

## The Problematique of South-South

By Devaki Jain

**I**t is important to raise the question of South-South within the current debate on diversity/specificity, intersectionality, multiple identities—and within the quest for equity and social justice. Such a discussion could highlight the critical issues facing the international women's movement.

It might be worthwhile to recall some of the debates that took place within Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN) at the time of its founding in 1984, and during its first post-Nairobi meeting in Rio in September-October 1985. DAWN is a network of women scholars and activists from the economic South who engage in feminist research and analysis of the global environment, and are committed to working for economic justice, gender justice and democracy. DAWN works globally and regionally in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Latin America and the Pacific on the themes of the political economy of globalisation; political restructuring and social transformation; and sexual and reproductive health and rights, in partnership with other global non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and networks.

The premise for a DAWN was the argument that women living in developing countries (as differentiated from women from developing countries living in developed countries) need to contextualise their perspective on the efforts being made at the global level, including by the United Nations (UN), on gendering development. Such act of location seemed important because it drew attention to the broader political, social, cultural and economic environment.

Crucial to understanding women's situation, specifically to analysing its roots and links to development impulses, and to mapping the road ahead, is the ability to locate the journey in the overall context. It was through such reasoning that the first meeting of persons that formed the core of the DAWN group came to flag what they considered at the time the major concerns stemming from the geopolitics of their particular locations. For example, for Latin America, the major concern was the debt crisis (today this is a concern of all nations in the developing world), for Africa, the food crisis; for the Pacific, militarisation; and for South Asia, acute poverty.

At the DAWN meeting in Rio, the issue of inclusion—the coming to terms that there is a South in the North, that there are indigenous people and people of colour who feel an identity with women from the Third World, and that there are women from the geographical South living in the North but speaking as people of the South—was tackled. When the larger group argued that the spirit should be one of inclusion, and not exclusion, we lost one of our founding members, Marie Angelique Savane, who is also one of the founders of Association of African Women for Research and Development or AAWORD (which was one of the pillars that propped the beginnings of DAWN). Savane found the decision a betrayal of the initial ideology or purpose for which DAWN was created.

A similar perception emerged during the attempts at analysis by the members of the South Commission between 1987 and 1990.<sup>1</sup> Those members of the Commission who lived in countries of the South were often irritated and impatient, if not openly in conflict, with those origi-



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nally from the South but were already living in Northern countries. Said one of those living in the South to another who lived in London, “You pick up your news from *The London Times* (or from *The New York Times*) and your perception of both our problems and of global ‘leadership,’ intellectual and economic, is from *The London Times* or *The New York Times*. We do not even know the names of the people that you mention as powerful and important, because they are senators or ministers on the U.S. or British cabinet. You have to live in our countries and read our newspapers and our daily debates, and travel on our roads to be able to highlight a view from the South.”

These stories are told and retold mainly to reveal that the debate is an old one that gets more complex and interesting because in the affirmation of diversity, women of colour and women of other ethnic identities find the need

to differentiate. There have been many definitions of the South—that South is not a “place” but a set of characteristics; that what defines the boundaries are social exclusion, poverty, discrimination and oppression, not location.

### Specific Characteristics

One of the other reasons—in terms of visually striking features or characteristics of South countries—that make a compelling argument for identity based on geographical location within the South, and multiple identities within that geographical location, whether these are derived from race, caste, class or religion—is the type of poverty one suffers, and the support systems for the poor. Amartya Sen has shown in more than one paper that there can be acute poverty—and disparities—even in advanced political economies. He illustrates this by presenting poverty indicators of Afro-Americans in Chicago, next to indicators in Bangladesh, and revealing their close-

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ness.<sup>2</sup> In another article, he shows that the child-sex ratio, one of the best indicators of female oppression, is the same in one diagonally split region of India—the North and Southeast of India, as in Europe.<sup>3</sup> This begs the question that because the child-sex ratio of this part of India is the same as in Europe, then this is a good child-sex ratio?

Such illustrations of similarity, however, conceal that the poor in Chicago, whose outcome indicators are similar to the poor in Bangladesh, still have a social-security floor, social insurance, or some basic social welfare entitlements. The poor in Bangladesh, on the other hand, could easily die of starvation, lack of clean water, or various forms of pestilence and disease, as they have in the past and continue to do so. In other words, unprotected death is a real, proximate and completely tangible phenomena among the poor in most of the poor countries, but not so for the poor in the advanced countries.<sup>4</sup>

Except for countries such as Malaysia and Singapore, and perhaps pockets of South Africa and Latin America, most of the countries in South Asia and Africa do not have regular power

or water supply, sanitation or drainage, not only in the rural areas, but even in their cities. There is an inadequacy of infrastructure and basic amenities.

Thus, inequality and poverty, which admittedly exist everywhere, take a different characteristic in the South. The inequality in South countries has a kind of vividness, cruelty and deprivation that offers no reprieve—it has no cushion, no safety net, no umbrella. In turn, this characteristic leads not only to forms of political and cultural difference, but also antagonisms, survival strategies that are even self-destructive, political and social instabilities, and further fragmentation that allows the use of identity as a means to stake some claims in parched territory. These realities and the politics that emerge from them make the South-South an exclusive identity crucial to overpowering both external and internal pressure.

Another affirmation of diversity comes from those who propose that feminism was born in many cultures in many ways, and cannot be considered a prerogative of the Anglo-Saxon intellectual heritage. Thus, there is description of many indigenous feminisms as well as of terms such as “local” feminisms.<sup>5</sup> There are also demands for accommodating tradition and culture, in the Human Rights Conventions, or cultural relativism.<sup>6</sup>

### **The Basis of Unity**

But whether in the midst of the affirmation of difference, in the midst of celebrating diversity, is it not as important to find unity—unity around not merely the physical difference of male and female, and therefore the lived experience of the different biological histories, but also unity of ideology? Is it not possible to suggest that feminism stands for something—say, for equality, for social justice, or to put it in reverse, for the removal of inequality, discrimination and poverty?<sup>7</sup>

This kind of reasoning could be premised on the reality that one of the major experiences of women worldwide is discrimination, even if this is within other discriminations such as racism, casteism, and religious experience.<sup>8</sup> If discrimination is the major experience and that discrimination based on gender is embedded within these discriminations, the removal of discrimination becomes a platform on which women can unite.

The universalisation of women's rights, despite their specificities based on location, especially vis-à-vis the quest for sovereignty among the less developed countries, is crucial for women as most cultures and traditions have embedded gender-derived discrimination.<sup>9</sup> Not only do the struggles for women's rights need to unite women against discrimination, but these should ally themselves with the other movements fighting racism, casteism and other forms of discrimination. This could be one minimum of feminism. But feminism assumes a definitive shape if added to it is a celebration and affirmation of the feminine experience.<sup>10</sup> If such a quest to find the core of what could be called feminism while allowing the periphery to be different is agreed upon, then one of the bases of "muting the difference" could be a common feminist objective and feminist analysis but different contexts of location and politics.

At the end of it all, sometimes clarity seems to come not so much from theory or analysis, not even from practices, but from action. In many parts of the world, poor women have given an answer to the question of unity within diversity to claim power. They have engaged in successive collective action around a single objective, which they identified as the common enemy. Once this objective has been achieved or the enemy has been attacked, they fall back to their original identity, whether they believe this is predominantly based on ethnicity, religion, class or ideology.<sup>11</sup> They have shown that it is possible to come together for a political assertion of resistance or attack without

losing their other identities. In other words, one could have multiple identities yet put forth a single identity for a single purpose.

A lesson to be drawn from poor women's actions is the importance of identifying a common purpose. The ideological imperative is defined by this purpose. An example is the the Anti-arack struggle in Andhra Pradesh, India. Arack is a locally brewed liquor that has been the bane of many women in tribal and rural areas. The poverty of the households in such areas is aggravated by the men's squandering of their earnings on this liquor. With the liquor consumption come the associated problems of wife-battering, drunken and disorderly behavior, and increased crime. Pushed to the limits, the women of the District of Nellore fought back through collective agitation. The agitation spread like wildfire, convulsing the entire state of Andhra Pradesh for three years. The women reached the pinnacle of success when they forced the Telugu Desam Government of Andhra Pradesh to declare prohibition as a state policy. Caste and religion were notable by their absence to divide the movement, as arack affected every woman's home, without discrimination. The issue itself went beyond caste and religion, for there were as many Muslim and 'backward'-class women as there were other religions and castes in the struggle.<sup>12</sup>

The September 11 attack and the America-led coalition's campaign once again reveals the dangers of a unipolar world. Such an unresisted war—where there was strong American as well as world public opinion against so much bombing of an agonised country—could not have been during the Cold War era. However absent the Eastern Bloc, the United States continues.

It should also be recalled that during the Cold War era, there was a third force, the Non-Aligned Movement, which was a collection of countries from the developing world that had

come out of colonisation, and were trying to establish an identity that is not linked either to the West or the East. The Non-Aligned Movement was able to create an identity for itself and become a bridge-builder. It was, in fact, a completely South-South initiative that supported post-colonial struggles and ideologies, and gave self-confidence to newly independent countries. It produced great leaders such as Nehru, Nasser, Nkrumah, Suharto, Shariar and Tito. Today it is withered and any attempts to replace it either through the Group 77 in the United Nations or the South Summit held in Cuba in 2000 have not yielded a force that can hold back the America-led campaign against Afghanistan. The Non-Aligned Movement leaders were Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist. Their ideology was not religion-determined, but space- and history-determined. Today, the divide has become Anglo-Saxon or Eurocentric culture and an extreme form of Islamic fundamentalism as a response, vitiating the location and articulation of liberal and democratic Muslims.

There is a case for South-South Initiative, there is a case for exclusivity. There is a case for the layering of identity with the overarching layer of being South and within it, the separation based on certain vivid forms of discrimination such as discrimination based on colour or religion. But for the women's struggle to have a politically meaningful impact, such identity has also to have another overarching shell or moral imperative, that is, feminism that crosses all the bounds of geopolitics and diversities. ♪

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Challenge to the South, Report of the South Commission, Oxford University Press, 1990.

<sup>2</sup>Amartya Sen, "Gender and Cooperative Conflict,"

in *Persistent Inequalities*, ed. Irene Tinker, Oxford University Press, 1990.

<sup>3</sup>Amartya Sen, "The Economics of Life And Death," *Scientific American* (May 1993): 18.

<sup>4</sup>Amartya Sen, "Many Faces of Gender Inequality," inaugural lecture at the Radcliffe Institute at Harvard University, April 2001.

<sup>5</sup>Devaki Jain, *Through the Looking Glass of Poverty*, Cambridge: New Hall, October 2001.

<sup>6</sup>Basu Amrita, *The Challenge of Local Feminisms: Women's Movements in Global Perspective*, Boulder: Westview Press, 1995.

<sup>7</sup>See: Devaki Jain, "Democratising Culture," in *Culture, Democracy and Development in South Asia*, ed. N.N. Vohra, New Delhi: Shipra, 2001; Helen E. Longino, "Feminist Standpoint Theory and the Problems of Knowledge," *Signs* 19, no. 1 (Autumn 1993): 201-212; Barbara M. Cooper, "The Politics of Difference and Women's Associations in Niger: Of 'Prostitutes,' the Public and Politics," *Signs* 20, no. 4 (Summer 1995): 851-912; and Christine Sylvester, "African and Western Feminisms: World Travelling the Tendencies and Possibilities," *Signs* 20, no. 4 (Summer 1995): 941-969.

<sup>8</sup>See: Susan Hekman, "Truth and Method: Feminist Standpoint Theory Revisited," *Signs* 22, no. 2 (Winter 1997): 341-365; and Devaki Jain, "Minds, Bodies and Exemplars: Reflections at Beijing and Beyond," New Delhi: British Council Division, British High Commission, 1996.

<sup>9</sup>Devaki Jain, "Women And Child Rights in the Context Of Globalisation," round table on Building Bridges For Equality—Mobilizing Actions for the Human Rights of Children and Women, New York, June 2001.

<sup>10</sup>Indira Rajaraman, "Economics of Prohibition," New Delhi, 1997 (mimeographed).

<sup>11</sup>Devaki Jain, "For Women to Lead...Ideas and Experiences from Asia: A Study on Legal and Political Impediments to Gender Equality in Governance," New Delhi: National Commission For Women, 1997; and Devaki Jain, "Feminism and Feminist Expression," a panel presentation at the Asiatic Society, Bombay, October 1997.

<sup>12</sup>Devaki Jain, "Removing Discrimination and Poverty: The Importance of Exemplars," third convocation address at the University of Tirunelveli, India, October 1995; and "Reworking Gender Relations, Redefining Politics: Nellore Village Women against Arrack," based on the report from Anveshi, *Hyderabad Economic and Political Weekly*, 16-23 January 1993.