THE STATE AND THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT IN INDIA

A Report

Indian Association of Women's Studies

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Report of a Workshop held in Delhi,
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Indian Association of Women's Studies

Preface

In addition to organising the large bi-annual National Conference on Women's Studies, the Indian Association of Women's Studies has always wanted to organise workshops in different regions of the country.

On the initiative of some of our members and in close collaboration with other organisations, the IAWS organised three workshops in 1994-95.

The first workshop was on "The State and the Women's Movement in India", held in Delhi in October 1994. The initiative for organising this workshop was taken by Kavita Srivastava, Abha Bhaiya, Nandita Gandhi, Nandita Shah and Amrita Chhachhi.

The second workshop was organised on "Feminist Approaches to Economic Theory" by Maithreyi Krishnaraj and Devaki Jain, at the Singamma Sreenivasan Foundation, Bangalore, in August 1995.

The third workshop, "Re-examining the Indian Family" was co-sponsored by IAWS, Jadavpur School of Women's Studies and Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, and held in Calcutta in July 1995. Nirmala Banerjee and Jasodhara Bagchi shouldered the entire responsibility of conceptualising and organising this workshop.

Working in close partnership with our members and their organisations has been an extremely valuable experience, and one that we hope will extend to other groups and institutions in the future.

We are happy to share with you the reports of the three workshops and we hope they will contribute to ongoing debates on these issues in the women's movement.

KAMLA BHASIN
General Secretary

December, 1995

The State and the Women's Movement

Moving beyond the 'in' and 'against' the State debate

The contemporary Indian women's movement and the State have always shared an ambivalent relationship with each other. The women's movement has protested against and demanded a series of legal reforms like amendments in rape and dowry laws; banning amniocentesis; reserving quotas; setting up of commissions; etc. Its persistent campaigns have forced the State to recognise the subordinate status of women and given women's issues much needed visibility. The State has often consulted women's groups on the formulation of policies and legislation, and its list of legal provisions, plans and programmes is truly impressive.

On the other hand, the State has continued to reinforce the inequality between the sexes, the subordinate status of women, and oppression on them through the non-recognition of women's unpaid domestic labour; seeing them as dependents of men; sanctioning discriminatory personal laws, and marginalising and impoverishing women in the development process. Its own arms — the police and the judiciary — are not only gender blind but at times deliberately anti-women. Many experiences of women's groups with the government, its bureaucracy and especially the police have been negative and dismaying. This has led to scepticism, suspicion and often hostility within the women's movement.

How should the women's movement strategise vis-a-vis the State? This is an old debate but continues to be on the agenda because both the women's movement and the State, and the context of their interaction, are constantly shifting.

Moving beyond

The women's movement is not a homogeneous group or even a federation of different groups. It has streams of seemingly different groups, with various ideologies and political party affiliations, and a range of strategies. There is no one voice but the unifying note of a basic acceptance of women's oppression and a belief that it can be eliminated. Thus from within the women's movement, there is no one characterisation of the State.

Rather, it has put forward what the State is not : it is not monolithic, it is not dominated by only one class or caste group but by shifting groups, it is not gender neutral and it is not apart from or outside of society. Therefore the debate within the women's movement has not centred around the nature of the State, largely because of its heterogeneity and because, as a movement, it has no electoral

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ambitions nor does it profess seizure of state power. What then have been the contours of the debate on the relationship of the State and the women's movement ?

The debate has very often touched on 'in' and 'against' the State positions. Some of the 'against' proponents have held that given the State's dominant class, caste and gender interests, all cooperation with it will be frustrating or a failure. Some bring in the classical 'reform versus revolution' overtones in the context of women's issues and the role of the women's movement. Others have voiced their concern at the State's co-option of the movement's language, issues and its activists.

Women within state bodies and programmes, concerned academics and activists would like to take advantage of the State's structural ambiguity and amorphousness, of the conflicting interests of the dominant groups within it and the rising consciousness regarding women's oppression. These often give women the possibility of the creation of some space for their own issues and strategies. It also carries the struggle against patriarchy into the State, where it is so insidiously installed and powerfully supported by its entire machinery. Many activists choose to selectively strategise, confront and co-operate according to the issue.

At this juncture, it is necessary that the debate on the relationship of the movement to the State is raised afresh because the scenario has changed drastically in the past decade. The contemporary women's movement is two decades old. It has grown in terms of newer members and an enlarging base; there is a shift from specific women's issues to a feminist perspective on all issues, and its strategies have become multi-pronged and diverse. The State is being pressurised by international finance agencies into introducing a Structural Adjustment Programme, by fundamentalist forces and by the rise of caste-based political parties. In a bid to accommodate the women's movement, it has come up with more policies and legislation. Thousands of women are being educated non-formally, empowered with consciousness about their rights, given space in local self government, etc.

Women activists cannot ignore the issue of reservations for women when thousands of rural women candidates will be affected by it. The Mahila Samakhya, a non-formal education programme, is most unlike government programmes as it is implemented by a combination of NGO and official inputs and consciously avoids targets; instead, it concentrates on raising women's awareness. If the State were willing to set up more special police cells, would the movement endorse such a move?

The State is attempting to reduce its responsibilities in welfare sectors like health and education for which it is increasing its contact with NGOs and women's groups. At the same time, it is increasing its control over citizens through its population policies, building dams which will uproot tribals and harm the environment, encouraging corruption, etc.

Is it possible to move beyond the physicalist position of 'in' and 'against', into a debate on how the women's movement has addressed the State in its various campaigns, its objectives, successes, illusions? Did the movement end up giving more power to the State through its demands for legislation? The State represents only one way and mode of struggle, many others lie outside its ambit. Can the women's movement explore ways of empowering women without the involvement of the State? Finally, what are the feminist principles and vision which will form the basis for an evaluation of the State's and other programmes for women, for a critique and confirmation of co-option?

The debate

The workshop put forward the following questions for debate:

1. What are the different ways women's groups have interacted with the State? Experiences, insights and observations on some of the different campaigns aimed at the State.

2. Defining collaboration and co-option. Can all forms of collaboration be equated to co-option?

3. What are the experiences of women's groups that have experimented with non-State interventions?

4. How can the women's movement be strengthened to resist State pressure on women and how can it ensure accountability?

5. What are feminist principles and a feminist vision of society? How can multi-pronged strategies be developed?

The workshop was an attempt at initiating such a debate. Participants came from different backgrounds, with diverse experiences of the movement (due to being located within different structures and ideologies) and of working with the government. It was hoped that this variety would enrich and help evolve a comprehensive understanding of the subject.

The workshop design

The first part consisted of a panel of academics addressing the group on the subject of the State. Once again the speakers came from different backgrounds — Rajni Kothari, political analyst and development thinker made an exhaustive presentation, followed by Bina Agarwal, feminist economist, and Kumkum Sangari, a feminist scholar, teacher and activist.

Part two consisted of practitioners presenting case studies through which the character of the State and its interface with the women's movement could be understood in the context of our praxis.

The third and concluding part of the workshop consisted of rethinking the agenda of the women's movement and the strategy to be used in interacting with the State. In some sections of the report we have used the narrative form, particularly while reporting the case studies. This may seem lengthy and at times without a central thrust but we do hope that the process will further discussion and debate and help us reorganise our categories of thought.

The State and
the Women's Movement:
A Conceptual Understanding

Excerpted from a presentation by Rajni Kothari

In January 2001, we are likely to confront a motley mix of institutions, all undergoing change and facing uncertainty and disorder at various thresholds of the historical enterprise.... In particular it is the institution of the State as a dominant structure, defining the whole phenomenon of power and authority in human affairs through the advent of modernity, and its cultural and political concomitants, that is in the process of erosion, facing a highly uncertain future.

The modern state in perspective

The State in modern times has been a source of both law and legitimacy, of authority and monopoly over coercive power (or so it was presumed, and in that presumption lay its power), a source also of security for the people, of systems of justice, equality and accountability, and through them all, of conditions for freedom and creativity, the arts and the pursuit of excellence. It has been the premier institution through which the multiplicity and plurality of the civil domain has been ordered in both perception and reality.

The modern State began as both a philosophical idea and a political construct to deal with a widespread condition of chaos and uncertainty and to provide conditions of peace, order and security in their place. So germane was it to the human enterprise at that stage (towards the end of the middle ages) that it was soon institutionalised by becoming an international actor for the promotion of the same idea of peace and security, on a world scale. Insisting on the identity it creates being prior to all other identities, the State has either reduced all other corporate identities to individualised subjects or, to the extent that it admits the existence of the former in the form of a complex called "civil society", it has purported to be both the embodiment and the protector of such civil society.

It is from this search for centrality and legitimacy in the modern world, despite so much diversity all around, that a series of theoretical models defining the relationship between the State and the individual or the State and the citizen, have emerged. We have had the bourgeois, democratic, liberal, institutional model of the State based on the theory of accountability. Different from, but at times complementing it, has been the social democratic model of the State assuming responsibility for social transformation and the welfare of the people. We have had the Marxist model which has considered the bourgeoisie as a committee of the dominant classes

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but one which also supervises relations of production and by their very logic creates contradictions that lead to a revolutionary takeover.

In recent decades, with growing sensitisation on the human dimensions of the State and its policies, and a realization of its increasingly repressive and exploitative thrust in both bourgeois and communist countries, a somewhat different conception of radical-ism in the form of a liberal-cum-neo-Marxist model of the State has emerged. It is seen as a space in which the struggle for civil and democratic rights is being waged with a view to usher in a decentralised, sustainable and people-centred structure of institu-tions that would promote social transformation. There is also a Gandhian model of the State as a trustee and arbiter between conflicting interests, that flows from the perspective of serving the deprived strata of society through modes of decentralisation and people's empowerment. My own idea (not yet a model) of the State is that of a plural arena which, while it displays growing use and misuse of the coercive apparatus, continues to be a mediator between contending groups claiming 'rights' of diverse citizen groups and 'privileges' of less diverse yet differentiated structures of entrenched interests, classes and bureaucracies. I think of it as a problematic of a still relevant arena encompassing the large diversity of both contending and coalescing populations and interests within a context of historic transformation, based on the democratic aspirations of people.

Each one of these models of the role and significance of the State is in transition. While on the one hand there is still a wide degree of faith in the State, especially amongst the poor, the oppressed, the minorities and women on the other, it is faced with growing scepticism and doubts about its efficacy. Instead of centrality and dominance, we are witnessing the State as increasingly marginal in its role and status in civil society, characterised by a growing myopia, dehumanisation and brutalisation in its relationship with this same civil society. Interestingly, the marginalisation of the State is a result of both over-extension and shrinkage. The international order itself which for long was based on the State system (even the capitalist development model had accepted the State as a key instrumentality) faces an era of uncertainty following the Reaganite swing to the right. But the basic mind-set of an international order based on the State remains in place and conditions the entire functioning of the world system. Both the so-called 'new world order' and the new Pax Americana sound ominous for a stable and predictable world order.

A far more serious impact of this mind-set is the new backlash on civil society and at the grassroots. With this, the State as an institution is under severe strain. Consequently it faces a variety of threats, both for taking it over and undermining it, in the names of the economy, world security, religion, ethnicity and notions of self-determination. This follows both the collapse of the Soviet model of State hegemony in ordering social and economic

relationships, and the decline of the autonomy and legitimacy of the State in large parts of the Third World.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and its implications for the future of the State

In a way the collapse of the Soviet Union provides us a historical vantage point from which to appreciate the growing erosion, marginalisation and over-extension of the State. Paradoxical as it may seem, while the Soviet Union was the ultimate example of state power it also, over time, made for its erosion and delegitimisation, a growing admission of the incapacity of the instrumentalities of state and party and loss of faith in them among both the rulers and the ruled. While we are still too close to events in the Soviet Union and their full significance is still unravelling, there is little doubt that what we witnessed at the end of the Eighties was in many ways unique in modern history; it cannot be explained except by reference to the hollowness of the whole corpus of the State in the former Soviet Union. Never before has a leadership in control of so much power itself dismantled the whole apparatus, allowed its vassals to go their own way, and completely uprooted its ideological moorings. Never before has so much change been brought about almost wholly non-violently, and that too in a society that has never accepted the creed of non-violence; never before has a major power so sharply reduced its military might, its surveillance machinery, or so drastically clipped the power of an all-pervasive centralised party on which the State relied so heavily for more than seventy years. What American imperial power and its worldwide network had failed to achieve for over 45 years was achieved by the play of ideas and force of conviction of a few individuals occupying strategic positions, without any powerful and widespread movement from below. What has happened is nothing short of an elite relinquishing its enormous power in order to usher its country towards political and social change.

We have still not arrived at the stage where we are willing to write off the modern State. But that it faces increasing challenge, above all from the very dialectic it has let loose upon itself through the playing out or over-playing of its own (inherent) logic, is without doubt. The challenge is by no means limited to this dialectic — it could have been contained and dealt with if it were just that. But the crisis has been accentuated by the rise of new and powerful forces that have emerged outside the main arena of the State while deeply affecting its status and survival as an institution, its role and position in human affairs. It is to these that we shall now turn.

New challenges affecting the survival of the State

The modern State and particularly the nation-state as a centralised structure faces serious challenges from at least three major sources. First, for the last few decades, technology seems to be replacing politics and socio-economic factors in the functioning of modern society, and this is seriously affecting the role of the State in civil society. It is leading to a process of depoliticisation, and the displacement of the civil servant who was accountable to elected bodies and the people at large, by the technocrat, who is

accountable only to his peers and to the momentum generated by the machine. It is not as if technology was absent in earlier periods of history, but that it was still a servant of man and of nations. The significant changes that have come about are that this technology, whether in the field of military R&D, informatics, medicine or agriculture (to say nothing of genetics, eugenics and cloning) is taking on an autonomy that is rapidly relegating the whole of mankind and civilization to a captive status. It is homogenising diverse cultures and social sectors and marginalising the political process. Naturally, in a technologically-determined world where there is little scope for real choice of a socio-political kind, the State loses its importance, and governance itself undergoes a radical transformation. The widespread sense of insecurity around the world, including among those who are supposed to be in charge, is primarily due to this condition created by modern technology and its institutional catalysts (the MNCs). Civil society, lay citizens, and the State itself are being pushed towards it.

However, exactly when the State is weak and disembodied before the advance of technology, it faces another major challenge from a source which is the polar opposite of technology and its homogenising mission. This is the assertion, with a vengeance, of cultures, ethnicity, nationalities, pluralisms, when entire societies are bursting at the seams in so many regions of the world, when the tension and violence generated by the cult of consumerism is being met by the violence of terrorism and fundamentalism, and the modern State as we have known it is ceasing to be able to mediate between the two. And it is also ceasing to be an embodiment of civil society and a protector of the poor, the weak and the oppressed. The critique of the State as an arena of repression and terror is wholly valid as an empirical description of the relationship between the State and the citizen, but it must take cognizance of the fact that it is also a State that has become powerless before the onslaught of the deep dialectic of technology and culture in our time. The State is ceasing to be a State: it is becoming something else which we, as witnesses to the end of the millennium, must try to fathom but have so far been unable to.

This brings us to the third major challenge to the modern State, namely the emergence of a new ideology, or rather a mind-set that is being proposed as the solution to all our problems and crises, including the crisis of the State, of the economy and of civil society. This mind-set, far from rejecting the role of modern technology, is proposing to make it the new god, departing from the old ideologies of liberty, equality and fraternity, from the role of the State in promoting these values, proposing to marginalise both god and the State, making human greed and avarice the prime movers of men and societies. Yet it presents itself as the harbinger of a new utopia of globalisation, of the integration of cultures and diversities into one single marketplace, nudging along governments and elites and, indeed, the masses to catch up with this new fantasy. This is not an integration based on diversity or of diverse entities finding common ground, but one based on cut-throat competition and

rivalry, using whichever means that work, giving a new lease of life to the old idea of survival of the fittest.

As mentioned in the beginning, the modern State emerged as a philosophical idea to deal with growing chaos and uncertainty, promising both order and justice. It seems to be ending as a project of the modern age, exposing the world once again to chaos and uncertainty, without either order or justice.

Presentation by Bina Agarwal

Bina began by stating that today there is a dire need to theorise the relationship of the women's movement with the State. Our characterisation of the State will determine our relationship to it, but whatever the nature of our characterisation, it ought to be based on the following three aspects:

1. Distinguish between the State as a political entity and the State as an economic entity. Bina gave the example of Iran which is a theocratic State politically, but has a capitalist economy. Similarly, China, although still a socialist State is also pursuing a capitalist economy. Thus using terms like 'capitalist state' per se don't help because the institution of the market has become all pervasive. Aspects of market operation affect disadvantaged groups regardless of political systems.

2. The State can be characterised as an arena of contestation between individuals/groups/regions in society (nation) and between elements within the State apparatus itself. The basis of this proposition is understanding that the State is not a monolith, does not represent a uniform class influence, or is uniformly patriarchal or without regional differences. Ideologies may change rapidly but the structures of implementation within government (bureaucracy) usually continue to be the same.

For instance, the State may pass progressive gender laws but may not implement them. There may be gender progressive individuals operating within State structures, and a programme like Mahila Samakhya may emerge. To elaborate, she compared three five year plans, Sixth, Seventh and Eighth, to show how in the Sixth Plan the issue of land rights for women was a central feature of policy. In the Seventh Plan it was dropped altogether, and in the Eighth the concern for women had become a part of welfare and disabilities.

She then asked participants to consider regional disparities. For example, the Hindu Succession Act functions differently in the northern and southern states. The north has a system of Mitakshara, the son is a member of the Hindu undivided family, as a matter of right, by birth, but the southern states have amended the law by making both sons and daughters co-parceners. The Hindu Succession Act does not cover land under tenancy. The 1935 state acts supercede the HSA, as agricultural

land was now a state subject. After Independence some southern states amended the Act and included agricultural land in personal law, but the northern states continued with discriminatory land laws against women.

3. The State functions in interaction with other arenas: the community, the market, the family. All four constitute the interacting arenas for gender issues. They either converge or diverge in contradictory directions. For instance, in Iran the community responded in a fundamentalist way towards women, and the State reinforced this trend.

Contestations may be cooperative or conflicting in nature — the issue determines the nature of the contestation. There can be cooperation on welfarist issues and conflict on the issue of rights. For instance, in the area of education and health there are greater chances of cooperation. The Mahila Samakhya programme could happen because it managed to fill the space in the interstices between divergent arenas. The State may reveal its progressive face when women's groups have bargaining power, but can become retrogressive when there is a loss of this power. Co-option can be looked upon as a loss of bargaining power. Contestations with the State may not necessarily be contradictory in nature although the outcome may be so. However, when we are trying to conceptualise or strategise the relationship of the State with the women's movement, we need to look simultaneously at the family, community, and market because women's bargaining power and that of the women's movement with each of these has to be assessed in relation to the other.

Presentation by Kumkum Sangari

Kumkum thought it was difficult to deal with the complex nature of the State in the present situation, and trying to understand the relationship of the women's movement with the State is even more problematic. She felt the movement has had an ambivalent relationship with the State: it has been both antagonistic and demanding. However, the rapidity with which the Indian State has changed in the last five years is beyond easy grasp, particularly with changes in global forces, and with an international class taking control over decision making.

She highlighted the contradictory and complex forms of the Indian State over the last forty-five years. The independent Indian State had a mandate to build a new nation, and there was a consensus among political groups on the notion of welfarism. Therefore it was feasible to cooperate. However, that early legitimacy has vanished due to the scaling down of the welfare role of the Indian State and the liberalisation of the economy. In this changed context, the three important considerations for the women's movement are:

1. To acknowledge that the movement is not a monolith. It is important to specify which women we are speaking of when

using the term women's movement. At this juncture it is more important than ever before to take cognizance of the existing social divisions in society. Poor women need basic resources like food, water, health and shelter. When the State is faced with a demand for real empowerment through access to resources the relationship between the two is of a different order.

2. It is a fact that the State has played a huge role in both defining (as agitational or as partners?) and institutionalising women's groups. Kumkum did not deny the experience of those groups who had linked up with State, but said that it is important to reflect on the strategy that emerged through such linkages, and then assess whether some women should stay out of State structures and others stay in.

3. She remarked that the question of funding has added a new dimension to this relationship. It is immaterial whether this funding is nationalist or internationalist — the sums of money involved are altering the economics of institutions, and this is a critical parameter in understanding any relationship between movements and State structures.

She also brought to the attention of the group the curious situation of the State being a complex confluence. While, on the one hand, the State is the primary agency with control over fundamental areas, it also enjoys a degree of arbitration on the question of land rights, resource distribution, and so on. Women have sought to redefine and alter many of the basic conditions of their lives through using the space provided by the State, as on the question of legal reform. If the question of common secular laws for all women were to be taken, for instance, it would be interesting to ask ourselves why we continue to deal with the State on it. Certain laws have come to define women, their private lives, their identities. The question of inheritance, which remains central to the reproduction of class, and of agricultural land, comes under different religious denominations. The movement considers the issue of common laws important mainly to strengthen the position of women, their claim as citizens, their democratic right as individuals, rather than claiming rights as sisters, daughters, mothers, wives. In our polity gender equality can only be defined in relation to the State; it is also clear that the idea of personal life as regulated by religion can only be contested through the State. However, putting these definitions into practice requires opposing the State. Given the kind of polity we live in, i.e., one of mixed structures, we cannot take a clear position on the State as 'friend' or 'enemy'.

To conclude the State can be looked at first as an agency of change, second, as an agency of arbitration together with the family and community. There are theoretical spaces — in the form of legislation for example — where we can make claims for women *as citizens*. Third, there is the State as an agency of mediation with the market. Today, the separation between State and civil society is only of an analytical nature.

The discussion that followed these presentations was an attempt to widen the framework of issues to be debated over the three days of the workshop.

Not only is the State becoming less amenable to accountability, it is actively abandoning the people. The question is: can we talk of ignoring the State and yet strengthen civil society? Rajni Kothari felt it was more useful to work towards transforming the nature of the State, while activating civil society. It is important to identify and strengthen non-State actors, to reinvent and redefine relationships between people's movements, political parties and the State.

He once again emphasised the technology factor. In the past technology played a key role in depoliticising society. Rajiv Gandhi categorically made the statement that we have had too much of politics, and it should be replaced with technology. With this attitude the issue of governance takes a back seat. We then have a displacement of the State, including the depoliticisation of movements. Finally, it leaves us with no fora or the will to address social concerns. At the same time it is also important to keep in mind that the State has understood the power of grassroot processes and movements. Thus, the co-option and incorporation of movements and people by the State is more aggressive today. For instance, World Bank loans are made on the condition that NGOs will be involved in development activities. There have also been efforts to divide social movements by giving recognition to some and oppressing others. Earlier the approach of international institutions was "ignore them", today it is one of active cynicism — "corrupt them".

Bina Agarwal questioned Kothari's judgement regarding the State becoming more monolithic. On the issue of forests and commons, for instance, the State's position has seen a hundred and eighty degree shift. In the Fifties common land was increasingly privatised — not enough surplus land was available so that forests and commons moved from the community to the State to the individual. However, since the Eighties there has been a change in the attitude of the State, and community ownership and management are once again on the agenda, with joint forest management becoming a reality and communal institutions being established for that purpose. The issue of gender in such experiments is complex. It is true that women are not generally given the powers of decision-making; however, there is an equal number of instances where State-supported community groups are sometimes more gender-sensitive than spontaneous community groups. With panchayati raj being put back on the agenda of the State, could this not be seen as an attempt at decentralisation of power?

The response to this was that there are always some gains from any such process, but it is difficult to say whether these are gains in an essential sense. Rajni Kothari was sceptical about the State's intentions regarding decentralisation. The present claim of panchayati raj being a transfer of power to the people is, by and large, hollow. Kothari further stressed his earlier position that the State has

abdicated its responsibility towards the people. Its lack of accountability to the victims of communal violence is further proof of this.

* Can the formation of women's self-help groups not be seen as an essential gain? These collective institutions that may have emerged through a State-supported process have provided a 'productive' forum for women, and have also effectively countered State oppression. The question is, can they counter market forces?

* In the present context it was felt that it is more important to work towards a strategy that would help in addressing the family, the market and the State. It is no longer sufficient to only address the State, nor is accountability of the State to the people the central issue any longer.

* The crisis in the women's movement is very deep. Our present strategies are impacting neither the family nor community arenas. With the State abdicating its responsibility, the hold over women by their communities is becoming stronger, and this is true not just for the minority community but also the majority. Institutions shape not just the gender identities of women but caste and class identities, too. It is imperative for us to widen our conceptual understanding of the category 'social relations'. The limited way in which we intervene in women's lives needs to be examined.

* It is also important to seek clarification regarding strategies to counter oppressive State power. Do we need to collaborate with MNCs and other international agencies?

* It was felt that there is a problem with the formulation that the State is an arena where any actor can enter and contest. Rather, bargaining powers are differential. Contestations are structured between caste / class and only those people enter the arena who have power and control or belong to a certain class.

* While rethinking our own strategies we need to look at how other movements and local groups are strategising with the State. For example, one mass-based organisation working with the poor was addressing the issue of employment and wages in State-sponsored employment programmes. With the changing economic context they have shifted the emphasis from wages to the consumer market in order to control prices. With strength in the market they can mobilise people against the State in a bigger way.

The Chair tried to pull together the morning's presentations and discussions and draw up a framework of issues so that they could be used as reference for further discussion.

It appeared that the State could not be seen as a single entity; rather, it had to be divided into institutions, practices, interest groups, discourses. Nor could it be considered a monolith, although there was some difference of opinion on the extent to which it was an open arena. While Rajni Kothari thought it was becoming increasingly monolithic with little accountability to the people, Bina

Agarwal saw it as an open arena of contestation where anybody could enter. Kumkum Sangari felt these contestations are structured within castes, classes, groups. Both Agarwal and Sangari were of the view that the State should be seen in relation to other institutions, particularly the family, community and market.

The State also plays a crucial role in defining the private and public domains, but these boundaries keep changing. The dominant trend seems to be towards globalisation on the one hand, and more and more nation-states emerging, on the other There is a definite increase in the repressive activities of the State and the shrinking of democratic spaces. However, there is also an increase in the number of non-State institutions, as well as a tendency towards regional autonomy, thus marginalising the State.

The issue of the institutionalisation of women's groups by the State or international organisations is an important facet to consider when looking into the subject. The dilemma of State regulation and control versus politicisation of women's issues, is a real one. For example, take the issue of domestic violence: do we want more laws which give the State greater power to control the lives of women? Should we not change the language of our demands — from using the language of protection to that of women's rights as citizens? Often, for the sake of short-term gains women's issues are couched in the language of welfare for easy acceptance, while demands relating to rights are usually rejected. In the long term this does more harm than good.

Case Studies

The six case studies discussed represented a wide range of interaction with the State. There were 'confrontationist' interactions such as the campaign by autonomous women's groups against hormonal contraceptives; there was the experiment of starting a political party, the 'third front' in Kerala, in order to negotiate space for women, dalits and environmental groups in mainstream politics; there was the anti-arrack struggle by masses of women against the state in Andhra Pradesh; the experiences of Pennurimai Iyakkam, a slum workers' union in Tamil Nadu working on survival issues like food, water, shelter; and there were cooperative interactions like setting up special police cells, conducting police trainings, working within State-sponsored women's programmes like the Women's Development Programme of Rajasthan and the Mahila Samakhya programme of the Department of Education, Government of India. The implications of thirty per cent electoral reservations for women was also discussed.

Each presentation raised issues and questions which the participants were directly involved with. By examining the details of strategies and issues that were being discussed they not only described the scenario from the ground but also redefined priorities. For instance, it was clear from all presentations that it was time survival issues came on to the agenda of feminist politics, centrally. Mass-based feminist politics was desirable because women's potential in this had not been tapped fully. Alliances have to be made with all those working on these issues. Collaboration with the State is useful in order to understand certain processes from within, extend one's reach and interact with large numbers of women. But this will neither change State structures nor build movements.

1.
The campaign against hormonal contraceptives

This presentation was made by Ranjana of Saheli (Delhi) and supplemented by Swatija of Forum Against the Oppression of Women (FAOW, Bombay), and Abha Bhaiya of Jagori (Delhi).

The campaign looked at the State as patriarchal, oppressive, and a conglomerate of vested interests, the nexus being the Indian government, agencies like WHO, USAID, UNFPA, and pharmaceutical companies like Max Pharma. Whether in its programme of family planning or family welfare or population control, the Indian State has made poor women its target and has promoted contraceptives which do not give the user control over them. Rather it gives power to the medical establishment and drug companies. The new reproductive technologies are also invasive and anti-women.

The first action by the women's movement was to file a case in the Supreme Court. The issue was then moved to the streets in 1992 with a demonstration outside the Drug Controller's office. Autonomous women's groups played a watch-dog role and highlighted this issue in public, through the media. Its action consisted of exposing the nexus between private practitioners, the medical establishment and multi-national drug companies. Negative reactions to this campaign came in the form of questions like:

- Are you against contraceptives?
- How can you represent the women of India?
- Do you have any alternatives?

One important change in strategy has been the alliances forged with Left groups, by linking up the issue to Structural Adjustment Programmes and the Narmada Bachao Andolan. The objective was two-fold: discuss the issue within the paradigm of alternative development, and highlight the gender dimension. What emerged from this campaign is the fact that government machinery and voluntary agencies are being used to push the programmes and strategies of the State.

Some critical issues that emerged through the campaign are:

- The State is appropriating and using the language and discourse of the women's movement. For instance the slogan, "reproductive rights and contraceptive choice" has now become a part of the discourse of the establishment, international agencies and commercial companies.

- The arguments of the State and its institutions are becoming more sophisticated; for instance, the Draft Population Policy prepared by the Swaminathan Committee speaks of gender equality but is based on the assumption that it is enough to meet the minimum needs of the poor. Neither the women's movement nor the Left has been able to counter the Malthusian argument of population versus resources.

- Do we consider various institutions, like the Institute of Immunology or the Indian Council of Medical Research as part of the Ministry of Health, and thus the government or are they autonomous?

- Vaccines are being promoted as 'indigenous technology' but are actually engineered by international interests. How are we going to strategise around the vaccine issue?

- Why is population control not part of the State list, like health?

- The State is turning a social and political problem into a technological one.

- Since the campaign has been restricted to urban centres it lacks the input and priorities of rural women. A campaign on an issue like this might have to take a different form in order to be more effective.

- Middle class intellectuals are not with the movement and need to be addressed.

- Several women's groups did not participate in the campaign. We need to sort out the differences within women's groups on this issue.

- The family planning programme has reinforced the family as an institution by targetting women only as wives and mothers.

2.
Experiences of the Third Front, a political party formed in Kerala

This presentation was made by Ajitha, who was part of a naxalite group in Kerala in the Seventies. Since the Eighties, she has participated actively in the women's movement, as she felt there was no immediate agenda for a revolutionary strategy in Kerala and that the process of social change was very slow. In Kerala there is little room for autonomous politics. The Third Front was conceived with the idea that the issues of the women's movement must enter mainstream politics through political parties and by allying with other forces like the dalits, the poor and the environmentalists. The Third Front was also supposed to be an alternative political force to the BJP, as fundamentalism is gaining ground in Kerala.

The party was formed under the leadership of K.P. Gauriamma, who was discriminated against by the CPM and expelled. Gauriamma was keen that it develop into a electoral party from which Izhavas, backward castes, dalits, women and environmentalists could contest the elections. So in March 1994 a party called the Third Front was formed under her leadership. She did not have a very different method or understanding of issues than the CPM, but she was vocal on the women's question. However, within the space of two months it became evident that she supported MNCs, and encouraged tourism and big dams. Her caucus in the Front took over control on the pretext that the naxalites might capture the party. Within six months Ajitha had left but she saw no contradiction between this experiment and the objectives of the women's movement. The autonomous women's movement lacks the leadership to enter mainstream politics, and this is an issue which needs serious consideration.

Ajitha's presentation raised the issue of how the women's movement has or should respond to the issue of thirty per cent reservation for women in panchayati raj institutions. Some participants from Bombay raised a few questions about whether women's interests at the mass level would be taken up if women came to power in these institutions? Would numbers make a difference? Would it mean that women and women's issues would become visible in the political process? Does participation mean fielding candidates? Would fielding our best candidates result in their being co-opted? Other participants felt that the issue of reservations could not be ignored. Participation should take place step by step. As an initial step, one should ensure that women's demands be highlighted in the election, through the printing of pamphlets, circulating them widely and

placing them on the agenda of the candidates. Second, after the election, trainings could be organised for the elected candidates.

Yet others pointed out that while responding to electoral reservations we must not forget the enormous strength of being part of non-electoral politics. The returns are much greater than from putting energy into representative politics. Second, panchayati raj today has become the buzz word and is being looked upon as the panacea for all ills in society. This is clearly an overrated and too hopeful response. Many people's and women's groups see the empowerment of poor women through these institutions. As things stand today these institutions are without much power. We live in a reality where, increasingly, decision-making is moving further and further away from the people, outside the country, into international fora, and unless the issue of empowering these institutions is not linked with the issue of empowering poor women, it will mean participating in a political process which has no teeth. A note of caution was added: the political process for urban local self-governing institutions is as dirty as that for parliament and assembly elections and unless candidates play the game, it is not possible to enter these bodies. Political survival is therefore totally dependent on party membership which usually has enormous political contracts and local interests. The Shiv Sena is a prime example of this. Would women's participation in this process make for a qualitative change in its politics?

3.
Mass mobilisation of women in the anti-arrack struggle in Andhra Pradesh

This presentation was made by Volga and Vasantha Kannabiran from Asmita (Hyderabad). They were not directly involved in the struggle but had linked up with it at different points of time to understand its ramifications and implications for the women's movement.

The anti-arrack struggle started in Nellore district in the month of May 1992 and lasted till early 1993, by which time it had spread to the entire state. It ended when the government finally banned the sale of arrack. The struggle began when women of Nellore district stepped out of their homes in the hundreds and stopped the auctioning of arrack. Initially the administration was supportive of this intervention, but when more than 40,000 women tried to stop the auctions in September 1992 the government panicked — one-third of its MLAs were supported by the arrack lobby. The government sent the police to lathi-charge the women. The movement then spread like wild-fire to other districts. Everywhere, women acted as excise officers, confiscated and burnt pouches of illegal liquor. For the first time women met the collector, S.P. and S.I. and realised that the machinery of the State was against women and actually perpetuated family violence. It not only made arrack available, it was unwilling to treat wife-battering as an offence and refused to register cases against violent husbands. When the women exposed the illegal liquor contractors and pressurised the administration to punish them they were called whores by the MLAs, police and village leaders. The women's encounter with the

police and government demonstrated clearly the link between the patriarchal family and State. Women were told to be good mothers, wives and daughters and perform household work, not picket on the streets; they should control their husbands and sons and prevent them from drinking; the problem of drinking was a result of the uncivilised ways of the working/peasant class. Women in turn asked whether being good and enlightened citizens was not being good women. They asked the officials whether they listened to their wives when they told them not to sell liquor.

The movement's strategy consisted of disciplining men, too. Women took their husbands and village men to task for drinking and selling liquor. They did not cook their meals, they even shaved their heads and humiliated them in public. Interestingly, the men of the community who were their supporters and those of political parties who had ensured their support, were unhappy with this aspect of the struggle, although they were appreciative of the other strategies against the •State machinery and liquor barons. This clearly showed how threatened they felt as individual men when women tried to chastise them.

The entire struggle was spontaneous, no party could take it over. Several Left parties tried to intervene but their role was limited to writing songs for the movement. The rural peasant and working class women were in control of the leadership, and even urban middle class women did not have a presence in it.

What sparked the struggle? How could women mobilise in such large numbers? Part of the reason definitely had to do with both economic hardship and the increase in violence in their homes, but what precipitated the resistance was the withdrawal of the two rupee rice scheme by the Congress government. Women's income was not enough to feed the family. The press played a major role in highlighting this campaign and the middle class was also supportive of it because they thought the struggle was mainly against family violence. Was the mass mobilisation also due to the high work participation rate of women in the state?

What were the achievements of the struggle? Masses of rural dalit women mobilised themselves, got fully involved in the struggle, and controlled its leadership. It was a precedent for Andhra Pradesh. In the past whenever there have been struggles it has been the cadre which has organised people. One major achievement of this struggle was the fact that one chief minister had to step down while another banned the sale of liquor. During the course of the struggle the women forced many sarpanches to declare their villages dry. They also collected donations from all political groups but resisted control by them and retained the autonomy of their movement.

In the by-elections of a former Chief Minister in Nandyal in 1993, Sandhya, an anti-arrack activist stood against him. The women actively campaigned for her, it was their first experience of the manipulative machinery of the electoral process. Although Sandhya lost, the experience gave the women tremendous confidence.

Where do things stand today? Although arrack was banned, Indian made country liquor (IMCL) is readily available. Men have not stopped drinking. Some men have shifted to IMCL and things have become harder for the women as it is more expensive and has added to the economic hardship of the family. There is talk of bringing about total prohibition. As far as gender relations are concerned, both in the family and in the community, women are still victims of male violence. There is some change in women's perception of themselves which needs to be reinforced through more organised intervention, but the women's movement is too small to reach out. In fact it clearly shows that women's groups should reflect on their politics in Andhra. There is a great need to widen the movement's agenda, raise the issues of the rice subsidy, prices of essential items and a hike in wages.

4. Experiences of Pennurimai Iyyakkam, Madurai: a slum workers (women) union's ongoing struggle

This presentation was made by Gabriele Dietrich who works closely with the organisation. This union emerged from the Tamil Nadu Construction Workers Union. It has no full-timers, and no funding, yet six to twelve slum dwellers work regularly for it. They are all illiterate, are given bus fares and tea or maybe a meal. They do subsistence work side by side. The organisation works primarily on survival issues like housing and basic amenities in the settlements. The attempt is to reorganise their life world, which includes production of life, as well as economic and social aspects. Women-specific issues like violence are not a primary area of work and only one day in the week is allotted to such cases. Everyday work focuses on preventing evictions, going to court and trying to get people settled close to their work place. Although area committees are formed by the administration, they are hardly functional. This means the union shoulders the burden of work. Although Tamil Nadu has a good slum clearance law, which is pro dwellers, it is constantly violated by the government. A board called the Slum Clearance Board was brought into existence but, together with the revenue department, it is into making money!

The situation has become worse in the past few years with the takeover by the new market economy; the media playing an important role in establishing anti-people views; and science and technology machines being used by the State to intimidate people. People's demands are not heard and one can see different forces working to dismantle their lives. Thus the reorganisation of the production of life of the people is the immediate agenda, but a very difficult task.

In the last one year there has been a heavy loss in property because of floods. Although the floods were due to a breach in a dam, the slum-dwellers were blamed for blocking the flow of water as they occupy what was once the banks of an operational canal. Hence the present programme of eviction. The World Bank has sanctioned Rs. 400 crores for eviction and resettlement. The middle class is actively supporting the evictions. More and more people are on the road today with no shelter and with diseases like malaria and

jaundice spreading. The price of land has rocketted and resulted in caste violence and may even take a communal turn. Democratic spaces are being violated and there is very little protest. Voluntary agencies are not interested in taking up the eviction issue and also do not have the structure to build a platform for struggle.

Pennurimai thinks that the class character of the State has undergone a change. In the freedom struggle, the bourgeoisie needed the masses and the independent Indian State gave legitimacy to their social demands. But that legitimacy does not exist today as it is an NRI-controlled State and the interests of the poor have been sold out. The new charter consists of anti-people policies, there is no accountability to the people, and there is an abdication of responsibilities. The new training of bureaucrats is also directed towards making the poor invisible. If the slum becomes articulate then their (the bureaucrats') existence is at stake. Feminist politics today requires a complete rethinking. We have to bring production of life issues centre stage and address livelihood issues. We have to begin working centrally on issues relating to poor women's control over resources like land and water, within an alternative development framework.

5.
Working with the special police cell for women in Bombay

This presentation was made by Anjali Dave of Tata Institute of Social Studies (Bombay). This ten-year old project was set up to help women in distress. Its mandate was to understand how the police system deals with crimes against women, and to conduct trainings for the police. It has now expanded to three cells. Initially, women came to the cell through women's groups and the media, with offences which were mainly non-cognisable. Now women come on their own. All kinds of cases of violence against women are dealt with, not just domestic violence. Women who come to the cell are helped to understand procedures and make informed choices. Sometimes the staff has to make extra-legal interventions and manoeuvre spaces within the police system in order to help individual women. The women in turn felt that they were being supported emotionally in their interaction with the police, but they could not be helped with livelihood issues or in courts. Anjali felt that though they may have sensitised a few individual policemen, they were unable to make a dent in the system. The atmosphere was repressive, there was a strong sense of isolation, but it was important to have that small space within the system to strengthen women.

From 1988 TISS conducted trainings for policemen on gender issues. The police made it clear that repression was on their official agenda. In the course of the trainings the station inspector and havaldars confided that they too were victims of the brutalisation of the police system. It was difficult to say how far the police were sensitised by this interaction; but one change has been that they are now seen not as 'villains' of a system but as individuals who may be good, bad or indifferent.

On balance, Anjali thought this collaboration with the police in order to reach out to women victims, was possible. Should this involvement be expanded or institutionalised? There are two possibilities: one, that a separate cadre be constituted by means of a legislation, which attaches itself to the police; two, that TISS works through the machinery of the State Commission for Women thus retaining is autonomy within the police system.

6. Working with state-sponsored women's empowerment programmes

Two presentations were made, one on the Women's Development Programme of the Government of Rajasthan and the other on the Mahila Samakhya programme of the Department of Education, Government of India. The first presentation was by Kavita Srivastava, who has been involved in the programme since its inception. The second was by Abha Bhaiya, supported by Kalyani Menon Sen and Manisha.

(a) The Women's Development Programme

Started by the Government of Rajasthan in 1984, it was the first time that the government had incorporated a feminist component in a departmental programme and involved women's groups in its conceptualisation and implementation. Women's 'empowerment' or 'development' was understood as bringing about a change in women's self-image through a collective process at the grassroot level; as providing them a space of their own and greater control over the conditions that determine their lives. It was based on the premise that if women's empowerment had to be achieved speedily and on a large scale, state patronage and legitimacy were needed in the context of Rajasthan which is quite feudal and has little progressive political consciousness. The backbone of the programme was village level workers called sathins, and middle level workers called prachetas. It was also felt that state sanction would be useful in challenging certain institutions like the family, jati, village, which perpetuate inequality. Finally, the hope was that if 'good' individuals, from outside the state structure, could be planted in government programmes there was a possibility of liberating spaces within them in women's favour. At the state level a research body, which was the third partner, provided the academic component. Since most NGOs were male-dominated, women with a feminist perspective were brought in on short-term or full-time basis. It was thought that because the programme was part of a government structure, NGO partners would act as a check against the state, protecting the workers and the programme. Training was supposed to be the guiding force, or the tool for raising self-esteem, valorising local culture, initiating participation in planning and decision-making, and generating an honest and self-reflective culture. It was in these trainings that caste/class analyses of the State and other structures took place and strategies for poor women, based on sisterhood and collective struggle as a tool for change, emerged.

The working of WDP can be seen in two phases, the first five years and the second five years. In the beginning there was trust, a sense of solidarity between the workers, building collective strength and

an atmosphere of giving space and nurturing each other. This later shifted to deep mistrust, with the assertion of individual identities, inflicting violence on each other and becoming competitive. Its identity as a rural women's programme with feminists and grassroot workers, changed. The NGO component lost its teeth, the workers (village and block level) wanted to become full-time state workers, the culture of voluntarism declined and the programme became a middle class women's programme.

Earlier work was rooted in the field and focussed on live issues like survival, oppression within the family and caste, challenging state authority through village fora, and giving strength to local women's struggles. The later period saw it become a government delivery programme with decision making in the hands of a few at the top.

The transition from one phase to another was a logical outcome of WDP's own organisational structure and process. The government was bound to take over sooner or later as it was the financial controller of the programme and the dominant partner. The take-over was not easy as there was resistance at several levels. Those who had a choice left the programme, some were victimised, but most of the workers have organised themselves around service issues. In retrospect one can say that the struggle to negotiate space within state structures was vitiated by two factors. One was the clash of egos among those providing leadership. Did the individual identity which we discovered within ourselves make us break away from the very collective which helped us discover it? Did we need to re-examine our feminist assumptions and training? Second, middle and grassroot level workers, over a period of time, identified not with poor village women but with other state programme workers. This meant they were not independent enough to fight openly with the government when it took over the programme.

This experience leads us to question our strategy of working within government/international structures. Voluntary agencies are faced with a similar problem of workers developing a vested interest in their employment. Finally, it can be argued that such programmes will throw up many individuals, build discussion fora and networks for workers; but will they build a movement at the grassroots which will protect poor women's interests particularly today, when the State's accountability towards people is declining?

(b) Mahila Samakhya

Mahila Samakhya, or Education for Women's Empowerment, learnt from the experiences of the WDP programme and therefore evolved differently in both its structure and content. It was initiated in 1989 and at present operates in five states: Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, UP, Karnataka, Gujarat. The MS programmes were registered as independent societies in every state. The chairperson of the society is the education secretary of the state and is the only sitting member from the administration. The EC consists of more than 50 per cent NGO representation, with some field workers; as such the control

of the state bureaucracy is minimised. Education is seen to be more than literacy or the creation of conditions so that women can take charge of their lives. As the MS is neither a state nor a voluntary body, there is space for experimentation, decentralisation and diversity. In most states fund allocation is in the hands of village level sanghas or sakhis. The programme also has the facility to provide support services like childcare and non-formal education. Women have the freedom to design their own education programme. Most trainings are done by outsiders in order to allow for continuous fresh inputs. At the national level a body has been constituted called the National Resource Group (NRG). It plays the part of a watchdog, giving direction and monitoring the programme. The NRG is made up of feminists from all over the country providing the ideological thrust to the programme. At the field level there have been clear gains with women having formed themselves into visible collectivities.

Abha Bhaiya spoke about her own involvement with MS. "I got involved in the MS programme out of a sense of frustration with the autonomous women's movement which was limited to urban centres. I saw MS as a possibility for mass outreach. When I decided to join, I wanted to work *with* women, not *for* the government, so the question of co-option did not exist. Rural women were my constituency. I saw the possibility of empowered women's groups making the state accountable to them. The MS was opened up to the women's movement so that rural women got a different exposure. As state structures were impersonal it gave some of us the advantage of incorporating and retaining a feminist component in the programme. When we work within a government programme, the validity of our work is questioned and often it is looked upon as a betrayal of the movement. Such questions are not raised when working with mass movements."

The last presentation was followed by a host of questions regarding the women's movement, its strategy and basic assumptions. Can we organize women on a mass scale through programmes like MS and WDP? Our methods of work keep our size small. The women of Andhra have shown that they can mobilise in large numbers on their own but we have not addressed ourselves to that potential. The women's movement has not created mass movements. Our natural allies can be women of the oppressed classes if we work with them consistently.

Strategies

The discussion on strategy took off with the following sets of questions which emerged from the six presentations:

If the State is patriarchal, repressive, hierarchical, abdicating its responsibility, what kind of relationship can we have with it?

- Conflictual
- Collaborative
- Programmatic
- Strategic
- Confrontationist
- Pressing for rights; demanding that it implement its own policies.

Are our options vis-a-vis the State an active/strategic choice?

Should there be a programmatic/collaborative relationship with the State?

How much, and for how long, can these spaces within the State be negotiated?

- Can the State ever be an ally?
- Can we bypass the State?
- Can we address other arenas of society? (family, market, community)

The discussion on strategy was determined by two concerns: first there was a general feeling that what ought to be the relationship with the State would be determined by the issues that we now wished to address, so it was more important to articulate them, make explicit the shifts that needed to take place in terms of the agenda of the movement. There was also an unstated concern regarding a consensus in the group on these issues.

Setting the agenda for survival/ production of 'life-world' issues

The one issue that seemed to predominate was the deteriorating survival conditions of the poor. It was articulated in different ways. The issue of 'life-world' was affected by the market and women's control over survival was declining. The intervention of the women's movement ought to be to strengthen the life-world to combat this challenge. It would mean delinking local support structures from the market and the State and strengthening them. Ten years ago the Indian women's movement had articulated a feminist politics and strategy, but rapid changes have taken place in the social and economic environment which cannot be ignored.

On the one hand we were talking of the State being oppressive and patriarchal, but at the same time we say that it is abdicating its responsibility. We talk of the State co-opting, but adopt cooperative strategies ourselves.

There was a general consensus that although the State may have abdicated its responsibility, we have to pressure it to provide basic services to the poor. For instance the PDS, health and education must be subsidised by the State. We must insist that social concerns be put back on the agenda of the State. It was also felt that we should define our demands and see how different or similar they are to other groups.

What should our strategy be?

It was suggested that at the policy level we must intervene and influence delivery services and, at the same time, extend people's control over these services. We must link up with other groups to lobby at the policy level. We should not take on the responsibility of providing basic services because we would then be strengthening the macro trends of the government in moving out of basic service sectors.

Perhaps we need to review whether the State can really alter gender relations in society. The State by itself has neither the skills to do so, nor does it feel the need. This finally raises the question with which we started this workshop: Should the State get involved in raising women's consciousness at all and run a Mahila Samakhya type of programme, and should women's groups get involved in it?

Redefining our politics

So far we have indulged in reactive politics and set a defensive agenda for ourselves. The group felt that we needed to draw up a positive and affirmative charter for women. Development had to be put back on the agenda of women's groups. It was also felt that earlier we had been multi-faceted but now needed to have a single focus and follow it through. Was this a call for specialisation? There was certainly a feeling that we need to do our homework before adopting positions and strategies on something like the NEP, for example.

Similarly, in terms of strategy the priority was working with people, widening our base, linking with other movements also working on development issues. It was important to understand our allies before setting out to dialogue with them. For instance, coordination between the women's, dalit, and environment movements is theoretically possible, but the dalit movement has made a critique of the women's movement's failure to address the issue of caste.

There were two views on the question of one's identity when allying with other groups. One stated that it was time we made our identity fluid in order to make alliances and become a stronger political force so as to face the new challenge. We shouldn't feel threatened if the labels of other movements are stuck on us.

However, the other view struck a note of caution: if we make alliances we must ensure that 'we' survive. In the past women's issues have suffered from being subsumed within other agendas. In times of crisis other groups have made demands on us and we have allied with them at the cost of becoming secondary. In alliances with mass movements we have not been able to raise the question of gender as we have often been accused of bringing in women's issues to break solidarity. We need to balance our priorities without losing sight of our issues or becoming submerged. It was also felt that since our agendas have never been recognised by other groups and movements, despite being in existence for the last twenty years, we need to have a clearly defined political strategy to impress our agendas on other social movements.

It was noted that, in the case of the population campaign, women's groups had linked up effectively with Left parties, and with the environment movement on the issue of the NEP and the entry of TNCs. So too, earlier alliances with mixed groups had made for some positive experiences: men have also started questioning the hegemony of leadership, and asserting the importance of personal experience.

Feminist politics is not concerned only with issues; it also values processes like building collectives, being non-violent and affirming our identities as women. We can continue to be involved with feminist politics while working on issues with other groups.

The group was of the view that this is a critical issue facing the movement and needs to be addressed as a priority.

It was time to reflect on why we have not allowed space for differences. Many women feel that activism has exhausted and stifled their creativity. Should they then withdraw? Often this decision is met with disapproval and becomes the cause for divisiveness. We should not insist on 'pure' feminist praxis and ideology as the only politically correct way of working. We must acknowledge the need for diversity.

It is important to accept differences while defining the terms of our relationship. It is also important that we make collective strategic choices. One issue that should have been discussed is that of interacting with the World Bank and IMF, as several feminists are being asked to prepare safety net programmes. World Bank funding to the social sector may well be the result of feminist intervention, but what do we see its role as?

Differences within women's groups have arisen over government policies. In the case of the population policy debate there were extreme differences between women's groups as a result of a strategy to deliberately confuse the issue of reproductive rights, freedom of choice, and population control. We must be conscious both of the State's strategy, and of our own differences.

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