
FIFTH NATIONAL CONFERENCE OF WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS IN INDIA, TIRUPATI 23-24TH JANUARY, 1994

Since 1980, autonomous women's groups have met in National Conferences, to share experiences and strategies of struggle. After two conferences in Bombay in 1980 and 1985 the third conference was held in Patna. The Patna conference witnessed greater participation of rural women and also women from mass organizations and political parties.

The Calicut conference in 1990 saw the involvement of over 2,000 women majority from rural areas.

The Fifth National conference held in Tirupati, from 23-26 January 1994 was attended by about 3,000 women. Andhra Pradesh was chosen as a venue in order to focus on increasing state repression and express solidarity with the anti-arrack movement of the women of A.P. The conference was hosted by a relatively new group, Mahila Shakti, assisted by several other women's groups comprising the state co-ordination committee. Funds for the conference were raised by voluntary donations through sale of greeting cards, calendars, bags, badges, fund raising events and the registration fees (which ranged from Rs. 25 to Rs. 200). As with earlier conferences, no institutional funding was accepted.

Groups from all over the country attended the conference and participated in various ways—in sessions, cultural programmes, special group sessions and the rally. The rally on the last day, in which about 15,000 women participated, protested against State repression, new economic policies and communication.

The different sessions of the conference were on different themes :

1. New Economic Policy
2. Health and Population
3. Violence against women.
4. Sexuality
5. Single women—included as a separate theme for the first time.
6. Struggle for survival (including environment related struggles)
7. Women and State
8. Relationship of the women's movement with other mass movements.

9. Politics of organising
10. Communications and politics of identity.

Special sessions which emerged during the course of the conference were sessions by Dalit and Tribal women and a small group on lib

The report of the entire conference is still under preparation. We are presenting the report of women and state, co-ordinated by Saheli.

Women and State Coordinated by Saheli, Delhi.

The session was attended by about two hundred women from different trends within the women's movement—autonomous groups, far left revolutionary groups, NGO's, government sponsored programmes, women's studies researchers, as well as individuals. No papers were presented, and discussion was initiated along the lines of a framework suggested by the coordinators with the broad understanding that there is an increasing trend towards institutionalisation of movements and an attempt by the state to co-opt women's issues. In-depth discussions took place on the following sub-themes :

Legislation and the Women's Movement

A brief history of the campaigns carried out by the movement to bring about more women-centred law was given. The pertinent questions identified for discussion were : Have these laws really helped women? What has been their impact on society in general? What are the lacunae in the laws themselves, and also their effective implementation? How far should the movement concentrate on law as an avenue to get justice for women? The discussion revolved around laws relating to violence against women—rape, dowry and domestic violence laws, as well as laws relating to property rights, personal laws and legislation dealing with equal pay for equal work.

The main issue raised was the rising violence against women and the role of law and other state agencies in this regard. The discussion highlighted women's experiences which brought out the basic anti-women and anti-poor nature of the state. In this context, it was felt that laws were ineffective in bringing the culprits to book. While women from Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu spoke at length

about rape (by police and para-military forces) as an everyday phenomenon used in order to terrorise those fighting for their rights, women from UP and Rajasthan spoke about the state suppressing women's voice within the government's own programme. Bhanwari and Usha Dhiman's case were cited as examples. These examples pointed to the fact that in the absence of pressure from strong women's groups, it is almost impossible to use legislation in order to get justice for women.

More specifically the dowry law, Sec. 304 B and Sec. 498 A and their ineffectivity were highlighted. It was pointed out that police and other state structures help the culprits. The use of anticipatory bail as a means to escape punishment was strongly condemned. Simultaneously, it was also felt that the women's movement cannot ask for strengthening all legal provisions, as this might adversely affect activists in various movements who are many times implicated by the state in false cases. Women from Andhra (Vishakhapatnam) demanded the scrapping of 498 A because this law made it easier for police not to register 304 against dowry murderers. Thus, many men who murdered their wives could get away with the less stringent punishment under 498 A rather than being booked for murder under 304.

The issue of personal laws and inheritance laws was also raised. The inequalities in property distribution was brought out by all participants. Some Muslim women present pointed out that in Andhra Pradesh, land is given only to sons and grandsons, and nothing is given to daughters. Another fact that came to light was that since the promulgation of the Andhra Pradesh Succession Act, which gives more rights to women, land is being demanded as dowry by the boys family. It was also pointed out that even when land is given to women in their names, only usufructuary rights have been given, and they cannot sell or dispose off that land. The States' discriminatory role in AP was highlighted by the fact that only Hindu laws have been reformed while Muslim laws have remained untouched.

The State's anti-women attitude is also apparent from the fact that while both men and women participate in struggles for land rights, women are denied that rights when it comes to granting land titles, which are given only in the name of men. Participants vociferously spoke about the "assetlessness" of women, who work hard at back breaking tasks for their families, but are denied any share in either matrimonial or natal property.

Two other points raised pertained to the ability to use

law effectively. One was the situation that most women are not even aware of the existing laws and the rights that they are entitled to. So, one role of the women's movement could be to raise awareness in this respect through legal education. The other aspect focused upon was the reality that even when women are aware of their rights, it is only the rich and powerful who can take advantage of the laws. The vested interests of the State saw to it that women, the poor and powerless had to struggle for even small gains within the law.

One participant stressed the need for networking of women's groups, emphasising the necessity to monitor the working of laws on a regular basis in order to understand the problems inherent in laws so that they can be made more effective.

In the face of increasing violence by the State machinery, the role of the women's movement to strengthen the struggle against the state was strongly emphasised.

The majority of participants in this sub-theme were from rural areas, and were either landless labourers or owned very little land. Most of them were facing severe repression at the hands of goondas, police and para-military forces. Thus, land rights and the issue of sexual violence as a form of state repression emerged as the most basic and immediate problems. In this context, many other aspects of the law could not be discussed in depth, for instance the controversy surrounding the Uniform Civil Code, reform of personal laws, ineffectivity of laws demanded by the movement—such as rape law amendment relating to shifting the burden of proof; law prohibiting sex-determination, among others.

Panchayati Raj and Reservation for Women

This sub-theme, though attended by relatively fewer participants, was lively and informative.

A background was given about the recent Amendment in the Panchayat Act which gives 33 percent reservation for women. The questions raised were—Will the reservation ensure that women can raise their concerns in the Panchayat? Is there a need to make any extra effort in order to enable women to become effective members? What have been our experiences in areas where women have already been participating in Panchayats? Is a 33 percent reservation adequate or should we demand 50 percent reservation? Is the concept of reservations genuinely in the interest of women or is it another method of co-opting and controlling women's political participation? What impact will reserva-

tion have on other movements; will it dilute peoples' struggles in any way?

The ensuing discussion brought forth experiences from four states—Karnataka, Himachal Pradesh, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh. Some of the problems raised were common to all states. One important point raised was that women were fielded as candidates by different political parties, which resulted in divisions on lines dictated by political parties.

This, hampered the process of unity among women. One participant from Chikmagalur district said "Earlier women could be friends, but were now put in opposition to each other on political lines" stated that since women are elected on party tickets and mostly with the support of male politicians, these elected women do not involve themselves with genuine women's programmes and issues.

Another fact which came to light was that women who are actually involved in women's issues or are associated with a women's organisation are not accepted as candidates.

Another important aspect brought out by Manasa group from Bangalore was that government officials regarded women as basically unreliable, when it came to matters such as handling election papers. Women were given the relevant papers only when accompanied by their husbands or other party men. It was stressed that political education of women is an essential step in making their participation meaningful. It was felt that while reservations are needed, the reality of male, caste and class domination reduce the impact of this step. Sometimes, women are harassed in order to prevent them from entering the electoral process. An interesting dimension was the control of finances. In some cases, men wanted women to participate in elections because a lot of money is involved. Finances are raised through different means, but men retain control over it, and often misuse the money for buying liquor etc. Such occurrences sometimes dissuade women from participating in the political process.

Ekta Parishad, Madhya Pradesh and Sutra, Himachal Pradesh all emphasised the role of money in elections, and the tendency of political parties to field only women who do not have a women's movement perspective.

Sutra, Himachal Pradesh, raised some practical problems that women face in trying to be politically active. Panchayat meetings are held late at night, which makes it

difficult for women to attend. This results in men deciding all important matters, and also complaining that women do not attend meetings.

A positive note was sounded by Aalochana, Pune. A member spoke of the Shetkari Sanghatana and its Mahila Aghadi (women's front). A law was passed in Maharashtra in 1990 granting 30 percent reservation for women. In the subsequent elections, about 9-12 "all women's" Panchayats were formed, mostly due to the effort of the Shetkari Mahila Aghadi and other activists. The Shetkari Sanghatana slogan of 'Laxmi Mukti' helped women to gain some control over family income, and also land rights. However, land transfers could be carried out, especially to widows and deserted women, out only where the movement was strong. It was felt that such a strong movement not only helped women to form Panchayats but also to take up real problems like water, schooling, land issues etc. She concluded that if women want to make use of the electoral process, the backing of a mass movement is essential. From the discussion, the following points emerged—

1. One of the major problems identified was the question of tackling interference by political parties.
2. Problem of funds and their proper utilisation.
3. Support of women's organisations and other mass movements is needed to push genuine women candidates and take up real issues in the Panchayati Raj Institutions.
4. 33 percent reservations still left women in Panchayats in a minority. The demand of 50 percent reservation was debated, but no conclusion was reached.

Government Women's Development Programmes

This sub-theme was attended by only about 30 women, but participation was intense. Experiences from Mahila Samakhya of UP and Karnataka, WDP of Rajasthan and interaction with government programmes in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh were shared. The issues identified to initiate discussion were—

- (a) What had been the impact of women's development programmes (WDP) run by the government?
- (b) What are the aims of the government in initiating these programmes. How have they affected the movement?

(c) What are the obstacles or limitations of working within the government structure?

Some participants from UP Mahila Samakhya felt that there should be clarity about whether or not those associated with WDPs were a part of the women's movement. They stated that they were increasingly being made to feel that they were "agents of the state", and had to face criticism from others in the movement, while they felt very much a part of the broader women's movement in that they too were working for the upliftment of women and fighting for their rights.

The co-ordinators intervened with the suggestion that instead of going into the question of whether or not certain people were part of the movement, it may be more useful to discuss what impact the WDPs have and what does it mean for the movement.

One position which emerged was that working within the government structure with government funds cannot be effective because the govt's real interest do not lie in giving power to women. There are bound to be restrictions laid down by the govt., it was felt.

The other view point was that it is necessary to work within the govt. structure since it has such a large outreach and has access to even remote villages. Workers from Mahila Samakhya, Banda (UP) asserted that it was possible to raise demands or fight for women's rights even within this structure. They cited their struggle (even facing lathicharge) to get payments for women from forest officials, and the successful struggle for water in several villages. However they did face resistance and restrictions from higher ups in the programme, it was admitted.

One question raised was whether it was possible to participate in a movement despite being part of government programmes. A worker of Mahila Samakhya, Saharanpur (UP) spoke of the experience of the anti alcohol movement in the area. She revealed that she, as an official in the programme was hesitant to join a protest rally against the liquor lobby. However the women mobilised by the Mahila Samakhya workers were militant and vehement about their own participation. Their conviction led her to also joint the rally. She said that despite restrictions it was possible to participate in movements if one had personal conviction.

Some women, however, felt that it is important to understand the reasons why government supported some women's organisations. Support will continue only as long

as the position of state is not challenged. Once this is done support will be withdrawn. Women from Mahila Samakhya agreed with this but felt that it is more important for them to stay in the programme and raise their voice against repression than simply move-out. As long as the programme exists, others will join it if they leave. The real challenge lay in fighting from within, with the support of women's movement. In the context of NEP they feared that they would face pressures for meeting family planning targets also. It was all the more important in such a context that women's movement offered them support rather than weaken their struggles by labelling them as a part of a state funded programme.

State, NGOs, Funding and the Women's Movement

The increasing influence of funding on the women's movement was discussed. Does funding ensure the autonomy of women's organisation? International funding agencies are channelising resources through NGOs more than before, in areas like health, education etc. in which the state had earlier a major role. It is imperative for us to understand the implications of these changing trends in the context of New Economic Policies (NEP) and Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAP). Do we see a difference between govt and foreign funding? Has funding led to further institutionalisation and co-option of women's issues by the state and other institutions?

In the context of government funds, women from groups in Andhra Pradesh pointed to the repressive and class character of state. During the anti-arack movement, police stations transformed into arack shops, and police pressurised people to drink. A government sponsored Akshar-Jyoti programme included a story about a woman who was beaten by her husband who came home drunk till she organised other women and brought about a change in the situation. As the anti-arack struggle gained momentum, this story was removed from the text books. This, they argued showed that government was not interested in the welfare of women. Women from Karnataka also pointed out that they had similar experiences of state repression when they tried to stop the opening of illegal arack shops. There was a general agreement that government programmes did limit the scope of operation for women who were a part of these. The autonomy in deciding the nature of work was not available.

The issue was also discussed in the context of NGO funding of programmes and organisations. Relating her experiences of a funded organisation, one woman pointed out that funding agencies only use women to carry out their

programmes. They are not involved in decision making or planning work at all. Only execution part is left to them. There is a clear hierarchy within these organisations and activists are not associated with the most crucial stages of framing programmes or maintaining accounts, etc. Their organisational structures are very undemocratic and pose a threat to the autonomous struggles of women. It was very important to evolve alternative strategies to sustain the autonomous character of the struggle.

One woman from Chattisgarh pointed out how they took funds to build a strong organisation of beedi workers and later discontinued funds to turn to people for support...now they can do without any funds external and therefore feel very much autonomous. Another view was that even when funds are taken, autonomy can be preserved and injustice challenged. Others, however, were very sceptical of these possibilities. When there are so many funded organisations, why is it not possible to build revolutionary movement, they asked? The question of dependence of women's organisations on party funds was also raised. Despite agreeing on the need for alternative strategies to secure autonomy in the context of worsening state repression, NEPs and vast inflow of funds, no agreement could emerge on the possible strategies which can be utilised. These examples highlighted the concern of all participants regarding the politics of funding. Participants stressed the need to be aware and critical of the role of funding in co-opting people's struggles.

State Repression on Movements

This sub-theme, as envisaged by the co-ordinators, was to focus on the increasing repression on women and movements in the context of growing state power. Participants were also to analyse whether the nature of state repression and violence has been changing over the years. Lastly, strategies to tackle this repression were to be discussed.

To begin with, activists from different parts of the country shared experiences of the brutalities heaped on women by the state through its agencies—the police, paramilitary forces, forest guards/rangers. Tribal women in forest areas are specially vulnerable to attacks by forest guards and police. Workers from Alternative for Indian Development, Bihar related experiences of oppression by forest rangers and police in the adivasi region of Santhal Parganas. Here, as in the Palamau area, one of the main occupations of women is to sell firewood collected from the forest. Women and young girls are raped and terrorised by these officials. They have no security, and can move around only in large groups. At the same time, contractors

are given free access to forest resources by these very same officials who sexually abuse women in the name of "guarding" the forest. Activists of the Adivasi Shethkari Shetmazdoor Sangathana, Nasik region, added their experiences of oppression by forest guards.

The high handedness of the police was brought out in the case cited by Stree Shakthi, Vishakhapatnam, where an eighth standard girl was raped in custody. To make matters worse, the rapist "married" the girl with the reasoning that this would ensure that her parents will not mind!

Another instance highlighted by Saheli, Delhi, was from Jayshankpur in Orissa. Here, the Orissa Armed Reserved Police Force gang raped women in a harijan village, while intervening in a land dispute. Men too were sexually abused. No cases were registered, and no medical examination conducted for the women. So far, no action has been taken, and the judicial enquiry order has not yet been implemented even 3 months after the incident. The role of police in protecting the higher castes and the powerful was pointed out, and the fact that the police used their status and power to terrorise common people, specially women.

An activist of the A.P. Rayat Coolie Sangham spoke of her participation in the peasant movement in Srikakulam in the 60s. Sexual abuse by landlords was rampant, one example being the practice of sending young girls after their first menstruation, to the landlord, who considered it his right to rape her. Women took active part in the movement against landlords, in the face of repression by the Congress government, which instituted a series of false cases against the activists. Activists, including those attending the session, were subject to police torture and brutal assaults, and had to spend long periods in jail. Despite these rigours, many are still active in the movement. The law and police are mere extensions of the state, and used as per the convenience of the rulers, to maintain the status-quo, it was felt.

The discussion moved to the changing nature of state repression, and that movements are becoming the direct targets of state violence. Earlier, the most powerless sections i.e., women, dalits, tribals were the focus of the attack. In recent times, in addition to these, there is a systematic attack when people demand their rights. A member of Stree Shakthi, Vishakhapatnam, declared that the border of India is not near Tibet, but in Andhra Pradesh itself. Paramilitary forces are killing off people in large numbers in Telengana. Women are kept in custody of the police and raped repeatedly, in Dandakaranya and E.

Godavari. If they become pregnant, they are forced to claim that Naxalites raped them. If they protest, they have to face bullets.

■ All kinds of brutal tortures were described, from putting fire and chilly powder in the vagina, to burning the body with cigarettes, electric shocks on wet bodies, apart from 'simple' beating. In Dandakaranya alone, 22 women were killed after severe torture, in '93. These murders are written off as 'encounters' with the police.

The situation is all the more ironical, because organisations, such as the Krantikari Adivasi Mahila Sanghatana in Dandakaranya, are banned though they are only asking for basic rights such as the right to till a small piece of land. Similarly, it was pointed out that any rally against dowry or rape, faces the threat of repression. Most activists have a string of false cases on their name. The focus on the police force can be seen in the fact that 48% of the total budget in AP is spent on police force. The state, it was asserted, is the first enemy of the people today.

Alternative for Indian Development (AID), Dharmapuri, Tamil Nadu, also spoke of the police hand in suppressing movements for basic rights. Workers from this group spoke also about the negative intervention of police in cases of domestic violence. Instead of helping the aggrieved party, the police ends up supporting violent and brutal husbands, by arresting and attempting to silence activists who are raising these issues.

AID, Bihar, in this connection, described the scene in Chota Nagpur, where dam construction was taking place in Subarnarekha, Chandil and Koelkaro, among others. Adivasi women have been organising themselves around issues of displacement, compensation, etc. However, whenever they raise their voice, they are beaten up by the police to suppress any protest. Despite severe repression, the women continue to fight, since it is a question of their very survival.

An activist of P.O.W. (Stree Vimukti) differentiated state repression at two levels: One on women who are part of a struggle, the other on women whose families are within the movement. In the latter case, the vulnerabilities of women are used by the police to make them reveal the whereabouts of their husbands, fathers and brothers.

The specific target of state repression, it was analysed, was any movement which raises basic questions. The government does not oppose small social groups taking up development programmes. Taking up issues which shake the foundations of the system automatically invites state repression. P.O.W. (Stree Vimukti) argued that if we tackle only dowry deaths, the government is not threatened in the same way as when we demand land rights, tendu leaves, or when we expose the government hand in arrack dealing. The government exerts more repression in case of "broad" issues than in case of "feminist" issues. This assertion led to some discussion and debate.

In this context, the example of the anti-arrack movement was cited to strengthen the former point of view. When the movement focussed on making men stop drinking, it did not affect the government much. However, when the nexus between liquor barons and the government began to be exposed, state repression intensified. The recent arrest of the POW Vice President under TADA was symbolic of the threat the movement poses to the state, it was pointed out.

The increasing use of Draconian laws such as TADA was then discussed. The state has many tactics to suppress a movement. Arrest, torture, rape and murder in the shape of fake encounters have been some of the weapons used. In recent times, the state has increasingly used "legal" measures in the name of preserving the security and integrity of the nation. Measures such as TADA, and the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, were a clear symbol of state repression. Unfortunately, women from Punjab, Kashmir and North-East were not present to share their experiences of severe repression.

Resolutions were proposed on several issues. There was a brief debate on the strategy of focussing on specific instances of state repression, when it is well known that repression was there even before, and is more widespread than the specific example demonstrates. Ultimately, however, there was a general agreement that it would be an effective strategy to focus on specific incidents as take off points to draw attention to state repression as a whole.



NEW ECONOMIC POLICY—CONCERN FOR WOMEN'

The beginning of nineties marked the accentuation of strains for Indian women with state giving in to the IMF-WB dictated programme, structural adjustment and economic reforms, life has become more difficult for the weaker and marginalised sections of society. And given the context of Patriarchy women have not only been the worst sufferers of this, there is little in these that can offer them any consolation for the times that are to come. The policies of liberalization of economy, the shrinking of public sector, the trend towards privatization, the emphasis on deregulation, the cut-backs in social sector and related spending by the state, the concern for efficiency and profitability, in short the acceptance of profits rather than distributive justice as the basis for all economic processes, is only likely to intensify contradictions in Indian society.

State policies have not only contributed to an increased rate of inflation, the rise in prices has been uneven for various sections of society, with poor being the worst victims, for it varied in respect of various items of consumption. Between December 1992 and October 1993 foodgrain prices shot up by 12.7 per cent with prices of wheat rising by 12 per cent, those of bajra by 17 per cent, of barley 25.9 per cent. The prices of pulses shot up by 37.6 per cent, with those of gram rising by 72.8 per cent. Vegetable prices too shot up by 40.8 per cent, with onion jumping by 160.5 per cent and potatoes by 68.5 per cent. Sugar rose by 20.5 per cent, khand sari by 22.3 per cent and gur by 37.5 per cent. The havoc that policies for promoting agricultural exports is going to play with the poor is not difficult to see, if one realises how scarcity and scarcity related price-increases have always taken things beyond the reach of the poorest strata of society. And if one knows anything from the various analysis of nutritional patterns within the family the pain of most cutbacks in food consumption at the level of household is borne primarily by women who try to ensure supplies to other members of family.

The pattern of policies being adopted also will have far-reaching implications for the labour market structure. Already such trends are showing with sharp reduction in organized sector employment and rapid increase in unorganized and informal sector employment, the employment of women has undoubtedly increased in the recent years, but conditions of work have only worsened the insecure and uncertain conditions of work in the informal sector and the fact that increased participation of women, especially, poor women in the labour market forced by

circumstances, marked by the worsening economic conditions of the poor, does raise important questions about the nature of changes being introduced though the new economic policies the much, talked about feminization of labour in unorganised sector is in effect a reflection on the helplessness of women in the changing economic context.

The increased burden on the girl-child to take care of the tasks being carried out by their mothers is only generating pressures for the withdrawal of girl child from schools. This further weakens the prospects of their acquiring the capacity to improve their economic status as they grow up. The trends in this respect are very upsetting.

The unbridled exploitation of natural resources, not only being facilitated by de-regulation but also actually being promoted through export promotion drives is also increasing the hardships of women who depend on these resources for meeting the needs of food, food and fuel for their families. Declining common property resources as a consequence of the inclination towards their privatization/leasing at industries on the pretext of development is also adding to the hardships of women who have relied on these resources for carrying out their traditionally assigned responsibility of running the household.

The increasing trend towards state withdrawal from social welfare activities and promotion of non-governmental organisations, with major responsibilities to carry out even state policy objectives and the funding of these organisations by various donor agencies is only pushing state policies in the directions acceptable to donors. A major part of loans being given in the name of health are being diverted towards population control programmes and that voluntary sector is being mobilized to carry out these programmes. This is not only at the cost of overlooking the basic health needs of women, this has also become an important mechanism through which extremely harmful contraceptive technologies are being promoted to profit the multinational producing them the acceptance of Dunkel proposals and the signing of GATT agreement has only worsened the possibility of state policies being linked to the needs of the poor.

Whether it is the policies of drugs or it is the public distribution system, the scope for relating the policies to the needs of the weak and marginalised sections of society has been reduced, thereby raising important issues of threats to possibilities of social justice as a consequence of

their policies. Efforts being made to co-opt. women's movement through relative funding of women's groups and issues by state and international donor agencies, pose a major challenge. Especially, in a context, where state is giving up its responsibilities to provide for women's needs and to create conditions for straightening their position, in response to the demands of the women's movement. The

challenge is a serious one and calls for collective struggles against the very framework of new economic policies, women's victimization must not be permitted at any cost, it social justice is still of same relevance to society.

