



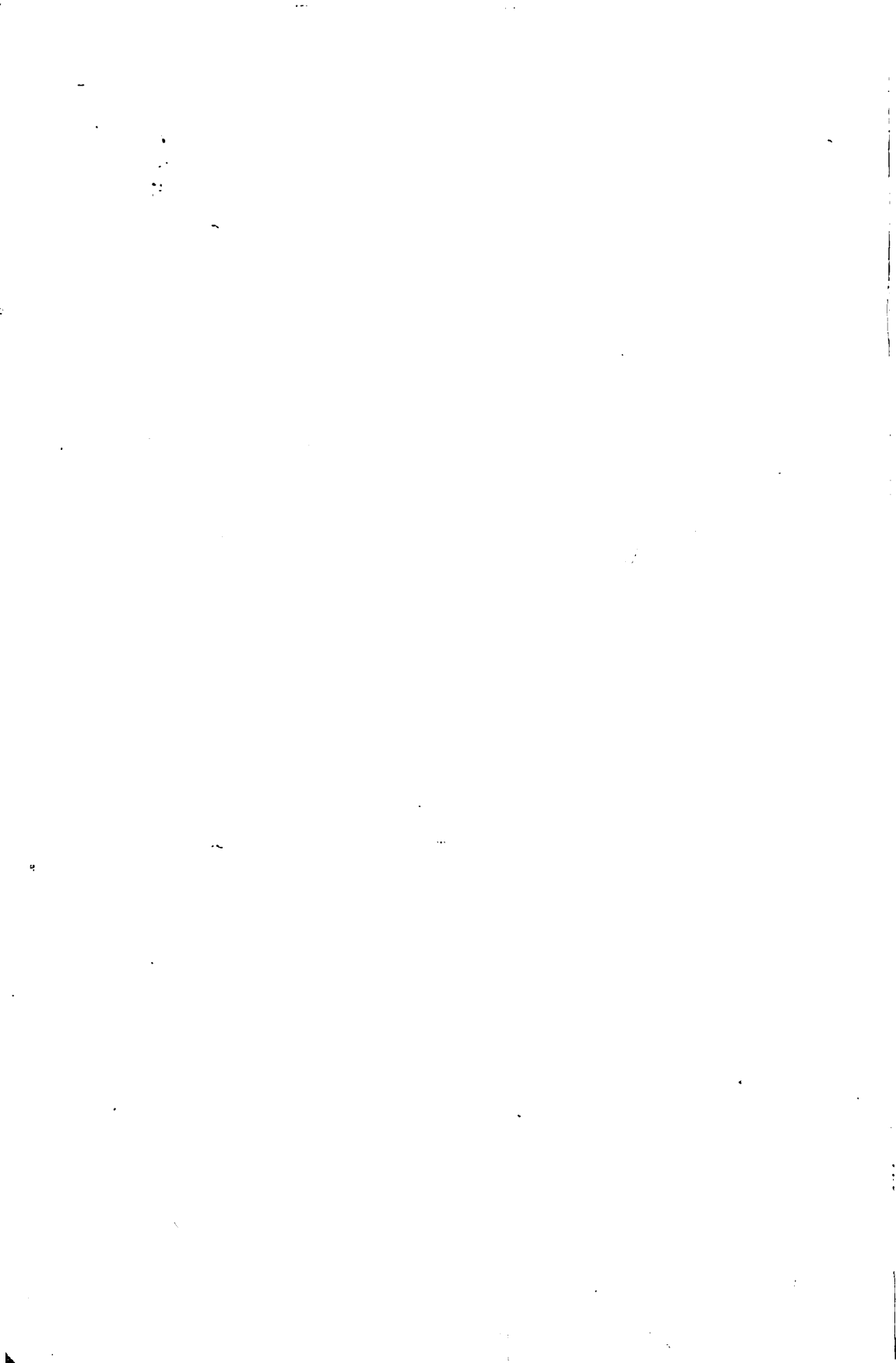
No Women No History

Women in Indian Movements

(19th century - 2004)

V. Gargi





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Published by



Virasam Books

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By
V. Gargi

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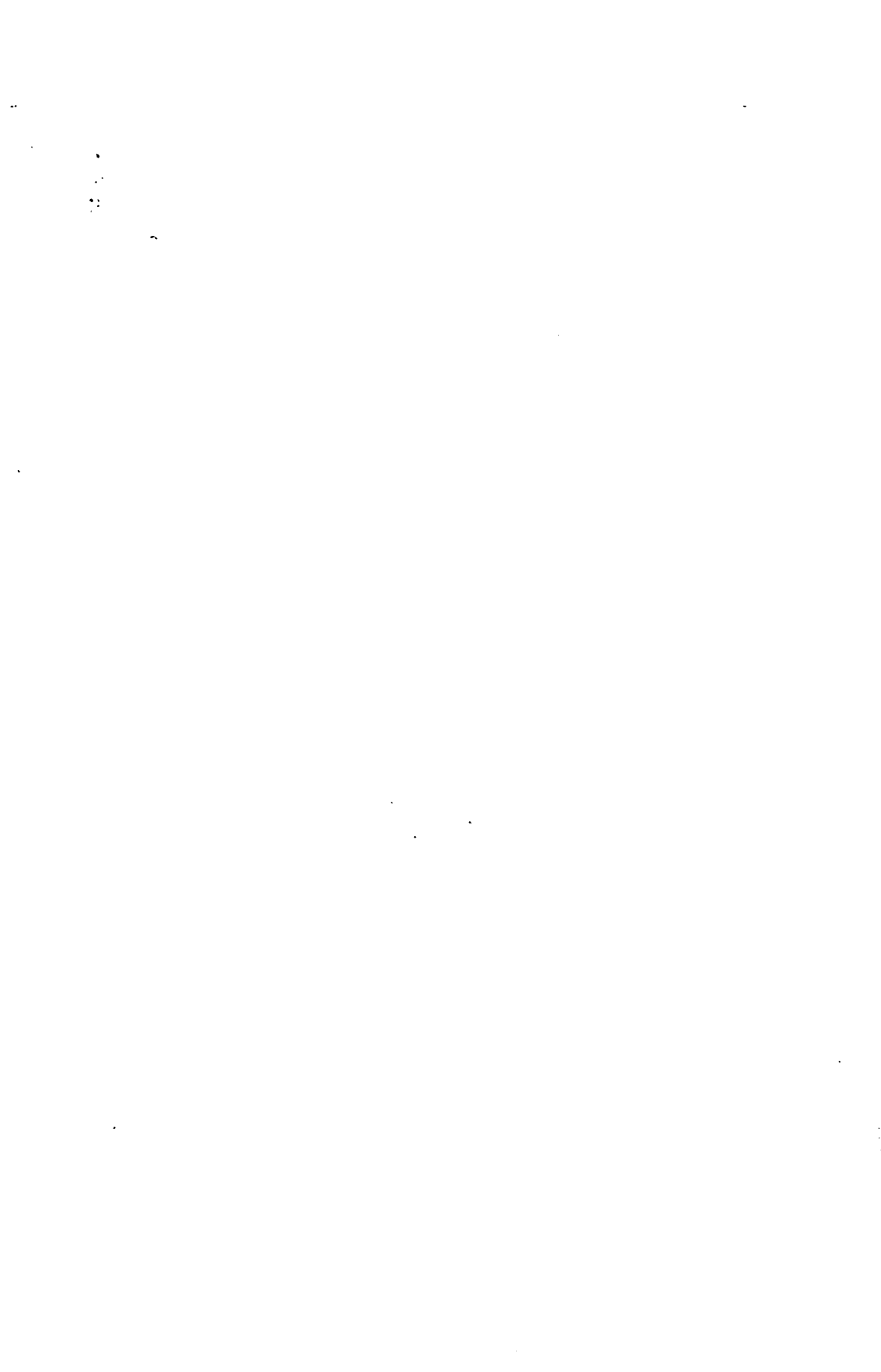
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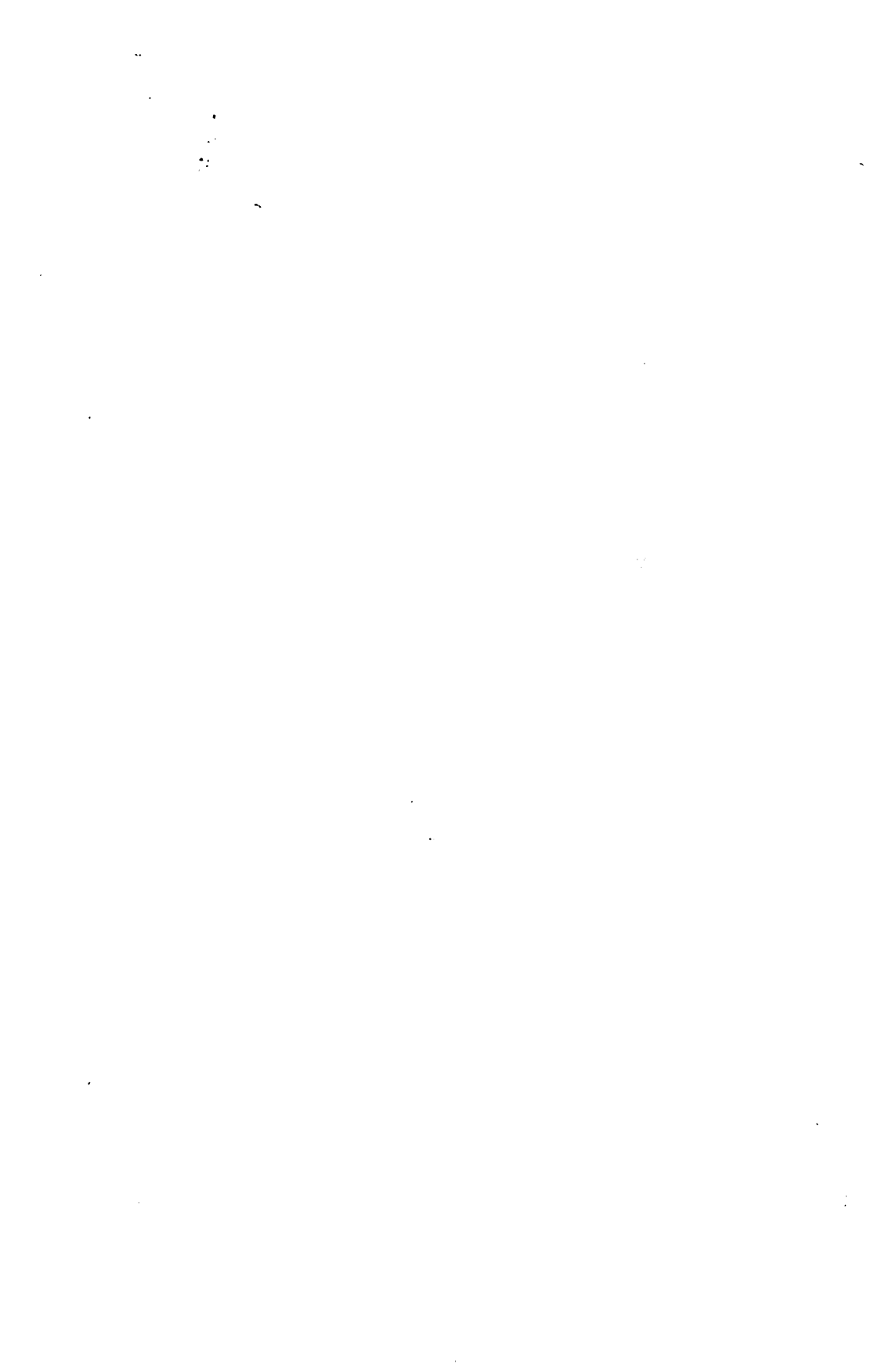
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*To all the women who fought against overwhelming odds,
made great sacrifices to the extent of even laying down their lives to
make this place better for all of us....*



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Publisher's Note

These notes were written by V. Gargi in English and were in private circulation in the revolutionary circles for the past two decades. The Telugu translation of these notes was first serialised in Mahila Margam magazine for several months and subsequently published as a book by "Mahila Margam Publications" in March 2014.

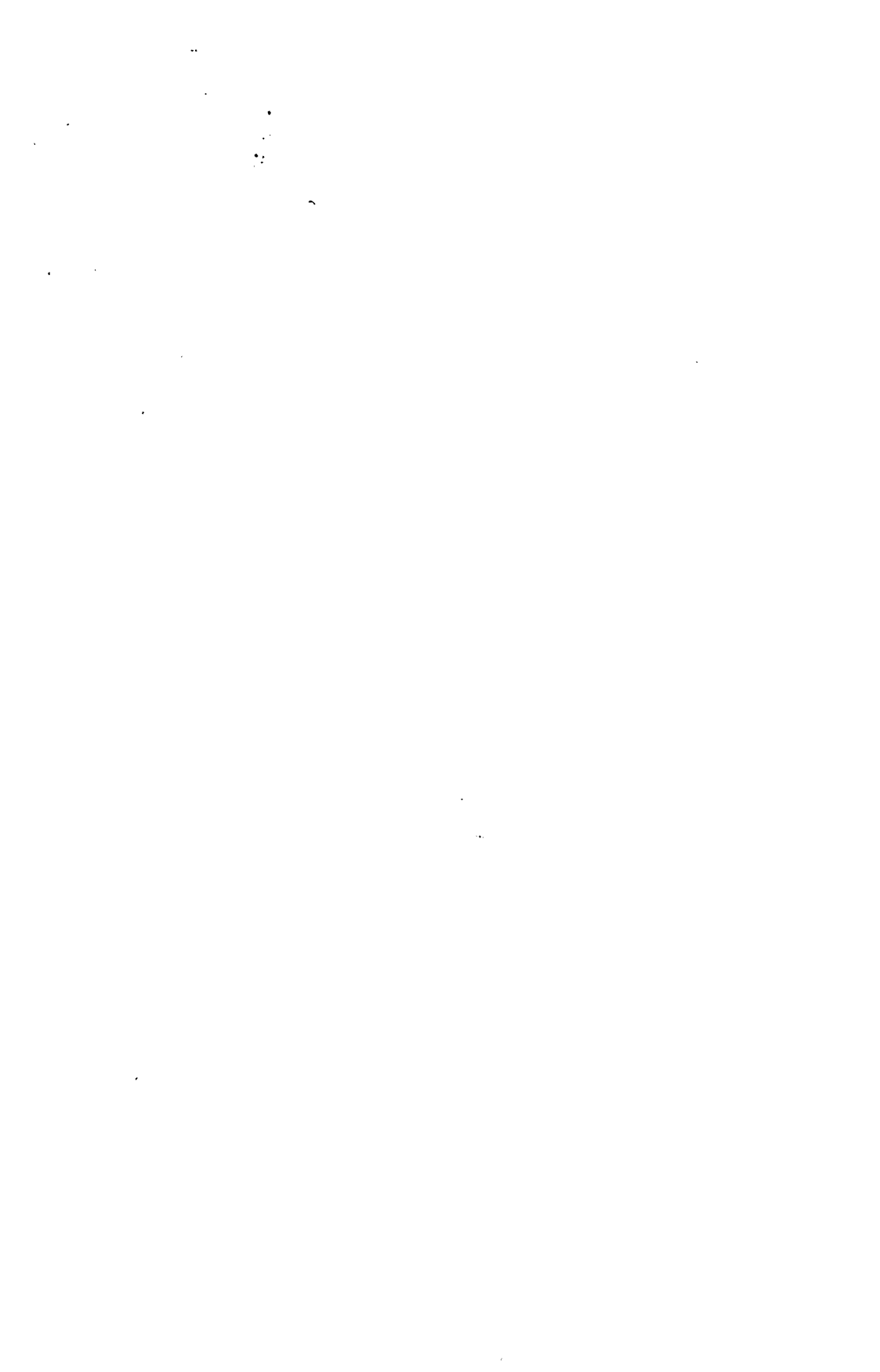
V. Gargi is a revolutionary activist and writes using several pen names. She is famously known as Shaheeda in the Telugu literary circles. She wrote nearly 40 stories which were included in the Viyyukka series published by us in six volumes in Telugu.

A part of these notes was recently published in English as "Unpublished article of Anuradha Ghandy", titled as "Women Struggles in Indian History", dated 18th September 2024. It was published by Counter Era on behalf of D.D.Kosambi Foundation. We humbly submit that this was not written by Comrade Anuradha Ghandy and the confusion must have arisen as she and V. Gargi worked together and might have exchanged notes on the matter. We write this to keep the record straight with due respect to the martyred comrade Anuradha Ghandy and also to the author V. Gargi.

With revolutionary Greetings

Virasam Books

(For Revolutionary Writers Association)



Introduction

These notes on the participation of Women in Movements in India deal mainly with the movements in the 19th and 20th centuries and include the contemporary movements. When we say movements, we mean only those movements which helped the society to move forward. We should be clear about this especially since there are many retrogressive, religious chauvinistic movements in our country. Though the movements mentioned in these notes have their own limitations, they were definitely a step forward for women. They helped to unshackle many feudal chains cruelly binding Indian women for centuries. They are a part of the democratic awakening of the people of India. They show that any amount of preaching or debating will not emancipate women and that direct action is the key element. They prove that only the praxis of class struggle can change the oppressive relations in this exploitative society.

We have included general movements as well as women's movements to understand the role of women in changing society and their conditions. Women do not have an identity just as women. In fact they belong to various classes and sections. So when we talk of oppression and exploitation of women, it does not mean just the oppression they face as women but also as peasants, workers, artisans and as citizens. So we thought it would be appropriate to include general as well as women's movements in these notes. In fact, there have been struggles on women's issues (or patriarchy) as part of the general movements and many a time general issues were taken up by the women's movements. It is a dialectical relationship and women's emancipation is not possible without fight against all these kinds of oppressions and

exploitation. Therefore, it is appropriate to write about both these kinds of movements when we want to record the history of women's struggle for change.

But people's history is invisible, and especially women's history as part of people's history is doubly invisible due to feudal/ bourgeois method of history writing. Feminists' contribution in retrieving this history has to be acknowledged in spite of their limitation in seeing it only from a feminist perspective. Yet, most of them, except perhaps Stree Sakthi Sanghatana's book on women's participation in Telangana struggle, ignore the leftist women's movements to a large extent or even totally.

The left/revisionists must bear responsibility for not recording the role of women in their movements properly, which to some extent is an outcome of their not recognizing the role of women in movements. The leftist women wrote only about their participation in leftist movements or in general movements prior to 1947 which did not give a comprehensive picture of the role women played in modern Indian history. There has been no effort from their side to put the role of women in perspective, i.e. analyzing the past to advance the present or to understand it as part of the social upheavals of their time.

The information we could get about women's movements of the North-East or the participation of women in the nationality movements is very limited though all of this is recent history. We hope to include more on their heroic role and sacrifices as we get more information.

Almost no effort had been put in by any of the history writers to record the role of women in contemporary Naxalite movements, which have built up women's movements over a large area in Southern, Central and Eastern India. Even the parties leading these movements have not come up with a comprehensive history of these movements except for some papers in seminars and articles in magazines. Once the vital role of women in the movements was recognized, more effort was put into recording

it. It is commendable that the revolutionary women's organizations are running women's bulletins and magazines which record the role of women on a regular basis. These magazines do not only carry reports of struggles, but they also discuss various problems women face and their solutions. The kind of problems taken up for discussion and the solutions offered provide a picture about the objectives of the women's movements and that of the revolutionary movements of which they are a part.

On the whole, there is scarcity of material on the topic and where available, it is unevenly distributed across regions and time periods.

Since women's studies departments have come up in a big way in the last three decades, many projects have been taken up by various organizations and universities to conduct in-depth research on certain issues and on the lives of some remarkable women who were pioneers. At a certain level, the information from these projects helps us in getting a fragmented picture or in discovering very high level insights but it fails to give us a totality of view. While giving the minutest details of particular issues, they miss the forest for the trees. Some of the studies are very academic and fail to reach the ordinary reader interested in the history of women's movements in modern India.

The dominance of elite perspectives is best demonstrated by the efforts of most historians to link middle class women's participation in the struggles primarily with women's education or the social reform movement ignoring the large number of women from the peasantry and the working class, including prostitutes, who took part in various struggles directly; and the thousands of housewives - mostly mothers and wives - who provided indirect support to the freedom movement by shouldering family responsibilities when their men went to jail or got killed.

Our general text books or academic history books (most of them, if not all) display a gender bias. It is no surprise if most of us heard or learnt of many women leaders only after we

developed an interest in women's movement and read some more books. Their histories are not part of our common memory as we are just not taught about them anywhere. The academic books also display a class bias. So when it comes to recording the role of women in India's freedom struggle, only the contribution of upper class/upper caste women and that of the Congress leaders is recorded but the role of ordinary Dalit/peasant/ working class women, their display of courage in the face of police repression, the social stigma they faced and the sheer effort they had to put in to cope with the double burden of running their households and participating in the movements doesn't find much mention. It is our task to illuminate all the dark corners of history and present the true picture of these women.

There were many other mass stirrings, some of which even erupted into rebellions against British rule and its socio economic consequences, but these rebellions lacked the recording and publicizing capacity of the literati i.e., the highly literate new middle class who were pioneers as well as products and beneficiaries of the social order. The role of women in the peasant rebellions before the Communist Party of India was formed has not been recorded even in this current work, which is a big lacuna. We will add information as and when we get it. We request readers to send us any information regarding this topic if available.

Since the beginning of the 19th century, the British earned the ire of the Adivasis for their anti-tribal policies which aimed to evict them from their natural dwellings and snatch their traditional means of living. So there have been many tribal revolts against them. Invariably, all of them were armed revolts, and witnessed a large participation from women. The role of tribal women in all these revolts has not been recorded or properly researched into. The story of Rani Gaidinliu is an exception because she at least figures in some books by scholars.

As with all other movements, with regards to the social reform movements too, we find very little information about the

women social reformers but since there has been documentation of some sort of their activities, it has been possible to get information about the role played by them. The social reform period coincided with the time when women also started writing. So their written experiences provide valuable insights into their work and times.

When writing about women's participation in movements before 1947, the role of Dalit women in anti caste movements led by Ambedkar had been ignored by most of the history writers. This gap continues to even this day with regard to the role of Dalit women in movements, post 1947. To assess their role, we must look at the anti caste movements during the colonial period. Urmila Pawar and Meenakshi Moon have written a book about women's role in Ambedkar's movements which is the best recorded source on the subject till now. Since it is in Marathi, we could not make use of the material in that book but if we could, it would have greatly enriched this chapter.

Some of the highly placed minority women (Muslim and Christian) find a mention to a certain extent in some of the books but not much is written about the role of ordinary women. The role of Muslim women is recorded only till their split from AIWC (All India Women's Conference) and the formation of Muslim League. The role of some foreign Christian women had been crucial in the early years of the freedom struggle and also in the formation of separate organizations for women in India.

There is some literature regarding the women in National Revolutionary movement but it is not easily available. Most of it is out of print or out of reach. Some of it is in Bengali. But since their struggle was mainly against the British and it was recorded to some extent, we could provide information about it in these notes. Since these women adopted armed actions as their tactic, most of our textbooks don't give them any prominence - indeed most of them hardly mention them. Bhagat Singh could not be ignored due to the place he earned in people's heart with his

martyrdom and vision, so he is grudgingly mentioned. But the women revolutionaries are conveniently ignored.

The role of Dalit, peasant, minority and tribal women in the Communist led armed struggles has been documented to some extent by communist women and left leaning men. Information on some legendary women trade union leaders is available to some extent. But the role of women workers in trade union struggles is not recorded in detail anywhere except in some articles here and there. In the books written on the history of workers struggles by leftists/ revisionists, we don't find any mention of struggles by women workers. Their plight in some of the factories is mentioned in some chapters with no attention paid to their role in struggles. In fact, many women leaders emerged from these movements.

The Autonomous women's movement (AWM) is composed of innumerable small groups which have been taking up local women's issues apart from some major campaigns or agitations of national scale in various parts of the country since 1980. The innumerable reports of these activities are scattered over a large number of magazines or seminar papers. A few books have also been written by them. There is no problem of documentation in this because the women who are a part of this movement are not only educated but also aware of the need to record. In fact, the documentation is so meticulous that sometimes even smaller movements got recorded and became available to researchers or gained popularity in academic circles whereas some movements of a larger scale do not get recognition since they are not documented. As it is not possible to enlist all the various campaigns (or agitations) here, only a few are mentioned.

It took a lot of time and effort to gather information for these notes. This is an attempt to bring all the information together for the first time. It is in no way complete but just a humble beginning. We would like to enrich these notes with inputs from the readers in future. Suggestions are also invited to make any additions or changes in the contents.

Women's struggle against the patriarchal views of the male members and leaders, is a common feature in all the general movements. It may be more intense in some, and less so in others. Sometimes it may lack a comprehensive view; sometimes it may be theoretically better addressed. Whatever be the scale or intensity or the clarity of this struggle, it is inevitable. Unless women fight patriarchy in the society, they will not be able to take part in the movements. So their fight starts there as they inevitably face patriarchal oppression in some form or the other in performing any tasks taken up by them and they cannot advance without fighting it. Since women's movements arose to fight patriarchy, it goes without saying that their main target is that. So all in all, we cannot separate the struggle against patriarchy from the history of women's movements.

Be it the nationalist revolutionaries or the communist women, they had to fight hard to become active participants in armed actions. With whom? With their leaders, mentors and comrades. Though they were naturally accepted as companions in the struggle, leading roles or positions were not easy to come by. The resistance from their male comrades had ranged from paternalism to patriarchal views on women's inferior position. It goes to the credit of women that not only did they fight these views at an ideological level but also proved themselves capable in tasks deemed to be impossible for women. Pritilata's dying statement in fact reveals the agony she had gone through to prove that women were as capable of sacrifices as men for the freedom of the country. The testimonies of the women who participated in the Telangana struggle give best evidence of the kind of problems they faced and the struggle they had to put up against the patriarchal views of their male comrades.

The women in Congress too struggled to a certain extent against the patriarchal views of their male colleagues and leaders. Especially, leaders like Mridula Sarabhai took up cudgels against such attitudes and were vocal in condemning them. This has to be seen as the rise of bourgeois women for equal rights in the bourgeois setup. Women won their right to be part of Salt

Satyagraha by arguing with Gandhi who did not select a single woman for this task. Even during Quit India movement, women defied his dictates and went underground to lead the sabotage activities. Actually the framework of Gandhism itself doesn't allow for criticism of patriarchy. So such instances of women defying their leaders in Congress are very few. In contrast, the very ideology of Marxism and armed struggle allowed ordinary peasant women to unshackle their chains and question the patriarchal attitudes of even their leaders.

The masses of women who participated in the communist led movements before 1950, true to their class nature aspired for an armed overthrow of the oppressors, be they the landlords or the British. In fact one is awed by the rigour and enthusiasm and above all the initiative they have displayed to start as well as carry on the armed struggle. This characteristic of the toiling women is to be seen in all the revolts of that time- Tebhaga, Telangana, Warli etc. They were not only part of the armed struggle but were ready to lead it. As we dwell into history, we will be amazed at the desire for armed struggle or at least armed retaliation to the oppressors, be they the British or the local land lords, expressed by women in various ways right from 1857 to the present day. This is in total contradiction to Gandhi's premise that women are more suited to a non-violent form of struggle. The fact is there were innumerable women freedom fighters who despised the Ahimsa path of Gandhi and embraced armed actions. Many of them died anonymously, unsung, unpraised for their role in terrorizing the British. Women realized that armed struggle was a must for their liberation. That's why when the leadership of the Communist Party of India decided to withdraw armed struggle and became part of parliamentary politics, women in the Party vehemently opposed it. They, more than anybody else, would be losing all that they had won. For women it had been a fight not only against the economic exploitation but also against the patriarchal oppression. The withdrawal of armed struggle was a big blow not only to the democratic revolution but also to the struggle for women's liberation.

Generally, women's history is not integrated into the general history. This is a mistake often committed by left/revisionist parties too. So we are still groping in the dark to evaluate the actual historical role of women. If women had been given their due share in history, then a separate or detailed study would have been necessary just to gather details. Since that has not been done, we had to write these notes to evaluate their role as well as to know the details of their contribution. At the end of writing these notes, an inevitable question arose in our minds - what should be the norm for such writing? Should we write women's history separately? Actually, we should strive to write women's history as part and parcel of general histories. Only when a detailed study about a specific topic is needed, it can be and should be written separately - for e.g. students' role or women's role in movements. Separate studies on women's role are definitely necessary but if the other side of it is ignored, that is, if it is not integrated into general history the purpose is only half served.

When we see history as a history of class struggles, it goes without saying that women had been part of all class struggles since the slave rebellions. But when we look for names of women who had emerged as leaders out of these movements, they are too few. Women leaders are considered as rare specimens and not 'natural' leaders, unlike men. In the 18th century, the social upheavals caused by industrial revolution and the eventual overthrow of the feudal class by the bourgeois led to great changes in the lives of women too. The rise of the bourgeois and the working classes and these social and political upheavals gave birth to the bourgeoisie led women's movements and the working class women's movements. The development of capitalism in Europe and the USA and the consequent changes in the family created material conditions and intensified the contradictions within which the women's movement for equal rights emerged. The movement for women's emancipation, a movement of and for women has emerged after the growth of capitalism. The past two centuries of the women's movement have been closely linked and are part of the broader economic and political struggles, of

the masses. From then on we see an upsurge in the participation of women in all movements as never before and consequently a rise in the number of women leaders.

In the 19th and 20th century, in US and Europe, women's struggle for equal rights grew alongside the trade union and socialist movement. The victory of the Russian revolution and the rights granted to women there had a tremendous impact on the women's movement. In the colonial countries the women's movement grew within the wide anti-imperialist upsurge and the struggle against feudal oppression. The most successful of them even in the matter of women's liberation was the Chinese Revolution.

While the bourgeois women's movement (First Wave & Second Wave Feminisms as they are called) had serious limitations in changing the society, even the revolutionary movements had some problems in identifying patriarchy and putting up a consistent fight against it. But when we look at both these experiences we see that better and radical changes have been achieved on a large scale with the active participation of a larger mass of women in the revolutionary movements and as a continuation of it in socialist countries. Whereas, even though the feminist movement can be credited with bringing the various facets of patriarchy to the attention of the world, in concrete terms, the changes brought about it were limited for the simple reason that power is in the hands of the feudal and bourgeois classes in most of the countries.

Even in India, we find that women's participation in class struggles and anti-imperialist struggles brought about more changes in society and women's position whereas struggles by women over just women's issues did not effect much change in society and women's position even though they definitely helped to make people recognize the women's cause. This is because power continues to rest in the hands of feudal, comprador ruling classes which are highly patriarchal too.

So the question of power is very important for women's emancipation. Unless power comes into the hands of the oppressed and the exploited, women's liberation is out of question. The brief periods in the communist led peasant movements when power came into the hands of the people gave a taste of the new society where the exploited ruled and here exploited included women. From these, we get an idea of how much power women enjoyed, how power comes into the hands of the exploited women, how much more fight and what additional steps are needed to include women's agenda in the movement and what more steps are needed to bring them closer to liberation.

We are also confronted with the question of leadership of women as we go through these notes. The vast gallery of women leaders in all these movements has proved one thing beyond question - that women are very capable leaders and sometimes fare even better than men. But at the same time we are acutely aware of the small ratio of leaders to the total number of women participating in the movements. This is a result of centuries of oppression of women. Though the fight against it may not take centuries, it sure is a long drawn battle. Tactics to speed up this process are needed. However revolutionary a movement may be, however great may be the changes in society due to it, unless women also become leaders in bringing about this change, the changes in women's lives will not be radical or permanent. 'Participation' of women is no longer 'the' important thing though it has its own importance and implications. How much the women are able to control or decide the process of change i.e., how much they are really empowered has become 'the' key question. We hope that a study of these notes will also help us in grappling with the questions of leadership and empowerment of women.

As we wade through this history, it becomes increasingly clear that women cannot achieve emancipation by participating or taking up only a struggle against patriarchy or only a struggle against the economic system. The struggle to change the economic system includes the fight against patriarchy and superstructure.

The women's movement against patriarchy should be an integral part of the revolutionary movement. All forms of social, cultural and economic exploitation and oppression should be addressed by the revolutionary movement.

This means that unless women put up fight against patriarchy in the general revolutionary movement, they cannot go ahead and claim their rightful place in history. And unless women become part of the revolutionary movement in general and see the anti patriarchal struggle as part of it, their emancipation is impossible. Wherever these two fights are separated we find the movements becoming narrow and reaching a dead end.

These notes will also help us to understand the theoretical and practical problems faced by the women. We can learn from their successes and failures. Success can be replicated and failures can be studied and overcome. So studying these notes is not just to learn history but also to help us in praxis i.e., in formulating correct tactics for the women's movement. We request the readers to go through the notes with this purpose also in mind.

A perusal of the history of these movements once again establishes the fact that armed revolution i.e., New Democratic Revolution alone will be able to pave the way for the emancipation of women. This history of ordinary women is a tribute to the burning desire in their hearts to win their liberation through armed overthrow of the exploiters.

1

Role of women in Tribal and Peasant Rebellions

The revolt of 1857 was the culmination of a century long tradition of fierce popular resistance to British domination. This took three broad forms: civil rebellions, tribal uprisings and peasant movements. Throughout the initial years of British rule, there was hardly a year without armed opposition or a decade without a major armed rebellion in one part of the country or the other. From 1763 to 1856, there were more than 40 major rebellions apart from hundreds of minor ones. The economic decline of the peasantry was reflected in twelve major and numerous minor famines from 1770 to 1857.

The first resistance, which the British had to face in India, was from the tribes residing in the various forests of India. The tribal people organized hundreds of militant outbreaks and insurrections during the 19th century. These uprisings were marked by immense courage and sacrifice on their part and brutal suppression and veritable butchery on the part of the rulers. The breakdown of tribal society and economy led to numerous uprisings from the late 18th century onwards. The complete disruption of the old agrarian order of the tribal communities provided the common factor for all the tribal uprisings which were broad based, involving thousands of men and women, often the entire population of a region. The advent of the British rule caused innumerable miseries to the freedom loving tribes. Their natural rights to the forest produce and land was taken away by the British in a brutal manner, which bred resentment among them and led to some of the most famous and heroic rebellions in our history.

The warfare between the tribal rebels and the British armed forces was totally unequal. On the one side were drilled regiments armed with the latest weapons and on the other were men and women fighting in roving bands armed with primitive weapons such as stones, axes, spears and bows and arrows, believing in the magical powers of the Commanders. The tribals died in lakhs in this unequal warfare.

Though not much had been recorded about the specific role of women in these rebellions, we know that women have been very active participants in all these revolts. Given the equal position of women in social production in tribal societies this is nothing but natural. The sexual atrocities, which the tribal women faced in the context of colonial rule in the later years, became one more factor in steeling their resolve to fight the foreigners. We quote here from the few records we could get hold of about the participation of tribal women in the rebellions, which rocked the earlier period of colonial rule in India.

Chuar rebellion (1766 - 1772)

In Bengal, one of the first to hoist the banner of revolt was the Chuar rebels who operated in the districts of Midnapore and Bankura in West Bengal and Dhalbhum in present day Bihar. From 1766 to 1772 and then again from 1795 to 1816 they virtually paralyzed British rule in these three districts. The revolt spread to a total of six districts in Bihar and Bengal. Most of the rebels who fought with arms were men. But the women of this entire area stood solidly braving brutal military terror. As the English District Magistrate of Bankura had testified, when the army camped in a number of villages, almost the entire male population left the area to avoid arrest and took shelter in nearby hills and forests, and it was the women who kept the resistance alive. At night they slipped through the military cordon and supplied food, drink, information and even arms to the men folk in their places of hiding. Some women were caught and savagely tortured by the military but their morale remained unbroken. This heroic

role of women gave such breadth and sustenance to the Chuar rebellion.

Bastar rebellions (1774 – 1910)

Chhattisgarh has witnessed several tribal rebellions starting from the late 18th century through the 19th century to the first few decades of the 20th century. Some of these tribal revolts were localised while others were more widespread. Geographically too, the rebellions were not centered in one region. In some of them the precipitating factors were immediate and local in nature while in others the revolt took its time to brew. However the central narrative of these rebellions remained largely common and unchanged. All of them were focused on the traditionally inalienable right of the tribals on the local resources, land and forests. Often the mobilization was around the issues of tradition, culture and the tribal way of life. These rebellions were also protests against an alien system of governance and an alien political, economic and social order that had been forced upon them by the British. These tribal rebellions, although they predominantly took place in Bastar, were spread across the various tribal areas of Chhattisgarh as well. Doubtless tribal women were equally active participants in all these rebellions but as we do not have particular information about their role we are unable to give the details.

Between 1774 and 1910 there have been ten rebellions in Bastar in the present Chattisgarh. From 1853 they fought the British rule directly. The most widespread and important rebellion was the Bhumkal rebellion of 1910 that spread to 46 of the 84 parganas of Bastar (nearly a thousand villages). The term Bhumkal is significant as it refers to the social solidarity of the members of a clan that binds them to each other and to their specific Bhumor land. It continued the tradition of tribal struggle for preserving and defending their traditions and their way of life and for reasserting their traditional rights on forests,

land and natural resources. Dispossession of traditional forests and land resources had been the most important cause of the Bhumkal rebellion. In 1908, the forests were first made reserved forests and the contractors given rights to take timber and wood for railway sleepers. This deprived the tribals of one of their main sources of livelihood. Leasing out of liquor monopolies also aggravated the situation, as the locally made country liquor was declared illegal. The introduction of education and schools was seen by the tribals as an attempt by the State to subvert their culture and therefore became a precipitating factor. Finally, the brutality and exploitation by the police, which included begar by the officials culminated in the Bhumkal rebellion. Durgarani is one name we hear as a leader in this rebellion though we don't have more information about her role.

As a result of the Bhumkal rebellion, Madiya Raj was proclaimed and people tasted its fruits till forty days. The repression unleashed by the colonial army was very brutal. Villages were razed to ground and thousands of adivasis were killed in cold blood. Countless women were raped and tortured. Rani Kunwar Sabaran was caught and sent to Raipur where she died in October 1910. Kukanar was the birthplace of Gundadur, the leader of the rebellion. So the British army attacked the village and killed all the men and women in that village. In many villages of Maad (Abhujmad in Government records) women were gang raped. The local zamindars also sided with the British. Thus this brave rebellion was put down in the cruelest manner.

The Kol insurrection of Chhotanagpur (1820 - 1837)

The immediate cause for Kol insurrection was directly related to the oppression of the tribal peasantry and sexual abuse of tribal women by outsiders. The economic exploitation of tribal women by outsiders was a long-standing grievance

of the tribals. The infamous Jafar Ali Khan Turuk used to forcibly take away all the iron from the Munda women, who came to sell it in the bazaar, and throw just two paise for each seer of iron.

The Maankis were joined by the Hos, the Mundas and the Oraons in the rebellion. Arrows of war were circulated by the Hos, Mundas and the Oraons in adjoining areas. The response was overwhelming. The tribals pillaged and burnt villages and executed their exploiters who were eliminated without distinction of age and sex. Police personnel were also their targets.

A major aspect of the revolt was avenging the honor of tribal women. Women participated actively in the movement, both in avenging campaigns and in keeping lines of supply and infiltration open. Captain Wilkinson sent by the British government in 1836 to quell the rebellion unleashed death and terror on the villages. Entire houses were set on fire and the women perished rather than disclose information to the British soldiers. Even though they were put behind bars and tortured by the police, they refused to disclose the names and whereabouts of their nearest male relatives who were declared absconders.

In many instances, women organized the defense of their villages and withstood pressure for a period of time before being forced to surrender. Many women were arrested by the British authorities. They were kept in custody till such time as the men were arrested. Thousands of them were massacred before British authority could be reimposed.

By 1837, Singhbhum had been completely taken over by the British but the causes for discontent continued laying the foundation for another spurt of tribal unrest.

The Santhal rebellion (1855 - 1866)

Among the numerous tribal revolts the Santhal Hool (Uprising) was the most massive. The triumvirate of landlord, moneylender and merchant exploited the Santhals through the mechanisms of rent and debt bondage. As a result Santhal discontent reached a boiling point. Secret meetings were held and the Santhals organized a series of looting expeditions against the *diku* (outsider) oppressors.

By 1854, the tribal heads, the *majhis* and *parganites* had begun to meet and discuss the possibility of revolting. Stray cases of robbing the zamindar and moneylenders began to occur.

About 30,000 Santhals - women, men and children - obeyed the summons of the brothers Sidhu and Kanhu, who were the legendary leaders of the rebellion, and assembled at Bhagalpur and under their leadership marched in a body to Calcutta to place their petition of grievances before the Governor-General in person.

The police attempt to control them proved abortive and this served as a signal for the struggle against authority to begin. The callous indifference of the government was the last straw. The tribal leaders called an assembly of nearly 6,000 Santhals, representing 400 villages, at Bhaganidihi, a place close to Barhat, on 30 June, 1855 and it was decided to raise the banner of revolt. They finally went on the warpath on 7 July 1855. It quickly spread to the neighbouring regions, viz. Bhagalpur, Hazaribagh and Manbhum.

The leaders mobilized the Santhal men and women by organizing huge processions through the villages accompanied by drummers and other musicians. The leaders rode at the head of the processions on horses and elephants and in palkis. Soon nearly 60,000 Santhals had mobilized. The revolt which had

begun in Santal Parganas fanned out to Bhagalpur, Birbhum and also to parts of Bengal. The rebels, both men and women, armed themselves with poisoned arrows and bows, swords and axes and marched through villages and seized markets and spread terror all around.

Five moneylenders were killed in the first week and attacks were made on policemen. Forming bands of 1,500 to 2,000 but rallying in many thousands at the call of drums on particular occasions, they attacked mahajans, the zamindars and their houses, police stations, railway construction sites, the dak (post) carriers- in fact all the symbols of *diku* exploitation and colonial power. The Santhal insurrection was helped by a large number of non tribal and poor *dikus*.

The government organized a major military campaign against the rebels and mobilized tens of regiments under the command of a major general, declared Martial Law in the affected areas and offered rewards of up to Rs.10, 000 for the capture of various leaders.

A body of troops under the command of Major F.W. Burroughs sent to subdue the rebels was in armed encounters on 16th July, 1855. Soon a large force was deployed. In a fierce encounter between the 200 hundred strong British regiment equipped with warfare weapons and 4000 Santhals with traditional weapons, the latter lost the battle. The Santhal brothers were wounded with bullets.

Declaration of martial law on 19 July 1855 was followed by instructions to kill all armed Santhals irrespective of age and sex. The army razed to the ground 36 Santhal villages in a single day (29 July 1855). By August, fifteen to twenty five thousand Santhals were killed, including women and children. Tens of villages were destroyed.

All throughout the movement, women participated actively in the campaigns of seizure and destruction of the

property of the exploiters. On these expeditions, the men carried out the job of burning while the women gathered up the booty. The names of two women, Radha and Heena, both described as wounded, occur in a list of 19 Santhal prisoners. Towards the end of the *Hool* (rebellion) women were mentioned several times in the official correspondence relating to the capture, incarceration and summary trial of rebels. For accompanying the rebels with baskets and bags to carry off grain, older women were given one year in jail plus a fine of fifty rupees each.

This pattern of family participation in movements repeated itself in all tribal movements. Between October and November 1855, at least 45 Santhal women were held in Birbhum jail. Some had their children with them and many of them suffered due to the unsanitary conditions in prison and got dysentery and dropsy. Thirteen of them were released after trial. One of the prisoners was shot twice in the left leg by the troops during a campaign and detained. Since then she had been far too ill to be produced in court and yet apparently she was regarded as far too dangerous to be released from custody. Five of the women were sentenced- three of them to one year's imprisonment each and two of them to six months.

The function of maintaining lines of supply and information for the insurgents was performed by tribal women in all movements. Most of the women acted as 'the eyes and ears of the rebel forces.'

Sidhu was betrayed and captured and killed in August 1855 while Kanhu was arrested by accident at the tail end of the rebellion in February 1866. The Rajmahal hills were drenched with the blood of the fighting Santhal peasantry. The suppression of the movement was complete after the execution of the leaders and the imprisonment of the others.

Kharwar movement (1874 -79)

Due to the Santhal rebellion, the government created the Santhal Parganas and promised some changes. But the rules and regulations drafted for Santhal Parganas almost became null and void. Discontent spread and led to the Kharwar movement, which appeared in the garb of a religious and cultural revivalist movement. The land question was at the heart of this movement. They wanted to get the land they tilled and end the exploitation of the *dikus*.

The movement attracted both men and women. Large numbers of women were reported at the leader Bhaghirath's meetings. Abstention from liquor appealed as a programme more to women than men and in turn they were asked to make the movement a success. Lower Hindu castes and sections of the oppressed peasantry in adjoining parts of Bihar and Bengal joined these tribal communities in a common cause.

Ulgulaan – Birsa Munda Rebellion (1890 – 1900)

For over 30 years the Munda Sardars had been struggling against the destruction of their system by jagirdars, thikadars (revenue farmers) and merchant money lenders. Birsa started a religious movement in 1895 saying he had a vision of God. Thousands gathered around him. Under the influence of the sardars, the religious movement soon acquired an agrarian and political content. Birsa's involvement in the struggle against the *dikus* and the state began with an agitation against the loss of traditional tribal rights of collecting forest produce, free grazing for their cattle etc. in the wake of the Indian Forest Act VII of 1878. The people participated in large numbers in the agitation for the remission of forest dues but nothing came of it.

Birsa began to move from village to village, organizing rallies and mobilizing his followers on religious and political

grōunds. One of the ways by which the lost honour and self respect of the tribals was reasserted was by visiting ancestral places and temples which were built by the tribals but later occupied by *dikus*. Large numbers of girls and women accompanied Birsa on these marches. Large numbers of women attended his meetings. When the government arrested him, 7,000 men and women gathered at Chalkad. He was released on 30 November 1897.

On Christmas Eve, 1899, Birsa proclaimed a rebellion to establish Munda rule in the land and encouraged the killing of thikadars and jagirdars and Rajas and Hakims (rulers) and Christians. The non tribal poor were not to be attacked.

The tribals were told to abjure liquor, theft, lying and murder. The Ulgulaan led by Birsa Munda stirred the women. The response of women was tremendous. Many left their homes and families and became his close companions – Sali of Burdih, two women from Bortadih and Sankara and several others. Sali was a brave woman. She and her friend Maki Munda, who along with their daughters-in-law and grand daughters took part in Birsa's rebellion, helped him.

Among Birsa's followers, women formed a significant and militant component taking part in violent confrontations with the police and the army. On the 6th January (1900) there was an encounter between the deputy commissioner (DC) and the Birsites. The DC reached Gaya Munda's house and demanded the inmates to surrender and disarm themselves. Gaya Munda refused to do so and questioned the propriety of the DC trying to enter his house. Gaya Munda fought with his axe and the commissioner fired at Gaya Munda injuring his arm. His house was set on fire. Gaya's family, armed with weapons, rushed out of the house, Gaya brandishing a sword, Noki, his wife, wielding a long lathi, and their little son holding a *bulwa*, and his grandson Ramu, hardly 14 years old, armed with a bow and two arrows, not to speak of the two daughters-in-law with a *douli* and *tangi* and his three daughters, *Thigi*,

Nagi, *Lembu* holding a lathi, a sword and a *tangi* respectively. The DC fired two more shots at Gaya. But in spite of his injuries Gaya advanced with his sword. The DC received a hammering blow from Gaya's wife, the most ferocious fighter of the lot, with a lathi. The women fought desperately before they could be disarmed. The most surprising part of this encounter was at least two of the women had small babies in their left arms while brandishing knives with their right.

The tremendous impact that Birsa had on women was the cumulative effect of several factors. Forty years elapsed since the *Hool* and the conditions had deteriorated further, situation was ripe for another rebellion. Birsa's teachings emphasized the need for an internal purification of Santhal society in order to sustain and intensify the militant struggle. A major aspect of this was the need to end the exploitation of tribal women by tribal men. Men should not marry more than once; they should not indulge in extra-marital affairs. Women should be able to divorce without difficulty. Men were to give up alcoholism because it dehumanized them in their relations with women.

Women's participation in this movement was demonstrably high. Their class-consciousness and militancy were well developed. Women recognized themselves as producers and workers. Their contribution to production was significant and was duly acknowledged. In matters of social behaviour and political participation they enjoyed considerable freedom. Although they did not hold the offices of Chief etc, they did have a tradition of active participation. They also came in for their share of oppression as members of a certain class and also as women. They had to render forced labor to the landlord and were considered to be easy sexual prey. They were oppressed by their own men too, particularly when under the influence of liquor.

Women's participation in the movement therefore has to be understood in terms of both class and gender oppression.

The movement began with attacks on Christians and churches and later violent attacks aimed at the police increased. When the police attacked the villages all members in the family including children and especially the women attacked the police with whatever weapons they could lay their hands on. The spirit of stubbornness and courage with which the women fought showed the extent of their militancy and hatred for their exploiters and their European and Indian allies.

After an attack on the police station at Khunti and on the landlord by men, women and children, the troops opened fire in which three women were killed. Birsa was guarded by Sali throughout the attack.

The women continued to urge the population to make common cause with them and told the Mundas who were loyal to the British to 'leave and go to the Sahib (British rulers)'. Since women maintained lines of supplies to the rebels in their hidden retreats, one missionary proposed that all the movable property of the rebels be attached 'and their wives be strictly forbidden to leave their villages' thus cutting off lines of supply. He also said that the 'womenfolk of the absconders' also threatened the 'peaceable Mundaris of their villages.'

Women accompanied their men folk on Sail Rakab Hill where the peasants offered a last ditch battle; two hundred Mundas including women were killed in police firing.

Women came in for more than a fair share of the reign of terror let loose on the countryside by the authorities. The women were molested by the police and the army. Many women were arrested and handcuffed and made to march on foot from the scene of operations to the district headquarters. Many detainees died in jail.

The men were awarded sentences ranging from years of imprisonment to death and transportation for life. Gaya Munda's wife who had played a leading role in the resistance

was sentenced to two years rigorous imprisonment. The movement was completely broken by the repression.

Birsa was captured in the beginning of February, 1900 and he died in jail in June that year. He was a leader of 7,000 tribals and his rebellion lasted for four years and was suppressed with great difficulty. The rebellion was crushed but Birsa entered the realms of legend.

Manyam rebellion (1922 -1924)

Even while Gandhi's non-violent struggle against the British was gaining ground in the 1920s, there have been peasant and tribal rebellions in the rural and forest areas. One of the most prominent was that led by Alluri Seetharamaraju in the Manyam agency area in the Eastern Ghats. From August to December 1922, Raju and his followers attacked a number of police stations at various parts of the agency and seized weapons and ammunition. During encounters they killed two European commanding officers and four policemen. There were nine major clashes between the British forces and the rebels from January to October 1923. The participation of women was remarkable in this rebellion. We hear of one woman Ratthi who fought the British bravely and was immortalized in the folklore of that region. Many women were arrested, tortured and even raped, but they did not bow down. Finally only after the leader Raju was arrested and killed in May 1924 could the rebellion be suppressed. By September 1924, the rebellion was all over.

Komuram Bhim's revolt - 1940

There was another brave rebellion led by Komuram Bhim against the Nizam Sircar in Hyderabad. This was waged to retain tribal rights to the forest land in Adilabad district. Though this was not directly against the British, it was fought against the very feudal forces which were acting as the props of the British at the time and had the full blessings of the British

in suppressing the rebellion. As was the norm in all other tribal rebellions, the Gond tribal women of Adilabad also participated in large numbers in this armed struggle. Many women died in the final battle in 1940 in which Bhim was killed and the rebellion was put down brutally. Komuram Som Bai's fight with an infant strapped to her waist in the pitched battle with the police when her husband Bhim was killed is a little known fact. Bhim and the brave martyrs of this movement remain etched in the memories of not only the Gonds but of all fighting people to this day.

The Bheel Rising (1857-58)

The Bheels were a section of the backward and warlike community of central India, scattered mostly in the Western Ghats. Their chief stronghold was in Khandesh. They had taken up arms against the British Raj, then represented by the East India Company in the first half of the 19th century between 1817 and 1825.

Inspired by the risings in the North and fortified by the Purwannahs from the king of Delhi, the Bheels under the leadership of Kajee Singh, Bhagoji Naik and others raised the standard of the rebellion and directed their attack on the British government in Khandesh.

Most important was the battle of Ambapani (11th April, 1857). They succeeded in inflicting serious wounds on captain Birch and Lt. Basevi. One native officer of the 9th regiment was killed. Four hundred and sixty Bheel women and children were taken as prisoners. Among them were the wives of Kajee Singh and Mowassia Naik. The niece of Bheema Naik was also caught, while Kajee Singh's only son Polad Singh was killed. Again on 20th January (year?) in another battle they wounded captain Montegomery, Lt. Chamberlayne, Davidson and killed Lt. Stuart.

It is interesting to note that women shared the responsibility of fighting against the British equally with their

men folk and fought side by side with them. The commissioner of Police in a letter to the secretary to the government secret department, Bombay on 1st June 1858, commented that "Bheel women were just as troublesome and mischievous as their men. In fact, the women played a vital role in the anti-British Bheel risings by obtaining information and supplying it to the men." In general they had great influence on Bheel males. As a result the British adopted the policy of holding Bheel women as hostages till Bheel naiks would be captured.

The unique organizing capacity of the Bheel Naiks is evident from the fact that the entire Bheel population inclusive of women and children were inspired to resist the British.

Indigo Revolt (1859-60; 1866-68)

The Neel (indigo) agitation of Bengal in 1859-60 is one of the largest farmer agitations of the modern times. European farmers had a monopoly over Neel farming. The foreigners used to force Indian farmers to harvest Neel and to achieve their objectives they used to brutally suppress the farmers. The farmers were illegally beaten up, detained in order to force them to sell Neel at non-profitable rates. Finally in 1859, the farmers revolted, and declined to cultivate Neel. They faced the brutalities unleashed upon them by the landlords and the British officers with courage and determination. At that juncture, the educated elite of Bengal stood by its farmers.

During the Indigo revolt of 1859-60, women too appeared on the battle scene. Separate fighting groups (companies) were constituted, equipped with bricks, copper plates and lethal fruits (called bel). To scare away the planters' gangs, the women made a nerve-breaking noise with plates of baked clay. Once when the goondas of the planters saw that women, well equipped with all these weapons were advancing in their direction, they turned back and fled. The play 'Neel Darpan' on the indigo revolt depicted the abduction of and tyranny against women by British planters. Such abductions were frequent then.

The flames of struggle were sparked off from a small locality in Jessore, but they quickly lit the peasants slumbering anger against the British planters in the bulk of the villages throughout Nadia, Khulna, Faridpur, 24 Paraganas, Pabna and other districts. For two full years, the planters were boycotted and the production of the indigo was completely stopped. Scores of indigo factories had to be closed instantaneously. At its peak, groups of villagers with sticks, bows and arrows, not only attacked indigo factories at widely distanced spots, but also fought pitched battles with police forces that were in league with or under the command of the indigo planters. Therefore the armed insurrection of the indigo peasants was transformed into revolution for the direct overthrow of the British Rule.

The Government was forced to appoint a committee which was to look into the corrupt practices related to this system and suggest means to reduce it. Yet the oppression of landowners and agitation of the farmers against them continued. In 1866-68 Darbhanga and Champaran in Bihar witnessed agitation by Neel farmers.

2

Role of Ranis, Begums and ordinary women in Nineteenth century Wars of Independence

The history of armed resistance to the British is more than two centuries old. The tribal tradition of armed rebellion was kept alive in various parts of India almost till the British left India. The other armed resistance the British faced was from an altogether different class – the feudal class. It is interesting to note that many Ranis have put up brave resistance to the foreign rulers even when many of the Rajas were surrendering to the British without as much as offering token resistance. Some of the Rajas did not take part in the 1857 war of independence and some of them even played the role of traitors and helped the British to conquer some kingdoms. The role of Ranis assumes significance in this context too. The fact that some of the traitors helped the British as covert agents because they did not like a woman to rule, is illustrative of the gender aspects of power.

While lauding the fight put up by these brave Ranis in fighting the annexations of their kingdoms and preferring glorious death to surrendering, we must also keep in mind the fact that the forces they represented were the most retrogressive feudal classes. In fact, they tried not to get into war with the British as far as possible by giving them many concessions and a share in their power. They fought only when the British tried to fully occupy their territories and the people were in no mood to surrender. The ruling class history books

tell us only about the Ranis in glorious terms but there are few references to the ordinary women soldiers who fought bravely and lost their lives. Even about the Ranis we have passing references to only the most famous ones. Surprisingly, the adulation the British bestowed, even though grudgingly, on these women gives us much information of their rare qualities as leaders and soldiers.

Rani Chennamma: Battle for Kittur

The battle of Kittur was one of the first Indian battles for freedom, against the British. The legendary queen, Rani Chennamma, led it. The British tried to usurp the Samsthan (kingdom) of Kittur under the pretext that it did not have a proper heir. She tried to enter into agreement with the British, but completely failed because the British were keen to annex it under any little pretext they got. Then she courageously defied the British by holding a durbar and declared the continuity of the State. She was firm in her demand of autonomy for the state. When negotiations failed and war became inevitable, she rallied her people for the war.

The British contingent had been completely crushed and humiliated by Rani Chennamma in the battle of Kittur on October 23, 1824. The British artillery was entirely cut up. The political agent and collector Mr. Thackeray, who with his adamant stand caused the war was also killed. Captain Buck, Lt. Sewell and Lt. Deighen were killed. They took about 40 Britons and two important civilian officers- Mr. Stevenson and Mr. Walker Elliot as prisoners. Keeping them as hostages, the Rani who was well aware of the mighty force of the British tried in vain to negotiate with the British for autonomy. She released the 40 Britons as an act of goodwill. Even after the British surrounded the fort, she tried to avoid war by releasing the two officers if there would be no war. But the British, bent as they were on capturing Kittur went back on their word and after the officers were released attacked the fort. There was a fierce battle. Thousands of Kittur people died fighting the British soldiers bravely. There was

sabotage and the gunpowder was made useless. The traitors were caught and put to death but the damage was already done. Chennamma's hope of outside help also was shattered as the Raja of Kolhapur, though he had arrived with his army, was prevaricating and before he could reach any decision the British had already vanquished Kittur. Late in the night on 4th December, the fort breached and the British rushed in. Few escaped but many died fighting. Rani Chennmma was captured and put in jail. Even in jail, she encouraged some rebels who met her incognito like Sangolli Rayanna to revolt. Her constant dream was the liberation of Kittur. After nearly 5 years in confinement in the Bailhongal fort, she died on the 2nd of February 1829. But her saga of bravery continued to inspire generations to fight the British.

1857 - The First War of Indian Independence

The upheaval of 1857-1858 was the first organized armed attempt by the Indians to free themselves from the political grip of the English. Lord Dalhousie had intensified the process of annexation through a vigorous application of the policy of 'lapse'. Lord Dalhousie's policy of Annexation was a lethal weapon of conquest. The policy of annexation known as the 'Doctrine of Lapse' was based on the forfeiture of the right to rule in the absence of a natural heir. The years of his regime (1848-56) saw the absorption of no less than eight states, which meant that a quarter million square miles of territory was added to the East India Company's territorial limits.

The Revolt of 1857, and unsuccessful but heroic effort to eliminate foreign rule, had begun when sepoys from Meerut who had defied and killed the European Officers on 10 May 1857 crossed the Yamuna and marched to Delhi. This was the precursor to a widespread mutiny by the sepoys and rebellion almost all over North India, as well as Central and Western India. Almost half the Company's sepoy strength of 2,32,224 rebelled against it. The Revolt of the sepoys was accompanied by a rebellion of the civil population, particularly in the N.W.

provinces of Oudh. The civil rebellion had a broad social base, embracing all sections of society since the nature of British rule adversely affected the interests of almost all sections of society.

Begum Hazrat Mahal

Begum Hazrat Mahal led the historical "Lucknow" struggle against the British during the 1857 revolt. Hazrat Mahal was a dancing girl and later on became an acknowledged wife of King Wajid Ali Shah of Oudh.

The annexation of Oudh was completed in 1856. As a consequence of the absorption of Oudh, 60,000 people were thrown out of employment. Artisans and craftsmen lost their only means of livelihood. From the beginning the Oudh Rani opposed the British attempt to capture their kingdoms through vice. The Lucknow Nawab Wajid Ali Shah was arrested and sent to Calcutta prison but the Rani escaped arrest by going underground. She took her 13- year-old son Birjis Khadir along with her and toured the length and breadth of the Lucknow Kingdom and roused the people.

Begum Hazrat Mahal took over the reigns at Lucknow, where popular sympathy was overwhelmingly in favour of the deposed Nawab. On 30th May, 1857 she declared war and the British army, officers, agents and touts all had to run away from Lucknow. Sensing that the nobles were not ready to accept a woman ruler, she made her son the king and ruled in his stead. She was not only known for the war manouvres and experience in battlefield but also for her administrative capacities. She ruled the State diplomatically and exhibited qualities of good leadership and statesmanship. The high offices in the State were distributed between Hindus and Muslims. She also honoured brave soldiers.

In September 1857 the rebels were defeated at Delhi. Then came the victory of the British at Kanpur. But nothing deterred her from the path she had chosen. In the month of November

they gave a tough fight to the British forces under Colin Campbell. The rebels again became active in Kanpur and their activities compelled Campbell to retrace his steps. The Begum took this opportunity and ordered for the occupation of Banaras and Allahabad. She also sent instructions to Nazims and Talukdars to march on Azamgarh and Jaunpur. She called a meeting of the chiefs on December 22, 1857, and criticized the leaders for not exhibiting courage.

She tried to encourage the soldiers and is reported to have appeared on the battlefield on February 25, 1858, mounted on an elephant.

On March 2, 1858 the British started operations against Lucknow with a strong force of thirty thousand under the command of Colin Campbell and Jung Bahadur (Nepal). The British forces occupied one place after another till the rebels found their positions precarious and decided to evacuate. Many died in the battle. Hazrat Mahal did not lose heart and went about in the battlefield inspiring her troops. By March 18, 1858, all the strong points of Lucknow were in the hands of the English except a palace which was defended by the Begum till the next day. Later she reinforced Maulvi Ahmedula Shah in his attack in Shahjahanpur. On October 1, 1858, she issued instructions to the troops and also led the troops to the battlefield. Irrespective of the result the British wanted to capture her alive. Though Lucknow was lost, Begum managed to escape capture.

Straight from the battlefield she reached Nepal forests and along with Nana Saheb once again began organizing an army. The Nepalese authorities were hesitant to give asylum to the rebels and asked them to surrender to the British. But she refused. She faced many difficulties in Nepal. Only women and boys of twelve were allowed to stay in her camp. When the Nepal prime Minister invited them to surrender she declared that they would sooner die than surrender. The British tried to lure her with a pension of 17 lakh rupees but she did

not give in. They offered her many humiliating terms for surrender which she promptly turned down as she was not ready to see herself deprived of all political power. Instead of surrendering she asked for armed assistance from the Nepalese authorities for the purpose of making conquest of the British province.

After the 1857 uprising was quelled, the Queen of England issued a proclamation to appease the people. To counter Queen Victoria's declaration, the Begum issued her own declaration from Lucknow kingdom, which created a lot of sensation. She dealt with each article in detail and uncovered the lies in it. She challenged the truth and sincerity of the declaration made by the Queen.

She tried to come back to India in 1877 but the government put down humiliating conditions so she remained in Nepal. In 1879 she died in the Nepal forests and became a legendary figure in the War of Independence against the British.

Rani Laxmibai of Jhansi: (1836-1858)

Since Laxmibai's mother died at her birth, her upbringing was different from that of other girls. She was adept at wielding various weapons, excelled in physical activities and was a skilled horsewoman. In 1850 at the age of 14, she was married to the king of Jhansi Raja Gangadhar Rao, then 40 years old. He allowed her to continue her practice in weaponry and riding. The Rani gradually began teaching these skills and the use of arms to the women of Jhansi because she thought it important in those turbulent times when the British were annexing kingdoms.

On the death of the Raja the English though bound by an old treaty to recognize the claim of his heirs to the throne of Jhansi did not keep their promise. Ignoring the right of the king's adopted son, Damodar Rao, they annexed the kingdom.

She faced two challenges to the throne, the first from Sadashiva Khondekar who claimed a right to be the ruler of Jhansi and the second from Nathey Khan who attacked Jhansi with a force of 20,000 soldiers. Though the English had confiscated her weaponry, the Rani, a superb tactician and strategist defeated the attackers roundly.

On 20th March 1858, General Rose and his army camped outside Jhansi. The battle that followed was ferocious and the people of Jhansi fought the English with magnificent courage. The siege began on March 22. The Rani's troops showed undaunted courage and returned shot for shot. Women were noticed working in the batteries and carrying ammunitions. Women and children were seen assisting in the repair of the havoc made in the defence by the fire of besiegers and in carrying food and water to the soldiers on duty. The Rani would go to the batteries to rouse the zeal of the soldiers by her presence and her fiery words. On March 31st at the request of the Rani, twenty-thousand men under Tantia Tope marched against the British camp before Jhansi but they were defeated. The English however had a vastly superior force and after Tantia's defeat Jhansi could not sustain the conflict too long. After the fall of Jhansi, the Rani escaped to Kalpi where she joined forces with Tantiya Tope. She cleverly escaped under the cover of darkness and in the garb of a man. Kalpi became the meeting place of all the rebels. The rebels once again challenged the English at Koonch. During the battle the Rani dressed in a man's attire and armed with a sword and a dagger rode at the head of 50 Sawars and 100 matchlockmen. After a series of hard battles the rebels had to evacuate on 23rd May 1858. And despite her allies' defeat, the Rani in an astonishing display of military tactics managed to save a large part of her force from the trap the English had set. After Kalpi fell the Rani and the Peshwa regrouped at Gopalapur. They captured the fort of Gwalior on June 4th at Rani's suggestion and the troops joined the rebels. The rebels held Gwalior for eighteen days. But while the English prepared for the decisive battle the Peshwa's army spent its time in the pursuit of pleasure.

On June 16th after a hard battle, rebels under Tantiya Tope were defeated. The British met the Rani's forces at Kotah-ki-Sarai. The British were able to clear the place of rebels. She took interest in almost all phases of the battle. Disguised as a man she passed rapidly from post to post until the persistent and deadly fire of Smith's guns drove in to her own artillery. The Rani herself led an extremely disciplined and loyal force known as Lal Kurtis or Red Coats, which included both men and women.

On June 18th the Rani fought her last battle. She cut a magnificent figure in her masculine attire, wielding swords with both her hands with the reins of her horse between her teeth. The English pursued her after the defeat. They were soon upon her and though she fought ferociously she met a hero's death. General Rose had to admit 'she was the bravest of all'. He said 'here lay the woman who was the only man among the rebels'.

She was one of the few leaders in Indian History who was aware of the contribution women could make on the battlefield. The women of Jhansi played a critical role in every area of military affairs, a fact attested by a Marathi writer who visited Jhansi under her reign. The Central India Governor General's representative Robert Hamilton in his report on Jhansi Laxmibai mentioned about an unknown Muslim young woman who died along with her. He wrote that this woman always used to follow Laxmibai on another horse and protected her.

Laxmibai also realized the need to involve all communities, castes and religious groups in her war against the British.

The people of those regions have immortalized all the brave deeds of these legendary women in various folk art forms and some people have even preserved the historical relics to this day.

Jhalkari Bai and other brave women who defended Jhansi

Jhalkari Bai was a dalit woman of Kori caste who had etched a permanent place in the hearts of the people of Jhansi

by her bravery and sacrifice. It was said that she had a striking resemblance to the Queen of Jhansi – Laxmibai. Laxmibai had a special bond with this poor dalit woman who was ready to lay down her life for the queen and the freedom of Jhansi. Jhalkari already had this legend about her that she had killed a tiger while trying to save cattle. When the queen began training ordinary women for combat it was Jhalkari whom she chose to lead them.

Mahashweta Devi wrote in ‘Queen of Jhansi’ - “Disregarding caste and religion the Queen called upon and organized a women’s troop. On the palace grounds, she would practice *malkhamba* or climbing a wooden pole and wrestling with women. Marking coconut trees with white for targets, they would practice pistol shooting with the women in the palace grounds; they also practised sword-fighting and horse riding regularly. Women were trained to fight as equals with men in order to aid the artillery section. In later chapters of history and in countries outside India, women have fought shoulder to shoulder with men; we can be rightfully proud that 100 years ago an Indian woman pioneered this glorious tradition.”

The queen had created quite a stir among the upper castes when she inducted lower castes (including dalits) and women into the army. The Rani had stubbornly stood against opposition from the elite rich upper caste against recruiting ‘lower castes’ especially dalits and women and fully recruited them into the army. She personally trained the women and supervised their skills. She trained them to fight in all kinds of terrain. When the Queen helped them in correcting their mistakes the women were overwhelmed. A writer Mohandas Naimisarai mentioned the names of Sundar, Mandar and Kasibai among the women who trained under the Rani. Appointing a dalit woman Jhalkari as the commander of these soldier women was an unprecedented achievement in the annals of Indian History

Jhalkari also proved her mettle in the battles for the defence of Jhansi. Mohan writes that Jhalkari personally led the battles from the Bhanderi gate to Unnav gate of the Jhansi fort and that she was the in-charge of the cannon balls armoury. She inspired women with her fiery words. While in battle she was informed that her husband Puran died in a battle, but Jhalkari took it in her stride and continued to fight like a lioness. The battle was fought in every street of Jhansi and the British massacred the people in thousands not sparing even old women and children. In the past women used to commit suicide when the enemy stormed in but now the women of Jhansi inspired by the Rani and brave women like Jhalkari fought till their last breath.

When the fall of Jhansi became imminent everybody advised the Rani to get out with her son Damodar to reach a safer place and continue the struggle. In one of the most daring escapes the Rani and her contingent of faithful soldiers went out of Jhansi by pulling wool on the eyes of the British soldiers even while they were on the lookout for the Rani. Jhalkari wanted to use her striking resemblance to the Rani to divert the attention of the British from the escaping Rani. So she dressed like Rani and went to Hugh Rose and Stuart and told them that she was the Rani. But a traitor identified her to them and Hugh Rose issued an immediate sentence for her death. She said, "So kill me. Do you think I am afraid to die? I am just like one of so many sepoys who are dying". Jhalkari had forever remained in the hearts of the people of Jhansi and Bundelkhand for her brave role in defending Jhansi.

When the Rani was fleeing from Jhansi she was chased by the British and they had met in a battle near Bhandir, hundred miles from Jhansi. Kashi and Mandar were beside the Rani in this battle. In the Battle of Kunch, Ganga, the woman warrior at the Rani's flank was killed. In the final battle just before the Rani was killed Mandar who had been accompanying the Rani in all her battles was killed by a bullet. Sadly she said, "I'm leaving you, Bai Saheba - I guess we won't be escaping together!" The Rani turned her horse around in a split second and killed

Mandar's killer. Within a few minutes the Rani was killed by a sudden bullet.

The Rani and her brave troop of women had indeed written the most glorious chapter in the first war of Indian independence. It is no surprise that Subhash Chandra Bose named their women's regiment as Rani Jhansi Regiment in remembrance of the great queen and her women soldiers. Many will be the instances where the women of Jhansi would continue to inspire future generations of Indian women.

Role of some more Ranis

Ramgarh was a small village of Mandala district in Madhya Pradesh. The British annexed it and fixed a pension for the Raja and his family. The Rani protested but in vain. Ramgarh became the fountainhead of the revolt in Mandala district in July 1857 and the Rani its originator. On April 1, 1858, the British forces advanced towards Ramgarh. She left the fort and led her troops to the battlefield. Her small force was defeated and she fled from the town. The Rani however did not lose heart and retired to the nearby jungles, from where she kept raiding the British camp. Her position became precarious and her capture became imminent. She did not want to be a prisoner of the British and so she plunged a sword into her body and died.

Rani Jundan Kaur, widow of Maharaja Ranjit Singh was detained at Benaras while her son Dalip Singh was taken to England. After suffering from preventive detention for two decades, Jundan Kaur was allowed to go to England to see her son.

The following are some other Ranis and Begums who resisted the British during this period. Rani of Tulsipur, Rani Tejbai, Tuklai Sultana, Zamaani Begum, Maharani Tapaswini, Maharani of Punjab Zindam and the leader of Chuar rebellion Rani Siromani.

·**Unsung valour of some ordinary women**

There were other women who laid their lives in the battlefield in the 1857 uprising but whose names still remain unknown. Thousands of women participated in the rebellion. Many were hanged or shot dead. According to one account 225 women were martyred in Muzaffarpur alone. One girl named Myna also fought in this war.

Gordon Alexandra observes: 'Among the slain at Sikendra Bagh there were a few negresses. They fought like wild cats and it was not till after they were killed that their sex was even suspected.' Forbes Mitchell makes mention of a woman who was shot at Sikendra Bagh. She was armed with a heavy old pattern pistol. Seated on a pipal tree she killed half a dozen people. Russell also discovered a woman a few days after the battle. She was dead but near her body there was an enormous mine. In Delhi there was another woman who became famous as the Maid of Delhi. She would go to the battlefield in a Sawar's uniform and was reported to have been worse than five sepoy's in the battlefield. She was given a horse by the King.

The 25-year-old Azizun fought in the battlefield in men's attire on a horseback and was a good speaker who made fiery speeches and aroused the masses. Azizun organized a separate women battalion. Espionage, supply of arms and food materials was its task. She herself trained them in swordplay, horse riding, and handling firearms and made them into a formidable force. Her fighting skills won the praise of the enemy also. She was injured and was caught. The British offered her amnesty if she apologized. But she valiantly refused to surrender and preferred to become a martyr and inspire hundreds of people to revolt. This brave young woman who responded to Nana Saheb's call to fight the British kept her word till the last.

The British were really terrorized by the guerilla tactics

of a certain unknown green robed woman. She used to organize men and women patriots and attack the British in the most surprising manner. She was very skilled in swordplay and a sniper too. When she was finally caught the British Officer wrote "the old woman is very dangerous...be careful"! After she was sent to Ambala we don't know what happened but the fate of such a brave woman can be easily imagined. Her name is not known but we know that she was a Muslim.

Khwaji Abdul Rahiman was one of those brave men to be hanged by the British. Begum Asgari Begum was his mother who participated along with her sons in the revolt. When she was caught such was the British hatred for her that she was burnt alive!

Begum Habiba was another woman who fought against the British valiantly and inflicted many losses on them. She was injured in the battlefield. The British hanged her.

Rahima Begum, born in a Muslim Rajput family in Muzaffarpur joined the rebels and fought against the British. She was injured seriously and caught. She was hanged. A battalion of women led by Begum Aliya defied the British troops. After their defeat, she was shot dead by the British soldiers.

Conclusion

The series of civil rebellions which run like a thread through the first 100 years of British rule were often led by the deposed feudal forces of the conquered Indian states. The backbone of the rebellions, their mass base and striking power came from the rack-rented peasants, ruined artisans and demobilized soldiers. They began as British rule was established in Bengal and Bihar and they occurred in area after area as it was incorporated into colonial rule.

Those almost continuous rebellions were massive in their

totality but were wholly local in their spread and isolated from each other. They were the result of local causes and grievances and were also localized in their effects.

Socially, economically and politically, the semi-feudal leaders of the rebellions were backward looking and traditional in outlook. Their resistance represented no societal alternative. It was centuries-old in form and ideological and cultural content. Its basic objective was to restore earlier forms of rule and social relations. Such backward looking and scattered, sporadic and disunited uprisings were incapable of fending off or overthrowing foreign rule. The British succeeded in pacifying the rebel areas one by one. They also gave concessions to the less fiery rebel chiefs and zamindars in the form of reinstatement, the restoration of their estates and reduction in revenue assessments as they agreed to live peacefully under alien authority. The more recalcitrant ones were physically wiped out.

The suppression of the civil rebellions was a major reason why the Revolt of 1857 did not spread to South India and most of Eastern and Western India. The historical significance of these civil uprisings lies in that they established strong and valuable local traditions of resistance to British rule from which Indian people were to draw inspiration in their struggle for freedom.

After 1857 War, Queen Victoria took over the reigns from East India Company in 1858 and India became a colony of the British Empire. The British were afraid of another rebellion and wanted to prevent people from turning to revolutionary means. This desire led to the formation of INC (Indian National Congress).

After 1857 Revolt the remaining feudal classes bowed to the British and compromised with them. They agreed to accept British rule in exchange for retaining some of their wealth, which they continue to own till now and continued to maintain

their local fiefdom as landlords. The British created a system of Zamindars who served as their agents and fleeced the poor to pay for their own luxuries as well as the British. The compromise between the feudal and imperialist classes was complete and both became the targets of Indian revolution.

3

Social Reform Movement

In this chapter we'll see what were the main issues related to women that were taken up as part of the social reform movement, the role of women social reformers and reformist women's organizations. To understand the impact of social reform movement on women and women's role in it, we think it is necessary to divide the chapter into sub headings. Though of a later period, we also included Periyar's Self Respect movement and the Ambedkarite Dalit movement in this chapter. Even though these two movements were more radical and rational, they also sought to reform the Hindu society but did not aim to overthrow the existing socio-economic system totally or for that matter profess to get rid of the colonial rule.

The impact of British colonization of India, the ideas of the French Revolution, the slow penetration of capitalism and the emergence of new, educated bureaucratic and commercial classes formed the basis for the social reform movement that emerged in various parts of the country. The early social reform movement of the 19th century was a movement for the upliftment of women by both legal and social means, but was paradoxically led by men with very few exceptions of women leaders. They were liberal in their outlook towards women.

By the second half of the 19th century, there were reform groups in all parts of British India. They focused attention on Sati, female infanticide, polygamy, child marriages, and vast differences in ages at marriage between men and women, dowry, purdah, prohibitions on female education, devadasis and the patrilocal joint family. The majority of these reform

leaders were Brahmins and their upliftment took into account mainly women of the upper castes. The methods adopted by these reformers were passive – mass signature campaigns, public meetings, lobbying for reforms with the British government. Their activity acted as a stimulus and encouragement to reform-minded individuals in other areas and gradually reformist organisations with an all- India identity began to emerge.

The social reform movement in India took up many issues, which concerned the upliftment of women. Many feudal customs, which were stultifying the upper caste Hindu women, were opposed. Awareness about the utter degradation of women was raised among the people through their propaganda and their activities. These reforms paved the way for women's education and subsequently for increasing their social role. With new liberal ideology emerging as a worldwide phenomenon, India also became part of the social turmoil unleashed by it. On a personal front they had to face lot of difficulties and even social ostracization due to their activities. But they withstood those and fought for their convictions. What is especially interesting about these 19th century reformers is their activism. Their ideas on gender were based on personal experience; during their lives they attempted to change those with whom they lived and worked. We can say the social reform movement successfully unleashed the social forces, which were fettered in the feudal society to a great extent, and so were no longer able to serve the class interests of the emerging bourgeoisie and the imperialists. The support of the various British Governor Generals for most of the reforms and at the same time their compromise with the feudal forces in some issues or lack of serious implementation is completely in tune with their scheme to carry on their rule with 'Indian clerks' and 'feudal support'.

Though male social reformers initiated this process we find many women social reformers emerged as leaders who went on to become crusaders in many fields concerning

upliftment of women. Many women who emerged as front-runners in this movement went on to become leaders in the freedom movement too and many emerged as national leaders standing on the base created by the social reform movement. Many "firsts" achieved by women were a product of this movement. Undoubtedly the reform movement laid the foundation for women's increasing social and political role by giving them education, bringing them out of the confines of the four walls and fighting against many evils of the feudal order perpetrated on women. Though the reform movement primarily fought against the social customs of Hindu and mainly Brahmin households, it should be acknowledged that the democratization of these communities led to the winning of some bourgeois rights for these women.

Every step of reform was resisted by the orthodox Brahmins and the liberal reformers had to suffer social humiliation ranging from social boycott to threats of violence. In the last two decades of the 19th century, even political leaders from the nationalist camp began attacking social reformers. Bal Gangadhar Tilak attacked the social reformers from the twin plank of being anti-religious and anti-national. He said no self respecting Indian should seek the help of alien rulers to change their own society and religion. From this clash arose a new trend which sought to equate nationalism with revivalist Hinduism. The new revivalism manifested itself in powerful organizations like Dayanand Saraswati's Arya Samaj (1875), Vivekananda's Ramakrishna Mission (1897), and to an extent Annie Besant's Madras Hindu Association (1904).

There was another important stream in the reform movements led by leaders like Jyotiba Phule, Periyar and Narayan Guru etc. which fought against the caste system and untouchability and worked for the upliftment of the oppressed castes. But it was only with the movement led by Ambedkar that the caste question has come into sharp focus.

The women's issues taken up were mostly concerning

upper caste Hindu women. Except for a few like Jyotiba Phule and Savithribai Phule, most of the reformers did not take up the issues of lower caste women. It is true that the social reform movement did not concern itself with the economic issues but even on the social front the lower classes and the lower castes did not figure much in their programmes. Only in the later phase i.e. in the 20th century, that the Periyar self-respect movement in Tamilnadu took anti Brahmin issues and as part of it questioned the caste and gender oppression of the Hindu society. In the anti caste movement of Ambedkar, women were mobilized in large numbers and it also questioned the basic tenets of Hinduism, which had caste and gender oppression at its core.

The non-brahmin movement of Maharashtra's Jyotiba Phule and Tamilnadu's Periyar and the Dalit movement led by Ambedkar challenged caste inequalities and the Brahminism and Hinduism which sanctioned it. In the process they also exposed the anti woman bias of the Shastras. They demanded equal rights for men and women of all castes.

Some of the issues taken up by the Social Reform movement

Sati

A decade before establishing the Brahma Samaj in Bengal in 1828, Raja Rammohan Roy undertook the crusade to campaign against 'Sati', which was the first women's issue to receive public attention. The debate on widow burning began in 1780s when the missionaries first took up the issue. The colonial administration first intervened in the civil society on the issue of Sati. Historically, the custom had been prevalent only in certain regions of India and among the upper castes and the landed. In regions where widows had a right in the deceased husband's property, the practice became prevalent in the 12th and 13th centuries. Finally the Sati Prohibition Act

was passed in 1829 due to the efforts of social reformers like Rammohan Roy. The main tactic he adopted was petitioning.

Child marriage

Associations like the Brahmo Samaj and the Arya Samaj took up the cause of child marriage. The girls were married very young between 5 and 10 years of age or even at a lesser age. It was at the instance of Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar that in 1860 the Indian Penal Code prohibited the consummation of marriage if the girl was less than 10 yrs old. The Age of Consent Bill made sexual intercourse with a girl less than ten years legally a rape. The Bill provided negligible protection to child-wives and remained a dead letter for all purposes. The issue reappeared in the 1880s and in 1891 the criminal code was amended to raise the age of consent to twelve years. However there were no convictions under the Act until thirty years later.

Phulmani Devi, a child aged 11 years was married to an adult husband. He raped her, as a result of which she died. The death of Phulmani was an important factor in forcing the lady doctors to send a memorandum to the government requesting suitable legislation to prevent child marriages. 1,500 Indian women who sent a representative to Queen Victoria beseeching similar reforms supported this request.

Finally the Sarda Act was passed at the beginning of October 1929 and took effect in April 1930. According to this the minimum age of marriage for women was set at fourteen and for men at eighteen. But enforcement was practically non-existent.

Attempts to raise the age of marriage further aroused a storm. The Bill for the first time raised a woman's issue on an all India basis. Revivalists like Tilak stressed that it was morally wrong, humiliating and socially weakening to ask for legislation to curb a domestic social evil. He said that a state

that had done little to uplift the conditions of the colonized had no legitimacy to tamper with its affairs. It also ended the period of seeking amelioration for women through legislative measures from the British government.

Widow Remarriage

The practice of not allowing widows to remarry was prevalent only in three upper castes. Of the 68 widow remarriages performed in Andhra Pradesh till 1905, 57 were of Brahmins, 8 were of Vaishyas and 3 were of other castes. The First widow remarriage was performed in Calcutta in December 1856. Iswar Chandra got an Act passed in July 1856, which legalized widow remarriage, and he set an example by marrying his first son to a widow and bore the expenses of such marriages. In the 1856 Widow Remarriage Act widows were not given share in their late husbands' property. The Rajahmundry Social Reform Organization condemned this and requested the government to correct the same. The remarriage Act did not change the status of widows.

Viresalingam performed the marriage of a Brahmin widower and a young widow on December 11, 1881 in Rajahmundry, which was the first widow remarriage in Andhrapradesh. In 1879 he gave a now famous speech that shastras approved of widow remarriages. In 1881 he established a widow remarriage organization. He started a widow rehabilitation center in 1878.

The widows also revolted. In May 1870, a young widow sought protection from a district official complaining that her father, Sita Ram, an agent of Sankaracharya, a Hindu high priest wanted to tonsure her head forcibly. The magistrate showed his inability to interfere in a religious affair! A widow teacher in Bombay wanted to marry a schoolmaster. She invited friends for the marriage and made preparations. Her relatives assaulted the girl, her intended husband and their friends. They forcibly tonsured the head of the widow and confined her to

the house. Viresalingam speaks of a Brahmin woman who had been recently widowed who told her brother that she had enough clothes to wear and that he should give the white saris he brought to his wife, as she intended to remarry. After stiff opposition, she was allowed to have a relationship with the person she wanted to marry, without marrying him. Yet another widow from Kakinada eloped with a Sudra boy carrying away some of her jewels. She and her lover were then jailed on charges of theft. Seetamma, a widow from Yasika village in Ganjam (Orissa), came all the way to Rajahmundry, where Veeresalingam lived, travelling part of the distance by bullock cart and walking the rest, after learning from newspapers that widow remarriages were performed there.

Widow Remarriage Associations were started and widow homes were opened to train them for an independent career. Sasipada Banerji founded the first such home in 1877 in Calcutta.

In 1881 the Court in Surat in Western India tried Vijayalaxmi, a young Brahmin widow, for killing her child born out of wedlock. At the first trial, she was sentenced to hang but on appeal this was changed to transportation for life and later reduced to 5 years. This case so angered Tarabai Shinde (C.1850- 1990), a young Marathi housewife that she wrote *Stri Purusha- Tulana*. This case had triggered an intense public discussion about the misfortune of widows and the issue of widow remarriage. For Tarabai it was clear that this issue was simply a metaphor for the general mistreatment of women. Tarabai's cries for equality went unheeded in a world where reformers wanted to help women but not accord them equal status.

The impact of the drive for widow remarriages was very minimal. Vidyasagar and Viresalingam had to take loans to support these couples who depended on them for money. The social reformers just concentrated on performing more remarriages and did not care if the natures of the men and

women entering such alliances were compatible or not. So, often these marriages ended in agony to the couple. Even Viresalingam later accepted that such marriages were performed in a hurry. Some prominent pro reform magazines also advised them on this. If by any chance the couple got separated, the reformers did not look after the welfare of the woman. And the widow never had a choice in choosing her husband. Arya Samaj was only for remarriage of child widows.

Devdasi System

The Mysore Samsthan brought an Act banning Devdasi system in 1909. Though reformers gave a petition to the Madras government to ban devdasi system as in Mysore the government was not favourable. Muthulakshmi Reddy from Madras province took up the question of Devdasis when she became a member of Legislative Council in 1926 and finally because of her efforts, Prevention of Dedication Act, 1929 was passed. The Bombay Government followed the example set by the Madras Government and passed the Devdasi Act in 1934.

Viresalingam opposed the culture of dancing girls and he started a rehabilitation home for prostitutes in 1909 in Rajahmundry.

Change was more evident from the inside. In 1906, some men belonging to the Devdasi caste made a resolution that they would not participate in dance performances as instrumentalists. They even took an oath to teach their women to read and write and marry them. A fine of Rs.500 was also decided for those who violate this and a committee was also formed to impose this fine. Due to the movement against dancing girls' custom some castes left their age old customs. In Krishna District, among the Jakkula caste there was a custom of dedicating one girl for this profession. This custom was abandoned. Many rich and influential people stopped arranging dance performances during functions. Magazines

reported about persons who did not arrange such performances and exhorted others to follow suit. Darsi Chenchayya was a freedom fighter and a social reformer of AP. He, Bangalore Nagaratnamma (who belonged to the prostitute caste) and her daughter established a magazine and conducted many meetings all over Andhra against the Devdasi system. Under their influence many women practicing prostitution left their caste occupation, learnt to read and write, got married and led dignified lives. Yamini Purnatilakam established a Hindu women's rehabilitation home in Madras for the children of prostitutes.

Sometimes when the devdasis themselves or persons from this caste opted out and tried to earn their livelihood in other ways, other castes opposed this and socially boycotted them and declared complete non cooperation with them. In Peddapuram (in AP) when 40 families decided to leave this profession, local Viswa Brahmins and Devang caste people declared non cooperation. The prejudices were so high that some vernacular papers wrote that girls of devdasis and other girls cannot study in the same school. When finally an Act declaring the sale of minor girls a crime was passed, it did not include devdasis.

Bride Price

This evil custom can be traced back to the middle ages in AP. This was confined to the Brahmin and Vaishya castes. Since widowers were allowed to remarry the demand for child brides rose. Child marriages inevitably led to child widowhood. This was a vicious circle. Veeresalingam in Andhra Pradesh took up this cause and propagated vigorously against it. He wrote many articles and sarcastic pieces against it and gave many speeches. Gradually this agitation picked up. The Rajahmundry Social Reform Association took up this cause and propagated widely. It requested the Government to ban it. Many magazines carried articles and one of them requested to ban it under

'abolition of slavery' Act! The Maharaja of Vizianagaram took special interest in this issue and had three years data collected in Vishakhapatnam district. The statistics were appalling. On an average 344 cases were registered of which 99 were married at an age of 5 years, 44, 36, 6 and 3 at ages of 4 years, 3 years, two years and one year respectively. The bride price of one year olds was between Rs.350 to Rs.400. Sometimes prices were fixed even for unborn babies. It may be one of the reasons which prompted Gurazada, one of the greatest writers in Telugu literature, who was working there to write his epochal play 'Kanyasulkam' (Bride Price). The Maharaja took up this issue in the Madras Assembly but the government did not agree to enact a law saying this concerned local religion and may hurt the sentiments of the people. This practice gradually gave way to dowry and is still plaguing our society.

Women's Education

As early as 1835, Bengali women wrote numerous letters to the local journals, asking for the spread of women's education. A school for girls in Andhrapradesh was established in 1867 by Goday Janakiamma in Visakhapatnam, which her daughter Ratnamma took over after her. A teacher's training institute was set up in Madras in 1870 at the initiative of Mary Carpenter. Another school was established in 1871 in Kakinada. The social reform movement of Veeresalingam Panthulu picked up by then and he established a girl's school in Dowleshwaram in 1874 and another in 1906. Begum Sugra Humayun Mirza opened two schools for girls in Hyderabad in 1919 and wrote about Hindu Muslim unity and Swadeshi. Begum Tayeba Bilgrami set up seven schools for poor children in Hyderabad.

The first thing that women did when they came into the reform movement was to set up schools for girls, recognizing the political import of education, particularly as an enabling force in spreading the ideology of reform. The shift from English education to Telugu / Urdu, a shift that was

intrinsically political, was affected by women who were becoming increasingly active in the field of education.

In 1848, under the leadership of Dadabhai Naoroji, a group of young Parsee reformers had started 'The Students Literary and Scientific Society' which had laid special and urgent emphasis on the hitherto neglected sphere of the education of young women. 740 girls, 475 of them Parsees, 178 Marathi Hindus and 87 Gujarati Hindus attended the society's schools for girls in 1855. Maneckji Corsetjee started the Alexandra Girls Education Institution with only 13 girls in his house, which went on to become one of the most prominent schools for girls. While in 1842 Sir Jamshetji Jeejeebhai had to have his daughters educated in strict secrecy fearing condemnation, by 1870 over a hundred Parsee girls had already had the benefit of a secondary education.

The Bharat Stree Mahamandal founded by Sarala Devi Chowdhurani had its first meeting in Allahabad in 1910. It planned to open branches in all parts of India to promote female education. It developed branches in Lahore, Allahabad, Delhi, Karachi, Amritsar, Hyderabad, Kanpur, Bankura, Hazaribagh, Midnapur and Calcutta. The leaders regarded purdah as the main stumbling block to popular acceptance of female education and so would send teachers into the homes to teach reading, writing, music, sewing and embroidery. Some of the Mahila Samitis taught basic subjects such as mathematics and geography while others offered only English. Especially popular were lectures and classes on health, childcare, hygiene and nutrition.

The class bias of the reform movement was most pronounced in the field of education. The plea that education would only improve women's efficiency as wives and mothers left its indelible mark on the educational policy. Demands for separate institutions, different curriculum, even different media and standards have been put forward by most champions of women's education. The goals of education of

women were limited and cautious. It was considered adequate for girls/ women to receive basic educational skills and training that would make them better wives and mothers. The curriculum revalidated the family as the most important social influence. Women had to be presentable in colonial society, models of virtue and fit companions of the new bourgeoisie who would serve the colonial system.

While most reformers and British officials propagated a separate type of education for women, the newly educated women's aspirations were developing on very different lines. Organized representations by women graduates of Calcutta to the Calcutta University Commission (1917) emphatically demanded the same curriculum for women as for men.

Reform movement in Islam

Muslim reformers were not as successful as the Hindus but they did establish major centers of education for women in Aligarh and Lahore. Reform movement in Islam is closely identified with Sir Sayed and the Aligarh movement, which represented the response of the Muslim elite towards the possibility of availing the benefits of western education. Sir Sayed established cordial relationship with the British and he perceived British rule as providential for reforming his society. The argument closely paralleled that of the early Hindu reformers of the Presidencies. Sir Sayed was averse to western education for Muslim girls and was critical of Parsis who sent their daughters to western educational institutions. In accordance with the purdah tradition, he wanted girls to be educated within the precincts of their homes, by ladies from respectable families and so opposed setting up of government schools for girls. The curriculum for girls included instruction in religious principles, training in the arts of housekeeping and handicrafts, rearing of children and respect of elders. The Muslim reformers like Sir Sayed and Mumtaz Ali felt that ensuring education of young men has a higher priority; and that the education of women has to be adjusted to the ratio

and distribution of male education. Chirag Ali and Mumtaz Ali opposed polygamy while Sir Sayed supported it. Mumtaz Ali argued for change in marriage laws and abandonment of arranged and child marriages. Muslim revivalist views on women hinged on the argument that practices such as non-remarriage of widows, deprivation of legal rights on inheritance, were all impurities which had crept in from Hinduism. The solution therefore lay in reviving the fundamental heritage of Islam.

Role of some women social reformers

The social reform movement in India was initiated and sustained by men. But that period also saw the rise of some spectacular women who against many odds educated themselves and laid the foundations for women's emancipation. The role played by these women for the democratization of the highly patriarchal Indian feudal society was exemplary.

Savitribai Phule (1831-1897): She was married to Jyotiba Phule at the age of nine. He was an important leader of the anti caste reform movement. The news of Jyotiba teaching his wife to read and write created big furore. His father threatened to drive him out of his house. Savitri chose to live with her husband and continued learning. She passed with flying colors and started a school for girls in Pune in 1848. Nine girls of different castes enrolled. When she went out of her house to go to the school, groups of orthodox men would follow her and abuse her in obscene language. They would throw rotten eggs, cow dung, tomatoes and stones at her. Jyotiba gave her 2 sarees - one to wear on the way while going and coming back, one to change and teach in the school. The ordeal continued for a long time till Savitribai had to slap a person who tried to molest her. This brought an end to the ordeal. She started more schools. They both started a 'Delivery Home' called 'Balhatya Pratibhandak Griha'. Women on whom pregnancy was forced, especially the widows, could deliver

here instead of committing suicide. They even organized a strike of barbers and persuaded them not to tonsure the heads of widows.

They opened up their reservoir of water in the precincts of their house to the untouchables. After Jyotiba's demise in 1890, Savitribai took over the responsibility of Satya Shodhak Samaj founded by him. She presided over meetings and guided workers. She worked relentlessly for the victims of plague. She organized camps for children and it is said she used to feed 2,000 children every day during the epidemic. She herself was struck by the disease while nursing a sick child and died on 10 March 1897.

Pandita Ramabai (1858-1922): Ramabai's father Anantshastri was a great scholar. He defied society and taught Sanskrit to his wife and two daughters. The orthodox scholars ostracized him but he did not care. He established his ashram in wilderness. After her father died the poverty stricken family had to go through many an ordeal and Ramabai lost all her family members one by one except her brother. They performed Harikathas and read puranas and roamed around the country. Finally in Calcutta this young woman's knowledge of Sanskrit scriptures and her oratory were recognized and the titles of Pandita and Saraswati conferred on her. She went on giving speeches. With the help of shastras she tried to prove that women participated along with men in all public and social ceremonies and events in Ancient India and that the evil custom of exploiting women was the brainchild of evil-minded men. She married Bipin Bihari who was from a 'lower caste'. In 1882, he died of cholera. She shifted to Pune. The orthodox Brahmins criticized and accused her of spreading rebellion among women, while reformists were happy. In 1887 she put her views on women's education before the Hunter Commission. She emphasized the need of medical and para-medical training of women. Her views were translated into English and the English were impressed. A chain of medical dispensaries for women was started.

She went to London and was impressed by the rescue homes for women. Her faith in Hinduism had been eroded, and she converted to Christianity. She went to USA and campaigned. People were impressed and formed a Pandita Ramabai Association in Boston. They collected funds for her widow's home. After coming back, she established Sharda Sadan, home for widows and destitute women. She arranged remarriages for widows also. The orthodox Brahmin society of Pune accused her of converting helpless widows to Christianity. Tilak also attacked her but she stood her ground. She remarked that, ' the missionaries {who} as a rule do not like the idea of my school being wholly secular, and the orthodox Hindu (who) finds it repulsive to have me, a Christian outcast, as his daughter's teacher.'

She always helped people in need – during epidemic or famines. She knew that under difficult circumstances, women and children, especially girls were the worst sufferers. Men in the families had no scruples in selling their women to satisfy their hunger. She organized relief and brought many widows and girls to Sharda Sadan. The orthodox society of Pune made the very existence of Sharda Sadan difficult. She did not have the money to shift it elsewhere. Finally she got help from USA and she could establish a Sadan on 15 acres of land at Kedgaon. She devoted her whole life to the upliftment of destitute women fighting against the orthodox society.

Kadambini Ganguly (1861-1923): She had many firsts to her credit- the first to pass the matriculation exam, the first woman to graduate in medical science, the first to speak from the congress platform at the Bombay session of the Indian National Congress (INC) in 1889 which she attended as one of the women delegates.

Kashibai Kanitkar (1861-1948): She contributed to Marathi prose and literature. Her effort to learn can be appreciated when we know the fact that she started learning to read and

write after marriage with her husband's help and encouragement. He also taught her English along with Sanskrit and the first book he wanted her to read was J.S.Mill's 'Subjection of Women'. She became the secretary of the Bombay branch of Sharda Sadan founded by Ramabai. She became its Vice President later. When she presided over the inaugural function the journal *Induprakash* noted that this was the first instance of an Indian woman presiding over a public function. She was one of the delegates of the Bombay session of the INC in 1889.

Ramabai Ranade (1862-1924): Ramabai was just 11 years when she married Justice M.G. Ranade. He was already a social reformer. She learnt to read and write, Marathi, English and other subjects from him. She gradually mastered the art of speaking effectively in public and was fluent in Marathi and English. In 1881 she began working for Prarthana Samaj in Bombay and when they returned to Pune she established a branch of Arya Mahila Samaj in the city. She also established the Hindu Ladies Social and Literacy Club in Bombay and started a number of classes to train women in languages, general knowledge and tailoring. Special classes were conducted to teach English. M.G. Ranade died in 1901. In 1904 she organized the first Bharat Mahila Parishad in Bombay. Women from all faiths, castes and classes got together to work for women's development. She worked tirelessly for another 25 years for women's education, legal rights, equal status, general awakening and encouraged them to particularly enter the nursing profession. She worked relentlessly against child marriage also. All these efforts took shape in establishing the Seva Sadan Society in Bombay, a home for distressed women. Pune Seva Sadan society was started in her own ancestral home in 1910. This later developed into a full-fledged institution offering a number of facilities like hostels, training colleges, vocational centers, sewing centers etc. She also fought for the cause of Indian labour in Fiji and Kenya. From 1918 to 1923 she worked for women's right to franchise. The first Indian nurse was the product of Seva Sadan and Ramabai took great

pains to win orthodox opinion in favour of nursing as a career for women and to encourage girls and widows to join the nursing courses in Seva Sadan. She often had to coax the students themselves, who were mostly widows, to keep up their spirits and overcome their discomfiture of nursing male patients. Seva Sadan remains a monument to her memory.

Anandibai Joshi (1865-1887): In her short life spanning just 22 years Anandibai achieved many things which were just thought impossible for women in those days. With the solid support of her husband Gopal Joshi she learnt to read and write overcoming opposition in her in-laws family. Anandi was just fourteen when her first child died within a week after it was born. Then they decided that she would take up medicine as a profession. Since they thought only America at that time provided good opportunity for women studying medicine they tried hard to get funds for both of them. When they couldn't collect for both of them Gopal decided to send her alone. In those days it was unthinkable for a woman to cross the seas and that too all alone. If necessary, Gopal was ready to convert to Christianity for this. She became the first ever Indian woman to get a degree from an American college. This was the first instance of a Hindu Brahmin lady to go abroad, stay there alone and return back with a doctor's degree. A warm and tumultuous welcome awaited her instead of harsh criticism that shows the change in attitudes with time. Unfortunately she contracted tuberculosis and died without fulfilling her dream of serving the people with her medical skills. But her saga of hardships and achievements inspired many to follow in her footsteps.

Anandibai Karve (1865-1950): Anandibai was widowed when she was eight. When Ramabai opened the Sharda Sadan in Bombay in 1889 she joined it as the first student. D.K.Karve who already earned a reputation as a social reformer became a widower in 1891. He married Anandibai in 1893. Anandibai also joined in his reform work and helped in establishing the Hindu Widow Home in 1896. Though she helped her husband

she was not allowed to participate in the internal management of the institution. She wrote in her autobiography that 'the atmosphere there was intentionally kept traditional and orthodox'. She was not allowed to touch the water used for cooking and drinking and had to take meals separately from the inmates. This shows very clearly the limitations of the upper caste led reforms of those days. She frankly wrote, '.... Sometimes in fun I tell him that although people call him Maharshi some of the credit is to me. For if I had not managed the family affairs and set him free to carry out his public activities, he could not have achieved so much'. Though she said it was for fun there is a large amount of truth in that and we must acknowledge her role also in the setting up of the first university for women in Bombay Presidency by Karve (presently called SNDT University).

Vidyarani Nilkanth (1876-1958): She was a woman pioneer in Gujarat who educated herself after marriage and became one of the first women graduates. She formed the Mahila Mandal at Ahmedabad in 1914 and helped to found the Lalshankar Umashankar College for women. Awarded the Kaiser- e-Hind medal by the British in 1926, she returned it during the Civil Disobedience movement of 1930.

Muthulakshmi Reddy (1886-1968): Her father first wanted her to learn just enough to keep the household accounts. But after seeing her fast progress he not only allowed her to continue her studies but also admitted her in a boy's school and then in a boy's college so that she could be better educated. Thus she became the first girl to be admitted in Pudukottai Boys College. In 1912 she became one of the first woman medical graduates in India. She was the first woman house surgeon at Madras. In 1926 she was nominated to the Madras Legislative council, the first woman to be nominated so in the whole world. She got passed a resolution to end the Devadasi system in spite of very strong opposition from interested parties. She was instrumental in getting passed the Supression

of Brothels and Immoral Traffic in Women Bill, 1930. She championed the Sarda Act by drafting a resolution supporting Sir Hari Bilas Sarda's Child Marriage Restraint Bill in the council. She organized meetings throughout the presidency to mobilize public support for the bill. As a legislator she piloted many important measures for the upliftment of women which included education facilities, maternity and child welfare measures, employing women medical officers, more facilities for training nurses and mid wives, exemption from fee for poor girls, scholarships for Scheduled Caste girls, medical inspection in schools, opening of child welfare centers and also the establishment of a girls hostel for Muslim girls. In 1937 she became the first Alder woman of Madras Corporation. She got seats reserved for women in local bodies when usually men were preferred. She got scholarships for widows to continue their studies and pleaded for their welfare and hostel facilities for them. Her role as a legislator with the welfare of women at her heart was remarkable. She resigned in 1930 protesting Gandhi's arrest.

Some women reformers of Andhra Pradesh

Unnava Laxmibayamma (1882-1956): belonged to Guntur district of Andhrapradesh and was married to Unnava Laxminarayana at the age of 10. Both became social reformers and freedom fighters. Unnava Laxminarayana and his wife Laxmibayamma also conducted widow remarriages and founded a widow home in Guntur in 1902. They also managed Viresalingam's institutions in Rajahmundry for some days. She and her husband were publicly shunned and excluded from all social and religious functions. But she displayed an unusual courage and withstood the onslaught. She displayed keen interest in cottage industries and the eradication of untouchability, while her main field of work was widow remarriage, women's education and political freedom. In 1910 she began to work for widow remarriage and such causes. Between 1911 and 1942 she was imprisoned six times for

participating in non-cooperation movement, civil disobedience movement and Quit India movement.

In 1923 she founded 'Sarada Niketan', a residential school for women of all strata of society in Guntur. The basic idea behind this was to provide basic education to all women and find a better place for destitute women, widows and orphans in society.

When Veeresalingam started conducting widow remarriages, the orthodox Brahmin community outcasted him and his wife Rajyalakshmi. Undeterred they carried on. Rajyalakshmi founded a Prarthana Mandir for women in 1891. She worked tirelessly for widow remarriage braving social boycott. For a woman to espouse the cause of widow remarriage meant that when Brahmins refused to cook at marriages that were so arranged, she would cook, carrying water from the Godavari. When widows arrived pregnant, she would assist in childbirth and in many cases care for these children if the mother decided to remarry. In 1878 Veeresalingam founded a social reform organization in Rajahmundry. He started a women's magazine 'Sati Hitabhodhini' in 1883, and a social reform organization in 1901 in Madras.

Pulugurtha Laxmi Narasamamba was another disciple of Veeresalingam who worked for women's education. She engaged herself full time for social reforms and established a women's magazine 'Savithri'. She founded the Stree Vidya Samajam in Kakinada and the first women's students association. Pulugurtha Laxmi Narasamamba wrote a book 'Mahila Kalabhodhini' on women's education. She founded the 'Stree Vidyarthini Samajam' in Kakinada.

Bandaru Achamamba (1874-1905): was a key figure in women's education and writing, having written the first history of women of Andhra, Abala sacharitra Ratnamala. Bandaru Achamamba was a Telugu scholar. She wrote articles to 'Hindu

Sundari' and 'Chintamani' espousing women's cause. Inspired by Veeresalingam, Bandaru Achamamba founded the Brindavanapuram Stree Samajam in November 1902 along with Mrs. Qruganti Sundari Ratnamamba. This 40-member organization met twice in a month. Even non members attended these meetings. With the membership fee collected they bought many books and founded a library. They even hired a person to distribute and collect the books back. Bandaru Achamamba wrote books and articles on women's problems. She formed women's organizations and worked for the upliftment of women. In 1903 she toured the length and breadth of AP giving speeches and establishing women's organizations. She gave shelter to many poor women. She convinced her brother-in-law to marry a widow.

In 1907, 'Stree Vidyabhivardhini Samajam' was founded in both Godavari and Krishna districts with the sole aim of encouraging women's education. It conducted competitions for this purpose and distributed gold medals. Maganga Annapoornamma started a girl's school in Eluru and Panaka Kanakamma opened a girl's school in Nellore.

K.Seethamma was a disciple of Veeresalingam and participated actively in women's welfare work. She was the president of the women's wing of the first Andhra Mahasabha held in Bapatla in 1913 demanding separate Andhra State. Bandaru Achamamba was the president of the conference.

Kotikalapudi Seethamma was another disciple of Veeresalingam who worked for women's emancipation. She gave many speeches encouraging women's education and her speeches were published in the form of a book. Editor of 'Hindu Sundari' Balanthrapu Seshamamba, Wanaparthysamsthan's Rani Sankaramma, Gadwal Rani Adilakshamma were among those who worked for women's upliftment. Veeresalingam established one of the first girls' schools in Andhra Pradesh in 1874 at Dhowleshwaram. Since then many girls schools have been established which encouraged women's education.

Women ran many women's magazines. 'Hindu Sundari' of Balanthrapu Seshamma, 'Savithri' of Pulagurtha Laxminarasamamba, 'Anasuya' of Vinjamuri Venkata Ratnamma, 'Vidyavathi' of Krupabai Satyanadhamma, 'Grihalaxmi' of K.S.Kesari were some of them.

In the women's magazines there were articles by women on the contemporary women's movements and women's issues. They discussed the laws enacted on women's issues like 'Sarada Bill' 'Divorce Bill' etc. A number of women evolved as writers and activists due to these magazines. They even discussed on the depiction of women in the literature of the feudal period and on whether women should act in plays or not. The issues written had a direct connection to the issues faced by women at that time and their practice -which is a positive aspect of these magazines.

Emergence of reformist women's organizations

The activities of social reformers acted as a stimulus and encouragement to reform-minded individuals in other areas and gradually reformist organisations with an all-India identity began to emerge.

The educational experiments of the late 19th century produced a 'new woman' with interests that went beyond the household. For the first time in India's history women began to communicate with women outside their families and local communities. Encouraged by their male guardians to 'move with the times' they joined the new clubs and associations formed for women. From local clubs and women's auxiliaries of the Indian National Congress (INC) and the National Social Conference came a variety of organizations and associations that reflected women's concerns. Saraladevi Chaudhurani, critical of women's meetings held in conjunction with the Indian National Social Conference, called for a permanent association of Indian women. When male colleagues criticized her, she charged them with patronizing women. These men

lived in the 'shade of Manu', and were unwilling to allow women independent action, she charged.

These associations were a training ground for women who would later take up leadership roles in politics and social institutions. Their model was western. Nevertheless, in the Indian context these organizations developed in harmony with a view of the 'new woman' as a companion and helpmate to men, an ideal mother, and a credit to her country. Men who belonged to the new religious reform associations began the first organizations for women.

Keshub Chandra Sen founded the Brahmo Samaj in Bengal. The Prarthana Samaj had G R. Bandavarkar, Narayan Ganesh Chandavarkar and M. G. Ranade working actively (in Bombay). When Pandita Ramabai Saraswati arrived in Western India in 1882, Justice Ranade and his friends helped her set up the Arya Mahila Samaj for the general uplift and enlightenment of women. Ranade's wife Ramabai became the backbone of the organisation. The Arya Mahila Samaj imagined the ideal woman as an efficient housewife entering the public world to help during emergencies such as floods, famines and plagues.

Women also met in the women's auxiliaries of general reform associations. The most notable of these was the Bharat Mahila Parishad (B.M.P) (Ladies' Social Conference) of the National Social Conference (N.S.C). N.S.C. was formed in 1897 but the B.M.P was not formed till 1905. The first meet was held with 200 women. The need for women to work for regeneration of the nations, Muslim Women's education, philanthropic and charitable work, medical relief, domestic life, early marriage, and child welfare were the topics discussed there. At subsequent annual meetings usually 300 to 700 were present. The main topics continued to be female education and the need to abolish "evil" customs such as child marriage, dowry and neglect of widows.

Women set up mahila sanghams all over Andhra and

organized conferences at the town, district and state levels right from 1897. Books, newspapers and journals in Telugu began to appear along with schools for girls. Begum Tayeba Bilgrami founded the Anjuma-e- Qawateen, a national level women's organization, of which Begum Sugra was the secretary. The All Andhra Women's Conference in Guntur in 1910 was presided over by Pulugurtha Laxminarasamamba and drew women from all over Andhra. It was at this conference that women demanded vocational training since they felt that the ordinary education available to them was no use in securing a livelihood. This conference expressed satisfaction that women's organizations have been formed in villages also and that they are meeting once in a week or 15 days.

The women's conference held in Guntur in October 1905 made resolutions on problems of women's education and marriage. The 'Hindu Balika Vidya Sangham' of Bellary was one of the prominent associations working for women's education. 'Stree Sanathana Dharma Mandali' did commendable work 'by holding meetings, conferences and running schools' wrote The Hindu in 1910.

In 1905, 'Sree Bharati Samajam' was founded in Vishakapatnam with 15 members. It not only discussed local problems but also problems of women's education and child marriages. They even arranged for training in domestic arts. In 1909 'Sarada Mandiram' was founded in Anantapuram which met once in every week. Such organizations were formed in some far off villages in Ganjam and Kurnool districts indicating that the movement spread to the interior parts of AP also.

In many district level and lower level social conferences women's education was given much importance in their activities. Women delegates attended the district social conferences held every year. This indicated the impact of the movement.

- There were women's organizations in all important centres of North Coastal districts of AP. Women gathered in large numbers in those and held discussions, gave speeches, conducted music performances etc. Social issues were also discussed. In some centers women opened girls' schools and taught them tailoring and music along with basic education. Women's conferences in which women gave speeches on education and family affairs, cleanliness etc also took place. Many social reform conferences were held in various towns and cities of AP in the first decade of the 20th century. Sometimes women's conferences were held separately. Women themselves conducted these conferences. In 1911 Kallepalli Venkata Ramanamma, a famous social reformer presided over 'Andhra Mahila Sabha' in Kakinada. In Visakhapatnam another women's conference was held which was attended by delegates from many parts of AP.

Within the Parsee Community the major organisation for women's social work, Stri Zarthosti Mandal (Parsee Women Circle) emerged from plague relief work. During the next 36 years the organisation expanded its agenda to include medical care and education and sought funding from the wealthy Parsee Sir Ratan Tata. Equally important, the organization served as a training ground for women who became active in a wide range of activities in the 1920s and 1930s.

Begum Jahan Ara Shah Nawaz's uncle Shah Din read about a Sikh Conference in Lahore where 2,000 women collected enough money to set up a high school for girls. Fearful that Muslim women would lag behind he ordered the women in his (Mian) family to meet twice a month to discuss female education and social reform. They were to write articles on these topics, present them at meetings for discussion, and begin 'social work' with poor women in the surrounding villages. This experience made Shah Nawaz's mother to launch Anjuman-e-Khawatin-e-Islam (the Muslim Women's Association in Punjab). By 1915, women of the Mian family were playing a leading role in the All India Muslim Women's Conference.

While male inspired and male-guided organisations for women did invaluable work in educating women and providing them with their first experience in public work, they also imposed limitations. Specifically, male reformers regarded the household as the primary focus and fundamental arena of activity for women. Their wives could assist in nation building not through political agitation but by building institutions to ameliorate the worst situations arising from social customs.

The restrictions that accompany male support and tutelage were revealed whenever women wanted to strike out on their own. The religious-reform and communal associations dealt with women's problems as defined by male leaders. When Haimavati Mitra, a child widow from Bengal, sought out leaders of the Brahmo Samaj to help her gain an education, they looked for a bridegroom! In Bombay, the Parsee Panchayat (council) welcomed the views of women on family law but soundly defeated Bai Dinai F. S. Patrick's proposal that sex differences be eliminated from inheritance laws.

British support for female education did not extend to issues for independence. Rukmabai, married at age eleven to Dadaji Bhikaji remained in her father's home after the marriage. She continued to study and passed the matriculation exam. When Dadaji demanded she come to live with him she refused. He sued for restitution of conjugal rights. Rukhmabai won but Dadaji appealed and the court ordered her to live with her husband or go to prison. Tilak approved of this decision, claiming British law was upholding the dharmasastras. Ranade and other reformers formed the Rukhmabai Defence Committee. Pandita Ramabai exploded with anger. It was only when Queen Victoria reacted to a special appeal in this case and issued a royal decree dissolving the marriage that Rukhmabai was saved from serving the sentence. This case made it clear that colonial administrators could not be relied upon to protect the women they had encouraged to seek education when these same women defied the patriarchal system.

Women leaders were defining women's issues as female education, child marriage, and the observance of purdah and women's status in the family. In a limited way they understood many of the problems shared by all women. What they did not share was the same economic base as the women they claimed to represent. They set up girl's schools, widow's shelters and handicraft training centers to help only women from their own class. The rural poor would not have been able to send their daughters to school even if they favoured female education. Widow's homes were meant for women from respectable families who needed to earn some money but often these homes were restricted to Brahmin widows. Handicraft productions, particularly sewing and embroidery enabled only some high caste women to earn a living because they had access to a clientele, homes they could live in and space to work.

Consequently, their institutions were able to serve some of the unfortunate women of their own class but few others.

The All-India Muslim Ladies' Conference (Anjuman- E-Khawatin-E-Islam)

This was founded on 1 March 1914 as part of a ceremony inaugurating a new residence hall for Aligarh Girl's School. Aligarh had been a center of the movement of modern education among Indian Muslims since Sir Sayed Ahmed Khan founded Aligarh College there in 1875. The Muhammadan Education Conference had begun a section to promote women's education in the late 1890s in response to the growing desire of western educated Muslims to find educated wives. The Secretary of the section, Sheikh Abdullah started an Urdu journal for women Khatun in 1905 and in 1906 he founded a primary school for Muslim girls in Aligarh. The Sheikh and his wife encountered many obstacles in their efforts to establish a girls' school. Finally with the grant from Begum of Bhopal and a matching grant from the Government the edifice was ready.

At the inauguration function of the school the Begum of Bhopal stressed the role of education, but also reiterated the constraints within which it had to be spread, for without adequate religious instruction and proper purdah Muslim parents would not send their daughters to school. The same issue had cropped up within Arya Samaj in the debates on female education. Following the inauguration ceremony the women reassembled to found the Anjuman, which was dedicated to the advancement of education and rights for women. The central concern of the Anjuman was the promotion of women's education in the Indian Muslim community. The Anjuman was also of the opinion that no Muslim girl should be married before the age of sixteen for early marriages were detrimental to girls' education. The Anjuman met annually during the war years, moved resolutions for more educational institutions for Muslim girls, and voiced approval for a type of purdah prescribed in the "shariat". At its Conference in Lahore in 1918 they passed a resolution against the evils of polygamy, which caused considerable debate in the Muslim press.

The Anjuman and the Aligarh school both believed that the British would initiate the reforms of their societies, just like the Nineteenth century Hindu social reformers. Both were elite and wanted women's education so that they can play their roles better as mothers and wives of a new generation of western educated Indians.

Role of Women in Periyar's Self-Respect Movement

The self-Respect movement saw itself as a social movement and not as a political party, which sought electoral power. Critical of the supremacy of the Brahmins and their assumed role as religious interpreters, the self-respecters called for a demystification of puranic Hinduism. Self-Respecters passed resolutions at conventions condemning the Hindu

Religion and its various scriptures – the Vedas, Shastras and the Puranas for legitimizing the caste system. They also argued for women's right to property, work, divorce, remarriage and contraception. In fact, they regarded Hinduism, and the caste system that went with it, as being at the root of gender inequalities. Women issues not only had a prominent place on the agenda but women were also encouraged to participate in large numbers in this movement. It marks the large scale entry of backward caste women into the public arena and the spread of rational ideas among the 'lower' caste women.

Periyar joined Congress in 1919. He believed the Congress would work sincerely to get rid of untouchability and that it would help the backward and depressed class people to have proper education and to have their proper share in government appointments. But he was disillusioned soon. He tried many times to move a resolution in the Congress conferences urging the government to accept the principle of communal representation in education and employment but failed due to the forward castes' opposition. Soon he objected to Gandhi's defence of the Varnashrama dharma and argued that it was but a veiled justification for the viles of the caste system. He got disgusted and finally quit. The launch of the self-respect journal 'Kudi Arasan' in 1925 is often taken to signal Periyar's break with the Congress.

Periyar felt that the non-brahmins must be united, form a party and continue to fight for their rights. So he started the Self-Respect movement devoted to social reform and social uplift and held its first conference on 17-18 February, 1929. The resolutions passed wanted the abolition of caste distinctions and untouchability and exhorted the people not to spend any money for worship in temple and not to recognize the need for priests to offer worship at any temple. The self-respect phase is often assumed to have come to a close in the early 1940s with Periyar's formal entry into politics and the formation of Dravida Kazhagam under his leadership. Justice party was converted into the Dravidar Kazhagam on 27th August 1944.

Reacting to Chief Minister C. Rajahopalachari's announcement in 1938, regarding the compulsory study of Hindi in schools, the Justice Party and the self-Respecters formed a boycott committee and launched the anti-Hindi agitation. Many, including Periyar were arrested and jailed. In February 1940, the British withdrew the compulsory Hindi programme. It was made an optional subject. What is especially striking about the anti-Hindi agitation was the active and large-scale participation of women. It was common for women leaders such as Moovalur Ramamirtham Ammaiyar, Narayani Ammaiyar, Thamaraianni Ammaiyar and Munnager Azhagiyaar to address meetings and other conventions organized as part of this agitation.

A self-respect women's convention was held in Madras in November 1938. Among other things, the convention passed a resolution condemning the imposition of Hindi. Many among those arrested and sent to prison were women. Women often participated in anti-Hindi processions and meetings clad in saris printed with the Tamil flag (carrying the symbols of the three ancient kingdoms – Chera, Chola and Pandya) chanting anti-Hindi and pro-Tamil slogans. Many of these women went to jail with their children. A member of the Congress Ministry commented that the women self-respecters who participated in the anti-Hindi agitation got themselves arrested in order to get milk for their children in prison. At the Madras provincial Self-Respect Women's Conference held at Vellore in 1938, women activists demanded that the minister in question withdraw his comment and offer an unconditional apology.

Many among these women were lower caste and believed in fighting casteism and in supporting inter-caste marriages and remarriages.

At the Tamilnadu Women's Conference and at the 14th Justice Party Conference two important resolutions were passed. One of these was in the nature of a condemnation of

the Brahmin Congress-affiliated Indian Women's Association's support of Hindi. In response to this, the women Self-Respecters who participated in the two Conferences challenged the Association to organize a Conference in support of Hindi. The Second resolution was a response to the disrespectful way in which the 'nationalist' newspaper 'Sudesamitran' had referred to the Self-Respect women, who participated in the Vellore Conference, even as it addressed Sarojini Naidu with respect. A resolution to boycott such newspapers was passed.

Effecting changes in civil society, fighting varnashrama dharma and in doing so, critiquing both Brahminism and Brahminical patriarchy, Periyar argued, were far more important tasks than political reform. The self-respect/ non-Brahmin journals launched in a big way in this period carried many articles and literature written by women Self-Respecters and they reflected their concerns.

Periyar's views on women's question found practical expression in three major activities of the movement: the performance of self-respect marriages, organizing of women's conferences and thirdly, the involvement of women in mass agitations. Periyar attacked the Silappadhikaram and the Thirukural for the ways in which they degraded women. He advocated contraception in support of motherhood by choice. He appealed for a wide distribution of literature on the subject. He said women could never gain liberation with the help of men. If every woman was economically independent and was free to choose her husband on becoming an adult, nobody need give her freedom; she would gain freedom for herself. The concept of chastity was seen as one of the instruments of male oppression and Periyar questioned the right of men to decide on the chastity of women.

Self-Respect Movement (SRM) brought women into the public sphere and it invested women activists with many important political responsibilities. Periyar took special interest in breaking the culture of silence that characterized the women

activists of the movement. He insisted that even the most inarticulate woman member should utter at least few words in the course of women's conferences.

In the self-respect magazines women writers wrote on varied subjects- on many problems touching their lives and their oppression. They wrote on plight of widows, child marriages, low value of women's position at home or outside, various forms of dowry, double burden, women not being allowed into the public sphere and especially the political arena, oppressive customs and rituals, backwardness of women, superstitions against women, problems of untouchable castes, Muslim women's problems, women's education, malnutrition in women due to feudal customs, male domination etc. They even wrote how women will be emancipated in a socialist society. Moovalur A. Ramamirthammal wrote a self-respect novel 'Dasigal Mosalavai' (The Dasi's wicked snares) in which she argues strongly for the abolition of Devdasi system.

Prevailing ideas on women's education had their impact on the radical SRM as well. For instance S.Janaki Ammal in Kudi Arasu appealed to men to educate women so that they could bear intelligent and courageous sons for the nation. But they also gave new dimension by emphasizing on vocational training for women. Periyar held that education, vocational training and marriage by choice, are central to the freedom of women. The right to divorce was seen as a women's prerogative.

Marriages without priests came to be called self-respect marriages. S.Neelavathi, a well-known orator formed the Anti-Purohit Association in Trichy and organized nearly 500 such marriages between 1932 and 1935. Of these many were inter-caste marriages within the non-brahmin community. She suggested that women's associations should be formed to advance the cause of women.

They wrote in the form of small articles or stories in a simple and heart touching manner. There was a lot of wit and sarcasm also in them, which effectively mocked at the feudal Hindu society. They wrote as women and also as non-Brahmins. The Self-Respect journals, which were launched in order to break the monopoly of Brahmins in the print media very successfully, also turned a horde of women into writers. Most of these women got their inspiration by direct or indirect participation in the Self-Respect movement.

After Periyar's death in 1973, his wife Maniyammai became the leader of the Kazhagam at a state level general body meeting in January 1974, she continued till her death on 16th March, 1978. She created a trust by donating all her assets in 1974. Many educational institutions were opened for the benefit of the girls belonging to backward and depressed classes in particular. Many hospitals and welfare institutions also functioned.

The social radicalism of the movement could not withstand the pressures from within. Landed interests felt threatened by sustained demands for equal rights for men and women, and specifically, by the undermining of the sanctity of marriage. The SRM slowly moved back towards the ideals of motherhood and chastity. It gradually slid back to unenlightened positions, demonstrating that a radical ideology unaccompanied by an equally radical social and economic programme cannot bring radical transformation of the society. As with all social reform movements it was mainly dependent on one leader and could not continue as a movement through collective work. It went on to do some educational work through trusts. The radical thrust and enthusiasm was lost. Later the political party split and none of them carried forward the social reforms or even the ideological struggle which was carried on relentlessly by Periyar. They got bogged down in parliamentary politics completely and some became more religious (Hindu) than ever.

Women's Role in Ambedkarite Dalit movement

In the first decade of the 20th Century Shivram Janaba Kamble took up the cause of the stigma of the prostitutes of the untouchables. In 1908, through his magazine 'Somvanshi Mitra' he wrote articles asking his community to accept in marriage the hands of women who were devdasis. He conducted various meetings to awaken the people and appealed to them to abandon the practice of offering girls to the god and goddess. His efforts yielded positive results. One devdasi named Shivabai responded and one of Kamble's associates Hanmant Rao Gaikwad agreed to marry her. Accordingly the marriage was conducted and given wide publicity. He also saw to it that such women got respect and dignity in society. His propaganda was so effective that in the year 1909 not a single girl was offered to Khandoba as a devdasi.

The early movement of untouchables in Maharashtra also led to increasing participation by women in conferences. A Nagpur woman, a nurse, described her experiences of untouchability to the All India Women's Conference of 1920.

One of the striking features of the Ambedkar movement is the participation of women. They have been in the forefront of the social, cultural and political programmes of the dalit movement. Separate 'Parishads' of women is a case in point. Whether it was the Mahad Tank satyagraha, the Kalaram Temple Entry or Merkhed of Ambadevi Satyagraha, dalit women have been in the forefront, just as they were in the Satyagraha of the landless in 1960-65 which was a 'jailbharo' satyagraha. Women have been more active than men in propagating the Buddhist 'Dhamma' of Ambedkar. Be it the installation of Ambedkar's portrait in Parliament, the 'Namantar' issue (the struggle to name the Marathwada University in Ambedkar's name) or land rights issue, the dalit women were in the forefront in all local struggles and constituted the backbone of the movement.

In the Ambedkarite movement women participated in struggles for water, grazing pastures and against caste oppression. At Kannad in Aurangabad district, Chandrasena Shejwal led one of the largest rastaroko andolans. In 1946 there was a satyagraha of the landless led by Dadasaheb Gaikwad, Gavai and Kumbhare in which many men and women were arrested. The participation of large numbers of women pointed to the consciousness of dalit women at the grass roots level. From Santabai Dani, Zadabai, Iswarabai, Dongrebai to every dalit woman who participated in the Ambedkarite movement at the village level, the tradition lives on.

The movement began by Dr. Ambedkar generated enthusiastic participation. He organized several conferences of untouchables. He saw to it that women's conferences were held simultaneously with those for men. By 1930 the women had become so conscious that they started conducting their own meetings and conferences independently.

Ambedkar established the 'Dalithodhar Muhim' on 20th July, 1924 at Bombay's Bahishkruth Hitakarini Sabha. This was intended to fight untouchability and establish schools and hostels in dalit bastis. Women participated in its activities. Venubai Bhatkar and Rangubai Shubkar were the noted women activists. They were speakers and used to sing songs in many of Ambedkar's meetings.

In 1924, Jaibai Chowdhary started the 'Chokhamela Kanya Pathsala' in Nagpur. At first there were just four students. Gradually it picked up and ultimately became a college with her name. Tulsibai Bansode played a significant role in bringing out the magazine 'Chokhamela' and in propagating it along with her husband. Their daughter Rajashree made a three hour film on Ambedkar. Dalit women also played a prominent role in 'Samatha Sainik Dal'.

In the Mahad Tank Satyagraha of 19-20 March, 1927, thousands of men and women participated in full strength

along with their children. The upper caste Hindus conducted a purification ceremony with cow urine, curd, milk, dhoop etc since they thought that the tank water became desecrated by Ambedkar's act. In defiance of this thousands of Dalit men and women gathered on the banks of the Tank on 25-26 December 1927 and burnt 'Manusmrithi'. During this historic satyagraha movement Dalit women not only participated in the procession with Ambedkar but also participated in the deliberations of the subject committee meetings in passing resolutions about the claim for equal human rights.

In his speech on 26 December 1927 at the Mahad Satyagraha, Ambedkar exhorted the women to get rid of heavy necklaces and their particular way of wearing the sari which distinguished them as dalit women. Dalit women responded to his call and began wearing only one necklace and also began wearing the sari in the same manner as other women.

There was a meeting in Amaravathi on 13 November, 1927 for entering the temple. Women participated in considerable numbers. In January 1928 a Mahila Mandal was formed in Mumbai with Ramabai Ambedkar as President. In the 1930 Nagpur meeting of the 'Depressed Classes Conference' also many women participated.

Inspired by the Mahad Satyagraha Dalits tried to enter the Parvathi temple in Pune on October 23, 1929. Among those who led the dalits were Tanubai Kamble and Sevanthibai Ogle. The satyagraha was not successful and they were instead beaten up by the upper castes. Later the collector intervened and got the satyagraha stopped.

Inspired by Ambedkar's Mahad Satyagraha Dadasaheb Gaikwad led the Kalaram Mandir satyagraha at Nasik to gain access to the temple for the dalits. The struggle went on for four years from March 2nd, 1930 to March 3rd, 1934. Women took part in great numbers in this Satyagraha and led the Jathas. Several hundred women conducted sit-in agitations

in front of the temple and courted arrest. Every batch of volunteers consisted of some women. Some women went to jail for a period of one month. Seethabai, Geethabai, Gaikwad, Ramabai Gaikwad, Ramabai Rayaji Jadav, Tulsiram Kale's Mother, Amrutharao Sharankhave's mother, Tarabai, Yamunabai Lokhande, Bhikubai Subhanrao, Thakubai Salve, Sarubai Bhalerao, Phundarbai Dhanaji Dani, Gangubai Pagare were among the hundreds of women who took part. During this period, women conducted meetings to support separate electorates for the untouchables and passed resolutions accordingly.

While joining the processions, satyagrahas etc., these women had to entrust their children and family responsibilities to a neighbour or to a close relative like a mother or a daughter. Occasionally some of them had cooperation from their husbands. But some of them had to face brutal beatings by their husbands. Some women courted arrest along with men in satyagrahas. At such times some of them took their infant babies with them to jail and some carried all their belongings, including chickens. Those who left nursing babies at home complained of breast pains in jail. In order to facilitate social work a few women underwent sterilization while a few brought home a second wife for the husband!

Women like Jaibai Chowdhary and Deshbratar in the Nagpur area started schools, hostels and orphanages for girls. Radhabai Kamble, a worker in a cotton mill, had come up as a labour leader in the 1920s in the Ambedkarite movement. She gave evidence before the Royal Commission of labour in 1929. Conferences of women of great magnitude were organized at Nagpur (1942), Kanpur (1944), Bombay (1945) and Calcutta (1946). They also joined political agitations, courted arrest and participated during the Scheduled Castes Federation's 1946 satyagraha in the state assemblies.

In May 1936 the women held an independent Conference along with the one for women in Bombay to support

Ambedkar's intent to convert to a non- Hindu religion. They wanted a religion that would guarantee their freedom, dignity and equal status with men and expressed confidence that he would not drag them into a religion where women would have to wear burkha or live in purdah.

The resolutions passed by women in various conferences demanded:

1. Free and compulsory education for girls
2. Women's representation in state legislative assemblies, local bodies etc.
3. Training for self protection of untouchable women such as wielding of sticks or Karate
4. Starting a women's wing in the Samta Sainik Dal
5. Prohibiting child marriages.

Ambedkar formed the 'All India Scheduled Caste Federation' (AISCF) at Nagpur on 19-20 July, 1942. On 20th July there was a special convention for women which was addressed by Dr. Ambedkar and attended by more than 25,000 women. The All India Dalit Women's Conference was held alongside the A.I.S.C.F. Conference in July 1942. Sulochana Dongre presided over it. Indira Patil was the Principal Secretary. It was a very successful meeting.

After that in 1944 at Kanpur and in 1945 at Mumbai, Women's Conventions were held along with the All India Scheduled Caste Federation's Conventions. Sulochana Dongre, Santabai Dani and Meenambal Sivaraj chaired the women's conventions. On January 6th, 1945 the third Indian Untouchable Women's Conference was held in Mumbai in which women participated in large numbers. Meenambal Sivaraj from Madras presided over it.

Since dalits were denied access to Universities, Ambedkar established 'People's Education Society'. Two

Universities were opened by this society at Mumbai and Aurangabad. Anjanabai Desbrathar in Nagpur (1924) and Jaibai Chowdhury, Geethabai Gaikwad at Nasik opened hostels for girl students.

When Ambedkar converted to Buddhism at Nagpur on 14th October along with five lakh supporters, there were many women among them. Later on in more than two hundred bastis in Mumbai these women established their branches.

Sugandabai Shinde ran a 'Depressed Class Girls Hostel at Nagpur. These schools and hostels paved the way for thousands of dalit girls to get educated.

Santabai Sarode, Damayantibai Desabrathar, Chandrika Ramteke, Ramabai Gaikwad, Sonubai Lanjewar were among the many women who participated in satyagraha and went to jail.

Some of the women active in Mumbai were Sakhubai Mohite, Santa Wadwalkar, Mukthabai Kamble, Ramabai Ambedkar and Santabai Dani. In Nagpur Radhabai Kamble, Jaibai Chowdhary, Sulochana Dongre and Bebithai Kamble were active.

Many women writers were thrown up by this Ambedkarite movement and they produced a considerable treasure of dalit women literature in Marathi.

In the struggle to rename the Marathwada University in Ambedkar's name between 1978 and 1995 (Namantar issue), thousands of dalit women went to jail and underwent untold tortures. At last this agitation was successful and the University was named after him. Samata Sainik Dal also organized beedi workers in Vidarbha, the majority of whom were Mahar women.

Though this movement is not directed against the British directly, it should be seen as a movement where the question

of self-respect of Dalit women was brought forth along with other Dalit issues. An attempt was made to look at the reasons for the oppression of women in Hinduism and its scriptures. It was directed against the Hindu religion of the feudal classes, which were serving as the props of the British.

Evaluation of the social reform movement

Along with the positive aspects mentioned already the social reform movement in India also had serious limitations. All the efforts by the reformers did not solve the problems but helped to focus attention on the problems. We should not judge the reform movement by the actual results gained but by the fact that they helped the society to understand that such problems should be seriously tackled. The reformers could not influence the government and so resorted to individual efforts on their own.

As the name itself suggests these were reforms in the existing social milieu and were not aimed at a radical transformation of the society. They mainly depended on the colonial government to make laws and to implement them. They were not averse to joining hands with the colonial rulers to fight the feudal forces, since they did not comprehend the nexus of power between the feudal and colonial forces. This limitation prevented these social reforms from becoming a mass movement involving people on a large scale. So, most of the reform work was carried out at an individual level and in the form of lobbying with the government for suitable laws.

Hindu widows could remarry due to the movement but there were many limitations to their choice. Though the reform movement could not bring about a total change in their lives they opened very valuable avenues to the upper caste women, which were completely closed by the feudal system. More women began to be employed though most of the jobs were an extension of their domestic roles. The doors of the public domain were opened to them permanently; there was no going

back now. The democratic revolution, which should have come up indigenously was not to develop naturally from internal factors due to the presence of British in the country. So we find a peculiar situation where the fight against the feudal ideology was fought by the reformers depending on the help of the British when in fact both feudal and colonial forces were hand in glove in exploiting the Indian people. Hence the irony of the reform movement being progressive and having an anti national content at the same time.

The common element among the 19th century reformers was their preoccupation with problems that primarily affected women in their social class and milieu, and made them vulnerable to humiliation. These 'social evils' brought charges of barbarity and uncivilized behavior from the new rulers, the new teachers and the new dispensers of rewards and recognition. Accepting women's status within family as an index of their own progress and modernity, the earlier reformers criticized particularly inhuman practices like widow immolation (Sati), marriage of child brides to much older men, ban in remarriage of widows and sought to promote some form of education for women. Orthodox criticism of such moves was countered by statements that such reforms would arrest conversions to Christianity or the drift of oppressed widows to prostitution and strengthen the stability of the traditional (patriarchal) family. Projecting oppression of widows and the bans on divorce or remarriage as the greatest evils in Hindu society ignored the customs of the majority of the Hindu population. As late as 1931, only 13.9 percent of the Hindu population and less than 10 percent of the total population of the sub- continent could be accused of such practices.

The second group of social reformers, focusing on the same issues but far more outspoken in their rejection of western values, projected their attempts as those of 'revival' of pristine traditions of 'Indian' culture, to rescue women from the cultural degeneration of which they had become victims. Most of the reform movements contained some elements of revivalism.

Education of a controlled kind and positions of protected dignity within the family and the community were argued as necessary to enroll women as 'custodians of traditional cultural values', against the onslaught of Westernization. Similar role prescriptions were made for the upper class Muslim women.

Some strands within the reform movements like the Swaminaryana cult, which rejected caste hierarchy, using the slogan of human equality, did not extend the concept to women. Instead they too followed the revivalists in imposing the traditionally dominant, higher caste model of gender role and ideology on women among their following.

Barring a few exceptions like Iswarchandra Vidyasagar and Jyotiba and Savithribai Phule, the 'modernists' or the 'revivalists' were not really concerned with gender equality, women's own desires or their perspectives on dignity and justice.

The explanations offered by the social reformers and the national leaders in the beginning of 20th century smacked of Hindu chauvinism, which was dubbed as nationalism. Tilak was a strong exponent of these views. Tilak opposed the promotion of women's education on the grounds that it would lead to women running away from home and refusing to marry! He wrote that the women's education movement was a guise for an attack on our ancient religion.

Ram Mohan Roy, Pandit Vidyasagar, Swami Dayananda Saraswati and many others were trained in Hindu classics and saw India as recovering from a dark age. There had been a "golden age" they argued, when women were valued and occupied positions of high status. This view of the Vedic past had been adopted from the Indologists. During this 'golden age' women were educated, married only after they had reached maturity, moved about freely, and participated in the social and political life of the time. The power of such an idea may well have stifled serious historical research on women's lives till recently.

Acceptance of the golden age was widespread but explanations of 'the fall' (degeneration of the condition of women) differed widely. Some commented on wars and invasions, some located the decline during the time of the Smritis. But most of the reformers blamed Muslim rule. Ignoring the fact that rulers such as Akbar attempted to abolish Sati and the Muslim law accorded women a higher status than Hindu law, these writers claimed child marriages, prostitution, widow remarriage, seclusion and restrictions on female education were responses to the Muslim threat to women's safety.

Another important flaw in their ideology was that their fight was against the most blatant forms of feudal patriarchy and was not directed against patriarchy as a social institution as such. So we find that they advocated women's education but it was mainly for the welfare of the family and upbringing of children in a better way (read according to the needs of the society i.e. well educated to serve the British administration etc.). Widow remarriages were conducted but the stress was only on child widows (read virgins). Guarding the morals of the society was the main reason for opting for this choice. Prostitution was opposed but women were seen as the main perpetrators. Instead of trying to persuade the government to rehabilitate them in a better way they were preaching to the prostitutes. This irony in their stands is not surprising when we note the fact that they were ideologically not against the socio economic system and were only trying to bring in some changes in the super structural components without changing their basic patriarchal content fully.

These reformers viewed women as objects to be changed due to their social action and not as subjects who would or could bring about their own emancipation with their full participation. They were to be changed as a consequence of persuasive arguments, social action, education and legislation. The historian Sumit Sarkar has argued that these reformers were concerned primarily with modifying relationships within

their own families and sought only "limited and controlled emancipation" of their women folk.

These reformers were unwilling to relinquish the power of the patriarchy or redistribute wealth. They dreamed of a world where women would be educated and free from some of the customs of the society, child marriage, Sati, and polygamy. But at the same time these new women would be devoted to home and family. Sarkar argued that the early 'renaissance' reformers were in any case, not full-blooded liberals. Fundamental elements of social conservatism such as caste distinctions, the patriarchal family, the sanctity of ancient scriptures and a preference for symbolic rather than substantial change in social practices were conspicuous in the reform movements of the early and mid-nineteenth century. On the position of women especially, there was no autonomous struggle by women themselves to change relations within or outside the family. The 'social ostracism and isolation' that they had to face drove them to 'a limited and controlled emancipation of wives as a personal necessity for survival in a hostile world'.

Even after the anti-British freedom movement gained momentum some of the social reformers continued with their reforms without actually taking into account the reality. They refused to realize that freedom from colonial rule would make way for a freer implementation of reforms. Only a few reformers associated themselves with the national movement led by Gandhi. Some of them were arrested and jailed. Some continued to work for reforms even while participating in the freedom movement. By 1907 many of Veeresalingam's students joined the Swadeshi movement. Annie Besant's Theosophical Society was revivalistic and criticized reformers. It also contributed to its decline.

The ideology of Phule and Periyar was democratic; it went beyond the liberal framework of the other social reformers. But since they were not historical materialists they

located the source of caste and women's oppression in Hindu religion and culture, not in the feudal model of production. The focus of their propaganda was cultural. Hence though they had a wide impact among the masses ideologically, in actual practice they were unable to transform oppressive patriarchal family relations or the feudal relations especially in the rural areas.

The Ambedkar led movement also had these limitations and could not give a scientific explanation for the exploitation of women. This movement saw a large participation of Dalit women. But since Ambedkar embraced Buddhism by seeing it as the alternate to the Hindu casteist religion, the fight against the oppression of women also stopped at that. Ambedkar did a sharp criticism of the Hindu religion for oppressing Dalits and women, but he did not draw up any continuous or consistent struggle programme against the specific patriarchal oppression of women. The burning of the Manusmriti was a symbolic protest. As we know it was also a text that was an epitome of Hindu feudal patriarchy.

Participation in movements has a more liberating effect on women's lives than the reforms. Most of the evil social customs, which could not be eliminated with reforms, were overcome in the national movement.

4

Freedom Struggle - Role of women

Background for women's participation

During the course of the 19th Century, the pattern of women's lives began to change world over. After the industrial revolution, women's movement developed as part of the bourgeois revolutions, in America and Europe. Actually there were two streams in the women's movement – one was the bourgeois women's movement and another was the socialist (working class) women's movement. The bourgeois women's movement was mainly concerned with winning the right to vote for the women whereas the socialist stream took up not only immediate issues of the working class women but also participated in the socialist revolutions. The rise of the bourgeois class and the working class led to these movements. These movements had their impact on the colonized backward countries.

In India too there was there was an upheaval due to the anti colonial struggle and the political turmoil led to a large scale participation of women in the movements of the first half of 20th century. Here too there were multiple movements - the freedom struggle led by the Congress under Gandhi's leadership, the armed actions of the National revolutionaries and the communist led worker peasant movements and armed struggle. All these movements witnessed unprecedented, militant participation of women. Women from all classes participated in these movements but their choice of movement was influenced by their class character and their class character in turn influenced the course of the movements.

In this chapter we focus on the bourgeois women's organizations and also on the militant role of ordinary women in the freedom struggle. We will also deal with the viewpoint of the leadership regarding women's role and its consequences for women.

As a consequence of the changes set in motion by the British conquest of India, by the end of 19th Century there were a number of women who were educated, articulate, mobile and increasingly involved in public activities. Like boys of an earlier generation, some of these girls attended educational institutions, social gatherings unrelated to family affairs, and new religious ceremonies. These "new women", as they were called became part of movements which sought to modify gender relations in the direction of greater equality between men and women.

Many of the 'new women' were educated in their homes and then sent to a girl's school. Parents who cared about female education waited until their daughters were older before arranging their marriages or occasionally allowed young married women to continue their education. Older brides became mothers at a later age and often played a greater role in child rearing.

Women also experienced increased opportunities for the expression of their individuality. Formal education and particularly the development of publications intended for and written by women gave women a voice. It is impossible to enumerate, let alone locate, all literature from this period (c.1850 - World War I) but we know that in Bengal women produced almost 400 literary works, ranging from poetry to novels and autobiographies, and 21 journals. Through their writings they were able to communicate with each other and develop new social networks. Many women took advantage of the opportunities to obtain an education and take the first steps towards controlling their own lives.

By this time many of the best-educated and influential men were involved with nationalist politics and the 'women's question' was no longer a subject on which educated Indians and British rulers could agree. But these issues were not discarded as the 'new women' moved forward to set up their own organizations and reorganize social reform priorities.

Nevertheless the campaign set in motion by the well-educated Indian men furthered attempts to establish institutions that would be supportive of a new generation of women leaders.

Initial activities in the Swadeshi movement

Women of Bengal started spinning and wearing their own clothes as replacement of British textiles long before Gandhi got this idea. They also responded massively to a call to observe a day of fasting and of refusal to cook. Peasant women in scores of far away villages were inspired not to light their ovens that day. Thus during the Swadeshi movement the women of Bengal undertook something like an anti-imperialist women's strike. In Bengal, girls and women discarded their veils and came out to protest in the streets. At a time when most women were wholly barred from political life, Sarla Devi Choudhurani organized a physical, cultural campaign in Bengal calling upon the youth to organize themselves into squads for physical exercises. These squads, aside from self-defense, aimed at defending women against the molestations of British soldiers in streets and railway stations. Sarla Devi gave a new life to the Suhrid Samiti in 1905. This was started as a benevolent institution in 1901. It became a political organization. She tried to infuse a martial spirit into the members by introducing religious rituals. The members were given rigorous physical training and they figured in numerous political demonstrations. Most of them possessed daggers, swordsticks and even unlicensed revolvers. Sarla Devi also took steps to organize the women's movement. The nucleus of this

movement was formed at Lahore in 1910. She was the tireless secretary of the Bharat Stri Maha Mandal. Its branches were also instituted in Allahabad and Calcutta. The object of this society was to bring together women of all castes and creeds on the basis of their common interest in the moral and material progress of women in India. She was put under surveillance. Sarala Devi was noted by official intelligence reports as 'far more dangerous' to the Raj than her husband, a well-known revolutionary.

INC and women

There was no woman delegate among those who entered their names in the register at the inauguration of Indian National Congress (INC). A woman delegate participated for the first time in the fifth annual session, in 1889. She was Kadambini Ganguly, the first woman in the British Empire to receive a B.A and one of India's first female medical doctors. In 1889, 4 years after the INC was founded, 10 women including Pandita Ramabai attended its annual meeting. In 1890, Swarnakumari Ghosal, a woman novelist, and Kadambini Ganguly attended as delegates. From this time on, women attended every meeting of the INC, sometimes as delegates but more often as observers. Women took a vow to devote themselves to the motherland and observed it by setting aside a handful of rice every day for the cause.

Partition of Bengal

The common people, including women were for the first time galvanized into political action by the announcement of the partition of Bengal on 20 July 1905. 500 women held a meeting at Janikandi village in the district of Murshidabad to protest against the partition. Women contributed their gold bangles and other jewellery for the promotion of the Swadeshi movement. Sarla Devi opened an emporium called Lakshmi Bhandar in Calcutta for popularizing Swadeshi goods. In 1905

women joined men in protesting the division of Bengal by boycotting foreign goods and buying only swadeshi goods, i.e., goods produced in the province of Bengal. Still other women gave support to these revolutionary organisations. Women hid weapons, sheltered fugitives and encouraged the men, their domestic roles providing cover for these subversive and revolutionary acts.

Kumudini Mitter organized a group of Brahmin ladies for maintaining an illegal liaison between the different revolutionary leaders who were watched by the police. This organization also helped in the circulation of revolutionary leaflets and literature. She preached the cause of the extremists through *Suprabhat*, a Bengali magazine. It propagated the cult of revolution.

Prosecutions and convictions became widespread. When Bhupendranath, the brother of Vivekananda was convicted on July 24, 1907, some two hundred women presented an address of appreciation to his mother.

Annie Besant

In 1903 Annie Besant stepped from the field of education to that of social reforms. In 1906, she organized the 'Sons of India' and the 'Daughters of India' within the Theosophical Society to work for social reforms. Ideologically her views on social reforms smacked of revivalism and this certainly acted as a reason for the setback of the social reform movement as the influence of the Society was considerable. The Theosophists praised the Hindu religion and its scriptures. It gave a new lease of life to the Hindu revivalists who opposed social reforms. In 1913 she turned to politics and joined the Congress in 1914. In the same year she was elected as a delegate for the Congress session. In her paper 'The New India' (started in 1914), she announced her intention to lead a political campaign in favour of 'Swaraj'.

The entry of Annie Besant into Indian politics accelerated the process of women's association with the freedom struggle. She maintained that the progress of India depended on their emancipation. She was the first President of the Indian Women's Association founded in 1917 and was largely responsible for putting forward the demand for political rights for women.

The Home Rule League was inaugurated in September 1916. It was started with a view to giving concrete shape to the 1914 Congress resolution of self-government. Annie Besant held that no nation gave liberty to another nation, and a nation was fit for liberty the moment she determined to have it. However she could never dream of India severing relations with England. She wanted India to be a member of the Commonwealth like any other dominion. She said that the words Home Rule were chosen as a short public cry, making the fact clear that the struggle was not against Great Britain, but for liberty within the Empire. She wanted to bring the two countries closer.

When the government failed to persuade Besant in regard to suspension of the Home Rule propaganda being carried out during the war, it used the Defence of India Act and an order of internment was issued on June 16, 1917. Though she was actually arrested in 1917 yet the plans to arrest her or to remove her from Indian scene were being hatched from 1915 itself. Even during her internment she and her companions hoisted a Home Rule flag- red and green - on their houses. At night they showed green and red lights. The immediate result of this internment was that an even more intensified campaign against the government was set in motion. Protest meetings were held all over the country. There were numerous protest meetings in various towns of Andhra region and these were attended by large number of women. Her internment strengthened the Home Rule movement not only in India but also in the United States and the Dominions of the Commonwealth. Finally under

intense public pressure the three interneers Wadia, Arundale and Annie Besant were released on September 17, 1917.

She was elected the President of Congress in 1917 and was the first woman to be elected so. It was under her presidentship that in 1917 the Congress " expressed the opinion that same tests be applied to women as to men in regard to franchise and the eligibility to all elective bodies concerned with local government and education". The membership of her Home Rule League was open to men and women above 18 years of age and the league had a special women's section. On the participation of women in the Home Rule Movement, Mrs. Besant said: 'the strength of Home Rule movement is rendered tenfold greater by the adhesion to it of large number of women.'

She was opposed to the non-cooperation movement of 1920 and spoke vehemently against it. She became very unpopular and her own Home Rule League members refused to elect her as president with the result she founded the National Home Rule League in April 1919. She toured the country and established many branches in several states. She continued her efforts for self-governance of India. Later she was ready to work with the Congress and took part in the boycott of Simon commission.

Franchise for women

In 1917 when the Montague-Chelmsford constitution was being drafted, for the first time women made an organized effort to press forward their political demands. But the British refused. Later the Southborough Committee was appointed to collect information and elicit opinion of the people of India on the projected reforms and on the question of franchise. This committee toured India. When it visited Bombay a requisition signed by eight hundred women of the Presidency was submitted to it. In addition similar requisitions were sent by the women Graduates Union Bombay, all the branches of the

Home Rule League, the Bharat Stree Mandal and by the members of the All India women's deputation, which had earlier met the Secretary of State on this subject. The Committee disfavoured extending the franchise to women on the ground that the prevailing social conditions in the country did not warrant franchise for women. Resolutions were passed in different parts of the country protesting against this decision. Annie Besant and Sarojini Naidu, who were in England as members of the deputation to give evidence before the Joint Select Committee took up the case for women's franchise. Hirabai Tata and Mithi Bai Tata were sent to England by the Women's Committee to express strong feelings of Indian women on this issue. But the Committee left the responsibility of deciding the question of franchise for women to the future Legislative Councils of India of each province.

In 1918 the INC placed the national seal of approval on the principle of granting franchise to women. The Indian legislatures followed it up by legally enfranchising and throwing open the legislatures to women and rather startling the hide-bound British legislatures. Madras was the first province to remove the disqualification of sex for the legislative franchise on April 1, 1921 and other provinces followed in its wake. In 1933, when a New Constitution was once again under consideration by the Joint Select Committee the premier women's organization sent three of its representatives to place the women's case before it. They demanded a democratic constitution conferring full self-governing rights on India, including a clause in the Fundamental Rights granting equal rights to women.

The old franchise qualification was very restrictive, being based on property, which under the present legal disabilities entitled few women to vote. The wifehood qualification placed a premium on marriage and perpetuated the dependence of woman on man instead of recognizing her independent right to suffrage. But all that the women had condemned and

objected to found its way into the constitution: communal electorates, reservation on communal basis, special constituencies, wifehood qualification etc. The literacy qualification is a mere mockery in a country where barely 2% of the women were literate. The total number of women enfranchised under the new constitution was about 9 million-2,000,000 by property, 4,000,000 by wifehood, 3,000,000 by literacy. The proportion was 1 woman to 5 men. Sex-bar had not been completely removed in the New Act. In fact these disabilities were maintained as some of the blessings a civilized government has bestowed upon them. Most of the 700 municipalities and 200 District Boards have extended the franchise and women were found in them.

The Government of India Act of 1935 granted the vote to women over 21 years of age who qualified because they owned property or had attained a certain level of education. Congress was reluctant to back aspiring women politicians as candidates. It made no special effort to enlist and support women candidates for the 1937 elections. When Radhabai Subbarayan ran for a general seat, another man decided to run for the same seat and immediately Congress deserted her to support her rival. 'Madras Mail' commented on this - 'this demonstrates the insincerity of much of Congress' sympathy with the aspirations of women, and proves that the Congress Party is no better than others in the treatment of women candidates'. Women are useful to head disobedience processions but scarcely good enough to sit with the party in the Assembly. Congress supported only women running for reserved seats. All parties behaved the same way.

Women Nationalists Abroad

Meanwhile, Indian women abroad were also beginning to engage in nationalist activities. The first and the foremost among them was Madame Cama, who devised and unfurled the first flag of Indian Independence.

Madame Bhikaiji Rustom Cama

On August 2, 1907, in front of nearly a thousand delegates from different countries who had gathered at Stuttgart for the second International Socialist Congress Madame Bhikaiji Cama unfurled a tricolor flag of green, saffron and red and declared 'this flag is of Indian Independence', after giving a brilliant speech on British atrocities and India's need for independence. She made history by unfurling India's first national flag on foreign soil and thus succeeded in focusing the world's attention on India's plight and problems. Her act made a great impact world over.

She was the most active revolutionary of India in her times and earned the epithet 'Mother of Revolution'. She was inspired first by Russian Narodniks. Sofya Perovskaya, who was executed for her attempt on Tsar Alexander III's life, was her ideal. Later she studied the role of masses in revolutionary movements and was completely convinced by the 1917 Russian Revolution.

Impatient with her husband who held more conservative views, who had little interest in public life and who believed in the 'benevolence' of British rule, Madame Cama gradually drifted away from him and within a few years they were separated. In 1902, gravely ill, she went abroad for treatment - the beginning of an exile, which lasted 35 years. After getting medical treatment and a year of travel in European countries she settled in London. There she embarked on a crusading campaign for India's cause giving public speeches at Hyde Park to a raptly attentive crowd. Shyamji founded the Revolutionary Party in England but it was Madame Cama and Savarkar who built it up. She realized that the Congress policy of petitioning made no headway and turned to militant methods. She carried on her unceasing propaganda for India's freedom from London, Paris and Geneva.

She was present at the opening of India House in London

on July 1, 1905. This became the headquarters of the Indian revolutionary movement in England and became one of the most feared Indian organizations outside India. They held weekly meetings and speeches and had daily discussions. The work included writing, printing, packing and posting thousands of revolutionary pamphlets and booklets addressed to hundreds of different addresses to evade detection. Later she even helped in procuring and dispatching arms and weapons and securing help for training in the use of these and of explosives. She spent freely of her own resources of money and energy for building up a revolutionary movement in India. Many revolutionaries of Europe had met her and were inspired. Madame Cama translated Savarkar's 'First War of Indian Independence' into French with the help of Acharya. They aimed at the sympathy and help of the radical press all over the world and so Madame Cama wrote vigorous political articles, which were then translated into German, French, Italian, Russian and Portuguese for worldwide distribution.

As a result of Cama's contacts with continental and Russian revolutionaries, her conviction in revolutionary methods grew. She organized the actual training of young revolutionaries in the use of arms and the manufacture of bombs. A Russian medical student Miss Annya in Berlin helped them by translating a bomb manual in Russian into English.

Since the noose was tightening for the revolutionaries in England she went and settled in Paris and since then became the focal point of nationalist activities in Paris while continuing her visits to England. Madame Cama and Har Dayal started 'Bande Mataram' in September 1909. She also promoted 'Talwar' edited by Chattopadhyay. They expanded the scope of their activities and established their centers in Berlin, New York and Tokyo apart from Paris.

When Jackson, the Collector and District Magistrate of Nasik was shot dead Cama signed a declaration at the British

Consulate in Paris to take the entire responsibility on her own shoulders. In November 1908 she addressed a gathering at India House. Her speech was printed in a leaflet, copies of which were afterwards sent to India in large numbers. This leaflet became the manifesto of the revolutionary creed.

At the Egyptian National Conference held on September 21, 1910 she proclaimed, 'what is the use of harping on the International legal position of Egypt? Only bombs and revolvers are the proper answer for foreign occupation'. Cama always held that violence should be used to overthrow foreign rulers and devoted her life for that cause.

In the same meeting she remarked, 'I see here the representatives of only half the population of Egypt. May I ask where the other half is?' She wanted women also to be active in the national movements. She had always been active in women's movements and in 1906 had attended a meeting of the International Council for women and made a plea for justice in India. She fully believed in women playing their legitimate part in public affairs.

After Savarkar's arrest in March 1910 all her energies were directed in securing his release. She undertook a lecture tour to enlighten Germans about Indian political aspirations as early as 1909.

Both 'Bande Mataram' and 'Talwar' were banned in India, but the revolutionaries distributed them to their compatriots all over the world.

It was her task to handle finances and accounts for the revolutionaries. In 1910 the 'National Fund' was established in Paris, of which Cama and Chattopadhyay were treasurers.

She was not ready to give a written apology to the British 'for her past misdeeds and a guarantee that she will take no more part in politics'. So she was not allowed to come back to

India. After thirty-five years of continuous exile, she had become homesick weighed down with age and illness. Though weak and aged, barely able to stand, walk or write, the government demanded a written guarantee from her that she would not hold any meetings or make speeches- a tribute to the terror she had inspired in them! Reluctantly, after much persuasion and with tears of humiliation she signed the guarantee and came back to India. Hardly had she landed in Bombay when she had to be rushed to the Parsee General Hospital where, after lingering for eight months, she quietly passed away on August 16, 1936 unhonoured and unmourned. Recognition came very late in 1960, her birth centenary year.

Prabhavathi (later Mirza) who had supported the 1905 Bengal revolutionaries worked with a group called 'Freedom for India and Ireland' in the United States; while Renuka Ray, Sarala Ray's granddaughter, worked with the League against British imperialism in England. Prabhavathi was in touch with communists and revolutionaries in Germany also.

Melli Zollinger, a Swiss intellectual was active in the freedom movement in Andhrapradesh. On 15th September 1942, eleven congressmen led by Melli Zollinger visited the houses of lawyers in Vijayawada and requested them to suspend practice as part of Quit India movement. On 2nd October 1942, Melli was arrested when she hoisted a congress flag, distributed leaflets, shouted slogans and attempted to hold a meeting at Vijayawada.

Round Table Conferences

The Congress boycotted the First Round Table Conference, but Begum Shah Nawaz and Kamala Subbarayan attended to lobby for women's franchise on the grounds that women would reach parity with men with initial reservation. Nationalist women opposed this argument and held demonstrations against their participation. But a few weeks' later, nationalist women changed their tune when Gandhi

signed a pact with Irwin. This pact achieved little beyond the release of Congress' civil disobedience prisoners. Women like Lajjavanti later described their shock at Gandhi's refusal to make any effort to secure a pardon for Bhagat Singh and his colleagues.

Both Begum Shah Nawaz and Sarojini Naidu attended the Second Round table Conference and presented memoranda to the Conference. It rejected all suggestions of concessions to women, whether of reservations, nomination or cooption of women.

Formation of bourgeois women's organizations

After World War I national women's organizations were created. Three major organizations - the Women's Indian Association (WIA), the National Council of Women in India (NCWI) and the All India Women's Conference (AIWC) - emerged between 1917 and 1927.

Women's Indian Association (WIA)

Margaret Cousins, an Irish feminist, theosophist and musician arrived in India in 1915. She met some women from Theosophical Society and spoke with Dorothy Jinarajadasa, an Irish feminist about forming a women's organisation. Many of the Indian women already belonged to the Tamil Madar Sangham (Tamil Ladies' Association) and had joined with British women in forming the National Indian Association to promote female education, particularly English language instruction and the teaching of crafts. They decided to form the Ladies' Recreational Club to sponsor tea parties, badminton and tennis. Cousins and Jinarajadasa were proposing a new organization that would combine education, crafts and sports. So the Women's Indian Association was formed in Madras on May 8, 1917. Annie Besant became the first President with

Margaret Cousins, Dorothy Jinarajadasa, Mrs. Malathi Patwardhan, Mrs. Ammu Swaminathan, Mrs. Dadabhoj and Mrs. Ambujammal as honorary secretaries. The Association's ideas on social reform found concrete expression in the activities of Muthulakshmi Reddy in the Legislature of Madras Presidency during the years 1926-1930. It had at its inception categorically stated that the political policy of the association was to work for reforms through the Legislative Councils. This policy necessitated the maintenance of cordial relations with the British. In fact, Muthulakshmi expressed the hope that the British government would continue till such time, as women were fully relieved of their social disabilities.

By 1927 the WIA had a total of 3,800 members from all major cities in India and smaller towns in the Presidency of Madras. It succeeded in opening 71 branches and 21 centres. Each branch was to chart its own course of work in four main areas: religion, education, politics and philanthropy. Most important was education and the branches were encouraged to set up adult classes for literacy, sewing and first aid. It was active politically from the beginning when they sent a delegation to meet with Secretary of State Montague in 1917 to request the franchise for women. Philanthropy involved feeding the poor, setting up shelters for widows and providing relief for disaster victims. They ran a monthly magazine 'Sri Dharma' in English including articles in Hindi and Tamil. Though as an institution the WIA represented conservative opinion its journal served as a platform for the expression of diverse and often radical points of view.

In Surat, Kanuben C. Mehta formed a WIA branch with 30 members. They collected enough money to begin a craft class. Later they started classes in English and drawing. They had weekly meetings at which adult women read and discussed books.

In many ways the WIA was the ideological successor of the reformers of late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries

and sought in the characters of mythology like Savithri, Damayanthi and Sita a source of support for their activities. They thought that the education given to girls should render them into efficient householders and as intelligent mothers and good citizens. It naturally followed that the education given to boys and girls should be different- 'girls should get a diploma in domestic science. What's the use of history and geography?' were some of the questions discussed.

At a WIA conference in December 1929, a resolution was passed demanding 'a single standard of morality for men and women, equal rights of separation and the introduction of an equal divorce law for men and women'. They faced stiff resistance from various sections of the society and so they tried to convince the society that chaos would not ensue if women were given the right to divorce.

Muthulakshmi opposed a resolution in favor of birth control in the Legislature in 1930 saying that it will lead to irresponsibility among the people and that it was premature for India to practice birth control. Margaret Cousins was convinced that the Indian women would not "selfishly" shirk motherhood even if they had the power to control it.

The efforts of WIA were pioneering in many ways but in the long run it popularized an ideology that was not conducive to the emancipation of women and it helped in establishing a stereotyped role for women.

National Council for Women of India (NCWI)

By 1925, women of Bombay, Calcutta and Madras had utilized the networks developed during war work to link their various clubs and associations into a new council. The International Council of Women convened its first meeting in Washington D.C., in 1888 to advance women's social, economic and political rights. The Marchioners of Aberdeen, President

of the International Council from 1922 to 1936, learnt of the Indian Council and invited them to join them. In 1925 the National Council for Women of India (NCWI) was established as a national branch of the ICW.

Mehribai who married the eldest son of Jamshetjee Tata, the founder of Tata Industries chaired the Executive Committee of the Bombay Council. In adopting a philanthropic style modeled on that of upper class English Women, these women who joined Lady Tata were also participating in a strategy followed by their men folk. Many of these women, particularly in Bombay Presidency were married to wealthy men involved in industry and banking.

Despite the influence of women like Lady Tata in establishing the ideology of the council, individual members' interests determined its work. Standing sectional committees were formed to deal with art, labour, legislation and the press. Generally, they collected information, prepared memoranda and presented these to the proper authorities. The committee on legislation to improve women's status was the most active. The new arena of activity that interested these women was petition politics.

Because of its elitist nature the council failed to grow and become a vital national organisation. Many women simply could not afford to join this organization nor did they feel comfortable in the presence of these affluent and titled women. But mainly, the councils were politically and socially conservative. Because of the connection with the British and the wealth and status of the leading members, the NCWI remained aloof from the struggle for independence. Socially they opted for the status quo. They found village work difficult and unhealthy, the villagers distrustful and hostile. The members of the NCWI looked to government for the improvements they desired. Shut off from actual work among the people whose condition they wished to improve, yet confident that they completely understood both the problems

of Indian women and the solutions to these problems, they advised the government in welfare issues! Their main concern was that India 'measures up' in international terms, to minimum standards for health and welfare found elsewhere. And both British men and Indian men in power had a vested interest in ensuring the same.

All India Women's Conference (AIWC)

The Women's Indian Association was the nucleus of AIWC, which emerged in 1926. Margaret Cousins edited *Stri Dharma*, journal of WIA for many years. A tireless organizer, she succeeded in establishing more than 40 branches of the Association. The enthusiasm and organizing abilities of persons like Muthulakshmi Reddy, Ammu Swaminathan and Rukmini Lakshmipathi helped the growth of the Women's Indian Association. With its base in Madras Presidency, the organization had 2,700 members by 1921. The Sarojini Devi Women's Association was established in 1916 in Andhrapradesh. In 1927 it merged into the AIWC and became its AP branch.

The National Council of Women was formed in 1925 to promote mutual awareness and coordination of work among women's organizations in various parts of the country. These efforts culminated in the establishment in 1926 of the All India Women's Conference, which held its first session at Poona in January 1927.

Mr. Oaten, director of Public Instruction in Bengal, urged women to decide what kind of education was suitable for Indian girls. A reply to his challenge was published in '*Stri Dharma*' and this eventually led to plans for a conference. Margaret Cousins suggested the women leaders organize local conferences to discuss educational issues and prepare a memorandum on female education for presentation at an All India Conference to be held at Poona. The AIWC began as a gathering of 47 women from different parts of the country who

were keenly interested in promoting girls education. They met to draw up a memorandum on educational reform. Delegates included a large number of professional educationalists as well as social reformers, women associated with the nationalist movement, and the wealthy and titled. The delegates favoured an educational system that would allow for the fullest development of the individual's latent capacities. But at the same time they wanted to teach all girls the ideals of motherhood, how to make the home attractive and how to help others. The AIWC did not advocate mass education for all women nor did they envision a world where all middle class and upper class women would receive the same education as men. They agreed that educational system should concentrate on producing educated wives and mothers but they also wanted women doctors, professors and lawyers. There was general agreement that education should complement gender roles.

They agreed that the condition for the accomplishment of girls' education was the abolition of child marriage. Therefore in the next conference at Delhi it was decided to send deputations to the Viceroy and the All Parties Conference to press for enactment of the Child Marriage Restraint Bill. This led on, in the 30s, to realization of the need to organize political support for the women's cause.

By 1929, AIWC declared its main activity to be organizing public opinion on social welfare issues. With 1930, came the Civil Disobedience Movement and its decisions to remain apolitical. It opted to preserve its identity as a petitioning organization.

The first presidents of the AIWC were Maharanis, but in the 1930s, members of AIWC decided that such presidents were mere 'figureheads' and as the AIWC was to be an organization of activists it needed an activist president and Sarojini Naidu was elected in 1931. Only in its eighteenth session in 1931 did the circle seemed to turn fully - from a position of 'no politics',

to the stance that national liberation is a necessary precondition for women's liberation. By the mid 1930s the list of Sub Committees included labour, rural reconstruction, indigenous industries, textbooks, opium and the Sarada Act. Their resolutions ranged from advocating film censorship to urging widespread instruction in birth control. The constitution of the AIWC was amended in 1938 to permit political activity of a non-party and constructive nature. In 1941, AIWC established a quarterly journal, Roshni and in 1946 set up a central office with a permanent staff. They devoted their energies to two major tasks: publicity and propaganda on women's issues and research to provide a database on women in India. AIWC also thought petition politics to be a comfortable realm and asked educated women to present women's demands to candidates, educate women voters, disseminate information about the candidates and prepare lists of potential women candidates for the political parties.

Their work on behalf of women was increasingly focused on legal disabilities while concern with the welfare of the nation led them towards Gandhi's program of reconstruction and social action. Their interest in women's status in law propelled them towards collaboration with British officials and members of the legislature. Nehru criticized that their program was superficial because it did not inquire into 'root causes'. At the end of 1930s and in the early 1940s the AIWC faced a series of challenges to its claim that it represented and could speak for all women. The proposal that the organization should emerge as a political force for women was voted down. Efforts to bring lower class rural and urban women into the organization centred on dropping membership dues to 4 annas rather than developing programs of interest to these women. None of these problems was solved at the national level.

The provincial branches took on new life during the war years. Some of these branches took up local issues, sometimes with a vengeance, supporting peasant movements, teaching

untouchables, and encouraging political involvement. They reached out to women the central body had ignored.

At the same time, other branches of the AIWC became prestige organizations, places where women played out games of status and influence while accomplishing little for either the women of their own class or for the downtrodden.

AIWC and Muslim women

The environment was particularly challenging for Muslim Women. The AIWC characterized itself as apolitical even though its leading members belonged to Congress. They passed resolutions to support Gandhi's programmes and frequently praised Gandhi and Nehru for supporting women's issues. When Muslim members tried to influence wording and substance of memoranda and petitions they were ignored and treated, according to their accounts like younger sisters. Nevertheless, there were a number of prominent and capable Muslim women, notably Hajiah Ahmed, Sharifah Hamid Ali and Kulshum Sayani who were connected with the women's organizations.

Muslim leaders asked Begum Shah Nawaz to organize a communal women's organization. Some of her friends and associates warned her that this would hurt the work of the AIWC. She argued that support for Muslim men's political aspirations was the only road to harmonious relations between Hindus and Muslims. By June of 1936 a meeting of the General Council of the Punjab provincial Moslem Women's League was announced. Once organized, the League became a sub-committee of the All India Muslim League with Begum Modh Ali as President and Begum Hafiz-ud-din as Secretary. Its declared goal was to stimulate the political consciousness of Muslim women. Begum Shah Nawaz's move in the direction of the Muslim League strained her relationships with her old AIWC colleagues.

In 1929, Qudsia married Nawab Syed Aizaz Rasul who opposed purdah. She discarded her veil and began speaking in public against purdah. In 1936 she decided to contest a general (Muslim) seat for the United Province's Legislative Council. The Ulema issued a fatwa. But she was elected with a thumping majority, which only showed that Muslims were not really as orthodox as they were made out to be. In the legislative council she earned additional reproaches when she spoke in favour of birth control and asked for women police officers. Even in her childhood when her father sent her to a Christian Convent, the Ulema had issued a fatwah condemning convent education as anti-Islamic.

Begum Sharifah Hamid Ali, a tireless worker for women's rights stood firmly with women's organizations. She rejected all politics that would divide the people of India. It was not separatist politics that made her cooperation with AIWC members difficult but rather their arrogance about Islam and Muslims. Their acceptance of the 'Golden Age' and 'Dark Age' theory both limited their potential for attracting women from other communities and classes and inhibited radical critique of their society (Golden Age theory blames the Muslims (foreigners) for a fall in women's status). Female seclusion and sex segregation were observed by both Hindus and Muslims but the two communities differed when they remembered the 'Golden Age'; Hindu women harked back to a time when women were active participants in the life of the community; Muslims to the veiling of the prophet's wives.

The All India Women's organizations had recruited Muslim Women and made efforts to represent their interests. Worried that condemnation of purdah might be seen as cultural imperialism, the women's organizations adjusted to it as a fact of life and only vaguely condemned it in resolutions. When it came to politics, the women's organizations talked as if all women were equal and threw their support behind universal franchise. Faced with the reality of communal elections, they had no answer. The growth of communal mobilization of

Muslims was accompanied by increasing efforts to blur the line between Indian Nationalism and Hindu communalism. The failure of the Congress leadership to build an adequate secular ideology of nationalism resulted in Muslim communalism getting consolidated outside the Congress and Hindu communalism getting passed off as nationalism either within the Congress or on an independent platform. Communal politics have had an inverse relationship with emancipatory efforts on Indian society. The women's question was no different. By the 1940s communal tensions were being manifested within the AIWC. According to Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, as relations between the Congress and the Muslim League became increasingly hostile, Muslim women in AIWC drew away from the others. By 1944, the AIWC had split, and most Muslim women left. After the partition of India, they formed the Pakistan Women's Conference. The blame for driving a wedge between Hindu and Muslim women must be shared by the INC, Muslim League and the women's organizations.

Limitations of Women's Organizations

The participation of women in the freedom movement also shaped the movement for women's rights i.e. bourgeois rights. Women won great respect for their political work and social benefits followed. There were psychological gains too. They felt that their life transformed from one of purposelessness and boredom to one of vital engagement and commitment. Large numbers of middle class women who gained experience in working with organizational structures benefited from these women's organisations. They learned first hand the dynamics of the political world and learnt them, in part from other women.

Apart from these positive aspects there were serious limitations to these organizations because of the class nature of its leadership. The upper class and caste composition of its

leadership did not allow a radical programme either for the independence of the country or for women's emancipation.

Such reformist Indian women's movements can be seen as an attempt by a previously excluded segment (high status bourgeois women) to enter the political system. These women did not challenge the hierarchical framework – they justified their demands on the grounds of restoring previously held rights. Because the Indian women's movement was composed of high-status individuals, it represented a low level of threat to the stability of the system. They did not aim to change class relations. Their movement was confined to gain certain bourgeois rights for the upper or middle class women. Their class bias prevented the vast masses of ordinary women or their demands from becoming part of the movement. The class collaborationist politics of the leadership of the freedom movement i.e. of the Congress was manifest in these organizations also and that's why they failed to give a radical programme to their members.

Most social reformers believed in the separation of the roles played by the male and female in society. They believed that women should not compete with men in all spheres. They should be pativrata, i.e., devoted and chaste wives who should view the vices of their husbands with tolerance. The women's organizations like WIA and AIWC, which were off shoots of the social reform movements, shared more or less the same ideology. In fact, through their programmes they even strengthened the traditional role of woman as wife, housekeeper and mother. She is asked to perform some of the functions outside the four walls to assist her husband rather than to raise her head, to develop her dignity as a human being. These organizations have become instruments in spreading an ideology, which assigned inferior role to women. They strengthened revivalist values, which are oppressive to women. They had gradually lost the zeal even to fight against oppressive social customs.

One more drawback of the organizations was that the number of groups involved in them, other than upper and middle class Hindu women, was never large. Few Muslim women were steadfast followers of Gandhi; many more either found it difficult to accept the overtly Hindu ideological basis of his ideas or were neglected by the Congress organizers. As the organizations centralized, many women became frustrated with their aims and left to work with broader groups. Those who stayed with the organizations put their newfound wisdom about petition politics to good use as they fought for women's franchise and women's legal rights.

By the 1940s there was a sense of seeing independence on the horizon, and the women's movement was absorbed into the struggle for independence in such a way that the issue of women's emancipation was felt to have been solved. With independence, the inequalities between men and women would be righted and all would be well with India. The fact that the image of a woman activist, which had been constructed in this period itself, limited and restricted women, was not questioned.

Mass Participation of Women Begins

Gandhi returned to India in 1915. He met women who belonged to women's social reform organizations. At one talk he told that India needed women leaders who were pure, firm and self controlled like the ancient heroines: Sita, Damayanti and Draupadi. On April 6, 1919, the day marked for a general strike throughout India, he addressed a meeting of 'ladies of all classes and communities' and asked them to join the Satyagraha movement to facilitate the total involvement of men. Within a week, the Jallianwala Bagh massacre occurred. Gandhi called off the campaign but it was already clear that women had joined the fight against the British. Gandhi urged them to take Swadeshi vow to give up foreign goods and spin every day. Ignoring indigenous crafts and purchasing foreign made goods, he explained, caused India's poverty. Restoration

of the rule of Ram would come only when women, emulating the faithful and brave Sita, united with men against this immoral ruler. Gandhi modified his message to appeal to Muslim Women. He asked them to spin and encourage their husbands to join the movement. British rule was the rule of Satan he said and exhorted them to renounce foreign cloth to save Islam.

First he explained to women there was a place for them in the movement, and then he expressed faith in their courage. It was possible to help the movement without leaving home or neglecting family. 'Do what you can' Gandhi advised women, convincing them that every act counted. At the same time, he reassured families their women would not sacrifice family honour or prestige. Since his moral stature was high, 'when women came out, worked in the political field, their family members knew that they were quite secure, they were protected.' (Sucheta Kripalani)

By the 1920s a generation of women nationalists was growing up, several of whom were influenced by their reformer mothers. Kamladevi Chattopadhyay and Lajjavanti's mothers were such examples. Lajjavanti became the principal of the Arya Kanya Mahavidyalaya and in 1919 entered the nationalist movement. Several of the ex-students of the Arya Kanya Mahavidyalaya were to become nationalist activists (one of them, Parvati Devi, was the first woman to go to jail from Meerut, in the Civil Disobedience movement of the 1920s) though, according to Lajjavanti, the school's objective was to make its students good homebodies and nation-worshippers. The founder principal did not encourage the girls to attend public meetings but they were taught to sing patriotic songs at reform meetings and taught to preach on the need for women's education.

A discussion of equality began to develop in the late 1910s and 1920s, amongst women who had been active in nationalist or women's rights campaigns. A series of questions were put

to male nationalists who either opposed women's rights or counseled caution in the matter of fighting for them: those who said women would be given their rights in due course were reminded of their own arguments that rights had to be fought for. Those who advised a gradual method of gaining these rights were reminded that the Congress moderates had been criticized precisely for advocating this and so on.

1920: Non Co-operation Movement

The involvement of really large numbers of women in the nationalist movement began sometime after the Rowlatt Act was passed in 1919. The 1920-21 non-cooperation movement, which followed, seems to mark the time when nationalists began to consciously organize women. The non-cooperation movement promised a more active role for women than that offered by Swadeshi vow. Hundreds of women went hawking Khadi and Charkhas from lane to lane in the cities of Punjab and took out processions to propagate Khadi at which they sang songs mocking 'fashion' and collectively burnt their foreign clothes. Women who attended the Jalandhar meeting to protest the Rowlatt Act said that even if one woman was arrested, they would all go to jail and had already told at home not to expect them back at any fixed time or worry if they were late in returning. But the local Congress leadership itself was divided on whether women should or should not court arrest for Lajpat Rai did not approve of sending women to jail. So they did not go picketing liquor shops nor did they court arrest.

It was different in Bombay and Calcutta than in Punjab. They were free of the restrictions imposed on them in Punjab. Women picketed liquor shops in Bombay and prevented liquor auction in the town hall.

On 13th of April (Jallianwala Bagh anniversary), women in Bombay founded the Rashtreeya Stree Sabha, an organization devoted solely to nationalist activities. This was the first of such women's organizations to be founded. They

propagated Khadi and were involved in organizing a Bombay wide hartal in boycott of the Prince of Wales' visit to India in November 1921.

In Bengal women organized 'Mahila Karma Samaj' or the Ladies Organization Board of the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee to carry out propaganda and constructive work amongst the women of Bengal. Branches of this organization were spread all over Calcutta. In their meetings women gave up their ornaments and also enlisted as volunteers. In a single meeting in Guwahati in Assam sixty women volunteers were enlisted. They went about carrying the message to the people to stop selling or wearing foreign cloth.

In Lucknow women were urged to take to wearing Khadi and to exhort men to join the national movement. A committee was formed, with Mrs. Abdul Qadir as president, to carry on the work among women.

A hundred and forty four women delegates, 131 women volunteers, and 14 women in the Subjects Committee attended the 1921 Congress session. Women were active in the Nagpur Flag Satyagraha of 1923, against a government order banning the display of the Congress Flag in certain parts of the city and the Borsad Satyagraha of 1923-24, against a punitive tax levied on the villagers for payment of the extra police forces drafted to control dacoits. A woman, Bhakthiben Desai, led processions against the government order in Nagpur.

In 1919 during Chirala-Perala satyagraha (refusal to pay taxes which were increased from Rs.4,000 to Rs.40,000 without corresponding benefits) in Andhrapradesh, an elderly lady Ravuri Alivelu Mangathayamma was arrested and jailed. Perhaps she was one of the first women to be sent to prison for a political offence. She was sentenced to seven days in jail. Women were also active in the Kanneganti Hanumanthu led 'Pullari Satyagraha' (refusal to pay tax for cattle). Led by Unnava Lakshmibai there was a massive protest in Guntur and

a no tax campaign in Palnad. Reporting this incident, the Andhra Patrika of 17 August 1921 says: 'when Unnava's wife hailed her husband on his arrest in Guntur, hundreds of women steered the chariot with their gentle hands... in this you can see the outpouring of people's power'. The situation precipitated in February 1922, with Swaraj being proclaimed in several villages. On 26th February, on the outskirts of Minchalapadu, a crowd of two to three hundred men and women attacked a police posse that had seized fifty goats and a hundred and twenty buffaloes sent to graze in defiance of forest rules. The firing that followed killed Hanumanthu. Among those arrested subsequently were 29 men and 9 women.

It was in this environment that the Kakinada Congress Mahasabha was held in 1923. Women came over from all over Andhra. Hundreds worked as volunteers. Fifteen year old Durgabai recruited many women as volunteers but could not work herself because she was too young. For women, the experience of leaving their homes, their villages and their families was liberating. This was the period when Duvvuri Subbamma, Ponaka Kanakamma and Unnava Laxmibayamma excelled the men propagandists in their ability to sway large masses of people. The Ladies' Congress Committee was formed in January 1922 and was reported to have done remarkable work in the use and production of Khadi. Subbamma, the organizer of this Committee was the first lady patriot to be called upon to furnish security for good behaviour and to be sentenced to one year's rigorous imprisonment. In 1925 the Andhra Sadhvi Sangham was set up by Nadimpalli Sundaramma, Goteti Manikyamba and T. Varalaxmamma. A forum was established to train women for the nationalist movement.

Responding to Congress call for funds many Andhra women gave away their jewellery. Women opened many khadi centers in Nellore district. When Gandhi was arrested Unnava Laxmibayamma resigned from the Guntur district board in protest.

Congress declared April 6-13, 1921 as Satyagrah week and women interested in politics held meetings to show their support. Women decided to form their own independent political organization – Rashtriya Stree Sangha. This required its members to join the District Congress Committee. Urmila Devi, the widowed sister of C.R. Das, urged women to be ready to leave their homes to serve the country. By November 1,000 Bombay women were demonstrating against the Prince of Wales' visit to India.

In Bengal, the first batch of volunteers, including C. R. Das's son were arrested while trying to sell Khadi on the streets. Then his wife, Basanti Devi, his sister Urmila Devi and his niece Miss Suniti Devi (who had founded the Nari Karm Mandir, a house for working women) were the notable women organizers. They took to the streets and were arrested. It had an electrifying effect and immediately more than 1000 men offered themselves for arrest. When word of their arrest spread a huge crowd of 'Marwaris, Muslims, Bhattias, Sikhs, coolies, mill-hands and school boys' milled around until the police released the women. The next day on December 8, 1921 the whole city was in commotion. The women of the Das family resumed picketing cloth shops and selling Khadi joined by numerous lady volunteers, especially Sikh ladies. Calcutta students came out in hundreds, joined the prohibited volunteer corps and marched out with khadi on, seeking imprisonment. On that day alone, 170 protestors were arrested.

Writing in 'Young India' Gandhi urged women from other parts of the country to follow the brave example of Bengali women. The arrest of respectable women was viewed as an appropriate tactic to shame men into joining the protests. At the All India Ladies Conference in Ahmedabad 6,000 women listened to Bi Amma, the mother of Shaukat Ali and Mohammed Ali, leaders of the All India Khilafat Committee. She urged women to enlist as Congress volunteers and if their men folk were arrested, to join the picket lines and keep 'the flag flying'.

Women from all provinces of British India stepped forward in response to Gandhi's call. He urged women to boycott foreign cloth, spin and join in public defiance of British laws. Between the suspension of non-cooperation in 1922 and his resumption of a leadership role in 1928, Gandhi devoted himself to reconstruction. During these six years he spoke to women's groups about constructive work, continuously reiterating that Sita was the ideal role model and spinning could solve India's and women's problems. He persuaded well to do women to learn about the conditions of rural and poor women. But he cautioned them not to neglect their own families in the process.

North India: Women from Allahabad, Lucknow, Delhi and Lahore joined public demonstrations and shocked a public unused to see respectable women in the streets without veils. Leadership came from a few families, eg: the Nehrus and the Zutshis, and most demonstrators came from schools and colleges. In Lahore, demonstrations against the Simon Commission were marked by violence and Lala Lajpat Rai died from injuries inflicted by the police in one such demonstration.

Lado Rani Zutshi, wife of Motilal Nehru's nephew and three of her daughters, Manmohini, Shyama and Janak led the movement in Lahore. In 1929, as a student at Government College Manmohini chaired the student reception committee, welcoming Subhash Bose to preside over the Second All-Punjab Student Conference. The same year she became the first woman President of the Lahore Student Union and served as a volunteer at the Lahore Congress. When Bhagat Singh and his comrades were sentenced to death, Manmohini decided to post women pickets at three colleges in Lahore - The Government College, Law College and Forman Christian College. It was a wildly successful demonstration as men students absented themselves for classes to cheer the young women. 16 women and 35 men were arrested. Manmohini was sentenced to 6 months imprisonment.

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Bardoli Satyagraha-1928:

A no-tax campaign was launched in Bardoli under the leadership of Sardar Patel. The people refused to pay taxes. The women of Bardoli took part in this movement from its very inception. Mithuben Petit and Bhakthiben Desai from Bombay greatly strengthened the movement amongst women. The women attended the meetings even if it meant covering long distances on foot. They composed inspiring songs appropriate for the fight. Sardar Patel arranged for Mithuben, Bhakthiben, Maniben Patel and other ladies to camp on those very lands, which were to be sold by fixing their tents and huts on it. The women helped in the collection of funds also. This Satyagraha displayed a large measure of strength among women. It served as an inspiration to all women outside Bardoli. The Bardoli Satyagraha was successfully completed after five and half months of struggle in September 1928.

In the Bardoli Satyagraha movement, tribal women composed songs, looked after the fields when their husbands were arrested and often followed their men to the court and the railway station.

Civil Disobedience Movement: 1930-35

The civil disobedience campaign brought large numbers of women into public life. Their participation differed quantitatively and qualitatively from the early 1920s and won them a place in history. Bombay women's picketing and

demonstrations from 1930 to 1932 received more press attention than women's activities in any other part of the country. The numbers of women marching were in the thousands and their pickets were organized and effective. By 1930, the leadership and structure of the Rashtriya Stree Sangha (RSS) were sufficiently developed for it to spawn a new, smaller organization, the Desh Sevika Sangha whose members were ready for action.

Kamala Devi was in charge of women's organization under the Hindustani Seva Dal in 1930. She arranged camps for the training of women workers. The training course was separate for girls. The course included sewing and spinning, organizing meetings and a course of study in Indian history and geography. A class to train women to take part in the Satyagraha campaign for breaking salt laws was started under the supervision of the members of Satyagraha Ashram and Khurshedben. These trainees were taught to sing propaganda songs and to organize village meetings, to show how to preserve peace and order at meetings, sanitation, first aid to the injured, nursing and spinning.

The Congress mounted forest Satyagraha in the central provinces in 1930 which spread to Nagpur and Jabalpure; large numbers of tribal women who came with their children took part in it and refused to give evidence or any help to the police and forest officers.

Dandi march

Gandhi began the civil disobedience campaign in March of 1930 with his 240-mile march from Ahmedabad to Dandi to make salt in defiance of the British monopoly. Gandhi had included no woman in his chosen 7 marchers in Dandi and this aroused considerable resentment among nationalist women. The WIA specifically asked him to include women but he refused because he feared the British would call Indian men cowards who hid behind women. Nevertheless, women

were very much involved. Khurshed Naoroji wrote angrily to Gandhi while Margaret Cousins protested the decision in 'Stree Dharma'. Gandhi remained firm saying he 'allocated a greater role to women than the mere breaking of salt laws'. Kamala Devi Chattopadhyaya persuaded him and at last won the permission.

Sarojini Naidu was the first woman to be arrested in the salt satyagraha. Inspired by her women in Andhra began to make salt in many districts inviting lathi charge and arrests. The satyagraha camps in Andhra at various places worked intensely during the salt satyagraha. Women assumed leadership everywhere. Many women from these camps were arrested. When six women from a camp at Repalle were arrested Pichamma led the women who took over the camp and set fire to foreign goods. The police, after arresting them, made them walk to Repalle subjail. In the early stages the police used to throw dirty water with chilli powder at women without arresting them. They would abuse them, transport them far away from home, forcing them to walk back long miles. The government hired people to harass these women emotionally and physically, in an attempt to break their will. In the second phase arrest became inevitable. Eleven year old Sugunamani was also arrested and sentenced to two years imprisonment.

Cells were formed to organize satyagraha, and their leaders were named dictators. Sarojini Naidu, Lado Rani Zutshi, Kamala Nehru, Hansa Mehta, Avantikabai Gokhale, Satyavathi, Parvatibai, Rukmini Lakshmi pathy, Perin and Hoshiben Captain, Lilavati Munshi, Durgabai Deshmukh and Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya were among the dictators. Thousands of women joined manufacturing and selling salt all over the country. This is generally remembered as the first time that the 'masses of Indian Women' got involved in the independence struggle.

Separate women's organizations to mobilize and coordinate women's participation in these activities were now

set up: the Ladies' Picketing Board, the Stri Swarajya Sangh and the Swayam Sevika Sangh. Processions, pickets, prabhat pheris, charkha spinning, khadi hawking, publicity and propaganda were their work. Several women mill workers were active in the Bombay Desh Sevika Sangh, which was banned in 1931; the others were banned a year later.

Desh Sevikas or Storm Troops amongst Congresswomen were in the forefront of the movement. Some fifty of them went to prison during the first year. Most of these ladies had never left their homes till then. They had to first learn the courage necessary to be seen in streets. They learned to walk long distances, to stand in the sun all day, to picket cloth and toddy shops, to hurry to danger points when summoned by the Congress, or the police, to remove stones, pipes and other obstacles placed in the middle of the road to obstruct traffic, even to shed their fear at night and of hooligan crowds.

In addition to these Desh Sevikas who courted arrests, thousands more joined in processions, flag salutations and hartals, cooked and nursed in Congress hospitals and sold khadi. Many of these women gave up their life of ease and comfort to suffer imprisonment and picket shops and went from town to town engaged in needful propaganda and unmindful of the heat and cold. Within three years of the call five thousand women had served terms of severe imprisonment, suffered lathicharges, loss of property, loss of livelihood from ill health etc.

The police reported meetings where thousands of women attended; in one case there were 10,000 women. Gandhi talked to these village women of their patriotic duties - picketing liquor and toddy shops, boycotting taxed salt and spinning and wearing khadi. He noted that women's patience and antipathy to violence made them particularly well suited for constructive work. Gandhi was constructing a new ideal for Indian women that rewrote passivity and self-suffering as strength.

In the countryside, the government reacted to the no revenue and no tax movements by confiscating household goods, implements and even land that they later auctioned. In the boycott of these auctions women were especially active persuading so many that only a few attended these auctions and they had to be sold cheaply. Those who bought them had to regret it, for women satyagrahis, often with babies in their arms, would camp outside their houses until the goods were returned. Some even occupied the houses going on stay-in hunger strikes there. The more persistent buyers would throw mud at them, insult them and even occasionally hire thugs to beat them up. Sometimes women even sat for one month!

Many Andhra women participated in the salt satyagraha and were lathi charged and arrested. Some had to undergo one year (or more) imprisonment. A few died due to the harsh conditions there after being released. A police report in Uttarpradesh gives a graphic account of the salt satyagraha.

‘The Indian woman.... has enormous influence over the stronger sex. Many loyal officials including police officers had suffered from taunts and abuse from their female relatives than from any other source’. Thousands of women-young girls, house wives, even pregnant mothers all joined salt satyagraha and went to jail. They did not flinch in the face of savage police repression. Some even gave birth to children inside jail. Thousands of Gujarati women marshalled at the Chowpatty Sea face in Bombay city, collecting seawater in their brass and copper jugs. In the heart of the city, women volunteers picketed toddy shops and asked owners to close their doors. Other women sold salt on the streets. While still others went house-to-house urging house wives to buy only swadeshi products.

The Desh Sevika Sangh (DSS) had designed and supervised this campaign. DSS leaders admitted being approached by ‘undesirable women’ but were clear they only wanted to recruit from the ‘good classes’. Joshiben captain, granddaughter of Dadabai Nauroji, a founding member and

leader of Congress insisted that members should have impeccable credentials. She warned women demonstrators to only perform actions that preserved their dignity and 'innate modesty'. This would preclude marching side by side with women of 'undesirable' character. She also vetoed 'leftist' suggestions that women lie in the doorways of foreign cloth shops to deter customers. In the final analysis most politically active women chose respectability over solidarity with their 'undesirable' sisters.

Sarojini was arrested twice as she led batches of volunteers at the Dharasana Salt works. Second time she was sentenced to one-year prison. Her leadership inspired hundreds of women to emulate her bravery by marching in the streets. Women proved their effectiveness in agitation politics. Merchants signed the pledge not to sell foreign cloth when faced with women picketers. Women joined men for flag raisings and demonstrations. On June 23, the volunteers refused to leave the esplanade. As the police advanced, the women moved forward to shield them and were injured. The Desh Sevikas organised a number of demonstrations that grabbed headlines and inspired women all over India. Processions of 1 to 2 thousand women, accompanied by children, were not unusual at this time. Even larger numbers had come to listen to speeches. The largest crowd gathered at the release from the prison of three of the most important women leaders- Lilavathi Munshi, Perin Captain and Mrs. Lukanji. Sevikas numbered more than 5,000 and crowds of 10,000 assembled at both ends of this parade of Sevikas.

Bengal: Calcutta women made and sold salt, picketed cloth and liquor shops, preached the value of Khadi, and took out processions in the streets. It was also the heart of revolutionary struggle and women's colleges became centers for recruiting new members. In district towns and villages, women joined processions, wore khadi, and hid revolutionaries on the run. In this setting, Gandhi's influence was no greater than that of prominent local leaders. Bengal women have always valorised violence and this ethos profoundly influenced the participation of Bengali women in the freedom struggle.

With Subhas Chandra Bose's persuasion Latika Ghosh founded the organisation The Mahila Rashtriya Sangha (MRS) in 1928, the first formal organization to mobilize women for political work. Latika successfully fielded a women's demonstration against the Simon Commission. Subhash, quite impressed by this, insisted she develop a women's organization connected with Congress. The MRS had similar goals as RSS in Bombay: achieve Swaraj and improve women's status. MRS believed these two were inseparable and one influenced the achievement of the others. The first step to Swaraj was the education of women to their double oppression as colonial subjects and inferior sex. Bose's mother was the first president of MRS. MRS was able to send batches for nearly six months for picketing and courting arrests. Aruanbala Sen of MRS and several women's organizations picketed foreign cloth shops in Bara Bazar and virtually brought the trade to a standstill for the time being.

In 1928, Subhash Bose decided to have uniformed women volunteers march with men in the procession to inaugurate the annual Congress meetings in Calcutta. He made Latika Ghosh a colonel and charged her with recruiting her own company for the parade. She enlisted 300 women: students from Bethune College and Victoria institutions and teachers employed by Calcutta Corporation. Their uniforms were saris with the colour of Congress flag. The impression this march of ladies created was spectacular. People associated them with the womanhood of Bengal with chivalry written on every face and manifest in every movement.

There was a new wave of nationalist movement between 1930 and 1933 in Bengal. The Civil Disobedience movement stirred both middle class and peasant women.

Along with middle class women and often led by them, peasant women joined meetings and processions, enrolled as volunteers and sold contraband salt; they were beaten up by the police. Processions of men and women moved from Tamluk town to the villages. There was picketing of schools by girl

students. As in 1920-22, the Congress did not organize a non-rent campaign, arguing that it would alienate the landlords and disrupt village unity. There was severe repression. Along with their husbands and brothers, women faced repression and left the village to take shelter in the forest.

In Calcutta Nari Satyagraha Samiti (NSS) was formed in 1929 and women volunteers took part in picketing foreign cloth shops and organized demonstrations. This group had a core of 15 to 20 women who were willing to picket and risk arrest. They belonged to 3 highest castes- Brahmins, Kayasthas, Vaishyas. They were educated, from professional families and all had observed some form of purdah. Middle class women rarely seen outside their homes, astounded and thrilled the general public when they appeared as satyagrahis. They took out processions violating orders. They were harassed and intercepted by mounted police but nothing intimidated them, so the police arrested them. For the first time in the annals of Calcutta the game of football had to be abandoned on Saturday owing to lady picketers.

In May 1931, a Ladies Picketing Board was started by women of Bengal to boycott and picket in collaboration with Bengal Provincial Congress Committee. They had a boycott and picketing section, Swadeshi prachar section, Prabhat Pheri section, constructive workers section (to learn to use the charkhas) and a general section (hold meetings and take out processions). Conferences and meetings of ladies became an everyday occurrence in Bengal.

At the same time other women were recruited by revolutionary organizations. In some cases, women initially attracted to Gandhi, joined the revolutionaries because they craved action or were appalled by police action. Most of these women were students. Most of them joined secret societies after they had worked with women's organizations and with Congress. Sarat Chandra Chatterjee's novel 'Pather Dabi' was also influential for some women to join the revolutionaries.

In the tumultuous environment in Bengal following the Chittagong raid and the repression unleashed, it was difficult to generate interest in women's rights. When it became apparent that Bengal Congress was not particularly interested in these topics, women leaders called for a meeting to form a separate women's Congress. The district Congresses, responding to the call of Santi Das, organized meetings, elected 10 delegates each and held discussions about social reform issues. Sarladevi Chowdhury's speech hit hard. She acknowledged men's role in bringing women into the freedom movement. But she doubted they really cared about improving the lives of women. Women were rewarded with flowery speeches but not appointed to sub-committees and councils. Congress assigned to women the position of lawbreakers only and not lawmakers. She concluded what was certainly the most forceful feminist speech of the 1930s with a call for legal, economic, social and educational equality. She spoke to an audience more conservative than herself and in their final session they reiterated the usual demands, rejected resolutions favouring birth control and equal treatment for women, and decided not to form a separate Women's Congress.

Gujarat: Gujarat was the citadel of the campaign. The womenfolk showed marvelous power of organization and steered the movement successfully. In Gujarat most of the dictators were women. The men were rounded up in the first few days and it was left to the women to come out as dictators one after another.

Delhi: About sixteen hundred women were imprisoned in Delhi alone. But they had done their work- though the shops opened no one went in, at last the licensees themselves closed them. A thousand women went to the court to persuade the lawyers and the authorities to close the courts. The police threatened to open fire and five armoured cars arrived. The ladies refused to leave the place unless the police was withdrawn and they were allowed to return in procession. Satyavathi was arrested several times and sentenced to imprisonments due to

which her health deteriorated and she finally succumbed and died in 1945.

Madras: Support for the Swadeshi pledge and for spinning, wearing and selling Khadi could be mustered, but there were no dramatic demonstrations of the kind found in Calcutta and Bombay. Madras women never joined the revolutionary movement nor were they subjects of extreme police violence.

S. Ambujammal, the only daughter of S. Srinivasa Iyengar entered the movement in 1928 and decided to form the Women's Swadeshi League. The members took the Swadeshi vow, spun a certain amount of thread each month and spread the word about the value of homespun cloth. Krishnabai Rau organized the Desh Sevikas, women willing to picket and Indirabai Rau took over propaganda. When the call came for women to join the movement, they went door-to-door preaching the value of Swadeshi, organized Swadeshi exhibitions, sold Khadi in the streets and joined men in picketing. Women especially enjoyed joining Prabhat Pheris. Sometimes they went in hundreds to these pheris.

A woman magistrate seeing how corrupt and cruel the police was, resigned her post and joined the Desh Sevikas. Not long before police began to treat women protestors the same as men. Madras women were among the first arrested in the country. Rukmani Lakshmi pathy accompanying C. Rajagopala Chary to break salt laws in 1931 was arrested and became the first female political prisoner in Vellore Women's Jail. At first no salt satyagraha had been planned for Madras but Durgabai saw this as essential for arousing support for the Civil Disobedience Movement and obtained permission from Gandhi. After T. Prakasam's arrest, she led the volunteers and was arrested too.

Sasumanu Gunnamma of Parlakimidi in Srikakulam district in Andhrapradesh fought with the forest officials and won the right to graze the cattle. She assumed the leadership

of the struggle in Mandsa estate in Sompeta in 1940. She was pregnant when she confronted the police in Rajamanipuram and died in firing. The village was named Veeragunnamapuram after her. Gorla Punnamma was also injured in this firing and was sent to jail. There were women who were pregnant and delivered children in jail like Koneru Bharathamma and women who went to jail with suckling children like Saraswathi Gora. The women used to march through the streets of Vijayawada wearing khaki shorts and wielding sticks. Of the 80,000 arrested during salt satyagraha, 17,000 were women.

The government's confidential records include detailed reports of how women's activities brought men into the movement. The women were steady in the face of police attacks and astounded everyone with bravery. In North, the political movement engaged elite women and women without any education. They belonged to two different worlds but they shared the burden of social norms that inhibited their autonomy.

Beginning in the 19th century, British rulers justified their rule by calling attention to the degraded status of India's women. But the involvement of Indian women in the nationalist struggle severely challenged the notion that the British were the legitimate rulers of India.

Police atrocities

In 1920 Sarojini Naidu accused the Martial Law Administration in the Punjab of grossly mistreating women. During the Civil Disobedience movement accounts of police brutality against women were epidemic. During Bardoli Satyagraha, in the village Badmani, the peasants of the village of Badmani stopped paying taxes. The police, in their efforts to intimidate the villagers beat many people. They locked one elderly woman in a house without food or water. In Bombay, 3 young women complained that the officer arresting them,

Sergeant Mackenzie, and another police constable visited their cells after midnight and made indecent gestures. Lilavati Munshi, a leader of such sevikas made this an issue.

A huge rally was held in Bombay to protest the police decision to pick up women demonstrators, transport them out of the city and abandon them in a jungle at night. The heavy hand of the police was felt in the rural areas. It was reported that in January of 1931 the police beat 'women of Borsad' unconscious when they participated in demonstrations. Kasturba Gandhi communicated she had seen police grab women by the sari, hit their breasts and utter indecent insults. When women complained, during the course of trials each woman who presented evidence was discredited in moral terms. Moral character, as defined by the British, was the touchstone for judging the truth or falsity of the accusations. When the police asked a married woman to remove her 'thali' (sacred to a married woman) when arrested, the incident caused such a commotion that British officials had to admit their blunder and restore the thali to her.

Manmohini Sehgal became the president of the Lahore Students Union founded by Bhagat Singh in December 1929. The college authorities threatened her with suspension if she did not resign from the Students Union. Later the University withheld her degree. She was arrested many times and served sentences. Parvathi Devi, daughter of Lala Lajpat Rai was also arrested many times and imprisoned and fined heavily.

The special role sought for women in 1920s, on the assumption that women would be protected from physical violence by their sex no longer held good in the 1930s. Police lathi charged the women processionists heavily. Hundreds of women were beaten mercilessly and arrested. In Madras, police even turned a water hose on them. Two women volunteers fell unconscious and after the Madras Corporation protested, this kind of treatment was withdrawn. In police firing in October 1930, on satyagrahis breaking forest laws in

Madhyapradesh, two Gond tribal women were shot dead. Media and Congress bulletins were full of such reports. The AIWC prepared a special report on this for the 1931 session at Lahore. The number of women arrested mounted rapidly and stiff sentences were imposed on them. When in response to large scale prohibitory orders, the Congress had issued calls to court arrest, the rush to obey came from women in both rural and urban areas.

The women took part in the civil disobedience movement by breaking salt laws, forest laws, taking out Prabhat Pheris, processions, picketing schools, colleges, legislative councils and clubs. The government met these just demands with lathi charge, shooting, arrests, Section 144, Press ordinance, Unlawful Instigation Ordinance and Intimidation Ordinance. Gender was no protection. Two women had been caned on their bare backs. In Madhyapradesh three women were killed as a result of firing in connection with the defying of Forest laws. Since picketing cloth shops was illegal women had to suffer rigorous imprisonment, lathi charge and rude behaviour of the police. As a protest against the high-handed measures of the government the women in high places resigned their posts - Muthulakshmi Reddy, Hansa Mehta, Kamalabai Lakshman Rao, Miss Dickson to name a few.

Women's organizations like Ladies Picketing Board, Nari Satyagraha Committee, Nikhil Jatiya Nari Sangh and Mahila Rashtriya Sangha were declared unlawful.

In Kerala, women satyagrahis were taken by night trains to distant places and left uncared for at midnight at wayside stations. Fifty or sixty days old babies were often separated from their mothers. Abusing, beatings of women and even raping have been allowed to be practiced. A report from Andhra described nine cases of ill treatment. In Karnataka in Siddarpur Taluq, they were dragged along the road, beaten with lathis and canes and even whipped. Their saris were pulled and torn and they were abused in the foulest language.

In Samanwal village in Ghazipur district of UP an Ahir woman was shot dead when she was running away from the soldiers. In Benaras, they were dragged by their long hairs and asked to perform sit-ups; no food was given. Nine students were externed from the Benaras Hindu University for actively participating in the movement. In one case a child was roasted alive in front of his mother's eyes. They were asked to part with their ornaments and sometimes they were removed forcefully.

Out of the 104 students arrested in Lahore 22 were girls. In Amritsar the girl students were treated in a very objectionable manner. The Karachi police abused the women and took them away to far off places and released them in the middle of night. The city magistrate slapped a girl because she refused to apologise. Two girls who asked him to resign and distributed pamphlets in the court were also arrested, tried and convicted to long terms of imprisonment. During the movement in 1930-31, twenty thousand women were imprisoned. In other words, for every six persons who courted arrest, there was one woman.

Kamaladevi C. described how in 1932 she and the Captain sisters were together in the Arthur Road jail where due to overcrowding political prisoners were kept with the non-political prisoners and with criminals. Seventy-seven prisoners with four babies including fifteen ordinary criminals were locked up in a single barrack. There were no proper bathrooms and in addition they had to sweep, clean the vessels and wash latrines. 'The political prisoners objected to being kept with the ordinary prisoners...particularly the prostitutes on 'health' grounds. So we carried out some protests.' In prison, the practice of separating women depending on class background and placing them in different sections of the prison with different food and amenities, mitigated against uneducated lower and middle class women learning the ideology of the elites.

In 1932, the INC invited the India League of London to investigate charges of police brutality. Their delegation was composed of two British women, one British man, and one Indian man. Eager to discredit this delegation before its work began, British officials charged that it was dominated by 'suffragettes' and denied interviews with political prisoners. The delegation cited reliable information that women had been sexually threatened, sexually abused, beaten and raped.

Zeliang Rong Movement (1917 - 1932)

Soon after the British arrived in Manipur in 1891 they compelled the natives to pay house tax directly to the government and not to the Maharaja of Manipur. They also compelled them to supply forced labour and to provide allowances in the form of food and cash for visiting officials. Under the leadership of a young Rongmei Naga named Jadonang the 'Zeliang Rong' movement was started against the British. In 1927 he planned an underground movement and one of his trusted lieutenants was Rani Gaidinliu under whose leadership girl volunteer teams were evolved. After Jadonang was executed by the British in 1931, Gaidinliu took up the leadership. In October 1932, she constructed a large wooden fort in Pulomi village to house her armed followers who exceeded 4,000 in numbers. The Assam government directed a special force to arrest her and a reward and remittance of taxes for 10 years was announced for the person who assists. She went on making preparations to attack the British soldiers. They conducted some raids also. Finally she was arrested on 17 October 1932.

As the 17 year old girl was sentenced to life imprisonment, she remained in jail for a period of 15 years. There was a continued fear among the British officials that Jadonang cult will be revived if she was released and nothing, not even Nehru's intervention could secure her release. In jail she became even more popular and a cult figure for her people. She was released in 1947.

The Two Nupilans

After the annexation of Manipur by the British, the history of Manipur is famous for the two Nupilans (female warfare). The first Nupilan was in 1904. The house of the British Political Agent caught fire twice once in 1903 and once in 1904. Maxwell, the Assistant Political Agent ordered every village chowkidar in the Imphal valley to fetch teakwood from Kabow valley. He also asked them to collect bamboos, thatch, reeds and other materials necessary for the construction of the house. While the male members were collecting the materials, women in a group suddenly appeared and snatched away the bamboo, thatches etc. from the hands of the male members and threw them into the Nambul river. Thus, they started action against the order of the British Officers. According to another account, the people protested the order and assembled at the Khwainanband bazaar. Seeing the agitation, more than five persons were not allowed to assemble. All the women resorted to strike and bazaar was completely stopped. They disobeyed the orders and entered into the residence of the political agent and superintendent in thousands. The demonstration of women continued for several days. The army was called to restore peace. As a result many women were injured and peace was restored at last. This is known as the First Nupilan.

In 1939 was the Second Nupilan. Excessive rain had seriously damaged the standing crops, which was further beaten and destroyed by the hailstorm. A large quantity of rice was being exported and this resulted in severe shortage of rice during 1939-40. The Marwar traders exclusively controlled the rice export. More than 15,000 women demonstrated before the Darbar Hall and shouted slogans for banning the export of rice. Many women leaders like Shabi Devi, Tharo Devi, Mukhi Devi, Kumar and Apambi Devi got serious bayonet injuries. And Tengok, Khongnang, Shabi and Akbu Devi were imprisoned for 9 months in the Imphal Jail in connection with the agitation.

The women traders at the local Khwairamband Bazaar

who earned their livelihood by trading rice and paddy were deprived of their means of livelihood. The outside traders were buying all the available stocks of rice. The public were at a loss. The women traders mobilized the public for agitation against the Marwari traders. 1,000 women gathered around the Darbar office of the Maharaja on 11 December 1939. the women demanded immediate stoppage of the export of rice. They also stopped some bullock cart drivers who were to sell rice to the Marwaris and handed them to police. The women entered the Durbar office furiously and rounded up the president. Since the Maharaja was on a pilgrimage they compelled the president to get a telegraphic order from the Maharaja. Soldiers were called and 21 women were seriously injured. From 12 December the women boycotted the bazaar and it was virtually deserted for about a year. Finally the women won.

Quit India Movement-1942

By 1939, women were members and sometimes-even leaders of student associations, peasant movements and labour unions. Altogether 400 Congress men and women were jailed in 1940. By 1941 almost 20,000 had gone to jail. During the Quit India movement, thousands of women all over the country were involved, going underground, forming parallel governments, and leading illegal activities in the course of which several women were killed. The Quit India resolution spoke directly to women as disciplined soldiers of Indian freedom and attracted them to the movement. Women participated in the initial strikes and demonstrations in cities and were among the radical students who organized peasant movements. When protest was suppressed, they joined the underground.

When the movement spread to countryside, large number of peasant women and men protested against taxes, land tenure and landholder's rights. In Jammu & Kashmir, where an

underground 'national' government of Congress functioned, the Congress listed 14 cases of police rape in one of which 46 women were raped on January 9, 1943. Six hundred soldiers surrounded three villages and assaulted these women.

Bengal: During the Quit India movement, there was an upheaval in Bengal. Women were in the forefront of the procession that was organized to seize the police station, which was burnt. At Nandigram crowds of peasants tried to capture the police station. The police fired on them and the retreating men and women burnt government offices. When a large procession of men and women marched towards Mahisadal police station, the army fired on it killing 13 persons.

On September 29, people of Tamluk sub-division marched in the town with the intention of capturing the court and the police station. Face to face with the soldiers guarding the court they were hesitant. Matangini Hazra, a 73-year old widow, stepped forward, lifted the Congress flag and gave her first public speech. She was shot first in the hand holding the flag and then in the head. Matangini Hazra and Kanak Latha Barua of Assam were well known women martyrs of that period. In Contai and Tamluk, parallel Congress administration was set up. This National government kept on functioning till August 6, 1944 when it was dissolved at the instance of Gandhi. A khadi center organized by them had four thousand spinners the majority of whom were women. Vidyut Bahini was formed with men and women; they took shelter in the forest and came to the villages at night to hold meetings.

Seventy-four women of this division were raped. One of them died as a result of the assault. Women with daggers tried to offer resistance collectively which proved effective. When houses of political activists were set on fire, sometimes the women were not allowed to come out and they had to be rescued by volunteers. So women started an organization called Bhagini Seva Sangham to protect themselves. Some of them faced the soldiers and the police with weapons. Two

ladies were prosecuted under the Arms Act for drawing daggers in self-defence. At Satahata, rural women organized in Bhagini Sena Sibir (Sisters' Army Corps). Kumudini Dakua was a commander of Bhagini Sena in Tamluk.

In the severe repression several women were raped. In some villages women tried to rescue the prisoners. Women volunteers sounded an alarm by blowing conches when the police entered the village. Sabitri Devi, a prostitute risked her life to save one injured teenaged participant from the vengeance of police. During Quit India movement thousands of women were imprisoned, hundreds were raped and tortured in Midnapore, Koraput, Chimur, Azamgarh, Satara and elsewhere.

Karnataka: At Dharwar on October 23, 1942 two lady students, Hemlata Shenoliker and Gulvadi entered the District Courts and hoisted the tricolour. Gulvadi addressed the members of the Bar and asked the Judge to resign and dissolve the court within eight days, otherwise he would be tried as a traitor. When the police came Gulvadi escaped but Hemalata was caught and imprisoned for one month as she refused to pay the fine. Gulvadi again went to Dharwar Bar and addressed it again when she was arrested. Thirty-two girls were severely beaten at Kuntha Adoni. The government dealt severely with law defying students.

Maharashtra: Usha Mehta left her studies during the Quit India movement and plunged into activities like dharnas in front of liquor and foreign cloth shops and participated in numerous processions and rallies. But she was not satisfied. She wanted to do something more revolutionary. So she established a patriotic clandestine radio with the help of some friends. Though it would endanger her father's job since he was a government servant she never hesitated. All the leaders were in jail and there was censorship on papers and magazines. So she chose the radio for disseminating national ideas. Quit

India movement began on August 9 and from August 14 Usha's radio began transmission. Usha Mehta operated the clandestine radio transmitter in Bombay. The voice of Freedom began broadcasting news of resistance and arrests, profiles of patriotic young people and Gandhi's famous 'Do or Die' speech launching the Quit India movement. She had to change the place every 15 days to evade the police. It was this radio, which first brought the atrocities on the women of Chimur and Asthi villages to the attention of the world. It became the voice of the Quit India movement. Usha and her brother continued broadcasting until their arrest. On November 12th 1942 the police attacked the radio station and arrested them. Usha refused to divulge anything even under great stress. Finally she was sentenced to 4 years imprisonment. She was released in 1946 and continued her studies and did research on Gandhi's social and political activities.

The other women militant leaders of the 1942 Quit India movement were Vidyadevi Des Sevak, Lila Patil, Indumathi Dattatreya and Lilathayi. Vidyadevi was sentenced to 15 years of rigorous imprisonment for removing fishplates and other disruptive activities. But she was released in 1946 due to the pressure of the people. There was a Toofan Dal of women in Satara, which was very militant. Lila Patil who led it was arrested in 1942. She escaped from Pune jail in 1944 and continued to lead the Satara movement from underground till 1946. Indumathi who belonged to Nasik was sentenced to 7 years imprisonment with severe labour because she had led the movement from underground. Lilathayi, the nurse from Jalgaon was sentenced to rigorous imprisonment of five and half years for the same reason. On August 19, 1942 two hundred European soldiers and fifty Indian constables reached Wardha in a special train and unleashed a brutal attack. Property was looted and women were raped. Some of them were in advanced stages of pregnancy or in confinement or in menses and minor girls were also not spared.

Assam: The women of Assam province took a prominent part in the movement. On September 20, 1942 Kanak Lata Barua, a girl in her teens, marched towards Gohopon Thana, at the head of five hundred people to occupy the Thana building. They were asked to leave but she told them that they must clear out and allow people to take possession of the place. She was fired in the chest, which killed her and flag was taken by her male comrade Mukunda who was also shot dead. Many more were killed; one of the women killed was pregnant. A grandmother Bhogaswari Phoo Kanani, who defied the police and hit an official who snatched the flag from her granddaughter, was shot dead. The women's organization under Anupriya Barua and Sudhalatha Dutta visited the terrorized areas and encouraged the people and gave them courage. Women faced the military and armed police and led processions in places like Gohpur, Barapujia, Teok and Barhampur. In Tezpur also women from surrounding villages paraded the streets, sang songs, shouted slogans and hoisted the tricolour. Women were treated inhumanly when they refused to disclose the whereabouts of their relatives who were underground. Anna Prava Barua bore police torture for two long years. They would not let her or her fellow inmates to even sleep properly.

Aruna Asaf Ali was the most spectacular woman leader of this movement. She became a leader of the underground movement in 1942 and was forced to remain in hiding until 1946. In 1941, she courted arrest by offering individual Satyagraha and was sent to prison but she was soon released. Within hours of the AICC's Quit India resolution, top ranking leaders were arrested. She decided she would not again tamely enter jail by offering Satyagraha. During her 3 ½ years of hiding, Aruna was constantly in motion, urging people to 'liberate' the land from foreign rule. Aruna and her associates sabotaged the war effort. Aruna claimed she advocated planned dislocation of war effort but not wanton destruction. Even when the Working Committee condemned the violence in 1945, Aruna wrote that she would not repent for their actions because they acted with noble intentions.

In 1940, **Sucheta Kriplani** was chosen to organize a women's department of the INC. The tasks of the department were to study the disabilities of India Women, recruit women to Congress, coordinate and guide the activities of Congress women and maintain contact with other women's organizations. Clearly this new development intended to co-opt the functions of the national women's organizations and place women under the control of INC. Hardly had it begun work, Sucheta was arrested and imprisoned for 2 years. After being released she went underground but unlike Aruna she advocated the non-violent path.

In contrast to 1930, when women were asked to wait until men completed the march to Dandi, and then assigned special duties, in 1942 women fought alongside men and suffered the same consequences.

Role of Muslim women in the National Movement

Of the Muslim women who participated in the freedom struggle Bibi Amman was the most famous in the 1920s. She was the mother of the legendary Ali brothers of the Khilafat movement. She lost her husband at a very young age and her whole family was part of the movement. She toured a lot and gave speeches advocating Hindu-Muslim unity and education for women. She was the president of the Allahabad Mahila Congress Meeting. She declared that all freedom fighters were like her own sons and discarded the purdah in a public meeting. She collected huge amounts as funds. She said that even Indian dogs and cats couldn't be slaves to the British. The British described her as a 'dangerous rebel.' She died on November 24th, 1924. Till her last breath she was active in the national movement.

Maulwi Hazrath Mohani's wife Begum Hazrath Mohani was active along with her husband in the national movement.

When he was sent to jail many times she withstood all the economic and social difficulties and encouraged him to carry on in her historical letters to him. She worked for Hindu Muslim unity and education for women. She wrote many books. Later she became active in workers movement. Till her death on April 3rd, 1937 she was active in the workers movement.

Mohammad Ali's (one of the Ali brothers) wife Amzaadi Begum went along with her mother in law and collected huge amounts of funds. Though her husband was sent to jail many times she was not disheartened. The British special reports mention her name and activities. She even toured with Gandhi. When differences arose between Gandhi and Ali over Kohat communal riots, she withdrew from Congress. She died in 1946.

Maulana Abul Kalam's wife Zulekha Begum won the praise of her husband and others by bravely carrying on her husband's tasks when he was jailed. He was in jail for nearly 10 years during which time she not only looked after herself but also helped other fighters' families and kept up the nationalist spirit in them. She was very sick but that did not deter her activities. Even in her last days the government did not allow Kalam to visit his wife. She died without meeting him on April 19th, 1943.

Zahida Khatoon Sherwani began writing from the age of 10. She was active in the freedom movement and worked for social reforms also. She gave lot of importance to women's freedom. Her poems full of anti-British sentiments were brought out as books. She died at a young age. Zahida felt that women should not be away from politics and she inspired many young women to join politics through her own practice.

Begum Khurshid Khwaja was from Hyderabad. Inspired by Sarojini Naidu, she entered the movement. She discarded purdah after marrying Barrister Khwaja Abdul Mazid. She was the UP representative in the National Congress Subject

Committee. She ran a Khadi Bhandar. She launched and edited a nationalist magazine called 'Hind' and was active in non-cooperation movement. Her husband was the head of Jamia Milia Islamia University. When he was arrested she ran this institution, which was a hotbed for nationalism.

Begum Saukat Bano was born in a wealthy family in Amritsar. She began writing poems at a young age. She married the 'hero of Jalianwalabagh' Dr. Saifuddin Kichulu. Her poems inspired the fighters and so won the ire of the British.

Daughter of a wealthy family of Bihar and daughter-in-law of a wealthier family Zubeida Begum gave up her everything for the freedom movement and led a pauper's life in her last days. She entered politics by participating in Khilafat movement. Her husband Maulana Safi Dawoodi, a freedom fighter was arrested during non-cooperation movement. Zubeida who was still wearing purdah immediately went to the Congress Party office and took up his responsibilities. She went along with her daughters in a special horse-drawn carriage propagating Swadeshi and burning foreign cloth in the villages. She participated in many meetings with her husband. She also held special meetings with women and inspired them to join. Though she was sent to jail and lathicharged many times her spirit did not die. She started a school in her house for the students who left foreign schools as part of non-cooperation movement. She was also a good speaker.

Sugana Khatoon of Osmanabad was married at 13 years of age and widowed at 19. She plunged into the national movement as soon as she came back to her maternal uncle's house. She boycotted foreign cloth and participated in rastarokos in front of foreign goods shops. In those days widows were not allowed to wear chudidhar. But Sugana wore chudidhar, kurta made of Khadi and also defied customs. Her act of giving away her 50 tola of gold as fund for Khilfat movement when Bibi Amman came and her patriotic speech

inspired many women to give large amounts in funds. This had created a sensation. Her essays in the magazines 'Hamdam', 'Zamindar', 'Humdard' etc., were a sensation.

Women from wealthy families like Muneera Begum, Ismat Ara Begum became strong sympathizers of the movement and gave away their wealthy possessions as funds without batting an eyelid and inspired others to do the same. Mebari Begum was well known for her fiery speeches during the Non- Cooperation movement. She especially inspired women, urging them to make the male members of their families participate in the movement.

Fathima was the first Muslim woman of Delhi to be convicted. She was arrested for participating in a rally, commemorating Jallianwala Bagh Diwas in 1931. She refused to participate in the trial. But the British conducted the trial without her and sentenced her to 6 months jail and imposed a fine of 50,000 rupees. Refusal to pay fine entailed another one and a half year jail sentence.

Amathussalaam and Aamana Qureshi were with Gandhi in his ashram and went to jail many times. Begum Rehana was a good singer and sang in many meetings. She was arrested during Quit India movement and sentenced to one-year severe punishment. Fatima, wife of Badruddin Tyabji participated in Dandi Satyagraha and went to jail twice during Quit India movement. Hameeda Tyabji was lathicharged many times. Once the British tried to trample the women with horses. Hameeda was injured in this attack but did not step back. She went to jail twice.

Ameena Tyabji, daughter of Badruddin Tyabji was active in the movement from a young age. She was elected the President of the committee to boycott foreign cloth and liquor in 1930. She led dharnas, rastarokos, and pickets with these demands in Gujarat and served as a role model.

Begum Sakina Lukmani, was active in boycotting foreign cloth and liquor. Once when she was picketing in front of a shop selling foreign goods the British arrested her. She was sentenced to 4 months severe imprisonment and a fine of hundred rupees. People were angered at this and they came onto the streets demanding her release. Since she was 65 years old people said –“if you stop our mother, the daughters are ready, arrest us, sentence us.” The government had to cut down the severe punishment.

Shafathunnissa Bibi, wife of Habin Ur Rehman suffered at the hands of British due to her husbands' and sons' activities. Once when they were in jail, the police ransacked and destroyed her house. Her daughters' earrings were also not spared. Since she was a purdahnashi woman she had to tie torn saris in place of walls and lived with her two daughters there.

Fathima Ismail was active from childhood in the Swadeshi movement. She conducted exhibitions with Swadeshi goods. She also encouraged education for women and adult education. She went underground during Quit India movement. Sultana Hayathi Ansari from her childhood addressed Congress meetings and recited poems in them. She served the fighters injured in the police attacks and formed a women Seva Dal for this task. She formed another special women squad for collecting information on British police movements to send to the fighters and to act as couriers between them. They also indulged in many activities creating disturbances against the government. These women carried small daggers with them. Sultana Ansari was against forming separate Muslim girls association and advocated Hindu-Muslim unity.

Hazara Ahmed was married to a police official in 1929. But because of her national sentiments she couldn't continue with him and took divorce in 1932. She went to London where she came under the influence of Communist ideology through

some Indian friends. She participated in many international seminars, meetings etc. She was in touch with an Italian International Conference. Her anti-imperialist, anti-war speech at an international seminar was memorable. As part of an Indian Student delegation she visited Russia in 1935 and became the first Muslim woman to do so. She came back in 1935 to India and worked as a teacher. She was active in organizing the first progressive writers meet along with Sajjad Jaheer. With Party's approval she married Ahmed. Both were active in Communist activities. According to the Party's will, she joined the National Congress and participated actively in all its activities. She also organized women. She worked for Hindu-Muslim unity. In 1940, she and Ahmed quit Congress and joined the Communist Party.

Sufia Som was born in a poor family. She was the President of the All India Congress Mahila Seva Dal and rendered great service to the people. Khan Abdul Gafar Khan praised her services in his autobiography. Safia Abdul Wajid, born in a well-educated family was very well educated herself. She imbibed progressive ideology from childhood and participated in the freedom movement with her husband. She was removed from her lecturer job for this. According to Gandhi's wish she discarded her purdah and became a full time activist.

Khatoon Begum, wife of Ghanse Baig Sahem did not go to jail. But two times she sold her gold to pay the fine imposed on him and then she vowed never to touch gold again. She was completely sympathetic to the movement and lost 23 acres of fertile land also in the process. Her husband was part of the famous Chirala-Perala no-tax payment movement.

The daughters of Professor Abdul Rahim, Zaheera Begum and Sultana Begum were the first Muslim women to be arrested in Bengal while picketing in front of shops selling foreign goods. Hasina Begum born in an ordinary family in Calcutta was active in the movement from childhood. She was arrested

during Second World War for her anti-British activities. Even after getting released she continued her activities.

Kaniz Saujida Begum was born in a freedom fighters family. She addressed many meetings during the Khilafat movement and won acclaim as a speaker. A young Muslim woman gave Khudiram Bose shelter. Her name is unknown, she was known as Khudiram ki didi everywhere. She was the sister of revolutionary Maulvi Abdul Hamid. She even tried to meet Khudiram in jail amidst severe repression.

Role of prostitutes during Freedom movement

The story of Azizanbai of Kanpur is a valiant one. She fought against the British force on July 4, 1857 with the help of her Tawaif brigade and was killed by the firing squad that was closing in on Nana Saheb and Tantiya Tope. Putlibai of Meerut played a role in the 1857 revolt. Along with her colleagues she inspired many jawans of third Bengal Cavalry to revolt against the tortures inflicted by the British rule. Many of them like Gauharjaan gave large amounts as donation to the cause of freedom struggle and some like Jaddanbai gave shelter to the revolutionaries.

Laithabai of Benares left her profession in 1931, spun charkha and wore only khadi and collected funds for Congress. She sang in mehfiles only when the organizers were ready to pay a good sum, which she donated, to the Congress. Vidyadhari Bai of Benares and Chandaparee of Pune/Hyderabad wrote many patriotic songs and performed to the general public in princely states all over India. Husnabai of Varanasi founded and presided over the 'Tawaif Sabha' and inspired several women of her profession to participate in the freedom movement in the 1920s.

Imaambandi of Lahore dared slap a native CID officer of the British police when he assaulted a young prostitute while enjoying refuge in her 'kotha' in the guise of a pseudo

revolutionary. Imaambandi was tried and imprisoned for several years. After her release she initiated herself in social service and started publishing an Urdu journal against the tyranny of the British Raj.

Firozabibi and Alikenry of Calcutta were highly educated and contributed by collecting money at the call of C.R.Das and Gandhi in the 1920s.

The Hindu Code Bill

In the early 40s the AIWC spearheaded the campaign for Hindu personal law reform. By 1945, the AIWC had formulated an 'Indian Women's Charter of Rights' which embodied their suggestions for personal law reform- equal inheritance rights for women, monogamy, divorce rights, consent of both partners for marriage, inter-caste and inter-faith marriage and equal rights of guardianship over children. All these demands were incompatible with Hindu tradition and provoked a great controversy and brought women of the AIWC in direct confrontation with the Hindu revivalist Brahmins within and without Congress. Yet it was the persistent lobbying of the AIWC that got the British government to set up the Rau Committee to prepare a draft reform law for Hindus which came to be known as the Hindu Code Bill, which was later radicalized by the Ambedkar Committee in the late 40s.

The Hindu Code Bill had its origin in a legislation which took effect in the year 1937. Ever since that year the provisions of this Bill have been bandied from one side to the other, from committee to committee. For instance in the year 1941, the Home Department appointed a Committee to consider some of the difficulties that arose out of the Women's Rights to Property Act of 1937, to report upon the difficulties and to suggest remedies. This Committee which is known as the Rau Committee made its report on the 19th June 1941.

In 1939 Hegde introduced his resolution on a committee

to investigate the effect of various personal laws on women. In 1941 and 1944, the government established a Hindu Law Committee to look into the question of codification. Again in 1942 Rau Committee submitted two draft Bills, one on succession and the other on marriage. The Hindu Succession Bill was introduced in the Assembly in 1943. That was referred to a joint Committee of both Houses. That joint committee again invited public opinion and a volume of them were collected and circulated to the then legislature in existence.

The Hindu Code Bill was debated during 1943-44 in the Central Legislative Assembly. The strongest opposition centered on the divorce provision, but a majority of witnesses opposed all the major sections of the draft Hindu Code and the very idea of codification. Most representations from the women's organizations supported the draft Hindu Code. In addition to the AIWC these included the NCWI, WIA and Bombay organizations such as the Gujarati Stri Mandal and Seva Sadan and Calcutta organizations such as Nari Siksha Samiti and The All Bengal Women's Union. The AIWC held a Standing Committee meeting in May 1941 to draft a statement to Rau Committee and answer its questionnaire. Representatives of both the NCWI and WIA attended the meeting. The women's movement statement protested against the absence of women in the scope of the Committee. In the AIWC journal *Roshni* it strongly pressed for a Hindu Code in which men and women would have equal rights in inheritance and marriage. Specific AIWC demands focused on equal rights in inheritance, marriage, and guardianship, requirement of the consent of both parties for marriage, prohibition of polygamy and legalization of divorce.

This Bill sought to codify the law relating to seven different matters.

The new provisions in the code were these: First, the abolition of birth-right and to take property by survivorship. The second point was giving of half-share to the daughter.

Thirdly, the conversion of the women's limited estate into an absolute estate. Fourthly, the abolition of caste in the matter of marriage and adoption. Fifthly, the principle of monogamy and sixthly the principle of divorce.

According to the code, the property was held by the heir as his personal property with an absolute right to dispose it of either by gift or by will or any other manner that he chose. One change was that the widow, the daughter, the widow of a pre-deceased son, all are given the same rank as the son in the matter of inheritance. In addition to that, the daughter also is given a share in her father's property; her share is prescribed as half of that of the son. The only new change which this Bill sought to make, so far as the female heirs were concerned was confined to daughter; the other female heirs have already been recognised by the Hindu Women's Right to Property Act of 1937.

The second change which the Bill made so far as the female heirs were concerned was that the number of female heirs recognised was much larger than before.

The third change made by the Bill was this that under the old law, a discrimination was made among female heirs, as to whether a particular female was rich or poor in circumstances at the death of the testator, whether she was married or unmarried, or whether she was with issue or without issue. All these considerations which led to discrimination in the female heirs were now abolished by this Bill. A woman who had a right to inherit gets it by reason of the fact that she is declared to be an heir irrespective of any other considerations.

Another change related to the rule of inheritance was that before, the father succeeded in preference to the mother; under the Bill the position was altered so that the mother came before the father.

It consolidated the different categories of stridhan into one single category of property and laid down a uniform rule of succession. All stridhan was one and there was only one rule of succession. The son also was now given a right to inherit the stridhan and he is given half the share which the daughter takes.

It was provided that while the daughter was getting half the share in the father's property, the son was also getting half the share in the mother's property so that in a certain sense the Bill sought to maintain an equality of position between the son and the daughter.

Under the Hindu Law where a woman inherited property she got only what was called a ' life estate '. She could enjoy the income of the property, but she could not deal with the corpus of the property except for legal necessity; the property must pass after the death of the woman to the reversioners of her husband. The Bill, here again, introduced two changes. It converted this limited estate into an absolute estate just as the male when he inherits gets an absolute estate in the property that he inherits and secondly, it abolished the right of the reversioners to claim the property after the widow.

The property which was given as dowry to a girl on the occasion of her marriage shall be treated as a trust property, the use of which will inure to the woman and she is entitled to claim that property when she comes to the age of 18, so that neither her husband nor the relations of her husband will have any interest in that property; nor will they have any opportunity to waste that property and make her helpless for the rest of her life.

Generally, under the provisions of the Hindu law, a wife was not entitled to claim maintenance from her husband if she did not live with him in his house. The Bill, however, recognised that there are undoubtedly circumstances where if the wife had lived away from the husband, it must be for causes

beyond her control and it would be wrong not to recognise the causes and not to give her separate maintenance. Consequently the Bill provided that a wife shall be entitled to claim separate maintenance from her husband if he is (1) suffering from a loathsome disease, (2) if he keeps a concubine, (3) if he is guilty of cruelty, (4) if he has abandoned her for two years, (5) if he has converted to another religion and (6) any other cause justifying her living separately.

Comparing the rules of marriage contained in the Bill and the then existing law, there were three differences which the Bill made. One was that while the existing law required identity of caste and sub-caste for a valid sacramental marriage, the Bill dispensed with this condition. Marriage under the Bill was to be valid irrespective of the caste or sub-caste of the parties entering into the marriage.

The second provision in this Bill was that identity of gotrapravara was not a bar to a marriage while it was under the existing law. The third distinctive feature was that under the old law, polygamy was permissible. Under the new law it was monogamy which was prescribed. The sacramental marriage was a marriage which was indissoluble. There could be no divorce. The present Bill made a new departure by introducing into the law provisions for the dissolution of marriage.

The Bill also provided that even though the marriage may be invalidated and may be declared invalid by a court of Law, the invalidation of marriage will not affect the legitimacy of the children born and they would continue to be legitimate just the same. Under the Code, it will be necessary for the husband if he wanted to make an adoption to obtain the consent of his wife and if there were more than one, at least the consent of one of them. Secondly, it also lay down that if the widow wanted to adopt, she could only adopt if there were positive instructions left by the husband authorising her to adopt.

When Ambedkar presented the Bill some members said that there was public opposition to the bill. Ambedkar answered this with great vision. 'Much has been made of the fact that there is a great deal of public opinion which is opposed to this Bill. I have certainly not weighed the opinions that we have received but I do like to say this, that this is hardly a question which we can decide by counting heads. This is not a question which we can decide in accordance with the opinion of the majority. When society is in a transitory stage, leaving the past, going to the future, there are bound to be opposing considerations: one pulling towards the past and one pulling towards the future and the test that we can apply is no other than the test of one's conscience. I have not the slightest doubt in my mind that the provisions of this Bill are in perfect consonance with the conscience of the community, and I have therefore, no hesitation in putting forth this measure although it may be as a matter of fact that a large majority of our countrymen do not accept it'. But all this fell on deaf ears.

Ambedkar was aware that this bill did not consider men and women totally equal and it was not completely ideal. When Hansa Mehta raised questions about the inequality he candidly answered thus:

'Mrs. Hansa Mehta raised several questions indicating that the women and particularly herself were not satisfied with some of the provisions contained in the Bill relating to the rights of women. It may be that in an ideal sense the Bill does not come up to expectations. But I would like to tell her that she must remember that this society is an inert society. The Hindu Society has always believed that law-making is the function either of God or the "Smriti" and that Hindu Society has no right to change the law. That being so, the law in Hindu Society has remained what it was for generations to come. Society has never accepted its own power and its own responsibility in moulding its social, economic and legal life. It is for the first time that we are persuading Hindu Society to take this big step and I have not the slightest doubt in my mind that a society which has bucked up courage enough to tolerate

the large step that we are asking it to take by reason of this Bill, will not hesitate to march on the path that remains to be trodden and reach the goal that she has in mind'. But the parliament did not allow the society to take this first big step and killed the bill.

The AIWC campaigned extensively for this Bill but they were no match for their orthodox Hindu opponents who took the issue to the streets by organizing marches of sadhus through the Hindu Mahasabha and demonstrations of Marwari women through the Marwari Chamber of Commerce. Only the Communists were able to organize mass demonstrations in support of the Bill. The revivalists argued that giving women inheritance rights would lead to fragmentation of property. And the granting of divorce rights would break up the family. The Hindu Code Bill was vehemently opposed from within the Congress and the fledgling national government by such stalwarts as Rajendra Prasad and Vallabhai Patel, whose orthodox sensibilities were further aggravated by the fact that it was an untouchable and a Buddhist- Dr. Ambedkar - who was trying to reform the Hindu law. The AIWC, having no support amongst women of the lower castes and classes or the minorities, was not able to muster up enough mass support for the Bill.

Women who opposed the Hindu Code were from orthodox associations including the Hindu Mahasabha or from aristocratic families. Other individuals who testified against the Code represented the Marwari Chamber of Commerce, orthodox groups and sections from minority religious groups such as Sikhs. The Hindu Code in 1945 was an issue, which clearly divided the educated elite. The opponents argued that it would lead to fragmentation of property and that divorce would have an adverse impact on society. In spite of the opposition the Rau Committee published a report endorsing the draft code and submitted 'the Hindu Code Bill' (a revised Draft) to the legislative assembly in April 1947. Post 1947 a majority of the Congress parliamentary party members also

opposed the bill. Opponents to the bill were very vitriolic in their attack. Ayyangar claimed that allowing women to inherit would lead to marriage going out of currency. Chatterji, Hindu Mahasabha leader, commenting on the prohibition of bigamous marriage pointed out that the Act would encourage the conversion of Hindus to Islam.

The Hindu Code Bill was first presented on 11 April, 1947 by Ambedkar. The Bill was introduced for a second reading, on 17 September but the delaying tactics continued. Jayasree, a woman MP and Dr, Kunzaru strongly supported the bill. Padmaja Naidu supported the bill with all her might. Hindu leaders like Pandit Madan Mohan Malviya were canvassing for the opposition in and out of the house. The discussion lingered. The Speaker of the House also helped the members in their delaying tactics. There was no hope of progress. Ambedkar was severely attacked on the fourth provision of the bill regarding divorce. Some called him a Manu of Kaliyuga. Later provisions of the bill never came up for discussion. Nehru let the issue die during the session in September 1951. Nehru retracted on his promise and bent over backwards to please the Hindu patriarchal society. Ambedkar felt this was the last straw and resigned from the Cabinet on 27th September 1951 in protest. He said that the Bill was unduly delayed for four years and that it was ultimately killed. He said, 'There in a society ridden with class and gender inequality, without touching the Hindu religion, seeking redress by continuously enacting economic laws, is ridiculing the constitution and building sand castles'. It was only in 1955 that the Bill was pushed through after taking away many of the progressive parts in the Bill.

Gandhi and Women

Gandhi failed to understand that oppression is not an abstract moral condition but a social and historical relation, related to production relations. Gandhi reformulated a

construct of contemporary womanhood: the reformulation itself being mediated by his class, caste and religious ideologies. His construct is drawn from a space inhabited by an urbanized middle class upper caste Hindu male's perception of what a woman should be. Though Gandhi did introduce a dynamic concept, that of politics, in his model of social role for women, he did not revolutionize the assumptions on which the middle class reformers of late 19th century perceived women. Those reformers believed in the doctrine of the separate spheres' whose roots were in biology. Gandhi not only accepted these assumptions but he extended them to fit his own perspective relating to the participation of women in politics. The introduction of spinning wheel as a political symbol becomes an instrument for the women-in-the home to participate in political life from within the home. The woman as 'mother' who had 'innate' 'natural' capacities for 'wiseness', 'strength', 'courage', 'patience' and 'intuition' now becomes the symbol of the new political message and its strategy of non-violence.

But since politics cannot be restricted necessarily to the home, this created within the Gandhian ideology an irresolvable tension. So by 1930, women came out in large numbers to perform Satyagraha. He reconstructed a new model of women extracted from the received image of a Hindu widow living on the periphery of the society. She can perform service to the nation only if she turns her back on sex, reproduction and family life.

Swadeshi and spinning was not only an effective strategy for increasing the involvement of women in the national struggle but it also made possible their involvement without shifting the terrain of the movement and struggle from the household. He knew swadeshi couldn't be successful without women's involvement since they 'look after the children' and 'take decisions regarding dresses'. Fight for swadeshi now became her 'dharma'. Gandhi is now creating a new arena of

domination for women that is the domestic sphere. He wishes to affirm and emphasize the crucial role of the women in the household as against her activity outside. He believes that within the household women are protected, and if they go out to work they have to put up with all sorts of indecent jokes and abuse.

There ought to be no need for women to work. 'They have plenty of work in their own homes. They should attend to bringing up their children. They may give peace to the husband when he returns home tiredly, minister to him, soothe him if angry and do any other work staying at home. It is not for our women to go out and work as men do. If we send them to factories, who will look after our domestic and social affairs? If women go out to work, our social life will be ruined and moral standards will decline ... I feel convinced that for men and women to go out for work together will be the fall of both. Do not, therefore, send your women out to work, protect their honour, if you have any manliness in you, it is for you to see that no one casts an evil eye on them....'

'... a wise mother only finds her time fully occupied in looking after her household and children.'

'Men and women are of equal rank, but they are not identical. They are a peerless pair, being supplementary to one another. Man is supreme in the outward activities of a married pair, and therefore it is in the fitness of things that he should have a greater knowledge thereof.'

Women's weakness is now turned into strength. He sees this as part of the same strategy and as embodied in the conceptions of Satyagraha and ahimsa. He refuses to understand the reasons for the weakness of women. All these show his middle class urban leanings. It is the women from this class who attend his meetings and whom he is addressing. In Gandhi's view prostitutes cannot get married. His ideology based on sexual exclusiveness cannot permit the prostitutes

to enter into the system of marriage and make it impure. But if they do not live in 'sin', they have a role to play in the movement, as sanyasins.

When he hears the news that C.R. Das's wife and sister are arrested he shows his agitation at the problem of protection of honour and chastity. He soon reconciles himself and affirms that this step is inevitable for it is now 'the honour of their sex to step into 'male places.' 'Honour' now is defined as that act by which women follow their husbands' footsteps.

He was critical of child marriage and propagated the remarriage of child widow but he was not that enthusiastic of the remarriage of adult widows. 'The real remedy is for men to take a pledge that they will not remarry.' It is only when a widow 'cannot restrain herself' that she should have the freedom to remarry for it is better 'to marry openly than to live in sin'. 'A real Hindu widow is a treasure. She is one of the gifts of Hinduism to humanity', 'God created nothing finer than the Hindu widow.'

Sathihood, for Gandhi, means the realization of purity through 'renunciation, sacrifice, self-discipline and dedication to the service of her husband.' If Gandhi doesn't want the woman to mount the funeral pyre on her husband's death, he wants her 'to strive to make her husband's ideas and virtues live again in her actions in this world'.

He insists that 'man is the breadwinner. Whatever the race, family life is the first and greatest thing. Its sanctity must remain. Upon it rests the welfare of the nation... no state can survive unless the sacred security of the house life is preserved.' He affirms his belief that marriage should take place only within particular varnas and condemns intercommunity and inter-varna marriage. 'Brahminism I adore. I have defended varnashrama Dharma.'

Sex and reproduction can only be possible within the boundaries of marriage and sex outside marriage is impure.

That is why when the dancing girls of Barisal are being made Congress members, he objects vehemently. These women are 'more dangerous than thieves.' 'The latter steal material possessions, the former steal virtue.'

Even before the Dandi march had started Kasturba had led a group of volunteers in a satyagraha. Gandhi was very disturbed by this active participation and within a few days came out with a special message for the women. They should not join the civil disobedience movement for they will be lost in the crowd and when they are so lost, there would be no suffering for which they are thirsting. Gandhi asks them to picket against foreign cloth shops and liquor shops. He argues that they do not have 'brute strength' but 'moral power' and this is suitable for them.

Marriage, he says, 'is only for those who want children.' The norm defining marriage is restraint. On the one hand, the male is considered a highly sexed individual and on the other the female, it seems does not have sexual needs and is a model of restraint. Gandhi's ideology denies women a sexual life and simultaneously imposes on her the role of a mother, which in turn posits to her a certain role in the family organization and thus in society.

Gandhi defines the woman's essence as the lack of 'sexual need', a sense of 'restraint', combined with 'courage', 'patience' and 'suffering', a universal mother. This essence in turn makes her 'the incarnate of Ahimsa'; a person who gives intimate love and 'has infinite capacity of suffering' and therefore can also become 'the apostle of peace.'

Gandhi is said to have unleashed the hidden energies of women in a big way. True, never before in Indian history have women come out in such large numbers on the streets and participated in movements braving inhuman lathi charges, jails and tortures. Since women responded in a big way to the calls given by Gandhi some people argue that his role in the

liberation of women is pioneering and great. They are even ready to ignore the heavily Hindu and male chauvinistic views of Gandhi on women. Is it true that Gandhi was the mentor of women's liberation in India? Does he represent the specific path of women's liberation in the socio cultural context of India as some claim?

In fact, what Gandhi did was to divert all the energies of women into a purely reformist programme and relegate them to a traditional role of the Hindu society. It was a period of awakening of the Indian women in the political arena. Due to the various socio economic and political changes, which followed the British rule, many women came forward to assert their rights in all the spheres including the political sphere. They were emerging as a political force in all movements. That women responded in great numbers is not to the credit of Gandhi. They were actually responding to the times. Their energies would have been better channelised if there had been a better leadership of the communist party leading the new democratic revolution as in China. Instead their energy was spent in the futile act of spinning charka and picketing liquor shops. Whatever militant acts the women took up were largely done by defying Gandhi's dictates. By siding with the landlords whenever peasants rebelled Gandhi had actually worked against the interests of the toiling classes, which was naturally detrimental to the peasant women. So broadly we can say that the diversionary non violent politics of Gandhi was from the beginning aimed at putting power in the hands of the comprador big bourgeoisie and the big landlords. This militated against the liberation of vast masses of peasant and working class women because there is no liberation for women unless these exploiting classes were overthrown. And regarding patriarchy also Gandhi's views did not liberate women in any sense and only reinforced the feudal patriarchal views on women. Gandhi was very shrewd and could gauge the latent rage within women and their potential to fight and the urge in them to be armed in the face of the mighty British.

So he cleverly diverted all their energies into the non-violent agenda of his and reaffirmed their traditional role. His leadership pushed back the women a few more years in achieving their liberation. As his leadership obstructed the new democratic revolution in India, it was also detrimental to women. And Gandhi did not hide his views regarding the traditional role of women, which explain in clear terms what he wanted women to be. Some quotes of Gandhi are cited by those who see him as the harbinger of liberation for women, which appear to be advocating women's equality. But when we see the entire text within its context and peruse all his writings and moreover look at his practice, it is very obvious that he never intended true equality of men and women. So it is one the tasks of the women's movement to counter the arguments of these people who eulogize Gandhi as the liberator of Indian women.

The trauma faced by women during partition is the gruesome example of what the comprador bourgeois leadership of INC and Muslim League gave women of this sub continent. Not liberation but innumerable suffering and humiliation and abuse, which left a permanent scar on the psyche of the women and girl victims.

Gandhi's supporters say he was not for partition and even laid down his life due to his opposition. But partition was a game played in connivance with the British by the comprador bourgeoisie of the present India and Pakistan. Gandhi was just representing the interests of these ruling classes and nothing less. He along with the comprador leadership of Congress and Muslim League was fully responsible for the untold sufferings of the people and especially women during partition.

Women began asking for their rights before they were brought into the nationalist agitation. The women involved in the women's movement, connected their arguments about women's rights to women's obligation to perform traditional roles and serve the needs of the family. Although some scholars credit Gandhi with bringing women into public life, the fact is that they

were already there; though Gandhi gave them a blue print for action, he at the same time assured their husbands and fathers that these politically active women would not rebel against the family. Women's demands for equality with men were never fully integrated into the nationalist programme.

By the 1940s women were part of all movements, conservative and radical and began to view themselves differently. Increasingly they began to borrow from more radical ideological frame works, especially Marxism and its offshoots.

5

Women National Revolutionaries

The rise of the national revolutionary movement in Bengal and elsewhere in the 30s revealed the simmering indignation of the radical youth against British rule. Girl students and women participated with great fervour in this movement and their actions inspired a whole generation.

There were scores of women who fought the British as bravely as the men national revolutionaries. They were young, mostly from a petty bourgeois background and did not bat an eyelid when they had to sacrifice their youth or lives for the liberation of the country. Many were the armed attacks carried by these women alone and along with their male comrades on the British. Their names sent a shiver down the British spines and the people of India took great pride in the actions of these brave daughters.

From the end of 19th century many armed groups kept the armed tradition of opposing the British alive and women were integral part of almost all these groups. Some like the Chittagong women became legends. The activities of these women national revolutionaries ranged from giving shelters to comrades, making bombs, transporting arms and ammunition to leading the actions. They firmly believed that the British couldn't be defeated and sent back through the Ahimsa path of Gandhi and that only by armed resistance could they be defeated.

Though some of these women were from various states in North and Central India, the breeding ground was Bengal

(then East and West), which had a rich tradition of such armed resistance to the British. There were colleges and some organizations, which were fully dedicated to the cause of independence and it were these colleges, which produced remarkable women leaders for these organizations. They trained the women in various physical and armed activities and ensured a continuous flow of recruitment to these groups.

By looking at the lives and activities of some of the remarkable women of that period we can gauge the role of women national revolutionaries.

In the first phase, i.e., from 1905 to 1920 we find women like Nani Bala Devi, Dukdi Bala Devi, Kshirada Sundari Chowdhury and Sushila Mitra who were actively supporting and propagating the national revolutionaries' cause. A schematic survey of Bengali women's radical resistance to the Raj may be appended to the Curzonian partition of Bengal (1905) that spearheaded widespread revolutionary upsurges with men at the vanguard and women in the rear. Ill-equipped to make overt appearances in militant politics in the face of inevitable social ostracism and political harassment, women had to limit themselves to covert participation within the narrow confines of dead weight traditions in this first phase. Outside in revolutionary circles, male perspectives, rigid rules and regulations and modes of operation hindered direct participation by women in acts of violence. Among the restrictive factors were elements of strict secrecy within parties, a puritanical emphasis in brahmacharya, rigorous intra-organizational discipline and insurmountable hazards involved in direct operations. Prior to 1920, there was no radical organization for women, no formal recruitment of women into the parties and no mingling of the sexes on an equal footing.

In the first decade of the 20th century, their participation broadly took three forms; the ability to inspire those within and outside the kinship nexus to patriotism; sympathetic support, individual and collective; and limited participation

within the framework of the family. Mataji Sarojini Devi inculcated patriotism in youthful hearts of both sexes in Barisal. Binodebala Devi supported her brother Jatindranath Mukherjee of the Yugantar. Radharani Devi gave full support to her son Jibantara Haldar of Anushilan. A large number of women attended a meeting chaired by Bipin Chandra Pal in 1907 and applauded his radical overtures. The considerable popularity of Suprabhat among urban middle class women reflected their substantial interest in revolution, subtly projected by its editor Kumudini Mitra.

Jagattara Devi gave asylum to fugitive revolutionaries at her residence in spite of repeated police harassment and searches. Bagalasundari Devi not only sheltered, but also helped absconders flee by scaling backyard walls during police raids. Kailashbashini hid Mauser pistols on her body in the guise of a pregnant woman and threw live cartridges into a steaming pot of dal to save her son from arrest. All this without taking her husband into confidence.

1910-1920

Between 1910 and 1920, women were involved in a wider range of activities. For the first time in the history of Bengal, women absconded and were convicted for participation in revolutionary activities. Sans organizational support, familial assistance, and socio-political sanctions, these fearless and unacknowledged heroines who unobtrusively nurtured the secret movement paved the way for successive generations of women rebels.

Noni Baladevi (1888-1967) was a young widow of 16 and plunged into the freedom movement due to the influence of her relative Amarendranath Chattopadhyay, a leader of the revolutionary Jugantar Party. She began to keep house for those who were plotting to help the Germans against the English. Such was her conviction that, breaking the feudal customs

which shackled her mind, she would pose as the wife of a freedom fighter to smuggle letters to him in jail, or rent accommodation for him without attracting the attention of the police. She collected funds and transported important materials. For many days she evaded the police. They even announced a reward for her head. She gathered information about hidden Mauser pistols from condemned activist Ramachandra Mazumdar of the Yugantar, lodged at Presidency Jail. She sheltered fugitives at Rishra and Chandannagar.

She went underground and fled from place to place in rural Bengal to escape detection. She even went to Peshawar. There she contracted cholera and was arrested. She was the first and only woman State Prisoner under Regulation III of 1818 (1917). She was subjected to inhuman tortures at the hands of British police but not a word escaped from her mouth. Even in the jail she fought the inhuman treatment of the jail authorities. Once she was on a 21-day hunger strike for the sake of another revolutionary Dukdi Bala Devi. She withdrew the strike only after rigorous labor of Dukdi was reduced.

She got released in 1919 under the General Amnesty but was still hounded by the police. As she was a widow and yet had posed as a wedded wife, her family rejected her. She lived in great poverty till her death.

Dukdi Bala Devi: She was born in 1884. Her father was a sympathizer of the revolutionaries and Dukdi came into contact with them as they were taking shelter in their home. She learnt to read and write and even learnt to wield the lathi and to use firearms from a revolutionary. She was married to Phani Bhushan Chakravarthy who was also a sympathizer. They hid arms and ammunitions in their home. They became involved in Atmannati Samiti's Rodda operations. In January 1917 their house was searched, in which 7 pistols were recovered and she was arrested. She was the first woman rebel to be sentenced to two years' rigorous imprisonment under Arms Act (1917).

Untold tortures were inflicted but they could not elicit even a word from her. They did not allow her to keep her baby boy who was still suckling with her. She was sent to jail with two years imprisonment. In the jail she was made to work so much that Nanibala undertook a hunger strike for her sake. She was released in 1918.

Kshirada Sundari Devi: She was born in 1883 and was widowed at the age of 32. She began giving shelter to the Yuganthar Dal revolutionaries. In due course she went underground along with them. They had to change many places because the police were after them. Many were the famous revolutionaries of that time who got shelter in her house. Once they had to flee the police and so went to the tribals. They lived with them in the thick forests of Assam for 2 months. Though the police arrested her she misled them by giving them proof that she was on pilgrimage and they had to go back leaving her. The details of all her adventures of the years 1916- 1917 are known through her memoirs written when she was 73.

Sushila Mitra was born in 1883. Her father was a revolutionary sympathizer. She came into contact with Yuganthar Dal after marriage. Her husband's brothers took her help for setting up a safe house for the revolutionaries of the Indo-German sedition case. She also collected funds for them and acted as a courier. She was arrested on January 26, 1932 for hoisting the flag illegally and sent to six months imprisonment. There she refused to sign a bond, which stated that she would not participate in the freedom movement anymore. She continued her activities after getting released and later associated herself with the CPI.

1920-36

From 1920 to 1929 there was a steady flow of women's recruitment in to the national revolutionary groups. From 1930

to 1936, mainly after the electrifying effect of the Chittagong raid, participation of the women in direct actions became the norm.

In this phase, for the first time in the history of Bengal, female youth power appeared, with an intellectual approach to militant nationalism and a distinct identity of its own. Rebel women were sceptical about the creed of non- violence as a political weapon against colonial oppression. Extremist ideology spread rapidly through private conversations, circulation of prohibited literature and contacts between novices and *dadas*.

Among the educational institutions that pioneered female activist leadership in Calcutta, Bethune Collegiate School was the alma mater of rebel recruits. Radicalism in Bethune reached a high pitch in a successful hartal on 3 February 1928, the first of its kind in a government college for women, in support of all India Simon Commission boycott programmes. Many schools and colleges of Calcutta and Dhaka emulated the Bethune College where embryo rebels matured in preparation for direct action. Numerically women rebels from East Bengal were superior.

In Calcutta, post graduate students of the Calcutta University, Kalyani Das, Surama Mitra and Kamala Dasgupta pioneered the establishment of Chhatri Sangha (1928). It aimed at the political, intellectual and physical growth of its members for full- fledged participation in student movement against the Raj, at par with male counterparts. It aimed at preparing female students for extremist activities. Less conspicuous but not less effective, some student bodies like the Comilla Chhatri Samiti under Pratibha Bhadra and Parul Mukherji, the Tripura Zilla Chhatri Sangha led by Santi Ghosh and the Barisal Shakti Bahini of Santisudha Ghosh, helped the dissemination of radical thought in distant mufasil belts. These associations through selective recruitment and rigorous training, brought women to the threshold of direct revolutionary operations.

The first overt manifestation of female militancy occurred at the momentous sessions of Calcutta Congress in December 1928 when 128 female volunteers who formed the Women's Volunteer Corps organized by G.O.C. Subhash Chandra Bose, under the leadership of Col. Latika Ghosh paraded in public in full uniform. In May 1929, the Chhatra Sammelan of Chittagong was converted to Chhatra - Chhatri Sammelan to accommodate women students, signifying equality of the sexes in political protest movements. At the All Tripura Students Conference in May 1931, attended by more than 1,000 women, Bose openly declared that brave youth should resort to violent methods as a political weapon and requested 'every man and woman, and especially the womenfolk, to carry daggers'. Direct recruitment of young girls into the Gupta (secret) Samitis marked the formal recognition of womanpower in armed revolution. The pattern of role allotment to female recruits within the different groups was largely determined by the particular ideology of a group.

Anil Roy of the Sree Sangha was the first to recognize the necessity of drawing women into the party as members. The principle of gender equality was strictly observed within the ranks of the Deepali Sree Sangha. Ramesh Acharya of the Anushilan, Akhil Nandi and Rasiklal Acharya of the Yugantar, Purnendu Dastidar of the Chittagong Revolutionary Party (C.R.P.), Nikhunja Sen of the Bengal Volunteers (B.V.) played crucial roles in building up the women's sections of their respective parties. Women revolutionaries themselves took considerable initiative in the formation of female task forces in the Samitis. Prafulla Nalini Brahma of the Comilla Yugantar, Protibha Bhadra of the Comilla Anushilan, Induamati Singh of the C.R.P., Renuka Sen of the Sree Sangha and Kamala Dasgupta of the B.V. successfully motivated and recruited women cadres for intra-organizational underground work. In each revolutionary fraternity, the women's wing was structured hierarchically, the cell in-charge being responsible to the leader of the group of cells who in turn directly reported

to the chief at the apex. Within the cell structures women were allotted specific work schedules according to their aptitude for a particular assignment.

Deepali Sangha and Lila Roy: Lila Roy and twelve others of Dhaka University founded the Deepali Sangha in 1923 in Dhaka. It was founded with the aim of developing the individuality of women by imparting them education. It also had the special goal of training them for revolution. The Deepali Sangha had ten or twelve branches in Dhaka alone.

Lila Roy was an avowed revolutionary who influenced many to become revolutionaries through Deepali Sangha and 'Jayasri' was the magazine she edited. When her husband Anil Roy was arrested for participating in the Chittagong raid she also took up the task of running 'Sree Sangha' another revolutionary organization founded and run by him. Her elevation as the leader of Sree Sangha was a unique instance of a woman in complete control of a rebel group in India. Despite her indisputable leadership qualities, her selection met with vehement opposition from the male members of the party and in a storm of raging controversy the dissenters broke away to form Bengal Volunteers. She took up the challenge. Setting aside constructive social work, she endeavoured to improve the organization by laying equal emphasis on the development of both male and female units for action oriented extremist programmes. These included arrangements for making indigenous bombs, collection of arms and ammunitions, creation of party arsenals, fund-raising campaigns, establishment of secret asylums, circulation of seditious pamphlets, rapid expansion of the branches of the Samitis and coordination with diverse revolutionary groups. Police records registered that between 1930 and 1932, more than twenty-six daring exploits were undertaken and the Sree Sangha went on to become 'one of the most formidable terrorist organizations of Bengal'.

The members of Deepali Sangha were instrumental in

carrying arms, ammunitions between Dhaka and Calcutta. The legendary Preethilata of Chittagong was also a product of Deepali Sangh. Lila Roy herself was arrested on December 20, 1931. She was released after six years. She went on a hunger strike two times inside the jail for the demands of the inmates.

Bina Das and Kalyani Das were two sisters who were active in the student organizations. Kalyani, the elder sister was a well-known revolutionary leader. She led the students in many agitations against the British. On the one hand, she was active in boycotting foreign cloth and participated in dharnas processions etc. during Civil Disobedience Movement, and on the other hand she helped the revolutionaries clandestinely in many ways. She was arrested in 1933 and sentenced to long years of imprisonment. But she was released in 1937 during the short Congress rule and resumed her activities.

She influenced her sister Bina Das and she also became active. Bina Das was in the forefront in boycotting Simon Commission and was one of the Women Volunteers Dal at the Congress conference at Calcutta. On February 6th 1932 she shot at Governor Stanley Jackson who was giving a convocation speech at her University. She was sentenced to 9 years rigorous imprisonment. In the court the young Bina read out a 3-page statement, which gives testimony to the national and revolutionary feelings of the young generation in those days. It is a historical document in itself.

Santi Ghosh and Suniti Chowdhary were 15 years old each when they shot dead Tripura district Magistrate Stevens who was already threatened by the national revolutionaries because of the atrocities he was perpetrating. The two girls went to his heavily guarded bungalow and on the pretext of getting his signature for help in the swimming competition they went straight into his room and shot him dead. This brave act of these teenage girls shook the whole nation. It showed how even school children hated the British. Since they were too young

they were not sentenced to death but were sentenced to life imprisonment.

Ujjwala Majumdar was a member of 'Bengal Volunteers'. After the Chittagong raid there arose in Bengal many revolutionary groups with the aim of taking revenge on the British and this was one of them. Ujjwala and her comrades planned and carried on an attack on the Governor of Darjeeling Mr. Anderson on 8 May 1934. The action team got away safely. But within a few days Ujjwala was arrested along with Shobha Rani, a member of Yuganthur and sentenced to 14 years imprisonment.

Suhasini Ganguly, Shobha Rani Dutt, Vimal Pratibha Devi, Charuseela Devi, Parul Mukherji, Usha Mukherji, Pratibha Bhadra, Helena Dutt, Prafulla Nalini Brahma, Meera Dutt Gupta, Santisudha Ghosh, Indrasudha Ghosh, Vanalatha Dasgupta, Jyotikana Dutt, Renu Sen, Saroj Das Chowdhary, Kshirodh Prabha Viswas, Kamala Chatterji, Nirmal Chakravarthi, Leela Kamal, Sarmishta Ghosh, Amitha Sen, Vanalatha Sen, Kiran Chakravarthi, Maya Ghosh were some of the innumerable women comrades who were members and organizers of Anushilan Samiti, Yuganthur Dal and scores of other revolutionary groups in Bengal and North India during the 1920s and 30s.

Many of them got physical training and learnt to use firearms. They learnt to drive various vehicles. One or two even learnt flying. They wielded the lathi, knife etc, exercised regularly and practiced to run fast. Some of them took part in armed actions. Some of them built up the organization. All of them read revolutionary literature. They acted as couriers and transported revolutionary literature, documents, arms, ammunitions in the midst of heavy police repression. In the beginning police did not suspect women but later it became very dangerous even for women to carry them. They hid revolutionaries and nursed the injured ones. They went to jails

posing as their relatives and sent secret messages to those in jails. Many of them were arrested, tortured and sentenced to rigorous punishments for many years. (Several of them got released in 1937 during the short period of Congress rule.) Some of them died due to torture and harsh jail conditions. After getting released from jails some of them continued their activities in the Congress led movements. A few joined the Communist Party. Some became social workers.

Chittagong Heroines

The most famous of the Chittagong heroines were Kalpana Dutt and Pritilata Wadedar. Both were friends from childhood. Priti was one year older than Kalpana. Both were attracted to the movement when they were in Chittagong. Kalpana went to Calcutta and Priti went to Dhaka after finishing high school. Kalpana went to the gym and learnt to wield the lathi and knives. Priti became a member of Dipali Sangha and learnt to wield lathis and knives and even learnt martial arts. She prepared herself physically for the battles to come. They both participated in the 1929 Chittagong Congress women's conference held under the leadership of Surya Sen. (Congress served as the cover for Surya Sen and other leaders of Chittagong armory raid). Kalpana and Priti did not get membership in the Indian Republic Army founded by Surya Sen because he was against women becoming members. Only later did he relent due to the women's persistence, their actual heroic role in doing many risky jobs and persuasion of some male leaders like Nirmal Sen.

After the Chittagong armoury raid was conducted it became very difficult for young men to move about, do any work or carry risky material with them. So now this task fell on young women like Kalpana and Priti who did this job excellently. Priti became a messenger between the comrades in jail and the leaders outside. Since Kalpana was a chemistry student she bought big amounts of various chemicals and she

started a workshop at home to manufacture dynamite. The big garden in her house was just suitable for training with weapons and target practice. Within one year they both were recognized as leaders.

Once when Priti was with Surya Sen and some other leaders in a den belonging to a poor household of Savithri, a widow, there was an encounter with the police. Nirmal Sen died in the incident. Then Priti decided that she has definitely to lead some actions and was adamant till she got permission. She learnt to use firearms some days back. She led a 7 member team and raided the Pahartali European Club on September 24th 1933. An Anglo- Indian woman died, 4 women and 7 men were injured in this raid. In the pamphlets they had thrown there they wrote that as part of their revenge they would kill all English people. Priti who wanted to prove that women are also capable of sacrificing their lives for the country and thought that her act would inspire many women to join the movement, took cyanide on her way back and died on the spot. A pamphlet with her last message and her photo was distributed widely. This message stands testimony to her steadfast determination and her eagerness to involve women in the struggle on an equal footing with men.

Kalpana who was also to take part in this raid got arrested just before the raid and was released in November. Giving a slip to the police continuously watching her she went under ground. She became an organizer along with her male comrades. When Surya Sen was arrested Kalpana was also with him but she could escape. She became a prime target of the police and won the name of 'Agni Kanya' (Woman of Fire). But she undauntedly went on organizing people. At last when she was taking shelter in a house she got arrested. Since she was just 19 at that time and since she was a woman she was not sentenced to death. She was transported for life.

Apart from these two brave women there were scores of women especially in Chittagong who wholeheartedly became

a part of these groups and were ready to risk their lives for the cause.

Indumathi Singh was the elder sister of Anantha Singh one of the leaders of the armory raid. She knew about the raid as she was helping them in many ways. She fought hard with the leaders to be made part of the raid. She even wrote a letter to Surya Sen challenging the men- 'in what way am I inferior to men? I can wrestle, use firearms and drive a car. Just because I'm a woman will I become inferior?' But at that time Surya Sen was against taking women and she was not given a chance. But she helped them in all the ways she could. Even when Anantha Singh surrendered she continued with the movement. She used to keep the arms and ammunition intact and prevented them from getting rusted etc.

Premalatha, wife of Kalikinkar Dey, one of the accused of the raid case, had become involved in his activities after marrying him. She learnt to make bombs and guncotton and to wield firearms. Kalikinkar was arrested. She was also to take part in the Pahartali raid but after Kalpana's arrest she was sent back. She was adamant and went back only after Surya Sen promised to give her another chance. But later all the leaders of IRA either got arrested or were martyred. Her husband was sent to Andamans for 10 years imprisonment. She became isolated with no organization members to work along with and so committed suicide.

Suhasini Ganguly who gave shelter to these comrades was arrested and was tortured very severely. Her nails were pulled out. But she withstood all these tortures without revealing anything and played an exemplary role in jail also. Savithri who gave shelter to Surya Sen was arrested and lost her ailing son due to police brutality. Many Muslim women also bore the brunt of the repression for sheltering the revolutionaries.

Ashalatha Sarkar: Though the British bestowed upon Asha's father the title Rao Bahadur it was her mother who had imbibed

the spirit of freedom in her by telling her stories of freedom fighters even when she was just a baby. Finally Ashalatha left home as a teenager and joined the IRA. Ashalatha admired Surya Sen a lot and was very fond of him. Andrew Collins was the British officer who was appointed to arrest Surya Sen. Ashalatha was determined that she would not allow it and at the tender age of 14 she killed him. The British government sentenced her to life imprisonment. She was released ten years later in 1938. The most inspiring thing about Asha is that even after seven decades at the age of 93, she is still active in her support of the struggles of the peasants of Singur who are fighting the revisionist ruling gang who are out to grab their lands. Those who heard her speech in Singur were left speechless at the courage of this 'old lady'. Her words that death only comes once, so why should we fear it reverberated in Singur inspiring awe among the younger lot. She urged them not to surrender and continue their battle against the rulers and assured them that she would be visiting them regularly to support them. This undaunted spirit of hers is directly a legacy from her Chittagong days when 'they vowed to fight injustice' and she says she would never forget it! It is indeed this spirit of Chittagong heroines which continues to inspire the struggling women of India even today.

Women Revolutionaries of HSRA

Durga and Sushila were part of the National Revolutionary group called Hindustan Socialist Republican Army whose most famous member was Bhagat Singh. Durga was the wife of Bhagavathicharan, a prominent member of the group. She had given shelter to a number of revolutionaries and was affectionately called bhabhi meaning sister-in-law by all. After a notorious police officer Sanders was killed she acted as Bhagat Singh's wife and helped him to escape under the very nose of the police. On May 28, 1930 Bhagavathicharan died when a bomb exploded during manufacturing. Though it was a big blow to her personally she withstood bravely and

went on working for the organization with the help of her comrades.

She transported weapons in the guise of a Marwadi woman by concealing them inside her saree. Once there was an explosion in one of their bomb factories and everybody had to flee. At that time the British police seized all of Durga's property. Her son was three years old and there was an arrest warrant on her. She had a tough time hiding in various places evading arrest. Even then she tried hard to get Bhagat and his comrades released who were arrested by then. She collected money for the case. She even met Gandhi and asked him to get their death sentence cancelled. She gave away her son to somebody to look after. She decided to kill the Bombay Commissioner. She went to his bungalow and fired on four Britishers. They were injured but the Commissioner was not among them. She escaped safely. Chandrasekhar Azad died in a police encounter and a few days later Bhagat Singh, Rajguru and Sukhdev were hanged. Durga who was very close to them could not recover from the losses immediately. Since their organization did not revive itself fully, later she went to Ghaziabad and worked as a teacher and took part in freedom movement and social work.

Sushila studied in Kanya Vidyalaya from 1921 to 1927 where she imbibed national feelings from Lajjawathi and Shanno Devi. She wrote many patriotic songs at that time. The one she wrote when Lala Lajpat Rai was arrested was published and became popular in Punjab. She met Bhagat Singh and his friends in an inter collegiate meet. They gave them some clandestine pamphlets to distribute which she and her friends promptly did. It caused a furore but they were not caught. In 1927 when she was writing her exam she came to know that the Kakori revolutionaries were sentenced to death and she immediately gave away all the gold, which was kept for her marriage to fight their case. She failed in her exams and took up job as a teacher and became active in revolutionary activities

of Bhagat Singh's group. She even worked with Lala Lajpat Rai for some days and gave him shelter. She was affectionately called didi (elder sister) by all. She not only gave shelter to many revolutionaries including Bhagat Singh and Azad and collected money but also did reconnaissance work for the action on the Viceroy as planned by HSRA. She boldly went into the train by dressing herself as an aristocrat woman and got the full details of the coach the Viceroy was to travel in. She formed a cultural troupe to collect money for Bhagat Singh's case. She dressed as a Sikh man and worked in a bomb factory, which they had to flee after an explosion. She also underwent many kinds of hardships in underground life but never wavered. Only after the losses and the group could not revive itself did she choose to marry. She continued to take part in freedom movement and social work.

The other women who had participated in the activities or helped the Hindustan Socialist Republican Army were Mrinalini Devi, Sunithi Devi, and Maya Devi. All of them had given shelters to the revolutionaries and hid weapons and ammunition. When they were caught they were sentenced to imprisonment. Prakashvathi who later married Yashpal of HSRA was also active in the group. Sridevi Musaddi, Santha and Sakunthala who were Sushiladi's sisters, Lakshmidevi and Savithri the mother and daughter for whom Sushiladi worked, Lila and Swadesh who were sisters were some of the women who took a lot of risk and helped the revolutionaries in many ways. Premavathi who ran away from her house and Dr. Sushila who defied her husband and helped the revolutionaries were two other names associated with the HSRA activities at that time.

Kumari Lajjawathi, Shanno Devi: After boycotting British government schools national schools were established for the education of children of patriots. The most prominent among them were Lahore National College, Ahmedabad's Gujarat Vidyapeeth and Jalandhar's Kanya Mahavidyalaya. Their role

in churning out many national fighters is well acknowledged. Lajjawathi as the Vice Chair of the college imbued national feelings among the girl students of her college. After the Jallianwala Bagh massacre she felt she had to stop her helping role and plunge into direct activity. So she left her job and joined Lala Lajpat Rai. At the same time she continued her sympathetic role with the revolutionaries. Revolutionaries like Bhagat Singh and Sukhdev were given shelter in her house. She arranged for money and shelters for them. After they were arrested she met Gandhi asking him to work for their release. She even helped in their plan to escape, which never took place. After her, Shanno Devi took up the responsibility of the college. True to her role as a successor she also imbued the students with love for their country and a will to fight for its independence. After 1947 she continued to do social work and became a minister in Haryana.

Bela Mithra the niece of Subhash Chandra Bose was born in and also married into a political family. She organized Mahila Samithy in Jessore. When Netaji split from Congress and formed another Sabha she was elected as the commander of Nari Vahini at the age of 19. After Netaji escaped from house arrest her husband formed a new revolutionary organization and she was part of that. They were transporting weapons and even ran a clandestine radio. Later Haridas joined the Azad Hind Fauz. He was among the 21 who were sentenced to death after their defeat. She campaigned as part of the movement to get these sentences cancelled and later due to this powerful movement their punishment was changed to life imprisonment. They were released in 1947. She worked in the relief camps during partition and died in 1952.

INA- Rani Jhansi Regiment

Ever since the formation of The Indian Independence League on January 16, 1942, at Kaula Lumpur the Indian women in East Asia helped to further its cause. In March, 1943, the women's section of the League was inaugurated.

Mrs.M.K.Chidambaram was elected the chairperson and Saraswathy as the secretary at Singapore. Lakshmi Sehgal was appointed the secretary at the Headquarters. These ladies toured the various parts of Malaya, Thailand and Burma to open branches and to enlist volunteers. Ultimately all branches of the League started a women's section. The work of the women was for the most part collecting funds and providing amenities to the soldiers. But with the arrival of Subhash Bose there came a revolutionary spirit in the organization.

From the days he was in Congress, Subhas Chandra Bose always encouraged women's participation in the freedom struggle. He always appreciated their initiative. Even when he formed the Azad Hind Fauz he was very clear that women would also be soldiers in that army. In his first speech addressing the soldiers and the Indians about the formation he announced that if women do not participate in war by joining the army then the struggle would be incomplete. He expressed his wish to form a women's regiment in the name of Jhansi Laxmi Bai.

Dr. Laxmi Sehgal was inspired by the speech. She along with some friends mobilized 20 women, took training along with them in marching and shooting and presented a guard of honour to Netaji. Netaji was very impressed and the very next day he had a talk with Laxmi and asked her to work for the formation of the regiment and take up the responsibility of it. Laxmi agreed. 15 out of 20 women who gave the guard of honour agreed to join and immediately their training began. Netaji and the other officers who gave them training looked upon them as their equals and very much a part of the army like themselves. From Penang, Ipohi and Kaula Lumpur Laxmi recruited members for the regiment. When Netaji announced the formation of an independent Indian government in exile, Laxmi was made the minister in charge of women.

A women's camp was started on October 23, 1943, in Singapore, which was followed by many more in Malaya and

Burma. They were given training in nursing, social service and general welfare work. The military part of the training consisted of drill, weapon training, tactics, map reading and general subjects. They were trained to use all kinds of weapons and even to wield swords and daggers. The women soldiers wore uniforms and had to observe strict discipline. They were taken on route marches and covered even 40 miles at times.

There were 150 women in the regiment and they all took military training. When the women in Khaki dresses with guns slung on their shoulders marched on the roads, people looked at them in wonder. Many Malaysian women asked to join (i.e. those who were born to an Indian or married to an Indian). But Netaji did not think it proper to recruit them.

In Rangoon 400 women soldiers and 100 female nurses completed their training. They were given equal training with men. The Japanese who first disapproved of a women's regiment, after seeing their military skills came to accept and appreciate it. Eight women were made commission officers after written tests and practical tests. Two women from the regiment died in bomb attacks. Laxmi was arrested and became a prisoner of war.

Though the regiment did not get the chance to participate in combat, due to the end of the war even before it was sent to the battlefield, its very formation is very significant in the history of Indian independence struggle. This was the first women regiment of that time and the very concept that women should be part of the army in those days was revolutionary. The immediate response from women to join and undergo the hard military training and their eagerness to fight and die in the battle for their motherland will remain an inspiring saga. By proving themselves to be equal to men in all tasks assigned to them in the army they even broke the patriarchal notions among men about women. Though Netaji took the help of the Nazis and Japanese Fascists who wanted to play the same role as the British in India if they won the war and helped him

with the same purpose, he wanted to use them for the ultimate aim of making India independent. He rejected the ahimsa marg of Gandhi and chose armed struggle and even build up an army with patriotic Indians. The overwhelming support to INA soldiers when they were sentenced to death and the mass movement built up to get those released shows the love and confidence which they won from the people for their patriotism. The enthusiastic participation of women shows that there were always women who wanted to fight the British as soldiers. It is tragic that none of the leadership, which chose the armed way, had a scientific understanding about revolution. So we find even these women also drifting away under their leadership and choosing to work with either the Congress or the CPI.

Glorious role of National Revolutionary Women and their limitations

The women national revolutionaries underwent all kinds of hardships and were no less committed to the cause than their male counterparts. But since the national revolutionary groups themselves were fired with petty bourgeois idealism and did not have a scientific understanding about the socio economic factors behind colonial rule or a scientific way of carrying on the armed struggle i.e., with the mass involvement of people all those groups fizzled away after the leaders got arrested or killed. Though Bhagat Singh came to embrace Marxism during his jail tenure he was hanged. The Chittagong leadership took the necessary step of going into the rural areas and tried to build up a movement with the help of the people but again we find that the leadership was trying to carry out some sensational actions instead of steadily building up a mass movement or arming the people. If the CPI had a programme of armed struggle it could have attracted a number of these revolutionaries into its fold. So a situation arose wherein a number of these petty bourgeois idealist groups carried out

some sensational actions separately but could not really put up a challenge to the British rule in a united manner.

The women carried out all the tasks, which were planned by the revolutionaries very bravely and were always more than ready to sacrifice their lives for the independence of India. But they could make a place for themselves in the groups only after fighting the patriarchal tendencies in the male leadership. Though the male revolutionaries were from the beginning ready to take the help of women and even widows for their cause they were not inclined to give them leadership tasks. It was only through their persistent fight and actually proving their mettle that they could earn the confidence of the leadership. This could be seen clearly in the case of Chittagong revolutionaries. After the disruption of the groups most of the women and those who were released after serving prison sentences carried on their work in the freedom movement led by Congress or just social work. A few joined the CPI. The suicide of Priti in order to inspire thousands of people to join the movement is in tune with the thinking of the national revolutionaries of the time. They could not think beyond that.

Though much is not written about them or taught in schools it was a remarkable achievement that they could inspire many people to join the national movement with their daring deeds and commitment in their times. They carved a niche in the people's hearts permanently.

6

Role of women communists

The communists were the first to give a scientific historical materialist explanation for women's oppression and to call for their total emancipation. They organized in a totally different way from all others drawing in thousands of women into direct militant action in the peasant rebellions led by them. They organized the basic masses of workers and peasants along with attracting a huge number of petty bourgeois women. From the beginning they worked to increase the participation of women workers in unions as can be seen from the involvement of women from textile mills in Sholapur and Bombay in the AITUC unions. The communists first formed women organizations of their own – the Mahila Atma Raksha Samiti in Bengal, the Andhra Mahila Sangham and the Punjab Women's Self Defence Leagues – all of which went in for mass work and whose respective membership reached 43,000, 20,000 and 13,000 by 1944, mobilizing women and girl students.

Activities of Girl Students between 1938 and 1947

The movement for the release of the armed revolutionaries, termed 'terrorist' by the British, started gaining momentum and women too began to be drawn into this. A number of them had been released in 1938, but there were still many in jail. Women of all political opinions, including those who had become communist or had communist leanings, joined in the Release Political Prisoners campaign. The Communist women, although their Party was illegal, began

growing in strength. When the agitation for the release of the Andaman prisoners reached its peak in 1938, women students participated in large numbers. But they had not come in large numbers into an organization like the AISF (All India Students Federation) where the predominant membership was of men students. So it was decided in the AISF to set up a Girl Students' Committee.

In 1940, women students from all over India came together at Lucknow. This was the first ever all India meet of Women Students. Sarojini Naidu inaugurated the Conference. After the AISF national conference in Delhi and the formation of Girl Students Association after the Lucknow Conference, work began in right earnest to organize girl students not only in Bengal, but in Bombay, Punjab and other places as well.

The girl students were almost the only educated cadres they had among women and they never isolated themselves from the problems affecting women. In almost all the areas, the main organizers of the women's movement were the young women students (militant) who did not compartmentalize the two movements. There was a section of opinion among them, which held that they should work only among students, which, later culminated in the girl students association being wound up and the girls being directly organized in the AISF.

There was no separate organisation for women students in Punjab, but a women's section of students was formed, they conducted study circles where communist leaders spoke. They distributed illegal literature in the rooms of girls. The women students' organization grew in Lahore and Rawalpindi also. In 1941, there was a big demonstration of 20,000 Delhi students among whom there were a large number of women demanding the release of Andaman prisoners and other leaders in jails. They started organizing various sections including municipal teachers. Under the shadow of war, long queues for food started. Sheila Bhatia wrote stirring songs to bring her message

to the women in queues. The women students participated in many dramas on topical issues. Side by side study circles found wide popularity.

In Bengal, there was a huge gathering at the girl student's conference held in Jessore. Almost all these young girl student leaders had to fight hard with families, even to the point of having to leave their homes in order to continue the mass work. In 1940, Kanak Mukherji was externed by the British government and Kalyani Mukherjee carried on her task. In 1941, when the Patna Students' Federation Conference took place, there were 50,000 members of the girl students' associations. Strong units grew up in Calcutta, Chittagong, Barisal, Patna, Rajshahi, Bankura and other places. In October 1942, two months after the legalisation of the Communist Party, a provincial women's front of the CPI was formed in Bengal. It conducted door-to-door campaigns to rouse women to take part in the freedom struggle.

During Second World War there were cases of atrocities on women by the British 'tommies' and American GIs who had come to guard the Indo- Burman front. When such a case occurred in Noakhali, women gathered signatures and sent a memorandum to the Viceroy. Since there was wartime censorship women had to find out and report such incidents. There was Japanese bombing on some areas and people began evacuating. In the midst of all the panic the women organizers did door to door campaigns about food scarcity, protection from Japanese bombing and defence of motherland from Japanese bombing. Many women became members of area samitis. After Soviet Union was attacked by Germany in the Second World War, the communists world over took a stand to support the Allied Forces of which Soviet Union was a part. In India since the British were part of the Allied Forces the Communist Party took a stand not to oppose it as it thought it would jeopardize the war efforts and would prove detrimental to the Soviet Union. Since the Quit India movement was

launched at this time and the communists took the stand of not opposing the British they had to face a lot of abuse from Congress and the people. Because of this stand women also faced attacks, sometimes physical attacks too. There was severe anti-communist backlash and they were dubbed anti-national.

The women staged many plays, wrote many songs on Soviet victory on Nazi Germany. With a lot of effort at last they could make women form samitis in their areas. They could not move far from their homes but could move in their neighbourhood. Many became active workers in Mahila Samiti.

Activities of MARS

Seven self-defence committees of women had come up in Barisal district of Bengal by 1942, where first aid and lathi training were imparted to women. Women's self-defence committees were formed in Bally and Chinsurah of the district of Hooghly, and in Maheshtala of 24 Parganas. Closed door meetings, prabhat pheris, poster exhibitions and meetings were held at various places. The movement drew women from the peasantry, the slum working class as well as the middle classes. Need for coordination and proper organisation arose. So it was decided that an organizing committee of the Mahila Atmaraksha Samiti (MARS) (Women's self-Defence League) should be set up. About the same time 'The Women's Emergency Volunteers' was formed with Pamela Bankurt of the Friends Ambulance unit as secretary. As the food crisis developed this corps worked in the villages and did remarkable work.

The activities of MARS spread rapidly to all districts of Bengal and even to interior villages. There were 3 main planks of the women's movement in this period. First, defence of the country, second, release of the leaders and formation of national government and third, defence of the people from starvation deaths. By May 1943, the Nari Samiti in Chittagong

had 3,600 members organized in 36 primary committees. Ten women's squads undertook regular propaganda for defence and for food. After the Surma Valley and Shillong MARS Conference 600 new members were enrolled in the MARS and 15 primary committees were formed from its inception. The MARS in West Bengal carried the 'Release Gandhi' campaign right into the rural areas. Hundreds of women were mobilized in various meetings. A Muslim women's self-defence Committee was also formed under the leadership of a young communist Nazimunissa Ahmed. It mobilized 500 Muslim women for the release of Gandhi. They taught women that the terrible sufferings of the people in famine or in war could never be solved unless they had a popular government for which the release of national leaders headed by Gandhi was necessary. And a national government must replace the present one, propped up as it was by the British.

As the war approached India's borders, a frightening food crisis began to engulf India. All essentials of life - food, cloth, medicines, coal - everything disappeared. It is estimated some 3 million people died in Bengal. Of these the most vulnerable were women and children. The number of brothel inmates increased from 20,000 to over 45,000.

From September 1942 onwards Communist women started working in the bastees of Calcutta and among rural poor. In Calcutta, Patna, Rangpur, Barisal and Dinajpur districts, women were the first to start famine relief work. The traders manhandled and misbehaved with the women in big queues. So, women volunteers saw to it that women were served properly.

On March 17, 1943, 5,000 women marched to the Assembly to demand food and to protest against the exorbitant rise in prices. This first ever hunger march to the Assembly was organized by the Calcutta Mahila Atmaraksha Samiti and Muslim Women's Self-Defence League. They finally made the government order 100 bags of rice to be distributed then and

there. It was one of the first militant actions of women, which stirred the city of Calcutta. From a purely middle class movement of women, the Calcutta MARS had moved out to the working class housewives and had spread its message to the village poor. Their rallies and demonstrations finally brought rationing to Calcutta.

Numerous hunger marches were held under the leadership of MARS all over Bengal. Cloth crisis precipitated. People were in rags and the plight of women was too heart-rending. MARS was everywhere guiding women to fight for the necessities of life. It was fully engaged in relief work. Various conferences were held and the leadership elected in almost all districts. MARS spread everywhere in every district. Girl students came voluntarily and stood in the forefront of organizing the movement. The need for a central organisation was felt. On May 8, 1943 the first provincial conference of MARS was held. Delegates came from all 21 districts of united Bengal. It was called the All Bengal Mahila Atmaraksha Samiti. Then it had 22,000 members.

MARS units in all the districts became active in famine relief work. They opened and ran gruel kitchens. For them 'before anything else, the battle to save life had become all important'. Any small help was accepted to give a morsel of food to the dying.

Epidemics spread like wild fire. MARS cooperated with others doing medical relief work and in spite of severe financial constraints, several district units of MARS set up clinics and even hospitals. The Mahila Samiti came forward not only to deal with epidemics, but to save the thousands of women left shelter less and guardian less.

MARS defined its programme thus:

The first stage was to agitate and make people aware of the oncoming famine, pressing government to bring down prices,

introduce rationing. Hunger marches and demonstrations were organized and thousands of women participated.

The second stage was not to stand by looking helplessly as people died, but to organize gruel kitchens, force government to open more kitchens, undertake de-hoarding operations wherever possible and identify the black marketers.

The third stage was to be the struggle for shelter and rehabilitation of those women rendered destitute and homeless. It included the struggle to save women from falling into the clutches of procurers and becoming prey to prostitution. The battle for cloth also had to be fought.

By the time the 2nd conference of the MARS was held in Barisal in May 1944, the Samiti through its ceaseless work against famine and epidemics had become one of the biggest mass organizations of women with a membership of 43,500 and branches in every district. Women from Congress and Muslim League were invited to the district conferences held prior to this and also to this provincial conference, and some of them have also been elected to posts in Executive Committees. MARS claimed that it never wanted to tread the narrow sectarian path of being only a communist women's organization, but strove to be an organization of the wide masses of women of all opinions.

At the beginning of the Conference news of Gandhi's release was announced and there was thunderous clapping as MARS had vigorously campaigned for his release. The Conference expressed its happiness at the reconvening of Rao Committee for amending Hindu Civil Law. It also welcomed the introduction of a bill in the coming assembly enforcing monogamy and also the resolution to check prostitution to be introduced in Bengal Legislative Assembly. It opposed the Government of India's approval for employing women in underground coal mines. The Conference demanded stringent measures for punishing those who traded in women's flesh

and also demanded the rehabilitation of such women in society. In the resolution on food, rationing was demanded. A resolution was also adopted protesting against the attacks on women workers. It demanded strong defence against the onslaught of fascism, especially Japanese fascism that was already bombing our country.

After the Barisal Conference rehabilitation of women who had been reduced to destitution and fallen prey to prostitution was taken up side by side with relief. The MARS decided to observe the week of June 10 to 17, 1944 as the week of: 'Restore and Rebuild Social life.' All branches were to bring pressure on government and agitate for the opening of work centers and shelters for destitute women, to demand the stepping up of medical relief, to continue agitation for more milk centers and the opening of childcare homes. Government effort under the British was all too inadequate. In this period, MARS activities were fully into helping run the rehabilitation centers opened by various organizations and opening some centers by itself.

On July 7, 1944 the government announced that out of 500 workhouses, only 60 would remain by August and others would be closed down. It meant that not more than 30,000 out of the 65 lakhs who were still surviving, would find food and shelter after this date. Though MARS also had to shut down some centers due to the order, it continued helping destitute women as far as their funds allowed. 50 women and children picked up the threads of a new life due to MARS help and Renu Chakravathy asks, "Was this not a patriotic task especially when the government was so callously closing down homes and shelters?"

In April 1944 the All Bengal Mahila Atmaraksha Samiti unitedly with other women and relief organizations formed a joint committee to save these shelterless women from prostitution. This was called Nari Seva Sangha. The main work

of this organization was to open homes and handicraft centers in different districts.

Nari Seva Sangha opened handicrafts manufacturing centers for women and held exhibitions with the products manufactured by the women. Many people wondered at the dedication and sacrifice of the women who faced ostracism from their families, slanders from opponents, and economic deprivation and yet worked hard to build up with such zealousness organizations such as MARS and other organizations set up with its initiative. Communist women held training schools to help them to become devoted workers in the service of the people.

A provincial training center of Communist women activists was held in Calcutta from February 22 to March 2, 1943. Women came from Calcutta and the districts of Barisal, Faridpur, Khulna, Pabna, Dinajpur, Mymensingh, Chittagong, Hooghly and Nadia. Altogether 28 attended. The agenda included reasons for holding the class, the condition on the war front and the attitude of Communists to the fascist war, the national crisis in India and the building of national unity for a national government, the outlook of the women's movement, the relation of the women's front with other fronts such as students, workers etc. and about the student and girl students movement. This was the first provincial education camp for communist women cadre in Bengal. There were 5000 MARS members at that time in the whole of Bengal. Communists among them were hardly 140 in number. So they took the pledge that within 2 months they'd increase fivefold the number of Communist women workers.

A series of training camps followed in the districts. One was organized by the Nari Seva Sangh whose aim was to train women for rehabilitation work in the villages. They learnt through practical experience how to make handicraft goods, to educate themselves in health, science etc. They visited homes in and around Calcutta and a month's intensive effort was

made to gather village statistics. The theory part included (1) How to run houses and work centers 2. Knowledge of the village and its social, economic and cooperative organization 3. How to reconstruct village life and to rescue those who needed shelter and how to study their psychology 4. Individual and social hygiene and 5. The education of adults.

Through practical training they learnt spinning, tailoring, other types of needlework, cane work, making handmade paper etc. and also visited hospitals. MARS side by side with food canteens started a campaign for milk for children. In March 1945 the cloth crisis reached its peak. So terrible was the crisis that when in September 1945 the Barisal district conference of MARS was to be held, out of 55 primary committees, delegates only from 12 primary committees attended. Most of the others had sent word that they could not come to the conference due to lack of clothes! In Lakhutia in Barisal, the secretary related how the work of the Samiti had almost stopped, because there was hardly any cloth available, which women could wear when they had to come out in public.

On August 21, 1945, the MARS organized a movement on cloth. They demanded that free cloth should be given for destitutes. To others cheap cloth should be made available. Women agitated and could force the government to distribute some bales of cloth.

In some areas, the struggle against wife beating was taken up by local branches of MARS. In Midnapur, for example, even while the shadow of famine was still looming large, the battle against wife beating was fought simultaneously with the performance of rehabilitation work. The women's committee (Mahila Samiti) itself sat in judgement and took up the role of arbitrator.

The third conference of the All Bengal Mahila Atmaraksha Samiti was held in November 1945. 45 delegates

attended from 14 districts of Bengal. Demand was made for the release of Azad Hind Fauz prisoners. Besides these questions, resolutions directly affecting women, their rehabilitation in social life, food, cloth, middle class unemployment, equal rights for women, were placed and passed at the Conference.

In Bengal, as the Communist women started work they had to face terrible slander campaigns let loose by Socialists, Forward Bloc, Hindu Mahasabhaites; filthy stories were spread about communist girls. Attacks on communist women workers came to such a pass that on January 6, 1946, Rani Mahalanobis, the President of MARS protested against them in a statement and Sarojini Naidu also intervened to stop it. There were even physical attacks with knives etc. but all these did not deter the communist women.

1946 began with the continued movement for the release of political prisoners. There were demonstrations and when police killed or injured the demonstrators there were protest meetings again condemning these. On February 20, 1946, the naval mutiny in Bombay came out in solidarity action with naval ratings' struggle. The city was turned over to the military. Defying the military on February 24, 3 lakh workers in Bombay struck work. 130 workers were killed including the daughter of a worker.

Women too joined the actions of solidarity. Kamal Dhonde, a worker of Communist Party was killed in military firing and Kusum Ranadive was wounded. In the historic Post and Telegraph strike, which took place on July 29, 1946, women telephonists who had never before come into action in large numbers, joined en masse. On July 23, Bengali and Anglo Indian girl operators jointly picketed the Telephone exchanges.

The biggest hartal in our national movement took place on July 29, 1946. Calcutta's life came to a total halt. An incident, which roused great anger, was the attack by the police on girl

students who went to picket All India Radio on that day. The assistant Station Director and his cronies cracked obscene jokes and the Station Director pushed one of the girls. The police were called. They came in jeeps and tried to breakthrough the girls' picket line. They hesitated as the girls threw themselves on the ground. A sergeant trampled on the arms of Parvati, one of the girl picketers. At once the leaders of girl students pounced on him and one was kicked in the stomach by the sergeant. They tore off his collar. The Indian constables kept quiet all this time. As the girls were having the scuffle, the AIR jeep pushed through into the station wounding Dipti Dey and other young girls.

The news spread and the hartal began. At the call of Trade Union Congress, there was an unprecedented rally of over 3 lakhs on the Calcutta Maidan - men, women, workers, and middle classes. The action of the girl students acted as a spark and more strikes followed, including that of radio artistes. Women became more militant. They began to campaign for the release of all political prisoners.

Partition and after

Even before partition of the country, in many places in North India, incidents flared up where Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs massacred each other. From the early hours of August 16, 1946 all hell was let loose in Calcutta for 3 days. Death toll was between 3000 and 5000. Bombay was the next storm center. Women became the worst victims. They saw their husbands murdered and they were forcibly converted. These very murderers forced them into marriage. Naokhali was one of the worst affected and Communist women went there for relief work. The AIWC cold-shouldered the Communist women team. So they proceeded on foot and visited and helped the victims. There was a big campaign in Chandpur where the women who had fled the carnage were housed. Communist women started working there.

To fight the battle against riot-mongers, a mighty fraternal upsurge overwhelmed Calcutta. A huge battalion of peace volunteers in which women also formed a part was organized as Santi Sena. A mighty army of 10,000 Santi Sena volunteers sprang up throughout Calcutta in the first crucial week of September 1947. It was formed spontaneously in every locality by various working class bodies, volunteers of political parties and women's organizations. MARS members joined in huge numbers. The efficacy and power of the Santi Sena could generate communal harmony and it saved Bengal from butcheries, which was not the case in East Punjab, West Pakistan and Delhi. Around October end, 1947, the women in the Santi Sena, among who were Communist women, organized functions to celebrate the Puja and Id. They were remarkably active in organizing a spate of get togethers of Muslim and Hindu women.

After August 15th, 1947, bitter disenchantment set in. The mass disaffection expressed itself through struggles of workers, peasants and even the middle classes. A wave of repression to stifle dissent and struggle had already swept the country by 1948. Many were arrested and thrown into jail without trial and warrants were issued against many.

On May 26, 1948, 80 women came in a procession to Writers' Building demanding the release of political prisoners held without trial, including communists. Lathi charge and butt charges wounded the women. Next the police started firing tear gas shells. Thousands of people gathered and supported the women and gave them water. Only after getting reassurance they dispersed. The repression did not break their morale at all. Warrants were issued for the women leaders after this and some of them went underground. MARS was declared illegal. Even the president Manjusree Devi (Rabindranath Tagore's niece) who was in no political party, was arrested and kept in jail. The Samiti's journal Gharey Baire was banned.

At this time, the mothers of the political prisoners who had been detained without trial, on their own initiative formed the "Mothers' Committee". Throughout this period of repression this was active in seeking their release. On April 27, 1949, MARS gave a call to protest against the detention of political prisoners without trial and to demand their release. Police fired on the women's procession. Lotika Sen, one of the founders of MARS, Prathibha, an activist of the Samiti, Geeta, a nurse and Amiya a middle class house wife lay dead killed by the bullets of policemen under Congress rule.

The fifth Conference of MARS was held clandestinely in Calcutta from November 18 to 22, 1949. Peasant and working class women came to discuss how they should participate in the struggles for getting a share of the crop, for their social rights, against police repression and for democratic rights, in their fight for equal wages, a decent minimum wage, permanent jobs, no retrenchment and an end to imperialist conspiracies for war and strengthening world peace. The keynote of the conference was that women must fight against exploitation and poverty.

The peace conference was held in the working class and bastee areas, and a pamphlet entitled "the call of Mothers for Peace" was issued. In 1948, in 24 Paraganas in Dongajora village, when villagers stopped the black marketeers surreptitiously carrying away paddy, the police fired and two women who were standing in the front got killed. In October 1948, in the village of Chandanpiri under Kakdwip police station, the police entered every house beating everyone and arresting them. The Zamindar's men received some blows from the women in the fracas. They beseeched the police for help. The police gave the order to fire. One old peasant fell down dead. Sarojini rushed up and put her hand on the nozzle of the gun. The police fired and one by one Sarojini, Uttama, Batashi, pregnant Ahalya, Suryamani, Naren's wife - all received gun shots and were killed. Almost 20 women were

injured. Similar incidents repeated in many villages and many peasants died or were injured in police firings. At no other period had so many women fallen victim to police bullets

Middle class women also came on the roads with demand for extension of rationing. When the promise was not kept, they went and surrounded the wholesale sugar dealers' depots in Burra Bazar when sugar went underground. The police attacked them with tear gas and lathicharged them. Again when they went to the chief minister's house same things happened.

The fifth conference elected Manjusri Devi the president and Renu Chakravathy who was still underground, the Secretary. Uma Debi, a working woman was elected as the working president.

Passive role of the Party

To fight the 1943 famine, the CPI could have launched a militant food movement with its capacity and organizational strength. But after Hitler had attacked the Soviet Union the Party concluded that its priority should be to strengthen the international resistance against the worldwide danger of fascism. Though this was a correct stand taken by communists world wide the CPI wrongly applied it in India and suspended all its activities against the British which created a backlash. While earlier it had promoted class struggle against the peasants' enemies, it now started advocating a grow-more food campaign.

On the whole, CPI failed to encourage the people to seize stocks from government storehouses and speculator's godowns. In Vietnam, in a similar situation 2 years later, the Party timely decided on seizure of stocks and thus considerably reduced the impact of the famine disaster. Simultaneously, it prepared the people for the capturing of political power. The lack of a food rebellion in Bengal was primarily due to passive

politics on the part of the leadership of the CPI. MARS movement against price-rises and hoarding in early 1943 taught many village women could struggle for their rights. But since the CPI did not have a revolutionary policy, the whole cadres of MARS were engaged only in relief work throughout.

When we see the whole activities of MARS as reported by one of its prominent leaders Renu Chakravarty we are struck by the fact that most of their activities were more reformist than revolutionary. Since CPI was like a tail to Congress during that period and was not initiating a revolutionary programme for the liberation of India all its mass organizations also followed suit. Hence, the reformist practice of MARS. We find the MARS women campaigning for Gandhi's release vigorously and celebrating his release. When Bengal reeled under the worst famine of the century the programme of the CPI and its mass Organizations was demanding gruel kitchens or setting them up on their own. MARS saved 50 women from prostitution and Renu asks if this was not patriotic!

Since the patriotism of the communists came under question for not participating in the Quit India movement with the notion that they have to support the British as they were Soviet Union's allies in the Second World War, Renu was trying to prove their patriotism by quoting such reformist 'achievements' of MARS. Actually the CPI would have been more patriotic if it had mobilized masses in a people's war against landlords and the British which would also have tackled the hoarders, black marketers etc during famine years. The party never planned to militantly seize grain from hoarders. It did not mobilize the people for such militant actions and did not try to raise their consciousness against the exploitative regime, which was acting hand in glove with the black marketers. In fact, women showed initiative in many villages to stop the hoarders and got killed or injured in the process.

MARS was opening centers to teach women sewing, spinning, handicrafts etc instead of mobilizing women in class struggle. The difference between Congress, which expected women to do spinning as a patriotic activity, and the communists, becomes blurred in such circumstances. Even during the riots, which ripped throughout North India on the eve of the handover of the power by the British to the comprador rulers, the main activity of the MARS was to arrange relief to the victims. Though all these activities in themselves have nothing to be opposed, the fact that the communist party that should be mobilizing masses against the callous rulers who caused these untold miseries was bogged down in such reformist activities which in no way help to change the situation warrants deep condemnation. We do not find any consciousness raising against the nexus between Congress and the British rulers as the party itself did not believe it and most of the time tried to be as close to the Congress as possible. So we have here a classic case in MARS of what happens to a communist mass organization's activity if it is not connected to an armed struggle to change the socio economic system.

Later some MARS women went to work in the Tebhaga movement but since that struggle itself did not culminate in armed struggle and the party withdrew the armed struggle in Telangana the prospect of communist women going to the rural areas and steeling themselves in class struggle or becoming part of armed struggle was stifled.

Historic Warli struggle

In the same period a tribal uprising took place on the western coast of Maharashtra led by the CPI. Another significance of this struggle was that a woman communist Godavari Parulekar led it. Warli adivasi women of Maharashtra experienced and bitterly resented class exploitation and also gender oppression. Their own men oppressed them too. The

Warli revolt was a struggle primarily of the Warlis, though a few other tribes too joined the struggle marginally at different points of time. Kisan Sabha led the revolt. Godavari and Shamrao Parulekar were the leaders.

The awakening started with the first Maharashtra Kisan Conference held at Titwalla in Thane district in 1945. Warlis went on strike and refused to do forced labour. The landlords made a furious attack and they did not know how to meet the landlords' offence. It was then that Godavari came and mixed closely with the Warlis and came to know of their inhuman existence at first hand.

From 1945 to 1947 the great uprising of the Warlis took place. On May 20, 1945 the Kisan Sabha (KS) held a Conference of adivasis at Zari. Thousands attended and carried the message to others. Week after week, adivasis from villages 10 miles around attended meetings in thousands. On October 8, a meeting of 7,000 was held at Kosbad where they decided to end the practice of 'marriage servants' (life long servitude, sometimes for generations, was the fate of those adivasis whose marriage expenses were paid by the landlord- moneylender) 'Get free from slavery' was the call to marriage servants. As soon as they heard this slogan they and their wives promptly left the houses in which they worked. For three days these processions walked through the villages freeing hundreds of marriage slaves. The landlords bowed to the collective strength and hastily shut themselves up in their houses without daring to protest.

On October 10, 1945, a rumour spread that Bai had called a meeting at Talwada village. The ruse worked and 7,000 Warlis came from 20 villages around to Talwada with whatever weapons they had. The police opened fire. The next day on October 11, 1945, they heard the 'Red Flag' had called a meeting and in spite of the earlier firing, 4,000 Warlis came to the same spot. A Kisan Sabha (KS) worker somehow got there and told them it was a trick. But the police had come and opened fire –

two Warlis were injured and Jethya Gangad died. A few days later Godavari and S. V. Parulekar were externed from Thane district. The landlords and police committed many unspeakable atrocities on Warlis between October 15 and 25, 1945. The landlords' grass remained uncut and was deteriorating. Shortage of grass was proving a calamity in Bombay. Warlis could not be brought down to their knees. The government had to yield. The Parulekars' externment orders had to be rescinded and others arrested were released. The adivasis won a significant victory. Kisan Sabha demanded Rs. 2.50 and Rs. 3, now the landlords in a hurry to get their grass cut were offering Rs. 3.50 and Rs. 4.50.

Around Dusshera-Diwali 1946, felling of trees in the forest started on a big scale. The adivasis demanded a daily wage of Rs. 1.25 instead of the paltry sum of 4 annas and stuck work. Again a ruse was sought to be played. But this time adivasis were not taken in and the strike continued. The contractors agreed to Rs. 1.25. But the government ignored the agreement and declared a state of emergency on November 14, 1946. Two hundred adivasis were arrested. Many others were detained and workers of the Kisan Sabha including the Parulekars were externed. Prior to this Saukars' goondas were openly beating up Warli men and even women, with the police lending a hand. After Godavari's arrest on February 6, 1947 some Marwari landlords and police went to Kosbad and beat up some women, because their men folk had fled to the jungle for shelter.

Over the years the landlords had become accustomed to enjoy the adivasi women, who worked in their farmhouses and forced them to satisfy their sexual urges. No man or a woman who knows the area would be surprised to hear that the first place the Warlis moved to destroy were these farm houses where their women's honour had been ravished.

Many men were arrested at that time. Women were alone. The struggle had started. Many men hid in the forest. Women

stayed together in the village. Police used to come asking for men. The women used to tell the police that the men had gone to work. When any Lal Bauta (Red Flag) person came, he was given food. Police used to come to arrest. Women too, used to go to the forest. No one was found at home. They used to come home in the morning. Sometimes when the police came looking for some persons, women would hide them in the house. Women and children would go out with sticks and threaten the police and the awaris. If one person were caught, all the women of the Pada would go and attack the police or the awari. "We fought well. We beat the awaris. The saukars ran away to Sanjan", said one Warli woman Devlu.

"Women went along with Godutai. We were taught by Godutai not to give any information to the police. Women faced the police fearlessly. We were ready to fight the police gang with our lathis. We had guns made out of wood. Looked like real guns from far. We used to frighten the police with these guns. Police were afraid. Sometimes many women used to chase the police out of the Pada. When men were hiding in the forest, women used to take food and water for them in small baskets, covered with dry cow dung. So that no one could see what we were carrying. We were not afraid. Godutai had secret meetings in the forest and many women used to attend these meetings. All the women joined the struggle," explained another woman proudly.

Women went to the meetings with small children. Women led the processions. They would come singing to the Conference. Young girls of 14 or 15 composed songs depicting their conditions and their struggle. Though diffident, they would come on the dais and sing songs. Even when the call to free marriage servants was given women were the first to respond. It came as a big relief to women. They spoke at meetings and said 'our chains are gone'. One woman said, 'now I can put my child to my breast' another said, 'I can now live with my husband and have a family'. Another summed up 'we have

escaped from hell’.

Women especially were the objects of the wrath of the police and the landlord’s goondas. They were threatened with beatings if their men did not report to work. Wife of a KS militant replied when the Saukars and the police approached: “don’t you even think we shall give up the Red Flag. Push my husband in jail for 10 years if you like. But we are of the Kisan Sabha’.

The women would pass a message around that the police was looking for a particular person and the person would be carefully hidden. The mothers and wives of party members were beaten, and even arrested and kept in lockups for a few days by the police in order to get information about their sons or husbands, but no woman divulged any secret. Women were humiliated, tortured and even starved in the SRP (State Reserve Police) camps set up in the region. Some of them would speak with pride. ‘I will let my son be a member. I will give my only son for Lal Bauta.’

Most women too went into the jungles, but most stayed at home with the children and the aged and had to bear the brunt of police brutalities. Women used to carry *bakris* (Jowari rotis) to the jungle in small packets and tie these packets to branches of trees so that their men did not starve in the jungles.

The heroic role of women in the struggle was remarkable and was acknowledged by one and all. But when we look at the efforts of the party to make them an integral part of the organizational structures which would be the first step to make them into leaders we will be surprised to note that women were not members of the Lal Bauta. Only after 1950 were they made members. Nor was there a separate organisation for women. When the Kisan Sabha leaders were questioned about this they just said that it was not possible at that time!

Issues of patriarchal oppression on women mainly in the form of wife beating were taken up at the insistence of women. In fact it is interesting to note that the women saw it as criteria that the leader of a Kisan Sabha should not be a wife beater. Women had a voice in selecting local leaders of the KS. Sometime they spoke disparagingly about a person: 'he beats his wife, what leader will he make?'

This consciousness of the tribal and the peasant women about the need to combine fight against exploiters with the fight against patriarchy at home is a feature we find in all the peasant struggles led by the party at that time. This proves that the class struggle leads to overall consciousness against oppression in any form. But it is the duty of the party to channelise this into a class struggle in the ideological sphere and integrate it with the class struggle going on. The CPI was not ideologically equipped to carry on this task. So we find them spontaneously taking up some issues like wife beating at the insistence of women but an effort to analyze the roots of patriarchy and educate the cadres and people on the issue is lacking.

Kisan Sabha also took up the issue of branding women as bhoothalis (witches). When a Warli leader beat up a woman accusing her to be a bhoothali he was suspended from party in 1954. Medical camps were held with microscopes to explain to people that the reason for illness were micro organisms and not bhoothali. Kisan Sabha discouraged the practice of polygamy prevalent among the Warlis. One man was expelled from the Party for having four wives.

Once during a women's conference of Kisan Sabha an old man asked the women how the Sabha could help them. Pat came the reply-your members can stop beating their wives. The peasant nodded his head and said 'yes we may do it, but it never occurred to us before maybe because we all beat our wives'. It is not surprising if an old peasant is unaware but as

a communist party CPI should have been aware of the specific problems of women and the need to organize them in women's organizations and class organizations.

Punnapra - Vayalar

In Kerala, there were movements of social reform during the 1930s, the most noteworthy being among the Ezhavas who fought against untouchability, and the Namboodiri Youth's struggle against outworn family relations, which hindered progress. The Namboodiri women had no right of divorce. They had to suffer polygamy, compulsory purdah, had no economic rights, and suffered from backward educational and cultural standards. A struggle on these issues took place. In 1931, seven women openly discarded the purdah followed by scores of others in the next few months. In 1934 widow remarriage took place and Namboodiri girls marrying non-Namboodiri boys and sending the Namboodiri girls to school started. Many of the women who were champions of this movement kept up their revolutionary spirit and were the organisers in building the anti-Japanese movement among women. In Anthikad the women had a fine volunteer movement and an organization of women also came into being in Cochin State. After the formation of the All Kerala Mahila Sangham, taluq and local Mahila Sangams functioned under it. Seven Mahila squads regularly did propaganda to educate women. The Kerala women became more and more conscious as they participated in the struggles for land and wages.

A mighty wave rose against the autocratic rule of the princely order of Travancore and its mini 'General O' Dyer', the Dewan Sir C. P. Ramaswamy Aiyer. On October 17, 1946, 50,000 coir workers from every coastal town - among whom a very large percentage were women workers - came out on the streets. The police and later the goondas, whom the Dewan sent, failed to stop them. Finally he sent soldiers but the workers were adamant and the officers did not dare to give the order to fire.

There was a strike in Alwaye against the arrest of the worker's leader Mathew. On October 21, 1946 the greatest political strike of one lakh workers took place demanding an end to C. P.'s regime of repression and calling for the establishment of a responsible government. The boat workers, rubber, oil, and textile workers - all joined the struggle.

In Alleppey martial law was declared after the police killed a worker and they in turn demolished the police station. In Ambalapuzha and Shertellai military soldiers entered every house looking for and raping every woman on whom they could lay their hands. On October 28, 1946 the soldiers attacked Vayalar where refugees from the Dewan's terror - men, women and children had taken refuge. People made up their minds that they would not die without fighting. As the soldiers landed from boats, people fell on them with whatever they had in their hands, even as the army fired. For hours the battle continued. Against an army equipped with modern arms, the Vayalar heroes hit back with bows and arrows and spears of areca nut and also a few rifles. Women surged forward with sickles and stones in their hands. Sir C. P.'s claim was that he had killed 500 men and women.

On October 24, 1946 ignoring martial law a mighty procession of 10,000 strong persons, both of men and women workers marched towards Punnapra. The military fired till their ammunition was exhausted. They tried to charge with their bayonets but the strong army of workers beat them back. Workers' spears killed the captain. Seven workers were killed but the soldiers threw away their rifles and ran. In Punnapra the battle against autocracy had been won.

Tebhaga movement

In the autumn of 1946, the Tebhaga movement erupted like a volcano. 'We want two-thirds share instead of half' was the slogan of the tenants, which reverberated throughout the 19 districts of undivided Bengal. The bargadars (tenants)

refused to give the paddy to the landlords and began storing it in their barns.

On 31st January, 1947, there was a real battle between the police and the Hejongs in Bahertali village; Rasimani, a middle-aged widow and Surendra Sarkar, an activist were killed, while two policemen were killed and their rifles taken away. When the police party went to Khanpur to arrest local activists, the police truck that fell into a ditch was attacked. 20 peasants including 2 women were killed and hundreds wounded. On 21st February 4 peasants including a woman were killed at Thumnia. The procession organized in Thakurgaon in protest was declared illegal. Rani Mitra and Bina Guha who had come to address the peasants were served with externment order. The Dooars virtually became a liberated area; men, women and children could be seen marching in processions. On March 1, 1947 when Oraon peasants tried to remove paddy of a Muslim Jotedar at Mal, police fired killing 5 peasants including 2 women. In April when they tried to remove paddy from a Rajbansi Jotedar, the police fired and killed nine peasants including one woman.

Tens of thousands of peasant women in hundreds of villages were in the thick of the Tebhaga movement. In most of the areas of the movement, peasant women, armed with lathis and shouting the familiar slogan 'Tebhaga chai' marched in processions, joined Kisan Sabha volunteers in carrying the crop to their *Khamar* (granary) and gave shelter to underground activists. They often acted independently, took decisions, surrounded the police force and organized warning systems in the villages. When the movement was in full swing, they became organized in Mahila Samiti, emerged as local leaders, and boldly complained of wife beating, demanding better treatment from husbands who looked upon them as mere objects. Widows, who had nothing to lose and every thing to win, remained in the forefront. In all regions women of poor and middle peasant families took part in the movement. Though rich peasants participated in the movement their wives

and sisters were seldom seen in meetings and demonstrations. In North Bengal districts the activists coming from Rajbansi women often played the leading role. In Dinajpur, there was Dipsari Singh, a tall middle-aged widow who chased the policemen armed with rifles waving a lathi. Bhandani, a young married girl snatched away the gun from the daroga who was overpowered and confined in a house. Punneswari Dabba, a Rajbansi widow took out a procession of women in Debiganj as the men had not dared to start the movement. Bimala Maji led women volunteers in surrounding the police party and became a local leader. Activists came from peasant women who had apparently lost faith in the Congress.

There was a marked change in the social status of the peasant women, as they resisted the landlords who very often used them to fulfil their sexual needs. In Dooars in Jalpaiguri Oroan women participated massively and four Oroan women were killed in police firing. The agrarian struggle made a deep impact on the peasant women, notably Rajbansi and tribal women. Ruthless repression continued under the Congress Raj. In February 1949 peasants in Masila village organized a demonstration on which the police fired, killing four women including Manorama, a 14-year old girl. In September in another clash in Hatal village, eight women mostly Mahisyas were killed. In Dubir Bheri police fired on a women's procession killing six women.

Bimla Maji went into hiding and moved in the villages organizing peasant women. When police surrounded a village to arrest the absconding leaders, some 3 to 4 hundred women armed with household implements faced them and refused to disperse. Jyostna Bhowmick born in a Mahisya jotedar family was arrested and sent to jail. In jail Bimala, Manikuntala and others went on a hunger strike demanding the status of political prisoners.

During the Tebhaga movement Maharani Oroan faced police bullets on March 1, 1947 in the Dooars area. On April 14, 1947 in another clash with the police near Mangolbari, nine Red Flag militants were killed, of whom two were women and one was a 13 year old boy.

In Kakdwip, a new base, the communists gave their blessings to the forcible expropriations of the landlords. The Kisan Sabha was formed in 1944-45 and the rural poor vigorously supported the Tebhaga movement in 1946-47. In the winter of 1948 police set up camps in the villages of landlords who issued several eviction notices to the bargadars. In the summer of 1949 the village squads armed with lathis and spears, raided the Kutcheris and seized paddy, cattle, utensils and cloth; the rural poor seized about 5,000 bighas of land; they took part in processions and blew conches when landlords' agents or police entered the village. Women were taken into the village squads.

Ila Bose, a medical student from Calcutta dressed like a widow and moved in the villages drawing in peasant women into the village squads. A few landlords and their agents were killed. The police raided the villages and raped women. 17 peasants including four women were killed in police firing in Chandanpiri and Budhakali. From Chandanpiri came Ahalya Das, an activist who was killed in firing. Sarojini was also killed in police firing. Suryamani Giri was wounded and her right hand was amputated. Kakdwip struggle was crushed. CPI withdrew the Kakdwip and Telangana struggles and participated in the general elections in 1952.

In the Tebhaga movement the most determined of all were often women. Large numbers of tenants' wives and female agricultural labourers joined the volunteer squads formed by the Kisan Sabha. And in some cases it is they who overcame the hesitance of peasant males, by taking out processions with sickles and sticks. In Debiganj, it was due to a woman's determination that the first battle for Tebhaga was

carried through. When two hundred volunteers tried to reap the harvest from the field of a peasant named Vidda, the police and jotedar's armed guards fiercely attacked them. People retreated. Vidda's wife gave a fiery speech at the meeting of cadres. Swayed by it, two days later no less than 500 volunteer women and men finished the job of cutting Vidda's crops within minutes. This time the police stood helplessly.

To stop the Tebhaga struggle in Thumniya, one of the best-organized villages, a police force armed with rifles was sent. A peasant woman called Dipshori stood defiantly in the field, swaying a stick. She rushed towards the policemen to drive them away, followed by other volunteers. The police retreated. Dipshori's courage is said to have inspired people in villages all around. In Rampur, when peasant volunteers were cutting paddy in violation of a local police ordinance, a police party entered the field. But they were obstructed by women, standing on guard, with pestles and brooms. Poliya Ramoni snatched a police rifle and broke it to pieces and four policemen reportedly lost their teeth in the melee. In Pachagor when 20 to 25 persons came along with Dukhiya, a timid peasant to his jotedar's catchery to collect paddy, it was heavily armed. Dukhiya ran away. It was Dukhiya's wife who came forward and snatched the first bundle of paddy. The action could only be carried through because of a woman's determination!

In Nandigram area, the local women's committee was informed that the catchery was packed with guardsmen recruited by its three jotedar-brothers to knock down the peasant women who had independently cut the harvest crops. Since a big pond on 3 sides surrounded the catchery, it was easy to besiege it. 5,000 rebels, including 2,000 women with brooms, blocked the main entrance road and thus forced those inside to surrender. The guardsmen were humiliated by having to pass through two huge lines of women who lashed them with brooms. And the jotedar-brothers were forced to ask for mercy from the women, with clothes tied around their neck, an insulting punishment.

In Tebhaga women developed an alarm system. This is their specific contribution. Mass mobilization was extremely rapidly achieved through this. In the Sundarbans area religious instruments were used in areas inhabited by Hindus while in Muslim dominated villages it was suggested to use school bells. In Debiganj women stood on guard against police raids but lacked conch shells due to poverty. So they gave a warning by yelling, the sound being carried ahead from village to village by those women who first heard the shouting.

Nari Bahini - the women militia

The formation of Nari Bahini in the course of the Tebhaga movement was very significant as it is a unique experience in the history of the communist movement in India. We next find women militia members in Telangana movement. But the formation of a separate women militia is a historically important phenomenon and it has practical significance from the point of view of tactics even today in the contemporary revolutionary movements.

The Nari Bahini was formed through the spontaneous resistance of women. According to Rani Dasgupta who was a female party cadre in Dinajpur the concrete occasion when they were formed was the moment when the police intervened. Once the police arrived in campaign villages with warrants of arrest to prevent further harvesting of paddy, female volunteers resisted and formed their own Bahini. One incident took place where female volunteers drove away the police. After this Nari Bahinis were formed everywhere to guard the villages.

In Magura, the subdivisional administrative office was occupied and some five hundred women held a procession through the streets of the town demanding food and blankets. The women went to the court, intruded into the place and caught hold of the judge, grabbing his tie. The police warned the judge not to touch the women. In Narail too, Nari Bahinis were established in many villages to keep guard against likely

police attacks, heralding the intervention of the colonial state. Many times the police had to retreat, failing to break through their array. In the Sundarbans, 2,000 men and women had gathered holding spears and sticks listening attentively to proposals for strengthening the organizational set up. Women arose and announced that women wished to form their own armed force. On the spot, a separate women's militia was formed and arrangements for training made.

The Nari Bahinis were not only organs of women's leadership, but also of class leadership. When the opportunist leaders of Kisan Sabha who came over to Kakdwip to make the villagers resign in defeat and surrender their paddy, the peasants were not at all convinced. The leaders returned to Calcutta and changed their resolution: those who have the strength can retain their paddy! Women continued to stand in the forefront even when its collapse had become inevitable and many women of the Nari Bahini were martyred. In Chandapiri 7 peasant women and female labourers were murdered while they resisted police searches for paddy. One of them was the renowned female leader Ahelya. In the districts of Howrah and Hooghly, women's troops continued defending rebellious villages by blowing conchshells and encircling police patrols. In two recorded cases, 7 and 9 women were martyred, including 2 young girls and pregnant women.

Nari Bahini was like semi militia. They were largely untrained and were not taught the tactics of guerrilla warfare and they were not consolidated as the mass base for a future people's army. The Nari Bahini's names varied from region to region. Jhata (Broom) Bahini, Pratirodh (resistance) Bahini, Nari Raksha (Defence) Bahini, Gayen (pestle) Bahini etc. They were purely armed with local instruments. These might be household instruments, such as jhata (broomsticks), bonti (wooden panel with knife to cut vegetables), or grain (pestles) or rul (stick) and chhuri (small knife) or ballem (spear). They frequently stopped, repulsed and humiliated police patrols

carrying fire arms with these instruments, largely relying on courage and ingenuity.

Fight against patriarchy

In the North of Bengal the battle against wife beating raged intensively, particularly in Dinajpur and in areas of Tebhaga struggle where women were well organized. In Dinajpur the Communist Party itself banned wife beating. Volunteers of the Mahila Samiti would drag any husband who violated the ban, put him on trial and mete out punishments.

Sexual exploitation of women stopped during Tebhaga movement. Afterwards the landlords would no longer dare abuse village women.

Heroic Telangana struggle

The Telangana struggle was a rebellion of the countless ordinary peasants against the feudal zamindars, cruelty of the razakars and later against the Indian army in the Hyderabad Samsthan between 1946 and 1951. It witnessed one of the highest participation of women. The struggle that started against the Nizam turned against the Indian army after the police action against the Nizam in 1948 and the merger of his Samsthan in the Indian Union.

Under the Nizam rule people faced worst forms of feudal oppression and exploitation. Needless to say women were in addition sexually exploited. No woman could consider herself safe in that feudal setup from the lustful eyes of the zamindars and jagirdars. The Dasis were virtually slaves to the landlords and had to satisfy the sexual demands of not only the landlords but also of their guests. The landlord had the right to 'first night'. The 'Gadis' (fortress like homes) of the landlords were silent witness to many tales of woes of the men and women of Telangana.

It is interesting to note that a women's struggle for land proved to be the turning point in the movement. It was Chakali Ailamma, a washerwoman at Palakurthi village in Jangaon Taluq who was the first to fight bitterly, to save her land and crop from being seized. The victory over the notorious deshmukh gave courage to the whole of Telangana. Chakali Iamma's husband and son were put in jail and booked under a sedition case. Her daughter was raped and her house and belongings were destroyed. But Iamma stood stubbornly and fought. Seven hundred volunteers (students from Suryapet) came and harvested the grain and kept vigil for about four months. It was during this struggle that they started carrying weapons – not guns but more traditional ones like lathis, iron rods, sticks etc. Volunteer squads were formed to train people in wielding them. These trainings and squads included women. Women used mirchi powder and pestles as effective weapons throughout the struggle. Ordinary village women heroically defended their land, participated in large numbers in agricultural labour strikes and participated in large numbers in demonstrations with a red flag. They participated in seizing the grain of landlords who were then forced to concede their demands of raising the daily wages. In Pindiprolu and Illendu, women participated in agricultural labour strikes that covered 90 villages. Out of these, women were in the forefront of the fight in 20 villages. In the Andhra region in a struggle against the Challapalli Raja in Turlapalem village, women went to jail.

The landless labourer women were organized for raise in salary and reduction in working hours. One of the demands was that the nursing mothers should be allowed to give milk to their babies, because in those days they did not allow even that and women had to show that they were actually nursing mothers by squeezing milk from their breasts!

By the end of 1946 this turned into an armed struggle with the guns seized from landlords. Gram Rakshak Dals (village defense squads) were formed with men and women. Hundreds of men and women were given guerilla training.

Guerilla fights between the razakars and the squads became commonplace. In almost 4,000 villages Nizam's administration came to a standstill. Gram Rajyas were formed. Ten to twelve lakh acres of land were distributed. Loans were annulled. Tenants got tenancy rights. Untouchability and other social evils were fought against.

Women played an important role in the Telangana struggle. They fought the Razakars and the Nizam's police and later the Indian Army standing shoulder to shoulder with their men folk. They were also the worst victims of repression. The Sangam (Andhra Mahasabha) became their guide and leader and helped to solve all their problems, including disputes between husbands and wives.

When the police tried to take away arrested men, women would surround the trucks. Repeated lathi charges could not budge them from their position and often the police had to let off the men. They sheltered and billeted the guerrilla squads in their houses, keeping watch day and night. They took food and supplies to guerrillas' hideouts in the hills and forests and suffered terrible tortures when the enemy found out. They used pounding pestles and chilli powder, carried stones and slings, provided food and shelter, transported guns, collected funds, distributed literature, tended to the wounded and provided cover for fleeing comrades by loudly mourning a faked death or celebrating a birthing or coming of age of children. Rural women were directly affected by the levies and land issues, which come first.

This struggle brought a qualitative change in the lives of the peasantry, especially the women. Most importantly bonded labour was abolished. They got land and a relatively progressive tenancy act was promulgated. Women who did not have the freedom to even sit and talk or dress up neatly or even wear flowers enjoyed independence for the first time. Levies were banned. Dasi system came to an end and sexual exploitation was checked to a large extent. The middle class,

upper class women came out of purdah and could participate in social production (agriculture).

Women's organizations

The Andhra Mahila Sabha (AMS) was formed in 1930. Though it was reformist it could create a forum for women. Due to feudal culture not only the Muslim women but even Hindu rich and middle class women also used purdah when they came out of their houses. It was unimaginable for women to speak on public platforms. Majority of the members of Andhra Mahila Sabha belonged to the upper middle class. They worked on issues like female education, ban of purdah, widow remarriage etc. There were opponents to these reforms both inside and outside these organizations. In 1932, in the third meeting of AMS in Khammam there was a fight between the reformists and the protectors of Hindu Dharma. In 1937, the Kannadigas and the Marathis formed their own forums. Till 1942 both the Andhra Mahila Sabha and the Andhra Maha Sabha held their meetings simultaneously. From then on Andhra Mahila Sabha held its meetings separately.

In Hyderabad, a women's organization called Nav Jeevan Mandal (NJM), a cosmopolitan organization mainly of non-Telugu women did splendid support work for the movement. The Nav Jeevan Mandal gave some prominent activists to the left movement like Brijrani Gour, Pramila Thai, Yashoda Ben and Sarju Ben. There were 2,000 Hindi speaking members in Nav Jeevan Mandal. It gave an opportunity for women to participate in social activities. There were Ranis, Begums, conservatives and RSS elements also in NJM. Congress workers and novices in politics were also there. It was the urge to work for the national movement that united these women of various classes.

Yashodaben, Sarjuben and Premlatha Gupta did relief work during war. Communist women like Pramilathai worked along with them because the government did not respond if

the Communist Party put the same demands in its name. They distributed 4,000 ration cards because they went as members of Nav Jeevan Mandal. They also worked with AIWC branch in the state. The AMS and NJM worked together and even took up issues like firings on Suryapet students.

There were bourgeois women's organizations, which did not allow ordinary women to be members. So communist women formed women's organizations for landless and poor peasant women. The Krishna district Mahila Sangham was formed in 1936.

Pramilathai even worked in TUs and organized workingmen and women. But the number of women engaged in TU work was very less. She was the president of two trade unions and took up struggles. There was a heroic strike in DBR Mills. Adivamma, an activist was arrested and tortured in this struggle. They put chains on her legs, broke her legs and even danced on her broken legs. But they could not extract anything from her.

At the same time in the Andhra region under Madras Presidency, Andhra Mahila Sangam was formed. It worked on issues of widow remarriage, divorce, right to property etc. Unlike the AMS in Telangana, this organization in the Andhra region mobilized peasant women also. In 1939 the All Hyderabad Students Union was formed and it built up a democratic students' movement. When the women students of Osmania University were attending classes by sitting behind a chilman (curtain) there were three women students in the Executive Committee of the students union - Sakuntala (Joint Secretary) Sushila (Treasurer), and Padma (ECM) which was quite a remarkable achievement. A sizeable number of Muslim women gave up purdah at the cost of being called Kafirs to take part in public work and along with Hindu women began to speak at public meetings. Mallu Swarajyam, Jamalunnisa Baji, Razia Begum, Kumudini Devi were all women who came out of purdah into public life.

An organization called Barje Ehabab meaning Friends Society was started in Malakpet in Hyderabad to oppose purdah. Many prominent writers and poets came to it. Self defence training like wielding lathis was conducted in Himayath Nagar in Hyderabad. The women squads used to keep vigil in batches at night to ward off the razakars.

The communist women activists had a frugal life style and did not resort to any dressing up or wearing ornaments. They were taught that they should serve as role models. One *anna* was the membership fee for joining Mahila Sangham. The members of the Sangham used to tour the villages on foot and recruit members. After 15 days of tour, they used to write a report of the membership campaign. Regular meetings were also conducted and their work was assessed. Education was also an important agenda point in these meetings.

When they went to the villages they had to face lot of heckling and even verbal abuses from the villagers who saw them as disrupting family lives, who would take away their girls. It was with sheer determination that these women pioneers braved all this opposition and built up women's organizations. They sang songs on women's problems and enacted plays. They campaigned for widow remarriages, the need for a divorce law and women's right to property. They taught the women about pre and postnatal care and also gave them tips on rearing children. They taught them to cook healthy food without peeling the vegetables. They made resolutions that every village should have an educated nurse and latrines. Some communists donated their own land for latrines or collected funds for the same. They also campaigned against the British rule. Sometimes, the women organizers going to villages organized Bal Sanghams (children's association).

Mahila Sanghams rescued girl children who were forcefully married away to older men and some of them became activists later. There was an attack in one of the instances when the Mahila Sangham conducted a widow marriage. Finally they

carried it out in another venue. They had to face all kinds of problems whenever they tried to challenge the feudal rule. In 1942, 40 women attended a district wide class for women in Krishna district in which they were trained to be activists. Again in 1943 they had a series of 4 or 5 classes spanning over a month with 50 members in each batch. Since Second World War was going on they were also taught self defense. The women were given shorts and shirts and made to march down the roads. They were taught drill and boxing with filled sacks.

Later Mahila Sanghams were formed in Guntur, West Godavari, Visakha, Kurnool, Kadapa and Chittoor districts in the Andhra region. They were so popular that when meetings were announced the older women used to go before time and sit because they were afraid that if they didn't go early, then they would be saddled with looking after children and miss the meeting. Even in times of repression they helped the cadres knowing fully well the consequences. They thought that socialism was around the corner and were ready for any sacrifice to achieve that. In the initial stages, Mahila Sanghams conducted group meetings of women inside their homes to get them together and even ran night schools. They had to fight caste discrimination in course of their work when people tried to discriminate the cadres on basis of caste. There was general education on fighting caste oppression.

During the period of Prakasam ordinance (ban on Party) the State Mahila Sangham conference was held in Chennur village of Guntur district in 1947. Telangana was not a participant in this. Since there were Mahila Sanghams in all districts of Andhra region they held a state conference. By the time the first Andhra State Women's Conference was held in Chilakaluru in Guntur, there were Mahila Sanghams already working actively in hundred villages in seven districts. Nearly six thousand women attended the public meeting and ten thousand women came to the cultural programmes. The government banned the State Women's Conference held in May 1948. A thousand women marched in a procession defying the ban. Dr. Acchamamba, Melly Zollinger,

Manikonda Suryavathi, Moturi Udayam and Kondapalli Koteswaramma were arrested. Dr. Achamamba and Manikonda Suryavathi were sent to Vellore Jail.

Mahila Sangham recruited members for AIWC whose meeting was scheduled to be held in Kakinada. Since all could not pay 25 paise they took only one *anna* (6 paise) for membership. Out of 22,000 members given membership only 2,000 paid 25 paise, while others paid just one *anna*. But when they mobilized and went to Kakinada for the conference AIWC did not allow communist women inside. They fought for entry but AIWC refused and said 'you bring in all labourer and poor women if we allow you to enter!' Some influential people lobbied for them and some communist women managed to go inside and tried to get an affiliation for the state organization. But AIWC refused them affiliation or even recognition. So much for the women orientation of AIWC.

Participation of women

Telangana armed struggle was a true united front struggle of the landless, poor, middle and rich peasantry against the landlords. That's why women of all these classes participated in this struggle. Most of them came into the movement along with their husbands or brothers or other male relatives. In Hyderabad though some women came and worked on their own, male relatives influenced most of them.

Majority of the activists were from villages than from cities. The phenomena of women getting attracted to the left movement from the national movement began in the mid 1940s. By that time the atmosphere was conducive for their participation because of the rural movement.

Becoming a part of movement had a liberating effect on women. They traveled alone and at night, transported weapons, letters etc. If jewellery had to be sold or money withdrawn from a bank it was the women who were given

responsibility. They sold newspapers in public places and collected funds. Many became voracious speakers. People wondered if they had studied

B.A. or M.A. when actually most of them had joined the movement at a very young age of 14 or 15 and had not even completed their high school studies. Many women were trained as medical workers.

D. Venkateswara Rao of the Communist Party wrote that till 1951 almost half the people who attended meetings in Nalgonda district were women and so they always had to reserve half the seats for them!

The Communist Party opposed the use of four letter words that always targeted women and propagated against their usage. It formed science squads also to disseminate scientific ideas and fight feudal superstitions among people. Women were part of these squads. They taught the Koya tribals to cover themselves fully. Women were given medical training after which they also gave medicines to the people and saved many lives.

Funds were mobilized by giving cultural performances, which played an important part in imparting revolutionary politics to the people. Women were not allowed to act in plays in those days. It was thought of as disgraceful. So men used to play the roles of women as well. It was the communists who broke this tradition and persuaded women members in their homes to act in plays. There were women burra katha teams which was in itself a big breakthrough because in those days women who went on stage were considered characterless. The stories (kathas) included those of Zoya and Tanya, the Soviet heroines of Second World War and that of Jhansi Laxmi Bai. The Burrakatha told by Tapi Rajamma, Radha and V.Sarojini who were part of the women's cultural squad of Krishna District spoke about rights, scientific knowledge, social reform and swaraj.

It is noteworthy that whatever changes the communists wished to bring about in the society they had to start with their own family members because otherwise people would question them. So in the beginning, most of the women activists came from the families of communist leaders. It is remarkable that most of these women worked hard and became leaders by virtue of their hard work and merit. There is an interesting story of Kondapalli Seetharamaiah going on fast at home to persuade his wife Koteswaramma to act in plays. A reluctant entrant at first she went on to become a popular actor and even won prizes for her acting skills. Praja Natya Mandali, the cultural wing of CPI saw the emergence of many talented young women actors.

Inter caste and widow marriages were encouraged and conducted in open meetings. Women carried progressive literature in their bags and sold it by lugging those heavy bags on foot. They did extensive propaganda on Nazi atrocities and Soviet victories. Bengal famine also figured in their propaganda and funds were mobilized for relief work.

It was impossible to transport weapons without women. There used to be rickshaws with purdah for women and so the women activists and sympathizers transported weapons in them without rousing suspicions. Even when they were questioned, they used this tradition of purdah in a sentimental manner and managed to get away.

A commune and a hospital were run by women for comrades. Bullemma who ran the commune was greatly respected and loved for her caring attitude and was likened to Gorky's Mother. Later she was arrested and even beaten up though she was an elderly woman. Achamamba who ran the hospital was a legendary figure. The pregnant women activists were also taken care of there.

Male comrades gave away their property after keeping aside shares for mothers and wives. When M.Suryavathi wanted to give away her property to the party there was a

high level discussion in the party. They debated as to what women would face if one day the party is not able to pay them allowance. After 20 days they allowed her to give her share of property. She and her husband were given 20 rupees allowance every month.

Marriages were conducted as stage marriages without following any feudal traditions. The people held the communists in high esteem for their high moral values. They did not drink or beat their wives. They knew the party would not tolerate debauchers inside the party. Wife beaters were reported on and immediately action was taken. There was no place for wife beaters in the party.

A number of political classes were held for cadres and some exclusively for women. They were also given practical tips on how to resist the razakars, how to keep mirchi powder ready and how to keep secrets in face of torture. They were taught that they should mix poison in food when they fled so that the razakars who had acute food problem would eat it and die. Women were also taught to seize weapons when the police come for combing operations.

Women's problems and methods to organize them were discussed. They started schools and reading sessions or even stitching centers for women to come out and participate in public life. They used to convince the husbands or in laws to let the women come out of their homes. They also held street meetings and discussions for this purpose.

In 1943 the communists dug a canal in Krishna district for the farmers after their pleas to the government fell on deaf ears. Thousands of men and women and top leaders participated in the work and completed it in record 15 days.

When the all India peasant conference was held in 1945 there were two volunteer squads of women. Peasant women came in large numbers with children and brought large pots full of pickles and rice bags. Hazra Begum, a leader of the All

India Women's Conference, inaugurated the conference and Melly Zollinger hoisted the flag. Acchamamba presided over the conference and Dasari Paripurna presented a dance ballet on the Bengal Famine. Almost two thousand women came to the conference, some walking, others traveling by bullock carts.

When most of the leaders were arrested some women under the leadership of leaders like Udayam went from village to village selling clothes and spread words of courage among families of those arrested and among the general public too. Some women joined in factories and tried to organize the working women. Women went ostensibly for the interviews of jailed comrades and passed on messages from the outside party by pulling wool on the eyes of the guards. Udayam kissed her husband openly once to pass on a message and another woman feigned heart attack for the same purpose. They even sewed messages in small children's undergarments and delivered them. Upper caste women had to face social ostracization from their families and relatives for mingling with all castes and classes especially dalits.

Brijrani was a member of City Committee of Hyderabad. In Telangana women were made part of the village committees, which imparted justice and were an organ of people's power. They solved all the disputes in the villages.

They were excellent couriers and some even donned male attire for this purpose. If an important cadre had to travel, women with their children accompanied them so that it'd look like a family and not arouse suspicion. They hid weapons under the beds of older women. Women were not checked much in railway stations. So they traveled around doing many tasks. Many women activists voluntarily gave away their jewellery and property to the party.

In 1936-37, classes were held for women in Katur village. They were exclusively for women. They were taught about the country, its problems, politics, problems of women, need for women to participate in movements, condition of women in

Soviet Union and on the necessity of communism for women's liberation. They were given books and newspapers to read. The youth associations mostly did it. The classes were taken by top rank leadership that shows the interest taken. Achamamba in Vijayawada trained many women in medical work. Special classes were held for women and there was a training center for women in Vijayawada in 1943. 120 women attended these classes.

After classes while youth learned to wield lathis, the women also did exercises. The members of organizations sent their wives and sisters to classes. It was almost a compulsory rule that if men became politically conscious, then their family members should be educated too. Gorky's 'Mother' was given to all as the first book to read.

Women ran almost all the party dens, which sheltered the top rank leadership. Since it would look odd if only men were seen in a house women were also brought in. Women arranged shelters for many comrades. Inside the dens the women mostly wrote copies or cut stencils of circulars and other revolutionary propaganda material. Since there were no machines this work required lot of human power and many women were engaged in this task. Men and women shared the tasks in the dens and squads. The den life and women's participation in it was described by one den keeper of the Telangana Armed struggle: He describes how risky it was to maintain dens and says that the women very courageously took up the task.

"The Women (in the dens) along with household daily chores, used to prepare reports, took carbon copies of circulars, documents, rewrote them, wrote pamphlets, took copies of them and also maintained correspondence. This they did with lot of patience - day and night without rest. Some women prepared even ammunitions. They used to maintain the danger signals of the den. Due to the precautions taken by these women and their courage and self- confidence they could

prevent any dangers to other dens also. It was also their responsibility to treat comrades who were injured in encounters or who became sick in field. More importantly, it was also the women's responsibility to maintain the 'story' they had cooked up for the den with the servant maid. In every den the important party leaders who used to stay there conducted political classes along with carrying on their party activities. It shows the party's efforts to educate the women. Women were also made part of structures and given responsibilities in the den."

Not only did the women fight in their villages and their homes but also many demanded to be taken into the guerrilla squads. The leaders admitted only a few women into the guerrilla squads. Com. Samrajyam and Com. Arutla Kamala Devi were the leading members who acted throughout the period as organizers of the movement and fought with rifles. When arrested, Kamaladevi led a hunger strike of 50 women prisoners in Warangal jail. In the Godavari forest area, women especially a number of tribal women of the Koya tribe had joined the squads.

One of the main problems the women in squads faced was pregnancy and childbirth since very little was known or practiced at that time about contraception. Their tales of agony in this condition, when on one side the army unleashed severe repression, are really heart rending. Several women made the difficult choice between motherhood and the movement, deserting babies and undergoing abortions in trying conditions. Women squad members gave away their months old babies and continued to work. Kamamma and Padma were just two such names. Some of them gave birth in the squads and continued moving with their babies. It goes to the credit of women that they continued to work in spite of all the hardships after giving away their babies.

The squads and the Sanghams implemented strict discipline. Wife beating and child marriages were dealt with

in people's courts. Any squad member misbehaving with women was severely punished. One squad member who raped a woman and misused party funds was given death sentence.

A Koya woman Venkatamma became a squad commander. She participated in and led many brave raids and attacks on police. The educated middle class women were not given weapons in the squad. They were given political tasks and education tasks. Most of the armed members of the squads were the tribal and peasant women.

Ramulamma and her husband joined the movement together. But later he retreated. She refused to go back with him. So she gave him divorce and continued in the movement. She remarried and went on to take part in many attacks on the enemies and also withstood many enemy attacks.

Women from even Zamindari background like comrade Padma also participated in the Telangana armed struggle. She worked in the armed squads and later when injured in a shootout also maintained a den. When she gave birth to a baby, she preferred to give away the baby and continue in the movement.

Repression and resistance

Razakars under Kasim Razvi, the notorious creator and leader of razakars unleashed dreadful terror on the struggling people of Telangana. People say every tree and stone of Telangana would recount the tales of horror of this dreaded outfit named razakars. Women particularly bore the brunt. Innumerable women were molested and raped. Once they attacked Bibinagar railway station, killed the stationmaster and raped a schoolteacher who later died. In a village Chitakondur near Jangaon of Nalgonda district four young women were raped and the whole village was razed to ground. In many villages people were burnt alive. The razakars were compared to the Nazis in their atrocities. They used to strip the women

and rape them. They made the women dance at their will. Some women died due to the atrocities. P.Sundarayya mentions the names of 20 women martyrs in the movement that included these women.

In the September 1948 police action, which was actually a military action, the Nizam's army surrendered within hours and the razakars fled. So the whole might of the Indian army was pitted against the communists. Home minister Sardar Patel vowed to crush the communists. The Prakasam government banned CPI. After the surrender of Nizam, the rich peasantry denied support to the communists. There were many losses to the squads. They had to retreat to the forests from the plain villages they had been working in. There they organized the tribals who gave unflinching support to the movement. Numerous sacrifices were made in the face of brutal repression unleashed by the Indian army. During repression only women were left to look after everything and this made the men realize that they should be taught everything. After police action even Congressmen informed on them and hundreds of people were arrested and sent to jails. In Warangal jail there were nearly 300 women who were arrested because they gave food or shelter to communists. Even an eighty year old woman was tortured severely (pricking with needles in her nails etc) for the whereabouts of her grandson. But neither she nor any other women tortured revealed anything to the police. A big jail struggle was conducted under the leadership of Arutla Kamala, Priyamvada and others and the demands were won. But the leaders were immediately taken to another jail without any of their belongings.

Women in Akkirajupalli were forced to strip and dance before the Razakars and often fled to the forest, leaving babies in their cradles. Katur was known as Andhra Moscow in those days for its communist sympathies. During repression the army stripped the men and women of Katur and Ellamarru and made them go around Gandhi's statue shouting pro Congress slogans. This led to wide spread protests and thoroughly

exposed the Congress government. Buchamma was killed in jail because she conducted jail struggles. She was from Pindiprolu of Khammam taluq.

When the Akhnoor and Machireddipally attack on women took place and many women were raped, the people of the state were roused to anger. A Committee was formed under Justice Pandit. Padmaja Naidu, daughter of Sarojini Naidu prepared a report on these incidents after making an enquiry. All political parties took part in it. Women were also represented in it. Women faced arrest for deposing before it. Some Muslim women like Jamalunissa Begum also participated in the movement. Their participation was significant because it was the Nizam's rule they had to fight. In September 1949, her house was raided and her four brothers and a sister were arrested but she gave her everything to the Party.

Armed women resisted the razakars and defended themselves. Sometimes they threw chilli powder at them and ran away. Suffering untold destruction, violence and the death of their children these women survived and still gave away scarce food to comrades who were hiding in the forest. Women were gagged, raped, beaten and sometimes burnt together yet were unwavering in their support of the Party. In Huzurnagar Taluq Penugonda village women challenged the police taking away the activists of Sangham and got them released. AMS fought against Section 144 and for the right to form organizations. It helped the struggling Telangana women in many ways. The enthusiasm, creativity and valour of these women can be gauged by their countless brave deeds, which in a way show the enormous support the movement enjoyed among the women. Rapes, arrests and tortures could not stop these undaunted women. There were many instances of women coming to the forefront when their husbands or male relatives backtracked due to severe repression. The women used to come together under the pretext of any feudal customs or functions and escape together.

When the Congress government banned the party, its publications and cultural organizations etc were also banned. Nearly a 1,000 women activists and sympathizers took a procession in Vijayawada by defying Section 144. Teargas was used and they were all arrested after a severe lathicharge. They went on a hunger strike on August 15th as a protest against celebrations of independence when so much of repression was unleashed on the people and the party. They refused to salute the Indian flag and did not recognize the independence.

The second conference of Mahila Sangham was planned in Vijayawada. They were also bringing a magazine 'Andhra Vanitha' by then. The third issue was in the press. But it was closed down. Women took out a procession to reclaim their magazine. Tear gas was used and 80 women were arrested. They were not allowed interviews or any contact with the outside world. When they hoisted the red flag the jail authorities objected. Four women sat around the flagpole and guarded it. They said that they would guard it with their lives.

They took up jail struggles against the oppressive jail regulations of the Congress government. They were manhandled during the struggle. All were released at the end of 1948. They resorted to hunger strikes twice - one for 17 days and another for 20 days - to press their demands. The children of the jailed women also suffered many hardships along with their mothers in the jails.

Concentration camps were established after the Indian army entered Telangana. Mahila Sangham Executive Committee members were arrested and their houses were raided or destroyed. When firing took place in Suryapet, there was a unique protest demonstration by students of Kadawendi. When elders were hesitant to protest for fear of the Razakars, girl students defied all opposition and came out boldly into the streets.

Finally the party decided to withdraw armed struggle in 1951 and went on to participate in the 1952 general election.

Communist Party's understanding and role

Apart from the movements for legal reform for women, women's issues as such were not taken up in a big way by the Communists except when active women themselves demanded action against drunken husbands or wife beating. In the documents of the CPI too, little attention was devoted to women's oppression. The CPI did not prepare any separate policy paper for women. With regard to property rights, though the communists supported legal changes that gave women inheritance rights, yet in all the land struggles undertaken under the CPI leadership, the question of giving land to women was never taken up. The lands seized from landlords were always distributed in the name of the male heads of the landless peasantry. Party looked at them mainly as supporters or sympathizers and not as makers of history. They had admitted in their documents that though women were taking part in processions and meetings in a big way in the villages, the party did not make any special effort to organize them for a long time. They said that they were applauding them when they became part of the movement but did not encourage them and thought that their protection would be a problem. They fought bravely and undertook many tasks like arranging shelter and food. Though many women wanted to join the party, the Party did little to attract them to the movement.

Many women wanted to leave their houses and husbands and join the movement. But the party did not formulate a policy and so many women were discouraged from joining the movement. Party thought it would create social tensions if women were divorced and taken into squads. The eligibility criteria for party membership did not take into consideration the effect of socio economic factors and the detrimental

influences of patriarchy on women's development. So though there were many women who braved everything for the struggle and proved themselves beyond doubt in the class struggle, many were not given membership citing 'backwardness' as reason. This accounts for the women's membership in the party being just 10%.

There was a strong misconception that women should not be taken into the squads because they were weak. Women argued against it vehemently and became members of the squads. In fact, they have proven to be equals and even more than equals in some incidents. If the party had a conscious policy of recruiting women into squads, definitely their participation would have increased by leaps and bounds. The few women who fought with the leadership and joined the squads achieved spectacular deeds. In one incident the husband who was the commander did not fire on the police but the wife who was a squad member fired and so they could seize weapons as they had planned. The husband did not accept his mistake and was jealous of her. They had to be sent to different squads and later the wife developed at a faster pace and even became a commander.

At the peak of the movement at least 5, 6 women came from each village to join the movement. But the Party was not willing to take them by negotiating their divorces. They mostly wanted to join because of their problems with husbands also and dreamt of a life of equality in a communist party. Party thought it would get a bad name if they were encouraged to take divorce and be recruited. When Padma Naidu ran away from home to join the party, the party did not recruit her because they thought that it may lead to people thinking that she had an affair with somebody in the party. So she was sent back and she had to get married under family pressure and remain inactive. Nevertheless these women remained staunch supporters of the movement and undertook many tasks bearing innumerable risks and tortures. But no Party membership was given to them. Since women were the most oppressed they

were ready to get recruited in large numbers and the party lost a chance to build a strong structure among them.

Though the movement broke some feudal barriers between men and women it invariably gave rise to some problems in man-woman relations. But women were seen as creating problems instead of looking at the influence of patriarchy.

In Tebhaga the Party was not ready to arm people. In Rani Sankail, a valiant force of female volunteers, led by a Rajvansi woman called Bhandari snatched all police guns and kept the inspector detained for a whole night. But the reaction of the party leaders was pathetic. They asked themselves: how to return the captured guns? The detained police-inspector was released with rifles, sticks, and revolver et al and he returned to make searches and arrests. In Dooars, cadres were given the 'historical' advice to throw away the snatched guns in a well! When hundreds of volunteers demanded arms 'the leadership racked their brains not knowing what to do'. The party did not give permission to fight with arms.

It was a really big blow to the aspirations of women activists for equality and liberation when the armed struggle was withdrawn and women were asked to go home. They were suddenly faced with a dead end and did not know how to cope with an ordinary life after so many years of struggle life. Many of them had to work hard to make ends meet and many legendary figures could not continue their political work and had to be confined to house work, raising children or becoming the sole breadwinners of the family. When one of the spouses had to choose between politics and running the household, it was the woman who became the breadwinner while the husband continued his political activities. The male leaders' patriarchal attitude towards women's participation came out sharply when they told the women who did not like going home - 'we ourselves are not able to do anything, what can we say of you? Go home!'

Unmarried women were asked to marry and married women were asked to go back to household duties after the withdrawal of armed struggle. Men either studied courses such as law or just continued in politics. The party gave Rs.120 and a bullock to comrades after withdrawal of armed struggle because most of them had given every thing they had to the party when they joined and they did not have absolutely any means of living.

7

Working Class women's movement

British period

Work among women workers

Anusuya Sonabhai was one of the first women in India to do work among mill-hands. She started night schools for them in Ahmedabad. She was a Gandhian and brought Gandhi into the Ahmedabad mill strike of textile workers against the mill-owners' withdrawal of the 'plague bonus' of 1917.

The 1920s also saw a shift in consciousness about working class women. Within workers' movement women began to be seen as a special category with distinct rights and a distinct role. The Women's Indian Association was the first Women's Association to take up women workers' demands and the group of moderate nationalists that they were associated with were the first to raise the issue of maternity leave and benefits for women workers. By the late 1920s not only were there many prominent women trade unionists, but women workers also began to be consciously organized and a special role began to be given to them in the workers' movement.

In Bombay, Maniben Kara emerged as a socialist leader of railway workers and Ushabai Dange and Parvati Bhore as Communist leaders of textile workers. In the 1928-29 Bombay textile strike, women were placed at the head of demonstrations in the belief that the police would not lathi-

charge them; and they used to pickets mills to prevent strike bearers from entering. It seems they stood at mill gates with brooms in their hands and when moral persuasion failed to win errant workers, they were not above using their brooms to belabour them.

Prabhavathi worked abroad for India's freedom. After she returned to India she began working with the Workers and Peasants' Party and became one of the most important trade unionists in Calcutta. The workers called her Mataji. In 1928, she was involved in organizing the Calcutta Scavengers' strike, in which women played a leading and radical role. Women scavengers threw excreta at policemen, a symbolic demonstration of how their very degradation related to impure caste and lowly tasks might be turned into a weapon of strength.

The first part of the 20th century, especially in the period after the First World War, led to a wave of workers struggles. Women workers who formed a significant section of the young proletariat played an active part in these struggles, which were against capitalist exploitation and also colonial rule.

In the textile industry women were active from the very inception. When a social reformer N.M.Lokhande began Mill Hands Association in 1890 women workers joined it, attending and even addressing its meetings. The Factory Commission, which got appointed due to the campaign of textile workers of Bombay, restricted working hours of women to 11 hours and prohibited night work for women.

In the famous long strike of textile workers in 1928 women were in the forefront of picketing at mill gates. Women workers and wives of men workers played an active role in the Sholapur uprising in May 1930. The British took seven days to regain control over the town. Working class women displayed exemplary courage in this uprising. Through their struggles, women textile workers in Bombay were able to prevent their retrenchment in the 1930s.

The trade union movement emerged in the 1920s in the context of anti-British movement. Hence many nationalist leaders kept in touch with the workers movements. It is in this context that Annie Besant was elected one of the three Vice Presidents of the AITUC (All India Trade Union Congress) at its founding conference in 1919. Many educated, middle class women worked tirelessly among the workers as organizers and came to be recognized as leaders of workers. In the Bombay province, Maniben Kara, a supporter of M.N. Roy, led the struggles of textile workers. Elected as president of AITUC in 1935 she remained active among workers all her life. Ushatai Dange, the wife of CPI leader S.A. Dange was active among the women textile workers from the 1928 strike itself. She led the eight month long struggle of the British mill workers against retrenchment. The high point of their struggle was the nightlong encirclement of the mill office by over seven hundred women workers. Usha Dange was also one of the organizers of 1934 strike and remained associated with the workers movement all her life. Prabha Bhore, a barber by caste was a fiery speaker and participated in many struggles of textile workers. She was elected Joint Secretary of Girni Kamgar Union. Meenakshi Sane, a member of the CPI, was sent to Sholapur by the party in 1934 to work among the workers who had earned a name for themselves with militancy. She built up a movement among textile and beedi workers with women playing a leading role. Shanta Bhalerao, a full time worker of the AITUC was elected Vice President of AITUC. Noteworthy about these women was the fact that most of them remained active trade unionists all their life.

In February 1946, during the militant general strikes in support of the Royal Indian Navy cadet uprising, almost five hundred workers in Bombay were killed in police firings. Among them was a woman communist leader Kamal Dande. In Bengal too several women, especially nationalist leaders became leaders of the TU movement. Among them were Santosh Kumari Devi who led the jute workers from 1922-1927 in the Gouripur- Naihiti region of 24 Paraganas, Dr.

Prabhavathi Dasgupta who led the struggle of scavengers of Calcutta municipal corporation in 1928 and then the general strike of jute workers in 1929 and Dr. Maithreyi Bose, a Congress woman who worked among dock and port workers. She joined the INTUC and was a prominent leader of the INTUC, a rare thing considering that the INTUC had no tradition at all of promoting women into leadership.

Communist women of various trends too were active among workers. Sudha Roy a communist schoolteacher worked among dockworkers in 1930s. Women workers in jute mills in the plantations too made a name for themselves as militant organizers. Dukmat was active among jute workers of the Baranagar area and led many militant agitations. She was a representative of the workers in AITUC and was elected as Vice president of the Jute workers union. Sukumari Chaudhari was an active worker of Bengal Lamps.

There were many such unsung heroines of the working class movement. These are few examples given to stress the point that women as workers and as active political members of the anti-imperialist movement and the communist movement played an active role in the working class movement. This history is hidden in the various specific struggles.

Working class women fought for their rights courageously during the British period. In tea gardens women formed 45 percent of the total labour force. Maili Chetri, a woman tea worker of Denghajhar tea garden, started a union in 1946. Within two months police were called. They opened fire and injured 3 workers. In protest Maili brought a demonstration of 1000 workers to the town. The strike went on for 2 months. Maili was always at the head of the demonstrations held in town. When the communist party was banned, warrant was issued against Maili. She was pregnant at the time. She had to take to jungles. The police failed in all their efforts to arrest her. Often hungry, heavy with cold,

without sleep, moving in the animal infested jungles, Maili continued to provide leadership to the 1800 workers of her tea garden. But her frail body could no longer withstand such great hardship. She succumbed, a symbol of steadfastness of the working class.

In the jute mills of Bengal the men and women workers stood united when their leader Bejoy of Bauria Jute Mills was retrenched. When hundreds of police and military surrounded, women workers in large numbers came and shouted at the police and surrounded the manager. For 11 days the women took Bejoy to the factory and brought him out to safety. The news of their courage spread far and wide. Women workers gheraoed the managers at Chengail, Bauria, Budge-Budge and Kamarhatti against retrenchment, for a weekly holiday and for bonus.

In Bengal pottery factory, the 350 women workers were always in the forefront of every movement. In 1946 when they picketed the gate for an increase in wages they faced lathis and teargas. In 1948 there was a strike call to protest against the Act for detention without trial. Many were arrested and their bastees burnt. The women workers told the women blacklegs (Strike breakers): 'we will see to it that not even a cat can enter.' There was a big lathicharge on the women picketing at the gate on August 13. But they were not cowed down. The strike continued for six months. The sweepers' strike in Asansol saw women sweepers fighting courageously. Their leader Nalini Debi was snatched away from the hands of the police and they were able to protect her among themselves for several days.

Women workers of Dhanraj textiles mills in Bombay put up another courageous fight when the management served discharge notices on the women workers of the winding department in March 1947. In the course of struggle, the police force charged upon the unarmed women and for ten minutes they went on assaulting them. 20 of them were wounded, 14

of them on the chest and abdomen. Narsubai Bhimayya, a pregnant woman was beaten on the chest and abdomen and had to be hospitalised. Gangubai, their leader had both her hands twisted behind her back and was arrested. The women got her released.

Women workers struggles in Tamilnadu between two world wars

Madras, Madurai and Coimbatore are the foci of industrial development in Tamilnadu, where the main industrial activity was the production of cotton yarn and cloth. The number of women was less and there was disparity in wages between them. The factories including cotton mill evaded payment of maternity benefits to women. In Choolai two women workers who had been dismissed by the management when in advanced stage of pregnancy were reinducted only after the pressure from Madras labour union. Though there were some legal provisions, women were given the maternity benefits only after prolonged struggles by the workers. Those women who came back from delivery had to bribe the maistry to be put on the roll. Their exploitation had an additional dimension of sexual exploitation.

The prolonged 1920 Madurai mill strike was provoked by the molestation of a woman worker by a maistry. When Guruswamy Naidu the head maistry dismissed Villiammal on a flimsy reason, women struck work demanding his dismissal and his replacement by a female maistry. It was a let up for their pent up anger against the bullying and abusing of the maistries. According to the Hindu newspaper this strike by the women workers was the first of its kind in the annals of Indian history. By April 25th the workers at large also struck work. The Madurai mill management sided with the maistry and broke the strike by June 1st with police repression and with the help of blacklegs.

By late 1920s women were becoming members of trade

unions. Three thousand men and twenty women attended the Madras labor union meeting in December 1918 and there it was announced that a hundred women had joined the union.

In July 1926 B&C Mill authorities dismissed over 200 women because they have in a body resolved to face dismissal rather than disown their union. This incident shows the level of political activism of the women workers. When women workers of the B&C Mills became members of the Madras Labour Union 250 women workers were dismissed on account of their joining the union. The Women's India Association demonstrated against this.

In 1923 there were strikes in Madras where women workers protested decrease in wages. Some were successful whereas in some strikes they had to go back to work without getting any of their demands fulfilled. In 1931 in Madurai there was a major strike to earn recognition for their union. Out of the eleven thousand workers who went on strike, two thousand were women. When some men workers were hesitating to continue the strike it was the women who were willing to continue for another six weeks.

On September 18, 1930 kerosene oil workers struck work opposing retrenchment of 35 women workers in favour of cheap mofussil labour. By the end of thirties there were a series of strikes in cotton mills for better wages and good working conditions in which women's participation was very high. Between 1930 and 1946 there have been many strikes in the industrial areas in Tamilnadu, which were witness to the display of finest determination and militancy by women workers. In a culture of violent militancy that developed in Coimbatore, Madras and Madurai during the tumultuous industrial strike periods of the late thirties, women were extremely active. Some women were killed or injured in the police firings on workers.

In 1946, one of the biggest strikes began in the South

Indian Railway from August 24 to protest against the dismissal of several workers. Girls had gone out to collect funds for the strike when the police started arresting them. 3 batches led by teenage girls were arrested. The girls refused to get into the police van and walked all the way to the police station, shouting slogans. Women shouting slogans supporting the workers were arrested. Mothers as old as 60, were among the women who faced repression during this strike.

Coimbatore Textile workers struck work in November 1946. On November 11, 1946 two hundred workers including many women picketed at the mill gates. The picketers did not allow the blacklegs to enter. Police let loose a violent lathi charge. Rifle butts and bayonets were freely used. A woman worker was shot dead at point blank range. Another woman worker Subbotha was also shot dead when she was helping the men workers. Another woman worker also died of wounds. Another's body was found on the railway track. As soon as the firing stopped workers took out a procession. When the police stopped them, a woman worker ran to the head of the procession crying out. 'Shoot, shoot if you dare. Drink more of the workers' blood'. Another woman with a bullet wound limped up to the head of the procession to face the police.

On August 7, 1946 the largest gathering of women jute mill workers marched to the Assembly to represent to the MLAs against the enforcement of 'Hours of Work amendment act' whereby thousands of women workers were being thrown out of employment in jute mills. A huge contingent of police awaited them.

Post 1947 struggles involving women workers

This period too is marked by the major struggles in industries where women constitute a substantial number. Organizations of bidi workers were active during the British period itself, but their struggles picked up momentum in the

1950s and 1960s especially in Maharashtra, Karnataka, Kerala and Andhrapradesh. Coir workers in Kerala also led some militant struggles in the 1950s. In the 1970s and 1980s casual and contract workers in the public sector steel and heavy engineering plants and mines around the country have started getting organized and participated in the militant struggles to get minimum wages, for regularization, implementation of provisions like PF, gratuity, bonus etc. Women contract workers have been very much part of these struggles. The government, due to these struggles was compelled to pass many acts.

In June 1955 the labourers in a Dooars Tea garden went on a strike demanding the reinstatement of five retrenched female labourers. From 1955 onwards unionisation of female labourers increased considerably. Some of them emerged as local leaders (eg: Maili Chatri). Jamuna Oraoni, daughter of a tea garden labourer was one of the most respected leaders. When she was a girl, Jamuna was deeply impressed by the Tebhaga movement and seldom failed to attend peasants' demonstrations. Her husband left her due to her activities but Jamuna increased her activities and became AITUC leader. Niara Orain, a childless widow, Amrita Thapa, a Nepali labourer, Victoria Kharia, a Christian labourer were other leaders of the 50s. In June 1955, the workers of Margaret Hope tea garden struck work; there was police firing on a worker demonstration in which five workers including two Nepali girls, Manla Soba Rani (22), Amrita Kumari Sani (18 yrs) were killed. Female workers were leading it. Female labourers constituted about 50 percent of the labour force in the tea gardens.

Many of these struggles had been subject to severe police repression but both women workers and the wives of the striking workers had braved brutal repression to continue the struggle. The wives of railway workers braved repression to sit on the rail tracks to prevent the para military from running trains during the famous All India railway strike in May 1974.

The women textile workers and women family members of the striking workers participated in the rasta roko and jail bharo during the longest textile strike in Mumbai in 1982. One woman was martyred in this jail bharo. Women workers from SEEPZ in Mumbai faced detention in jail when they militantly gheraoed a minister. Such accounts are innumerable in the history of working class struggles in almost all parts of India. The militant role of women workers and wives of miners in Singareni coalmines of Andhrapradesh during strikes in the face of very severe repression has been remarkable. Sundar Navalkar, a labour lawyer who worked among construction workers all her life was arrested in the early 70s for her association with Marxist Leninist politics and sentenced for 3 years.

In the unorganized sector too women have slowly started organizing themselves. The tendu leaf pickers and bamboo cutters in Dandakaranya have been organized by the revolutionary mass organizations DAKMS and KAMS since the 80s. In the same period the women bidi workers all over Telangana have been organized by the revolutionaries. Among the reformist attempts to organize women in the self-employed sector the most famous is SEWA started by Ila Bhatt in Ahmedabad.

Between 1968 and 1975 India witnessed women's mobilization in the struggles of agricultural labourers, tribals and industrial working class. Support by Railway workers' wives, daughters and mothers during the historic railway strike, was unprecedented in the Indian working class movement. In spite of inhuman beatings, mass rape (Kishanganj Railway colony etc), ransacking of their tenements these women stood by the strikers. To stop the running trains they slept on the railway tracks.

In the late 1940s the CPI led women organized some conferences of working women but it was not followed up. The next systematic attempt to bring working women on a

platform and highlight their problems was done by CITU in 1979. They organized a convention of working women in Madras and followed it up by forming the All-India Coordination Committee of Working Women (AICCCWW) at the center with some state units. It organized three conventions in 1981, 1984 and in 1991. Its main stated tasks were to popularize the charter of demands for working women and mobilize women for political call at an all India level. In a review in 1987 they admitted that after initial gains in the beginning of 1979 a stagnation period set in for 3-4 years and the committees formed became non functioning or inactive. Since the CPI, CPI (M) were bogged down in revisionism all these attempts did not really lead to any gains for the working class women other than getting some fringe benefits here and there.

The Chattisgarh Mines Shramik Sangh (CMSS)

This emerged in 1977 at Dalli Rajhara in the Southern part of Durg district. In the manual mines of Dalli Rajhara, where CMSS has its base, women constitute roughly half the workforce. In CMSS, women have participated in all union struggles and activity. They played a major role in the first strike of 1977, as well as in the 1981 movement to secure the release of union leaders arrested under the National Security Act. Women are elected as union office bearers from the mines in equal proportion to their numbers. Women played a leading role in anti-alcoholism campaign. In propagating the philosophy of this campaign, in organizing mohalla committees for the detection and punishment of offenders, women were much more active than men. There has never been any economic discrimination against women in the mines. All manual workers are piece-rated and earn in direct proportion to their production in raising ore. But there was the sexual harassment of women by lumpen elements. With the union women were free of such harassment and were prepared to tackle their problems strongly. In 1980 when CISF jawans attempted to gang rape a young tribal girl, it was the protest

demonstration by the CMSS women that led to legal proceedings being initiated against the offenders.

Experiences like these led to the launching of a women's front known as the Mahila Mukthi Morcha (MMM). This was designed to campaign for women's issues, act as an intervening body in cases of wife beating, marital dispute, abandonment of women etc. Hundreds of cases came to the union and those concerning women's rights were redirected to MMM.

There was general concern that women were not coming into union leadership in the way men were doing. It was felt that due to women's social and cultural backwardness their leadership capabilities could be developed through day to day organizational experience, public speaking etc.

Apart from anti-liquor campaigning and related work, MMM women lobbied for public support and administrative action for demands like separate toilets at the bus stand, punishment to hooligans harassing women at the cinema hall and as a corollary, a separate enclosure for women at the cinema. They also took on the task of mobilization of rural women in rural struggles in which the union and Mukthi Morcha were involved. The entire women membership of the union was also deemed to have membership of MMM.

The most significant achievement of the women of Dalli Rajhara has been in their strong statement, in theory and practice, of women's inherent and equal rights as workers. They had no access to maternity leave or benefits nor were there any crèches at the work site. The union men and women had fought for and achieved these rights by 1980.

The management flouted the voluntary retirement scheme for women workers. Under this, women workers who had more than 15 years to go for superannuation were offered large and attractive cash compensations. The CMSS and MMM both took a very strong stand on the non-acceptance of the

VRS and took conscious steps to deepen its own understanding of the adverse effects of mechanization on working class women. Later in 1987 at the captive Hirri dolomite mines the male partners of working couples were offered regularization of employment if their women accepted voluntary retirement. To make the offer irresistible the men to be regularized were offered a posting at the Bhilai main plant over 100 km away. The majority union at Hirri was a branch of the CMSS. Women from Dalli Rajhara went in a large body (over 300) to Hirri, held meetings and discussions there and in 1987 convened a large seminar of working women on 'Mechanization and women' to which women of all trade unions in the region were invited.

All union facilities had been extended to MMM and articles on MMM had regularly appeared in the union newspaper. The women themselves had felt a strong identification with TU and did not see any dichotomy in their affiliation. MMM had developed theory and practice on the women's question that is class and situation specific.

Although women do not form as large a proportion of the workforce in the Bengal Nagpur Cotton Mill at Rajnandgaon as they do at Dalli Rajhara, they have been involved in the Rajnandgaon struggle in a major way. One interesting feature of the Rajnandgaon Kapda Mazdoor Sangh (RKMS) struggle is that in demonstrations and in union work both family members of workers and also people from working class mohallas with no relative working in the BNC Mills have been involved. Remarkably women - wives or sisters of workers - and several neighbours have gone on demonstrating and participated in dharnas for the demands of RKMS workers. The credit for this large involvement of 'non-working' women in a workers' movement must go to the women activists of RKMS, who have spared no pains to make this possible.

When Section 144 was in force in the Motipur area where 80% of mill workers live, it was a women's vanguard, which

broke it and courted arrest. Women faced physical attacks, molestation and personal humiliation. The lathi charge and brutal attack on the women's demonstration of August 14th, 1984 was one of the most savage attacks. Policemen as well as lumpen elements molested several women and policemen had raped at least 3 women. In the 1985-87 strike also, women in the spinning department of the mill played a leading role.

Trade Union's role in organizing women and their politics

The average book on TU history does not display any gender sensitivity and does not dwell into this aspect of the working class movement. To an extent this is also a reflection of the weakness of the TU movement itself which drew women into struggle, raised their demands, but did not conceptualize the significance of the women's participation in modern industry, the problem of the double burden and thereby devise strategies to counter the anti woman maneuvers of the capitalist class.

While women have been militant and consistent during struggles, their participation in regular trade union activities and in taking leadership in TU is low. Few are found in responsible positions at the higher levels. The neglect of the special problems of women by the TUs remains the single most important reason for these. But the issue, which requires our utmost attention along with this, is the politics these TUs represent and its implication for women's liberation.

In India the TU movement is splintered on the basis of alignment to the various ruling class parties in post '47 period. Though many militant struggles have been built up by the CPI and the working class also played a brilliant role in the anti imperialist struggles during British rule the weakness in the political line of the party prevented the proletariat from taking the leadership of the anti imperialist movement. This had its

bearing on women's oppression too. At the TU level it was reflected in taking up seriously the question of women's participation in modern industrial production and devising political strategies or organizational ways to combat their super-exploitation or the gender bias. Though the record of evolving women TU leaders when compared with other bourgeois TUs was remarkable even as late as 1987 the CPI leaders admitted their inability to bring in women leaders to represent at least sectors where women were the majority. In fact after the line of the party changed after 1951 we find a difference in the interest paid to the question of women's role in trade unions.

But more importantly the inability of the party to lead the New Democratic Revolution in India led the TU movement to be bogged down in sheer economism and the mire of electoral gains. Till the dawn of the Naxalbari there was no hope for the workers in any form to get rid of the severe exploitation. Though politically it became the beacon light for the workers it should be said that the attempts of the revolutionary parties to organize the organized as well as the unorganized workers leave much to be desired. The question of equal wages for equal work have been taken up and won in the forest areas like Dandakaranya and the problem of sexual exploitation of women workers was dealt with effectively in their areas of influence. Attempts have been made to bring women leaders to the negotiating tables instead of men representing them. Commendable though the efforts have been, they are highly inadequate to lead the working class men and women in the path of revolution.

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Historic awakening of women – Naxalbari

Women were mobilized in the Naxalbari (Darjeeling district, West Bengal) struggle. They attended village meetings and remained in the vanguard of the demonstrations. Very often entire families joined the movement. Women confronted the police when the male activists went into hiding; they kept contact with the activists, while doing household work and looking after the field. Some young activists who learnt to use arms chased away the anti socials that molested women. There grew up a nucleus of militants.

After the murder of Wangdi, the male activists took shelter in the forests; the women activists tried to organise a meeting on 25 May 1967 at Prasadjote. The police fired on the demonstration, killing seven women. Dhaneshwari Singh, Sanamati Singh, Pulmati Singh, Surabala Barman who were killed in police firing came from the Rajbansi Community. Naganeshwari Mallick who was born in a Dhamal Community in 1944 married a refugee schoolteacher from East Pakistan. She worked hard as a sharecropper and collected wood from the forests. Nayan was killed along with her child who was tied to her back. Dhaneshwari Singh was literate and became a leading activist and went to distant villages for campaigning while her husband remarried a sympathiser. Samsai Saibani, a brave tribal girl was one of the leading organizers of the demonstration. These were the first (women) martyrs of the Naxalbari struggle.

Srikakulam Armed Struggle

The armed uprising of Srikakulam owes its origins to the organization of the tribals under the banner of the Girijan Sangham formed in 1958. The Sangham launched a series of struggles against the well-established ruling class nexus and scored several victories. As the movement grew, so did the degree of repression. The movement took a violent turn when landlords at a village called Levidi opened fire on unarmed tribals who were on their way to the Girijan Conference at Mondemkhal on Oct 31, 1967. This incident, in fact began with the large-scale participation of women. A group of 400 tribal women from the village Gumma dressed in red saris, carrying red flags and singing revolutionary songs were proceeding to the Conference when the goondas of the landlords attacked them at Levidi. The women were molested, their saris torn, and the red flags burnt. Some of the women then ran to Mondemkhal, the venue of the conference and reported the incident. Hundreds of women accompanied by men returned to the place. In the ensuing scuffle the women participated by throwing chilli powder and beating up the goondas with sticks and grain pounders. At this stage, a landlord hiding in a house nearby opened fire and killed two tribals, Koranna and Manganna on the spot.

Following the incident, a number of arrests were made and once again women came to the forefront when they actively, and at times successfully, resisted the police raids and arrests of their men. At Gumma, they successfully warded off a police party by assembling in large numbers and using chilli powder, brooms and sticks. At Pedakaraja it was again mostly women who confronted the police party, which opened fire and killed three tribals.

The first phase of guerrilla struggle began on 24 November 1968 at Garudabhadra in Kasibugga police station limits in the plains. Led by Panchadi Nirmala and Subbarao Panigrahi, the squad forcibly cut the crops of a rich landlord.

From about the mid-sixties up to the very last phase of the movement, women participated in large numbers. In any hamlet or village where men joined the movement, women also joined in equal numbers. A perusal of FIRs in over 1,800 instances recorded in a large number of police stations scattered all over, brings out the extent of women's participation in sharp relief. In the earlier phase, i.e., 1967-69, in almost all cases lodged in the hill areas we come across references to 'a large number of women.'

Their participation in the plains was not at such a scale. In Uddanam (the plains), Mahila Sangams were established in early sixties and in the 1967 general elections, a conscious effort was made by the CPI (M) to mobilize women for the purposes of electioneering. In the hills Girijan Mahila Sangams were formed only after the movement took a militant character. These Sangams were instrumental in mobilizing women for meetings, processions, protest marches, public meetings and strikes. Hundreds of women took part in these activities. When large meetings took place in far off towns like Srikakulam, Parvatipuram and Palakonda, women walked, sometimes a distance of 100 km holding red flags and carrying children, food and utensils.

Panchadi Nirmala inspired generations of women with her valour, commitment and martyrdom. Sampooramma, Puli Ramanamma, Tamada Chandamma, Medavarapu Ramasita were some of the other women leaders. Some of them had left their children with their relatives and joined the squads.

At the peak of armed struggle there were about 100 dalams comprising nearly 500 men and 50 women.

As the movement became more militant and repression intensified, the supportive role played by women of the villages continued to sustain the hunted guerrilla squads for a while. They often took great risks to keep squads supplied with food and water long after the men had turned away in fear.

Usually they did this in spite of being dissuaded by their husbands. They used to pack rice or flour or millets in long strips of cloth and wrap them around their waists under their dress. On reaching the guerrillas, they used to strip in nearby bushes, remove the hidden food and dress again. They carried pots of water along secret path for guerrillas. Even from the regrouped villages women continued to take ambali (gruel) and tobacco on the pretext of carrying their own food while working in the podu (shift cultivation) fields. Even in conditions of most brutal treatment by the police, the women consistently refused to divulge the whereabouts of dalams or the leaders. Altogether about two to three thousand women faced prosecution. More than a thousand of them suffered long periods of imprisonment. Six of the 140 accused in the Parvathipuram conspiracy case were women. Some of them stayed in jail for almost 8 years. Women were also subjected to molestation, torture and harassment of all kinds when the state began regrouping the villages. Of the 157 people killed in so-called encounters, 17 were women (13 tribals and four from the plains).

Reverberations in Kerala and Tamilnadu

Around Pulpally in Calicut (South Wayanad) people were very restive because they had been promised land deeds by the left front government before the elections, but after the elections, the government was dragging its feet on this. The land in question belonged to a devaswom (temple trust) and when the settlers began to encroach on it and prepare it for cultivation, a camp of the Malabar special police was set up in the temple compound. The Ganesh bidi factory of Telicherry, owned by Mangalorians employed about 18,000 workers- all men. The left front government had declared a lockout in the factory and had closed its leaf depots all over Cannanore district. The CPM rebels took up the cause. An immediate solution to the problem of 18,000 laid off workers had to be found. The police station in Tellichery and the police camp at Pulpally were to be attacked.

On November 22, 1968 as planned about a 1000 people went to attack the police station at Telicherry. The action did not quite take place because the crowd dispersed once the policemen inside were alerted and threatened violent retaliatory action. The action at Pulpally on November 24, done by 50-60 men and one woman Ajitha was more successful. They took the police by surprise, killed one constable and one sub-inspector who had a reputation as a sadist and captured a large quantity of arms. At a village enroute, while retreating in the forest area, they attacked two landlord homes, looted their stores of grain and other valuables and distributed these to the villagers. At this point many tribal peasants came and joined them. Men and women were extremely enthusiastic about the struggle.

The other group did not join them. The police had undertaken a big hunt for the group and a few were captured. This group also gradually dwindled. One old comrade died in an accidental blast. Finally 15 of them were left and when they went to a village for food and shelter, somebody informed the police and they were captured.

Though Ajitha's mother had not taken part in the raid she was also arrested. In police custody Ajitha was beaten, tortured and subjected to filthy abuse. She was threatened with rape several times. They reportedly accused her of prostituting her body to fulfil the sexual needs of the comrades. During the emergency and immediately before she was kept in solitary confinement for 5 years. She was on the point of insanity before release. In 1977 she was released.

In Tamil Nadu, the DMK government tried to suppress the Naxalite movement from the beginning and unleashed severe repression by forming a separate 'Q' branch. When the heroic sons of the people were being brutally hunted down by the police, it was the women who treated them as their own sons and brothers and provided them with safe shelters, food and clothing risking their own lives.

In 1971, in the Nayakankottai area, women participated in a big way in the struggle against usury. Dharmalinga Chettiyar and Periyana Chettiyar were notorious landlords and tyrants who made the lives of women also miserable in that area. They were annihilated by the squads in 1971 and 1973 respectively. Anantha Nayaki Ammal who was a sympathiser of the movement (and a sister of the State Committee member of CPI (ML) Kaliya Perumal) was brutally tortured and had to spend 12 years in jail. His wife Vallambal was also implicated in a false case. Com. Jaya who was an eyewitness to the police killing of Com. Seeralan was stripped naked in the village open itself and abused. They shoved a stick into Jaya's vagina and tore hair from her scalp. In jail they threatened that they will burn her boy and even falsely showed her some ashes. This kind of torture went on for six months on her. But she faced these threats boldly and gave witness in the court in the case of Seeralan's murder. The police murdered her husband. In 1979, when a movement to release political prisoners was launched some meetings were conducted where the leadership and speakers were all women. All of these women belong to the families of comrades who were in jails. In those days of repression this required great courage.

9

The turbulent decade of 1967-1977

Anti Price Rise Movement

Women were in the forefront of the agitations, which swept the country in the period between 1967 and 1975. Landless women working in famine relief programmes eagerly participated in land grabs and marches. Women from the organized sector joined the self-employed, casual workers and lower middle class house wives for a common show of strength against unemployment and prices. Probably for the first time after the Maoist student groupings, young women students in Bihar and Gujarat from peasant or small trading and middle class families joined their colleagues to be lathi charged by the police in anti corruption agitations.

The Mahangai Pratikar Sanyukta Mahila Andolan or the Anti-price rise movement of Bombay (APRM) was one of the many struggles against inflation. In 1972, the two communist parties and the socialist party women leaders who had individually through their parties been taking up the issue of prices routinely, met to discuss the possibility of joint action. A large number of women answered their call to protest against inflation in general and the shortage of food grains, sugar, cooking oil and kerosene in particular. The objective was - the government should check the price rise and ensure an adequate quota of subsidized essential commodities through the PDS. Sporadically, but faithfully, over a period of 3 years, middle class and working class women - young, old, housebound mothers, Mahila Mandal (Women's Club) members, those

- working at home, on piece rate work or as domestic servants, those belonging to unions or having joined the demonstrations because of friends, marched with rolling pins, plates and spoons, gheraoed officials and confronted state ministers. The media publicity led to ripples of similar action in Maharashtra and in Gujarat. The lathi morcha or the rolling pin demonstration attracted huge number (estimates range from 10,000 to 20,000) of women. Its surprised leaders hailed it as a 'new women's movement' 'a popular consumers movement' and as the beginning of a 'people's movement.' The APRM came to an abrupt halt with the arrest of most of its leaders during the Emergency in 1975. The economic crisis of the 1960s was amplified by increase in unproductive expenditure during the China and Pakistan wars in 1967 and 1971 and 3 years of continuous famine and drought in different parts of the country. Essential commodities saw a 25 to 30 percent increase. It had an immediate and tangible effect on the working class families in Bombay. The most obvious effect was the lengthening of the women's working hours to an inhuman level. Ultimately it was the responsibility of the housewife to feed the family and the whole drudgery and pressure led her into the struggle.

The demands verbally articulated by the members were: all black or unaccounted/illegal money should be destroyed, trade in essential commodities should be nationalized, all essential commodities should be distributed through ration shops, the government's policy of deficit financing and indirect taxation should be halted, and hoarders, food adulterers, black marketers and income tax evaders should be severely punished.

Their main emphasis was primarily on action and mobilization. On receiving complaints a delegation of women would meet the official in charge and gather information. If they found the official replies unsatisfactory, a dharna or meeting was organised. At times the entire Samiti would pitch

in to organise a rally or a morcha. One of the first intensive campaigns was on the price of milk. A delegation of women went to meet S. B. Chavan, a state cabinet minister and spontaneously gheraoed him in his own office. The minister escaped from the enraged women on the pretext of going to the toilet.

Complaints of dirt and pebbles in food grains prompted a Kachra-tula (weighing the dirt) demonstration. Women were asked to collect all the dirt found in grain distributed through ration shops and bring it to a demonstration. Hundreds of women in April 1974 saw a weighing of an effigy of the chief Minister against the collected dirt. The Samiti announced a Ghanta Vadan (sounding of bells) to resent the 1974 cut in the quota of rations. This form of action was meant to involve all women, especially women with children who could not come to rallies. At an appointed hour, 10.00pm women came out on the streets and beat empty plates with spoons. Surreptitiously, but surely, a group of women entered the government secretariat and made their way to the cabinet meeting room, whipped out several empty kerosene tins with which they made a deafening noise until they were arrested (August 1974). In Nagpur 5,000 women on the streets marched waving milo (sorghum) rotis attached to their rolling pins. The campaign reached its peak with the now famous and massive latni or rolling pin march in October 1973. The Samiti declared November 26, 1973 as an Anti Price Rise Day and collaborated with parties and trade unions in their protest against prices, unemployment etc. A black flag and black balloon demonstration against the Prime Minister Indira Gandhi provoked the Bharatiya Mahila Federation (CPI) to withdraw from the Samiti. The rest of the Samiti continued to function until the declaration of emergency when they went underground and their activists abandoned the APRM to protest against the emergency.

Women in Nav Nirman Movement

During 1974 January-February unprecedented upsurge

took place in Gujarat when thousands of women came out in the streets of very important cities and towns. It was against skyrocketing prices of essential commodities, scarcity of mass consumption commodities, corruption, hoarding and black marketing. It lasted 3 months and heavy repression by police and Special Reserve Police was unleashed. Women students of schools and colleges and other middle class women showed unassuming initiative and energetic participation of them was seen in activities like organizing demonstrations, rallies, gheraos, prabhat-pheris, mock court, ringing death-knell of the then legislative Assembly with roller pins and thalis, mass fasting, organizing mock funerals of Chief Minister and local Congress leaders etc. Women showed tremendous courage against police repression and were effective in protecting men activists from state coercion.

Later on, Anti Price Rise Women's Front was started with great gusto in Baroda around August 1974. It had a membership of 6,000 women mainly from lower middle class background with almost no participation from working class. It waged long drawn fight against price-rise of milk by Baroda dairy but despite initial enthusiasm it fizzled out after emergency.

In the Bihar movement, lots of women students participated, inspired by the Nav Nirman movement and led by Jayaprakash Narain. Mahila Sangharsh Vahini was formed and new radicalisation was seen amongst its members. Many of them had to face great resistance from their families. With the declaration of emergency, this movement petered out.

Dhulia Struggle

In 1972 in Dhulia district of Maharashtra, Shramik Sanghatana launched systematic struggles around issues like land distribution, higher wages, exploitation and oppression of tribal masses by landlords, moneylenders. Issues of tribal women's sexual harassment were also taken up. Agitations

against rape of tribal women by goondas, rich peasants and police drew a lot of women into the movement. Women were in the forefront of these struggles. They were the ones who physically stopped strikebreakers. They also worked for drought relief from 1973. Tribal women in the movement raised the issues of alcoholism, wife beating and sexual harassment by the rural rich. Women activists without waiting for green signal from their male leaders launched a furious battle against bootleggers and broke wine pots. Any man who consumed alcohol and beat up his wife was beaten up with brooms by a group of women and forced to pledge that he would not beat his wife. Any man who molested women was made to wear a garland of footwear and was given a donkey ride in the village. In Marathwada also such campaigns took place between 1976 and 1978, at the initiative of Kashtakari Sanghatana.

Against Emergency

Indira Gandhi, the then prime minister of India declared emergency on 25th June 1975 which unleashed a reign of terror and brutality till her defeat in the general elections in 1977. Even political leaders of parliamentary parties were arrested and press freedom was gagged. Nearly one and half lakhs of people were arrested under MISA and DIR. Many of them were the single earning males in their families. The women of their families underwent untold trauma and misery trying to get them released and looking after the families. Many women who were active in the various political movements in the turbulent decade of 1960-1970 were arrested during emergency. Molina Dhak of Bengal was sentenced to death and rotted in the jail in those days; later her death sentence was cancelled after a movement was built up on this.

The crackdown on the naxalites was more severe. In Andhra Pradesh the fake encounters which started during the Srikakulam struggle continued. Bommareddy Snehalatha, a MSC gold medalist from Andhra University joined the armed struggle inspired by the Naxalbari politics. She along with some

more male comrades was caught, tortured most inhumanly and was killed in a fake encounter. Her martyrdom was immortalized in songs and after Panchadi Nirmala became the most inspiring figure to the women in those days and continues to do so even now. Naxalite women like Pyla Chandamma and Komuramma who were arrested while in underground had to spend in jail during emergency. Komuramma gave birth to a child in the jail. A false case was foisted on Jana Natya Mandali singer Sandhya who was tortured and put in jail during the emergency. K.Lalitha, now a well known writer, was arrested in November 1975, tortured and put in jail under MISA. Dr.Veena Satrughna was arrested along with her husband Satrughna who was running the magazine 'News and Views of China' and put in jail. Women activists of PDSU, a revolutionary student organization in AP, Ambika and Swarna were arrested for celebrating Mayday in 1976 and distributing pamphlets against emergency on the occasion. Pyla Chandamma had to continue in jail even after the emergency was lifted on 23rd March, 1977.

The makers of Samskara were harassed rather cruelly by the government during the Emergency. Snehalatha Reddy, the leading actress in Samskara and wife of Pattabhi Rami Reddy, the director of the film was accused of concealing information about the whereabouts of George Fernandes (who later become Union Minister in successive Governments), a trade union leader, whose arrest had been ordered in the Emergency roundup. Snehalata Reddy known to be a friend of Mr. Fernandes, denied knowledge about the whereabouts of Fernandes. She was jailed and interrogated for eight months. An asthmatic deprived of medicine; she fell seriously ill and was released just before her death. She died in January 1977, five days after her release. Undoubtedly she was a victim of Emergency.

The Archana Guha Case, West Bengal

On 18 July 1974, at about 1.30 am, Archana Guha, her brother Soumen's wife Latike Guha and another family

member, Ms. Gouri Chatterjee were arrested by the officers of "special cell", Calcutta Police, and all three were subjected to inhuman torture by and under instruction of the then officer-in-charge Ranjit Guha Neogi, to extract confession of these three women's alleged involvement in the Naxalite Movement and to extract information on the whereabouts of Archana's brother Soumen Guha. He was active in the Naxalite movement. This movement became the chief target of state repression and it is well known that during that period, thousands of young men and women have been unlawfully detained, brutally tortured and killed for their direct or indirect involvement in this movement.

The three women were confined in police custody for 27 days and then sent to "Presidency jail", where they were detained for about 3 years under "Maintenance of Internal Security Act" (MISA). Soumen was also arrested on 5 August 1974 and tortured by police, and ultimately detained under MISA for about 3 years. All of their family members were put to jail during the notorious period of internal emergency in India, except Archana's mother, an old helpless lady. A crippled Archana Guha was released on parole in 1976. Her brother Soumen and his wife Latika were released in 1977 when general amnesty was granted to almost all political prisoners in 1977. Archana Guha became paralysed in the lower limbs because of the torture inflicted on her. Much later she was taken to Denmark with the help of Amnesty International where she recovered after prolonged treatment.

Archana Guha's case was filed on 20 August 1977 against the police officers who tortured them. In an unprecedented order, the trial court under its own responsibility allowed Soumen Guha, who is without a degree in law, and himself a victim of torture in the hands of the same police officers, to cross-examine and argue on behalf of his sister Archana Guha. For 19 years (from 1977), she and her family members fought for justice. Finally on June 5, 1996 judgment in the Archana Guha case was delivered.

The accused, Ranjit Guha Neogi, a former Deputy Commissioner of Calcutta Police, and a constable, Santosh Dey were convicted on charges of torturing and outraging the modesty of Ms. Archana Guha and two other women, Mrs. Latika Guha and Ms. Gouri Chatterjee, in 1974. In the judgment it was clearly mentioned that the complaint of torture in police custody has been made out and that he was also convinced that the modesty of the complainant Ms. Archana Guha has been outraged by the accused persons when she was threatened that if she did not confess her links with Naxalite activities she would be gang-raped by four drunk men. The magistrate sentenced the accused police personnel to simple imprisonment for a total period of one year and fined them Rs. 2000 each. In case of failure to pay the fine the jail term would be extended by two months. APDR's Sujatho Bhadra commented that he should have been sentenced at least to seven years imprisonment.

It may be mentioned in this connection that the prime accused Ranjit Guha Neogi was appointed the head of the anti-Naxalite "special cell" of Calcutta Police during the seventies, to enforce the large scale state-repression which came down on the Naxalite Movement. This shows how the state uses its officers for its own ends in spite of their notoriety.

Progressive Organisation of Women (POW)

Among the first women's organisations was the Progressive Organisation of Women (POW) formed by the CPI (ML) CP Reddy group in Telengana in Andhra Pradesh. The Progressive Organization of Women (POW) of Hyderabad emerged in 1974 from students' movement. With its manifesto proclaiming solidarity with all women and all oppressed classes it attracted young college students. Their campaign against dowry and eve teasing became very popular. At one stage it had a membership of hundreds of college girls. Towards the end of the 1970s units of the POW were formed in villages in Karimnagar district and conferences were also

organised. Later as work of organising women rolling beedis (leaf cigarettes) began, they too got organised into the POW apart from being organised in the unions which were also formed. Thus the demands of women, especially peasant women began to be articulated. After declaration of emergency, POW leaders were imprisoned. In the words of one of its activists 'because of the general repression and also because of organizational methods employed, the POW was temporarily 'smashed' if you can call it that'.

POW started working again in the 90s. Even though it had also split along with the splits in its parent party, the various fragments are functioning and working to an extent among the oppressed women. They have been tackling issues of patriarchy as well as class issues of women. Almost all of them take part in elections and participate in the election propaganda for the candidates of their respective ML parties.

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The Autonomous Women's Movement - AWM

Emergence of autonomous groups and organizations of women was a distinguishing feature of the mid-seventies. These were formed out of agitations against state violence in the form of police rapes on women. The autonomous women's organizations in almost all the centres were initiated by women who were active and gained political experience during the turbulent decade of 70s in the various political movements and later drifted away from them. The name autonomous indicates that they do not adhere to any political party and are run by women totally. Let us see how they are defined by themselves.

In Vibhuti Patel's words – "Here 'autonomy' is understood in terms of independent existence from a political party. These groups and organizations take up women's problems, its members are only women and they are run by women only and not by bosses (men) of the political parties. This does not mean that in such organizations activist members are apolitical. Women members of AWM may adhere to various political ideologies and some of them belong to different political parties. It is also not separatist. It does not exclude men. Men do participate in the campaigns and struggles launched by AWM. The only insistence of feminists is that women should decide the course of the movement."

"Characteristics of AWM -

Women organize and lead the movement.

Fight against oppression, exploitation, injustice and discrimination against women is the first and foremost priority

of the movement; any other considerations can't subordinate women's rights.

It can't be subordinated to the decisions and necessities of any political or social group/organization."

Though this has been the definition there were many ups and downs in its implementation and the autonomous movement was never or could be really autonomous of so many things. Let's see how it is after going through some of their well known agitations.

Against Rape

Rape is one of the most common and frequent crimes against women in India and also one of the most under reported of crimes in India.

The issue of police rape achieved new significance in 1978 through an incident in Hyderabad where a woman called Rameeza Bee was raped by several policemen and her rickshaw puller husband murdered because he protested at his wife's gang rape. Following this rape and murder, 22,000 Hyderabadis went to the police station, laid the dead body in the station verandah, set up road blocks, cut the telephone wires, stoned the building and set fire to bicycles in the compound. Two platoons of armed police were called in to quell the crowd's fury. When the CM was gheroaed there was police firing. The next day a Hyderabad bandh was called to protest the firing, curfew was declared in 16 areas and nine people were killed and eight injured by police firing. Within two days, the agitation which had started in Hyderabad spread to other parts of Andhra Pradesh. 18 police stations were burnt during the agitation and 26 people died in police firings. The main defence of the police was that she was a prostitute. Women were even more angered with this blatant lie and articles were written to refute the argument that a prostitute can be raped.

The agitation continued even when the army was called in and could only be repressed after President's rule was declared. A commission of enquiry into the rape of Rameeza Bee and the murder of her husband was appointed. Despite the report of the Commission of enquiry, which established the policemen's guilt, the Sessions Court acquitted them. While public pressure in the case of both Mathura and Rameezabee resulted in a criminal case being registered against the concerned police, the women victims did not receive any support from local community which viewed women as 'loose characters'. Rameezabee was stigmatized as a prostitute. Derogatory comments about her were made in state assembly even by ministers.

In 1979 there were women's demonstrations against incidents of police and landlord/employer rape in Sangamner, Patur and Malur villages in Karnataka while in Guwahati there were huge rallies protesting the rape of women by the army in Kamrup. As part of the movement for a separate state of Jharkhand, a movement to campaign against mass rape was started in the Santhal Paraganas.

In 1980, an open letter by four senior lawyers against a judgement in the Mathura rape case by police in Maharashtra sparked off a campaign by feminist groups. The Forum against Rape (later FAOW) decided to campaign for the reopening of the case and wrote to feminist groups all over the country to propose that demonstrations be held on International Women's Day to demand a revival of the case. This was the first coordinated campaign by feminists all over India. On March 8th, there were women's demonstrations in Bombay, Delhi, Nagpur, Pune, Ahmedabad, Bangalore and Hyderabad and huge protest rallies in several major cities and towns. In Bombay, FAOW held its first meeting on 12 January, 1980, followed by a public meeting on 23 February and a mass protest rally on 7 March 1980. On 17th March, 1980 women's groups in Delhi held demonstrations outside the Supreme Court and demanded reopening of the Mathura rape case. In both

Bombay and Delhi, Joint Action Committees of feminist groups and organizations affiliated to socialist and communist parties, mainly that of students, were formed to coordinate the campaign. Coordinated action however was not to last long. A review petition was filed by the Bharatiya Mahila Federation and the Women Lawyers Council. But the court held that the women's organizations have no locus standi to file the review petition. Then on, reform in rape laws became the main focus of the campaign at national level.

Meanwhile protests against incidents of police rape began to be reported from all over the country; only some of which were organised by feminists. In April, women students in Patna protested against the rape of a rickshaw puller's wife; and in the same month in Vijayanagar, in Rajasthan, villagers surrounded the police station and stoned it following the molestation of a widow by the SHO (Station House Officer). In May angry mobs attacked the Bankura police station and set fire to some houses and shops in protest against the 'molestation' of a girl. In June, the sub-divisional magistrate of Dhunda town, in Uttara Kashi was gheroaed after he attempted to rape a 20-year-old woman in the district hospital.

In June police arrested Maya Tyagi, in Bhagpat (Haryana) stripped her naked, raped her and paraded her through the streets. The incident caused such a furore that a judicial enquiry was ordered.

5,000 residents of Dahwali in Haryana demonstrated against the rape and alleged murder of Shiela Devi, the wife of an orderly, who was raped by a police constable in the police station. Twenty-two were injured in police firing. Furious at the incidents Sirsa town went on a one-day hartal and the chief minister's car was stoned.

The sustained campaign during the initial years received wide media publicity. Apart from the traditional methods of raising public consciousness through leaflets, posters,

demonstrations and public meetings, the campaign also adopted unconventional forms like songs, skits and street plays. The groups tried to work at many different levels. Through sustained grass roots level work, the groups followed up rape cases locally, organized posters and tried to provide support to the victim. Secondly, with the help of statistical data, in-depth case studies and theoretical debates, they tried to break the existing myths about rape in society and foster change in social attitudes. The campaign also highlighted gross sexual atrocities by the police and the army and built public and political pressure against them. The issue was supported by media, civil liberties groups, political parties and progressive legal forums.

During the mid 80s, rape ceased to be an important issue for the women's movement. There was either sporadic investigation in an isolated case or a participation in a demonstration organized by a community organization. A national conference of activists in Bombay in April 1990 was aimed at redefining rape and providing a platform for sharing the experiences of a decade in order to rejuvenate the campaign. While it confirmed the inadequacy of the movement, it did not lead to a renewal of the campaign.

Between 1975-1980 civil liberties groups investigated many rape cases and there had been protests and agitations organized by them; mainly at state level. Most of the rapes were part of state repression.

A national conference was held in Bombay in 1980 to coordinate the work and evolve a common perspective. This was attended by 200 women from various parts of the country. Legal reforms were discussed in detail. Finally when the Bill was passed in 1983, it had many loopholes. Observation on this Bill by Flavia Agnes, a prominent women's rights activist and lawyer is interesting.

"While reviewing the decade long campaign, these crumbs thrown to the women's movement by the state one

assessed as one of the concrete gains of the movement, while in reality, the fact that the Bill which had created such a furore in August 1980 could be passed so stealthily in December 1983, is a reflection of the setback the movement had already received. The state had succeeded in co-opting and subverting the demand raised by the movement. What is worse, this set the trend for the state to co-opt and subvert every single demand raised by the women's movement for legal reforms during the decade. The laws on obscenity, Sati and prostitution are concrete examples of this phenomenon."

Against Dowry

The first protests against dowry in the contemporary feminist movement were made by the Progressive Organization of Women in Hyderabad in 1975. Some of their demonstrations numbered as many as 2000 people. After a lull of around 2 years, a new movement against dowry started in Delhi especially against murder and abetment to suicide. There have been protests against dowry harassment murders in several parts of India (Punjab, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Bengal). Though Mahila Dakshata Samiti (MDS) was the first women's organization in Delhi to take up the issue of dowry and related harassment, it was Stri Sangharsh whose campaign made dowry murder a household term. Many demonstrations were held against dowry murders as they occurred and each one hit the headlines. MDS brought out a booklet on the issue. One of the biggest demonstrations was organised by the Nari Raksha Samiti on June 12. Within weeks feminists reversed the indifference of decades linking death by fire with dowry harassment, showing that many official 'suicides' were in fact murders. Feminists insisted that dying declarations be treated as evidence, police procedures be tightened up and these murders be confronted by society. People responded and joined in the protests spontaneously.

Stri Sangharsh gave the first performance of its street play, Om Swaha, an attack on dowry and dowry murder in 1979, which

became enormously popular with people asking them to visit their locality and perform the play there. One year after the agitation began, governments started to legislate against dowry murders.

Anti-dowry demonstrations have always been outside the homes or workplaces of dowry demanders or accused dowry murderers as well as at police stations; neighbourhood groups had been formed to boycott dowry harassers, accused husbands of dowry victims had their faces blackened (in one or two instances); public meetings had been arranged at which people had pledged neither to give nor to take dowry.

Against Sati

Roop Kanwar's murder in the name of Sati in the village of Deorala in Rajasthan in 1987 sparked off a series of protests against it all over the country. There were some pro-Sati demonstrations also by women under the guidance of extreme right organizations. After Roop Kanwar's death the Sati Dharma Raksha Samiti was formed in Jaipur city and along with the Deorala Trust they announced that a Chunri Mahotsav would be held 10 days after her death. Feminists in Jaipur petitioned the High Court to forbid the ceremony and the High Court instructed the State government to prevent it. But it took place without any interference from the government forces, in fact with their connivance and actual presence. This also led to protests from women in various parts of India. Within Rajasthan, considerable opposition both to Sati and to State inaction on Roop Kanwar's death was voiced by a huge number of women, largely rural, who joined demonstrations to protest against the glorification of her death. Gandhians held a rally of about 10,000 women in Orissa, who gheroad the head priest of the Puri temple, calling him to account for his views (supporting Sati) which he was unable to.

Campaign against sex determination tests

In October 1985, 'The Forum against Sex Determination and Sex Pre-selection' was founded in Bombay. In March 1986,

it organized a workshop and discussed the technical, social, legal and campaign aspects. Weekly meetings were held. Since pro-SD (sex determination) lobby and the SD clinics did a lot of propaganda their bill boards, pamphlets, posters etc were seen everywhere. So to counter this they started a campaign in the trains, through counter advertisement. They prepared a poster 'Ban SD Tests' which became popular. This was followed by a dharna outside a SD clinic. Next they collected signatures for a letter to PM. They published a book for Nari Jeevan Sangharsh Yatra. They organized a Parents-Daughters Yatra on Children's Day in 1986. The slogan of the day was 'Half the Children Are Female or ought to be'. Some school children also participated. For the next Children's Day, they mobilized hundreds of children at Hutatma Smarak. They included students from convent schools as well as tribal children from Thane district mobilized by Kashtakari Sanghatana. A roadside exhibition was also held. Children sang songs and acted in plays giving the message of the campaign. This inspired many artistes who for two years went on drawing on this issue. A special sticker was made for Children's Day in 1988. PTI-TV prepared a documentary. Another documentary was also made by a Mr. Singh. The Forum prepared a slide show in Marathi and wrote songs. A renowned dramatist wrote a play based on this theme.

These efforts at raising people's consciousness culminated in a month long Nari Jeevan Sangharsh Yatra. It was organized in and around Bombay during March- April 1988 with the help of several local groups. They interacted with people and used video films, slide shows, posters and plays to spread the message. Several women slum dwellers came together and collectively wrote, directed and presented a play on topics related to their everyday lives. The Forum published a set of posters used in the Yatra in the form of a book.

Then they filed a PIL and prepared a draft of the legislation. Later Mahila Dakshata Samiti filed litigation in the High Court following the death of a mother and a foetus due

to the SD test. It did not come up for hearing for years. Dr. Sanjeev Kulkarni carried out a sample survey of gynecologists and came up with one of the most authentic statistics available on the subject. A group called 'Doctors against SD' (DASD) was formed. DASD publicly asked IMA, IMC and FOGSI to take a stand on this matter. Barring FOGSI, others didn't bother. Finally, the bill was passed and Maharashtra Regulation of Prenatal Diagnostic Techniques Act of 1988 was enacted with many lacunae which provided loopholes for the culprits to escape. Next, the 'Forum against SD' was formed in Gujarat. After a long drawn out struggle, it succeeded in the introduction of a private member's bill in the Gujarat Legislature. In Goa, the campaign against SD spearheaded by Bailancho Saad even succeeded in the introduction of an official bill in the assembly.

Campaign groups were organized in different parts of the country and they raised the demand for a nationwide law.

Shah Bano case

On 23rd of April 1985, a five-member constitution Bench led by Chief Justice Chandrachud ruled that a 75-year-old woman, Shah Bano, was entitled to maintenance by her husband under Section 125 of the Criminal Procedure Code. The way the wordings in the judgement were put, it was clearly possible to infer that the judges were saying that Muslim personal law was bad, that the Muslim Community preferred unjust laws, so somebody (in this case the state) has to impose justness on them. It was similarly easy to infer that the imposition was to be made not for the sake of justice alone, but also for the cause of 'national integration'. And from this it was also easy to infer that national integration required Muslims to abandon 'loyalty' to Islam and Islamic personal law. The judgement was criticized widely on a variety of grounds: overall feminists, liberals and secularists were critical of it for having brought issue of religion and personal law into what was essentially a question of secular, criminal law.

Further instead of dealing with the general issue of personal laws and their effect on women's rights, it focussed on Muslim Personal law alone.

A whole debate went on around this. On 25th of February, 1986 the Muslim Women (protection of Rights on Divorce) Bill was introduced which excluded divorced Muslim women from the purview of Section 125, stating that the obligation of their husbands to maintain them ended with a three months 'iddat' period, after which their families would have to support them or failing this, their local Wakf Board. The introduction of the Bill caused considerable furore. About 150 to 200 women from the Janwadi Mahila Samiti, the Mahila Dakshata Samiti, the National Federation of Indian Women and the Dahej Virodhi Chetna Manch courted arrest outside Parliament House on the same day. Opposition to the Bill took the form of public meetings, demonstrations, a concerted press campaign and lobbying. However, unlike the anti-dowry and anti-rape agitations this was not carried out under a single, joint action umbrella. Several different lobbying groups were formed, representing different strands of opposition to the Bill: liberal, feminist, progressive and Muslim.

Two initiatives against existing personal laws had received widespread support and publicity from women all over the country - Mary Roy's petition against Christian Personal Law and Shahnaz Sheikh's petition against Muslim Personal Law. So much of pressure was put on Shah Bano that she gave up the right she had fought for so many years, asking the Supreme Court to record that she now stood against the petition they had upheld, and abjuring the maintenance the Court had accorded her.

Present condition of AWM

The AWM brought to the fore many women's issues which were till then seen as forbidden and played a key role in spreading awareness regarding hitherto 'hidden' issues. Women, especially

the petty bourgeois sections and women intellectuals succeeded in building up a women's movement which had an impact at an all India level in the urban areas. Though all of them worked as small groups, through their propaganda and writings and most importantly through their activism they could create an ideological impact among the urban educated population. The media also gave them a lot of publicity and the phenomenon of starting women's pages in the daily papers could be seen as an indication of their wider audience with awareness of issues (the anti women content of these pages in some aspects can be dealt with elsewhere).

Wherever attempts were made to involve poor, slum women there were good results. They added a militant angle to the agitations. The women's magazines started in this period (80s to 90s) tried to educate men and women about the various aspects of patriarchy affecting their lives. They helped propagate about the activities of these groups and helped in campaigns on various issues. The various studies led to an understanding of the specific manifestations of patriarchy in the Indian context.

Whether it is the campaign against SD tests or against rapes or any other women's issue the AWM started with activism, involving many middle class professionals, students and sometimes city slum dweller women but ended up in the long drawn out hassles of legislation. It's true that whatever progressive changes in laws that have been made till now have been the result of agitations. But once the women's movement leaves activism and gets bogged down in just lobbying, the movement loses its momentum. It fails in building up a large base which will in turn exert pressure for any changes. But even the laws which have been passed are so full of loopholes that sans activism even they don't get implemented and ultimately the crusaders feel dejected or betrayed and disillusioned. A Marxist analysis of the class nature of the state and its need for patriarchy in continuing its super exploitation gives one an understanding and perspective on what can be achieved now and what requires a total change in the system.

It helps one realize the limitations of the demands that can be achieved and plan accordingly. Most of the activists or theoreticians of the AWM did not have this clarity and so finally most of them ended up getting co opted by the state. That's what happened with most of the groups or individuals active in the 80s and 90s in the women's movement. They failed to realize the power of the aroused masses and depended on the flawed laws of a reluctant state. Ironically some of them turned against the very people's power won by the masses in class struggle in the rural areas and unabashedly started taking funds from imperialist organizations.

Even though the name AWM suggests that it is an independent movement, it was never actually 'autonomous' of its class ideology. Ideologically they represent the petty bourgeois class which is in essence bourgeois. They refuse to attach themselves to any political party and prefer working in small groups. In reality, some of these groups' opposition is mainly to the revolutionary parties as they don't mind hobnobbing with the bourgeois, revisionist parties or the imperialist funding agencies. There are just a handful of these groups which practice what they say and keep away from all parties and funding agencies. But this stand also is not taking them anywhere as this does not allow them to integrate with the vast poor masses in the country or build up a mass movement. All of them refute the right of the masses to carry on armed struggle for political power and still believe that the government will solve the problems in spite of their bitter experiences regarding legislation of pro women laws. Their lack of scientific understanding of the economic system and the need of class struggle to change power equations leaves them at best as lobbyists and at worst as imperialist funded pseudo activists. They lose their activism and become mere academicians. They cannot sustain any organization and remain propagandists in a limited sense of the word. This has been the two and a half decade practice of the AWM in India.

Due to the AWM, feminism has come to stay as a fact of

life in India but its reach and impact is confined to a small section of petty bourgeois class in the urban areas. Because of its inherent weaknesses and an absence of strategy to attack the State it fails in upsetting the combination of feudal and imperialist patriarchy in a semi feudal and semi colonial country like India. That surely requires a revolution.

Many of the women involved in founding the first contemporary feminist groups were themselves academics who chose to study different aspects of women's lives with the idea that this would be useful to the development of the feminist movement. Women's studies, however, really took off in the eighties, initially under the aegis of independent research institutes such as the Centre for Women's Development Studies (CWDS) in Delhi. SNTU Women's University also set up a Women's Research unit. Together with the CWDS, in the mid-80s, they began to jointly host annual National Women's Studies Conferences. An interest in women's studies grew rapidly but it became a separate sphere, and the initial rather utopian vision of it as aiding in the generation of feminist theory to inform feminist practice was relegated to the background. Thus a somewhat paradoxical situation arose in which much knowledge was produced that had great significance for feminist activity but which remained, by and large, disconnected from the activity itself.

Many of these groups receive state funds or from foreign sources for their activities. They are participating in the various forums created by the State like Commissions and police cells. They are actively advocating women's participation in political, local, self government bodies. Lacking a clear-cut strategy for the overall transformation of society with the genuine empowerment of women through struggle for just and democratic society, they are now advocating empowerment of women by making them participate in the corrupt and exploitative election politics within the existing socio-economic set-up. There is no doubt that pulling women into electoral politics would have a negative effect on the liberation efforts of women.

11

Ecological movements

Protection of Forests – Chipko movement

Colonial forest policy was based on British need for wood for its shipbuilding and transportation. In 1830 the Malabar Teak forests were declared State property despite people's protests. The early years of the 20th century saw many struggles against forest policy in Uttarakhand. The forest movement of 1920-21 became part of Gandhi's movement for civil disobedience. A strong movement took place in Yamuna Ghati in 1930, the people there declared unilaterally a free panchayat and called a meeting on 30 May 1930 at Tilari. There was firing and 17 persons were killed. Many were jailed. Although this movement was crushed, discontent at forest policy continued to brew. After 1947, 30th May began to be observed as Shaheed Diwas. On this day each year people would gather to hold discussions on forest problems. A declaration of forests was prepared on behalf of the people and thousands of people took a pledge to redeem this at the Martyr's Memorial in 1969. This became the fundamental document of the Chipko movement.

The first demonstration was on 11 December 1972 at Purola in Yamuna ghati the birthplace of the 1930 forest agitation. The second was on December 12th and the third on December 15th. The demands included an end to the contract system of forest exploitation, supply of forest produce to the villagers at concessional rates and forest revenue settlement. When a sports goods company came with a permit to fell 50

trees, people especially women resisted. Again at Kedarghat in Chamoli district, when a forest was auctioned, women led by Gaura Devi drove the fellers out.

On the first of February 1978 when the contractor went to the jungle with tree fellers to village Advani in Tehri Garhwal, the Provincial Armed Constabulary (PAC) contingent followed closely behind. Before the axes could strike, the women hugged the trees and attached themselves to them. The armed force had to turn back. Shortly after this when a forest auction was arranged, 15 men and 8 women broke the police cordon and entered the auction room. They were arrested. In December 1978, forest felling began. Bhagwat Katha style consciousness raising programmes, coupled with Shri Dhoom Singh Negi's hunger strike and speeches succeeded in making the people stop this work.

In January 1979, when 2500 trees were marked for felling in Vadiargarh, women stood close to marked trees and foiled their attempts even at night. Sunderlal Bahuguna began a fast in a small hut in the forest. The contractors' men set fire to this hut, but he came out in time. On the 13th day of fasting police arrested him. Though the police threatened them with dire consequences women who had come from outside continued to guard the forests and local women mobilised in the surrounding villages. Tree felling had to be abandoned. Bahuguna continued the fast in jail for 24 days. Eventually the government agreed to discuss forest policy with the agitators and this phase of the movement was temporarily halted. It was resumed when the government went back on its word and prepared to recommence felling at Dugamdar patti. Once again women came together to resist and save the forests. It took another year and a half for the forest felling to stop.

Commercial felling of green trees was banned for 15 years above the Shivalik Talhatti. The Chipko movement did not stop with the end of commercial forest felling. Educational work became the main focus. The women of the hills have gained

enormously in self-confidence through the movement. They can now clearly articulate their own, long-term larger needs clearly. In Shreekot women rose against the planting of commercial species. Silyara Mahila Mandal also undertook care of forest department nursery on the condition that if they come across any environmentally unsound soil or water depleting tree like Eucalyptus they would uproot and destroy it.

They fought against the New Forest Bill also. The slogan that 'the benefits of the forest were produce, wood and commerce' of the government and contractors was replaced by 'the benefits of the forest are soil, water and pure air, the essence of life' during the Chipko movement by women. This was not only to save forests but also to establish a caring and mutually supportive relationship between human beings and nature.

In the movement against environmentally destructive limestone quarries in the Doon valley, women played a lead role. A youth organization Yuwak Mangal Dal and Mahila Mandal took an oath on 25th July, 1985 that they would not allow excavation at the mine which threatened their very existence. The women sat in dharna from 16th to 27th September and held a public meeting on 27th September. They stopped a truck carrying limestone.

Anti-liquor movement in Uttarakhand

Formed in 1977, the Uttarakhand Sangharsh Vahini has been active in the Chipko movement. Its activists went from village to village to spread information about the movement. In 1983, when they held a large public meeting in Almora, alcoholism emerged as a major problem in Garhwal and Kumaon. In 1965 at Dhangali near Silyara liquor contract was given out. Women used the Ramlila form as a platform to campaign against the contract and went from door to door to collect rice to sustain their workers. The government finally did not open a liquor shop there and in the following year, the

movement spread to other areas like Thal, Badshahi Towl and Chandrapur. In Badshahi Towl women forcibly locked the liquor shop. They took the Chief Minister Ms. Sucheta Kripalani to the villages and she assured the women that no new shops would be opened in the area. The movement next spread to Garur. In April, when the contract was to be given out as many as 2,000 women demonstrated and challenged the administration to arrest them all. The shop had to be closed down. In Kotdwar and Lansdowne where many women courted arrest, the shops were closed. In 1970 women picketed a shop at Tehri violating section 144. Many women, some of whom were 80 years old went to jail in this connection. Men threatened their wives that they would be thrown out of their homes. The women retorted that homes did not belong to men alone and they were after all struggling to protect their homes from destruction through liquor. The government announced prohibition in Tehri Garhwal and Pauri Garhwal but the contractors got them reopened through a writ in High Court. To protest this, women came in a demonstration from Chamlo and Uttar Kashi and from around Tehri. 8,000 women and 2,000 men demonstrated in Tehri. Women were arrested and sent along with their young children to Dehradun, Tehri and Saharanpur jails. Eventually prohibition was enforced once again in April 1972.

Between 1965-71 there was a widespread agitation against liquor so that the government had to declare prohibition in some areas but they could not wipe out liquor distribution as alcohol is used in Ayurveda. Vahini gave a call for an anti-alcohol movement in 1984. In village after village all liquor found was thrown away, pots and shops were smashed, and in some instances liquor sellers were made to apologise and had to promise never to do it.

In Himachal groups of women closed down liquor shops, kept guards outside and if there was any threat to them, used drums and songs to inform their sisters. Women have also used the tactic of 'shaming' the liquor sellers and drinkers, often by blackening their faces or by parading them through the streets.

Bhopal disaster

In the midnight of December 2nd, 1984 lethal gas Methyl Iso Cynate (MIC) leaked from Union Carbide fertilizer plant which was situated dangerously in the midst of populated areas of Bhopal in Madhya Pradesh killing more than 3000 people mostly poor slum dwellers. This was a direct result of sheer negligence of the US based UC towards installing safety measures inside the factory as 'Indian lives always come cheaper'. The comprador ruling classes of India were hand in glove with the imperialists and allowed the dangerous plant to run, in spite of being completely aware of the risks involved. The disaster resulted not only in loss of lives but in permanent genetical disorders and other related health problems due to inhaling of the poisonous gas. Women and children were the worst victims as is the case with all disasters.

After the the disaster it was the women gas victims who were most active in campaigns for relief, medical aid and information. In the initial years the ratio of women to men in demonstrations was something like 60:40, but as the years passed this ratio grew to 80:20 and even became 90:10. Sewing centres were opened in 1985 by the government as rehabilitatory training and gave training to roughly 2,000 women. One year later when the government announced their closure women occupied the centres in protest; the protest lasted well over a month, and out of it emerged the Bhopal Gas Peedith Mahila Udyog Sanghatan. From a campaign to ensure the continuation of employment, the organization took on local campaigns for relief and rehabilitation for all victims and then went on to approach the court for relief. When in 1989, the Government of India arrived at a shameful settlement with Union Carbide under the aegis of the Supreme Court, the Sangathan launched a massive campaign against the settlement, adopting a multi-pronged strategy of demonstrations, litigation, publicity and lobbying. In 1992, Supreme Cour upheld the settlement. Still the women are continuing their fight with undaunted spirit.

12

Northeast Movements

The participation of women in popular mass movements in the Northeast is a given as women there are more actively involved in economic and social activity.

In other mass based popular autonomy movements and the Bodoland movement it has also been thought expedient at some point to form separate women's organizations to mobilise women to carry on the wider objective of the struggle, such as the KNCA (Karbi Nimgo Chinto Achi) Karbi Women's Progressive Association and the Tribal Women's Welfare Association. The women's organizations, which came up during the Assam movement, never attained any independent standing. The other women's organizations, because of their political affiliations to ML parties, on one side wholly subscribed to their general political aims and on the other side took up women's issues such as rape, family violence and so on.

Ever since the Naga insurgency of the sixties the rapes of tribal women by the Indian Military have often been cited as instances of state repression and terrorization of the tribal peoples of the region. During the Assam movement, the insurgency in Manipur, the Bodoland demand movement and during the ULFA militant activities, rapes of tribal and mainly rural women by army and police personnel became focal points of the movements. However the rapes of women in these cases have been used not just to mobilize women alone, but also to draw attention to the whole political issues. In the women's movement, rape is a social as well as a political issue.

There has been a great development of women's consciousness regarding the demands of women, mainly through the efforts of women's magazines, as well as the numerous local agitations against dowry deaths and rapes led by local and state level women's organizations like the Mahila Sangha, Nari Mukthi Sanstha, Sadou Asom Nari Sanstha, all associated with leftist political parties as well as by non-party local women's organizations of the Mahila Samiti type.

Manipur

British rule over Manipur lapsed on 14th August 1947 and Manipur regained freedom from an indirect British rule of 56 years. In 1948 Manipur became a constitutional monarchy with an elected National Assembly. The Manipur people were not for integration into India though Congress pressed for it. When it became clear that they would not yield India resorted to underhand methods. The King was put under house arrest, threatened and tortured. Finally he was forced to sign the 'Merger Agreement' which was never approved by the National Assembly. The people strongly protested against this annexation. But the resistance was cowed down, atrocities were committed and the National Assembly was abolished. Manipuri people have never come to terms with this annexation. They feel their progress, development and very existence are threatened by India. They feel that liberation from India is the only way for them to preserve their identity, lead a dignified life, develop themselves and prosper as a nation. They have chosen the armed path to achieve their goal and have been facing heavy repression.

In 1980, the entire valley (Manipur) was under heavy combing operation by the army to flush out the 'extremists'. Women have been organizing against this since then. On April 27, 1980, there was a heavy combing operation in Pastoi village in Imphal district. As a result more than hundred women were hospitalised. More than 10,000 women from every corner of Manipur gathered in front of the Chief Minister's Bangalow

and shouted anti-combing slogans, followed by big demonstration in the city of Imphal, and this had some desired effect.

In July 1987, the Assam Rifles Post near Oinam village in Manipur was raided by the underground cadres. Large quantity of arms was seized. Nine jawans were killed and three were seriously injured. The Assam Rifles launched operation Blue Bird in 30 villages in and around Oinam. The villagers were subjected to all kinds of cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment by the armed forces. Women and girls were assaulted. Two women were even compelled to give birth in the open ground in full view of the jawans and the villagers. Operation Blue Bird would go down as one of the most horrible, brutal operation in the history of repression by the Indian armed forces. The coordination committee in Oinam has taken up legal battle against the sexual exploitation of women in Oinam district in Manipur. The women's union of Manipur convention filed a petition on behalf of women who had been raped, molested and also those who had been forced to work as construction labourers by the Army.

The women folk started to guard their sons/husbands from the harassment of the police and para-military forces by holding torch in their hands through the night. These women came to be known as *Meira Paibi*. Slowly, every location in Manipur formed *Meira Paibi'* due to the increase in social problems. If there is any serious problem, which would affect the peaceful social atmosphere of the locality, Meira Paibis would come out. Every house must join Meira Paibi. So, it may be said that all married women of the locality have been directly or indirectly involved in the Meira Paibi.

In 2004 when Manorama of Manipur was tortured brutally, raped and killed by the Indian army, all of Manipur exploded in anger. There were many women who faced a similar fate before Manorama also and many faced untold sufferings at the hands of the army personnel. This just proved

to be a turning point. For months together Manipur people agitated very militantly in an unprecedented manner with the demand to take back the Armed Forces Special Powers Act under which all these atrocities were committed by the army. Meira Paibis were the life force of this movement. The women were so frustrated with the callousness of the government and the army that some middle aged women went and took off their clothes in front of the army Head Quarters challenging the Indian army jawans to rape them. This incident sent shock waves through out the world and conveyed the brutality of the army starkly.

Innumerable are the struggles of the Meira Paibis against the atrocities of the armed forces. The amount of torture and brutality heaped on them by the jawans on a daily basis would shame the Nazis!

Assam Movement

By 1980, roughly four to five million immigrants from Bangladesh entered Assam. Illegal migration had started in the British rule itself because of their policies. These immigrants occupied fertile lands in Assam. It was encouraged by the Congress party with an idea of gaining votes in the elections. The foreign nationals question remains a point of tension between Assamese and the immigrants. AASU (All Assam Students Union) started a movement in 1979. Their demands were: identify the immigrants and send them back to their countries, removal of immigrants names from the voters list before election. It continued for four years. The people of Assam picketed oil refineries, organized bandhs, strikes and even tried to break down oil lines facing lathis and bullets. The anti foreigners movement was crushed by the police and para military forces. CRPF and BSF killed 800 agitators.

Assamese youth lost hope on India and they took to the armed path to protect the interests of Assam. Thus ULFA came

into existence. Its aim is to liberate Assam through an armed national liberation struggle from the clutches of the illegal occupation of India and to establish a sovereign independent Assam. It maintains armed squads to fight against the Indian state demanding the right to secession. ULFA undertook campaigns against alcoholism, sexual harassment, prostitution rackets and drug peddlers and gained popularity with its people oriented schemes. It was banned in 1990. Obviously it has women armed members who are quite active but since we do not have any information about their role and activities we are unable to write on them.

Women were very active in the Assam movement. The movement gained momentum with the mass rally of November 6, 1979 in Guwahati. Tens of thousands of women attended the rally and actively participated in Satyagrahas, and picketing in front of the state government and election offices. They demanded the deletion of foreigners' names from the voters' list for the ensuing parliamentary elections of 1980. Women were the moving force behind this movement. They launched dharnas and round the clock picketing at the residences of potential candidates in order to obstruct the filing of nominations. From December 27, 1979 thousands of men and women squatted, stood and shouted slogans outside the gates of various oil installations and refineries throughout the state, including Narengi in Guwahati. A group of women belonging to the Tribal Women's Welfare and Development Association and Shillong Mahila Samiti also participated in the picketing at Narangi to express their solidarity. As the momentum picked up, female picketers including old ladies outnumbered their male counterparts in the picketing. On January 18, 1980 when thousands of women demonstrators were picketing peacefully in the oil installations in Dullijan, there was firing by CRPF, in which four people died and many women were injured and hospitalised.

Army personnel raped a number of women, including unmarried girls and pregnant women. 17 cases of rape and 23

cases for molestation had occurred in Nalbari sub-division. Actual number will be much larger since women hesitated to report. On January 18, an anti-oppression 'Women's Day' was observed throughout the state. Women organised rallies on the occasion and demanded punishment of the guilty persons.

Sight of thousands of Assamese, especially women of all ages, walking throughout the streets and offering satyagraha had become a familiar one. In most places, female satyagrahis outnumbered men. Among them were many aged women, as well as mothers with babies in their arms. An old woman of 80 years was among those who courted arrest. The Chief Secretary accused the leaders of the movement of being cowards and taking shelter behind women. AASU and AAGSP called this statement unbecoming of a higher-ranking civil servant and asked the women of Assam to join the movement with great determination to give a fitting reply.

On April 19, under the Preventive Detention Ordinance leaders were arrested and an indefinite curfew was imposed in Guwahati. Over 500,000 women rushed out of their homes to defy the imposition of this order. They were lathicharged in three places and a total of 65 persons were hospitalised including a large number of elderly women. In Guwahati nearly half of the injured were women and girls. Even old women were not spared and were punched and beaten.

Women also squatted on railway tracks to prevent the movement of trains carrying bamboo, plywood and jute outside Assam and thousands of them joined on martial sounds day, beating drums and other instruments in a unique way of expressing their protest. One elderly woman of Loxalpara was killed by CRPF in her own house.

During Assam movement huge rallies were held in Guwahati and other places to protest against the rapes of rural women by the Army in Kamrup district. The Bhumika rape case in Kokrajhar became the centre of a widespread agitation

led by the tribal women's welfare organization and the Nari Mukthi Sanstha.

By 1983 as the Assam movement progressed it became clear that women, who were spontaneously joining the movement, had to be organised separately in order to play an effective role. Women's coordinating committees were formed in places like Tezpur, Tinsukia, and Guwahati and eventually an All Assam Convention of Women's Coordinating Committee was held in August 1984 and an All Assam Women's Coordination Committee was formed to carry on the objectives of the Assam movement. Other auxiliary women's groups with names like Malav Gabharu Sangtha and Assam Jagrata Mahila Parishad came into existence supporting the movement.

The movement led directly to the growth of several women's organisations based mainly in Assam's urban areas. Some organizations also sprang up as a result of the excesses committed by the police. The All-Guwahati Women's Coordination Committee in its convention on August 12, 1984 strongly condemned the statewide police atrocities and demanded a judicial enquiry. Some visited the affected areas and also provided help to the victims and their families. Many women's organizations offered relief and donations to victims. Mobilized by women, children boycotted Children's Day celebrations on November 14, 1980. In 1983 elections were declared by the Central government despite people's resistance. Even the state government employees boycotted their election duties. The women played an important role in boycotting all the legislators. AGP came to power through these elections.

Assam Accord was signed on August 15, 1985. In the series of discussions since the beginning of the movement till the final settlement, there was no woman representative at the discussion table, even though women had played a very major role in the apparent success of the movement.

In due course, the people of Assam, particularly the women, faced the stark realities and came to realize the futility of the Assam Accord. The women never had a say in the decision-making. The AAGSP or the AASU did not have a woman representative in their forums. After elections there was only one- woman minister for state and only after much persuasion was a woman member elected to Rajya Sabha.

13

Contemporary Revolutionary Women's Movement

Perspective of the Revolutionary Women's Movement

The revolutionary movement takes as its guiding theory the theory of Marxism-Leninism-Maoism. Hence the Marxist analysis on the origins of women's oppression governs its perspective which is as follows:

'The masses of women face twin oppression. Just like the male members they undergo class oppression. But at the same time they experience patriarchal oppression. Patriarchy is the system of male domination over women. The ruling classes of all exploitative societies institutionalize patriarchal oppression. But in addition to that, men who are at the same time oppressed by the ruling classes resort to patriarchal domination. All men thus generally practise patriarchy, which is institutionalized by the ruling classes. This is an important characteristic feature of women's oppression. This feature contributes to the pervasiveness of patriarchal prejudices. Thus class oppression and patriarchy are interconnected, and at all points of time this interconnection must be grasped and is the cornerstone of the Marxist perspective on the women's question.'

In the Indian context, the oppression faced by women has to be seen in the framework of the nature of Indian society. After the withdrawal of the British in 1947, India became a

semi-feudal, semi-colonial society under the rule of the big landlords and comprador bureaucratic bourgeoisie. With the aid of imperialism they oppress the working class, peasantry, petty bourgeoisie and national bourgeoisie.

Even while feudalism remains the predominant social relation, capitalist relations have also spread and the two coexist. Hence in India both the feudal as well as the capitalist varieties of patriarchy are visible. However they do not exist as separate entities. Just like other aspects of the semi-feudal semi-colonial structure, patriarchy exists in a combined form. It is with the help of this form of patriarchy that the landlords, compradors and imperialists oppress India's women masses. But due to the uneven development of Indian society patriarchal oppression has its specificities among the different classes, castes and tribes; its manifestations also vary in the big cities, in the towns and in the vast rural areas. While in the big cities and to an extent in towns, influence of capitalist-imperialist patriarchy is greater, in the villages feudal patriarchal norms dominate more. Therefore in India the concrete struggle against patriarchy requires that semi-feudal, semi-colonial structure be overthrown and a new democratic society be set up in its place. Thus without a new democratic revolution, all struggles and reforms can at best bring some partial changes in the lives of a section of women but cannot bring about a qualitative change in the lives of women, and cannot be a major step to eliminate patriarchy and emancipate women.

The targets of the Indian New Democratic Revolution (NDR) - the big landlords, the comprador bureaucratic bourgeoisie and imperialism - are also the perpetrators of patriarchal oppression on Indian women. Hence, the struggle against these classes and their State also encompasses the women's liberation struggle against patriarchy. There is a continuous and lively dialectical relationship between the two. One cannot be conceived without the other. The struggle for NDR opens new vistas for women's emancipation from patriarchy and the struggle against patriarchy energises the NDR. The NDR,

harbinger of liberation for the Indian masses, is the sure road to women's emancipation.

It is with this perspective that the Maoist parties are organizing women in the rural, forest and even in urban areas. The revolutionary women's movement is now widespread and has large scale membership in Andhra, Bihar, Jharkhand, Dandakaranya, Maharashtra, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, West Bengal and has made its presence felt in Haryana, Uttarakhand, Karnataka, Tamilnadu etc.

The revolutionary women's movement has not emerged overnight, and nor has it emerged spontaneously from mere propaganda. The women's movement has grown with the growth of armed struggle. Contrary to general opinion, the launching of armed struggle in the early 80s by the communist revolutionary forces in various parts of the country, and the militant struggle against feudal oppression gave the confidence to peasant women to participate in struggles in large numbers and then to stand up and fight for their rights. The poor peasant and landless peasant women who constitute the most oppressed among the oppressed, who have lacked not only an identity and voice but also a name, have become activists for the women's organisations in their villages and also guerrilla fighters. Thus with the spread and growth of the armed struggle the women's mobilisation and women's organisation have also grown leading to the emergence of the revolutionary women's movement, one of the strongest and most powerful women's movement in the country today.

The vast majority of women live in villages weighed down by feudal oppression that takes many forms such as intense economic exploitation, crude and brutal social oppression, a culture that not only denies them independence but also denigrates them in all possible manners. Hence, women from the oppressed classes have had a stake in the destruction of the feudal rural order and have come forward to do so.

Revolutionary Women's Movement Led by NMSS

In Bihar, since the 80s due to the initial campaigns around the issue of social dignity, strikes for better wages and resistance to criminals and dacoits, women have been drawn to the peasant organizations. At the beginning they gave shelter and food to the cadres which in itself involved great personal danger and inconvenience. In Akbarpur, while the Kisan Sangh (the landlord army) and CPI (ML) (Party Unity) squad were exchanging fire, the women of the village braved the crossfire in order to carry food and water to the squad. Preconceptions of their 'backwardness' and diffidence notwithstanding women often protected male cadres by pretending they were their husbands. At Arwal, when the police opened fire on a public meeting, women protected peasant cadres with their bodies. After the arrest of some activists in Jehanabad, villagers including women attacked the police van with rocks and traditional implements and freed the cadres. Their involvement had taken more militant and aggressive forms of participation in all kinds of mass actions - be it crop seizures, land occupations, strikes for better wages or raids on landlords houses and the gherao of police stations. Women participated in large numbers in rallies, demonstrations and public meetings. In the early days women came to these programmes carrying traditional implements like the sickle. When a massive contingent of women, armed with sickles and scythes boarded a train to take them to Daltongunj where they were to attend a May 1st rally the train was stopped many stations away. Carrying infants in their arms, the women walked all the way to Daltongunj and attended the rally.

In Karpi, women successfully resisted the landlords attempt to break their strike for better wages by bringing in outside labour at gunpoint. The women were armed only with sickles and scythes for their action. At Anandgarh women took part in an action that destroyed a landlord kacheri. In a village

in Panki (Palamau) women spontaneously arose against the police who came to stop them from picking mahua flowers and snatched their rifles. In another instance a police jeep was gheraoed and the DSP was bound and tied up. In Jehanabad four women forced the police to give them the dead body of a cadre who had been killed in an encounter and carried the corpse all the way to the village. A raid on the house of the notorious Ramanand Yadav, a criminal, saw women participating in large numbers.

The massacre of people who gathered for a meeting at Arwal included women in its toll of martyrdom. Many women were injured in police firing. At the time of police raids, property attachments proceedings, it is women who bear the brunt with their men absconding. They are not only protecting their sons and husbands but also other comrades. The mothers and wives of martyrs have steadfastly remained committed to the struggle. After the annihilation of Kisan Sabha members at Masaurhi, women of the village had faced tremendous repression with 10 police camps being set up. A woman SHO led the assault on the women.

However women had not become squad members of Party Unity till the 90s even though women activists moved around with squads. For a long time no separate organization was formed. Later Nari Mukthi Sangharsh Samiti in Patna and Jehanabad and Nari Chetna Samiti in Palamu were formed. These have been next merged to form Nari Mukthi Sangharsh Samiti at the State level. Basic issues like equal pay for equal work and right to land ownership for women have been taken up by the peasant organization.

In Karpi, women participated vocally in a Gaon (village) Committee meeting bringing to light the irregularities in the construction of a village well by the villagers. There have been some successful attempts at promoting inter caste marriages, widow remarriages and developing consciousness against dowry. When an activist of the organization was accused of rape, it was

the women of the village who made it an issue and called for a people's court. The participation of women suffered a setback towards the latter part of the eighties due to massive repression and organizational/political problems. The 90s again witnessed an upsurge and women were taken into armed squads.

Revolutionary Women's Movement Led by NMS

Nari Mukti Sangh (NMS) commenced its activities in the early 1980s. The NMS emerged after the tribal peasants in Jharkhand started getting organised under revolutionary leadership against the feudal oppression of Rajput landlords and the harassment of officials and contractors of the forest department. It first started in the district of Giridih, a district in which the majority of the peasantry belongs to the Santhal tribe. It is a women's organisation in which almost all the activists and leaders are drawn from the adivasis – from Santhals, Mundas, etc. Now NMS activities have extended to almost all major districts of Bihar – Jharkhand.

Anti-Feudal Struggles

Women were first organised in the anti feudal struggles. Women faced intense exploitation both economically and sexually. They had to slog 12 hours with only a meagre allowance of food. If they didn't go to work for some reason the goons of the landlord used to come to their homes and drag them to work. The Rajput landlords did not treat the adivasis as human beings. The newly wed bride had to spend the first night with the landlord. They kept some of these women as concubines too. The whole family, including children, had to do forced labour (bandhua majduri). Verbal abuse was also routine and common. They could not wear chappals, and they could not sit on a chair in front of the landlords. Rural Bihar served as a model of feudal exploitation. It is from the darkness of this condition that the people, including women started getting awakened in the late seventies.

Women organisers spoke against this exploitation and organised women. But they did not fail to mention the social customs among the peasants which oppressed women and also about male supremacy at home. At first, men opposed NMS and women's participation in organizations. Later when the peasant movement against the landlords gained momentum and as men and women began participating in them in large numbers, their attitude gradually changed. They could see how women were exploited. Women's resistance opened their eyes and NMS got a strong foothold.

Verbal abuse stopped completely and now they are addressed as 'Bhai' and 'Behen'. They wear chappals and are invited to sit in chairs!

Issues taken up by NMS

Child Marriages

Among adivasis, girls do not get married at a very young age but in some areas they are married off by 13 to 15 years. Among the non-adivasis and other castes in the plain areas this is widely prevalent. The girl's family has to spend a lot of money as marriage expenses.

The NMS has done a lot of propaganda against child marriages and has created an atmosphere against it. So they get prior reports of child marriages, which are going to be conducted. The NMS didis go there and after a long discussion convince the family that physically and emotionally also it is not good for the children to get married at such a young age. The people get convinced and stop the marriage. Then a bond is written that they will not get their children married for another 9 to 10 years. And when they want to marry them off they ask the permission of the NMS. If all the conditions are fulfilled then the NMS promptly gives the permission.

Over the years the NMS stopped many child marriages and carried on political propaganda also. As a result, in Jharkhand where NMS is strong, child marriages have stopped and girls are married off only after 18 years of age. Even among the non-adviasis it has increased to 18 years age.

Dowry and dowry related deaths/harassment

The practice of taking dowry is not prevalent among the adviasis, but it has reached an unprecedentedly high among the non-adviasis. Harassing women for dowry and later murdering her is also prevalent.

NMS has done a lot of propaganda against giving and taking dowry. (propaganda of NMS on any issue includes postering, wall writing, rallies, demonstrations, songs, plays and village level meetings). When NMS comes to know that a marriage is being conducted with dowry they go and tell them that '*this is not allowed in the (NMS) area.*' They educate all the village people. A bond will be written by the groom and his parents that they will not take dowry nor will they demand it in future and that they will look after the girl and will not harass her in any way. The NMS also educates them not to spend lavishly on marriages and if they agree it conducts a 'shibir vivah'.

When the NMS comes to know that a woman is being harassed for dowry or is being thrown out of her in-laws house they conduct a jan adalat (people's court). The husband is summoned and asked to come forth with the reason for abandoning her. Usually what they get is a lame answer. So they argue with him against it. If he still insists on leaving her, they just calculate how many years she has toiled in their house and how much she should get for it and also make a list of all the items she had brought into their house from her parents and the dowry amount is also calculated. If he has land, they also demand a share in the land for the woman. Then he is reprimanded for all his wrongs. Normally he takes his wife back. A bond is written

by him promising to look after her well. If the man is ready to give back the money or a share in land, some times a divorce is given to them. Now, dowry harassment has come down a lot in the Jharkhand NMS strong areas. If a girl is killed for dowry, NMS conducts a *Jan Adalat*. Once the husband had to return the dowry and also a compensation of Rs.50,000 to the girl's parents. He is usually beaten up as a punishment and made to write a bond that he will not remarry without the NMS's permission.

Shibir Vivah

The NMS conducts propaganda against feudal marriage customs and lavish marriage expenses. People influenced by the propaganda ask NMS to conduct a Shibir Vivah. In this there is no dowry. It is a simple get together of all the people and relatives. They all have meals and the marriage is solemnised in a public meeting. The bride and the groom, mass organisation leaders and of course the NMS didis speak on marriage and the relations between men and women, how they are in feudal society and how they should be democratic. The bride and groom wear new clothes, garland each other, shake hands, eat sweets and the marriage is over. Such marriages give the people a glimpse of the new culture coming up in the struggle areas and have definitely saved the girl and her parents a lot of expense and trouble. Love marriages or intercaste marriages are also conducted by NMS in this manner.

Sexual harassment, rape

Sexual harassment cases and rape incidents have come down in NMS areas. When a rape incident occurs NMS conducts a *Jan Adalat* and metes out justice according to the crime. In Bihar in 1994 when a girl named Meena was raped there was a big agitation and NMS ensured that the culprit got punished though the police and government tried to protect the boy from a landlord family. Later also NMS in North Bihar has agitated against some rape cases. Due to anti-feudal struggles, the sexual exploitation of women by landlords has

completely stopped. In both Bihar and Jharkhand there have been struggles against the sexual exploitation by forest range officers and contractors and several of them were beaten up.

Anti-liquor struggles, wife beating, Polygamy

Lot of propaganda work was done against arrack. The adivasis brew as well as sell arrack. In some villages NMS conducted raids on arrack shops and brewing centres and had broken the pots. In a few places they even raided some shops nearby and destroyed whisky and brandy bottles too. But this struggle has not taken place in a big way, so only in a few areas it was controlled and propaganda is under way. It is interesting to note that in the Jan Adalats conducted on wife beating, the wife is asked to give the unheeding husband a beating, which immediately brings him to his feet, and he promises the 'behenjis' to look after her well. But the NMS tries to solve the problem amicably as far as possible between wife and husband. The participation of village women in the political arena has increased their self-esteem in the family and reduced violence on them.

NMS strongly opposes polygamy. Formerly when a man used to get a second wife for himself either by abandoning the first wife or without, there would be no opposition from any quarter of the society. But NMS has taken it up as an issue for propaganda and agitation.

On Health problems

The public health centres in the villages and forests are in a very poor state and the people never get any medicines or proper treatment in them. The NMS has taken up the issue in a big way and every year conducts campaigns and organises rallies against the Health Dept. and holds demonstrations/ dharnas till the officials agree that they'll come to their villages and distribute medicines. Especially during monsoons all kinds of diseases spread and NMS makes it a point to mobilise people

at this time every year. The nutritious food, which is to be given to the pregnant women, is also ensured due to these struggles. Epidemics are controlled to some extent and vaccines like polio are being administered properly. NMS does propaganda also on the double standards of the government in providing medical facilities to the rich and the poor. Through songs, doctors are requested to give treatment to the poor.

Equal wages for equal work

One of the demands on which the NMS vows to fight is equal wages for equal work. In feudal Bihar - Jharkhand, it goes without saying that women are paid much less than men. So there were agitations for increase in wages and the demand for equal wages to women is also put forward. Now, in forest areas of Jharkhand women get equal wages and the wage rates for all have also increased considerably.

Superstitions and witchcraft

The backward villagers especially the adivasis believe in witches and ghosts. Not knowing the scientific reasons for illnesses, if somebody dies or falls ill they feel some witch has done something. They go to the Ojha (witch- doctor) who for his own ends points out to some women indirectly. The 'victims' then go and beat her up and ostracise her family or even kill her. Many poor women have met such a fate for no wrong of theirs. A lot of propaganda work is being conducted and Jan adalat held whenever NMS comes to know that a woman had been named a witch. The witch doctor and the persons who blame her are brought to book. In cases where she had been beaten, she is asked to beat the ones who tortured her. They are made to pay all her medical expenses. On this occasion NMS educates the people on the landlords' interests behind propagating such superstitions among poor people and also explains the medical reasons for illnesses.

Saving the forest (Jungle Suraksha)

Women have not only resisted the forest contractors who stopped them from collecting forest produce, but they have also apprehended forest officials who were smuggling teak or were assisting those who smuggle. The women lay waiting and caught them red-handed. The officials were beaten up and a bond was signed by them not to do such things again. The carts carrying illegally felled wood were caught by NMS women. NMS takes upon itself the responsibility of stopping this smuggling and saving the forest.

August 15 and Elections

Every year on August 15th NMS goes to the schools in the area and propagates among the children about fake independence and the children boycott the function organised in the schools. They even hoist black flags where possible. The NMS boycotts elections because they are of the firm opinion that the lives of people are not going to be changed through this corrupt electoral system and a revolutionary change is necessary. Hence it conducts propaganda along these lines. In one village in West Bengal the women were so fed up with CPM goondalism that they did not want CPM candidates to get elected and wanted to burn down the polling booths. The police guessed something was wrong and stopped the women. The women said, 'we want to cast votes, why are you not allowing us' and barged into the booths in 3 places and brought the boxes out. The candidates who come to campaign are also questioned by the women on women's issues.

Celebrating March 8th as a Struggle Day of Toiling Women

The work of NMS is almost completely based in the rural areas. It determinedly celebrates March 8th in big cities every year and propagates its ideology among the city dwellers. Since

1990, March 8th is being celebrated in the cities of Bihar and Jharkhand by mobilizing thousands of women from the countryside. A month long campaign is conducted by volunteer teams of NMS and Jharkhand Abhen in the villages and in the city. On March 8th a rally and a public meeting is conducted.

Since 1997, in various ways the authorities have been trying to stop the NMS from celebrating March 8th in cities. But the NMS women with a single minded purpose of celebrating March 8th have been overcoming all obstacles by fighting militantly and have been literally celebrating March 8th as '*the struggling Day of toiling women*'. The police try to stop them but the NMS strongly condemns this and pins them down on the question of whether women have a right to celebrate the International Women's Day or not.

Campaign teams and their leaders are also being arrested, but press statements are released and the demand to release them is also made a part of the propaganda campaign. NMS also has alternative arrangements made to conduct the programme in some other place.

Repression and Resistance

From 1990 itself, arrests of the activists had started. Restrictions began to be imposed on public meetings. Though there was some repression on NMS from its very inception, 1997 was the turning point. Till now there are no killings or firings but women have been arrested, tortured, booked under false cases, beaten up during the combing operations and interrogated. In many districts village women have also been raped as part of operations conducted against the Maoist Party and the squads/platoons. In Jharkhand, women have also been booked under POTA. In some villages arrested women have been paraded to deter other women from joining organizations.

The women did not take all this lying down and NMS was instrumental in organising the resistance of women. Many

are the instances where women have rounded up the police and beat them up. In one instance, 3,000 women did a 24-hour rasta roko against rape by police. The men stood guard in support. The rapist policeman was fully beaten up. The DSP apologised and wrote a bond that they will not do so again. In many villages the women (some times the whole village) gheraoed the police stations to get the arrested persons released. Some times there were firings on people gheraoing the stations.

In Jharkhand the adivasis beat the drum (called nagaara) whenever the police attack. Hearing it, all the people from neighbouring villages will gather and resist the police. They also take their bows and arrows along and sometimes use them. Women take any household implements they can lay their hands on or else pelt stones. Many such battles with these militant people have left the police helpless. And in almost all incidents, the police are made to write a bond in which they apologize for their ill deeds and promise not to come again. Indeed, they did not enter such villages after that!

Revolutionary Women's Movement Led by Viplava Mahila Sangham

The Telengana region of Andhra Pradesh remained a bastion of feudal exploitation and many forms of patriarchal oppression related to it have continued there till the early 80s till the anti-feudal struggles hit them hard and decisively. The landlord's 'sexual rights' over the wives of his labourers is only one of them. Then under vetti, both the male and female labourers were expected to provide free services to the landlord and his family. The service castes too were forced to provide free labour. Child marriage was widely prevalent. So were religious practices like the jogini or basavi. A local variant of the devadasi cult, young girls from the lower castes were married to the gods and a girl so married could not marry any man. In effect she was forced into prostitution.

When the anti-feudal struggles broke out in Karimnagar and Adilabad districts of Telengana in 1977 one important form of struggle was the social boycott of landlords. The labourers refused to go and work for the landlords in the houses and in the fields. The success of the social boycott was made possible because of the active participation of women too. Vetti came to an end in many districts of Telengana only because of these struggles. The active struggle of women also helped the formation of the Ryotu Coolie Sangam (RCS), the peasant organisation. They also became members of the peasant organisation. As the struggle developed, many incidents challenging the right of the landlords in social and cultural aspects of their lives came up. After this struggle broke out the first RCS organiser to be murdered by the goons of the landlord was Laxmirajam. He was murdered because the women in his village went against tradition and decided to celebrate the Batukamma festival in their own locality rather than in the gadi (courtyard) of the landlord's house.

Among the other major issues taken up by the revolutionary peasant movement has been the issue of wages. Though initially the question of equal pay for equal work was not taken up, the struggle for an increase in the pitifully low wages was fought bitterly. The movement led to an increase in wages for all kinds of agricultural labour, though the rates for men and women remained different, women getting less than men. The peasant struggle developed in the midst of intensive propaganda about the NDR to end feudal and imperialist exploitation.

Women in the Telengana region and in the Eastern region of AP were also active in the land struggles undertaken by the CPI (ML) (PW). By the early 1980s itself women of the poor peasant and landless classes were clashing with the landlords and police over the lands occupied by them. Tribal women had started displaying their militancy. In April 1980, when the police suddenly banned the tribal peasant conference at Indravelli in Adilabad district and started driving away the

people who had gathered in the market by resorting to indiscriminate firing, it was a tribal woman who pulled a bow against a policeman and hit him with her arrow. Gradually village level organisations of women began to emerge and they became widespread from the late 1980s. These women's organizations also became targets of police repression and found it difficult to function.

In areas where the revolutionary movement was strong, women took up the anti-arrack struggle in their localities. This became a major agitation in the beginning of the 1990s encompassing a variety of women's organisations. Thus the village level women's organisations formed in the various districts as the peasant struggle developed, coalesced into the Viplava Mahila sangam (VMS) around 1995. (In North Telangana they were initially called Mahila Vimukthi Sangham or shortly MVS. Now they have also been renamed as VMS). This underground women's organisation is the culmination of many efforts and experiments to build the women's movement in rural Andhra Pradesh in the face of state repression. As the peasant struggle expanded from North to South Telengana, from Guntur to Rayalseema districts so has the mobilisation of women. Born and steeled within the revolutionary struggle for a new democratic society of which the principal slogan is land to the tiller, the land struggles have and still occupy an important part in the mobilisation of women. For example, in December 1997 the peasant association Rytu Coolie Sangham (RCS) in Ainool village (Mehboobnagar district) decided to occupy 200 acres of land controlled by Ramachandra Reddy and two other landlords. Of the 300 people who took part in this campaign 100 were women. In Shalkarpeta village in the same district the VMS supported the call of the RCS to take over 100 acres out of 200 acres belonging to a landlord. The VMS campaigned among women to prepare them to participate in the struggle. Finally in June 1999 when a public meeting was held, over 100 women participated. They took part in the rally and planted the red flags on the land they occupied. Similarly in 1998 in Kovunoor

village in Cuddapah district a land struggle committee was formed to regain control of 120 acres of land illegally occupied by a landlord. The lands belonged to the SC society and village community. It is a decision of the RCS and the VMS that when lands are taken over and distributed, women should also be given titles to the lands independently and this was implemented wherever the revolutionary movement was able to give titles to the land.

Wage struggles occupy another important activity for the women's movement. A campaign for equal wages for agricultural work had been taken up. In Tandra village (Mehboobnagar district) the VMS campaigned among women labourers for days to make them realise the need for and the importance of struggle. Finally when the RCS and the VMS together gave a strike call for higher wages it was a success. They beat the drum and began the strike. Two days later the landlord and rich peasants bowed to the demands of the labourers and negotiated in public to decide on the increase in rates. Inspired by the example of Tandra, women in surrounding villages also took up similar struggles even though in all of them there were no VMS units. The initiative of women workers too has increased with the growth of women's organisation. In June 1998 in Pallikonda village of Nizamabad district, women beedi workers faced unemployment because the owners decided to remove their local agents and thus stop local production. 300 women went to Bhimgal mandal centre and sat on a dharna before the beedi company office. The local agents were re-appointed and production resumed.

An account of the issues taken up by the VMS in various areas will give an idea of the variety of issues addressed by the women's organisation in AP.

In Achampet area, Vakeshram village one woman Autamma's husband died but his brothers refused to give her any share in the land. The VMS organised a panchayat and made the brothers give her 5 acres plot of land.

In Warangal village of Medak district 70 women organised a morcha to protest against the rape of a Dalit woman by a landlord's son. They thus exposed the incident. In Dubbakka village one man Venkata Gowd promised to marry Balamma. But finally he ditched her. She committed suicide. The women took out a rally demanding that he be held responsible for her death. The rally was lathicharged by the police.

In another interesting case in Erpedu mandal village Cinnanuru, a village head attacked and chased away a family. In the process the 8 year old daughter of that attacked family got lost. She was found by one Ramaswamy, who took her and made her a bonded labourer in his house. When the VMS got wind of this they mobilised the local villagers and rescued the girl. They insisted he pay for the months she had worked for him. He was made to pay Rs 12,000 to the girl for her labour. VMS units in several areas have been instrumental in organising small symposiums on issues like dowry to educate people against dowry. They have organised processions to spread awareness about dowry killings.

Besides these, VMS units have been active in mobilising women for agitations against drought, for facilities like roads and electricity. Especially in the summer of 1998, faced with a severe drought, women were in the forefront of the agitations for water and relief. They were in the forefront of exposing Chandrababu Naidu's Janmabhoomi reform program. Hundreds of women demonstrating in Regonda mandal town shouted, "We want water not liquor". They have staged rasta rokos and dharnas, held meetings and processions.

They have stood up in many instances against police atrocities. They have stopped police from arresting mass organisation activists, peasant leaders from their villages. In Tanda village of Warangal district for example, the police came to arrest one Mahendra Reddy in January 98 on the suspicion of his being involved with the revolutionary movement. They

caught him and started beating him on the way itself. About 500 men and women surrounded the police carrying sticks, broomsticks and stones. The police loaded their rifles and threatened to attack the villagers. Undeterred the women went forward and started attacking the police with whatever they had in hand. They even tried to snatch their rifles. Shocked police ran away leaving Mahendra Reddy behind. 20 special batch police came back another day but were again confronted and chased away. Similarly, in Gurajala mandal 50 women stopped a police bus taking away the Sangham leader and forced the police to release him. In Durgi Mandal, Naramalapadu village twice the police arrested RCS leaders and both times under the leadership of the VMS women staged rasta rokos and got them released. Such examples can be multiplied by the hundreds all over the state. Women themselves have faced repression for leading the struggles. They have been beaten up by the landlord's men, they have faced harassment, threats and beatings and arrests by the police. But through all this, under the influence of revolutionary politics women got organised and built their own organisations and fought for the right to equality and freedom from oppression. For them the struggle for new democratic revolution and the struggle against patriarchy are integrally linked. Hence their feelings and dedication for the revolutionary movement. This came out most sharply in a major confrontation that developed with the police in Manala village of Nizamabad district over the martyr's column. In Sept 1997, 1800 men and women of Manala and neighbouring villages laboured for 18 days to build a 45 feet high column in memory of revolutionary women martyrs. Thousands attended the inauguration of the memorial column. Hence in June 1998 when the police came and tried to force the women and men of Manala to break the memorial they faced stiff resistance. When the police realised that the villagers were willing to face death but not allow the column to be broken they were forced to retreat. Though they tried to harass the Manala women in other ways they did not succeed.

Revolutionary Women's Movement Led by Adivasi Viplava Mahila Sangham

Adivasi Viplava Mahila Sangham

Up in the mountains of East Godavari and Vishakapatnam districts of Andhra Pradesh an overwhelming majority of the people are tribal and they belong to the Kondlu, Gadaba, Kondareddy, Bhagata and other related tribes. The hard life in the hills makes the woman's labour even more arduous and tedious. Even fetching water entails climbing and descending with pots over long distances. Patriarchal traditions make her socially dependent and politically powerless. Added to it is the exploitation by people from the plains who have come into the hills and started plantations. Closer to the plains such as in Malkangiri district of Orissa, women are facing newer forms of exploitation. Settlers are marrying tribal women to gain access to tribal lands. The woman loses her place in the tribal community only to be used and abandoned by the avaricious husband.

Women were in the forefront of the tendu leaves struggle which began in this area from 1983 onwards. They negotiated with contractors before the entire village. When a contractor refused to negotiate with a woman named Sanyasamma she told him, "Give me the keys to your jeep, I will drive it, while you carry this one sack of tendu leaves and show me." Women participated in struggles to occupy the excess lands of landlords. Through protracted struggles they emerged as mass leaders.

While women's organisations began to be formed in villages from 1985 itself, they got area and district level character when the Krantikari Adivasi Viplava Mahila Sangham was formed in 1989. In 1995, the name of the organization was changed to Adivasi Viplava Mahila Sangham (AVMS).

In the beginning of the 1990s the major struggle undertaken by the AVMS has been on the anti-liquor issue. Apart from this the organisation has undertaken campaigns, organised meetings, rallies, people's courts on many issues. For example in 1996 a dowry death case in Ramavaram became an issue in which hundreds of women

were mobilised and they demonstrated to teach the killer husband a lesson. In March 2000 a campaign against polygamy was taken up in the Koyyur mandal. People's courts have been conducted on many cases of polygamy, on forced marriages. Punishment has also been meted out to those men who have sexually exploited women and then abandoned them. In big meetings in which neighbouring villagers are mobilised the men have been forced to marry the woman and give them a share in their property. The struggle for equal pay for equal work has been taken up from 1988 in bamboo cutting and other related work and won. Thus a tremendous change came about in the region because of the awakening among women and the growing organisation among them. From 1997, March 8 was celebrated all over the region, even in the remote villages. In March 2000, hundreds of meetings were held in all parts of these districts and women used to look forward to March 8 as 'their' day, the day to talk and plan to struggle for their rights. Women started going to cities far from their region, like Vishakapatnam and Guntur to participate in state level programs. By 1998 there were 200 units of the AVMS with 6700 members. But the organisation functioned in the face of severe repression and many units were destroyed in the raids and arrest campaigns launched at regular intervals by the armed police.

Anti-Liquor Agitation of AP

In the early 1990s the anti-liquor agitation led by women swept the whole of Andhra Pradesh and thousands of rural women were activated to demand the banning of arrack. This agitation has its roots in the anti-arrack struggles begun by local organisations of women spontaneously. The struggle began in the Singareni coal mines area when the women spontaneously took up a campaign to close down arrack shops. The issue got taken up in other villages where the revolutionary movement was strong. Hence when the struggle against arrack broke out in October 1994 in Nellore district it swept the state. The government was forced to ban arrack, but two years later the Chandrababu Naidu government lifted the ban. This once again led to a widespread agitation. A state level body of 42 organisations was formed to oppose the lifting of the ban and the reduction in subsidies for social welfare. Since then VMS units have been active in trying to close down arrack shops in their villages. There have been militant struggles too. The women of Anantapur

agitating before the Collector's office on April 15, 1997 did a rasta roko because he refused to come out and take their memorandum. They were lathicharged and arrested but that did not deter the women. Women have picketed arrack shops, broken barrels, destroyed hundreds of litres of arrack and other liquor.

Similarly tribal women in the Eastern region took the lead in their area to demand the enforcement of a ban on brewing and sale of liquor. From 1990 itself they were propagating about the destructive impact of liquor and making men take pledges that they would give up drinking. Thousands of them participated in the struggle. They destroyed lakhs of litres of arrack, the liquor extracted from palm trees. They destroyed arrack brewed from jaggery. In fact, earlier in 1990 while campaigning against liquor they had managed to stop the supply of jaggery to the brewers for almost six months. Therefore from 1995 this became a mass issue. Women broke the village distilleries of the brewers. In more than 50 villages hundreds of women continued this struggle for almost three years. In 1997 when the Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu lifted the ban on liquor more than 4000 women took out a morcha. They also organised a big rally the same year to cut down jeelugu trees (palm tree from which liquor is extracted).

Revolutionary Women's Movement Led by Krantikari Adivasi Mahila Sanghatan

The impact of the revolutionary movement on tribal society both in Dandakaranya and also in the Eastern Ghats (Vishakapatnam, Srikakulam, Vijayanagaram districts) has been even deeper. The majority of tribals in the districts of Gadhchiroli, Gondia of Maharashtra, in Bastar division of Chattisgarh, Balaghat in Madhya Pradesh and Malakangiri of Orissa belong to a sub-tribe of the Gonds - Madia, Muria, Pardhan, Dorla or RajGond though other tribes like Raut, Halbi also inhabit these forests. Though there are particularities in the customs their society is patriarchal. The women play an important part in production, they labour hard and long in the fields and home yet traditionally they have no rights to the land. They do not have any social rights either. Their

participation in the actual rituals is prohibited by custom; their role in community decision-making and arbitrations is also marginal. In many ways, through customs and beliefs, small and big, their subordination is reinforced. Thus, for example, though women may plough the land and even cut the harvest, they may not thresh the grain, nay, they should not even step on the threshing floor when it is going on. Girls are not allowed to enter the main grain store of the family. During menstruation they must stay outside the village and not be seen, especially by a priest. The family has the right to decide the marriage of a girl and boy. Even if a girl disagrees with their decision, she is still forced to go to the house of her in laws. In case of resistance, it was common to beat her inhumanly, tie her to a pole and carry her off, like an animal's carcass being carried after a hunt. In some areas, boys would kidnap a girl one of them liked and force her to marry him. Polygamy is common, a woman's labour being prized. Though their society does not prohibit pre-marital sex, and in some parts it is acceptable within certain institutional arrangements like the Ghotul, yet promiscuity is neither a practice nor is it acceptable. A girl pregnant before marriage is looked down upon. In some areas, like Gadhchiroli, the custom of giving up wearing the blouse once a girl is married was strictly enforced among the Madias. But it is not uncommon in other parts too for women to give up wearing the blouse once they have a child or two. Better publicised is the oppression that these women have been facing at the hands of 'outsiders' – the contractors, traders, settlers, policemen and other government employees who come into the forest, into the tribal villages and take advantage of the simplicity and innocence of these girls to sexually exploit them and then abandon them. For them the tribal ways amount to promiscuity, which gives them the license to treat them as prostitutes.

As the squads of CPI (ML) (People's War) entered the Dandakaranya forest from 1980 onwards they confronted these patriarchal customs and practices. As they won the trust of the people and started struggles for rights over the forest and

for raising the rates for tendu leaf picking in the hot summer months they gained the trust and confidence of women too. Women are in the forefront of picking tendu leaves so they came into the struggle too in large numbers. Women actively participated in the strikes when the contractors and the Government were intransigent about their demands. Women participate in many kinds of labour in the forest. They go for bamboo-cutting for the paper mills, they work in the forest department nurseries, in road building and other such work. In all these areas of work, struggles broke out to improve the wage rates and the conditions of work and women were very active in the struggles. Young girls came forward to campaign in villages, to put up posters propagating the issues and demands. Women with babes in arms walked for days to attend meetings and conferences. There were many instances when outsiders exploiting tribal girls or molesting them were brought by the squads before the people, forced to apologise and either leave the area or reform their behaviour. As a result the incidence of sexual exploitation in the areas of struggle went down a great deal. And when the police repression began to crush the revolutionary forces and their struggles women learnt to face the police and help to keep the movement and organisation alive. From all these experiences the Krantikari Adivasi Mahila Sangathan (KAMS) was born. While the initial units were formed in Gadhchiroli district they gradually spread to all parts of the district and to the neighbouring districts. Since 1995 the KAMS has spread by leaps and bounds in Bastar - Dantewada district, some parts of Bastar district and Kanker district, Gondia, Rajnandgaon and Balaghat.

The first district Conference of the KAMS was held in Gadhchiroli in 1991, but the Maharashtra Government launched its repression campaign a few months later and all the KAMS district committee members were forced to leave their homes and operate from the forests, or become full time organisers functioning underground. The KAMS took up the task to propagate against tribal customs which are oppressive for women. They struck a chord among young women and

gained their active support. KAMS units began to be set up in village after village. But due to the repression the units found it difficult to function openly. For the police merely being a member of KAMS is a crime. In the chargesheet of a middle aged woman arrested from Gondia district was written that she is the president of the village KAMS unit! Thus from 1993 onwards KAMS has grown in the midst of severe repression. KAMS units have been set up in the Abujmad hills, in the areas around Kondagaon and Keskal, in the hills of Byramgad and the plains of the Avapalli, Indravati and Pamed national parks, up to the banks of the Sabari river. Today there are hundreds of villages with units of the KAMS. In areas where there are more units range committees have been formed which oversee 25 to 40 villages. Since 1997 range level conferences of the KAMS have been held in several areas and the range Committees elected. [add membership of KAMS]

Issues and Struggles

The KAMS has actively propagated against the more oppressive customs that are resented by the women and helped women and girls to put up resistance against them. For example due to the active campaign against forced marriages now one rarely finds a case of physical force being used to force a girl to marry against her wishes. If a girl brings such a case before the village unit of the KAMS or the peasant organisation the KAMS members and/or the squad talk to the family to convince them to desist from imposing their will on the girl. In fact there are many cases in which girls have left their families and become guerrillas in the PLGA to avoid a marriage they are not interested in. Women perceive the revolutionary party as their own because they see it as a force which is helping them to become aware of their oppression and fight it. They come to the squads with their problems and expect help. Girls from the Kondagaon area approached the party to end the Ghotul system because they felt oppressed that they were forced to go and dance in the Ghotul every night even if they were not interested. The KAMS in the area took up this

campaign to stop compulsory dancing. Meetings and rallies on this issue were organised. In many villages the Ghotuls were shut down or atleast were no longer a compulsory activity for unmarried women. But taking advantage of the increased repression of the police when it is not easy both for the party and mass organisations to function, the elders of the clan and community again forced the Ghotul activity to be restarted. In Gadhchiroli there was strong resistance from the clan elders to the campaign for wearing the blouse after marriage and it has taken some years to wear down their resistance so that now the practice is no longer widespread as before. Initially it could be enforced only in the families of those active in the peasant organisation.

The KAMS has been regularly organising March 8 programs around specific themes. While sometimes, big programs gathering women from many villages have been held, in some areas smaller meetings of women of 5 to 10 villages have been organised in every range. Women squad members have presented skits in these meetings and sung songs. A March 8 meeting organized in the Indravati national Park area in 1999 was busted up by the special armed police when a report of the meeting somehow leaked to them. Almost 1000 people, half of which were women had gathered for the meeting in the forest. A pamphlet had been brought out for the occasion. The people had to return very disappointed that the meeting could not be held. The KAMS has also organised on issues of all India significance like the 400 to 500 strong morcha taken out by women in Narayanpur to protest against the Miss World contest in Bangalore in 1996. KAMS has actively participated in the anti-famine morchas, in election boycott campaigns, in development activity in the villages undertaken by the village itself. Representatives of KAMS also sit in the revolutionary people's committee wherever they are formed. KAMS has conducted people's courts in cases like wife beating, re-marriage by men while abandoning the first wife. In one case of a people's court the local KAMS brought forward the case of a girl made pregnant by one boy. The KAMS unit

ferreted out the identity of the boy. He was forced to part with some land and cattle for the girl and her forthcoming child.

As a result of the women's organisation and campaigns women's political and social consciousness has developed. Women are actively supporting the armed struggle and the people's guerrillas. Every year they gather in large numbers before the martyr's column in their village to pay homage to the revolutionaries who have died fighting to make the new democratic revolution a success. They take tremendous risks to help the guerrillas during police encirclement. When the police arrested some men from Bellum Nendra village the women followed the police and the men all the way to the police station over 5 kms away and did not budge because they refused to release the men. The police arrested these women too and sent them off to jail, more than 150 kms away. The women are participating in large numbers in political rallies and meetings. Young girls, often defying their parents, are joining the People's Liberation Guerrilla Army in large numbers and their numbers have gone up remarkably in the past 5 years. Now almost 40 % of the fighters in the PLGA in DK are women fighters. Women, who have been housewives, too have left their children with relatives, and joined the squads to serve the poor.

Tamilnadu

In the 80s the hundreds of youth associations, which were formed in villages, had women as members too. They took the issues of caste discrimination, hike in wages, usury, market fraud, rowdy menace etc. Women were in forefront in dragging landlords to people's courts. In Ahiyamankottai and Pennagaram forest officials harassed the women folk who used to go to the forest areas for collection of firewood or for grazing their cattle.

When funds were collected for legal expenses, rural women liberally gave away the grains, which they have stored,

in their houses for food. When a high level fact finding team constituted by PUCL visited North Arcot and Dharmapuri districts on December 19th and 20th, 1992 a large number of women left their work to come forward courageously to depose before the members of the team about the police atrocities.

There had been impressive presence of women in large number in all the public meetings organised all over TamilNadu to condemn the genocide of Tamils in Sri Lanka in July 1983 and also to condemn the move to send the Indian Army there. In the cultural events organised in support of Eelam cause many women participated as full time activists for a number of days. In June 1984, when statues of martyrs (Appu and Balan) were being erected, women in great numbers gave their free labour to honour them.

Shantha, a mother of two children succumbed to police injuries. Cultural troupes (Makkal Kalai Manram) had women as full time members. They not only sang songs against anti-women feudal ideas and practices but also carried mud pots with fire to prove that there was nothing divine or holy in the act of carrying such mud pots. The Naxalbari movement encouraged, enthused and conducted a number of inter-caste marriages, love marriages as well as marriages, which were, divested of all the reactionary, casteist and religious rituals.

Since 1989, 'Mather Viduthalai Iyakkam' began working in Dharmapuri. Condemning the custodial rape of Kalpana Sumathi, a schoolteacher, district wide campaigning was organised. Radical women league was started in certain major cities and towns like Madras and Madurai. This led a few struggles.

To prevent the first RYL State Conference on 21, 22 September 1991 Jayalalitha government arrested 27 women with 14 babies. 27 adolescents (amongst them two girls) were also arrested. In spite of these arrests, again on September 22, 23 comrades including five women and six children defied the

ban and surprised the police by taking out a procession. Police pounced on them, brutally attacked them and arrested them. The women launched hunger strikes and other struggles in prison to assert their rights. They sang revolutionary songs and conducted political classes inside the jail.

Revolutionary Urban Women's Movement

Some revolutionary women's organizations had been formed during eighties and nineties in urban areas in some states to take forward the programme of NDR among the poor, middle class urban women. Organizations like **Andhra Pradesh Chaithanya Mahila Samakhya (APCMS)**, **Pennurimai Kazhagam of Tamil Nadu** are working with the aim of NDR. These organizations work among the poor working class women in the factories and slums, among students, intellectuals and employees. They take up class as well as women's issues and build up militant struggles. Dowry and dowry related deaths, sexual harassment, rape, acid attacks, obscenity, beauty contests i.e. commodification of women's bodies, police atrocities, imperialist sponsored birth control programmes/devices are some of the main women's issues taken up by these women's organizations. Since women are affected as communities and sections by various problems, those are also taken up. For eg: fee hike, facilities at educational institutions, discrimination (caste and gender), ragging etc. of students; privatization, discrimination at work place, facilities like crèches, bathrooms for working women; evictions, land rights, hygiene, water problems etc. of slum women are also taken up. They take up campaigns against the anti people policies of imperialist agencies like WTO, IMF and World Bank and protest the implementation of reforms and LPG (liberalization, privatization, globalization) policies dictated by them.

They take up campaigns against the various burning issues which affect women not only as women but also as

citizens. They have been active in opposing Hindu communal forces and the attacks on minorities especially on women. They thoroughly expose the hollowness of government policies meant for women and continuously propagate about the semi feudal, semi colonial nature of the state which uses, protects and perpetuates patriarchy. They vehemently condemn and build movements to protest state violence on struggling women masses - whether of the nationality movements, revolutionary movements or any sections of women fighting for their rights. They use the cultural forms of dance, song, drama and street play very effectively in their propaganda work which forms an important component of their work. Propaganda is also carried out through various magazines, books, pamphlets, videos, audios etc brought out by them.

For the urban women these present a revolutionary alternative to the funded or narrowly confined small autonomous women's groups. The state also recognizes that these are different from other women's organizations by their revolutionary practice and uncompromising attitude towards the state and its agencies. Hence the repression on them. Since the revolutionary movement is facing severe repression in some of the urban areas, sometimes the party is forming urban women's organizations without claiming any links with them. This is just a question of tactics since cities and towns are the head quarters of the enemies of NDR and they plan to work with a long term perspective without exposing all their forces. Whether they claim allegiance to the revolutionary movement or not, these urban organizations and the urban women organizers are also facing repression. Some of them have been killed in fake encounters while many were arrested, tortured, kidnapped, raped and had false cases foisted on them.

Women's role in the revolutionary cultural front

Jana Natya Mandali (JNM)

The Jana Natya Mandali, the cultural wing of the CPI

(ML) (PW) in Andhra Pradesh was formed in May, 1972. Its songs, theatre and dance have had a major impact on the cultural ethos of A.P., particularly amongst the oppressed sections. It influenced lakhs of people attracting them towards revolutionary politics. Many women artistes have been part of the JNM teams since the initial years and have carved a niche for themselves on the cultural front.

Comrade Sandhya, one of the first women to take part in JNM activities had a booming voice and her songs exposing the police officers sent tremors down their spines. She was arrested during Emergency and tortured. Such was the contempt of the police officers that after torturing her they asked her to sing the song on police officers.

Comrade Padma (martyred in an encounter in 2002 in Eturunagaram area) was the first whole time woman artiste in the JNM team. In 1982, when there were very few women working in the Party, Padma started her singing career at a very young age of 15 years.

On April 20, 1981 police fired on adivasi men and women at Indravelli of Adilabad district killing many of them. JNM prepared a ballet about the plight and struggle of the adivasis in this background. Out of the 25 people trained for this ballet four were women - Padma, Swarna, Sarada and Vanaja. Nearly every town in AP held this ballet, and at each function the hall was packed.

In 1983/84 when the Party planned an All India programme for JNM to tour the entire country Padma was part of the six member central team. In this tour which covered 25,000 kms Padma and two others continued throughout the entire programme.

During the period of repression in 1985-1989, main JNM comrades including Padma were shifted out of AP and they gave performances and training in other states. In 1989 Padma

was shifted to Dandakaranya to develop cultural activity among the adivasis there. Some other women artistes also chose to go underground.

In 1990, a central ballet team was composed to make use of the legal opportunities and comrades Padma and Kumari were part of it. Kumari also joined JNM at a very young age of 13 years and gave innumerable performances in coastal AP and elsewhere. Kumari and Padma gave performances playing the main singer's role in Oggu Kathas which was a breakthrough for women. Many women comrades followed their example. Sometimes these Kathas were performed by all women teams. Many women learnt to beat the 'Dappu' (drum) which was till then the traditional forte of men.

With the repression once again coming to the fore in 1991, all legal activity came to an end. Since then, the central JNM team concentrated on All India tours and preparing audio visual cassettes. Women were part of all this effort. In 1996 all leading comrades including Padma and Kumari had to go underground due to heavy repression. They continued their cultural activity in the rural and forest areas along with the armed squads and they even formed exclusive armed squads with JNM comrades to propagate revolutionary culture. Some of these squads were led by women and all squads had women members. Kumari who did exemplary work on the cultural front in the forest areas died of cerebral malaria contracted while working there. She developed herself to become a leading woman comrade in JNM and is best remembered for her excellent portrayal of Kashmiri women's agony.

After JNM began to be built up as part of the armed squad activities many women from the rural and adivasi areas became part of the JNM teams. While giving performances or imparting training many had to face encounters with the police. Inevitably they had to go around armed.

The experience of JNM when it worked openly and after

it went underground is very unique in the history of Indian cultural movement. It showed to the world that any amount of repression cannot suppress a people's cultural movement and that a true people's cultural organization would not hesitate to undertake any tactics to propagate revolutionary culture. It is remarkable that women took part in all these activities on par with men and even sometimes leading the teams and did not hesitate to even go underground or even take up arms to work among the masses.

The repression in Andhra Pradesh on cultural activists propagating the truth about the ruling classes can be gauged by the brutal manner in which Belli Lalitha, the first woman convenor of Telangana Kala Samithi was murdered. She was an excellent singer and the people swayed to her songs. She was especially critical of the police officers who unleashed a reign of terror. So the Chandrababu government in connivance with Nayeem, a renegade and leader of a black gang created by the notorious AP police hatched a conspiracy and had her eliminated by hacking her body into 17 pieces. Since she was a woman the police tried to malign her character that she had relations with some People's War leaders and died as a consequence. In fact this kind of maligned propaganda about women working in various fields of the revolutionary movement including the cultural movement has been consistently carried on by the government. This is one patriarchal aspect of the repression unleashed on revolutionary activists.

The Chetana Natya Manch (CNM)

This is a revolutionary cultural organization in Dandakaranya. It is mainly composed of adivasi men and women and is doing extensive cultural propaganda work among the adivasis. This has units in villages and has a vast membership. There are some armed squads also which do exclusive cultural work and train up new members. Some of the teams in the villages as well as the squads are led by women

and it is not surprising to find many women in the teams as adivasi women are natural lovers of music and dance. They have also started composing revolutionary songs which not only touch upon the women's problems but also the social, economic, cultural problems and their solutions. They have adopted the cultural forms prevalent among the tribal people in those areas and infused them with revolutionary content. They also adopted their traditional dress for performances. Songs, dances, story telling in the form of songs, dance dramas and street plays are the main forms adopted. All their forms are collective as it is the norm among tribes.

Jharkhand Abhen, Kranthikari Sanskrithik Sangh

Jharkhand Abhen is a revolutionary cultural front working in Jharkhand. It boasts of a number of young boys and girls as its members. Kranthikari Sanskrithik Sangh is doing similar work in North Bihar. They have been propagating revolutionary culture among the masses of Bihar-Jharkhand. Songs, dances and small skits are their main art forms. The 'war dance' which actually is a traditional dance form of the Santhali tribes has been adopted with a revolutionary content and has become quite popular. They regularly give performances in the villages but also perform in big cities and towns when required. Girls have always played a leading role in these performances and are also learning to compose apart from giving performances.

Women's struggles in jails

As part of the repression on the revolutionary movement numerous women were arrested, tortured and kept in jails. Sometimes they had to spend years together without any trial. They fought against the horrible conditions in the jails and built up solidarity with the ordinary convicts also. They went on hunger strikes and adopted whatever means they had to propagate about the horrid conditions and get the support of the outside world for their struggles. The

authorities tried to suppress these struggles by resorting to more brutality but the revolutionary women withstood all this with much determination worthy of praise.

Mary Taylor was a British national who came to India and was inspired by the Naxalite movement. Taylor was married to an activist of the revolutionary left movement. She along with her husband worked among the poor peasants in North India. She was caught and was kept in miserable condition in various jails. She wrote a book 'My years in an Indian prison' describing the horrid conditions and the inhuman treatment meted out to the women prisoners - ordinary as well as political - in those jails. She had to languish in Indian jails for more than five years from 1970 to 1975 for her allegedly 'seditious activities'. Her experiences brought into sharp focus the processes of brutalisation and dehumanisation which targets, particularly, the deprived and the marginalised and also raised a lot of debate about the conditions inside Indian jails in the late '70s and early '80s. Many revolutionary women arrested during naxalite movement in West Bengal like Krishna Bandyopadhyay and Joya Mithra fought to improve the conditions in jails. The conditions in the jails had not improved but turned even worse in the subsequent years.

Women comrades of Tamilnadu had been arrested many times by the repressive DMK and AIDMK regimes and they had always fought militantly against the authorities. Six of them were arrested at the end of 2002 and booked under the notorious POTA. They went on a hunger strike and had to undergo torture and forceful feeding and had to languish in the jail without bail till mid-2005.

That the Chief Minister Jayalalitha was a woman did not make a difference or only made it worse. Her government chose to go to court against the bails granted to these women! So much for the 'Sisterhood' of women! This is just a recent example but the brave deeds of revolutionary women in jails are many. Many naxalite women who languished in the various AP jails also bravely fought against the Congress, TDP repressive jail policies and set a glorious example.

Role of women in the “Association of Martyrs’ Relatives and Friends”

This association was formed to help families, relatives, and friends of revolutionaries killed in police shootings reclaim their bodies and conduct honorable final rites. It mainly consists of mothers and relatives of the deceased.

Historically, since the Srikakulam struggle, police often cremated unclaimed bodies of those killed in encounters. Families couldn’t claim the bodies due to fear of harassment or lack of timely information.

A turning point came in December 1991 when journalist Ghulam Rasool and his friend Vijay Prasad were killed in a staged encounter. Journalists protested, demanding the bodies, but the police cremated them before discussions ended. In September 1994, the fake encounter of Chintala Venkataswamy and Padma led to legal action. The High Court ruled in favor of the families, affirming their right to claim bodies.

A similar case occurred in February 1997 when three revolutionaries were killed in Narsapur. Legal intervention ensured the bodies were handed over to families, leading to a mass funeral procession.

These events led to the creation of the “Encounter Victims’ Bodies Retrieval Committee” in 1997, later evolving into the “Association of Martyrs’ Relatives and Friends” in 2002, primarily led by women. Since then, it has worked to reclaim bodies and ensure dignified final rites. Every year, on July 18, the association observes “Martyrs’ Day” with the families of the deceased. The women relatives of the martyrs play a major role in reclaiming the bodies braving the police harassment and defying all odds. Several cases were foisted against the women leaders of this organisation. They are fighting with the police to construct memorial columns wherever possible, in the name of their loved ones.

A Bright Future beckons

As we review the history of various movements in India including the communist movement, it is clear that none of them carried to the end the struggle for the emancipation of the peasants, workers and the other oppressed masses of India, half of whom are women. It is also clear that they failed in formulating and practically fighting the patriarchy in the society and within their own organizations and parties. We also saw the limitations of the women's organizations in addressing the problem of patriarchy, in finding out its root cause and adopting a scientific method and practice to fight it. Naxalbari had shown the correct path of emancipation to the toiling masses of India through the New Democratic Revolution (NDR). The spark of Naxalbari has turned into a prairie fire and has now spread to vast rural tracts of India. Without a Communist Party and a People's Army, women cannot expect to achieve liberation in India.

Let us hope the rich experiences of the past and the analysis of the various kinds of movements presented here would help in the further advancement of women. There is no doubt that a bright future awaits them with the victory of NDR.

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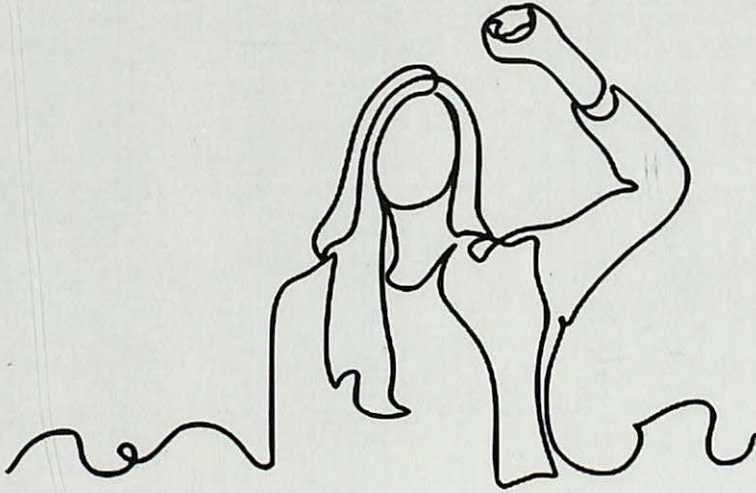
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No Women No History

Women in Indian Movements (19th century - 2004)

By V. Gargi



It is important to study general movements as well as women's movements to understand the role of women in changing society and its conditions. Women do not have an identity just as women. In fact they belong to various classes and sections. So when we talk of oppression and exploitation of women, it does not mean just the oppression they face as women but also as peasants, workers, artisans and as citizens. In fact, there have been struggles on women's issues (or patriarchy) as part of the general movements and many a time general issues were taken up by the women's movements. It is a dialectical relationship and women's emancipation is not possible without fight against all these kinds of oppressions and exploitation. Therefore, it is necessary to study both these kinds of movements when we want to understand the role of women in the struggle for change. This book contributes towards such a study.

