

**WOMEN'S ORGANIZATIONS IN DELHI:  
A CASE STUDY OF TWO ORGANIZATIONS**

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### Certificate

Certified that this dissertation entitled **Women's Organizations in Delhi: A Case Study of Two Organizations**, submitted by **Divya Tripathi** in partial fulfilment of the degree of **Master of Philosophy** is entirely her own work and has not been considered for the award of any other degree either at this or any other University.

We recommend that this dissertation be placed before the examiners for evaluation.

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Chairperson

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## INTRODUCTION

This study attempts to look at the women's movement from the perspective of two women's organizations which are different in ideology, structure and organization. I focus on two women's organizations to analyse the participation of women in a movement which cuts across all classes, castes and religious communities to embrace the ideal of an equal and just society. The study examines the nature and strategy of Saheli, an autonomous women's organization and All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA), affiliated to CPI-M. AIDWA and Saheli have chosen for analysis because they are ideologically and politically different, they address different issues and draw support from different sections of society. An analysis of these two organization will help uncover the ways in which their perspectives and strategies have influenced the development of the women's movement and women's status in Indian society and how they, in turn, have been affected by the overall trajectory of the movement.

The women's movement is characterised by its diversity both in ideology and praxis. There are different theorisations which represent different strands of feminism within the Indian context. Nandita Gandhi and Nandita Shah identify with the strand of

socialist feminism within India.<sup>1</sup> In their book they differentiate between three waves of Indian women's movements documenting the present and the third wave of this movement. They identify three main issues in women's struggle - violence, health and work. They also deal with legal campaigns around violence, rape, dowry, sati, indecency and for change in family structures.

The central focus of Gandhi and Shah's work seems to be women's body. Their discussion on violence and health, legal campaigns, work, questions of sexuality consciously focuses on women's body, though they also offer a sophisticated analysis of class, gender and at times, caste and ethnicity as interacting and mutually reinforcing women's oppression. Hence, despite the authors' own materialistic orientation towards women's oppression, as socialist feminists, their analysis remains preoccupied by women's body, which brings them closer to the assertions of some strands of radical feminism. In this sense, their analysis reflects the hybrid character of socialist feminism in India. Lastly, the views of the authors can also be seen to be representative of many women's activists in urban-based

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1. Nandita Gandhi and Nandita Shah, The Issues at Stake : Theory and Practice in the Contemporary Women's Movement in India, Kali for Women, New Delhi, 1991

autonomous women's groups within India.<sup>2</sup>

Ilina Sen in her book also highlights the diversity in the women's movement by presenting a collection of essays on women's participation in mass movements.<sup>3</sup> She questions the existence of an overarching women's movement in the country given the diversity of cultures and the complexities of caste and class among women in India. Furthermore, she raises questions of who is the true representative of the aspirations of the Indian women. Her contention is that to gain a true perspective of the women's movement it is necessary to take in account mass movements in which women have participated. Seen in this is the critique of urban-based feminist groups who are alienated from the lives of Indian women and hence, by and large remain isolated from the mainstream of the political processes in the country.<sup>4</sup>

Sen's arguments draws attentions to some unresolved vital questions of the 'nature of women's movement' and reveals the existing divisions between

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2. Supriya Akerkar, Theory and Practice of Women's Movement in India : A Discourse Analysis, EPW, vol XXX, No. 17, April 1995, pp. ws17- ws18.
  3. Ilina Sen, A Space within the Struggle : Women's Participation in People's Movements, Kali for Women, New Delhi, 1989
  4. Ibid, pp. 1-2

between women's groups in India. They show the urban/rural divide on the one hand and mass movements / autonomous women's groups divide on the other.<sup>5</sup>

Gail Omvedt also echoes Sen's arguments and her analysis of Indian women's movement. For Omvedt, the emergence of new women's organizations linked to mass organizations of the new social movements has unleashed a new dynamic in which rural women constitute the base.<sup>6</sup>

A different kind of theorisation is presented by Vandana Shiva, an activist in the Chipko movement and a vocal eco-feminist.<sup>7</sup> She questions science and development which brings destruction to eco-diversity, the death of nature and its effect on marginalisation of women who depend on nature for sustenance. Men's domination and mastery over nature is synonymous with mastery over women. Indian women have risen to protect nature and fought against the violence perpetrated on them. Shiva asserts the feminine principle in which nature is considered as 'prakriti', a living and creating process and this challenges the dominant concept of power as violence with the alternative

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5. Supriya Akerkar, op. cit

6. Gail Omvedt, Reinventing Revolution : New Social Movements and Socialist Tradition in India, M.E. Sharpe, London, 1993



concept of non-violence as power.<sup>8</sup>

Shiva's assertions are quite controversial among many feminists who critique Shiva for positing women as a unitary category undifferentiated by race, class and ethnicity etc. What is clear then is that there exists different articulations and theorising on women's movement today in India raising questions on who is the true representative of Indian women or what is considered 'legitimate' women's issues. In this context then, a very relevant question arises - what is a movement?

From the beginning Indian women's movement has been an amorphous, multi-class, sporadic, issue-oriented and autonomous movement with several streams of ideological thought and varying strategies. It has sought alliances with different organizations in different political circumstances but maintained its independent character and strategy. However, inspite of the differences there certain commonalities and a shared vision of a better society which is equal and just. The belief that the women are an oppressed section of society and that this is not inevitable and can be eliminated is common to all women and women's

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7. Vandana Shiva, Staying Alive, Kali for Women, New Delhi, 1988

8. Supriya Akerkar, op. cit.

organizations constituting the women's movement though there may be differences in the understanding of class and gender, the origin of women's oppression and its perpetuation.

The study of Saheli, an autonomous women's organization, and AIDWA, a leftist women's organization, then, is an attempt at comparing, contrasting and analysing two different kinds of women's organizations which tries to encapsulate the diversity of the women's movement. Such a study necessarily excludes a host of other kinds of organizations as well as women's experiences in other mass struggles. However, studying these two organizations in detail and in depth, allows focus on its internal dynamics and helps make larger generalisations of the Indian women's movement.

#### **THE PERIOD BEING STUDIED**

The choice of Saheli and AIDWA was a deliberate one for both were formed in the same year and marked a new phase in the women's movement. The eighties and the nineties mark the changing nature of women's activism in India and this is what is sought to be highlighted.

The emergence of women's issues can be traced to the reform movement in the nineteenth century wherein the problems of women were highlighted and attempts to ameliorate the conditions of women were made by the

predominantly male reformers. However, by the turn of the century, the effect of the reform movement started to show when women started coming forward to take charge of their lives and their sisters' and to lead the way for a more equal society.

This period also saw the birth of first all-India women's organizations. The subsequent participation of women in struggle for independence drove women by the thousands out of their homes to become a part of the mainstream struggle. Women were also active in the peasant and workers' struggle.

The years after independence marked a period of passivity in the women's movement while the government sought to translate its promises to women, made during the nationalist movement, in a half-hearted manner. However, participation of women in Telengana and Tebhaga movement paved the way for future radicalization of the women's movement.

The sixties saw the crises of the development which reached its peak in the seventies when the effects of lop-sided development strategy became manifest in the shape of spiraling prices, shortage of essential commodities and increasing poverty. The growing disillusionment with the state and its rhetorical socialism manifested itself in the rising grassroots movements and other struggles against the state which

radicalized the youth of the country. The JP movement provided to many an avenue to mount an attack on the corrupt and authoritarian state. The radical political mobilization of a large number of people of whom women constituted half the number, came to an abrupt halt with the declaration of emergency in 1975. However the excesses of emergency were in themselves instrumental in generating a debate on civil liberties and it is in this scenario that atrocities on women became increasingly highlighted.

The post- emergency period saw the proliferation of a host of women's organizations who articulated women's oppression from a different perspective. The eighties then witnessed public action on issues which were considered to constitute the 'private' domain of women. This period then witnessed the growth of different kinds of women's organizations who were mobilizing different kinds of women and fostering debate within political parties, trade unions as well as the government about issues of gender.

In this context, chapter I of this study traces the birth and growth of women's organizations and women's movements right from the reform movement period to the contemporary time highlighting its diversity. This provides the necessary backdrop to a more

analytical study of the two women's organizations. Chapter II deals with Saheli and the dynamics of an autonomous women's group. Chapter III goes on to study AIDWA as influenced by its marxist ideology. The dynamics of women and work and the emergence of grassroots organizations as representing the wider reality of the women's movement today are highlighted in chapter IV.

#### **SOURCES AND METHODOLOGY**

This study follows the historical - analytical methodology. The two women's organizations, Saheli and AIDWA, are studied on the basis of their reports on their activities. Available secondary materials relevant to this study has also been studied. Interviews with leaders and members of the organizations also helped in giving detailed knowledge of the organization as well the women's movement in India.

## CHAPTER I

### THE HISTORICAL EMERGENCE OF WOMEN'S ORGANIZATION IN INDIA

The history of women's organizations in India goes back to the nationalist struggle although the reform movement of the 19th century had addressed itself to the 'women's question'. This chapter makes an attempt to locate the history of women's organizations right from the pre-independence period to the contemporary period.

The birth of the women's organizations in India was a result of the reform movement as well as the nationalist movement and this forms the backdrop of feminist activities of the post independent India. The existence of different perceptions of women's oppression today and of different ways of overcoming it testify to the plural practice of feminism which, in turn, is influenced by the plurality of experiences of women and women's organizations. This chapter then focuses on this plurality in the women's movement both in terms of ideology and experience.

#### **The Reform Movement And the Women's Question.**

The 19th century witnessed not only the emergence of the social reform movement in India but also the whole debate on the 'Women's question' as a direct result of the former. The colonial economy with its new

agrarian and industrial relations accompanied by a vast and expanding administrative structure led to the growth of a nascent middle class or bourgeoisie which, as it developed under western domination, sought to reform itself, initiating campaigns against caste polytheism, idolatry, animism, purdah, child-marriage, sati and more, seeing them as elements of a 'pre-modern or primitive identity.<sup>1</sup> The social reform movement was permeated by the western ideals of progress and modernity. The impact of western liberalism, secularism and scientific rationality was very evident paradoxically even in the later revivalist nationalist search for a glorious, pre-colonial, caste based 'tradition.<sup>2</sup>

The social reform movement formed only one dimension of the vast changes that were transforming Indian society during the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. The reform movement itself was later heterogenous in character having different campaigns and issues which were taken up at different times at different places. The genesis of the movement can be

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1. Radha Kumar, The History of Doing, Kali for Women, New Delhi, 1993, pp.7-8.

2. Ibid. p.8

traced to Bengal, to the radical students of H.Derozio, a young Anglo-Indian, who was fired by the concepts of liberty and equality of the French Revolution.<sup>3</sup> From the long Bengal movement as it came to be called, to the Brahmo Samaj, Prarthana Samaj and Arya Samaj, improving the position of women became one of the earliest tasks taken on by the movement. The causes which attracted the attention of the 19th century reformers as gross social evils were sati, the ill-treatment of widows, the ban on widow remarriage, polygamy, child marriage and the denial of property rights to women.<sup>4</sup> The multiplicity of the issues coincided with multiplicity of approaches of various reformers. Ram Mohan Roy, Ranade and Dayanand eulogised the position of women in ancient times and attributed the decline in their status to irrational practices developed in later periods. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Phule and Lokhitvadi were far more critical of the structure of Hindu society which they perceived was responsible for not only the subjugation of women but sudras as well. Thus, they questioned some of the fundamental values and principles of Hindu society.

One of the earliest campaigns of the reform

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3. Ibid

4. Vina Majumdar in B.R. Nanda's Indian Women: From Purdah to Modernity, Radiant Publishers, New Delhi, 1990, p.48.



movement was against Sati initiated by Ram Mohan himself. His efforts paid off when in 1829 the Sati Abolition Act was passed, when Bentinck was the Governor-General of India.<sup>5</sup>

The issue of education of Indian women was also raised by Ram Mohan Roy but soon it garnered support from the unorthodox Hindus, Brahma Samajists and radical students in Bengal. However, the education which was envisaged for women was not to enable them to become independent earners, but rather to enable them to be 'better wives and mothers'. The following statement sums up the aim of reformers as far as education of women is concerned - "India's need is to devise such a system of education for Hindu females as will make her an agreeable companion, a good mother, an intelligent and loving wife, and an excellent housewife. We want her to possess those mental accomplishments which enable the wife to serve as a solace to her husband in his bright and dark moments, the mother to undertake, or at least to superintend, the early instruction of her child, and the lady of the house to provide those sweet sweet

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5. S.P. Sen, Social and Religious Reform Movements in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries, Institute of Historical Studies, Calcutta, 1979, p. 28

social comforts idealized in the English Word-Home."<sup>6</sup>

The purpose, hence, of education of women in India was, according to reformers, to train women to perform their functions as makers of home which, no doubt, is the reason for the emphasis on subjects like home science and simpler liberal arts rather than the 'manly' subjects like mathematics, sciences or professional courses like law, engineering etc. - an attitude which carries on till today. In fact, with the exception of Agarkar, no other reformer had seriously thought of educating women for employment and professions.<sup>7</sup>

Another issue of the women's question in India which became central during the reform movement was the age of marriage for girls. In 1860, the government had legislated on this issue making sexual intercourse with a girl less than 10 years legally a rape.<sup>8</sup> However,

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6. Leonard and Leonard in Patricia Caplan's Class and Gender in India, Travistock Publication, London, 1985, pp.107-108. Interestingly the mention of 'Hindu ladies reveals the preoccupation of the reform movement with the majority community i.e Hindu, upper class women which symbolised, in the larger context of nation and its history, the process of inclusion and seclusion wherein the dominant discourse veered away from secularization.

7. Vina Majumdar, op. cit. p. 53.

8. Maitrayee Chawdhuri, Indian Women's Movement: Reform and Revival, Radiant Publishers, New Delhi, 1993, p.68.

further attempts were made to raise the age of marriage which, in fact, pushed this issue on an all India basis as far as women's issues were concerned.

However, by the turn of the century, reformism increasingly came under attack by revivalist forces. This was the time of resurgent Hinduism which offered a critique of the reformers that it was both alien and elitist. By collaborating with the British, the reform movement violated the Hindu's sense of pride in his or her own culture and tradition. The revivalists sought a break from the modern philosophical and political models as becomes evident from Tilak's pioneering attempts to use religious symbols as a method of mass contact, the rousing spiritual fervour of Vivekananda, the more obscure mysticism of Annie Besant's theosophy, the conceptual definition of the Hindu state of Aurobindo, the search of Bipin Pal for the religious spirit of the country.<sup>9</sup> Although Tilak, Annie Besant, Vivekananda, Sister Nivedita continued to reiterate the need for betterment of women's position, they espoused the regeneration of purified Hindu society based on a spiritual revival as means to realize it. Ashis Nandy has identified four concepts common to most reformers and revivalists which ushered in a new frame

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9. Ibid. p. 75

work of Hindu culture. These are the ideas of organized religion, a sacred text, monotheism, and above all a patriarchal godhead.<sup>10</sup> This was to have a profound effect on both nationalist politics and politics of women. The progressive ideas of the reform movement in fact sought to entrench the existing inequitous structures.

Far from 'liberating' or 'emancipating' women, the reformers emphasized women's role within the family as wives, daughter and mothers. However, the greatest failure of the reform movement lay in its inability to expose the nature of the oppression that affected women in different layers of the society, and consequently to set any goals that would be meaningful to all women and those who believed in this cause.<sup>11</sup>

The arrival of Gandhi on the nationalist scene provided a new thrust to the whole question of women in India which had started languishing as the reform movement had come to an impasse. Gandhi transformed the movement into a revolutionary one by highlighting the role of women in this transformation. His critique of the social structure went side by side

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10. Ashis Nandy, The Intimate Enemy, Oxford University Press, 1983, p. 25

11. Vina Majumdar, op. cit. p. 16

with his assertion that 'Swaraj' would be meaningless without reform of the former. He insisted that women and untouchables must be uplifted. His attitude towards the women's question was revolutionary to say the least. Without belittling their roles as mothers and wives, Gandhi proclaimed at the same time that they had an equal role to play as men in the achievement of freedom and social justice. He emphasized the nurturant role of women which encompassed the ideals of non-violence and hence for satyagraha' and 'Swaraj'. His portrayal of women as being essentially self-sacrificing and suffering stemmed from his experiences in South African satyagraha agitation which showed him the extraordinary capacity women had for self-sacrifice and suffering.<sup>12</sup> This portrayal of women by Gandhi was built on the construction of the 'new woman' by the nationalist discourse. Closely associated with the construct of the 'new woman' were the concepts of 'femininity' and 'motherhood'. Femininity had to be projected in a particular way so that it maintained traditional patriarchal relations within the family by offering no threat to the dominance of male attitudes. The mythical figures of Sita and Savitri were invoked by the

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12. Radha Kumar, op. cit. p. 82

nationalists as constituting ideal Indian womanhood while the sanctified image of the mother was considered important for it was non-threatening to the traditional male hierarchy. Gandhi modified this construct of new woman and stressed those attributes which were beneficial for his political campaign. However Gandhi remained a 'traditionalist' in the domestic sphere. His constructs called for no reorganisation of familial duties. In fact, he believed that political participation could not take place at the cost of domestic duties.<sup>13</sup> But, Gandhi's contribution in bringing women into the mainstream national struggle cannot be denied. Gandhi made women active subjects from passive objects propelling women into the nationalist struggle transforming the trajectory of the struggle for independence of the nation as well as of the women.

#### **The National Movement and the Birth of Women's Organizations**

By the late 19th century the effects of social reform movements were beginning to show. The numbers of women in public spheres had increased considerably. In fact the early years of the 20th century saw not only

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13. Suruchi Thapar, Women as activists, Women as Symbols: A Study of the Indian Nationalist Movement, Feminist Review, August, 1992, p.. 84-86

the increasing participation of women in the nationalist struggle but also the birth of all-India women's organizations Rabindra Nath Tagore's sister Swarn Kumari Debi started a women's organization called the Sakhi Samiti in 1886, which was to train widows to teach so that they could become self reliant and it helped in the spread of women's education. 14

The decade 1910-1920 was one in which first attempts at setting up all India women's organizations were made The earliest organizations were usually Arya Samajists or Brahmo and, therefore, urban and sectarian. These were followed by local or regional women's organizations such as Banga Mahila Samaj and the Aghorekamini Nari Samiti in Bengal, the Satara Abolamati Sabha in Maharashtra, the Mahila Seva Samaj in Bangalore, the Bharat Mahila Parishad in Benaras and the Prayas Mahila Samiti in Allahabad.15

The entry of Annie Besant into Indian politics in 1914 not only accelerated the process of women's association with the freedom struggle but also helped in creating the first all-India women's organization called the Indian Women's Association in 1917 of which she

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14. Radha Kumar, op. cit., p. 37

15. Ibid. p. 54.

was the first president. <sup>16</sup> Committed to Indian nationalism, the WIA from the beginning was interested in Home Rule and women's suffrage and spoke in a rhetoric that was clearly patriotic. The Indian Women's Association's growth was dramatic to say the least. By 1922, it had 43 branches with 2,300 members and five years later this had increased to 80 branches and 4,000 members.<sup>17</sup> Although the association declared itself to be non-political it rapidly became caught in the nationalist movement never giving up its reformist work though. In the 1920's the franchise question was taken up very enthusiastically by the association.

The National Council of Women which started in 1914 and the All India Women's Conference formed in late 1920s were other women's organizations which demonstrated the growing participation of women in public life. Ten women attended the fourth session of the congress at Bombay in 1889. The women present were Swarn Kumari Debi, Pandita Ramabai, Mrs Shevartibai, Trimbak, Mrs Shanta bai Nikanbe, Mrs Kashibai Kanitkar and Miss Manekjee Cirisetjee, all of whom were renowned educationists and social reformers.<sup>18</sup> From this meagre

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16. Aparna Basu, op. cit., pp. 17-18

17. Patricia Caplan, op. cit., p. 111.

18. Aparna Basu, op. cit., p. 17



participation of women in the Congress to the election of Annie Besant as President of the Calcutta Congress in December 1917 marked the big step that women's movement had taken in India.

The involvement of large numbers of women in the nationalist movement began with the non-cooperation movement launched by Gandhi in 1920. It was during this time, in fact, that nationalists started to seriously consider women's involvement in the struggle for liberation of the nation and hence, took steps towards this end. Women joined the non-cooperation movement in different parts of the country by taking part in processions, propagating use of Khadi and Charkha and even going in for picketing.<sup>19</sup> The Civil Disobedience also saw the participation of women in large numbers which also opened up for them opportunities which could not be denied again<sup>20</sup> It was in these struggles then that voices for the right to equality could be

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19. Ibid. p. 21.

20. The participation of women in extremist activities also increased. Kalpana Dutt & Preeti Waddadar were associated with the Chittagong Armoury raid. Santi, Sumit and Bina Das courageously tried to shoot the British, DM and Governor respectively. In Calcutta, the 'Chhatra Sangha started becoming an important training and recruiting ground for future revolutionaries where a number of women also received training.

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heard and gained volume till the constitution of free India enshrined the right to equality as a fundamental right.

After 1930s, with the participation of women in the nationalist struggle becoming an accepted fact, women's demands raised by the all India women's Organizations tended to be absorbed in the larger nationalist movement in such a way that the issue of women's emancipation was felt to have been resolved. With the realization that independence being highly achievable, it was felt that the inequalities between men and women would be righted in free India.

### **The Post-Independence Period and the Contemporary Women's Movement**

The post independence period can be divided into three phases: (i) the period from 1947 to the late 1960s was marked by acquiescence in the women's movement, despite the proliferation of a large number of women's organizations; (ii) the period from the late 1960s until 1975 marked by recession and growing economic crisis leading to rural revolts in which women were very active; (iii) the post 1975 period which is marked by a number of developments. The observance of International women's year, the growing contact with feminist groups of the west, the revealing data on Indian women's status

brought out by Committee on Status of Women in India, (CSWI) and the new concern of international agencies for the third world women. All this generated a climate which was conducive to the rise of a new type of women's organizations.<sup>21</sup>

After independence the Congress made certain attempts to fulfill their promises to women. The constitution of free India promised right to equality of women and men and adult franchise to all women above twenty one irrespective of caste and class. Efforts were made by the Congress to set up various administrative bodies for the creation of opportunities for women, also supporting the spread of Mahila Mandals and reformist programmes. However, the much promised and awaited Hindu Code Bill was heavily opposed by influential leaders of the Congress and finally saw the light of the day in the late 1950s in a piecemeal fashion with many radical changes being toned down or altogether deleted. The demand for a uniform civil code applicable to all communities was shelved altogether. This issue has since then been the rallying cry of the contemporary feminists.

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21. Kate Young, Serving Two Masters: Third World Women in Development, Allied Publishers, New Delhi, 1989, p. 190

This period was marked by passivity of women's movement. In fact, post Independence Indian feminists were more fragmented than ever for they no longer saw a common enemy. Political divisions became more important than they had been earlier, especially since feminists had neither openly sought nor identified the enemy in gender terms, due partly to the exigencies of colonialism, and partly to the complexities of a culture in which gender relations were not as clearly distinguished as in the west .<sup>22</sup> In the 1950s and 1960s then there was a lull in feminist activities and campaigning.

From the mid-1960s onwards, a number of struggles, protests, and movements gained ground in every part of India and continued to grow until quashed by the emergency in 1975. The development strategy followed by independent India helped in the dramatic growth of industry while attempts at agricultural reforms sought to change the social landscape. But at the same time, the majority of people, and more so the women, experienced the effects of this transformation in the form of poverty, social confusion and class polarization. The promises of independent India had by then proved to be largely unfulfilled for large sections

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22. Radha Kumar, op. cit., p. 97

of people. The tepid implementation of land reforms, the increasing polarization of the countryside, the rise in urban poverty and unemployment was coupled with increasing radicalization of students and youth led to increasing draconian laws and measures directed against any form of protest by the state.<sup>23</sup>

This radicalization and politicization of the youth was a direct fall out of the left movement and the Gandhian ideals of Sarvodaya. The Telengana struggle in Andhra Pradesh saw the involvement of a large number of youth including women who displayed as much militancy as the men. The CPI however called off the movement in 1951 leaving a large number of activists feeling betrayed. The Naxalbari Movement, which picked up from where the Telengana movement had left off and has, in fact, been called the second wave of Telengana movement, espoused Maoist ideology and peasant insurrection also had women fighting alongside the men sometimes even in the guerrilla warfare. The Naxalbari movement however came in for brutal state repression.

In direct contrast to the violence of the Telengana and the Naxalbari movement, the Bhoodan

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23. Ilina Sen, A Space within the Struggle: Women's Participation in People's Movements, Kali for Women, New Delhi, 1991, p. 4

movement, started by Vinoba Bhave espoused Gandhian ideals of non-violence and Sarvodaya (self-help). The movement had some success in Bihar and it is here that Jai Prakash Narayan, popularly known as JP, joined the movement. The politicisation of youth connected with this movement was but obvious in the generation of the whole debate on the nature of Indian state. Hence, corresponding to these developments on the radical left, within the socialist movement too, new ideas and movements developed albeit on a smaller scale, on the nature of the state and revolution, environment, trade-unionism and gender. The participation of women in these movements charted out new dimensions for women's struggles in India the manifestations of which was in the Anti Price Rise Movement (APRM) in Bombay.

In 1972, the two communist parties and the socialist party women leaders, who had individually and through their parties been taking up the issue of prices, met to discuss the possibility of joint action. A large number of women answered their call to protest against inflation in general and for the availability of foodgrains, sugar, cooking oil, and kerosene in particular. The objective of the joint front was to pressurize the government to check inflation and ensure an adequate quota of subsidized essential commodities through the Public Distribution System. Sporadically,

but faithfully, over a period of three years, middle-class and working class women marched with 'rolling pins' and spoons confronting the state ministers and officials.<sup>24</sup> The Latni Morcha, in fact went on to become enormously popular attracting as many as 10,000 to 20,000 women.

The APRM was phenomenal in the kind of response and support it elicited from women. However, in absence of organizational solidity, this issue-based movement came to an abrupt halt with the declaration of emergency. The APRM was distinctively a women's campaign peopled only by women and which was perceived as being both a part of women's movement and linked to a general struggle.

The spread of this movement to Gujarat revealed the movement's linkage to the larger and general struggles against corruption, black-marketing and soaring prices. Known as the Nav Nirman Movement in Gujarat, it garnered support of thousands of women and became a massive middle-class movement. Nav Nirman activists were influenced by JP's concept of total revolution fighting to reform as well as limit state power. <sup>25</sup>

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24. Ilina Sen, op. cit., p.51.

25. Radha Kumar, op. cit., pp.97-99.

The Shahada as well as the Chipko movement were also phenomenal in terms of support of women. Shahada movement in Dhulia district in Maharashtra was a tribal Bhil landless labourers movement against the extortionate practices of local landlords, most of whom were non-tribals and treated the tribals as sub-human.

The formation of Shramik Sangathan in 1972 led to the rapid growth of the movement. Women participated in this movement with great militancy. They led the demonstrations, invented and shouted militant slogans, sang revolutionary songs and mobilised the masses.<sup>26</sup> As women's militancy developed in the movement, gender based issues began to be raised by them especially that of male alcoholism.

The Chipko movement began under the leadership of C.P. Bhatt and other male sarvodaya workers who initially just demanded the limiting of commercial exploitation of forests and for local participation in their management. The women, however, participated in large numbers, adding a new dimension to the perception of what constitutes "women's issues".<sup>27</sup> Economic

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26. Ibid, p.100.

27. Vandana Shiva, an activist in the Chipko movement has been credited with legitimising 'eco - feminism' and raising debate on development that destroys rather than creates. See Vandana Shiva, Staying Alive, Kali for Women, New Delhi, 1988.



development and environmental conservation were introduced as issues of central concern to women. Both in its expression of empowerment of women and in public issues, the Chipko movement was an important inspiration to further organising. Interestingly, the participation of women in larger movements (Shramik Sangathana Dhulia, Chipko, Chattisgarh Mines Shramik Sangha) has revealed that even within the larger struggles women were organising separately as they often had different priorities or the fact that gender based issues which inevitably cropped up tended to be sidelined by the, more often than not, male leadership.

The late 1960s and early 1970s then were marked by a dual trend. Increasing political repression on the one hand and strong movements for democratic rights on the other. For women too the period marked a water shed in their political participation. In fact many older women's organizations, like the AIWC and NFIW, which had become inactive following the end of freedom struggle began a new phase of activity marked by increasing interaction and cooperation with one another.<sup>28</sup>

This time their focus was not only on mobilising women but on understanding and attacking the sources of

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28. Ilina Sen, op.cit., p.5.

their oppression. In addition, newer efforts towards forming organizations with women as leading protagonists occurred in large number of situations. The first women's group of the contemporary feminist movement was formed in Hyderabad - the Progressive Organization of Women (POW). Comprising women from the Maoist movement, the group was another example of the process of rethinking within the movement after its savage repression. 29

Maharashtra too witnessed a rise in feminist activities influenced, no doubt, by the Shahada movement and the APRM. Influenced also by POW, Maoist women in Pune formed the Purogami Stree Sangathana, and Maoist women in Bombay formed the stree Mukti Sangathana.<sup>30</sup> For the first time in India, March 8, International women's day was celebrated. The influence of UN declaration of 1975 as International Women's Year was quite evident.

However, the declaration of emergency and suspension of civil liberties brought a halt to all these activities and movements. The lifting of emergency in 1977, and the formation of Janata government saw an upsurge in the women's movement which marked a distinct break from the pre-emergency passivity not only in terms of volume of mobilization but also in ideology. Attempts

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29. Radha Kumar, op. cit., p. 105

30. Ibid.

were made, in the contemporary feminist movement, to understand the oppressive hierarchical relationship between men and women and societal systems in order to introduce changes in the society and usher in the dawn of new, more egalitarian era.

A fillip to this wave of feminist movement was provided by the Report of the CSWI 'Towards Equality' which unfortunately, languished following the declaration of emergency. The data compiled by the report on women's inferior position in religious and family life, in health care and in law and with regard to economic, educational and political opportunity served as a jolt to the consciousness of many educated and politicised Indians, and helped spur their activities in a new direction. Towards Equality not only exhorted the government to help better the conditions of women but also called upon non - governmental organizations especially women's organizations to "mobilise public opinion and strengthen social efforts against oppressive institutions like polygamy and dowry and to mount a campaign for the dissemination of information about the legal rights of women to increase their awareness." <sup>31</sup> Hence, the report of CSWI indicted

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31. Towards Equality, Report of the Committee on the Status of women in India, Government of India, 1974, p. 101.

the socio - economic and political system that pervasively discriminates against women.

This new consciousness of women manifested itself in the formation of host of autonomous women's groups. Autonomy here is understood in terms of an independent existence from a political party, government umbrella, or outside any form of political aegis, but at the same time not depoliticising women's question. In fact, the members of these organizations are definitely not a political many of them being involved in various progressive, radical and left organizations and movements in the 1960s and the 1970s.

The characteristics of autonomous women's movement are:

- (a) Women organise and lead the movement.
- (b) Fight oppression, exploitation, injustice and discrimination against women. This is the first and foremost priority of the movement.
- (c) It cannot be subordinated to the decision or necessities of any political or social group/organization <sup>32</sup>

Organizations like Mahila Dakshata Samiti, Samta Manch, Stree Sangharsh, Saheli were formed in Delhi.

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32. Vibhuti Patel in Neera Desai's (ed.) A Decade of Women's Movement in India, Himalaya Publications, Bombay, 1984, p. 118.

Purogami Sangathana (Pune), Stree Shakti Sangathana (Hyderabad), and Pennurimai Iyyakum (Madras) were also autonomous organizations which came into existence in the post - emergency period. Even cities like Kanpur, Patna, Kolhapur, Madras, Aurangabad, Raipur and other smaller places were not unaffected by the proliferation of autonomous groups. Baija in Marathi, the Feminist Network in English and Manushi in Hindi and English were some of the first women's newsletters and magazines to appear. 33

The diversity of women's experiences has led to diverse kinds of organizations being formed. Apart from autonomous women's organizations, there are other groups which were born from opposition political parties and generally act in concert with the politics of those parties. These include the Janata Party's Mahila Dakshata Samiti, CPI's NFIW and CPI - M's AIDWA.<sup>34</sup> These organizations are national in scale, have local chapters and are organized hierarchically. Other national, older women's organizations are AIWC and YWCA. In direct contrast to these type of organization's, the autonomous groups have very few members, not more than 20 or 30, and usually function as a collective.

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33. Ibid, p.122.

34. Leslie Calman, Women and Movement Politics in India, Asian Survey, October 1989, p.943.

Then there are other organizations which seek to empower women through organising as a trade union of the women or as just voluntary organizations. The aim is at personal and community empowerment of poor women in both urban and rural areas. Self Employed Women's Associations (SEWA), Working Women's Forum (WWF) and Annapurna Mahila Mandal are examples of such organizations.<sup>35</sup>

In keeping with the diversity of women's organizations, the issues taken up by them are as wide ranging. Issues such as health, law, access to land and other productive resources, environmental degradation, media, rape, violence, dowry, deaths, Sati, Wife - beating, alcoholism, trafficking, police atrocities, prostitution, devdasi, women prisoners, communal and caste conflicts and gang rape of tribal and dalit women reveal the depth and diversity of the women's movement in India for wide ranging issues provide space for participation to different groups of women.<sup>36</sup> Agitations since 1970s on issues such as dowry, rape, crime and violence against women, have also shown vital role played

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35. Ibid, p.944.

36. Kumud Sharma, Shared Aspirations, Fragmented Realities-Contemporary Women's Movement in India: Its Dialectics and Dilemmas, Occasional paper no. 12, CWDS, 1989.

by information generation, sharing and dissemination by the women's movement and the media and the need for joint action. Acts of violence against women (Mathura rape case, Sudha Goel dowry murder case, Deorala sati incidence) have drawn so much attention and emerged as rallying point for women's groups, rather than day to day oppression of millions of women in their homes and workplace. Efforts are also always on to find new and alternative ways to create messages, communicate and mobilise. Issue based agitation, street plays, skits, poster campaigns, songs and mobile exhibitions, newsletter, women's studies journals are some of the various ways.<sup>37</sup> Growth of women's studies, women and development debate, reconstruction and reinterpretation of 'her own history,' her identity and subjectivity, have all influenced the dialectics of the women's movement and its agenda for action.<sup>38</sup>

Simultaneously, the nature of activism has also changed, with women's groups moving into rural areas, to such areas as literacy, slum development, women's health and training. Also women at the grass roots level have become the prime movers of a slew of movements - the anti-arrack movement in A.P, the women's development

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37. Ibid.

38. Ibid.

movement in Rajasthan, the anti-alcohol movement in the north-east and environmental movements such as Chipko and Appiko.<sup>39</sup> Consumerism, the New Economic Policy and Reproductive health have become the focus of the contemporary feminist movement constituting the present trends within it.

The gains of the women's movement have been many and varied. The greatest achievement has been in terms of the legitimisation of the movement. Owing to the impact of the women's movement, it has now become completely automatic to think about women's issues and rights while formulating policies which was a contested area in the 1970s. Besides influencing legislation, judiciary, media, education programmes and government strategies, the most important gain is that it has been accepted that a woman who was earlier considered weak and needy of welfare should be a participant in her own development.<sup>40</sup> The women's movement today is truly anti-patriarchal and anti-capitalist.

However, inspite of solid gains of the women's movement the overall status of women has not improved and has, in fact even declined. The whole struggle

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39. Mini Kapoor, Twenty Years of the Women's Movement: Advances and Retreats, Pioneer, March 6, 1994

40. Ibid.



appears to be a series of advances and retreats. Further more the above existence of different groups and women's involvement in various mass movements in rural and urban areas shows that there exist different perceptions on women's oppression and on the ways to overcome them. This has also meant different articulations around the category 'woman.' The labels of bourgeois feminists, radical feminists, Marxist feminists or socialist feminists directly stem from the above and suggests that there can be no 'one' feminism in the Indian context or one way of understanding or locating women's oppression. This means that the context itself suggests a need for a plural expression of feminism around women's multiple oppressors. viz. class, caste, ethnicity, gender, sexual preference etc. In some ways, the diverse responses to the women's oppression and existence of diverse groups reflect this plural reality of women's oppression. Unfortunately, these different perceptions have not led to a celebration of plural practice of feminism instead leading to divisiveness and sectarian tendencies within the movement.<sup>41</sup> However, the movement today is at a very reflective phase wherein it is consolidating its gains and planning future strategy. The challenges

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41. Supriya Akerkar, Theory and Practice of Women's Movement in India: A Discourse Analysis, EPW, 30 (17), 1995, pp. ws 13-ws 14.

facing the movement are also increasing fundamentalism being the biggest challenge. However, given the maturity of the movement, it is all set to build on this solid foundation.

## CHAPTER II

### A SEARCH FOR AUTONOMY: THE SAHELI EXPERIENCE

This chapter studies an autonomous women's organization-Saheli. The name Saheli, symbolising the notion of sisterhood and friendship in a specifically Indian context, was deliberately chosen by the feminists who set up the centre to signify that they were not only concerned with women in distress, but also with sharing moments of play and pleasure. The idea underlying this was to give an equal weight to the positive aspects of women's lives in India, particularly, their forms of celebration and creativity.<sup>1</sup>

The birth of Saheli indicated the new consciousness of women which sought to analyse and articulate the roots of oppression of women. There was a proliferation of women's organization which were autonomous taking up women's issues from a totally different perspective. Not only was the more holistic approach to women's oppression adopted but various issues which had hitherto been considered private, became an agenda for public action by women's activists.

The experience of emergency had been instrumental in making civil liberties a hotly debated topic in the

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1. Radha Kumar, The History of Doing, Kali for Women, New Delhi, 1993, p.144

post- emergency period as a result of which atrocities on women were highlighted. The report of Committee on Status of Women in India provided a great fillip to women's activism for it drew a dismal picture of the Indian women as the victim of a patriarchal society. Also the declaration of 1975 as International Women's Year had an impact on women's movement resulting in the emergence of many an autonomous women's organizations.

These new women's organizations were autonomous in the sense that they independently exist from a political party which need not necessarily make them apolitical. In fact many of the women's activists of such organizations not only were involved in various political movements but also belonged to or identified with different political parties and ideologies.<sup>2</sup>

These autonomous organizations were characterised by women who organize and lead the movements and the fact that the organizations decision cannot be subordinated to the decisions of any political or social group/organization.<sup>3</sup> Also, many of these organizations were small-having not more than 20 or 30 members and

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2. Vibhuti Patel in Neera Desai's (ed.) A Decade of Women's Movement in India, Himalaya Publications, Bombay, 1984, p.118

3. Ibid.

functioned as a collective<sup>4</sup>. Saheli in Delhi, Sakhi Kendra in Kanpur, Stree Shakti Sangathana in Hyderabad etc. were such organizations.

### **The Beginning**

The origin of Saheli lies in the campaign against dowry taken up by women's activists in the early 1980s. One of the first dowry murders to get press publicity was that of Tarvinder Kaur whose protests against the constant pressure of providing money for the expansion of her husband's business, earned her a fiery death on 17 May 1979.<sup>5</sup> Though the Mahila Dakshata Samiti was the first women's organization in Delhi to take up the issue of dowry and dowry harassment, it was Stri Sangharsh whose campaign made dowry murder a household term.<sup>6</sup> Stree Sangharsh took up the case of Tarvinder Kaur with much gusto organising a number of demonstrations which were widely reported by the press.

Until this time death by fire had evaded scrutiny of both the police and public as these were considered suicides, and even these suicides were rarely seen as being due to dowry harassment. Mostly they had been

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4. Leslie J. Calman, Women and Movement Politics in India, Asian Survey, October 1989, p.944

5. N. Gandhi and N. Shah, Issues at Stake, Kali for Women, New Delhi, 1992, p.54.

6. Radha Kumar, op. cit., p. 118

passed off as private affairs which took place within the family and which were no concern of the state. However, in the wake of anti-dowry campaign undertaken by women's activists, this indifference to violence perpetrated on women was reversed for the campaign highlighted the linkage of death-by fire with dowry harassment, showing that many official 'suicides' were in fact murders. The dying declaration of the victims, which had been hitherto mostly ignored by the police, should be treated as evidence, demanded the women activists. Changes in the law and the cooperation of the police machinery was also demanded.

Dowry was earlier known as 'streedhan' or women's property and was a form of inheritance for women in a land-dominated, agricultural economy.<sup>7</sup> However, today with increasing consumerism the practice of dowry has become a means to elevate one's social status. In some cases, the dowry which comes though a son's wedding gets used in the daughter's wedding.<sup>8</sup> Whatever the reason for taking or giving dowry, it degrades and commodifies women and is one of the manifestations of the low social status of women in Indian society.

The campaign against dowry pursued many cases of

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7. N. Gandhi and N. Shah, op. cit., p.52.

8. Ibid, p.60.

dowry deaths. One of the main thrusts of the anti-dowry murder campaign in its early stages was on humiliating the in-Laws and the husband, publicly shaming them by soliciting the sympathy of the neighbours and asking for a social boycott of the family. Different methods like public demonstrations, sit down dharnas in front of the murderer's home, wall writing, poster-sticking in the neighborhood and house to house mobilisation were used. The campaign also emphasized consciousness-raising at a broader level. There were seminars, debates, poster competitions, and plays. In fact, one of the street plays 'Om Swaha' performed by activists of Stree Sangharsh went on to be enormously popular and was performed in a large number of localities in Delhi. Another form of consciousness-raising was organising mass pledges against taking dowry.<sup>9</sup>

The government responded speedily to the campaign. In New Delhi, the Crimes Against Women cell was set up in 1983 as the Anti Dowry Cell and in Bombay, the special cell was initiated with the aid of Tata Institute of Social Sciences in 1984. Both the cells were swamped with distress calls from hundreds of women.<sup>10</sup> However, many women's activists who had been a

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9. Ibid, p.55.

10. Ibid.

part of the anti-dowry campaign felt that these efforts by the government were highly inadequate for in the absence of an external supportive structure, distressed women lacked space and strength to take a stand on issues like dowry, wife-battering, harassment and more. Hence, efforts were made to establish support centres where women could have the space to share experiences, give and receive support, courage and strength and could be assisted in their struggle for survival. Also, most such groups helped women informally by forming a network of contacts. It was in this context and with this ideology that Saheli was set up in August 1981.<sup>11</sup> Eight women, who had been a part of the highly popular street play 'Om Swaha' came together to form an organization which would provide an alternative support structure for women, so that they could take constructive actions in their own lives. Saheli started in a garage. Sixteen women volunteered to keep the centre open everyday.

The aims and objectives with which Saheli has started are:<sup>12</sup>

- (i) To provide services for women such as legal and medical aid, employment, training, shelter etc.

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11. Saheli, The First Four Years.

12. Saheli Newsletter, Sept 1986.



- (ii) To create social awareness about the status of women.
- (iii) To help women in distress
- (iv) To facilitate research and study into issues that concern women
- (v) To publish and disseminate material concerning women.
- (vi) To hold discussions, seminars, and workshops on women's issues.
- (vii) To provide upto date information to women's organizations and voluntary associations through a documentation service.
- (viii) To provide a library service and circulate existing books and materials concerning women in different languages
- (ix) To set up area-based centres which provide similar services
- (x) To assist groups and organizations engaged in similar activities
- (xi) To undertake activities to further the status of women.

It is quite clear that Saheli has very overarching aims and objectives. Saheli, when it started, faced problems regarding almost every sphere of its activity-right from space, women power to funds. Kalpana Mehta, founder member of Saheli recalls that "Saheli shot into

prominence too early in its growth and was consequently inundated with cases which Saheli volunteers found difficult to cope with"<sup>13</sup> The problem was compounded by the fact that most of the volunteers held full time jobs and had limited monetary resources. However, the conviction and commitment to provide a space for distressed women- emotional and physical- carried the day even in the most turbulent years of Saheli existence.

It was this need for space for both the Saheli volunteers and the women who sought their help in terms of making constructive choices which determined the choice of the organization to not to start with a Manifesto. Ideological heterogeneity was accepted as being normal to an organization which provided that space to a woman to experientially determine her ideology. Also, Saheli members felt that too many groups had fallen apart on ideological differences while ideological homogeneity often curbed the creative growth of an organization making it more bureaucratized and less sensitive. Further more, feminist consciousness was never the same in everybody. Hence, the Manifesto was dispensed with as a result of which Saheli did not start

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13. Interview with Kalpana Mehta, Saheli member, March 29, 1995.

with a distinct or clear ideology, priorities and goals. It was felt that differences could be sorted out in practice. In practice, however, things did not work out so smoothly. Multiplicity of ideas about how Saheli should be run made practical working a little difficult. It also turned Saheli into an amorphous mass to which people found difficulty in relating with. This also created the problem of involving new volunteers with the work and the thinking. "We faced the problem of not knowing where we were heading and what indeed was the way to go" says Kalpana Mehta.<sup>14</sup> Owing to Saheli's strong publicity image, the work pressure increased tremendously and the questions of planning, defining the organization took a back seat until things came to head in 1986 when Saheli witnessed a split.

The initial years of Saheli functioning saw its involvement in a large number of cases so much so, infact, that many members felt Saheli had become limited to being a 'crisis centre.' Obviously women in crisis could not be ignored for it would negate the very existence of Saheli but the issues and campaign work suffered as did educational and awareness - raising work. Many volunteers started using other avenues for this work at the cost of Saheli. Frustration built up at

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14. Kalpana Mehta, op. cit.

Saheli's focus on just one aspect of women's movement which impeded the growth of both the volunteers and the rethinking on what direction Saheli was headed for as well as the volunteer's involvement in other programmes in other organizations.

With these reasons, the process of introspection, fault finding, critiquing and reviewing began in March 1986. Certain conclusions were arrived at and certain changes were made as regards the organization. Major structural changes were effected. Collective functioning had been adopted by Saheli in the context of certain feminist consciousness of the members which rejected hierarchical set of relationships as being patriarchal. "Hierarchy is rejected not only in personal life but in political life too," says Dolly, a Saheli member.<sup>15</sup> Collective functioning is a belief in equality which gets reinforced by the organization so that personal and political are not dichotomous.<sup>16</sup> A collective empowers women in decision-making and running an organization for commands are not imposed and there is no exclusion of a large number of members vis-a-vis decision making as there is in a hierarchical (read patriarchal

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15. Saheli Newsletter, Sept 1986

16. Interview with Dolly - Saheli member.

organization. Collective functioning, therefore, is liberating in that sense for it allows each and every member to have a say in all aspects of the running of the organization.

The early years of functioning of Saheli saw a fairly smooth running as a collective but slowly problems cropped up. Since each volunteer could participate in every sphere of activity of Saheli, time became too thinly divided. Multiple involvement is a problem for a new volunteer as well where she is faced with a lot of choices but no real work because it is not the task of any one woman to involve new volunteers in Saheli's work.<sup>17</sup>

This drawbacks in the functioning of Saheli were sought to be eliminated and it was decided that each woman would concentrate energy in one activity although in activities like preparing for March 8 every one would get involved. Furthermore, a certain degree of cohesiveness, common purpose and ideology became prerequisite to further functioning of the organization. This effectively nullified the participation of Saheli volunteers, esp the core members, in other organizations which had differing ideas and ideology than Saheli. This led to withdrawal of some members from Saheli who could

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17. Ibid.

not agree to this kind of functioning. Withdrawal of certain active members and the need to develop a common perspective meant that activities of Saheli were restricted to certain extent. The impact was felt, to a large extent, on the 'crisis' work. It was decided that work in this area would be curtailed. This decision could be taken because of the rise of a number of other feminist and non-feminist organizations which offered services similar to that of Saheli's. Also "the experience of working with distressed women, who were poor women more often than not, had benefited the largely urban English-speaking, middle - class volunteers and the centre had evolved. Need, therefore, was felt to utilise and apply these new experiences in other areas of women's movement" says Elizabeth, member Saheli.<sup>18</sup>

Saheli which emerged out of this soul-searching in 1986 was significantly different from what it had been when it had started. It had lost a number of members, had curtailed the scale of the very work which had led to its inception and talked of having common perspective and even a common ideology when a few years back it was proudly proclaiming the heterogeneity of these two. But

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18. Interview with Elizabeth, Saheli member, March 22, 1995.

the 'new' Saheli was more focused, dynamic and determined to lead the women's movement to areas which were still half hidden from the feminist's gaze.

The functioning now became tighter and more responsive to the shifting sands of women's movement. Earlier all decisions were taken at volunteer's meeting which often led to lop-sided agenda and discussions, undue influence of vocal members and at times no clear cut decisions. Now it was decided that for each activity/project, which is in progress all concerned people meet in small groups, for all policy decisions coordinators meet and for developing perspective the broadest forum consisting of all active members is utilized, which also is the forum for deciding an annual plan. To many this kind of structure negated the collective ideology of the organization. However, in reality it was not so. It was felt that since coordinators were most knowledgeable about their area of activities, it would be best to leave decision-making to them but in no case could the decision be unilateral as any member of Saheli had a right to know what was going on in every sphere of Saheli activity. Also the perspective building did involve all the members of the Saheli. And anyway, coordinatorship was and is rotational which prevented power centres from emerging.

Most Saheli volunteers do feel that sustaining collective functioning has required combined and deliberate efforts by all volunteers ." The struggle is constant to keep the collective from developing dominant and passive groups" says Dolly.<sup>19</sup> According to Kalpana Mehta " it is advisable for older volunteers/members to withdraw a little from the functioning and create space for newer members to participate more vigorously after a certain number of years have gone in activism. This lessens the risk of older members becoming dominating and creating hierarchical relationships."<sup>20</sup>

Saheli's rejection of hierarchies in personal and political functioning was reflected in its stand on funding too. Saheli had started in a small way with Rs 30/- in the kitty put in by the founder members.<sup>21</sup> The organization decided that individual donations would be adequate for basic survival instead of depending on funding agencies whether domestic or foreign or governmental. In depending on funding agencies problems would arise if the objectives were not the same as those of Saheli's. "No funds came free and that each kind meant some control, we would rather be controlled by

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19. Interview with Dolly, op. cit.

20. Interview with Kalpana Mehta, op. cit.

21. Saheli Newsletter op. cit.



what our support base thought of us than by any funding agencies.....such funds still left a few questions unanswered. What would happen to Saheli if these sources dried up? What would happen if Saheli wanted to take a stance in conflict with those of the funders and finally how could we provide a model which could have a wide applicability. We also felt that funders, did not, by and large, take in to account the interest of those funded in order to channel and allocate funds but that this was much more governed by which programmes they felt to be relevant which would mean funds for women's organizations/programmes during the decade for women and that for peace organization if the US so decided and then move on to the youth, children & the aged with time."<sup>22</sup> Saheli then rejected funding by funding agencies as being detrimental to its autonomy. Saheli wanted the sources of funds to be secondary to the strategies of the organization. It was felt that it was vital to decide the programmes of the organization on the basis of the needs of the movement and not on the basis of the policies of the funders. Autonomy, therefore, became extremely important not only in terms of political affiliation to a party but in practical functioning too. As Kalpana Mehta says "Autonomy

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22. Ibid.

provides Saheli the guts to take independent stance like it did in the whole controversy surrounding the Muslim women's Bill, the demolition of Babri Masjid and many more while other women's organizations which are party affiliated perforce had to echo their party's stance."<sup>23</sup> The idea of autonomy therefore pervaded every aspect of Saheli functioning.

#### **SAHELI'S CAMPAIGNS**

In the fourteen years of its life Saheli has addressed itself to issues which encompasses the whole range of oppression of women- from dowry deaths to injectable contraceptives and from communalism to New Economic Policy. Alongside Saheli's work for awareness - raising and consciousness-raising has been going on. The organization has been quite pioneering regarding certain issues like the population policy and hazardous contraceptives, which it has been highlighting since the beginning of its formation. Working with the premise that 'personal is political' Saheli has drawn attention to issues which were, and still are, considered 'as private' like wife beating, rape, dowry.

Apart from these campaigns Saheli has participated as well as organized conferences of

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23. Interview with Kalpana Mehta, op. cit.

autonomous women's organizations' where such organizations can share experiences and strategies of struggle. In 1983 Saheli hosted a workshop for feminists from all over India, called 'Kriti' at which there were sessions on song, dance, drama and painting. For most of the feminists who attended the workshop this emphasis on exploring their own, often traditionally defined, creativity was a liberating one. Discussions, conversations, written statements, and so on, now grew to represent politics in a public context, dancing and singing, on the other hand, were both means and signs of immediate, personal, culturally rooted and collective warmth for dance and song, and to a more limited extent painting, allowed a short cut to communication, which cut across class barriers. Also the emphasis on traditionally defined forms of women's expression which accorded a formal recognition to folk cultures, gave Indian feminists a sense of regional, ethnic and national identity. Simultaneously, through familiarizing them with different cultural forms in India, it allowed them to experiment with these forms in feminist context.<sup>24</sup> Although Saheli's activities have been quite diverse, the organization has consistently and repeatedly raised one issue time and again-that of

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24. Radha Kumar, op. cit., pp.144-145.

'reproductive health' of women. A study of Saheli's campaign regarding this issue will reveal not only Saheli's theory of 'personal is political' but highlight the very many ways a women is oppressed in terms of her body, her sexuality and also the choices that are available to her.

### **The Right to Health**

In recent years and largely in response to the women's movement, there has been an upsurge of interest in the health of women and the control (or lack of it) that women have over their bodies and their lives. There have been efforts by women's organization and, to a limited extent, the medical profession to raise consciousness on issues concerning women's health.

Family planning has had a long history in India. It was introduced in 1951 and India had the distinction of being the first country to introduce family planning. The Family Planning Programme since then has changed its form and method several times without altering its main thrust and objective which is to control the population.<sup>25</sup> During the first and second five year plans (1951-61) the programme adopted the 'clinical' approach of providing information and advice to couples

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25. N. Gandhi and N. Shah, op. cit., p.114.

on various contraception methods. However, as this approach had hardly any impact on the birth rate, an "extension" approach was attempted which aimed at changing the knowledge people had, as well as their attitudes and behavior about FP. But the government was in too much of a hurry to patiently pursue this educative and motivation-inducing method. By the mid-60s there was a clear shift to population control or the reduction of the birth rate within a stipulated period. At the same time, the methods changed to sterilization and invasive contraceptive methods like IUDS and Hormonal contraceptives.<sup>26</sup>

It was the emergency which witnessed the worst form of population control unleashed by the state. Forced sterilisations, withholding information on harmful contraceptives, using women as guinea-pigs without their knowledge and consent became the norm of the state and led to a sense of disillusion among the populace. Forced sterilizations created a lot of anger among the men for they considered it as an assault on their virility and many medical staff saw the state's aggression as authoritarianism. This was one of the main planks used by the opposition parties to whip up feeling against the ruling party, which finally ended in the

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26. Ibid. p. 115

collapse of the Indira Gandhi government in 1977. Having burnt their fingers once, the government became extremely careful in approaching men. It conducted a short and unsuccessful campaign for the use of condoms and then concentrated its family planning drive on women.<sup>27</sup> Unfortunately, the government not only bypassed non-clinical methods of contraception but also phased out barrier methods (like diaphragms) which are not so harmful to women's bodies instead placing before women a range of hormonal contraceptives manufactured by foreign multi-national drug companies, which, while they can be effectively and cheaply administered, also run the risk of being fatal to the woman and her children.

The campaign against injectable contraceptive started in early 80s when women's organizations protested against High Dose Estrogen- Progesterone (EP) drugs which had serious side effects on woman a fact often conveniently suppressed and ignored by the medical practitioners. Saheli participated in this campaign right from the beginning. In the early 1980s in India, EP drugs were being sold over the counter and were prescribed freely by doctors to test pregnancy, to postpone menses or as abortifacientes.<sup>28</sup> This was

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27. Ibid. p.117.

28. Saheli Souvenir.

despite the fact that countries had banned their use, either totally or in pregnancy testing. The World Health Organization (WHO) had circulated this information to all member countries and advised that these drugs were hazardous because of their association with congenital malformation when administered to pregnant women.<sup>29</sup> In India however, due to pressure from the powerful lobby of gynaecologists and drug manufacturers the drug was not banned although it became mandatory to carry a warning on the packaging of the drug. But widespread misuse of the drug continued. In 1982, several drug action, health and women's groups came together to highlight this malpractice. Since women were the sole consumers of these drugs, a campaign was launched on March 8, International Women's Day.

Saheli's initial efforts involved at gathering evidence of misuse." Saheli volunteers went to chemists and bought the drugs over the counter without any difficulty. In this process they discovered that some drug companies had not printed the warning against use in pregnancy in their packaging. Saheli volunteers also visited qualified gynaecologists and, by posing to be pregnant, found that E.P drugs were being prescribed for

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29. Ibid.

pregnancy testing as well as for inducing abortions.<sup>30</sup>

Along with Voluntary Health Association of India (VHAI), letters were written to doctors and chemists, raising these issues, and a signature campaign was started. As a result of this campaign, pressure was brought to bear from several quarters, and questions were raised in Parliament regarding the sale and manufacture of E.P drugs. Stretching over a period of six years, this campaign culminated in public hearing and on June 30, 1988 the manufacture and sale of these drugs was banned in India<sup>31</sup>

However, the campaign against hazardous drugs did not end with the successful completion of the E.P campaign because again new drugs under different names and which were more invasive were pushed in the market as a method of family planning like Net-En, Depo-Provera and most recently Norplant. These new drugs have one common property-they are all long acting, with effects varying between a couple of months and for injectables, to five years of contraceptive effect with Norplant. The problem with injectables has been in the fact that the side effects of these injections continue long after their effectiveness as a contraceptive is over. Some

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30. Ibid.

31. Ibid.



women have reported years of misery.

These contraceptives, however, are being introduced and marketed more and more aggressively. They are posited as being convenient for they do not need to be stored the way pills have to be or remembered every day etc. Also they are touted as means of contraception which women can use without the knowledge of their family. Furthermore, injections are attractive to doctors because they do not have to waste time in giving instructions to their patients yet achieve a high rate of success in contraception.<sup>32</sup>

Saheli, as stated earlier, has been active in this campaign since the very beginning when other organizations were concentrating on visible forms of oppression of women like dowry and rape. Furthermore the long period of agitation by Saheli reveals its growing maturity as an organization. Initially, Saheli had concentrated in campaigning against the hazardous drugs only though it did provide a critique of government's stand on this as well as those of pharmaceutical companies. After the experiences of the campaign Saheli offers a more sophisticated understanding of the whole issue, taking strong political stands.

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32. Saheli Newsletter, July 1994

Saheli today has offered critique of the injectable contraceptives by relating it not only to the development policy followed by the state but of neo-colonialism of the industrialized nations. According to Saheli-" since independence the government, backed by population control agencies and the national elite has been pursuing a policy of population control, presented first as a family planning programme and later as a family welfare programme."<sup>33</sup> Criticising the New Economic policy strongly Saheli states," India has at last been declared a 'Laissez-Faire' economy, with no regulation of domestic industry and trade, no tariffs, no planning and no central control over the gambit of economic activity foreign as well as indigenous. It is the demise of the freedom we won in 1947 to decide on our own the process of economic development. It is also the final swing away from commitments real or rhetorical to socialism. The stage is now set for complete take over of the Indian economy by the transnationals of the G 7"<sup>34</sup>

According to Saheli the NEP will have a serious fallout on women. The economic invisibility of women will only increase. More serious, however, will be the

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33. Ibid.

34. Ibid.

conditionality of international 'aid-giving' agencies for e.g. UNICEF and World Bank to control India's rising population".

Saheli's perception of oppression of women, therefore, has also undergone changes. Earlier Saheli considered women's oppression from a predominantly social angle but so many years of activism has given Saheli a political understanding of oppression of women. This reflects in its activities and campaigns as well. The campaign against injectable contraceptives has become broader as Saheli has started concentrating on broadening its penetration to the rural areas. For example Saheli is thinking of holding this workshop where 25 women activists will be informed thoroughly on contraception and family planning and subsequently they can reach a large number of women and educate them about it.<sup>35</sup>

Moreover, issues of sexuality and health engendered by this new focus on issue of contraception are also getting attention by the women's organizations for any talk of choice of contraceptions by women will raise questions about women's sexuality. However, this a still uncomfortable topic for women's organizations and discussions on compulsory nature of heterosexuality,

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35. Kalpana Mehta, op. cit.

non-penetrative sexual methods and lesbianism are still few and far between.

Thus, the above study reveals the growing maturity of Saheli as a women's organization as well as of the women's movement. The movement is addressing itself to issues which were largely peripheral a decade ago. A more holistic approach as well as understanding is revealed about the women's question. Saheli which earlier had concentrated upon social mobilization about issues now takes it upon itself to take strong political stands. Realising that just working with slum women is not enough, Saheli is increasingly making efforts to broadening its penetration in rural areas and amongst rural women a fact reflected by the women's movement as a whole. Interestingly, ideological heterogeneity with which Saheli started has given way to a common perception of the women's issue shared by most volunteers. Long years of activism has made Saheli realise the viability of a shared ideology perception as being more conducive to action/campaign. Also, as an autonomous women's organization, Saheli is making consistent efforts to forge links and alliances with not only national women's organization but international ones as well. Holding conferences of autonomous women's organization is one step in this direction. Being a small organization Saheli realises the danger of

isolation and possible extinction if networking with other organization does not happen or if the women in the countryside are not made aware of the issues and struggles of women and women's organizations.

However Saheli sees its failure in not being able to mobilise enough young people to be a part of the organization as well as of the women's movement. This is partly due to the consumerist culture which objectifies and commodifies women. Also, the rightist religious forces which are throwing frontal attacks on women's movement are held responsible by Saheli for reluctance of women to join the women's movement a fact, echoed by other women's organizations as well.

Hence, the picture which emerges from the above discussion on Saheli is of an organization which has made 'Body politics' central to its functioning. From the anti-dowry campaign to a campaign against injectable contraceptives, body politics has been a crucial factor in Saheli's functioning. Believing that women are oppressed in a patriarchal society as victims of their 'gender', Saheli's agenda has been to get public recognition of this hitherto private aspects of women's oppression. Although Saheli understands and accepts that oppression of women is also due to the political and economic set up which denies any kind of empowerment to women, but it is the 'personal' aspect of women's

oppression, in a day to day living at individual and household level, which activates Saheli.

The State when pressurized by women's organizations readily initiates policies relating to economic or political aspect of gender discrimination. However, the same state also readily uses sexual and reproductive control to disempower women, the poor, minorities and dissidents. Practices ranging from pro-natalist and population control policies to forcible sterilizations and sexual torture have been used by the state to keep women (or their families) quiescent.<sup>36</sup> In some cases states have taken aggressive action against pornography or prostitution - sometimes with the support of and sometimes vehemently opposed by organized groups of women. But rarely have states, in the absence of pressure from women, made a priority of combating rape, harassment, battering. For these issues to reach the public agenda, women have needed to operate as an organized, autonomous, political force. Hence, it becomes important for women to organize separately, distanced from the state or party institutions for body politics will not gain public attention without the force of women's mobilization behind it.<sup>37</sup> Saheli

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36. Mary Fainsod Katzenstien, Getting Women's Issues onto the Public Agenda: Body Politics in India, Samya Shakti, vol.VI, 1991-92, pp.11-12.

37. Ibid.

recognizes this and hence, maintains its autonomy zealously which gives the organization guts to take up issues which might be neglected by other organizations.

However, Saheli's seems to be caught in a major dilemma. While 'Body Politics' engages its attention and Saheli campaigns against dowry, sexual harassment, rape etc., its focus on just these aspects of women's oppression prevent the organization from adopting a more holistic approach to understanding and overcoming women's oppression. The economic and political context and conditions which actually disempowers women have also to be combated for until a woman is economically independent and an equal political citizen, she will continue to be oppressed by the system. 94% women work in the unorganized sector, with its attendant ills, and this trend is increasing especially as result of the NEP and liberalization. Politically, women are denied access to the decision making process and are unequal citizens, in that regard. Therefore without economic and political power, a women is powerless to take action on the atrocities perpetrated on her. Though Saheli realizes this the course of action that it follows does not seem to take this into account. The obsession with just body politics seem to make Saheli's functioning a trifle lopsided and other organizations seem to get an edge

over Saheli in this regard. Furthermore, while Saheli has been successful in making feminism acceptable to the masses the language of feminism has been easily appropriated by the rightist forces to garner support from women while not offering any kind of fundamental changes in the society to actually liberate women. This is because of lack of concrete changes which would empower women which makes feminist articulation just that - articulation which can be used in communalistic discourse without any hindrances for articulation can lend itself to any discourse, meaning.

Notwithstanding Saheli's achievement in putting body politics on public agenda, an awareness of political powerlessness of women has led the organization to support political participation of women and reaching out to grassroots to further legitimise feminism which has become its agenda for future action. Moreover, Saheli has contributed its bit in making feminism acceptable among masses through plays, skits, songs, poster exhibition, creative workshops etc. Furthermore, as a women's centre, Saheli has provided that much needed and usually denied space to women where they can forge links with other women & thus, form a bond of sister-hood but also make constructive decisions about their lives and themselves.



### CHAPTER III

#### ALL INDIA DEMOCRATIC WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION AND THE MARXIST APPROACH TO THE WOMEN'S QUESTION

Marxist theory offers its own account of women's oppression, what constitutes it, what causes it, and how it can be ended. The Marxist approach to the women's question is governed by its allegiance to the method of historical materialism. This method presupposes the outline of a certain conception of women's nature: insofar as women are human beings, women's nature must be formed by the dialectical interrelation between women's praxis, their biological constitution and their physical and social environments.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, marxist approach seeks equality at the legislative, political and educational levels are all necessary ingredients in the Marxist strategy to end women's oppression.<sup>2</sup> However without economic freedom and a stake in the ownership of the means of production, women would remain dependent on men and could therefore never be free. As such, the process of working toward

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1. Alison Jaggar, Feminist Politics and Human Nature, Rowman and Allanheld, New Jersey, 1983, p. 63
  2. Patricia Loveridge, Approaches to Change: The All India Democratic Women's Association and a Marxist Approach to the Women's Questions in India, Indian Journal of Gender Studies, July - December 1994, p.217.

women's emancipation was seen as necessarily bound up in a wider struggle to radically transform the economic and political structures of society, to abolish the family as the economic unit of society and to bring property and the means of production back into the hands of the community <sup>3</sup>

From the Marxist perspective, women's emancipation is necessarily contingent on the overthrow of capitalism and a radical restructuring of the social and political order. As such, the process of emancipation necessarily entails not only women's struggles but forging links and alliances with other oppressed groups, namely the proletariat. This chapter, then, traces the growth of All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA) as influenced by its affiliation to the leftist political party the CPI-M and where marxism plays a determinant role in the organization's praxis.

#### **AIDWA**

The first conference of AIDWA was held in 1981 in Madras and from it emerged the organization's constitution, programme and statement of aims and objectives. The structure of the organization is federal in character with headquarter's in Delhi and branches in

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3. Ibid.

the states and in the union territories. 4

The organization is hierarchical in character with All India Conference being on top of the hierarchy followed by the Central Executive Committee (CEC). The Central Secretariat which comes third is followed by the branches and affiliates. The term of the Central Executive Committee is for the period between the two conferences and the Conference is normally held once in three years. In between these two conferences C.E.C. is the highest body and executes the decisions of the conference. There is a President, at least three vice Presidents and one General Secretary, at least five Secretaries and one Treasurer elected from among the members of C.E.C. 5

The group's central objective as listed in its constitution is to "take upon itself the task of organising the masses of women in town and villages of India and of building a powerful broad-based women's movement for the uplift and betterment of the lot of women as a whole, to remove all discrimination between man and woman, to fight for democracy, equal rights and emancipation of women, in a society free from

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4. AIDWA Constitution.

5. Ibid.

exploitation." 6

AIDWA then incorporates the aim of organising women so that they can struggle to secure these rights. However, struggles of women are not to be seen in isolation but are to be linked to the wider struggles of the workers, and all sections of the oppressed masses so that a radical change can occur in the society. The idea underlying is that unless AIDWA is a part of the mainstream struggles, emancipation of women cannot be achieved for a society based on inequalities cannot even hope to offer justice to women as well as dalits, peasants, workers etc.

#### **AIDWA'S Perception of Oppression of Women's**

AIDWA perceives women's identity at three levels that of gender, citizens of a democratic nation and class. Each level is equally important and struggles and agitations have to be waged on issues in all these categories for a total emancipation of women because otherwise the movement for equality will be weakened.

Women experience oppression at the gender level. The mere fact of them being female determines a certain set of attitudes which are biased to the extent of being

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6. Ibid.

extremely oppressive. Women are denied access to education, employment, skill - formation and largely the freedom of choice. Consequently, advance and development of women is severely curtailed. Expressing concern at this AIDWA seeks to "launch campaigns and struggles against social evils like the dowry system, polygamy, child marriage, prevention of widow marriage etc. and against all obstacles which prevent the implementation and improvement of existing legislation pertaining to the above subjects."<sup>7</sup> Furthermore AIDWA's aim "to strive for the social, cultural, educational and mental upliftment of women so that women can develop as responsible and democratically conscious citizens capable of providing leadership in all fields" is a call to all women as citizens of the country.<sup>8</sup> At the level of citizens, women though not denied access to citizenship are incorporated differently from men: they are incorporated as subordinates, as the different sex, as women. They are said to lack the characteristics required for participation in political life. Women are seen as not capable of making the same contribution as men and so do not get the same entitlements from the state. For example, the state is extremely negligent

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7. AIDWA Constitution, op. cit.

8. Ibid

about providing creches to working women which places too heavy a burden on them to manage both work and mothering. The tasks of a wife, and mother, are not the work associated with citizenship. Paradoxically, women as mothers nurture the next generation of citizens.

Therefore, according to AIDWA, equal political standing of women is necessary for democracy and for women's emancipation. A constant struggle has to be waged to achieve equality not only in terms of gender but as citizens possessing the same rights as men. According to Ranjana Narula "political participation of women is of utmost importance and, in this regard, the reservation of seats for women in Panchayats assumes great significance for only when women have access to political power and the decision making process will real changes be brought about."<sup>9</sup>

Lastly, women's identity is also determined by her placement in the class. Although gender oppression cuts across all class barriers, the women belonging to the working class are doubly oppressed because of their gender, as well as their membership in an exploited class. Hence AIDWA's attempt "to struggle for security, rights and proper working conditions for working class,

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9. Interview with Ranjana Narula, AIDWA member, June 17, 1995.

peasants, and all other sections of working women."<sup>10</sup> So unless all these three levels are addressed to by women's struggles, emancipation will always remain a distant dream.

Further analysis of oppression of women reveals that growing marginalisation of women in the economic and productive spheres add on to gender discrimination. Moreover, oppression at the societal level further compounds the problem. According to AIDWA there is a direct relationship between the decline in women's participation in the productive sphere since independence and an increase in the incidence of violence against women during the same period. <sup>11</sup>

Being an organization which takes strong political stands, AIDWA offers a critique of the Congress Government policies which have led to a worsening of women's position in India. The development strategy followed by the Congress Governments at the Centre since independence has been held responsible for pauperization of large section of people and especially women. Women have been increasingly pushed to the unorganised sector due to lopsided industrialization and this has had an adverse effect on their social status. In India 94% of

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10. AIDWA Constitution, op. cit.

11. Patricia Loveridge, Op. cit., p.222.

female workforce is concentrated in the unorganised sector where they get extremely low wages and the conditions at work are extremely adverse. 12

There is a growing informalization of employment as a result of Congress policies. The critique of Congress becomes even more intense when AIDWA talks of the New Economic Policy and the 'structural adjustments' which characterise it. "The withdrawal of the state from social sectors is going to have an extremely detrimental effect on women results of which are already being evident. The female face of destitution in India is going to be more and more clearly seen."13

The 'feminization of poverty' becomes an agenda for struggle by the AIDWA. However, at the societal level too AIDWA holds Congress responsible for the increasing atmosphere of violence in which, as usual, women are the first ones to face the brunt of it. The increasingly consumeristic society which is a direct fallout of NEP will have adverse consequences for women not only in terms of sexual objectification but in an increase in dowry deaths, rape especially child rapes etc. "Thus women are going to be victimised by the NEP

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12. Sujata Gothoskar, Struggles of women at work, Vikas Publishing House, New Delhi, 1992, p.4

13. Women's Equality. April-June 1992, p.9



in myriad ways and it is all these aspects that we have to take in account in our campaigns to the mass of women" 14

Communalism, which has been linked by AIDWA to the Congress policies, is posited as posing a serious threat to women. Launching a strong attack on Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP), AIDWA states that BJP's advocacy of the Hindu Rashtra is a subversion of democracy. The concept of Hindu Rashtra necessarily excludes other communities from being equal citizens of the country therefore reducing them to second class citizens. More alarming is the fact that fundamentalist Hinduism which preaches 'Manu' and defends Sati will be even more oppressive for women. 15

The concerted attempt to re-establish a fundamentalist Hindu order marked by a return to a rigid, patriarchal caste system and all the ills that go with it, is the thrust of the Hindutva campaign. "In other words, it is the writ of Manu Smriti which is sought to be imposed in the place of Indian constitution..... The ideological links between an anti-minority/Muslim platform and the propagation of a Brahmanical code is the very basis of the Hindu Rashtra

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14. Ibid.

15. Ibid.

platform with its disastrous consequences for India's women, dalits and scheduled tribes. One of the basic pillars of any democracy is the protection of the rights of minority communities. By attacking such rights in the name of ending 'appeasement' of the minorities, an attack is made on democracy itself with its adverse impact on vulnerable sections including women." 16 Shakuntala Kumari, a grassroot member of AIDWA, echoes this concern and says that she "with other grassroot members goes from house to house educating women about the real nature of communal forces"17

Thus, AIDWA incorporates an incisive and overarching perception of the oppression of women. This

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16. Women's Equality, Jan - March 1993. Interestingly, Supriya Akerkar has highlighted the trend of Rashtrasevika Samiti, the women's wing of RSS, to appropriate the image of the independent and powerful woman a symbol of feminist movement in India for furthering communal propaganda. The ease by which feminist discourses have been appropriated by the communalists who while talking about a powerful and economically independent woman visualize no fundamental changes in values only a sort of readjustment is extremely dangerous. The emphasis remains on women within the household. Akerkar posits that this argues against any kind of direct confrontation with the patriarchal power, structures and values. What is troubling is the ease by which the feminist discourse is appropriated by retrograde forces. Supriya Akerkar, Theory and Practice of Women's Movement in India: A Discourse Analysis, EPW, 30 (17), 1995.
17. Interview with Shakuntala Kumari, grassroot worker, AIDWA, June 17, 1995.

is reflected in its campaigns and strategies of struggles too. AIDWA then, reiterates fundamental Marxist principles of social change. "This means that we see the process of ideological struggle as well as concrete practices against all forms of gender oppression as part of a wider class approach to the different aspects of oppression in Indian society as a crucial task today. This would imply also a conscious struggle within the oppressed classes also, because an aspect of their oppression is the domination of ideologies inimical to their interests."<sup>18</sup>

#### **AIDWA'S Campaigns**

Having branches and affiliates all over India and involved in struggles in almost all aspects of women's oppression it would be more useful to look at a number of campaigns which AIDWA has launched instead of just focusing on one.

AIDWA follows a two - pronged approach. First, much effort is expended on bringing about short term changes to improve the living conditions of Indian women within the society as it stands. Such tactics include propoganda campaigns aimed at making women more aware of their rights and at raising awareness of men and women both, concerning specific issues such as the

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18. Women's Equality, Jan - Jun, 1994

status of the girl child and the effects of communalism.<sup>19</sup> "In this context even the struggle for civic - amenities for women becomes important for AIDWA for it is a basic right of women," says Shakuntala who is heavily involved in mobilising women at the local unit.<sup>20</sup> "We take up issues of water shortage, ration etc for it is the women who have to suffer the most about such things." <sup>21</sup> Efforts are also made by AIDWA to bring about changes at the official level. For example, a rally to demand employment and land rights from the governments was staged by AIDWA in New Delhi in September 1989, in which 20,000 women from across the country participated.<sup>22</sup> In fact, this all - India march was unprecedented in the post independent history of the women's movement. There have been rallies and marches against dowry, sati, Muslim women's bill but for the first time in this case, women came together against unemployment. AIDWA believes that without land, house and employment it is not possible to check the onslaught on women. If child - marriage, sati have to end, it is necessary to have a fundamental change in the pattern

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19. Patricia Loveridge, op. cit., p.230.

20. Interview with Shakuntala Kumari, op. cit.

21. Ibid.

22. Women's Equality, July-Dec, 1989, p.4.

of land ownership, and the tillers of the land must acquire the capacity to retain their land.

Furthermore, legislation is seen as an important tool to bring about short term social change. Raising public awareness and influencing government policies assumes importance in this case. AIDWA uses a number of methods to bring about short - term changes like street plays, street corner meetings, distributing pamphlets and holding workshops on legal rights of women. Dharnas, Gheraos become useful in pressurizing the government and government officials to take notice of various problems of women.

Interestingly here, AIDWA, although not functioning as a women's crisis centre, takes up a lot of individual cases and follows them through. Janawadi Mahila Samiti, the Delhi unit of AIDWA, on every saturday throws open its office to women in distress and provides them with emotional and legal counseling. Kalindi Deshpande sees this as enriching their broad understanding of women's oppression by this day to day dealings. Moreover, it helps to reach out to women in a personal way and forge links with working, poor women.<sup>23</sup>

The second level of AIDWA's approach is the promotion of long term and radical social, political and

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23. Interview with the President of AIDWA, Kalindi Deshpande, April 22, 1995.

economic change. Raising public awareness, again of the nature of women's oppression and the exploitation of working class is one aspect of this strategy. Further, forging links between women's movement and other democratic organization in order to build a larger movement for radical reform is another aspect of this strategy. 24

Issue based alliances with other women's organization have always been important to AIDWA right from the beginning. However AIDWA supports only those women's organizations which possess correct political understanding. Ranjana Narula very frankly admits that "AIDWA is opposed to all autonomous women's groups which are funded by foreign organizations but this does not rule out issue-based alliances with women's organizations which possess correct political understanding. In fact, many autonomous women's groups are moving closer to AIDWA's position on political participation of women and are shedding their earlier a political stance which is a very positive turn."<sup>25</sup> AIDWA, therefore, has been a part of the national joint platforms of mass organizations regarding such issues as

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24. Patricia Loveridge, op. cit., p.232.

25. Interview with Ranjana Narula, op. cit.

communalism and the NEP. Most notable in this case were the joint conventions organised in Tamil Nadu with the agricultural worker's union to focus on the demands of poor rural women.

At the third level the need to change the power structure of Indian society is also the basis for AIDWA's widespread campaigning to gather support for left and National Front candidates and to secure women's participation at all levels of regional and national government. Political representation is seen as one means of ensuring that the interests of women and the working class are protected at the policy - making level. In the long run, however, the election of Left candidates and, equally, the defeat of Congress (I), have been sought in order to ensure larger structural changes and to bring about the economic and social conditions necessary for improvements in the status of women in India. <sup>26</sup> As Kalindi Deshpande put it, the ultimate aim of AIDWA, in accordance with the Marxist approach, is a classless society which is just and humane and where women finally will be equal in every sense <sup>27</sup>

Thus, the three level understanding of women's

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26. Patricia Loveridge, op. cit.

27. Interview with Kalindi Deshpande, op. cit.

identity is translated in action by AIDWA. The organization strongly feels that a bigger framework is absolutely essential to deal with specificities of any issue. This broad understanding gives the organization strength to frame out demands and methods of struggle, which would bring about a more holistic change in the Indian women status, at all the levels.

### **The New Economic Policy**

AIDWA units throughout the country have been actively involved in the big struggles of the people against the New Economic Policy (NEP). In fact, AIDWA was one of the first organization to raise the issue of 'structural Adjustments' in 1981-82 when the IMF/WB loan was sanctioned while other organization were still grappling with the issues of violence against women. Drawing a grim picture of the fallout of NEP, AIDWA has been active throughout the country raising awareness, staging marches and allying with other democratic groups and women's organizations which are also opposing the NEP. The protest actions include two nation wide industrial strikes in Nov. 1991 and June 1991, two massive rallies in 1992 and 1994, a nation - wide court arrest programme and a Bharat Bandh. In all these AIDWA has been very active. In one rally over 10,000 women



from different states participated. Women in protest against NEP along with others faced police arrests, lathis, tear gassing and the water cannons in numerous centres including Delhi, Bangalore, Bihar, Haryana, Gwalior. On a conservative estimate AIDWA would have organised at least 20,000 street corner meetings against NEP in this period in different parts of the country.<sup>28</sup>

An important aspects of the NEP campaign been the projection of the class aspect of the NEP. In the joint campaigns with other organizations there was an important focus on imperialist penetration of the economy, the IMF/WB dictates concerning the direction of the Indian economy and the subsequent sell out of India's interest by the Narasimha Rao Government. Interestingly, in the joint platforms of AIDWA led by trade unions the major concern became the impact of NEP on the organised sector. AIDWA faced a dilemma here for women in the organized sector are merely 6% of the female workforce.

Apart from struggle against NEP in relation to employment, AIDWA also highlighted the social fallout of NEP. The government cuts in social sectors have had a direct and adverse bearing on women and AIDWA has campaigned against this as well. Moreover, the opening

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28. Fourth National Conference Report, 1994.

of media has led to 'cultural imperialism'. Motivated solely by profit, the programmes are increasingly portraying women in a degrading manner adding on to the perception of objectification of women by man. This perception is reflected in increasing incidence of violence on women and sexual harassment. Towards this aim then, AIDWA has launched a campaign against the sexist media. In February 1995 AIDWA held a rally outside Bennet and Coleman office to protest against the Miss India beauty contest which is the worst form of a public display of 'objectification' and 'commodification' of women.<sup>29</sup> AIDWA has also joined hands with other women organizations which are campaigning against the population policy of the government which is anti-women and is directly linked to the NEP. Saheli, an autonomous women's organization has been very active on this issue and is supported by AIDWA. As of now, the campaign against NEP is the important task of AIDWA who is seriously thinking of extending it to the grassroot level.

However, AIDWA has witnessed certain weaknesses in this campaign. While the organization has campaigned on macro issues, they have not been able to focus on specific needs of specific sections of women. This is

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29. Interview with Kalindi Deshpande, op. cit.

because AIDWA's work is geared more to general campaigns. For example, AIDWA has made no specific efforts to organise women in the unorganised sector even though it is working with them to better their conditions.<sup>30</sup> However, AIDWA hopes to overcome its weaknesses and pose a concerted attack against NEP.

### **Violence Against Women**

AIDWA has made very important interventions on issues and in cases concerning violence against women. AIDWA runs over 100 legal aid cells all over country. Starting with the dowry campaign. AIDWA's activism encompassed almost all forms of violence perpetrated on women. AIDWA has extended support and help to victims whose cases assumed national importance like Ameena, Gajraula Nuns and many more.<sup>31</sup>

AIDWA has also raised its voice against custodial rape and rape by the powerful. The organization pressurizes the government., judiciary and the police to take notice of such cases as well as for a speedy trial by going on dharnas, organising marches etc. Also, AIDWA is increasingly focusing on the rising incidence of child rape and the domestic violence. Also taken up is another aspect of violence which includes

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30. Ibid.

31. Ibid.

female infanticide and female foeticide through sex-determination tests. In the affected areas of Tamil Nadu, the AIDWA state committee organized consciousness raising campaigns with a very effective leaflet, songs and a play. In another horrible display of negative attitude towards women, a clinic in Sirsa, Haryana advertised sex-determination and abortion by displaying the corpses of female foetuses in glass jars in the window. AIDWA unit organized a big demonstration and got the clinic closed. <sup>32</sup>

While focusing on the macro level of violence against women in terms of government attitude and criminal negligence on issues of child-labour and violence against the girl child, AIDWA does not want to ignore the micro reality of family attitude and in particular the attitude of the mother towards her daughter. AIDWA place the agency of change in the woman empowering her with the courage to make a difference, however marginal to the girl child's life. In this context it is important to note that though AIDWA perceives women as being an agency for positive change, it does not see these issues as being only women's issues which are to be dealt by women only. <sup>33</sup>

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32. Ibid.

33. Interview with Kalindi Deshpande, op. cit.

It is necessary to raise awareness of the society and to garner support of both men and women if real changes are to be made because only attitudinal change of society, especially of men, towards a positive womanhood will mean anything in the struggle.

### **The Anti-Arrack Campaign in Andhra Pradesh**

Apart from national campaigns, the state units of AIDWA are also involved in local struggles. The anti arrack campaign led and sustained by poor rural women was started by women learners in the literacy campaign in Nellore districts in June 1992.<sup>34</sup> The expenditure of family income in liquor, curtailment of jobs and increase in prices added to women's problems which were compounded by the fact that instances of violence against women, wife-battering etc, when husbands were drunk, greatly increased. Thus, when the movement started it got a massive, spontaneous response from the rural poor mainly agricultural worker, day labourers, and poor peasant families. The target of the women were not only arrack outlets but arrack auction distribution programme of the government which took on a distinct anti- government colour. The close links of MLAs with the strong arrack lobby boded ill for women but they stuck tenaciously to the campaign even in the face of

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34. Fourth National National Conference Report, op.cit.

such strong opposition finally forcing the concerned Ministers to resign. 35

At the private level women faced opposition from male members of the family. In spite of this the movement never took on anti-male hues but did its best to gather support from the community and it was actually successful in doing so. AIDWA played an extremely important role in the movement to make it more widespread and to sustain it. Out of 1100 villages in Nellore district, AIDWA campaigned in 700. In Nellore AIDWA organised a study circle for 165 women who were active in the movement. In many other districts it was AIDWA who took the initiative. A state level coordination committee was formed with 18 women's organizations. In its functioning its programme, its direction, AIDWA made a very important contribution. 36

The victories of the movement, the experience of collective mass action, the development of scores of activists have definitely given a big boost to the women's movement in Andhra Pradesh.

These then are some of the campaigns, both national and at the state level, which AIDWA has undertaken. There have been many more campaigns against

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35. Ibid.

36. Ibid.

multiple issues. AIDWA has also sought to build international link and has campaigned on many important international developments. AIDWA had been very active during the Gulf war and had organised independent rallies of women for peace against US aggression while also participating in joint rallies. The struggle in South Africa was one which also inspired AIDWA. Numerous meetings and demonstrations were organised in solidarity.<sup>37</sup>

All the AIDWA campaigns are permeated by its understanding of women's oppression at the three levels and it has been waging struggle at all these levels. However sometimes many issues which constitute the micro level reality of women's oppression are neglected by the organization and these issues often come up in the campaigns of other autonomous women's organizations.

As in the case of NEP and its fallout on the family planning programme, AIDWA was so busy focusing on the NEP at the macro level that it ignored the adverse effect of the population policy which was pushing in hazardous injectible contraceptives in the market in the name of population control. However, once this issue was taken up by other women's organization notably Saheli, AIDWA extended its full support to it. In fact a close working relationship between AIDWA and other

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37. Ibid.

autonomous women's organizations has increased over the years, especially on issues which earlier AIDWA had considered as constituting only the gender level oppression of women. However, AIDWA still has strong reservations about the autonomous groups which are financed by foreign funds. Such groups in fact play a disruptive role with their concentrated bias against the organised Left, feels AIDWA.<sup>38</sup>

The organization has been involved in almost all major struggles by women all over India and has greatly extended its activities. However, the recent socio - political and economic changes which India is witnessing has been causing disquiet among the women's organizations. The frontal attacks by the Rightist forces and the NEP is having an extremely detrimental effect on the women's movement, but the movement today is trying to pose a counter challenge to these two. AIDWA has chalked out as its future tasks an intensification of struggle against NEP. This will be done by broadening the base of the struggle by taking up issues of homebased workers, self - employed and the rural poor women which will include maternity benefits and child care facilities. <sup>39</sup> Also sustained campaigns

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38. Women's Equality, Oct-Dec, 1990.

39. Interview with Kalindi Deshpande, op. cit.



against communalism, which will be linked with every other issue, will see AIDWA'S concentrated attention in the coming years.

In terms of organization efforts will be made to further expand it. A positive change which AIDWA has witnessed in the last few years has been the development of grass - root level leadership in big numbers. Composition of the organization has changed from upper middle - class, English - speaking, urban leaders to grass - root leaders. <sup>40</sup> Another achievement has been the recognition which AIDWA has managed to get which has been extremely useful in providing it with bargaining power both at the national and local level.

From the above analysis of AIDWA'S ideology, its aims and objectives and the struggles in which AIDWA has participated, it becomes clear that AIDWA offers a holistic and overarching perception of oppression of women. What has become clear from the above discussion is that the basic premise on which AIDWA has built its programme for social change is the marxist perspective. Social relations are necessarily determined by the material conditions characterising a given society. Following this, the social status of women is understood to be directly related to the role they play in, and the

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40. Ibid.

degree of control they have over, the productive and economic spheres. Correspondingly, the central premise of AIDWA's programme for change in the status of women in India is the belief that women must have economic independence in order to be able to protect their own interests and to gain an equal position in the society. Hence, AIDWA's demand is for women's right to employment and economic self - sufficiency, and to bring about the conditions in which women can be both economically independent and stand up for their own well - being.<sup>41</sup>

A historical - materialist approach is also evident in AIDWA's observation that feudal practices such as sati and child - marriage will not change until relations of production characteristic of feudalism are changed. From AIDWA's perspective, then, the position of women in society is necessarily bound up with the society's economic structure. Further more, the political system which supports this system is also responsible for the oppression of women.<sup>42</sup> Hence, the need to oppose the Congress governments especially their economic policies which have brought only suffering to women. AIDWA then actively campaigns against the Congress party and supports candidates speaking for the

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41. Patricia Loveridge, op. cit., pp.233-234.

42. Ibid.

rights of the oppressed, particularly those of women. According to AIDWA, therefore, women are oppressed as citizens, as members of a class, and as women; a strategy to end their oppression must therefore take each factor into consideration equally.

However, AIDWA pays very little attention to the dynamics of power characterising intra class male - female relations for women are evidently being oppressed by individual men at the interpersonal and intra - familial levels. According to AIDWA, men, though they are perpetrators of violence against women, are as much conditioned by the system as women and it is this system which is responsible for men acting the way they do. Their punishment in itself will not change the system. Hence, AIDWA seems to pay little attention to interpersonal dynamics of power. Also neglected by AIDWA is the role women play in their own oppression.<sup>43</sup> Although, Ranjana Narula mentions that "women who are co-opted by the Rightist forces are as much to blame" there is little exploration of this by AIDWA. <sup>44</sup> Although now AIDWA seems to be considering course of action to combat this.

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43. Ibid.

44. Interview with Ranjana Narula, op. cit.

Furthermore, inspite of AIDWA's incisive and overarching perception of oppression of women and its struggles at the three levels of oppression which women face, there is a strange silence on the structure of ideal society of the future. All that Ranjana Narula had to say about this was that " it is a long, long battle and it might take years to achieve real equality."<sup>45</sup> However, the contours of, or the problems of a mass radical movement have not been anticipated, nor have any concrete goals been elaborated.

All these questions need to be explored and a workable solution found within the contours of the women's movement as a whole for AIDWA is one of the largest women's organization in India and has reach in almost all parts of India. As Ranjana Narula puts it "AIDWA is the mainstream movement today" and as such it has to concentrate and explore areas where it is weak.<sup>46</sup> However, it cannot be denied that the organizations has played an important and significant role in the women's movement. By providing a more broad and holistic as well as historical- materialist understanding of women's oppression, it has helped broaden the movement's horizons from the confinement of women's issues to only

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45. Ibid.

46. Ibid.

those concerning her oppression as women i.e. the question of rape, dowry etc. This had to a marginalisation of not only so called women's issues which are of great importance to the movement but also divorced the women's movement from the mainstream politics and fundamental issues of national concern which are of equal importance to women. However, there has been a significant change over the last few years wherein the issues and struggles have widened to include questions of government policies on a range of issues from employment, to its approach to communalism and religious fundamentalism.

It is in this context of the increasing recognition of the importance of participation on wider issues that AIDWA has played a crucial role in the last few years.

## CHAPTER IV

### WOMEN, WORK, STRUGGLE

Involved in an unbelievable variety and multiplicity of activities, Indian women live and work and suffer in common deprivation and discrimination of the worst kind. Virtually nowhere are they paid wages equal to men's and some of the lowest paid, most arduous work is done by them in a context of economic compulsion, discrimination and restricted opportunities. Moreover, inspite of women's multiple roles as workers, child - bearers and rearers, and family - maintainers, women's work is considerably undervalued to the extent of being invisible. The vast majority of Indian women are assetless and illiterate, with little access to resources, education and training in modern skills, tools, even to space.

This chapter attempts to look at the invisibility of women's work and how women have organised against this. The impact of women's movement has been felt in the sector of women's work and various women's organisations as also trade unions have taken up this cause and organised women so that they can get a better deal from the society.

## Women's Work

The average Indian female handicapped by the lack of education and training, finds it difficult to get a job in the formal sector and is therefore pushed increasingly into the informal or the unorganised sector. Only 38% of female workers in rural areas are wage - earners. The total female workers, according to the 1991 census were 91.4 million out of an all-India total of 314.9 million workers. The percentage of women workers to men, according to 1991 census, was 22.5% and 51.6%. In 1989, only 3.55 million women were working in the organized sector. Also, the incidence of marginal workers is much higher amongst women. Out of 29.48 million marginal workers in 1991, women constituted 85% of them.<sup>1</sup>

The proportion of skilled workers among females is also very low. Nearly 90% of female workers in rural areas and 70% in urban areas are unskilled workers. Again, the skills amongst women workers are confined to a few traditional occupations like spinning and weaving, tailoring, book - binding, bidi - making etc. and even in the manufacturing activities, four industries account for over 86% of female workers - these are food and beverage, tobacco, textiles, wood and wooden products

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1. Census of India, 1991, Government of India.

and ceramics. Moreover, nowhere are equal wages paid to women for the same work.<sup>2</sup>

The powerlessness of women and the devaluation of their labour is a consequence of their extremely limited access to resources like, land, forest, education, health etc. Although women have traditionally played an important role in land use whether it is for agriculture, pasture for animal husbandry, or land covered with forests their access to ownership of land is extremely limited.<sup>3</sup> A major blow to women's struggle for resources was the policy of land reforms which gave land titles to men and subsequently extension training, credit, technology and inputs were disproportionately channelled to men. Privatization of land through agrarian policies eroded women's traditional usufruct rights to communal land. And although women perform most of the agricultural tasks such as manuring the fields, sowing, harvesting, threshing, processing etc. they are debarred from using the plough which is actually ritually taboo to women.<sup>4</sup>

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2. Shram Shakti, Report of the National Commission on Self-Employed Women and Women in the Informal Sector, Government of India, 1987.

3. Ibid.

4. Madhu Kishwar and Ruth Vanita (ed.), In Search of Answers, Zed Book Ltd., London, 1984, pp.2-3.



Women's lack of control over the basic tools of production at this level provides the basis on which relatively advanced technology comes to play a further devastating role. For example, every introduction of even low level technology in rural areas has had a disastrous impact on women's employment opportunities.

The difficulties and problems of women are compounded by the fact that they face sexual harassment, violence, forced prostitution, rape and the threat of it. The pressures that women workers have to live under, the stress and strain of entire situation, have physical repercussions, as well as an impact on their entire emotional, psychological ability to cope with their lives.

However, increasing levels of education and economic necessity are propelling more and more women into the labour force. But the increase has been mostly in the informal sector while the workforce participation of women in the organized sector has actually declined.

A number of reasons account for the decline in employment and recruitment of women in the organized sector. Firstly, the idea of family wage displaces a woman worker. The notion that a man should earn enough to feed his wife and children, while women should stay at home and do the unwaged work - housework, childcare etc. - has been instrumental in the displacement of

women from industries notwithstanding the fact that family wage is an illusion as it is rare for a working man to earn enough to support his wife and children at a decent standard.<sup>5</sup>

Secondly, the identification of the woman with the 'inside', that is home, has been extremely detrimental for working women as they are faced with a dual burden of work at home and at the work place.<sup>6</sup>

The introduction of 'protective legislation' directly stems from this belief and has had a very adverse effect on women's employment. The decline in the number of women workers in the textile industry in Bombay, which was once the stronghold of women, is a result of the protective legislation banning night shift for women.<sup>7</sup>

Thirdly, the industry is viewed as the main preserve of men. The gender division of labour in industries has resulted in women being a disadvantaged minority within the workforce. The division into unwaged labour in the home, traditionally the preserve of women, and wage labour in the factory where men dominate interacts and reinforces the division and segregation of

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5. Sujata Gothoskar (ed.), The Struggles of Women at Work, Vikas Publishing House, New Delhi, 1992, p. 5

6. Ibid., p.6.

7. Ibid.

women and men into different types of jobs - for example, the preponderance of women in jobs like packing and assembly while engineering jobs are monopolised by men. <sup>8</sup>

This division partially overlaps with another division of jobs into low paid and well paid. Women are allowed by men only to perform those tasks that correspond to the presumed 'natural inclinations'. And these tasks just happen to be ones receiving the least money and least opportunity for advancement or public recognition.

Mechanisation or automation also proved to be detrimental to women's employment in the organised sector. Moreover the vast majority of jobs where women were not traditionally employed, remained shut for women. Thus, a reduction in the number of jobs open to women is inevitable.

The biases and prejudices against women's work is a result of their work being regarded as a continuation of their domestic work and that work is always regarded as outside the sphere of valuation. Moreover, the notion of 'prestige' attached to working with Machines accounts for male monopoly on them.

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8. Nirmala Banerjee (ed.), Indian Women in Changing Industrial Scenario, Sage Publications, New Delhi, 1991, p.19.

Lastly, the perception of the employers regarding women workers as being "most expensive and least flexible type of labour force" is another reason for the decline. Certain crucial facilities and benefits like regulation of working hours, maternity benefits, creches etc. which women have struggled over the years to achieve render them 'expensive' and 'inflexible'. But given their dual burden, women cannot do without these facilities and benefits. Lack of responsibility at home, on the other hand, renders a man, more flexible.<sup>9</sup>

The situation is even worse in the unorganised sector. Here legal rights of the workforce are much weaker and unions are virtually absent. Women have to work for long hours without any facilities or benefits. Lacking a choice and discriminated against by a labour market which prefers men, women workers have been increasingly channelised into the informal sector, in labour - intensive, poorly paid occupations. The three broad categories in the informal sector are a) unpaid family labour; b) casual manual workers and, c) the self employed.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, women are mostly concentrated in a) the construction industry; b) the bidi industry; c) the match industry; d) sweeping and scavenging;

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9. Sujata Gothoskar, op. cit, p.10.

10. Vina Mazumdar (ed.), Women Workers in India, Chanakya Publications, Delhi, 1990.

e) domestic servants; f) small scale industries.<sup>11</sup> In all these categories, the earnings of women are less than half of men's and those of home - based workers even lower.

In the informal sector, women face a high degree of exploitation, lack of protection and infrastructural support, job insecurity, absence of worker's collective bargaining.

#### **Women's Struggles in the Organized Sector**

This realisation and awareness, by women, of existing inequality in society and oppressive hierarchical relationship between men and women resulted in not only a proliferation of women's organisations and women's struggles for access to resources but a struggle by women for a more equal and humane society.

Women have been active in various movements like the struggle for land, water, right to forests and to work. The Chipko movement and the Bodh Gaya land struggle are examples of women's struggles for forests and land. The word Chipko originates from a particular form of non-violent action i.e. hugging the trees to prevent deforestation and destruction of forests the

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11. Gayatri Singh and Sandhya Gokhale, Trade Unions and Women, Forum against Rape.

Bodhgaya land struggle was an attempt by women, with the help of Chhatra Yuva Sangharsh Vahini to claim a right to land on which they worked.

In the organized sector, the struggles of women started as early as 1920. The Bombay Textile Mills, where close to one fourth of the total labour force were women, the women were fairly organized and participated actively in strikes. In a 14 year period from 1923-37, there were 240 strikes. Women were active in about 56 of these strikes, that is, about 23% of them. Over one tenth of the total strikes in this period were conducted by women alone.<sup>12</sup>

The post-independence period saw women's struggles continuing with the help of trade unions and women's organizations against discriminatory practices at work. In Nipani, Beedi workers struggled against the employers who were trying to retrench workers on the basis of age, with the help of Chikodi Taluka Kamgar Union, a women's trade union. The union was also instrumental in setting up several institutions like women's multipurpose co-operative society. The union also started a credit scheme with capital raised from workers which charged a much lower interest. The struggle of Beedi workers also

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12. Radha Kumar, Factory Life : Women Workers in the Bombay Cotton Textile Industry, 1919-1939 in Sujata Gothoskar, op. cit., p.127.

raised issues not related to work in the union - issues of devdasi women, health etc. thus sensitizing it to a broad range of women's issues.<sup>13</sup>

Another instance of women's participation in trade unions is of the Chhatisgarh Mines Shramik Sangh (CMSS) - which is a strong and militant union. Women have participated in all CMSS struggles and activity playing a major role in the first strike of 1977 as well as in the 1931 movement. Women demonstrated against sexual harassment by lumpen elements forcing legal proceedings to be initiated against the offenders. Side by side with such activity, on the union front, CMSS women with the support of the entire union, fought successfully for the achievement of maternity benefits. It is such experiences that gave birth in 1930 - 31 to the Mahila Mukti Morcha, an organization concerned especially with women's issues, that functions in close relationship to the CMSS.<sup>14</sup>

Women's efforts at organising especially in a union reveals certain disquieting problems. Firstly, despite militancy and loyalty women do not emerge into more than

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13. Chaya Datar in Iлина Sen's (ed.), A Space within the Struggle, Kali for Women, New Delhi, 1989, p.171.

14. Iлина Sen, Women in Class Struggle: Perspectives from the two Trade Unions, XIth World Congress of Sociology, New Delhi, August 1986.

middle - level leadership in the unions. Secondly, women's participation in union activities is very low the major reason having to do with the 'dual burden' of home and work. And lastly, the gender bias of unions effectively excludes women from it.

### **Women Organise in the Unorganized Sector**

Women from poorer households need their own organisations to help them break the barriers of inequality, invisibility and powerlessness and expand the base for their 'participatory development.' Examples of such organisations are Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA), Ahemadabad and Working Women's Forum (WWF), Madras, which are viewed as vital to the growth and diversification of the women's movement in India and as an alternative to the government promoted organisations for the delivery of services which basically view women as 'beneficiaries' rather than 'participants' and agents of change.<sup>15</sup>

Despite differences in perspectives, approaches and methodology, there seems to be general agreement both within the government and the women's movement that grassroots' organization of urban and rural poor women are vital instruments to provide them collective

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15. Kumud Sharma, Grassroots Organizations and Women's Empowerment, Samya Shakti, vol.VI, 1991-92, p.28.



strength, bargaining capacity and collective articulation of their interests. Over the years, the debate on 'gender and poverty' has increasingly focused on the critical nature of such organization for building women's capacities as a pressure group. The term 'grassroots' is often used to mean organizations of poor rural and urban women.<sup>16</sup>

The dynamics of such organizations are transformational, aiming at changing the existing unequal power relations which deprive women of their legitimate share in resources, knowledge, power and decision - making processes. At the strategic level, grassroots organizations are viewed as pressure groups and levers of power, and at the level of action, they combine agitational and developmental approaches and are expected to negotiate the distributional aspects of power and resources. At the organizational level, the grassroots ideology lays emphasis on decentralized decision - making, participatory development and collective leadership and empowerment. The idea of empowerment expresses the interests of disenfranchised groups of society and it represents a confluence of experiences at the grassroots. Empowerment has been identified as a key goal of feminist grassroots

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16. Ibid.

organizations that want to move beyond the 'women in development' focus on formal equality with men. The concept has travelled beyond the grassroots today.<sup>17</sup>

SEWA stands out as an organization which possesses all these aspects of a grassroot organization. SEWA started in 1972 as a trade union in Ahemadabad. Its origin was the women's group of the Textile Labour Association. The aims of SEWA were to improve the conditions of work of women through training, technical arts and collective bargaining. The organization whose name translates as service, subscribes to Gandhian ideals.

The goals of SEWA are (i) to make the work of self-employed women visible and their voices heard; (ii) to increase their rate of income and earnings and; (iii) to increase their control of income in the family. SEWA has struggled for fixed wages for head-loaders, secure selling spaces for hawkers, defence against police harassment and higher piece - rates. The mode of struggle has been that of strikes and demonstrations as well as legal battles.<sup>18</sup>

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17. Naila Kabeer, Reversed Realities: Gender Hierarchies in Development Thought, Kali for Women, New Delhi, 1995.

18. Kalima Rose, Where Women are Leaders: The SEWA Movement in India, Vistaar Publications, New Delhi, 1992.

SEWA experiments with the attempt to straddle both development and union activities, to address the problems its members face within the family as well as in the market place, as women as well as workers. It acknowledges women's reproductive responsibilities, long overlooked by male - dominated trade unions, and has formed child-care and health cooperatives, often using these issues as the basis for reaching women who have not yet organized.<sup>19</sup>

Furthermore, SEWA attempts to bridge the class as well as gender interests of its membership. It provides a social connection to a section of the workforce whose members are either isolated within the home or in dispersed and shifting work locations. Access to these new and collective relationships, built around their shared needs and interests as workers and as women have given SEWA's members the opportunity to think of themselves in terms other than those imposed by their traditional domestic, caste and community roles.<sup>20</sup>

#### **Grassroots Organizations and Movement Politics**

The proliferation of women's groups in the seventies and eighties reflects the diversity and

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19. Naila Kabeer, op. cit.

20. Ibid.

complexity of the women's movement. These groups have grown out of women's struggles against oppressive social and economic systems. They differ in respect of the quality of intervention, organizational structure and ideological perspective. However, the great strength of women's movement rests on grassroots organizations and women's participation in movements and not on organizations confined to women of the elite sections.

Calman argues that it is possible to differentiate between two essential organizational and ideological clusters within the women's movement : one, which is largely urban-based, focuses on issues of rights and equality; the other, with both urban and rural components, emphasizes empowerment and liberation. Both seek to raise the consciousness of women and men, first to understand that women in contemporary India occupy an inferior position relative to men economically, socially and politically, and then to realize that this position is unjust and unacceptable.<sup>21</sup>

Calman characterises women's groups within the women's movement that focus on women's issues as issues of human rights the 'right wing' of the movement which according to her is 'unfeminist' in the western sense,

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21. Leslie J. Calman, Women and Movement Politics in India, Asian Survey, Oct. 1989, pp.942-943.

as it does not posit a conflict between men and women or women and the institution of family. The focus of this - part of the movement is to bring pressure on the government to pass and administer laws, and to improve women's access to health, education and employment. The other wing of the movement, according to her, is the 'empowerment wing' which aims at personal and community wise empowerment of poor women in both rural and urban areas. The emphasis is more on economic and social rights and not on civil rights. Such organizations are not averse to seeking and accepting resources both from international sources and from the Indian government to assist in the organization and implementation of economic schemes.<sup>22</sup>

In the 'rights wing' of the women's movement, organizations such as AIDWA are examples, while SEWA represents the 'empowerment wing'. However, Calman herself agrees that the barrier between the two clusters is a fluid one. The emphases are different but not mutually exclusive, and often a single organization engages in both type of activities simultaneously.<sup>23</sup>

Interestingly, some sections of the feminist movement which arose in late seventies and represented

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22. Ibid.

23. Ibid.

the 'rights wing' of the women's movement, did not claim SEWA - instead criticising it for its reformism. SEWA itself maintained a distance from the feminists, perhaps because it felt they were 'westernized', or too radical.<sup>24</sup>

The proliferation of grassroots organizations could contribute both to the strength and weakness of the women's movement. A multiplication of such groups is an expression of the rising level of awareness among women. Organizations like AIDWA and Saheli emphasize the need to reach out to the grassroots as an important step towards the extension and democratisation of the movement. Yet grassroots organizations face numerous and complex problems as for example ideological links with other social movements (civil rights, tribals, Dalit movements) inter and intra - organizational tensions and so on. Furthermore, increasing pressures in society related to the worsening of the economic situation on the one hand and the growth of new social forces like communalism and identity politics, on the other, have thrown serious challenges to grassroots mobilization and women's movement.

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24. Radha Kumar, The History of Doing, Kali for Women, 1993, New Delhi, pp.102-103.

## CONCLUSION

What emerges from the study is a picture of women coming together, speaking out and listening to one another and thereby transforming their frustrations into a collective awareness of oppression and exploitative male/female relationships which are reproduced in society's institutions. Creating this awareness has been a major achievement of the women's movement over the past two decades and especially over the last ten years.

The last decade saw some positive advances in women's movement and the emergence of a new feminist consciousness after two decades of passivity of women's organisations. Women's movement as it currently unfolds itself beyond its traditional concerns with legislation, education and political participation, with multiplicity of forms, diversity of concerns, motivation and ideological orientation brings together several perspectives and raises several issues. The newly emerged women's groups signify an ideological shifts in the analysis and understanding of women's issues, breaking out of the limited perspective of 'charity' and 'social work' of some of the older women's organisations in the post independence period.

The emergence of All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA) and Saheli in 1981 signifies the

growth of 'protest politics' in the last decade, addressing itself specifically to issues of women's oppression which has redefined the conventional idea of politics by bringing in issues which were located in the private realm and by definition outside the purview of 'formal' politics. The public/private dichotomy has been attacked by campaigns for women's rights and issues of crime and violence against women. The current concern with 'gender' and its social, cultural, economic and political manifestations, is central to the women's movement today.

The last decade saw the struggle for women's rights taken to ideological realms, to those issues which political parties, trade unions, and other democratic progressive organisations did not consider as their objective for example, issues of domestic violence, crimes against women, sexual harassment, rape, dowry deaths etc. This is manifested in AIDWA's and Saheli's campaigns as well as their understanding of oppression of women.

From the study of these two organisations it appears that the structural differences of the two organisations is translated into difference in approach to issues. AIDWA, being a national organization with a clear and distinct ideology which is clearly left



echoes, to a large extent, CPI- M's stand on a number of issues. Saheli, on the other hand, as an autonomous collective considers itself relatively independent where issues are concerned. Both deal with issues in a manner markedly affected by their ideology.

For all the ills affecting the country, AIDWA holds Congress (I) responsible. In the case of NEP the criticism of Congress (I) becomes even more shrill. AIDWA posits the left alternative as being the best alternative which the country, bankrupted politically, socially and economically by Congress (I)'s policies since independence, can go for. AIDWA then champions the cause of the left which is in accordance with its ideology and aim of a classless society being the most equal and free. This, sometimes, impedes a free and independent stance on a number of issues while gender issues sometimes is subsumed under larger political considerations.

Saheli, on the other hand, being largely free of any such constraints takes independent stands and its critique of political parties as co-opting the issues of women to further their own political interests includes parties representing all the ideological streams in the country. While both Saheli and AIDWA are concerned about the marginalisation of women from the political

processes an interesting contradiction appears in their respective approach to this issue.

AIDWA which focuses on woman at the three levels of her identity that of gender, as citizens and as member of a class, posits as its ultimate aim a classless society the means to which would be the path of left alternative. However, given the existence of parliamentary democracy in India, the organization sees the only alternative in the present time as making the best of the situation, of using whatever means possible in a democracy to bring about the holistic changes it envisages, in the society. Towards this aim, AIDWA feels that the presence of women with a clear leftist leaning, in the functioning of political processes of the country would pave the way for future radical action while empowering women politically in the meantime. Thus, it sees no problem in critiquing the state and the present political processes of the country in which women constitute the fringe, and participating actively in the same hoping for a better deal.

Saheli, on the other hand, eschews the participation in politics and prefers to remain on the outside and thus, in a better position to objectively critique the state. However, lately Saheli has begun to realise that remaining on the 'outside' can have the dangerous effect

of isolation and that unless women have a voice and say in the political processes of the country, the aim of an equal society where women are empowered would only remain a dream. This is reflected in Saheli's strong political statements and stands and its support for women who want to infiltrate the male-dominated political institutions.

This convergence of stand has been a result of growing awareness within both the organizations that with increasing criminalization of politics, the growing rightist challenge and the socio-economic crisis which the country is facing as a result of NEP, the women's movement today faces its biggest challenge. In this kind of scenario, it becomes imperative that women have a say in the policy decision making.

As far as issues are concerned both organizations reveal stark contrasts. AIDWA seeks to expose women's oppression at all levels and offers a broader understanding of issues. It deals with issues at the macro-level. Saheli offers a contrast to AIDWA as it concentrates on the micro - level reality of women's oppression. This has been a major grouse of AIDWA against autonomous women's organizations. By concentrating on only gender issues like rape, dowry, sexual harassment, they dilute the whole issue for a broader

understanding of an issue is necessary to deal with it and find solutions at all levels. Moreover, this tends to limit the women's movement to certain issues which again becomes self-defeating for unless oppression is understood and combated at all levels, women's equality is doomed from the very beginning. Not only this, but the attack on all political parties by the autonomous women's organizations creates disenchantment with them which poses a problem to the left parties' attempts at mobilising support. This makes the task of women's organizations who favour a left alternative a little difficult.

Saheli, which initially focused on gender issues only has, over the years, attempted to develop and foster a broader understanding of them. According to Saheli's perception, the autonomous women's achievement lay in exposing gender oppression at the private level and making it an agenda for public action. By focusing on woman's powerlessness in the family which directly translated into her subjugation to it and within it has generated debate on the entire conceptualization of the family and ideological dimension of the women's oppression.

However, in the years of their functioning, both the organizations have realised that they cannot

concentrate on one aspect of women's oppression be it at the macro level or the micro level, that a merging of the two is necessary if women's rights are to become a reality. This is increasingly being reflected in the functioning of the organizations as is evident from the whole issue of 'hazardous contraceptives.' Saheli has adopted a broader understanding of the issue linking it to the development process, liberalization and the consequent invasion of the Indian market by the transnational corporations. AIDWA also realising that it cannot ignore oppression in the private domain has sought to incorporate it in its understanding about the oppression of women. Furthermore, lately there has been, in Saheli and AIDWA, the realisation that grass-root mobilisation is extremely important. While AIDWA, since its the largest women's organization in India with membership running in lakhs, has encouraged rise of grass - root leadership and is working towards extending the organization more Saheli has also decided to go in for grass-root mobilization especially over the 'invasive contraceptive' issue, Furthermore, although not apologetic about its middle- class, urban leadership, Saheli also feels the need to cultivate grass-root constituency.

Hence, we see that both the organization represent the diversity of the women's movement and the gamut of experiences which women and women's activists have faced in the 1980s and the 1990s.

The women's movement which has addressed itself to wide ranging issues, as is evident from AIDWA's and Saheli's campaigns, provides space for participation of different groups of women. The concern for issues of marginalised groups of tribals, landless and poor rural and urban women, women in the informal sector and mobilising them around these issues is what separates the contemporary movement from the earlier movement by taking women's issues into new areas of concern. In the process, the relationship between educated, articulate middle class women acting as 'catalysts' and mobilising in rural and urban areas is also changing. The concept of grassroot organization of rural and urban women as participatory and mobilising mechanism has emerged from the critiques of development models and the blindness to gender dimensions in development policies and programmes. An important development during the decade was the growing importance and emphasis on problems of women in the informal sector and need to mobilise them and work out strategies for dealing with their problems. These women's groups actions have helped to develop

alternative thinking outside the given structures. 'Empowering women' through developmental action, thus strengthening their economic base' and their bargaining power is reflected in organizations like SEWA.

It is interesting to observe that AIDWA, Saheli and SEWA which have been most active regarding women's issues, are all relatively autonomous women's organizations. They have been successful in creating a space for women as women, where sexual difference becomes operational. By having thus operationalized their sexual differences they are able to attain a degree of political and economic self - determination previously unknown. They have also been successful in operationalizing other differences. For example, those organisations, especially SEWA, have been able to establish a fruitful cooperation between working class and middle - class women, thus coming to grips with class differences.

Hence, what these organizations aim at is creating personal and community empowerment, in creating alternative political spaces in which the powerless can learn to organize and act politically in which they can exercise self - determination immediately. Thus, such organizations aim at challenging the structure of the economy and the 'socio - cultural' barriers that prevent

the poor and powerless from taking purposeful action while working outside the formal institutions of political parties and government. This signals the belief that non-party organizations can bring something to the poor and powerless that party politics cannot for formal or institutional politics is still male-dominated.

The challenge of the 1990's, then, is to bridge the vast gap between male - dominated reality of today with its various forms of subordination of women, and the visions of a feminist future. However, the question arises whether the formation of women's organizations is sufficient to bring about such a change. For a strategy which aims to create a broadly - based and politically - strong women's movement is faced with the reality that women do not constitute a homogenous group. Different women have very different needs and interests. Hence, there cannot be one feminist future nor one blueprint for realisation of that future. Strategies for women's liberation need to be formulated and reformulated in a dialectical interaction of theoretical insights and practical realities. Success in raising women's consciousness and achieving improvement in the life and work of the participating women is, not enough. Development from a feminist perspective requires long



lasting structural changes. Cooperation between different people in and outside existing power structures is an important element in strategies for women's empowerment. To prevent such cooperation turning into co-option, mechanisms need to be created and sustained, such as strong direct links with grassroots women's movement. First, organizing as women and then joining hands with other groups makes women's organizations more than a women's interest group because women are half the oppressed groups in all these groups and therefore need to take an active part in all these movements as well as in struggle for their own rights. Hence, alliance between a strong and autonomous women's movement, and other groups with related goals inside and outside of electoral politics is what the (feminist) future requires.

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