

# conferences of the women's movements:

## .....history and perspective.....

From 200 women, who met for the first time in Bombay in 1980 under the banner of National Conference of Autonomous Women's Groups (AWGs) to 4,000 women in the last National Conference on Women's Movements, held at Ranchi in December, 1997, the change is to be viewed not only from the point of view of increase in numbers participating in these conferences, but also in the number and nature of issues addressed and the nomenclature too. In fact this period of just 19 years, during which 6 conferences have taken place, has been a turbulent one. The purpose of these conferences has been to come together, to share experiences, to analyse issues, build alliances and strategies for change and to strengthen the movements. It is important to know the context of each conference which shaped the nature of conferences, the themes that were taken up and the groups that participated. It is also important to understand that it was not only the venues of conferences which have been centres of debates and dilemmas. The period between these conferences has also been beset with similar debates both within and outside women's groups, on the meaning and use of terms like patriarchy, feminism, autonomy and on questions as to how to build relationships with other mass organisations. The emphasis has been on the fact that the women's movement cannot achieve its objectives by isolating itself. Thus the struggle is to incorporate women's experiences in every movement or effort to bring social change.

At the outset, it must be made clear that what has gone in the name of women's groups and organisational practices. This means that there has not been any cohesive and homogeneous women's movement in India at any point of time. The existence of various women's groups and women's involvement in various movements, in both - rural and urban areas, shows that there exist different perceptions of women's oppression and different ways to overcome them. Therefore, how one defines the women's movement in India, it depends very much on one's own perception, perspective and ideological position. There has not been any one single explanation of women's oppression and no single category of Indian women can be articulated. Women in India are not a

homogeneous category and socially they are differently situated. Accordingly, the nature and degree of oppression they suffer from is also different according to their social position. That is why there have been different responses to women's oppression, its analysis and the strategies for the struggle. Thus women have been a part of workers' and peasants' movements and other mass struggles, including those in the unorganised and informal sectors. While these movements have drawn in a number of women, the question, as to what extent they have or have not raised issues concerning women, became the criterion for qualifying to be women's movement. In a country where the process for social change has yet to go a long way, the struggles of the people and women in particular, are inextricably linked. This need has been recognised by women's organisations and has constantly been reflected in the discussions and debates taking place within the movement. While emphasising the need to forge linkages/alliances, the other major issue has been how to bring in the questions of inequality within these movements and assert that no struggle which does not incorporate women's experiences and perspectives is complete. This conscious and continuous recognition of building alliances with other organisations and movements, and the need to incorporate women's experiences and perspectives in every other movement for social change, became the basis of change from National Conference of AWGs to National Conferences of Women's Movements.

In order to understand the development of these conferences, let us look at a brief account of the period - 1960s and 1970s - would be taken, specially with a view to understand the phenomenon of AWGs - Who are AWGs? Why have these emerged? What have been their distinctive features? What has been their role in taking up women's issues? And how are they different from other groups and movements working for social change, that involve women?

### background

The period after independence, especially after the passage of Hindu Code Bill - broken into 5 Acts,



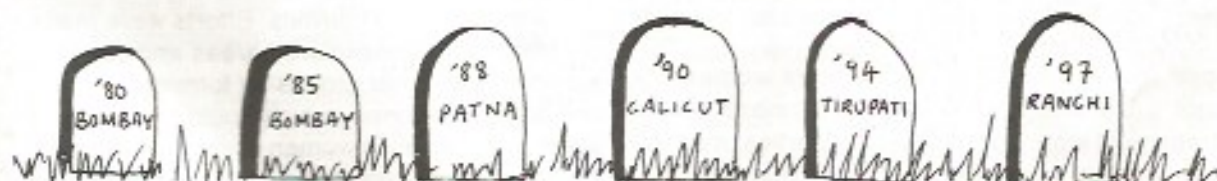
and postponing a decision on Uniform Civil Code, was a period of lull, both from the point of view of raising women's issues and of mobilising and organising women and of creating awareness on the changes made in the Hindu Personal law. It was only in the 1970s and 1980s that growing out of many other radical movements of the time, women's issues made their presence felt in a very different way. The mid-1960s signified a period marked by two major developments - one was the emerging debate on the modes of development and the consequent raising and mobilisation on issues of unemployment, price-rise, corruption, increasing poverty and economic disparities, ecological degradation etc. And two, there were more competitive elections and the youth, particularly disillusioned with the state of economy and politicians, moved into the political arena. Radical students' groups, some of which had severed ties with the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and other independent groups, became active in the Naxalbari movement that emerged in different areas of Bengal, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh and Kerala, organising tribals and peasants for armed struggle. Anti-price rise and anti-corruption movements emerged in Maharashtra, Gujarat and Bihar. The Dalits, Adivasis and hill-people launched spontaneous struggles. Most such groups were born out of a disillusionment with political parties. They felt the need to experiment with alternative forms of organisation, emphasised conscientisation of people and aspired for societal and structural changes. In Bihar, Jayprakash Narayan's call for a 'Total Revolution' raised a number of questions about power structures. In this process of questioning, the issues related to the work-distribution in the family, family violence, unequal access to resources by men and women were also raised. Chhatra Yuva Sangharsh Vahini, became one of the first important organisations to provide a critique of patriarchy. Vahini's work in the villages linked it with the Bodhgaya Math struggle on the issue of land rights for the peasants, which eventually raised the question of women's ownership rights over land. They also raised issues about violence against women in the family and its relation to women's dependent economic status. Bodhgaya struggle was thus, the first important struggle of rural women. This

struggle contributed in developing newer levels of understanding and providing a powerful model for later struggles. Amongst the other important movements, the Shahada movement in Maharashtra, initially started on the issue of land alienation, grew to raise issues of oppression of women leading to two significant developments: emergence of the anti-alcohol agitation and making the issue of wife-beating a public issue.

The period of the 1970s also brought women into other important mass movements like Chipko, linking the issue of environmental degradation to the increasing toll on women for fuel and fodder, and the Self-Employed Women's Association in Gujarat which concentrated on developing women's co-operatives and banks. In 1977, the Chattisgarh Mines Shramik Sangh in Madhya Pradesh raised, among other demands, the issue of retrenchment of women workers and their right to equal wages. In Andhra Pradesh, the Progressive Organisation for Women (POW) comprising of women from the Marxist movement, focussed on gender oppression and the need to organise women against it. The other important women's groups that emerged were, Purogami Stree Sangathan in Pune and Stree Mukti Sangathan in Mumbai. The formation of Mahila Samta Sainik Dal (MSSD) marked the beginning of linkages between the anti-caste Dalit movement and feminism. All these groups emphasised that women's oppression has its roots in sexual division of labour and that it was rationalised by culture. They also raised the issues of linkage between caste-oppression and women's oppression. A number of women from both the middle class and working class participated in these and many other struggles and became conscious of being an oppressed group. In the late 1970s, the wide media coverage, the western women's movement, the declaration of the International Women's Decade, the Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India (1974), Mathura Rape case and other factors provided a kind of focus for activities centering on women issues.

the beginning of autonomous women's groups

This upsurge in women's consciousness was acknowledged by almost all the political parties and





the existing women's organisations, which tried to revive their women fronts and take up women's issues. While some women chose to work within the established organisations, others opted for autonomy. This quest for autonomy was different from the earlier need for establishing separate 'women only' groups which, while attracting more women members, did not have a definite position on the question of autonomy. The quest for autonomy was in reaction to the fact that in most organisations, issues affecting women were getting minimum or no attention. While some organisations did pay some attention to women's issues, the attitude was mainly paternalistic. The ideological stagnation, the disinterest in attempting to go beyond the existing understanding of women's issues and a refusal to change the strategies for struggle by incorporating women's experiences led to disillusionment. In most Left organisations, there was no recognition of the specific oppression of women within class and caste structures. The raising of women's issues in this manner was viewed as 'divisive'. The new autonomous women's groups that were formed during this period were in reaction to both, the Marxist and Gandhian understanding of the women's question. These groups took to radical politics and simultaneously promoted a new analysis of women's issues. Two incidents that played a catalytic role were Mathura and Maya Tyagi Rape Cases. Both were cases of custodial rape.

A distinctive feature of these groups was that they comprised of educated, urban, middle-class women, mainly drawn from the left. As they were critical of party structures that did not recognise their experiences and perspectives, they distanced themselves from political parties. They maintained their autonomy and opted for non-hierarchical structures, emphasised on collective functioning and shunned institutionalised funding. These groups were mainly city-based and mobilised on issues of violence against women. They also set up counselling centres and shelters for helping women in crisis. Recognising the fact that women in India are a heterogeneous group, they sought commonality of women's experiences. Despite coming from similar socio-economic backgrounds, the activists were not ideologically homogeneous. This led to constant debates, discussions and conflicts within and between groups.

Despite the fact that the autonomous women's groups grew out of the disillusionment and frustrations of working with political parties, mass & revolutionary movements, Trade Unions and

other organisations, who refused or failed to recognise the specificity of women's oppression and relegated such issues to the background, this did not imply a severing of ties with those groups and movements. One of the most important issues for them was to build up linkages with those movements on the basis of equality. There was always a conscious realisation that they cannot isolate themselves from the mass struggles. Thus, the initial years of these groups went into 'self-definition' pertaining to their role in organising women, possibility of raising or not raising women's issues in mass organisations and how do they look at women's oppression, etc.

need for building alliances:

..... lead up to the first national conference

It is against this background that we locate the First National Conference of Autonomous Women's Groups (referred to as Conference of Socialist-feminists) which was held in Bombay in 1980. While the Conference was organised in the context of Anti-Rape agitation and a special session was held to discuss the provisions of the Anti-Rape Bill, a host of other issues were also discussed. One of the central themes was of what relationship women/feminist groups should have with party-based or mass organisations. Another major issue of debate was, how the women's movement would and should develop. Two hundred women from 38 organisations from Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu came to participate in this conference which was organised by Forum against Rape (now known as Forum Against Oppression of Women), Bombay and Stree Shakti, Andhra Pradesh.

growth of the women's movement:

.....the second national conference

During the 1980s many changes took place. The years were marked by massive city based agitations on dowry harassment, dowry deaths and maltreatment of women within families. Women's Centres grew up to give support to women in various ways - through counselling, health education, legal advice, providing shelter etc. The period was also marked by production of feminist literature, audio-visual material and journals. Efforts were made to get into hitherto unexplored areas and coordinate activities with other groups by forming joint fronts and action platforms, which could be seen in the attempts to unionise women workers in Bombay, in experiences of Chhattisgarh Mine's Shramik Sangh



and Nari Sangharsh Manch in 1983 in Bombay. But attempts to raise women's issues on the platforms of left parties were still being resisted, with the result that women continued to leave these parties. The spread and development of the movement also had its impact on certain areas. e.g., academics, journalism and medicine. The period witnessed the evolution of women's studies coinciding with the opening of centres like, the Centre for Women's Development Studies, Delhi and SNDT University, Bombay and many dailies started reporting on women's issues with a different perspective. In the area of medicine, major changes reduced the gap between theory and practice. For the first time the women's movement shifted the focus from maternal and child-care to develop a holistic view of women's movement to develop a holistic view of women's health, by addressing issues like: the manner in which women's were bodies treated and negated their health, why women's health was the last priority for the family and for women themselves. The groups also ventured into a totally untouched area so far, that of the impact of contraceptives on women's health.

The process of political clarification and differentiation that took place within and between these groups was quite a complex one. The movement always remained self-consciously non-cohesive and the existence of various streams of thought was often emphasised. An important aspect of work for these groups, during this period, was to explore the traditional sources of strength rather than suffering by reinterpreting history, historical and religious images. The search for historical examples of women's resistance led to scrutinising the distant and immediate past and to reclaim some movements, two of them being the Telengana and Chipko movements.

The Second National Conference held at Bombay, Maharashtra, in December, 1985, was called to discuss the Perspective of Women's Movement and it focussed on issues on which women's organisations had been working in the period immediately preceding. By now some experience had been gained. Feminism had provided not only a critique of society and patriarchy, class, caste etc., but also a new way of looking at things. The slogan 'Personal is Political and Political is Personal', became a catch phrase which meant confronting patriarchy within social institutions, the family, religion and the State, as also challenging values like authoritarianism, hierarchy and aggression.

The themes of the Conference included Dowry, Domestic Violence, Personal Laws, Functioning of Women Centres, Organisational Structures and Collective Functioning. About 380 women from fifty

six organisations from Maharashtra, Karnataka, Gujarat, Rajasthan, West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Haryana, Delhi, Tamil Nadu and Kerala participated in this Conference.

### new challenges: the third national conference

Significant developments marked the post-1985 period posing serious challenges before the women's movement. We would like to focus on three major developments that took place. One was the reaction to feminist work, faced by women activists individually as well as by the groups. Their work was seen mainly as a western phenomenon. This reaction came from the political parties, as well as, from various sections of society through the print media. Second, the aid for 'developmental activities', that had started pouring into social movements by the beginning of the 1980s, resulted in creating competition, schism and bitterness amongst the various women's groups, which also affected the movement. By making women's development an apolitical activity, the focus was shifted from struggle to development work. The third important factor that affected the movement was the rise of communal and reactionary forces during the mid-eighties. During the 1984 Hindu-Sikh riots, women's groups came forward and campaigned against communal violence. But the developments after 1985 created a number of challenges before the women's groups. In 1986, developments like the Shah Bano case, passing of Muslim Women's Act, renewal of the debate on Uniform Civil Code and Sati incident in Rajasthan, led to the reinforcing of religious, caste and community identities as the primary identities of women. While women's groups had all along been conscious of the multiple identities and their impact on women's position, the objective of this reinforcement and creating of counter-movements against feminism was to divide the women's movement which was being viewed as a threat to the well entrenched patriarchy.

It was against this background that the Third National Conference was held at Patna, Bihar, in February 1988 (called the Nari Mukti Sangharsh Sammelan). In the meanwhile, however, women's issues had become so widely recognised that many political parties had formed their own women fronts and special attention had begun to be paid many other movements of the eighties. In Bihar, in 1984, various Marxist-Leninist fragments came together to form the Indian People's Front (IPF) which grew to lead a strong peasant movement. Within this



front too, special efforts were made to organise women and to forge links with autonomous women's groups. As a result, IPF played an important role in organising the Patna Conference in 1988.

At the time of organising the Patna Conference, an attempt was made to include more groups right from the planning stage. Two preparatory meetings were held to discuss the agenda for the Conference. The preparatory meetings began to assume an important role in the organising of conferences henceforth. A co-ordination committee was formed at the national level which came to be known as the 'National Co-ordination Committee' (NCC). The venue for the Conference was collectively decided upon and the deciding factor for choosing the venue was to strengthen the local women's organisations and their struggles. The issue of criterion for participation in the Conference was also raised and Right Wing parties and groups were kept out of the Conference. It was decided to draft a document giving the perspective of the Conference. There was increased national representation at this Conference and many women activists from struggle oriented mass-organisations participated. For the first time, there was a large participation from rural areas. About 760 women from 101 organisations from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Orissa, West Bengal, Assam, Kerala, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Delhi, Goa, Himachal Pradesh and Punjab participated. The discussions were held in small groups on the following main themes: Women, work and property; Women and violence; Women - health and ecology; Women - communalism, culture and religion; and Women - patriarchy and struggles.

changes in the nature of conferences:

#### .....the fourth national conference

By the time the Fourth National Conference (called the Conference of Women's Movements in India), was held at Calicut, Kerala, in December 1990, issues like environmental degradation, housing, development policies, besides women-specific issues like rape, domestic violence etc., were being taken up. In fact, by this time, the women's movement had spread widely. It was the only movement that made efforts to encompass and inter-link issues such as work, wages, organisation, environment, ecology, resources, methods of production, health, religion, community etc. The growth of the movement, its conscious efforts to link up with other movements and emphasising the need to include women's perspective in them got reflected in the themes chosen for the Conference.

The themes that were taken up included Environmental degradation, Communalism, Personal Laws, Violence, Rape, Work, Health, Ecology, Women Studies, Women and Politics, Relationship between Mass Movements and the Autonomous Women's Movement, and Single Women. Around 3000 women from 113 organisations from all over India participated. The local level co-ordination was done by the Kerala Co-ordination Committee along with the NCC, which had activists from women's organisations from the rest of the country. The nature of participation in this Conference reflected a major change that had occurred in the national situation. This refers to the emergence of various national, international and government supported organisations, which employed women, including activists from the movement, to work on issues concerning women, but they worked from a different perspective. Thus, a large number of women from these governmental and non-governmental development oriented programmes participated in addition to women from AWGs and mass organisations. Some participants of earlier conferences did not participate due to differences originating from the previous conference, as well as the selection of the venue.

women's movement and the State :

#### .....the fifth national conference

The period between the Fourth and the Fifth National Conference was characterised by certain major developments. Various forces were appropriating the feminist agenda. The number of NGOs and government-supported women's programmes had increased and so did the number of women in them. Questions were being raised about their functioning and their perspective on women's issues. Problems related with foreign-funded groups and the government supported women's development programmes were raised for the first time in the Patna Nari Mukti Sangharsh Sammelan in 1988. The main problems related to such funded and government supported groups were with regard to their working on the issues as well as the depoliticising effect of the 'development' approach. Their accountability to funders and/or their governments stops these NGOs from raising political questions, which is an important aspect of any movement or struggle-oriented work.

More serious were the challenges being put forward by the communal, fundamentalist, traditional and reactionary forces. This came in two forms, firstly there was the backlash on women's groups, as mentioned earlier, which were presented as modern



western groups alienated from the realities of the masses and being cut off from the Indian culture and traditions. It was alleged that the women's groups couldn't claim to represent the masses of Indian women. The other challenge came in the form of appropriation of feminism by communal forces. For example, the women's movement's demand for an egalitarian Uniform Civil Code was appropriated by the BJP for its own purposes. The women fronts of the RSS, BJP and Shiv Sena were also talking of strong courageous women and were holding special classes not only to make women physically strong but also bring them 'culturally closer to Indian tradition' as defined by them. In addition, the mobilisation of women by the Right Wing groups in this manner was being used against women of other communities in situations of communal riots and also against women's groups. Secondly, commercial interests, in the wake of liberalisation and globalisation, had begun using the image of 'New Woman' to sell their products. The concept and ideas of double burden, domestic work and liberal woman were being used by companies for commercial purposes. This appropriation of feminist agenda, in the absence of any significant change in the position of women, posed a major challenge.

The planning for the Fifth Conference, which had begun in 1991, required addressing the constraints and shortcomings of the organisation and structure of the Conference because of the large-scale participation of women. This was done in the various planning meetings. An important suggestion was to have regional conferences to address the limitations of large conferences, and also to identify issues and strengthen zone wise links at conferences: North, South, Central, East and West Zone. But the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992 and the communal frenzy that gripped the country after that affected the process of Regional Conferences. Only the Northern Region Conference (called the Nari Mukti Sangharsh Sammelan, North India), was held at Kanpur in 1993 which focussed on the issue of communalism.

As the preparation for the Fifth Conference began, many questions pertaining to the nature of participation in both - the Conferences and the NCC was debated. The criterion for participation in the Conference was discussed again and it was decided that the Declaration of the Third National Conference be taken as the basis, as was done for the previous conference. The participation of the government sponsored Women's Development Programme (WDP) in the NCC was opposed. It was expressed that the practice/perspectives of government-run programmes and Right Wing organisations differed from the stated positions in the Declaration, therefore



these groups, institutions or organisations couldn't be part of the NCC. The need emerged to draw up some criteria for inclusion. It was felt that we need to state our position on the issues within the movement and those who stood by these views and positions could participate in the Conference. Thus a "Declaration of Autonomous Women's Groups" was drafted incorporating the suggestions of various groups. The Fifth National Conference of Women's Movements was held at Tirupati, Andhra Pradesh, in January 1994. By holding the Conference at Tirupati, women from all over extended their solidarity to the women in Andhra Pradesh who have been actively engaged in mass struggles since several years. The rural and tribal women of the state have been facing heavy state repression too. The early 90s had also witnessed the sharp rise of Hindu fundamentalist forces and communal strife. The liberalisation of the economy and the series of economic reforms had generated a wave of protest all over the country. It is in this context, that the Fifth National Conference of Women's Movements in India focussed on State Repression, New Economic Policy and communalism.

The Conference also discussed various other themes which included: Violence against Women, Health and Population, Communalism and Politics of Identity, Struggle for Survival, New Economic Policy, Women and State, Politics of Organising, Dalit and Tribal Women's Movement, Relationship of the Women's Movement with other Mass Movements, Single Women (included as a separate theme for the first time) and Sexuality. The Tirupati Conference made advances in significant areas. It was the very first Conference to have a special session on Lesbianism, an issue which had not been taken up in any of the earlier conferences. Despite considerable hostility, the session was a success. Again, it was for the very first time that the theme of Dalit and Tribal women's movement was taken which drew around 700 participants in one session. The last day witnessed a mammoth rally. The mobilisation of rural women from various districts of the state by host groups added strength to the Conference.



the marginalised speak out:

.....the sixth national conference

The selection of a venue for the Sixth National Conference had involved many discussions within the NCC. Since the previous two conferences were held in the South, it was decided to organise the Sixth Conference elsewhere. Women's groups and NGOs from Bihar offered to host the Conference and therefore, it was decided to hold the Conference at Ranchi, also keeping in view that it has had a long history of democratic movements.

The women's movement has been raising fundamental questions about the development model that has caused severe ecological crisis, been manipulated by the dominant class/caste groups and has led to the impoverishment and displacement of large sections of working people. Women are the worst hit by this deprivation of livelihoods, lands, jobs and cultures. Violence against women has been increasing in severe forms and intensity. Issues like marital rape and sexual harassment at the workplace are being taken up by women's organisations. As the pressures on the State from political parties, fundamentalism, economic crisis etc. increase, it is resorting to more violence to suppress people's struggles. The anti-woman character of the State is seen most clearly when it is unable to contain its own armed forces and officials from perpetuating violence against women. The State has, no doubt, brought in various legislations and policies for women. But the blatant anti-woman character of the State is explicit in its inherently manifest patriarchal, classist and casteist nature that sustains and perpetuates the status quo, doing little to offer justice to women. In this context, it was decided to focus on three major issues in the Ranchi Conference held December 1997- the Displacement of Women, Increasing Violence against Women and the Anti-Women Character of the State.

Besides the focus on these three issues, other themes discussed at this Conference were: Health, Sexuality, Women and Labour, Different Perspectives in the Women's Movement, Natural Resources, Communalism, and Special sessions were held on Muslim, Dalit and Adivasi women. The issue of

lesbianism, which was introduced in the previous Conference, was taken up once again, despite the opposition of some women's groups. Women from the North-East participated for the first time and added their issues to the agenda of the women's movement. A special session on women in prostitution and sex-work was also held for the first time. A special session was also added on the request of Tibetan women to highlight the oppressive policies of China against Tibetan women, so as to pressurize the Chinese government to release women prisoners.

The plenary session to pass the resolutions on the third and final day could not be held as per schedule. There was an incident of molestation of one of the participants by the police, which led to a spontaneous protest by most participants of the Conference. This rally generated enormous collective strength, which many participants saw as the most significant assertion of women-power during the Conference.

present trends in the women's movement:

.....impact on the conferences

The time for the Seventh Conference is upon us now. Suggestions to improve the Conferences came up in the meeting held in Baroda in April 1998 to review the Sixth Conference. These included streamlining the NCC, networking with movements prior to the Conference, and holding smaller Conferences to ensure manageability and more intense participation. The basic objectives of holding Conferences need to be clarified in order to make the process more meaningful. The developments affecting these conferences have reiterated the need for a serious and open debate within the women's movement on a number of issues like; the nature, participation, overall organisation and structure of the conferences etc. All these observations lead us to think seriously about how we look at these conferences? What is the purpose of organising such conferences. What kinds of women's groups are now participating? Are they struggle-oriented or NGO based? How is the decision-making regarding these conferences affected? There is a need to critically analyse the present trends within the women's movement as they are impinging upon and shaping these conferences.

