

India: North Kolkata LGBTQ Community Dialogue with CPI(M) Candidate

Wednesday 1 May 2019, by [SANYAL Sourodipto](#) (Date first published: 22 April 2019).

Though LGBT voter numbers are unlikely to change the electoral outcome, CPI(M) candidate Kaninika Bose (Ghosh) made time to meet members of the queer community.

Kolkata: Around twenty people have assembled on a hot Sunday afternoon inside the Lokayat Samaj Trust auditorium at Ripon Street in central Kolkata. A one-of-a-kind political engagement, unusual for elections in India, is awaited.

Kaninika Bose (Ghosh), the Communist Party of India (Marxist) candidate from the Kolkata North Lok Sabha constituency, which goes to polls on May 19, will interact with members of the LGBTQIA+ community. The event is titled “Kaninika meets LGBTQIA+”.

The CPI(M), in its 2019 Lok Sabha election [manifesto](#), has addressed issues concerning the LGBTQIA+ community. It promises to introduce anti-discriminatory laws, provide reservations for members of the community in educational institutions, condemns the controversial Transgender Persons Bill, 2019, which lapsed in the Rajya Sabha earlier this year, amongst others.

Kaninika Bose (Ghosh) arrives five minutes before the clock strikes three. By this time, all the red chairs have been occupied, and around 40 people are present.

Members of the queer community, the CPI(M) and its Students’ Federation of India (SFI) take turns to share their points of view from the podium. Another important speaker is Ranjita Sinha, a transgender woman and a member of the [Transgender Development Board](#) under the department of women development and social welfare, which was set up by the Mamata Banerjee-led West Bengal government in July 2015.

Ranjita Sinha is highly critical of how the board has functioned over the last four years. She says, “For three years, I was in touch with the board. But in many areas, I felt... by keeping us under the aegis of the the women and child department, that I have given my independence to women. They will decide for us what is right and what is wrong.”

She also told me in a conversation after the speech, “We (the board) have met 12 times in three years. No work has been done.”

However, Manabi Bandopadhyay, the vice-chairperson of the Transgender Development Board and the principal of the Krishnagar Women’s College in Nadia district has been full of [praise](#) for the Mamata Banerjee government. She is critical of the CPI(M)-led Left Front government, which she claims refused to identify her as a woman in official government records. This was possible only after the Trinamool Congress came to power in 2011.

Bandopadhyay became the principal of Kirishnagar Women’s College in June 2015, the [first](#) transgender person to occupy such a position in an Indian college.

Sinha is critical of Bandopadhyay even though she refers to her as a 'good friend' and 'sister'. She told me, "Since she (Bandopadhyay) is working for the government or has got the principal's post due to the government, some sort of manipulation is going on."

In April 2018, a group of ten transgender activists [sought](#) Bandopadhyay's removal as the vice-chairperson of the Transgender Development Board. Sinha was one of them.

Despite not being a known face like Ranjita, Abir, a young and fiery woman who worked for the SFI during her days in Jadavpur University surprises the audience. She criticises the left for being trapped in a 'dangerous patriarchal cage' and not having done enough for the queer community over the years.

Pointing out that the CPI(M)'s manifesto talks about the LGBTQIA+ community under a sub-head "Transgender", she says angrily, "Do all of you understand LGBTIQ+? I have serious doubts. In the manifesto, do you only want to talk about the transgender community? Otherwise, why is the subtitle 'transgender'? This is something I still have not been able to understand. Because the umbrella term is not 'transgender'. It is LGBTQ."

She embarrasses the party, but is not interrupted even once during her five-minute speech.

The last scheduled speaker is Kaninika Bose (Ghosh). A woman in her early 50s, she was the CPI(M) candidate in both the [2016](#) and [2011](#) vidhan sabha elections from the Kashipur-Belgachhia assembly constituency, which comes under the Kolkata North Lok Sabha constituency. On both occasions, she lost to the Trinamool candidate Mala Saha.

She speaks for a little more than 13 minutes and tries to convince the crowd that the CPI(M)'s fight for the rights of the queer community is not a ploy during the elections. She says, "This fight won't end on May 19, it has just begun." Many in the audience clap.

Kaninika Bose appeals to the audience to accompany her when she files the nomination on April 24. "On 24th, we'll go to file nomination. Come if you want to. We have no problems whatsoever," she adds, as the small but enthusiastic audience applauds.

After the meeting ends, she tells this reporter that the potential electoral damage of associating with a stigmatised community in a conservative India does not concern her. She says, "Does that mean I don't talk about an oppressed human being? Is politics about getting votes by forgetting values?"

The event was attended only by a handful of people and hardly received any media coverage. It is unlikely to change the electoral outcome in the constituency.

However, the fact that a mainstream national party such as the CPI(M) is engaging with sexual minorities can only be a positive step for the world's largest democracy.

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