing with threats of nuclear warfare, and establishing solidarity with anti-imperialist struggles. In the wake of the Cold War, for an organization like the WIDF that operated at the international scale, women’s rights were inextricable with the peace and solidarity movements. One of the ways of interweaving these two was through the rhetoric of motherhood. In their publications as well as conferences, the WIDF emphasized child welfare, and children’s upbringing and education in different parts of the world, especially in Africa, Asia and Latin America, which repeatedly brought the crucial role of mothers to the forefront. It also contributed to generating new ideas of motherhood in its own right. WIDF’s internationalism envisioned a different societal role for mothers, and women in general, in the struggle against colonialism and war, which

crossed the invisible lines between the public and private domains and encouraged women’s active participation in their contemporary politics.



Fig. 1: Portrait photograph of Surjeet Kaur, undated, Private photo album, Roly Jha.

While looking for African and Asian women within the WIDF, I encountered Surjeet Kaur, an activist from India, who had lived in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and participated in various international networks as an Indian representative at the WIDF. My first introduction to Kaur was through some of her writings in the WIDF magazine *Women of the Whole World*, and later on through a recount of her daughter’s memories of her. Therefore, even though I got my first deeper insights into her life trajectory as a mother-figure, through her daughter’s narratives, a deeper probing into her life indicated a somewhat exceptional trajectory within the constellation of the women’s movement in India, Afro-Asian solidarity, and internationalism(s) during the Cold War. Surjeet Kaur had come to East

Berlin as a Representative of the Asian Commission of the WIDF from 1981-1983. As an active member of the Communist Party of India (CPI) as well as the National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW), she had been asked by the NFIW to represent them at the WIDF. Not wanting to leave her child behind, Kaur arrived in East Berlin in 1981 with her fifteen-year-old daughter. This essay is a biographical sketch of some aspects of Surjeet Kaur's life as an activist, an educationist, and a mother. It relies on the narrative and memories of her daughter, Roly Jha, who accompanied her mother as a minor on her first trip ever to the GDR. Jha completed her schooling in East Berlin and eventually pursued her higher education in Medicine (later moving to Psychology) at the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. She thus continued to reside in East Berlin even after Kaur's return to India in 1983, and presently lives in Rösraath, Germany.

### Education and the formation of political subjectivity: Networks in India

Born in a Sikh family on 11th of November, 1922 in Uttar Pradesh, India, Surjeet Kaur experienced the social boundaries and limitations that came with being a girl in India (at the time) from an early age. She was not allowed to go to school given that most women of her family background were not educated. Seeing her younger brothers attend school, Kaur, however, insisted on being educated. It was also her mother, who had personally never received a formal education, who asserted that her daughters should at least learn at home. She thus ensured that all five of her children, whether male or female, had the possibility to study as long as they wanted to. Thus, her mother's struggle and resistance at home enabled a young Kaur to receive basic education from home. Upon her insistence, she could eventually also go to a school from grade VI onwards. This access to education played an important role in shaping her life course and choices, eventually also impacting her ideological formation.

Kaur had been exposed to liberal thought from her teenage years through her maternal uncle, Gurubaksh Singh, who founded Preet Nagar, the progressive intellectual movement which had

developed in Punjab. Literally meaning, the "City/Land of Love", Preet Nagar, a village in Punjab, was a community living space situated between Amritsar and Lahore where artists, thinkers, poets, activists gathered. Gurubaksh Singh had already started a magazine named *Preet Lari*, which became extremely popular and preceded the setting up of the township. Preet Nagar was the meeting place for many notable progressive thinkers from Punjab such as Nanak Singh, Balraj Sahni, Mohan Singh, Amrita Pritam, Sahir Ludhianvi, Imroz and others. Therefore, from quite early on, through Preet Nagar, Kaur had been introduced to ideas and visions of a left leaning, liberal society, which imagined men and women as equals. Kaur eventually joined the Indian National Congress (INC) along with her elder and younger sisters. Her political activism thus began with the nationalist anti-colonial movement.



Fig. 2: Portrait photographs of Surjeet Kaur from a page in a family album, undated, Private photo album, Roly Jha.

Kaur accompanied her younger brother to pursue her BA at Banaras Hindu University (BHU). She was initially enrolled in a college in undivided, pre-Partition Lahore (due to the location of the Preet Nagar movement), also attended by Amrita Pritam, who would later become an acclaimed novelist and poet. However, she eventually decided to leave Lahore and join BHU to be with her younger brother. It is during her student life in BHU that both siblings drifted from the Congress to the Communist movement. Their trajectory was quite similar to many of the leaders of the Communist Party of India (CPI), whose dissatisfaction with the leadership of the nationalist Congress party in the Indian anti-colonial struggle steered them towards the

communist movement, which had already been functioning well before India's independence but was in a chaotic state. The party was legalized in 1942 and it strengthened itself thereafter. The desertion of so many young cadres immediately after the independence of India in 1947, had created an atmosphere of discontent within the higher leadership of the Congress party.

Kaur's daughter recalls in her interview in 2024 that Kaur, and several others like her, who had left the Congress Party to join the communist movement, "they were (...) being punished in the way that life was not easy for them, going for meetings or demonstrations, they would often end up in jail."<sup>1</sup> Managing university along with her active involvement in the Party, she successfully received both her Bachelor's and Master's degrees from BHU. When her brother took the decision to leave Banaras and devote his life to the Communist movement and its work despite topping his Engineering degree, Surjeet Kaur also came back to Kanpur and began pursuing her M.Ed degree at Kanpur University. In Kanpur, she continued working for the Communist Party. She was driven with the strong urge to work for Indian women. The women's question had always occupied her. She realized that the country had gained independence but not its women. For her, activism was thus a combination of grassroots work with women as well as contributing to society through a teaching career. Having a professional career and her own income was crucial to her for her own independence as a woman.

Kaur was working at a time when the Communist movement in Kanpur, especially the Kanpur Trade Union Movement, was quite vibrant and strong. From her interest in the women's movement, she became an active member of the National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW). Her engagements included working with rural women on different issues, demonstrations, protests, and sit-ins around Kanpur. It was through her work for the movement that she also met the man who would later become her partner and husband, fellow comrade and Secretary of the Kanpur Communist Party, Mr. Kali Shankar Shukla. After getting married in 1953, both of them later moved to the city of

Lucknow, the capital of Uttar Pradesh. In Lucknow, Kaur and Shukla, lived in a commune near Daryaganj, which was also the residence of many of their fellow comrades who were well-known figures in the Indian left movement (artists, poets and authors among others) such as Balraj Sahni, Kaifi Azmi, Shaukat Azmi and others. Through her pre-existing networks and the various political networks she crafted herself, Surjeet Kaur had become a well-known activist in the Indian left movement, which later on also enabled her to participate in and create new international networks. Already in the 1970s, during her term as the General Secretary of the NFIW office in Uttar Pradesh, Vimla Farooqui, the all-India General Secretary of the NFIW, asked Kaur if she would be willing to work in the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF) office as a representative of the NFIW when the earlier representative wished to come back. Given her daughter was still young, a teenager, she did not wish to go alone to East Berlin and agreed to go only on the condition that her daughter was also allowed to accompany her.

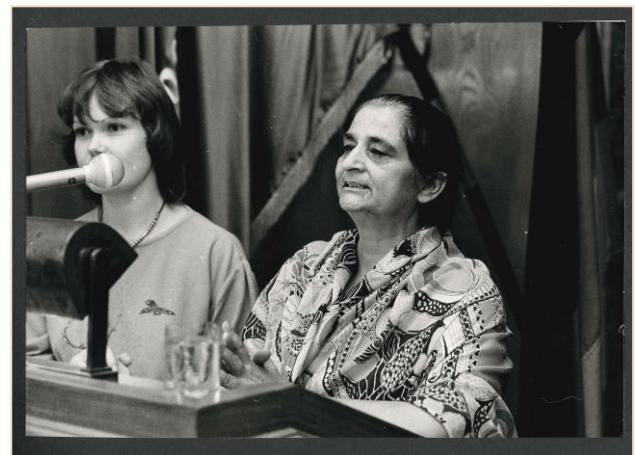


Fig. 3: Photograph of Surjeet Kaur giving a speech, undated, Private photo album, Roly Jha.

<sup>1</sup> Roly Jha (daughter of Surjeet Kaur), in conversation with Anandita Bajpai, Rösrath, Germany, 15.08.2024.



Fig. 4: Photograph of an international conference. Kaur fourth from left, undated, Private photo album, Roly Jha.

### Friendship, Solidarity and Internationalism(s):

#### International Networks through WIDF

Thus, with everything arranged, Surjeet Kaur arrived in East Germany in 1981 as a representative of the National Federation of Indian Women within the WIDF and began her tenure. While at NFIW, she had been involved with grassroots level work with Indian women, actively participating in movements and protests, the international platform provided her an exposure to women’s problems all over the world. This was also the period of the United Nations Decade for Women (1975-1985) which witnessed several activities and resolutions taken by the UN for the betterment of women’s conditions. As an Indian passport holder, travel to the western world was easier for Kaur than for her colleagues from socialist countries. Therefore, for the three years of her tenure at WIDF in East Berlin (1981-84), she travelled to numerous countries for conferences, meetings, or collecting reports on the conditions of women. Her daughter recollects her meetings with important men and women in different parts of the world, stories of which left impressions on the young girl’s mind. Surjeet Kaur also headed the delegation which accompanied Valentina Tereshkova to the United Nations. She supported WIDF’s activities and her wish to have Kaur onboard was also strategic, given that India and the Indian state had an important voice in such contexts as one of the key founding states of the Non-Alignment Movement (NAM).

Being able to work for not only Indian women, but also to broaden the scope of work excited Kaur.

“When she was working in Gorakhpur with the women, nobody in New York would know what was happening in Gorakhpur or in Tundla or Barabanki. So, she was very happy about (...) getting to talk about Indian women and their struggles and getting to hear from them,”<sup>2</sup> Roly Jha recounts from conversations with her mother. WIDF and its transnational networks became a means for Kaur to acquaint herself with struggles and achievements of women from different parts of the world, especially womens’ activisms in Latin American, Asian and African contexts. It is from such lived moments of solidarity and understanding, that new international friendships were forged.



Fig. 5: Surjeet Kaur giving a speech at an event of International Solidarity against Racism and Sexism, circa 1981-83, Private photo album, Roly Jha.



<sup>2</sup> Jha, 15.08.2024.

Fig. 6: Surjeet Kaur at an event of International Solidarity against Racism and Sexism, circa 1981-83, Private photo album, Roly Jha.

Kaur had built friendships with women from different parts of the world, many of whom, even after she left the GDR, maintained lifelong connections with her daughter, Roly. Gisella Bennett, one of the workers in the WIDF, whom she called “Mutti” (mother) became almost her foster mother, helping her in many situations. As a young student, she also frequented the home of Malobika Chattopadhyay, who came to East Berlin in 1984 as Kaur’s successor at WIDF. Roly Jha fondly remembers the time: “I became her (Malobika’s) family and she became mine<sup>3</sup>” [3]. Upon her second visit to Berlin years later on the occasion of Gisella Bennett’s 90th birthday, Chattopadhyay stayed with Jha at her residence. Her name always finds fond mentions in Malobika Chattopadhyay’s memoirs of her times spent in Berlin— Biswaloker Ahvane (*Call of the World*). Looking for traces of Surjeet Kaur also led me to other women in the WIDF, whom she had crossed paths with— women with similar socio-political backgrounds, like Bei Handa from Mongolia, Sawsan Akhmet from Iraq, Joan Oehme from South Africa. Oehme as well as other members of the WIDF from South Africa, such as Mita Seperepere (mentioned in Chattopadhyay’s writings) or Kate Mollale (photographed in Oehme’s private collections), were anti-Apartheid activists as young students/workers in South Africa and continued their fight against racism and colonialism in international networks that they built when they arrived in East Berlin and became involved with the WIDF. These various everyday entanglements reveal how women from Asia and Africa were interacting and forming friendships and solidarities beyond rigid Cold War borders.



Fig. 7: Surjeet Kaur and other WIDF delegates at a WIDF congress in Prague 1983, Private photo album, Roly Jha.

## WIDF and Revolutionary Motherhood

While motherhood as a topic was a popular rhetorical tool, which was commonly used by the WIDF in its internationalist discourse, it was not seen as a biological role women were destined to fulfil. Rather, the word/phrase or “revolutionary motherhood”, as Elisabeth Armstrong calls it, was utilized as an activist strategy for political mobilisation. Motherhood meant raising and educating children, but at the time it also meant acts of resistance— such as the WIDF calling upon European women to stop their sons from going to wars, tearing up their enlistment letters or stopping their governments from declaring wars. With solidarity towards the Third World, anti-imperialism broadened this idea of motherhood beyond nations, territories and races.

Revolutionary motherhood, in these appeals, sought a global peace that would keep sons and husbands out of the war machine. When these men were conscripted by an imperialist state, revolutionary motherhood intervened to blockade the loading of trains and ships with the materials for war.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Jha, 15.08.2024.

<sup>4</sup> Elisabeth B. Armstrong, *Bury the Corpse of Colonialism* (University of California Press, 2023), 12.



Fig. 8: [From left to right] Freda Brown (Vice-President of the WIDF), Surjeet Kaur, Bei Handa (Mongolian delegate), Ribbon (South African delegate), Mariam Vire-Tuominen (in the middle) and Roly Jha, circa 1981-83. Also to be seen in the photo is Kaur's/Jha's friend, journalist and author Arif Naqvi. Private photo album, Roly Jha.



Fig. 10: Young Roly Jha with Bei Handa (left), delegate of the WIDF from Mongolia and Ribbon (right), a South African delegate of the WIDF, circa 1981-83, Private photo album, Roly Jha.



Fig. 9: Celebrations of Surjeet Kaur's birthday by WIDF staff, circa 1981-83, exact date unknown, Private photo album, Roly Jha.

The WIDF's imagination of a universal femininity through motherhood, especially in its early years, also created new ideas of femininity and motherhood. In India, the dominant notions of femininity during the colonial period had been of domestic conjugality. As Partha Chatterjee mentions, for Indian nationalists, women had largely been seen as the embodiment or repository of culture, constrained to the inner domain of the 'home' which was inaccessible to the outer domain of colonial oppression.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, colonial law, too, distinguished between the public sphere, modelled after European society and the personal law which was based on religion and customs of the 'locals'.<sup>6</sup> Liberal and Hindu nationalism(s) had thus naturally followed the colonial division of these two spheres. Ania Loomba points out that women's struggle against both colonial and indigenous patriarchies were underlined by this division of the public and the private, the home and the world. Women who were part of the nationalist movements too had often drawn from the ideals of Hindu femininity from the discourses of Hindu nationalism, equating political devotion with sexual renunciation, an ideal solidified by Gandhian nationalism. Revolutionaries and communists alike, inherited these traditions as well as the rubrics of the public and the private and had to negotiate with them. As Loomba demonstrates, while women in conventional nationalism participated in the nationalist movement while

<sup>5</sup> Partha Chatterjee, "The Nation and Its Women", in *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton University Press, 1993), 120-121.

<sup>6</sup> Ania Loomba, *Revolutionary Desires: Women, Communism and Feminism in India* (Routledge, 2018), 14.

never questioning the cultural roles of women, communist women had imagined or inhabited alternative “models of inhabiting personal relationships, the bonds of parenthood, conjugality, and friendship.”<sup>7</sup>

Surjeet Kaur, too, had taken charge of her own life, reshaping the norms of sexuality and marriage of her times. She had pursued relationships and married out of her own choice, just as she pursued her education and fought for it. Notwithstanding any societal pressure, she had married a fellow comrade, a “whole-timer” of the Kanpur Communist Party, Kali Shankar Shukla. She had chosen her own partner in life, despite him not meeting the societal (financial status) expectations from a husband. She was the primary breadwinner of the family. Surjeet Kaur was not a conventional mother in that sense either. Her daughter, the younger of the two children, was born when she was 42 years of age. When her daughter was one and a half years old, she had the opportunity, through the socialist Indo-Soviet friendship networks which both she and her husband were part of, to go to Moscow and pursue her PhD. The decision to pursue a PhD was seen by Kaur as a necessity to some extent. Despite her high qualifications of having a Bachelor’s, and two Masters’ degrees (quite an achievement also for her male colleagues at the time), as a woman, Kaur faced discrimination when it came to selection for jobs. Kaur finally got the PhD opportunity in Moscow and a day-care/creche was arranged for her child while she pursued her research. But as Roly Jha recounts,

“All this was waiting for my mother to say yes to it. Her passport was ready. Everything was done. Then she decided, if she takes her child with her, she would be there alone. Her parents (...) her husband, no friends she knows are coming with her. What will she do if the child falls sick? (...) She would have to take care of the child and she will be out of her research. So, she decided that if I pursue this I am not taking my child with me. And if I come back in between to my child, I will never be able to go back again. So, I am going away for four years, (...) leaving this child with someone whom I trust.”<sup>8</sup>

Eventually Kaur left her child in the care of her sister in the city of Bhubaneswar. An act, which even these days women would be criticised for. She also deliberately did not once return for four years to see her in between because (in her own words) she needed to first finish her education with full focus, and then get a job to support her family, her own work as an activist, as well as her husband who was a whole-timer of the Communist Party of India. The same one-and-a-half-year-old child would later accompany her as a teenager to the GDR. Kaur thus gave equal importance both to her role as a mother as well as to her professional life, when the former is often expected to surpass all the other roles a woman inhabits. Her job as a teacher in a women’s college was also part of her activism. She taught girls, was eager to help anyone who approached her, insisted on women’s education whether they were married or had children. Jha’s recollections of narratives she has been told of her mother and her own testimony aptly show that Surjeet Kaur’s life was fraught with moments of defiance of oppressive authority, challenging social norms, especially those that confined women’s independence and of a life dedicated to Indian women’s struggle.

To cite just one of the several vignettes narrated by Jha— Kaur cycled every morning to college, while being pregnant, clad in a sari, with her big belly visible, this sight was shocking to most around her, if not all. “My mother was never ever affected much by what others think of her. I have always seen that even as I was growing up”, Jha recalls. She and her husband had both been actively part of the Communist Party activities in UP— its agitations, dharnas (sit-ins), protests and movements. They were always in and out of jails. She had also gone on a hunger strike in jail while 7-8 months pregnant, forcing the authorities to ultimately inject her with intravenous glucose in order to avoid the responsibility of any accident.

<sup>7</sup> Loomba, *Revolutionary Desires* (Routledge, 2018), 19.

<sup>8</sup> Jha, 15.08.2024.



Fig. 11. Surjeet Kaur on her travels as a WIDF delegate, circa 1981-83, Private photo album, Roly Jha.



Fig. 12: Surjeet Kaur on one of her international visits as member of a WIDF delegation, circa 1981-83, Private photo album, Roly Jha.

In *Guerrilla Mothers and Distant Doubles: West German Women Look at China and Vietnam, 1968-1982*, Quinn Slobodian talks about how West German women looked up to China or revolutionary Vietnam as societies where women had achieved a status equal to men. Influenced by East Asian Communism, West German feminists had for a certain period built their idea of a global socialist framework for their own activism.<sup>9</sup>



Fig. 13: Cover of *Gidra*, vol. 2, no. 3, March 1970 Issue, a student newspaper.

An image like this on the front page of the March 1970 issue of *Gidra*, a newspaper published by the Asian-American students at the University of California shows the inspirational, somewhat romanticized imagination of mothers as revolutionaries, which was circulating around this time.<sup>10</sup> While the militant struggle of communist East Asia had engendered this popular imagination, the WIDF was imagining revolutionary motherhood through the lens of peace.

Images like this were circulated by the WIDF through their publications, which suggested and reinforced mothers' important political role in the peace movement. Women's political actions too often blurred the borders of the public and the private. While the more public, explicitly political acts are understood as political acts, private lives are often not seen within the realm of the political. Motherhood inhabited that nascent space where the domestic and the public, the public and the private came together. While these various imaginations of motherhood travelled and crossed the Cold War borders, an act like Surjeet Kaur's was an actual example of mothers on the ground, who were fighting oppressions of the state— women embodying new roles and creating alternative visions of femininity and activism at the same time.

9 Quinn Slobodian, "Guerrilla Mothers and Distant Doubles: West German Women Look at China and Vietnam, 1968-1982," *Zeithistorische Forschungen, /Studies in Contemporary History* 12 (2015): 39-65, <https://doi.org/10.14765/zsf.dok-1461>.

10 *Gidra*, vol. 2, no. 3, March 1970, Courtesy of the *Gidra* Collection, Densho Digital Repository, <https://ddr.densho.org/ddr-densho-297-12/>.





Fig. 14: Images from WIDF's magazine *Women of the Whole World*, no. 3, 1960, pp. 6-7.

After she left the WIDF, Surjeet Kaur left her job in the college and devoted her entire time to NFIW till her very abrupt death in 2002. She, like several other women in the WIDF and women working in different parts of the world for the women's movement, fought different forms of patriarchy as well as different kinds of structures of power and discrimination on an everyday basis. It is important to see Kaur's (and her comrades') political contributions, but it is also equally crucial to write the histories of their personal lives; to sketch how the "personal" was "political" for them; to understand how they navigated the different domains of the public and the domestic; and to trace how they practised their politics throughout their lives as mothers, workers, citizens and internationalist activists. Kaur was not just an Indian activist working for the cause of different women in India, her life trajectory is also illustrative of internationalism(s) and how Cold War ideological divides could not deter women across the ideological spectrum to engage with each other and to actively build networks that helped them in their own local agendas.

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