



Perspectives on Independence
Through Women's Eyes



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Selections from
A National Seminar on
The Early Years of Indian Independence
Held in August 1997 at Baroda

Organised by
Indian Association of Women's Studies
Centre for Women's Development Studies, New Delhi
Women's Studies Research Centre at M S University, Baroda

**Perspectives on Independence
Through Women's Eyes**

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Foreword

For those of us who were at the Baroda seminar on the Early Years Of Independence, the three days from 9th to 11th August, 1997 proved to be a memorable experience. The papers presented were well-researched and often very moving. The testimonies gave us a sense of participation in our history and a feel for the struggles that had gone into the making of independent India. This booklet is an attempt to share those exciting moments with the other members and friends of the IAWS. I am happy that I could persuade Dr. Vina Mazumdar, the doyen of Indian Women's Studies, to write a brief introduction to this publication.

I would like to thank EZE and the HIVOS Foundations, the Centre for Women's Development Studies, New Delhi and the Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India, for their generous grants for the seminar and for this publication. I am particularly grateful to the Vice-Chancellor and the faculty and staff of the Women's Research Centre, M S University, Baroda, for their warm hospitality and excellent organisation during the seminar. I am grateful to the Sparrow organisation for their careful transcription of the testimonies from the audio-recordings. I am also grateful to Sm Madhuchhanda Karlekar for designing the cover and helping me to get the material into proper shape.

I hope this document will help forge stronger links amongst all of us who are committed to the idea of Indian women becoming truly free citizens of the Republic of India.

May 1, 1998

Nirmala Banerjee
President, IAWS.

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Introduction

Vina Mazumdar

I was very happy to learn that the Indian Association of Women's Studies had decided to celebrate the 50th anniversary of Independence by organising a seminar focusing on the first two decades of the Indian Republic. This was not a sudden, ad hoc decision. Many of us, as participant observers of the growth of the women's movement since the seventies, and the shifts in intellectual concerns and priorities within women's studies, had been experiencing increasing discomfort with some presumptions carried over from the earlier period.

The Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI) — anxious to lay responsibility for the marginalisation of the Women's Question by the mid-fifties, had lamented the death of the women's movement after Independence with the cooption of many of the leaders within the ruling political establishment. Even before the CSWI, some scholars on the social reform movement of the 19th century, usually viewed as the precursor of the demand for gender equality in India, had observed that the social debate on the women's question got subsumed by the nationalist movement and lost its cutting edge¹. Another trend, reported by some political scientists in the studies commissioned for the CSWI, was of withdrawal by many women from active political life into social work or spiritual activities after Independence.²

Yet another mystery was the insistence of large women's organisations, born before and after Independence, to define themselves as 'non-political'. The CSWI, already handicapped by the absence of the word political in its terms of reference, and other evidence of the loss of a political perspective on the issue of gender equality within the government and political parties, was also reeling under its discoveries — of the increasing burden of inequality and contradictions, accelerated by changes in the economy and society — the 'modernisation process'.

Leela Dube taught us that status was realised through roles³. But we didn't have the theory, the concepts or the language to adequately articulate the 'massive contradictions' in the evidence that came to us — between women's roles that were socially perceived, accepted and recognised, and the real, actual, varied and multiple roles that women in different classes played.⁴

The Committee's decision — to lay the blame on colonial education and urban middle class bias of the intelligentsia, and planners in particular — for this 'invisibility syndrome' or 'intellectual purdah' was a desperate attempt to get out of a theoretical vacuum. But my

discomfort increased further with the progress of women's studies and the galvanising of the women's movement. Our perceptions began to change — discovering women's agency, and the great variety in forms of protest, strategies, setting goals and priorities among women in different contexts and classes. To cite only a few of these that tried to bridge the gap between the present and the past, I would mention: peasant women's reactions to the environmental crisis⁵, the challenge thrown at academics by the members of SEWA⁶ — "why do you define us (the majority), in terms of the minority (the 5% of women workers in the formal sector)?" the painful recovery of women's role in various people's struggles⁷ both before and after Independence.

As evidence piled up of non-acceptance of their subordinate status by many sections of women, some of us began to catch glimpses of the complex diversity in women's perception and understanding of their social, familial, occupational and ideological or political obligations — sometimes dormant, sometimes manifest and vigorously articulated.

Multiple roles meant multiple identities. Was conflict inevitable within this multiplicity? Sociologists had vigorously argued so, to explain the secondary status of women in work or professional roles. During the work of the CSWI, as we demolished myth after myth about women's roles, values and condition — and began to question the meaning of tradition, social norms and cultural values that were supposed to control and regulate women's and men's lives in our 'traditional' society, we had to confront several dilemmas about our understanding of Indian society and our own identities — as Indian women, as academics, social scientists, as political activists or social workers — since the Committee was composed of members from all three groups.⁸

All of us had vivid memories of colonial rule and the freedom movement. Some had been fully active in the struggle. Those of us who were younger — had only partial experience as students, during the last phase. We were 'the daughters of Independence'⁹, the first generation beneficiaries of the equality promised by the Constitution. We had been *free to choose* our post-Independence lives — our careers, beliefs, and to some extent our aspirations. Any restraints on these, we believed, had been self-imposed — the outcome of our good sense, educated wisdom, and acceptance of our responsibilities.

The shattering of this complacency brought in its wake a sense of shame and outrage — driving us to question our own beliefs, choices, and self-assessment. What had we done to justify and deserve our new freedoms? We had seen ourselves as good teachers and reasonably competent social scientists, yet we had remained so ignorant — that we had helped to perpetuate the same myths that we now had to demolish. We took pride in our nationalist arrogance but found we had done nothing to get to know what was happening to that nation in the two decades that had followed Independence. What had happened to our democratic responsibility?

Some of us had refused to work with women's organisations — preferring our identity as professional teachers. We could be active in teachers' associations, which for us represented the outer boundaries of our social responsibility, manageable without too much problem with our familial and personal lives. Phulrenu-di (Phulrenu Guha) had however combined political and

social work, and Maniben remained active in trade unionism and the Samajwadi Mahila Sabha.

Most of our discussions with political activists and social workers in women's organisations were disappointing. They were from the same class as ourselves and only a few could throw some light on the unexpected trends of decline in women's conditions in livelihood, health, access to education, and the right to life with dignity — that our data hunt had brought out in stark, quantitative terms.

None knew of the decline in sex-ratio or its implications. Demographers had been arguing about it, but we would not have known of it but for the fact that Padmini Sengupta - an old war horse from pre-Independence days of struggle, incorporated it in a paper on women workers that she prepared for Phulrenu-di.¹⁰

Among the rest, a few demonstrated some real concern - Vimal Ranadive, who had been struggling within the CITU to raise the worsening conditions of women in the bidi industry ; Sahodara Bai¹¹, and Pramila Dandavate¹² who were angry with increasing insecurity and hostility faced by young women political workers, and some junior political cadres of different parties who felt excluded and discriminated against in the race for representational tickets.¹³

In contrast — the anger among poor women or women facing absolute insecurity, of all communities and sectors was tangible and vigorous. They were the victims — of acute poverty and insecurity, of unemployment, exploitation, wage discrimination and powerlessness — against oppression by employers, society and their families. What was this much-vaunted independence, and whose independence was it — only of rich, and irresponsible men? How much independence did women have even in affluent families? Why had dowry become such a menace that it was now threatening even poor families, who could not afford it? How could such women preserve any sense of dignity or security when they could be kicked around, or thrown out because they could not bring enough dowry? And why should such practices enter their own communities where they had not been customary before? The mothers felt that they had enjoyed more dignity and security in their families through their labour in the family and livelihood, which was now going out of reach of their daughters.

It was becoming clear to some of us that these women had a level of social awareness and perspectives on independence that we had not demonstrated — cocooned as we had been in our protected and privileged lives — confined by our class experience. As a teacher in Bihar through the fifties and sixties, I had been aware of my students' enjoying 'father-in-law scholarships' with a lot of humour, but it had not impelled me to instil a sense of revolt among them as my mother had done with all of us from three decades before Independence. The practice was carefully avoided since then within our vast joint family, through the later years. Attending a niece's marriage during the CSWI's tour in West Bengal, I asked my uncle and my older cousins what they felt about dowry. All of them thought the practice had 'died down' — no one in 'our family' would dream of either demanding or paying dowry! Yet, by middle class standards, all of them were well-informed men with some social conscience¹⁴ who were taking some indulgent pleasure in a daughter of the family (whom they still saw as very young) having 'made it' to the membership of a national investigating committee —

thus justifying their indirect support to her prolonged education.

Through the seventies and eighties the women's movement acquired many new and shifting foci. Violence against women dominated the public eye because it was the rallying point for all protests. On the studies front however there were many avenues being opened — with increasing scrutiny and critique of the dominant economic development strategies — at national and international levels; on the education (literacy-cultural-values) front; questioning state laws and policies vis-a-vis the conditions of the people, with greater focus on their impact on women and children, — intervening on the national agenda on many fronts.

There were many differences — at the ideological, operational and choice of priorities and alliances levels — which many of us viewed as evidence of greater strength and vitality — but two trends were becoming clear increasingly. The movement(s) had taken on the mantle of political, constructive responsibility to *alter* and *redirect* the processes of change at national and global levels. In spite of repeated rebuffs, disappointments, and decreasing or stagnant resource support, women's studies became a vital part of the women's movement, calling for the same kind of activism on many fronts of the reinvigorated, or new women's organisations.

The Indian Association of Women's Studies¹⁵ during its earlier years had to repeatedly face the conflict of identities among members. Were they to view themselves primarily as academics or as activists? Some felt the divide was unbridgeable, but many of us didn't agree. We were challenging not only established beliefs, stereotypes and myths about Indian women, but also the theory of academic-neutrality, and value-free, non-judgmental role of academic disciplines - social sciences in particular. By the mid-eighties, M N Srinivas - the doyen of post-Independence development of social sciences in India - acknowledged the political nature of the challenge by describing women's studies as 'a thrust from below', and 'the most significant development in Indian social sciences during the last decade'.¹⁶

We were all committed to 'change' government's development policies, laws, institutions and procedures; behavioral and learning patterns; the education system; media, socio-cultural values and institutions, dominant mindsets of men and women who would not listen to women's needs, hopes, or despair and continue supporting (often unconsciously) — myths, that covered the reality of oppression — exploitation, humiliation, undervaluation, abuse, and fears — of all kinds of powerlessness, incapacities and failures. Our methods and areas of struggle could differ along with our skills, vocations and other reasons — but we were all parts of the same movement — with multiple identities, priorities, and preferences.

Working with seasonally migrant peasant women in Bankura, I learnt that multiple identities, like bio-diversity, or plural cultures, could be a source of strength, not of weakness. The formats and blueprints for nation-building inherited from the past needed questioning, and our assumptions about the collapse, or 'silence' of women's agency during the early decades after Independence needed reassessment. It was in this context that we called for 'personal testimonies' of women who had viewed Independence not as the end, but as the beginning of new struggles for a better, more just, and free India.

The decision brought an unforgettable experience, whose impact was visible on every

participant young and old, from different regions of our vast country, with only vague ideas about the different faces of Indian women's struggle for freedom and search for meaningful social roles for themselves. They came from diverse backgrounds— cultural economic and ethnic — they spoke in different languages and modes but symbolised for us the richness of the experience of struggle — the heroic courage against repression, and the camaraderie across classes that promoted the spirit of human equality, showing and learning from each other to forge a mutually reinforcing sense of solidarity and empowerment.

Did any of us know that Kasturba Gandhi acquired literacy from a young *adivasi* girl, or played mid-wife to the latter's sister-in-law in jail? Born into a family of constructive reformers, Dasri-ben was a natural follower of the Mahatma, using her joyous youth, singing skills and total lack of fear to organise other women and defy repression, shaming both police and courts. After Independence, she found her role in teaching and family life, preferring a local board school to one run by the legatees of the movement, possibly because she recoiled at the evidence of corruption that had already set in. The spirit of patriotism and protest continues in her son.

Manavati Arya, offered us her understanding of 'total mobilisation' -and the story of her common sense approach to operational details. She had the capacity to be a planner and executive, but like Dasri-ben, she too felt uncomfortable about party politics and preferred family life and social service, focusing increasingly on children deprived of a childhood.

Ila Mitra, and Rani Dasgupta played leadership roles in *Tebhaga*, suffered physical and mental repression, long separations from their families, and shattered health. A chance to return to family life was 'bliss', but the shattered economy of their families called for more active roles for a livelihood. They see themselves as tools of 'history' at a point of time, and are surprised that their stories should arouse so much interest among young people today, as they feel they were 'very ordinary women'.

Swarajyam and Mrinal are eternal activists who cannot withdraw from a life of continuous struggle. Born rebels, they are used to the ups and downs, the ebb and flow, and the hazards of political activism. There is no bitterness — but the passion to "set the world right" remains undaunted and inspiring. Both have played active roles in the resurgent contemporary women's movement, but feel embarrassed when young researchers in women's history try to unearth their life stories.

I offer my grateful congratulations to the same young researchers for uncovering these forgotten histories. They are vital today — when the future looks bleak and uncertain, and cynicism is in the air. I do not like models or role models as concepts, but I am sure many will find inspiration and hope for the future in the stories of these women; for their integrity of spirit in upholding a vision of independence and nation-building — still to be realised — but not unattainable — if the courage to struggle is maintained.

I thank the Executive Committee of IAWS for giving me the chance to introduce this volume. As teaching material for the young — these stories are of as much value as the records of the 'achievers', which is the usual method pursued by textbook writers to appease the women's studies movement.

Notes and References

- 1 S. Natarajan - This was the position put forward by S. Natarajan, Social Reform in India and by Charles Heithsath in Social Reform Movement in India. I contested this thesis in two papers (1) "Social Reform Movement from Ranade to Nehru" in B.B. Lal (Ed) - Indian Women: From Purdah to Modernity Delhi, Vikas 1975 and (2) "The Women's Question in India and the Role of Women's Studies." - CWDS, Occasional Paper 1985.
It was rather disturbing to find the old thesis resurrected - though in a new language of discourse by some younger scholars - Partha Chatterjee and Sumit Sarkar in the eighties. See Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (Ed) - Recasting Women's History, also V.M. and Leela Kasturi (Ed) - Introduction to Women and Indian Nationalism Delhi, Vikas, 1992.
- 2 See Vina Mazumdar (Ed) - Symbols of Power, Delhi, Allied Publishers 1978 for a collection of these studies.
- 3 Towards Equality Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India, GOI, 1975 - Chapter I.
- 4 See "Making of a Report:" Indian Journal of Gender Studies - CWDS and Sage India - April 1998.
- 5 CSE - State of India's Environment Delhi 1981; Kumud Sharma - "Women in Struggle (Chipko)" - CWDS 1984; Voices of Peasant Women CWDS - 1992 and 94; also, "Who Will Save the Earth? Report of a Workshop" CWDS 1987; V. Mazumdar - "Embracing the Earth: South Asian Peasant Women's Views on the Environmental Crisis" - UNFAO, FFHC - Delhi 1992; Report of the National Colloquium on Women and Water Resource Management"; CWDS 1991.
- 6 Self-Employed Women's Association, Ahmedabad, at a Workshop on Women in the Informal Sector, at Delhi in the early eighties.
- 7 Susie Tharu and K. Lalita - We Were Making History: Women in the Telengana Movement
Sunil Sen - "Role of Women in Popular Struggles" Samyashakti, CWDS 1984; "Rural Women's Initiatives" (Technical papers edited by Shimayi Muntemytra - ILO 1984. Rounaq Jahan - "Women, Resources and Power: Report of an Afro-Asian Inter-regional Workshop"; ILO 1985.
- 8 See Towards Equality op. cit.
- 9 Joanna Liddle and Rama Joshi ed - Daughters of Independence, Kali for Women, Delhi 1986.
- 10 Unofficially commissioned by Phulrenudi through the Indian Council of Social Science Research. During the first two years of its existence, (1971-73) the Committee's Secretariat was reluctant to avail of the ICSSR's offer to sponsor research for the Committee. Individual members who realised the necessity, followed Phulrenudi's method - to involve over a 100 social scientists to scan available studies and other sources of information - giving Towards Equality the reputation of being "the most well-documented Report on Women" by the UN System, salving our nationalist arrogance to some extent.
- 11 Scheduled Caste Member of Parliament from Madhya Pradesh (Congress Party).
- 12 A founder of the Samajwadi Mahila Sabha and later of the Mahila Dakshata Samiti, a leader in the Anti-Price Rise Movement in Maharashtra: jailed during the Emergency (75-77). Elected to parliament in 1989 (National Front). an active member of a coalition of National Women's Organisations, popularly known as the Seven Sisters.
- 13 See dissent Note by Lotika Sarkar and Vina Mazumdar on the issue of political reservation in Towards Equality and Seminar - September 1997.
- 14 My uncle was acknowledged as one of the doyens of nationalist historians who was out of tune with the ruling establishment for its one-sided view of the Freedom Struggle. My cousin had dabbled with revolutionaries during his student days, and edited a journal after independence which was critical of Congress rule in West Bengal.
- 15 Established in 1982, following the mandate given by the First National Conference on Women's Studies (SNDT, Women's Univ. Bombay, 1981 - to provide a forum for academics and activists of different backgrounds - political/social work, trade unions, government, educational reformers, women's organisations etc.
- 16 Inaugural Address - World Conference of Sociology, Delhi 1986 published in Economic and Political Weekly Jan. 24, 1987 Vol. XXII, No.4.

Issues & Themes

Seminar Overview

In the fiftieth year of independent India, the Indian Association of Women's Studies in collaboration with the Centre for Women's Development Studies, New Delhi and the Women's Studies Research Centre at M S University, Baroda, organised a seminar to critically examine the historic events of the early years of Independence from the perspectives of Indian women. The seminar was held at Baroda between 9-11 August, 1997 coinciding with the nationwide commemoration of the "Quit India" declaration. Its main objective was to examine the experiences of Indian women against the background of the Nehruvian paradigm of planned economic development accompanied by state promotion of social welfare. Organisers of the seminar had long felt that feminist scholars had yet to analyse and reflect on that vital period which had given shape to most of the institutions and ethos of modern India. This lacuna in their studies had made it difficult for them to understand the transition of Indian women from the heady days of the nationalist movement to the grim reality of their overall situation in the seventies and onwards.

The beginnings of independent India had been deeply scarred by the agony of partition when numerous women underwent the trauma of abduction, recovery and painful rehabilitation. At the same time, this was also a period set apart in the history of India for its grand design for a modern, egalitarian India: women were given Constitutional guarantee of full citizenship and rights on par with men. The Indian State had made several other ostensibly pro-women gestures such as passing of the Hindu Code Bill. India was perhaps one of the first countries to officially institute a family planning programme. The planning process was meant to build a modern, growth-prone economy. However, many active strands in the political movements of India, whose roots went back into the period preceding Independence, had long harboured reservations about this grand design put forward by the Indian State; their protests continued to create a groundswell of popular resistance throughout the period under examination.

Participants at the seminar drew hope and inspiration from the moving testimonies presented in their own words by several women who had been active in those popular struggles. There was Mallu Swarajyam who had been an active worker in the Telangana

movement; Rani Dasgupta and Ila Mitra (Rani Ma) were heroines of the Tebhaga movement. There was Manavati Arya of the Azad Hind Fauj. Dasriben Chaudhari of Bardoli and Quit India movements. And Mrinal Gore, the 'Paniwalli Bai' of Mumbai. The indomitable spirit that came through in their simple narrations was no doubt the high point of this three day event.

The Inaugural Session

The inaugural session was chaired by Padma Ramachandran, Vice-Chancellor, M S University, Baroda. She welcomed the participants and expressed her happiness about the fact that her university was hosting this significant event. A brief outline of the objectives of the seminar was then presented by Nirmala Banerjee, president of the IAWS. She outlined the three main issues that the seminar was to consider. First, the state policies vis-a-vis women during that period. Second, the roles played by women in the popular movements of those early decades. And third, the cultural representations of women in that period in different parts of India. Banerjee stressed that the deliberations were to focus chiefly on the first 25 years after Independence because it appeared that during that period there was some kind of a lull in the lively activism of Indian women that had marked the pre-Independence years as well as the years since 1975. She concluded by introducing and welcoming the veteran activist women who had consented to grace the occasion by their presence.

The chief guest for the inaugural ceremony was Ela Bhatt, the moving spirit behind SEWA, the Self-employed Women's Association of Ahmedabad. In her rousing speech, she charted the course of events that constituted the history of SEWA, and which she claimed had been a movement to achieve "Doosri Azadi" or second independence in the form of economic empowerment of the poor, toiling women of this country.

Soon after Independence, poor women had realised that in order to win their day-to-day battles against poverty and exploitation at the combined hands of male authority — in their own households, in their own society, as well as in the State — they needed to gain economic independence. As Ela-behn so eloquently put it: "When a SEWA member has a room of her own, a farm of her own, a well of her own or a forest of her own, she experiences economic freedom; an operational freedom where she is in a bargaining position in her dealings with the vested interest groups both inside and outside her home." Since measures like bank nationalisation notwithstanding, official financial resources hardly ever reach poor women, the SEWA cooperative bank provided an alternative source of funds for them. Since then, the movement has inspired a hundred cooperatives and a thousand producer groups of women at the grassroots, which promote capital formation and ownership of assets by poor women. Ela-behn also told us about several other measures that SEWA has promoted for women's empowerment: such as upgrading of their skills, introducing them to available technological innovations, creating opportunities for exports etc. For SEWA members, it is not just the profits in their ventures that are important, but also the methods by which the profits are achieved. She gave the example of SEWA's Vanalakshmi project, where women of landless

households in the drought-prone Mehsana district of Gujarat formed a cooperative after a prolonged battle all through the sixties and seventies with their caste leaders. The cooperative, besides empowering the women through its collective strength, has also in the process, brought to the region new techniques for preserving and farming water and an environment-friendly cropping pattern. For the households of the women themselves, it has provided a self-sustaining livelihood and a viable alternative to the earlier trend of migrating out of the region.

Summing up, Ela-behn urged that our focus should be on women workers the majority of whom are confined to the unorganised sector; although most of them are poor and illiterate, they can still play an important role in the women's movement. SEWA has shown that these women can absorb new ideas and also fight for public interest issues; as they have been doing for issues such as the registration of self-employed workers, or for legal protection and social security rights for home-based workers. She felt that we should take inspiration from their spirit in fighting their socially disadvantaged position through self-managed, self-propagated independent economic organisations.

Her closing remarks were indeed inspiring, "We knew, in those early years what we wanted, which was, in one word, EVERYTHING. We have not changed our minds."

Keynote Address

Vina Majumdar opened her keynote address, by describing the conference as an attempt to negate the oft-repeated allegation that academics do not criticise themselves. Here, the participants had come together to reopen several of the debates and strongly held positions about the course of the women's movement in India during those crucial years immediately before and after Independence. The objectives of the seminar were, first and foremost, to re-examine the widely held belief that the early decades of independent India were the 'silent years' of women's movements. Whether the movement which in the pre-Independence struggles had been subdued by, and to an extent subsumed within, the nationalist fervour, had indeed continued to decline. If there was a decline in women's status in those years, where could one objectively lay the blame for that — the State, the education system or the women's movement itself? She herself felt that, at that time, the women's question was being addressed by social movements, and the ways in which those movements set their goals and priorities were different. But, as the struggles of rural peasant women of Bengal illustrated, they were no less persistent in pushing for their rights.

Vina-di argued that, the 'invisible Indian women' very skilfully used their multiple identities to overcome the conflicts that were immanent in their diverse obligations to their families and to society. Side by side, they were also asserting their individual identities and communicating with other groups of women. Enterprising women luminaries of the post-Independence era, like Mrinal Gore, Ahilya Rangnekar and Aruna Asaf Ali, were continuously pushing the women's perspective not only within their families and in the society at large, but also into the male-dominated parliamentary forums. However, the newly appointed

planning commission, also under the leadership of Pandit Nehru, showed no awareness of these earlier efforts and settled down to viewing women as targets of motherhood-oriented welfare services. Finally, Vina-di was of the opinion that, if this seminar proved to be an inspiring and rejuvenating experience for the younger generations, there would be hope for a better India in the future.

THE NEHRUVIAN ERA: A CRITICAL APPRAISAL

Whatever Happened to the Dreams of Modernity?

Nirmala Banerjee began by emphasising that the first two decades or so of independent India had laid the framework of the Nehruvian dream — planned socio-economic development of the country to usher in a modern democratic India based on the principles of justice, liberty and equality for all its citizens. However, specially where women's empowerment was concerned, the ideals never got translated into reality. A possible excuse for the planners — that they were really not aware of the actual situation of Indian women — lacks credibility. Because there was in fact a document — the report on Women's Role in a Planned Economy (WRPE) — prepared in the late 1930s for the National Planning Committee set up by the Congress Party under the chairmanship of Pandit Nehru. The WRPE had put forward many arguments and recommendations that were surprisingly modern even by today's standards. This was specially true of the WRPE's recognition of the role of women as workers, of their subordination by the intra-family patriarchal authorities, and the treatment it had recommended for women's unpaid familial labour. Remarkably, that document was allowed to sink without a trace, and the first few Indian plans, though prepared under the leadership once again of Pandit Nehru, took a completely different stance. From the lofty heights of WRPE's radical ideology, the policy makers quickly descended into a safe and innocuous welfarism where women received no consideration except as mothers and home-makers.

Banerjee suggested that there were several possible explanations for this; the first few plans had deliberately left the unorganised sector out of their design; this no doubt affected women as workers, because the overwhelming majority of them were working in this sector. It is also possible that women were victims of the real politik of the ruling party in which the elite were fast moving away from the egalitarian ideals of the nationalist period. It is also possible that, though the pre-Independence nationalist fervour had brought together people from all classes, women in it had not had the time to forge a gender-based identity cutting across classes. Last but foremost, it has to be recognised that, for the minority of women who did get the opportunity to play a part as citizens of the new, modern India, those early years of Independence were years of euphoria — years when they were still to take notice of the numerous pinpricks of gender-based discrimination that filled their lives.

Women and Work: 1947 to 1997

In the second paper of this session, Madhura Swaminathan presented statistical data to show the changes that had taken place in the economic status of Indian women over a period of fifty years following Independence. It appears that, when defined conventionally on the basis of generation of income, the rate of women's participation in the productive workforce in India was significantly below the rates found in most east and south-east Asian countries. However, feminist scholars and activists have repeatedly stressed the importance of women's invisible and unpaid work for the household as well as the national economy; therefore, there have been some changes made in the official assessment of work and workforce to include unpaid work in all household-based productive activities, as well as domestic work such as the free collection of consumption items, and sewing, tailoring, weaving for household use. With this definition, women's workforce participation rates show a dramatic increase.

Swaminathan further showed that women's economic participation has been falling significantly over time. According to census estimates, it had fallen from 37% in 1961 to 27% in 1991 in rural areas and from 13 to 10 percent in urban areas. In 1993-94, the proportion of women engaged in domestic duties along with that of women in paid work showed a sharp decline in both urban and rural areas. The paper further indicated that the majority of women workers in India were in the primary sector as agricultural labourers and that their shift to secondary and tertiary sectors had been much slower compared to men. There has always been a strong correlation between low caste status as also the extent of agricultural backwardness and the incidence of female agricultural labour. Over time, there has if anything been a movement of women from the organised to the unorganised sector where, increasingly they are found working as casual labour. Swaminathan felt that, with the introduction of structural adjustment policies, this trend was likely to be aggravated.

Over time, the disparity in male and female earnings has declined in certain occupations like manual labour in public works, but has risen in others like casual agricultural labour. Wage disparities have worsened in rural areas and in some states, women are getting one-third of men's wages. These disparities are often hidden by maintaining a gender division of labour, and by classifying women's work as light. Women are also not compensated for their unpaid work.

Swaminathan went on to provide evidence of the various ways in which households as well as the labour market discriminated against women. Of these, one of the most important was the denial of access to productive assets including cultivable land for women. All these factors were collectively responsible for the increasingly adverse sex ratio of the Indian population and the persistently higher proportion of women and girls in poorer households. Swaminathan felt that there was need for some fundamental changes in the laws relating to work, particularly for those who were working in the unorganised sector.

State Welfare Policies and Women

The third presentation of the morning was by Nirmala Buch. Since she had occupied a senior position in the Social Welfare department of the Government of India, Buch had the advantage of having looked at state policy both as an insider and as an outsider. She felt that, inside the system, there were constraints, while outside, there were pressures from the feminist movement. She averred that quite often, the pro-women policy makers did not have the power to enforce those policies; on the other hand, those who had the power lacked the political mandate. As a result, women's programmes very often got marginalised. In fact, the way she saw it, for the first twenty-five years after Independence, there was no clear policy on women. For the period of the first few Plans, the government's priority was economic development rather than social reconstruction. If women were considered at all, it was only as targets of social welfare programmes. The First Plan had made no mention of even the health of mothers and children; it had merely emphasised the need for limiting the size of each family and to ensure the appropriate spacing between children. Similarly, though the slogan was, equal opportunities of education for men and women, in practice women's education was being directed more to those areas in which women were supposed to have special aptitudes; and there too, the idea was to make provisions for women's education through channels for studying in private and through short-term correspondence courses. Also, the actual work of organising social welfare programmes for women was largely left to voluntary agencies under the guidance of the Central Social Welfare Board.

Although in the seventies, official focus did shift from policies for the welfare of women to development with them, no efforts were being made to question and overturn the patriarchal values which marginalised women in the first place. Instead, their problems were clubbed together with those of other weaker sections like the scheduled caste and scheduled tribe populations. In short, the welfare policies were merely attempting to treat the manifestations of what was taken to be their unchangeable situation; there was no attempt or intention to analyse the root causes of their subordination. Rather, the general assumption made was, once economic development took place, its benefits would automatically trickle down in time to all the deprived groups, including women. Buch felt that it was not for want of information that planners had ignored the women's cause; they just did not want to look at those issues. They simply assumed that by encouraging the participation of communities in the development process they could take women's participation as given.

For Buch, the fundamental question that remained unanswered was, Why did women themselves not raise these issues? She suggested that this was so presumably because women trusted the policy makers and the State to look after their interests. They therefore allowed the women's question to get subsumed in the plans for nation building. It was not till the 1970s that the women's question shed its middle class urban bias and began to link up the problems of large cross-sections of women from all walks of life. It was then that the movement began to draw the policymakers into formulating policies for impact at the grassroots.

The lively discussion that followed brought out the linkages between the issues of

employment, the Nehruvian paradigm of planning and the ambiguities of the welfare policy. Some members felt that the post-Nehruvian policies which focused on employment for women were equally one-sided; they took no note of the fact that while women's employment was increasingly becoming a necessity, it usually left them overburdened without having any control over their incomes. Also, women's invisible work was increasing and there was as yet no measure of that work. It was argued by some that no work should be regarded as 'full employment' unless it provides the worker not just work but also adequate food, social security, shelter and certain means to retain personal dignity.

Many participants shared Nirmala Buch's misgivings about Nehruvian policies. A commentator appeared to voice the general feeling when she said that, the critique of the Nehruvian model had some serious implications for the women's movement of today. It stressed the urgency for women's movements to explore other alternatives instead of putting too much faith in the government's pro-women policies. As to the question why the women themselves had not given a feminist perspective to plan policies, it appeared that they had been discouraged by the Congress party's conservatism and indifference to human values. An interesting suggestion was to make a comparative study of the welfare policies of states which had different political and economic ideologies.

Population Policies and Family Welfare

Malini Karkal examined the historical background of various family planning policies (FPP). Her main thesis was that the Indian FPP was not the outcome of Indian thinking alone; it had been crucially influenced by the ongoing international debates on the issue. In this, she felt that the Rockefeller Foundation had played a leading role in the Nehruvian period.

In tracing the history of population growth the world over, Karkal argued that during the period when the first world countries of today were in their early stages of development, their populations had been allowed to grow naturally and had in fact grown fast. It was only when the status of their women had improved and their child mortality rates had fallen that the growth had slowed down. The Fabians began to talk about birth control mainly on grounds of improving women's health. It was much later that thinking on the issue of population came under the influence of Kingsley Davis who contended that the growing nationalism coupled with an urge for rapid development would drive the newly developing countries towards communism. And their growing weightage in the world population would tilt the balance of power in international politics towards the Communist bloc. This was conjoined with an argument that unbridled population growth even in first world countries would lead to a relative increase in the ranks of the poor and the idle.

The Rockefeller Foundation set up the Population Council in 1950 against this background; though the US government was initially reluctant to intervene in the population policies of other states, Rockefeller did convince Nehru of the urgency of the problem in India. In 1951, India became the first country to accept a national population policy and it was from here that the term 'family planning' was coined to make the programme palatable although nobody

ever explained how and why a '*chhota parivar*' was to be a '*sukhi parivar*' (Small family - happy family - campaign slogan). Gradually there was a growing conviction among US politicians that the US had to play an active role in controlling the population explosion in developing countries. Even the UN agencies find nothing objectionable in the violation of human rights that is involved in denying families a free choice about their size.

Karkal further argued that the practice of using coercion for controlling population growth is well rooted among the Indian as well as international policy-makers. So though that coercion is no longer as blatant as in 1975/76, the aim still is to take away the initiative about family planning from the user and keep it with the provider; hence the move towards promoting long-acting contraceptives and sterilisation rather than diaphragms, pills or even IUDs. Karkal concluded with a brief review of the FPPs of the government of India since the Cairo conference. She felt that although target-free the new health policies still focus only on the women's reproductive period and needs. These would not meet the needs of the average Indian woman who needs healthcare and hygiene throughout her life.

Indian Muslim Women's Response to Independence

The next paper, by Zarina Bhatti, was made lively by the many personal instances that she gave in her analysis. Looking back to the period just after Independence, she described the poignant aftermath of Partition. Families on both sides of the borders lost their relatives, property as well as their earlier sense of community. Those Muslims whose loyalties remained with India, felt hurt and dismayed at the treatment meted out to them; as expected, this alienation to a large extent, got translated into a new conservatism specially vis-a-vis women's position. However, the new circumstances were unusual enough to force families into giving their daughters more responsibilities and with that, more freedom from the *pardah*. For the first time in many families, girls were allowed to go out to work and to mix more freely with other communities.

Unfortunately, the Indian idea of secularism was not to promote neutrality between religions, but to promote all of them. This was partly responsible for the tension that grew in the post-Independence period between the Hindus and the Muslims; even the Urdu language became identified with the Muslim religion. This tension put the breaks on the more radical and liberal Muslim thinking that had been growing before Independence. The Muslim women's movement and their access to secular education in particular received a setback. Many of its earlier leaders had migrated to Pakistan: and the younger women who could have replaced them had greater difficulty in getting access to modern education and liberal ideas in general.

Post-Independence social scientists and scholars ignored the heterogeneity of the Indian Muslim population; they were often placed outside the social structure and isolated from other sections of the population with whom they actually shared a common culture as well as common problems of poverty and deprivation. In the eyes of the rest of the population, there came to be a uniform stereotype of the Indian Muslim and the backwardness of Muslim women became a byword.

Bhatty concluded that, by the time the women's movement in India once again became rejuvenated in the seventies, the divide between the Hindu and Muslim psyches had become so deeply entrenched that even activists in the movement were wary of approaching issues concerning the other.

Role of The All India Women's Conference

In the last paper of the session, Aparna Basu dealt with the historical significance of the AIWC as the voice of the women's movement since the early part of this century. The AIWC had been established in 1927 primarily to promote women's education; but gradually, it had become the spearhead of women's organisations in India.

Although there had always been a few feudal women dignitaries associated with the organisation, most of its leaders had actually been drawn from the prominent women in the political and social movements in India. All its leading members had been actively involved in the freedom struggle. Later, in the early years of Partition, its members had played a leading role in the rehabilitation of displaced women.

In its early years, the organisation had lobbied for various important issues concerning women's lives. Among these were women's right to divorce, their hours of work in factories, universal adult franchise, enactment of a uniform civil code, increasing the legal age at marriage for girls and many others. As an all-India organisation, it was recognised both in India and abroad as the speaker on behalf of all Indian women, fighting for their social, political, and economic rights.

In summing up, Basu observed that, the AIWC's earlier militancy had been based on a dynamic nationalist ideology; but later, after the passing of the Hindu Code Bill in the mid-fifties, the AIWC lost that dynamism. This was partly because many of its members had by then joined the government: it had increasingly become an agency for implementing various women-oriented schemes of government agencies like the Central and State Social Welfare Boards. Chief among these projects were establishment of working women's hostels all over the country and organising vocational training programmes.

Also, Basu observed that, as with most women of the country, in the AIWC too, there was a post-Independence euphoria about what had been achieved; there was also a trust in the sincerity of the new government's concern for women. The organisation had assumed that, while the State would do its best for women, they and other NGOs like themselves would prove adequate for filling whatever gaps in women's welfare that might still be left. The AIWC after all remained an organisation of urban, educated, middle class women who had neither any great awareness of the problems and concerns of women at the grassroots nor the will to raise the latter's consciousness.

In the discussion that followed, several controversies were raised and clarifications sought. It was pointed out that, though in the pre-Independence period, the AIWC had been an umbrella organisation including members even from the Left parties, it had not been as predominant in south India. Further, given its middle class, upper caste base, its appeal had

always been limited. Its declining dynamism and mainstreaming from the 1950s onwards was described by one participant as 'ideological dehydration' which ultimately had led to the formation of an independent National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW). The ideological dilution of the AIWC had gone to such an extreme that at one point it had even suggested that mothers should not work!

Karkal's paper raised certain fundamental questions particularly with reference to the proposed National Population Policy Bill on which there was an urgent need to collate available data and to organise a national debate. Some felt that in the Bill the demands of the women's movement regarding family planning had not received the serious consideration they deserved. In particular, there was need to challenge the clinical use of contraceptive drugs meant for women which did not have proven safety records but were now being sold over the counter. Although originally the demand for family planning measures had come from the women's movement, they could not accept the coercive nature of the subsequent policies being followed by the government. Also, more and more public funds had been directed into the family planning programme, and not into general healthcare. Medical education in the country also put an unnecessary emphasis on contraception. Further, it was pointed out that, particularly in slum areas, sexual violence and general disempowerment prevented women from using contraceptives even when they wanted to. All in all, it seemed essential to many that women themselves set their agenda for birth control and not expect the government to give the right lead.

This brought on a heated debate regarding the movement's stance vis-a-vis the government. Some felt that women should not depend on the State to provide relief and answers to their problems, while others felt that the State could not be absolved of its responsibility. Holding the State accountable was all the more important now since the National Population Policy Bill was likely to be tabled soon. There was need to publicise the fact that the present population policy was skewed in its emphasis on quantity rather than the quality of the population. Though large, the Indian population was physically one of the weakest. Also, though the growth rate of the Indian population was already demonstrably on the decline, quite often, there is a bogey created about its explosive growth by using diverse, ideologically biased techniques.

Within the Bill there was a clause to the effect that persons who had more than two children or who had married before the legal age would be punished by measures such as prohibiting them from contests for elected offices, barring them from entry into government jobs and withdrawing from them healthcare and other benefits like maternity leave. In sum, if implemented, the Bill would punish the economically weaker sections of the population. All left parties and a few other individual MPs were against the Bill, but the majority of MPs were pro-coercive methods. Particularly, the Bill had an obvious communal slant being based on the belief that it would curb the relatively higher rates of population growth among Muslims. Use of coercive powers implied that the authorities viewed women as ignorant, silly beings who bred like animals. The fact is that women lack the information they need about their

bodies and about contraceptives on which they could make the right decisions. Since, after the Emergency, men had been let off the responsibility for contraception, women were being denied knowledge of self-operable and safe contraceptives like diaphragms and cervical caps and were being forced to use risky drugs like Depopova and Norplant. The participants suspected that there was a nexus between Indian family planning policies and foreign official aid which had helped the multinational companies to market risky contraceptives here.

The consensus was that the women's movement would have to react strongly to this Bill in the interests of the poor. A committee was set up to draft an appropriate resolution protesting against the Bill; accordingly on the concluding day of the seminar, the committee presented its draft which was then unanimously passed.

WOMEN AND PEOPLE'S MOVEMENTS: THE GROUNDSWELL

Periyar, Women and the Ethic of Citizenship

V. Geetha's paper looked at aspects of the Self-Respect movement, a radical protest against casteism which had been initiated by E.V. Ramaswamy Periyar in 1925. This movement had raised a storm of defiance, anger and subversion that had convulsed the Tamil territories for the next two decades. Although the movement had been at its strongest in the years preceding Independence, it was relevant to the ongoing discussions because even today, Tamil politics stems from the consciousness that Periyar created.

Periyar was an iconoclast particularly angered by caste as a system of inequality and cruelty. Though influenced by Gandhiji, he differed from the latter on several counts; his chief quarrel with Gandhiji was because the latter found *varnashrama* an acceptable part of the Indian tradition, whereas Periyar continuously raged against it and enjoined Tamils to fight against the oppression that went with it. He blamed not just the social and economic structures which exploited the labour of low caste people and treated them as untouchables, but also the feeling of lowliness that the poor unquestioningly accepted as their lot. He started the Self-Respect movement as a counter to the Gandhian Congress and its over-emphasis on nationalism. Instead, he argued that the liberation of all non-brahmin Tamils lay in the liberation of the *Adi Dravidas*; for that, he launched a social and cultural movement of revolt against caste, brahminism, religion and the rule of men over women.

While Gandhiji believed in religious faith, truth, penance and sacrifice to sustain political and social activism, Periyar trusted reason, rational and critical scrutiny of ideas rather than the sophistry of truth. He highlighted the antagonisms and contradictions inherent in a caste-based society and promoted the need for resistance and struggle against them. Where Gandhiji communicated through complex metaphors drawn from the language of faith and devotion, Periyar spoke as a pedagogue, a teacher who encouraged discussion and debate. Gandhiji's piety and transcendence were presumably dictated by the hegemonic demands of a multi-layered Congress party. Periyar's emphasis on reason and commitment to the here and now left him with a constituency confined to the large and complex non-brahmin bloc.

Along with denouncing the caste hierarchy with all its privileges, Periyar also worked for the reshaping of masculine and feminine subjectivities. Geetha cited from the writings of Neelavathi, a prominent speaker and writer in the Self-Respect movement who, following Periyar's ideas, had sought to establish a homology between women and the *shudras*; the former were condemned to housework and childbearing, but were denied the status of workers. The latter were condemned to their caste status (and labour) and once again denied the identity of productive workers. Along with resistance to caste-based deprivations, women self-respecters also came out against patriarchy. In this, their movement greatly benefited from the Self-Respect Marriage. A Self-Respect Marriage was chiefly meant to be inter-caste and secular, with a social contract made on the basis of individual choices and desires. In the consciousness promoted by the movement, reason and desire did not exist as polar opposites; rather, desire was seen as an adjunct of reason and authenticated only by rational self-expression.

For women in the movement, the new sense of self came to change two aspects of their consciousness. Firstly, the primacy of reason led them to question all the rituals to which they had been bound; and secondly, the mutuality of the relations between men and women made marriage a partnership rather than a hierarchical relation. The self-respecters supported the *devadasi* abolition bill because for them, the system appeared to be a complex and unholy articulation of religion, caste and the claims of masculine sexuality.

Similarly, for the self-respecters, the notion of citizenship defined new modalities of personal and social interactions where self-respect and mutuality governed human relationships and called forth a social commitment to the destruction of caste, faith and gender differences.

Geetha's main intention was to highlight the close links between the Self-Respect movement and the women's movement. She showed how the former movement could help in theorizing the position of those feminists who demand a uniform civil code; it could be shown that the State should be made accountable for the plight of women who suffer discrimination and injustice because of the codes prescribed by State-approved personal laws. She felt that formulating a truly gender-just code would provide a forum for comradeship based on a new and radical female subjectivity.

State and Dalit Organisations

The next paper by Meera Velayudhan began with the history of Dr. Ambedkar's shift in the forties from a belief in mass struggle by *Dalits* for their rights, to a position of negotiating for their citizenship. Holding that the forties was a crucial period because of the beginning of these *Dalit* negotiations with the State, Velayudhan focused on Ambedkar's dialogue at that time with Gandhiji on the question of *Dalit* rights in independent India. Ambedkar held that political rights alone would not guarantee social and economic rights to the *Dalits*; he rightly characterised 'development' to be hegemonic and oriented towards the upper castes and classes. He believed that the *Dalits* could get security only by taking charge of their own development. It was on that understanding that negotiations were conducted.

In post-Independence India however, though the *Dalits* did get citizenship rights, these

were being continuously monitored by a violent State; therefore, Ambedkar's 1940 position can be read as a critique of the Nehruvian paradigm of development. In post-Independence India, contrary to the Gandhian model of decentralisation of governance through mobilising opinion, power once again got concentrated in the hands of an upper-class-caste bureaucracy. And their policies marginalised the *Dalits* from the main course of development.

Velayudhan cited from the experiences and memories of her mother who had been the only *dalit* woman in the constituent assembly. The latter could recall how in Kerala, the anti-caste and the nationalist movements had gone hand in hand. Attempts had been made to redefine the roles of women while still keeping them within the Hindu structure. The hope was that, with increasing class consciousness, caste consciousness would disappear. The anti-caste movement had not only questioned the discriminative hierarchies that castes created between different groups of people; it also questioned the division of labour on which it was based and which exploited certain sections of people and denied them dignity and socio-economic rights. In post-Independence India, however, the ethos became one of bargaining and negotiating for citizenship and positions of power at the level of various subnational identities. The responses to such negotiations came to be marked with much hostility on the part of the educated upper caste elite; also, a lot of confusion was created between communalism and casteism.

Srikakulam Movement

In the last paper of the session, U Vindhya placed the Srikakulam movement in Andhra Pradesh in the context of the duality with which tribals dealt with the state. At one level, they were revolting against the State's repulsive policies; at another they were a little baffled and confused by the State's role in their development. In post-Independence India, Srikakulam was the first district in Andhra Pradesh to witness an armed struggle led by the Marxist-Leninist variant of the Communist Party of India. It was brutal and brief and by 1970, it had been crushed. A significant feature of this movement was the participation of women in unprecedented numbers and the impact it had on their consciousness.

The Srikakulam district is topographically divided into two regions, the agency areas which are hilly, mainly inhabited by tribals, and the plains and coastal areas. It was in the former that the struggle was more intense and had a much greater participation of women. The struggle started in 1960 when there was an armed uprising in that area by an organisation of tribals called 'Girijan Sangham'; it was on the issues of land and wages and against the nexus between the exploitative landlords, moneylenders, forest revenue officials and the police.

Later, Venkata Sattyam organised the people under the broad ideology of the CPI(ML) into a militant movement. The State was defined as 'They' as against 'We', the oppressed, who included both the tribals and the plains people. There was a further increase in women's political participation when the movement began to address immediate economic issues like the right to cultivation, of access to forests, abolition of customary forced labour, etc. It also addressed social issues like payment of bride-price and advocated for women marriage by

Tebhaga Movement

Kavita Panjabi filled us in on the background of the Tebhaga movement. It was a mass struggle of the sharecroppers of rural Bengal against the landlords' traditional claim to two-thirds of the crop that the former harvested. The movement started with the Kisan Sabha in September 1946 after a major threat of crop failure; and it was marked by the participation of very large numbers of women. Panjabi explained that the paper had been prepared on the basis of an enquiry about the movement that she was conducting with her partner, Paromita Banerjee; their method was to conduct open-ended communications with women leaders and peasants who still had memories of their personal involvement in the movement. Amulya Sen's book, "In Search of Our Selves - Women's Experiences in Tebhaga movement." had provided them with valuable leads for these.

Panjabi described how the 'Nari Bahini' and 'Janata Bahini' had provided militant vitality to the movement; hundreds of women whose only weapons had been their home-made pickles or chilli powder had bravely fought with the police. They had taken out a 'Rally of the Hungry' for providing food during the ensuing famine.

Panjabi pointed out that the left movement and the women had been able to enrich each other in their united struggles under this banner. Closely linked to the movement were the structural and political notions of class. The urban educated middle classes had little sympathy for the rural remnants of feudalism; so they had provided leadership to the rural masses; the latter on the other hand had provided visibility and credibility to the movement. Women had played an additional important role in building solidarity between the Hindus and the Muslims.

The Mahila Samitis had often raised questions about gender-based discrimination in the Kisan Sabhas and the communes - issues such as "my man beats me up", or that "we cultivate, we produce, we market, so why do the husbands take the bigger share?" They also used social codes and traditional ideas as a strategy to deal with the police and their own comrades. These women had come forward because to them, it had become a 'basic needs movement'; their slogan was, "when the kids don't get rice, mothers come out". The organisation which emerged from this movement then took up the cause of the beedi workers for better wages; even today, it works at the grassroots with women to fight patriarchy.

While the women acknowledged that the leftist ideologies had strengthened and organised them, their own contributions to the struggles were not given due recognition by the latter.

Maha-Gujarat Movement

Varsha Bhagat took up another movement of the 1950s which considered language as a feature creating nationalities and bonds between people speaking a common language. Its demand was for a separate state of Gujarat for the Gujarati speaking people from Maharashtra. It attracted a number of women who had earlier been active in the freedom movement. Bhagat had reconstructed this history mainly through their narratives about how women had come to join the movement and what had been their activities and experiences in it.

In August 1947, Maharashtra had been declared a united bilingual state. The Maha-Gujarat

movement began on 8th August 1950, when eight students who were protesting against this were killed in police firing. The very next day several women appealed to the government against such indiscriminate firing on students of independent India. There were several rallies including one in which three lakh women marched through the streets. Later, they participated in a 'Janta curfew', a self-imposed curfew and a 'Jail Bharo Andolan' in which 21 women deliberately courted arrest and were sent to jail under the leadership of Ranjanaben Dalal. The movement saw women taking out processions with torches, black flags, black clothes, etc. There were special '*prabhat pheris*' or morning tours through the streets for which special songs and dances were composed on the Maha-Gujarat theme.

Responses to these papers largely took the shape of providing additional information. One of the participants remarked that every history had a pre-history. In the case of the Tebhaga Movement, the CPI had been mobilising women of rural areas since 1945. However, it was in crisis situations that women were activated only to be ignored when the crisis was over. It was important therefore to examine this historical disjunction in order to understand how women could participate so effectively but briefly in the Tebhaga movement.

Regarding the Maha-Gujarat movement, some felt that it was necessary to take account of the various organisations in Maharashtra which had supported the idea of separate statehood for Gujarat. The women in the Maha-Gujarat movement were mainly from upper-class-caste urban backgrounds, and influential in their own right. Hence, they were able to get privileged treatment in jail. Moreover, the movement had been shaped both by the absence of a significant Left movement and by the presence of a powerful Gandhian tradition in the region.

DISPLACEMENT AND REHABILITATION

Freedom in an idiom of loss: The Feminine in Partition Literature and Cinema

Jasodhara Bagchi in her eloquent presentation, alluded to the deep scar on the mind and body of Bengal - of 'Sonar Bangla' - and the agony of those uprooted by the man-made partition. She recited several poignant poems that Rabindranath Tagore had penned when Lord Curzon made the first attempt at partitioning Bengal in 1905. To her, they seemed equally relevant to the second partition of 1947.

In Bengal, women were not exchanged in lieu of property and cattle; but the chastity belt that had been heroically worn by women to save the family honour had been seen as the signifier of the most important defense against total social disaster. In all accounts of the Bengal Partition, an inevitable refrain is that of the abduction of women. Moral reputation or rather, a hypocritical obsession with women's sexual purity and their bodies was used as a pawn even in the game of nation building.

Bagchi referred to a significant work of that period; Jyotirmoyee Devi's 'Epar Ganga Opar Ganga' (The river is churning) a Partition novel written in 1967. It focuses on violence and probable rape of a Hindu girl in East Bengal and her subsequent marginalisation by her own community in post Partition 'secular' India. Violation of her sexuality is the great 'unspoken'

Historically, the poetry of 'Siva Kanulu', of the *bhakti* poets, and verses by Vemana all of whom had strongly opposed the caste system laid the foundations of Dalit poetry. Joshua who wrote 'Gabbilam' (the bat) can be called the first Dalit poet; he was followed by other Dalit poets like Nakka Chinnanenkayya, Jala Rangakani and Kusuma Dharmanna. Dalit poetry has its roots in Telugu Dalit movements like Chundururu, Karamchedu, as well as the Ambedkarite anti-caste movements and the Dalit Panther Movement in Maharashtra. To date, there are about thirty Dalit poetry anthologies in Telugu.

Poetry by Dalit women, written from their own perspectives exposes the triple oppression that a Dalit woman faces on account of her gender as well as in the caste/class hierarchies. She is thus a dalit even among the dalits. A large part of the written and oral literature composed and sung by Dalits for centuries has been destroyed over time. Molla, who wrote the Ramayanam in Telugu, could be called the first Dalit woman poet; she was followed by others such as Kolakaluri, Swaroopa Rani and M. Gauri.

Swarooparani recited several poems describing this triple exploitation of women; the themes were: denial of education, sexual atrocities and rape, the *Devadasi* system, the woes of working women, the indispensability of her labour, etc. Some poems also talked about the humiliation that Dalit women face from upper caste women.

Swarooparani remarked that Dalit women's issues had not been represented adequately in feminist writing.

Literature in Gujarati

Sonal Shukla in her presentation, focused on one author named 'Darshak' who was the last of the Gandhian writers. He ran away from home at the age of sixteen to join Gandhi in the Dandi March. He was greatly influenced by another Gandhian, Nanabhai Bhatt, who wrote children's books and gave nationalist education to children. Himself a Gandhian worker and an educationist, the novelist was active throughout the fifties and sixties. Shukla discussed one of his novels set in pre-Independence India where Rohini the central character is supposed to be a role model for the educated Indian woman. That novel explored the development of nation and the ideal Indian woman.

Dhiruben Patel emerged as the first woman writer; but she was acclaimed only orally. In reviews and critical histories of Gujarati literature she is totally marginalised.

Shukla discussed how post-Gandhian literature Gujarati had often rebelled against Gandhian politics. However, there was no Dalit literature in Gujarati in the first twenty-five years after independence

Literature in the East

Nabaneeta Deb Sen began her presentation with a historical review of writing in Bengal. In the thirties, some writers rebelled against Tagore and created a new genre of literature. They were closely followed by a new group of poets and writers who emerged in the forties. In the fifties, not all writers responded to the agony of Partition; some who did, described the

experiences in a romantic way. It was Jyotirmoyee Devi, an eminent woman writer who wrote vividly on the theme, but she did not get any recognition. Deb Sen drew attention to the silencing apparatus of Bengali literary history which did not take women's writings seriously. There was, however, a considerable sisterhood among women writers. In a review of Bengali novels, Srikumari Banerjee made serialised mention of women novelists.

Jyotirmoyee Devi (1894-1994) was the most prominent writer and wrote extensively on issues like rape victims, readjustment into families, child marriages, widowhood, divorce etc. that concerned women. Ashapurna Devi was another such writer. In Mahasweta Devi's writings a woman is often the central character; but she generally does not focus specifically on women's issues.

Locating her own position within this, Deb Sen recalled that her own early response to women's writings was very much a stereotyped rejection as dictated by the patriarchal values that we all internalise. It was in later years that she realised the worth of the writings of the women who had made literary life available to her since her childhood. She strongly objected to the term "women's writings" which is used by male anthologists to sideline women's literature. She felt that, unless women appoint themselves as custodians of general literature, they will continue to face such marginalisation.

In Search of a New Role: Women's Aspect in IPTA

Malini Bhattacharya traced the history of women participants in the IPTA performances in Bengal from the forties and fifties; she also circulated a useful handout about these women.

Bhattacharya's project was to explore the impact of the engagement in cultural and political activities on class/gender identities. According to her, it was the disjunction in social and cultural practices in the 1940s which had enabled women to transcend the conservative family values of their class identities and to come forward to participate in cultural activities. The main impetus had come from the Communist Party of India for whom it had been imperative to overcome the traditional class/caste barriers in the interest of the anti-imperial and anti-feudal thrust of its policies. Both men and women were eligible for its membership. As a result, a broad forum cutting across the class/caste and gender divide had emerged which could effectively deploy theatre in the interest of political issues.

However, Bhattacharya pointed out that the women's creativity was limited not just to a particular moment in history but also to the specific activities of singing, dancing and drama. More active participation in the form of directing theatre, writing plays and composing songs was still a male preserve.

Manikuntala Sen, Anu Dasgupta and Tripti Bhaduri had formed their own group; they, along with Shobha Sen, were among the leading women performers; Reba Roy was a prominent Left activist who went to Bombay to perform in the central squad there. Usha Datta, another interesting performer, came from a land owning family in Faridpur; she participated in the relief work in Rangpur. She joined the Party commune in Calcutta, learnt Manipuri dancing in Assam and performed in the Punjab squad.

In 1940, in the pre-IPTA days, the Youth Cultural Institute had staged 'In the heart of China'; initially, women artistes used to be segregated during the performance and were not allowed to dance in the action song. But later mixed dancing of boys and girls was encouraged.

'Nabanna' performed in 1944, marked the performative transformation of Bengali theatre; the Bengali middle class started looking outside their own class context. Most of the women participants were drawn from the Hindu middle class and their roles in the theatre had involved a conscious transformation of their identities. The IPTA plays also incorporated a new perception of the roles of women. In independent India, the IPTA was revived with the performance of 'Neel Darpan'. However, its glorious role in the Bengali theatre came to an end with the ideological crises of the CPI and the ban imposed on it in 1951. Increasing State patronage of the arts in the form of the Akademis also reduced the importance of such efforts.

Theatre in Maharashtra

Pushpa Bhave's presentation linked the cultural representations in the early years of Independence to the process of nation building. Formulating nationalism in line with Benedict Anderson's 'Imagined Communities', Bhave interpreted it in terms of systems of cultural significance. The national space is constructed out of competing associations of human societal values; nonetheless it is assumed that the nation is a monolith. The first advocate to break out of this bind and to introduce the idea of multiple narrations in the cultural space was Jyotiba Phule: however, his kind of ideas, according to Bhave, came to be lost in the domination via the Nehruvian rhetoric — 'Unity in diversity'.

The emergence of Marathi theatre has to be seen against the wider socio-economic character of capitalism. Uneven development which led to uneven economic growth, had a bearing on the various cultural manifestations. Had the earlier folk and indigenous traditions been allowed free play, Marathi theatre in its modern form might not have emerged. But in its emergence, it also marked a rupture with the British theatrical traditions. In Bal Gandharva, the Marathi theatre reached a golden period and his association with the nationalist movement transformed him into a cult figure.

Amidst the euphoria of the Nehruvian era, there emerged the rebellious figure of P L Deshpande, a playwright who not only abandoned the Gandhian ideology but professed hedonism through his plays. As a discourse this was considered to be dangerous because it redefined liberation as self-indulgence and self-appeasement. Bhave underlined the importance of movements such as Phule's and the folk theatre, the Prithvi theatre and the IPTA. Unfortunately, the Bombay IPTA got absorbed and appropriated by the emerging commercial cinema.

The theatre got its pro-Dalit orientation only after the emergence of several experimental groups in 1954 which took a conscious anti-establishment stance. Bhave however felt that the honours should go to Vijay Tendulkar, in whose plays emerged a new notion of woman and who encouraged women artists in the performances of his plays.

Nationalism and Gender Sexuality

The session concluded with a paper on films and women by Gayatri Chatterjee. Her timeframe was a decade before and a decade after Independence. She asserted that films always have a sense of history and that the history of representation is embedded in the history of the country. Chatterjee distinguished between two levels within a film — 1) the banal or the surface level, and 2) the hidden dimension of history. According to her, Ritwik Ghatak's films are unique in the sense that the historical or unique overrides the banal. The example given was that of 'Subarnarekha'. Viewed from this perspective, films represent either an alliance or a disjunction with history.

Between the two alternatives, the new genre of the Discovery of India films appeared. On the one hand, it formed a counterpart to the Nehruvian rhetoric of the modern and on the other, it represented the orientalist dimension. 'Yatrik' of 1952 was a case in point which demonstrated the collusion between the nationalist and orientalist discourses. Films like 'Andaaz' of 1944 are to be seen against the wider history of capitalism. In the same vein, a rape scene becomes an allegory for the city taking over the village. Violence in this context becomes an organisational principle. According to Chatterjee, the factor of resemblance to life and the banality that necessarily goes with it in the viewing of films obstructs the analysis of films from their historical/allegorical perspective.

In the discussion that followed, it was pointed out by one of the participants that the Bengali middle class was not active in the dance form. Also the Bengali theatre had often mimicked the British nationalist middle class ideology of the theatre as a watchdog on behalf of the elite lifestyle. In fact the claim of being a 'mass theatre' dehydrated the opportunities for the masses. Some participants felt that the IPTA movement in Bengal did not die out in the fifties, but shifted to local arenas.

Various arguments were put forward to highlight the importance of the IPTA. The use of body language by the IPTA in its performances had ushered in a new era of liberation for women and expanded the form of urban theatre. In fact, one of its squads had polished up and refined various folk forms. The political thrust towards anti-imperialist struggles in its performances had an appeal for a broad spectrum of people. In the fifties when the CPI was banned, it was for its survival that the IPTA had collaborated with the Sangeet Natak Akademi in West Bengal. Some other changes also became necessary with the emergence of censorship; religious themes could only be portrayed as allegories. The role of IPTA in starting the Urdu literacy movement in Maharashtra and the inclusion of plays about family situations by Bal Gandharva Natak Mandali in 1923 was also pointed out.

SUMMING UP

Neera Desai summed up the proceedings: the three days of the seminar had been full of enthusiasm and inspiration. They had provided wonderful insights into the events during the early decades of Independence from the perspectives of different women. She added that there had been some hesitation in the initial stages about organising such a seminar, but the

events of the last three days had justified the efforts. Particularly, the narratives of the several women who had participated in various movements had given us glimpses of their courage, their resourcefulness and their inner strengths which all would long treasure. Indeed we need to make more effort to preserve the memories of such valuable experiences.

For the organisers, it was a matter of regret that discussions on some other areas like education, legal issues, the *Sarvodaya* and the trade union movements could not be included. Desai sincerely hoped that there would be future occasions when this forum would be able to uncover those histories and give them their rightful place in our consciousness.

In sum, the conclusion we came to was that the early years after Independence were certainly not the 'silent years' of women's movements. Within the constraints of the socio-cultural context of that era, women had responded in various strong ways; they had participated in diverse struggles against the exploitative and chaotic environment of those times. Perhaps we should end on the note that it was in fact not an era of euphoria but an era of powerful struggle.

Chhaya Datar in her vote of thanks lauded the constant dialogue and discussions between the IAWS and the CWDS that had made the seminar a success. She also thanked M.S. University colleagues for their wonderful hospitality and efficient organisation which had made the seminar such an enjoyable experience.

Resolutions: The seminar came to an end with the decision to send the unanimously passed resolution against the proposed population policy to the President. The participants also resolved to evolve a research agenda to analyse the linkages between various movements.

The organisers of the Seminar are happy to have at least partially fulfilled their promise to explore opportunities for publishing the papers as well as the testimonies that were presented. This monograph is first and foremost a record of the moving testimonies of our respected elders. The video and audio tapes of those narrations are available with the IAWS for those who wish to use them for any documentation or presentations.

*Narratives of
Six Veteran Activists*

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Manavati Arya

Manavati Arya was born in Maiktila in upper Myanmar (Burma) in 1920. As a member of the women's wing of the Indian Independence League she worked out a detailed proposal for the increased participation of women in the ongoing struggle. Impressed by this proposal, Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose appointed her Secretary-In-Charge of Women and Children in the provisional government of the Azad Hind. She later served as a lieutenant in charge of the first batch of women of the Rani of Jhansi Regiment which went into action on the Indo-Burma Front.

At present Manavati Arya devotes her time mostly to writing — to reawaken the youth of India. Her literature for children in Hindi has brought her all-India fame.

“We tender caring mothers were trained for armed combat”

Manavati Arya

To begin with, let me tell you that I am an Indian citizen who from birth in 1920 till she was twenty-six years old, had never even seen India. And not for one day did I get the opportunity to study India's national language Hindi at any school. My entire education was completed in Burma, through the medium of Burmese and English. But I am happy to say that my dear father who was a postmaster, and whose only child I was, took me with him to the post office every day, sat me down beside him and taught me Hindi; he told me about the history of Hindusthan, about the freedom struggle going on there. He taught me all this right from childhood till I was ten; he didn't send me to school because he wanted to make sure I was a thorough Indian to the core. Not till I was eleven did I see the inside of any school, and that was a convent. That in brief is my background. Now I would like to tell you a little about the Burma of those times. I am seventy seven now, so take it that I'm talking of the situation sixty-sixtyfive years ago. In those days, women were not as independent as they are today. I myself faced a lot of opposition regarding studies. Father used to teach me at home, and my mother was not at all in favour of my going outside the house to study. Somehow, after much argument, I managed to get through high school at age twenty, and was studying for my intermediate when the war broke out. After that, the rest of my studies were completed here in India. That is a short summary of my early life. What I would like to stress is the way my father instilled in me bit by bit from early childhood a love for my motherland, a love for her language. That is the reason why I am speaking to you in Hindi with such pride, even amongst all you English-speaking sisters. Because I firmly believe that a nation whose national language does not flourish, whose every citizen does not use that common language with pride, that nation has no voice, it is dumb. How can we be proud of ourselves as a nation if we are not in favour of, and very strictly affectionate towards, the national language? I would first of all appeal to all my sisters here to learn the national language and give due respect to it so that we can proudly say that we are not a dumb nation. Now I can come to the point for which all my sisters are eagerly waiting. My experience in the women's movement in Burma. I shall go back to Hindi again,

please excuse me. Not because I don't give value to English, but I value the national language more. I value my mother more than I do my aunt. Well then, people ask me how come I became such a staunch nationalist, when I didn't even live in the country, didn't study Hindi, didn't experience the environment of Hindustan. That I have already explained. When the English started retreating, leaving us Indians in a foreign land, many came seeking refuge with us, naturally all Indians, not only in Burma, but in all of South-East Asia, and there were thousands and thousands of them, forty thousand Indian prisoners of war, and their anger against the English had increased even more. Those Indian soldiers who had been used as tools for the expansion of English imperialism became their natural enemies. Ordinary citizens too felt that the English are running to save their own skins, and leaving us here to die. They are deserting us. So there was natural hatred against them. That, plus Rashbehari Bose's efforts from 1915 - the revolutionary Rashbehari Bose who had taken refuge in Japan, become a Japanese citizen, married a Japanese woman - he had kept the light of the revolutionary struggle burning there. He bore the torch of freedom struggle in South East Asia, especially in Japan, when he became a citizen of Japan. The Indian Independence League that he founded there became very active around this time, and all of us came under their banner to fight for India's Independence. The prisoners of war from the English army - we called them Ghulam Hind Fauj - these Ghulam Hind Fauj soldiers were inducted by the Japanese and the Indian Independence League people to work out a joint programme, which led to the formation of the Indian Liberation Army, to fight for Indian Independence. Netaji was then in Germany. Netaji's influence was there; but the Azad Hind Fauj was formed under General Mohan Singh. For this reason, some misunderstandings arose between Mohan Singh and the Japanese, on one hand; on the other hand, our revolutionary leader Rashbehari Bose, who was quite aged by then, and quite infirm, felt that he was no longer capable on his own of running things the way they should be. He sought the cooperation of the Axis powers consisting of Germany, Japan and Italy. He negotiated with Germany to try and bring Netaji over to Japan, and once Netaji was in South-East Asia our Azad Hind struggle gathered real force. While he was in Germany, so far from the Indian Front, Netaji was not able to do much. But once he was on the Eastern Front, based in a bordering country, we accomplished much good work. Consequently, all the twentyfive to thirty lakh Indians who were there, plus the forty thousand ex-English army men, were mobilised after Netaji's arrival, and the detailed history of that struggle must be already known to you. Here I shall talk of the women's participation because that is what you wanted to know. As I said earlier, women were not so independent then, not even literate, particularly those who went abroad to make a living, were from a poorer strata. And very few of the poor women were able to read or write. Take my own case for instance. My mother was from a village near Faizabad, and totally illiterate. My father taught her to read so she could help me with my studies, and studying along with me she became much better read than me and was able to teach me. In such circumstances, when the women were all illiterate, when the purdah prevailed, and they were forced to live

within the confines of the four walls of their homes, just imagine what a unique achievement it was to build up a regiment in those times - unprecedented. Something unprecedented in the history of the world for a women's regiment to be built when they would not normally be allowed out of the four walls of their homes. That was due to the influence of Netaji, and because the developing international situation of those times was in our favour, we could exploit the moment, take full advantage of it, so that the consciousness raising which Netaji inspired led to the formation of this women's regiment. Before Netaji arrived, I had been working with the Indian Independence League as a civilian member. I taught school, and in my spare time did propaganda work within the Indian community. Did some fund-raising too. When Netaji came, he gave a call for Total Mobilisation. For Total Independence we needed Total Mobilisation. From every home, every family, menfolk joined the Azad Hind Fauj, women joined the Jhansi Regiment, children joined the Balak Sena, and the old folk formed the Azad Hind Dal. That is how the organisation was built up. Prior to this, the more educated women of the upper classes would hold meetings and when the meeting ended they held rasgolla parties among themselves while the rest of us went home. It struck me then that Netaji had given a call for total mobilisation, and these fine ladies from rich families were only playing at politics, sitting there singing songs, talking big about patriotism, and going back home after their rasgolla party. How could this forward the cause of independence in any way? It made no sense to me. I felt very bad. My opinion was that for total mobilisation to happen, every woman, each and every one of them, be she in *pardah* or in burkha, must be persuaded to help. We needed some sort of programme to bring them into our fold. I worked out an eleven point programme and typed it out myself. I was just a small time teacher, I couldn't get a typist to help me. So I typed it all out by myself, put my heart into it, and then I took it along to Lakshmiji - Lt Col Lakshmi Saigal, who was Swaminathan then - so I presented it to Lakshmiji as my programme of action. Unless we follow this, total mobilisation will not be possible. Lakshmiji liked my plan. It appealed to her and she told me that Netaji was expected any day, 'I will see that you get to meet him and present this plan to him yourself.' When Netaji came that first time, he was to visit the Jhansi Regiment camp which had managed a few recruits then and Netaji was to meet them. I was called too, for the same appointment. I arrived. When I gave him the scheme, Netaji said, paper doesn't work. Let me tell you at the outset that I knew Bengali too, and at that age I was eager to make a mark. So I thought I would speak in Bengali. Netaji would be very pleased to meet a Bengali. I handed him the paper and spoke to him in Bengali, and I feel so proud to say this, why I'm so proud of the national language, because Netaji replied to me in Hindi, and he spoke in Hindi all along. I, a non-Bengali, spoke to him in Bengali, but he spoke to me in Hindi, and he said that this programme on paper wouldn't be of any use. The person who had thought of the programme, the one who had visualised it, would have to implement it, so come to the Headquarters tomorrow morning and join up. Mechanically, in a matter of fact way, so there was no question of arguing over this, it was Netaji's order. Even though I was my parents' only child, I went there straight the very next

morning, was made Secretary of the Women's Department that very day and had to take full charge right away. I became a full-timer from then on. That was in the first week of January, 1944. From then on till April 1945, I was in constant touch with Netaji, being attached to his Headquarters. Now I shall tell you a little about the programme itself. At that time, when women were so backward, how could we involve them in our work. My programme kept in mind the women in burkha, the muslim women who were great with their needles, but never ventured outside the house, never came to any meeting, so I thought up a sewing campaign for them. They were to sew up little bags, put needles, thread, buttons, pins, buckles in each as part of the soldiers' kits. We needed thousands of these. Women were to collect all the items, sew up the bags, fill them and have them ready as fast as possible. These sewing kits were one, preparing packets of dry food was another. Further, the women's organisations would visit wounded soldiers in hospital, take presents for them, see that they were being looked after properly. Yet another task was to see-off the soldiers going to the Front, put tilak on their foreheads and bless them. That sort of thing. And also to get more women to join in, holding meetings, staging plays and musical soirees - because let me tell you that Indian women living abroad were not too well-informed about happenings back home. So we had consciousness raising work to do. In this manner, women from every strata of society, each according to her capacity and with the cooperation of others, became active participants, and that was the reason why there awareness rose, and naturally recruitment became much easier. I came in late as I said, after Col Lakshmi came over to Burma, that's when I became a whole-timer. I say this with deep gratitude, I feel a great obligation towards her, because she was the one who made it possible for me to meet Netaji. Just as it is said that - Guru Gobind dhou khade khake lago payen/ Bhalihari Guru aapne Gobind diou batayen. (Guru and God stand before you who to honour first/ When Guru himself has shown the way as God?)

So Lakshmi was the woman who led me to Netaji. Secondly, Lakshmi has earned our respect as the first woman in the history of India to be a minister in our independent government, and Col Lakshmi was the woman who had the good fortune to meet Netaji first. She was Lakshmi Swaminathan then, when she presented a Guard of Honour of sari-clad women - uniforms were not ready, the Jhansi Regiment was still not formed. The nucleus of the Rani Jhansi Regiment was in that first group of sari-clad women. The regiment was trained as *vakayda* soldiers. Each chose her line of work according to her aptitude, her preference - if she liked nursing, she'd take that up. Some chose to be part of the military police. Others were soldiers doing administrative work. There were three lady doctors in the Jhansi Regiment - Dr Narula, Dr Gyan Kaur - who became Gyan Puri later - and Dr Lakshmi herself. All three women later chose to live in Kanpur by chance.

Well, that is how in those days, we saw the rise of such immense patriotic fervour which I don't see nowadays in our own children. I see the present generation and I feel sad that they are being distanced from this history. In our time, we had to study Burmese and English history in school. But how much Indian history I learnt even though I was abroad; here they

study Indian history of course, but the things that would provide inspiration to our children are left out. So much so that sometimes if I tell the youngsters that I was with Netaji, they turn around and ask, which neta is that?

I wind up with that. Since my sisters here ask about the Jhansi Regiment, I'll recite a few lines from a long poem I composed. Here's how it goes -

Declaration of the Rani Jhansi Regiment.

We fought for independence, did not mind the cost.

Inspired by Rani of Jhansi who fought though all was lost!

Lakshmibai the homemaker, wife, mother, and queen,

All womanly virtues, yet the bravest warrior ever seen.

What power the race of mothers have, Netaji showed us that,

We tender caring mothers were trained for armed combat!

Strength to bear all hardship, strength of inner resolve,

Self-sacrifice and unity where weaknesses dissolve!

To march into the battlefield without a trace of fear,

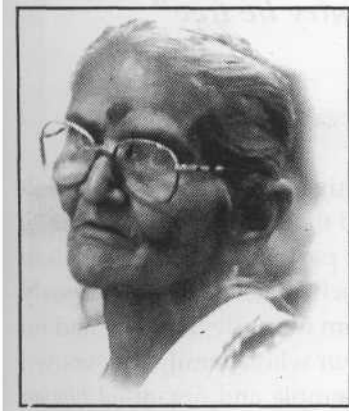
Beat the English, throw them out! The cry was loud and clear!

Even the oldies girded up, their strength of will new forged,

And joined the march for freedom with the Azad Hind Fauj!

It's a very long poem and I don't have time to recite any more. This was just to give you some idea of how it goes. Perhaps if I get the opportunity, I'll publish it as a book some day.

JAI HIND!



Dasriben Chaudhari

Dasriben Chaudhari was born in Vedchi village in the Valud district of Maharashtra, nearly eighty years ago. Her community was earlier known as chaudharas. The tribes in this area were generally referred to as kali paraj, the black people. Later they were called rani paraj, that is people of the forests. Now the general term adivasis or original inhabitants is used. Dasriben is short and lean in built; but surprisingly agile for her age. She also sings beautifully, with a strong, clear voice.

“Let this head be crushed but our country be free”

Dasriben Chaudhari

From the song of the Women's Brigade

When Gandhiji launched his satyagraha movement, he was motivated by certain moral values, such as nonviolence, patience, tolerance. He was convinced that women were naturally endowed with such qualities and would have to be important participants in the freedom struggle. Of course, we did not know about all these ideas till much later. I was tremendously influenced by my grandfather, Jivanlal, who was a reformer from his early days. He had no bad habits, he didn't drink, and was free from all vices. In fact our whole family was known to be very strict in such matters. My grandfather went to the temple and organised *bhajan mandlis* - where religious songs are sung. He was also a nationalist.

This was a period when there was considerable influence of the *devi* cult in our region. The bad practices of the *adivasis* went through a wave of reforms. Many of our people came under its influence in one way or another. They stopped drinking liquor and came to the *bhajan mandlis* in their free time. My grandfather took great interest in this movement. Being a teacher, he could influence other teachers and prominent people. The reforms were spread through *bhajans* or songs. They went from village to village urging people to abandon arrack and other vile social practices.

Gandhiji came to Vedchi in 1924. We were all thrilled beyond words. To actually see him in flesh and blood was such great good fortune! Of course, we were very young then. Around that time, my grandfather acquired a *charkha* (spinning wheel) from Bardoli. He knew both spinning and weaving; and he set up these activities in our region. All this was constructive work; but Gandhiji of course had to face tremendous resistance when he initiated these ideas.

I learnt to spin too, but I didn't know weaving. I was also learning to make my own clothes. I remember once, a *bhajan mandli* had been set up in our locality. Everyone had assembled, but my grandfather who would lead the group had been held up somewhere else. So I picked up my grandfather's *pagari* (turban), I put it on my head and took charge of the situation. "Sit down, everyone! Start singing the *bhajans*!" I was hardly seven or eight years old then, but I was already learning to play the role of a leader!

In 1926, Gandhiji visited us again. Crowds of women were there this time to see him. I too

went along with them. I had made a *sutari anti* (a garland of thread) from the cotton I had spun, to garland Gandhiji with. I was wearing handwoven khadi and various ornaments. I was so small I couldn't reach up to his neck, so someone lifted me up and I garlanded him. Gandhiji smiled and commented on the ornaments I was wearing, and asked, "What are these?" "These are ornaments. My uncle had them made for me," I told him smiling proudly. "Little one, these are not ornaments, these are shackles, don't wear them." So I took them off there and then, and ever since that day I have never worn any gold or silver ornaments.

In 1928, Sardar Patel launched a No-Tax agitation in Bardoli. He held a meeting in our area which I attended. Vallabhai explained how this was one way to fight the British, and that women as well as men were to join in to ensure the movement's success. I plunged in right away, mobilising my own people, the tribals. They were illiterate, backward and quite uninformed about the outside world. To them I seemed to be quite a knowledgeable person. So they were willing to listen to me. I went from village to village gathering support for the No-Tax agitation in Bardoli. The land revenue was indeed very high at the time, so people were to simply refuse to pay. We formed a woman's brigade and held meetings. There was a song we sang regularly which went like this:

"Let this head be crushed, but our country be free,

"Let this life be gone, but our country be free."

I talked to the people, assured them of the success of the struggle. I gave them courage to resist paying the tax until it was reduced. They responded because the tax was really oppressive.

My grandfather had a fair amount of land, but he refused to pay tax. He was thrown into a shallow pit, and the police started trampling all over his back. There was blood all over him. Another old man had to pay just one anna as revenue, but he too refused and was severely beaten up. The revenue officers confiscated a person's land and threw him out on the streets. Still the resistance continued, until the government was forced to reduce the rates. Vallabhai's leadership was acclaimed, and Gandhiji gave him the title of Sardar.

In 1929, we started an agitation against country liquor or *tadi* which was the common drink in the area. We formed a woman's brigade and picketed a liquor shop owned by a Parsee. He simply pushed us all out in the street. So, since this strategy did not work, we went to the people who actually made the liquor and persuaded them not to sell. We knew that drinking was an evil habit, and how the tribals were being exploited through their addiction. Finally, we decided to cut down the pine and date palm trees from which the liquor was made.

Once that movement was over, I went to a national educational institution to study. Mithuben Petit was running that school. Kasturba was also there. One day she received a letter from Gandhiji. It said that a civil disobedience movement had to be launched; she, Mithuben, Kalyanjibhai, should all join in. I too participated in the Salt March. We were four women in our batch. We went round the villages to rally support for the struggle. We were all arrested; but I, being under age, was let go. My father was in jail at the time,

-serving a nine month sentence. He had asked me not to participate in the movement, but still I had. So when the police asked me to apologise for my conduct, I refused. Why should I apologise?

In 1933, I was involved in the Boycott British movement. We formed a batch of six women to picket shops selling foreign cloth. We went to Surat in secret. We hid in a temple, dressed in ordinary clothes, not *khadi* so that we would not be identified. The foreign cloth shop was in the main bazaar. At an appropriate time, we began shouting slogans against foreign goods. We held banners saying, Use Swadeshi. Boycott foreign cloth. Use khadi. We cordoned the shop and started singing. This is how my song went:

"I went to the cloth market,
I saw the colour of khadi.
I saw fine muslin too
And felt pain in my heart.
Here I stand in the midst
Of the market, with khadi
Intoxicating my heart."

The shopkeepers gradually realised that these girls would not allow any customers to buy their cloth. They called in the police. "Why are you coming in the way of the customers? Why are you not allowing the shopkeeper to sell his goods?" the policemen asked. "We're here to break the law. We're fighting for freedom," we replied. One of them pointed at me and said, "Hey girl, you look too young. Go away, and promise not to take part in such activities ever again." I refused of course. So we were lined up in pairs, bound up with ropes, and taken into custody. Our case was put up in the court at Surat. I, being the youngest, was called last. "How old are you?" the officer asked. "How do I know?" I replied. "Do you think my parents registered my date of birth?" Then I started singing:

"Crush this oppressive alien law!
Hear the call of the hour!
Wake up all you fearless ones
Show the people's power!
Lay your life down
For the sake of Truth!
That's the call of the hour!"

The police put a bayonet to my chest and ordered me to write an apology and declare that henceforth I would never participate in such movements. "I have been part of the movement since the age of six," I told them. "I have worn khadi. I have personally greeted Gandhiji with a khadi garland. Why should I give an apology?" So we were all sentenced to one year's rigorous imprisonment. We were first sent to Sabarmati jail. There we were given very rough treatment. Coarse mats, hard beds, and two sets of clothes. We had to work very hard too. We were each required to stitch two sets of prison clothes daily. After one month we were transferred to Yerwada jail, since Sabarmati was by then overflowing with political prisoners.

I met all the great women leaders at Yerwada. Sarojini Naidu, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, Mridula Sarabhai. Kasturba was also there. In fact, Ba recognized me at once. "You're Dasri, aren't you? Will you teach me to read and write?" I readily agreed. Yes, I was one of the people who taught Kasturba to read and write. When I tell people this, they say how can it be, Kasturba died so long ago. But it was in jail that I taught her; we made time for that, though we had to work very hard in this jail too. We had to clean one maund of tamarind every day. If we failed to meet the target, we had to go without food. In spite of all hardships, we enjoyed the company of all those great women. And Ba kept at her books day after day. My sister-in-law was among the women who gave birth in jail. Ba looked after the baby. Mukti was the name Mridula Sarabhai gave, because the mother had been confined in jail for the liberation movement. Mridula-ben also taught me geography.

The movement was at its ebb when I was released. So I decided to complete my studies. I joined Mithuben Petit's institute. In 1936 I joined Gujrat Vidyapith in Ahmedabad where I learnt music and completed three standards. I studied under Narayan Khare, I learnt classical music and played the dilruba. When I was studying in the fourth standard, I heard that a Congress session would be held at Haripura with Subhas Chandra Bose presiding. This was a historic event and it was in our region too. So we all participated enthusiastically as volunteers. Every day, before the working committee started its deliberations, our group was asked to sing patriotic songs. (I also played the dilruba quite well and gave a recital at a music soiree once and we even sold tickets for it!) After the Congress session I wanted to complete my studies. But I was asked to go and teach at Mithuben's Maroli Ashram. My scholarship grant at the Vidyapeeth was also suddenly stopped just like that, so I had no alternative. I couldn't become a graduate.

I had my first glimpse of Jawaharlal Nehru in 1936, when I was at the Vidyapith. He was addressing a meeting, and all young people flocked to see and hear their beloved leader.

In 1941, I left Maroli, came back to Vedchi and started working in a school. Soon the individual *satyagraha* programme was started. I had to organise meetings to explain the methods to be adopted. Individual *satyagrahis* would come out for peaceful protest and resistance and court arrest. In 1942 I joined the Quit India movement. Since there were no significant leaders left to lead, we were told that each one was to be his own leader acting on his own initiative. I was arrested and imprisoned for a year. After we came out of jail there was hardly any direction available. Negotiations for Independence were in full swing.

I got married only after it was definite that India would win her independence. Earlier I had thought I wouldn't get married at all, but then I did. I have two sons, both of them well-educated. My second son who is an engineer has become an activist. Back then, there was not

Translator's Note: It was not just the Adivasi women who participated in the struggle, but the Patel and Baniya community women too - they all wore sakacha saris without petticoats so that legs could remain free. But in Ketan Mehta's film 'Sardar' all the women look like Baniya widows in full white saris, petticoat and all. So the peasant women's contribution is wiped out. Even a so-called well-researched film costing some five crore Rupees, has this big gap. But earlier records mention their participation quite clearly.

much political activity left for us, so we turned to national reconstruction work. My husband and I started an ashram on our own, but I was called back by the Gandhian leaders to Vedchi. Jagatram Dave who is called a legendary teacher of Gandhian style basic education, recalled us from the village where we were working among the *adivasis*. That is because Mohan Parikh (Narhari Parikh's son) and Narayan Desai (Madhav Desai's son) had come there to give training in basic education, but they didn't know the *adivasi* languages of the area; so we were asked to leave our own Ashram and take up teaching. There were sixty children there at first, but I helped increase the numbers to 360 because I introduced music and a lot of other activities. After all, I had been a teacher for a long time in various Gandhian institutes.

After Independence, the government rule for trained teachers had to be followed because our school was taking a grant. But neither my husband nor I had training in that sense. We had studied in the nationalist schools. My husband, having been an active *satyagrahi* had even burnt his certificate. So we were given half salaries. At an ashram where we worked, run by Annapurna-ben, we signed for Rs25 and received only Rs17! Annapoorna-ben herself had to do the same thing. She was the one who started the first institutes for tribal women, and she dressed like an *adivasi*. Her father was the first man during Gandhi's time to start an ashram there. I decided then to get training privately.

Since Independence I have never worked in any place outside our own area. I was pregnant with my second son when I appeared for my final exams. Jagatram Dave was starting a Teacher's Training Institute with eight girl students and he asked me to join him once again. But I was not inclined to go. I studied mainly as a private student because I had a job to keep. Dave himself was not a formally trained teacher.

We had nothing, no assets. We had two children. We'd spent all our time in the movement. Even when we had jobs, it was within the movement's institutions. So I finally joined a school under the local Board, a government school. My husband got his certificate from Gaekwad State. I became a government servant, not allowed to join politics. The Ashram was there, the Bhoodan movement was there. But I remained a government servant.

After retirement, I was made a trustee of Shabari Ashram where I had worked earlier. Shabari is a tribal institute for both boys and girls. I look after the management of five units that come under it. From 1981 to 1984 I was also a member of the Khadi Gram Udyog Board of Gujarat State.

You ask me how I feel about politics in today's world? I hate it. Women still remain poor and neglected. I don't like it. Now my son is a part of the Nav Nirman movement. He is a trained engineer, but he works within his own community.

Mrinal Gore who intervened after this testimony, informed us that dedication to the struggle against injustice was still continuing in Dasriben's family. She recalled how in 1992 when they had organized a movement against Kargil in Kutch, and 30 volunteers had marched from Dandi to Sabarmati as part of the action programme, Dasriben's engineer son Ashok had been an active worker in the movement. Vedchi had been a resting spot on the way; and she recalled how moved they all were at the hospitality they enjoyed at Dasriben's house.



Mallu Swarajyam

Mallu Swarajyam was born in 1932 into a landowner's family in the 'princely state' of Hyderabad, where news of the nationalist struggle reached only as the sound of distant thunder. Yet even in this sheltered milieu her brother's activism as a communist, led to her politicisation very early in life. She became a member and leader of the Andhra Mahila Sangham and took up the cause of the oppressed peasants which eventually led to the armed struggle known as the Telangana movement. When the CPI withdrew from this movement, Swarajyam was so disappointed she became inactive though still a card-holder. When the Party split in 1964, she joined the CPI(M).

Since 1981 Swarajyam has been in the central executive committee of the All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA) and for some time President of a rejuvenated Andhra Mahila Sangham.

"I speak of the shared experience of thousands of women..."

Mallu Swarajyam

I was asked to speak about my experiences; but I can't isolate my experiences from the story of my life; which in turn is linked to the stories of thousands of women who came into the movement with me. So when I speak about my experiences or my life story, I am also speaking of the shared experience of thousands of women who struggled along with me.

When I was 11 years old, the nationalist struggle was at its peak, and I was inspired by it. Later, my brother joined the communist movement and brought communist literature to the house. One of the first books he brought was Gorky's 'Mother'. I read it out aloud to my mother - all of us read it, my sister, my comrades. And all of us were deeply affected by this book. A number of my comrades who read the book at that time continued to be sisters in the struggle to the end, even to this day. Some of them went to jail for their politics, like Priyamvada. I escaped from the police; I never got caught, but quite a few of the others did.

Being born into a landowner's family meant that we women could have greater freedom. There wasn't much discrimination between me and my brothers, so I wasn't really aware of any gender differences when I was young. I was taught horse-riding and all the other sports generally reserved for boys. So I wasn't very conscious of being female. I was taken to the Andhra Maha Sabha meeting, when I was a mere child. I remember this one meeting, where people delivered speeches which I found very inspiring. I also remember they'd organised races for children. I came first in the race and went back home triumphant. There was a ban on the communists at the time. So leaders of the Andhra Maha Sabha were in fact communist activists. Within the movement issues were constantly raised about women's oppression, of how they were exploited by landlords and by the feudal system. I had composed a lullaby at that time. I didn't really write it down, I simply composed it in my head and sang it. Lullabies were normally sung by working class women who lived outside the landlord's premises. The landlord's house was usually locked, and the doors were heavy so you couldn't hear what was going on outside. The lullabies composed by the women outside were very strongly worded and sung. My brother heard my lullaby about oppression and realised it could be a very useful tool for propaganda. I sang it later to thousands of women, and it became a consciousness-raising medium in the villages. I went to an Andhra Mahila Sabha meeting

which was addressed by people like Sarojini Naidu, Durgabhai Deshmukh and others. This song lists out a number of places where landlords were extremely violent and repressive, and tells people of the need to rise up in revolt against such oppression. My political career began in this way. I participated in the struggle for the redistribution of land. One important person I met then was Ailamma. She was one of the leaders in the struggle. She came from the village of Ramchandra Reddy who I mentioned in my lullaby. Ailamma was forbidden to till the land by the Vishnur *zamindar*, but she refused to listen. She came to us with some of the *karyakartas* and told me of how she was being prevented from working the land. I asked her to go back, and with the help of these workers she actually defied orders and tilled the land. There was a big confrontation with the *zamindar*, and he put a ban on all the peasants. A meeting was organised in the village, which Ailamma addressed. And she became one of the most important figures in the Telangana struggle. The other leader was Kumariah, who also fought against the landlords, but he was killed by the landlords in a firing. These are two leading figures we ought to remember. Ailamma was a Chakali by caste - washerman's caste.

In Chilpakundam, Mallamma and Venkatamma were two other women in the forefront of the struggle. All the land in this village was the landlord's property, and the peasants worked as bonded labour. The wages were very low, and there was no food. The peasants were half-fed, the only thing they got to eat was gruel. The men were sort of resigned to their fate. 'This *vetuchakeri*, this bonded work is our lot, and we will have to live with it', they said. But the women would have none of it. They refused to carry on being oppressed, and they kept on trying to rouse the men from their apathy, and put up some kind of resistance. So one of the things we did in Chilpakundam was to pick an old tree (as a landmark). We just went and put up a flag, drew a line across the tree and announced that any of the landlord's *goondas* who crossed the line would be dealt with by us. The weapon we had with us was a kind of catapult made of jute. You could pelt stones with it and hit a man straight on the head. Women in the Telangana struggle had perfected the art of using this weapon against the landlord's forces.

Many women joined the movement as *karyakartas* or activists and one of the reasons why they came was that during that period no good-looking woman in the village was spared by the landlord. If he found someone attractive, she had to be sent to him immediately. Girls who were likely to face this kind of molestation came and joined us. Destitute women came too, because they would certainly not be spared. Young girls who had been married off to old men and simply found no meaning in their lives, became *karyakartas*, because here they found a cause they could devote their lives to.

At that time too, there was awareness of women's issues. One of the first issues we took up was wife-beating, which was common across all castes - right from the landlord's caste and all the way down to the landless labourers. Husbands would beat up wives at the slightest pretext, beat them up so badly that the women had huge wounds on their bodies. We took out processions in the village, shouting slogans against wife-beating. Another issue we took up was against liquor. We also tried to promote widow remarriage. We set up a *Panchayati*

committee to settle divorce matters. Until that time, women were not allowed to ask for divorce, however much they wanted to.

Our party committees in various villages helped solve problems people faced in their daily lives, and a lot of these were women's problems, things they had to face in the family and in the community. We had area committees too in villages all over the Telangana area, to look after local issues and work out strategies. I was asked to lead one of these area committees which was to take part in armed struggle. But arms did not come into our hands right in the beginning. All we had were sticks, sickles, chilli powder and knives. Only the military division was given arms. We were in the political side. But women participated in both divisions at the leadership level as well as at the cadre level. After a point, there was a discussion in the Party about who should go into the forest. To do that, it was necessary to carry arms, and that was a matter to be debated at length. Ultimately, the decision was that anyone who wished to go into the forest could do so. It was not just those in the political struggle or in the leadership who went in. Even women who were ordinarily home-bound in their villages, and not very active in the movement, decided to go along with us into the forest. The reason was that there would be no security for them in the village once we went away. In one instance, a woman called Nagamma went into the forest with her husband who was an area commander. He, however, failed to take the initiative when action was called for. So she took command and ordered that four policemen should be surrounded. When they came out of that situation, he complained about her at the next area committee meeting, saying that she should not have given the order since he was the one in command. The matter was discussed, and the collective verdict was that she had done the right thing.

I was in the political division as I said. But I too would take up arms when necessary and enter the forest. However, the major part of my time was devoted to raising public awareness, and doing organisational work in the area committees. I worked in four or five zillas. Women did many kinds of work. Apart from armed action and political committee work, ordinary members worked as couriers, or as nurses for example.

When the Party decided to withdraw from the movement, I was very disappointed and depressed. I did not agree with that decision, so I decided to devote my time working the fields for a living and to raising a family. But I did not officially resign. It was hard staying out of active politics, but I did so for several years. Then the leadership insisted that I should get back. They knew I was a very good public speaker, that people always listened to me. However, I was happiest when the Mahila Sangham was revived once more and I could get back to working with agricultural labourers once again. Basically, that is where my main interest has always been.



Ila Mitra

Ila Mitra was born in Calcutta in 1925. She joined the Mahila Atma Raksha Samity (a women's defence group) and the Communist Party of India in 1943. A prominent leader of the adivasis of Nachole (Bangladesh) during the Tebhaga movement, she was arrested and severely tortured in police custody.

Later, she played an active role in the teachers' agitation in West Bengal, and was elected to the legislative assembly four times between 1962 and 1977.

Ila Mitra is currently a member of the Paschim Banga Mahila Samity.

"I, in my humble way, tried to play my part..."

Ila Mitra

Dear Friends, "There is no one in the audience to see your performance, yet everyone takes part on the stage of life." So wrote Julius Kuchi in his notes from the gallows of a Nazi prison. I, in my humble way, tried to play my part, for which I have nothing unusual to speak of. Time generally helps a person to take up a role. For me, the time that I passed through has left its indelible marks, may be majestic, or heroic, or cowardly. For peace in this country, I look for a signal from my star.

Today, very few know that I was an athlete once; a sprinter, selected for the Helsinki Olympics in 1940 - the first Indian girl. Of course that Olympics was not held, due to the war. In my younger days in Bengal, no young person could keep herself from the influence of the national revolutionary heroes who staked their lives to bring freedom to the motherland. Khudiram and Prafulla Chaki, our first martyrs from Bengal. Kanailal, Bagha Jatin, Surya Sen and many others gave their lives. Troilakya Maharaj, Rashbehari Bose, heroes of the Chittagong Armoury Raid, kindled in us the fire of patriotism. In the same way, Sister Nivedita, Bina Das, Kamala Dasgupta, Kamala Chattopadhyay, Charuprabha Sengupta, Pritilata Wadedar, Suhasini Ganguly, Badrennisa, and many other women came to the vortex in the national movement. Subhas Chandra Bose, the doyen of national revolutionaries, enthused us. The songs of Tagore, Nazrul Islam, Mukunda Das, Dwijendralal Roy, Atul Prasad Sen, Rajanikanta Sen, enriched our minds, giving a perspective of non-communal and secular vision. The writings of Swami Vivekananda gave us a fillip for chanting the truth of the time: "I am a Socialist." Scientists like Jagdish Chandra Bose, Meghnad Saha, Satyen Bose; painters like Abanindranath Tagore, Nandalal Bose, even Rabindranath Tagore, showed that Indians are not inferior - rather they had a role to play in the world stage. Gandhi and Lenin came to us together, so also Tolstoy and Gorky, to proclaim their largeness of vision - non-violent mass movement and revolutionary violence came up as issues. The realisation came that those who were oppressed in all respects had to be emancipated to ensure victory for the national liberation struggle. Women were included for the sake of the community; factory workers, and as an extension of them, the peasants - all these were to be emancipated. That is how the national movement, as we saw it in Bengal in the early forties, interpenetrated with

the movements of workers, peasants and women against the British imperialist.

I grew up in such a milieu. I joined the national movement. And it was only later, in 1943, that I found myself in the company of the communists. I grew up in a free and open atmosphere, uncommon in those days even for an educated Bengali family. In school and college, my Anglo-Indian friends kept boasting of their superiority in sports and other outdoor activities. I took that up as a challenge and knocked it in the end. I talked to nobody about it, but I concentrated on painstaking physical exercise and training - which later bore fruit. I became a well-known sprinter in India - known as Ila Sen, The Shooting Arrow. If you think of this sports arena, Indians had to show their worth there too, and I would say my performance helped prove it once again. Just as in my younger days we heard how all Indians rejoiced when the local Mohan Bagan Football Team defeated an All British team in 1911.

At first I joined several mass philanthropic organisations, and then, in 1943, I enlisted as a volunteer in the Mahila Atmyaraksha Samity. I joined the army of women who were fighting day and night to free their own gender, and propagate their services to the panting people of Bengal. The Midnapur hurricane, and the flood which followed as its aftermath, brought me to the side of the suffering villagers.

In 1941, after the treacherous attack on the USSR by Nazi Germany who cleansed the land of the threat of the Soviets - I had in my mind the first lot of women revolutionaries. I was a student of Bethune College and a member of the student committee.

In 1945, I participated in the movement for the release of Azad Hind Fauj prisoners. In 1946, my comrades and I entered the post-war struggle for independence, propagating the idea of people's emancipation. I also participated in movements supporting the revolt of the naval forces, for releasing Rashid Ali, and others. I started to learn about the land problem of Bengal from my husband, Comrade Ramen Mitra. Though born in a landlord's family, he joined the Communist movement. He helped organize the sharecroppers, poor peasants and agricultural workers in and around his industrial village, bordering the present frontier between India and Bangladesh. In 1946, the Great Calcutta Killings provoked me so much that I threw myself into a whirlpool of constant, 24-hour work. We provided service to the victims and sufferers, campaigned against the rioting and killing, at the risk of our own lives. I went to Noakhali with my comrades and tried to bring peace and amity to the area. In 1947, the induction of Sikh soldiers by the British to sabotage the freedom movement in China, widened the rift with the Bengali youth, who took to the streets in protest, facing bullets.

In 1946, the Communist Party of India, of which I was a member from 1943, organized a peasant movement known as Tebhaga. The main demand of the sharecropper was for two-thirds of the output. The landlords and the new owners who bought land at distress sales from the starving peasants lost out on land tax. Assistants from the government, the main political parties, i.e. the Congress League and the Hindu Maha Sabha, sat together to combat the demand of the poor. The peasants formed volunteer groups at the time, and the women of the sharecropper families were at the forefront of resistance against the *jotedar*, *zamindar* and police. The adivasi, tribal people, who had been exploited in many ways, stood united. In 1946, I opted

for the East Bengal Peasants movement. I was called Ranima by the peasants sometimes, and they also composed songs about me. Recently, I came across two books from Bangladesh, which spoke highly of the heroic peasants' movement in the then Rajshahi district of Bangladesh. In West Bengal, poems, articles and stories have been written on the spontaneous uprising. I had to work underground for four years to organize the Tebhaga movement at Naaten and was arrested by the Pakistani Army on 7th January, 1950. I was sentenced for life by the Court. After my arrest, what hell I had to endure under those male chauvinist custodians of the jail. My statement regarding torture while in Pakistan jail custody, was read out in Court, printed and distributed to thousands. Question was raised in the Parliament in India - the West Bengal legislative assembly, and Pakistan national assembly. The doctors had lost hope of my physical survival; but I did survive, though with a completely battered body.

In 1954, a United Front government came into power in East Pakistan, defeating the Muslim League. I was released on parole, and I came to Calcutta. Till only a few days back, I was still being hunted for jumping parole in Bangladesh. In a recent assessment of women there, I was ranked among the first 25 persons in that country who made history. I don't like speaking of this, but then, this is not my singular contribution in making history. Rather I would say, as I have said earlier, that it is the historical moment that leaves its mark through individuals, and through nations. I am connected to that which the times demanded for the role I had to play. After coming back to Calcutta in 1954, with broken body and disturbed mind, I started preparing for an examination. My son was only one and a half years old when I went to jail; he was seven by the time he rediscovered his mother. Finally it was bliss, with husband, son, and my books. In 1958, I became a lecturer at City South College. In 1962 however, I was elected to the West Bengal Legislative Assembly from Maniktala. I was re-elected from the same constituency in 1967, 1969, 1970. As a lecturer, I also joined the college teachers' movement. I became a member of the Calcutta University Senate and Syndicate.

In the Bangladesh liberation movement of 1971, I had a positive role to play as a complete compatriot of the then East Pakistan. Communist leaders, progressive writers, serious peasant leaders, would ritually meet in my home. I jumped headlong into the Bangladesh Solidarity movement and toured all districts of Bengal and many other places in India. After the liberation of Bangladesh, whenever I went to that country, the common people came in their hundreds and thousands and gave me a rousing welcome. The Mujibur government floated the idea of conferring honorary citizenship to me.

Today, I am a wife, a mother, a mother-in-law, and a grandmother in my family life. To the people around me, I am Ila-di, for which I am really proud. The fact that a simple sports loving person was pushed to the forefront, that a simple woman who wanted to lead a peaceful family life was catapulted to a significant arena of history was due to the influence of an international league of humanists and an ardent desire to move the weights of humanity from the mere fact of starving to complete emancipation of human kind, half of which are women - the most oppressed everywhere. This is the testimony of my life.
Thank you.



Rani Das Gupta

Rani Das Gupta was born in Dinajpur in 1925. She was a founder-member of the Mahila Atma Raksha Samity in Dinajpur and a member of the Communist Party of India since 1943. She was also the joint secretary of the National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW) from 1964 to 1992. A prominent leader of the Tebhaga movement in Dinajpur (Bangladesh), Rani Das Gupta was active in the Refugees' and Teachers' agitations in West Bengal after Partition. She went underground when the CP was banned, and later in 1954 was arrested during the Teachers' agitation.

At present, Rani Das Gupta is a member of the Paschim Banga Mahila Samity.

"I had to hide in jute plantations or ARP trenches to escape arrest"

Rani Das Gupta

Post Second World War, India witnessed a great upsurge of struggle for the freedom and independence of our country from the bondage of British imperialism, with all its attendant oppression, extortion, and nefarious divisive activities. All sections and strata of our people participated in those great struggles. Peasants, who constituted 80 percent of the population, were also very much involved. The Tebhaga movement in Bengal fifty years ago, was part and parcel of these struggles. And a large number of peasant women - Rajbanshi, Barga-Khatriya, Santhal, Kol, Oraon, Munda - played a vital role in the Tebhaga struggle.

'Tebhaga' as you know, was the struggle of the sharecroppers (*adhiar/ barga chashi*) for two-third share of the produce; that is, they wanted the land rent to be reduced from 50 percent to 33.5 percent. The *adhiar* had to bear the the entire cost of production. He carried the crop to the *kholan* or farm of the landowner - *jotedar* or *bargadar*. This man took half the produce as his legal share; and he extorted more in the name of expenses for cleaning the *kholan*, feeding his elephant, his son-in-law, for religious and cultural events and so on. In the end, the *adhiar* went back almost empty handed. About 60 percent of the population were *adhiars* and many *jotedars* in North Bengal owned from 500 to 5,000 bighas of land. They were the most powerful people in village society. The *adhiars* who had to feed the *jotedars* elephant were unable to feed their own children. The Tebhaga movement of 1946-47 was the struggle of the *adhiars* for some justice.

As I was born and brought up in the district town of Dinajpur in North Bengal, I will try to tell you here about the heroic role of the peasant women on the basis of my experiences there. And Dinajpur was the storm centre of this Tebhaga movement.

These Rajbanshi, Barga-Khatriya, Santhal, Kol, Oraon and Munda peasant women who played a prominent part in all peasant movements, were poor and illiterate, but very brave and very intelligent. They had this great urge to learn which I came to realise on many occasions later.

These simple hard-working women dressed in just a piece of cloth called *jota - bukhani* in all seasons, had to get up before dawn, husk paddy for the day's meal, cook, wash, do other household work, and also all the work in the fields - except ploughing for which there was some social bar against women. Many of them had to work in the *jotedar's* house without pay, and were sexually exploited there. Poor peasants had to take the *jotedar's* permission to give

their daughters in marriage. Many of their social customs were against women folk. To prevent fragmentation of family land, sometimes a widow would have to marry a much younger brother-in-law, or a girl would be married off to a man her father's age. Among the Rajbanshis, the custom is for a man to pay dowry; and a poor man often crossed marriageable age before he could collect enough money.

These sturdy and brave women often joined the movement against the wishes of their menfolk. Often they *gheraoed* leaders of the Kisan Sabha and Communist Party and later Tebhaga committees demanding to be enrolled in their ranks, and complained against wife-beating. At a later period, they themselves organised meetings, passed resolutions condemning wife-beating and often a culprit had to appear in the women's court and pay a fine. They not only became members of the Kisan Sabha and Communist Party, but well-trained volunteers and even leaders.

In early 1943 we, a batch of girl students, went to a Kisan conference in Itahar subdivision out of sheer curiosity. We were amazed to find that a middle-aged widow, Kanthamoni Barmani, was the main organiser of that conference, and women volunteers with red caps on their heads and bamboo poles in hand were on management duty. Kanthamoni moved a resolution to the effect that all sale proceeds of women from *hats*, that is village markets, would be regarded as *streedhan* - the exclusive property of women. Kanthamoni was able to read and write, unlike the rest of the poor village women.

These poor women were quite different from the literate middle-class town women whom we failed to enrol in the Mahila Atma Raksha Samity at first, or even to attend our meetings within their locality without permission from their menfolk. Even as a young student, I was attracted to the peasant women and frequently visited them.

It was the Tolaboti movement in 1938-39 which first involved these women in large numbers, and prepared the way for Tebhaga. Tolaboti was primarily a movement of poor peasants, *adhiars* and landless labourers. But all those who came to sell goods and services in the weekly markets got involved in it. The owners of the land on which the hats were held, would impose all sorts of illegal levies or *tolas* and *lekhai*s or written receipts from the sellers, and forcibly make off with goods. Along with the menfolk, elderly peasant women too would come-especially those from poor families- to sell vegetables they'd grown on their homestead land, or fruits from their own trees, or eggs, milk and so on. The little cash they earned went to buying salt, cooking oil, spices, washcloths, and other essentials. Women had a special stake in these sales, since they used a part of it for their personal needs-vermillion powder, red liquid *alta* to decorate their feet, white shell and coloured glass bangles etcetera. As the illegal extortion grew, spontaneous resistance started. When the Kisan Sabha was formed in 1936, resistance became more and more organised.

By 1938-39, the movement had engulfed the entire district of Dinajpur, as well as adjacent areas of Jalpaiguri, Rangpur, and north Mymensingh. Men and women volunteers marched through the hats shouldering *lathis* and shouting slogans refusing to pay *tola* and *lekhai*. The Kshatriya Mahasabha putabanon their women attending these *hats*. They said that the *bhadralok*

leaders kept their own women at home, but instigated the Rajbanshi women. The peasant women however neither gave up going to the *hats* nor did they drop their *lathis*. At some places, more slogans were raised. "*Nij kholane dhan tolao*" And "*Karja dhanu bari nai*". Bring the paddy to your own courtyard. No one and a half interest on loan paddy. Tolaboti made the Tebhaga struggle inevitable. It taught peasant women to hold the lathi and face the oppressor.

Again, during the man-made Bengal Famine of 1943, peasants had to sell off their land. About ten crore rupees worth of land was sold off in 15 distressed areas, and five percent of the peasant population sold all their land, mostly to jotedars and village merchants. The landless peasants next sold even their utensils and left the village in search of food and jobs in the towns and cities. Some 35 lakh villagers lost their lives. Thousands of women lost their families. Food, clothes, kerosene and other daily necessities went into the black market. *Jotedars*, being owners of huge amounts of the crop, turned into hoarders and black marketeers. They sent paddy to the towns in the darkness of the night and made unimaginably high profits.

Volunteers of the Kisan Sabha started campaigning against this hoarding and black marketing. They kept vigil day and night to stop movement of rice and paddy out of the village. Women and children were most effective in unearthing hidden stocks. Volunteers seized cartloads of rice, distributed it among the people at controlled price and paid the entire money to the *jotedar's* men with proper receipts.

At this time in 1943, the Mahila Atma Raksha Samity was formed covering almost all districts of Bengal. The MARS unit in our district, Dinajpur, was made up of students like us and a few housewives. We campaigned against black marketing, organised relief work, ran gruel kitchens to feed the famished people coming from villages in adjacent districts in search of food. In Dinajpur town MARS organised a procession of 3,000 women - very unusual in those days. Their demand was for strong government action against hoarders and black marketeers and for the introduction of price control and rationing.

Members of MARS, especially students, went to the villages to help with relief work alongside the peasant women. Women from nearby towns were enthused to work with them. MARS members helped organise relief centres at Atwari, Patiram and other places which helped women earn some money. They also enrolled the peasant women in the Kisan Sabha and MARS. The women saw this as the right way for unity between town and village women. This joint membership programme was recommended at the time by the Kisan Sabha and the Party in our district. Thus began my long association with village women and my participation in their struggles. They helped me to gradually adjust myself with their lifestyle.

The unity we achieved through such struggles enabled the peasant population to elect Rupnarayan Ray, a poor peasant from Phulbani to the Bengal Legislative Assembly in March 1946, defeating Bhabesh Singh, a big *jotedar*. And Shri Jyoti Basu was elected MLA by the railway employees of Parbatipur in Dinajpur district.

On August 16, 1946 the beastly and shameful communal riots started in Calcutta. They did spread to various places, particularly Noakhali in South Bengal. Here there were fewer killings, but the most barbarous and shameful crimes were committed. Nobody knows how

many women were picked up from their homes every night and returned the next morning. Nobody also bothered about how many people were killed in Calcutta. But in the districts of peasant struggle *jotedars* tried in vain to create communal division. The organised *adhiars* and poor peasants foiled all the conspiracies of the Muslim *jotedars* to foment hatred among Muslim *adhiars*. Even Moulavis brought over from Noakhali couldn't shake them. So the trouble-makers tried to kill Haji Mohammed Danesh, the most beloved and trusted leader of both Hindu and Muslim peasants of Dinajpur.

Three months after the Great Calcutta Killings and one month after the Noakhali riots, Bengal was in the vortex of the Tebhaga struggle. In the winter of 1946, the *adhiars* took their paddy to the threshing ground and demanded two-third share instead of half. Within a month the struggle spread through the districts of North Bengal and some pockets of Mymensingh, Medinipur, 24 Parganas, Jessore and Khulna. In Dinajpur it engulfed 22 police stations out of 30. *Jotedars* were served previous notice. Thousands of booklets and lakhs of handbills explaining 'Tebhaga' were distributed at hats and fairs, meetings and demonstrations. Each family of *adhiars* and poor peasants provided one man, one rupee and one lathi.

On 1st January, 1947 harvesting started in Baliadangi, a famine affected area but also the most organised by the Kisan Sabha and Communist Party. Women volunteers encircled the field with lathis in hand, and *adhiars* set about harvesting the crop in one plot after another. Next morning the *jotedars* men brought the police along to have the leaders arrested. But Dipswari, leader of the women volunteers, raised her lathi and came charging towards them. The police fled, and so did the *jotedars*. The news spread like wild fire, and harvesting went on full speed. The crop was stocked at common farms called *dasher kholan*. The frightened and hypocritical *jotedars* proposed compromise and invited the leaders to meet them. But at many such meetings they got the leaders arrested by the police. Sec 144 was clamped on the paddy fields; but *adhiars* ignored this and declared 145 on the *jotedars*. Harvesting went on nonstop. But on 4th January the police killed Shibram and Samiruddin while they were reaping paddy in Chirirbandar. That was the first time that the golden paddy was smeared with blood. Shibram was an *adhiar* and Samiruddin, a landless labourer. That day the railway workers of Parbatipur went on strike.

The second stage came when in the middle of January the League ministry of Bengal proposed a draft Bill in the Assembly giving tenancy rights and two-thirds share of the crop for the *adhiar* or *barga chasi*. This was known as the Bargadar's Bill. The recommendation had been made earlier by the Flood Commission in 1940. Police excesses were also stopped by the government. This news heightened the self-confidence of *adhiars* and the movement spread to unorganised areas also. All the crop was brought to the *adhiar's* own farmyard or *dasher kholan*. The *jotedars'* shares were sent to their farms and receipts were taken. Poor and landless labourers also joined the movement.

The *jotedars* were not sitting idle. They joined forces - Hindus and Muslims working hand in hand. Many of them, especially Muslims, were themselves MLAs and they had a strong lobby in the government. They began sending false and alarming reports of communist

lawlessness, though the Statesman was publishing the real news of the movement, and Gandhiji himself supported the demands of the *adhiars*. Still the United Congress League *jotedars* won their point. The peasants were subjected to inhuman and indiscriminate repression of a kind never seen or heard of before. All leaders and workers who could not go into hiding were arrested. The police killed the peasants without any provocation. They opened fire on them during harvesting, gunned them down as they sat in the Kisan Sabha or marched in procession, even dragged them out of bed in the middle of the night and shot them dead. They killed peasants on the instruction of *jotedars*. In Dinajpur alone they killed 40 *adhiars*, Hindu and Muslim, poor peasants and *khetmajurs* - including three women. A total of 71 were killed all over Bengal. Not a single *jotedar* was killed, or even wounded. And not even a handful of paddy was looted by any *adhiar* or poor peasant. Only one policeman was wounded by an arrow and died later in hospital.

Peasant women played a very brave and important role in this period. They kept vigilance, and at the sight of any policemen entering the village, they blew conch shells or rang bells to warn the menfolk. They served as contact persons between different groups and centres, passed on messages, delivered letters, distributed handbills and other literature which they concealed under the goods they brought to the marketplaces and other gatherings. They often clashed with the police and *jotedar's* men who raided the village to arrest leaders or to stop harvesting. Four or five days after Dipswari's action at Baliadangi, hundreds of women, led by Rohini and Jaimoni, chased the police out of the paddy fields at Rampur Molani in Atwari. They snatched five or six rifles from the police and broke them to pieces. In Ranisankail, a truckload of policemen entered the village and arrested Basanta and some others. Basanta's wife Bhandon, along with hundreds of women volunteers, *gheraoed* the truck. Bhandon snatched the rifle from a subinspector's hand and locked him up in a room. Only when she received instructions from the leadership did she let him go. That is how the women protected their homes and their crops when most of the menfolk were either arrested or had gone into hiding.

Then came 15th August, Independence and Partition. Most of the areas where the Tebhaga struggle had been concentrated came under East Pakistan. Arrested peasants and their leaders on both sides of the Border were released. The rest came out of hiding. But in March 1948, the political situation changed. The Communist Party was banned in West Bengal and offices of the Kisan Sabha and Mahila Atma Raksha Samity were sealed.

In East Pakistan, though there was no formal ban, but all known Communists - including myself - were arrested overnight. That was mid March, 1948. All peasant leaders in the villages were also arrested. I was released a few months later as a goodwill gesture on Mohammed Ali Jinnah's birthday; I was kept under house arrest thereafter. I went underground in October the same year and returned to the village. But it was very difficult for me to move around or work there. There were policemen stationed in the villages who were acting as the *jotedar's* voluntary squad. When the *adhiars* brought in the crop to their own *kholan*, the police snatched it and sent it to the *jotedar's* place. They often looted the peasants' homes and set fire to the huts. The peasants fled to the nearby jungles. Often, I had to hide from morning to evening in

the jute plantations with my feet under water, or lie low in old ARP trenches.

The situation became even more difficult when Muslim youths from Kisan Sabha families joined the new *Ansar Bahini*, somewhat like the homeguards here in West Bengal. But not all these young men turned out traitors. They would come and warn our hosts to shift the 'comrade' elsewhere as the house would be raided next morning. So, very often we would be walking all night in search of a new shelter. No real work was possible. We could only talk with old cadres to keep them united and save their homes.

During this period, I got word one day that Bhandon's mother wished to see me. I was delighted. Old Mother must have arranged some meeting, I thought. So I went to her house that very night. She greeted me and disappeared into the kitchen. She lived there with Bhandon's two sons. While I was talking to the boys about their parents, she came back with some *bhaka-pithey* on a platter. This dish was a great favourite with the peasants. She served me happily, as if she were feeding her own daughter. It was a late December night, but we had to leave for another shelter. Old Mother looked at us with tears in her eyes. My eyes were wet too, but my heart was warm.

Once, during the summer of 1950, Jaimoni and I were in the same house when a large police force entered the village unnoticed by the volunteers. There were no men around in that village. The women put me up on a loft and covered me with bundles of straw and jute. I asked Jaimoni to avoid a clash unless the women were physically attacked. The police looted every single house and destroyed what they could not carry away. When some protested, they attacked the women, dragging them by the hair. At once, all the womenfolk came out with *lathis* and *gaiths* (small sickles) and started shouting slogans. The police at once turned tail and fled. But the village *chowkidar* with a goat he had looted in his arms, could not run fast enough, and one stroke of a *gaith* broke his skull. That night of early May, 1950 I had to leave my birthplace with her simple, honest, gentle and loving, but brave sons and daughters. Jaimoni was sent to a distant shelter. As far as I remember, it was Helegadu Singh who helped me cross the border. I lost connection with them; specially Jaimoni, my beloved and constant companion whom I had once promised to teach how to read and write.

Somehow I managed to reach Calcutta, and was sent to Midnapur in late May, 1950. Here there was a police camp in every village and all I could do was rove from one shelter to another to keep contact with women in places of struggle. Many leaders, both men and women, were in jail. The Tebhaga Bill was passed in West Bengal in 1949, but not enforced. On the contrary, repression was let loose in places of struggle. Police camps were withdrawn in 1951 and I left Medinipur for Calcutta in July, 1951.

In East Pakistan, the Tebhaga Bill was not passed. The *adhiars* and poor peasants there became poorer and lost their land year by year and gradually turned into agricultural labourers.

The people expected to have their long-cherished land, employment, food, shelter, education, drinking water and healthcare and child welfare. Workers, peasants, women, students, teachers, started their sectional movement and faced *lathis*, imprisonment, and sometimes bullets of the police. MARS went on a protest march in Calcutta on 27th May, 1950

demanding the release of those people who were on hunger strike in jail. The police fired on the procession and killed four women. These were the first martyrs of post-Independence democratic movements.

MARS organised not only middle and lower middle class women of cities and villages, but also women working in jute mills, tea plantations and in some places peasant women, mostly as housewives and not as members of any class organisation. Women teachers joined in large numbers and played a very important role when they faced jail during the great week-long sit-in demonstration of teachers in front of the Raj Bhavan.

Wave after wave of refugees from East Pakistan came here at different times. It was a national problem no doubt which has not yet been completely resolved. They cleared jungles and filled up the marshy low lands in the suburbs of Calcutta and other towns. There they erected shelters - four bamboo poles covered with a sheet of plastic or jute - and lived there for weeks and months, fighting against the landlords' goons and the police. Most of these people were women. After a long drawn out struggle they managed to acquire the land and built houses. That is how refugee colonies sprang up in West Bengal.

The oldest and only central organisation of women in our country at that time was AIWC. This AIWC and MARS often jointly launched programmes of literacy and primary education for adult women. They jointly organised long drawn out movements for the Hindu Code Bill, Personal Law etc. MARS leaders felt the need for a central common platform for women of every class, caste, creed and faith. Leaders like late Renu Chakravorty who herself was a member of the AIWC often proposed that middle class women, working class and peasantry be allowed entry to the AIWC and that the subscription rate be lowered to four annas so that this could be the central united platform for women. But such proposals were always ignored.

At last, in September 1954 the NFIW, an all India organisation was formed at a conference in Calcutta. Its doors were open to all women. Many were inducted into it, irrespective of class, caste or creed.

At present there are several all India organisations of women. There are NGOs also; and there are in this half century old free India vast masses of women with new looks, new thoughts and new ideas. For all these women of different class, caste, creed and thought, a really federal type of common platform is urgently needed, where unity in diversity may be the motto.

Fifty-four years ago in 1943, we organised peasant women both in the Kisan Sabha and also in the Mahila Atma Raksha Samity. We did this in the belief that it would help peasant women to be class conscious and also conscious of their inequalities. Our leaders then agreed with us and helped us. Later, after Independence, this proposal by MARS was neglected by both the Kisan Sabha and trade union leaders. Our proposal for associate membership also has not yet been accepted. This attitude weakens women's organisations as well as the class and professional organisations.

Free compulsory universal primary education has been delayed by 50 years. Adult literacy for both men and women is also a delayed issue. Thus illiteracy remains a great hindrance for all democratic and humane movements for the women of today.



Mrinal Gore

Mrinal Gore was born in Mumbai in June 1928. Brilliant student though she was, she dropped out of medical college in order to join active politics. She started her political career as a Gram Panchayat member, and moved up step by step to ultimately find a seat in the Lok Sabha. She was a member of the Maharashtra legislature for two terms, successfully performing her duties as Leader of the Opposition. She was elected President of the Janata Dal in Maharashtra.

“The water struggle made us women totally united”

Mrinal Gore

I've been asked to speak in English but I think I'll stick to Hindi so I can go faster. It takes a little more time to speak in English. I will try to stick to the things you are interested in.

I was a very good student in school, always winning scholarships. All I was interested in was building a fine career. My father was a Professor of Physics. My brothers and sisters were all scholars, very good in studies. Three doctors, two engineers, one an M A. And I was going to the medical line. But then, in May 1942, I came across the Rashtra Seva Dal. That's the first time that I realised there was another world outside, beyond career-building. A great big world. After that, on 8th August, when there was an AICC meeting being held here, I took a real interest in it. I followed the proceedings, heard the discussions, read everything there was to read. My family however had no background in politics. That evening I had a big argument with my father, I got my mother to defend me, and I finally got permission from him to attend the next day's meeting at the Kranti Maidan. Next morning, 9th August, I was up early, getting ready to go to the meeting. Then we heard that all the top men had been arrested, so there would be no meeting after all. But I think it was on that 9th August that my life was changed completely. Someone who had so far been immersed in school life, in discipline and studies, caught a glimpse of the outside world. I was studying in Poddar High School in Santa Cruz. We picketed the school for four months and finally had it closed. Every day I went to school with plans of how to spread the word about some new bulletin, some new line of action, some new ideas, it was a small way to start. But to this day I know full well how it changed my life. So, even though your present conference started on the 9th, it was important for me to be in Mumbai on that day and take part in the golden jubilee celebrations there. I spent the whole day participating in the programmes, and left them only at night so I could come and join you here. Well, to get back again to my story, I started attending college. I worked a great deal for the Rashtra Seva Dal. I studied hard too. I won a University scholarship for my inter-science, took admission for medicals, got a scholarship to the Medical College. But I was finding greater interest in other kinds of work. The Seva Dal was very active at this time. We were doing excellent work organising women's wings of the Dal in Mumbai and the surrounding suburbs. Gradually, the groups we started for girls were extended for women as

well. From 1947, along with the Seva Dal, I was getting more and more drawn to their politics, in what was going on around us. After Independence Day, August 15th, the Rashtra Seva Dal sat together to analyse the situation. Now was the time to work together to build a new social order they said. We must work for change, work to fulfil the socialist dream. Being a doctor was responsible work, and this too was responsible work - changing society. But I couldn't do both at the same time. So I put up with a lot of rows and scoldings from my family and gave up college in 1948, after I'd done my MBBS first year. And I went into politics, full time. The Congress Socialist Party separated from the Socialist Party in '48 itself. I started working for the Socialist Party. I had been with the Seva Dal, so after I got married and went to live in Goregaon, I got busy working with women. I first set up what I thought was of primary importance in 1951 - a family planning clinic. I felt that if women gave birth at an early age, no other work could proceed. That's a decision I took for my own self, and when I saw the women coming to us with two, four, five children tagging along, I thought how would they manage, poor things, to do any other work? How could they come and join us? So we ought to teach them from the beginning about child birth. So I called my sister over, she being a doctor, and we started work in one room, teaching women about family planning. Later we got the women together and approached the gram panchayat in a body, and forced them to give us space in their dispensary to carry on the work. Our influence grew and we saw women coming to our clinic from all over Bombay, because even though there was an official Family Planning Association even then but the national level programme was not there, it got going only in 1952. But we had started much earlier. So what I have to say is that we believed right from the beginning that if women are to progress in any way, socially or politically, they must have fewer children. That is why we started work early. The second thing we observed was that the women were busy with some ritual or the other all the time. So two or three of us got together and started explaining the background and meaning behind these rituals, how they came about, whether they had any relevance in our times and so on. Along with this, we also explained to our sisters about child care, how to look after the few children better. They didn't know much about proper diet in those days, so we explained to them in detail, what is good, what is not, as any good doctor would do. There's another thing we introduced. There's a *chatur maas vrat* which all the women would do. We told them that this vow was fine, but the rules were too old-fashioned for our times, they were useless. Instead of the usual practices, we should take a new vow. We would go to the poor dalit slums, and in four months we should teach at least one woman there to read and write. How many of you are prepared to take this new vow? We got fifteen women who agreed to take this vow. So that's how we gave a new twist to the old *chatur maas* vow. A lot of other rituals were also seen in a new light. That's how we tackled the basic religiosity among our women, which exists even today, we tried working through that. We started temples for development projects. When we started family planning work, we thought the name wouldn't quite appeal. So we also gave advice to women who were unable to have children - advice on fertility - which my sister being a very good doctor was able to tackle. She had several patients coming to her for that. So we publicised

this too, and our clinic gained greater prestige. Gradually we extended our work to local *bastis* and through libraries. We took out processions to the *gram panchayat* on various issues, and the women became more conscious and aware. Then the panchayat elections came in 1954. I was very eager to stand for election, so I did. And I was elected. My work there helped expand the work we were already doing. I will say this definitely that in those days, there were men in the socialist party who genuinely wanted to see women progress, who believed in equality. One can think of so many of them. My own husband, Pandu Gore, Madhu Limaye, Sadashiv Bogaitkar, Vinayakrao Kulkarni, all of Maharashtra still remembers their work for women's rights. And the guru of them all, Dr Lohia. I must tell you about the little book I came across as a student. It is the first book that openly discussed man-woman relationships. When I read that book I realised that this was a topic that needed to be discussed. Yet no one talked about it then, or gave it any thought. So I took up Dada Dharmadhikari's little book and his lectures with the women who were working with me and we liked it so much we thought this should be shared with more women. Even today I consider Dr Lohia, who never married himself, to be the most sympathetic to the women's cause, who understood our sorrows, that was the kind of leader Dr Lohia was.

I'll also say this, when I stood for Corporation elections in 1961, the United Maharashtra movement had got under way, and I took the message to the women. When the Hindu Code Bill came up around 1951 I organised at least thirty meetings in and around our area to explain to the women how important it was for the Bill to be passed, so that women could establish their rights. It's amazing but absolutely true that the upper class women were very much against it. The middle class women came along with us. But those who were brahmins and higher castes among them, would be dead against it, simply because their families were opposed, nothing else, not because they really understood. We tried to reason with them as best we could.

So on one side there was the social aspect, hence the family planning programme. Second, they started standing on their own two feet, so we had work centres. We started these *udiyog mandirs*, but they didn't run for too long. Third, there were quite a few talented, gifted women in the women's organisations called *mahila mandals*. They could write, compose poetry. But we never could get them to come with us. So we started a cyclostyled monthly magazine called 'Sanjivani'. When I came here first, after I got married, I decided to involve myself with both kinds of work, in the home and outside, and also to delay having children, I got a lot of time to travel around. So the middle class women who were my neighbours deliberately stood around and passed remarks like, "Does she do any cooking or not? Whenever we see her she's on her way out somewhere or the other." So I decided to give it back to them straight, once and for all. The next time they started talking like that within earshot, I went up to them straight and said, "Haven't you realised as yet that she lives on fresh air?" They stopped their jibes from that day. I carried on with the child-bearing issue, the best doctors in Bombay started visiting us at the mahila mandal, different kinds of specialists. By and by, about sixty or seventy women started coming to our house once a week; we had a large hall

where they would meet every Wednesday. We had different kinds of programmes for them. What I'm trying to stress is that we had a clear design in our minds regarding the things we were trying to achieve, and we worked according to that. Our group was small, we kept up our efforts. In 1961, as I've told you, I stood for elections for *mahapalika*. Dr Lohia himself came to canvass for me. His meeting would start at 9 o'clock at night. We often held meetings at such times, when shops, transport, everything would be closed. First he came to our house for a meal and then I walked with him to the meeting ground. It was a small village, there were no rickshaws or taxis there. So I took him there walking. When we were coming back after the meeting gave over, some of my sisters were standing at the street corner, filling water. So he asked me, why do such a thing at 12 o'clock in the night? So I said, can't help it, that's when we get water. When I was with the gram panchayat, I went through a lot of trouble trying to get the pipelines extended beyond Jogeshwari. That used to be the city limit for Bombay those days. I managed to get the municipal water supply up to Goregaon, and had pipelines laid at several places for public use. So why fill water at midnight? Because that's when the water comes, we said, Twelve o'clock it's got to be. So he said, Look Mrinal, after you get elected, this water problem is the first thing you must take up. This is inhuman. They have to work all day, these sisters of ours.

I said I would, and I would keep trying. Then I started going into it in great detail. How far has the pipe been drawn, why not any further. We have to get the tank changed. Hold street corner meetings with women. Set up a water council. We demanded to know why we couldn't get water twenty four hours like Bombay city, since we paid as much taxes as the city folk? Why don't we get water in the morning? We must get water then. We won't fill water at night from now on. Because it came at 12 o'clock or even 2 o'clock. At that hour, no servant would work, so we have to stay up all night, keep a watch out, and do the filling ourselves. So I too was determined. We got together and demanded why such discrimination should go on. When we are paying the same taxes as Bombay city, then why are we not getting water? We must get water. I should mention that we had quite a few young managers working with us too. I picked out two of them, they were holding some minor jobs, which I persuaded them to resign. Goregaon is becoming much larger, I told them. It's within the corporation area now. More houses will come up, there'll be plumbers working. You better do a plumber's course. You can help us then, as well as run your own business.

They did the plumbing course, and they run a successful business even today. One of the known plumbers in these parts. With their help, we worked out exactly what kind of lines were needed, why the water was not coming, what changes were needed, we studied all this. A long story. But I'll give you just a little example, because we're examining the past here, aren't we? Not the future. So, there was this Maharashtra Housing Board colony there. We saw a pump in the basement, a tank on the roof, and still the people on the top floor said they were not getting any water. How could that be? We inspected the pump, and the overhead tank. Being a corporator, I could summon the engineer any time. I made the pumpman start up the pump again. I went up again and saw the tank filling up. Now, was the water reaching

the top floor flats? It still wasn't. Why not? Such a thing just wasn't possible. So then our plumber told us that they had fixed the valve upside down, and the water was all going back the way it came! I went and reported this to the MHADA, but who would believe me? Impossible. So I told the Engineer quietly to come next morning and see for himself. He came, and he was sitting in the office. I had made all the arrangements earlier. All the women said they would be there. Go and *gherao* him, don't let him slip off. I won't be there. You go on your own. Call me only if he creates trouble. So I sat at home, and the women surrounded him for four or five hours till he was really upset, saying where is Mrs Gore? They sent a messenger to me. What's the matter, I went and asked them. He said these women are sitting here all morning, won't budge. I said, why should they move? They get water alright, don't they? I told you, but you refused to listen. Now come along with me. Start the pump and watch what happens. He finally saw for himself, and apologised to everyone present. So that's the water story. Now I'll tell you another one. There was this compound named Manibhai Hathibhai. There were lots of huts there, one of them belonged to the owner. He had an old well which had plenty of water, but the water was filthy, which he just wouldn't accept. People wanted to pay money and buy it off him. No! It's my property. No one can enter here. The municipal engineer came, he was thrown out. No one could touch it, yet four boys died and the doctor said it was due to the filthy water. So we went to the Corporation and made a huge commotion. Some madcap fellow stops you from cleaning the well, and how can you just come away quietly! I'll go and stand there myself, and you must clear the pipelines overnight. The Commissioner agreed. He and the hydraulic engineer inspected the site. They decided to send men to lay lines. I phoned the municipality men who were scared and told them I would stand there myself. I'll see who dares stop you. I didn't mean I'd be there alone, but we would all be there. When I stood there, they all came and joined me. Jain colony women, Gujarati colony women, every one. There were at least 200 women standing all night at the Manibhai Hathibhai place. By early morning the municipal lines had been laid. Release the water first thing, we said. The owner just kept sitting inside his house. Then everyone realised what people's power could achieve. That's how we got started. Then we found out why the well water had turned filthy. The schoolhouse next door had blocked the gutter that used to flow on their side, so all the sewage was flowing into the well. We told the school trustees to reopen the gutter, because and disease was spreading otherwise. That shouldn't happen. These people wouldn't accept what we were saying. So fine, so we got together, all two hundred of us, dug up the concrete ourselves and allowed the gutter to operate again. That's the only way, we told the municipality people. There's no other way. And you can do it too. But no, they have to go to court. We said we will break it, take us to court if you like. Let's see what happens. No one went to court. They accepted it. We got the men in one line to throw out the rubbish. And a second line of women to hand back the empty containers again. All these Gujarati women handling rubbish bins, imagine. Not for me, I told them. You're doing this for yourselves. If you don't fend for yourselves, nothing will ever get done. They all set to work. The whole road was water-logged. So we phoned the owner himself, told him

to send us three truck loads of bricks and rubble and we would fix the road for him. He quietly sent us the stuff. We didn't have money to spend, but we could work. People gained a new confidence from this. It proved they could do their own work. I think this experience was good for whatever struggles we had to take on later. They took out a huge procession to meet the Commissioner. At first they were stopped near the gate. I was attending a corporation meeting at the time. I walked in to the Commissioner's room and asked him why he wasn't willing to meet the women. They just want to talk to you, and you won't let them. The poor man thought there must be ten or fifteen women may be, so he asked for them to be allowed to come up. So they trooped in and sat down, filling his entire office and beyond. They spoke to him in strong terms. And there was a bit of fun and laughter too. They invited him to their homes for a meal; but warned him that he would have to return home to drink water. We don't have any water to offer you. All kinds of chit-chat. I saw that women basically are quite smart in this way. They know how to tackle the problem and they work with a lot of zeal. Then I called the hydraulic engineer and told him to go along with them and look into their demands. First was that the water must be clean. Water from the Tulsi lake was being used to wash animals in the Aarey colony. Powai water was bad, so it couldn't be used. We demanded that the Powai water be sent to Aarey and the Tulsi water be sent straight to Goregaon. So the large pipes had to be laid accordingly. Another thing. The Chinese war was on then, so there was no cement available. They said that to get water in the morning fix a large tank which should not be pumped. We have to build a large reservoir. But there's no cement, they said. What can we do. We said, how do we know, you work that out yourselves. You have big engineers with you, why ask us? All we can say is that is what needs to be done. They sat there for four hours. Then an engineer comes up to me and whispers that there is a way out. We have 140 inch diameter pipes, which we could lay on the ground and join up. That could serve as a tank. No need for cement. We had two such tanks fixed in our constituency, one in Goregaon and the other in Malwani. So the water that used to come at midnight now came from five to eight in the morning. We took up the slum problem next. They had no water connections. In the rules it was explicitly written that water connections could not be given to *kaccha* hutments. We even organised a *satyagraha* to break open the pipes. How can you have such a rule. They are human beings. They need drinking water. Change the rule if you have to. We were punished for the *satyagraha* but the rule remained. Then there was a riot in Majaswadi for this issue of water. Eleven people died. We kicked up a huge fuss at a meeting that day. They were preparing for by-elections for the House Committee. We went and tore up the ballot papers. But you must note why we did such a thing. Thousands and thousands of hutment dwellers not getting any water. You won't change the rule, and there's eleven people dead. How can one tolerate this. Change the rule first; if not, no other work will proceed. There were three of us, Shobana Singh, George Fernandes, and myself. When we pressed our point so strongly, they had to listen. A special meeting was called. The rule was changed. From then on all the hutments are entitled to get water too. That was 1964. My entering parliamentary politics, raising a hue and cry - since we're discussing the rights and

wrongs of these methods - let me say that once in a while it becomes very necessary. I think it's a *punyata yogya*. But if we adopt these tactics every day for every little thing, then parliament wouldn't run. That is what is happening today. Some people think that all you have to do to get any demand is do a *gherao*. That's not true. We assessed the situation, talked to the engineers, saw whether it was a feasible demand first. Only then did we resort to a *gherao*, not otherwise. Acting responsibly, that's something we should remember. So, I was referred to as the *paniwali bai*, the water-lady. The hutment dwellers were so happy. The water struggle made us women totally *sharikh* - united. Our street corner meetings were held in the afternoons because water was very much a women's question. They came, talked things over, moved into action. That goes for the '72 movement against rising prices too. Legitimate questions were raised, and it wasn't just me alone. The women came forward and formed a united front to control price rise - Mahangai Pratikar Sanyukta Samiti. Then too they put forward just one demand settled with everyone's consent at the very first meeting, at which I wasn't present. They wanted me to be president, I said I was willing, but they would have to tackle both the state government and the central government. If anyone backs out when we take on the Centre, that will not be accepted. Because Indira Gandhi was Prime Minister then and the CPI people who were with us were pledged to support her. So I made this clear from the beginning that they should be prepared to go against her. So we built this committee, took out massive protest marches, but before each such demonstration we would have to hold at least forty public meetings. Later it turned out that people called us of their own and said don't worry, we'll make all the arrangements, set up the stage, hire mikes. You just give us some time, tell us when you can come. We never took any donations from big people. We got one hundred two hundred rupee contributions, and that was enough, because we got a lot of support from ordinary people. We worked out what the government's role should be. There was compulsory rationing at the time. But vegetables were scarce, very poor quality too. We made a thorough survey of this with the help of the women, and then made our plans accordingly. Our Food Minister, Haribhai Vartak, had some American milo brought over which was really very bad. I had a big argument with him, even had him *gheraoed*. Took it up at the Assembly too. I found out that the very next day after the furore in the Assembly, this man sent out a circular asking the flour mills to grind up the milo before distribution. I came upon the circular that night and that was concrete evidence our people had gathered. Next morning in the Vidhan Sabha I asked the minister whether he thought the people were fools that he was thinking of passing off the milo in this way without even having it cleaned. Was this any way to act? We pressed him to withdraw the order, got all 170 members to back us up. They had to support the three of us. The Shiv Sena came in '66, and they did a lot of *dadagiri* during the '68 Corporation elections. The united Samiti put up its own candidate. Now the Congress who didn't like the socialist, communist forces gaining such strength, deliberately allowed the Shiv Sena to grow, with the help of the mill owners. There was no Sharad Pawar, it was Vasant Rao Naik then. Later, the slogan came up, 'ya mati var prem kara, Shiv Senela vijayi kara' meaning those who love Maharashtra support the Shiv Sena. In the '68 elections these Shiv Sena people

wouldn't let anyone else put up a table even, they simply came and overturned them. They were so powerful that people wouldn't dare resist. Krishna Desai was murdered. And people made a lot of money too from this, from the industrialists. The propaganda was strong, it said Marathi people were being denied opportunity, that young Marathi men were all becoming *aashik* and they needed support. Still, in '68 I did get re-elected with a huge majority. We put up a strong fight. In my first meeting, they started their usual tactics of joining in and creating trouble so that people would disperse. So I got up and said, you must have come here to listen, or why else would you have gathered here? The crowd said, yes they'd come to listen. So I said, all those who don't wish to listen may please leave. If they don't leave but continue to create disturbance, just get hold of who happens to be near you and throw him out. Our own people were sitting there, so were the police. Well, if the police don't look after law and order, we'll have to see what we can do. This can't go on, this is a democracy. We're holding an election meeting here. I have a right to say what I want to. We won't tolerate any *dadagiri* from the Shiv Sena. A couple of them still tried to create trouble, and they were removed bodily. After that they fell silent. And my meetings continued. Not very large ones. And at some places they just wouldn't allow it. So I kept telling the Shiv Sena that what they were doing was wrong.

I'll come to 1969 now. It was Gandhi's birth centenary year and different programmes were being organised for it, when this Bal Thackeray comes up with the declaration that we don't accept him as the Father of The Nation. I was an appointed member of the Kamgar Kalyan Kendra at Worli. This was at a function organised by them. So I got up and asked what right Thackeray had to make such a declaration. If he himself didn't accept it, that was okay. But I accept him, we all do. And we will not tolerate such insults to the Father of The Nation. Once and for all let me make it clear. We will not stand such remarks. They kept quiet that day. Next day, all their men were in the House, about fifty to sixty of them. We were just two. And they started the same thing again. And again we protested, please withdraw those remarks. Or we won't let any other work proceed. Ahilya was in the House at the time. She started shouting and screaming, 'Arey! this Communist has now grown fond of Gandhi suddenly! They were against him before.' Well I didn't sit quiet. Gave them back good. I turned to the Congress men. How can you put up with this, denigrating the Father of The Nation. So they too stood up. And we made a joint demand that the remark be withdrawn. The meeting would be at a standstill until then. He had to withdraw. Achyutrao Patwardhan's brother, Janubhai Patwardhan, was Municipal Commissioner at the time. When I came out of the meeting he was waiting there for me. 'I don't know how to thank you,' he said. I was sitting there feeling distressed, my blood was boiling, but being Commissioner I couldn't open my mouth, or do a thing. I was wondering how everyone could sit there and swallow such insult. Then you stood up, and he was forced to withdraw his words.'

So what I'm saying is, that if you stand up against such people, they back down. If you're frightened into silence, they become even more daring. I had made up my mind from the very first day that these were bad elements and I would resist them. They knew I could blow

up trouble, and that's exactly what I did. I'd oppose them at every opportunity, and never let them browbeat me, ever. This much I was certain of.

Year 1972 was another inflationary year. We launched various kinds of agitation. You have to devise novel methods to suit the need. We'd launched massive rallies earlier and paid heavy costs. So we chalked out a plan to slip into the Secretariat through different doors. Our sisters had become smarter by then. Men wouldn't have known how to handle this, but the women did. Thirty five or forty of them would enter the Secretariat unnoticed. I being an MLA would enter through the front gate quite easily. We all met at an appointed time, no one got a chance to prevent us. We decided to meet under Shivaji's statue at 4 o'clock sharp. Each woman carried a bag from which she took out an empty food case and rolling pin and started beating on them, creating a massive din. The sound echoed through the high ceilings of the Mantralay building. Three or four of us then took the lift and went upstairs. The police had come running by this time, and the entire Secretariat had emptied out to see what was happening. The lift was stopped, but the women ran up the stairs to the fourth floor, and the crowd made room for them to pass, with the police in hot chase behind them. We reached the door of the minister's office and knocked hard. He, poor chap, took such fright he locked the door from within. We went on shouting, till the police arrived, arrested us and took us to the lock-up. But that very night the minister had to give an undertaking that ration cards that had been withheld would be returned.

The lesson from all this is that we need to work towards some long-term objective. Side by side, we need to assess what the immediate objective can be, based on the situation on the ground. Study this very carefully before taking any decision. If we go about it systematically, we definitely will achieve something. These days I feel very regretful. Poor Ahilya is now ill, and I too am not up to creating too much of a noise. But the young women of today don't seem to be thinking sincerely on these issues, from their hearts. Thinking out new strategies. We tried gheraos, we took nooses along at others. Vasantrao Naik had said at one time that if Maharashtra did not become self-sufficient by the coming year, he would hang himself. So here you are, we've brought a noose for you. His wife was very upset. We met her later and explained to her at length that all this was part of an agitation, so she shouldn't be upset. But these are some of the tactics we tried. Once it was about rubbish in the rations. The women were asked to bring along all the stuff. We made plaster of paris cut-outs of the Food Minister and Chief Minister and put these up on a truck with a huge weighing balance. Next we put the cut-outs on one pan of the scale and got the women to line up and pour the dirty rations on the other pan. The police wanted to confiscate the whole thing at first. But they couldn't because the women and men together put up a huge resistance. People shouted, 'The Chief Minister's coming, stand aside, make way!' The police were confused. They didn't quite know which Chief Minister we were referring to. We did this in the afternoon near the Fountain, so there were thousands of people watching and wondering what we were up to. After that, there was an immediate order passed in the House that all rations should be cleaned before distribution. So fifty of our workers got jobs too.

We beat plates in the villages, tried all sorts of things. Jobs were scarce during a drought, so the villagers gheraoed the revenue collector's office and started beating on these plates. Antulay used to say very boldly that he never took anything under the table. We take it openly, not for the organisation. It's a government thing, how can we take money for it. So we went to court with a refutation. Then some people turned up who we didn't even know before, and they supplied government circulars to support our point. When you're prepared to fight, people do come forward with information. These days I feel that since TV has arrived, my sisters are eager to get on to it. But if that is what our leaders get busy with, work will not proceed in the proper manner. What to do, how to go about it, these are questions left with the poor dalit. Therefore, we must remember this when we get together on some major issues, it's always with women from the upper strata, from the better families. But unless our sisters from dalit and OBC sections join in too, we will never accomplish our task fully. We have to try and draw them in. Only then can we women make progress.

Thank you.

Baroda Seminar Programme

August 9, 1997

Inauguration

Welcome: Padma Ramchandra, Vice Chancellor,
M.S. University of Baroda

Opening Remarks: Nirmala Banerjee,
President IAWS

Introduction of Activists Presenting Testimonies.

Inaugural Address: Ela Bhatt, Secretary, SEWA

Keynote Address: Vina Mazumdar,
Professor Emeritus, CWDS.

Vote of Thanks: Prof. Amita Varma,
Women's Studies Centre,
M.S. University, Baroda.

PANEL ONE:

THE NEHRUVIAN ERA: CRITICAL APPRAISAL

First Session

1. Nirmala Banerjee: The Larger Perspective on Planning
2. Madhura Swaminathan: Employment Opportunities for Women
3. Nirmala Buch: State Welfare Policies and Women

Second Session

1. Malini Karkal: Family Planning & Its Implications for Women
2. Zarina Bhatti: Responses of Muslim Women
3. Aparna Basu: Role of the AIWC

Testimonies of Mallu Swarajyam, Rani Dasgupta,
Ila Mitra

August 10, 1997

PANEL TWO:

**WOMEN AND PEOPLE'S MOVEMENTS:
THE GROUNDSWELL**

Third Session

1. V. Geetha: The Periyar Movement and Women

2. Meera Velayudhan: State and the Dalit Organisations
3. U. Vindhya: the Srikakulam Movement

Fourth Session

1. Sandhya: Women in Telangana Movement
2. Ambika: Progressive Organisation of Women on the Path of Struggle
3. Kavita Punjabi: The Tebhaga Movement
4. Varsha Bhagat: The Maha-Gujarat Movement

Testimonies of Manavati Arya, Mrinal Gore,
Dasriben Chaudhari

August 11, 1997

PANEL THREE:

DISPLACEMENT AND REHABILITATION

Fifth Session

1. Jasodhara Bagchi: Freedom in an Idiom of Loss : The Feminine in the Partition Literature and Cinema
2. Ritu Menon: Partition, Abduction and Recovery of Women, Punjab

Sixth Session

1. Swarooparani: Dalit Literature in Talagu
2. Sonal Shukla: Literature in Gujarati
3. Nabaneeta Deb Sen: Literature in the East

PANEL FOUR:

CULTURAL REPRESENTATIONS

Seventh Session

1. Malini Bhattacharya: In Search of a New Role: Women's Aspects in IPTA
2. Pushpa Bhawe: Theatre in Maharashtra
3. Gayatri Chatterjee: Nationality and Gender Sexuality

Notes on the Panelists

Ela Bhatt : Secretary, Self-Employed Women's Association, Ahmedabad. Winner of Magsaysay Award for her contribution towards empowerment of poor women working in the unorganised sector. Currently involved in an international struggle to get due recognition of the contribution of informal sector workers to the national economy.

Vina Mazumdar: Professor Emeritus at the Centre for Women's Development Studies, New Delhi. Earlier, Secretary of the Committee on the Status of Women in India.

Nirmala Banerjee: Professor of Economics, Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta and current president of Indian Association of Women's Studies.

Nirmala Buch: Visiting Fellow at the Centre for Women's Development Studies, New Delhi and vice chairperson of the National Environment Appellate Authority. Formerly of the Indian Administrative Service.

Madhura Swaminathan: Fellow in Economics, The Indira Gandhi Institute for Development Research, Mumbai.

Malini Karkal: Demographer and formerly Professor, Indian Institute of Population Studies. Involved in several health-related action programmes.

Zarina Bhatt: Consultant on Women and Development. Has done extensive research on women working in several informal occupations like bidi making.

Aparna Basu: Vice President, All India Women's Conference. Formerly Professor of History, Delhi University.

V Geetha: Activist in the women's group, Snehidi in Chennai. Has recently published monographs in Tamil and in English on Periyar and the non-brahmin movements in Tamil Nadu.

Meera Velayudhan: Post-doctoral UGC Research Associate in History, Mahatma Gandhi Institute at Kottayam, Kerala. Presently at Junagarh working on a South Asian research project on Women and Governance coordinated by the International Centre for Ethnic Studies, Colombo.

U Vindhya: Teaches Psychology at the University of Andhra at Vishakhapatnam. Has done extensive research on dowry related violence in Andhra. Active in Andhra Pradesh civil liberties movement.

Sandhya: Activist in Progressive Organisation of Women, Stri Mukti Group, Hyderabad.

Ambika: Cultural activist in Progressive Organisation of Women, Stri Mukti Group, Hyderabad. Participated in the Beijing Conference in that capacity.

Vimala: Activist in Progressive Organisation of Women, Stri Mukti Group, Hyderabad. Writes feminist poetry in Telugu.

Kavita Panjabi: Senior Lecturer in Comparative Literature, Jadavpur University, Calcutta. Active in West Bengal's Association for the Protection of Democratic Rights. Currently working on Women in the Tebhaga Movement.

Varsha Bhagat Ganguli: Social researcher working in an action-oriented research organisation, SETU - Centre for Social Knowledge and Action. Has been studying the problems of teenage girls and widows, and deaths under suspicious circumstances.

Jasodhara Bagchi: Professor of English and Director of the School of Women's Studies at Jadavpur University, Calcutta. An important contributor to literary studies, especially on the 19th century.

Ritu Menon: Co-founder of the feminist publishing house, Kali for Women in New Delhi. Has researched and written extensively on the theme of Partition of India and Women.

Swarooparani: An important worker in the Dalit movement in Andhra Pradesh and a well known poet in Telugu.

Sonal Shukla: An active member of the Forum Against Oppression of Women. A writer and media activist and founder-member of Vacha, a women's group. Also, the principle conceiver and producer of the documentary film, Bhitār Vahe Mukti Dhara.

Nabaneeta Deb Sen: Professor of Comparative Literature at Jadavpur University, Calcutta and a well known litterateur in Bengali.

Malini Bhattacharya: Professor of English, Jadavpur University, Calcutta. An active member of the CPI(M). Formerly an elected Member of Parliament from 1991-96.

Pushpa Bhawe: Teaches English Literature at Ruia College, Mumbai. and is active in the Maharashtra civil liberties movement. Current president of Maharashtra Stree Abhyas Vyaspeeth.

Gayatri Chatterjee: Works in the Film Institute and Film Archives at Pune.

