

**Looking Forward, Looking Back:  
In Search of Feminist Visions,  
Alternative Paradigms and Practices**

**Report of the  
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**Section I**

**INTRODUCTION**

**Over-view of the Conference**

**VII NATIONAL CONFERENCE OF WOMEN'S STUDIES**  
**on "Looking Forward Looking Back: In Search of Feminist Visions, Alternative Paradigms and Practices"**

**Introduction to the Conference Theme**

In the past few years, the Indian scene – the economy, politics, political groups, social movements and State response to them – has changed so rapidly that fifteen years seem long ago. The contemporary phase of the women's movement was at its peak then – it had dramatised issues like sexual violence against women, dowry murders and pornography. Some within the movement voiced their dissatisfaction with the prevailing development paradigm, our destructive, unsustainable economy and the feminisation of poverty; others had condemned the coercive family planning practices of the government and focused on the reproductive rights of women. The women's movement's critique of the existing socio-political system highlighted the invisibility of women, their marginalisation, discounting of their issues and the systematic perpetuation of patriarchal controls.

The movement re-introduced concepts like patriarchy, feminism, sexual division of labour into its language and analysis. It started looking at and articulating issues in broader terms and moved from talking about women's issues to developing a feminist perspective on all issues. Activists and academicians had aided in the development of women's studies and made inroads into development planning, census enumeration and government schemes. Along with critiques and debates emerged some alternative policies and practices. Women's studies experimented with an interdisciplinary approach, a different methodology, looked afresh at women's issues and stubbornly attempted to influence entrenched disciplines. The Indian Association of Women's Studies was born out of this churning of activities. Women's groups used different ways of organising, of non formal education, health care, counselling women in distress, and developed a creative use of media structures for group functioning. Some tried to fuse theory and praxis, beliefs and life-styles. The women's movement called for a transformation and creation of a just, democratic and equal society.

The fifteen year period of struggle has yielded some noticeable changes, some failures, hopes and many grey areas of complexity and confusion. A brief stock-taking would make an impressive list of achievements. This is true especially for the State which has come up with many legal reforms, policies for women, a National Commission for Women, and reservation for electoral seats. Women's Studies has now been accepted as a distinct sphere and women's studies cells have spread to different parts of the university network. The response of women to the movement motivated the growth of many small groups, rejuvenated older ones and political parties co-opted women's issues on to their agendas.

Today, we need to **recapitulate our earlier critique**, analysis and strategies. How have the alternatives which we had proposed and experimented with, fared? How have the schemes, legal reforms, family courts, etc. which we had struggled for helped women? What sort of

changes have women's groups undergone? Some earlier campaigns have withered — e.g. the pornography one has reached a dead end. How do we now look at this issue in the context of satellite and cable T.V.? What is the relationship of the State to the movement? How do we understand the rising fundamentalism among women and their active participation in communal riots? New trends have been introduced in industry, agriculture and fisheries as a result of globalisation and liberalisation; what effects will they have on women's domestic and paid labour? Has the presence of women's studies cells sensitised the various disciplines of the social science? Had the feminist debate on methodologies been carried into each discipline? What has been the effect of institutionalising women's studies?

During the last fifteen years, women have participated very actively in other movements and campaigns — the campaign against big dams, campaign against religious fundamentalism, for secularism, civil liberties, democratic and human rights campaigns, etc. Have we developed a feminist perspective on these issues and has that been integrated into these movements? What has been our experience of relating to other mass movements? We need an honest critique of our past actions programs, alliances which will provide us with a concrete basis for evolving our future strategy.

Our understanding of women's oppression has lead us to strategise, devise alternatives and programmes and in that process, evolve a vision of a better society. We need to once again articulate these visions. The first phase of the women's movement hoped for a society in which all backward social practices would be eliminated. From European liberalism, the movement moved towards a more socialist vision of a society free of class, caste and gender oppression. However, today this vision is slowly evaporating under the glare of globalisation and new technology. How have these new forces social, political, economic forces influenced our vision? Do we, today, have one or many visions? The environment and green movements have put forward a plea for sustainable agriculture, curtailed consumerism, decentralised political structures which would entail a different life-style and use of natural resources. Some others have revived the Gandhian vision of a decentralised, technology-free, self sustaining society. How do we in the movement relate to these visions? Does the women's movement need to join other movements to evolve a common vision? These and other questions were addressed by the VII National Conference on Women's Studies.

The Conference aimed at the following:

- a stock-taking of the women's movement many programmes and alternatives and a review of how the new trends in our economy and in society have influenced women and men and the movement;
- encouraging analysis and critiques of our programmes projects and experiments;
- unfolding of our visions and our hopes;
- developing strategies for the future.

### **Over-view of the Conference**

The 7th National Conference on Women's Studies concluded on December 30th with

tremendous enthusiasm and hope for the future. The four day conference had a registration of 712 delegates from 20 States in India and 12 countries, particularly the South Asian Countries. The theme of the conference "Looking Forward, Looking Back — In search of feminist visions, alternative paradigms and practices" was spelt out in four plenary and nine sub-theme workshops with over 120 presentations. This conference not only addressed a wide range of women's issues but looked at major socio-economic, political, cultural and ecological problems of society in an integrated feminist perspective. The style in which the conference was run corresponded to this approach. The conference sounded a call for a resurgence of the feminist movement. The movement has to face the challenge posed by the resurgence of patriarchy, consolidating itself through the alignment of several forces. Several pioneering and committed women who have been part of the women's movement for several decades attended the conference. The Indian Association of Women's Studies was honored to have in the conference Pramila Dandavate, Mrinal Gore, Medha Patkar, Krishna Sobti, Vandana Shiva, Aruna Roy, Veena Das, Indira Jaising and several other well known academics and activists.

### **Celebration of Women's Creativity**

The St. Xavier's School, which was the location of the Conference, had a festive and celebratory look with colourful banners and posters all around. Dozens of banners in Hindi and "Looking at the world through women's eyes", "The light of knowledge is now my partner".

In addition to over 700 participants in the main Conference there were about 75 craftswomen and men and 40 women folk artists who had brought their crafts and performances to the Conference. The crafts exhibition and the performance by women artists from Rajasthan were an integral part of the Conference. Those crafts groups had been invited which are empowering women through income generation and revival of traditional skills and crafts. Local women's groups had also put up food stalls on the venue. Over 37 groups from seven States exhibited their crafts and sold them. The vibrant, skilled and energetic folk artists presented another face of feminist expression and aspirations and lent colour and energy to the gathering. The **book exhibition** had over 5000 books of about 50 Indian and Third World publishers and organisations. There were also several cards, posters, calendars and video and audio cassettes for sale. The painting exhibition had more than hundred women painters from all over the country exhibiting their paintings and sculptures at the Jawahar Kakla Kendra.

These exhibitions provided a link between the Conference and the citizens of Jaipur and thereby conveyed women's concerns to a larger number of people.

Songs from the women's movement were sung before, during and after sessions. Some groups presented street plays, others showed video films on the themes of the Conference.

### **Conference Publications**

An attractive poster on the theme of the Conference made by a leading woman cartoonist/painter/writer Manjula Padmanabhan and several publications were brought out

by the IAWS on this occasion:

- Remaking Society for Women: Visions Past and Present, Maithreyi Krishnaraj (Ed.) IAWS, 1995.
- The State and the Women's Movement-Report of a Workshop by Kavita Srivastava, Nandita Gandhi, Abha Bhaiya and Ritu Menon, IAWS, 1995.
- Feminist Approaches to Economic Theory - Report of a workshop by Maithreyi Krishnaraj, IAWS, 1995.
- Re-examining the Indian Family - Report of a workshop by Nirmala Banerjee and Jasodhara Bagchi IAWS, 1995.
- Women, Ecology and Economic Globalization, keynote presentation by Vandana Shiva IAWS, 1995.
- In search of Feminist Visions, Alternative Paradigms and Practices: A Source Book, compiled by Lakshmi Menon, IAWS and Akshara - A Women's Resource Centre, Bombay, 1995.
- Women and Violence, Radhika Coomaraswamy, IAWS, 1995.
- Mahila Adhyayan Kya Hai? Neera Desai and Maithreyi Krishnaraj, IAWS, 1995.
- Karuna Aye Magar Is Terhe Nahin, compilation of poems by IAWS, 1995.
- Catalogue of Paintings, Sculptures and Graphics by Women Artists of India, Jawahar Kala Kendra and IAWS, 1995.
- A Volume of Abstracts of Papers submitted to the Seventh National Conference Women's Studies. (ed. and published by Nandita Gandhi for IAWS, 1995). f

#### **A Celebration of Collaboration and Solidarity**

The Conference was the result of collaboration and collective thinking, planning and action by a very large number of women and men. In addition to the fifteen Executive Committee members of the IAWS, seventeen women and men from different parts of India were involved in the conceptualization and running of the five plenaries, nine sub-theme workshops and the exhibitions. Forty women's groups, peasant organisations in Rajasthan were part of the local co-ordination committee which made excellent arrangements for board, lodging and conferencing.

The process of organising this Conference in Rajasthan was used very effectively by the



local women activists and scholars to popularize the concept of women's studies, to revitalize women's groups, to make alliances with other people's organizations, NGOs, like minded media persons, artists etc. The local group showed feminist films in colleges, university women's hostels and in cinema halls to reach out to younger women and involve them as volunteers. All these efforts bore fruit and there were 100 women and men students who worked long hours on the tasks assigned to them. We hope this exposure will attract many young women and men to the women's movement and other people's movements.

Donor partners like EZE Germany, SIDA, New Delhi, FAO/NGO South Asian Programme and UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia extended their full co-operation to the IAWS for making this event a success.

It was with the support of the FAO/NGO Programme that financial resources were mobilized, a large South Asian presence was ensured and a successful South Asian panel discussion was organised.

The support provided by the media was also quite considerable. The Conference was well covered by the local newspapers, some national dailies, by several television networks, All India Radio and BBC Radio. It was featured on the national TV news and there were several reports on the Jaipur Doordarshan. As the process and method of organising this Conference was synergetic and feminist it energized all those who were involved.

### **The South Asian Presence**

Being committed to the creation of a peaceful South Asia, the IAWS has always tried to promote co-operation and solidarity between women's groups, feminist scholars, people's organisations and NGOs working in different countries of South Asia. Like in earlier Conferences, special efforts were made to invite feminist activists/scholars from the SAARC countries. The response was very positive and there were 16 women from Nepal, one from Bhutan, six women and one man from Pakistan, four women from Sri Lanka and five women from Bangladesh. The South Asian participants actively participated in different sub-theme workshops and all the other events.

A special South Asian Plenary was co-ordinated by Kamla Bhasin, on the theme "**Women's Visions and Strategies for a Peaceful and Democratic South Asia**". Five speakers from peasant organisations, trade union groups, women's organisations, human rights organisations and academic institutions spoke on different aspects of the South Asian reality and people's (specially women's) struggles to create a just and sustainable society. The Indian participants and the media made special efforts to interact with the South Asian delegates.

The efforts made by the IAWS to reach out to Indian scholars based abroad and foreign scholars working on India attracted women from South Africa, Germany, U.K., U.S.A., Canada, Japan, Netherlands and Thailand. Their presence added an important dimension to the Conference.

## The Plenaries

The opening ceremony began with the lighting up of 1000 *diyas* setting the mood of the meet. This was followed by a song from Mirabai who struggled over 400 hundred years ago to establish her identity in her own way and challenged the patriarchal controls in her life.

Pagdola Kondamma from the anti-*arrack* movement in Andhra Pradesh, in her interviews says : "Our village has no water, no primary health care centre, but plenty of arrack". This was part of the opening plenary entitled 'Voices of Resistance and Struggle' which focussed on the crucial issues of survival facing poor women in today's context. The present realities and women's struggles were elaborated in the other presentations too. Complex experience arising in the context of the Total Literacy Movement in Pondicherry and the Students Movement in Andhra Pradesh were narrated.

In her key note speech on '**Women Ecology and Economic Globalization : Searching for an Alternative Vision**' Vandana Shiva an eminent feminist ecologist, critiqued the present non-sustainable development model and the way in which the IMF, the World Bank and the GATT agreement are destroying our resources and the means of livelihood of the masses of women. The major foci of the presentation were the extremely wasteful and inhuman manner in which nature is manipulated, the loss of control experienced by people and the marginalisation of women's knowledge systems.

In the afternoon of the first day the voice of women in struggle in Rajasthan were heard by the participants of the conference. Although there has been a sense of empowerment and several struggles, the Women's Movement is confronted with the challenge of multiple identities of women — those of class, caste and community. A cross section of speakers from adivasis, landless labourers, teachers, community organisers, and party based organisers spoke in this very illuminating and exhilarating session. This plenary co-ordinated by Aruna Roy of Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathana (Organisation of Workers and Farmers) brought together the experiences and aspirations of people's movement on gender, environment, cast and class issues and highlighted the need for alliance between these movements. This plenary had women speakers from different class and educational backgrounds.

The second day dawned with similar echoes of struggle from the South Asian regions. The efficacy of SAARC in promoting harmony and co-operation in the region was questioned by all the speakers from Nepal, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. The discussion covered the problems emerging from the process of globalisation of the economies of South Asia and the consequent marginalisation of women. The problems of minorities were perceived as a threat for the ruling elite to justify heavy defence expenditure with the possibility of raking up huge commissions. In the plenary on the third day on 'Resurgent Patriarchies' the speakers spoke about the solidification and resurgence of patriarchal thinking and behaviour in the legal system, mainstream media, the economic system and religions.

## Sub-theme Workshops

The morning plenary sessions were followed everybody by simultaneous workshops on 9 sub-themes.

In the sub-theme on **'Family and Sexuality'** a major preoccupation was the manner in which social, religious and familial relations impact on the sexual and reproductive capabilities and feelings of women and how often control is sought to be imposed through these relationships. The role of the commercial media in reinforcing the construction of female sexuality as legitimate only within marriage does great damage to women's autonomy. The workshop drew attention to the prevalence of a wide range of relationships outside marriage. The need for exploring alternatives to the patriarchal family was an important aspect of this workshop. Increasing the public space for women does not necessarily change the intra-household inequality between men and women.

The sub-theme on **'Culture, Identity and Women's Rights'** examined questions of identity which evolve from the intersection of categories of caste, class and community, with and around gender. Some of the issues explored in these sessions were women's relationship to the nation State and the treatment of women in politics. Another important aspect discussed was how the lack of security and autonomy in some communities, including some of the adivasi communities restrict women's access to public spaces. The discussion concluded with a recognition of the need for all struggles to deal with a range of issues — class, caste, community and gender and the need to build strategies in ways that foreground survival.

The sub-theme on **'Women's Writing: Aesthetics and Future Visions'** discussed the distinctiveness of women's writing from the historical, philosophical and socio-economic points of view. It was necessary to move out of not only patriarchal norms of morality and chastity, but also outside the 'victim syndrome'. We must address ourselves also to aesthetic concerns and seek to preserve the uniqueness of women's contribution in terms of myths, forms and language in de-constructing patriarchy.

The sessions on **'Women, Political Participation and the Politics of Organisation'** dealt with the incorporation of women in the representative process at different levels and the limitations and constraints that the existing structures of power and patronage pose for women's active involvement. The major conclusion was that participation in the present setup by itself was not enough for social transformation. This was illustrated by the experiences of women members in Panchayats. It is of critical importance to equip women in positions of decision making with information, confidence, managerial abilities and knowledge of their responsibilities.

With regard to organising around issues of work, the participants highlighted the denial of recognition of women functionaries in various women's programmes such as *sathins*, *balwadi* workers, *gram sevikas*, *bal sevikas* etc as workers and the right to minimum wages, security of service and protection from various types of harassment. In this context, the role of the State and State sponsored bodies came in for serious criticism. The women's movement has to take up this

challenge of organising women in various informal sectors, especially in the present context of liberalization and structural adjustments, which is displacing women on a large scale. The National Policy on Women has to be formulated in a more democratic manner.

The sub-theme on **'Creation and Dissemination of Knowledge and Knowledge-Systems'** discussed the manner in which knowledge is constructed, the marginalisation of traditional knowledge and how the methods of communication of important knowledge has to be re-oriented from a feminist and a people's perspective. In this context, the scientific establishment came in for criticism as a tool and hand-maiden of hegemonic forces. It was felt that women's studies could play an important and useful role in re-constructing knowledge through a dialectical process of engagement with modern and traditional knowledge in the light of women's experience.

It was strongly felt that the presence of women's studies have to be enhanced in the field of Literature, Physical Sciences and Technology.

The sub-theme of **'Work and Workers'** focussed on how concepts of work, workers, skill and heavy/light work were defined in a biased way so as to marginalise women's expertise and the need to come out with alternative definitions. A second issue was that of regeneration of traditional crafts to provide employment. While it is true that these are caste-based and operate within patriarchal households, efforts can be made to overcome these hurdles by mobilizing women. A crucial sector in the coming years is going to be the fast expanding informal sector. New strategies are called for and a clearer articulation from the women's movement on the structural adjustment policy. Do we want to reject it altogether or find ways of mediating it? Agriculture and natural resource management would be priority areas. A South Asian trade block is called for. We have to chalk out a clear-cut research agenda.

The sub-theme on **'Women and Media'** discussed developments in the media sector and the growing marketization of the media industry where marketability overrides all other concerns. A historical picture was presented of how the commercial Hindi cinema has changed to project a different kind of heroine who has combined the 'vamp' and the 'good woman'. In the print media there is an emphasis on individualist and self-assertive, consumerist middle-class woman as the 'new woman'. Advertisement not only commodify women but also sexualise all commodities. The absence of any kind of regulation on private channels has led to utter chaos. The participants made several recommendations of which the major ones are: restructuring censor boards, improving regulatory mechanisms, sustained gender training for all media persons and monitoring media as a public activity.

The sub-theme on **'Women-Centered Natural Resource Management'** engaged with the crisis of survival faced by the majority of people in the wake of destructive models of development. The participants were seriously concerned with the acceleration of these processes by the single-minded export promotion as a strategy of development. The agenda for women's groups put forward were:

1. women's access to natural resources (land, water, forests, pasture land etc.)
2. capability-building for neighbourhood resource management.
3. a shift to renewable energy sources such as bio-mass.

In this context the participants spoke about many experiments in local community level management and regeneration of natural resources like water sharing schemes, wasteland development, and watershed programmes from across the country. The need for new methodologies in all these areas of work was emphasised.

The sub-theme on 'Personal Laws' had the most well-attended sessions, where participants spilled over to the corridors. Several groups presented their points of view — Majlis, Working Group for Women's Rights, The Forum Against Oppression of Women (FAOW), All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA), The Bombay Group, Saheli, and Women's Research and Action Group. There were two opposing points of view: one pleading for reform within personal laws within each community and the other for a secular law applicable for all. It was felt by some that we need to seek a middle-ground between these two extreme views because:

- a) women are desperate for legal changes,
- b) women fear a threat to their community, identity, and
- c) women are aware of oppression by men of their community.

As many customary practices have positive features, participations spoke about the need to work towards a draft of a gender just package of civil law and retain the possibility of options.

### **Spontaneous Sessions**

In addition to the planned sessions several discussions were organised spontaneously during the free time.

In one such session Medha Patkar from the Narmada Bachao Andolan spoke about the people's struggles against unsustainable and destructive development thinking and project and the attempts being made to create a National Alliance of People's Movements.

In another spontaneous session the well known Krishna Sobti spoke of her literary journey and her women characters.

Smaller groups met to discuss alternatives sexualities, a national campaign on violence against women, people's struggles against unsustainable development etc. A special press conference was organised on the rape of a minor girl which was brought to the knowledge of the Rajasthan Mahila Sangathana.

## Resolutions

In the plenary of the last day, the Conference participants discussed and passed the following resolutions:

1. The Conference expresses serious concern at the manner in which the Government of India has turned the long standing demand of the women's movement for a National Policy on Women into a pre-election political stunt. With no concrete action plans or recognition of the impediments to the goal of gender justice and equitable society, the draft policy makes no mention of resource allocation in terms of budgetary provisions, or women's access and control over productive resources.

2. The conference protests against the continued exploitation of women working as *sathins*, *anganwadi* workers, *Balsahiyakas*, *Sahyoginins* etc. It extended its support to the continued struggle of *sathins* and other women workers struggling against the continued devaluation of their work and social victimization.

3. The participants of the Conference have been deeply disturbed by decision of the sessions court in the Bhanwari Case. She was a *sathin*, employed by the Women's Development Programme of the Rajasthan State Government. In discharging her legitimate duties to enforce the legal ban on child marriage, she earned the enmity of caste Hindus who subjected her to gang rape as punishment. The session court acquitted the accused on the plea that upper caste men will never do such a thing. Physical and mental violence on women is on the increase. A rape of 14 year old Monisha a week ago, also discussed in the Conference, is only of the many such instances. LAWS resolve to launch a campaign against rape and sexual violence.

4. It was resolved that women's issues should be given priority in coming elections. All the reports and resolutions will be given to all parliamentarians, political parties and the National Commission of women. It is hoped that the voices raised on this platform will be given priority in setting the agenda for election.

5. Apart from the intense and engrossing discussions in the plenary and the sub-theme workshops, the Conference was studded with the emotions of meeting friends, sharing our work and our lives, learning from each other and dancing and singing together. One of the several songs sung over the four days was:

*Bahna chet sake to chet  
zamano aayo chetan ro*

## **Section II**

# **PANELS**

## Voices of Resistance and Struggle

*"As we resist and struggle we sow seeds of hope"*

— Anveshi

( It has been the usual practice of the IAWS to invite an eminent personality, expert or dignitary to address the Conference on the opening day.

In keeping with the main theme of the Conference and the spirit and tradition of the women's movement, it was decided that the conference will be inaugurated by women representing different movements, resisting injustice and different forms of violence, inching their way towards more just, democratic and ecological ways of being, knowing and doing. Examples of these are women working in the informal sector, in the anti-liquor movement, the movement against big-dams, the dalit and tribal women's movement deserted and single women's struggles. The IAWS invited some of these women to share their experiences of resistance and struggle, their mobilisation strategies, their aspirations towards a better future for all. There were three presentations. A taped interview (translated in English) on the Anti-arrack movement by Pagadala Kondamma, who was active in this spontaneous agitation by women from Nellore district, Andhra; a report by Sudha Sundra Raman on the Total Literacy Campaign in Pondicherry and a note on Women' Studies Movement by Rekha Pappu.)

### **i) Anti-Arrack Movement**

Pagadala Kondamma who led the Anti-Arrack movement in her village spoke of the suffering of women. Even her husband used to drink heavily and create a lot of nuisance. After five O' clock there was no peace in the house. She would often receive his blows herself to protect her daughter-in-law who had just delivered. She could have hit him back but she asks. "What is the point of hitting a person who is not even conscious of himself?" All of us women suffered like this.

"In our area men get Rs. 20/- as wages per day while women get only Rs. 10/-. The husbands blow away the entire amount on 'saara' (local liquor). The result was there was no food even for children.... We have no facilities in the village; no water, no work, no water for irrigating of fields. We have to go a long way for delivery or diarrhoea cases. There is no lady doctor or a general doctor. Who do we tell all this?"

The women in her village attended a night school where educated young people were volunteer teachers. One of the lessons was a story describing ways to stop men from drinking, of how Seethamma in Dubagunta organised a struggle and the women there stopped the sale of arrack. Pagadala Kondamma and others questioned themselves on why they cannot wage a similar struggle. The Government was duping them and earning money at the expense of the poor. The women went together and stopped the unloading of arrack cartons. Despite this, arrack still kept coming in clandestinely. The men under the pretext of having tea, would get drunk, come home and beat their wives.



One night, a neighbour's wife reported her husband coming home drunk. Some of the village women went to his house and asked him where he got 'saara'. They went to the hotel which sold 'saara' broke the bottles, set fire to the hut. The police arrived but the women were not afraid. "If you fire at us, one of us will die, but the whole village will not die. If you fire, two of us might die but the rest will be behind us" said the women.

Another day, a jeep arrived carrying illicit liquor. They caught hold of the jeep and set fire to it. The women announced that every person who drank will be slipped five times and fined fifty rupees. They collected money to construct a platform which they called 'saara samadhi' (tomb of liquor)

The news spread to a number of villages. The women organised anti 'sara' meetings. Men, women and children attended the meetings. Life became peaceful. Fights at home were fewer. Now the government has brought in prohibition. A savings scheme called *Podupu Lakshmi* has been launched. Kondamma collects these savings, walking up and down for days. The women are disappointed that no concrete improvements in facilities have come. They keep asking "What is the government doing with our money"?

Before the 'saara' struggle literacy classes known as *Akshara Deepam* were conducted. Now even that has folded up. The teachers were promised an acre of land but nothing has been given.

Kondamma asks, "How can they teach when there is no oil for our lamps. We took up the 'saara' struggle for our families but there are still many problems."

The villages have scarcity of water, fodder — The two political parties in the village do not care about these problems.

A heroic struggle by women, much acclaimed and written about. It was made an election issue but the issues of poverty, basic amenities have gone unaddressed by parties and the government.

Some issues and problems merit serious consideration, in the light of one specific experience of/in the anti-arrack struggle in Andhra Pradesh with particular reference to Nellore district.

1) When women agitated against arrack, this was not the only issue raised. Rather this issue was placed in the context of absence of health care, price rise, water, transport, primary education etc. It is strikingly evident that this context has more or less disappeared/faded into the background.

A few reasons which can be adduced for this development are:

a) taking over the course of the movement by political parties of all hues almost without exception. Every party attempted to make political capital of the movement thereby distorting it in the process. In fact the Telugu Desam party which was the first to take to this trend came

to power subsequently on the plank of 'prohibition'. It is noteworthy that the grassroots articulators never thought of the anti-arrack struggle in terms of prohibition of arrack much less any other liquor. 'Prohibition' however became a political as well as an expedient administrative response to a complex social problem.

b) the movement has been taken over not only by the political parties but also by some of the urban middle class women's groups who were quick to make it a moral issue largely. With this development, the context highlighted earlier receded further into the background. We do not mean that the policy of prohibition has not been helpful. It has indeed been an effective method of preventing the flow of arrack into the villages on a large scale. Prohibition has definitely improved domestic relationships. However other equally important political issues has been left unaddressed by the State.

2) The role of the media in the present phase is highly questionable. It has been consistently engaged in sensational reporting of the inevitably arising cases of illicit liquor and its effects thereby making it out as if prohibition will not work. Moreover the primary responsibility for monitoring bootlegging is being tagged on to the rural women as if the problem concerns only them and not the larger society and its institutions.

3) One gets an impression that schemes like *Podpu Lakshmi* (money saving schemes) seems to be tying up women's energies in the tasks of money mobilisation thereby disengaging them from pondering and struggling on a range of issues. Moreover it has placed the activist of the movement in a double bind — on the one hand they have to arduously mobilise savings and on the other they are forced to explain to the savers as to where the monies are going, what the benefits are, and why they don't seem to materialize. The only beneficiary in the whole process seems to be the State to whom the monies are going, reportedly around rupees four crores per annum from Nellore district alone !

The above are but a few issues that have been presently highlighted. More intensive research needs to be done to understand the present phase.

## **ii) Lessons for the Women's Movement from the Literacy Campaigns**

Sudha Sundara Raman offered an analysis of Total Literacy Campaigns and their impact on women. The Total Literacy Campaigns are a uniquely Indian creation. Unlike most of our development schemes both its inspiration and its funding is national. Unlike the other successful literacy campaigns in the world, there was no revolutionary changes or political triggering process preceding these mass campaigns. Rather, these campaigns were initiated in 1988-89 by a combination of relatively chance developments in the administration and the people's science movements. It is rather surprising therefore to find that this movement has grown in the space of five years into an unprecedented national mobilization of women and rural youth. This has had an impact not only on literacy and on primary education, but in a number of other developments areas.

Today, as the literacy campaigns appear to be largely losing their transformatory potential

and are increasingly degenerating into routine governmental schemes, we find this an opportune movement to sum up the experience of these five years and draw upon the lessons we can gain from it. We will restrict this paper to five themes which we think are relevant for further study and for activists in the women's movement. There are of course many other areas of concern and interest. But we choose these five so that there is a definite focus in the paper.

- a) Why was there such a large impressive mobilization of women for the Total Literacy Campaigns? In what way was literacy and the campaign for literacy perceived as empowering women? Most figures now establish that between 60 to 75% of learners and volunteers were women. A conservative estimate of women who must have been learners is at least 40 million! That means over 4 million women volunteers. (If we take a sum of 123 million target illiterate in the districts covered so far, and assume that only half of them actually participated, and that 65% of them were women)
- b) What was the nature of opposition encountered by the literacy activists, and why did these sections oppose the campaigns? How is this opposition relevant to understanding the nature of these campaigns.
- c) What was the fall out for women's movements from the literacy campaigns? That is, in what non alphabetical areas of concern to the women's movements did the literacy campaigns have an impact. These were not necessarily intended benefits of literacy but occur they did and often like in Andhra these results were more evident and gratifying than the effect of literacy per se.
- d) Why are the literacy movements collapsing today? Why has the TLC been a nine day, or to be precise, a five year wonder only? Why could these campaigns not be sustained?
- e) And finally, what general lessons on the strategic and tactics of a woman's movement can be gained from the literacy campaign.

Women were keen to acquire literacy because of many reasons — to read bus signs, to write letters and so on. It was obvious that literacy is a sought after value or status in itself, giving a woman, a sense of identity. The contents of primers and unconscious attempts to build in messages relating to their daily lives sowed to motivate them. Most important, it was the accessibility of the classes that played a critical role. Groups of 5 or 10 would sit near their own doorsteps at a time of their own choosing with a familiar person as instructor. 'Kalajathas' by popular science groups that used peoples' own cultural idiom and forms, to give the message in ways that sought to link literacy with basic livelihood problems and exploitation. Local vested interests, did not perceive the literacy mission as threatening. Determined attempts by activists broke down some of the powerful sanctions against women in public places. For the first time, women began to participate in discussions on social issues, mingle with men, sing songs. The success of the literacy campaign lay in its organisational strategy. Opposition to literacy campaigns were not slow in coming. The attacks were on voluntarism, on mobilisation as key strategy and the linking of empowerment issues with literacy. The Pondicherry campaign took off well with the blessing of Lt. Governor and other key officials of the education department.

When the campaign culminated in an unprecedented rally of over fifty thousand people, the Assembly members launched an attack on the movement, in a rare unity, cutting across party lines. Pondicherry received the UNESCO award. The Education Minister camped in Delhi to ensure that he would be sent to Barcelona to receive the award. Once back, he removed the voluntary organisation. The reason stated was that the literacy movement was infiltrated by extremist agents. Whereas academics pose the role of literacy and education in State policy and political consciousness, the actual terrain of conflict is within the campaign — between using a mobilisational and empowering process in association with progressive forces or a bureaucratic, acculturating process where the administration seeks to impose literacy or pretends to be doing literacy. Today the latter trend has won the day. Seventy-five percent of the participants were women, is there evidence of women's empowerment?

The anti-arrack movement of Andhra Pradesh is by far the most celebrated outcome of the literacy movement. After the enforcement of prohibition, the Savings' Scheme called "*Podupu Lakshmi*" created the possibilities for women centered activities. Women's credit cooperatives have spread to Kanyakumari, Ramanathapuram and Madurai. In Madhya Pradesh and Bihar also this is being replicated. Madurai developed a Production network with over 150 groups undertaking mixing and sale of spices. Another span off, of the literacy campaign is the fillip it gave to women to enter as candidates for local bodies like the *Panchayat* or *Gram Sabha*. The Total Literacy Campaign (TLC) sought to change gender stereotypes and construct a positive image of women.

In many places like Madhepura and Madhubani, women removed their *purdah* as it interfered with their reading. Songs, plays and conscious introduction of gender content in premiers did have an effect on cultural attitude. Many women's groups came together to consciously develop and enhance this dimension of transforming TLC into a cultural movement for women.

Today, the Total Literacy Campaign covers 336 out of 468 districts in 20 states and 4 union territories. Of these more than 112 districts are in the post literacy phase. The sad story is the passing of TLC from a committed volunteer force into a bureaucratised programme of the government where district officials obtain grants and 'declare' the completion of the 'targets'.

### **What are the lessons for the future?**

Any broad democratic movement, even when the State participates can reach out to millions of women and overcome traditional hurdles to their involvement in social mobilisation. However the spaces created by such movements tend to be transient. Only a conscious and meaningful integration of women's priorities with the opportunity that such large scale mobilisations represent that can best channelise the movement into a sustained one. Amongst all areas of development and possibilities for intervention, literacy still occupies a unique place because its is a skill, a tool to unlock many wide areas of knowledge and capabilities.

### **iii) Women's Studies Movement**

Rekha Pappu from Hyderabad presented an account of the Women Students' Forum (WSF) in the University of Hyderabad was formed in 1990. This Central University has a student population of about 2000. Initially most of the members of WSF were from the English Department or School of Social Sciences, may be because both these departments had women studies' courses.

Most of the members of the WSF were part of the anti-*Mandal* group. A single minded focus on 'Women's Oppression' had blinded the students from seeing the connection between clan, caste, community and gender. The transition from an unthinking anti-*Mandal* position to a committed acceptance of the pro-*Mandal* ideology was a difficult and painful journey. They began to grasp the clan/caste angle when protesting against a male student's behaviour. He belonged to a lower caste/clan. The WSF members realised that they ignored or had difficulty in confronting objectionable behaviour from male students of their own class. A question that was particularly vexing was 'to what extent can one use the discourse of freedom and of rights when it so easily lends itself to subversion of feminist intentions?'

The WSF did not receive much popular support particularly because they supported the *dalits*. University authorities discriminated against *dalit* offender but let off the hook, other male students who were complained against for sexual harassment.

The experience of WSF and their struggle against concrete day to day campus issues brought to the fore many troublesome perceptions about the limitations of feminist theorising itself. Is there a characterisation beyond either the victim or the resistant woman? What kind of framing ensures the recognition of women's issues as a Women's issue?

If feminism is a discourse theory and political practice which seeks to dismantle oppressive structures of behaviour, it cannot restrict itself only to the women's question — it has to analyse the complex interaction between clan, caste, community and gender because what holds up the hierarchy of caste and clan is the way gender is structured them.

## Women's Visions and Strategies for a Peaceful and Democratic South Asia

— Kamla Bhasin

In 1989 a group of South Asian feminists stated the following in a declaration: "As women, our lives are subject to control through predominantly patriarchal structures and family laws and institutions, often justified on the basis of religion. The onslaught of capitalism and imperialism in the post independence period, has led to increasing restrictions on our space and access to resources and a destruction of our traditional skills and knowledge systems.

"Along with other marginalised communities we have been subject to increasing levels of State, community and family violence. Our voices are not heard as we are excluded from the political process which projects class privileges, dynastic rule, whether by men or women leaders. The disintegration of civil society, the increasing centralisation of authority in the hands of the State, often backed with fundamentalist sanction, leaves us vulnerable to constant attack inside and outside our homes."

However women in the region have not remained silent in the face of different kinds of violence within each country of South Asia, and between them. They have resisted and challenged family violence, violence unleashed by the fundamentalists, violence in and by the media, State violence etc. Although tentative, women have also expressed their dreams and visions of a peaceful and democratic South Asia. They have stated, in different fora, that because of geographical, historical and cultural inter – connections, the future of South Asian countries is a common one. Therefore hostility and tension between South Asian countries must end, if the region is to move ahead.

This panel brought together four women and one man from different South Asian countries to share stories of resistance and struggle against different kinds of violence and their vision of just, democratic, peaceful and sustainable communities, countries and region.

Meena Acharya (Nepal), Khushi Kabir (Bangladesh) Karamat Ali (Pakistan), Sunila Abeyasekara (Sri Lanka) and Veena Das (India) were the panelists in this session on 'Democratic and Peaceful South Asia'.

**Meena Acharya** spoke about the problem of Bhutanese refugees in Nepal. The number of refugees of Nepalese origin from Bhutan, seeking shelter in Nepal is very large. They were fleeing from persecution, women subjected to beating and rape, their property and papers seized. Women were 80% of the refugees and suffered great hardships in refugee camps. This has exposed the conflict between ethnicity and citizenship and between feminist identity and the nation State. Capitalism in its present stage encourages the sale of arms to separatist groups. Bhutan has not yet descended into a Terrorist State. If countries in South Asia can collaborate, the issue of refugees can be solved peacefully.

**Khushi Kabir** wanted to recapture the goals and ideals of the liberation war that gave birth to Bangladesh. Recently, she identified a woman from a remote place in the country. She

was poor and landless but had participated in the freedom struggle. Today women and the poor who fought for liberation have been forgotten. At the time of the freedom struggle class and gender divisions were blurred.

In the present context where Bangladesh has adopted liberalisation and globalisation, the impact on women and the poor is worse. External funding has fueled fundamentalist forces. Women must now assert themselves. There is a sharp divide between activists working with rural poor women and elitist, urban women's organisations. The rural elite receive the support of the State police for suppressing the emergence of assertive rural women's groups. It is important that urban women's groups forge links with rural women's organisations.

The issues that are common are domestic violence, social violence like dowry and other repressive norms. Rural women engaged in post-harvest work are demanding work in the fields and are raising questions of fair wages, right to employment and equal access to resources.

A critical national issue is that of legal reform, especially family laws. *Fatwas* are issued to control women and to punish individual women who challenge social restrictions. Women recently mobilised against the rape and murder of a teenage girl by the police.

**Karamat Ali**, a trade union and human rights activist from Pakistan, condemned any kind of oppression on the basis of religion or ethnicity. People should be able to live like human beings. Strife has maximum impact on the poor and the working class. What is needed is to change the present set-up of highly militarised States that breed violence and use religion cynically to spill blood.

The elites create debt (Out of its GDP, Pakistan has to spend 45% for debt servicing) and the poor bear the 'costs'. Conflicts are created by the rulers to justify defence expenditure. National interest is defence by the rulers. What is national interest? What meets the needs of the masses of people is national interest.

People, unthinkingly echo the point of view of the State as for example with regard to Kashmir. For fifty years, the country has been ruled according to the priorities set by the elites. We need to build a broad coalition, where all who are victims can join to build a democratic and peaceful society.

**Veena Das** gave a penetrating analysis of War and Violence. Modernity assumes that conflict is a residue of the pre-modern barbarity. This is not true, she argued. War is very much part of modernity. Wars are contracts between men. Wars are waged against other nations, countries and Nature. Rules that govern 'war' are waived, when it comes to women, because women were never part of the war-contract, they did not belong to heroes or heroic possibilities. Most people live in neither war nor peace, in repressive States. Women cannot walk anywhere without fear. From women's point of view, absence of war is not peace. What is Peace? Women are subject to so called protective laws but they do not protect. They are only expressions of sexuality. Why is rape worse than beating? It is because women also internalise male values of

honour. Judicial process produces judicial pornography giving graphic details of 'penetration' and so on. Rape law separates the 'good woman' from the 'bad woman'. Woman's sexuality is for a man to dispose of. What is defined as 'normal' masculinity is deeply problematic.

**Sunila Abeyasekara** has lived through 15 years of conflict in Sri Lanka which is not a simple problem of Sinhala versus Tamils. Unless concepts of equality and social justice are applied to all, the principle of non-discrimination is accepted, women cannot get their issues settled. During the uprising in the South in the 1980's, there was the highest number of disappearances. When there was abduction and rape of women in the North, Sinhala women did not identify with them but when repression in the South became rampant, it opened their eyes. Attempts were made then to foster solidarity by bringing Sinhala and Tamil women to share experiences. This was a small but significant initiative. The women realised the need to question their identity.



## Resurgent Patriarchies

— Ritu Menon

Patriarchy, as a system of male domination, exists, appears and re-appears in different ways and forms. The forces of fundamentalism have resurrected new and old patriarchal structures. In some communities, women are being encouraged to enter politics and armed conflicts, in other they are told to return to secluded domesticity. New economic policies are creating conditions which are either pushing women into or out of their homes and the labour market. Right-wing economics and right wing politics are simultaneously working against women's democratic and secular rights, their access to resources and to mobility, while at the same time, reinforcing a patriarchal culture. Values, totally at variance with feminist values, like competition, individualism, centralisation, hierarchical leadership etc. are once again gaining ground in an ideology-less world. A different culture/cultures is taking over — of consumerism, of religious intolerance and prejudice, of the mass media, of a patriarchal family. Institutions like the education system, the market, political structures, the judiciary are all affected.

The panel asked well-known women to speak on the trends they foresee.

### Print Media

Kalpana Sharma spoke about new trends in print media. She contended that it was wrong to say patriarchy is 'resurgent' — 'consolidation' would be a more appropriate expression for what was happening in the print media, where developments were closely tied up with events outside. In the early years after independence, print media observed a kind of unwritten code. Later there was censorship but now it is free for all under globalisation.

There is a hierarchy in the concept of 'News'. Events are news, never processes. Ordinary people are not material for news except when they congregate in large numbers for *morchas* or processions. It is only celebrities that make to the front page. Proximity is another consideration. The women and Media Committee in their book, 'Whose News' identified five land marks — dowry deaths, rape cases, Shah Bhano case, *Sati* of Roop Kanwar. Otherwise in the normal course, politics is top priority. Despite abundant literature on 'Development', it does not receive any attention. An event or process has to be dramatic to get into the newspaper.

Has there been any change in the mid nineties? Nothing really. If we rank news in the order of importance given, it is politics, economics, business. If women appear, it is Princess Diana or Miss World. The yardstick is set by the notion that news is to be marketed. A journalist is not supposed to see herself as someone with a purpose. She must achieve marketability. Today, business and economics dominate print media. In the eighties, despite the news-ranking, there was some response to human rights violations and women's issues, women's movements gained some space as part of this. Editorials, feature articles, news columns, reported on the above. Newspapers did their own investigation, for example, Indian Express did some research on dowry. In the nineties this has been given up. Partly this has to do with the fact that there is no national level action now; partly because a lot of action is really taking place in the rural areas. Newspapers focus mostly on urban, middle class and six hundred words is considered to be their attention span. Understandably serious issues like the effect of structural adjustment on

employment, health, poverty, living conditions do not merit any attention. The print media has abdicated its role as the Fourth Estate, as guardian of people's rights, as conscience keeper. There has been a severe narrowing of space for serious debates on women's issues. It is only women who 'succeed'. Like the professional woman, who is given prominence and the reportage is usually out of context and framed within the existing values of society, the women separated as an 'individual' divorced from the social context in which she operates. It is time that the print media became feminised. Fifty percent of reporters are women and yet a reporter is always referred to as a 'he'. Male values dominate. Merely increasing the number of women is not of much help. Women studies mount stringent criticism against current practices of print media and chastise it for not using its opportunities.

### **Trends in Law: Patriarchy under Globalisation**

Indira Jaisingh spoke about the effects of globalisation. The case against the film 'Bandit Queen' (based on Phoolan Devi's life by Shekar Kapoor), brought by Phoolan Devi provides an interesting example. It brings to the forefront many different types of oppression codified in institutions. The key issues in this case were :

1) Phoolan was not fighting Shekar Kapoor, the director but Channel IV which had financed it and bought the rights. Channel IV is an MNC. Throughout the period of the making of the film, Phoolan was in prison. The MNC declared that Phoolan had signed the contract. It resorted to the legal vocabulary of Freedom of Contract. Phoolan who was illiterate, signed a contract, drawn up in English?

2) What does 'freedom' represent here? The freedom to sell her body? Or have some other actor 'sell' hers? The adversary was Channel IV which claimed that it was not accountable to Indian laws. If Phoolan wanted to challenge Channel IV, she should do so in a court in England. Indian judgments are not binding on MNCs. This new trend, unleashed by globalisation is going to make things harder for women to fight cases in courts and the already shrinking judicial space for redressal is going to become unavailable as an area of struggle. Activists do not understand the nature of the relationship between the judicial process and the social system. The judiciary is not like a plumber, plugging leaks. The legal discourse entails an elaborate process of arguing/reasoning out

3) In the context of Patriarchy, three interesting legal arguments are pertinent. If the harm caused to the victim is so slight, no reasonable person would complain. This was the argument used in Roopam Bajaj's case, when she complained against a senior army officer slapping her bottom. What is a slap on the bottom? Is it so much as to make a fuss about it?

What is trivial? Who defines it? Who is a 'reasonable' person? What is 'harm'? The degree to which the legal system is willing to protect the injured, as perceived in the social system we can regard it as its maturity.

Take the case of Union Carbide, the MNC that was responsible for the death and maiming of thousands of people in Bhopal when its factory leaked poisonous gas. Both Channel IV and Union Carbide show a similar trend, that access to justice for the common man/woman

is denied. We have learnt no lesson from Bhopal. It was hoped that the articulation of values that concerned people expressed, would endure. MNCs are disclaiming any legal liability for accidents. They put in clauses where for dispute settlement and arbitration, one has to do so in courts abroad. The task before us is to democratise the legal process. In future, increasingly women's issues will be related to media, commodification, the market, religion, law. All marriage laws are really speaking property laws. In the coming years increasingly, freedom of contract will be invoked.

### **Recomposing Patriarchy in the Labour Market**

Amrita Chhachi spoke about the impact of the new economic policy on the labour market. Market triumphalism and export orientation have encouraged de regulation and an accent on flexibility. This is leading to feminisation of labour. These changes are projected as technological necessity. They are actually a reflection of neo-liberal ideology. The Labour market must be freed from unions. Full employment is seen as a rigidity. In this new regime, labour rights have been eroded. Maternity benefits are represented as 'disadvantages' that make companies less competitive. In many ways the market, reconstitutes patriarchy by defining skill in particular ways, by segmenting the labour market, by using sexual harassment to control women's labour. What we are witnessing is jobless growth.

In the study that she is engaged in, to see the effect of Structural Adjustment she found middle aged skilled women workers in the organised sector, after 15 to 20 years of service dispensed with under the Voluntary Retirement Scheme. A lumpsum received at the time of retirement is not equal to a steady income. It vanishes in no time. Women found a few jobs in the informal sector. Men found it easier to find new jobs. When men fail to find jobs, unemployment is not just loss of earnings, it is loss of one's identity and this hurts men who sink into depression, alcoholism or suicide. The National Renewable Fund meant for retraining, ironically is used for counselling such men! Women have been recruited in the export industries — garment, electronics, diamonds. They are usually first time entrants, are unprotected by unions or laws regarding fair wages and benefits. Parental control as well as sexual harassment is used by male bosses to control women workers. Another strategy is casualisation. A group of workers is employed, sacked, re-employed. A fourth strategy is subcontracting. Who is the employer here? Feminisation is taking place in women recruited under 'cheaper' terms as well as when the characterisation of female labour are extended to male labour for example through casualisation or sub-contracting. Trade unions are finding it difficult to define a worker. Under conditions of insecurity, loss of identity, breakdown of traditional support systems, communal identity is gaining ground.

Our strategies have to mediate between micro and macro; we must go beyond critique. Minimum wage demand should include domestic work; compensation at the place of work for doing house-work. We have to force the State to provide basic amenities. Issues have now moved out of sectional interests into a larger arena of citizenship, State and capitalist patriarchy.

### **Emergence of Right Wing Women: New Support for Capital and Patriarchy**

Tanika Sarkar traced the evolution of right wing and communal politics. There has been

an increasing visibility of women since the Ram Janam Bhoomi agitation. Women's involvement in RSS has deep roots. The RSS had its women's wing since 1930, drawn from upper and middle castes. Paradoxically this public presence of women is promoting patriarchy. The Hindu-Muslim women in the RSS view, attains happiness only with one man, however unrequited. This is a peculiar view of the Hindu family. Murli Manohar Joshi in an article in the *Organiser* propagated this kind of ideal. Our legal rights unless also have a social equation cannot protect us. Women's education and employment have been going up. This has led to women being targetted as consumer. Trade and industry are usually adherents of the Right. The kind of promotion of individualism that trade and industry are indulging in will not liberate women for this individualism has to do with consumerism. Women's public space will be used to promote class and caste interests. In comparison, the older forms of Patriarchy seem more benign. Age is no longer wisdom but decay. Whereas the struggle for women's rights set women of any class against men of their class and align them to women of other classes, the increasing bargaining power won by right wing women due to their public role is being channelised to serve the political agenda of right wing parties.

### Competing Patriarchies

Kumkum Sangari pointed out that after the first IAWS Conference in 1981, we are now reluctant to talk of 'all women'. We are unable to speak as women at precisely the time when patriarchy is ascendant. Are there separate patriarchies? The co-existence of different castes, tribals, matrilineal/patrilineal groups are not accidental differences but are structured to uphold the caste system. Today we have difficulty in evolving common laws because different patriarchies have distributed entitlements and oppressions differently. We have discrete religio-legal systems restructured by customary laws, by class and by the political economy of capitalism. As capitalism tends to homogenise communal ideology seeks new differentiations.

If we see the religio-legal system of Islam and Brahminical Hinduism, we find that Islam (in its antique version) gave limited property rights to women. The modified Hindu law does so too. Where there is discrimination there is a commonality between the two systems. It is usually believed that Islamic marriage is contractual, Brahminical Hindu marriages are not. Actually Hindu marriages does have a contractual component. Among Hindus, different types of divorce prevailed. Customarily, even among the upper castes, extra judicial divorce was possible. There is therefore some overlap between the two systems. Both had a dynamic relationship with Customary law notion of morality. While Islam bases itself on a revealed text, Hindus do not have a revealed text as such but follow a legitimation process by appeal to the '*Shastras*'. There are caste and class differences among both communities. In the 19th century religious differentiation was accompanied by new class formation. The areas of domestic labour, control of sexuality, parental control were similar by class. Urbanisation, secularisation of some areas of life produced similarities.

The two communities in their competitive patriarchy, are self congratulatory, basing their claims to treating women better by appeal to text and not practice, by appeal to ancient texts and not contemporary versions and by seeing religion as the sole determinant of patriarchy rather than as only one element. Women are also dispersed in regional clusters in addition to religious groupings. Patriarchy functions in three ways simultaneously — it is systemic; it has common

features but it is also different in different social groups. Patriarchies are constituted by partly primordial and partly non-primordial values. Feminist politics cannot be fought within a particular religion. Forms of organisation are needed that can grapple with multiple and overlapping patriarchy. Political economy is going to dominate the scene in future.

## Rajasthan State Panel

— Aruna Roy & Shail Mayaram

In the last decade, women's mobilisation in Rajasthan has shown two very broad trends. The first is the coming together of women on many issues. The other trend which arises out of the same set of experience indicates differences in approaches, strategies and understanding. This in a sense is also the emerging pattern all over the country. Both these sets of experiences/trends have thrown up a number of questions over which collective reflection needs to be done. This panel presented experiences of women representing the different sections and perspectives of the work done in Rajasthan in Government Programmes, NGOs, Human Rights Organisations, Academics (Universities and Research Organisations) and other agencies and professions.

This panel coordinated by Aruna Roy presented perspectives on the women's experience in Rajasthan. Aruna Roy introduced the issues by stating that the work on women concerning minimum wages and other issues has now become part of mainstream discourse in the State. The panel brought together mostly rural women who had joined hands over the last decade in an attempt to address an academic, intellectual world with whom shared bonds had been established in terms of developing a vision of an alternative world.

Ratan Devi, presently Member of *Panchayat Samiti*, Silora, described her middle class background and the beginnings of her career in SWRC, Tilonia. She had to face much pressure from her village and family in this context, particularly caste injunctions. But undauntingly she worked among poor women labourers and in particular, recalled that she gained much strength from the *Mahila Mela* of Tilonia held in 1984. This *mela* brought many women together and enabled some of them to share their pain such as the rape of an eleven year old girl. Ratan Devi mentioned that she is now trying to understand the politics of votes. In her *Panchayat Samiti* where most husbands attempt to project their wives, she faces the problems of obtaining information at all levels. Women, she added, have to be made to understand women's issues. Electoral politics does not lead to empowerment unless there is a process of personal change. She attributed her own strength to her involvement in villages for the last two decades.

Sumitra Chopra, State General Secretary of the Mahila Janwadi Samiti, stated that the last 15 years had witnessed an increase in violence in the State as all over the country. The particularly backward region of Rajasthan had witnessed familial violence in the Deorala Sati when the right of a widow to exist was snatched away. Sumitra raised the question whether this could be called a gender issue as so many women participated in the pro-*sati* movement. On caste violence she cited the case of a Sikh Harijan woman being beaten to death. In terms of class exploitation there was the prevalence of exploitation of women labourers. This was because of the absence of landholdings and large mass of women labourers. Thus, patriarchal authority reinforced class exploitation. Sumitra also described the persistence of communal violence and how fear became a part of Muslim women's existence as men ranging from the ages of 13 and 70 were held as TADA detenus. Women's issues, she concluded, were constrained by communal, caste and familial violence.

Hami Bai of the Adivasi Vikas Manch, Kotra, Udaipur held that the forests belonged to the tribals and it was the State which had unauthorizedly occupied them. She mentioned that both

men and women were involved in the initiatives taken to organize tribals. Together they challenged the setting up of a cement factory and a game sanctuary. Previously women only got Rs. 6/- of 7/- in the *tendu patta* forest industry. Now wages have increased to Rs. 32 and the Samiti is able to buy its own raw material. Besides, they have also undertaken struggles against the consumption of alcohol and continue to organise women over livelihood issues.

Hooki Bai has worked for twenty years with Sewa Mandir of Udaipur. She stated that she was elected as a Ward Panch but refused to be UpSarpanch as she is illiterate.

Shanta Bahen has worked variously with Sewa Mandir, Astha and is now with Ekta. She described her work as being related to awareness and conscientization but as being weak with respect to literacy. Why is the honour of the father, husband and brother always held to be at stake? What about the question of a woman's *izzat*? Earlier she had to think of making a contribution of Rs. 2/- for the Mahila Mandal. Now, she claimed, the male dominated organizations have to worry about issues being raised by women's organizations. But, she admitted, it is caste, politics, religion and money that break us.

Bhanwari, *Sathin* with the Women's Development Programme, suggested that the politics of recognition caused by awards tends to cause isolation and also fractures the organisation. It singles out what is collective support.

Gerda Unnithan, Advisor, Student's Bureau and also founder and elected President of the Rajasthan University Women's Association. As a middle class woman she recognizes that she is specially privileged. She described RUWA's attempts to create alternate spaces within the University in the hope of an egalitarian world. Shakti Stambha is a short stay home for women and has registered 200 cases and one hundred cases of dowry murders. Nonetheless, Gerda Unnithan recognized that middle class women have greater limits to their action as compared to rural women. It has been particularly difficult to find a space among girl students.

Aruna Roy described her departure from the Indian Civil Service to successively join two voluntary organisations, SWRC and the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan. In her view the headiness, the euphoria of 1984 when terrific collective strength was experienced had given way to a series of persistent questions. Why had an individualism set in? Why had the collective voice weakened? Mobilization on collective issues brings people together but it also brings to the fore contradictions and compromises. Why has there been no mobilization on the question of communalism? The left protested, but there was no protest from women. Some persons worked sporadically on the riots. But there was no march against the butchering or at the breaking of the Babri mosque. What stopped us, is an uncomfortable question we must address, Aruna asserted. The claim to empowerment had drawn several women to the feminist movement. If women are visible it is assumed that women are empowered. But even as terms such as empowerment have been appropriated, real empowerment has suffered. In Rajasthan, Aruna maintained that there have been women's struggles, but no sustained women's movement which would involve a concerted effort of all twenty-seven districts.

The discussion following the presentations raised varied issues, but no substantive concerns. One participant held that the real problem lay in the caste system which should be

attacked. Another claimed that the Bhanwari rape case was sensationalised, the counter-response to which was that it was symbolic. To one commentator the middle class woman cannot play an activist role given the boundaries between the academy and the activist world. As the panel presentations were in Hindi-Rajasthani much time was lost in translation and conversely there was less for discussion.

**Gerda J Unnithan, President,  
Rajasthan University Women's Association**

My birthplace is not in Rajasthan, but my work and activity place has been here since 34 years. As a founder and currently the elected president of Rajasthan University Women's Association, which is one of the organisers of this Conference, I extend a hearty welcome to all delegates.

RUWA has completed 20 years of its existence. As part of, and as the outcome of the second wave of the feminist movement globally and in India the need was felt amongst women in the University to:

1) examine and promote their own position and situation within the University structure, which was and remains heavily male dominated and

2) that we owe a social debt to society that has provided us with privileges far beyond what the average Rajasthani woman and girl child can ever aspire for. Our visions have been to work for a more egalitarian world where those who have been deprived and despised for centuries can have dignity and recognition for their contributions in their homes and in their work places. Since the educational setting and processes are best suited to create awareness, to liberate one's mind of stereotyped thinking and to effect social change, it was our hope that RUWA could play an exemplary and leadership role in the entire process of empowerment of Rajasthani women. We have to struggle and continue to struggle both within the University framework and in the larger community to have our voices heard.

It is ironical that the greatest struggle continues to be within the University structure which is heavily male oriented and as such also makes it difficult for women, both teachers, students and administrators to assert and create alternative spaces. Many university women find it therefore more domestically and professionally rewarding to remain part of the patriarchal set-up than to be closely identified with RUWA. We have 80 life members and more than 400 paid up members, but the group that is continuously and actively involved is not more than 50. Events like visits by well-known personalities, seminars and workshops which are non-threatening are well attended, but continuous and committed assistance and involvement are only given by a handful of women totally devoted to the cause. We may have to perhaps create a built-in element to cater more to the self-interests of the members. This situation is very worrying for the women's movement and for the leadership role University women have to play. There is occasionally a smugness, a casteism and class-consciousness which is no good. Recently also, although we are a non-political organisation, certain reflected ideologies have started playing a subtle role in decision-making.



It is in the larger community that RUWA's contribution have been better appreciated, both in official government and non-official circles. We run a short-stay home for women called Shakti Stambh, which has been privileged to help about 350 women from all over India and all sections of society, all victims of domestic violence, during the last 8 years. We have a Family Counselling Cell, a Legal Cell, an Academic Cell, all actively involved in directly assisting women in need and in spreading awareness. At present there are four rape cases and more than a hundred dowry murder cases with us.

So you see, our hopes and visions have been very inspiring and stimulating, we have made a certain impact, but it is in the nitty-gritty of day to day operation and experience that we come to struggle with the harsh reality. We belong to the 'BIMARU'\* States: grinding poverty stares us daily in the face, all parameters of women's development are below the national average. The work carved out for all NGO's and voluntary organisations is awe-inspiring. Our personal, domestic lives and our professional lives are heavily influenced by the existing economic and political scenario. In both the private and the public spheres we have to move from dependency and independence and finally to interdependency. There is no short cut in this process; the struggles continue both in the rural areas, but also for educated, professional women in the urban areas of Rajasthan.

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**Section III**

**SUB-THEMES**

**&**

**CONCLUSION**

## Family and Women's Sexuality

— Nirmala Banerjee

In the standard language of social sciences, the family is regarded as a basic but innocuous, building block of society. There are debates on its forms and changes within it, but rarely on its internal politics or its objective functions. The State accepts the family's authority on its members even at the cost of inroads being made on the constitutional human rights of women and children. Feminists, specially in South Asia, have highlighted the deeply hierarchical nature of the family. They have argued that the family socialises women not as individuals in their own right, but as a family resource to serve its numerous functions in the interest of patriarchal authority. The State does not question this authority because it has made the family responsible for many social security functions, such as care of the young, the old, the sick and the unemployed. In order to accomplish this the family needs to have complete control over women's productive and reproductive labour. As the new economic policies lead to further limits on State expenditure on welfare activities, the latter is likely to lead to further support to family control on women.

Women's sexuality is similarly placed entirely at the disposal of the family, making all expressions of it outside the family, illegitimate. On the other hand, the use of women's sexuality outside marriage in prostitution and sex tourism also benefits their male controllers as well as the State in its new emphasis on the tourist trade. Whether a community permits remarriage of widows and deserted women or not, there are strong taboos on women indulging in any sexual relations outside marriage.

Whether or not there were traditional outlets for women's sexuality in any other form, modern South Asian society is still unprepared to acknowledge other forms of alliances between men and women or between women themselves. This has inhibited the growth of alternative support systems of women when they are outside the marriage and family structures. In this workshop an attempt was made to conceptualize the feminist understanding of the politics of family and of 'legitimate' sexuality. Special emphasis was placed on explicating the contradiction between women's rights as citizens, and the State's endorsement of family authority. It was hoped that this will lead to our evolving alternative alliances and support systems for women which can find a space in our society.

In all there were four sessions on this sub-theme all of which were remarkably well-attended. Earlier, many people had volunteered to prepare and present papers on the subject. Of these, fourteen papers had been selected on the basis of the abstracts sent to the coordinator and the authors had been invited to participate in the sessions. The final version of one paper was found to be less than satisfactory: two authors, Kalpana Vishvanath and Ispita Chanda could not attend the conference: but Chanda's paper was presented and discussed. Nirmala Banerjee and Neera Desai withdrew their abstracts since they had not prepared the final versions. Pushpa Acharya from Nepal was permitted to make an impromptu presentation.

The first session was held at 11 A.M. on the 28th December where the rapporteur was Pratima Choudhary. At the beginning, the coordinator, Nirmala Banerjee gave a brief introduction of the theme. She began by describing the proceedings of an earlier workshop on a related topic which has been held in Calcutta in July 1995. The IAWS had printed a report on it and copies of that were distributed amongst the delegates who had registered for this sub-theme. That workshop had concentrated more on examining how the existing body of mainstream social science disciplines, particularly Sociology, Economics and History dealt with issues relating to the family and gender. Based on the general trend of those discussions, the coordinator in her initial note had suggested that for the deliberations at Jaipur, paper writers should focus on the following three broad aspects of the theme; the family as a support system, the family and women's work, and the family and women's sexuality. However in the final form, the themes of the paper did not closely follow the suggested format and had to be grouped somewhat differently.

The first session was therefore devoted to examining some ideological aspects of gender within the family; there were two papers in this area. Dr. Sonia Amin of the History Department, Dhaka University gave a paper "Utopian Alternatives to the Patriarchal Family?"; in it she had discussed Begum Rokheya Sakhawat Hussain's novel Padmarag which had been written in 1902 and published in Calcutta in 1924. Amin argued that the novel could arguably be viewed as an early feminist utopia offering women an alternative space outside the oppressive patriarchal family. The heroine, along with several women belonging to different religions had come to Tarini Bhavan. This was a community set up exclusively for women by another woman who herself had opted out of the oppressive life of a Hindu widow in the patriarchal family. Here, self-reliant and economically independent women were supposed to live as equals of men in both the public and the private space. As fugitives from the oppressions of patriarchy the inmates of Tarini Bhavan not only find dignity and sanity but can also put up resistance to those ideals. Padmarag's ultimate refusal to go back to normal family life is an instance of that.

The vision was very much a product of the rationalist ideas that were the hallmark of the educated and the enlightened in Bengal at the beginning of this century. Amin argued that despite Rokheya's serious reservations about the patriarchal society, her utopia was not an alternative to the family since it included no men and made no mention of women's sexuality; it was meant to be only a sisterly shelter. Particularly, the vision did not question the primacy of marriage and the importance of chastity for women. Amin concluded that rather than regarding Tarini Bhavan as a feminist utopia, it can best be described as a transitional arrangement where the wounds of patriarchy were to be healed. The novel did not really create any new form of gender relations.

The other paper in the session was by Dr. Divya Pandey of the SNDT University, Bombay: entitled as Motherhood: Different Voices, it analysed the social organization of reproduction as revealed in a sample survey of women drawn from those visiting a middle-class maternity home in Bombay.

The main hypothesis of the paper was that not only the socially approved gender-based relations between sexes but also the social objectives of the patriarchal authorities in the family keep intruding and reshaping the subjective experience of motherhood. Women are under great pressure to fulfill these expectations and are blamed for any outcome other than the one required. All in all, there is nothing natural, spontaneous or autonomous about women's reproductive behaviour. Maternity for women appear as a great ordeal where they are tested and judged by their ability to fulfill their socially ordained roles and their failures are punished at least by social condemnation.

Paromita Banjeree was the main discussant on these two papers; she pointed out that in Rokheya's utopia, there was a marked absence of any awareness of women's sexuality. Also in the heroine's rejection of marriage there was more a sense of a sacrifice for the sake of some principles rather than a choice accepting a joyous alternative. In that sense the novel was more about a struggle rather than a vision. Women in Tarini Bhavan did not question the socially approved sexual division of labour; they merely highlighted a woman's capacity to operate in the public space. This was very much in keeping with the social reformist ideas of Rokheya's times. About Pandey's paper it was pointed out that the sample was very specific to a particular community and social class; but conclusions of the analysis were presented as if they had a much more generalized application. In the case of the few exceptions she had noted, the author had not been sufficiently analytical about the possible reasons for the exceptional attitudes. For example she had not considered the possibility that a woman's relative position may be easier once she had produced the desired number of sons.

The main point to emerge in the subsequent discussion among participants from the floor related to the excessive importance of socialisation and social pressures in shaping women's reactions whether in 'natural' or physical functions like reproduction or in their abstract visions about their utopia. There was also some discussion about women's inhibitions regarding giving any weightage to their sexual needs or preferences. Several people noted that the obverse of the very high premium placed on male children was a degradation and undervaluation by women of themselves and of any daughters they may have. The process therefore is self-perpetuating.

The second session was held during the afternoon of the 28th December where Shailaja was the rapporteur; for papers grouped roughly around the theme of rethinking women's sexuality were discussed. Pushpa Acharya from Nepal made a presentation on the ideological determinants of women's rights and motherhood in the context of Nepal. The main point of the paper was as follows: as the dominant ideology of the society, Hindu patriarchal practices shape the ritualistic status of and perceptions regarding women's reproductive experiences within the family as well as for the State. In their turn the latter determine both the rights of women in the family as well as the public policies meant for women's reproductive health, nutrition and access to contraceptives. There is a basic contradiction in the societal ideology in that menstruation and related processes are viewed very negatively while motherhood, specially bearing of a male (boy) child

is glorified. Women too internalise this entire belief system and do not resist the practice of regarding their bodies as worthless except for producing preferably, male children. This was evident from the still very poor status of the health and nutrition of the average Nepalese woman. The question raised by Acharya was what kind of strategies were necessary to shift the policies meant for women from their existing focus only on the process of reproduction to one on women's health and well-being in general.

The second presentation was by Veena Talwar Oldenberg from Baruch College, City University of New York and its title was 'Secret Liaisons: Subverting Compulsory Marital Sexuality within the Hindu Extended Family'. Oldenberg had explored two kinds of spaces available to women as alternatives to the family and the alternative sexualities that were possible for women. The two spaces considered were a *Kotah* or the stylized brothel of Lucknow, and a woman's resource centre, Saheli in Delhi. The author argued that while the former is usually regarded as a venue of male exploitation of women, it in fact offered the latter a control over their own property as well as some deep and empowering relations with other women. She noted that there was a system by which some married women called *Khangies* also came to the *Kotah* to earn some income or sexual experiences. In the process some of these women had formed deep and satisfying sexual relations with other women. Yet the society entirely ignored this whole phenomenon of homosexual love between women: it did not even have adequate language to express the feelings or even to describe the practice.

The author had further examined the relations between the women who visited the Resource Centre and those who ran it; there she had found that the problems dealt with were overwhelmingly related to dowry or other such harassments in the marital home. Women never talked about unsatisfactory sexual experiences, their urges for alternative sexuality or their relational problems in general. There too sexual relations were reduced to their reproductive content leaving out other considerations like pleasure, companionship etc. She argued that by ignoring these issues, feminists also were being implicated in the perpetuation of patriarchal morality and homophobia. She felt it was critically necessary to question the absence of legitimate spaces for women to express their sexuality outside the bonds of marriage and heterosexuality.

The next two papers focussed on the popular cinema and the portrayal of the social image of women's sexuality in the media.

Dr. V Janaki from Madras gave a paper, 'Images of Women's Sexuality in Tamil Films' in which she examined the interrelations between the gender-specific images of the Tamil hero Rajanikanth and the message sent by these movies about women's sexuality. She noted that all the films she had considered glorified motherhood; at the same time they portrayed women as vulgar temptresses, flippant socialites or passive victims of male violence. In all the images it was the patriarchal image of the man that got reinforced without any note being taken about the changes in women's roles in the society or in the economy. In that sense Tamil films had undergone little change in the last several decades.

The other paper on the same theme was by R. Vijaya Laxshmi, of the Centre for Women's Studies, Nagarjuna University and was entitled 'Family and Women's Sexuality'; it was based on an analysis of the Telugu film 'Aunty'. This film had been released in 1995 and had proved to be very popular. Vijaya Laxshmi mentioned that before independence many Telugu movies had been concerned with social issues; but in all of those women used to be shown to accept patriarchal values without question. Later, in the '50s and '60s there were a few films where women were shown to have questioned patriarchal values: in the recent period women are being portrayed as being modern — being economically independent, having high profile careers etc. But throughout it is the patriarchal values which succeed in the end and women are shown to submit to them in the ultimate analysis. In this film, a single young and attractive woman is befriended by three men and faces severe social condemnation for this. Although her motives for leaving the husband are revealed in the end as having been very noble, she can only atone for her sin of having 'tempted' or misled the men by dying. Vijaya Laxshmi noted that if a film ever shows a woman defying patriarchal values it usually ends in her death.

The commentator for this session was Yashodhara Bachi: on Acharya's paper she noted that in most public programmes for women the tendency to support a modern role for women was foiled by a simultaneous attempt to contain them in traditional mores regarding sexuality and chastity. Commenting on Oldenberg's paper she said that in fact a considerable body of earlier literature was available which had talked about women's alternative expression of sexuality. Also while it is true that homosexual relations especially of women are rarely mentioned in our society, it is also true that the theme of sex is in general engulfed in silence and seldom expressed in language used by women. She thought that the fact that the Resource Centre appeared to have tabooed talk on sexual issues was worrying and felt that the women's movement in India needed to reflect on this. On the whole she felt that Oldenberg's narrative did not really provide us with strategies to fight patriarchal controls.

In commenting on the two papers on films, Bagchi pointed out that the hegemony of patriarchal ideals is being reinforced by the forces of globalised capital. There is a further effort to use patriarchal norms to persuade women to become mindless consumers. She felt that a utopian film will not change these values: what we need are good films which challenge and fight the dominant culture of both patriarch and capitalism.

In the general discussion that followed several participants felt that in the Indian context male values within the family ruled out questions of women's right to sexual gratification except to highlight its negative potential for threatening the honour of the family. However, it is not uncommon for women to seek alternative expressions of it inside or outside the family through various forms of hetero or homo relations. Our traditional society had scope for the development of various kinds of relations between women. On the other hand, it appeared that the current women's movements had so far not really assimilated these kind of questions into their agenda. They only deal with the pathology of sexuality but not the relationships between feminist politics, norms of sexuality and sexual repressions in their caste/class specifics.

Another issue raised was about the need and desirability of a strong censorship on the media. Although some felt that we should demand stricter norms in the matter it was generally agreed that defining obscenity or vulgarity was difficult outside the context. In fact vulgarity when put in the legal domain becomes even more obscene because of the impersonal nature of court discussions and judgements. It was generally agreed that our battle was with the patriarchal system which colour the views of the observers rather than with the media who cashed in on them.

Many participants felt that for women there were few viable alternatives to the family and therefore to the familial value systems. Women themselves realise this and therefore opt for the family even when they are oppressed. If the women's movement too has been slow in propounding these alternative sexual mores more forcefully it is mainly because at the ground level they are aware of the weakness of the support systems they offer to women. It is not likely that today's women's movements take a moral position against alternative sexuality or relational spaces outside the family; It is probable that they feel ill-equipped to take on this further challenge against family-based patriarchy. They feel that what is perhaps need more urgently is to reflect on how to go about a movement for supporting women's autonomy in sexuality along with movements to offer women some real choices in life in general.

The third session took place during the afternoon of 29th December where the focus was to be on familial control and support for women. The rapporteur was R. Vijaya Laxshmi. There were four papers; the first paper was by Maitryee Chatterjee of the Nari Niriyatan Pratirodh Mancha of Calcutta: its title was 'Is the Present Family System in India the Ideal Support System?' Chatterjee had dealt with the question on the basis of the cases of women who had come for help to her organization. The joint family system had earlier given women no autonomy but it had ensured for them at least a shelter and two meals a day even when they were deserted, widowed or orphaned. The Mancha's twelve years' experience of counselling indicated that with the modernization of the economy, the emerging family structures had become ineffective in those functions. The man/woman relationship is still not that of one among equals but remains that of between the owned and the owner. Women are forced to accept infidelity on the part of their husbands and the latter's families show little sympathy to the victimised woman. In case a woman earned a better income than her husband she is occasionally subjected to humiliation by the latter and again the marital family shows no sympathy. Fathers often paid little attention to the daughters' wishes in arranging the latters' marriages and gave them little help if the marriages did not work out. Chatterjee concluded by saying that since the natal or the marital families gave women little support in cases where their marital relations did not work out, it was necessary for the women's movement to promote some alternative support systems.

The second paper was by Pratima Choudhary of Barkatullah University which explored the issue of the role of the families in certain tribes in promoting prostitution by their women. She had studied seven tribes of Madhya Pradesh where the practice had been made a part of the tribes' religion or culture. Originally these had been tribes which served as the army or its camp-followers of various local kingdoms. When that activity was



destroyed by the British they had turned to thugy and later still to petty crime. Living had become increasingly difficult so that women who earlier had been entertainers had become prostitutes to support the families. By now most of these tribes had given these practices a ritualistic and religious significance so that the few women who were unwilling to follow the profession faced a lot of social hostility. In general the women did not resist the pressure because the practice gave them social position and also some autonomy. Choudhary gave detailed statistical evidence to support her thesis that the main reason was the populations' illiteracy and poverty which left them with few other options.

Ispita Chanda of Jadhavpur University had sent a very interesting paper called 'Nwanybuife: A woman is also Something.' In it she had drawn parallels between the way the colonial powers in Africa as also in the tribal areas of India had systematically destroyed the original form of the family in those tribes mainly because they were alien to the European colonials' idea that the family should be a patriarchal and patrilocal. In this project, in India they also got the support of upper class brahminical forces. Chanda brought the following specifics of the alternative model that prevailed in the African as well as the Indian tribal societies. This alternative form of family had found no contradiction between motherhood and women's productive work so that their women did not suffer from any guilt complex about participating in economic activities. Women carried their children to work. In Africa they bore the responsibility of producing the family's food. Even in patrifocal societies there was no strict separation between the private and the public spaces. This pattern meant that women had some real power and their roles were complementary with rather than subordinate to mens' roles. None of these societies placed a premium on pre-marital virginity or chastity: divorce was easy and carried no stigma. The polygamy in Africa gave mothers considerable real power. The colonial and post-colonial mainstream societies have systemically undermined these traditions through changes in laws and through missionaries glorifying patriarchal traditions. Nationalist movements, in their struggle against the colonial powers also tended to assign to women subordinate roles as handmaidens of the freedom fighters. Chanda pointed out that the *sangi* or *sakha* model that prevailed between Birsa Munda and Ulgulan was very different from this. Now popular culture which is male-dominated is also being used to propagate these patriarchal values.

Chanda argued that it is important for feminist theory to investigate such alternative family models in order to overcome the constructed 'naturalness' of the patriarchal, monogamous, model which isolates women from their natal homes and makes their subordination in the marital family appear as the norm. Once this ideology is made a part of the socialisation process it is then easier to make acceptable the further formulation that suits men viz. that as child-bearers and nurturers women are too occupied and weakened to enter the more rough public world.

The fourth paper in the session was by Paromita Banerjee of Jadhavpur School of Women's Studies. Her paper was based on the preliminary findings of an on-going action research programme being conducted by the School in some slum of Calcutta. It dealt with the strange contradiction the research team had found between women's attitude and

practices relating to abortions. The survey had found that over a fifth of the women had resorted to abortions as a means of family planning and several of these had done so repeatedly. This was inspite of the fact that over a half of those women were opposed to abortion and that too not on any religious or moral grounds but simply because of its likely adverse effects on their health. Thus these women have to be considered modern and urbanized. That they resort to abortions in spite of these beliefs was mainly because they are denied access to full knowledge about alternative methods of family planing. Most women of all generations, income classes and educational levels favour controlling the family size. But it was television much more than formal education which had given this consciousness to specially the younger women. Problem was, the State machinery only promotes the pill as an alternative to abortions and the information given about pills is not adequate to ally the women's fears regarding its adverse side-effects. Abortion on the other hand is not only a familiar and tried option but also one that requires no money, can be done at one shot without involving frequent trips to clinics and therefore lets them get away without informing the men. The picture that emerges therefore is of women being very conscious and rational but entirely powerless to take independent, well-informed decisions.

Divya Pandey was the commentator for this session: she felt that economic and social developments were indeed changing the form of the family: yet women were still being kept dependent on family support. They have no place outside the marital family and are therefore compelled to accept any injustice that the latter may perpetrate against them. As a result women's traditional supports even within the family had been eroded but women's need for these had remained as urgent as before. It was imperative for the women's movement to reflect on this state of affairs and start working out viable alternatives which can have a wide application. Regarding the two papers about tribal societies, Pandey pointed to the contrast between the traditional pattern as portrayed by Chanda and the current reality that emerged from Choudhary's study. That women traditionally had more sexual freedom in those societies has come to be used for their being pressurised to take up prostitution for supporting the family.

In general discussions in this session was somewhat scattered and got diverted away from the substantive issues. Nevertheless there were questions raised from the floor about the logic of State policies in making abortions so easily available in India. While participants in no way wanted a reversal of these policies, they none the less had strong objection to the State pandering to male values and underplaying the importance of male contraceptives even when this led to multiple abortions and connected health risk for women. Another participant raised the question as to why assimilation of tribal societies into the mainstream always led to their women losing their traditional rights. Had there been any instances when there was resistance to this from those women? If not, can their earlier powers or rights have been all that substantive?

The last session on the theme of Sexual Politics was held on the 30th in the morning when there were three presentations. In spite of it being the last morning, attendance at the session was very good. Maitryee Chatterjee was to be the rapporteur but she did not submit a

report on the session. The first paper was by Yashodhara Bagchi of the JadHAVpur University on the topic 'Sexual Politics and the Family' the case of Bengal'. She argued that in Indian feminist studies women's sexuality has emerged as a major topic at least in two areas — one regarding the ideology of motherhood and the other about prostitution. Nonetheless there are some reservations about discussing the politics of sexuality in Indian women's movements because sexuality is considered to be a private matter to be kept within the family; its public discussion is often abhorred as a western fashion. Bagchi thought it essential to unpack the ideology of the family; in the colonial period motherhood was made to represent the unchanging domain of the Indian culture which was preserved in the private sphere of the household. By making it invisible the ethos gave legitimacy not to the daughters but to the mothers of sons. It made the latter the carriers of the patriarchal ideology and condoned the neglect and torture of daughters and daughters-in-law. The imperatives of containing female sexuality into the ideals of *sati*, the chaste and devoted wife was not just a domestic programme: it was also made into a symbol of the dominant class to represent a resistance to the colonial hegemony. Bagchi reported that even in the course of the field work for the School's recent study of the girl child in Bengal they had found persistent differences made between the son and the daughter, and a continuing fear of the unbridled sexuality of the girl which leads to early marriages, neglect of girls' education and inhibitions about free and frank discussions within the family about sexual issues. She felt it was time that women's sexual rights were made central to the Indian women's movement.

The second paper in the session was a joint one by Geetanjali Gangoli and Gopika Solanki from Bombay. Its subject was Woman's Sexuality through the Law and it aimed to trace the different ways in which women's sexuality is constructed within the family and legitimized by law to adhere to the norm of the virgin daughter and the chaste and subjugated wife. The laws reemphasize and support the position that women have no sexual freedom but are there to give pleasure to the rightful owner who in most cases should be their husband. In order to establish these hypotheses, the authors discussed several illustrative cases under law which apply in cases of rape, prostitution, adultery, homosexuality etc. They pointed out that under the rape law in India marital rape is not an offence even when the wife is under age and therefore the marriage is not valid. Senior Indian politicians have supported this position from the floor of the parliament. In trials of even those accused of custodial rape the judges disregard the usual notion of abstract and objective justice and take account of the woman's class or morality. Similarly that in marriage men are to get total control on a woman's sexuality is indicated by the fact that in adultery cases, the case made out is of the other man transgressing the husband's property rights. But in the corresponding case of the husband committing the same offence there is not concern expressed about the wife's rights over the husband's body.

In keeping with mainstream concerns, homosexuality is considered disreputable since it involves men behaving like women. But lesbianism is not mentioned specially since it is the unauthorised penile penetration of a woman's vagina that is considered an offence. Similarly the ambiguous attitude of Indian laws relating to prostitution can be explained by the conflict between the general acceptance of men's right to take pleasure from the bodies of

women, who are by definition considered to be the inferior and subjugated group and the society's general fear of women's unbridled sexuality.

Unfortunately, in the absence of a detailed report on that session's proceedings it has not been possible to report on the orally delivered presentation by Kanchan Mathur and her colleagues from the Institute of Development Studies, Jaipur.

Sonia Amin as the discussant pointed out that all the papers appeared to complement each other in that the social politics regarding women's sexuality was well illustrated by the case law discussed. She raised the question whether or not the ambiguities in the law were deliberate or not. Even though one does not want to accept a conspiracy theory, it could be that the makers of the law were wisely leaving an area for debate and rethinking as society changes its mores through time. Others however felt that one should take note of the conflict between what is known to be just and what is acceptable at the societal level.

In the subsequent lively debate, many instances of misinterpretation of existing laws by the judicial authorities in different parts of the country were mentioned. Unfortunately quite often women's movements were found doing little about these instances because judgements were inordinately delayed and the former did not have the resources to take sustained interest in each case. Moreover most people in the movement were not trained to correctly interpret the legal language in the laws and could not anticipate the kind of misinterpretation that may take place in operating the laws. Again and again the need for legal literacy in the movement came up from the point of view of checking the drafting of laws as well as to highlight the miscarriage of justice.

At a more abstract level, the discussion focussed on how patriarchy regards the controls put on women's sexuality. From one angle it could be to give men the undisputed right to use women's bodies for their private pleasure. From another there is also the tradition which portrays women's unbridled sexuality as a dangerous force capable of spreading havoc and destruction in society. It can also be an instrument by which men can limit women's access to public life and thus appropriate their labour as well as their reproductive capabilities for the use of specified men. The process also play a major role in perpetuating the system of family as the most stable unit of the society.

In all the four sessions highlighted the keen interest there is in the issues relating to the nature of the family and women's sexuality. A review of women's studies in India indicates that this interest is of a relatively recent origin. It appears to have emerged as a logical follow-through of issues like women's work, their status in the family and violence against them. Earlier there was perhaps a reluctance to focus on a topic which seemed alien in the India context. The current interest is therefore particularly welcome because of its spontaneity and seriousness.

## Women and Media

The original plan of the sub theme was changed as the earlier coordinators withdrew because of lack of response from the people they contacted to present papers. Akhila Sivadas, at the last minute, put together the following sessions.

The Media scenario in the country has undergone cataclysmic changes since the beginning of this decade. This has many implications for women and women's groups in the country have adopted different strategies to deal with the changes. These strategies need to be shared, evaluated and moved forward collectively.

The sub theme workshop began with a discussion on emerging trends and direction in Media. This covered cinema, television and print. Sonal Shukla gave a historical retrospect of media representation of women. Ranjani Mazumdar and Shika Jhingan demonstrated the changing characterisation of the bad woman/vamp in the Hindi cinema where the good woman has taken on the vamp qualities.

Sevanti Ninnan traced the effect of the growth of the private media industry on television and its negative effects on the content and focus of programmes. Aarti Pai and Akhila Sivadas spoke on the impact of liberalisation and commercialisation on the depiction of women on T.V. This has given rise to the 'new woman' — the consumerist ideal, individualist, successful.

Anita Anand traced the growing influence of advertising on print media and its impact on rural audiences.

Session II took up experiences of group activity to resist the stereotyping and derogatory depiction of less empowered groups — that is, women.

In the absence of a coherent and well formulated media policy, the consumers and women's groups have adopted a case by case approach. During the last year the legal controversy around the film 'Bandit Queen' the protest by the Nurses' Association over their depiction in the Zee tele film, 'Dil Ka Doctor' and attempts by women's groups in Madras to change the imagery of women in the Tamil cinema and tele serials are some examples.

A dialogue with policy makers on these strategies is essential to work out future strategies of media redressal. This could range from assessing the existing laws and guidelines, review its application and enforcement, evolve more relevant guidelines and norms on the portrayal of women in media, and look at strategies which aim at transforming media from within.

Ms Joseph, Secretary, Nurses' Association, Ms Janaki of Media Monitoring Committee, Tamil Nadu and Indira Jaisingh of Lawyers' Collective discussed the above issues. This was followed by a review of media norms and laws with Jai Chandiram

facilitating the group discussion. The last session had media practitioners sharing their experience. Puneeta Roy (Producer, Television), Chandita Mukherjee (Independent Film maker), Shohini Ghosh (Independent Film maker), Usha Bassein (Producer, Radio), and Anita Anand (Womens' Feature Service) made presentations.

The workshop concluded with recommendations for Policy makers, Media Producers and Women/Activists/Citizens.

### **Policy Makers**

- 1.Censor Boards' method of functioning must be reviewed. All members must be informed about the monies that have come before the Censor Board. There must be no arbitrary allocation of monies to the members which will in the final analysis defeat the purpose of the Censor Board.
- 2.The functioning of the Censor Board must be more transparent.
- 3.There must be a regulatory mechanism which applies to all forms of media. This should give adequate representation to women. The functioning of this body must be open and transparent and must have a wider range of expertise (feminists, behavioral scientists, psychologists)
- 4.There must be consumer protection laws which extend to the functioning of media also.
- 5.There must be a review of existing laws on media.
- 6.Along with having these laws, it is necessary to ensure that there is regular enforcement of these laws in order to be effective.
- 7.There must be a separate committee for each media.
- 8.Sustained gender sensitive training must be ensured for various groups.
- 9.Efforts must be made to make media education as a part of curriculum.
- 10.Media monitoring as a public activity should be facilitated at all levels e.g. school, university. The reports so formed should have a platform for exchange and increased dissemination of information. Press, Parliament can be used as instruments of change.
- 11.Certain amount of resources must be allocated for such purposes. Opinions of media groups and organisations should be enlisted.
- 12.Ministry to develop educationary material at different levels (Health, Agriculture, Industry etc.)

13.Exposure must be given to the alternate media on government channels on a regular and not ad hoc basis.

14.A list of experts/directory for expertise on broadcast panels and bodies. This expertise will not only provide general advise but also in special areas and subjects for regulation.

15.There must be censoring of expression e.g. names of organisations.

16.The journalist whether in print or media must be called upon to reveal his source in certain situations. The freedom of speech guaranteed to press is not the freedom to violate private space of another person.

When libel suits have been instituted revealing one's source should be made necessary. This may be revealed in required only to the judge concerned and the aggrieved party. Defence of freedom of speech should be sparingly given.

### **Media Producers**

1.Detailed version of rape should not be depicted/narrated. Scenes of violence should be censored to a great extent.

2.Regular interaction between policy makers, media producers and activists.

3.Consistent application of self regulation of code for advertisers as set up by ASCI.

4.In T.V. rating, apart from merely quantifying viewers there must be a qualitative input and feedback.

5.Films promoting alternative value systems should be shown. Issues reflecting reality and projection respecting dignity of individual.

### **Women/Activists/Citizen Group**

1.People need to be oriented about critical analysis of mass media particularly from feminists perspective.

2.Need for consensus on indecent representation of women — where does depiction of decent end and indecent begin.

3.Net working and coordination between women activists, citizen groups etc.

4.Greater participation by citizens in the media process.

5.Act as ombudspersons linking watchdog activity to the policy.

## Culture, Identity and Women's Rights: Exploring New Directions in Feminist Praxis

-- Kalpana Kannabiran

Feminist mobilisation and writing in India has in the past ten years been preoccupied with questions of culture, the increasing and violent polarisation of difference, and the emergence of a right wing dominant caste and community hegemony. Several women's groups and individual scholars have attempted to grapple with this troubling phenomenon through a range of actions from writing to provide relief to people trapped in violent situations. There is now fairly detailed documentation available of communal and caste riots, as also analyses from various view points about how identity politics impacts on women from different castes, classes and communities. There is a fair degree of consensus for the view that, more often than not, the identity of a community is constructed on the bodies of women. It is also generally agreed among feminists from different streams, that there is an inevitable conflict of rights for women who are located both within communities as well as within the liberal democratic State, and although attempts have been made, that there is no easy or simple solution to this conflict.

With this framework in mind, this sub-theme explored:

- The question of cultural nationalism, customary rights, the rights of indigenous peoples within the larger framework of the liberal democratic, secular State. Specifically, explicating attempts, if any, to evolve feminist paradigms of culture in recent years, and discussing the specific ways in which deep contradiction arising from multiple identities may be resolved.
- Culture and discrimination, explicating efforts by dalit activists and scholars to confront and address discrimination through new frameworks of theorising and radical mobilisation strategies and to discuss and develop support and solidarity networks.
- Culture and expression, exploring the spaces women create for themselves in an oppressive environment. We are primarily concerned with questions of spirituality religious expression, and religious beliefs -- areas that are in an important sense 'woman space' and yet have never been seriously thought through and discussed but often dismissed, within the women's movement.

The overarching theme of this panel was to examine questions of identity which evolve from the intersticing of categories of caste, class and community with and around gender. That those often appear as conflicting is a matter of necessary concern for those of us within the women's movement in India. The role of the State in constructing/eroding identities is also significant, as these are often unilateral ones which clash with the cultural and community constructions. It becomes important for us as feminists to examine these multiple often overlapping, sometimes conflicting identities, and devise ways in which we seek alternative visions for ourselves.

The papers in the first session were by S. Anandhi and Maya Unnithan Kumar. Anandhi's study of the women who participated in the nationalist movement attempted to show



how the women's space for participation while a public one, was essentially defined and construed by the nationalists. In such a patriarchal discourse, women were seen as repositories of culture and tradition, and hence, the 'ideal' woman was defined as chaste, good, pure and envisioned in the form of the upper caste/class, Hindu woman. Maya's paper presented the ways in which women's sexuality and other rights are governed and monitored by kin-based tribal patriarchies. While there is a popular belief that tribal women have a certain freedom of sexual choice and control over their property and bodies, this proves to be a misconception in the course of her field studies. It also implies the need to go beyond categories of caste and tribe, class and community as these delimit the manner of perception of women's identities.

In both of these papers, the essential argument was that women's identities are constructed in particular ways to suit and perpetuate the patriarchal hegemonies of states and societies. It also threw up for debate the question of tradition and modernity, and to locate these problematics within the regional and historical contexts in which they occur. This is extremely important given the present preoccupation with the assertion of communal identities as the primary distinguishing ones by right wing forces.

In the discussion that ensued, it was apparent that the questions raised above were very delicate, and that often contradictory definitions of the 'self' and the 'other' are visible and operational. Very often the plea for preservation of 'the glorious traditions of the past' meant that it was the right of women (as also lower castes and minority communities) that were encroached upon or divided. It is even more problematic if we were to examine the plight of immigrant Indian/Asian women in Western countries. Where on the one hand there is this strong need to assert communitarian solidarity to oppose discriminations of race/colour/class, while on the other, there is the problem of patriarchal controls and limitations within and across such identifications. It often means that women have to negotiate their class, caste and religious identities (which are anyway gendered) with their minority identity as immigrants (which is also defined by patriarchal norms). It becomes a necessary exercise therefore, to examine critically the way in which such constructs operate, and thereby, to break down these categories through an emphasis on how gendered oppression is a common delineating factor in all constructs.

A very important point raised was that do we separate the cultural identity of women from women's identity in a culture. It brought to the fore the need to widen the scope of our discussion on identities for their homogenizing force leads to their appropriation by communal, fundamentalist forces, an identification that takes place in the case of immigrant Indians/Asians.

While it is true that 'spaces within' do exist, as in the case of tribal women, where the bride price is a marker of a woman's apparent importance, this does not negate the reality that it is a limited and controlled terrain. It is also important to acknowledge the prevalence of other self-definitions through categories of difference, that are not necessarily oppositional; infact they often run parallel to the dominant discourse. This is not surprising if we were to examine the location and space from which it is being articulated for e.g. rural/urban, north/south, Indian/Western, which leads us to the need that generates such articulation.

In terms of strategies, it was felt that while the overarching concerns of gender should take precedence, often it is not possible to transcend our caste, tribal, regional, religious and class identities. Also, these are not separate and do intersect differently at different points of time. Therefore, our agenda must be to recognise these contradictory subject positions, and hence, give precedence to our gendered, patriarchally constructed identities.

The second session dwelled on the State and community and how gender is defined by and through them. The paper by Meera Velayudhan highlighted the ramification of so-called 'social reform' movements, and what it meant in terms of women's political participation. Thus, what started off as a movement to uplift the women of a low caste group in Kerala resulted in the construction and delimiting of their spaces with regard to marriage and property. The shift from matrilineal to patrilineal patriarchies meant that the women's initiatives towards bettering their lot soon lost impetus.

The discussion again centred around the conflict that arises out of women's locational and personal identities. It offers a dichotomous relationship between political and civil rights, and the cultural/religious rights, glossing over the historical context in which such definitions are made. Judicial reforms play a very important role in creating and standardising women's identities, hence the laws on *devadasi* system, etc. Thus, women participate initially in the reform movements, which then ironically renders them bereft of certain important 'free' spaces which they earlier occupied.

However, we do have to distinguish between the various patriarchies, as those that arise from lower caste/class/minority milieus are qualitatively different from say, the nationalist discourse (since the location and why it is being asserted serves different purposes). The imperative then, is to relook at history, and working class and other movements.

The second paper in this session by Deepti Priya attempted to seek an alternative for us as women within the movement by forging bonds of spirituality i.e. to seek out our religious spaces rooted in their social reality and use these as a source of sustenance for ourselves as well as the women's movement.

The discussions centred around the ways in which we continue to locate ourselves in our (most often upper) caste-class positions, which are distinctly Hindu, and hence, how prudent would it be to use symbols which are used to polarise religious interests and identities. There is also the danger of losing sight of the political economy that produced such conceptualisations, as the choice of such symbols become very visible political. While in the theoretical realm it is possible to posit a difference between the spiritual and the religious, such differences do not get translated in actual experiential terms.

To understand the depletion of our energies as activist feminists, we have to analyse the problematics of:

1. the personal being the political and

2. the insidious ways in which globalisation intersects with our self identities and ideologies, resulting in our reversion to our caste, religious, etc. identities. While there is a need to address the attraction of such signifieds, it also reveals a move towards fascist tendencies of glorifying the heroic individual.

Srilata Swaminathan's presentation on the need for left groups to think seriously about caste and gender issues and incorporate this understanding both in theory as well as in practice was through provoking. She spoke from the standpoint of her experience working with a rural mass organisation in Rajasthan, and stressed the need to build coalitions between different radical struggles all over the country.

The final presentation in the sub-theme by Kavita Panjabi raised important issues that ranged from State oppression of women to the strategies evolved by women to counter such control. The assumption here was that women's experiences in prisons are in fact heightened and explicit representations of State power and its policing of women's bodies and sexuality. It also offered a necessary and useful optimism in the nature of women's questioning of and opposition to the State power and authority. The experience of the Naxalite women prisoners is compared with that of women in the concentration camps of Argentina, and it appears that in both cases the primary concern expressed by the women was their sexual repression and control by the State, rather than the movements they were part of per se.

The familial spaces that women carve out for themselves is drawn upon, where kin identification (such as mother, sister etc.) and sharing (of food/torture etc.) forges a collectivity that acts as a support system for them within the prison walls. The prevalence of lesbianism also indicates the need and recognition of such bonding, where the 'ideal type' is rejected by the women themselves.

The lively discussion concentrated on forms of State torture and control, and how often women activists as well as prisoners do actually work within the moulds of morality prescribed by the law, and endorsed by State and society. It was argued that there is a difference in the agendas of violence perpetrated by the State, and that by the radical, political movements, precisely because of the lack (or a different emphasis) of morality as the centre of the discourse in the matter.

The use of familial terms of reference is problematic as the institution of the family is underridden by dominant, patriarchal notions of 'good' 'tradition' and 'pure'. Also, if motherhood proved a finding factor, why couldn't the women's movement sustain itself. It is, therefore, necessary to re-examine the family as a structure, as well as the regional context in which 'disappearance' of children and family determines and sustains bonds of motherhood (viz. Argentina, Srilanka, Nagaland). Also, while the sexual relationships were consensual as well as exploitative, it is necessary to see the possibilities of such solidarity.

## Papers presented

- 1.S.Anandhi, *Sexuality and Nation : 'Ideal' and 'other' women in the Nationalist Politics, Tamil Nadu, C.1900-47*
- 2.Maya Unnithan Kumar, *The Politics of Culture, Gender and Tribal Identity : Experiences in Southern Rajasthan.*
- 3.Meera Velayudhan, *Women, Tradition and Change in Kerala.*
- 4.Amrita Shodhan, *Displacement of Customary Law by Religious personal Law : A Re-examination of Religious Community Identity as Enclosed in Law.*
- 5.Deepti Priya, *Bridges between Spirituality and the Women's Movement in India.*
- 6.Srilata Swaminathan, *An attempt to Integrate Class, Caste and Gender Struggles.*
- 7.Kavita Panjabi, *'Feminine' Values and Feminist Resistance.*

## **Women's Writing: Redefinitions, Aesthetics and Future Visions**

— Jasbir Jain & Sudha Rai

Women's writing has been viewed variously in different ages and societies. Often marginalised and viewed as literature restricted in its experience and readership, it has been seen as romantic and unrealistic, or as confined to domestic realism and as a projection of experiences which have less value than mainstream writing. Women's writing and feminist stances have very often resulted in a form of ghettoization. In the present century, it has moved through three distinct phases, the first of women's biographies, autobiographies and experiences but still located within an aesthetics of universalization, and with the acceptance of being secondary; then an appropriation and imitation of male models; and now in the third phase there is a conscious exploration of the specific female both in terms of experiences and responses. There is, in this, a questioning of the 'universal' which does not reflect this specificity.

Female specificities, however do not exist independently in themselves. Their formations are governed by facts of history, class, race, religion and myth. They influence women's perceptions of themselves, their aspirations, their struggles and their projections of alternative structures. Women's experience of space and freedom is framed within these cultural contexts.

Indian women's writing reflects the direction of the women's movement which has sought to work for change and space within the existing social institution and cultural paradigms rather than opt out of them. It has questioned inequalities, oppression and injustice; it has raised issues of divorce, marriage, widowhood, rape, adultery, female sexuality but primarily within the familial patterns. The sub-theme proposed to examine the contemporary writings of Indian women and its aesthetic and ideological dimensions. Literature in any Indian language (including English) was to be taken up for consideration but the presentations were admitted in English or Hindi. The focus was on:

—**Redefinitions:** defining feminist writing, identifying female positions within the cultural centres, exploring the relevance and validity of the specifically female vis-a-vis the 'universal'.

—**Aesthetics:** exploring the narrative strategies of women writers, their ways of knowing and stating their experiences.

—**Future visions:** the projections of alternative structures, concepts, societies and view of freedom both within the realistic and the utopian models.

The presentations made at the sessions, examined a range of multi-lingual literatures, including Hindi, Telugu, Bengali, Gujarati and English, scrutinizing gender themes and expression of feminist thought in the post-Independence phase of these literatures. The session focussed on Women writers' engagement with the representation of women, their questioning of patriarchal structures and exploitative power, hierarchies, and the articulation of new women's

voices claiming individuality, dignity and the freedom of self-expression.

In the opening session (chaired by Suman Mehrotra), Krishna Sobti opened up the dialogue by illustrating from sequence in her own novels existential questions about women's new identity, the meaning of freedom and the question of choice, the discovery of an authentic women's voice and its articulation through a literary language, responsive to new needs and social changes. K Seshi Rekha introduced three Telugu women novelists — Ranganyakamma, Volga and Aruna and the focus on issues such as rape, the plight of unwed mothers and the male's deception of the female, in their writings.

Kavita Bhatia, in her paper, argued for the development of a feminist aesthetics which moved out of the gender polarisation model offered by the Western feminist aesthetic tradition, by incorporating indigenous, socio-economic and historical parameters.

Lata Sharma gave an interesting interpretation of the 'visible invisible' male in three novels by Ashapura Devi — *Prathi-Shrute*, *Souvarnalata* and *Bakul Katha* arguing that the sensitive male had yet to acquire a stature where he could be a fitting companion to woman.

Vishwapriya L. Iyengar discussed her short stories *The Midnight Soldier*, *Calcutta in 1989* and *The School-girl Atlas* so as to create a focus on issues such as the exploitation of women, especially in lower socio-economic contexts, as well as literary strategies for feminist writing. Santosh Gupta examined a novel each by Mahashweta Devi, Mirdula Garg and Shashi Deshpande, creating a focus around the complexities and perils of freedom for women who have moved out to occupy space as professionals, in the world outside the home.

Prabha Saxena raised questions about role redefinition and redefinition of human relationships and traditional stereotypes, in writers like Kundanika Kapadia and Amrita Pritam. Sudesh Batra explored the intricacies of freedom as a notion and reality for women, and emphasized the importance of a women's perspective in writing by both women and men and Anju Dhadha opened up issues pertaining to the marginalisation of women's poetry in Hindi, arguing for the need for a mature aesthetics in women's writing rather than an over-reliance on the content of tears and anger.

Mary Ann Negi examined the value of the feminist critical concept of 'authentic realism' exemplifying from Nayantara Sahgal's treatment of patriarchy, motherhood, marriage, female sexuality and women's emancipation.

Meenaskhi Shivram explored areas of absences such as a professional woman's work concerns and humour in the Novels of Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai and Geeta Hariharan. In the same session Ruchira Shukla focussed on Anita Desai's varied, intense and complex portrayal of the feminine sensibility in the questioning world of her characters consciousness.

Ketu Katrak examined some chords of the diasporic Indo-American experience in writers like Meena Alexander and Bharati Mukherjee against a network of 'Mainstream' pressure on

'ethnic' self-assertion.

In the final presentation, Padma Hallikeri provoked thinking on the male chauvinism displayed when men interview women writers, with gender — role biases that pre-determine the boundaries of women writers' priorities.

Each presentation led to keen discussion, with participants sharing in the view that literature was both a reflection of change and an agent of change. Amongst the issues addressed from historical, Philosophical and socio-economic points of view were those concerned with the distinctiveness of women's writing, the need to move out of not only patriarchal norms of morality and chastity, but also out of the 'victim syndrome! Women's writing must address itself to larger social concerns, transforming its aesthetic components of structures, myths, forms and language, deconstructing patriarchy and constructing womanhood.

Participants debated the following concerns, which surfaced repeatedly:

- a)The issue of freedom; its definition, how the freedom of the self relates to the freedom of others.
- b)Sexuality both within and outside the marriage, which needs to be related to freedom; the woman's need for sexual expression should be recognised and separated from the institution of marriage.
- c)The woman's right to private space within marriage was viewed as an aspect of woman's individualism.
- d)Traditional cultural concepts (Sobhagya, for example) needed to be redefined and expanded in relation to feminist concerns.
- e)Women writers were still on the periphery and needed to be prominenced through publications.
- f)Criticism and critical theory emphasizing Indian theoretical perspectiveness needed to be projected as critical through continued to be influenced by Western thought and market processes.
- g)The family as an institution needed reviewing, but not rejection.
- h)Polarisation and gender division in society need to be avoided; for this, women need to step outside a passive, feminine role and recast themselves as persons.

The consensus which emerged on both the ideological direction of feminism and women's writing as that:

- 1)More space is needed for women within the home.

- 2) Women require greater control over their own sexuality.
- 3) Sensitive depiction of actual social realities in literature, can generate attitudinal changes, and
- 4) Positive and problem solving attitudes have to be adopted by women, rather than mere protest.

At its final session, participants shaped and gave consensus to the following resolution:

*"Sub-theme Four resolves that exploration of Indian literatures be made a permanent part of IAWS Meetings. As globalisation and fundamentalism of 1990's raise significant issues related to culture, literature and literary criticism and theory, we need to address those concerns in sessions and literature."*

### **Papers presented**

1. Krishna Sobti — *Women's Writing*
2. K. Seshi Rekha — *Tales of Oppression : Ideological explorations of Three Telugu Women Novelist.*
3. Kavita Bhatia — *On the Question of a Women's Aesthetic*
4. Lata Sharma — *Ashapura Devi*
5. Vishwapriya L Iyengar — *Feminist Vision and Social Reality.*
6. Santosh Gupta — *Redefining Women's Roles in Modern Indian Culture : Reviews and Revisions.*
7. Sudesh Batra — *Hindi Sahitya Mein Nari Chetna*
8. Prabha Saxena — *Istrilekhan*
9. Anju Dhaddha — *Hindi poetry and Women's Writing*
10. Mary Ann Negi — *Hindi poetry and Women's Writing*
11. Ketu Katrak — *Diasporic Indo-American Women Writers: Geography and Memory*
12. Meenakshi Shivram — *Areas of Absences*
13. Ruchira Shukla — *Feminine Sensibility in Anita Desai's Novels*
14. Prema Hallikeri — *Women's Vision in Indian Writings*



## Creation And Dissemination Of Knowledge And Knowledge Systems

— Maithreyi Krishnaraj & Mary John

Women have generally been excluded from mainstream knowledge production. The creating and use of most kinds of knowledge, including science, has been very much a male enterprise. Whatever knowledge women have possessed has not been acknowledged or given legitimacy. Technology as the handmaiden of science has more often than not served patriarchal ends. In the beginning feminists demanded an entry into the male bastions of science and technology, but as their understanding of social processes grew, they saw that merely getting into mainstream science as it is practiced would simply perpetuate the same biases — its anthropocentrism, androcentrism, elitism, and its value neutrality.

This led to a search for alternative sources of knowledge, as well as alternative ways of practising science. A critical issue with regard to science, technology and education is the question of who has access to knowledge and who controls knowledge generation and dissemination. It is here that the current threat posed by globalisation of production, technology and media has to be taken seriously. It reinstalls the hegemony of some countries over the rest of the world. Its consequences for international scholarship are severe — turning India into a permanent periphery dependent on the international centres for its research agenda. Knowledge is being rapidly displaced by information. Social sciences are undermined with the over-emphasis on technical education, skill acquisition and vocationalisation, geared to the needs of the market, bereft of any knowledge or ethical base. Another insidious effect is the way homogenisation is paradoxically accompanied by a promotion of cultural relativism that uses ethnicity to defuse the legitimate struggles of women and minorities to forge a more broad based identity. In this scenario, the sub-theme sought to take up women's responses to these challenges. It hoped to cover the following:

—Analysis of women studies programmes: to what extent they have been successful in achieving their transformative potential; the achievement of women studies in terms of content and direction of scholarship; methodologies in research and teaching; the connecting of theory to practice; impact on students, teachers and university culture; effects on the disciplines, on women's movement and on policy (e.g. through reforming data systems; through advocacy research; through research for gaining information on policy related issues such as new reproductive technologies); the dissemination of this alternative knowledge to people at large (feminist literature, feminist publishing, use of multiple media like posters, videos, theatre, music)

—What kind of interventions have been made through text books and other educational processes?

—What kind of role can or have women played in people's science movements; in alternative technology; and in making a dent in the scientific establishment.

—What type of non-electronic media have been used or have scope in the future for conscientising, for empowering, for mobilising dissent and for reaffirming basic feminist values?

—What part is played by alliances with feminist network abroad?

Interventions in the form of case studies or practices by NGOs or educational establishments such as : production of material at primary school level; non formal educational programmes; use of literacy missions; creative use of government programmes; participation in science and technology programmes to convert them into an opportunity for generating new knowledge; analysis of gender training programmes to understand their potential and limitation; a critical look at programmes of empowerment through knowledge by women NGOs and others.

The workshop tried to look not at critiques of science but at feminist efforts to overcome them.

By the very nature of the broadness and openendedness of this particular sub-theme, the kinds of papers presented, and issues raised varied considerably. They ranged from women's relationship to science and technology, the relationship of the women's movement to the production of knowledges, alternative paradigms, the institution of women's studies, to questions of communication. A total of 14 papers were presented, which unfortunately put severe limitations on the amount of time available for discussion.

The first session took up three papers on the question of science and technology in relation to women and feminism. Meera Nanda's opening papers 'The Science Question in Post-colonial Feminism' was a strong defence of the spirit of scientific enquiry and method, using the work of the British philosopher Ernest Gellner. Nanda felt that this spirit was in danger of being rejected altogether by nationalists, post colonialists, Third world feminists and anti-modernists. Even if Enlightenment was bound up with imperialism and masculinism, there was still room, she argued, for Enlightened reason — the idea of accepting nothing that contradicts independently established evidence — as an ideal to struggle toward. For without such an ideal, there was no way to fight arbitrary and unjust authority — of god, the father, the community, and so on. The next paper was by Swatija Manorama and Chayanika Shah entitled 'Learning and Unlearning Together.' This paper was something of an intellectual autobiography, which reflectively traced their involvement with questions of health in the context of the debates around contraception in particular. They found that over the years, their position had grown from a reactive one of having to defend themselves against accusations of being anti-science and anti-progress, to the more positive one of beginning to build an alternative knowledge base. Building this base involved both relearning dominant paradigms based on agendas of population control, to gaining a fuller understanding of fertility awareness, the extreme delicacy of the menstrual cycle and the socio-political nature of contraceptive research.

Lalita Ramachandran's paper, 'The Use of Science for Women' was a strong plea on the part of someone employed in Space Research, to see satellite technology, include the SITE and INSAT experiments, as basically beneficial to women and to India as a whole. For a country of

India's size and complexity, the possibilities of providing education to all could be realised through such technological means. Kerala, with its high literacy and positive sex ratio, stood out for her as a model of what education could achieve.

There was active discussion of all the three papers. Questions were raised about the tendency in Meera Nanda's paper, for instance, of not being able to provide any detailed sense of the new 'hybrid' knowledge that she advocated. While her position was undoubtedly a useful corrective to traditionalistic positions that were set against modernity as such, she herself appeared to club very different critical stances all into one category of being anti-science. There was considerable appreciation, therefore, for Swatiya and Chayanika's effort to build an alternative way of reorienting contraceptive research, since it was more nuanced and fleshed-out and was much clearer about the socio-political stakes involved in any kind of agenda. Whose agenda, whose research are we talking about, and under what conditions were the kinds of questions raised. There was, therefore, also some criticism of Lalita Ramchandran's paper for being too uncritical of science, and for viewing technology as something neutral, if not beneficial. People pointed out that satellite technology remained extremely centralised and one way in its approach, was hardly gender-neutral, and could easily turn into a way of excluding the majority from vital information. Moreover, 'the Kerala model' had many ambiguities as far as women were concerned, and should not be idealised.

The second session had three papers on the women's movement and its relation to the production of knowledge. Mary John, in her paper 'The Question of Development', traced the emergence of debates of gender and development in the 1970s and '80s at a time when feminists adopted a national frame as constitutive of their efforts to highlight women's work, to the 1990s, when globalisation was serving as a disorientation to such a frame. Debates about women and work, however, have, been recast today by international agencies into proofs of women's efficiency as economic actors. Many argued against the desire to wish away this new context, but rather of the need of developing new survival skills. Geeta Vyas' paper 'Rethinking Women's Liberation' was quite different, and was presented in the form of a skit. She attempted to show that all the concerted efforts today whether by the government, academia or NGOs to help women overcome patriarchy were futile unless they were accompanied by an inner process of spirituality and transformed consciousness. Gabriele Dietrich's paper, 'A perspective on the Women's Movement' discussed how women's issues had changed over the years, based upon her experience in Madurai, Tamil Nadu. Globalisation and the New Economic Policy had definitively contributed to a deterioration in women's chances for survival, both in urban and rural areas, and especially in the informal sector. There was still the need, she felt, to speak of alternatives to the present onslaught, which she posed in terms of the contrast between production for profit and production for life.

Discussion was somewhat short due to limitations of time. There were a number of doubts raised about Geeta Vyas' construction of an inner spiritual realm and external space of influence, which sounded dichotomous to some people. These doubts were misunderstandings, she felt, and tried to clarify her position by looking at the interconnections between one's inner self and the collective world. Some questions were raised about the place of the State in Mary

John's paper. She tried to clarify that if the State was the Indian women's movement's most important constitute site during the '70s, today there was a need to diversify our struggle more explicitly.

The next paper was by Jyoti Rani, 'On Neo-classical Economics'. By examining the analytical tools of neo-classical economics, such as those of marginal utility and subjective satisfaction, maximisation, and so on, and especially the strong faith in the functioning of the market paradigm, she felt that neo-classical economics was unable to deal with the socio-economic and cultural environment of patriarchy, which is entirely to do with relations of inequality. She therefore did not see how such existing tools could be used to study the women's question. In the ensuing discussion, the presence and usefulness of alternative schools of thought such as that of political economy was raised. It was pointed out that recent developments in this field, especially in the field of Marxist-feminism, has not at all been incorporated into courses on Economics. Others felt that, in the present climate of structural adjustment and liberalisation, when neo-classical economic thinking was receiving a new boost, it might be important to see how it would be modified and questioned in such a way as to make it possible to explicitly raise questions of gender inequality.

The next session dealt with various aspects of Women's studies as an Institution and provoked lively discussion. K.A. Parvathy, 'On Women's Studies as Knowledge' discussed her experience of teaching Women's Studies as an M.A. course at Tirupati Women's University. She dwelt upon the frustration she often experienced in teaching students who had come with little motivation, who had been 'parked' in the M.A. by their parents before marriage, and who suffered many of the disabilities of their rural background. It was therefore, a tremendous challenge for her to make the course relevant and meaningful. Her desire to see such women develop into change agents was often frustrating. However, over the years, she had to learn how to modify and change her methods and style of teaching — by using the common viewing of a popular film as an introduction to the study of women for example instead of a discussion of the differences between liberal, socialist or radical feminism. Ravikala Kamath's paper on the 'Dilemmas of Teaching Women's Studies to college students' dwelt upon three main foci:

- 1) the target group of young college students
- 2) the pedagogical approach of women's studies that is inherently different and yet has to conform to the prevailing educational system and
- 3) the gap between practice and precept.

How, for example, does one deal with the vast difference between the constructivist strategy of action taught and learned often with enthusiasm in the classroom, which can then be crushed so easily in the outer world beyond the class room? How, again, can one deal with the fact that the spirit of women's studies and the structure of academia, with its focus on 'marks' and job-orientation, are often at cross purposes?

Manisha Desai's paper, 'From the Margin to the Troubled Center: The Fate of Women's Studies on U. S. Campuses' discussed some of the contemporary problems facing women's studies in the U.S. She dwelt upon the conservative backlash by the new right on University Campuses, which was becoming an extremely active force in that context. She felt that there were two aspects of women's studies in the U.S. that were problematic in such a context: The first was the moralism of identity politics, the belief that women's studies must be tied to its roots in the women's movement. The second was the dominance of post-structuralism, which, she feels, equates cultural analysis with social change.

To combat this, Desai feels that renegotiated human rights framework such as at Beijing, would be a way forward.

There was a lot of discussion around the question of women's studies. Distinctions were drawn between women's studies as a discipline and as a structure. A number of people felt that the opposition between women's studies as a separate discipline or as transformative of existing disciplines was a false one. Since we need both. The contradictions of the university system based on career options has to be accepted, others felt. Women's studies can never become a career option in this sense, since it is all about building an alternative and challenging society as it is systemically structured. Moreover, women's studies is a new field — 10 to 15 years old in India — it is too soon to think of it as an area of expertise. The gap between the class room and the world is a real one, and cannot be erased. The question is how to accept the fact that students of women's studies will encounter problems and conflicts in the world, and may even find that what they have learnt does not seem to make sense to others. At the same time, in spite of all these frustrations, everyone agreed that none of them would want to turn the clock back to the time before they were exposed to such ideas.

The last papers dealt with questions of legal literacy, methods of visual perception, gender training and the social construction of violence in schools. A paper from Nepal by Mandira Tamrakar and Mira Mishra on schools in Kathmandu, argued that since schools were a vital institution for the socialisation of children into gender identities — through physical, social, cultural and academic forms of violence — it was absolutely imperative to intervene at this stage itself in order to change gender norms.

Lakshmi Murthy's visual presentation and discussion on 'Understanding Visual Perception in Designing Appropriate Visuals' drew from her experience in designing posters for rural areas. She discussed how her initial efforts at producing posters, using alien symbols and styles of presentation resulted in miscommunication. It was only after this experience of failure that she learnt how to produce visuals collectively with the target group. Urban designers therefore need to re-examine their role in communication when working with non-literate and rural groups.

(Sakina Hassan and Zarina Bhatti's paper could not be presented as it arrived late.)

## Papers presented

- 1.T. Jyoti Rani and H Girija Rani; *Applicability of Neo-classical Analytical Tools in Economics for Women's Question -- A View Point.*
- 2.Mary E John; *Indian Feminist Theory in the Context of Globalisation. The Question of Development.*
- 3.Swatija Manorama and Chayanika Shah; *Learning and Unlearning Together.*
- 4.Gabriele Dietrich; *A Perspective on the Women's Question.*
- 5.Ravikala Kamath; *Dilemmas in Teaching Women's Studies to College Students.*
- 6.Chitra Ghosh; *Need for a Focus on Women's Studies in the Academic World.*
- 7.Manisha Desai; *From the Margin to a Troubled Centre -- The Fate of Women's Studies on U.S. Campuses.*
- 8.Meera Nanda; *The Science Question in Post colonial Feminism.*
- 9.V Janaki; *Why Legal Literacy?*
- 10.Lalita Ramachandran; *Application of Space Services on the Uplift of Women.*
- 11.K.A. Parvathy; *Creation and Dissemination of Knowledge and Knowledge systems.*
- 12.Sakina Hasan, Zarina Bhatti; *Muslim Women's Vision in the Past.*

## Women-Centered Natural Resource Management: Land, Water and Energy

— Chhaya Datar

In the last few years, the degradation of natural resources has been quite apparent in India in many fields of production and its impact has been well documented. Poor and labouring women in rural areas as well as in urban centres are most vulnerable to these effects. They provide subsistence and contribute to the 'production of life', which is a precondition for the production and reproduction of any society. At present, the centrality of women's contribution is undermined all over the world, and women's labour is further subjugated and exploited to perpetuate the system. Globalisation contributes to the reconstitution of the international divisions of labour. More claims are made on natural resources from the Third World which is compelled to produce for northern markets, in order to repay its debts. Our search for a paradigmatic shift in resource use and its institutional management is grounded in this contemporary situation.

Our premises is that if poor people's needs and especially women's needs are placed centrally, and the resource use pattern and, thus, the whole economy will be geared differently. It will go beyond the debate of market versus State run mixed economy and ground itself in principles of equitability, people's participation and decentralisation. We realise that political decentralisation and women's participation in decision making cannot become meaningful unless a decentralisation of the economy is carried out simultaneously. It appears that ecological sciences also prove that the best way of achieving productivity, stability and sustainability is through equitability. The most important question faced by the women's movement is how to achieve the idea of decentralisation, and what kind of alternative institution building should be visualised.

Against this background this sub-theme sought to examine three sectors based on the use of three natural resources: land, water and energy. The exercise also tried to analyse the linkages between the degradation and institutions such as the market, technology and management systems. The discussion indicated alternative institution building, on the basis of the principle of centrality of women's contribution, decentralisation, equitability, space for traditional knowledge and cultural practices related to the production process.

In the colonial period changes were introduced in property rights and entitlements which asserted patriarchy in new forms. Today, the process of restructuring the world economy have brought about a new regime to enable multinationals to have access to natural resources, further depriving women of subsistence production and food security. This area needs to be investigated.

While evolving a new paradigm it is essential to understand the ecological characteristics of a particular natural resource and the constraints imposed upon increasing its productivity, due to institutional arrangements of market and technology.

Alternative institutional arrangements are being initiated by grassroots organisations or government departments so that women can assert their needs and participate in decision making.

These need to be analysed and the principle for alternative institution–building discerned. This alternative material base will constitute one element in a feminist vision, and alternative principles can provide some rallying points for the women’s movement.

The impact of environmental degradation on women has been well documented in many empirical studies in India. Fodder, fuel and water crisis is well recognised and the plight of rural women has drawn attention of the policymakers in India to some extent. Joint Forest Management Programme and social forestry programmes are some of the answers tried so far. However they have been piecemeal approaches and do not provide the conceptual framework to understand over increasing phenomenon of degradation on one hand and povertification on the other, world over.

Vandana Shiva has provided the incessant critique of the present development ideology which is the root of the degradation problem according to her. Rapidly expanding markets giving impetus to energy intensive technologies, particularly in the area of agriculture which is getting industrialised day by day is the root cause of this devastation which manifests in depriving people from access to natural resources. She has opposed globalisation especially in the area of food security. She talks of economics and using advanced science and technology which is people friendly. However, she has not suggested yet what kind of new institutional arrangements we should be looking for if we want grassroot level people to have livelihood security and mainly food security. Resisting to policies of globalisation is one thing but there is a need to increase productivity of the degraded sources as well as an urgency to think of institutional arrangements to enable people, women especially, to control the natural resources such a way that their livelihoods are secured.

## **Planning**

I decided not to focus discussion either on the impact of environmental degradation nor on the efforts of making people participate within the same development framework so that the responsibility of maintenance etc. can be handed over to them. My own understanding is that the efforts of institutional development in the developmental projects are merely aiming at shift from pure public sector management to encouraging some involvement of the consumers in that management, without educating them in the technological options and allowing them to make choices in terms of technology and also management for the sustainable use. I was afraid that women and environmental discourse was perceived only within these limited parameters and the papers would remain within this limited perspective, if I relied only on the spontaneous response of the IAWS members.

I planned the workshop to go beyond the usual terrain of, ‘Women, Environment and Development’ and tried to draw lessons from at least one vision of an alternative development paradigm developed by a group of persons who prefer to call this paradigm as ‘biomass based production system’. The system is based on the alternative patterns of the resource use which assures equitability and sustainability in the long term and encourages evolution of local traditional knowledge and cultural practices related to the production processes.



I had compiled these papers in an informal collection and had put this collection on sale, so that it could be available to those who could not attend the session. The titles of these papers are found in an annexure, i.e. the content page attached to this report.

To make the workshop meaningful I also tried to obtain a list of NGOs in Rajasthan who would be interested in these issues and also taking up some activity suggested on the experimental basis. I thought of organising atleast one session where the main presentations would take place in collaboration with the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) who has been taking interest in assessment of local natural resources. Somehow both the efforts did not pay off. IDS insisted that they could organise something on the campus but it was not possible to persuade their faculty or researchers to come to the venue of the conference. There was some participation of the activists/social workers from NGOs in Rajasthan. For the first session 50 participants were there. The number went on reducing. Out of the total four sessions two were quite good. The first two were attended mainly by the paper presenters. The first two were devoted to the perspective of 'biomass based production system' and later other papers were presented and discussed. There was sufficient time for all the papers, more than 20 minutes each and also rich discussions followed, although the attendance was less. According to me this situation manifests the weakness of the women's movement and women's studies, which focuses mainly on the issues of violence, laws, politics and employment but major issues of what should be the direction of development has not caught their attention.

### **Presentation of papers**

The coordinator introduced the theme by charting out the context of this endeavour. Capitalism and State socialism both have failed to bring about social justice to majority of people in the world. The reason identified by the environmentalists is that both the systems are based on non-renewable energy intensive industrialized mode of production which brings about not only ecological crises but also social crisis. In the ensuing process of polarization majority of women in the world are worst affected. The process is accelerated by the forces of globalization. The situation warrants urgent task of developing our vision of a new society and concertize the steps to accomplish this vision by prioritising the immediate tasks. The new vision probably can be called ecosystem development where livelihood and reproductive activities are centrally placed.

Three papers were specially commissioned to talk about three resources, land, water and energy. After analysing how wasteful use of resources is encouraged by the present regime of unequal access and ownership of resources and the pull of market forces coupled with the governmental policies of subsidies, the papers attempted to work out the alternative pattern of resource use and its management in terms of institution building.

Another paper was submitted by the delegates which provided a theoretical framework to the scientific breakthrough described in the resource management areas by the three authors. The paper challenged the theory of evolution which is a basis of present development thinking. The evolution theory has based itself on the two main principles of 'scarcity and competition'.

The paper writers proposed that the new principles on which the theory can be formulated which encompasses the above mentioned scientific approach as, 'coexistence and plenitude'.

The first three papers also tried to put forward an agenda for women's groups to discuss the concrete steps which flow from their analysis. The steps mainly envisage demanding access to natural resources such as land and water and capability building in neighbourhood resource management which is knowledge based and not equipment based. The authors feel that knowledge based, biomass based production processes which will ensure continued equitable access to resource is likely to appeal women mainly in the rural areas where 70% of the world's poor women live. Their traditional knowledge bases will give them edge over the resource poor in the urban areas who are trapped in the informal sector jobs created by the globalization processes. These women from poor peasant and landless class and tribals are immobile and cannot easily avail jobs at long distance. This situation prompts them to develop stakes in the new alternative resource use pattern and can be motivated to demand access to common property resources of water and land.

It was suggested that instead of using the term 'development' we can talk of 'enrichment and enchantment' of natural resources including human brains and knowledge systems. It was stressed that exploitation will stop with the reversal of 'unequal exchange' in terms of energy units. One of the fundamental ways to make it possible is that we rely more and more on regenerative processes of nature and understand the growth patterns based on photosynthesis mechanism and nurturing of soil such a way that primary productivity is never degraded. The simple rule to see whether the production process is efficient or not is to see that energy units as inputs do not exceed the energy units it is able to produce. In fact regenerative process always enhances the number of energy units. Measurement in terms of calories will be able to allow us to do the comparison between inputs and outputs, or what is called ecological audit. If we provide the system of social audit along with the ecological audit we will be able to achieve the idea of equitability among humans and sustainability of the resources and ecological systems.

The six papers received from the delegates dealt with some concrete aspects of the women's relationship with natural resource management. They were mainly within the WED perspective.

1. Methodological issues were raised when the attempts were made to capture the women users' perception of the neighbourhood natural resources. It is realized that patriarchal system along with the caste and class systems heavily constrains the researchers to avail any picture closer to reality of women's perception. It was also observed that women's economic role is extremely complex. It is necessary to devise the methodological tools to capture this complexity in a holistic manner so that meaningful intervention to safeguard the economic rights of women will emerge.

2. Watershed management programmes designed within the Women, Environment and Development perspective were found as too narrow and focussing on women's activities of fodder, fuel and water collection in isolation. It appears that such programmes do not stop

migration. Instead, the watershed programmes aimed at stabilizing the entire household on dry land farming and other related activities are found more successful in creating food security along with fodder and fuel.

It was realised that since women's economic role is extremely complex, intervention to safeguard the economic rights of women is needed which might provide some leverage in terms of resource generation as well as time saving which then could be carefully utilised to influence the gender issues as an integral part of the households livelihood strategies. Eventually, this should bring women into the decision making process in the mainstream economic activities rather than continuously getting identified with the relatively marginal activities of fodder, fuel and drinking water

3. The experience of haycooker was narrated as an attempt to conserve energy and thus saving women's time to collect wood-fuel from the community land. The direct benefit of the time saving was given in terms of patchwork provided through some other organisation through which women could increase their income.

4. Two more papers depicted the examples of people's participation in the natural resource management, piped drinking water and sanitation programme in Kerala and growing of Allo, a fibrous plant and processing it into a cloth, a traditional activity form some tribals in the interior of Nepal. Both paper findings show that women's perception and interest in the natural resource management differs than that of men. The project related to allo fibre shows that with a little facilitation women got an incentive not only for conserving the allo growth but also enhancing it and shift from the 'use based' activity to 'production based' activity took place.

### Issues Discussed

The knowledge based, knowledge sharing processes to bring about neighbourhood resource literacy and sharing the productivity of small plot of land — 10 *guntha* (1/4 acre) — was well appreciated. Doubts were raised as whether illiterate women could develop so much capability.

The question was raised as how it was possible to achieve equitable access to water and land, particularly to women from landless families. Somehow, the impression was created that the papers presented technological solutions of training women in resource literacy etc. The paper presenters, Mr. Datye and Mr. Dabholkar asserted that political conflict, class struggle will be required to obtain this access and also the funds for training etc. What they insisted was that the present poverty alleviation programmes can be utilised with altered emphasis on making the waste land available to women along with some water right. The question is whether this issue will be taken up for struggle by the NGOs and the women's movement in the immediate future.

Mr. Datye pointed out that one could start with the demand of wasteland as it was done by the deserted women's movement in Maharashtra. Also the example was provided that some water user's society organised to buy bulk water from irrigation department has also agreed to

give some water to women's cooperative as was the case in Khudawadi.

Within watershed development programmes too, within an integrated approach of stabilizing the families in the dryland area, special intervention can be done for capability building of women in neighbourhood resource literacy and raising the productivity of land.

In the programmes of such as haycooker energy saving stoves, women can be made aware of the new perspective on the renewable energy resources and enhancement of energy through acquisition of wasteland. The time saved from the energy conservation can be utilised to grow plantation where fuel wood can be grown and electricity supply can be undertaken by the women's groups based on gasifires technology for local use. The demand for the waste-land and some water can be raised if the NGO has a vision. This can be incorporated in the design of the programme.

The experience narrated by Amita Shah on women working on the watershed development programme went to another construction work when more wages were made available to them proved that in the short term, women did look for direct benefits in terms of cash and enhancement of income. But it was agreed that through the process of deliberation and empowerment, it is possible to make women relate to the larger vision based on the paradigm shift.

This also raised the question whether women have special 'affinity' towards natural resources. None of the participants liked the term 'affinity' but it was realised through many examples that women were located with a specific division of labour regime which varied from class to class and climate zone to zone. However, it was found that in the long term women were more interested in managing the neighbourhood resources in a sustainable way because it facilitated their activities.

It was pointed out that people's participation concept used in the development project may be deceptive and additive rather than integral one where people have taken part in designing of the project and develop a sense of ownership of the project.

Two activities emerged out of the discussion. Mr. Maheshwari a retired government horticulturist expert from Jaipur promised to show the participants some of his efforts to grow plants with the understanding of photosynthesis methodology, the place 11 kilometers away from Jaipur. Eight participants went and enjoyed the demonstration and discussions which followed.

Chhaya Datar promised to host a meeting to discuss the issue of women within watershed development programmes.

#### **Papers presented**

1. Mr. K.R. Datye; *A Development Vision Based on Human Resources: An Agenda for Women's Groups.*

- 2.Mr. S.A. Dabholkar; *Women's Role in Capability Building: Bioresource Development and Management.*
- 3.Mr. Subodh Wagle; *Energy, Development and Women; Towards Women Centred Perspective.*
- 4.Ms. Swatija Manorama and Ms. Chayanika Shah *Evolution as a Paradigm to be Reconstructed.*
- 5.Ms. Veena Deosthali and Ms. Swatija Manorama; *Women as Users of Natural Resources.*
- 6.Dr. Chhaya Datar; *Envisioning the Future: Feminist Alternative to Development. In Search of Material Base for Alternative Paradigm.*
- 7.Dr. R. Jayasree; *Gender Aspects in Water Management*
- 8.Ms. Manjari Acharya and Mr. Sarvadaman Acharya; *Energy Management Practices and Rural Homemakers.*
- 9.Ms. Meeta Sainju Pradhan; *Women, Environment and Participatory Development, Some Experiences from East Nepal.*
10. Ms. Amita Shah; *Developing Rainfed Agriculture : Implications for Gender Centrality.*
- 11.Ms. Chetna Gala; *Sita Sheti: Sustainable Agriculture Done by Women in Maharashtra, India.*

## Work and Workers

— Indira Hirway

Several changes have been taking place in the labour market in India during the past decade or so. The economic reforms initiated in 1991 have generated several new forces which have affected, and are likely to affect, the process of change in the labour market in future. Various problems and challenges therefore need the careful consideration of academicians and policy makers.

Modern industrial growth in India is likely to be labour intensive in nature, to promote flexible labour systems leading to informalisation of the labour market. Since female labour fits very well into this new environment, women will get more employment in diversified industries and activities in the coming years. However, with occupational diversification, the quality of employment (including employment security and terms of employment) is likely to decline. The experiences of East Asia support this observation. The question before us is whether to accept the poor quality employment as part of the development process or to work for improving it.

With increasing competition and globalisation some sectors are likely to adopt capital intensive technology which may result in employment reduction; frictional unemployment is likely to be generated now and then; and new employment will require better skills and education. For various well known reasons women workers will be in a disadvantageous position and they are likely to lose out. The relevant questions therefore are, how to protect workers in the midst of frictional unemployment; how to improve skill and education of women to enable them to participate in hightech industries; how to train/retrain.

Unprotected wage earners and self-employed workers working in a large number of traditional industries, handicrafts, and in other sectors need institutional support for credit, market, skill training etc. as well as infrastructural support. How to improve the organisational and managerial capacity of these workers, access to markets and capital; how to provide them skill training and knowledge; and how to enable them to participate in the new economic environment, are some of the questions which need answers.

Emerging trends in the labour market call for safety nets and social protection on the one hand and facilities for industrial restructuring on the other hand. The National Renewal Fund (NRF) has proved to be highly inadequate in this context. Again, unorganised workers in general and women workers in particular will be the worst sufferers. How to redesign NRF in a comprehensive fashion is an issue that deserves serious attention.

The above issues have implications for the speed and nature of the economic reforms. How do we globalize while keeping national economic interests at heart and how to give a human face to the reforms? Can we put limits on the race to globalise? Can we pass laws to keep some resources like forests or water, or agricultural lands out of the reach of large companies? Or get the State to reserve some products/raw material for the small sector?

Some organisations and governments have been successful in getting answers to some of these questions. These experiments can provide lessons for us.

About 22 papers were discussed under the sub-theme Work and Workers. Of these, four papers were on women workers in Agriculture, dairying and quarries; three papers were on women workers in the urban informal sector; two papers were on women in handicrafts, eight papers were on Structural Adjustment programme and its impacts; three papers were regarding the dual responsibility of women workers; and two papers were on Structural Adjustments in Nepal. These papers were discussed in four sessions at the end of which recommendations were formulated. The following paragraphs discuss the major issues of the deliberations in the sessions as well as list the recommendations that came out of the deliberations.

### **Women's Work in Rural Areas**

Section I was chaired by Dr. Krishna Ahuja Patel. In her initial presentation she pointed out that the gap between the research and activism has increased in the field of women's issues. There is a need therefore to bridge this gap by better interaction and better linkages. She also argued that though a lot of work has been done in terms of netting women's work in statistics, a lot is still to be done. For example there is still confusion regarding who is a worker and what is work.

Five papers were presented in this session which focussed primarily on agriculture, dairying, quarry work and relief works.

The major issues discussed in the session were as follows:

1. Invisibility of women's work due to the limitation of the concepts and definitions of work as well as due to the limited efforts by investigators: It was argued by many that inspite of several efforts in the past, women's work is not properly recorded in the Indian data system. The use of time use study has been suggested as a way out. It was felt that if Time Use Studies are planned in different states in India, in a systematic way it will be possible to collect more realistic information about women's contribution to GDP in the country.

2. The second issue discussed during the session was regarding the marginalisation of women in the development process. It was argued that a mass based activity like dairying in which women participate on a large scale does not provide decision making power in the hands of women when modern technology is introduced. Since women in this sector usually do not possess asset ownership, they participate in decision making in a limited way. They also do not acquire modern skills and modern management techniques in managing diarying, and not receive direct income from diarying. Women also have limited access to the credit market which ultimately results in their marginalisation.

3. There was a lot of discussion regarding the definitions of skill for women and men. It was felt that the skills are defined on the basis of patriarchal values. With the result that women's skills

do not get proper recognition. Usually the skills possessed by women are recognised as 'unskills' or 'semi skills' even when women have acquired the skills after hard work. There is a need to define skills afresh in order to do justice to women's work.

4. Women's participation in scarcity works is usually observed to be very important. However in most cases the work done does not result in the creation of productive assets because it is not planned well. It was therefore argued that scarcity works should be used more meaningfully so that they generate productive assets and infrastructure which, in turn, increase the labour absorbing capacity of the mainstream economy. The experience of Maharashtra Employment Guarantee Scheme was discussed in this context.

### **Handicrafts, Home-based Work & Women in the Urban Informal Sector**

One major issue discussed in this session was regarding the employment of women in Handicrafts. In the coming years the demand for these products is likely to increase in the export markets as well as in the local markets. How can women take maximum advantage out of this is a challenge to these women. It was felt that there is a lot of scope for NGO activities in this sector.

Diversification of women workers in modern sectors in general should also be promoted by appropriate policies and by appropriate institutional support in the areas of credit and marketing. If women have an access to skill training as well as to adequate infrastructure and institutions, it will be possible for them to take advantage of the new opportunities arising out of the economic reforms.

Women in the urban informal sector are poorly protected in terms of social security measures as there are no labour laws operating this sector. With the increasing informalisation of the labour market the situation is likely to deteriorate further. There is a need therefore to ensure atleast a minimum social protection to these workers.

Industrial restructuring arising out of increasing competition in the market is likely to create frictional unemployment, particularly women labour in the coming years. Unfortunately the National Renewal Fund has not been able to meet the needs of these workers satisfactorily. It was proposed therefore that the NRF should be redesigned so as to take care of the interests of frictional unemployment of workers.

In the end it was felt that the problem of urban informal woman workers call for appropriate policies of the government. However NGOs can play an important role here. There is a need to promote collective actions and collective movements of women to fulfill their demands in the urban informal sector.

### **Dual Responsibilities and Women Workers**

Session III discussed the papers relating to the problems of women workers arising out



of their dual responsibilities at home and in the workplace. Prof. Indira Hirway chaired the session.

The following issues emerged during the discussion in this session.

First of all, it was felt that women face several constraints in the labour market because of their domestic responsibilities at home. In fact, their supply as well as the terms and conditions of their employment are largely determined by the socio economic values that prevail in within their household. e.g.

Child care is a major responsibility that puts constraints on women's employment and on their upward and horizontal mobility in the labour market. The empirical study by Jayshree Venkateshan showed that women workers tend to lose in the labour market because of their responsibility of child care. The facilities provided for child care are far from adequate at present. There is an important need to formulate a national policy for child care. The cost of baby and child care may be shared by the employers (employing or not employing women), government and workers (not women workers alone) in general.

Women's poor mobility, upward as well as horizontal is also constrained by socio-cultural values. They have to manage two different roles at home and at the workplace. Even educated and professionally qualified women workers have not been able to get out of this socio-cultural trap and the consequent tension. Nothing less than a social movement can help here. To start with, there is a need for generating awareness among women workers themselves and among employers and government about new egalitarian values. Women will have to organise themselves for a collective action to active those values. It was pointed out, however, that looking for solution within the patriarchal values will not serve much purpose.

**Session IV** discussed Structural Adjustment Programme and related issues. Prof. Devki Jain chaired this session.

It was argued by several participants that the economic reforms or the structural adjustment programme is likely to have an adverse impact on women in general and women workers in particular. To start with, the reforms will result in the declining quality of employment for women. More than 95% of women workers work in the unorganised sector at present. With the expansion of this sector without any regulating mechanism, the quality of employment will deteriorate further.

Secondly increasing competition and the resultant increasing sickness of industries will tend to generate frictional unemployment among men and women workers. Once again women are likely to suffer more because majority of them are illiterate or poorly literate and possess very low levels of skills. Thirdly, reduction in social expenditure as well as withdrawal from certain social services by the Government may lead to lower access of women to social services, which in turn, may harm their health and nutrition, education and general welfare. Fourthly, aggressive globalisation implying higher rate of opening up of the economy as well as excessive

push to exports may harm Indian industries in the traditional and small sectors, which may deprive women of their livelihood.

The unorganised sector will have to face the following challenges in the coming years:

- a) How to improve labour productivity at a fast rate
- b) How to improve professionalism in management and better organisation of production so that the producers can compete with corporate sector units and MNCs.
- c) How to provide social protection to workers in order to protect them from the fast deteriorating quality of employment and
- d) How to organise women workers so as to enable them to acquire collective strength.

The future scenario will depend on how far women's organisations are likely to be successful in facing the above challenges.

### **Recommendations**

At the end of the last session several recommendations were made for promoting the welfare of women workers.

1. Structural adjustment programme is a mixed bag. There is a need to examine it carefully to identify as to which components and policies of the programme harm women. Women's organisations then should take up these issues at the macro level to fight out and demand modifications in the reforms.
2. Aggressive globalisation, indiscriminate deregulation and radical privatisation may harm the interest of women workers. There is a need therefore to identify the negative impacts and make recommendations for change.
3. Subordinate status of women as well as their limited mobility in the labour market have their roots in the patriarchal values and policies. Changing this however is not easy. Nothing short up women's movement will help here.
4. Child care and maternity benefits should be an integral part of promoting welfare of women workers. The facilities therefore must be universalised.
5. In order to protect and promote women's employment in traditional crafts and industries, there is need to prepare the unorganised sector for facing the new challenges. The NGOs of women workers should equip themselves to face these challenges.
6. Women workers can get integrated in to the upper end of the labour market only if they are

qualified in technology and in professional areas. There are not short cuts at all. Women workers will have to equip themselves in these areas.

7. And lastly, with regard to make correct estimates on women's work participation Time Use Studies can be used. Though there is a lot of discussion unpaid work of women limited efforts have been made to collect correct data on this.

### **Papers Presented**

1. Shoba Vanthamma and V Ram Mohan; *Experiences of women agricultural workers in Chittoor*
2. Padmavati; *Mechanization and plight of the women in dairying.*
3. Geetanjali; *Empowerment of women in Andhra Pradesh through dairying.*
4. Krishnakumari; *Wages earnings and income of women quarry workers*
5. Jeemol Unni; *Employment Security: Relief work programmes V/s Productive Employment.*
6. B. Rekha; *Situational analyses of women workers in the industries and impact of organised interventions.*
7. B. Suguna; *Unprotected self employed women workers: case study of women meal workers in Tirupati.*
8. *Self-employed women in the informal sector in the twin cities of Hyderabad and Secundrabad*
9. Darshini Mahadevia; *Sustainable income generation for poor women: a case of an NGO.*
10. Renana Jhabwala; *Invisible Women Workers Reach International Heights.*
11. Ratnakumari; *Self-employed women in the urban informal sector.*
12. D. Dastur and S. Jayshree; *Wage differential among women.*
13. Subhdhara Anand; *Migration and economic changes: role of Sindhi migration women in the post partition period.*
14. Jayshree Venkateshan; *Women's multiple roles and coping strategy for child care.*
15. Anil Dutta–Mishra; *Problems of urban working women in India.*
16. Indira Dutta; *Structural adjustment programme and women workers.*

17. Malkit Kaur; *Gender issues and economic reforms.*
18. Nillie Nihila; *Increasing empowerment opportunities for women in export oriented industries.*
19. Nisha Srivastava; *Starving for a toe hold; Women in the organised sector.*
20. Manjri Achrya and Kavita Pomal; *Profile of women entrepreneurship in and around Vallabh Vidyanagar.*
21. Anita Mahat; *Feminization of poverty in Nepal.*
22. Chandra Bhadra and Sangeeta; *Impact of macro economic reforms on women: a feminist perspective.*

## Women, Political Participation and Politics Of Organising

— Indu Agnihotri

The primary goal of the women's movement is the creation of a just, democratic and equal society. Despite the expansion and the widening arena of the movement, women's impact on the formal political process has changed only marginally during the last two decades. To many in the country the symptoms of criminalisation, with the increasing use of money and muscle power, and violence against women as an instrument for political action signify politics as "dirty". At the same time it is not possible to achieve any of our goals in any arena of life without transforming political power relations, structures and processes.

While the movement has been debating its relation with the State, the rapidly changing global and national political scenarios force us to raise fundamental questions about the nature and strength of the present State structures. It is in this context that we need to examine the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments which promise to strengthen the democratic base of the Indian State; and seek to expand women's participation in the formal representative process by providing one third reservation for them in these bodies. To what extent can these changes contribute to transforming the present culture and structure of politics?

What has been the experience of women's organisations who have been involved in voter education, training for Panchayati Raj (before or after election), of women's fronts/wings within political parties/trade unions/other people's organisations? To what extent have they succeeded in getting the goals of the women's movement onto the agenda of these organisations? How do we explain the participation of women in communal parties/movements which seek to impose a political identity by birth, and oppose gender equality overtly or covertly? Some people have been talking about starting a women's political party in India – would it help to get a women's perspective on to the political agenda?

The movement has all along used organising as a mode for bringing women's perspective on to the political arena. We should question our own experiences of organising by examining the dynamics of this organising: have they remained static? Have they reduced, changed, or eliminated the gap between the organisers and the organised? Have we resolved the problem of hierarchy versus solidarity and movement for change? What has been the role of resource requirement, the source of such support and the methods of utilising it? What has been the role and use of autonomy in the aim of changing political structures and processes?

How are we to deal with the issue of identity? Who defines it and how? How to relate the perceptions/priorities of the organised to the existing structures/processes in order to change the latter? Is protest enough? Alternative experiments also generate political force and responses from existing power structures (parties, governments, community organisations, funding agencies etc. – which use methods of co-optation/manipulation with different degrees of sophistication. What are our lessons from the experience of the last 20 years? What should be the warning signals to determine our strategies/responses?

Finally – How can the movement balance the three values of rights, responsibilities and accountability, their demands on our own consciousness, the movement's trends, and the rapidly changing local, national, and global scenarios?

The issues as they emerged in the sub-theme on Women in Politics and the Politics of Organising are reflective of the state of affairs in women's studies and to some extent the gap between women's studies and the women's movement. This statement is borne not out of cynicism, nor is meant to be a stance, but is reflective of the serious concern and thought that the subject merits. The theme co-ordinator, Dr. Vina Mazumdar had a format in mind when paper-writers were approached. It so happened that most of those approached failed to show up in Jaipur, including those who had willingly consented and forwarded their abstracts. Further, at the last minute the Co-ordinator herself had to drop out and a set of seemingly unco-ordinated individuals were left holding the baby, so to say.

The irony of the situation lay in the fact that there were, nevertheless many research scholars, ready with papers, wanting to make their presentations. Their concerns were not at variance with the sub-theme. However, with the collapse of the format, serious imbalances could be seen in the perspective of those grouped together in the sub-theme. Consequently, if one were to think of the issues as they emerged through formal presentations or in the course of discussion, it would have to be noted, at the outset that many of the major concerns, at the national or international plane, were hardly voiced in Jaipur in this group. Coming as it was in the post-Beijing scenario, scholars seemed to be trailing far behind even the rear guard of the political goals articulated by the visible movement in India and elsewhere. This is primarily an ideological problem – how is it that concerns expressed both at national fora as well as grassroots level workshops fail to strike the imagination of scholars?

This is not merely a logistical problem. There was an overwhelming response from scholars engaged in the study of Panchayati Raj system in the wake of the 73rd amendment. We seem to have nearly achieved the 'balance of perspective' that was sought to be imposed on activists in the course of preparations for and deliberations at Beijing: focus on the ground reality of drainage, sanitation, and get bogged down with the nitty-gritty while accepting unquestioningly the macro-structures, the global reality, the given framework of international relations. For a while one wondered where the politics was in the politics of Organising Women? Or had the a-political definition of women's rights at last had its field day? Why were women's studies scholars way behind focusing on what had been voiced so sharply on the streets? How is it that politics was only to be viewed through the reference point of the 73rd amendment and not the constitution itself. The anger against failure of constitutional promises voiced in 1975 by the CSWI, the absolute about-turn on 'mainstreaming' of gender and the whole gamut of debates on women in development, the seething anger at the free-for-all permitted under fundamentalist banners wreaking havoc in women's lives in these years, and above all the basic premise that the women's movement was a political movement, it had to engage with politics at the level of praxis – all this was missing. Or perhaps, in classic fashion of a particular brand of feminism which sought to keep the movement separate from politics, participants chose to discuss the subject matter with no reference to the times they were living in. With the exception of

interventions in the form of introductory remarks by some of the women chairing the sessions, notably Kumud Sharma, Devaki Jain and Pramila Dandavate and a few of the speakers the rest chose to tread a very straight and narrow path. Perhaps in the classical post modernist style, the fragment had overtaken the more holistic perception and politics had chosen the alternate route of cropping up from under the umbrella of cultural identities and so on. May be these are the prejudiced musings of someone who was not very happy putting together a hasty and shoddy act, and in fact came back wondering about the politics of women in women's studies.

A number of papers presented were on women and the Panchayati Raj system. The discussion of issues arising out of these presentations carried over in two and a half sessions with several common observations.

### **Panchayati Raj, Decision Making and Women**

Rohini Gawankar's paper "Women Sarpanches – Miles to Go" was based on interaction and sharing of the experiences of elected sarpanches specifically in Maharashtra, and the Konkan region. The paper briefly discussed the background of the region, Konkan being in the limelight in recent times in connection with the Enron project. The paper identified the obstacles to women's effective participation in the panchayats. These were both procedural as well as rooted in perceptions of norms laid down for women's behaviour within the rural set up. The study outlined various forms of patriarchal behaviour in everyday life in rural India and how the smallest detail was kept in mind while depriving the woman sarpanch from making a meaningful assertion of her authority as well as the attempt to block out her entry altogether. The phenomenon of male Deputy Sarpanches proxying, or filling in for non-existent women sarpanches seemed to be widespread. Most of the women elected before the introduction of reservation came in on party tickets. Many come from political families or families which had provided sarpanches earlier. Education provided another kind of advantage. What about caste, class, rural structure or is the struggle all about male *ego/kursi* in the panchayat office and patriarchy? This was the first paper and participants were yet to gear up for discussion.

Addressing the question of marginalisation of women in politics even in the face of extension of political rights to women in most countries, Ranjana Sheel and Kiran Bansal pinned down on the case of rural women. In their paper Sheel and Bansal studied the Empowerment of Women through the Political Process through a case study of Women gram Pradhans of Kashi Vidyapeeth block in Varanasi district. What were the expectation from these women who have newly emerged as 'leaders'? Had the State played a role as facilitator in equipping them to take decisions in their new capacities or was representation in the panchayats to be yet another tool to further patriarchal hegemony? The authors rightly pointed out that the 73rd amendment removed social barriers to women's entry into politics through reservation but still felt it was necessary to ask whether this would bring about a qualitative shift in power relations. The Kashi Vidyapeeth experience too underscored the 'proxy' factor whereby decision-making continued to be a male preserve, both in public perception as well as in the self-image of the elected women. An inherent obstacle could be identified in the conflict between female gender roles and the expectations associated with political roles. While the existing sexual division of labour

remained undisturbed, women pradhans were expected to take on additional roles. Since the latter involve public dealing, and held out the promise of power and status, husbands – often themselves former pradhans – happily took on the mantle of what Vrinda Karat had recently identified as a phenomenon, of panchpatris. In some cases the woman pradhan is often an older woman, who is allowed the time and freedom to travel due to her very age and the presence of grown up daughters/daughters-in-law who took over household chores. There was however very little independent movement or decision-making, thus far. Tensions, nevertheless, existed. As the authors point out, as political beings as well as accommodation of women's new role behaviour at the societal level, how far and the manner in which these tensions could be resolved would be determinant of the level of 'empowerment'.

Does not the State have a role in all this? If the objective of the 73rd amendment was to provide strength and dignity to viable people's bodies with a view to devolution of power then decentralisation has so far remained a myth. A former Chief Minister of U.P. aptly put across the apprehensions in the words that he did not want 65 CMs in his state. Political resistance to genuine decentralisation, a highly compartmentalised bureaucracy and entrenched patriarchal attitudes, all emerged as blocks to women's attempts to turn the apple-cart. Women ended up being the underside of the local bureaucracy, onerously waiting for instructions about how to implement 'schemes', the format of which was all too well-planned down to the last detail in a given top-down method of governance.

Further, important concerns such as the nature and scale of employment schemes and wages paid, crucial components in government schemes were also pre-decided and women pradhans, themselves underpaid, had no freedom to raise these issues. Sheel and Bansal pointed out that this was important since few had seen the discussion on political empowerment and decision-making as encompassing aspects of men/women's economic roles. Rather, the debate had remained centered on how to put women there and not on what they are expected to do once they were there. Even where some recognition was given it was to socially endorsed forms of income-generating activities.

– The authors pointed out that structural sources of powerlessness thus remained by and large unattended and untackled. Problem areas identified included – low wages for labour needed for brick-paving, installation of hand pumps, digging of drains and road construction; the reclamation of the gram sabha property and village wasteland which involved disturbance of local power alignments and confrontation with those illegally occupying common properties, who were invariably drawn from the dominant class.

– The lop-sidedness of the target-oriented official programme and the intersection of the caste, class and gender nexus, as well as the information bottlenecks all exacerbated the problems of those newly elected. Any attempt to break with long – existent patterns of corruption, power and privileges was seen as overstepping one's brief, and an attempt at 'supervision' or monitoring of paper work as well money disbursement was interpreted as 'interference' in other's work, and being in contrast with the 'previous pattern'.



At the same time it would be wrong to dismiss the new entrants as only proxy candidates. This would frustrate the project of gender equality and empowerment. To expect action specifically on gender-related violence may be a short-cut also not immediately feasible. It was important to remember that for these newly elected women, the struggle for substantive empowerment had just begun.

Another case study of Harhua block, also in Varanasi district, was presented by Kumud Ranjan, who is also the State Convener for East and Central U.P., for Samata, under the Total Literacy Mission. The study addressed the question as to why women's participation had remained low and escaped official redressal despite the B.R. Mehta Committee, 1959 and the Asoka Mehta Committee, 1977. After the 1994 regulations around 15,000 women Gram Pradhans were elected in U.P. in April 1995.

The interviews in the study highlighted that government official – the Village Panchayat Officers called secretaries – continued to be very powerful in the sphere of planning and budgeting. Being more literate, they also controlled the disbursement of funds and thereby ended up sidestepping the elected women leaders. The women had little knowledge so far of the work they were supposed to do, having picked up only a few details about the Jawahar Rozgar Yojana, the Indira Avas Yojna and the Widow Pension schemes. Even so, the women were aware enough to complain about the utter inadequacy of funds for provision of even minimum facilities to the rural poor.

In a paper focusing on Perceptions of the Politically Active Women Regarding the Reasons for the lack of Women's Participation in Politics, Uma Joshi and Rakhi Ramavtar searched for strategies to encourage and examine the advantages for women's participation in politics.

In a study sample of 85 politically active women in Gujarat, it emerged that in the case of a majority, close relatives were involved in politics and a little more than 50% were women from the middle income groups. Also, a majority were married and in the age group of 40 and above. Also, they belonged to joint family households. These women were also highly qualified and many had a social science specialisation at the school or college level, 40% of those interviewed had been involved with political activity for more than 11 years.

Among the reasons given for lack of participation in politics, personal, social and political factors were cited. These ranged from lack of awareness about rights as well as disinterest and the reproductive role and responsibilities of women. The well as disinterest and the reproductive role and responsibilities of women. The prevalence of *goondalism*, corruption and communalism, non-availability of money needed for political activity, hostility shown by men and inadequate training were stated as major determinants under social reasons for lack of women's political participation. Fund collection was seen as a problem, and there was a practical problem in establishing contacts with party workers in male dominated party structures. There was, at the same time, a general inability to connect with the broader socio-political context as well as to visualise politics as a career for women. A number of measures were suggested to effectively

encourage women's participation in politics. What was most heartening was that over 80% of those interviewed reported that political activity gave them a distinct identity, an opportunity to fight against women's exploitation as well as greater confidence and respect in the family and society. Most saw political participation as an opportunity to develop new skills and ability as well as part of an attempt to move towards greater equality for women.

In a similar case study of political participation at the Zilla Parishad level in Nasik, Vandana Talekar interviewed 56 respondents. In the sample there was a larger number from Marathas castes, largely drawn from within the political party system, nearly 46% were between the age group of 31–45 years and 69% illiterate. 61% of the representatives came from political families and 89% of the women were housewives. Awareness of the concept of Panchayati Raj however seemed to be on the lower side. Many complained of difficulties in functioning due to complicated rules/procedure and inadequate staff. Paucity of funds and low level of planning emerged as a universal complaint, with decisions being imposed from the top and lack of communication between elected members and the government seen as the 'authorities'. Those from dominant castes/classes held forth. Dependence on males was high in the list of priorities. Need for sharing of housework so as to give time off to women for fulfillment of their new roles was often articulated.

Sheela Shukla's study emphasised the scope for transforming the social structure through women's empowerment. Her paper argued that the quality of participation need greater thought and was hampered by low levels of literacy as well as lack of economic independence. At present members were largely drawn from a conservative rural elite and a male-dominated set up. Women's self-articulation was actually discouraged by this apart from fears instilled by criminalisation.

Almost all the studies emphasised the need for women's organisations to provide back up. At this point there was a prolonged discussion on the need for training.

### **Empowerment and the Political Process**

Vijayalakshmi Ramamohan and Sobhavathamma studies two panchayats in Chittoor district of Andhra Pradesh to gauge how equipped women were to take the challenge of participation in political discussion-making and how such participation impacted the women's movement. The questions posed to women were similar as in the other case studies. The same kind of answers had been received. All respondents in the study unanimously admitted that representatives were under pressure to become on part of the entrenched culture of political patronage. While it was expected that women representatives may be able to intervene on issues such as those of dowry, domestic violence, rape or even drinking water, their interventions on developmental issues were likely to be far less successful. The women electorate wanted more attention to be paid to health and education. By and large women seemed to be still unaware of the reservation quota. The authors posed a question about the role of NGOs and women's studies centres in this context.

Addressing Myth, Models and the Power structure of Rural Panchayats, Shail Mayaram posed the question 'What Do we Do' with the '*Mardani aurat*' (Manly Woman). The investigation began with the question of how families, lineages and rural power structures in Rajasthan were coping with the unprecedented presence of over 30,000 women in the public sphere. The attempt was to understand the dynamics of power politics in which the village communities are "managing" the legislative enactment. The paper attempted this by covering the overlapping domains between politics, gender and popular religion. It was argued that the mythic provided a reservoir of archetypes for patriarchal social and political control. Two examples were taken from the Hindu and Muslim popular folk cultural traditions—the *Chandraval Gurjari* and *Jaitun Jokdhya Ki Bat* which centred on social control over the *mardani aurat* providing a collective subconscious to cope with 'aberrant' and 'deviant' women who transgress models of received femininity. While nationalism provides a justified space for empowerment other situations did not. It was argued that the close relationship between the worlds of popular culture and political practice were apparent in the two cases of Bhanwari Devi and Mohini, both *Sathins* in Rajasthan. The religious order intervenes to curb transgression but female subjectivity does not require a wholesale rejection of religious traditions for these need to be seen as the locus of plural voices and practices. The paper concludes that there is a need to make new entrants to rural power structures conscious of the presence of multiple and competing images representing women.

As in the case of the sessions, there was and overlap in the questions that came up during the discussion. Firstly, it was felt that not adequate attention had been paid thus far in the discussion around the panchayat representation to aspects other than far in the discussion around the panchayat representation to aspects other than the patriarchal bias which had been identified at various levels as well as in its multiple manifestations. The role played by the existing socio-economic structures and what bearing these had on the very functioning of the panchayat had to be addressed afresh to also examine how this intersected with women's presence. Also, how did the elected women's own economic standing impinge on her role in the panchayat? How did the need to meet livelihood requirements fall in place with the political mantle since a wage labourer would certainly have to forego her daily wage many a time to discharge the responsibilities of a political representative? Many expressed surprise that so much was expected of women's participation in isolation of the continued existence of other institutions and structures. Were we only wanting to put women there or were we questioning the earlier structures?

A question that came up repeatedly related to how women's presence in representative bodies could alter the nature or culture of present day politics. There seemed to be an unwritten/unstated belief on the part of many in the pristine purity of women. The truth in fact was that there was no separate women's world. It would be naive to believe that only parties were corrupt, whereas individuals and certainly women were not. Many scholars had in fact encountered instance, of women indulging in corrupt financial transactions as well. At this point the argument was advanced, from the participants, that women being less experienced, were less prone to corrupt practices in the first round. A few mentioned that there was a need for a link-up with movements working towards an alternate political culture. It was time, someone

said, to examine what kind of parties and politics were in favour of women.

An issue which comes up each time panchayats are mentioned is that of training. Many of the participants expressed a keen interest in this. While some saw it as a question of sensitization of women a few raised the point for a need to sensitise men as well, or that the situation called for joint training programmes. Further, the point was made that it was necessary to look at the training modules developed by the three nodal agencies, the Mussoorie Academy, the IIPA and the NIRD. Someone volunteered the information that at least 90 training camps had already been organised. Many NGOs are located in the villages. Are they sensitized to gender issues?

Again and again the question was raised – how can we expect women to deliver the goods – all at once? Had any thought been given to develop the movement, specifically at the village level? It was pointed out that there was an underlying assumption of a sort of linear progression that undercutting patriarchy through women's representation would lead to empowerment, whereas in fact, empowerment often ended up reinforcing patriarchy. Many felt that in fact there was a grave danger of women's representation being absorbed by the existing state of democracy and decision-making. This was different from the role visualised in terms of a transformative potential as well as the framework of redefining politics in favour of a widening of the political base and decentralisation.

Srilatha Batliwala's paper addressed critical questions about the transformation of women's social position and condition through participation in political power. In 1985, the Karnataka Panchayati Raj Act introduced 25% reservation for women, cutting across other reservation categories. The motivation for this came from an understanding that sustainable and long term change in women's subordination could come about through a political process. Subsequently, the introduction of the Mahila Samakhya programme in the State in 1989 was seen as an added input into the attempt to engender change, by specifically confronting one of the barriers to change, i.e. illiteracy and lack of awareness of rights and responsibilities. The Mahila Samakhya model attempted to organise poor rural women into collectives in village *sanghas*. The district teams helped the village mahila *sanghas* to lobby the Mandal Panchayats which after 1985, had over 90% of the districts development resources. The pressure women panchayat members came under showed up their poor capacity to function effectively and highlighted the need for special training and other supportive interventions. Batliwala argued that there was a need for the movement to evolve a clear agenda and a strategy of entering and transforming political structures as well as accountability of the movement's responsibility to women in politics.

A number of questions arose in this context in terms of membership of the *sangha* and the platform from which women contest panchayat polls. Would there be an overlap and where would the onus of accountability lie? There was the additional question of how the *sangha* would relate to elected women panchayat members and to the panchayat as a whole. There was apprehension about how the *sangha* would handle changes in attitude/behaviour of members after they became panchayat representatives?

In 1994 nearly 500 sangha women contested panchayat elections, including 50 who contested open, non-reserve seats. Many had been exposed to over three years of interaction where the above questions had been discussed and also attended the countless workshops and training programmes. While women contested in their own name, they were permitted to use their membership and political record in the sanghas in their campaigning and other sangha members campaigned for their candidates, but on being elected representatives had to abdicate from formal leadership positions in the sangha. There was also a role for linkages with a larger, vibrant politically conscious movement. The attempt was made through the Mahila Samakhya to experiment with multiple leadership/rotation, and collective planning and action while also upgrading information and skills. A study showed that gram panchayat members who had come from the sangha were considerably more effective.

### Organising Around Issues of Work

In the women's movement, a great deal of attention has been paid in recent years to the overtly 'political', in view of the 73rd and 74th amendments. Much more effort needs to be put into getting the rights of those women whose lives are lived outside the pale of 'formal' politics. This vast mass includes millions of women who earn their livelihood in the informal sector and whose struggle for their rights is only now gaining some visibility. Over the last few years the struggle of the Sathins in Rajasthan has been gaining momentum and their untiring efforts through their union have focussed some attention on aspects relating to women's work.

Arti Sawhney, a health worker who has functioned in close collaboration with the *sathins'* union spelt out the main issues before the women working in nearly 20 districts of Rajasthan under the Women's Development Programme. Whereas at the state level there is a Directorate which looks after the programme, its implementation rests on the Sathins who work at the level of gram panchayat and the Prachetas who work in co-ordination with 10 gram panchayats. While they are actually functionaries in government schemes, they have only a temporary status as per the record, denied the status and rights of a worker and are paid an 'honorarium'. The earnings would roughly be to the tune of Rs. 250/- for a *Sathin*, Rs. 3500/- for a *Pracheta* and Rs. 5000/- upwards for a Project Director under the IDARA. The *Sathin* has very clearly defined duties, and definite, tangible tasks under 22 heads and the programme has all the markings of a government department with targets set from above including a family planning quota. While the programme developed over the 80s, there has been a clear shift in emphasis in the 90s in keeping with other changes in economic policy. It is the awareness generated over time about their rights and roles that drove Sathins to discuss these issues at a *mela* in Padampura and the initiative to unionise came from sathins in Bhilwara. Sathins in Ajmer followed these leads and organised themselves. Since 1992, changes have been sought to be imposed on the Sathins through an alternate model of the *samooh* or group as opposed to the Sathin's (individual?) model. Since 1995 all Sathins who had completed 5 years have systematically been sought to be retrenched, as also those who were illiterate and those who had completed 55 years of age – the plan being to get rid of all the sathins over a period of one year. When this was resisted, recruitments were stopped and in the new districts when the WDP was extended no new appointments of sathins were made. Thus there are districts where no more

than 6 may be on the rolls now.

The union finds that the response of the women's movement is complex too. While support has been forthcoming on issues such as the rape of Bhanwari Bai, and some others are prepared to talk about a raise in the honorarium, not many supportive voices have been raised in terms of their getting recognition as 'workers'.

Other questions too have come up. Initially, the WDP was projected as a programme to push gender equality with emotional hype. As conflict situations developed there was both organised as well as personalized attack, not to speak of empowerment. Within the union, issues surfaced which are today seen as linked to the retreat of the State in the welfare sector as part of new economic policies in the current phase of globalisation. At the same time it is a question of devaluation of women's work which is never recognised as 'work'.

Mrinal Gore saw the issue of the Sathins bearing some resemblance to the problems faced by *Anganwadi* workers under the ICDs. The nearly 6 lakh women workers under this scheme were similarly denied wages in the name of being paid an honorarium or *Maandhan*, whereas actually there was neither any *Maan* (dignity/honour/respect) nor any *dhan*. More than 60% of the women employed in this scheme were either widows, or deserted/abandoned women and the large majority were heads of households whose, very survival depended on their earnings. Yet these women earned anything between Rs. 200–Rs.600 for working over long hours and 20 years on, they still are not entitled to Provident Fund or Pensions and could avail of no allowances. An ex-gratia payment for Diwali, of Rs. 250, was the maximum they would not have found any other work so they should be thankful for what little they have got.

In fact the *Anganwadi* worker, as also the Sathin could form a crucial 'link' in the movement, to establish contact between rural women, and the women's movement. She could in fact be the 'carrier of the vision' to the rural areas.

The Sathin's experience threw up many questions. In the discussion questions were raised regarding the low priority given to work-related issues as well as to the politics of organising around the work place. Did not the larger presence of women in the informal sector pose question for the manner in which women were to be organised since unions continued to be enterprise-based while the new form of industrial enterprise as well as development encouraged scattered, home-based work for women? Had the movement sought to devise new forms of organisation as well as of struggle to confront the changed situation and new development with regard to women's role in the economy.

There was no real 'salary' and no 'real job'. And yet there were other issues involved. These models, both different and similar envisaged paying to a woman to 'empower' other women, assuming that she could contribute to changing women's position in society; at the same time there was a union of sorts being built of women around the fact of their of their being women. These women now found it impossible to pursue earlier forms of livelihood and yet had been made dependent on a wage that was not wage. Similarities appeared between Karnataka and

Rajasthan and yet the 'models' adopted were different as between Anganwadi workers and the Sathins. There was an inbuilt 'discrimination' in the job, Pramila Dandavate, chairing the session, pointed out and this was an instance of violation of the law.

The struggle of the Sathins needed to be highlighted further since it had also thrown up many questions regarding self-perception of their own role.

A resolution was adopted in support of the Sathin's demands for (a) recognition as workers (b) raise in the existing honorarium and (c) calling for an end to retrenchment.

While a scheduled paper on the Politics of Displacement could not be presented, Medha Patkar agreed to speak at the afternoon session on the 29th of December. Patkar emphasised the fact that representation for women was being introduced under the aegis of a political system whereas 80% of the people, including women, were kept out of any discussion or organising for change, on planned development and of decision-making altogether. Is participation in the political process on existing terms within the given structures desirable, she asked? Critiquing the existing brand of politics she said that if political change was to be in favour of advancing the rights of those who had been oppressed then the movement for change too would have to be defined in terms of initiatives coming from struggles by dalits, tribals and women. None of these were homogeneous categories but these had to be included if the social base of those participating in decision-making had to be expanded. The problem however arose at several levels. While all along activists were critiquing the top-down approach of governmental schemes and the Nehruvian model of development, today we find that resources are controlled by MNCs and a gang-up of anti-national forces. Displacement was not just a geographical concept – summed up a process by which access and control over productive resources was increasingly denied to a majority of people, men and women, along with the destruction of the means by which families interacted with nature to ensure survival and livelihood. Thus it was not a question of whether women could play a role in social change and fulfill responsibilities when they were increasingly finding it difficult to play even the roles they fulfilled within the family. Therefore the question should not even be posed as one of the woman versus the family. At the same time it is not merely a question of putting women onto the panchayat bodies but also whether the panchayat performs any role in taking decisions about livelihood, resources and control over these. Thus we have to cross mental barriers to see that the dilemmas are not 'environmental' concerns per se, but questions about the nature of development and the role of polity as well as people's role/interaction at all levels of these processes.

Participants wanted more discussion on the Narmado Bachao Andolan and how that interacted with women's concerns/leadership, but members were constrained both by time and the cameras that were clicking.

### **Gender, Politics and the State**

The afternoon session on the 29th was a mix of very different presentations. In a paper on the Politics of Information Dissemination, Sarbani Goswani pointed out that information was

an economic resource at par with other resources and there was tremendous scope for opening up new opportunities for women through access to information. Citing the example of Towards Equality, the Report of CSWI, she illustrated how useful an exercise even the compilation of existing information could prove to be. The new information system had opened up a whole new array of research questions to feminists and there was need for decentralised and egalitarian processes to make these information technologies available to the women's movement. At the same time there was a felt need for advancing collaborative efforts which would subvert capital intensive information systems as well as combat the domination of a handful over global control systems. Goswami argued that there was a need to restrict instrumentalist use of information systems at the global level within the grammar of human relationships and values as well as concepts of community and social responsibility.

In a discussion of the Policy for Women introduced in Maharashtra, Neelam Gorhe traced the advances made since the 1970s towards mobilisation, emancipation and empowerment of women. The implementation of reservation for women in the panchayats and other local bodies aimed at greater involvement of women in decision-making was to be seen as an important step in the process. There were simultaneously other measures, such as the setting up of institutions like the National Commission for Women and various State Level Commissions. In continuation of this, Gorhe argued, was the formulation of a Policy for Women by the State of Maharashtra, after consultation between government, voluntary groups, scholars and a 'vast mass of hitherto unheard women'. Describing the policy document as 'extensive' and 'exhaustive' and aimed at changing laws with regard to divorce maintenance, property rights, custody of the child. There were problems areas as well. Was it correct to accept that the cess from liquor be utilised for development of women? What about the impact of new economic policies and the issues of reproductive rights for women? Even while activists saw it as a small step towards challenging the male bias within planning and the political process, it was clear that honest implementation was not possible without deeper attitudinal change. But the deeper issue which arose about of this exercise related to the political process. How were policies to be kept on track in the wake of changes in government? The space that had been opened up for gender issues, stood endangered the moment there was a top level governmental change. That raised many questions, including about the National Policy for Women. What was the commitment that a successor government could be called upon to have to plans and reports/recommendations drawn up by previous governments? While formulation of policy is one thing, ensuring a system of accountability and monitoring was equally important, including of the record achievement and failure of the government and its own departments.

In the discussion around policy, which continued the next morning when issues to be put in the report were being finalised there was a resolution adopted on the National Policy for Women expressing apprehension at the motives behind ushering in of a policy without consulting women's organisations when elections were around the corner; further the proposed policy had no provision for budgetary allocations and had not taken into account the issues being raised in the movement.

In a paper titled Gender, Politics and Fundamentalism Indu Agnihotri laid out the



parameters of the debate on the issues of the Uniform Civil Code. It was pointed out that the present conjuncture seemed ridden with contradictions. The Hindu Right, which had opposed even the slightest suggestion of reform at the time of the Hindu Code Bill, was championing the cause of the immediate implementation of a uniform civil code while the women's movement apparently was making a 'retreat'. The paper discussed the main positions taken up by women's organisations as well as political parties as well as prominent individuals. It was argued that in the current debate the issue became as one of BJP versus women. This was seen as symptomatic of our times wherein the conservative–communalists–fundamentalists combine is locked in a battle for hegemony as against the left–secular democratic combine. The 'non–interventionist' stance of the Congress–I was telling enough as was visible on December 6, 1992 when it was converted into paralysis while the *Hindutva* brigade demolished the Masjid in Ayodhya. This stance was not status quoist, as was made out but was in fact responsible for creating an extremely volatile situation whereby communities were being prompted to be at war with each other so that the respective groups of fundamentalists could draw political mileage and women became pawns in the cynical games being played by 'community leaders'. The BJP in the meantime had succeeded in projecting an issue arising out of a complex pluralist society and one impinging on women's right to equality as a 'problem' plaguing the nation thanks to the anti–reformist and anti–national stance of minority communities. The BJP suddenly bemoaned the lot of women due to the 'existence of different personal laws', some of them even 'barbaric' and lamented this separateness which fractured and diluted the 'integrated personality of the Indian Nation'.

The shift in the position being taken by women's organisations had therefore to be understood in the context of this attempt to browbeat minority communities into submission to a mainstream Hindu model. The cost of this browbeating was democratic policy and the secular fabric; rather than focus on equality for women and against discrimination within the fold of religion, the BJP's espousal of the uniform civil code was aimed at bringing about uniformity or, in other words reversing what they saw as the 'appeasement' of the minorities. Most women's organisations, in the process had come around to a position whereby the attempt was to expand, step by step, the scope of secular laws for women on specific counts such as matrimonial property, maintenance, divorce, guardianship etc. While also pushing for gender justice through a notion of equal rights for all women though perhaps even under different laws. Thus AIDWA had called for equal rights and equal laws, Majlis wanted gender just laws, Saheli pushed for egalitarian laws and so on. This 'shift' in positions was based on the realisation that

a) most women still saw some scope for expansion of their rights within the religious frame or and where not at this point of time prepared for an either/or choice between women's rights and religion and      b) that the BJP's espousal of the UCc slogan in fact threatened democratic polity and used a selective critique of patriarchy to attack the democratic rights of minorities. Women's organisations on the other hand critiqued patriarchal modes within all religions and aimed at expansion of the democratic base through their critique. The shift was therefore aimed at foregrounding women's rights in a manner that fundamentalists were not allowed to hijack the rhetoric of women's rights to settle scores amongst themselves and sabotage democracy, thereby stalling the movement for equality at the general plane.

## Papers Presented

1. Rohini Gawankar; *Women Sarpanches -- Miles to Go.*
2. Ranajan Sheel & Kiron Bansal; *Empowerment of Women Through the Political Process: A Case Study of Women Gram Pradhans of Kashi Vidyapeeth Block, Varanasi.*
3. Uma Joshi & Rakhee Ramavtar; *Perceptions of the Politically Active Women Regarding the Reasons for the Lack of Women's Participation in Politics. Strategies to Encourage it and Advantages of Women's Participation in Politics.*
4. Srilatha Batliwala; *Reservation Policy and Grassroots Organising for Women's Political Participation -- Lessons from the Karnataka Experience.*
5. Medha Patkar; *The Politics of Development: The Narmada Experience.*
6. Vijayalakshmi Rammohan & I. Shobhavattamma; *Women and Electoral Quota: Reflections by Women in Andhra Pradesh.*
7. Vandana Tawalkar; *Political Participation: A Case Study of Nasik Zila Parishad.*
8. Arti Sawhney; *The Women's Development Programme: A Case Study of the Sathins and the Politics of Organising Around Work. (Oral)*
9. Shail Mayaram and Pritam Pal; *What do we do with the Mardani Aurat (Manly Woman) ? Myth Models and the Power Structure of Rural Panchayats.*
10. Neelam Gorhe; *Policy for Women, Process, Maharashtra and India.*

## Special Sub-Theme : Personal Laws

— Gautam Navlakha

The sub-theme was organised with the objective of bringing together the alternatives developed by different women's groups on the issue of the Uniform Civil Code, and to think in terms of engaging with both a) the differences in feminist positions and b) the common ground we can share.

On 28th December, 1995 the session began with presentation by Majlis of Bombay and Working Group on Women's Rights (WGWR) of Delhi.

Majlis 'Protection of Women's Economic Rights Through Specific Legislations and Reform From Within — Dual Strategy for Law Reform' holds the view that any all-encompassing code, whether based on feminist understandings or brought about by the BJP, will harm the interests of *Muslim women, who in today's sharply communalised politics* bear the double burden of being minority and being women. However, recognising the need for law reform, Majlis put forward two strategies which will be more effective 1) small specific statutes to address the immediate problems faced by women especially in the fields of economic rights and protection against domestic violence. These areas do not impinge on personal laws and will not communalise the issue. 2) Support to all initiatives for reform.

Within the community in order to take away the focus from the communalised demand for a UCC. WGWR 'Civil Codes and Personal Laws: Reverting The Options' puts forward the idea of Reverse Optionality, which may help to break through the impasse created by the polarisation of State/Community & Community/Women. WGWR critiques demand hitherto put forward for a UCC, on the grounds that such demands have either explicitly foregrounded or been appropriated for the idea of national integrity rather than being about gender justice. On the other hand, reform from within personal law proved to be blocked by patriarchal pressures from the communities and has therefore been limited. So while supporting all feminist initiatives for reform from within, WGWR feels this to be a limited strategy.

The proposal of the WGWR has three planks.

1. The preparation and institutionalisation of a comprehensive gender just package of legislations which will provide equal rights for women not just within the family but in the sphere of work as well.
2. All citizens of Indian would be covered by this framework of common laws by birth (or by taking on citizenship).
3. All citizens would also have the right to choose, to be governed by personal laws if they so desire, while retaining the option to revoke this option at some future date, and returning to their birthright of genderjust laws.

This way of tackling the issue reverses the present situation where people are born into Personal Laws and have to opt for the few secular laws which must exist. This choice is more difficult for women to make under present circumstances, while if gender-just laws are their birthright, their interests are better protected.

In this discussion that followed the following kinds of questions/comments came up

1. The need to accept that Muslim women are in fact worse off than women of other communities. That is, the attempt by BJP to use this as a communal weapon should not push us into a defensive posture of rationalising provisions for polygamy, triple talaq etc.

2. The only workable strategy is reform from within given the sharp and communalisation which have taken place and the attendant dangers. Women will not support laws which will improve their situation because they fear to put their community in danger, whereas if the leadership of the community can be pressurised to accept such reforms, then this will be acceptable to women. The counter to this came in the form of arguments that reforms from within have never come from mass demand but from small groups of forward looking people. Also that the situation of women is so desperate they will certainly accept common gender just laws, but the only idea of any UCC which exists is the BJP one. Feminists need to spell out what a gender-just common code will look like, then women would be supportive.

In this context a comment was made that we need to understand 3 parallel strands at work.

- a) that women are desperate for legal changes.
- b) that women fear a threat to community identity.
- c) that women perceive that they are oppressed by their 'own' men, within the community.

Any strategy for common laws should work with an understanding of these three strands.

3. The position that law becomes relevant only at movements of dispute, and to enforce any kind of universal legal package can be counter productive, for it may wipe out customary practices which are better for women. Also, many provisions may exist legally which are in fact not operational. e.g. triple talaq and polygamy are seldom actually practised.

4. Questions about Reverse Optionality such as:

- a) the statue of children if one parents opts for personal law.
- b) whether the option for personal laws means the choosing of the whole personal law or can one choose parts of it (e.g. in marriage but not in succession, etc.)
- c) Does opting out of Personal Law mean opting out of religion. On this, the response was

that many of the actual procedural details need to be worked out since R.O is not a comprehensive legal package but an initial attempt to reconceptualise the ways in which the debate has been cast. On (a) it was held that we must distinguish between religious practice and personal law; by being born under secular laws one does not cease to be a Hindu, Muslim, Christian etc.

On 29th December presentations were made by All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA), Women's Research and Action Group (WRAG), Forum Against Oppression of Women (FAOW), Saheli and the Nikahnama group from Bombay.

**AIDWA** 'Equal Rights, Equal Laws' put forward the need for a two-pronged strategy.

1. Legislation in areas where no laws exist (e.g. domestic violence, matrimonial property etc.). Here there will be no overlap with Personal Laws, and so the right of women can be ensured without clashing with the community.

2. Support for initiative for Personal Law reforms: We have surrendered the arena of PL to fundamentalist forces. Further, we need to conduct an actual struggle within communities to mobilise forces of reform.

**WRAG** works with Muslim Personal Law. They presented the findings of a survey which they have been conducting all over the country. The study includes interviews of 15000 Muslim women as well as lawyers, judges, political and social activists and religious leaders. Preliminary results indicate that differences in the practices are very evident from one part of the country to another within the community and so too in the sources on which the practices rest. The group feels strongly that reforms must come from within the community and be based on the Muslim personal code and Muslim texts and customary practices. Women in the community are not willing to respond to changes that come from outside the community or seem to threaten the community identity. The focus will therefore be on smaller changes and more rights for women, even though they may not measure up to absolute gender justice.

**FAOW** from Bombay in their 'Vision of Gender Just Realities' stressed the need for reform in legislation alongside the imperative need for defining the contents of laws. The thumb rule guiding the formulation of the law has to ensure the rights of the individual especially those of marginalised sections. The areas of focus within this framework that were stressed:

1. Law alone is not enough, it would have to be accompanied by changes and modifications in the procedures to ensure implementation.

2. The demand for a system of social security benefits since conflict situation often leads to loss of other social and community support systems.

3. Responsibility of the State to impart legal education to women at all levels.

To broaden the concept of family to include homosexual relationships and people living together outside marriage and to define all such contractual relationships to protect the rights of women living within them.

An urgent need to start discussion the content of these laws and areas that can be brought under legislation to empower women, with the awareness that since social interactions are dynamic these laws will be open to change with time and the existing realities.

**Saheli** argued for equal rights for all women: this would not be an imposition but rather, rights that women have demanded over several decades. New legislations should be taken up issue by issue and need not be made in one sweep. They felt that debate must extend beyond personal laws to how the constitution through the 9th schedule was limiting inheritance rights for women in tribal and non-tribal groups. They felt that existing plurality of laws was creating a number of conflicts.

**Bombay Group: The Nikahnama group** from Bombay discussed the model Nikahnama they have drafted through which they have tried to put certain limitations on polygamy and improved women's rights to residence and *meher*. They thought that it would be better to work with the existing religious authorities such as *Ulemas* and persuade them to declare these changes as Islamic and put the onus on them to implement it.

The discussion raised several questions, some of which sought clarifications from the presenters, and some which disagreed with or critiqued the alternatives suggested. There was considerable discussion on the second day too, on reforms from within, since both WRAG and the Nikahnama group work on these lines. Finally, a broad consensus was worked out about the lines on which our future action should be based. Three broad areas on which it was agreed that we can work together:

1. We must support initiatives for reforms within Personal Law as well as work for ensuring acceptance of already formulated reforms which are held up. e.g. Christian Bill — and push for their implementation.
2. Work towards formulation of laws on areas where laws do not exist — identify these areas, what should be the content of these laws.
3. On a long-term basis, think of what could be the specific content of a comprehensive gender-just package of legislation. We need a clear idea of what a gender-just common code would look like, both
  - a) in order to move forward on the question of women's rights and
  - b) to counter any programme the BJP might put forward and we need to come together to elaborate the content of such a gender-just package, even if we hold differing views on whether it can be brought about all at once, or in stages.

## Conclusion

How does one assess a Conference? By the number of participants? By the quality of papers and discussions? By, whether a concrete vision of the future and strategies emerged? By how well it was organised?

Different people may have carried different impressions. This Conference had the largest attendance so far. It was also a tribute to Rajasthan Women's collective endeavour. The participation of young members was a good sign. Over the years, though individual women political leaders came, parties ceased to attend the IAWS Conference. Ironically at precisely the time when women studies during the last decade has been actively engaged in deliberating on major political and economic issues confronting the country, there is a greater schism between organised political groups and women's groups. Periodically some of them do come together as in the discussions prior to Beijing or on the National Policy for Women, but their presence at IAWS Conference after 1983 has been thinning with the exception of a few. The women's movement in this country is facing a challenge in the wake of three major forces – the rise of virulent communalism, the emergence of separatist regional groups and the new policy of neoliberalism and integration with the global economy. Together they have combined to side-line women's rights, women's issues. Grassroot women's organisations have fought on specific local issues but the link between urban women's groups and the former is yet to be forged to provide a common forum. More than any other issue, the problem of the majority of women for basic survival in the wake of the devastation of the environment have taken precedence over every other issue. Yet the market-orientation lobby is very strong.

Today, as one speaker aptly put it, we can no longer speak of all women as if they were all one. As the four day deliberations emphasised, our gains of the past will be fast eroded if we do not revitalise ourselves for a fresh and renewed struggle on myriad fronts. Our confidence in the State has been badly shaken. We have to rethink our strategies. This seemed to be the main message echoed in every session.

On the positive side, women's movements and women's studies have grown in their grasp of realities and in their understanding of the sheer complexity of issues. Women's creativity has found so many avenues for expression and even if struggles have not been always ending in victory, that there are stories of resistance from every corner of this country speak for the resilience of women's spirit.

It was a Conference that had everything — serious discussions, festivities and solidarity. For its organisational success, we all owe a deep debt of gratitude to all the women and men involved in it — The President of IAWS, The General Secretary, The EC members, the theme coordinators, the Jaipur women's groups, local hospitality, the delegates, the folk artists and crafts persons, sections of the media and donor agencies. We missed though some of the stalwarts who could not come because of health reasons.

## COUNT DOWN TO TOGETHERNESS

### ORGANIZING THE SEVENTH NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON WOMEN'S STUDIES

#### Report and Reflections by the Jaipur Group

— Kavita Srivastava

A diverse number of women's groups and social organizations in Jaipur organized the seventh national conference of the Indian Association of Women's Studies. It was a microcosm of feminist organizing and women's collective action on a global plane.

Interestingly the " Search for Feminist visions, Alternative paradigms and practices", as was the conference theme, took place on a terrain which consisted of an acceptance of plurality built around a collective order oriented towards action. Meaning, a new way of organizing was worked out which accepted multiple identities along with individual initiative and choice. This organizing established many other values too.

The hierarchy that puts intellectual work over physical work was broken. The fifty odd women who formed the core group of organizers willingly gave their time, labour and invested personal resources of telephone and petrol to carry out many an invisible task that formed a part of the organization. No meaningful knowledge generation can happen by negating the conditions that help you generate it. Thus it was a political choice of playing the role of an organizer rather than just being involved in an intellectual activity. Most of the organizers hardly got an opportunity to sit in the discussions held during the conference leave alone read papers in it. But this was acceptable to them.

It helped in experimenting with collective leadership and a horizontal structure of task allocation. All tasks of organizing were considered of equal importance and value and it was left to the particular task coordinator to go about it as she wanted. What was collectively worked upon were a set of guide lines which helped each task coordinator to develop her work within it. A coordinating team of eight persons was put together to help build the work of various teams and to provide a common platform so that each worker would know their work as a part of the whole. That the majority of the organizers were from outside the structures of formal academia and that the venue of the conference was not the university (for the first time) resulted in acknowledging the fact that the arena of knowledge generation was equally if not by and large, outside these structures. This needed to be affirmed.

It helped **deconstruct** the age old stereotype which says that bringing four women together under the same roof would destroy the house before they depart. In contrast, bring four men together and they will only get up after the house is built. It also showed that women have the knowledge, skill and efficiency in carrying out roles strictly considered belonging to the male domain. Like putting together the infrastructure of food, housing, transport and work space which formed the basis of a successful interaction in the conference.



The job of collectively organizing the conference was no mean task. It took more than nine months to shape ourselves as a collective which excluded some. We are only too willing to reflect on our decisions and learn as we wish to co-exist inspite of dissent and diversities. Even though some exclusions are inevitable which also happened in our case yet at a deeper level of feminist values human relationships are to be preserved. A collective democratic order has to be produced within the movement. Thus this note is an attempt to go beyond the documentation of the nitty gritty.

### **Putting the Coordinating Group together: Upholding the feminist principles of organizing.**

The take off was not smooth at all. We began our preparations with a difference between members of the coordinating group turning into a confrontation.

Kamla Bhasin asked Sharada Jain (who had the experience of planning an earlier conference) to call a meeting of some of the Jaipur women active in women studies way back in April '95. Seven of us belonging to both the University system and outside it met and took the decision to organize the conference. What was needed was the permission of the vice-chancellor to hold the conference in the University. After all it was the latter that had the biggest infrastructure in the city and it also had a centre for women's studies which could become the nodal agency within the university to steer the conference. The permission was granted and the preparation began. However, in less than a month's time it also became clear that the University system could not take an alternative praxis.

The nature of the leadership and the structure of the conference organizing group that the University system demanded was against the values of participation and collective decision making. The choice for some of us was that either we take a stand within the University and organize it differently or we all move out of the system and organize it outside. However, both these choices were not acceptable to two of us from within the University. The conflict further got the overtones of a non-university younger member of the organizing committee being disrespectful of the senior members working in the University. A combinations of these factors resulted in the two persons from the University group walking out of the preparations.

Initially attempts were made to apologize to, dialogue with the persons who walked out and convince them of the alternative way of organizing the conference. An attempt was also made to explain to them that the hiatus between those belonging to the University and the outsider was artificial. However, the dialogue could not be restored and the two who excluded themselves remained silent dissenters to the conference. An attempt at making an open statement on the issue only proved counter productive.

The initial suggestion of organizing the conference outside the University now became the only option. It now meant hiring a venue on market rates. Since preparations of lodging had to be made for over five hundred people, it meant that the participants would be staying all over the city. This shattering start gave doubts to some of us of the possibility of organizing the conference at all. But some others were convinced that the conference could be organized

smoothly and the above stated doubts would cease the moment we would mentally prepare ourselves for the task.

### **Who would do the actual task of organizing.**

By July we had fixed the venue, a boys school. We located and booked the eleven places of stay, where the out station participants would be housed and established the conference office in Sandhan, one of the NGOs actively associated with the conference. Another NGO, RVHA provided us with a pivotal person to run the office. This initial work had been done by the coordinating group which consisted of eight (three university and five non university) people now. To carry out the work efficiently, a core group of three persons from these eight was constituted.

But it was clear that organizing the conference consisted of a variety of jobs and that the eight of us couldn't shoulder them. Would members from other organizations including the Universities, Colleges and NGOs help us? In the month of August an initial contact with more than eighty people, mostly women was made and about fifty people turned up for the first planning meeting of the conference. The meeting spelt out thirty critical tasks which had to be handled. One coordinator and a committee of atleast two other persons was appointed by consensus for every task. Each committee was asked to conduct its independent meetings and visualize the work that was entailed.

The thirty tasks were grouped under nine subcommittees and each member of the eight member Conference Coordinating Committee was asked to follow up the work of one sub-committee. The nine sub-committees were

Publications, Media and Translations

Food and Food Stalls.

Lodging, Transport, Reception

Exhibitions( art and craft), Cultural and Film Shows

Registration, Creche and Conference Bags

Inauguration and Sessions

Sight Seeing, audio visual, Medical Aid, Duplication of papers

College Contact Programme

Venue, Office, Accounts

Individual task committees, sub-committees and the total organizing group met as and when required and worked out details and drew up budgets. Close to conference days the Jaipur group was very lucky to have Dr. Lucy Jacob ex-General Secretary of the IAWS and a resident of Jaipur till 1991 who came from Cochin to especially streamline the preparations. The complete trust of the IAWS Executive Committee and constant support from the Delhi office of the IAWS was yet another factor that brought about the success of the organizing.

The throwing open of the forum to a wide group resulted in the participation of more

than thirty five groups in organizing the conference. This was no small achievement. It established that in Rajasthan there was a solidarity between organizations on common issues.

### **Widening the conference base in Jaipur and Rajasthan: Involving the Colleges, Schools and NGOs**

From the beginning it was clear that the objective of organizing the conference was not merely to provide the space and facilities for a national group to come together and interact. The conference was also meant to be an opportunity to spread the women's studies movement in the city of Jaipur and in Rajasthan.

Rajasthan University Women's Association through its network in colleges became the medium to enter colleges and hostels in order to initiate interaction with the students and the faculty. A team consisting of representatives from all groups in Jaipur got involved in this activity. Gerda, Jasbir, Sita, Pritam, Renuka, Mamta, Rashmi, Anju, Ranju and many others went to most of the women's colleges including degree and professional colleges.

With the help of pamphlets, booklets, seminars, discussions and film shows we interacted with the students and teachers. A pamphlet in Hindi, introducing women's studies and the theme of the seventh national conference, and a booklet on " Mahila Adhyayan kya Hai" (what is women's studies) were prepared by the publications committee for the contact programme in Jaipur and the State. Creative activities were also planned. Students were asked to send their entries for a poster and/ or a poem on the theme the "new woman". This did evoke some amount of enthusiasm among students as well as resulted in bringing out an IAWS publication of poems by women poets, entitled " Karuna aiye magar is tarha nahin ". This consisted of poems by some well known and some not known women poets at the national level and the unknown poets from Jaipur. On the suggestion of the media committee an all women Kavi Sammelan was also organized by the local Jaipur doordarshan for their viewers.

The committee on films organized shows in colleges and hostels and in one of the theatre's of the city. K. P. Sasi's Ilayum Mullum, an award winning Malayalam film and Deepa Dhanraj's "Girija" were two films liked most by the Jaipur audience.

The contact programme spread outside Jaipur too. All Colleges in Rajasthan that have women's studies were contacted through the Directorate of College Education. The literature brought out in Hindi on women's studies and the conference was sent to them. A college in Udaipur especially organized a meeting prior to the conference.

The process of organizing the Rajasthan State Panel, under the leadership of Ms. Aruna Roy for the conference on the theme of "our coming together and our differences" became the activity to network with all NGO's that are working with women as well as with professional like lawyers, government officers, and activists from trade unions and political parties.

This contact programme and networking resulted in an increase of membership of the

IAWS and registrations for the conference. Firstly all the NGOs in Rajasthan working with women came to the conference. It also helped us recruit one hundred and fifty student and youth volunteers (mainly from Jaipur) who worked in the various teams to operationalize each task of the conference. Kanodia Girls college and Satya Sai College for Women stood out in the manner in which they let their students participate in the conference. Thanks to the two male lecturers from the University who were part of the organizing group, we had male students as volunteers from some of the men's colleges.

Although fund raising was not the responsibility of the Jaipur organizing group, Gerda and Jasbir raised twenty six thousand rupees locally, in order to support the registration of the volunteers and contribute to the additional expense of hiring the ten buses that brought the participants to the venue every day.

### **A celebration of resilience and mutual cooperation**

Saint Xavier's School looked festive and cheerful with colourful banners and flags with messages of welcome and about the conference and the IAWS hanging from every bush, tree and pillar in the pathway. Posters on the conference were pasted on the walls of all the buildings. Rekha and her team of art college students along with Kamla worked round the clock to give this festive look and feeling.

Father Augustine the Principal of the School had been generous and had handed over the entire school to us. Yashodha Saxena, Lucy Jacob and some others planned the physical lay out of the conference. The Class Rooms, the corridors, the Staff room all had different labels on them. Class Room IX (A) had become the Local Organizers room, the Junior school had been taken over by the craft mela, the Staff room was the registration room, the meeting room had become the Press room.....The School had a completely changed look.

Sarojini and her team from the English department and the Janwadi Mahila Samiti planned the system of registration which helped every participant register, obtain the IAWS membership and the conference bag in ten minutes of their arrival at the registration counter. Ginny from Udaipur selected the bag and organized the note books. More than eight hundred conference bags were bought by the IAWS from the Women's Rehabilitation Group.

Ajay had carried out the tedious task of organizing the list of the five hundred participants who registered in advance in alphabetical order. This made the task easy for those managing the registration counters. There was a separate counter for those registering afresh and for foreign participants. And true to their word the counter which started working from the 26th afternoon when batches of participants arrived by bus and train, had by the morning of the 27th, seven hundred participants collect their bags. The counter closed to reopen only after the inaugural session that morning.

At about half past eight on the morning of the twenty seventh one could hear the playing of the typical Rajasthani drum beats and that of the horn from the open space in front of the

mess. The communication team from SWRC Tilonia consisting of Bhurji, Babulalji and others had reached and were announcing the beginning of the conference. Rukma Bai Manganiyar from Barmer with other women from her community were singing melodius maands. The participants gathered around them joining in the music and the dance. And gradually in the form of a procession led by the communication team of Tilonia the participants reach the main building of the school and entered the auditorium through the school's majestic entrance.

The stage of the main auditorium of Saint Xavier's school was aglow with the flames of diyas lit by the several hundred participants as they walked into the hall. Beautiful rajasthani fabric was liberally used to add to the aesthetics of the hall and the stage. The inauguration had a very large turn out of local and outside participants and Kanchan, Shail, Reema, Varhsa and others who organized the inaugural plenary had to make quick alternative arrangements of seating in the ante room and in the verandah outside the auditorium.

What could be more befitting for a women's conference in the land of Rajasthan than to begin with the lyrics of Meera which was sung in a melodious voice by Vidya. The land of Meera has had through the ages upto recent times many women who stood for dignity and justice, the heritage coming down to pioneering women of modern Rajasthan. The two stalwarts of Rajasthan, Hemalata Prabhu and Laxmi Kumari Chundawat, were honoured in remembrance of the work done by the pioneers.

For over four months Renuka and Rashmi had been running around to the eleven hostels where the over five hundred participants were to stay. A range of tasks had to be organized by them like negotiating space, bargaining rates, looking into the aspects of cleanliness of rooms and bed linen, checking flushes in toilets, organizing hot water for bathing, providing morning tea for the participants, the list seemed endless. Their task seemed most unwieldy. They worked out a Statewide system of putting up participants. One hostel was kept for the foreign participants only. The lodging group needed the maximum number of volunteers as their work was round the clock and spread put. The volunteers worked in three shifts of eight hours each. In every hostel a coordinator was appointed by the organizers. In the cold winter Renuka and Rashmi would not leave for home before midnight and begin taking the rounds of the hostels before day break, supervising arrangements and being available for any crisis.

Dr. Yadav and Dr. Mathur with over twenty men student volunteers took on the task of organizing transport. Since all the meals were being collectively eaten at the venue, their job was to see that the participants got to the conference venue every morning before breakfast and left for their hostels after dinner. Tagore Public School gave the conference ten buses on a discount. This was one of the few task committees organized by men. At the end of the conference convinced of the need for women's studies and impressed by the kinds of questions that were raised, both these men they became members of the IAWS.

Komal with her BGVS group took care of the enquiry and information counter that started very early and only shut after all the participants left. To inform participants of the lay out of the venue, they put up colourful maps and sign boards all over the premises. The

volunteers who were mostly students and came from small towns of Rajasthan, left with a heady feeling of being part of a larger women's mobilization in the State.

The Jaipur organizing group had decided to recognize the presence of children and decided to provide support to the mothers during the conference. More than twenty seven children of different ages registered for the creche. The creche started to run from the twenty sixth onwards. Sarla Grover with support from Shishu Needh ( creche run by RUWA )and the Home Science Department of the University took the responsibility of indoor and outdoor activities. Thus the children had their own space everyday from eight in the morning to six in the evening.

Leena Parmar counting food coupons became an important symbol of the conference. She and a team of friends from the University Adult Education department did the job of feeding the participants four times a day. They even took care to provide hot water for washing hands after dinner in the cold wintery night and put up four large Angethis (fire p[laces) around which the participants sat to have their dinner, sing and dance. On the last day of the conference they provided packed food to the participants for their journey homeward. Lalaji and his team cooked the sumptuous food provided at the conference. Ajit Kumarji organized the system of food coupons. After several discussions the team worked out the decisions on who would be entitled to complimentary coupons and how would those be distributed. On the evening of the last day of the conference, the entire assembly of the participants gave a big hand to the organizers along with a special vote of thanks to Leena who missed the complete conference as she was looking after people's stomachs.

The conference organizing committee decided not to distribute papers of the conference free, but provide photocopies of the papers on payment. Sawaiji and Reena with their team of volunteers, mostly teachers had the responsibility of photocopying papers and providing them to the participants. The Saint Xavier's school authorities provided their photocopying machine. Requisition forms were designed by this team and given to the participants. The work load on this team built up by the third day. By then the participants had made up their minds about the papers they wanted photocopied. Photocopying had to be arranged from outside too. On the last two days, volunteers of this team were seen commuting on their vehicles between the photocopying shop and the venue, trying to efficiently meet the demand put to them.

Academic interactions in the conference were planned through nine workshops and four plenaries. However, as it happens in every conference, several informal workshops and one more plenary were organized spontaneously. The job of organizing the space, arranging the rooms, providing audio visual equipment, providing support to each workshop and plenary coordinator and linking up with the duplication committee was taken up a group of volunteers who were called workshop associates. This work was jointly coordinated by Sharada Jain and Asha Sharma and had the faculty of Sandhan and students of Satya Sai College as volunteers. Neat labels displaying the theme of the workshop and the room numbers hung outside the nine rooms. The lay out of every room was organized according to the needs of how the coordinator had planned the interactions.

Since the Conference was being organized in Jaipur it had been communicated to the EC in October '95 that Hindi language should also become an official language of the conference. The EC took the decision that summary translations in Hindi would be provided of the proceedings of the plenaries. However, it was left to the discretion of the workshop coordinators to organize this facility. The Jaipur organizing group was asked to organize the translators. Pratibha Jain, Simantini Raghav and Anita Rampal did a remarkable job of impromptu translations.

Anju, Mamta, Ranjana and Ramanathan, with two typists and messengers, kept the press informed of the happenings in the conference. Five press conferences were organized between the 26th and 31st of December and every day press briefs in English and Hindi were prepared and distributed to the press and electronic media persons. This team also organized interviews of some of the participants on significant issues with media persons. The work of the media committee started many months prior to the conference. Their role was to build a public opinion through the media. Several programmes around the conference were recorded and broadcasted by the Jaipur AIR and also televised through the local Doordarshan. Ajanta made a special effort to bring the camera team out of the studio to where the event was happening. Several articles were written for and carried by newspapers. Due to the hard work of this committee the conference did not remain a local phenomena, instead the debates of the movement got represented through the local, regional and metro press, and the electronic media.

The SMS hospital had promised to provide us with the a team of nurses and a Doctor at the conference venue. However, due to an administrative formality not being completed by us, at the last minute our request was turned down. Pritam, a volunteer and, a medical doctor, quickly came to our rescue and offered to run the first aid centre. But the next day she had to leave due to an emergency. Alka Rao, another medical doctor stepped in next. She hung her telephone number outside the first aid room and we had a doctor who was available for twenty four hours in case of need.

Support came from every quarter and the crises were solved creatively by people. The most frequently announced names from the announcement booth were that of Thomas and Pillai of Saint Xavier's School and Ajay of the organizing committee. All these people worked round the clock. If cleaners were not available, if water was in short supply, if there was a breakdown of electricity, if the phone was not working.... they never said no for any of the tasks that they were asked to intervene. Ajay, a few student volunteers, and one member of the organizing committee moved in with their belongings and decided to stay on at Saint Xavier's and run the twenty four hour office at the venue.

One evening there was a serious crisis of water. The pump failed to pull water upto the fourth floor. How would the water be thrown up?. While Thomas and Pillai were trying their best to operate the pump, Nirja had a brilliant idea. She called the fire brigade office and explained the seriousness of the situation. They were convinced and in fifteen minutes fire engine arrived and in no time the water was filled up in the tanks on the fourth floor.

The conference primarily provided a forum for participation for those interested in debate, reflection, knowledge generation and accessing new kinds of information. However, a parallel interaction of the expressions of women artisans, women artists, women folk performers and women centered publications was also planned during the conference. The language and space for interaction was obviously different. Thus the conference provided a marketing space for the products of the women artisans, a stage for the folk performers of Rajasthan, a gallery for the women artists and an exhibition space for the publications. The period of break during the conference consisted of participants rushing to either buy a book or a dupatta or hear a folk singer. All these activities were carried out with the Institutional support of another group. This was an opportunity to link the conference with the Jaipur public who also found their way to the conference.

Kumkum, Parul, Priyanjali and other friends of Vihan put all their energies and organized a craft mela of products produced by women's groups and NGOs. More than fifty rural based artisan groups from the states of Rajasthan, Gujarat, Haryana, Manipur and Delhi arrived with their products. The artisans were both NGO based and independent like those belonging to DWCRA. The premises of the craft mela was the Junior School Building of Saint Xavier's School. The craft mela was a big attraction for the conference participants. A great deal of effort went into advertising and giving publicity to the mela. Jaipur public also responded in good numbers although, being the end of the month, it was not considered the best time to attract buyers. On the first day itself the sales were worth over a lakh of rupees. The total sale over the four days went upto rupees three lakhs. Artisans also got a good feed back on the kind of product the buyer was seeking.

To provide tea and snacks between meals, food and tea stalls were put up by the residents of Shakti Stambh ( short stay home run by RUWA ) and the Women's Rehabilitation Group. One farmer ran for a couple of days a salad stall of organically grown vegetables.

The Other India Book store, specialists in bringing books of third world country publishers, with the assistance of the Rajasthan Mahila Sangathan, organized the Information mela at the conference. Srilatha, Lata and other members of the Sangathan spent over a month contacting publishers, receiving consignments and sticking price labels on books. More than ten thousand books from a variety of Indian and Third world publishers were on sale at the exhibition. The book exhibition was a treat for scholars and activists. For Jaipur the conference provided the first women centered book exhibition. The exhibition also attracted local publishers, and many organizations that participated in the conference came with their books, cassettes, posters and other materials for sale.

Nirja, Ms. Chandramani, Rekha, Nirmala Vashishitha and Sangeeta planned the exhibition of paintings, sculpture and graphics of Indian women artists during the period of the conference. The Jawahar Kala Kendra, the prestigious art and culture centre of Jaipur joined the IAWS to organize this exhibition. A great deal of effort went into bringing in the works of artists from all over the country. For the first time works of rural artists were also displayed. A brochure giving the details of the exhibits and the artists was also produced on this occasion. For



the art connoisseurs in Jaipur, this was the first such exhibition of women artists. Buses from the conference to the JKK were made available for the art lovers to go and see the paintings.

Rashmi Priyadarshini of the West Zone Cultural Centre, Udaipur responded to the IAWS call and paid for seven groups of folk artists to come to the conference. Some of the groups came on the first day itself. Apart from the formal performance on the day of the cultural evening, it was a normal sight to see during breakfast, lunch and evening breaks every day, the conference participants gather around the artists and watch them perform. The first day especially was characterized by different types of singing and music. It has only been in the last ten years that women singers from the Manganiyar community in Western Rajasthan have started performing on stage. Rukma Bai is one of the leading Manganiyar women singers. She came with three others. Bhavai nritya, till recently a preserve of males, has now women performers. Kusum, a college student from Jodhpur, who came as part of the cultural troupe to the conference, has received recognition for her excellence in this dance form. Bina Kak planned the cultural programme on the 27th. The artists performed to a packed hall that evening. The participants were amazed by the energy and skills of the women performers.

Management of accounts and finances are generally considered the domain of men. However, this aspect was also managed by us during the conference and we maintained complete transparency in the system of accounts. Every penny spent was accounted for. Gerda and Kavita with the help of Ajay, Jain Sahab, and later Rajesh, from Delhi, worked on the accounts and five days after the completion of the conference the accounts were despatched to Delhi.

### Conclusion

Present times are faced with the phenomena of increasing fragmentation of society. Sure enough this is reflected in every formal and informal institution in society and exists in the women's movement too. In this context the spectacle of so many women coming, sharing and caring together for a common goal of creating a world informed by togetherness and justice, not only for women but for all, was, we thought worth putting on record.

The spirited and energetic conference is over. We hope that the energy, the understanding and the new relationships that have taken shape are carried further into our individual organizations and our future work. After all, the conference was only one event and the challenge of remaking society remains before us as always.

**" Sakhiya karo re ekta ro kaam, kaam maro kun karsi  
Sakhiya padayo re mokho kaam, kaam oppan mil karsi !"**

Friend we must work together, otherwise how will our work finish. Friend an enormous amount of work awaits us, let us work together.

( excerpt from a song made in the Padampura Sathin training 1985 )