

SHARED ASPIRATIONS, FRAGMENTED REALITIES CONTEMPORARY WOMEN'S MOVEMENT IN INDIA ITS DIALECTICS AND DILEMMAS

Kumud Sharma

Women's Movement Enters a New Phase in 70s

The resurgence of women's movement in the 70's which has been termed as the 'new wave' or this 'second wave' of women's struggles, has raised many issues. In what ways does it differ from the earlier movements? Which particular issues concern contemporary women's movement? What are the new strategies of mobilisation for socio-economic change? Women are continuously searching for answers through an understanding of the specific nature of their oppression and the social, cultural, economic and political context within which the issues need to be addressed. They are participating in agitational politics in response to various issues in contemporary socio-economic context, at the same time challenging old myths and their present manifestations.

The present paper basically confirms itself to the contemporary women's movements in India. The last decade saw some positive advances in women's movement and emergence of a new feminist consciousness after two decades of what some scholars maintain, "passivity of women's organisation". Women's movement as it currently unfolds itself beyond its traditional concerns with legislation, education and political participation, with multiplicity of forms, diversity of concerns, motivation and ideological orientation brings together several perspectives and raises several issues. The newly emerged women's groups signify an ideological shift in the analysis and understanding of women's issues, breaking out of the limited perspective of 'charity' and 'social work' of some of the older women's organisations in the post-independence period. There is also a shift in orientation of pioneer women's organisations which were set up during the freedom struggle.

Women's role in the national liberation struggle gave birth to several women's organisations which articulated the debate on women's question and its essential outcome was constitutional equality and the legislative amendments in Hindu laws in the 50's. Gender equality as an operative principle was never examined in the context of emergent nation state and its development plans and perspective. A panel discussion on Indian Women and Nationalism while re-examining available literature on women's participation in liberation movements from women's perspective, and the need for a united front in the mass movement, left many contradictions in

ideologies and visions for the future unresolved within the nationalist debates, which now need to be examined afresh. **The women's question and the implications of the principle of gender equality adopted in the Fundamental rights Resolution of 1931, represents one of the most important of these unresolved debates".¹**

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

The issues that women's groups have taken are wide ranging such as health, law, access to land and other productive resources, environmental degradation, media, rape, violence, dowry deaths, sati, wife beating, alcoholism, trafficking, police atrocities, prostitution, devdasi, women prisoners, communal and caste conflicts and gange rape of tribal and dalit women. Wide ranging issues provide space for participation to different groups of women. Agitations since 70's on issues such as dowry/rape/crime and violence against women, have also shown the vital role played by information generation, sharing and dissemination by the women's movement and the media and the need for joint action. Acts of violence against women (Mathura rape case, Sudha Goel dowry murder case, Deorala Sati incidence) have drawn so much attention and emerged as rallying point for women's groups, rather than day to day oppression of millions of women in their homes and workplaces. A sustained campaign against the 'sexist media' and finding new and alternative ways to create messages, communicate and mobilise is an important aspect of issue based agitation 'street plays, skits, poster campaigns, songs and mobile exhibitions, newsletters, women's studies journals etc.).

Davies thinks that amongst all the third World Countries India with its incredibly complex pattern of sex, class and caste oppression, appears to have produced the one women's movement which is truly anti-patriarchal and anti-capitalist in character. It is clear from recent material coming out of Asia and Latin America, that more and more sexuality is becoming a leading issue among Third World women and with it a new debate about sexism, racism, imperialism and their relationship to patriarchy is opening up".²

Several factors have contributed to the widening of debate on women's issues in India. The reassessment of the challenges of growth, development and equity issues from women's perceptive has generated interesting

debates on dimensions and causes of gender inequality. Growth of women's studies, women and development debate, reconstruction and reinterpretation of 'her own history' her identity, her subjectivity, have all influenced the dialectics of the women's movement and its agenda for action. The connections between knowledge and practice are always problematic particularly within a complex and diverse society, however, the construction of social reality of women as an oppressed group, provides a point of departure.

The Development Crisis, State and the Women's Movement

The debate on development crisis and crisis in key social institutions, and a critique of growth models and their national and international dimensions, and analysis of new inequalities generated by the pattern of development and new forms of exploitation emanating from world economic systems, have given a new direction to women's movement. The 'women in development' literature which began exploring and explaining the realities of women's lives and inter-connections between macro-processes of development and women's disadvantaged situation, found many areas of common concern i.e. impact of technological changes on women's work and income, women and migration, female headed households, women in the informal sector and in home-based production, impact of industrialisation strategies (particularly in export oriented industries), on women, women and environmental degradation etc.

The official ideology of a 'soft state' committed to women's equality and development, occasionally get expressed in various policy statements, however, the social reality of the majority of women presents sharp contrast to stated policy objectives.³

Strategies of agricultural and industrial development and assumptions underlying government's policies and programmes, have strengthened patriarchal norms and class interests. The increasing tensions and conflicts along religious, ethnic, caste and class divide are associated with modernising state. However, alongside these tensions the laissez faire state as a mediator has not hesitated in passing progressive legislation (without effective enforcement) and the last decade has witnessed government hijacking several issues raised by women's groups which does have a depoliticising effect. In 1988 the Government prepared a National Perspective Plan for women (1988-2000 A.D.) which promises a long-term and holistic approach to women's issues. The new Panchayati Raj bill now pending before the Parliament promises reservations of 30 per cent seats for women in all Panchayati Raj institutions. These overtures do provide space for women, however, the dichotomy between the system committed to theoretical equality of gender and the political economy with its emphasis on

growth and modernisation which sharpens class and gender inequalities, remains unresolved.

The concern for issues of marginalised groups of tribals, landless and poor rural and urban women, women in the informal sector and mobilising them around survival issues such as fuel, fodder, water, forest dwellers rights, minimum wages, working conditions, sexual exploitation by rural rich, bondedness, indebtedness etc., separates the contemporary movement from the earlier movement by taking women's issues into new areas of concern. In the process, the relationship between educated, articulate middle class women acting as 'catalysts' and mobilisers in rural and urban areas, is also changing.

The concept of 'grass roots organisations' of rural and urban poor women as participatory and mobilising mechanisms has emerged from the critiques of development models and the blindness to gender dimension in development policies and programmes. Women's research and action groups have brought to focus the administrative and bureaucratic bottlenecks, leakages in the benefits reaching to poor, corruption, delays etc. and the need for vigilant and strong organisation of producers and beneficiaries. Grassroots organisation earlier seen as 'delivery mechanisms' are now seen as 'participatory and mobilising mechanism' to increase women's visibility and bargaining power.

The crisis of rural and urban poverty has generated several responses from voluntary action groups and provides an interesting experience about the roles and perceptions of such groups in mobilising the poor women and questions relating to form, content and methodology of grassroots organisations. Do such organisations whose critical role is being recognised now both by bureaucracy and the social action groups, besides increasing women's visibility to development planners and administrators, also 'empower' them? Do they equip women in better understanding their oppression and in trying to combat pressures from the family community and the exploitative power structure? It is also argued that while women share many of the problems of the poor in general there are many issues which are female specific and to deal with such issues, women need to organise separately.

There are two distinct view points about middle class 'catalysts' mobilising the rural and urban poor. Some women's organisations believe that mobilising women for economic development is critical as it is likely to help them challenge the forces of oppression. They also believe that search for more effective strategies and instruments for women's development, has opened up a line of communication between the government, researchers and activists. The process of interaction has helped to improve the conceptualisation of women's needs, problems, roles and potentialities within the Government, although it is highly uneven and there is still lack of

clear understanding, lethargy and misinformation at the conceptual and implementation level. Insufficient understanding of the complex relationship between the achievement of policy objectives and women's active participation has hampered formulation of effective policies and programmes. The strategy of involving voluntary agencies in the implementation of anti-poverty and Minimum Needs Programme definitely assumes that such programmes should build on people's initiative and participation. Government's recognition and development assistance to grassroots groups creates a dilemma for such organisations as they are faced by a contradiction between their interests and state policies.

Some advocates of 'participatory development' have a negative view of the role of bureaucracy. There are social action groups which believe that "grassroot participatory organisations", are not something which the Government can promote. They mobilise women for self-initiated collective action. Some of them combine mobilisation with development action and see such action as 'empowering strategy' by enabling women to sustain such struggles, while other support women's mobilisation for struggle but do not support the idea of women forming a separate forum to articulate their problems as women, and believe that women's issues need to be raised within all social and democratic movements. There is no doubt that there is a difference between grassroots organisations promoted by the Government, or by some old fashioned women's organisations who want to 'do something' for the deprived women, and grassroot organisations promoted by committed catalysts.

The role of such 'catalysts' has also come in for considerable scrutiny and criticism. The question of perspectives, leadership and their relationship with local organisations and leaders, funds (from both national and international agencies), issues of credibility and accountability, have been intensely debated. It is argued that in order to play the catalysts' role, such organisations need to be independent of government and yet influence policy matters. NGOs receiving foreign funds face another dilemma, as such organisations are vulnerable to adverse propaganda. To be effective, catalysts need to have credibility and trust of the people. While several of these issues related to 'grassroot experiments' remain unresolved, the growth of such pressure groups has definitely contributed to the debate on mobilisation strategies and the role of such organisations as a counter-force. There are, however, some dissenting voices. Kalpagam warns against such organisations "often containing workers militancy and unrest and may have a strong depoliticising trend in the women's movement. More often than not many of these 'women in development' projects supported by government and some non-government organisations (still steeped in the tradition of charity and relief) deteriorate into relief operations ignoring women's right to access to the productive resources".

A panel discussion on “women, informal sector and forms of struggle”, while stressing the need to understand the problems of women within the macro level development and industrialisation policies, pointed out that different forms of organisations are needed to tackle the multidimensional problems of workers in the informal sector such as wages, credit, raw material, marketing, housing, child care etc. Jhabwalas argues that “such organisations need to struggle at three levels i.e. direction, fighting for these services with state agencies and using the legal structures and thirdly by bringing about policy changes, however, basic to all these strategies is to organise these workers.”⁵

The interaction of women’s struggle in the informal sector with other forms of worker’s struggle has emerged as one of the important issue. While exclusive concentration on economic issues may take the movement away from ideological and political issue, however, the social reality of their day to day lives results in the pre-occupation with the former. Mathew feels that “the widening of the dimension of women’s question, has created an incompatibility between political mobilisation and economic action. This may possibly be the reason for the apparent regression in the women’s movement”. He thinks that “combining politicisation and economism is a difficult task, where the level of consciousness of workers has not attained a certain level.”⁶

While working women have always disproved the notion of women’s domesticity and passivity, still there is a common view among some women’s organisation that poor women lack awareness about their rights and need conscious-raising. Developing consciousness important as it is, has not helped many women to fight against the oppressive conditions as they visualise no options. The contradictions in Indian traditions where women face both reverence and repression, idealisation and exploitation, further blunt the sensitivity about women’s oppression.

The concentration of women workers in the informal sector makes it imperative that we effectively combine the practical interests of these groups with strategic gender issues and not loose important development during the decade was the growing importance and emphasis on problems of women in the informal sector and need to mobilise them by learning to contact each other, evolving methods of dealing with immediate problems and working out strategies for dealing with larger issues. These small group actions have helped to develop alternative thinking outside the given structures. ‘Empowering Women’ through development action, thus strengthening their economic base and their bargaining power is reflected in organisations like SEWA and WWF.

Recently the National Commission on Self-Employed Women and Women in Informal Sector constituted by the Government of India, submitted its report with a focus on unprotected women labour in poverty sector. In the preface

the Chairperson of the Commission Ms. Ela Bhatt writes, "I learnt that these women are better fighters against poverty than their men, have more calculative, stable, forward looking strategies to deal with their own environment, yet the women remain poorer Awareness has spread, though slowly The new opportunities are gradually catching their attention. In every group that we met, there were one or two bright, articulate, defiant young women ready to act as catalysts for better futureIf left to women's groups and to poor women's own efforts, it is unlikely that such organisations will come up that soon and in large numbers to make a significant dent on the situation of these women. That is why the Commission has recommended to the Government to actively help initiated and maintain a network of grassroot level organisations. It is ironic that one is asking the state to support a machinery to promote action for change in state policies, but we have done it with great hope on the strength of the **Forward of our Seventh Plan stating that Development is basically about....**"⁷

Autonomous Women's Groups -The Dilemma of Building a Broad Based Movement

Women's participation in agitational policies in the late 70's and 80's and the emergence of autonomous women's groups in response to various issues have contributed to an interesting debate on theoretical, organisational and ideological perspectives of various women's groups and action strategies for dealing with issues of gender inequality, women's oppression and exploitation. Entry of the voices of middle class women, making public issues of what was so far strictly within the private domain of the family, led to a questioning of the entire conceptualisation of family and the ideological dimension of women's oppression.

The last decade saw the struggle for women's rights taken to ideological realms, to those issues which political parties, trade unions and other democratic progressive organisations did not consider as their objectives for example issues of domestic violence, crime against women, sexual harassment, rape, dowry deaths etc. It also witnessed the emergence of 'autonomous women's groups.'

What the term 'autonomous women's groups' mean? In what ways they are different from older national women's organisations! Desai and Patel think that "autonomous women's groups have been fighting for women's issues from a totally different perspective in a militant manner and articulating roots of women's oppression". Autonomy here is understood in terms of an independent existence from a political party, government umbrella or outside any form of political aegis, but at the same time not depoliticising women's question. The members of these organisations are not apolitical. They firmly believe that "the leadership of present women's movement is in

the hands of the young, dedicated, courageous, theoretically oriented educated middle class women, some of them have opted out of mass based organisations because their experience showed that though such organisations were sensitive to the problems of poor, denounced casteism and communalism talked of fighting oppression and exploitation of the toiling masses, but were totally insensitive to the oppression of women and were perpetuating patriarchal norms and forms in both the political and the personal sphere”.⁸

In several instances women’s organisations have emerged from women’s participation in broader peasants’ and workers’ movements as during the course of their struggles women realised their own constraints and oppression. A sizeable amount of literature has grown on the militancy of working class women during the struggles. However, that did not sweep aside the traditional patriarchal values within these organisations. The experiences of women activists have thrown up interesting issues in the current debate on ‘autonomous’ women’s organisations. Illina Sen writing about the experiences of Mahila Mukti Morcha in Madhya Pradesh says “women’s position in Mahila Mukti Morcha has always been from the stand point of the working class women, with greater focus on class rather than sex. The issues have been class and situation specific although in some of the criticisms of traditional trade union activities by women such as the failure of women to emerge into movement’s leadership and in building up the understanding about issues of women and mechanisation etc., there was an awareness of the disadvantaged position of women within the trade union movement. However, patriarchy per se is never posited as the main contradiction in the consciousness of the Mahila Mukti Morcha leadership or in the general body of the union. They avoid the question of unequal power relations within the working class because the debate on how far to take women’s question has never been resolved satisfactorily at the level of the movement leadership. Where both husband and wife are the member of the trade union, highlighting unequal power relations between them is considered as weakening rather than strengthening the movement”.⁹

In a coal mining area, describing the heroic struggle of women workers Mitra observes, that “some women have come to recognise the fundamental problems of dichotomous attitudes within workers’ and peasants’ organisations and the need to struggle for greater control over issues related to women workers per se”.¹⁰

Formal or institutionalised politics is still male dominated. Several women activists have found that trade unions have not addressed themselves to issues like discrimination against women in recruitment, promotions, division of labour in jobs and training, equal wages, maternity benefit and retrenchment etc. A case study by Jhabvala shows that while women were the most loyal workers of the Textile Labour Association, Ahmedabad, it colluded with the management in retaining their jobs and retrenching

women workers.¹¹ Patel also talks about the attitude of male trade unionists which she finds no different than the attitude of the management to women workers.¹²

The experiences of activists organising women separately (SEWA, WWF, Annapurna) and within larger movements (Shramik Sangathna, Dhulia, Chattisgarh Mines Shramik Sangh, Chipko Andolan, Chatra Yuva Sangharsh Vahini in Bodh Gaya struggles etc.), have been an area of lively debate. The Report of the National commission on Self-Employed Women says “as the trade union movements became stronger, the workers became more organised and wrested considerable concessions for themselves..... However, poor working women gained little if anything at all. As the trade unions became politically powerful, the participation of women decreased not only within the trade unions but within the organised workforce itselfIt was after 1975 and with the rise of women’s movement, that the labour movement has very slowly begun to try and reorganise these women”. SEWA itself an offshoot of Textile Labour Association, broke off from its parent organisation because the male activist thought it was too assertive regarding issues of poor women”.¹³

The experiences of Shramik Sangathna in Maharashtra, Chattisgarh Mine Workers Association, Madhya Pradesh and several workers and peasant organisations, indicate that even within the larger struggles women were organising separately as they often have different priorities. In Chipko movement it has come out quite clearly where women wanted fuel and fodder trees while men wanted trees which can generated cash. A problem universally faced by poor women and an issue against which they have continued to organise is alcoholism and wife abuse by drunken husbands. Nalini Nayak in her book on “Struggle within Struggle” describes women’s active role in fisher folk’s struggle.

All organised political groups have taken up issues of wages, working conditions etc., but women workers have to struggle at both material and ideological level. At the level of political practice, Kalpagam argues that “there has been a conflict between the organised left and autonomous left groups. The former accusing the latter of divisiveness in the working class movement and the latter accusing the left of not concerning itself with large masses of workers”.¹⁴ In a hard hitting argument against the current trend in the autonomous women’s movement, authors of a paper say, “Enthusiastic feminists who would like to see the results of liberation here and now `autonomously’ of people’s movement, impose two caricatures on those who believe that women’s liberation (i) that the resolution of the women’s question is postponed to the post-revolutionary period; and (ii) in countries where socialist revolution has taken place, the women’s question has not been resolved, meaning thereby that social change by no means ensures women’s emancipation.

According to these authors both these are _____ because there is no question of conscious of their position in society and reasons for their daily oppression and have to daily organise and struggle. It is only who women and men are organised in broader movements that women's demands earn attention and credibility. Secondly, the struggle for women's emancipation has in fact to be in the post revolutionary period, and is an important platform for the mobilisation of an autonomous movement of women which will safeguard the interests of all women. Such a movement in the absence of a socio-economic base to sustain it is likely to degenerate into a movement controlled by the elite women and a movement of which the long term ____ goals will be defined by this controlling group In specific social contexts which are, exploitative, the abstract preoccupation with rights of women, boils down to the rights of elite women".¹⁵

Their analysis does not see the contradictions between the interests of women and men. While the argument against women's groups following women's issues in a narrow sense and thus isolating and marginalising themselves, are strong, the dilemma they face concerning their relationship with other democratic movements and making necessary alignment without compromising their autonomy and by not losing sight of gender dimensions remains unresolved. The issue has been raised repeatedly however, the experience of many activists who have earlier worked with the formal political organisations, has forced them to abandon the logic that workers and peasant organisations will automatically take up women's rights issues particularly those which concern them as women.

During the UNDW, setting up of women's wing within parties and trade unions, support for women's organisation under governmental activities and programmes and emphasis on grassroot organisations of poor rural and urban women, has further complicated the scenario. The case for separate women's organisations has remained strong, however, the diversity in such organisations in terms of activity, leadership, organisational forms, resources, issues and strategies and level of politicisation, raises several questions.

Gail Omvedt discussing the role of middle-class, Marxist `socialist-feminist organisation' in building a broad-based women's movement in India, observed that "it is important not to identify them with the entire women's movement - they are not grassroots mass organisations. At the same time I believe that they have an important role to play". She believes that the process of building up a genuine women's movement will require a leadership which does not come from a `women's group' but from a political organisation including both men and women. Similarly, she thinks that grassroots organisation will for a long time remain limited to enclaves and one need to think of ways to direct and influence the growing turmoil among women at a mass level. Mobilising women around economic issue or coming together specific issues (dowry, rape etc.) is by itself insufficient. The need

is to link all these together and build up a working class and liberationist consciousness.¹⁶

Issue based agitations all over the country, do they hold a promise for a genuinely broad based women's movement? Dangers of over concentration on legislative measures or short term militancy which fails to make a dent in the larger structures and does not have a long term perspective, will it dampen the enthusiasm? About 'protest politics', Gerda Lerner says "women not only have to react to situations and turn more to picking up evidences of victimisation but also recover the creativity with which they have shaped and turned the historic situation".

Kishwar while arguing for the emergence and spread of autonomous women's organisation, emphasises that "they should not narrow down the scope of their politics to a select women's issues (rape, dowry, abortion, discrimination in wages and marriage laws) thus rendering themselves powerless if they want to restructure every aspect of our society and remove various causes and forms of oppression. By confining ourselves to women's issue we marginalise ourselves to the process of decision-making. First organising as women and then joining hands with other groups makes us more than a women's interest groups because women as half the oppressed groups in all these groups need to take an active part in all these movements as well as in struggle for their own rights".¹⁷

Besides ideological differences, fragmentation within autonomous groups poses a serious challenge. The issue which keeps surfacing is the divide between activists and non-activists, between urban middle class dominated groups focussing more on domestic violence and oppression within the family and grassroots organisation of urban and rural poor struggling against the pressures of survival and cannot be separated from gender issues. Issues of poverty, landlessness, indebtedness, bondage etc. are as much class issues as gender issues as women are doubly oppressed and more adversely affected than men.

An analysis of women in youth and students' struggle pointed out that the divide between activists and non-activists is not only of class and culture but also one of lack of communication between English speaking upper and middle class women and the majority of Hindi speaking lower middle class women. The barrier is not only of language, dress, life style etc. but also one of perception, political expression focus of their struggle (patriarchy, sexuality etc.) and idiom of protests and it makes it difficult for the latter to relate to them.....Another problem is that of an arrogance and lack of sensitivity on the part of activists while dealing with other women and refusal to understand the every day pressures on these women and their coping mechanisms."¹⁸

In a month of self-reflection Patel, Sujata and Padma recount that the organisational issues confronting the 'Forum against Rape', are how to deal with competition within ourselves and how to overcome barriers of class and culture. They feel that "autonomous women's groups are faced with the contradictions between their newly realised power in the struggle against women's subordination and their own position as women within home and society. It has led to redefining the goals of class movement, as women's question and class questions re-interlinked, however, such organisations will have to fight the twin dangers of separatism i.e. cutting off women's movements from an overall movement to change society and at the same time not getting sucked into the framework of the existing left, losing our goals and autonomy".¹⁹

Besides the danger of fragmentation within autonomous groups there are tensions between those formally associated with political groups and those concerned with feminist politics. The very word feminism evokes different reactions and has various levels of understanding and political reaction. While some women are apologetic in using the word 'feminism' others feel that it needs to be redefined in the Indian context as the existential reality of women here poses a whole set of different issues. The latter group feels that the former groups has imbibed the considerable false propaganda generated by the controlled media against 'feminists' and 'feminism' with the result that feminists are dismissed as middle class, 'westernised' and rootless women out to destroy the family institution. Arguing that 'feminism' does not derive its theoretical formulation they define feminism as "an awareness of women's oppression and exploitation in society, at work and within the family and conscious action by women and men to change this situation". It is argued that "the main difference between earlier feminists and present day ones is that earlier they struggled for the democratic rights of women i.e. education, employment, right to property, right to vote etc. while today they have gone beyond mere legal reforms and are working towards the emancipation of women".²⁰

Are these divide real? How do women overcome the class, caste and other divide within themselves? Or despite varying emphasis on issues concerning women in different classes and contexts, it is possible to forge alliances and develop a political perspective?

The current scenario within women's movement is marked by a variety of organisations, national, regional, grassroots, women's units within trade unions and political parties, issued-based informal groups etc. with different ideological orientations and priorities. They came together on specific issues and have formed joint fronts on issues like dowry murders, rape, sati etc. Recently in Delhi two such forums have come into existence on the issue of Sati i.e. Joint Action Committee Against Sati (includes 54 organisations) and Sati Virodhi Sangharsh Manch (includes 9 organistions). Sometimes radicals and liberals find themselves on the same side of the issue. Are

these organisations mutually supportive or are there undercurrents of antagonisms?

Participants in a panel discussion generally agreed that “women’s movement today faces the same situation where the needs of joint action in the interest of women evokes ideological controversies and compromises which is bound to affect the quality of perspectives, strategies and methods of mobilisation or of seeking alliances”.²¹

The present trends within women’s movement need a deeper analysis and concerted action to synthesise different experiences of women in different situations to develop a broad-based women’s movement. The internal divisions and politics in which several groups are involved, need to be debated and solutions found. The issues of autonomous women’s organisations and their relationship with broader social and democratic movements, the fear of isolation and fragmentation issues of organisational structure and strategies are all crucial questions for the contemporary women’s movement. The question which also needs to be addressed, is how to combine poverty, illiteracy and survival issues which affect both men and women with the specificity of women’s oppression and the need to mobilise women separately.

Women’s Organisation and Legal Activism

Law is an important instrument for social change and has been on the agenda for struggle. Concerted action was taken up by women’s organisations for not only pressing for legislative changes but also in challenging inequitable laws. The nationwide agitation to reopen the Mathura rape case in the Supreme Court and review of the existing Rape Laws was a sequel to an open letter written by four senior persons from the legal profession.²² The Mathura case later, became the symbol for mobilising against sexual oppression of women particularly from the lower caste/class groups who became victims of custodial rape, gang rape and sexual harassment during caste and communal conflicts. Women from different background and ideologies came together. In Bombay, Forum Against Rape was formed and several women’s organisations in different cities, launched a sustained agitation against crime and violence perpetrated on women. A commentator noted that the first women-specific report and the only one where the Government asked the Law Commission to study the problem with the objective of removing the inadequacies, was the one dealing with the offence of rape. The Commission took note of various points raised by women’s organisations and activists and hold discussions with them before finalising its recommendations. The Commission suggested not only amending the substantive law, but also procedure and evidence part of it.²³

In 1983 the Criminal Law Amendment Act was passed which makes revealing the identity of rape victim an offence (which women's groups feel makes the task of organising campaigns difficult). For the first time the amended Act included 'custodial rape' (rape by superintendents of remand homes, hospitals, prisons and of women in police custody) as a new category of offence where the burden of proof lies with the man accused of rape.

Another issue which has witnessed sustained campaign over a period of time was of 'dowry murders'. A combined forum of several women's organisations and other civil rights groups and progressive organisations in Delhi called "Dahej Virodhi Chetna Manch" and organisations in major cities have been campaigning through protest, demonstration, discussions, street theatre, posters etc. to focus on domestic violence against women and its extreme manifestation in dowry deaths. The violence against women within the confines of home has proved the most difficult issue to tackle, and has been the issue on which sustained efforts have been made.

In 1981 a Joint Select Committee of Parliament was appointed to look into the problem. The Law Commission on its own initiative also conducted an enquiry into dowry deaths and submitted the report in 1983 making comprehensive recommendation not only on how the substantive law on Dowry should be changed but more important what changes are necessary in the Evidence Act to facilitate prosecutions against the person committing the murder. The Commission mentioned that the reason for its taking up this issue *suo motto* is "an alarming increase in the number of case in which married women die in circumstances which are highly suspicious. The Report continued "The crimes that lead to dowry deaths are almost invariably committed within the safe precincts of a residential house proof of the cause of death is thus rendered an arduous task because of scanty available evidence".²⁴

Despite these efforts no initiative was forthcoming from the Government and women's organisation were pressing for an amendment in the Dowry (Prohibition) Act 1961. In 1984 a Bill was introduced which contained none of the recommendations of the Joint Select Committee or of the Law Commission. Several women's organisations and civil rights organisations held meetings to discuss the Bill and prepared a note suggesting amendments in the Bill. The memorandum while suggesting specific additions and modifications in the Joint Select Committee's recommendations, argued that they display a genuine and realistic attempt to grapple with the problem of dowry with all its social, economic and political implications. Non-inclusion of some of the most vital recommendations of the Joint Select committee in the present Bill, defeats the basic objective of the amendment and ignores the active and informed social movement which has preceded the introduction of this amendment before Parliament".²⁵

The 1983 Criminal Law (Amendment) Act made some crucial amendments in the Indian Penal Code of the criminal procedure and the Indian Evidence Act making cruelty (both mental and physical) and abatement to suicide by the husband and his relatives, punishable with imprisonment upto 3 years with fine. In case of an unnatural death of a woman within 7 years of marriage, the Act provides for an enquiry by a police officer. Investigation carried out by women's organisations on reported cases of suicides or accidents of newly married women reveal the gravity of the problem.

The issue of 'dowry murders' brought in forcefully voices of middle and upper class women who earlier did not identify with the feminist movement. Dowry deaths took a heavy toll. The Ministry for Home Affairs admitted in the Parliament of increasing incidence of dowry deaths and crime against women during the last decade. In 1986, 7158 cases of rape, 1285 cases of dowry deaths, 16203 cases of molestation, 8326 cases of kidnapping of women and girls were reported. It was also reported in the Rajya Sabha (Upper House) that since 1982, 4400 Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe women were raped. The data from bureau of Police Research and Development indicates that from early 70's to mid-eighties, crime against women have almost doubled.²⁶

To deal with matrimonial offences, women's organisations demanded setting up of family courts and in 1984 the Family Court Act was passed, which provides for quick disposal of cases and an informal procedure of conciliation in cases of matrimonial disputes. The term 'reconciliation' has evoked strong reaction from some women who argue that this will mean reconciliation almost always, at the cost of women-putting them back into unwanted marriages or impossible situations in the name of preserving the sanctity of the family or for the welfare of children. It is this attitude towards the family and the bogey raised by some people - for not allowing the destruction of the 'family', that has been responsible for domestic violence against women. There has been hardly any convictions (with a few exceptions) in cases of dowry deaths for want of conclusive evidence.

In the new famous Sudha Goel (dowry murder of a pregnant woman) case, the Supreme Court reversed the judgement of the Delhi High Court, awarding life imprisonment to husband and mother-in-law. The sessions Court gave death punishment holding that "dowry death cases of this kind deserved to be visited by the extreme penalty under the law". The judgement of the trial court was adversely commented by the Delhi High Court acquitting the accused. The Supreme Court in its observations regretted the remarks of the High Court and opined that "its views are bound to create flutter in public mind. The court must worry only to find out the truth and not public reaction and media". This case created fierce controversy over the High Court verdict and comments on the lower court judgement, women's rights organisations and women lawyers greatly

agitated, made vigorous efforts to bring the guilty to the book. The issue has remained at the centre of agitation by women's group.

Violence against women is expressed in various forms such as female foeticide, infanticide, bride burning, widow burning (Sati), rape, sexual harassment, wife beating prostitution etc. The issue of sex determination test (amniocentesis) for selective abortion of female fetuses, has also witnessed continuous efforts by women's groups to pressurise the government to ban such tests except for medical reasons. The Medical Council of India has been highly reluctant to take any action against medical practitioners indulging in such practices and making huge profits by capitalising a deep rooted prejudices against the female child. Maharashtra is the only state which has passed a legislation banning such tests. The national government has yet to take any step in this regard. There is a long struggle ahead for women's basic human rights and a life with dignity.

It may not be out of place here to discuss the role of the judiciary in responding to several issues raised by women's organisation: and legal activists and the role of the press. Despite the mixed response of the legal system to the issues of 'gender justice' a positive development has been the public interest litigation which has added a new leaf in the history of Indian jurisprudence. The public interest cases have taken up issues of plight of prisoners, pavement dwellers, women in remand homes, under trials, bonded labourers etc., as the courts have given the individuals and organisations a *locus standi* to file cases for democratic rights of the poor and the oppressed groups who otherwise could not have moved the court.²⁷

There have been instances where courts have treated a news item as a writ petition (Rajasthan High Court's directive in respect of rescue homes maintained by the Social Welfare Department. The High Court maintained that "in view of the report based on the evidence and personal investigation by the Chief Judicial Magistrate, Bharatpur, it was not necessary that this writ petition be admitted and notices issued".

In a judgement of far-reaching significance, the Assam High Court (14th march 1988) ordered an ex-gratia payment of Rs. 25,000/- to each of the 10 rape victims (assaulted by the police) for their rehabilitation. The order was based on a press report where a journalist interviewed the victims and reported in the paper. The incidence took place in January and in February Assam Tribal Women's Welfare Federation organised a mass rally but there was no reaction from the government. After the investigation report by the journalist, the new Chief Justice issued a *suo motto* notice to the State Government to file an affidavit. In order to pre-empt the order of the court, the State Government announced the arrest of policemen and agreed to hold a judicial probe. Delivering the judgement on 14th March, the Court said that "it was the belated response of the State Government to the public

demand for judicial probe which had compelled it to intervene *suo motto* in the matter”.

The Supreme Court’s judgements in the ‘stridhan’ case was hailed as a landmark judgement “in dismantling the massive and age old structures of injustice in the Indian matrimonial world”. The three judge bench rejecting the contrary verdict of the Punjab, Haryana and Allahabad High Court, gave an absolute and exclusive right to the woman over property and gifts in cash and in kind given at the time of her marriage. However, doubts have been expressed about the need to clarify the distinction between ‘Stridhan’ and ‘dowry’ (*Indian Express* - 22.3.88). The Supreme Court also asked the Union Government to explain why it should not strike down as unconstitutional section 23 of Hindu Succession Act which totally excludes women under Hindu Law from the joint family’s property legally called ‘co-percenary’. The bench passed this order on a petition of Miss Lata Mittal claiming her rights in the dwelling house left behind by her late father. The wife of the Hindu under the Mitakshara Law (governing North India) cannot be her husband’s co-percenary.

Some of these illustrations indicate some positive advances in judiciary’s response to women’s issues, however most of them have been the result of mass campaigns by women organisations and contributions made by legal activists and journalists. Judiciary’s response to women’s issues has been very mixed. In a recent judgement the Supreme Court reduced the minimum sentence of ten years awarded to two police officials in a custodial rape case. The Supreme Court opined that the ‘girl who was the rape victim’ was “a woman of a questionable character and easy virtue with lewd and lascivious behaviour”. The reduction of sentence negates all the gains achieved by women’s movement through years of protest after the Mathura case. It also cancels the specific policy accepted and incorporated after consultation for a provision of a minimum sentence in case of a custodial rape. In an open letter to the Chief Justice of India, several Delhi based women’s organisation protested that “the ideology underlying the 1983 Criminal Law Amendment was not to protect ‘virtuous’ women but to prevent police officials from committing sexual violence against women in their custody In reducing the sentence the Supreme Court has demonstrated not only continued patriarchal bias, but also a retreat to a conservative ideology which views rape only as an attack on women’s chastity, and not an offence against human rights and dignity.”²⁸

The strengthening of the patriarchal ideology through state and legal interventions, economic, political and educational system, culture (a new synthetic culture and now being promoted through government channels), media and religion, pose a fundamental challenge to women’s movement.

Fundamentalism - The Growing Challenge

The issue of women and fundamentalism came to the forefront in the 80's. During the last couple of years the country has witnessed revivalist forces getting a new lease and the secular ideology is under tremendous pressure. The interpretation of the term 'secular' as 'freedom to follow one's religion and respecting of personal laws' has perpetuated unequal status of women in most of the religious communities.

The Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India (1975) in unequivocal terms had demanded a Uniform Civil Code. The Report said that "the absence of a Uniform Civil Code in the last quarter of the 20th century, 27 years after Independence, is an incongruity that cannot be justified with all the emphasis that is placed on secularism science and modernisation. The continuance of various personal laws which accept discrimination between men and women, violate the Fundamental Rights and the Preamble of the Constitution which promises to secure to all citizens "equality of status" and is against the spirit of national integration and secularism".²⁹

The whole concept of secularism in Indian context needs to be re-examined, particularly in view of the rising communal forces and the emerging ideologies on women vis-a-vis religion.

The Third National Conference on Women's Studies (1986) addressed itself to the contemporary issues relating to religion, secularism and women's rights. The papers presented in the session, pointed out the ambiguities in the use of religion by different sections and stressed the need to look at the relationship between religion and patriarchy. The two critical issues raised during the discussions were at what point religious identity becomes a communal identity and when communal identity becomes important how gender identity gets subsumed within it.³⁰

It is clear that the ideology of 'secularism' has proved inadequate in countering the re-assertion of communal ideology. The selective picture of the past or a 'false history' projected through these religio-cultural movements have one thing in common and that is their view of women's rights. Why is it so vital to control women by projecting a particular view of religion as something desirable? Few groups have addressed themselves to issues of communal riots and its effect on women are now zeroing in on the unholy alliance between patriarchy, religion and politics as the fundamental basis of women's subordination.

A SEWA activist narrating her experience of communal riots in Ahmedabad, says that "while women were more concerned with their struggle for economic and social justice, SEWA organisers in the course of their work accepted the important role of religion in women's lives. With the rise of communalism and its distorted interpretations of religion, we are facing serious challenges to our work. Not only are women's economic gains being

threatened but also our very survival as a union of poor women, regardless of caste, creed or religion, is at stake”.³¹

The method of organising women by using cultural symbols or religion is old. SEWA as an organisation of poor women has through discussions, questioned some aspects of religious texts and unjust attitudes towards women but debunking religion was considered to have destructive consequences. With rising communalism and in the wake of Ahmedabad riots the organisation was faced with a dilemma. The issue is highly complex and the factional politics on caste, linguistic and religious basis divides people on trivial issues.

The ‘Shah Bano Case’ in India provides an interesting example of the alliance between communal politics and fundamentalists. A five member Constitutional Bench of the Supreme Court gave its verdict upholding her right to secure maintenance under section 125 Cr.P.C. (1973). This was not the first judgement of its kind and prior to this case there have been several cases in which judgement was given in favour of Muslim women under section 125 Cr.P.C. An interesting number of divorced Muslim women have been seeking redress against destitution in courts, taking recourse to the secular law. Why did this particular case created so much furore?

Within the Muslim society opposition by the liberal elements against orthodox elements and demand for reform in personal laws has been growing. The Supreme Court verdict got a wide coverage including their comment on the nature of Muslim Personal Law and the reference to Article 44 in the Constitution which calls for a Uniform Civil Code. the comment irked the fundamentalists and they grabbed this opportunity to reassert their authority to interpret Muslim Personal Law. The judgement also came at a time when communal forces were getting stronger.

The conservatives labelled the Supreme Court judgement as the ‘death warrant of Muslim identity’ in a Hindu majority state thus turning the battle for the rights of Muslim women in Civil Law to the rights of Muslims in secular India. Muslim Shariat conference in Ahmedabad decided to create a network of Shariat Panchayats to settle petty disputes among Muslims. Within the Muslim community a certain section wants to assert its right to impose punishment on its defiant members in utter disregard to the law of the land. Shabanat a divorcee, was severely beaten up on a charge of adultery and had to be hospitalised. Following widespread protest within Kerala and outside Sulekha Bivi was spared the humiliation of being flogged publicly on order of the Jamaat.

However, the voices of reform within the community are being raised. In two separate petitions Mary Roy (Christian Women’s Right to Property) and Shahnaz Sheikh, have challenged the Constitutional validity of personal

laws arguing that fundamental rights under our Constitution guaranteed equality before law.

In Shah Banu case, the Supreme Court ruled that a Muslim wife can live separately and claim maintenance for herself and her children if her husband takes a mistress or marries again (9.4.87). Besides, the reaction of the conservative elements to voices of reform, the political response for the reaction fundamentalists to the judgement was revealing. Election reverses suffered by the ruling party in Assembly by-elections and the fierce debate generated by the Supreme Court verdict, resulted in the Congress (I) buckling under pressure from the fundamentalists due to fear of closing the electoral support of the minority votes. The outcome was the Muslim Women's Protection of Rights on Divorce) Bill 1998. Strong reactions from women's organisations, jurists, civil rights groups and Parliamentarians including a Minister and some ruling party members, could not prevent the passage of the Bill. Justice Krishna Iyer in an open letter to the Prime Minister wrote "the Bill to kill the Shah Bano decision of the Supreme Court is the unfortunate political product of a creative genius for multi-dimensional injustice. The bill is an injustice to our Republic's secular principle, it is an injustice to women's basic rights and therefore violative of human rights, it is an injustice to the egalitarian policy in our Constitution, it is a vindictive injustice the Muslim women, selling the soul of the state's humanism to obscurantist fundamentalists" A few months after the judgement, Shah Bano pleaded for the withdrawal of her case due to tremendous pressure. A writ petition is also pending before the Supreme Court challenging the Act as ultra virus of the Constitution. Taking advantage of the situation in two separate judgements, lower courts have already given maintenance to divorced Muslim women under section 125 Cr.P.C.

Coming on the heels of the Muslim Women's Act, was the incidence of a young girl forced to commit Sati on the pyre of her husband. The whole issue brought but a heated debate and protests from women's groups and human rights organisations. Condemning the long silence maintained by the P.M. and non-action by the State Government to prevent the 'Chunri Ceremony' (13 days after the episode) despite the Rajasthan High Court's ban order, women's organisations demanded a probe and stern action against the guilty. The delayed response of the Government in the wake of mounting agitation, came in the shape of Commission of Sati (Prevention) Bill which was hurriedly passed in the Parliament. The Act instead of treating women as the victim, treats her as an offender. it also assumes that Sati is a practice sanctioned by custom.³¹ The Act also does not seek to punish those who profit from such crimes by selling photographs, cassettes and video or those who profit economically and politically through glorification of Sati. There is nothing on preventive action. Enactment of legislation on the one hand gives political mileage and on the other compromises with fundamentalists and ideologue.

The response from the Rajput Community in mounting a counter agitation against the so called attack on their religious customs, shows that when women's issues get communalised, the government not only buckles under the pressure of fundamentalists but also loses sight of the main issues involved. The anxiety not to lose the vote banks of various minority groups has resulted in policy of appeasement and counter pulls and pressures. Women's groups mobilising lower castes and minorities in a complex socio-economic situation, are often faced with the dilemma when the questions of women's rights often get merged within the caste and communal divide.

The reason for my citing these examples, is that the issues relating to women and rising fundamentalism not only in this country but all over the world, go beyond legal and religious interpretations of customs and personal laws. Besides a general criticism of religion as obscurantist and an oppressive force, a serious debate on women and fundamentalism and the use of religious symbols and cultural imagery, needs to be done by the women's movement. The word 'culture' is almost used as an ideology through which to project women's traditional images. It is also important to understand the distortions which have crept in with the politicisation of religion and what its implications are?

Gabriel Dietrich argues that "it is important to acknowledge that "it is important to acknowledge that in communalism, in religious reform and in the women's movement, a common question is raised but provided with different answers, the question of 'cultural identity'. Communalism tackles the question of identity by creating a false consciousness with the suggestion that people of the some religion automatically have the same socio-economic interest irrespective in class and patriarchy and the way to implement their interests is to politically organise on the grounds of religion. Defence of religious personal law is crucial to this approach".³³

The women's movement also tends to build on the assumption that there is a certain commonality of interest between all women and the barriers of class, caste, religion and community have to be overcome for a unified movement. Communal barriers are often dismissed as artificial. However, genuine religious reform deals with the matter in a dialectical way by acknowledging caste and communal cleavages and identifying and contesting their religious sanctions. While there have always been saner voices within religio-cultural movements, generally people have been reluctant to touch upon religion for fear of communal reaction. Anti-upper caste agitations by dalits have met with strong reactions and repression.

The issue of developing common perspective across classes is an important one, however, there is difference of opinion on issues, priorities and strategies. The issue of linking up, sharing and learning from each others'

experience is stressed but the process of developing a broad-based unified movement has been halting and slow.

As Hike Pietila says, “the most interesting and the most original of these movements is the women’s movement. It receives substance and enhancement from widening and diversifying women’s research, which opens up new perspective for equality between men and women as well as for social transformation altogetherHere it differs decisively from the so-called equal rights movement, which has not questioned the basic structure and values of the present social order, and which pursued equality for women in the men’s world mainly on male terms”.³⁴

Women’s Studies and Women’s Movement: `The Politics of Knowledge’

Women’s Studies has not only made women visible to scholarship but has also enlarged the horizon of women’s struggle. A vital role has been played by women’s groups in information generation, dissemination and expansion of horizons of knowledge. Efforts to open up the world of knowledge, economy, politics and power to understand the forces that marginalise women, have also empowered women by transforming their consciousness, sense of identity and purpose.

The organisational structure of knowledge establishments is such that those who generate knowledge, maintain a distance and hierarchy from those who are subjects of enquiry. There are scholars however, who are consciously using alternative modes of generation of knowledge both as a critique to existing systems of knowledge and as a method of intervention. Lucille Mair calls women’s studies, “women’s growing involvement with the `politics of knowledge’ by attempting to reconstruct a past devoid of women, reinterpret the world to question dominant stereotypes and liberate scholarship by positioning themselves for the real engagement which is the engagement of mind”.³⁵

Mazumdar articulating the links between women’s studies and women’s movement, says “women’s studies has been described as the “intellectual arms of the women’s movement, as a powerful instrument which is not value-neutral but works actively to transform values in favour of women and as an essential instrument that transforms women’s perceptions about themselves and tries to transform people’s perception about women”.³⁶

If we began with the premise that `women’s studies is not value-neutral’ than the distinction between conventional social science research and women’s studies becomes strikingly clear. Knowledge as intervention, as an instrument to not only discover the contours of gender disparities and roots of women’s oppression, but also to translate new knowledge into action at

various levels, is a departure from established norms of social science teaching and research.

In a recent workshop a further distinction was made between studying women and studying women with women's perspective. Women's studies was interpreted "as intervention, as an instrument to not only discover the contours of gender disparities and roots of women's oppression, but also to translate new knowledge into action at various levels, is a departure from established norms of social science teaching and research.

In a recent workshop a further distinction was made between studying women and studying women with women's perspective. Women's studies was interpreted "as intervention in the problematic situation of women. The onus of responsibility for a problem solving approach rests on women's studies scholars and they have to arrive at alternate solutions to women's problems..... Researchers sitting in ivory towers cannot meet this challenge of bringing about social transformation". Further elaborating on this idea it was observed that "women's studies is not the only area that takes a problem-oriented approach, studies on poverty, bonded labour etc. also deal with impact of policy or impact of changes, but what is specific to women's studies is the new information and individuals who have entered the field Prevalent methodologies are the ones that leave out women and women's experience or distort them. To understand women's reality, one has to innovate The problem is not one of rejecting all existing tools of knowledge - but to use them where we can, refine them where we must and reject them when necessary".³⁷ Despite this emphasis on close links between women's studies and action, the question of researcher and researcher activists kept surfacing in each of the seven Regional Workshops organised by the ICSSR during 1987-88.

In a UNESCO sponsored meeting in 1982, to examine the links between "women's studies and social sciences in Asia, participants defined women's studies "as a critical instrument for social science development and worked out a set of objectives to be pursued by the researchers. However, at a later date some of the women's scholars thought that this definition was too restrictive and tried to redefine women's studies as "the pursuit of more comprehensive, critical and balanced understanding of social reality whose components should include women's contribution to the social process, their perception of their own lives and the broader social reality, their struggles and aspirations and roots and structures of inequality that lead to women's marginalisation, invisibility and exclusion from the scope, approaches and conceptual framework of most intellectual enquiry and social action".³⁸

In 1985 in the seminar on 'Perspectives and Organisations of Women's Studies in Indian Universities' it was again reiterated that women's studies aims to change the present attitudes and values in society regarding women's roles and rights.³⁹

The challenge posed by women's studies is not only to value-neutral social sciences but to mainstream historiography which has ignored women's contribution to struggles and movements, to economists who have omitted women's unpaid productive work from official records and thereby ignoring the nexus between family and capitalist development, to sociologists who talked about women only in relation to marriage, family and kinship. It questions the prevailing notion of knowledge, methodology, social reality, sources concepts has enlarged and enriched the knowledge base however, introduction of women's studies in the university system poses a real dilemma as it has to meet the requirements of the higher education system.

Women's studies scholars emphasise the links between academic and action and at the same time it is argued that to be fully effective and to play the type of role expected of it, women's studies must acquire a secure and legitimate base within the educational system. The knowledge system are still hesitant to accept the challenge. The women's studies centres/cells set up within the university system face this dilemma in their interaction with various social science disciplines.

Neera Desai feels that "the problem today is establishing legitimacy of women's studies both academically as well as socially as it will have to be relevant for its academic contribution, of better understanding of gender relations as well as for changing the present inequitous gender relationship". Elaborating the term 'relevance' she says that "it means breaking the unequal power relations and the hierarchy prevailing in the field of knowledge by making women visible in history in society and in polity".⁴⁰

Linked with this dilemma is the criticism against women's studies scholars of the 'relevance of research' to grassroot organisations and the distinction drawn between researcher and activist.

Many activists are a product of the university system and as Mines puts it "there is a general view that scientific work, research and theorisation can be done only in institutions specially suited for the purpose... who can function as think tanks, can analyse problems and can recommend suitable solutions to the politicians and activistsThe division is simultaneously on hierarchisation".⁴¹

The report of the Third National Conference on Women's Studies pointed out, that the "distinction has not only tendencies to lead to domination of one group by another but was also often found to be incorrect. The problem of identity of the women's movement and of the participants in it, is much more than a question of semantics or labelling. Increasingly it is viewed that the distinction between 'Theory' and 'Practice' would be more adequate".⁴² Women's studies scholars however, contend that the theory is not divorced from practice but only a tool of understanding the realities of

women's lives better and then trying to intervene at different levels. Desai argues that if we consider women's studies as an integral part of women's movement then the distinction between committed researcher and activist becomes irrelevant. It would be useful not to focus on divergence but evolve methods of converging fruitfully. She argues that a very vital aspect of women's studies is its relation to action.

From the First Conference on Women's Studies in 1980 the linkage between research, teaching and action has been emphasised but the crucial problem is now to integrate these components? What will be the content and perspective of each? She believes that "the initiative of studying women with a perspective is not entirely a movement born phenomenon, although women's movement had serious impact on character and objectives of women's studies. For various reasons initiating changes in the education system particularly in the higher education system, the attitude of the wider movement has been lukewarm. If action and research has to be fruitfully combined then women's studies will have to be looked not merely pedagogically and philosophically but in terms of social change".⁴³

The ongoing debate on links between research and action has generated interesting discourse on the content, relevance and perspectives of women's studies.

Baxi's provocative 'discourse' on a possible dichotomy between discourse and praxis visualizes a real danger in women's studies becoming yet another 'oppressive scientific domain' or an 'alienating scientific enterprise'. According to him aggression or violence against women should not just become raw empirical data as "a mere scientific pursuit generates no capabilities for the comprehension of patriarchal structures, let alone for effective intervention or social action". He even goes on to suggest that every institute and research programme funded by agencies like ICSSR, UGC and CSIR should be required to organise public opinion and social action in their area on every major reported incidence of violence against women. Unfortunately he reduces the women's studies movement to a single point agenda i.e. violence against women. If women's studies have to play the 'positive interventionist role' and not merely become an 'archive of suffering', then it will have to be an enabling experience an 'empowering' strategy. Women's studies will have to be much more than 'victimology' and develop as a critical instrument for social science development' as well as a dynamic instrument for women's struggle for change.

A Fresh Look at Women's Struggle: "Women Reclaiming their History"

Underlying the idea of women as 'victims of history', is the belief that the world of knowledge of the oppressed and the marginalised groups. The social construction of reality minus women's perspective is a partial truth

and the dominant tradition in history has obscured much of the creativity of women. Women 'reclaiming their history', are explaining new ways of generating knowledge, both by reanalysing the past struggles from their perspectives and using the knowledge for intervention.

Women's protests and struggles have a long history, however, much of the social science research on agrarian and workers movements, has ignored women's role and contribution as a legitimate area of enquiry. Attempts to reconstruct their vision of oppression in specific situations, the necessity to act, how women made a creative use of the cultural traditions or symbols, what were their points of strength and weaknesses, what alliances they made at different points of time; are all aimed at correcting the distortions arising out of token acknowledgement of women in history. Some interesting insights have come from the analysis of past struggles and contemporary movements and why women invariably after the event, have fallen back into anonymity.

"There is a tendency among social scientists to relegate women's activism to movements with a specific focus on women's issues only. If women are mentioned in other movements they are by and large confined to stray mention of an 'also ran' character. We need to correct the 'historical invisibility' of large number of women who played an active role in these movements, to demolish the myth of women's passivity in political action.....Would not knowledge of activism of peasant women, working class women, women of both higher and lower castes - against caste hierarchy, class oppression, make an impact on the consciousness of women today, who feel overwhelmed by their problems, or of men who think of the women's movement as a 20th century aberration knowledge of our past is critically important to deepen our sense of identity and to find the roots of our protest".⁴⁴

Neera Desai sees this as an attempt to redeem the study of movements from looking only at the elitists participation to the inclusion of 'subaltern' policies thus attempting to develop history from below. Mainstream scholars have viewed movements as symptomatic of social disequilibrium denoting breakdown in social order or as relative deprivation explaining emergence of movements as subjective perceptions of people that motivate them to join such struggles. There are others who consider movements from the angle of collective action in relation to resources, organisations, structural opportunity etc.⁴⁵

While there are different levels of action from advocacy to active participation in struggles, the tendency to ignore women's perspectives in analyses of contemporary struggles continues. Women activists who played an important role in the Telangana Armed Struggle in Andhra Pradesh, analysis has written about heroines who fought alongside men or women who were supportive. Early feminist historians however, have documented

the extent to which women were involved in such movements, their achievements and their role in social life however, the new perspective also does not alter our understanding of the event itself nor does it search the experiences of women themselves, that is, the scope of political action nor its implications for women's lives are put under scrutiny". They argue that "women's history that analysis and debate 'power issues' which are located in what is considered as private realm of women's lives. Such an approach picks up evidence of women's victimisation and not of their creativity which shapes and gives a direction to the historical situation. Capturing women's experiences and the way this gets translated into political action, will contribute to theory and practice of political action today". The authors argue that "the crisis situation allows women what peace time denies. it also requires a realignments of the interface between the private and the public domain. They develop new talents, skills and capacities. For women too, war and revolution are times of reprieve, times when the intricate, often internalised social policing that defines and controls both actions and imagination is laid aside to allow new possibilities of response, a new sense of self to emerge". Questioning the organisations' attitude to women they ask as to why women should be considered as an auxiliary force for a movement which was expanding and women were joining the struggle and their support was necessary for underground activitiesWhy they are ignored when it comes to the question of power and authority? They feel that the women who participated in such movements with achievements, felt isolated in personal struggles. Their experiences as women were not considered of any theoretical or strategic significance and were not recorded by historians and thus lost.⁴⁶

Today 'Chipko' is known both nationally and internationally for the crucial role women have played in the movement against deforestation. "At several places, the movement not only sharpened conflicts between different economic strata but also between men and women and between women and the local Panchayats. The movement gave women a strong forum to articulate what obviously are women's concern (fuel, fodder and water) however, their participation has not helped them to struggle against the patriarchal family framework or find a place in organisations spearheading the movement".⁴⁷

For many of these questions facing the women's movement, we have to find our own answers. Today we see ideologically disparate organisational firms, visible and invisible movements confronting the concept of laissez faire state and the manifestation of its various policies. Desai says that "at the end of the Decade a new scenario is visible in the Indian women's movement. There has been a sea change in structuring of women's groups, in mobilising of women and in focussing on issues that concern women". Can we call it a women's movement? While agreeing that one of the major problem in the Indian women's movement is of widening the base, she thinks that we would be ignoring the reality that there is no women's movement or that it is an

`urban elitist thunder clap' or women's groups are `merely instruments of bigger political power brokers".⁴⁸

If women's question is a political issue, it ceases to only women's issue. it becomes vital to forge alliances with other organisations and people's movements while at the same time keeping women's perspective on issues. It is important to combine `reactive politics' with multi-faceted and long-term perspective and approaches. The task before women's movement is a challenging one however, the urgency of dealing with immediate issues should not obscure the fact that challenges of development, growth and equity, the native of state and the new forces emerging within the present socio political context, will need to be continuously assessed and confronted and the action strategies and organisational initiatives will need to be redefined.

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