Durgabai Deshmukh Memorial Lecture-1993

'WOMEN AND THE POLITICAL PROCESS'

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WOMEN AND THE POLITICAL PROCESS

(DURGABAI DESHMUKH MEMORIAL LECTURE-1993)

It is indeed a great honour to be asked to deliver the second Durgabai Deshmukh Memorial Lecture, and I thank the Council for Social Development for conferring this privilege on me. While younger generations perhaps know Durgabai as a pioneer social worker, older women and men still remember her as the indomitable freedom fighter, who created and managed an institution at the age of twelve, and brought Mahatma Gandhi to address a meeting of Devadasis against the wishes of the local leaders organizing his programme. The impact she could make on women cut off from any knowledge or contacts with the national mainstream, was best symbolised for me in a village in Nagaland in 1973. When the Committee on the Status of Women arrived there to talk to the women, one old woman came forward to ask "Do you know Durgabai?" We said we knew her slightly, but our Chairperson, Phulrenu Guha, had a long experience of working with her. "Oh then, we shall tell you all you want to know. Durgabai came here 20 years ago, and told us to organize a Mahila Mandal, so that we could resolve our problems. We have done something, but there are many new problems; now that you people have come, we can tell you about them."

Durgabai's early life epitomised the struggle of many upper-caste, spirited women to whom the freedom movement provided an opportunity to break out of oppressive social norms, and seek creative avenues for self-fulfillment and leadership without the opprobrium of being perceived as "selfish" or "self-centered". A rebel constricted by her inherited values, which prevented placing her own dreams and designs before her obligations to the family, she could take on the needs of the bigger family, the nation, without feeling guilty. But within the nation, her priorities were clear and consistent-her obligations were to all those oppressed by poverty, ignorance and oppressive social institutions. In her own words, the political awakening of the freedom movement provided "the renaissance of Indian womanhood".[1]

The value of equality had to be internalised by all who preached it, so the young rebel, at the age of 21, was challenging her own party leaders for allowing the Raj to

divide political prisoners into A, B & C classes for identical offence of breaking the salt law. Two decades later, she challenged two successive Finance Ministers (including the one she was to marry later) for drawing up "rich men's budgets, with no provision for the poor".[2]

Since the Constitution designed India as a 'welfare' instead of a 'Police' State, she told the Legislature[3] as well as the Prime Minister and the Finance Minister that "there was no use talking about the need for bringing up the weaker sections of society, and giving better status to women unless we had a budgetary provision to help them and to save the institutions working for their welfare from being closed down". "The Chapter on Directive Principles places on the State a wide range of obligations".[4]

This insistence on obligations of the State as well as of individual men and women, was the lesson she had learnt from Gandhiji that justified her rebellion. Though she used the term welfare, by her own definition she was talking about social reform which "aims essentially at change, a *change that may sometimes involve the basic values and the social institutions in the community,* fighting for the equality of rights of women, pleading for a better deal for Harijans, and launching a movement for a change in the manner of handling juvenile delinquents" etc.[5] The rebel was thus fully aware of the hurdles on the way and was impatient with the two men she admired so much for being so insensitive to them.

I intend to interpret her creation and development of the Central Social Welfare Board (CSWB) from this perspective. Durgabai had an intimate understanding of the obstacles that would hamper the women that she know best from actively participating as equals of men in the political process-a responsibility that came with equal political rights. Upper caste, middle class women were rooted deeply in their family roles and obligations to traditions, caste and religious norms, and would not find it easy to free themselves from those values. The excitement and slackening of controls that had come during the freedom struggle were already over. The strength of the opposition to genuine gender equality was also visible from the rejection by the Constituent

Assembly of:

(a) Prof K.T. Shah's move to include women's housework within estimations of the national income; and

(b) deletion of the word 'practice' from Article 25 of the Constitution (freedom of conscience and free profession, practice and propagation of religion) despite the pleas of all women members.

It became more visible during the debates over the Hindu Code Bill by the same body sitting as the Central Legislature prior to the General Elections of 1952.

The women's movement, mostly confined to elite women in urban areas, was beginning to flag. Younger generations with greater advantages of education and/or professional experience who could have been expected to swell its ranks appeared to be more keen on taking up jobs, as the first generation beneficiaries of the equality clauses of the Constitution. Women's organizations were beginning to break down under ideological and/or personality tensions. The relatively better known leaders with broader popular support were picked up by the Government for high offices, a move which could not be opposed but was certainly going to denude the women's movement and the organizations of a sense of direction, purpose and much needed challenges, excitement and leadership.

Realist enough to know that the women's movement had a very narrow base and had never really reached the grassroots except perhaps for short spells during the great national upheavals, Durgabai also knew that her lieutenants would need considerable exposure to the variety of problems at the grassroots as well as skills to create new institutions to manage nation-building activities. One such lieutenant[6] told me how Durgabai dragooned them into learning accounts keeping, records maintenance, being ready to face audits and still maintain touch with the actual work going on in the field among women, children and the needy at the grassroots.

The CSWB was a unique institution whose real purpose and status baffled many political and administrative pundits over the years. Even members of the Committee on the Status of Women in India, 20 years after the birth of the Board, remained confused.

While the relatively younger, professional academics used to neat classifications and categories, saw the Board as an official agency, a creation and extension of the State, the serving Chairperson of the Board[7] and some of the older members who had served on it earlier, perceived it primarily as a non-official women's body, assisting other voluntary organizations, most of which they believed were run by women to carry out nation-building tasks that in the Board's opinion could be done much better by them than the bureaucracy.

In hindsight, after the experience of the last 20 years, I am compelled to admit that what I dismissed then as lack of understanding by older colleagues was in fact the message that Durgabai had sought to imprint on their minds-to view themselves not as agents of government, but as constructive workers in nation-building, and mobilizers of new groups of women, especially in rural areas, for similar tasks. And, while as a teacher of formal politics decades ago I would perhaps not have regarded such mobilisation as political action, in today's context I find strange parallelisms between some aspects of the post-emergency women's movement and the vision and efforts of Durgabai. I would, therefore, describe her first steps unhesitatingly as efforts to expand avenues for women to participate more efficiently and effectively in the political process.

This lecture is not meant to be an analysis of the work of the CSWB or of Durgabai, but to present before you the changing perspective of the inter-relationship between women and the political process that has been evolving through the revival of the women's movement since the 1970s. In my view, this re-interpretation of Durgabai becomes not only an important analytical tool, but provides some critical answers to a few of the dilemmas that face the present women's movement.

I shall concentrate on only three:

a) nature and purpose of the role that women do or should play in the political process;

b) meaning and implications of the frequently used term "women's perspective";

c) in the face of earlier lessons from India and elsewhere in the world, how to ensure the sustainability as well as sustenance of the women's movement?

Friends and colleagues who have known me closely over the last two decades will understand the degree of shifts in my own ideas and perspectives that the selection or formulation of these themes indicate, but for the many not too familiar with the travails and tribulations of the women's movement, I offer a simple explanation. Being born a woman or being trained as a political scientist did not help me to identify these issues. But the process of unlearning, new learning and redefining that began in my case with the investigations of the Committee on the Status of Women in India has continued with the rebirth of the women's movement. I believe my formulations will find echoes in many hearts, even if the claims of activism impose constraints on some to articulate them in the same manner.

But the situation forced on us today by dissolving certainties, collapsing institutional frameworks and paradigms that we had taken for granted for the major part of this century, compels me not to evade some of these fundamental questions which we treated in the CSWI's report as 'settled facts' that did not require reopening.

> "Equality is an article of faith in our Constitution and guaranteed by specific articles. We could therefore treat this as a settled fact, for which no discussion was necessary. Our investigation, however, proved that there was still considerable ambiguity as well as ambivalence in the general understanding of the need and implications of sex equality in our country ... We believe that equality of women is necessary not merely on the ground of social justice, but as a basic condition for social, economic and political development of the nation."[8]

II

The CSWI's investigation of changes in women's status since independence left us with more questions than answers. Why had the whole process of change-economic, political or otherwise-deviated so far from what the women's movement had dreamt of when it demanded total equality? Why had the government, political parties, other institutions of our political system and constitutional and political pundits of all hues ignored the gender dimensions of such deviations? Why had the women in active political life,

including many who achieved positions of great power and influence, not done anything about it, not even registered any protest? Above all, why, despite the steadily increasing participation of women in the voting process,[9] no one had taken the responsibility to inform them of what were their rights and responsibilities in free India?

In the absence of a movement, the Committee's recommendations could only be addressed to the formal institutions--the Government, the judiciary, political parties, the educational system, trade unions etc. But, we did not spare ourselves--educated professional women--for our failure to ensure the extension of these rights to other women. We too had contributed to the increasing devaluation and marginalisation of the majority of women by the society and policy-makers by ignoring our broader responsibilities. Neither could we absolve ourselves of the guilt for the collapse of the women's movement or the total lack of understanding, knowledge or sensitivity among educated middle class women of the appalling situation of women in poverty and the courage with which they faced their utter powerlessness.

The voyage of discovery-of the diversity of women's situations, roles, traditions, values, constraints and strengths despite powerlessness that began for some of us twenty years ago, is nowhere near completion. It would be futile to attempt even a summary recital of all that we have learnt from our attempts to come closer to the lives of different sections of women in our vast and diverse population. The rebirth of the movement has not been either a painless or a simple, unified, linear one-way process. Our society is plural and diverse as well as iniquitous and unjust. The last two features had to be fought undoubtedly. But, was it necessary to regard the plurality and diversity as points of weakness? Could we not view them as potential sources of strength instead?

That question, forced on us while grappling with the multiplicity of issues, perspectives, ideologies, priorities and information and communication gaps that revealed themselves with the growth of the movement, has today been answered by science. Years ago, some peasant women asked us:

> "why does the Sarkar allow felling of the variety of trees in the forest that supplied so many of our needs and then replace them with only eucalyptus? Don't all these learned people know that it is not good for the soil, apart from not meeting our

needs for food, fodder, fuel and a livelihood?"[10]

We had not then heard of bio-diversity as essential for sustaining the planet. I hope this audience will forgive me for claiming some acknowledgement that Indian peasant women were ahead of the scientists and heads of powerful states of the world by at least two decades, if not more! We also know now that they had resisted intensive cropping of only HYV seeds with heavy doses of chemical fertilizers and pesticides.[11]

But no one had given them a hearing. They have no voice because the political process has not provided any ears to listen or communicate their opinions, knowledge or priorities. And, this deafness is at all levels-in the families, the community and other parts of the socio-political system.

All of us in North India are familiar with the word *char diwari* which we interpret as the four walls of the home which traditionally confined all women. An illiterate village woman taught me a totally different meaning.

> "We have four walls to scale before we can even acquire an identity as women in our own right-the family, the caste or the community (this is a tribal region with multiple ethnic groups), the village and then religion. These have been the barriers that kept us divided unaware that we had any rights as women, as citizens, as workers. Now that we have our organization and know our rights, we shall ensure that every woman we come across knows that we do not have to feel powerless. We shall force the Panchayats to listen. If we fail there, we shall go to higher-ups, but we are not going back to our earlier state of suffering, silent, powerlessness. Rights also mean responsibilities and our responsibilities now go beyond our own children and the farnily."[l2]
>
> "All children need care and a chance to develop. Why do we not have child-care centres in every village? They would make our work easier, release our daughters to go to school and give the kids some chance to have a better life than ours. They will learn something in the Centre and will not feel frightened or handicapped when they go to school."[13]

There are many other such voices. Factory workers, asked as to why the creches provided by a few employers according to the labour laws were empty, answered with counter questions:

> "Would you hand over your children to be cared for by those who exploit you? And, how do we bring them all this distance when we have to face a daily struggle to reach here ourselves"? [14]

Members of SEWA, after joining in several discussions on the dualism of the Indian economy, challenged their own classification as workers in the informal sector.

> "We are the majority, are we not? Why then should we be defined in terms of a minority which does not share our characteristics or problems?"

A peasant woman at an Asian Development Bank Workshop on Gender Issues in Agriculture heard the word 'mainstreaming' being used repeatedly by the participants and asked her interpreter for its meaning. When it was explained, she made her intervention:

> "What do you mean by mainstreaming? To make some room for us in all that is going on? But that is not what we want. We want no part in planting thousands of eucalyptus trees that rob our soil of water and other plants, leaving our children and cattle hungry. We want to *change* these processes. If we have our way, we will call the scientists to work with us, adding their knowledge to ours, and look for solutions that would be good for everybody."[15]

A delegation of national women's organizations which visited Bhopal, Ahmedabad and Surat in February 1993 to talk to the women affected by the recent communal riots heard even more unexpected voices:

> "Our present plight is a direct consequence of the moving out of our Harijan neighbours from the mohalla five years ago. They were our neighbours and friends. We celebrated all festivals together. Many of us did the same work. The society (housing society) moved them out. After that, the Hindus started attacking us".
>
> "We would all have been killed if our Hindu *behenen* (sisters) had not hidden and sheltered us in their homes, fed us, given us saris, mangalsutras and bindis before

escorting us to safer areas ... But women are not included in the Mohalla Peace Committees".[16]

These few examples illustrate on the one hand the strength of diversity, and the potential role that such women can play in shaping the path and direction of development. *But the political process had failed to tap this energy, knowledge and sense of human and social responsibility.*

After reviewing women's role and status in the political process over a quarter of a century, the CSWI concluded:

> "All the indicators of participation, attitudes and impact come up with the same results-the revolution in social and political status of women for which Constitutional equality was to be only the instrument, still remains a very distant objective ... the large masses of women continue to lack spokesmen who understand their special problems, and be committed to their removal, in the representative bodies of the State ... though women do not numerically constitute a minority they are beginning to acquire the features of a minority community by the three recognized dimensions of inequality: class, status and power" [17]

The CSWI also commented rather sharply on resistance from political elites to measures aimed to promote gender equality, and "contradictions in the regard and concern" among women elites - social or political - for the inequalities suffered by women in every sphere.

Well, the revival of the women's movement has changed that bleak picture to some extent. But the dilemmas still remain. The right to political equality is an individual right. But the institutional forces that are arraigned against gender equality are all powerful collectives that exert control on people's minds and behaviour-class, caste, community, religion, locality, family occupation etc. These controls affect women and men both, making them accept gender inequality as a value *per se.* Sometimes it persists as an unconscious bias, even among persons committed to progressive secular and egalitarian ideologies.

Another source of resistance comes from the calculations of electoral arithmetic. Since women are not perceived as an organized interest or pressure group, it is the anticipated reaction from a community or voters at large that influences decisions on measures that would affect women's status directly.

The situation has worsened with the deepening conflicts of identity politics with movements that seek a political identity based on race, caste, ethnicity, culture or religion. All such movements require greater control over women's freedoms, as women are viewed as the first and major carriers of this sense of an identity defined by the accident of birth.[18] Another role thrust on them is to be "custodians of traditional cultural values". Contemporary history however proves conclusively that in defining the values that are to be preserved, neither women nor history have any say, only the perception of political imperatives by the male political elites.

Let me illustrate this from some less known examples. In 1983, a Times of India reporter interviewed the leader of a team of lawyers commissioned by the Akali Dal to draft a Bill for a separate personal law for Sikhs. The story suggested the possibility of withdrawal of the Punjab agitation if the Bill was accepted by the Union Government. The draft provisions would have deprived Sikh women of their rights to a share of parental property and to divorce provided under existing laws. Another clause sought to give legal approval to the custom of Chaadar Andaazi (widows being married to a brother-in-law, irrespective of the latter's age or marital status) which was claimed to be a Sikh custom. We have found it to be a custom among peasant communities in many parts of the country, which has nothing to do with the Sikh religion. Secondly, as reported to us by many Sikh village women in Punjab, it was a dying custom not practised "since their grandmother's times". A protest meeting called by national women's organizations and civil rights groups was announced in the national press. Before the meeting, the Centre for Women's Development Studies received resolutions from several village Mahila Mandals in Punjab, stating that they had not been consulted on this move and had very strong objections to such erosion of their rights, especially to "bringing back polygamy by the back-door". They requested that their resolutions be conveyed to the Prime Minister, and also made public at the protest meeting. We carried out both their requests. While it is not possible to provide research evidence on their impact, the

objective fact remains that no Bill for this purpose was initiated by Srimati Indira Gandhi.

The ethnicity based movements, often viewed by their sympathisers as democratic, are equally hostile to gender equality. Women researchers have identified the customs of some tribes which were prevalent as late as the mid-nineteenth century, guaranteeing usufructuary rights to land to women for subsistence food production. Words defining such customs in the particular tribal language, e.g. Santhali, recorded in earlier ethnography and judicial records[19] have gone out of use, and have been replaced by terms like *Khorposh* which do not obviously originate from any tribal language. And, the issue of women's ownership or control of land, both as the basic production resource and the root of any status or entitlements in rural society, has been voiced by peasant women from many communities-tribals, scheduled castes, Muslims and others-repeatedly through the last twenty years.[20]

In fact, peasant women's struggles on their right to have a voice in the management and especially distribution of natural resources like land, water and forests which are essential for their survival, provide one of the best examples for the observation in the Human Development Report 1993 - that

> "the forces of democracy are not likely to be so obliging as to stop at national borders."[21]

The political fall-outs from the Shah Bano and the Roop Kanwar cases are too well known to require discussion here. What is perhaps less known and therefore worth emphasis is the role played by the women's movement, and especially the large mass-based national women's organizations in forcing policy changes, even Constitutional amendments, during the last 20 years by bringing these diverse but clear, articulate voices of women from the grassroots into the political process.

Research, or women's studies too has played its role when it has responded to the issues and priorities articulated by the grassroots women, and approached the issues from the latter's perspectives instead of imposing pre-conceived frameworks, concepts and categories. It is this feature of Indian women's studies that led M.N. Srinivas to describe it as "the most significant development in Indian social sciences" during the 70s and 80s,

and as "a thrust from below"[22]

This mutually reinforcing relationship between grassroot mobilization, developing large-scale organizations, networks or joint fronts cutting across individual organizational identifies with their respective claims, and the demands of academic research, which can claim validity before academic peer groups, has not also been without tensions and difficulties in choices. But the relationship has persisted. The capacity that the women's movement has displayed to overcome recurring identity crises perhaps legitimizes its claim to be recognized as one of the most powerful forces against the destructive, fascistic and criminalized elements that seem to be overtaking the political process in the country and many other parts of the world.

Movements, however, are seldom efficient in recording their struggles, changing priorities and perspectives in response to changing political situations. The mild hints of problems and difficulties given earlier explain why participants find little time and face enormous problems in undertaking such exercises. However, the misinformation campaign about the nature, origin and aims of the women's movement have become even more virulent since its declaration of war against communalism, and it is essential to record some authentic information before we are defeated by the "politics of memory".

The most common charges against the movement have been of being west-inspired, against Indian cultural traditions, divisive of people's democratic aspirations, and dominated by a small number of urban, educated middle and upper class women. Such charges ignore basic historical facts. I list only a few of them.

a) Movement politics is virtually as old as India's recorded history, and very few movements from the ancient, medieval or modern periods can be named which did not receive massive support from women-as followers and leaders. Poor recording by historians or chroniclers does not eliminate the objective fact of women's participation.[23]
b) Association or dialogues with women's movements outside the country does not make it subordinate to or Inspired by the former. On the other hand, the Indian women’s movement played a major role in incorporating third world perspectives and priorities into the International women's movement, thereby enriching and

revitalizing the latter. The World Congress of Women for a Healthy Planet at Miami in November 1991 perhaps represents a far greater triumph for the third world than the efforts of NAM or G-77 for a new international economic order.

c) Even exercises of the wildest imagination would fail to attribute such characteristics to manifestations like Chipko, SEWA, the WWF etc., their smaller, localized counterparts in different corners of the country, or the current waves of anti-Arrak, anti-political terror or anti-dowry movements in the country.

d) Most of the reluctant, hesitant but highly publicized policy decisions of the Government of India in favour of women did not emanate from altruism or a belated acceptance of its Constitutional obligations, but under pressure from the women's movement. The amendments in Criminal Law relating to Rape, Suicide, Dowry deaths, etc., establishment of the National Commission on Women, the introduction of a minimum quota for women within the anti-poverty programmes, and finally the introduction of 1/3 reservation for women in Panchayat institutions and urban elective bodies come within this category. Since attempts have already begun to use misinformation to make political capital out of these measures, I crave your indulgence to set the record straight in these few instances.

The criminal law amendments took place only because of a carefully constructed alliance between women's organizations, legal academics and activists and the Law Commission, with considerable support from the Press.

The National Commission on Women, recommended by the CSWI in 1974 and the UN's World Plan of Action for the International Women's Decade in 1975, was resisted by the Government right up to 1989. The much publicized National Perspective Plan for Women up to 2000 A.D. prepared by Government of India in 1988 suggested only the appointment of a Senior Officer within the Department of Women and Child Development as Commissioner for Women's Rights. National women's organizations called for a debate on the NPP and reiterated their demand for an autonomous statutory Commission.[24] The National Front included this in its election manifesto in 1989 and introduced the Bill early in 1990. The final Act passed in August was substantially different from the original Bill because of intense lobbying by women's organizations

and the emergence of a virtually all-party women's lobby among Members of Parliament.

Introducing a Special Component for Women within all anti-poverty programmes was first recommended by a Planning Commission Working Group on Employment of Women appointed by Prof. Raj Krishna, when he was Member-Planning Commission during the Janata government in 1977-78. The recommendations of this as well as other Working Groups on women's issues appointed by this Government went into oblivion after the General Elections of 1980 which brought Congress back to power. The framework document produced by the new Planning Commission made no reference either to the findings of the CSWI (despite a Parliament Resolution after a full debate on the Report, requesting government to mount necessary legislative and executive action programmes "to remove all disabilities that Indian women continued to suffer from"), or the Working Groups. A formal request from the Ministry of Social Welfare, which then included the Division on Women's Welfare and Development created in 1975, to have a separate chapter on Women and Development, was rejected.

It was at this stage that a joint front of seven national women's organizations -some old, some new- was formed to demand that government should live up to its Constitutional obligations.[25] The leadership included many freedom fighters, members of several political parties including some in Parliament, former members of the CSWI, and several former members of the CSWB. The public rebuke[26] from the white-haired freedom fighters, and lobbying by the group of women MPs assisted the Ministry of Social Welfare's efforts to ensure consideration of some of the alternative strategies recommended by the earlier Working Groups, as well as the Joint Front of Women's Organizations.[27] A chapter on women and development entered the 6th Plan 1980-85) document with some promises of government's 'endeavour' to provide some assets to poor women, including joint titles to land. But, the Special Component Approach for all anti-poverty programmes had to wait till the 7th Plan and another general election following Indira Gandhi's assassination in which, by all estimates, the women's vote had something to do with Rajiv Gandhi's landslide victory.

There is a persistent effort to misinterpret and trivialize women's motives for the way they exercise their vote. The underlying idea is that women do not understand, are not interested in politics, and therefore vote for non-political reasons. The popular interpretation of the 1984 election was that ‘women had voted for Rajiv out of sympathy for his mother's death'. This interpretation ignored the fact that very few women had demonstrated any support for that mother in 1977 when they too decided to punish her for the anti-democratic interlude of the Emergency. Pronnoy Roy's study of the 1984 elections offered a far more substantial reason. In his pre-poll survey, he had asked 11,000 respondents to identify the three greatest problems facing the nation in order of priority. He had expected most women to identify inflation as the first and was taken aback when 64% of women placed national integration as No.1, whereas only 13% of the men gave it that much of priority. Unfortunately, such findings are not followed up or even publicized by their authors, and research on women's political participation continues to be inadequate and influenced by false assumptions and stereotypes. Political parties also need to clear their minds of a lot of obsolete ideas rooted in western interpretations of Indian society to re-examine the issue, or they will continue to be shocked by demonstrations of women's political choices as the Congress did in the recent Tripura elections.

I now come to the two recent Constitutional amendments. Discussions on them in the capital during the last few months display such blatant ignorance or misinformation that I must again crave your indulgence to present a straight history, The debate on reservations for women in elective bodies did not begin with the NPP or the 64th Amendment Bill introduced by Rajiv Gandhi, but in the Constituent Assembly itself. One section of the women's movement had at that time suggested continued reservation of seats on the lines of the GOI Act of 1935.[28] Women members in the Constituent Assembly, however, rejected this as against the principle of total equality.[29] The CSWI decided to maintain the same position though two members submitted a dissent note.[30] A group of social scientists[31] consulted by the Committee strongly advocated reservation, especially in Panchayats.

The Committee therefore recommended "statutory women's panchayats at the village level to ensure greater participation by women in the political process as an integral part

of the Panchayati Raj structures'[32]. The recommendation was passed on to State Governments, received mostly negative response and was thereafter buried within the GOI. Some states, however, began a gradual process of induction of more women in the Panchayats as they began steps to entrust more powers and responsibilities to the Panchayats. The most daring was the Karnataka Zilla Parishads, Taluk Panchayats, Mandal Panchayats and Nyaya Panchayats Act 1983 which provided for 25% seats being reserved for women.

The Government of India's NPP (1988) proposed 30% reservation in all elective bodies to be filled, at least in the initial years, by nomination or co-option. The debate organized by the National Women's Organizations rejected this as 'subversion of the Constitution'. They refused any reservation in State Assemblies or Parliament, but recommended 30% reservation in Panchayati Raj institutions, "with due precautions to ensure representation of the poorer sections of women, especially Dalits and Adivasis". The organizations were, however, emphatic on the need for election to ensure the emergence of a new leadership from the grass-roots.[33]

The 64th Amendment Bill, was thus not inventing the wheel. The 72nd Amendment Bill introduced by the National Front government in 1990, proposed to increase the reservations for women to *1/3rd*, with an additional provision of *1/3rd* among the reserved categories of *SCs/*STs, and among office bearers. This, with minor changes, is the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution. The Governments of Orissa (a National Front Government) and West Bengal (a Left Front Government) however did not wait for the Constitutional amendment. They amended their Acts in 1991 and 1992, and held election in 1992 and 1993, electing about 25,000 women in each state to these bodies. Despite the gloomy forebodings of various political pundits, and the high rates of female illiteracy in rural areas in both the states, neither has reported lack of enthusiasm among women to participate-has voters or as candidates.

III

Like all other movements, the women's movement too fragmented by ideological, organizational, educational, class, regional and personality differences. But, on certain

issues, there have been remarkable unity and solidarity. What began as a protest against increasing violence against women round which women could rally, has gradually expanded to a principled opposition to social, political and state violence as destructive phenomena to be opposed. On the issue of rising communalism and communal violence, the movement's reaction has been spontaneous and openly critical of political parties and some women's flirtations with communal organizations. This is no mean achievement in a country where the majority of women are deeply religious through their socialisation. Despite its disillusionment with the political process to fill women's dreams of equality, justice and dignity, the movement has remained staunch in its defence of the ideological foundations of the Indian political system-secularism socialism and democracy. The same ideology has driven it to oppose the new economic policies which it firmly believes will hurt the poor, the unemployed, human development in general, and aggravate existing inequalities and divisions.

If we accept the theory that the dream of building an Indian nation required "radical departures from the inherited social system" which institutionalized inequalities at all levels - vertical and horizontal - then the women's movement's general opposition to hierarchies of all types, oppressive and exploitative social institutions, and to being "co-opted" by the state or other powerful groups, offers at least a partial answer to the first of the three dilemmas that I posed in the beginning. The most critical role for women in the political process should be to oppose all those barriers that resist human equality, dignity and justice, not merely for women but for all. To quote from the CSWI's guiding principles:

> "Any policy or movement for the emancipation and development of women has to form a part of a total movement for removal of inequalities and oppressive social institutions, if the benefits and privileges won by such action are to be shared by the entire women population and not be monopolised by a small minority."[34]

As for the implications of the term "women's perspective", I am forced to submit that this is a typical method of obfuscating and mythifying gender into an all-pervasive homogeneous category. As long as people are divided by various forms of inequality and diversity by class background, life experience, culture etc., how can there be one uniform

perspective for women or for men? The commonality of subordination, or the 'nurturing quality of women' that are often advanced in defence of this theory, tend to oversimplify the complex social factors that influence and govern the social construction of gender roles at different levels of society, or the dimensions of personality that they tend to promote. Could any of us-urban, educated middle class women-be able, spontaneously, to produce the kind of ideas and voices that I quoted earlier? Do we have either the knowledge or the experience?

But at an ideological level, any rational, sensitive person can recognize the value and significance of such voices, and make a deliberate choice to identify with them. Many in the women's movement have chosen to do so. Some have even conceded that the transformational effect of this closer identification is empowerment, for both the privileged and the marginalised women at the grassroots. But I cannot say that such a view is shared by all. Its implications are far- reaching and would include being prepared to accept not only the rights of the marginalised majority to participate as equals, but even their right to lead in areas where they have far greater competence and expertise than us.

I am convinced that this mutually reinforcing empowerment was the dream that Durgabai tried to institutionalise through her network of women's organizations, by pushing them to work with underprivileged women, mobilising them for 'self-improvement' and 'nation-building' tasks. But, like Mahatma Gandhi, she under-estimated the influence of class differences and the 'sanskritisation process' in strengthening the power of patriarchy. Neither could she anticipate that the process of planned development would increasingly give less priority to over-all social and human development and accelerate, rather than reduce, economic and social inequalities. Nor did she visualise the power of the co-optation process that would affect men and women in public life.

But her dream remains as valid today as it was forty years ago. The current women's movement has, for the time being, obtained a grudging recognition from a minority that the women's question is basically a political question, being linked to changes in power-relations across and within all levels of society. Building on this fragile foundation, strengthening the ties with the currently powerless women at the grassroots, and learning

to grow stronger along with them through a mutually supportive process of empowerment are the challenges as well as the source of sustenance for the women's movement in the coming years. Without that strength, women's capacity to influence and redirect the political process would crumble. There are plenty of examples before us. If we ignore them, then we have learnt nothing from the past or the present.

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