

THE SIXTH NATIONAL CONFERENCE OF WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS AT RANCHI:

Some Reflections

The Sixth National Conference on Women's Movements held in Ranchi from 28th to 30th December 1997 was an opportunity for women from movements from all over the country to share their experiences, visions, struggles and campaigns.

Around 4,000 women from over 300 organisations participated in the conference. There was not only an increase in the number of participants, for the first time women from the North East participated in large numbers and brought their issues to the agenda of the women's movement.

The central themes of the conference were: displacement of women, increasing violence against women and anti-woman character of the state. The session on displacement was one of the most largely attended. The session brought out as to how the construction of big dams in the name of development are displacing thousands of poor people. But unfortunately the discussion remained confined to the Narmada dam. Other big dams and other kinds of displacement, specially keeping in mind that Ranchi was the venue of the conference, displacement due to the Netarhat firing range could not be discussed.

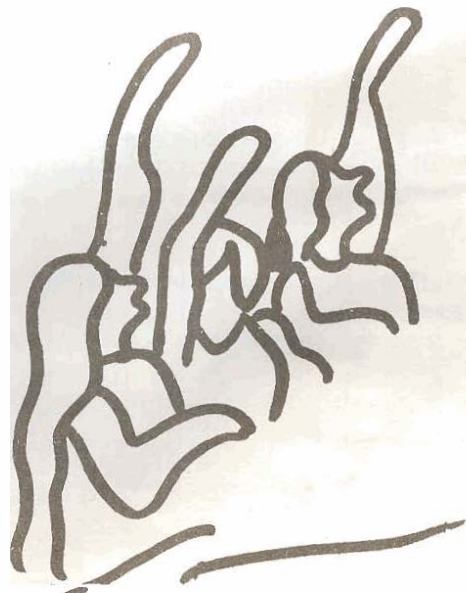
An indepth discussion on increasing violence against women did not take place, since the session was primarily dominated by street plays. The anti-woman character of the state was divided into various sub-sessions. These were: the coercive population control policy, women's development programme, anti-liquor movement and state repression. There was a follow-up meeting on anti-liquor movement and state-repression to discuss the possibilities of networking to build solidarity among ongoing democratic struggles.

Parallel sessions and workshops were also held on Muslim women, Adivasi women, Dalit women, natural resources, sexuality, health, lesbianism, women and labour, different perspectives in the women's movement etc. A special session was added on the request of Tibetan Women's Association to highlight the oppressive policies of China against Tibetan women so as to pressurise the Chinese government to release women prisoners. The wide range of themes reflected the numerous issues confronting women from different sections of society.

Apart from discussions there were other creative expressions like films, plays, songs and dance presented by various groups. Many women who generally feel alienated from the format of discussion could relate to such forms of expressions in a more meaningful way. Stalls and exhibitions were set up, where the organisations displayed their materials like newsletters, magazines, books, posters, pamphlets, cassettes, etc. Even handicrafts produced by women were on display.

Cultural programmes in the evenings were an opportunity where women celebrated their coming together through songs, dance and plays. went on till late night during the conference where the women were not only engaged in discussing the various issues, sharing experiences formulating strategies and networking but also in selling their materials, talking informally to other activists and groups and reporting to the press.

The third and final day's programme which was to have the plenary session to pass the resolutions and the rally which culminates into a public meeting could not be held as per schedule. There was an incident of molestation of one of the participants by the police. This led to a spontaneous protest, and thousands of women blocked the main chowk of Ranchi, moving out only when the accused was suspended.



The Ranchi Conference has 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 conference, etc. Some of the problems identified were - selection and thrust of the themes, criteria and amount of registration, boarding and lodging facilities, lack of local volunteers to guide the participants, non-availability of space to conduct sessions, etc.

Most of the participants also felt that the total time allotted (one and a half days) for discussions for both the central and the sub-themes was inadequate both from the point of view of a large number of women participating, as well as the wide range of issues covered. It was also felt that there was not sufficient preparation on the part of the coordinators of the sessions. This was reflected in the level of discussions and the nature of participation in many of the sessions.

One of the objectives in selecting a venue of the conference is to highlight the ongoing struggles of that region and to extend the solidarity of women from all over India to such struggles. This requires a special session which should focus on the local issues but unfortunately there was no such session in the Ranchi Conference.

All the above observations lead us to think seriously about how we look at these conferences. What is the purpose of organising such conferences? What kind of women's groups are now participating? Are they struggle oriented or NGO based? How is 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.

Saheli organised a review meeting of the Ranchi Conference on 30th January which was attended by about 30 women from different women's organisations. Some of the issues which emerged were: What should be the role of the National Coordination Committee (NCC) and State Coordination Committee (SCC) which organise the conferences? How can the coordination between them be improved? It was stressed that among other things the role of NCC should be to provide continuity between the conferences. It was observed that interaction of women's groups between the two conferences is also getting limited and that efforts should be made to improve it. It was also suggested that the decisions and resolutions which

get adopted during the conference should be carried forward in order to strengthen the women's movement.

The other major issue which emerged was: what should be the criteria for including various organisations in the NCC? Serious concern was also expressed over the increasing presence of funded NGOs and government organisations in these conferences. It was agreed that this feedback would be shared at the NCC review meeting to be held in Baroda in early April.

The Developing Countries Research Centre (DCRC) in Delhi University organised a discussion on the Conferences of the Women's Movement on 3rd February. Saheli was invited to present a report of the Ranchi Conference in the context of the history and

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perspectives of the earlier conferences. A number of women who had attended the Ranchi Conference were present in this discussion. The presentation was followed by a critical and lively discussion regarding the politics of the women's movement as reflected in these conferences. The increasing NGO-isation of these conferences and the impact of foreign funding was brought up. A strongly expressed opinion was that a struggle-oriented

perspective was missing in the sessions and discussions at Ranchi. It was also pointed out that what began as a Conference of autonomous women's groups can no longer be defined as such. The discussion focused mainly on the questions arising from Funding and NGOs on one hand and alliances with left groups on the other. The low participation of women's groups of ML parties at Ranchi as compared to the earlier two conferences was also mentioned. Yet another opinion expressed was that if one recognizes the diversity in the women's movement, why do women continue to come together under one conference? Why not more conferences if the trends are so different? Though the discussion raised more questions than it could answer, concern from various quarters over the changing character of such conferences was clearly articulated.

These are questions which neither we, nor all those engaged in the struggle for women's liberation, can afford to ignore any longer. At this point of time, as a group which has been a part of the NCC, a need has been felt in Saheli to clearly determine an organizational objective and role in these conferences. The assessment of the Ranchi Conference makes it imperative to think afresh of the various trends in the women's movement.