

Changing Terms of Political Discourse: Women's Movement in India, 1970s-1990s*

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The twentieth century promoted the cause of gender justice by internationalizing women's struggles for equality by women and other oppressed people. Women's struggles against their subordination were intertwined in varying degrees with ideologies and movements based on the values of freedom, self determination, equality, democracy and justice. The defeat of fascism and the forced retreat of imperialism around the mid - century paved the way for social advance or which gender relations was a key component along with the other broad objectives or human rights and the end of iniquitous social orders. The revolutionary changes which followed the two world wars also created fora and structures that promoted debates on women's rights. The International Women's Decade was initiated during this period of hope which also posited New International Economic order. By the end of the decade, however, this hope was already shaky.¹ in the mid-nineties, the context in which the international struggle for advance of women's rights is being waged has been transformed and debates promoted today twist the very premises on which' the movement had been based. Terms like empowerment, choice, reproductive freedom, spiritual autonomy etc., are being appropriated by forces inimical to the goals or the women's movement. Can the movement ensure the continued existence of fora to mount pressure {or intervention in Cavour of more equitable gender relations-both at the level of international realpolitik, as well as at ground level processes?

It is important to note these international developments since these have influenced the movement in India. If we were to spell out the parameters within which the movement developed in recent years, these would be (a) the decadal thrust provided by preparations for the Conference in Mexico. 1975 and the initiatives coming from the on-Aligned Movement in this context; (b) the history of and relationship between earlier movements for freedom, equality and democracy, values were subsequently enshrined as basic political tenets in the Constitution of India, and the constraints felt towards achievement of these in independent India and (c) the influence of ideas coming across through various streams of the women's liberation movements of the west.

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I

Although in India colonial rule and the freedom struggle marked the beginning of an awakening among women, differing streams within the anti-imperialist anti-feudal struggle posited different, even contentious images of identities for women (Sangari and Vaid 1989). But the nationalist consensus symbolized in the Fundamental Rights Resolution of the Indian National Congress, 1931, postulated freedom, justice, dignity and equality for women and the Constitution assured these rights. In the post-independence period, however, women exploring avenues for socio-economic and political mobility came up against limitations of a third world ex-colonial state which posed conflicts between their new rights and the values carefully promoted by a longstanding patriarchal social hierarchy. Social disabilities and gradual isolation from the politico-ideological struggles that were shaping the nation-building process led to the fragmentation of the women's movement and the women's question faded from the public arena (GOI 1974; Mazumdar 1978). This is not to imply that no struggles were waged during this period. But, with the exception of the tempo built up before the passage of the Hindu Code Bill, 1956, these could not form the basis of spurring agitations which could catch the public imagination, cutting across sectional demands and organizations.

In contemporary India the resurgence of the women's movement and its contours have to be seen in the light of (1) The crisis of state and government in the 1970s going into the emergency; (2) the post-emergency upsurge in favour of civil rights; (3) the mushrooming of women's organizations in the early 1980s and the arrival of women's issues on the agenda; (4) the mid-1980s marked by a fundamentalist advance; and (5) the 1990s, when the crisis with regard to state, government and society has deepened.

The women's movement in India is one of the many burgeoning efforts at reassertion of citizen's claims to participate as equals in the political and development process. This places it in a situation of direct confrontation with the forces of conservatism and reaction. The fundamentalist onslaught in one country after another has exposed the vulnerability of women's advance in most places. In the third world as well as in erstwhile socialist states, the combination of these with the onset of free market capitalism has both strengthened the powers of the oppressors, as well as created new instruments for hegemony, by weakening the balancing mechanisms and ideologies that sought to place limits on their rapacity. [n India the mid- [980s have seen an onslaught on even existing rights of women through a harking back to 'tradition' and 'culture' and the positing of images which emphasise women's reproductive role as the only natural, historical one. The fundamentalist/revivalist face of many social movements today is directly opposed to the radical demands and upsurges coming from below.

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

This changing character and the contradictions are reflected within the governmental structures and in a shifting attitude towards the women's movement. A major question-facing all governments in office has been how to respond to the movement and its demand to place the women's question on the political agenda. While the government's response has been teetering between responding to the conservative or the radical forces the women's movement, in turn, has mounted pressures from the opposite end of the spectrum. Itself experiencing major transformations, it has grown immensely despite pressures from diverse areas. Within the movement diversities manifested themselves in the form of ideological cleavages, fragmentation and regionally uneven growth. But the issues on which women first articulated their visible opposition covered a vast terrain--ranging from those which were gender-specific to those which impinged on citizen's rights, class formations and the direction of social transformation.

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

This disenchantment of women with the post-independence 'development' scenario was not a stance dictated by exogenous political considerations. Demographic indicators like the accelerated decline in the sex-ratio, increasing gender gaps in life - expectancy, mortality and economic participation, or the rising migration rate were disturbing enough. Combined with this was the utter failure of state policy to live up to its constitutional mandates in any field of national development. The CSWI noted clear linkages between existing and growing social and economic disparities and women's status in education, the economy, society and the polity (GOI 1974:234). It also formed a starting point for women's studies.²

In this paper we confine ourselves to the movement's responses to violence, fundamentalism and the debate on economic role and processes. This is not only because of limitations of space, but because we see a close link between the marginalisation of women as economic beings --a trend which continues to be on the rise -- and the rising trend of violence targeting women. In India today the most modern techniques of propaganda are used to project women as consumers and reproductive beings rather than producers; and, above all as members of one or other particular community which seeks to establish its political identity by right of birth, religion or culture. Fundamentalism provides an ideological framework while globalisation and glorification of the market provide the operative instrument to demolish women's claims to equality, freedom and dignity as individuals. This awesome combination poses a challenge to the movement.

The paper not attempt to write a history of the movement. It only focuses on some of the issues, trends and challenges that emerged even as it locates women in the overall

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

II

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

Violence, however, is perpetrated through the given institutions of the state, community, the family and society at large. It draws sustenance from prevailing ideologies which advocate 'falling-in-line', in response to transgression of social norms or laws, which are defended in the name of age-old customs and tradition, religious or caste identities, or even political dissidence. Status quoists perceive the movement's focus on violence as a threat to basic social institutions like the family, community and construction of gender roles developed by the elites.

Rape

It was the widespread, national level campaign, in the course of 1979-80, on the Mathura case which brought women's issues onto the public agenda. The Supreme Court's acquittal of two policemen involved in the rape of a minor tribal girl brought to the fore several crucial aspects of women's oppression, viz. the roles of class and caste in oppression of women, and the issue of accountability of public servants and the judiciary. These were pointedly raised by four law teachers in their protest to the Chief Justice: "must illiterate, labouring, politically mute Mathuras of India be continually condemned to their pre-constitutional India fate?"

The agitation sparked off by the Mathura case led to significant changes in the Evidence Act, the Criminal Procedure Code and the Indian Penal Code, including the introduction of a category of custodial rape, though these were insufficient. The concept of power rape was resisted and has only recently been admitted through an amendment in the Civil Rights Act. Significant loopholes nevertheless remain, both with regard to the law and lack of will to implement it. While the movement's understanding of the issue has widened, success has been limited due to both lacunae in the conceptual definition as well as monitoring of procedures. The definition of rape does not extend to marital rape and anomalies exist between the Child Marriage Restraint Act and the rape law in that consent is not required for intercourse in marriage before the age of 18. Also, whereas the character of the victim is not supposed to be a consideration in determining rape, even the Supreme Court has at times violated the principle of custodial rape on this count. In recent cases the Courts even gave concession to the element of 'provocation' and 'temptation' in what was described as a 'crime of passion'. As has been highlighted in the case of rape of nuns in Gujraula, UP, the law leaves sufficient loopholes for agencies such as the police and medical personnel to not act, with perfect impunity. Of late, the movement is emphasizing the rising trend in child rape and demanding new legislation to combat the trend.

The Anti-Dowry Agitation

Of all the agitations focused on violence the one that touched the public imagination the most and emerged as a rallying cry was that against dowry and dowry-related violence. The slogan 'Brides are not for Burning' attracted media attention-- both in India and abroad- on the torture of young brides for dowry. For those who became crusaders in the fight against dowry the movement transmitted a pulsating sense of energy which, over time, got transformed into a brand of activism which asserted women's agency for social change.

This public assertion shook older organizations from a seemingly unending slumber. Section 498-A, of Criminal Law amendment passed in the wake of the agitation, encompassed for the first time, a definition of cruelty which included not just physical but mental cruelty as well. The Dahej Virodhi Chetna Manch, formed in 1982 in the wake of the widespread anger kept up a mass public campaign along with sustained pressure for legal reform leading up to amendment of the Dowry Prohibition Act in 1984 and again in 1986. The campaign threw up many questions and different perspectives, some of which are discussed in greater detail in another contribution in this volume.

Amniocentesis and Sex Selection

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

While government did issue some circulars to this effect, not much action followed. In the meantime the sex determination business had come to stay. Today the business flourishes more rampantly in North India. From the South, alarming reports have come in of the prevalence of female infanticide among the Kallars in Tamil Nadu which did not historically adhere to this 'tradition'.

In 1985, The Forum Against Sex-Determination and Sex-Pre-Selection (FASDSP) was formed in Bombay. The Forum addressed itself to the entire spectrum of new reproductive technologies. It sought wider alliances, undertook surveys, and filed a public interest litigation. A private member's bill introduced in the state assembly was finally adopted by the Maharashtra government in 1988. This had several lacunae as does the central government's bill passed in July 1994. A question that has arisen from these long campaigns and the debate is, what about women who practise female

foeticide or infanticide? -The new law treats them as guilty and punishable. But does a woman in India have the right to choose or decide?

Population Policy

Ironically, both sex-selection followed by female foeticide and female infanticide cite national population concerns as the instigation for these anti-women acts. The Government of India's efforts to formulate a new population control policy in 'consultation with or at the behest of its international benefactors, include a series of measures foisted on women after the initial attempts at vasectomy during the emergency period met with stiff resistance. The notable features of this policy are that (a) it is premised on the assumption of the population bomb theory; (b) women feature as the main targets since they are the agency of reproduction; (c) the contraceptives include steroids and hormonal injectables, with long-term effects on the health of the user; (d) no provision/consideration for monitoring of impact.⁴

Women's organizations have been fighting for several years against the entry of these hazardous contraceptives which "exploit women's desperate need for 'safe' contraception", and proposals for coercive, 'fascist' punitive measures such as changes in the People's Representation Act to disqualify those with more than two children, and in the Maternity Benefits Act to restrict the benefits up to two children, while increasing leave provisions for abortions. These concerns were articulated forcefully before an expert committee appointed by government of India to draft a new national population policy.⁵ The committee's report also stirred up a public debate.

Political Violence

In a highly charged political environment, violence against women too is viewed through coloured lenses. Whereas the movement has attempted to contextualise the woman victim on the basis of prevalent social inequalities, divisions in society take the edge out of the condemnation of the crime *per se*. Thus in every incident of violence against women, the attempt is made to underplay the crime itself by focusing on the identity/position of the perpetrator as well as the victim in order to mobilize support on the basis of defined parameters of polarization in the specific context. These can be caste, community, regional or even politico-ideological. Thus rape and other atrocities inflicted on women and others in Nagaland, Manipur, Assam, Tripura, Punjab or Kashmir by the armed or par-military forces could.....be condoned by the administration as well as government under cover of action taken to put down subversive activities. A more perverse definition of pro-national activity in complete violation of constitutional guarantees, human rights as well as women's rights would be difficult to find. This 'teaching a lesson' to curb dissidence (whatever its shape or form) is disturbing. Given the trend of growing criminalisation of politics in India, this form of violence can be crucial in keeping women away from public life.⁶ [n fact this also reflects a cynical societal response to transgression by women of given norms of social behaviour, which in turn are defined along lines of caste, class and status. This violence is limited neither to the personal sphere nor to the framework of man-woman relationships (Karat and Agnihotri 1993).

There is also an increasing social acceptance of violence against women in recent years with an increase in incidents of stripping, rape and other forms of humiliation inflicted on dalits as well as other women in different parts of the country. This is in addition to earlier instances of lynching of women on suspicion of being 'witches'. Many have seen in these the reflection of new political configurations and conflicts arising out of the aspirations of upwardly mobile backward castes. This comes along with reassertion of authority by traditional community and religion-based structures, claiming sanction and power to wield authority on the basis of various brands of identities. There is in contemporary India a powerful ganging-up of conservative and reactionary forces which aggressively impose moral prescripts. Where other processes fail, gender equality and women's rights to freedom is opposed through intimidation, humiliation and violence, in complete violation of norms of civil society.

Response from social scientists on the subject of violence in general and specific to women has not been very illuminating and there are very few studies of the patterns of violence or even causal analysis (Das 1990: Datar' 1993). While the movement itself defined and identified violence against women in many different ways, analytical perspectives from social scientists are singularly lacking. Within the movement, while there is a shift away from the earlier emphasis on domestic violence alone, there is also a simultaneous trend of subsuming other arenas of conflict--communal conflicts, fundamentalism, even economic conflicts within 'violence against women'? Conceptually, while this may give primacy to a gender perspective, it oversimplifies conflict in other spheres and different levels of societal existence, by reducing them to a one-dimensional affair. Such conceptualization also ignores differences in perception and impact of these varied conflicts among diverse groups of women.

III

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

As early as 1983, 'a deal' was reportedly struck between the government of India and the Akali Dal, spearheading the agitation for a Sikh state, to withdraw the agitation if government of India accepted a separate personal law for Sikhs. The draft bill would have deprived Sikh women of their rights to a share in their fathers' property (provided under Hindu Succession Act 1956); of right of divorce except through the dispensation of the religious heads (against the provision of the Hindu Marriage Act), and would have legitimised polygamy through the custom of *chadar andazi*, claimed as a 'Sikh custom'.⁷ Protests from national women's organizations and others, backed by several Sikh women, including five village mahila mandals, apparently compelled GOI to change its' mind and no bill was introduced.

1985, however marked a shift in Indian politics. Pro-liberalisation statements and measures by the government on the economic front began to be combined with

compromises with fundamentalists. People's disenchantment with the nature and pace of India's development was sought to be offset by successive governments playing the 'communal card' to win community support.

May 1986 witnessed a total surrender by the government to Islamic fundamentalism with passage of the Muslim Women's (Protection of Rights of Divorce) Act 1986, which deprived divorced Muslim women of their right to seek maintenance under section 125 of the Criminal Procedure Code, a secular law open to all communities (Engineer 1987). The Act came in the wake of a year-long debate on the Supreme Court judgment in the Shah Bano case. While upholding a Muslim woman's right to this legal remedy, the court observed that it was high time for government to think of a uniform civil code. In the months that followed, Muslim fundamentalists organized themselves for a show-down accusing government of interference with Muslim Personal Law. It is no coincidence that the campaign preceded alongside protests against the reopening of the gates of the Babri masjid which Hindu fundamentalists claimed was the birth place of Lord Rama. Women's organizations campaigned against the bill, drawing support from large numbers of Muslim women especially from the poorer sections, intellectuals and reform groups from the community. While the Bharatiya Janata Party suddenly espoused the demand for the uniform civil code, Muslim fundamentalists responded with the hysteria of 'Islam in Danger'. Despite sharp differences within the ruling party and the resignation of a Muslim minister (who had opposed the bill), the bill was enacted (Hasan 1989; Palriwala and Agnihotri 1993). Petitions were filed in the Supreme Court challenging the new law as anti-constitutional and discriminatory. Meanwhile, organizations report that many more Muslim women come to discuss their problems and participate in other campaigns for women's rights.⁸

In September 1987 in Deorala, a village in Rajasthan, Roop Kanwar, a young bride burnt to death sitting atop the funeral pyre of her dead husband, while several thousands of people watched and even chanted slogans glorifying sati. Though a few in the media came out with strong statements against the event, many played it up as a return to pristine glory, likening Roop Kanwar to a devi (goddess), who presented a sharp contrast to the urban elite, westernized feminist women who had disowned their traditional values. Sati was sought to be projected as a sort of ethnic re-assertion of indigenous womanhood.⁹

The state government remained paralysed, despite massive protests by women's groups and a court order to stop the celebrations of the event. The public outcry forced the Government of India to intervene, belatedly, with an unnecessary and ineffective law against both the act and the glorification of sati. A strange feature of this law was to make the victim, if she escaped death, culpable for attempted suicide, even as women's organisations, some scholars and legal experts argued that sati was murder, that its worship in Rajasthan and elsewhere was being encouraged by the rich Marwari business community and the landed Rajputs. They also argued that glorification of such heinous crimes would encourage violence as well as the positing of a family and community bound identity for women.

The Nineties

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

The overtly political manipulations of fundamentalists also found other victims. Several scholars were threatened or harassed for not adhering to fundamentalist versions while writing cultural, religious or even literary histories with a gender focus. These incidents of growing intolerance were not confined to any single community. The need to counter communal politics and fundamentalist perceptions emerged as the greatest challenge before the repeatedly during discussions on their movement. Activists pointed to the rupture with progressive movements of the 19th and 20th centuries, the growth of a metropolitan culture and continued use of English as the lingua franca of officialdom which made the non-English speaking feel alienated from the emerging elite cultural ethos. This disjunctive situation, they argued, was capitalized upon by communal parties who stepped in to fill the void. Some pushed for a dialogue with reform movements and women's groups working within a religious framework.¹⁰

There was also an ongoing debate regarding retrieving religion from fundamentalists and highlighting the progressive aspects of socio-religious reform movements. Some argue that given the politicization of religion this may reinforce the notion that reform can come only through preordained idioms, in denial of secular space. Respecting people's faiths is one thing, but preoccupation with religion is quite another. Some say it may endanger the fragile solidarity the movement has achieved. At the same time women from the minority community argue forcefully that they can advance only if the majority does so.

The movement has sought to counter communal propaganda amongst women. Organisations have intervened in riot situations to provide relief as well as to start a process of dialogue between women of different communities. Apart from several local initiatives, at least two massive mobilizations of several thousand women each were organized in Ayodhya 1989 and Lucknow 1992 to focus on secularism and communal harmony. Nevertheless, whenever a confrontation took place between women and fundamentalism, the inaction of the government on the plea of neutrality was a stance which itself constituted an active intervention. Meanwhile taking advantage of women's attachment to religion, fundamentalist organizations amongst both Hindus and Muslims are today floating new organizations and fronts such as the Durga Vahini, wherein women's role as mothers, progenitors and defenders of the faith are highlighted along with exhortations to act against the 'other.' Realisation of the global nature of this threat only increases the need to understand the basis or reasons for the spread of fundamentalist or communal ideologies, and their persistent hold on many women. The connections between state, government and communal forces within the country are apparent. But what are the global forces that lie hidden behind this phenomenon?

Given the patriarchal ideology of family and community honour-during riots women were invariably the primary targets of attack by the other group and were subjected to

rape and humiliation in order to devalue and demoralize members of the 'other' community. Further, women's role as instigators of violence requires careful analysis which can only emerge from developing greater insights into the way in which caste, community and gender intersect. This challenges an essentialist construction of the feminine identity. At the same time, instances abound of women playing a compassionate role in protecting members of the other community, often incurring personal risk. Such acts were often also in contravention with the stated intent of ideologues and the wishes of their own family or community groups.

Post-emergency India has seen many communal riots but the nature of violence witnessed since 1992 was marked by the specific targeting of women for sexual attacks and perversities inflicted primarily on women from the minority community. A joint delegation of national women's organisations which visited three of the riot-affected cities in February 1992 found that (a) women were the most affected in the riots yet their needs were the 'least attended to' and relief itself had become a cause for "further P(o) exploitation, corruption, poisonous propaganda"; (b) over the years "some amount of communal relocation of populations" had taken place as an outcome of urban housing schemes, contributing to alienation and growth of suspicion along with 'lack of communication between groups; (c) nowhere had women been included in the peace committees set up to restore normalcy; and (d) no thought was given to the psychological rehabilitation of traumatized children, who witnessed acts of violence against their families. The delegation also came up with some questions about the politics of women's organizations in this context for, 'even the most committed work among vulnerable sections of women is not capable of enabling such women to liberate themselves from the pressures of divisive identity politics, without a conscious direction to confront this type of politics which is so inimical to women's rights and the movement for equality (YWCA 1993: 23 - 24).

IV

If violence was the rallying issue [or women's organizations, the marginalisation and impoverishment of the majority of women within the changing economy became the entry point for academics into the movement. The CSWI's initial analysis was based more on inferences, the deposition of thousands of poor women across the country before the committee and demographic evidence of a secular trend of decline in women's value in the economy and society as a whole. The complexities of the relationship between macro-economic changes and women's status issues -- at different levels of society -- had been neglected by social analysis till then. The committee appealed to the social science community to study this relationship on a continuous basis (GOI 1974). Meanwhile, large organizations of poor women in the informal sector had emerged.¹¹ The dynamism in struggle demonstrated by these groups became a major focus in the search for alternative strategies of development -- with organized groups of women from the grass roots as primary agents of change.

Coinciding with the increasing intensity of critiques of the dominant model of economic growth emanating from various parts of the third world, Women's Studies in India began and grew rapidly in its initial stages to study this interaction.¹² The Women's Studies Programme of the Indian Council of Social Science Research helped to start off a

research process heavily biased in favour of 'invisible' women, i.e. poor working women in rural and urban areas. The focus on economic themes by the Indian Association of Women's Studies in its National Conferences facilitated the interaction between academics and activists and policy makers. A new national government in 1977 opened up various development policies for review.

The combined pressure of a group of women members of parliament, some concerned bureaucrats and leading social scientists led to research as well as the constitution of several working groups at the behest of the Planning Commission, to search for alternative strategies to arrest the marginalisation of the majority of women - especially the poorer -- through prevalent development policies. A memorandum authored by the ICSSR's Advisory Committee on Women's Studies highlighted the problems of increasing devaluation of women in the economy and society, and recommended special strategies for employment, health and education.¹³ These documents, along with the CSWI's report and some of its major recommendations were to form the initial thrust of demands by a network of national women's organisations that came into existence, informally in 1980. The memorandum, Indian Women in the Eighties: Development Imperatives, one of the first joint statements by women's organizations, stated that:

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

It recommended that the family/household approach in programme thrusts be replaced by "explicit mention of women as a target group", since the 'invisibility' of women to planners and administrators was rooted in the "tendency to view women only through the screen of families and households and not as individuals in their own right, " which reinforced the perspectives of seeing women's economic role as "marginal and supplemental" (All India Women's Conference 1980). The demands included a special component approach with earmarked resources and separate monitoring arrangements in each of the sectoral programme thrusts; inclusion of child care centers within the Minimum Needs Programme; and the demand for joint 'pattas' (land titles) for women and men already voiced by poor peasant women. Some of these demands led to a 'sharp exchange' with official representatives with regard to the "philosophy of the family-household approach," which, women activists maintained, reflected the planners' status quo approach in the name of defence of the family."¹⁴

Despite government's reluctance--this dialogue, backed by several women MPs from opposition parties who were members/leaders of a network of national women's organization resulted in the appearance of a chapter on - Women and Development' in the Sixth Five - Year Plan for the first time in the planning history of India. Acknowledging government's failure to achieve gender equality, the Plan stated explicitly that without economic independence, equal access to education, skill-training, and family planning services, the constitutional guarantee of equality would remain a myth (Sixth Five-Year Plan 1980-85, Chapter 27). Henceforth all anti-poverty programmes were directed to include women as targets, along With a promise to "endeavour to provide joint titles to husband and wife" in cases of asset-distribution by

government (productive/homestead land, technology, etc) along with priority to 'female headed households' (Sixth Five-Year Plan 1980-85. Chapter 27).

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

The women's movement also consistently demanded implementation of genuine land reform even as 'defenders' of the 'family' accused women's organizations of arresting 'distributive justice' by demanding women's right to a share of productive resources. A study of land ceiling laws enacted by different states brought out clearly that many of the ceiling laws were discriminatory and thus unconstitutional. State procedure/rules for redistribution were even more so. While in one case, a group of peasant women challenged their exclusion from getting title to redistributed land in the Rajasthan Canal Area in the Rajasthan High Court, the issue of land rights featured consistently in discussions in the movement from different perspectives.¹⁵

The closing year of the Women's Decade marked a high tide. The Rajiv Gandhi government announced in January 1985 that women would receive greater priority than before. The same year Government of India hosted the second NAM Conference on Women and Development, and the official delegation included several leaders of the national women's organizations. Not content with this, the Delhi-based network of organizations held its own review a week before the NAM Conference and separately distributed their report to all delegations ¹⁶ (GOI 1985).

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

Shramshakti, the Report of the National Commission on Self Employed Women and Women in the Informal Sector, to an extent represented the voice of a substantial section of the women's movement and of women's studies' scholars, who were inducted into its various task forces. (Govt. of India 1988). Yet, there were shades of divergence in approaches to the problem of women in the informal sector. While some went along with government in its active promotion and special emphasis on the role of women in the self-employed and home - based sectors, others disagreed. The latter felt that this reinforced the process of marginalisation and was a retreat on government's earlier commitment to bringing women into the 'productive' sphere. The dilemma was a genuine one. No one disputed that the limited opportunities for economic earnings should be expanded and work conditions in this sector be improved. The point at issue was whether one should settle for little 'bits and crumbs'. As one economist put it, "the women's movement should have fought harder for gender equality in the labour market/force." ¹⁷

Meanwhile the National Perspective Plan for Women (NPP), up to the year 2000, was prepared by with no interaction with activists. The draft, placed for endorsement before a National Committee headed by the prime minister faced opposition from some members who found the absence of women's organisations' representatives inexplicable and demanded a national debate before adoption of the document. With no response from the government, the organizations proceeded to organise a debate in Delhi, followed by several state-level discussions. The women's organizations critique of the NPP pointed out that the proposed plan's recommendation to bring women "into the mainstream of development" ignored "the reality of women's marginalisation being the result of such 'mainstream' development".¹⁸

The NPP's approach omitted the earlier thrust for convergence of economic and social services with organization for collective strength and participation, and demonstrated a trend towards centralization, disregarding ongoing debates on the need for decentralization and democratization of the planning process. The proposed reservation of 30 per cent seats for women in elective bodies, to be filled by co-option or nomination in the initial stage, revealed the government's interest in subverting the representative process. Another real danger came from the 'preferential emphasis' to be given to the unorganized sector. Rejecting all these anti-democratic proposals, women's organizations demanded (a) the constitution of statutory, autonomous women's commissions at the Centre and in the States with a broad-based, representative composition; (b) inclusion of child-care as a priority within minimum needs from the next plan onwards; (c) ratification of CEDAW (d) due recognition of national organizations of women at all levels of the planning and decision-making processes.

The movement has adopted a multi-pronged strategy on these issues. While the specific skills of women's studies' scholars have been directed at evolving a critique of the macro-level policies of government, grassroots level initiatives to develop alternatives have been stepped up. One of the biggest mobilizations of women in Delhi from all over the country, in September 1989, was of over 20,000 women demanding the right to work.

Women's organizations have mushroomed : sometimes combining issues at the workplace and family environment; sometimes as sub-committees within existing trade unions or joint fronts. The critique of macro-policies basically adopts three thrusts: (a) that they would enhance inequalities among the people in general; (b) that this would make the majority of women already struggling for survival in the informal sector still more vulnerable; and (c) they would contribute to the social turbulence and violence, of which women and children are the major victims. Critiques have also condemned violence stemming from the promotion of consumerist lifestyles through the mass media as such lifestyles trap women into the stereotype of being objects and subjects of consumerism (Bhasin and Agarwal 1984). It is important to note that the few important concessions wrested from the government in the poverty alleviation through economic development programmes provided some space upto the early 1990s for urban poor and rural women to use the opportunities to organize and articulate their demands. However, the macro-policies adopted, continued with the processes of marginalisation.

The issue facing the movement today is about the relevance of these debates and efforts. The earlier critique of macro-policies was from a standpoint of introducing a pro-women approach within the given parameters, using constitutional guarantees as the basic

reference point. Today, Indian women feel that the Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAP) and the package of economic 'reforms' threaten not only earlier gains, but also the stated national goals by successive governments. While the movement was critiquing the development model, SAP has now removed the few regulatory/compensatory aspects of India's mixed economy, leaving 'global market forces' the sole players in the field. The processes bear significant resemblance to what happened to the Indian economy, and to women's role in the economy in particular, during the colonial period (Krishnaraj 1988; Patnaik 1993; Krishnamurty 1989; Mitra 1979).

This realization has made unity amongst differing organizations easier to achieve today. In a joint statement women's organizations argued that: "discussions on the impact of the new economic policies usually focus on the impact on the organized sector, since women make up only a small percentage here it is assumed that the impact is minimal. We need to untidily and forcefully correct the picture. In our multidimensional roles, as workers, as peasants, as producers, as citizens, as mothers, wives, daughters, as women, the economic policies hit us the hardest".¹⁹

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

Conclusion

The contemporary women's movement in India spans a large canvas. There are small groups as well as large national level organizations.²⁰ While some are recent having been formed only over the last two decades, others go back to over 50 or even 100 years. Some focus on a single issue while mass organizations cover a vast range. Their organizational structures, as well as activities undertaken, differ.

The movement has been fraught with tensions, rifts and differences, reflecting differing notions of what are women's issues or how to proceed to focus on these. Nevertheless, in comparison with the early years of the decade, today it is much easier to come together. With an experience of working together for over a decade and a half women's groups in the country are fairly well aware of the issues they agree on and where they differ. However, neither the agreement nor the differences should be seen as static, or in a frozen time frame. Whereas ideological differences remain and perspectives differ, the overall thrust is in favour of unity in action.²¹ The same attitude is reflected in the issues being taken up. In the 1970s the movement took off as part of an overall build up against the authoritarian regime symbolized, ironically, by a woman prime minister. It then got fragmented and even perhaps insulated. For a while even overtly political statements were resisted. Today it is much easier to come together even on a platform to denounce the economic and other policies of the government. The 1990s represent a trough in the political graph, where the need to join hands and build alliances with other forces is ever greater.

The women's movement has undoubtedly grown. Its outreach is far beyond the figures of enrolled membership of organisations. Nothing illustrates this better than the response to the literacy campaigns in several states. Whereas earlier attempts to reach women had been abysmal failures, today it is estimated 'that two-thirds of the neo-literate learners as well as two-thirds of the volunteers are women (Government of India 1994). The impact of the literacy movement came to be highlighted in the context of the anti-arrack movement in Andhra Pradesh. Another remarkable achievement in recent years has been the process set in motion by the implementation of the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments which provide for 33 per cent representation for women in local bodies in rural and urban areas. Whereas observers rightly see in this a qualitatively new dimension that has been added to the women's movement through this development the depth and complexities of these linkages are yet to be understood. In rural India, as also in the cities, it is the new found articulation and confidence which is coming into conflict with the consolidated combine of conservative social forces which draw strength from the regressive steps taken by government as well as political representatives of reactionary forces. The latter are today preparing to mount an onslaught through the political process to check women's halting steps to advance and strengthen democracy in India.

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

Clearly, as it has developed, the focus could not be confined to the Issue of interpersonal relationships. The limits to creating an essentialist, biological entity as well as identity of "woman' have become only too obvious. While the ideological outreach of 'feminine' identity politics has widened, this spread has also demolished the fossilized image sought to be created. From different starting points, organisations have moved towards a more holistic vision. As the proto-fascist undertones of political events/processes become clearer along with the state's surrender to them, the need to join hands is felt ever more deeply, lest we come out with a *cri de Coeur* --"we have the movement but they (the other?) have the women". While the movement is aware of these challenges the strength of its grass roots support base provides a ray of hope that counter - actions and counter - ideologies are not impossible.

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End Notes

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2. See Tharu and Lalitha, K (eds), 1994. Women Writing in India, Vol II, OUP.
3. 'Open Letter to the Chief Justice of India, 1979', Supreme Court Journal, 1979, (4), pp 19-22.
4. 'Perspectives from the Women's Movement: Health and Population' in *Some Issues in the Struggle for Women's Equality, 1994* (henceforth, *Some Issues*); a joint document published by the Delhi Network of Six National women 's Organisations, pp 10-17.
5. Joint Memorandum to Swaminathan Committee by 12 women's organizations, November 12, 1993, also see Open Letter to Swaminathan Committee, Indian Express, July 9, 1994. Also see, National Population Policy, Perspectives from the Women's Movement, CWDS, New Delhi, 1996.
6. Cf Resolution adopted in meeting to plan Joint Action against Criminalisation of Politics and Sexual Abuse of Women, Delhi, October 22, 1994 (unpublished).
7. A common custom among peasant communities, aimed at preventing partition of property by making a widow marry her brother-in-law. For more on this see Chowdhry, 2007.
8. Information received in conversation with AIDWA activists in Delhi; also. The Times of India, Research-Fellowship, Study of Muslims in India (unpublished).
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11. SEW A Ahmedabad, the Working Women's Forum, Madras, the Annapurna Mahila Mandai, Bombay etc.

12. It was the first priority area in the Indian Council of Social Science Research's sponsored programme of women's studies, See, Critical Issues on the status of Women, 1977, ICSSR.
13. 11 Critical Issues on the Status of Women, op cit.
14. Vina Mazumdar to Lotika Sarkar, M-6/80, September 12, 1980, CWDS Files, and Vina Mazumdar to Ashok Mitra, M-6/80, October I, 1980, CWDS files.
15. For more on this issue see Agarwal B, *A Field of Women's Own. Gender and Land Rights in South Asia*, Cambridge Univ Press, Cambridge, 1994.
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18. Joint Press Statement by National Women's Organisations, July 6, 1988; also see, *National Debate*, 1988, op.cit.
19. Why We Need to Struggle against the New Economic Policies? In *Some Issues*, op cit., p3.
20. Some of these may even have a membership going up to a few million: AIDWA-3.5 million. NFIW, 1 million, YWCA 15,000.
21. This point came across from consultations held by the CWDS with activists across the country in 1994. A greater readiness and felt need to act together is also reported from state level Consultations of Women NGOs preparing for the World Conference on Women, Beijing, 1995.

