

WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS IN INDIA : AN APPRAISAL

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Introduction

Anjana Mishra from Orissa while talking about her horrific personal experiences and struggles, says, "My struggle is a struggle for justice. They called me insane; they threw stones at me; they defiled my character; they took my children away from me. But I'm determined to continue my struggle for justice."¹ Far away in the land of scams and slander, women in Bhusra, a nondescript village near Muzaffarpur, are celebrating freedom. For the remote interior of north Bihar, replete with stories of dowry deaths, female infanticides and rapes, it seems unbelievable to find women who rule a village, manage it and even earn their daily bread.² A committed social worker, a staunch communist and a leading woman activist, Geeta Mukherjee, turning 76, is still fighting fit! Her political career began from the student days itself when she joined the Bengal Provincial Students Federation in the early 1940s and became the first ever woman general secretary. As one of the freedom fighters when Indian National Army (INA) trial began in

¹ As cited in *Documentation on Women, Children and Human Rights*, April-June 1999, p. 78.

² Davinder Kumar, "In Bihar's Heart of Darkness, Women Earn and Rule, Learn to Live," as cited in *Documentation on Women, Children and Human Rights*, Jan-March 2000, p. 47.

Red Fort, soon after the end of World War II, she organised a students' movement which spread all over India which resulted in the acquittal of all the three accused namely, Captain Rashid Ali, Sehgal and Dhillon.³

Six years ago, women from Murgabani village in Jama block of Santhal Paragana district, Bihar traversed 10-12 km to collect fire-wood. Today, they have shortened the distance to just one km. This they have achieved by protecting the adjoining forest. Makhanni Tudu of Murgabani said, "Not cutting timber for sale when there was no food at home involved great sacrifice in the short run. But the vision of better earnings and more food in the future kept us going."⁴

These few illustrations reveal to us that women today, both as individuals and as groups, have begun to articulate and express their opinions and views and have started to fight for their liberation from the oppression of the patriarchal society. Women's movement in India have played a vital role in enabling women to give expression to their experiences, have uplifted their status to a certain extent and increased awareness among them as well as in the society. This article assesses historically and critically the expansion of women's movements in India, in relation to their objective, impact, approach, focus and relevancy and proposes a new way of responding in today's situation.

Women's Movement: A Historical Perspective

The present day reality of the status of women has been shaped by the past and this calls for an understanding of the historical forces that have shaped the process. Here is an attempt to give a very brief account of the history of women's movements in India.

³ R. C. Acharya, "Empowerment through Quota," as cited in *Documentation of Women, Children and Human Rights*, Jan-March 2000, p. 17.

⁴ Aditi Kapoor, "Regenerating Forests: Tribal Women Show the Way," *Documentation of Women Children and Human rights*, April-June. 1999, p. 26.

Its Origin

The struggle for women's rights in India has a long history going back to at least the mid-nineteenth century, especially the class and mass struggles against the British rule in the twenties, thirties and forties of the twentieth century. The impact of British colonisation of India, the ideas of French Revolution, the slow penetration of capitalism and the emergence of new educated, bureaucratic and commercial classes formed the basis of 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. The sole exception being Pandita Ramabai who was perhaps the only woman of her time who acted without family support and who, apart from making great efforts to educate women, also pioneered the setting up of homes for widows and destitute women. The early social reformers, Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar of Bengal, Agarkar and Ranade of Maharashtra and Veeresalingam of Andhra were liberals in their outlook of women. They campaigned against *sati* and child marriage, and for widow re-marriage, for the raising of the age of marriage and for the education of women. But these reformers were all Brahmins and their 'upliftment' took into account mainly women of the upper castes. The methods of these reformers were passive mass signature campaigns, public meetings, lobbying for legal reforms etc., with the British Government. They were successful in getting some progressive legislations passed, like the Government Regulation prohibiting *sati* in 1829, the widow's re-marriage Act 1865, legalising the re-marriage of widows and the controversial Age of Consent Act 1891.

In History

The history of the past two centuries of the women's movement both in the advanced capitalist countries and in the third world countries shows that women's movements have been closely linked with an even part of the broader economic and political struggles. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, women's struggles for political and trade union rights grew alongside the socialist and trade union movements and within the wide anti-imperialist upsurge. These women's struggles left their imprint

upon society and led to legal rights for women. In the late 1960's the women's movement again emerged from within the worldwide anti-imperialist upsurge, from the Vietnam War and the student-youth revolts of that era.

An important feature of the growth of women's organisations until 1910 was their regional character. Three national women's organisations in the country voiced women's demand for vote and mobilised public opinion to support this demand between 1917 and 1927. These organisations were Women's Indian Association (WIA), National Conference of Women in India (NCWI) and All India Women's Conference (AIWC) set up in 1917, 1925 and 1926 respectively. They had also developed branches all over India.⁵ In India women gained wider visibility through the Independence movement. Many women came with men to participate in the freedom struggle.

Most women who participated in the nationalist movement were primarily involved in Gandhiji's *Satyagraha* and in constructive programmes. A few of them became members of the secret and terrorist societies. The actual participation of women in large numbers in political and social activities (such as the freedom struggle, trade unions, anti-caste movements) began from 1920s onwards. The most comprehensive record on radical activity of women is available in Bengal in relation to the Quit India Movement of 1942.⁶

Approaches of Women's Movements

Social scientists and women activists both accept the main postulate that woman is not biologically inferior and her lower social status to that of man is man made.⁷ However, their approach and focus to the cause of women's liberation differ right from the beginning and these approaches have resulted in the formulation

⁵ P.M. Mathew and N. S. Nair, *Women's Organisations and Women's Interests*, (New Delhi: Ashish Publishing House, 1986), 11.

⁶ Vijay Agnew, *Elite Women in Indian Politics* (Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1979), 67.

⁷ Kalpana Shah, *Women's Liberation and Voluntary Action* (Delhi: Ajanta Publications, 1984), 8.

of three theories. They are 1) Liberal Feminism 2) Radical Feminism and 3) Socialist Feminism. They all maintain that the social inequalities between man and woman are a creation of the socio-cultural milieu. In fact these theories have been a source of inspiration for the formation and the functioning of several women's liberation movements all over the world and particularly in India.

The liberal feminist trend within the social reform movement in India manifested itself in 1927 in the formation of a nationwide women's organisation called the All India Women's Conference (AIWC). This organisation was different from the several smaller regional ones that preceded it (e.g., Brahmika Samaj, the Arya Nari Samaj, etc.) in that women themselves came forward to run it and there was a genuine orientation to female leadership and more radical stances on women's rights. It was meant to be an instrument for women to get their rights. Started by Margaret Cousins to spread literacy among women, it soon expanded its activities to bring civic and political rights to the Indian women.⁸

Having a dynamic leadership, AIWC in its infancy withstood the disturbances that rocked India to free it of the British Raj. It concentrated on helping women to break away from traditions that kept them bound as slaves.⁹ From the beginning of the formation of the All India Women's Conference, the first national organisation of women in the country, it was dominated by two schools of thought. The one, dominated mostly by conservative middle classes, confined its activities to the sphere of educational and social reforms and the other, which was more radical, confined its activities to the sphere of politics. Hence women's movement in India can be classified under two categories: a) equality movements and b) liberation movements.

The equality movements aim to attain an equal place for women within the society by abolishing the most open remnants of feudal patriarchy. These types of movements included suffrage

⁸ "All India Women's Conference", *How*, Vol. 4, No.2-3 Feb-March 1981.

⁹ Jessie B. Tellis Nayak, *Indian Womanhood: Then and Now* (Indore: Sat Prachar Press, 1983), 108.

movements and struggle against such customs as dowry and child marriage in India, whereas the liberation movements question the very stratification in society based on sex roles and demands an egalitarian culture and society, in which women can take part equally in areas of production and political life on par with men. Both are democratic in character, but the former is anti-feudal whereas the latter questions the basis of class society itself.

In Tamil Nadu, it acquired a new edge, objective and sensitivity from mid-sixties. Periyar's self-respect movement was a source of inspiration and paved the way for the emergence and formation of the women's groups. Women started playing an important role in the peasant worker upsurge of 1940s and 1950s. Communist women activists participated in the varied struggles of workers like the one in the textile mills of Coimbatore, the jute mills of Bengal and in the South Indian Railways in the late 1940s.

Paradigm Shift in Its Focus

In the beginning, women's movements focused on correction or setting right or replacement of the existing social, economic and political institutions in order to serve the needs of their new urgencies and priorities. The isolated radical groups, which have operated in some pockets of India, have positively contributed to the growth of a radical women's movement in the country.¹⁰

Slowly this gave women an opportunity to bring forward their own needs and were often became part of a process leading to the development of women's movements as such. They were involved in various kinds of agitations raising economic demands, mobilising women to come out of their traditional family roles and stereo-types.

The definition of Gail Omvedt on women's movements began to become a reality in its approach. According to her, "Women's movements are those which arise as conscious, organised efforts of groups of women to change this system of economic, cultural and political inequality. While women individually struggle against their subordinate position under many conditions, such organised

¹⁰ P. M. Mathew and N.S. Nair, 1986, p. 6.

movements have only arisen with the development of imperialism and capitalism, as part of the efforts to carry through the democratic evolution."¹¹

In the early seventies women in the cities began to gather as groups which opened up new processes of seeing and questioning. The safety of this bond strengthened women to articulate their experiences as well as to analyse the patriarchal structures that legitimised women's secondary status. Some of the women's groups began to actively forge links with the poor women in the rural and the urban areas. The issue of violence against women has been the most pervasive theme of the new women's liberation movement in India since its rise in 1974-1975.¹²

Women's Face in the Global Scene

When the UN declared the period from 1975 to 1985 as the Decade of International Women, it provided a stimulus to the need for a focused approach to the women's movement in the country and lifted the face of women in the global scene. During the decade, the women's movement, acquired a new sensitivity. It started off with a new approach wherein women's issues were not seen as problems needing merely relief, rescues and rehabilitation. They were looked at from a totally different perspective. The problems of women were seen as problems of active, participating and dignified human beings and not as those of objects of pity and piety.

As rightly pointed out, the international women's decade brought to the centre of human awareness and high-lighted in a focused manner some crucial facets of the women's movement which had been developing in an unconnected, parallel manner for a long time.¹³

¹¹ Gail Omvedt, "Women and Rural Revolt in India", *Social Scientist*, 6:1 (Aug. 1977), 5.

¹² Gail Omvedt, *Violence against Women: New Movements and New Theories in India* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1997), 2.

¹³ Alva Myrdal, 'Foreword' to the *The Changing Roles of Men and Women*, ed. Edmund Dahlstorm (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd., 1967).

During the decade a sensitive section among women developed a qualitatively different and higher type of awakening and developed a new perspective and thrust with regard to various categories of humiliation, atrocities, tortures and individual and mass assault to which they were subjected. They started questioning the postulates of official, dominant social, cultural and economic norms, which provided the basic gestalt of the socio-economic and political and cultural orders which were being ushered in after independence. Individuals, groups, grass-root activists, researchers and sensitive sections of urban and rural women started a conscious search for preventing the oppression and exploitation, sexual harassment and domestic violence which were being intensely felt both by educated middle class women as well as by women of the agrarian poor, ruined artisans, the tribal population, as well as scheduled and other despised castes and craft groups. They started exposing the fallacy underlying what was overwhelmingly assumed to be the private affair of the family and pointed out how these issues were public and social. They emphasised that it was erroneous to accept the traditional image of a good woman as an accommodating, self-sacrificing and efficient member of the family which was soaked in through and through with masculine patriarchal values and norms.

Numerous women's groups and organisations emerged, sometimes focusing on certain issues and sometimes undertaking the task of over all conscientisation of women. Participation in the struggles of exploited and oppressed classes increased in various parts of the country. Women participated in struggles organised or informal. They also participated in the growing struggles of tribals and of dalits against caste oppression.

Women belonging to various religious denominations started raising their voice against the adverse impact of patriarchal, demeaning and discriminatory personal laws. Women took a leading part in the struggles against price rise. They also participated in struggles against oppression and harassment in academic and administrative office set-ups. They started crusading against the degrading use of women's bodies in advertising for augmenting sales and profits by government and private enterprises. Women extended their struggles on the legal front and conducted many battles to change laws or force the administration

to effectively implement the laws. In short, during the decade women's struggles proliferated and acquired a new focus.

In fact the International Decade, by focusing on women's issues and movements, worked as a catalyst to highlight and stimulate all aspects of women's growing awakening, organisational experiments and theoretical and practical struggles, which were evolving during the late sixties and seventies. Women's movements started questioning the existing institutions of patriarchal family and private and public spheres of life. The feminists saw the roots of the inequality between the sexes in these very age-old social institutions.

It helped the women's movement become a powerful source of political energy, a battle ground and a sisterhood. In the late 70's and in the early 80's the All Democratic Women's Association opened a new chapter of history, by forming women's solidarity movement embracing all classes, progressives, intellectuals, labourers, farmers, housewives, etc. In the 80's, women started participating in large numbers in a wide range of political movements - from revolutionary peasant struggles to nationalist movements.

However, the most interesting innovations in theorising in India appear rather to be linked to mass movements of various sections of rural poor women, and to draw upon indigenous traditions. In fact, the whole new women's liberation movement has a special dynamics in India, with a growing number of toiling women asserting their rights not in isolation, not in connection simply with conscious feminist groups or with the women's wings of the left political parties, but even more within the frame work of the new social movements that have been so prominent in India in recent years. They are doing so even in the context of growing social violence, economic polarisation, political degeneration, ecological destruction and with the tide of religious fundamentalism reasserting patriarchy. This context is reflected in their theorising too.

Achievements of Women's Movements

The women's movements in India have played a crucial role in uplifting women's status and increasing awareness among men and women. It has enabled women to develop a new sensitivity and consciousness, which no longer tolerates the suffocating

familial, institutional, political and cultural norms, which place them in a humiliating and subordinate status. In the context of increasing violence against women and a pervasive social political crisis, some of the feminist movements in India appear to be emerging into an era of new richness and complexity, spearheaded by intellectuals connected with mass movements.

They have brought a vast change in the life of women all over the world, influencing their attitudes, values, inspirations, ways of feeling, standards of behaviour and actions for effective participation in all walks of life. One of the main enduring consequences of the recent social evolution for women has been their emancipation from their tradition bound ethos. A new type of consciousness has emerged in recent decades, a consciousness of subjugation of women by men, of women's liberation from male dominance and of equality of the sexes. Women are today coming out of their insulated enclosures and social spaces, expressing their freedom, dignity and equality with men. Radical and liberal feminists in India, organised primarily in the urban-based middle-class women to conscientise them. These autonomous feminist groups have focused on issues of family and sexual violence, rape, amniocentesis, wife-beating, *sati* and the legal struggles of Muslim and Christian minorities. Nevertheless urban feminists can be credited with helping to create a wide atmosphere of resistance in which women at all levels are increasingly standing up to fight the violence against them and seeking resources to live independently and with dignity.

Grass root organisations of women have been coming into being and are functioning in tribal, rural and urban areas. To illustrate a few, the anti arrack agitation of Nellore district has been one of the most significant of women's agitations in the last decade. Liquor emerged as a central issue that pushed household economies to the brink, in the light of the deteriorating economic situation of the poor consequent to the new economic reforms. However, many more elements of change have also taken place in these villages. An effective thrift programme, which is self-managed, has followed the arrack struggle. It has also been followed by effective social action by women in groups against social crimes such as the use of female child labour, child marriage, rape and other forms of violence against women, revealing that

women's collective struggle against arrack has a greater and wider value than the elimination of liquor from household.¹⁴

Women in the hilly regions of Uttar Pradesh have been agitating against men's drinking habits for several decades. They also agitated against Dabur and other Ayurvedic tonics, as they contained a high percentage of alcohol. The hilly districts have been agitating for a separate state, Uttarkhand, where women were in the forefront. These women reveal an extraordinary clarity in defining the kind of laws, economic policy and political arrangements about what they demand. They want full rights guaranteed over village trees, land and water. These women demand 50 percent of the places from the agencies that control the forest land. They want control over the tourism industry as tourism today threatens women's security – it brings with it liquor and prostitution.¹⁵ From their origins as a spontaneous protest against logging abuses in Uttar Pradesh and in the Himalayas, thousands of supporters of the Chipko movement, mainly village level women, have won bans on felling of trees in a number of regions and have influenced the natural resource policy in India. The name of the movement comes from a word meaning "embrace". The women practised *Satyagraha* – non-violent resistance, and interposed their bodies between the trees and the contractors' axes, thus becoming the environmental movement's first tree huggers.

They also carry on agitations, campaigns for rescue and rehabilitation work, and legal and pressure movements to expose the atrocities and tortures which women of various strata are subjected to. They are also involved in the activities, which attempt to assist, console and prepare the victims to build up courage and to organise themselves to fight back.

Some take up the issues of battered women, of women who are raped, tortured or are led to the stage of even attempting to end their lives. They crusade against the menace of dowry, which has resulted in thousands of murders of married women

¹⁴ Mohini Giri, "Powerfully Empowered?", *The Hindu* (Sunday), January 20, 2002, p.4.

¹⁵ Mohini Giri, "Powerfully Empowered?", p. 4.

falsely reported as suicides or accidents. Some have started a systematic campaign for conscientisation of women through the use of various media like posters, pamphlets, exhibitions, slide shows, films, street corner plays and group songs as well as 'padayatras' in certain areas.

Some are concentrating on work among slum women or women living as squatters, while some others are rooted among women working in the unprotected informal or small-scale industries, in plantations, coal mines, construction works and various other occupations in rural areas.

Some have been combining the constructive relief and income generation experiments along with consciousness-raising-campaigns for family reform programmes to humanise the relationship between men and women. Some of the organisations are evolving devices to fight injustice and insults, by establishing women's courts and providing on the spot punishment to those who insult or abet in inflicting insults and humiliations on women.

A major gain from the women's movement has been the emergence of a rich storehouse of information and data on women at every stage of the life cycle.¹⁶ The important thing is that although these women's movements at the beginning were developed on the level of care and comfort, gradually this was changed to the level of challenge and transformation of the systemic evils. Women who bear, nurture and preserve life are now willing to protect life by struggling against the anti-life evil powers. Women's solidarity is reinforced and women's power has become an important political power able to change the culture of injustice and life-killing forces.

Women's Movements A Long Way to Go...

Though there are several groups, organisations and movements of women working in India for the cause of women's equality and liberation and their impact on the society is quite strong, still the women's liberation movement in India is today at

¹⁶ Malavika karlekar, "Domestic Violence," *Women's Link*, vol.5, no.1, Jan-March 1999, p. 8.

the crossroads. It has a long way to go to spread throughout the country, to make a deeper impact and to bring about transformation in the lives of women and men in the Indian society. Leading proponents of the movement recognise that it is facing stagnation. There are number of blocks both within and without that hamper the healthy growth of these movements.

Hurdles from within

1. Some of these movements spend too much of energy into lobbying and simply resisting individual atrocities. There is not only the tendency to neglect economic issues but there is also an alienation from the issues of political power and little challenge to the social, systematic basis behind increasing atrocities.
2. Too often Indian feminists have remained caught up in the inherited theories of traditional Marxism which have seen violence only as a derivative of economic exploitation and property ownership or they have repeated the tendencies of western radical feminism which sees violence as an inherent feature of the "dialectics of sex" posing women against men.¹⁷ They have continually put forward demands for "women's participation in social production" and taken up wage and employment issues, they have never organised a collective fight on women's property rights but rather (like other women's organisations from 1975 onwards) have mobilised mainly on "reactive" issues, fighting atrocities, resisting communalism etc.
3. Women's participation in the political process has shown a steady increase, both in the elections and in their readiness to express their views on issues directly concerning their day-to-day life. But their ability to produce an impact on the political process has been negligible because of the inadequate attention paid to their political education and mobilisation by both political parties and women's organisations. The structures of parties make them male dominated and, in spite of

¹⁷ G. Omvedt, *Violence against Women*, p. 2.

outstanding exceptions most party men are not free from the general prejudices and attitudes of the society.¹⁸ Women's struggles have tended to be against development, but women have rarely been able to translate their struggles into a political platform.

4. Instead of allowing democratic spirit and leadership qualities to grow among the women who are affected, often the same old women retain their leadership position in many of the women's movements. And very often the leaders are from the so-called high classes.
5. They also recognise that the lack of a well-developed strategy is hampering the forward march of the movement.
6. Lack of clarity and commitment among the women members regarding women's liberation, the ups and downs of the problems and the role of both men and women towards this cause are some other reasons.
7. Lack of co-ordination and collaboration with other organisations, social action groups and NGOs that fight for the equality of men and women in the society are hampering the cause.
8. The autonomous women's groups politicise and make public the issue of violence against women but do not address the issue of Brahminism because many are from the upper castes.
9. Another block is lack of support and encouragement from the family and society and in particular from women themselves. And very often it so happens that women who work vigorously in these movements, lose heart and get discouraged when they do not see their labour bringing forth fruit. Hence they quit the movements and get back to their normal routine household work.

¹⁸ Gabriele Dietrich, *Women's Movement In India* (Bangalore: Breakthrough Publications, 1988), 14.

10. The problems of the women of the depressed classes, working class and lower middle class are not taken into consideration by these movements.

These are some of the obstacles that the women's movements face from within but there are also others that they face from outside.

Hurdles from outside

1. Religious fundamentalism and fanaticism do pose a serious threat to the liberation of women. Women's movements are alarmed by the influence of communal, reactionary forces on women. Fundamentalism is defined as an 'aggressive conservative movement, which suggests narrowness, bigotry, obscurantism and sectarianism.'¹⁹ The fundamentalist goes backward rather than forward and shun openness, change and growth. It wholeheartedly embraces rigidity and regression. In the hidden agenda of Hindutva there is no place for democracy and equality. In this situation, women are once again the victims of oppression and domination. They have also been mobilised for the reactionary Hindutva cause. All these reflect the sharpening of social contradictions in our society.
2. Too much interference from the part of the ruling party, especially when culprits are related to politicians and to the high officials. They do not allow the movements to take up issues and fight them out.
3. Kallet Millet, sometimes referred to as the Mao Tse-tung of suffragism studied the infinite variety of man's exploitation of woman and challenged all previous interpretations of the differences between the sexes. She argued that, be it the patriarchal society of the West or the other historical civilisations like India, the relationship between the sexes is a power structured, with the male having power and domination over the female, wielding power in every area – military,

¹⁹ Rosario Rocha, "Religious Pluralism in the Hindu Perspective," *Vidyajyothi*, 64:11 (Nov. 2000), 830.

industrial, technological, scientific, financial, political and administrative. The patriarchal society defined the role and status of the sexes on the basis of values and needs of the dominant male group. The male dominated society and male culture decree that dominance is the male temperament and subordination the women's. For women were allotted the 'domestic service and attendance on children', and for men, the rest of human achievement. The limited role allotted to women around procreation 'tends to arrest her at the level of biological experience.'²⁰

4. The planners of national economy have failed to acknowledge, respect and register women's economic activities and contributions. The whole domain of women's labour virtually remains as an invisible and unsung economic sector.
5. The patriarchal oppression and exploitation of women, their economic dependence and subordination is linked to the semi-feudal relations that dominate vast areas of the country, holding back the productive growth of our economy, today vehemently injecting the consumeristic culture into our social life. The capitalists, the feudalists and the ruling classes of India are defenders and upholders of patriarchal, caste based social relations and feudal ideology, without which they cannot keep their hold over the economy. The state apparatus has been their main instrument for a twin pronged strategy, of ideological propaganda and coercion to maintain this system. Hence the general social contradictions and those specifically concerning women's oppression are intertwined and the struggle for women's liberation is part of the broader struggle against imperialism and its supporting structures.

Towards a New Thrust

By the arrival of globalisation women are faced with new types of oppression and violence. Even today Indian women lack basic democratic rights in the society. If hunger had a face, it would

²⁰ Kallet Millet, *Sexual Politics* (New York: Doubleday, 1970).

be of a woman as seven out of 10 in the world's poor are women with some 550 million women living below the poverty line, says World Food Programme (WFP).²¹ Malnutrition is killing several thousands of females every year in the country causing an imbalance in the male and female sex ratio. This has been revealed in a recent study conducted by the World Food Programme. According to the census, there are 927 females presently for every 1000 males, but this ratio is becoming skewed as a result of the number of females going down.²² The birth of female is being controlled by selective abortion. This is accomplished according to the results of factual sex identification through the examination by amniocentesis. Though such examinations are defined as unlawful, they are being carried out quietly and in some places openly too. The present century sees a mushrooming of *Sex Determining Clinics* that encourage the urban couple to identify the sex of the foetus. New types of oppression and violence are ever on the increase in today's society. Hence women's movements in India need to give a new thrust in its approach and functioning.

(According to Dr. M.S. Swaminathan, the renowned agricultural scientist, in many hill and remote areas of developing countries such as the Himalayan region, agriculture is largely in the hands of women, since men tend to go to towns and cities in search of salaried jobs which can augment family income. Therefore, without the total intellectual and physical participation of women, it will not be possible to popularise alternative systems of land management of shifting cultivation, arresting gene and soil erosion and promoting the care of the soil and the health of economic plants and farm animals. Scientific and technological empowerment of rural women alone can usher in prosperity to them as well as to the rural society.²³

If we look historically at the social movements of India, the most powerful pro-women themes and actions have come not so much from the ranks of the nationalist movement or upper-caste

²¹ For further details, cf. *The Economic Times*, March 3, 2000.

²² For further details, cf. *The Asian Age*, March 3, 2000.

²³ As cited by M. Giri, "Powerfully Empowered," 4.

moderate social reformers as from those of the radical anti-caste leaders who often found themselves in confrontation with nationalism in the non-Brahmin and Dalit movements – men like Jyotiba Phule, B.R. Ambedkar, E.V. Ramaswami “Periyar”.²⁴

For example, Phule not only founded one of the first schools for girls in India (in 1884 in Pune), but also when he and his wife, Savitribai, had no children he resisted intense social pressure in refusing to take a second wife, and instead adopted a baby born to a Brahmin widow (the existence of such babies being a much discussed sign of the “atrocities” of that period).²⁵ His earliest writings on women linked their oppression with that of *sudras* and *adi-sudras* (*sudras* are untouchables) by the Brahmin dominated caste groups. He also launched a fierce condemnation of male domination both in Brahmin and non-Brahmin families where women were helpless victims of *pativrata* while their husbands could marry or engage in as many sexual relationships as they wished. Hence there is need for a social revolution and change of value system wherein the patriarchal value systems are made redundant and thrown into the fire. So it is suggested:

- Women’s movements need to come heavily on these value systems which are the by-products of patriarchy and attack the traditional ideology that justifies the differences in the role and temperament as arising out of inherent biological differences between the male and female.
- Women’s movements need to pay more attention to build the capacity of the disadvantaged women in order that they are enabled to cross all social and economic barriers, and thereby facilitate their full development into empowered citizens. Unless the age-old oppressive value system and the social structure that uphold oppression are shattered and the social institutions are transformed, there is no possibility of equality, between the sexes and liberation of both women and men.

²⁴ G. Omvedt, *Violence against Women*, 16.

²⁵ G. Omvedt, *Violence against Women*, 17.

- There is a need to create or reorient democratic, economic and social process and institutions to enable women to participate fully and actively in decision-making in the family community and at the local, district, state and national levels and to empower women to work together with men as equal partners and to inspire a new generation of women and men work together for equality, sustainable development and communal harmony.
- There is an urgency today to promote and ensure the human rights of women at all stages of their life and to bring about a change in the attitudes of and in the value judgements by, the judicial officials, the police, so that they become protectors and not destroyers.
- Women movements also need to echo to promote legal and social reforms which include the right to equal education, equal inheritance rights, legal equality in marriage, equal rights in working, access to public position, equal political rights principle of equal pay, regulation on female worker's protection and rationalisation of house hold work etc.
- Women need to socially redefine the patriarchal norms and remove the gender bias and strengthen their movements, organisations and other committed NGOs, so that they can do this work successfully.
- In order to make women's role meaningful in the Panchayat Raj, we should have a training module for men and for other family members to share the household chores so that a woman could really become an effective instrument of change in society.

Above all, women's movements in India should challenge and unfasten the age old myths, theories, stereotyped ideas and conventional methods of action which keep women under subjugation such as the myth of feminine and masculine, myth of motherhood, myth of marriage and myth of development.

Myth of Feminine and Masculine

The society is in need of a sexual revolution – a revolution that aims at ending the system of patriarchy with its ideology of male sexual power and supremacy and the traditional sexual inhibitions and taboos. The male definitions of 'feminine' and

'masculine' need to be uprooted, for these concepts are unrealistically defined. The feminine is characterised as passive and the masculine as dominant, encouraging male violence against women as virile. The tenderness and consideration are associated with the female, and intelligence and efficiency with male. Women are characterised as physically weak and men full of physical strength and prowess. They need to challenge patriarchy in all its forms, in all its ramifications, at all levels of life.

Myth of Motherhood

The conservatives' attempt to create a 'myth of motherhood' that invests in mother's rearing role a thoroughly disproportionate share of the duties and excludes much of father's contribution. It is being proved today that mother's absence is not necessarily detrimental to the child's development and that both men and women should equally share the child-rearing work. Changing the relationship between husband and wife should be favoured – a change from institutionalised patriarchalism to equality companionship.

Myth of Marriage

The very existence of the male invented marriage to subjugate women and the relationship between the sexes in the family is power-structured. The males have domination over women and wield every avenue of power in their hands. While men have pushed women to the private sphere to do domestic service and child rearing, they have allotted for themselves the public spheres of life such as politics and economy. The feminine has been wrongly characterised as physically and morally weak. This should be erased from the minds of both men and women.

Myth of Development

Women, as victims of the violence of patriarchal forms of development, need to rise against it to protect nature and preserve their survival and sustenance. They need to challenge the Western concept of nature as an object of exploitation and protect her as Prikiriti, the living force that supports life.

Conclusion

Empowering men towards gender justice and to become the agents of change of society is the need of the time. The women

movements must dedicate at least a decade to change the attitudes among men and in communities and societies.

"In the new millennium, it will truly be no longer a man's world or even that of mankind. Instead, it could be a world of people, humanity, human beings, humankind, human species, men and women, homo sapiens, one, the public, society, the self, human nature" says Lalita Panicker in her article on "No sexism, Please, We're Humankind."²⁶ And this is what the feminist movements aim at. In the words of Gail Omvedt, "The feminist movement has always stressed that the liberation struggle is not simply one of mobilising an army to capture State power and establish the socialist society, but of changing relations between human beings here and now, changing the very methods and process of action. Only this is not simply a process of changing individuals as much as a transformation of the collective movements against exploitation themselves."²⁷

²⁶ Cf. *Documentation on Women, Children and Human Rights*, April-June 1999, p. 31.

²⁷ G. Omvedt, *Violence against Women*, 42.