

Development, Patriarchy, and Politics: Indian Women in the Political Process, 1947-1992

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Introduction

In India, as elsewhere, women's development has to be related to national development. This is no mean task, as the problems of women are not uniform. There are marked differences by rural and urban residences, occupational and gender role diversities across caste, class, and community. Further, there are five separate systems of personal law for the five major religious communities-Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Parsee and Jew-apart from innumerable and diverse customary laws that continue to be practised by smaller ethnic or regional groups or tribes. Finally, state policies affect various categories of women differentially, while gender-blind development plans evade the major issue of women's economic and political participation as equal partners, decision-makers, and agents of national development (National Perspective Plan, 1988).

In this paper, I propose to give an overview of various aspects of women's status by relating it to succeeding waves of the women's movement with the help of three seminal documents which span a period of over fifty years (1940-92) and perhaps four generations of women. Set in three historical periods-pre-independence, post-independence, and post-1975, the documents roughly chart women's progress and/or regression over time, and articulate the hopes and demands of women. The first of these is the Report of the Sub-Committee on 'Woman's Role in Planned Economy' (1947); the second is the Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India (Government of India, 1974), and the third is the National Perspective Plan for Women, A Perspective Plan the Women's Movement (1988).

The content of the three reports reflects the way the women's movement or women leaders tried to articulate the issues and analyse contemporary conditions in relation to women. They could see that change was not uniform and that in all spheres women were unequal. The documents prove that Indian women were not willing to be passive spectators or victims of the process of transformation but intended to be active participants in directions of their own choice.

Challenging the patriarchal social order was a central goal. The shifts in emphasis and priorities demonstrated through these three documents indicate the evolution of a political understanding of the process of development and a recognition that the development process has actually strengthened patriarchal structures in India.

Before examining the documents, a discussion of the unevenness of Indian development is in order.

Uneven socioeconomic development

India, as one writer put it, is 'a congeries of micro-regions' (M.N. Srinivas, 1978). There is considerable variation among regions, classes, religions, and ethnic and caste groups. Family structure and kinship patterns, social and economic milieux, culture, and social practices vary widely within the country. The rural-urban divide has also to be taken into account as a consistent factor. This-great diversity was complicated further by the changes wrought by colonial rule. Traditional and modern values have been perennially in conflict since then and many ambiguities have resulted. The absence of social, cultural and economic homogeneity makes it difficult to generalise about Indian women in the crucible of change, and images of Indian women are paradoxical and contradictory. For instance, in one context, a subordinate status can coexist with advanced education. In another, a free status coexists with illiteracy and low caste. But an impression has gained ground that Indian women are developing fast in various spheres. The fact is that the vast mass of Indian women has still to be emancipated. Complex socioeconomic processes implicit in development-such as modernisation, urbanisation, industrialisation, commercialisation, technological change in the methods of production, and the spread of education have had a differential impact on Indian women in terms of the diversities indicated above. How far has such socioeconomic development helped women's development? Has change been wholesome and egalitarian? This is a question that has been exercising activists and researchers since the publication of *Towards Equality*, the Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI) in 1974.

An investigation on the position of Indian women cannot be done outside the social framework (Government of India, 1974). Indian society is a traditional and hierarchical social structure based on caste, community, and class. It has fostered numerous inequalities which affect both men and women. Caste / class / social group configurations occur with such regularity that the implications of these connections cannot be easily brushed aside. Certain

patterns- social as well as economic---correlate positively with class and caste, distinguishing members of one class or caste from others.

Despite recent socioeconomic changes which have tended to blur such caste/class identifications, class status can still be often identified with caste status; this is especially true at the lower levels of the caste hierarchy in the rural areas. For instance, members of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes are among the poorest sections in rural areas accounting as before for a substantial percentage of agricultural wage workers. On the other hand, several 'middle' castes have been pushed or moved upwards (and play the role of 'vested interests') as a result of changes brought about by land reform, the 'green revolution', or political success. It is also quite common for members of upper castes to have suffered downward mobility as a result of the same or other changes and lost class dominance.

It is interesting to note that some regions/sub-regions of India are clearly better developed than some others. These differences are evident in terms of health, literacy, education, sex ratios, fertility and mortality patterns, employment, social and economic development, the incidence of poverty, economic disparities, and political participation. Four sets of factors are relevant to an analysis of regional differences: (a) pre-existing levels of development; (b) agro-ecological endowment in terms of climate, soils, natural resources, topography, farming systems, crop choices, traditional economic practices, and so forth; (c) development strategies and priorities pursued by individual states as well as the central government; and (d) socio-cultural norms and practices and religious beliefs. While regional imbalances in development may be directly traced to a greater or lesser extent to the first three sets of factors, the last-named is particularly crucial in determining the relative strength of the ideology of gender not only among the population in a given region but in government policies and programmes at state level as well. Gender bias in the community and in state policies have had negative consequences for women and, indirectly, as studies have shown, for the level of development in individual regions or states. Judged by the measures of economic development and the high or low incidence of poverty, the better developed states include the north western state of Punjab and Haryana. The poorest less-developed states are headed by the states of Bihar, Orissi, Uttar Pradesh, and Madhya Pradesh.

The processes of development have been fraught with contradictions; benefit, have accrued alongside inequalities, and beneficiaries have often been the leaves rather than the have-nots, defeating in some settings the aims of development. The effects of development have thus been variable not only by region but by class within regions, and within classes, by gender. Class and gender-specific consequences (of development) for women are visible at both ends of

the spectrum. Middle and upper class women are the obvious beneficiaries whereas proletarian women have been the worst affected. To take only one dimension: work- while educated middle class women have been increasingly entering the modern sector of employment as professionals, encouraged by an expanding structure of opportunities, illiterate, poor rural women lost their traditional economic opportunities and with it the traditional status conferred on them by economic participation. The material situation of the latter has been further worsened by the entire gamut of discrimination resulting in lower wages, unequal access to technology, information, credit, training, resources, and the double burden of work, and so forth. State policies have aggravated poor woman's marginalisation and exploitation in the economic sphere. The majority (94 per cent) of the female workforce is dependent on the informal sector.

There are variations across regions in women's status judged by indices such as infant mortality, school enrollment, literacy, age specific economic activity, sex ratio and so on. Of course within regions there are variations by caste and class. A variety of interlinked historical, ideological, economic, and cultural factors underlie these differences. In general, the northern states are noted for lower female work participation rates, greater discrimination against females, lower female survival rates, higher incidence of dowry, violence against women, and thus a lower status of women. Among the southern states which provide a dramatic contrast, human resource development is best in Kerala, the development of women being central to the difference. This state compares well with developed countries in many respects and stands out among the states of India for this reason. However, figures do not tell the whole story and recent research has pointed out that women in Kerala have still a long way to go, a paradox that has gained much attention.

Widespread poverty and economic mismanagement in India have prevented the expansion of wage and salaried employment for both men and women but the situation is especially acute for women. There is a marked gender disparity in labour-force participation rates for both rural and urban areas. Notwithstanding the advantages that have accrued to a segment of middle class women, Indian feminists have been very critical of the development process for its marginalisation of women and for the exploitative conditions suffered by labour, including child and female labour.

Patriarchy

Women's status is affected by relations in the family, class status, and the ideology of the social

group to which they belong. It is inherited through historical institutions and culture. The social relations of gender as well as class relations are part of a historical inheritance. Among the ideologies underlying our inheritance is, that of patriarchy. This is a term in which inequality and hierarchy are implicit and is a concept and institution which is discussed in sociological and feminist literature in a variety of ways. Literally 'power of the father' and indicating male supremacy, it is understood variously as 'a symbolic male principle' governing social and gender relations, an institutional structure of male domination, or an ideology based on the power of men. Zillah Eisenstein (1979) suggests that patriarchy provides the sexual hierarchical ordering of society for political control. It is a feature of a large number of societies predating capitalism; a separate phenomenon and independent dynamic observed in connection with social relations between men and women as well as the Organisation and control of production (Rowbotham 1981). Thus it is a useful analytical tool with which to investigate both class and gender relations.

Operating in some or all of these senses, patriarchy as an ideology is deeply embedded in several societies, cultures, and institutions as well as in the minds of men and women. From experience and a variety of studies we are able to conclude that women over whom such power and authority is exercised are socialised suitably to 'fit in'. Prejudices coloured by patriarchy are inherent in many traditions. Where tradition rules, institutions, cultures, social mechanisms, norms, and practices tend to become resistant to change and hinder women's development.

Despite being ruled by such traditions, Indian history offers innumerable examples of protests against such submission and domination. Protest, struggle, and the urge for equality are as old as constricting structures such as caste, hierarchy, patriarchy and inequality of power, wealth and knowledge. Subaltern groups have always tried to be upwardly mobile.⁴ This too is part of the Indian heritage. Although research on women's role in such protests is only of recent origin, it is known that women were not only involved in protests in large numbers but were leaders as well. They challenged existing patriarchal structures and systems, becoming poets, saints, rebels, and drop-outs.

'Patriarchy' is pervasive in India but varies in degree depending on region, community, class, caste, and religious or social group. Therefore, in this regard it would not be possible to generalise. Researchers are aware that within the broader universe of Indian women, women must be studied in specific contexts, whatever the historical period.

Broadly speaking, three classes of women emerge; the economically secure at one end of the spectrum, and at the other, women below the subsistence or poverty level (which is relative), and in between, women who shift continuously between subsistence (that is, minimum

economic security) and starvation (Government of India, 1974: 5). The latter two classes of women are more likely to be of a lower caste than others. There may be a cultural divorce between the elites and the masses but women as a category are objects of patriarchal control. Therefore, it may be safe to assume that male strength, authority, and power contribute to the oppression of women of all three classes. Such values are visible in all the indicators of women's status: health, education, political status, economic participation, law and its implementation. Women face these values in their day-to-day life in all areas of living, for such attitudes are widely held mainly by men, whether they are leaders, members of families, or others, or in agencies of the state. In sum, Indian women live within patriarchal frameworks.

Politics

There are several definitions of politics, but common to all is the view that it is inevitable in any society. In plural societies, where interests are diverse, tensions are likely to be greater.

Theorists have long held that politics is about representation, policy, position and power, with government as the arena of politics. Political activity is any activity which aims at bringing government to bear in a particular direction to secure particular results (Miller 1962: 14-16, 254-87). The definition of politics has, however, in the recent past widened considerably from merely denoting the area of formal government in its widest sense, including all processes directly or indirectly associated with it and in which in a democracy every citizen has a share (Nettl 1967: 29-30).

The concept of politics in terms of spheres, objectives, and activities has evolved much further than this. Political theorists have accepted now that movements, protests, and struggles are legitimate expressions of political behaviour and 'argue for theories that use availability of resources and opportunity structures to explain why, when and how people protest and make claims' (West and Blumberg 1950: 5). The political sphere thus includes the 'spheres in social relations where power relations are generated, institutionalized and used to encourage, control or move people's behaviour, attitudes, beliefs in a specified direction-to control and regulate the distribution of resources'. It should be noted that this broader definition of the political sphere and political action was drawn up by a group of women scholars and activists who participated in a UNESCO seminar on the 'Participation of Women in Political Life' held at Lisbon in 1983. Two years later, this definition was endorsed by a non-aligned Ministerial Level Conference on 'Role of Women in Development' (New Delhi, 1985). Political issues now include every kind of issue, including those of everyday life, of survival itself. Collective actions of ordinary people

on such issues symbolise the challenge that the powerless throw to the powerful. Cross culturally and across classes women have participated in open confrontations and collective actions which are now accepted both definitionally and on the ground as established ways of doing political business.

The shape and direction of development, its priorities, allocation of resources, and targets are determined in the political sphere and by political processes., More narrowly, it is the government which decides these; but more broadly speaking, political processes are initiated by disagreement with state policy in the wider society as a result of which state policy is ultimately either modified, cancelled, or replaced. Political struggle is not only for power but for change. Development planning is thus a political process where objectives, resource allocation, and implementing strategies call for a firm ideological perspective, and opportunities for the participation of the people from planning to implementation (National Perspective Plan for Women, 1988).

In modern India, the political participation of women took place at several levels. Not so well documented are women's struggles in rural areas on survival issues, where anti-imperialism was often mixed with anti-landlord feeling. Better documented are women's entry into the struggle for freedom and the activities of women's organisations working for women's uplift and development. The quality and extent of women's role in the national movement drew praise and admiration from the nationalist leaders. The work of educated elite women leaders of the first women's movement was equally important, although it did not involve itself deeply with the mass of rural women or reflect on issues relevant to them. Participating in both the national and women's movements elite women campaigned for legislative action in the areas of education, political rights, marriage, and property. To their credit it must be said that they highlighted the socioeconomic phenomena which hampered the progress of Indian women while occupying themselves with welfare activities. Some of them never gave up campaigning for equal rights as opposed to women's uplift.

Women's search for equality was given an impetus by the historic decision of the Indian National Congress at its Karachi session in 1931 to adopt a Resolution on Fundamental Rights by which the nationalist leadership committed itself to the principle of equality for all citizens irrespective of caste, creed, or sex. Gandhi was emphatic that the reconstruction and development of the Indian nation would not be possible without the full participation of women as equal partners.

India's Constitution which came into force in 1950 incorporated this Resolution twenty-five years before the World Conference in Mexico, and twenty-nine years before the UN

General Assembly's Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women in 1979.

Five significant features of the new political system were:

1. universal adult franchise;
2. legal equality of a citizens;
3. certain fundamental rights and freedoms such as freedom of speech, protection of life and personal liberty;
4. prohibition of discrimination on grounds of sex, caste, or creed;
5. special protective measures for sections of the population traditionally marginalised in Indian history.

The last named provision was designed to assist 'weaker sections of society' to transcend their traditional inequality through a system of reservations and special supports in education, 'employment, and political representation. The women's movement rejected the proposal for similar support for women and demanded complete equality. However, Article 15 (3) empowers the state to 'introduce special measures for the protection of women and children irrespective of its obligation not to discriminate on grounds of sex'. Thus the Constitution provided positive as well as negative rights (Basu 1955).

The values embodied in the Constitution are present in the Directive Principles of State Policy, the Preamble, and its various provisions, all of which reflect the high ideals of a liberal democratic polity. They function as a guide to social transformation and embody the objectives of a social, economic, and political revolution. Further, they seek to confer upon Indian women an equal position and status in society. Finally, the Constitution assigns primacy to law as an instrument of directed social change. It demands of the government continuous vigilance and responsiveness to the relationship between law and social, transformation in contemporary India (Government of India 1974).

The government undertook the massive task of nation building and planned to eliminate poverty and the several forms of social inequality and to raise the standards of living of the masses. This was how we embarked on national development taking into account the wide disparities between different sections of people including women.

Report of the Sub-Committee on 'Woman's Role in Planned Economy'

One of the important documents which has turned out to be a little-noted landmark in the evolution of the perspectives of the Indian women's movement is the Report of the Sub-Committee on 'Woman's Role in Planned Economy'. The Sub-Committee was appointed in 1939, many years before independence. As Chairman of the National Planning Committee (NPC), Jawaharlal Nehru appointed several sub-committees-as many as twenty-nine-to report on various aspects of 'national life and work' and to make recommendations in accordance with a predetermined Plan. One of these dealt with the-place of women in the planned economy of a free India. This report was reviewed by the National Planning Committee and some resolutions were passed on the basis of the Sub-Committee's recommendations (Report of the Sub-Committee 1947: 225-31).

The terms of reference of the Sub-Committee were comprehensive. The Sub-Committee was to consider the social, economic, and legal status of Indian women and, in particular, was to concern itself with family life and Organisation and women's employment in the house; marriage and succession, and the laws governing these; the conditions of employment of women in various sectors; social customs and institutions which hindered women-development, and appropriate types and methods of education which would enable women to play their due roles in the household, professions, and national services (1947:27).

Woman, according to the Sub-Committee, 'still labours under disabilities which must be removed before she can take her proper share in the social life of the community. She has special problems and duties which require adjustment in the social scheme'. Even more than man, 'she is a guardian and trustee of future generations ... it is essential that woman should have her proper place in the scheme of things, and that she should be considered as, an individual and ... have the same rights as man. If freedom and equality are the bases of human development, woman must share in them ... It follows, therefore, as a natural corollary that woman should be recognized as an equal unit in the social order with man, and that she should gain the same political rights, civic and legal status, social equality, and economic independence' (1947:28-9). But a lot remained to be achieved in terms of freedom. This would mean an entire reorganisation of life. 'Woman cannot be free until the means and training for economic liberty have been assured to her, and until the functions which nature and society impose on her are organized in such a way that while fulfilling them woman still retains the right to mould her social and economic life in any way she chooses' (1947:30).

The work of the Sub-Committee was hampered by scarcity or unevenness of information. Questionnaires, quite stunningly comprehensive, were issued widely and the replies and reports analysed. These form the basis of the text of the Report. The Sub-Committee could not 'build a structure of any firmness on the foundations supplied to [it] in the shape of data' (1947:52), but laid down the main principles on which a structure could be built. The Report may therefore be regarded as a framework of principles-a sort of work plan. The Sub-Committee stressed the importance of social and economic planning in an era of change. Social care would be required in the period- of transition when moving from existing conditions to a future based on recommendations which at first glance might appear to be drastic.

The Sub-Committee did not seek to belittle traditions which have in the past, contributed to the happiness and progress of the individual ... We do not wish to turn woman into a cheap imitation of man or to render her useless for the great tasks of motherhood and nation- building. But in demanding equal status and equal opportunity, we desire to achieve for woman the possibility of development under favourable circumstances of education and opportunity, and while so doing, urge upon the State its responsibility towards women in this respect' (1947: 32-3).

The Sub-Committee fully endorsed the 1931 Fundamental Rights Resolution of the Congress. In the light of this resolution, one of the first demands made by the Sub-Committee was adult franchise. Woman had not been granted the right to vote as an individual but has been given only a limited right to vote as a wife. Additional qualifications were education and ownership of property (1947:37). No impediments should be placed in the way of women holding public office or employment, which might in effect prevent women from taking their full and equal share in civic duties and obligations. They should be eligible in the same way, as men and on the same conditions in all branches of public service. The right to work, free from social prejudice, was not articulated but implied in demands for equality of access to the public services. Women were debarred from several Class I services under the Act of 1935.5 For example, in the Post and Telegraphs Department women were employed only as 'telephone girls' (1947:50-1).

Another important right demanded was that every India-born national should be regarded as an Indian citizen and that every Indian woman should have the right to choose her own nationality in the event of marrying a non-national (1947:43).

Among the rights discussed under 'civic rights' are women's right to an identical moral standard as men and the right to health, leisure, and recreation.. For the first time, the drudgery of the housewife was openly acknowledged. The demands for health, leisure, and recreation for

women emphasise two things; the hard work a woman puts in as mother, wife, and homemaker, and the right of a woman to recover her energies and to have something left over for herself as an individual. The concept that housewives are also working women is clean throughout the Report. There should be cessation of all work during the day at a fixed hour so that the housewife is released from duties in the kitchen. This may not be a practical possibility but the suggestion implies the need to allow the housewife some time for herself and thereby to establish her identity as an individual. Co-operative services could relieve her burden by providing meals and doing the laundry. Local bodies should provide opportunities for recreation. The need for creches is repeatedly articulated. They should be available to all women. There is an emphasis throughout on local bodies for action, as the need is greatest at that level (1947:38-43).

Thus the Report of the Sub-Committee established that all women work regardless of class, and the meaning of work was extended to include housework. In homes where men and women work, they should not only share expenses but domestic responsibilities as well. Men of every class should learn housework and 'domestic science'. The Sub-Committee was far in advance of the times when it stated that housework receives no recognition from state or society as having an economic value and that it should not be considered in any way inferior to other types of work done outside the home. Woman's function as Homemaker and her labour are indirect contributions to family income. However, her economic dependence on man has reduced her to the position of a slave. This social degradation has brought into contempt the work of the woman in the home. Unless the homemaker/maker is considered as much a productive worker as the one who is engaged in work outside, it will be difficult to raise the dignity of labour in the home (1947:104-5).

The Report discussed the lives and inequalities of working-class women at length in a chapter on Economic Rights. The problems of the mass of women were distinguished from those of middle class women for whom employment for wages carried a certain stigma. There were very few educated women in employment; if they were employed it was while waiting for marriage and motherhood, which were their ultimate goals. Wage earning was abandoned after marriage despite grave financial circumstances, social attitudes being what they were (1947:51-2).

On the other hand, the majority of Indian women were 'instruments of labour who had to seek work to feed their families. One third of all workers were women. They worked on land, in cottages and factories, in retail trade and family units, and as indentured and forced labour, for meagre returns. In addition, they had to shoulder a double burden: child care and domestic

tasks awaited them after working outside. Working-class women's problems were too numerous:

1. They had difficulty reconciling economic activity with their domestic roles.
2. At work they faced endless problems - gender bias ruled their work lives in every sector. Wage differentials existed obviously because of the low status given to women's place in the economic life of the nation. As illiterate, unskilled, unorganised, abundant labour, women were paid low wages. What worsened the situation was the theory (a) that women's labour is not equal to men's; (b) that woman is a supplementary worker with no dependents and is supported by the family. Women's work is not recognised, said the Report, as separate and essential, particularly in agriculture, family production, and even in the management of the household.
3. Further, women were victimised by both employers and the state's 'protective actions'. Women were thrown out of work in the interests of rationalisation. Certain occupations and industries were banned to them; special legislation to protect them, such as maternity benefit acts, resulted in employers' refusal to employ women, especially married women. Trade Unionists colluded with management against women workers in the interests of male workers. The government itself was guilty in this respect by not selecting married women in its various departments (1947:52-5).

While demanding equal wages for equal work the Sub-Committee was clear that this right should be enforced without endangering employment opportunities for women. The right to work would be meaningless without equal opportunities. Further, training facilities, security, and protection from exploitation through control and regulation of general conditions of work (wages, working hours, membership in trade union), child care, medical and health care, would have to be provided.

Women's right to work was affected not only by low work opportunities but by social attitudes in all classes. Baldly put, gender bias, assumptions of woman's place in society, and failure to assess woman's economic value resulted in a range of effects. Middle class women could not enter all spheres of economic activity. Retail trade, and the theatre, for instance, were considered off limits regardless of the necessity to work and earn a livelihood. Working-class women suffered the prejudices of employers particularly if married, and the non-recognition of the value of their work denied them fair and equal wages.

It was quite clear to the Sub-Committee that

1. women of all classes have to work out of economic necessity;
2. social attitudes at all levels (the state, employers, family members) operate against women of different classes in different ways;
3. women's labour is not valued at all or sufficiently, inside or outside the home;
4. as a consequence, the work women do is not socially valued and therefore neither recognised nor remunerated;
5. working women have great difficulty in balancing work outside with housework;
6. there is a dire need for state action to help women in all these respects in order to further gender equality and bring justice to women.

The issue of women's economic dependence exercised the Sub-Committee throughout its analysis of women's economic rights. Economic independence has to be seen as very distinct from equal access to employment, which still remains the current slogan in much of the WID literature.

Women are dependent on men for all the reasons stated above. Disparity in wages, unpaid labour performed by women as housewives, in family production, and in manual work as helpers and team-mates, absence of any right for women to the collective income of the family, the belief that marital status cancels out the right to receive equal wages and lack of control over their earnings reinforce women's economic dependence and subordinate status.

One of the objectives of a planned economy is that women must be made economically independent. To achieve this end, one of the important recommendations made by the Sub-Committee was that women should be made co-sharers in the collective income of the family (1947:61). The economic value of women's work at home and in family production must be recognised. As this is difficult to measure in terms of wages, women should have absolute control over some part of the family income, have a share in the husband's property which he cannot will away, and the husband should contribute to any appropriate state social insurance scheme on his wife's behalf (1947:105).

Equal wages should be given to women; equal work opportunities must increase; child care should be provided, and it should be possible for married women to earn an independent income, without facing social prejudice and familial control. Economic independence rests on a woman's absolute control over the money she earns. Unfortunately, even educated women in the middle class regard their salary as part of the family income (1947:62-3).

Women's prospects for economic independence would be improved if they could claim equal rights to property as well. Property rights of women varied under different personal laws; such rights are not absolutely denied but are limited. Under Muslim and Parsee laws women have better rights than under Hindu law: inequality flows from the diversity of laws and the differences in custom and practice in different sections of the same community. This has resulted in the lowering of women's status in the eyes of law and society. Equality exists only under the Indian Succession Act.

As early as 1939 the Sub-Committee was once again most far-seeing. It said: 'no national plan can entertain such communal diversities which result in inequalities among men and women governed by the same state ... We therefore recommend that a common civil code for the whole country based on the fundamental principle of equality between man and man and between man and woman be evolved incorporating the best points of the personal laws' (1947:118).

In the opinion of the Sub-Committee a common civil code should be evolved in India on the pattern of a common criminal code. It should cover inheritance and succession, divorce and marriage. The recommendations of the Committee were aimed at giving Hindu women- wives and daughter - a larger share than granted by traditional laws. Daughters should be entitled to the same rights pertaining to maintenance, education, marriage, Succession or inheritance, and the acquisition of property as sons. This recommendation was a seminal departure from tradition. Vigorous propaganda should be carried on to educate Muslim women of their existing rights, and glaring defects in other laws should be remedied (1947:216-18).

Another really admirable concept introduced by the Sub-Committee was that of matrimonial property, although not defined as such. The Sub-Committee stated: 'The income or acquisition from any sources whatever, made or acquired during coverture will be owned by the husband and wife jointly.' On the death of a spouse 'half of the property jointly acquired with the help of the income during coverture should devolve on the surviving husband or wife and their children'. The division of the joint property in the event of divorce should be left to the discretion of the court (1947:125).

These recommendations and the ideas relating to women's share in the collective income of the family together comprise the concept of matrimonial property which was alien until then, not to be found in tradition.

The Sub-Committee even considered the rights of children and made several modern pronouncements. The child is an individual who has rights and needs help and protection from the state (1947:43-4). Child labour particularly in the unorganised sector was recognised as an

evil. Among its recommendations were compulsory universal education up to the age of fourteen and a legal prohibition of such labour (1947:81-3, 149).

Legislative action

The importance of legislative action by the state was undeniable. Only law could guarantee and ensure essential measures for women's equality and development. It was quite clear that social, political, and economic rights of women needed to be written into state-sponsored legislation backed by state power. The role of the state was clear in several situations.

1. The state must uphold the rights of children. Child labour should be prohibited by law. Children, especially girls, are liable to various kinds of exploitation and require special protection. Parents and guardians bind children to lifelong commitments through child marriage, dedication to temples, sale into prostitution etc. Children should be given a choice on reaching the age of maturity to repudiate such commitments and pledges (1947:44).
2. The need for creches was reiterated throughout the Report. Whole-time creches should be provided where all mothers needing leisure, rest, tension-free convalescence, or child care arrangements during working hours could leave their young children. This Sub-Committee realised the needs of mothers other than those working outside the home. Creches are normally associated only with the latter. This is an extraordinary acknowledgement of all women's need to be free of child care for reasons of personal development and the recovery of their health. The State must provide for the maintenance of creches and nursery schools under a system of social insurance, suggested the Sub-Committee (1947:42-3).
3. To ensure the economic rights of women and the provision of support services to enable women to work for a living out of financial necessity, the state must legislate on several issues including creches, equal wages for equal work, prohibition of dangerous work in terms of health and safety (night work need not be totally abolished except for pregnant/nursing mothers and girls under eighteen), medical care, better working conditions (reasonable working hours, leave, sickness insurance, maternity benefits, welfare, union membership), and training for the work she is required to do, whether it is factory work, agriculture, or home-based production.

The issue of reservation occurs even in relation to women's employment. Should any occupation be either legally prohibited or set apart for women to protect their social and economic rights? The Sub-Committee believed that it would be undesirable to advocate reservation. It may be noted here that the Sub-Committee was against reservation in principle even in the electoral process. It endorsed the views of three women's organisations who raised a hue and cry against such reservations on the ground that women could contest on equal terms with men. This belief was justified when women were elected from general constituencies (1947:37). 'Women's demand is for equal rights and opportunities: the question of preferential treatment cannot arise' (1947:50).

The Sub-Committee did not overlook the fact that social legislation has its dark side, that good intentions could backfire, that the letter could defeat the spirit of the law. The equal right to work and the right to equal opportunity underlay various measures which have had the effect of decreasing women's employment. Employers would rather not employ women than go to the trouble and expense of providing them benefits or clash with the state over this issue (state legislation had been mostly preoccupied with maternity benefits for women workers in the 1930s). Therefore, women were dismissed or discriminated against in employment, and marriage automatically disqualified women. Social legislation for the benefit of women would not act against women's interests in the long run if such legislation thoughtfully went hand in hand with measures to ensure absorption into other new sectors of employment. For instance, no occupation should be prohibited unless an alternative scheme of employment is provided by law for those thrown out of work as a result of such prohibition (1947:54).

Summary and, assessment

The Report of the Sub-Committee may be summed up as the first attempt to assess the status of Indian women and to define the parameters of their development. Although the analysis was not that of a group of professional sociologists or economists, as committed intelligent women they based their conclusions on their knowledge of society and the data they received. Some aspects of women's lives were emphasised and some not, but most of the issues were outlined. We see that they were not against tradition or in favour of modernisation, but they were certainly in favour of women's development as individuals.

They attempted a class analysis and divided women into the middle class and the mass of poor women who had to work outside their homes for wages. However, they did not belittle

the work of the middle class woman-the housewife. They knew more about women in industry than women on land and less about the landless. But they could clearly see that all of them were economically dependent and badly off despite their hard labour and toiling. Economic independence for women, they averred, should one of the objectives of a planned economy. They also realized the importance of legal rights in the pursuit of women's equality and asked for a uniform civil code which even now finds few supporters among men. They recommended that working women's conditions should vastly improve, demanded creches, for the benefit of both mothers and children, and emphasised the rights of children in many contexts, from child labour and child marriage to protection from immoral purposes, and education. Social attitudes cannot be abolished by law and the Sub-Committee could only pray for a change in such attitudes. For the rest, they relied on law to bring about change. By emphasizing the crucial role of legislative action, the Sub-Committee was laying the responsibility for bringing about a social order based on gender equality squarely on the government, the sole law-making and law-enforcing authority. Progressive for its time, this document disappeared in the years after independence, was forgotten, misplaced, and overlooked.

Members of the Sub-Committee were eminent or distinguished women active in public life during the nationalist period. They were freedom fighters from different political parties, legislators, social workers, office-bearers in women's organisations, or otherwise working in fields connected with the rights of women or the poor, bound together by the common cause of national freedom. They pooled their ideas and talents when working together on the Sub-Committee to articulate and describe the rights, hopes, and new roles of all classes of Indian women in a free India. The Report, however, went into cold storage along with the Final Reports of the other Sub-Committees of the NPC. As documents, they were valuable and were published immediately after independence, but have been out of sight and out of print ever since. It is hoped that the Report of the Sub-Committee discussed here will soon be reprinted as an important document relevant to the history of Indian women.

Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India

The political response to the issue of equality was contained in the breaking down of formal barriers to women's access to legal, political, educational, and economic institutions. It was hoped that this step would bring about an increase in women's participatory roles. However, the guarantees of the Constitution and protective and just laws passed in favour of women

failed to eliminate structures of subordination deeply rooted in all our social institutions. Legal equality was not followed by change either for the poor or for women as a category.

Legislation can only reflect desirable social values and provide the framework for change. Translation of equal rights into reality is the task of other agencies of government. Implementation of the law is as important as the law itself (Government of India 1974:103). Change also requires a transformation in the value structure. There was a great deal of ambivalence towards the idea of equality, as is clear from the discussions and debates on women's rights in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s (Everett 1979; Government of India, 1974:103). In addition, women face numerous constraints that restrict their social, economic and political roles.

The distance between the intention of the framers of the Constitution and the reality was measured by the Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI) appointed for evaluating the status of Indian women. This it did, conditioned by the ideals of the Sub-Committee of 1939. The Committee stated that equality of women is necessary not merely on the grounds of social justice but as a basic condition for the social, economic, and political development of the nation (Government of India 1974:8). Both the Committees thus echoed the importance of women as a national resource.

The terms (if reference of the Committee clearly indicated three major dimensions of enquiry:

- (a) to assess the impact of the constitutional, legal and administrative provisions on the social status of women, their education, and employment, particularly in the rural sector during the period since independence;
- (b) to examine the status of women in the changing social pattern; and
- (c) to suggest remedial and other measures in the fields of law, education, employment, population policy, etc., 'which would enable women to play their full and proper role in building up the nation'.

The framework for the study was provided on the one hand by constitutional provisions that have a bearing on the status of women, and on other, by the clear objective specified in the last term of reference (1974:1)

The Committee's task was formidable one as it involved a wide perspective including all aspects affecting the life women in diverse contexts. Uneven rates of development between regions, communities, and sections of the population and contradictory trends made generalizations difficult and analysis of quantitative methods baffling. There was a basic

paucity of data which the Committee tried to overcome by studying types of existing documentary sources, preparing special studies covering numerous aspects of the lives of various categories of women, organizing tours, interviews and discussions with knowledgeable men and women working in various fields. The committee studied gender roles and status, social, economic, and cultural institutions, and the structure of rights and opportunities provided by the state (1974:7). The Committee's report was published in 1974. This is the second document which I wish to use to give an overview of the impact of development and the activities of nation building on the women of India between 1947 and 1975.

The Committee's findings highlighted the fact that the development process instead of helping to promote equality, had itself accentuated inequality. Planning development, education, legal reform, and political rights had been seen as the main instruments of social transformation. But the Committee found that these various indices faithfully reflected the stratification of society, systematic discrimination against women leaving them with narrow life options and choices, and distributional inequalities. While tradition, custom, caste and class were assuredly among the prime constraints holding back large sections of the general population from realizing equal rights and economic freedom, the Committee did not believe that these alone constituted obstacles to equality. The Committee laid stress on the structural aspects of both the old and modern system as providing a base for discriminatory and marginalizing attitudes and factors.

The class dimensions of inequality in the wake of development was noted by the Committee. It reported that 'while opportunities had widened immensely at certain levels of society and enabled women to forge ahead in areas which had been completely closed to them in earlier years, for the other levels of society, this was not the case' (1974: 5). The population of the middle and upper classes had better access to the benefits of development.

The gender dimensions underlying every type of inequality was next fully exposed by the Committee. Imbalanced were seen in every sector; at work and within the family women were affected by the unequal distribution of roles, resources, rewards, and authority. The Committee identified certain trends in society which has resisted time, the British intervention, and twenty-eight years of independence. Though women do not constitute a minority numerically, they were acquiring the features of one by experiencing inequality of class, status, and political power (1974:301).

The lower status of women was visible in the adverse sex ratio which reflected son preference, lower life expectancy, early marriage for girls, high female mortality and morbidity rates, unequal access to health care, and inadequate nutritional intake.

Literacy is crucial to women's development but the vast majority of Indian women were illiterate-this is a great barrier to an improvement in their position in employment, education, and at health, exercise of legal and constitutional rights, equal opportunity in training equality of status (Government of India 1974:204). Female literacy did not increase at a rapid rate after independence either in absolute numbers or in relation to the growth of literacy among men (1974:265). There were also disparities among different regions and sections (low literacy among Scheduled Castes and Tribes, and Muslims, but high literacy among Christians) and between urban and rural areas.

Similarly, school enrollment rates showed wide differences between the sexes, poverty and rural residence working against the girl child. There was an improvement in enrollment at various levels of higher education but the disparity between male and female rates was striking in all disciplines. Biases in curricula continued to reflect social attitudes to women's roles and place (1974:234-82).

The Committee was greatly exercised over disparities and regional/local unbalances in literacy and educational levels, noting with care that local conditions varied, needing particular solutions. No set solutions could be universally applicable. There must be universalisation of elementary education and attention must be paid to the retention of girls in schools; gender biases must be removed from curricula. Equality is a major value which can be taught through the educational process to counteract socialisation, rather indoctrination, into sex roles. As it stands today, reflected the Committee, the system strengthens the traditional prejudices of inequality and has not even attempted to undertake this responsibility. In this respect, the educational system must make a planned and sustained effort (1974:282).

A review of the legal position of women convinced the Committee that there was widespread violation of laws which laid down the government's social policy. This was due to the persistence of tradition and custom. Further, every personal law was seen to reinforce women's subordination and inequality. The Committee considered the issues of bigamy/polygamy, age at marriage, dowry, divorce, adoption, guardianship, maintenance and inheritance, and recommended parity of rights and the enactment of a secular law applicable to all women to remove existing discrimination against women under different personal laws.

The main theme running through the chapter on law is that there should be a unified law as primary rights continue to be vested in men. Even where fundamental changes were made by the Hindu Succession Act (1956), legislators compromised and retained in some respects the inferior position of women (1974:135). But the Committee found the Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act (1956) an improvement on the previous law in social ways, for

instance, by allowing single women to adopt a son or a daughter (1974:125).

The Committee followed the Sub-Committee (1939) in upholding the economic value of a woman's contribution to the family economy and her right to matrimonial property on the basis of her work, be it inside or outside the house. Mothering, child care, and housework are activities without economic remuneration, but these keep women dependent. Why should ownership of property be determined on the basis of financial contribution alone? (1974: 140- 1). This line of thinking is in consonance with a current world-wide trend. It may be reiterated here that the Sub-Committee had thought of it decades ago.

The Committee also recommended that Indian women's right to Indian nationality should be unaffected by marriage to a foreigner; that the age at marriage for girls be raised to eighteen, and that adultery should cease to be a criminal offence, the implication being that the wife ceases to be regarded-as the husband's property. Another important recommendation made was that the right to initiate proceedings for bigamy can also be made anyone other than the aggrieved party-a forerunner in principle of the rights to initiate public-interest litigation accepted in the post 1975 period.

In the political sphere too there was no equality for women. Throughout India, except as voters, women's participation as contestants, elected representatives, members of the government, and so on, was negligible. Regional and sectional patterns in political participation manifested themselves with familiar correlations. Two of the chief reasons for women's poor performance in this sphere were laid at the door of both political parties and a moribund women's movement.

After independence, Indian women had not been unified by political, economic, and social issues on a national scale as they had been during the struggle for freedom. The women's movement petered out after the passage of the Hindu Code Bill in 1956. Nor did political parties seek out women as a constituency or encourage them within their own ranks. Thus women were neither mobilised by political parties and organisations nor by women's organisations and women leaders. Meagre attention was given to women's issues as a result, and the plight of rural women remained neglected, lacking spokeswomen (1974:294-300).

The question of reservation, however, cropped up again and was debated by the groups of women the Committee met; some wanted reservation as a transitional supportive measure but the Committee rejected it. However, at the local level the Committee recommended the establishment of village-level statutory women's councils to ensure greater participation by women in the political process (1974: 302-5).

The Committee came into its own in its examination of the economic roles of women. It was mainly concerned with the majority who have to work out of necessity. The majority of women were found in the unorganized sector in a variety of occupations too numerous to enumerate and where working conditions were appalling and inhumane. A considerable number of women therefore had no equal rights in the economic process, they had unequal access to unemployment opportunities, knowledge and skills, and did not therefore have an adequate means of livelihood nor anything equal pay. In family production and home-based activities they had little or no return and recognition. Policies and processes of economic development had clearly marginalized women in the primary sector. A higher degree of concentration of capital, exploitative relations of production, modernization in agriculture, export-oriented production, and technological change had pushed women into the unorganized sector, led to the feminisation of certain production processes, increased female migration and female-headed households. Discriminatory attitudes not only by private employers but also by the state (such as the assumption that women are supplementary earners); lack of successful unionisation among women workers; and a lack of alternatives compounded the problem, increasing women's economic dependence on the family.

The Committee called for a well-defined state policy to provide equality of opportunity in employment for women. Special attention to women's disabilities and needs has to be given, and the policy implemented carefully. The Committee recommended that maternity benefits be extended beyond the organised sector, creches be provided, and wages equalised by law. Integrated development of training and employment, provision for re-entry, steps to organise labour unions in agriculture and other sectors were needed, as well as formation of women's wings in all trade unions to look after the problems of women workers and to improve women's participation in trade-union activities (1974:148-233).

Summary and assessment

Although the Sub-Committee's outline of a proposal for the realisation of women's equality was not retained as a guide, the women's question remained on the economic and political agenda until 1956. Some legislative changes pertaining to labour laws and personal laws were made, but they were piecemeal and incomplete. Gradually, the social perceptions of the political leadership, including women in political parties, moved away from the hopes, norms, and ideals set out before women in the nationalist period. There was also no investigation during this period of the role women were playing in development until the Committee was set up.

The CSWI was a product of the earlier women's movement and influenced by the message of the Sub-Committee. Using the Constitution as a point of reference, it undertook a critical analysis of trends since independence. Its findings in various spheres were that development had not been guided by the Constitution and that inequality was rampant in society in terms of class as well as gender.

The condition of the mass of women had worsened, except for that of a fraction of women in the middle and upper class in terms of higher education and white-collar employment in a few professions. This is not to suggest that economically secure women were free from gender oppression or that they were politically effective. The blame for the predicament of the mass of women was equally distributed among the following: educational institutions which played a role in perpetuating gender role socialisation and prejudices leading to inequality, the indifference of political parties to the women's question, the absence of the pressure that could have been provided by a women's movement, and trends in Society that ran contrary to the earlier political commitment to equality.

The state itself did not take up the task of creating a new social order. Issues relating to women did not enjoy a high priority for a government besieged by problems of poverty, a slowing growth rate and political factionalism. The women's question as such and the commitment to eliminate gender disparities disappeared from the political agenda between 1956 and 1975. Existing laws were not enforced by the state nor were they comprehensive of complete. For instance, maternity benefits were granted only to a limited number of women workers in plantations and mines, although 95 per cent of women workers are in other sectors. The legislation on equal remuneration was delayed until 1975. Furthermore, the persistent debate within economic development has been centered not so much around equity as productivity. The argument was that a large section of the human labour force, i.e. women, were left out of the strategies for development. Women were seen as an economic issue but not in terms of equality even within that issue.

These varied failures strengthened 'the structures' of patriarchy and increased inequality and exploitation of women. The Committee suggested several important measures in every sphere for the reduction of such inequality. Its emphasis throughout was on greater legislative support; implementation of laws; greater decentralisation with an emphasis on action at the local level, whether it was non-formal education, human resource development, or child care; and the inclusion of women in political parties, women's panchayats, committees, commissions and so on, that is, in all decision-making bodies.

1975-1988-1992: Debates on the Draft National Perspective Plan for Women

The publication of the Report of the CSWI was an event that took place in a period of political ferment. The political emergency imposed in 1975 by Indira Gandhi (and which ended in 1977) coincided with several democratic people's movements, labour strikes, and a mood of questioning. Agrarian and student unrest, protests against food shortages, inflation, unemployment, deforestation, public corruption, and so on had been on the increase since the 1960s, culminating in the Total Revolution Movement initiated by the late Jaya Prakash Narayan in 1974.⁶ All these protests had attracted substantial participation by women. Once they were mobilised, they also raised women-specific issues like alcoholism and atrocities against women which gave rise to the growth of women's groups even before the declaration of the UN Decade for Women. The Emergency suppressed this discontent for two years, but from 1977 onwards women's protests gathered momentum along with the general upsurge of popular movements.

The CSWI's report by itself had produced only token gestures by the government though the report created extraordinary interest in the media, because of its unexpected findings. Between 1975 and March 1977 the government created a Cell on Women's Employment within the Ministry of Labour. A Women's Welfare and Development Bureau within the Ministry of Social Welfare formulated a National Plan for Action for Women (which had no legal status as it was not incorporated within the activities of the Planning Commission) and constituted a National Committee under the chairmanship of the Prime Minister with undefined powers, to ensure a fair deal for women. Though an Empowered Committee drawn from various ministries had examined the fifty-nine recommendations of the CSWI and decided on follow-up action, none of this was initiated during the period of emergency.

From 1977 to 1980, however, the successor Janata Government (after the General Elections of 1977 in which Mrs. Gandhi defeated) initiated various policy reviews. Some of them included a search for new or alternative strategies to undo the damage done to the large majority of women through the government's neglect in the past. Even these new strategies, however, concrete as they were, did not ultimately find favour with the ruling government or its Planning Commission. There Working Groups were set up by the government on village level organizations for rural women, in the Ministry of Rural Development; on employment, in the Planning commission; and on adult education for women, in the Ministry of Education.

Another general election in 1980 brought Indira Gandhi back to power. In the same year, seven national women's organisations presented a Memorandum to the government (Indian

Women in the Eighties: Development Imperatives) which resulted in the Planning Commission's decision to include for the first time a chapter on Women and Development in the Sixth Five-Year Plan and some of the recommendations made in the Memorandum. Most of the recommendations drew on the analysis and the approaches of the three official Working Groups mentioned above, and carried political weight with the backing of the larger national women's organisations. It is from this point that intervention by the women's movement became intense and effective and a dialogue was opened up between the government and the women's movement. However, by September 1980, a new approach to the Sixth Five-Year Plan produced by the Indira Gandhi government did not reflect the exercises undertaken by the official Working Groups between 1977 and 1980, or the contents of the Memorandum.

In 1985, another national consultation was convened by the same groups of organisations to review the developments in the Women's Decade. Some of the recommendations of this conference formed a basis for discussions on new policies during the Seventh Plan period. Some were reflected in the strategies recommended by the Ministerial-level Conference of Non-aligned and Other Developing Nations hosted by the government of India in 1985.

In the post-1975 period women's organisations conscientised the wider society, worked with all classes of women, combining developmental activities with mobilisation for socio-economic rights, put a limited but successful, pressure on the state for legislative action to curb exploitation of women in matters relating to marriage, rape and workers' rights. They raised many questions specific to women and challenged patriarchal values in all spheres and structures through agitational tactics, propaganda, and lobbying. Many problems of women are class-related. Therefore, while separateness as a gender-based movement was regarded as essential to unify women vertically and horizontally, collaboration with other socioeconomic and political movements was also seen as necessary. The women's movement joined civil rights movements, struggles in rural areas, people's and workers' movements. It challenged state policies on population women's employment, environment, training and Organisation of women workers, planning for rural development, agriculture, education, and so on, and protested against atrocities against women, distorted portrayal of women in the media, and so forth. As a consequence of all these activities, the movement grew increasingly political. Its concerns have shifted to such basic issues as the state of the polity, the state of the economy, the criminalisation and communalisation of politics, communalism per se, violence and the rise of fundamentalism.

Two events, the furore over the Shah Bano case and the self-immolation or sati of a young widow in Rajasthan, brought the issues of fundamentalism and revivalism into the open.

The Shah Bano Case

The Shah Bano case threw up many issues: the rights of religious minorities, the rights of women, the role of the judiciary, and so on. Before briefly commenting on the case it would be useful to explain that Muslim Personal Law provides for mahr, a payment by the groom (or his family) to the bride (or her family) whose amount is stipulated in the marriage contract. Its intent is to represent an insurance against divorce or widowhood; thus divorced women do not have any right of maintenance beyond a limited period (iddat). However, Section 125 of the Criminal Procedure Code of India acting as a preventive against destitution and vagrancy, permits wives, including ex-wives, to seek a summary maintenance order from a court. This maintenance provision is subject to a ceiling of 500 rupees per month, depending on the economic capacity of the husband or ex-husband. The Criminal Procedure Code, being a secular law, applies to all citizens, and many Muslim women have been able to obtain this remedy through the courts. In 1985 in the case of Shah Bano, the Supreme Court, while upholding the order given by the High Court for maintenance under Section 125, commented that it was time for the government to consider drawing up a uniform civil code as directed by the Constitution (Article 44).

The opinion of the Supreme Court was interpreted by Muslim fundamentalists as an attack on minority rights and Islamic personal law. Since the political situation was already tense over the issue of the construction of a temple on a site where a mosque was located in Ayodhya, the legendary birth place of the Hindu epic hero, Rama, in pursuit of its policy of appeasing Muslim opinion, the government of Rajiv Gandhi enacted the Muslim Women's (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Bill in 1986, which deprived Muslim women of their right to maintenance under the relevant section of the secular Criminal Procedure Code. The women's movement and all progressive opinion condemned this measure as an invasion of women's constitutional rights. Several writs challenging its validity filed by various women's organisations are still pending with the Supreme Court. Other suits by young Muslim women challenging their personal law were also filed.

The Sati at Deorala

Hard on the heels of the Muslim Women's Bill, an act of sati occurred in Deorala in 1987. Hindu revivalism legitimised this heinous act by the deification and worship of the young woman, Roop Kanwar, and the formation of a Dharma Raksha Samiti (Organisation to Protect Religion). The government passed a Commission of Sati(Prevention) Act 1987 which, while penalising the glorification of sati, treats the act as suicide, placing the onus of responsibility on the victim. The half-hearted, loopholed, and hurried legislation in response to protests against the outrage was not followed up by firm implementation of the law.

In both cases women's issues became communalised and the government was seen in a poor light. Caught between political expediency, appeasement of fundamentalists, and minority rights, the main issue was totally blurred and lost.

In 1987, the government announced the appointment of a National Commission to study the problems of self-employed women and women in the informal sector. In report was published in 1988. In 1989 the recommendation for a National Commission on Women made by the CSWI in 1974 and which had not been acted upon, was finally considered. A Bill on the National Commission was introduced, then passed in 1990, and in 1992 the members of this Commission were eventually appointed. One can assume that these were attempts to pacify the women's lobby which had been badly upset by the enactment of the Muslim Women's Act and the Bill on sati.

The National Perspective Plan for Women (NPP) was an exercise internal to the government in which women's organisations had not been at all involved. The first that the women's organisations heard of it was when they were confronted with the announcement that the NPP would be placed before Parliament for endorsement as a policy. No one knew what the plan contained. The fragments of information which trickled out in the press were sufficient to disturb the women's organisations which then issued a public statement that there should be a national debate on the Plan before -it was adopted as a policy. When no response was received from the government, seven national women's organisations convene a public debate in which thirty-nine organisations from all India participated. Their comments and reactions to the NPP were basically a critique along with many constructive alternative suggestions. These were collected under the title: The National Perspective Plan from the Women's Movement, 1988-2000: A perspective from the Women's Movement.. This is the third text I proposed to discuss here.

The NPP reviews women's condition in nine areas: rural development and agriculture, employment and training, education, health and family welfare, legislation, media and communication, supportive services, political participation and decision-making, and voluntary action. It incorporates many of the recommendations of the CSWI which I have not yet been implemented. It stresses enforcement of laws, new legal safeguards, and support mechanisms for women in all spheres.

The government's awareness that women need better protection from the status and more legislative action is expressed in every chapter. Women have been viewed as a human resource and as producers making major contributions to family and national income. The Plan speaks of a national labour policy, education for development, a uniform civil code, and echoes various suggestions made by the CSWI and the women's movement in regard to family law and women workers. It even mentions measures to ensure protection from destitution, domestic violence, and non-implementation of the law. However, nowhere in the Plan is the role of government mentioned nor how much of women's situation is the consequence of the government's own policies. The NPP does not take note of the major issues which women face overall.

The women's movement's critique of the NPP is contained in the text I have referred to. It appreciated the government's admission of its failure on various fronts but felt that there are great gaps between the government's analysis of problems and recommendations is made for needed measures. The issues of resource allocation, their distribution between infrastructural development and participatory human development, and the question of accountability have been evaded. The social and political constraints, and the adverse impact of mainstream development policies are inadequately articulated in the Plan.

The Plan does not take into account the wide disparities between different sections of women, and does not clearly call for the active participation of the people in the development process from planning and resource allocation to implementation. The expressed need to bring women into the mainstream of development ignores the reality that women's marginalisation is the result of such development. Several deficiencies of the NPP were pointed out. The NPP indicates a departure from the existing 'convergence' approach in development assistance programmes. Strategies were evolved during the last two Five-Year Plans to achieve women's economic independence through additional employment opportunities, and 'social strength' through Organisation and support services. There is little evidence of this in the NPP. The proposal to distribute responsibility for monitoring and/or implementing state policies oil women at various levels appears to be contradicted by centralising strategies also mentioned in

the NPP. The women's movement stresses the need for greater decentralization of the planning process. In the case of women's development, the situational diversity calls for greater flexibility than centralised, streamlined programmes can provide.

Instead of having a Commissioner in the Department of Women and Child Development to prevent atrocities against women (and children), it would be far- better to bring legal redress within reach of all women through informal courts, legal literacy, and by making legal procedures quick and inexpensive. Penalties need to be enforced on those who do not apply the law. This would revitalise the principle of accountability and spread awareness of women' rights.

The NPP acknowledges the need to increase women's participation and representation in the political process and recommends 30 per cent reservation in legislatures, administrative bodies, and positions of power as a 'transitional' measure. It also suggests the method of co-option for filling such reserved seats in all elective bodies. This, in the opinion of the women's movement, would be a subversion of the Constitution and all democratic norms.⁷ The CSWI had recommended the promotion of genuine representative women's bodies at the loaves level of the representative structures for wider participation, articulation of women's concerns, and the emergence of genuine leadership. Co-option would be a dangerous threat to the future of democracy.

Strategies and policies of the government continue to subvert employment Opportunities. There is ample evidence that the government has contributed to the expansion of the unorganized sector. The participatory right of poor working women in trade unions and struggles to articulate their problems were sought to be denied by certain recent measures of the government (e.g. Hospitals and Other Institutions Bill 1988, which attempted to deny the basic rights of workers under labour- laws; withdrawal of the Minimum Wages Notification for garment workers in Gujarat and incentives provided to employers in the Export Promotion Zones). Several recommendations of various working groups, and of women's organisations, and various laws continue to be unimplemented.

The NPP, in short, appears to believe that by creating a few top-heavy structures and co-opting women into decision-making bodies, an immense, complex problem involving women's subordination, inequality in power and resources, and active opposition from powerful and organised forces, can be solved.

The women's organisations representing the women's movement demanded the ractification by the government of the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, as also adoption of Article 2 of the Convention as part

of our Constitution. The women's movement also demanded the recognition of the right to work as a fundamental right.

The other demand of the women's movement was for the establishment of statutory autonomous Commissions on Women at the Centre and the States as recommended by the CSWI. The shape and powers of these commissions were outlined so that they could function as watchdog bodies with rights to question, suggest, and censure. Further, 30 per cent reservation for women in local government institutions and planning groups should be assured with special emphasis on representation of women from the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. These seats are to be filled by election, not co-option. Other critical demands were: allocation of resources for women's development within sectors; free compulsory elementary education; widespread child care; land reform, new laws, implementation of all laws; cessation of all anti-labour and anti-democratic measures of the state; more accountability, sensitisation of educators and members of government at all levels to women's issues; Dissociation of women's organisations in the enforcement of laws for the protection of women and at different levels of planning.

As the NPP was formulated without discussion and debate, the women's movement termed it an undemocratic exercise. The women's movement's critique of the NPP was a critique of the government-unlike the CSWI's Report, which was an investigative analysis that divided the blame. To this extent the critique is a political document and proof of the increasingly political nature of the women's movement.

Conclusion

An analysis of these three documents shows that Indian women have been associated to a greater degree with political processes in the wider society and less with the formal political system and with government. In the twentieth century they broke the mould of the traditional woman by joining the national movement in their thousands. Simultaneously, the first wave of the women's movement fought for access to equal rights including political and civic rights for women as individuals and social beings. Equality was the dream of the women's Sub-Committee of the NPC. The Constitution guaranteed equal rights but in practice women did not experience equality. As the second report that of the CSWI has shown, women have not been able to get into mainstream or formal politics, into decision-making or representative structures on account of the constraints of poverty, illiteracy, ill health, traditional attitudes in society, inequality in class, status and power.

Secondly, over time the political leadership grew away from the promises made to women in the nationalist era. Thirdly, the entire social system and state structure followed a particular path of growth in the course of which the whole question of gender equality was jettisoned. The pattern of development, especially economic development and changing social institutions, did not eliminate the stranglehold of patriarchy. Instead, the structures of patriarchy including the state, the community, and the household, have been strengthened through the processes of development.

Macro- and micro-level studies in India have pointed out that although socio-economic development depends to a certain extent on the quality of natural as well as human resources, the root causes of poverty are often man-made. These include economic policies, political factors, and sociocultural norms. Interacting with one another they not only reinforce poverty but inequality. In addition, the so-called beneficiaries of development have to contend with ever-increasing violence in society caused by divisions based on class, community ethic, and religious separatism. All these trends have affected women far more adversely than men. Gender bias in pernicious forms, unfortunately encouraged by the state in various ways, has weakened the social and economic position of women. Specifically, male bias in development thinking, planning, and implementation has affected women's position in the family, the community, and society. Women perform the lion's share of the work on a national scale but are unequal in terms of benefits, entitlements, and allocation of resources. The question therefore seems to be not whether women should be integrated into development and existing structures but whether structures and strategies should be changed in order to benefit women.

Institutions based on religious and social traditions are opposed to woman's equality, dignity, and status. Women's rights have been increasingly subjected to social and religious, oppression to such an extent that they are unable to avail of the minimum protection given to them under existing secular civil and criminal laws. Clear examples are the revival of sati, 'witch hunting' in rural areas, the resistance to the prohibition of dowry and a woman's right to maintenance. Crimes against women such as rape, dowry murder, female foeticide, and child prostitution are widespread, affecting all classes. The increase in brutality and force are related to consumerism, religious revivalism, and the hardening of feudal, sexist, and patriarchal values in society. In the media-the cinema and TV mainly - women are portrayed either as powerless commodities or parasitical consumers. Projecting such stereotypes reinforces the influence of patriarchal values, dangerous when directed towards a vast illiterate audience. These; perverse trends have been creating a wide dispersal of anti-women values. Most women thus live in a state of threat and reprisal, coercion and fear.

It is the duty of the state 'to ensure that its citizens' rights and dignity are not violated by its own laws or by other citizens. No state should benefit from the violation, abuse or neglect by its own agents or by others, of the rights of its citizens. But in reality, all states violate citizens' rights because of their failure to create real and reliable equity and equality for the female 'sex' (Ashworth, 1986). The Indian state is not gender neutral, whatever its protestations. Society and state are influenced by patriarchal values and atrocities against women are being used as instruments of political action. The basic objective underlying the demand for statutory autonomous commissions on women is the restoration of the rule of law breached also by the government. Law is the only powerful instrument to support women's status, and must be strengthened, and the Constitution must be upheld. In placing this emphasis the women's movement of today has not veered from the perspective of the women's Sub-Committee and the CSWI. At the same time, the women's movement recognises that women's political participation is central to the struggle against patriarchy and for women's emancipation.

It is, appropriate to remember what Gandhi said about women's role in society. He had great faith in the women of India: in their forbearance, capacity for sacrifice, dedication to the family, and steadfastness. Gandhi went even further than the 1931 Congress Declaration on Fundamental Rights in viewing political and legal equality for women as only the beginning.

Women must have votes and an equal legal status. But the problem does not end there. It only commences at the point where women begin to affect the political deliberations of the nation.⁸

NOTES

1. Caste and class are, historically, closely interlinked, acquiring special significance in the nineteenth century consequent upon the development of 'stunted capitalism' specific to colonial India. See Bipan Chandra (1979).

2. Under Articles 341 and 342 of the Indian Constitution, certain castes and tribes, specified by public notification, have been deemed to be Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. These categories were and still are among the poorest and most backward sections of Indian society. Considered unclean, hence untouchable, and outside the pale of the caste system, the Scheduled Castes -were subjected to various

types of discrimination ranging from physical avoidance to exclusion from temples. The tribes of India are diverse, spread out, and isolated, their customs and culture different from those of the mainstream. Hindered in their development by socioeconomic and cultural factors, these categories receive protection under provisions of the Constitution and special laws which safeguard their civil rights and representation in various spheres, such as education, employment, and elected bodies.

3. See National Commission on Self-employed Women and Women in the Informal Sector, *Shram Shakti* (1988) for a detailed account of the working lives of women in the poorest groups. For an excellent documentation of the implications of development for Indian women (for the period 1947-74), refer to Government of India (1974). For the post - 1975 period, see among other studies, Desai and Krishnaraj (1987), and Desai and Patel (1985).

4. The term 'subaltern' implies the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender, and office or any other way. See Guha (1982).

5. This term refers to the group of government services at the top of the hierarchy of services. Class I services are characterised by greater power, prestige, remuneration, and scale of benefits. Recruitment is made through open competitive examinations to draw young people of merit and ability into the bureaucracy to become decision-makers in due course.

6. Jaya Prakash Narayan) popularly known as J.P., was an illustrious freedom fighter who occupied the position of an elder statesman in Indian politics. A Gandhian and a socialist, he did not aspire to public office but exerted himself outside the realm of party and power politics, speaking out for greater popular participation and the protection of democratic principles in a state that was becoming increasingly centralised. The term 'Total Revolution' is Marxist in origin, is ingrained in Gandhi's political thought, and has taken a place in Indian political discourse. The concept connoted for J.P. a vision of systemic change and a new social and economic order to be achieved by non-violent mass action. In the early 1970s, the Indian state faced a crisis and popular discontent challenged the legitimacy of the prevailing system. In 1974, young people in Gujarat and Bihar turned to J.P. for leadership. The movement he led was treated as a law and order problem and ended with his imprisonment and the imposition of a political emergency in 1975 by the Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi. When released in late 1975, J.P. was a very sick man and died four years later in 1979. Suggested readings on his life and thought are: Bimal Prasad (1992), Selbourne (1985), Ostergaard (1985).

6. Whereas a nomination is an act of an authority which has the power to do so, co-option is a collective decision of a democratically constituted committee, board, commission, or official group whereby groups or interests which have not succeeded in getting representation (through the democratic process implied above) are given representation. Although the two processes of selection are different, their objective is often the same. The number or percentage of seats 'reserved' for co-option may vary, depending on the size of the body, its purpose, and the population it represent and serves. In India, the alternative of co-option is provided as a device while representatives from the weaker sections of society, such as women, Scheduled Castes, and Scheduled Tribes, who may fail to be elected, may be given a voice had a place in representative institutions, particularly at the local level. However, in practice, this is often misused or manipulated in such a way that co-option smacks of arbitrariness and high-handedness. Through co-option, individuals or groups often maintain dominance and control over elected assemblies. Where this is a standard practice, democratic norms are, obviously, subverted. Reservation is a form of affirmative action for weaker groups and is utilised generally during the electoral process, co-option is resorted to after elections to redress any imbalance that may have resulted.

8. Young India, 17 Oct. 1929.