

early 20th centuries as one mainly concerned with equal rights for women. Although control over one's body and fertility is considered one of the key demands of feminism, there was no demand for contraception in India because there was no material basis for it, though some individuals might have propagated it. Therefore, even the definition of feminism changes with what is historically possible.

Our definition of socialist feminism applies to the present period and cannot be used for earlier periods. Our feminist tradition and history give us a sense of strength and continuity, so that feminism can also be used generally to describe different movements which took up the rights and issues of women. If we go into history, we will

see women activists, their lives, their travelling and networking have a familiar ring. Or there are actions, so bold and daring for their time that we might want to call them feminist. What is important, however, is that definite ideological shifts were made from time to time. Today we emphasise the struggle against patriarchy and capitalism; this does not mean that all groups are waging anti-patriarchal/capitalist struggles but that there is a movement towards it. In Pakistan, women are campaigning against their personal laws and going to vote against the wishes of their men. There is a consistent effort in the development of feminist theory towards an international perspective which takes into account the processes of imperialism.

*Note: This article and the following one were taken from the nine day workshop attended by 23 women from Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka in 1989. The two reports were a result of the debates on critical issues being faced by women in South Asia. It focuses on current trends in feminism and the women's movement.* ☐

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*Source: Pressing Against the Boundaries, Draft Report of an FAO-FFHC/AD South Asian Workshop on Women and Development, pp. 12-14. Freedom from Hunger Campaign/Action for Development F.A.O., 55 Max Mueller Marg, New Delhi - 110 003, India.*

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# Feminism, Women's Movements and Mass Movements

by Gail Omvedt

**I**n taking "mass movements" and "autonomous women's groups" as the two main forms in which women's action can be seen, these can be viewed as almost polar opposites. Further, feminists whose main experience was in small groups and have gone through the process of working with Left parties and organizations, have often seen mass movements as inherently inimical to the values of feminism.

In conventional terms, it has to be said that, at the very least, mass movements seem to work on a different level than the new "feminist movement" - if we have the image that most



in South Asia do, of mass movements as strikes, rallies, demonstrations in the streets, roads or government offices, involving thousands or hundreds of thousands. Judging by this crite-

riion, the women's movement would indeed seem to be of secondary status, for it is clear that women do not come out in huge numbers in response to calls by feminist leaders; rather there is much more massive and enthusiastic participation by women themselves in mobilisation by class or caste-based organizations or those taking up the nationality question. Mobilisation even on clearly reactionary appeals to religious identities has also outstripped that by women's organisations, while even on "women's issues" mass calls seem to have to be done on the fronts with more "general issue" mass organisations or party wings. This seems

to yield a general situation that while women's oppression is now almost universally admitted and the new women's movement has gained a good deal of social prestige, feminist organisations and activists seem to have very little "movement power"

As a result, the relationship of feminist activists and mass movements or party leaders may be a tense one. On the one hand, leaders of party and mass organisations feel free to dismiss the women's movement and feminist activists as insignificant and ineffective - when they do not go farther and describe them as the bearers of an alien "bourgeois" ideology floating on the wings of foreign funding. On the other, some feminists reject mass movements as wholesale, viewing leadership and structure themselves as too patriarchal and anti-democratic to be of use on women's issues. "Mass mobilisation" (in response to a call given by a leader or a large organisation) is posed against "self-mobilisation" (undertaken by a small group on its own initiative); "collectivity/democracy" is posed against "hierarchy/bureaucracy", and parties, organisations and mass leaders are accused of "using women" for their other priorities.

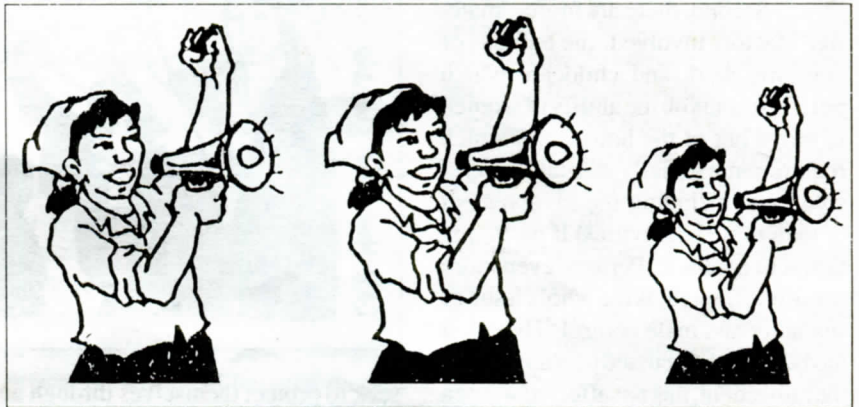
Both responses seem inadequate, it has been argued. The fact is that in spite of the seeming lack of "mass" mobilisation by purely women on women's issues, the women's movement is still felt to be a force in contemporary South Asian societies; feminism continues to be a spectre haunting both conservatives and the traditional Left. How can we understand this? In fact it is argued that to do so we have to transcend the rigid polarisations of autonomous collectives/controlled mass movements; mass mobilisation/self-mobilisation; women's issues/general issues.

There are several points that

emerge when looking at the actual processes of mass movements. We could begin by questioning the very definition/conceptualization of "mass movements" - which need not simply mean a one-time huge mobilisation at the call of a leader or organisation, but also, for instance, large-scale coordinated actions held in widely dispersed places over a large geographical area, organised under the auspices of fronts including quite diverse organisations,

issues", and women's involvement in movements taking up such issues expresses their very basic concerns.

What about the objection that the "actually existing mass movements" have often simply used women as participants and then moved towards restoration of patriarchal control when the need has passed? While we do see, historically and today, such processes taking place, it is also connected with the fact that all kinds of



and with local initiative providing the main infrastructure. "Mass movements" might also mean innumerable local actions guided by a common understanding. It should also not be forgotten that the one-time "big" rally or demonstration is invariably preceded by numerous "small" meetings, discussions, camps, training sessions. Far from "mass mobilisation" being a contrast to "self-mobilisation", it seems to presuppose it, in the sense that involvement always expresses some inherent needs, and in the process, people leave their stamp on both leaders and organisational structures. Similarly, it is difficult if not impossible to separate "purely women's issues" from others: in a very real sense imperialism, environmental degradation, the lack of basic needs such as water and housing, caste oppression, etc. are also "women's

control - imperialist, capitalist, brahmanic - tend to get reasserted, often in new forms, once the course of a movement or revolt has been run. Further, the tendency to evaluate a mass organisation or mass campaign in terms of whether the party or individual leading is "using women" is in fact analysing the movement in terms of the subjective intentions of leadership; put more polemically, it is to look at the movement through male eyes. Instead of looking at the masses of women as if they were simply helpless sheep herded into a pen, it is important to understand their reasons for joining the agitation and to ask the question: what kinds of long-term and short-term openings does this provide for a mass feminism move forward?

While these become quite complex issues, we can make a beginning

in dealing with them by noting the obstacles to increasing women's participation in mass movements. There is first the fact that any massive and sustained participation by women in socio-political movements involves a challenge to the "public/private" distinction so crucial to almost all structures of patriarchy. Women have to break the traditional notion that "a woman's place is in the home" when they do participate, particularly when they move to decision-making and leadership levels.

Second, there are more "material" factors involved: the burdens of domestic work and childcare which put constraints on the ability of women to move out of the house, and which require some socially institutionalised solutions (including the involvement of men in such activities) if participation is to continue. Perhaps even more sensitive, though, is the whole issue of sexuality and male control. Though it has been little discussed publicly within the movement, this has affected women in all kinds of mass movements. Moving out of the house and coming into interaction with the men inevitably raises doubts about the woman's "chastity" and loyalty. In fact there is more than simple suspicion at stake here: sexual or other personal needs do not get expressed in the formation of new relationships in the process of movement involvement. Sexual slandering and in some cases more direct physical suppression are used against women in almost every form of public life.

There have been different ways of dealing with this issue. More traditionally, organisational assurances that "our women are chaste" or that the organisation provides them with protection are used - this is a correlate of the special care that women activists in mass movements often get, but it involves at least some reaffirmation of the traditional ideal woman, and as-

suming the need for special protection implies the weakness of women and provides justification for their downgrading by male activists. Another strategy would be the activating of a separate women's wing which may, by making an organisational separation between male and female activists - be used to avoid some of the problems of this type. Or, women in public life may

tion. It is a striking fact that in the last decade in India, at least, some of the most fundamental issues striking at the heart of patriarchy seem to have been raised by mass organisations.

...Can we speak of a new "epoch of feminism" which holds the promise not only of confronting patriarchy in fundamental ways but also of transforming -- or being a central part



seek to protect themselves through an inversion of the ideal that the "personal is political", asserting their right to have their private lives kept out of public purview. (This in fact is the most challenging to traditional patriarchal evaluations of the character of women.)

But the fact is, that the dynamics of women's mass participation brings them into confrontation with various aspects of patriarchal control and thus, as noted further, must either lead to moving further or to a slackening of participation itself.

"Moving further" involves several things. One is the degree to which mass organisations themselves take up what we may call "women-specific" issues. This has been happening increasingly and it is linked to the process in which the women's movement as a whole is moving towards taking up more and more fundamental issues of women's exploita-

of the process of transforming -- socialist and liberation movements themselves?

Can the traditions and experiences of South Asian feminism also be a vital resource in other parts of the world?

Can the gloom which sometimes settles on us, the feeling of exhaustion and wasted effort, of having to confront too many personal level obstacles and powerful political reactionary forces be changed into some confidence in our own power to face the future? ☾

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*Source: Excerpt from Pressing Against the Boundaries, pp. 20-23. Draft Report of an FAO-FFHC/AD South Asian Workshop on Women and Development, pp. 20-23. Freedom from Hunger Campaign/Action for Development F.A.O., 55 Max Mueller Marg, New Delhi - 110 003, India..*