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EDITOR'S DESK

When we met as the new editorial committee of the newsletter, we were confronted with the impressive fact that this publication reaches out to over 1200 IAWS members. Consequently, our chief concern was to make it more useful to all concerned with women's issues. With this in mind we have introduced a new section – letters to the editor – in the hope of facilitating networking and dialogue on research, campaigns, and needs of the movement.

In the next two years the IAWS wishes to put in its best efforts to integrate activist struggles and academic perspectives, because a joint effort is necessary for strengthening the women's movement and influencing policy decisions, especially with the 9th Plan coming up. In this case the letters page could prove to be extremely valuable if activists and academics used it to reach out to each other. Grassroots activists could involve academics in areas which need their attention for policy intervention, and share their experiences and analyses of local conditions with the latter. And academics could request activists to help them by providing local data and insights to improve the quality and impact of research.

We want you to see this as **your** newsletter (in other words we demand greater participation!). It will be obvious to you that West Bengal dominates this issue. This is because very few people sent us material for publication, so we almost had to corner local folks physically to send in reports of workshops and other happenings! Please help to bring in a wider perspective. Send in:

- **analytical reports** (max. 750 words) of seminars, workshops, campaigns and other events, highlighting issues that need to be tackled at local and national levels, and your insights on how best to do this;
- **brief announcements** regarding upcoming events – seminars, workshops, campaigns, new feminist ventures such as publishing houses and bookshops, etc. at the national and international level.
- **creative writing** – we can print only short pieces like poems, songs etc. for reasons of space.
- **letters** (of not more than 300 words each). In consideration of space restrictions it will be necessary to make a selection, but we will try to accommodate as many as possible.
- **brief critical, but constructive, reviews** (max. 700 words), of significant books or research in women's studies. We could consider starting a review column.

Send all newsletter material to: **Kavita Panjabi, 67B Ballygunj Circular Road, Calcutta 700 019.**

A lot of hard work and learning went into the making of this issue, and we would like to thank Aditi Chowdhury for all her help and for making it an enjoyable experience.

We hope you will stay with us all the way in making this newsletter an effective agent of the women's movement in India. The picture *Penpush* is as much a comment on the effort we've put into our first newsletter, as it is a message to you – start pushing you pens!

Editor

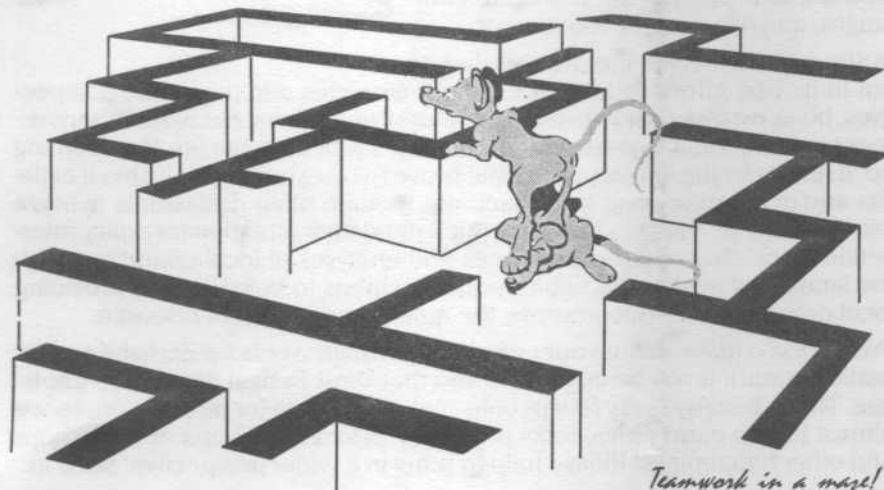


**A NOTE FROM THE GENERAL SECRETARY ON THE PROPOSED ACTIVITIES
OF THE IAWS DURING THE NEXT TWO YEARS**

Dear Friends

Greetings and welcome from the new IAWS EC and office bearers!

The new EC got elected this May, but as many of us were not well-prepared to take up our new assignments, it took us some time to take over from the last EC and sit together to chalk out our priorities for the next two years. When we met at the end of August, all the EC members were quite excited about their new responsibilities and came up with many ideas which, we hope, will enable all members in the different regions to get involved in IAWS activities, and in turn contribute to the advancement of Women's Studies perspectives in their respective areas of concern.



Teamwork in a maze!

Let me first announce that the office has shifted to Mumbai for the next two years. Please note the new address that appears on the first page. I am working at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, and a small office has been provided there, courtesy my colleagues in my department. I have got a coordinator, Shalini Mahajan, who will be helping me out with all the correspondence and administrative duties. Fortunately, the treasurer, Rohini Gawankar, also belongs to Mumbai, and hence responding to your queries about membership dues, receipts, etc. should be quicker than earlier. However, I will plead for some time to systematise the membership list, which requires proper duration to be listed against the member.

When we met in August and tried to orient ourselves by reviewing the activities the last EC had performed, we became convinced that the last general secretary, Kamla Bhasin, and her entire EC team had been very active. It could be judged in terms of the great successes they achieved vis-à-vis several pre-conference workshops and the reports of the same, published within no time, ready for dissemination at the time of the conference. To add to

this is the fact that the conference at Jaipur was a joyous meet marked by a large turnout of grassroots women's organisations along with the women's groups and academics. The lessons we learned from this heritage were that we need to have many regional events before we decide on the conference theme. Also, we felt that these regional events will help to initiate some small research programmes, mainly collecting data, recording perceptions of women, and documentation of their experiences. These can then contribute to the conference in the sub-theme forums.

The overarching theme we have in mind can be summed up as **Survival and Sovereignty**. The present political and economic environment is hastening the pace of a 'development' determined by market forces which, in turn, are

conditioned by policies encouraging globalisation. This has posed the dilemma of how to survive in this period of crisis when everything from environment to culture is endangered. It also raises the question of how to assert the sovereignty of the local ecosystems over natural resources which form the material base for the poor and marginalised, and which are under threat from commercial interests ready to produce for the markets. Gabriele Dietrich has elaborated the theme elsewhere in this newsletter to present to you the nature of our discussions. We believe that whatever specific themes we may choose to work upon during this period, they should extend their boundaries to explore ramifications of the ethos described under the theme of **Survival and Sovereignty**.

The main activity before the biannual conference will thus focus on organising regional workshops, for which the EC members will be expected to take the lead, contact the concerned persons in the region, and organise the workshops together before March 1997. The IAWS will provide the seed money to get the event going, and the additional amount may be raised by sending in proposals to various national and international funding organisations. The IAWS CAN help with the follow-up, hence a copy of the proposals should be sent to the Mumbai office.

In the process of identifying the probable themes for the regions we exchanged news about ongoing activities in women's studies, and a few issues were noted:

- A need was felt for the compilation of women's studies material related to different topics in a more accessible form, say in the form of readers. It was felt that the IAWS should take the lead in inviting the convener

WELCOME ADDRESS

to prepare such books on different themes which could be translated later in the regional languages.

- The gender profile of each state, preferably written in the format of a gender development index, was an important project and could be taken up by the women's studies centres or by groups of women collaborating on this project. There could be workshops to help towards the concretisation of the format and for dividing the responsibilities. The Union Ministry of Women and Child Development has already expressed interest in supporting such projects, and those interested can write a proposal and directly approach the department. One copy can be sent to the IAWS to follow up.
- Food security is another area where not much information is available, particularly in the light of market-driven development encouraged by the government in the realm of agriculture during the last six years of the structural adjustment programme. The shifting nature of land-use patterns and its impact on women's work, as well as the purchasing power and availability of food locally can be the focus for some workshops.
- The assessment of the impact of political participation at the level of local self-government is another theme which some people felt like concentrating on.
- The communalisation of politics and caste-based politics, their effect on women, and this in the context of the NEP is also an important issue which needs discussion.
- The EC also discussed the importance of the politics of state and family, and the struggle for gender-just laws.

It was suggested that the IAWS could work with the WS centres, or with interested experts/researchers towards the collection of data on customary practices and tribal laws and their effects on women. This is an area where not much information exists, and which could be taken up in the next two years.

There are a few copies of the reports of the pre-conference workshops available for sale; so is the conference report prepared by Maitreyi Krishnaraj which gives an excellent feel of the emerging interests in the field of environment on one hand, and the family and sexuality on the other. All these reports are available from the Mumbai office. The list is printed elsewhere in the newsletter. The new brochure is ready with the application form attached and can be sent to you on request.

You are urged to take up the drive for new membership. The receipts will be dispatched from Mumbai once the money is received towards membership. Do not forget to send the membership form with the correct address, as this facilitates the dispatch of receipts. The newsletter, which will keep the members informed of various ongoing activities of the IAWS, and others under the rubric of women's studies, comes free with the membership.

Once again, thank you very much for your support and enthusiasm expressed through the many letters of congratulation I received. I would like to appeal to you to continue this interest — we must work together towards strengthening the women's studies perspective. You will agree with me that the IAWS does provide a good forum for this dialogue.

Chhaya Datar

PUBLICATIONS FOR SALE



- 📖 **Looking Forward, Looking Back: In Search of Feminist Visions, Alternative Paradigms and Practices:** A report on the 7th National Conference of Women's Studies, Dec. 27-30, 1995, Jaipur; General Editor: *Maitreyi Krishnaraj*; IAWS 1996. **Rs 100**
- 📖 **A Source Book: In Search of Feminist Visions, Alternative Paradigms and Practices;** Compiled by *Lakshmi Menon*; IAWS & Akshara, 1995. **Rs 30**
- 📖 **The New Economic Policy and Women:** A collection of background papers to the 6th National Conference of Women's Studies, 1993; IAWS, 1993. **Rs 100**
- 📖 **Remaking Society for Women: Visions — Past and Present:** Background volume for the 7th Conference; Compiled and introduced by *Maitreyi Krishnaraj*; IAWS, 1995. **Rs 25**
- 📖 **The State and the Women's Movement in India:** A report of the workshop held in Delhi, Oct. 19-21, 1994; IAWS, 1995. **Rs 10**
- 📖 **Re-examining the Indian Family:** A report of the workshop held in Calcutta on July 7-9, 1995; *Nirmala Banerjee & Jashodhara Bagchi*; IAWS, 1995. **Rs 10**
- 📖 **Feminist Approaches to Economic Theory:** A report of the workshop held at Bangalore on August 5-6, 1995; *Maitreyi Krishnaraj*; IAWS, 1995. **Rs 10**
- 📖 **Women, Ecology and Economic Globalization: Searching for an Alternative Vision:** 7th National Conference Keynote Presentation; *Vandana Shiva*; IAWS, 1995. **Rs 10**
- 📖 **Karuna Aaye Magar Is Tarah Nahin: Aaj Ki Mahila Kavita;** Edited by *Anju Daddha Mishra*; IAWS, 1995. **Rs 10**
- 📖 **Mahila Adhyayan Kya Hai?** IAWS, 1995. **Rs 10**
- 📖 **6th National Conference Papers;** 8 vols; IAWS, 1994. **Rs 400** for 8 vols

Note: Prices listed indicate suggested contribution

Survival and Sovereignty

Regional Workshops 1996-97

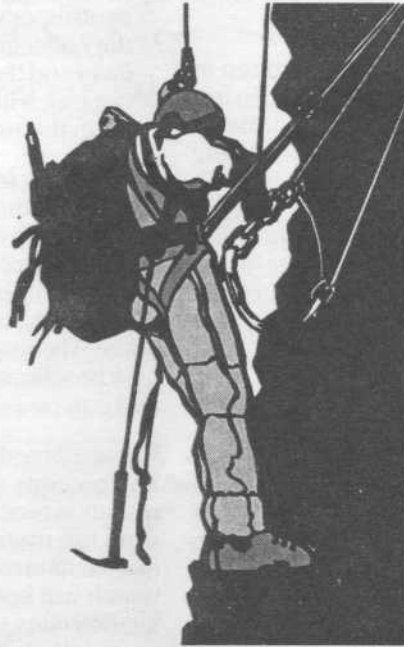
During the last EC meeting of the IAWS on August 24-25, we decided to have a series of regional workshops which would help to build the IAWS further and develop links between academic pursuits and activist endeavours.

As an overarching title to work out a perspective we chose **Survival and Sovereignty**. We wish to place the work of the IAWS in the overall context of the impact of globalisation, both economic and cultural, and the general crisis of democracy, which both our nation and many other countries find themselves in at present. When we tried to characterise the conditions in greater detail, we came up with the following points:

- Women are impacted by the entrance of multinational corporations and the widening gap between the rich and poor in our country. Export orientation jeopardises food security. Loss of land and increasing depletion of water resources contribute to migration, the congestion of cities, and the worsening work conditions in the growing unorganised sector.
- People's control over resources is a crucial demand in this situation, but with the crisis of democracy deepening, the opportunity of panchayat elections leaves wide open the social question. If women and Dalits are to participate in the decision-making of the *gram sabha*, we need vigorous struggles for the right to life, livelihood and social transformation.
- The trend towards communalism and fundamentalism, which bulldozes women into religious and caste identities, must be seen together with economic and cultural globalisation. Often this trend appears to be a resistance to globalisation as it harps on cultural identities. However, where communalists have come to power, they have been in the forefront of the New Economic Policy (NEP) and retracked completely on any critical stand they might have taken earlier, as the Enron issue in Maharashtra shows.

Thus communalism and fundamentalism are not forms of resistance to the loss of economic and cultural sovereignty as they appear to be, but are instead forms of adjustment to the NEP, and substitutes for sovereignty. In the women's movement we have not fully succeeded in integrating the analysis of economic conditions with the struggle against communalism and fundamentalism. Integrating these perspectives will contribute a lot towards clarity and unified struggle.

- The increase of violence in women's lives needs to be looked into, specially when it happens under the



impact of economic hardship, social disintegration, increasing criminalisation of political life, commercialisation of women's bodies, and communal control over the same

- Detailed data and analyses regarding the effects of the changes in India's economic policy need to be gathered and disseminated for building up a meaningful critique of the 9th Plan proposals.

The NEP has brought in some major changes in economic outlook about which we still do not have sufficient information. Most data used in the report of the working group on women's development relates at the most to 1993. The newspapers sometimes publish official overall figures, but not detailed data categorised on the basis of sectors, regions and work conditions.

Several scholars have attempted to get round this difficulty and gauge the likely shape of the post-reforms economy on the basis of parallels drawn with other countries undergoing a similar policy package. But this exercise can be misleading as the actual policies adopted in India are still a greatly modified version of the standard set suggested by the Bretton Woods institutions for most developing countries.

For example, while India professes to have adopted a policy for an open, globalised economy, it continues to closely control its agricultural sector. On the other hand, many of the long-standing institutions of India have been — or are being — materially altered, as in the case of land tenure systems. Several of these factors probably combined to cause the sharp fall in the growth rate of foodgrain production last year, even though rainfall in that year had been normal, but we do not have enough data and analyses to confirm such hypotheses.

The Think Tanks have connections with macro-level changes while NGOs and activists are the ones in close touch with ground-level realities. The regional workshops could be used to establish links between these two groups so that concrete recommendations can be formulated. I suggest that we use some of the time in the regional workshops for collating reports of recent experiences and experiments taking place in different areas. The areas of interest in this case would be: work, employment and technology, food security, impact of changing landuse policies, and of women's induction in the panchayati raj.

The organisers could start by sending a preliminary note to the groups and persons they would want to invite to the workshops, asking them to prepare reports about their recent observations regarding women's issues on which policy interventions are necessary.

Gabriele Dietrich

Uniform Inequality?

The question of how the Uniform Civil Code will affect women and minorities still remains shrouded in dangerous ambiguity. The contents, and the very desirability of the UCC or other strategies for legal reform, were discussed at the four-day National Workshop on Drafting Gender-Just Laws, organised by the Human Rights Law Network, Lawyer's Collective, Forum Against the Oppression of Women and the Kashtkari Sanghatana in Mumbai from May 30 to June 2, 1996.



Attended by over 120 lawyers, activists and academics from all over the country, the workshop was boycotted by some women's groups on grounds that it was premature to discuss the *contents* of the laws; at present the women's movement should focus only on the *strategies* for achieving gender justice.

The majority present agreed that the arguments of both Hindu and Muslim fundamentalists, whether for or against the UCC, are limited to a framework of uniformity *between* communities. They ignore the crucial aspect of uniformity *within* each community — between men and women.

In addition to sessions on gender-just laws and violence against women, inheritance, custody and maintenance, tribal women's rights and lesbian rights, the workshop focussed on the critical question of the strategies through which secular and gender-just laws should be implemented. This debate in the women's movement has finally come to focus on three broad strategies.

One approach demands a secular and egalitarian UCC rather than one culled from the existing personal laws. To emphasise the issue of gender justice rather than that of uniformity, many within the movement prefer the term Egalitarian Civil Code. Devised independently of the personal laws, such a code would also address areas not currently under personal law like those of livelihood, and the effects of the Structural Adjustment Plan on women's employment, income, and work conditions.

The problem in implementing this would be that it could still be seen as too close to the idea of a UCC that impinges on the identity and rights of minority communities. For the minorities to accept it, far greater popular awareness would be needed of the distinction between the BJP idea of the UCC, and its concept in the women's movement. *What might be more acceptable is egalitarian principles that could govern the existing personal laws and be the final deciding factor.*

Another choice is that of reverse optionality under which all citizens would be born into a secular gender-just code, with the option of reverting to the personal laws later. The option has been suggested in this order as community pressures would make it difficult to change to the gender-just code later, were one to be born into personal laws.

The loophole in this case is that even if all citizens have a right to choose the personal law or revert to the

gender-just code at any point in life, and as often as desired, there is still no safeguard against the possibility of women being pressurised by their communities to opt for personal laws.

The reverse optionality stand is still an attempt to find realistic ways of dealing with the problem, circumventing apprehensions about the UCC. It does not deny a community its personal laws, but adds an alternative and provides a choice. Also, since the code would not be *imposed*, it would be more difficult for religious powers to oppose the move. Given the current nature of community politics, this

option lays the ground for a transitory phase.

The third stand is that of reforming existing personal laws from within the community. This is a position that would definitely safeguard the identity of each community, but that is precisely where the problem lies. For identity is not an ossified concept — it changes with the times. If we were to base community identities on laws derived from scriptures written centuries ago we would be trapped in a retrograde process. Genuine pluralism is not regression — it is dynamic and evolving.

Even if reformists within the community challenge the rights of religious heads to define laws, the adherence to religious texts, the source of personal laws, poses a problem. For, despite the leeway of interpretation, all such texts have been elaborated within a patriarchal framework that gender justice would be compelled to overthrow.

It is crucial not to confuse the identity of a community with the politics of religious laws. Challenging personal laws is not an attack on religion itself. Prominent Muslims signed a memorandum in 1986, opposing the new Muslim Women's Act and insisting on preserving the right of Muslim women to claim maintenance from former husbands. They challenged their personal law; yet they demanded justice as a group of committed Muslims deeply invested in their collective cultural identity. It is crucial to delink religious and cultural identity from the divisive politics of personal laws, for gender-just reform from within the community to be possible.

The issue of gender justice is simultaneously an issue of the secularisation of laws. A genuine secularism can flourish even within the framework of an identity based on religion — if its laws are governed by the principles of justice and consensus, rather than by personal laws.

Unfortunate legal precedents have deemed that personal laws are currently immune from judicial review even if they violate fundamental rights. In the early 50s it was decided in the Narasu Appa case that personal laws could not be challenged.

However, the right of the state to enact legislation on religious issues is no longer in doubt. Codification of Hindu laws in the early 50s and the banning of Sati after the immolation of Roop Kanwar in the 80s are testimonies to this. What may not be possible in court is possible in

Parliament. The future of genuine secularism and gender justice — at present virtually nonexistent in this 'secular democracy' of ours — lies in the hands of a conscientious and mature electorate.

Kavita Panjabi

In Defence of *Witches*

On May 25-26, 1996, an evocative conference was held in Jamshedpur, Bihar. It focussed on 'witches' or *dayin* as they are called in local parlance. That women still get stigmatised and killed as witches is the worst manifestation of the oppressive depths to which people can be dragged through social prejudice and self-centredness. Some of the incidents that manage to get printed in the dailies tell us about the range and variety of torture these so-called witches have to face. But to listen to these stories, or see them enacted by women who have actually faced such tortures, is a whole different experience.

The Free Legal Advice Committee of Jamshedpur had organised this conference at the Tata Tribal Cultural Institute with the help of the eastern zonal office of Oxfam. Participants included NGOs, government officials, sociologists, social researchers, and, significantly, many women who have already been earmarked witches and are living under the threat of torture and murder.

On the first day of the conference the past and present regional commissioners of Singhbhum, who are well-aware of this evil, were present. It was quite clear, in all that was said, that this practice of witch-hunting is nothing other than a process of utilising the oppressive hold of patriarchal values and blind prejudice to feather the nests of those with vested interests. Usually the young widows of the countryside get targeted, primarily to feed the avarice of some men who covet their bodies and property. Older women get stigmatised only when they put up a resistance against those with vested interests who try to appropriate the women's property.

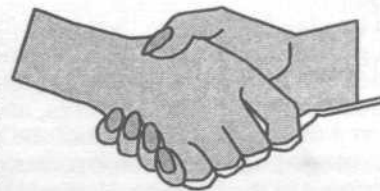
There was a lot of discussion on how to eradicate this social disease. There were talks about the viability of establishing a special women's cell that would be responsible for arranging police and legal support for hounded women. Yet it was felt that nothing would actually succeed in effect till attitudes — both individual (of men and women) and social — change. In many parts of the country, especially Bihar, an unwritten social sanction exists for the eradication of those branded witches. As a result mere legal intervention is inadequate; continuous awareness-raising programmes to educate people and build up public opinion against this custom, are necessary.

Shanti Chakraborty



Networking in Maitree

The Beijing Conference in 1995 necessitated a certain amount of networking among various women's organisations in West Bengal. As a first step, March 8, 1995 was celebrated together by 22 groups in and around Calcutta. The general feeling was that Beijing should not be a one-time occasion.



What had begun as a post-Beijing network was given more concrete shape by the International Women's Day Forum in 1996, and Maitree was finally conceptualised as a women's network based in Calcutta. Groups outside Calcutta — from Howrah, Madhyamgram, and Baruipur — have also joined the network. Diverse groups and individuals have been participating in the meetings held regularly on the first Saturday of every month since January 1996.

Of the activities undertaken by the network, one of the most important has been a continuing debate on gender-just laws. Another was the pre-election circulation of a March 8 manifesto, issued by the network to all political parties, with the aim of bringing the demands of the women's movement to their notice, and eliciting their reactions. The CPM, CPI, CPI-ML, Forward Bloc, RSP and BJP met Maitree representatives in their offices. The final outcome was a report submitted to the network.

At present violence is a priority on the Maitree agenda. The dowry death of Nahid Naushad at her in-laws place just five months after her marriage, and the brutal rape of a minor girl by a police constable were occasions for intervention. In Nahid's case Maitree representatives attended a protest meeting organised by the Iraqi community outside the residence of her in-laws, in solidarity with her family. They also met the Bowbazar police station officials, attended court hearings, and met Minister of Police Buddhadev Bhattacharya, demanding a quick filing of the chargesheet and speedy trial. In the minor rape case, Maitree functioned as a pressure group, urging the West Bengal Human Rights Commission to rehabilitate the girl.

Maitree's concerns have ranged from the local to the national and the international. It collaborated with the School of Women's Studies at Jadavpur University to organise a discussion on beauty contests. Last month Maitree also condemned the Taliban *fatwas* against women in Afghanistan.

Future projects include an awareness and conscientisation campaign during the International Fortnight Against Violence on Women from November 25 to December 10, International Human Rights Day. Activities planned comprise streetcorner meetings, radio and television coverage, and a concerted effort by Maitree members to publish articles on various aspects of violence against women in the English and Bengali newspapers and magazines during the fortnight. The network is also

coordinating, with Sakshi of Delhi, an eastern region workshop on sexual violence, to be held in Gopalpur at the end of November. There are also plans to observe March 8 in a big way next year.

It has been decided that for the present Maitree will continue to be self-funded through annual subscriptions from its members — both organisations and individuals. Member groups will volunteer to coordinate activities and take charge of all communications in rotation, on a three-monthly basis.

Maitree has set up for itself the challenge of bringing together and empowering women's groups from eastern India, and of ending their isolation from the national mainstream.

Maitreyi Chatterjee

Song, Skit and Poster Politics

A three-day song, skit and poster workshop organised by Sanhita, a Calcutta-based gender resource centre, tapped the often dormant creativity of women activists of West Bengal. There had been a long-felt need for such a workshop in the state. The idea was to generate more attractive, interesting and inspiring communication materials on gender issues, in the local language to address the grassroots. Sanhita has come forward to tackle this need, and this workshop was just the beginning of a process.



The workshop was held in Dwaranda, near Shantiniketan, during October 3-6, on the sprawling grounds of BABLI—Bureau of Agro Based/Linked Industries, but also named after a lost sister of Neela Sen, one of the stalwarts of the venture — a farmhouse itself notable for its grassroots development activities.

Anchita Ghatak of Swayam and Kalyani Menon Sen of CAPART acted as facilitators. The introductory session, almost immediately after arriving at the spot, was directed at breaking the ice. First there was a game which, apart from being extremely energising and funny, subtly challenged the traditional divide between 'inside/outside'. This was followed by a session of each one choosing a partner not known before, spending half an hour with her, and both partners coming back with verses on the other — telling the rest something about the partner. It was a hearty way of getting all participants to know each other and begin interacting.

The next session was aimed at: exploring issues to be highlighted in the communication materials being generated; the process required to design these into posters; and the mechanism of composing songs based on these concerns. The issues that surfaced were: Right to Education, Right to Income, Mother's Right to Guardianship, Right to Fight against Discrimination, Child Labour, Legal Awareness and Aid, Child Marriage, Organisation, Self-sufficiency, Violence, Witch-hunts, Stereotype Role Divisions,

and Discrimination against Women. The facilitators pointed out that all these issues could actually be grouped together under two broad heads of Discrimination and Protest.

POSTER-MAKING

This session generated wonderful new ideas, designs and slogans, each group concentrating on one particular aspect of discrimination. In a retrospective appraisal of the attempts, the technicalities involved in the designing process were explored, and the messages that had come across were analysed. It was decided that the posters should:

- be created with specific purpose and target viewers in mind;
- be focussed, with clear and strong messages;
- not be cluttered or overcrowded with too many motifs/slogans; and
- be attractive enough to catch the eye.

SONGS

First the participants learnt songs from the already existing collection of the organisations present. In the workshop session on songs, participants were split into groups and four new songs were created, focussing on self-sufficiency, mobilisation and movement. A verse that had been created during the poster session was also set to tune, thereby creating a fifth new song.

SKITS

The specific aspects of discrimination in the four skits produced were violence against women, education, health and women's role in society. The following points were highlighted through retrospective analysis:

- skits are to be designed with the target audience in mind;
- they must have a coherent script;
- skits should use every available resource, extending participation as far as possible;
- they should be careful with body movements, composition etc.; and
- the point of view must be clearly, unilaterally feminist.

Sanhita had also organised one *Baul* evening with three *Baul* women and a male *Baul* singer. Gana Bishan, a well-known activist cultural group of Calcutta, had been invited to sing for the workshop participants. They also taught the members a song on role division and protest. All in all, the workshop proved to be a great success. It has been decided that separate workshops for songs, posters and skits would be organised by Sanhita, which will also act as a liaison between the workshop participants to build up a team of singers. The songs generated in the workshop will be polished and recorded.

Sohini Bhattacharya, Paramita Banerjee

The Beauty Bazaar

Amitabh Bachchan's NRI venture, ABCL, is determined to give a facelift to the newly 'liberalised' soil of India by organising the Miss World Beauty Contest in Bangalore. This event has encoded 'the agony and the ecstasy' of latter-day fundamentalist though globalised India. The euphoria of an open economy has been articulated side by side with voices condemning the degradation of having the purity of Indian soil and womanhood sullied.

To discuss what this contest means for the women's movement — and for the larger community — the School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur University, in collaboration with Maitree organised a meeting on October 10, 1996.

The terms of the debate were set by Ratnabali Chattopadhyay, activist art historian, as the convener. Hindutva forces have cried halt to the contest in the name of the 'purity of Indian womanhood'; Sashikala threatened self-immolation in protest; the AIDWA has denounced the commodification of women's bodies in the interest of multinational companies that are further invading the Indian market. Where do we stand in this debate, specifically as major gender issues are at stake?

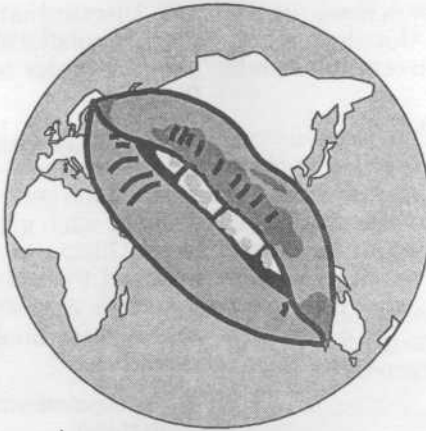
The panel was prepared to avoid the two main pitfalls of the moralism that has got built into the protest against the beauty contest. This moralism is founded on a puritanism no different from the crass patriarchy that controls the woman's body through a hatred of her sexuality, and views it as ultimately destructive of social health.

However, if moralistic protests against a display of women's half-clad bodies are sexist, is the event itself free from the same charge of sexism? Was there not an implicit manufacturing of consent about the kind of look that was marketable, or even desirable in women? This was the note that formed the point of protest in our students' presentation. Urbi Mukhopadhyay analysed the way the mass media are systematically projecting a certain image of femininity as the only vehicle to liberation and progress.

Anuradha Chatterjee, representing the world of advertisement, disagreed that advertisements created any role model of beauty. She stressed the belief that Indian women were beautiful from the days of Khajuraho and a beauty pageant would simply be a celebration of it.

The naivete implicit in this belief was taken up by many participants. What did her claim that Indian women were always beautiful mean? Ratnabali pointed out that the Khajuraho women were constructed according to prescribed models stipulated in manuals, and bore little resemblance to actual women. Hence, the argument that Indian women are beautiful cut little ice.

There was a suggestion, on the contrary, that the presence of the beauty queens in our society is restricting the young people's choices, pushing them into conforming to one dominant pattern, to a notion of beauty and



glamour that such feminine bodies exclude. This produces its own anxieties and frustrations. A case was mentioned of a young girl committing suicide because her measurements would not come down to the stipulated proportions. Rina Mohan, the filmmaker who is making a documentary on the ways hegemonic notions of beauty affect women's relationships with themselves and others, said that even Susmita Sen underwent breast surgery in order to qualify as a filmstar.

Another intriguing feature that emerged was that the beauty contest, an age-old phenomenon, is being given

a fillip in this phase of globalisation. In the agenda of putting India on the world map, all post-modernist pluralities are pushed aside and the Bengali triumvirate in internationalism emerges as Tagore-Satyajit Ray-Susmita Sen! Jayeeta Bagchi, a student, brought out the underlying hollowness of this *parampara* and the way it trivialises women's achievements.

Despite all the compulsions of feminists battling against male diktats about the way proper women should look, and the Talibanesque dress codes that go with it, is the stipulation about beauty in such contests any the less exclusive? While one protests against the irony, the MNCs are cashing in on this newly-manufactured, homogenised ideology of beauty. Is one simply mouthing the male compulsions of a Communist Party through such protests, or is one pointing out the oppression of a male gaze harnessed to bulging MNC pockets? The profits, of course, will never be ploughed back into India; they will merely add to the process of immaterialisation of Indian women.

Opposing the resplendent forward march into the 21st century that the Beauty Contest is meant to signify, Nirmala Banerjee, the economist, was skeptical of the 'commodification' thesis — the *Telegraph* had reported her as saying: 'A model earns her living by selling her photographs, I live by selling my writing'. She endorsed that a model's work has to be recognised as such.

Finally, I have been musing on history lecturer Samita Sen's misgivings; did we in the meeting try to erase the space that today's young women have carved for themselves by looking elegant; dressing as they think is convenient, freedom-generating and to their own taste? Or, as Tista Bagchi, a linguist, later concluded, did we try to promote the ideal of plain-looking as a comfortable signifier of high thinking?

I recognise both these as incipient symptoms of a cryptopatriarchy, but I cannot help noticing the beauty contest and its concomitant ad world as a restricted territory in the name of freedom of market and *doux commerce*. Only certain types of the female body, body language and sexuality are being projected to peddle products ranging from toothpaste and shampoo to skin bleach and lipstick. In our search for half the world and half the sky, why should we endorse this 'freedom' of a concentration camp?

Jashodhara Bagchi

**IAWS*****Regional Workshops on Survival and Sovereignty***

Survival and Sovereignty is the overarching IAWS theme for the year, as it covers issues such as economic conditions, empowerment, violence, etc. that affect women in critical ways (see page 4). People in different regions of India are invited to organise a workshop in their region and choose a topic that addresses their local needs and situation. These workshops should be directed towards students, researchers, activists, etc. The IAWS can collaborate with other groups such as NGOs or the UGC wherever required and possible.

ORGANISATION: EC members of the IAWS in the region can help in the organisation of the workshop.

REPORT: The report of the workshop will be an important part of the process and will be published separately if funds are available. The IAWS will also try to publish it in the EPW in order to secure a larger platform for distribution. Local EC members can help in the writing of the report.

FUNDING: Funds can be obtained from the ICSSR, UGC and others. The IAWS will contribute Rs 25,000 for each of the four regions — East, West, South and North — and Rs 50,000 for the Northeast on account of greater distance. The IAWS will also pay 1st class trainfare to the chief resource persons and the concerned EC members.

DEADLINE: The proposals should come in to the central office of the IAWS by **end December 1996**. The workshops should be held by March 1997.

Women's Studies Readers for Teachers

Members of the IAWS have articulated a deep need for basic material on Women's Studies that is geared towards orienting and sensitising teachers to issues of gender in every discipline. It could be compiled in the form of readers, with introductory material on Women's Studies, and a few papers and references. A reader can also be written in a local language, and be used in the curriculum. Workshops can be organised to compile such readers if necessary.

FUNDING: The IAWS will pay travel grants for informal meetings with resource persons. It can also help find funding for the workshops and for the publication of the readers.

DEADLINE: Interested members should write to the central office of the IAWS by **end December 1996**, and send in a proposal if they need funding.

Booklets in Local Languages

The IAWS encourages the preparation of simple pamphlet-size booklets in local languages on issues of local importance to women in their daily lives, such as those of caste, class, family, community, the communalisation of both religion and politics, and the New Economic Policy. Those interested should get in touch with the IAWS General Secretary's office and start writing.

FUNDING: The IAWS can help in finding a grant.

UNIFEM-IAWS workshop

A workshop on the Eastern Region's perspective for the 9th Plan, and the issues that need to be highlighted, is being organised by Nirmala Banerjee under the joint rubric of UNIFEM and the IAWS. It will be held some time in the first fortnight of January.

INTERNATIONAL***Competition on Girls and Young Women and the Women's Movement***

Research Committee 32 (RC32), Women in Society of the International Sociological Association, is organising a world competition to stimulate the formation of comparative studies on the changing position of women in the developing world. Papers, maximum 6000 words, are invited that elaborate a conceptual framework dealing with the effects of the women's movement at bringing about change in the cultural, religious, ethnic and national political spheres, as these influence girls and young women.

DEADLINE: Papers should be reach RC32 in Canada by June 1, 1997.

RESULTS: Will be announced in early 1998.

WINNERS: Will be invited to present their papers in Montreal, Canada, at the World Congress of Sociology, July 26-Aug. 1, 1998.

FUNDING: Although funding cannot be promised, RC32 will provide support to help the winners find resources to attend this meeting.

DETAILS: Contact Kalpana Kannabiran, Asmita Resource Centre for Women, House 45, Road 2, West Marredpally, Secunderabad 500 026.
Ph: 040-780 4745 Fax: 040-84 1697.

Seminar on Gender and Democratisation: International Perspectives

The British Council is organising a seminar that aims to explore both the opportunities and ambiguities of democratisation within a gendered framework. It will also focus on the possibilities of developing new ways of power-sharing that need to be evolved if the world community is to meet the commitments made by governments in the 1995 World Conference on Women. The three themes of the seminar are **Defining the Issues, Politics of Location, and Outcomes as Evidence**. It will be held at the University of Warwick, April 13-19, 1997.

FUNDING: It is a residential seminar and the fee of 990 pounds covers all costs except travel. The application form indicates a possibility of British Council funding.

DETAILS: Further details and application forms may be obtained from the nearest British Council office.

NATIONAL***West Bengal Women's Development Undertaking***

The Planning Commission documents indicated that Women's Development Corporations (WDCs) were to be set up in all states. They have already started functioning in some regions. The inaugural workshop of another WDC, the West Bengal Women's Development Undertaking, was held in September 1996, whereby two districts, Purulia and Bankura, came under the purview of the Indira Mahila Yojana and Mahila Samridhi Yojana.

Nirmala Banerjee President

Professor of Economics at the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, Nirmala Banerjee has worked as an economist/town planner for the West Bengal government. A founder-member and joint secretary of Sachetana, a 15-year-old women's organisation in Calcutta, she is also a founder-member of DAWN international network. She has been studying women workers in the urban labour market since 1970.

Kamla Bhasin

A social scientist, Kamla Bhasin has been working on gender and development since 1972. With the FAO since 1976, she has been supporting NGO initiatives, and facilitating networking between NGOs and women's organisations in South Asia. She has written extensively on participatory development and women's empowerment, is well known for her songs on the women's movement and for children, and is now compiling a book of feminist humour.

Manu Bhaskar

Actively engaged with research and teaching in Women's Studies since 1983, Manu Bhaskar is a Reader in Sociology at the University of Kerala, Trivandrum. Involved with the IAWS since 1993, she has helped design Women's Studies curricula at several universities in Kerala, and has done an ICSSR project, 'Women in Grassroots Democracy — Kerala'.

Manjit Bhatia

Manjit Bhatia teaches Philosophy and Political Science at Delhi University and is associated with the Women's Studies Centre there. She does research in the area of women and philosophy, specially on women in science and technology.

Chhaya Datar General Secretary

Chhaya Datar is Reader and Head of the Women's Studies Unit at TISS, Mumbai. A member of the UGC standing committee for Women's Studies, and a founder-member of Stree Mukti Sangathana, she is also a short story writer. In 1972, frustration as a housewife confined to domestic chores led to her participation in social movements, trade unions and women's organisations, and later to a scholarship and an MA degree at the Hague.

Neera Desai

One of the pioneers of women's studies in India, Neera Desai has been involved in examining women's issues for more than three decades. She was the first Director of the Research Centre for Women's Studies at SNDT Women's University, Mumbai, and founder-member of the IAWS. Her work focusses on the women's movement, critical analyses of family structures and functions, and feminism as ideology and practice.

Gabriele Dietrich

Director of the Centre for Social Analysis, Madurai, Gabriele Dietrich teaches Social Analysis at the Tamil Nadu Theological Seminary, and has been involved with the women's

movement since 1979. She has worked with environment movements, women in the unorganised sector, and housing rights. Her two books on the women's movement in India are *Conceptual and Religious Reflections* and *Religion, Ecology, Development*.

Rohini Gawankar Treasurer

A retired Reader and Head of Political Science at SNDT Women's University, Rohini Gawankar was the first President and founder-member of the Maharashtra Stree Abhyas Vyaspeeth. She is Vice-President of the Mahila Dakshata Samiti, and the Maharashtra Federation of University and College Teachers. Author of *Contribution of Maharashtrian Women to Politics*, she conducts training camps for women members of gram panchayats.

Devaki Jain

Devaki Jain, adviser to the National Commission for Women, was a member of the Advisory Committee on Gender Strategy for the South Commission, and Director of the Institute of Social Science Studies Trust. She launched the DAWN international network, and has published extensively in several areas of women's studies and the social sciences.

Usha Kanhere

Usha Kanhere has taught sociology and coordinated Women's Studies activities at Gujarat University for 30 years. She is a researcher and resource person with the Academic Staff College of Gujarat University, Gujarat Vidyapith, NGOs working with women, and a member of the Mahila Suraksha Samiti, Gujarat Rajya. Her books and papers include work on the girl child, bank unions and women employees, and women and socialisation.

Kalpna Kannabiran Joint Secretary

Kalpna Kannabiran, a sociologist, is Executive Secretary of Asmita Resource Centre for Women in Hyderabad. She has been active in the women's movement since 1980. Her PhD dissertation looked at the social history of the Devadasi system in Madras Presidency. Currently her work focusses on gender politics, identity and culture.

Bhavana Mehta

Bhavana Mehta, a Programme Officer at the Women's Studies Research Centre of MS University, Baroda, has a degree in Social Work from the Nirmala Niketan College of Social Work. Her involvement with the women's movement began with her first IAWS Conference in 1988 at Vishakhapatnam. She has worked with women in Mumbai's redlight areas, and against the dowry system.

Kavita Panjabi Editor

A lecturer in Comparative Literature, and a member of the Women's Studies Academic Committee at Jadavpur University, Kavita helped design the MPhil syllabus in Women's Studies. Her PhD was on women's narratives of political struggle in Bengal and Argentina. She is now working on sexual violence, mental health, women's resistance, and oral histories of women in the Tebhaga movement. She is a member of Maitree.

Sunita Pathania Vice-President

Sunita Pathania is a Professor of History and the Director of the Women's Studies Research Centre at Kurukshetra University in Haryana. She has been actively involved in Women's Studies, both through her own research and in her supervision of a team of PhD scholars writing their theses on Women in History. Her centre has also been successful in setting up Women's Studies cells in various undergraduate colleges in the state.

B Ratna Kumari

B Ratna Kumari, of the Women's Studies Centre, Vishakhapatnam University, does research in education and on working women. She campaigns actively for Dalit women's rights.

Usha Thakkar

Usha Thakkar is Registrar and Head of Political Science, SNDT Women's University. She has been promoting Women's Studies through research and teaching for many years.

TO THE EDITOR



On May 23 '96, Harivallabh Parikh, a renowned social activist of the Chhota Udepur area near Baroda, made it to the headlines of *Sandesh*, a local Gujarati daily. He was accused of rape by 20-year-old Geeta Rathwa, an adivasi student of Rangpur Ashram, of which Parikh is the head.



Geeta became pregnant while at the ashram for vocational training. On May 15, she aborted and was hospitalised. The inmates of the ashram, mostly supporters of Parikh, filed a complaint against Geeta, accusing her of having murdered her own child, and she was charged under section 318 IPC. The inmates also informed the police that Geeta had illicit relations with one Raimal. Questioned about the father of the dead child, Geeta named a nonexistent person, Ramesh Tadvi. Later she confessed to the police she had lied under pressure from Parikh.

Outraged by this incident several Baroda-based organisations such as PUCL, Sahiyar, Swashraya and Olakh sent two investigating teams to Rangpur. On May 25 the first team met Parikh, Geeta, her family, and others. The dsp said that even though there was sufficient evidence against Parikh, no arrest could be made as the body of the dead child had been sent for a DNA test.

On May 28 when the second team reached Rangpur, Parikh had fled the ashram. The police, instead of pursuing him, kept watch over Geeta and Raimal. The Chief Minister and Home Secretary said they would take action only after the DNA test results were declared.

The four-member team, returning from Chhota Udepur, was intercepted by a 400-500-strong mob of men who threatened to rape and kill the women members if they did not withdraw their charges against Parikh. This is a clear indicator of the support Parikh enjoys on account of his economic and political influence.

Such unlawful activities are not new to the ashram. It is high time that the usage of government and foreign funds, and the organisation of Lok Adalats came under close scrutiny.

We urge all those committed to women's and human rights to:

- > write to the Union and State governments to stop all funding to the ashram;
- > put pressure on the Ministry of Home Affairs to investi-

- gate the use of foreign funds by Anand Niketan Ashram;
- > seek scrutiny of the annual reports and accounts of the ashram by the Baroda Charity Commissioner; and
- > demand a CBI inquiry into the functioning of the ashram.

Manisha Bhattacharya

Women's Studies Research Centre, MS University, Baroda

We wish to garner support for our efforts to have the killers of Nahid Naushad punished. Nahid, a 19-year-old, died at her marital home on September 4, 1996. She had been married only five months, and her husband had left for the US soon after the marriage. Nahid had been tortured for dowry ever since the time she got married, and her death was a result of burns.

Her in-laws claim that she died because the cooking stove burst. But the stove was found intact! Also, Nahid's body was found in the bathroom and there was blood on the bathroom tiles. A brother-in-law of hers also died of burns. There is evidence to support the fact that he got burnt when Nahid was trying to escape her killers. We, as well as her relations and neighbours, believe that hers was a dowry death.

A case was registered at the Bowbazar thana (case no. 360 d. 5.9.96, U/S498A/304B/34 IPC). Nahid's brother-in-law, Badrul Islam, one of the accused, is absconding. The rest of the family has been granted bail. Despite our appeals, the state has not yet moved for cancellation of bail.

During a meeting with women activists, Home Minister Buddhadev Bhattacharya promised that he would do his best to see that the guilty were punished.

Nahid belonged to the Iraqi community which is determined that the guilty should be punished and has initiated a social boycott of Nahid's in-laws.

Maitree, working closely with Nahid's relatives, holds that if justice is to be done, the accused should be in jail. This will prevent them from influencing the police and judiciary. We want the state to apply for cancellation of bail. It would help the cause if organisations and individuals wrote to the Minister of Home Affairs (Police), Government of West Bengal, Writers Buildings, Calcutta 700 001, and The Chairperson, State Commission for Women, 4 Rainey Park, Calcutta 700 019, demanding that the bail granted to Nahid's killers be cancelled. Please send copies of your letters to Maitree, c/o Swayam, 3F Palm Avenue, Calcutta 700 019.

Anchita Ghatak

for Maitree

CREATIVE WRITING



For Koel

Written for my daughter when she, uncomprehending, pitched into a high fever after someone's tirade against me

Raging fever hugs her little body,
Sorrow digs chunks out of her face.
In the tricky guise of love they gagged
Her being with unfathomable distress.
Profound hurt shadowing her eyes,
Dense clouds invade her tiny breast.
She was well, better off with the lies
Of sands that concealed the flood of unrest.
Even the night offers her no sleep,
Poison, with every breath kills her respite.
The emergent light of her nascent mind
Blazing, ravages her day and night.
They, so mature and so worldly wise,
Fragmented her heart with such grace.
Her little body flares up in response,
It burns in sorrow, her small face.

Paramita Banerjee

Originally written in Bengali

Ache

So easily you touch
this body.
Eyes blind with hunger.
Lips quick with need.
You have forgotten wonder.
But has she?

Once, two hands that healed...

Dance of the Seven Veils

Seeded deep in memory —
the pulsing, circling beat
feet slowshuffling rhythms
as crisp hands clap.
With years, the veils.
Now
withered, timewrung,
but shrouded still —
I am the dance.

Anjum Katyal

IAWS MEMBERSHIP FORM

I would like to be a member of IAWS in the following category (please tick appropriate category):

- Ordinary member Institutional member Student member Life member Corporate member
Rs 100 for 2 years Rs 700 for 2 years Rs 50 for 2 years Rs 500 Rs 5000

I enclose herewith a demand draft/money order of Rs made out to the Indian Association of Women's Studies.

Signature & date: _____ Address: _____

Name: _____

(please print)

Education: _____

Occupation: _____ (Please give pin code and phone number, if any)

Please fill in, detach and mail to:

Rohini Gawankar
Treasurer, IAWS
Shiv Prabha, 304 R K Vaidya Road
Dadar West, Bombay 400 028