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# Changing Terms of Political Discourse

## Women's Movement in India, 1970s-1990s

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*The revolutionary changes which followed the two world wars created fora and structures that promoted debates on women's rights. By the beginning of the 1990s however, the international context in which the struggle for the advance of women's rights was being waged had been transformed. Debates being actively promoted today twist the very premises and values on which the movement had been based. It is against the background of these developments which have influenced the women's movement in India that one must evaluate the goals and directions of the movement and locate its strengths and weaknesses.*

### I Introduction

THE 20th century promoted the cause of gender justice by internationalising struggles for equality by women and other oppressed people. Women's struggles against their subordination were intertwined in varying degrees with ideologies and movements based on the values of freedom, self-determination, equality, democracy and justice. Confined earlier by locale or limited foci, these now found expression through movements against imperialism, for national liberation and social transformation. The defeat of fascism and the forced retreat of imperialism around the mid-century paved the way for social advance of which gender relations were a key component along with the other broad objectives of human rights and the end of iniquitous social orders. The revolutionary changes which followed the two world wars also created fora and structures that promoted debates on women's rights. The International Women's Decade was initiated during this period of hope which also posited a new International Economic Order. By the end of the decade, however, this hope was already shaky [Mair 1985]. In the mid-1990s, the context in which the international struggle for advance of women's rights is being waged has been transformed. Debates being actively promoted today twist the very premises and values on which the movement had been based. Terms like empowerment, choice, reproductive freedom, spiritual autonomy, etc. are being appropriated by forces inimical to the goals of the women's movement. Can the movement ensure the continued existence of fora to mount pressure for intervention in favour of more equitable gender relations – both at the level of international realpolitik, as well as at ground level processes?

It is important to note these international developments since they have influenced the movement in India from the start. If we were to spell out the parameters within

which the movement developed in recent years, these would be (a) the decadal thrust provided by the preparations for the UN Conference in Mexico, and the initiatives coming forth from the Non-Aligned Movement in this context; (b) the history of and relationship between earlier movements for freedom, equality and democracy, values which were subsequently enshrined as basic political tenets in the Constitution of India, and the constraints felt towards achievement of these in independent India, and (c) the influence of ideas coming across through the various streams of the women's liberation movements of the west. Thus equality, democracy and freedom were at the same time, actual, notional and ideological goals which the women's movement addressed in all their connotations including specific gender perspective and components.

### II The Indian Movement

Although in India colonial rule and the freedom struggle marked the beginning of an awakening among women, differing streams within the anti-imperialist anti-feudal struggle posited different, even contentious images of identities for women [Sangali and Vaid 1989]. But the nationalist consensus symbolised in the Fundamental Rights Resolution of the Indian National Congress, 1931, postulated freedom, justice, dignity and equality for women as essential for nation-building. The Constitution assured these rights. In the post-independence period, however, women exploring avenues for socio-economic and political mobility came up against the limitations of a third world ex-colonial state. This posed conflicts between their new rights and the values carefully promoted by a longstanding patriarchal social hierarchy. Social disabilities and gradual isolation from the politico-ideological struggles that were shaping the nation-building process led to the fragmentation of the women's movement and the women's

question faded from the public arena [GOI 1974; Mazumdar 1978].

This is not to imply that no struggles were waged during this period. But, with the exception of the tempo built up before the passage of the Hindu Code Bill, 1956, these could not form the basis of spurring agitations which could catch the public imagination, cutting sectional demands and organisations.

In contemporary India the resurgence of the women's movement and its contours have to be seen in the light of: (1) The crisis of state and government in the 70s going into the emergency; (2) the post-emergency upsurge in favour of civil rights; (3) the mushrooming of women's organisations in the early 1980s and the arrival of women's issue on the agenda; (4) the mid-1980s, marked by a fundamentalist advance; and the 1990s, when the crisis has deepened with regard to state, government and society.

The women's movement in India is one of the many burgeoning efforts at reassertion of citizen's claims to participate as equals in the political and development process. This places it in a situation of direct confrontation with the forces of conservatism and reaction. The fundamentalist onslaught in one country after another have exposed the vulnerability of women's advance in most places. In the third world as well as erstwhile socialist states, however, the combination of these with the onset/acceleration of free market capitalism has both strengthened the powers of the oppressors, as well as created new instruments for hegemony, by weakening the balancing mechanisms and ideologies that sought to place limits on their rapacity. In India the mid-1980s have seen an onslaught on even existing rights of women through a harking back to 'tradition' and 'culture' and the positing of images which emphasise women's reproductive role as the only natural, historical one. The fundamentalist/revivalist face of many social movements today is directly opposed to the radical demands and upsurges coming from below.

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These decades in India have marked the end of the age of complacency, apathy and acceptance of the existing social order. Undoubtedly, these stem from both problems of transition as well as the outcome of the world's largest experiment in democracy. Shifts in foci and awareness of problems that impinged on women's lives, the social construction of gender relations and the identity of women from different classes in their attempts to resolve the problems of the national economy and polity occurred during a period of dissolving certainties that characterised local, national or global systems.

This changing character and the contradictions are reflected within the governmental structures and in a shifting attitude towards the women's movement. A major question facing all governments in office has been how to respond to the movement and its demand to place the women's question on the political agenda. The government's response has been teetering between responding to the conservative or the radical forces in dealing with the women's question.

The women's movement, in turn, has mounted pressures on the state and government from the opposite end of the spectrum. Itself experiencing major transformations, it has grown immensely despite pressures from diverse areas. Within the movement diversities manifested themselves in many ideological cleavages and fragmented, regionally uneven growth. But the issues on which women first articulated their visible opposition covered a vast terrain – ranging from those which were gender-specific to those which impinged on citizen's rights, class formations, values and the direction of social transformation.

The main concerns of the movement, as it emerged, were laid out in the issues opened up by the report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI) which drew attention to the wide diversities in 'culturally' prescribed gender roles in India's plural society. The committee raised serious doubts about the 'development' or 'modernisation' models that not only ignored the real differences that revolved round caste, class and ethnic history, but exaggerated the influence of religion, culture and 'social attitudes' on gender role prescriptions. Questioning the continued 'invisibility of women' in areas/sectors where they were largely involved, the CSWI pleaded for a renewed concern that would reflect real life issues and aspirations of the majority of women [GOI 1974:3].

This disenchantment of women with the post-independence 'development' scenario was not a stance dictated by exogenous political considerations. Demographic indicators like the accelerated decline in

the sex-ratio, increasing gender gaps in life-expectancy, mortality and economic participation, or the rising migration rate were disturbing enough. Combined with this was the utter failure of state policy to live up to its constitutional mandates in any field of national development. The CSWI noted clear linkages between existing and growing social and economic disparities and women's status in education, the economy, society and the polity [GOI 1974:234], putting the demand for equality on an actual historical terrain. It also formed a starting point for women's studies.

In this paper we have confined ourselves to the movement's responses to violence, fundamentalism and the debate on economic role and processes. We have focused on these not only because of limitations of space, but because we see a close link between the marginalisation of women as economic beings (a trend which is now on the rise despite the movement's interventions in the last decade and a half) and the rising trend of violence targeting women. In India today the most modern techniques of propaganda are used to project women as consumers and reproductive beings rather than producers; and, above all as members of one or other particular community which seeks to establish its political identity by right of birth, religion or culture. Fundamentalism provides an ideological framework while globalisation and glorification of the market provides the operative instrument to demolish women's claims to equality, freedom and dignity as individuals. This awesome combination poses a challenge which is forcing women's organisations into rethinking, soul-searching and questioning of their roles and identities in the reshaping of the struggle.

This, however, does not mean that the movement has not intervened in other critical sectors that affect the overall processes of national transformation, e.g. education, science, technology, research and development, management of natural resources and food security. We have here focused on three main aspects which are critical determinants in the struggle for gender equality.

The focus on these themes reflects both the views of the authors as well as that of activists in the movement. The method followed is one of fairly widespread consultation with activists through workshops organised in different regions to get a feedback on what activists considered to be the major issues looking back on the last two decades.<sup>2</sup> The paper does not attempt to write a history of the movement. It only focuses on the issues, trends and challenges as these have emerged while locating women in the overall context of the

complexity of India's social and political entity of a democracy-in-making, as well as a democracy endangered.

### III Violence: Case of Expanding Arenas

From its earliest phase in the late 1970s, the contemporary women's movement perceived growing violence as a major issue, bringing 'visibility' to the movement itself. This identification violence has also been interpreted in many ways, by analysts of the movement. Primarily of course, it has been seen as a 'rallying cry' or a 'rallying point'.

Violence, however, is perpetrated through the given institutions of the state, community, the family and society at large. It draws sustenance from prevailing ideologies which seek to propagate status quoism through advocacy of 'falling-in-line', be it in response to transgression of social norms or laws, which are defended in the name of age-old customs and tradition, religious or caste identities, or even political dissidence. Such status quoists perceived the movement's adoption of violence as a threat to basic social institutions like the family, community and construction of gender roles developed by the elites and projected as universal to "Indian" culture – at all levels. Over the decades, however, there has been a change in this perception.

#### RAPE

It was the widespread, national level campaign, in the course of 1979-80, on the Mathura case which brought women's issues onto the public agenda. The Supreme Court's acquittal of two policemen involved in the rape of a minor tribal girl brought to the fore several crucial aspects of women's oppression, viz, the roles of class and caste in oppression of women, and the issue of accountability of public servants and the judiciary in achieving the constitutional guarantees. These were pointedly raised by four law teachers in their protest to the chief justice.

Must illiterate, labouring, politically mute Mathuras of India be continually condemned to their pre-Constitutional India fate?...<sup>3</sup>

Though the agitation sparked off by the Mathura case led to significant changes in the Evidence Act, the Criminal Procedure Code and the Indian Penal Code, including the introduction of a category of custodial rape, the changes introduced were not sufficient. The concept of power rape was resisted and has only recently been admitted through an amendment in the Civil Rights Act. Significant loopholes nevertheless remain, both with regard to the law and its implementation.



While the movement's understanding of the issue has widened, success has been limited due to both lacunae in the conceptual definition as well as monitoring of procedures. The definition of rape does not extend to **marital rape** and anomalies exist between the Child Marriage Restraint Act and the rape law in that consent is not required for intercourse in marriage before the age of 18. Also, whereas the **character of the victim** is not supposed to be a consideration in determining rape, clauses in earlier legislation to the contrary effect continue to be used and even the Supreme Court has violated the principle of custodial rape on this count. There is also the element of **'provocation'** or, as the Supreme Court put it recently while reducing the sentence in one case, inability to resist temptation so that rape became a **'crime of passion'**. Apart from all this there is the inability and unwillingness of the state machinery to act in a manner as to collect evidence in order to prove rape. As has been highlighted in the case of rape of nuns in Gujraula, UP, the law leaves sufficient loopholes for agencies such as the concerned police and medical personnel to not act, with perfect impunity. Of late, the movement is emphasising the rising trend in child rape, and demanding new legislation to combat the trend.

### ANTI-DOWRY AGITATION

Of all the agitations focused on violence the one that most touched the public imagination, the media and the widest sections outside the pale of organisations, was that which protested against **dowry and dowry-related violence**. It is the anti-dowry agitation which emerged as a rallying cry.

The **'atrocities against women'** headline, attracted attention in the post-emergency scenario of 'excesses', and the **'Brides Are Not for Burning'** slogan focused media attention both in India and abroad on women's lives. The question has often been posed, whether it perpetuated the 'women as victim' syndrome? But for those who became crusaders in the fight against dowry the movement transmitted a pulsating sense of energy which over time got transformed into a brand of activism which asserted women's agency in social change. It was this public assertion of what had till then been seen as a private agenda, which shook older organisations from a seemingly unending slumber.

One of the amendments in the **Criminal Law, Section 498-A**, passed in the wake of the agitation, encompassed for the first time a definition of cruelty which included not just physical but mental cruelty as well. One of the most commonly used clauses in cases filed by women, the invoking of the clause has in effect focused

on the issue of domestic violence. The successive campaigns brought into focus the trauma women undergo within the confines of the ever-enduring family, glamorised by policy-makers and elite groups in general, as "the basic foundation of Indian society".

By 1982 organisations in Delhi and elsewhere built up formidable evidence of dowry-related murders being passed off as **'suicide' or accidents** [Kishwar and Vanita 1984; Kumar 1992]. In several cases activists had themselves recorded the dying declaration of victims and urged the courts to treat this as evidence. Newspaper headlines screamingly reminded readers that 'dowry deaths' were on the increase. But the government, the police and other official agencies along with society at large slumbered in insensitivity and the convenient middle class ploy was used to dismiss torture of a young bride as an **'internal family matter'**. It was a consistent, widespread mass campaign both individually by organisations and jointly under the aegis of the **Dahej Virodhi Chetna Manch (DVCM)** that finally mounted pressure on the government to act, if only out of political expediency. The Law Commission undertook a *suo motu* study on improving the law to combat this social menace more effectively. The parliament appointed a joint committee of both houses of parliament to review the working of the **Dowry Prohibition Act**. Though members were drawn from all political parties, it included several leaders of national women's organisations and led to one of the rare occasions of "all the women speaking with one voice" [Government of India 1981; Palriwala 1985].<sup>4</sup>

What came into focus in the course of the campaign was a clear link between dowry and the urge to accumulate consumer items as well as mobilise resources to be used as **'investment' or 'capital'** to start petty business or enterprise [Karat and Agnihotri 1993]. These facts were so stark that for the high court to assert that the giving of gifts was customary was sure to invite the wrath of women's organisations. **The irony of the high court assertion seemed greater in view of the fact that in 21 years since the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961, only one conviction had taken place.**

However, as anyone in the movement would today testify, even as increasing 'cases' of harassment and torture are registered with the numerous complaint cells as well as legal aid centres, the menace of dowry has increased manifold. Did the focus shift from fighting dowry to only highlighting dowry deaths, asks an activist? Why could we not end dowry, ask others? There are no simple answers. While analysts have critiqued the movement for an emphasis on legal remedies, the fact is that the movement addressed itself to much

more, and also achieved more. The question that may be raised is, was it and is it possible to fight dowry in a social context where both **caste and consumerism** are penetrating deeper? Matrimonial columns of leading dailies now proudly classify advertisements along caste lines, and consumerism has spread its tentacles far and wide in Indian society. The DVCM's demand of comprehensive legislation including changes in the whole gamut of inheritance/succession/property laws has gone unheeded, prompting even feminists/erstwhile feminists to **'rethink' dowry** [Kishwar 1988a; 1988b]. Dowry, far from being a 'deep-rooted' Indian tradition, is the fastest way to make quick money in India while also claiming social sanction and legitimacy [Srinivas 1983]. In fact despite the most visible solidarity shown on the issue in the media, concerned women parliamentarians and activists, the issue has today been relegated to the background from the public eye in the face of more 'immediate' and 'pressing' problems, which are not altogether separate from the social agenda inherent in the anti-dowry campaign. In fact with the given state of a **son-preference** in Indian minds **amniocentesis and sex-selection** also draw their rationale from the dowry menace.

### AMNIOCENTESIS AND SEX SELECTION

In 1974 the department of human cytogenetics, All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), New Delhi, started a sample survey with the aid of **amniocentesis to detect foetal abnormalities**. By 1975, the AIIMS knew that the tests were being followed by abortion of female foetuses. While the AIIMS tests were stopped by 1979, reports came in from Amritsar in Punjab where medical entrepreneurs openly advertised their services referring to daughters as a 'liability' to the family and a 'threat' to the nation's population problem. Expectant parents were exhorted to avail of the services of clinics to rid themselves of the daughters to come. At a meeting convened in New Delhi in July 1982 a three-point position was arrived at wherein: (a) government was requested to restrict use of **amniocentesis** to only teaching and research establishments; (b) the Indian Medical Council was requested to take severe action against members indulging in **unethical practices**; and (c) women's organisations were to remain **vigilant** against the spread of the practice for commercial purposes [Mazumdar 1994].

While government did issue some circulars to this effect, not such action followed. In the meantime the **sex determination business** had come to stay, with clinics spreading even to small towns and information on this count reaching families



which were otherwise unaware of technological advances. Today the business flourishes more rampantly in North India, where in some places which earlier practised female infanticide, female foeticide has come in. From the south, alarming reports have come in of the prevalence of female infanticide among the Kallars in Tamil Nadu. Ironically, this was not a tradition of the community. Approval and connivance for the practice are being granted by an emerging new prosperous community leadership which includes educated professionals as well as politicians.

In 1985, The Forum Against Sex-Determination and Sex-Pre-Selection (FASDSP) was formed in Bombay. The Forum addressed itself to the entire spectrum of new reproductive technologies. It sought wider alliances, undertook surveys, and filed a public interest litigation. A private member's bill introduced in the state assembly, forced the government to move into action. The bill, finally adopted by the Maharashtra government in 1988 had several lacunae as does the central government's bill passed in July 1994. A question that has arisen from these long campaigns and the debate is, what about the women who practise female foeticide or infanticide? The new law treats them as guilty and punishable. But does a woman in India have the right to choose or decide?

#### POPULATION POLICY

A strange link has united sex-selection followed by female foeticide and female infanticide. Both cite national population concerns as the instigation for these anti-women acts. The government of India's current efforts to formulate a new population control policy in consultation with or at the behest of its international benefactors, include a series of measures foisted on women after the initial attempts at vasectomy during the emergency period met with stiff resistance. The notable features of this policy are that (a) it is premised on the assumption of the population bomb theory; (b) women feature as the main targets since they are the agency of reproduction; (c) the contraceptives include steroids and hormonal injectables with long-term effects on the health of the user; (d) no provision/consideration for monitoring of impact.<sup>5</sup>

Women's organisations have been fighting for several years against the entry of these hazardous contraceptives which "exploit women's desperate need for 'safe' contraception", and proposals for coercive, 'fascist' punitive measures such as changes in the People's Representation Act to disqualify those with more than two children, and in the Maternity Benefits Act to restrict the benefits up to two children, while

increasing leave provisions for abortions. These concerns were articulated forcefully before a recent expert committee appointed by government of India to draft a new national population policy.<sup>6</sup> The committee's report, while upholding gender equity as crucial, and declaring its position as pro-poor, pro-women and pro-nature, recommends disincentives and other measures that have united many women's organisations in protest and one woman member dissociating herself from the recommendations.<sup>7</sup> It has also stirred up a public debate.

#### POLITICAL VIOLENCE

In a highly charged political environment, violence against women too is viewed through coloured lenses. Whereas the movement has attempted to contextualise the woman victim on the basis of prevalent social inequalities, the prevalent divisions in society take the edge out of the condemnation of the crime *per se*. Thus in every incident of violence against women, the attempt is made to underplay the crime itself by focusing on the identity/position of the perpetrator as well as the victim in order to mobilise support on the basis of defined parameters of polarisation in the specific context. These can be caste, community, regional or even politico-ideological. Thus rape and other atrocities inflicted on women and others in Nagaland, Manipur, Assam, Tripura, Punjab or Kashmir by the armed or par-military forces can be condoned by the administration as well as government under cover of action taken to put down subversive activities. A more perverse definition of pro-national activity in complete violation of constitutional guarantees, human rights as well as women's rights would be difficult to find. It is this 'teaching a lesson' to curb dissidence (whatever its shape or form) which is disturbing. Given the trend of growing criminalisation of politics in India, this form of violence can be crucial in keeping women away from public life.<sup>8</sup> In fact this also reflects a cynical societal response to transgression by women of given norms of social behaviour, which in turn are defined along lines of caste and status.

This applies to the increasing social acceptance of violence against women. In recent years there has been a spate of incidents of stripping, rape and other forms of humiliation inflicted on dalits as well as other women in different parts of the country in recent years. This is in addition to earlier instance of lynching of women on suspicion of being 'witches'. Many have seen in these the reflection of new political configurations and conflicts arising out of the aspirations of upwardly mobile backward castes. This comes along with reassertion of authority by traditional community and religion-based structures.

Claiming sanction and power to wield authority on the basis of various brands of identities, there is in contemporary India a powerful ganging-up of conservative and reactionary forces which aggressively impose moral prescripts. Where other processes fail, gender equality and women's rights to freedom is opposed through intimidation, humiliation and violence in complete violation of norms of civil society.

What is important is that even as the movement for women's rights has strengthened, there is the opposite phenomenon of increasing social acceptance of violence and its use for political purposes. This violence is limited neither to the personal sphere nor to the framework of man-woman relationships [Karat and Agnihotri 1993].

It is notable that response from social scientists on the theme of violence in general and specific to women has not been very illuminating. There have been few studies of the patterns of violence or even causal analysis [Das 1990; Datar 1993]. While the movement itself identified violence against women in many ways and has expanded its horizon in terms of definition of violence also, corresponding perspectives in terms of analysis of the phenomenon are singularly lacking. Within the movement of course differing perspectives continue to persist. While there is a shift away from the earlier emphasis on domestic violence alone, there is a simultaneous trend of subsuming other arenas of conflict – communal conflicts, fundamentalism, even economic conflicts within 'violence against women'? Conceptually, this gives primacy to a gender perspective, but it oversimplifies conflict in other spheres and other levels of societal existence, by reducing them to a one-dimensional affair. Such conceptualisation also ignores differences in perception of these varied conflicts among diverse groups of women.

#### IV Fundamentalism and Communalism

The wave of fundamentalist xenophobic upsurges sweeping across the world threatens the international women's movement as a whole. In India the complex social structures, economic constraints and political opportunism have provided ample breeding ground for the growth of revivalist ideologies and identity politics. These have adopted aggressive postures, showing scant regard for the Indian Constitution or the fundamental rights it guarantees. All religious, ethnic or cultural fundamentalists are basically hostile to gender equality whatever the rhetoric they profess.

As early as 1983, 'a deal' was reportedly struck between the government of India and the Akali Dal, spearheading the agitation for



a Sikh state, to withdraw the agitation if government of India accepted a separate **personal law for Sikhs**. The bill drafted by the Dal would have deprived Sikh women of their rights to a share in their fathers' **property** (provided under Hindu Succession Act 1956); of right of **divorce** except through the dispensation of the religious heads (against the provision of the Hindu Marriage Act), and would have legitimised **polygamy** through the custom of *chadar andazi*, claimed as a 'Sikh custom'. Protests from national women's organisations and others, backed by several Sikh women, including five village mahila mandals, apparently compelled GOI to change its mind and **no bill was introduced**.

1985 however marked a shift in Indian politics. Pro-liberalisation statements and measures by the government on the economic front began to be combined with compromises and even advancing the cause of fundamentalists. People's disenchantment with the nature and pace of India's development was sought to be offset by successive governments by playing the '**communal card**' with each community to win their support.

May 1986 witnessed a total surrender by the government to Islamic fundamentalism. The Muslim Women's (**Protection of Rights on Divorce**) Act 1986, deprived divorced Muslim women of their right to seek maintenance under **section 125 of the Criminal Procedure Code**, a secular law open to all communities [Engineer 1987].

The act came in the wake of a year-long debate on the Supreme Court judgment in the **Shah Bano case**. While upholding a Muslim woman's right to this legal remedy not available to them under Islamic personal law, the court observed that it was high time for government to think of a uniform civil code. In the months that followed, Muslim fundamentalists organised themselves for a show-down with government, accusing it of interference with **Muslim Personal Law**. It is no coincidence that the campaign proceeded alongside protests against the re-opening of the gates of the Babri masjid which Hindu fundamentalists claimed was the birth place of Lord Rama. Women's organisations campaigned and drew support from large numbers of Muslim women especially from the poorer sections, intellectuals and reform groups from the community against the bill. The Bharatiya Janata Party however, suddenly espoused the demand for the **uniform civil code**. Muslim fundamentalists responded with the hysteria of 'Islam in Danger'. Despite sharp differences within the ruling party and the resignation of a Muslim minister (who had opposed the bill), the bill was enacted with the help of a three-line-whip issued by the Congress to its members [Hasan 1989; Palriwala and Agnihotri 1993].

Petitions challenging the new law as anti-constitutional are still pending hearing in the Supreme Court. Meanwhile, organisations report that many more Muslim women come to discuss their problems and participate in other campaigns for **women's rights**.<sup>10</sup>

In September 1987 in Deorala, a village in Rajasthan, Roop Kanwar, a young bride burnt to death sitting atop the funeral pyre of her dead husband, while several thousands of people watched and even chanted slogans glorifying sati. Though a few in the media came out with strong statements against the event, many played it up as if it was a return to pristine glory, likening Roop Kanwar to a devi (goddess), who presented a sharp contrast to the urban elite, westernised feminist women who had disowned their traditional values. **Sati therefore was sought to be projected as a sort of ethnic re-assertion of indigenous womanhood**.<sup>11</sup>

The state government remained paralysed, despite **massive protests by women's groups**, and a court order to stop the celebrations of the event. But protests from all over the country forced the government of India to intervene, belatedly, with a quite unnecessary and ineffective law against both the act and the glorification of sati. A strange feature of this law is to make the victim, if she escaped death, culpable for attempted suicide.<sup>12</sup>

Women's organisations, some scholars and legal experts argued that sati was murder; that its worship in Rajasthan and elsewhere was being encouraged by the rich Marwari business community and the landed Rajputs. They also prophesied that glorification of such heinous crimes would encourage violence as well as the positing of a family and community bound identity for women.

#### AYODHYA: PRELUDE AND AFTERMATH

In December 1992 when aggressive Hindu fundamentalists demolished a 500-year old mosque in Ayodhya, claiming that it was a mandir (temple) which marked the birthplace of Lord Rama, the government's paralysis was fully exposed, indicating the depth of the crisis of state and government. It also deepened cynicism about the state's legitimacy. The demolition also sparked off **riots** in several parts of the country.

The overtly political manipulations of fundamentalists also found other victims. Several scholars were threatened or harassed for not adhering to fundamentalist versions while writing cultural, religious or even literary histories with a gender focus. There have been several such indications of **growing intolerance**. These were not confined to any single community. Repeatedly, during discussions on the movement, activists expressed the view that **countering communal politics is the greatest challenge before the movement**. Many expressed the need to define religion

and secularism as more positive, ethical values, and to discuss links with other progressive organisations.<sup>13</sup>

Activists express concern at the rupture with the essence of progressive movements of the 19th and early 20th centuries. The growth of a metropolitan culture and **continued use of English as the lingua franca of officialdom** often makes the non-English speaking feel alienated from the emerging elite cultural ethos. This disjunctive situation was capitalised by communal parties who stepped in to fill the void.<sup>14</sup>

Of late there are many activists who have established dialogue with reform movements and women's groups coming up within the religious framework. It is argued that this is necessary since religion seems to be the only outlet sanctioned by society for advance of women's latent talents. There is also an ongoing debate regarding retrieving religion from fundamentalists and highlighting the progressive aspects of socio-religious reform movements. Others argue that such instrumental use of religion, at this critical juncture of its politicalisation would not only be self defeating, but might even prove hazardous, since it may lead to the assumption that reform too can come only through preordained idioms in denial of secular space. Activists from minority communities argue forcefully that they can advance only if the majority does so. Respecting people's faiths is one thing. But excessive preoccupation with religious analysis within the movement would endanger the fragile solidarity that has been achieved.<sup>15</sup>

The movement has sought to counter communal propaganda amongst women. Organisations have intervened according to their capacities in riot situations to provide relief as well as to start a process of dialogue between women of different communities. Apart from several local initiatives by the myriad women's organisations, at least two rallies of several thousand women each were held in Ayodhya, 1989, and Lucknow, 1992. Nevertheless, as had been witnessed on previous occasions, when a clash took place between women and fundamentalism, the inaction of the government on the plea of neutrality was a stance which itself constituted an active intervention.

The fundamentalist/communist organisations, aware of the ferment in women's minds, are today making a bid to channelise/harness the nascent consciousness about women's rights for their own purpose. Taking advantage of women's deep attachment to religion they are today floating new organisations and fronts such as the Hindu Mahila Sammelan and the Durga Vahini, wherein women's role as mothers, progenitors and defenders of the faith, etc, are highlighted along with their role in the family. Fundamentalists of all hues have moved in this direction.



Awareness of the global nature of this threat only increases the need to understand the basis or reasons for the spread of fundamentalist or communal ideologies, and their persistent hold on many women. The connections between state, government and communal forces within the country are apparent. But what are the global forces that lie hidden behind this phenomenon? The Indian experience certainly does not support the interpretation of such movements as a revolt against the spread of materialist values. Evidence is quite contrary to this thesis. On the other hand, the anti-women face to the new trend of communalism indicates a rupture with past cultural values cutting across religions.

Given the patriarchal ideology of family and community honour, during riots women were invariably the primary targets of attack by the other group and were subjected to rape and humiliation in order to devalue and demoralise members of the 'other' community. However, activists feel that women's role as instigators of violence also requires careful analysis which can only emerge from developing greater insights into the ways in which caste, community and gender intersect. This challenges an essentialist construction of the feminine identity.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, instances abound of women playing a compassionate role in protecting members of the other community, often incurring personal risk. Such acts were also in contravention with the expressly stated intent of ideologues and the wishes of their own family or community groups.

These acts of compassion, however, need to be understood against the ideological rhetoric of communalism because many of the women subscribed to it. The emergent paradox was women sympathising with the victimhood of the minority groups and yet mouthing particularly rabid ideological positions. Post-emergency India has seen many communal riots but the nature of violence witnessed in the last round after the mosque demolition episode was marked by the specific targeting of women for sexual attacks and perversities inflicted primarily on women from the minority community. A joint delegation of national women's organisations which visited three of the riot-affected cities in February 1992 found some other significant features [YWCA 1993]. (a) The women who were the most affected in the riots were the ones whose needs were the 'least attended to' and relief itself had become a cause for "further exploitation, corruption, poisonous propaganda"; (b) Over the years "some amount of communal relocation of populations" had taken place as an outcome of urban housing schemes, which had contributed to alienation and growth of suspicion along with lack of communication between groups;

(c) In none of the areas had women been included in the peace committees set up to restore normalcy; and (d) No thought had been given to the psychological rehabilitation of traumatised children, who witnessed acts of violence against their families. The delegation also came up with some questions about women's organisations in the context of Ahmedabad, for,

even the most committed work among vulnerable sections of women is not capable of enabling such women to liberate themselves from the pressures of divisive identity politics, without a conscious direction to confront this type of politics which is so inimical to women's rights and the movement for equality [YWCA 1993:23-24].

## V

### Women as Economic Beings

If violence was the rallying issue for women's organisations, the marginalisation and impoverishment of the majority of women within the transforming economy became the entry point for academics into the movement. The CSWI's initial analysis was based more on inferences, the cries of thousands of poor women across the country voiced before the committee, and demographic evidence of a secular trend of decline in women's value in the economy and society as a whole. The complexities of the relationship between macro-economic changes and women's status issues – at different levels of society – had been neglected by social analysts till then. The committee appealed to the social science community to study this relationship on a continuous basis [GOI 1974].

Coinciding with the increasing intensity of critiques of the dominant model of economic growth emanating from various parts of the third world, women's studies in India began and grew rapidly in its initial stages to study this interaction.<sup>17</sup> The Women's Studies Programme of the Indian Council of Social Science Research helped to start off a research process heavily biased in favour of 'invisible' women, i.e., poor working women in rural and urban areas. This focus not only fed new information to the movement but transformed many of the academics into active participants in the women's movement, where they exerted a definite influence in the choice of priorities and lines of advocacy for dialogues with policy-makers. The focus on economic themes by the Indian Association of Women's Studies in its National Conferences facilitated the interaction between academics and activists.

A third factor was the emergence of some large organisations of poor women in the informal sector.<sup>18</sup> The dynamism in struggle demonstrated by these groups became a major

focus in the search for alternative strategies of development – with organised groups of women from the grass roots as primary agents of change.

A new national government in 1977 opened up various development policies for review.<sup>19</sup> The combined pressure of a group of women members of parliament from different political parties, some concerned bureaucrats and a leading social scientist (the late Raj Krishna) in the new Planning Commission led to the constitution of several working groups, to search for alternative strategies to arrest the marginalisation of the majority of women – especially the poorer – through prevalent development policies. These working groups, which included both women's studies researchers and some activists, received as a major input a memorandum authored by the ICSSR's Advisory Committee on Women's Studies. The memorandum highlighted the problems of increasing devaluation of women in the economy and society, and recommended special strategies for employment, health and education.<sup>20</sup>

These documents, along with the CSWI's report and some of its major recommendations were to form the initial thrust of demands by a network of national women's organisations that came into existence, informally in 1980. The memorandum *Indian Women in the Eighties: Development Imperatives*, one of the first joint statements by women's organisations stated that:

...unless explicit provision for the imperative developmental needs of women is made in the Sixth Five-Year Plan, the conditions of women will continue to decline notwithstanding constitutional pledges of equality and justice and the parliamentary mandate for removal of disparities and discrimination [All India Women's Conference 1980].

It recommended that the family/household approach in programme thrusts be replaced by "explicit mention of women as a target group", since the 'invisibility' of women to planners and administrators was rooted in the "tendency to view women only through the screen of families and households and not as individuals in their own right". This reinforced the perspectives of women's economic role as "marginal and supplemental" [All India Women's Conference 1980]. The demands included a special component approach with earmarked resources and separate monitoring arrangements in each of the sectoral programme thrusts; inclusion of child care centres within the Minimum Needs Programme; and the demand for joint 'pattas' (land titles) for women and men already voiced by poor peasant women.<sup>21</sup>

Not surprisingly some of the demands led to a 'sharp exchange' with regard to the "philosophy of the family-household



approach". The official representatives came in for attack since the women maintained that "the planners' defence of the family seemed to be motivated by status quoism".<sup>22</sup>

Despite the government's reluctance – this dialogue, backed by several women MPs from opposition parties who were members/leaders of a network of national women's organisation resulted in the appearance of a chapter on Women and Development in the Sixth Five-Year Plan for the first time in the planning history of India (Sixth Five-Year Plan 1980-85, Chapter 27). Acknowledging the government's own failure to achieve gender equality, the Plan stated explicitly that without economic independence, equal access to education, skill-training, and family planning services, the constitutional guarantee of equality would remain a myth (Sixth Five-Year Plan 1980-85, Chapter 27). Henceforth all anti-poverty programmes were directed to include women as targets. In cases of assets distributed by government (productive/homestead land, technology, etc) – government promised to "endeavour to provide joint titles to husband and wife", plus give priority to 'female headed households' (Sixth Five-Year Plan 1980-85, Chapter 27).

Women have comprised a crucial component of those struggling for land and forest rights, against the havoc wrought by construction of large dams and ecological disasters, struggles for fishing rights in coastal waters, for recognition as workers in governmental networks of health and child care services, as urban unorganised labour, migrant labour and rural workers [Sarkar 1995 forthcoming]. In all these they have fought for basic rights as workers, for equal wages and better working conditions. Microstudies have highlighted the role women play in all these sectors. But a fuller history of these numerous and multifarious struggles is still awaited.

The women's movement has consistently demanded implementation of genuine land reform. Nevertheless defenders of the 'family' accused women's organisations of arresting 'distributive justice' by demanding women's right to a share of productive resources. A study of land ceiling laws enacted by different states brought out clearly that many of the ceiling laws, were discriminatory and thus unconstitutional. State procedure/rules for redistribution were even more so. In one case, where a group of peasant women challenged their exclusion from getting title to redistributed land in the Rajasthan Canal Area in the Rajasthan High Court.<sup>23</sup>

The closing year of the Women's Decade marked a high tide. A new government, headed by Rajiv Gandhi, announced in January 1985 that women would receive greater priority than before.<sup>24</sup> The same year

government of India hosted the second NAM Conference on Women and Development, and the official delegation included several leaders of the national women's organisations. Not content with this, the Delhi-based network of organisations held its own review a week before the NAM Conference and separately distributed their report to all delegations [GOI 1985].

But the tide receded fast, for reasons discussed earlier. The widening divergence between the perspective of the government of India and movement-based initiatives on gender roles, issues and participation became clear with the release of two documents in 1988.

*Shramshakti*, the Report of the National Commission on Self Employed Women and Women in the Informal Sector, to an extent represented the voice of a substantial section of the women's movement and of women's studies' scholars, who were inducted into its various task forces. Activists helped in organising public hearings with women workers in the informal sector – in both urban and rural areas [Government of India 1988]. There were shades of divergence or difference in emphasis in the approach to the problem of women in the informal sector. A large section of women activists went along with government in its active promotion and special emphasis on the role of women in the self-employed and home-based sectors, while others differed with this approach. The latter felt that this reinforced the process of marginalisation and was a retreat on government's earlier commitment to bringing women into the 'productive' sphere. The dilemma was a genuine one. No one disputed that the limited opportunities for economic earnings should be expanded and work conditions in this sector be improved. The point at issue was whether taking cognisance of the fact that at stake was the survival of entire households one should settle for little 'bits and crumbs'. As one economist put it, "the women's movement should have fought harder for gender equality in the labour market/force".<sup>25</sup>

The National Perspective Plan for Women (NPP) up to the year 2000 was, on the other hand, prepared by a team of consultants for the Department of Women and Child Development with no interaction with activists. The draft, placed for endorsement before a National Committee headed by the prime minister faced opposition from some members who found the absence of women's organisations' representatives inexplicable. The organisations in turn demanded a national debate before the document was adopted.<sup>26</sup> The same demand was echoed by a national seminar of women NGOs convened by the Central Social Welfare Board. Since the government seemed in no mood to do this, the organisations took upon themselves to proceed in the matter by holding a debate

in Delhi which was then followed by several state-level discussions.

In their critique of the NPP, women's organisations pointed out that the proposed plan's recommendation to bring women "into the mainstream of development" ignored "the reality of women's marginalisation being the result of such 'mainstream' development". Earlier, NAM's New Delhi Document had also admitted that marginalisation had been "intensified by the current processes of economic change and may continue in future" [GOI 1985].

The critique found that the NPP's approach omitted the earlier thrust for convergence of economic and social services with organisation for collective strength and participation, and demonstrated a trend towards centralisation, disregarding the ongoing debates on the need for decentralisation and democratisation of the planning process. The proposed reservation of 30 per cent seats for women in elective bodies, to be filled by co-option or nomination in the initial stage, revealed the government's interest in subverting the representative process. Another real danger came from the 'preferential emphasis' to be given to the unorganised sector.

Rejecting all these anti-democratic proposals, women's organisations demanded (a) the constitution of statutory, autonomous women's commissions at the centre and in the states with a broad-based, representative composition; (b) inclusion of child-care as a priority within minimum needs from the next plan onwards; (c) ratification of the International Convention on Elimination of Discrimination Against Women; and (d) due recognition of national organisations of women at all levels of the planning and decision-making processes.<sup>27</sup>

The movement has adopted a multi-pronged strategy on this issue. While the specific skills of women's studies' scholars have been directed at evolving a critique of the macro-level policies of government, grass roots level initiatives to develop alternatives have been stepped up. One of the biggest mobilisations of women in Delhi from all over the country, in September 1989, was of over 20,000 women demanding the right to work.<sup>28</sup>

Women's organisations have mushroomed – sometimes combining issues at the workplace and family environment, sometimes as sub-committees within existing trade unions or joint fronts. Many groups at the grass roots level have directly entered or sponsored income-generation activity, with SEWA heading the list as the most well known combination of the two. Even though women's participation in trade union activity and involvement at the level of decision-making still remains abysmally low, over the last two decades at least the problem has been highlighted



and the class and gender bias marked out for criticism.

The critique of macro-policies basically adopts three thrusts: (a) that they would enhance rather than reduce inequalities among the people in general; (b) that this would make the condition of the majority of women already struggling for survival in the informal sector still more vulnerable; and (c) they would contribute to the social turbulence and violence, of which women and children are the major victims. Critiques have also condemned violence stemming from the promotion of consumerist lifestyles through the mass media as such lifestyles trap women into the stereotype of being objects and subjects of consumerism [Bhasin and Agarwal 1984]. It is important to note that the few important concessions wrested from the government in the poverty alleviation through economic development programmes provided some space for urban poor and rural women to use the opportunities made available to organise and articulate their demands. However, the macro-policies remaining untouched and unchanged, continued the processes of marginalisation.

The issue facing the movement today is about the relevance of these debates and efforts. The earlier critique of macro-policies was from a standpoint of introducing a pro-women approach within the given parameters, using the constitutional guarantees as the basic reference point. Today, Indian women feel that the structural adjustment programmes and the package of economic 'reforms' threaten not only earlier gains, but also the stated national goals by successive governments. While the movement was critiquing the development model, SAP has now removed the few regulatory/compensatory aspects of India's mixed economy, leaving 'global market forces' the sole players in the field. The processes, especially to those with inconvenient historical memories, bear significant resemblance to what happened to the Indian economy, and to women's role in the economy in particular, during the colonial period [Krishnaraj 1988; Patnaik 1993; Krishnamurthy 1989; Ghosh et al 1994; Mitra 1979].

This realisation has made unity amongst differing organisations easier to achieve today. In a joint statement women's organisations asserted: "We say no to Dunkel, no to GATT, we oppose the unrestricted entry of TNC's into the Indian economy". They argued that

discussions on the impact of the new economic policies usually focus on the impact on the organised sector, since women make up only a small percentage here it is assumed that the impact is minimal. We need to unitedly and forcefully correct the picture. In our multidimensional roles, as workers, as peasants, as producers, as

citizens, as mothers, wives, daughters, as women, the economic policies hit us the hardest".<sup>29</sup>

The overall impact of SAP has to be understood in the context of the overbearing reality that already 94 per cent of the women workers are part of the informal sector and that they constitute half the labour force in the unorganised sector.<sup>30</sup> What is the future lying ahead for women in an economy which itself shall be struggling to find a space within the model of 'sustainable development' under the aegis of a carefully orchestrated Structural Adjustment Programme?

#### CONCLUSION

The contemporary women's movement in India spans a large canvas. There are small groups as well as large national level organisations.<sup>31</sup> While some are recent having been formed only over the last two decades, others go back to over 50 or even 100 years. Some organisations focus on single issues while the mass organisations cover a vast range. The organisational structure as well as activities undertaken differ.

The movement has been fraught with tensions, rifts and differences, reflecting differing notions of what are women's issues or how the movement should proceed to focus on these. In comparison with the early years of the decade, today it is much easier to come together. With an experience of working together for over a decade and a half women's groups in the country are fairly well aware of the issues they agree on and where they differ. However, neither the agreement nor should the differences be seen as static or in a frozen time frame. Whereas ideological differences remain and perspectives differ, the overall thrust is in favour of unity in action.<sup>32</sup>

The same attitude is reflected in the issues being taken up. In the 1970s the movement took off as part of an overall build up against the authoritarian regime symbolised, ironically, by a woman prime minister. It then got fragmented and even perhaps insulated. For a while even overtly political statements were resisted. Today it is much easier to come together even on a platform to denounce the economic and other policies of the government. The 1990s represent a trough in the political graph, where the need to join hands and build alliances with other forces is even greater.

The women's movement has undoubtedly grown. Its outreach is far beyond the figures of enrolled membership of organisations. These have now to take note of the increasing articulation of confidence by women at the grass roots level. Nothing illustrates this better than the response to the literacy campaigns in several states where earlier attempts to reach women had been abysmal

failures. At a general level it is estimated that two-thirds of the neo-literate learners as well as two-thirds of the volunteers are women [Government of India 1994]. The impact of the literacy movement came to be highlighted in the context of the anti-arack movement in Andhra Pradesh. However, another remarkable achievement in recent years has been the process set in motion by the implementation of the 73rd and 74th constitutional bodies which provide for 33 per cent representation for women in local bodies in rural and urban areas.

Whereas observers rightly see in this a qualitatively new dimension that has been added to the women's movement through this development, the depth and complexities of these linkages are yet to be understood. In rural India, as also in the cities, it is the new found articulation and confidence which is coming into conflict with the consolidated combine of conservative social forces which draw strength from the regressive steps taken by government as well as political representatives of reactionary forces. It is the latter which are today preparing to mount an onslaught through the political process to check women's halting steps to advance and strengthen democracy in India.

Movement politics, as it has developed in India, tends to show-up elements which are unclassifiable. Ideological differences exist – but within a continuum – and tend to get blurred when strategic choices have to be made between priorities. But the debates continue and the questions persist. Is the movement's decentralised structure and multiple arenas of interaction a point of strength or weakness or both? Is the movement's 'excessive preoccupation' with the state's development policies and legislation 'welfarist' in its objective rather than 'feminist' or 'radical'? Does the extension of the issue of violence against women from the domestic to the social and political spheres indicate a backsliding or an advance? Or does it successfully combat the dichotomy posed between 'economic welfarism' and 'body politics'? Should the women's movement get involved with issues related to environment, population, child rights, globalisation/marketisation, international debt burden, all of which arise from its widening base at the grass roots level or should it retain its autonomy while restricting its focus?

Clearly, as it has developed, the focus could not be confined to the issue of interpersonal relationships. The limits to creating an essentialist, biological entity as well as identity of 'woman' have become only too obvious. While the ideological outreach of 'feminine' identity politics has widened, this spread has also demolished the fossilised image sought to be created. From different starting points, organisations have moved towards a more holistic vision. As



the proto-fascist undertones of political events/processes become clearer along with the state's surrender to them, the need to join hands is felt ever more deeply, lest we come out with a *cri de coeur* – "we have the movement but they (the other?) have the women". While the movement is aware of these challenges the strength of its grass roots support base provides a ray of hope that counter-actions and counter-ideologies are not impossible.

## Notes

[This paper, commissioned for a volume of studies on the women's movement in different countries, was written on the basis of a process of wide-ranging inter-action in four regional consultations to incorporate activists' own perceptions of current challenges. It was not included in the volume since the authors refused to comply with large-scale revisions in the text: deleting certain sections by the editor/publishers/the agency funding the study. The deletions included the introduction and conclusion, the section on population policy as well as large parts of the discussion on communalism/fundamentalism, on the grounds of their not being "specific to the women's movement in India". Instead new paragraphs/pages were incorporated which contradicted the views of the authors. The political context in which women's struggle was being waged in India was edited out altogether. Reports of the consultations which provided the evidence for our analysis shall be published shortly.]

There is a wide difference in the age of the two authors of this paper. However, both happen to be students of history. What initially brought us together was the contemporary women's movement's effort in India to bring out a journal in English. Vina Mazumdar was the first publisher of *Manushi* and, Indu, a member of its editorial collective. Our link with the movement could be put very logically – there is perhaps not a single joint statement/document of the women's movement which may have emanated from Delhi to which both or either of us, individually or as part of sponsoring women's organisations – the Centre for Women's Development Studies and the All India Democratic Women's Association, have not been signatories. Our doubts, dilemmas and convictions in some way reflect the continuum of consciousness passed over from one generation of Indian women to another.]

1 A recent study, making note of *Towards Equality* as a reference point, points out that as a "founding text" it is perhaps a good measure of "the contrast between the Indian movement and the movement in the US, which often cited Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* as the book that set the women's movement in that country going". See Tharu and Lalitha, K (eds), 1994, *Women Writing in India*, Vol II, OUP, p 101.

2 The first such consultation was held in Bombay where activists from Maharashtra and Gujarat participated. At a similar exercise in Calcutta, groups and organisations from West Bengal, Bihar and Orissa came together. The third consultation

in Delhi brought together activists from the northern and central region and the southern region activists met in Hyderabad in November. Reports of these consultations shall be published within the year.

3 'Open Letter to the Chief Justice of India, 1979', *Supreme Court Journal*, 1979, 4, pp 19-22.

4 The comment on the committee achieving solidarity despite party-based differences was made by Susheela Gopalan, MP, and general secretary of AIDWA.

5 'Perspectives from the Women's Movement: Health and Population' in *Some Issues in the Struggle for Women's Equality*, 1994 (henceforth, *Some Issues*); a joint document published by the Delhi Network of Six National Women's Organisations, pp 10-17.

6 *Joint Memorandum to Swaminathan Committee* by 12 Women's Organisations, November 12, 1993 (unpublished).

7 Open Letter to Swaminathan Committee. Cf *Indian Express*, July 9, 1994, and *The Pioneer*, July 11, 1994.

8 Cf Resolution adopted in meeting to plan Joint Action against Criminalisation of Politics and Sexual Abuse of Women, Delhi, October 22, 1994 (unpublished).

9 A common custom among peasant communities, aimed at preventing partition of property by making a widow marry her brother-in-law.

10 Information received in conversation with AIDWA activists in Delhi; also Razia from Patel, *The Times of India*, Research Fellowship, Study of Muslims in India (unpublished).

11 *Janasatta*, editorial, September 18, 1987, also see Nandy, Ashis 'Human Factor' in *The Illustrated Weekly*, January 17, 1988, pp 20-23.

12 For debate on 'voluntary' *sati* see Vaid, S and Sangari, K, 'Institutions, Beliefs, Ideologies: Widow Immolation in Contemporary Rajasthan', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol XXVI, No 17, April 27, WS 2-18. Also see 'From the Burning Embers', A film on *sati* by Mediastorm. Also see, Mani, Lata in Sangari and Vaid, 1989, *op cit*.

13 All the consultations emphasised this issue.

14 These points emerged from a discussion on Fundamentalism and Violence during the Consultation in Bombay, January 1994, organised jointly by the Centre for Women's Development Studies (CWDS) and the Maharashtra Abhyas Vidyapeeth to review the last two decades of the Movement (henceforth Bombay Consultation). Cf *Women's Movement: Towards a Critical Self Appraisal Report on Consultation*, 1994 (forthcoming), CWDS.

15 Plenary session, V National Conference on Women's Studies (NCWS), Jadavpur, January 1991. The theme of the conference was 'Religion, Culture and Politics'.

16 Bombay Consultation, *op cit*.

17 It was the first priority area in the Indian Council of Social Science Research's sponsored programme of women's studies. See *Critical Issues on the Status of Women*, 1977, ICSSR.

18 SEWA Ahmedabad, the Working Women's

Forum, Madras, the Annapurna Mahila Mandal, Bombay, etc.

19 The general election of 1977 removed the government led by Indira Gandhi, for the excesses of her rule during the emergency and a non-Congress government came to power at the centre for the first time.

20 *Critical Issues on the Status of Women*, *op cit*.

21 The demand for Joint *pattas* was earlier made by peasant women in two officially sponsored meetings in West Bengal: *State Conference on Women and Development*, Calcutta, 1979 and *Orientation Camp for Seasonally Migrant Women Labourers*, Jhilmili, Bankura, 1980.

It is ironical that the demand which brought on the movement the charge of 'trying to break up the family', was ardently advocated by three representatives of the Government of India in 1992 at a conference on *Peasant Women and Environment of India, Bangladesh, Nepal and Pakistan*. See *Report of the Lahore Conference 1992*, Aurat Foundation and Unifem; also Mazumdar V, *Embracing the Earth: An Agenda for Partnership with Peasant Women*, 1994, UN FAO.

22 Vina Mazumdar to Lotika Sarkar, M-6/80, September 12, 1980, CWDS files, and Vina Mazumdar to Ashok Mitra, M-6/80, October 1, 1980, CWDS files.

23 *Charter on Employment*, March 8, 1983. Also, *Appeal to NAM Summit*, New Delhi, 1983, reported in all national dailies on March 11, the day before the summit ended. For NAM's decisions on women – see *The Non-Aligned Movement and the International Women's Decade: A Summary of Decisions*, CWDS 1983. Also Tomsic, Vida – 4th J P Naik Memorial Lecture, CWDS, 1986.

24 *President's Address* to the newly elected (in December 1984) parliament at its opening session, January 1985.

25 Nirmala Banerjee, See *Report of Calcutta Consultation*, CWDS, forthcoming, 1995.

26 Joint Press Statement by National Women's Organisations, July 6, 1988. Also *National Perspective Plan: A Perspective from the Women's Movement. Report of a National Debate by Women's Organisations*, 1988, New Delhi, CWDS (mimeo).

27 *National Debate*, 1988, *op cit*.

28 The memorandum submitted to the president asserted that "the struggle for economic independence is of prime importance if women are to achieve equality and lead a life of dignity". At this rally as on other occasions activists pointed to the paradox of government continuing to view women as supplementary earners even though all records show that over 30 per cent of rural households are headed by women. Cf *Women's Equality*, July-December 1989.

29 'Why We Need to Struggle against the New Economic Policies?' in *Some Issues*, *op cit*, p 3.

30 'Organising Women in the Unorganised Sector, Some Issues': Workshop organised by National Labour Institute (NLI), New Delhi, 1994.

31 Some of these may even have a membership going up to a few million: AIDWA – 3.5 million, NFIW, 1 million, YWCA 15,000.