Social Movements, Feminist Movements and the State: A Regional Perspective

By Sunila Abeysekera

Introduction

The task of defining a regional perspective on such wide-ranging matters as social movements, feminist movements and the State is challenging. First, it is necessary to address the diversity of South Asia, as well as the specificities of the social movements in the region. At the same time, it is also imperative to address the issue of 'the State,' particularly the complexities of the contemporary post-colonial State in South Asia, with the understanding that the concept itself is constantly being refashioned by political and social scientists, and by activists and practitioners, in the face of the contemporary processes of social transformation.

Social movements are processes of constant change and transformation. Despite their ever-changing nature, they have enabled the development of wide-ranging alliances that have led to tremendous social, political and economic change. Through women's movements, women have built alliances and coalitions across the divides of class, race, language, ethnicity and other diverse identities, and have engaged in collective action that has changed policies and decision-making structures. A critical part of this activism has addressed the subordination of women. Understanding the experience—both action and analysis—that makes this type of collaborative work among women possible, therefore, is critical to developing women's participation in political processes.

Social movements are generally described as conscious, collective activities to promote social change, representing a protest against the established power structure and dominant norms and values. A main resource of such movements is the commitment and active—often,

unpaid—participation of its members or activists. Referring to the phenomenon that some academics and activists now call the 'new social movements,' Alberto Melucci calls attention to the 'invisibility' of those networks that help develop a sense of common interest, and facilitate collaborative work and collective action (Keane and Mier, 1989). According to him, contemporary social movements are no longer guided by the sense that they are completing a universal plan. Their agenda is not shaped by long-term or fixed goals, and the mobilisation they undertake is rooted in specific times and places. Thus, he refers to the actors in these movements as 'nomads,' dwelling entirely in the present. Leslie J. Calman claims that such movements are more easily able to embrace a diversity of ideological beliefs and choice of tactics because they do not adhere to one single, strict ideology, or demand that participants do the same (Calman, 1989). Melucci expands on the new social movements by identifying four key features that characterise them: treating information (both factual information and

symbolic resources) as a resource; acting in the present; accepting the journey (the process) to be as important as the destination (the result); and striving for a complementarity between private life and public commitment.

Using these insights to describe and analyse women's movements in South Asia in the late 1990s could, therefore, provide us with some understanding of the processes that shape women's activism, as we move into a new century and a new millennium.

Feminist movements, or groups of women mobilising for change, have been constant, yet ever-changing, features of modern history. Actions organised by feminist movements in the early part of the century were focused at the national or regional level. By the second half of the 20th century, these movements had gathered force to become a global phenomenon. While differences in approach and analysis had to be accounted for, nevertheless, women across the globe succeeded in building networks on critical issues and in drawing public attention, at the international level, to their demands. Most of this activity has been based on a shared understanding of the need to make real changes in the situation of women. Those movements that have worked together in protest against violence against women, in favour of the recognition of women's reproductive rights, and against trafficking and other forms of exploitation of women's labour and sexuality, are amongst the best-known.

Theories of the State, of the processes of nation-State formation and of the relationship between the State and civil society are, again, many and varied. For purposes of this discussion, let me adopt the more orthodox definition of the State as a mechanism of government, and as an amalgam of institutions linked to the business of governance, such as the bureaucracy, religious and political formations, the military and other law-and-order mechanisms, legal structures and the judiciary. The State always represents the interests of one particular social group, more often than not those who are superior in number, or those with economic and/or political influence. The State also espouses an ideology that safeguards the base of those who have power. This is why theories and strategies of 'overthrowing' the State have formed the backbone of revolutionary and radical political thought in this century.

Feminists argue that the modern nation-State is founded on patriarchal attitudes and norms of behaviour that have led to the exclusion of women from the arenas of power. Carol Pateman has described the 'social contract' between the State and the citizen that is the principal foundation of liberal democratic structures as a 'sexual' contract, one that is based on the exclusion and the subordination of women (Pateman, 1988).

In the modern context, the process of globalisation also impinges on the authority of the State, especially in terms of an individual State's ability to define economic policy or cushion its people from the onslaught of globalisation and its appurtenances like satellite television, for example. As the capacity of the individual State to 'reign' over its people shrinks, the citizens of these States experience economic hardship, social upheaval and ideological confusion. This is perhaps one of the reasons why issues of sovereignty have never been as much the cause of massacres and wars as they are today.

Historical Perspective of South Asia

A key feature of the history of the South Asian subcontinent in the past century has been the transition from colonial to post-colonial States, and from monarchy to democracy, through a process of widespread political and social upheaval. South Asia contains a large proportion of the world's population, as well as some of its most marginalised, illiterate, unhealthy and pauperised people. The subcontinent seethes with political activity and is home to what some scholars have described as the world's most vibrant democracies. Traditional leftwing political parties have exercised a fair degree of political power in the region, with Sri Lanka's Finance Minister in the 1960s being an avowed Trotskyist, and the provincial governments of West Bengal and Kerala in India being traditionally held by communist and leftwing parties.

The shared history of the subcontinent is a critical feature that shapes the lives of all South Asian people. South Asia is home to the ancient Indus Valley civilisation and several other great empires and monarchies. It is the birthplace of two of the world's most popular religions, Buddhism and Hinduism, and home to literally thousands of philosophies. The people of the subcontinent speak over a hundred languages, and worship a thousand gods and goddesses. Their lives are imbued with tradition and custom based on a multidimensional religious and mythical belief system. This fabulous diversity of language and culture, which stretches from the Himalayas to the Indian Ocean, is unique and has captured the imagination of many travellers and creative persons from all over the world throughout known history.

In this century, the Indian subcontinent has been divided several times until, today, it consists of seven sovereign States—India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka and the Maldivian Republic. These divisions—the partitions of Bengal and the Punjab in the British era, the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, and the creation of Bangladesh in 1971—were all initiated on the basis of differences, in languages and religion, in particular. The process of fragmentation on the basis of identity is very much a current political phenomenon in the subcontinent and will definitely shape the political future of the region.

South Asian States are all developing economies, with ongoing processes of industrialisation, and, increasingly, adaptation to new technologies. The impact of the neoliberal economic policies adopted by the international financial institutions have led to growth in some areas of the South Asian economies, while other areas face ruination. The fact that much of the population of South Asia remains dependent on agriculture for their survival constitutes a major challenge within these changing economic frameworks.

The South Asian States are all members of a number of regional and international bodies such as the United Nations (UN) and the Economic and Social Council for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP). In 1985, they came together as the South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation (SAARC). The States of South Asia are also signatories to many of the treaties and covenants established by these bodies.

Social Movements in South Asia

Through the entire history of the subcontinent, there have been movements of certain groups or sectors of people seeking redress for grievances, or justice for a wrong that has been done them. Buddhism, which was a challenge to the caste-bound Brahminical society of the time, is one. But I will restrict myself to an overview of the broad movements for social reform and political self-rule that emerged in the Indian subcontinent during the late British period.

The processes of social transformation taking place in India during the late 19th century were rooted in an internal dynamism for change, as well as influenced by external factors such as European liberalism. Thus, there were various measures taken to educate some proportion of the 'native' population and draw them into the lower levels of the colonial administrative structure. In various parts of the subcontinent, there were movements against landlords and feudal social formations—for example, in Telengana—which were spearheaded by leftwing political parties that were active in the area at the time. Movements against the caste system and against the labelling of certain social sectors as 'untouchable' were strong, especially in the south of India. In erstwhile Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) and some parts of India, the leftwing-inspired trade union movement was also strong.

Issues that were raised with regard to the status of women by these movements for social reform were of specific relevance to the upper caste communities—such as widow remarriage, *purdah* or the seclusion of women, child marriage, and *sati* or widow burning. The desire of these 'reformers' to transform India into a 'modern' society coalesced with the colonial agenda of preparing young South Asian women to be suitable wives for a new generation of liberal, Western-educated South Asian men.

Women were actively involved in some of the campaigns launched by social reformers for girls' education. They fought against forms of seclusion and discrimination against women such as child marriage. The struggles to enable women to work outside the home and to win the right to vote were other critical arenas for the women in this period.

Just as the men in the nationalist movement represented the elite from different religious and regional communities, so did the women. In spite of the divisive nature of the nationalist movement, as Shaheeda Lateef says, one of the noteworthy features of the Indian women's movement was the cooperation and unity between women of different communities on issues specific to women, despite, on the other hand, the unbridgeable political differences that separated the men of these communities (Lateef, 1990:88).

The immediate post-independence years on the subcontinent were ones in which the main preoccupation was, in India and Pakistan, dealing with the reality of partition and independence. Some male leaders of the nationalist movements moved into positions of political power within the newly independent States of India, Pakistan and Ceylon. A handful of women from elite families became members of the State legislative bodies. Consolidating their hold on the economy and creating a political system within which the divisions brought about by the very nature of the nationalist movement could be bridged were key preoccupations of the leadership of the time.

During this time, the women in northern India and East and West Pakistan tried to cope with the social dislocation and horror of partition, described by Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin as "a gendered narrative of displacement and dispossession, of large-scale and widespread communal violence, and of the realignment of family, community and national identities" (Menon and Bhasin, 1998:9).

There were many expectations that the new States would respond positively to the demands of their citizens, and a great deal of public goodwill existed for the new leaders of the independent South Asian States. In analysing the women's movement and women's activism in Pakistan during this period, the Network of Women Living under Muslim Laws (WLUML) points out, "Perhaps due to the successful alliance and overlap between those leading the Pakistan movement and those advocating women's rights, women's groups in the newly created State believed, for more than two decades, that the government would automatically expand women's rights and open avenues for their participation... It was not until the Zia government (1977 to 1988) seriously threatened to rescind all women's rights that women's groups felt the need to establish an advocacy lobby for women" (Shaheed, Zia and Warraich, 1998).

The 1960s and 1970s

In the post-colonial phase of the 1960s and 1970s, the South Asian States were engaged in the consolidation of economic and social power. This was an era during which a State-planned and regulated economy prevailed in most South Asian countries.

Political upheavals throughout the region marked this era. In 1971, the subcontinent witnessed the war of liberation in East Pakistan that led to the creation of Bangladesh. There were also a series of insurgencies during this period, perhaps beginning with the mobilisation of rural poor in what is now commonly referred to as the Naxalite movement. An insurgency led by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) or the People's Liberation Front erupted at around the same time in Ceylon.

Women were involved in all these radical political movements, not only as auxiliary cadres, but, sometimes, bearing arms in the struggle. In recent times, studies have attempted to look at the situation of women within these movements, taking into consideration the difficult interaction of patriarchal attitudes and revolutionary politics (see Stree Shakti Sanghatan and Ilina Sen).

During this period, in the mainstream, South Asian women were preoccupied with consolidating their achievements in education, employment and legal status. The principle of equality became the issue around which much awareness-raising took place, and formed the basis for the mobilisation of women in various struggles for legal reform.

Women were also active in several mass mobilisations during this period in India. Of them, the most vibrant and inclusive is perhaps the Anti-Price Rise Movement centred in Bombay in the early 1970s. This action was led by the Joint Women's Front, comprising women from leftwing political parties, as well as women from a wide range of neighbourhood groups and community organisations. Over 20,000 women participated in some of the larger demonstrations of the movement, which ground to a halt only when a state of emergency was declared and the leaders of the movement arrested.

The development of what some academics call the 'second wave' of feminism in Western Europe in the late 1960s had its own resonance in South Asia. The development of 'women's studies' as an academic discipline, and the holding of a number of national, regional and international seminars and conferences on women's issues created an environment in which interaction between diverse women became possible. Issues such as women's incorporation into export-oriented industrialisation, the undervaluing of domestic work, violence against women, and the criminalisation of abortion were shared concerns, which led to a proliferation of research and investigation into women's issues in South Asia.

In the wake of the first Women's Conference in Mexico in 1975, which exposed alarming inequalities and injustices to women worldwide, the concept of 'integrating women in development' emerged as the main thrust of change. This led to the prioritisation of women's economic needs and the formulation of programmes for self-employment, skills training, and savings and credit. National governments subsequently created mechanisms to promote the advancement of women, putting in place institutions such as women's ministries and bureaus. In Pakistan, in 1975, a National Commission on Women was appointed, which carried out a broad survey on the situation of women. A women's bureau was established in Sri Lanka in 1977.

During this period emerged a range of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), Community-Based Organisations (CBOs) and People's Organisations (POs) working for the advancement of women in the region. There was an influx of foreign funding from both bilateral and non-State donor agencies for the establishment of community-based and constituency-based 'non-political' initiatives for development and social change, with a special focus on women.

The South Asian States also ratified the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Sri Lanka was the first of the South Asian States to ratify the convention, without reservations. Although India, Pakistan and Bangladesh eventually also ratified it, their reservations against critical articles of the convention that address the issue of equality and non-discrimination render this ineffective in those countries. Nepal is the only South Asian country that ratified the convention on the basis that all its articles would pass into national law automatically and would not require separate and specific legislation in order to become a part of the national legal structure.

The 1980s and the 1990s

In these two decades, the full impact of globalisation of the economy and of communication became obvious in the South Asian region. Foreign investment flowed in, creating Free Trade Zones and other exploitative forms of employment. The 'informal sector,' where workers are most unprotected and which employs the largest number of women, expanded. Hundreds of thousands of poor women from urban and rural communities headed for West Asia from Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Pakistan, in particular, to work as domestic help. Forces of conservatism became prominent in religious and cultural life and gave new energy to an image of woman as the bearer of the tradition and honour of the community.

The level of social differentiation on the basis of access to resources, power and also difference heightened during this period in South Asia. There were many instances of social mobilisation based on ethnicity, race and religion,

> All over the subcontinent, women who reached certain levels of attainment, in terms of education and employment, have had to struggle hard to break through the barriers that impede their advancement, and working-class women have fought for the rights to equal remuneration for equal work, to paid maternity leave and benefits, and to participation in trade union activity on equal terms with men.

which resulted in massacres and bloodbaths that left the subcontinent in shock. Among the worst examples that come to mind are the anti-Tamil riots in Sri Lanka in 1983, the anti-Sikh riots following Indian prime minister Indira Gandhi's assassination in 1984, and the communal riots following the demolition of the Babri Masjid mosque in India in 1992. At the same time, there were positive moments of social mobilisation—for example, the campaigns in Pakistan during the first elections after Zia-ul-Haq, the pro-democracy movement in Nepal and the evolution of an Indo-Pak People's Forum for Peace. There is evidence of the active participation of women on both sides as participants in fundamentalist and anti-democratic groups, as well as critical actors in various movements for peace, democracy and respect for human rights.

The Present Context

If one takes a sweeping look at the history of the subcontinent in the 50 years since independence, it becomes clear that religious, linguistic, regional, cultural and ethnic differences have continued to play a critical role in both social formation and fragmentation. From the bloody violence of the 1947 partition to the civil war in Sri Lanka in 1997, South Asian communities have fought and died defending their identities. As the structures of governance grew more authoritarian and repressive in response to this turbulence, the societies became heavily militarised, and violence against women and members of minority communities increased. In the economic arena, South Asian countries moved from protectionist eras which emphasised the development of national industries and investments, to the 'open economy,' which is part of the neoliberal economic strategy espoused by global financial institutions.

In the early years after independence, different South Asian governments created different systems of 'reservations' or 'quotas' as a form of affirmative action in order to enable women and members of minority communities, including those of the so-called scheduled castes, to gain access to higher education and State-sector employment. During this period, the hope that the democratic structures of the State and governance would provide space and opportunity for all the marginalised and disadvantaged social sectors that had joined the struggle for independence was pervasive. However, the inability of the States to accommodate the different demands of various social groups and categories has led to much frustration, which has, over the years, expressed itself in sometimes peaceful, and sometimes violent, ways.

Although the governments of post-colonial South Asia have tried to build into their constitutions and legal frameworks different mechanisms and safeguards that would protect the rights of minority communities and disadvantaged social groups, these measures have been, for the most part, ineffective. Within this context, women, and members of religious, linguistic, ethnic and caste groups facing systemic and systematic discrimination, members of tribal and indigenous communities, and people living with HIV/ AIDS emerged as vibrant members of the 'new social movements' that form a part of civil society in the South Asian region.

Division based on religion is a major cause of conflict in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. In India, although the principle of secularism remains enshrined in the constitution, it has been heavily eroded by the inability of society and the State to withstand different waves of communalism and religious fundamentalism. In Bangladesh, the secular principle was abandoned via constitutional changes in 1988, while in Pakistan, the Islamic principles on which the State was founded in 1947 have been re-interpreted in ever more conservative forms. In Sri Lanka, the conflict is related to ethnic identities, as in Bhutan. In the northeast of India and in the hill tracts of Bangladesh, conflict is related to tribal identities. In Kashmir, it is an inter-State conflict between India and Pakistan. Yet, the eruption of these conflicts in all their diversity is a reflection of the inability of the post-colonial South Asian States to develop a democratic framework of governance that would treat all citizens with equal respect and that would accommodate difference with dignity.

The processes of development have slowly improved the living conditions and status of some sections of the population of the subcontinent over the years. Yet, in terms of access to education and health services, or to basic amenities

such as potable water and electricity, much of rural South Asia remains at a disadvantage, even today. According to the World Development Report (WDR) for 1998, 18% of South Asians live without access to clean water, while 64% lack access to proper sanitation.

The WDR has also designed two sets of indicators for measuring women's status. One is the Gender Development Indicator (GDI), computed on the basis of women's life expectancy, adult literacy, educational attainment and income; and the other is the Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM), computed on the basis of women's representation in parliament, in administrative and managerial positions, and in professional and technical positions.

Comparisons of the two give an interesting picture of the situation of women in South Asia in the late 1990s. According to the GDI ranking, Sri Lanka rates highest, with a score of 70. Following Sri Lanka are the Maldives (77), India (128), Pakistan (131), Bangladesh (140), Bhutan (147) and Nepal (148). The rankings in terms of the GEM index are slightly different, however, and there are no figures available for Nepal and Bhutan. According to this ranking, the Maldives does best, with a score of 76. Next are Bangladesh (80), Sri Lanka (84), India (95) and Pakistan (100). The corelation makes it clear that health, education and income are not the only factors that can influence women's capacity to move into positions of political authority and administrative power.

In addition, the breakdown of law and order, the rise in crime and violence, corruption, and the flagrant abuse and misuse of political power for personal advantage all contribute to make South Asia one of the modern world's most violent and undemocratic regions. The comment contained in the 1999 Human Development Report that South Asia remains the least and worst governed region in the world is a pointed reminder of the complexities of the issues that South Asian women moving into the new millennium face.

Some Trends in the 'Modern' Women's Movement in South Asia

Since women's groups and organisations came to the fore as key civil society actors in the region in the 1970s and 1980s, the chief issues that have engaged women have been:
- improving women's access to income, and empowering them to take control of their own situations;
- developing legal and social networks to deal with violence against women, including the issue of trafficking in girls and women;
- processes of legal reform, with particular emphasis on laws governing 'family life';
- focusing on women's reproductive health, with emphasis on improving their health and nutrition status and enhancing their reproductive and sexual choices;
- evolving strategies to enhance women's participation in

political processes, including the establishment of quotas and reservations for women at policy and decision-making levels; and
- analysing the representation of women in mass media, and rejecting the perpetuation of gender-based stereotypes.

In addition, the consideration of diversity has led to a specific care and concern for the inclusion of women from various minority communities, including tribal and indigenous women, in the agenda for women's advancement, and a focus on peaceful political resolutions of conflicts within and between nation-States in the region.

All over the subcontinent, women who reached certain levels of attainment, in terms of education and employment, have had to struggle hard to break through the barriers that impede their advancement, and working-class women have fought for the rights to equal remuneration for equal work, to paid maternity leave and benefits, and to participation in trade union activity on equal terms with men. At the level of policy and planning, women argued for the recognition of women's work at home and in social reproduction, as well as in the 'informal' sector, as a critical contribution to national economies. Among the results of these were efforts to make national databases gender-specific, and data collecting processes, gender-sensitive.

The movement for reform of personal (family) laws in India paved the way for a range of legal and judicial activism aimed at eliminating discrimination against women in the 'private' arena—not only in India, but throughout the subcontinent. The Shahbano case, which led to legal reforms regarding marriage, divorce and maintenance for Muslim women, and the Mary Roy case, from which Syrian Christian women won the right to equal inheritance of family property, both established landmark standards for the equal status of women in the family.

In Pakistan, in the period following the overthrow of the Bhutto regime and the imposition of military rule, several women's groups became active in the struggle for democratic rights. In 1981, the sentencing of a Pakistani woman, Fehmida Allah Bux, to 100 lashes in a public flogging aroused an outcry both within and outside Pakistan. The decision of the government to impose certain Islamic principles into law, such as the Hudood Ordinance and the Law of Evidence, resulted in the formation of the Women's Action Forum (WAF) in 1983. WAF actively and publicly mobilised women to resist discriminatory laws. A public demonstration organised by WAF against the proposed Laws of Evidence in Lahore led to a brutal police attack on the demonstration, and made headline news around the world.

In Sri Lanka, in the free trade zones, women activists worked to organise the women workers, and there were several critical strikes in the early 1980s that paved the way

for a broadening of women's activism throughout the island. In the plantation and agricultural sectors, too, the efforts were focused on organising women into associations or unions that could demand better work conditions and better pay.

In Nepal, the active involvement of many women in the movement for democracy resulted in a very revolutionary achievement. One of the principles of the new Nepali constitution recognises women as a disadvantaged sector in society. Accordingly, taking steps to redress these disadvantages becomes the responsibility of the State.

Over the years, a number of regional networks that focus on women's issues have emerged. Among the ones that have had the widest regional impact are the Asia-Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD), International Women's Rights Action Watch, Asia-Pacific (IWRAW A-P) and the Network of Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML).

The Process of Political Restructuring in South Asia

The process of political restructuring that we witnessed in South Asia at the end of the century was one in which States were losing their autonomy. 'Globalisation' is the word with which we now encapsulate this process. In terms of decision-making on the economy, the contemporary South Asian State has no choice but to move in concert with the demands and commands of the international financial institutions and other donor countries. Demands to 'rationalise' the State sector have led to waves of privatisation and the unravelling of the welfare State, which had provided the poorer populations with free or heavily subsidised public services and amenities. 'Development' projects that focus purely on the economic growth rate, rather than on the totality of impact on an affected populace, displace and disorient millions more, with tribal and indigenous communities being most severely affected. The rapid growth of the 'informal' sector means that many more workers are exposed to the most brutal forms of exploitation, protected neither by the State nor by international law.

These processes have been set in motion by States that have increasingly abrogated their responsibilities toward their people. The 1990s have seen the South Asian States move towards more repressive and anti-democratic forms of governance. The embezzlement of public funds takes place at the highest levels, and there is no control of corruption. All the South Asian States have special legislation that permits the suspension of the fundamental rights of their citizens. They also have anti-terrorism laws that give inordinate powers to the armed forces. These are a reflection of the reality that the only laws that the South Asian States have agreed to pass in recent years, within the ambit of SAARC, have been laws related to the control of 'terrorism.'

The inability of the South Asian States to deal with the issue of the diversity of their peoples has led to growing intolerance and majoritarianism in the political arena. It has fostered the growth of all forms of communalism, racialism, and ethnic and religious hatred, manifested in violence of the worst and most inhuman kind. The principle of secularism as a means of affirming democratic praxis in a multi-religious society has been seriously eroded. As a result, modern South Asia is home to many different struggles for self-determination and autonomy within and across borders. Whether these involve Christians in India and Pakistan, or Tamils in Sri Lanka, or Buddhists in Bangladesh, or *dalits* in Bihar, throughout South Asia, one's origins and beliefs can be the root cause of deprivation and marginalisation.

Since economic growth is not linked to social progress, and since political instability is linked to growing intolerance and violence in society, the process of social trans-

Mari M. Santiago/Isis Photobank

WOMEN AGAINST GLOBALISATION! The All India Democratic Women's Association in a protest action at the World Social Forum in India in January 2004.

formation in South Asia is varied and often retrogressive. The pauperisation of the so-called middle classes, who used to be the mainstay of society, is taking place alongside the growing landlessness of the rural population. The alienation of the mass of the people from their government and from formal political processes leads to growing cynicism regarding the existing form of 'democracy' in South Asia.

Women's Position in South Asia in the 1990s

The position and status of women in South Asian society today is a reflection of the economic, political and social phenomena described above. Economic changes are pushing more and more women out of the house to work in low-paid and exploitative forms of work, where they are often exposed to sexual and physical abuse as well. The areas of work open to women are in the unskilled sector. Domestic work and home-based work remain the most available forms of employment. Women's contribution to the household and national economy remains grossly underestimated and undervalued, while they continue to bear the burden of the household and family responsibilities, mostly alone.

The commodification of women's bodies and sexuality leads to continued degradation of women in society. The globalisation of female/feminine symbols in the advertising industry homogenises gender-based stereotypes. Globalisation has also had an impact on the selling of 'sex,' making this 'industry' a far more critical aspect of women's existence. The tremendous increase in prostitution and the trafficking of women in the region bear witness to this reality.

The rise in all forms of intolerance leads to an increase in violence, with women's vulnerability to violence rising as well. The patriarchal nature of identity-based politics, prevalent throughout the subcontinent today, denies a woman her right to choose, especially in matters relating to her so-called 'private' life, and increasing restricts her autonomy and mobility. Violence against communities results in massive displacement and eventually, the disintegration of these communities. The threat of such violence creates an environment where women are pushed to play a special role as those who bear the identity of the community.

Well worth noting, however, is that the contemporary scenario for women in South Asia is not a completely bleak one. More women than ever before have become part of the workforce, and enjoy enhanced mobility, access to public space and a degree of economic independence, which also brings with it, on many occasions, a degree of autonomy. Women's organisations and groups have proliferated in number, and more women are in public office and represented in public institutions. Various legal battles that enhance women's equality before the law have also been won.

1995 and Beijing

In assessing the role and impact of the women's movement in South Asia, the activism and enthusiasm gener-

ated around the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 can be viewed as a critical juncture. In each of the countries of the region, there were national preparatory processes within which women's groups and organisations prepared situation reports and analyses of the status of women. Representatives of women's organisations met at the sub-regional and regional levels. Some of them also participated in the official meetings which, in the Asia-Pacific region, were co-ordinated by ESCAP in Thailand. Over a thousand women from South Asia participated in the NGO Forum of the Beijing Conference, and all the regional organisations were present as well. Following the adoption of the Platform for Action emanating from the conference, different women's groups have taken on different roles in monitoring the implementation of the document.

In India, the post-Beijing era has seen the emergence of the National Association of Women's Organisations (NAWO) as the largest national women's network. In 1997, NAWO organised the first National Conference on Post-Beijing Review. At this gathering, the main areas of focus were identified as: the political participation of women; peace; defence of the rights of *dalit*s, tribals and Muslims; sustainable human development; prohibition of liquor; establishment of State commissions for women; better access to resources; and violence against women.

In Nepal, in 1997, women's organisations held a mini-Beijing Conference. Over 700 women participated in the meeting, which was aimed at raising awareness of the Beijing Platform for Action and mobilising women to lobby for implementation of the commitments in the Platform. A National Plan of Action and Strategies for the Effective Implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action was drawn up.

In Bangladesh, a National Conference of Women's Organisations was organised by Naripokkho, in 1995. 'Decentralisation of government' and 'devolution of power' emerged as key issues. In 1996, the government of Bangladesh initiated a multi-sectoral programme to deal with violence against women, with the collaboration of women's groups.

In Sri Lanka, the Beijing process saw the creation of a network called the Sri Lanka Women's NGO Forum. This comprised over 40 women's organisations from all over the island, representing all sectors of society. As a result of the activities of the Forum, over 40 women from Sri Lanka participated in the NGO Forum in Huairou, China, in 1995.

All these groups are actively involved in monitoring the implementation of the State's commitments to the advancement of women through the Beijing Platform for Action. They are also a part of various State and non-State processes aimed at influencing policy and decision-making processes in order to bring about structural changes in society that would effectively change women's lives.

Some Critical Contemporary Issues

The involvement of women in global arenas has created a concerted lobby for women's concerns at the international level. The understanding that pressure for 'gender mainstreaming,' especially at the level of the UN, has to continue has meant that a number of women and women's groups from the Southern hemisphere, including South Asia, have had to commit themselves to this work. This involvement has been sometimes at the cost of their work and involvement at the national and regional levels, and has led to various expressions of dissatisfaction within some sections of the women's movement. This focus on the global has indeed created a set of 'international' activists and a process of international activism that could be divisive, if not handled with the awareness that thinking globally and acting locally must be necessarily, and at all times, intertwined.

A critical outcome of the involvement of large numbers of women in these processes has been the engagement of women with the State and State machinery, especially those relating to women, and their entry into the sphere of decision-making and policy-making at the national and regional levels. Women from the movement are involved in various consultative bodies and committees that prepare official documents for the UN bodies monitoring the implementation of the Platforms for Action from the various World Conferences. Women and men from the administrative services have been appointed 'gender focal points' in government ministries. There have also been proposals for the establishment of national commissions for women involving women from the movement.

These exercises in 'mainstreaming gender' have played a role in gaining more visibility for, and more acceptance of, women's advancement at the official level. However, the involvement of women from the women's movement in these State-focused processes has been heavily criticised from within the movement itself. The women who face charges of 'co-optation' from their colleagues argue that gender-aware women must occupy the spaces made available in the public sector. For the women opposed to such a move, however, the presence of women in such forums precisely masks the State's sluggishness in moving toward the equal status of women in South Asian societies. The fact remains that, despite the establishment of various mechanisms for 'gender equality,' in most arenas of life and work, discrimination against women and the perpetuation of negative and gender-based stereotypes of women persist. For example, within many strands of the formal education system, the textbooks and curricula remain imbued with gender bias; in the health system, the primary perception of women is still that of 'mother' or 'mother-to-be.'

The Challenges of Coalition Building

The prevailing political realities in South Asia have led to a radical re-thinking of the concepts of 'difference' and 'diversity' within the women's movement. The recognition of difference is a key factor in the many initiatives for pluralism and multi-religious and multi-ethnic coexistence. In India, the formation of the Dalit Women's Association and the growing awareness of the connections between caste-based oppression and women's subordination have been a critical part of this process. In many areas of Bihar and Orissa, as well as in other parts of India, the movement of *dalit* tribal and indigenous people has become one of the strongest in the country and the region. Within these movements, the role played by women is significant, although this is more in terms of their engagement in organisational and mobilisation work, rather than in terms of the role they play in actual decision-making structures within the community.

In many ways, the encounters between women's groups and others engaged in working for social justice from different perspectives have led to closer collaboration, as well as to conflicts and tensions created by divergences in priorities and agendas. Some of these differences in understanding are clearly due to the patriarchal attitudes and structures of many broad-based, mixed (male and female) groups that have a social-justice agenda. The fact that many women's groups in the region have, in the past years, devoted more time and energy to developing strategies to deal with violence against women and other forms of exploitation particular to women has led to their alienation from other social movements. Thus, while there is always a display of solidarity when it comes to public demonstrations or campaigns on broad economic, social and political issues, women's concerns are rarely an integrated part of the long-term agendas of other civil society movements. Nor are women from the women's movement, in any way, key decision-makers in many of these organisations.

In the present context, the sectors that women's groups are forging linkages with include: *dalits*; indigenous and tribal peoples; members of religious, ethnic and linguistic minorities; migrant workers; refugees and internally displaced people; gays and lesbians; and people living with HIV/AIDS.

These organisations, many of which can be described as a part of the tradition of 'new social movements,' are creating a space for articulating the needs and interests of their specific community in a way that focuses on discrimination, and the oppression and exploitation that accompanies such discrimination. Much of their experience is similar to that of women. Of course, the experiences of women within each of these groups are made far more complex by the several levels of discrimination they have to suffer. As a consequence of action-oriented interactions, many of these organisations now pay greater attention to the participation of women in their programmes, and to the heightening of gender-awareness within their organisations.

Using a Rights-based Approach

The emphasis on 'human rights' which has emerged within the women's movement as well as within the UN system as a whole, has led to both positive and negative outcomes for women, including women in South Asia. On the positive side, human rights groups have begun to accept the need to be more gender-sensitive in their work. Women's groups have also begun to re-frame their work on legal reform and legal intervention from the point of view of a rights-based approach. As a consequence, in the last five years of the decade, there have been innumerable initiatives aimed at re-defining legal concepts and legal frameworks regarding women's rights at the international, regional and national levels.

Offences against women have been newly codified in ways that acknowledge the specificity of, for example, women's vulnerable situation in contexts of conflict. Rape, forced impregnation and other forms of sexual violence against women in times of war have been classified as 'war crimes' in the statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC). The work done by the Women's Caucus for Gender Justice at the ICC, which is a multinational women's lobby group in which several South Asian women participate, has been invaluable in this process.

The appointment of Sri Lankan lawyer Radhika Coomaraswamy as the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women in 1994 can be seen as another extremely critical outcome of consolidated lobbying and advocacy work at the international level by women's groups and human rights groups. Her reporting on issues that are crucial to South Asian women, such as trafficking, the use of culture and tradition to justify violence against women, and violence against women in conflict situations, has created a space for these issues to be raised at the national and regional levels.

However, the controversy around the proposed SAARC Convention on Trafficking clearly demonstrates the care with which one needs to venture into the process of law-making within States. The present draft legislation, which treats women as victims and objects with no 'will' of their own, can be viewed as a result of women's interventions, yet it is not respectful of women's rights at all. Different initiatives in India and Sri Lanka to create legislation on domestic violence that would incorporate aspects of both civil and criminal law need to take these concerns on board before draft legislation is developed.

The reluctance of most mainstream human rights groups in the South Asian region to intervene in family laws, including laws governing marriage, divorce, maintenance, custody of children and inheritance, is an indication of their conservatism in this area. Divisions on how to apply the principle of non-discrimination and equality in situations where minority communities, for example, feel under siege and therefore cling tightly to their identities and to the cultural, traditional and religious norms that define those identities, remain at the heart of this matter. Among other issues relevant to women that mainstream human rights agendas do not easily address are abortion, trafficking and sexual harassment.

Work in the area of rights-based legal reform has been mainly focused on violence and violence-related issues throughout South Asia. In India, the Supreme Court judgement on sexual harassment in the workplace generated concern and attention. In Sri Lanka, in 1995, changes to the penal code included the criminalisation of incest and sexual harassment, and the introduction of mandatory minimum punishments for rape. Although some women's groups had been campaigning for such reforms, when they did take place, it was as a result of a State initiative. In

> The difficulty of dealing with diversity comes hand in hand with the issue of identity-based politics in the region. In situations where minority communities feel threatened, which leads them to strengthen their own resistance to the onslaught they face from the majority, it becomes extremely difficult to urge any form of equality that could be interpreted as a move toward homogenisation....In recent years, feminists that have begun to use the human rights framework as a basis for discussing issues of equality and difference have proposed that returning to concepts of discrimination and disadvantage would perhaps provide some insights into the problem.

Nepal, women activists have changed laws relating to the inheritance rights of Nepali women. However, the effective implementation of such changes in the law and in legal structures so that they would have real and immediate impact on women's lives remains extremely difficult due to existing social and cultural barriers.

Poverty and Globalisation

The macro-issues of poverty and the strategies for its alleviation and eradication, globalisation, peace and demilitarization, and democratisation are also areas of concern for women in the South Asian region. In many South Asian countries, women's groups are part of broader alliances and coalitions that work on social-justice issues. The activism around the World Summit on Social Development in Copenhagen in 1994 led to a series of debates on poverty and related issues. One result was the formulation of a United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) policy document that states that poverty is a violation of human rights, and that looks at women as key 'actors' in strategies aimed at the eradication of poverty.

Women's groups in South Asia are involved in campaigns against development projects that lead to deforestation, environmental degradation and deprivation of access to tribal land, which deeply affect the survival of tribal and indigenous communities. Large numbers of women throughout the subcontinent participate in programmes of action and research linked to a whole range of issues on sustainable development, particularly, initiatives to reclaim traditional healing and farming methods. In this process, members of women's movements have had to define the objectives that they could adhere to, in common with other civil society movements that share the same perspectives and with whom they engage in collective actions. Key among these objectives is a vision of a just society where development is sustainable and all members of society are treated as equal.

Social movements in India and Bangladesh that have the active participation of women have been among the foremost to challenge the patenting of indigenous seed and plant varieties by multinational companies, and have launched major campaigns against the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and several multinationals. The focus on organic farming and more ecofriendly farming systems that respect the biodiversity of the planet has been a significant feature of these movements, as are the protests against debt and the call from Southern countries for debt cancellation at G-7 meetings. Women researchers and activists have also worked extensively on issues related to the employment of women in the export processing zones that have sprung up around the region.

Within the women's movement, especially among women's groups that have focused on reproductive health issues, the question of re-strengthening traditional and indigenous health and healing practices has been another critical area of action and research in the past decade.

In addition, many thousands of women have been involved in popular agitation campaigns, such as the Narmada Bachao Andolan in India, which counts among its leaders the charismatic Medha Patkar. Several women's groups are also involved in the National Alliance of People's Movements (NAPM) in India, which was created in 1997 to bring together groups campaigning on issues of food security, globalisation, exemption of agriculture from the WTO negotiations, and debt cancellation. Within the NAPM, groups have also taken up some specific issues that have special impact on women, including those of equal wages, property and inheritance rights, and the provision of basic heathcare.

Throughout South Asia, there is a debate regarding the efficacy and ultimate result of many programmes aimed at eradicating or alleviating poverty. The design and implementation of many micro-credit programmes, income-generation schemes and self-help programmes aimed at addressing the issue of poverty seem not to have taken gender relations into account. For example, the role played by women's unpaid labour in the home is often ignored in discussions on the economic base of a household. In Sri Lanka, some preliminary surveys have shown that, at times, women's vulnerability to domestic violence increases due to her enhanced income-earning capacity. Yet, there is little willingness among many of the larger NGOs that engage in this type of development activity to address issues of violence and sexual harassment within their own organisations and constituencies.

Political Participation

More than any other region in the world, South Asia has had its share of women heads of State. Yet, all of them were representatives of political dynasties, rather than women politicians in their own right. Thus, their political agendas were shaped more by the needs and interests of their political parties and constituencies than by their desire to uplift the women of their country. In addition, the women leaders of South Asia have, without exception, acted with scant respect for democratic practice when their powers have been challenged. Throughout the subcontinent, figures show that the political participation of women at the highest level, in cabinet positions or as members of parliament has, in fact, improved only minimally—by 1 percent or 2 percent, at most—in the 50 years since independence in 1948.

Creating space for women's political participation through legal and legislative action has been an arena in which significant changes have taken place in the region. In India, two constitutional amendments—the 73rd and 74th—made it possible for one-third of the representatives elected to village, block and district *panchayats* to be women. As a

consequence, over one million women throughout India are today members of these local government bodies. The 81st amendment to the Indian constitution mandating that one-third of members of parliament be female enacted in 2000, was of topic of much controversy and discussion throughout the region.

In Nepal, changes in administrative procedures and legal frameworks in 1997 made it mandatory for one of every five members in a ward committee (the smallest local government administrative unit) to be a woman. Following this change, 36,000 women were elected to local ward committees in 1998. However, the Nepali experience also merely exposes that the mere inclusion of women in the system does not guarantee opportunities to participate in the proceedings and processes of governance in an equal way.

The experience of having many more women in positions of power in the region has been varied. In some instances, the women have been mere 'nominal' members while the men carried on with the actual business of governance. In other cases, the opportunity to be a member of local government has paved the way for women previously active in their communities to wield authority and power. This process has also led women's groups that in principle supported enhanced political participation of women to re-think some of their strategies of 'participation,' and to become more involved in the political debates about democratisation and devolution of power.

The debate in the region on the issue of quotas and reservations is more alive today than ever before. In spite of repeated affirmation that this kind of action can only be a temporary measure, and is justified in light of the centuries of deprivation, there are still arguments around the logic of having 'unqualified' or 'incompetent' women in positions of power. Clearly, numbers alone will not resolve the issue, and only when there are gender-conscious women and men in positions of political power will any legislative action advancing the situation of women take place. Yet, there can be no doubt that the presence of women in large numbers in a political arena hitherto dominated and controlled by men is an extremely significant improvement, even if only to enhance the visibility of women. In addition, once women are in these positions, at least a few of them gain confidence and become interested in staying on within the framework, and advancing not only themselves, but also the cause of women.

Women's groups have been extremely active in encouraging the political participation of women, as candidates and representatives, as voters and as members of election-related civil society groups that engage in voter education and poll monitoring activities. In the course of this work, they have developed relationships with political parties of all persuasions, and have also worked with the State machin-ery that conducts elections. Work on the processes of civic education and election monitoring is among the ways in which women have become involved with governance issues. Some women's groups in Sri Lanka and Nepal, for example, have also lobbied political parties and groups to include women's concerns in their programme manifestos and campaign platforms.

Peace and Conflict Resolution

Militarisation, armed conflicts and civil wars have played a major role in shaping and changing women's lives in South Asia throughout the post-independence period. The 'normalisation' of violence, coercion and intimidation to suppress opposition and different views are felt at all levels in society—nationally, regionally and even domestically.

The peaceful and negotiated settlement of conflicts in the region, therefore, continues to be a major area of concern for the whole of the South Asian region. Women's groups, at the level of their individual nation-States and also at the regional level, have focused on the issue, which becomes ever more critical as tensions based on differences in ethnic origin, religion and language sharpen into acrimony and confrontation.

In both India and Pakistan, which are divided over the issue of Kashmir, joint campaigns for peace became more imperative in the wake of the nuclear tests carried out by both countries in 1998. The threat of nuclearisation also made the issue a regional one. Several forums committed to a peaceful relationship between the people of India and Pakistan, and to an end to the conflict in Kashmir, have been formed. For instance, the Indo-Pak People's Forum for Peace, which is a people-to-people initiative, has the active participation of women. In Pakistan, several women's groups are also members of the Joint Action Committee (JAC), which campaigns against discrimination against minorities, including Christians, in the country.

In Sri Lanka, women have played an active role in agitating for a peaceful resolution of the ethnic conflict, which has had serious impact on the women's movement since the 1970s. Because the conflict has sharpened, keeping the connections between women and women's groups from all the communities alive and engaging them in a process of dialogue and discussion have not been easy. Using the symbolic articulation of motherhood, the Mothers' Fronts of the north and the east were the only public voices of protest. They gained prominence, both within the island and abroad, for their courage and activism. Through various networks, such as Mothers and Daughters of Lanka, Women for Peace, the Women's Coalition for Peace and the Sri Lanka Women's NGO Forum (SLWNGOF), the National Alliance for Peace, and the People's Peace Front, women have come together to oppose all forms of extreme nationalism and any attempts to resolve conflicts militarily.

The conflict in the seven States of northeast India, which have been historically denied their autonomy, is one of the most complicated in the region. There are a number of concurrent and different conflicts taking place in the area, between the Central government and the different States, as well as among different tribal groups. In addition, the indigenous people of the area are in confrontation with settlers from Bangladesh and Burma. The conflicts are extremely brutal, leading to hundreds of deaths. In addition, there is an almost continuous flow of displacement, which is difficult to record.

Even though there are matrilineal communities in this region of India, according to women activists from the northeast, this has not translated into political or decision-making power for women. For many years, women from the northeast remained on the fringes of the women's movement in India. During the process of preparing for Beijing, a strong federation of women's groups in the northeast evolved, under the name North-East Network (NEN). This network is involved in monitoring the situation of women and human rights abuses in the northeast region, in collaboration with other groups within and outside India.

Making the connections between politically motivated violence and violence against women by the family and within the community has been among the most critical of the advances made by the women's groups in the region. An understanding of patriarchal nature of the power relations that operate in each situation of oppression has been critical to developing an understanding of the patriarchal roots of violence.

In addition, sections of the women's movement have been engaged in developing a feminist critique of communalism and all other forms of discrimination based on race, ethnicity, language or religion. Women's groups have committed themselves to maintaining a dialogue across the religious and linguistic divides that separate them from one another. Especially in the field of mass communication and creative arts, women artists, theatre artistes and cultural workers have evolved a wide range of creative communication materials that convey ideas of harmonious co-existence in the subcontinent. Women academics have also engaged in the study of communalism and its impact on women. In India, for example, there have been studies of women's involvement in the rightwing Hindutva political organisations, while in Sri Lanka, women scholars have studied the role played by women in all aspects of the ethnic conflict.

The Feminist Dilemma

There have been fewer and fewer women's groups in South Asia that want to identify themselves with a feminist analysis of society or declare themselves to be feminist. This may be, in part, due to continuing prejudices regarding feminists, which, interestingly enough, are similar in many parts of the world, the most common allegations being that they are 'Westernised' alienated from the indigenous culture, and intent on the destruction of 'family values.' But this is also partly due to the inability of many feminists to take on the challenges posed by modernity and the processes of globalisation, and evolve new modes of analysis that respond to the rapid transformations taking place in our societies. While there have been studies and research on the impact of globalisation on women's economic status, and on the impact of the growth of religious fundamentalism and national chauvinism on the social status of women, these have been too few and too specific.

The symbolic disappearances of words such as 'liberation' and 'emancipation', 'oppression' and 'exploitation,' 'patriarchy' and 'feminism' from our lexicons may be key to understanding this phenomenon, especially when one considers the one word and term that seems to have replaced them: gender. The concept of 'gender' as social, in contrast to 'sex' as biological, was first used by feminist sociologists to describe the social construction of masculinity and femininity. Placed within an analytical framework that embraced the concept of patriarchy and looked at gender relations as being relations of power, gender is an invaluable tool that we may use to enhance our understanding of reality. However, as used now by development agencies and government bureaucrats, it has been stripped of its analysis of power relations and, therefore, has been de-politicised.

The constant pressure put by feminists on mixed civil society organisations, in terms of their attitudes and policies on violence against women and sexual harassment, has led to a certain distancing between the two groups. Instances in which the male leadership of trade unions, political parties and even community-based organisations has been accused of sexual harassment and abuse of their female colleagues are well known in each of the South Asian countries. Yet, bringing the perpetrators to justice has been as difficult as in other cases.

Among the challenges that confront the feminist movement in South Asia today is that of re-shaping its linkages and connections with other social movements from a perspective that deals with the issue of diversity in a democratic and just manner. For women, this means an acceptance of the fact that speaking of the dignity and equality of women cannot suffice; one must also take into consideration the need for all members of society to be treated with dignity and equal respect.

The difficulty of dealing with diversity comes hand in hand with the issue of identity-based politics in the region. In situations where minority communities feel threatened, which leads them to strengthen their own resistance to the onslaught they face from the majority, it becomes extremely difficult to urge any form of equality that could be interpreted

as a move toward homogenisation. Accepting the differences and trying to devise forms of harmonious co-existence and solidarity pose a great challenge to the understanding of equality that postulates 'equal' as being 'the same.' In recent years, feminists that have begun to use the human rights framework as a basis for discussing issues of equality and difference have proposed that returning to concepts of discrimination and disadvantage would perhaps provide some insights into the problem.

For the feminist movements of South Asia, another difficult process has been that of forging links with the State and becoming involved in policy-making in coalition with State agencies. Overcoming traditional resistance to links with the State is a critical issue, since many feminists had traditionally been active in opposition to the State. As the nature of the South Asian State changes, and as it withdraws from its traditional role as provider of services and protector of rights, various community-based organisations have no option but to step in to provide essential and basic services to the community. Assuming this role, however, brings with it another range of problems about becoming a 'part' of the 'system' and, therefore, losing the capacity to stay critical of the system and of structural injustice as a whole, since one is committed, on a day-to-day basis, to a range of activities that in fact prop up the system.

Difficulties in dealing with power and issues of leadership, the generation gap within the women's movement, the marked absence of younger women in leadership positions in the movement, and the conflicts and tensions created by the process of transforming movements into institutions are among the more serious problems that confront the different women's movements in South Asia today. These internal crises are, of course, sharpened by the processes of social, economic and political change taking place within the larger South Asian context.

Conclusion

Looking at the nature of women's movements in South Asia in terms of Melucci's definition of what constitutes a new social movement, one can see that, in the early years of the 1970s and 1980s, they were truly 'nomadic,' in Melucci's sense of the word. There was a focus on commitment and a resistance to structures and formalities. Funding imperatives were minimal, and in their stead were much voluntarism and a concentration on self-awareness. The slogan "The personal is the political" is symbolic of the era, with its struggle to break down the divisions between the private and the public worlds. The wide range of discussions, debates and activism focusing on various aspects of marriage and the family can be seen as a manifestation of this trend. Many of the older women's organisations in South Asia, such as Saheli in Delhi, the Forum against the Oppression of Women in Bombay, Nari Pokkho in Bangladesh, and Voice of Women in Sri Lanka, can be viewed as a part of

this spectrum. Changing social perceptions about women, and transforming traditional and cultural practices that discriminated against women were key components of their work.

During this period, there was not much focus on institution-building, leadership or policy change. The political analysis of patriarchy within the women's movements went along with the critique of the family and monogamy. The relationship of women's movements to the State in its 'welfarist' phase was based on a belief in the State's duty and capacity to deliver essential goods and services in an equitable manner. The relationship with the State was, therefore, shaped by this perception, and addressing demands to the State for better and enhanced 'delivery' formed a large part of the activism.

> ...the trend toward a 'gender' analysis that is devoid of the politics of understanding patriarchy and power poses a major obstacle to our ability to create an analytical framework that encompasses the totality of woman, as mother and as citizen. For all South Asian women's groups committed to bring about a process of social transformation, the creation of a more democratic and plural system of government based on concepts of the inherent dignity, rights and integrity of every person remains a challenge for the future.

The interactions of members of the women's movement in South Asia with members of women's movements at the international level created a space for the discussion of women-specific issues from the perspective of cross-cultural understanding. Theoretical debates on issues such as 'gender' as a social construct went side by side with global campaigns to draw attention to the severity of women's situation as victims of all forms of discrimination and violence.

In later years, in the 1990s, as the State began withdrawing from the economic arena due to the pressures of globalisation, and as the forces of chauvinism and extremism began to gather strength, women found themselves being pushed into several contradictory positions. The rising cost of living and the need to supplement the family income meant that more and more women had to go out to work. However, the areas of employment that were open and accessible to them were, for the most part, exploitative, and, in many instances, reaffirmed women's subordinate and 'domestic' role. In addition, in the face of heightened ethnic consciousness within the community, women's major role was prescribed in a specific way, as bearers of the community's 'honour' and culture. In this context, many women had to face the dilemma of being caught between the demands of their community or collectivity, and their personal interests as individual women.

A grim reality of the subcontinent of the 1990s is also the slow but sure increase in female-headed families, due to abandonment and death of male family members, especially of breadwinners. This is largely related to the many internal conflicts in the region, which have resulted in massive displacement of populations, as well as extensive human rights abuse. The very critical changes in the role and status of women in South Asian society that have come about as a consequence of this situation are yet to be addressed fully by social scientists and women activists.

In the face of these challenges, women's movements in South Asia have moved along several different trajectories. Some have become integrated into broader social movements that focus on the impact of globalisation, including environmental degradation. The dilemmas of coalition building, especially with regard to maintaining a gender-specific analysis of the issue and with regard to equal space and opportunities for women within the movement, remain similar to those experienced by women who worked closely with leftwing political parties, groups and trade unions in the 1970s.

This situation has also led many women's groups to work on specific issues related to globalisation that have an impact on women—migrant women workers, trafficking and prostitution, new reproductive technologies, and food security, among the most significant. In each of these cases, there are issue-based coalitions that emerge and work with State and non-State institutions and agencies to achieve their goals. This emphasis on acting in the 'present' is one feature of the new social movements identified by Melucci, and clearly visible in many South Asian women's groups and organisations. While the narrow focus has some extremely positive outcomes, in terms of sharpening both analysis and strategies for action, it also could lead to a blindness to other issues, which has a negative impact on the movements, in the long term.

Engagement with the UN mechanisms and activism aimed at influencing policy documents on women put out by the UN for the various world conferences made women more familiar with the structures of power at the global level. The need to transform the commitments made by States at the international level into concrete improvement of women's conditions at the national level made women more involved with the State and with negotiating with the State.

In this situation, what Melucci identifies as one of the characteristics of new social movements, that is, the treatment of information as a resource, has certainly come to the fore. All over the world, obtaining and sharing information on the advances made in women's rights in other countries and other situations, following international conferences, and discovering creative and innovative ways of using mass communication and the media to disseminate information have all become critical aspects of the women's movements. New communication and information technologies have certainly facilitated this process, although the question of access remains crucial in the region, due to inadequate technological resources. In addition, the ways in which women have used the symbol of the 'mother' in their struggles for justice and peace in the region, whether it is the Mothers' Front in Sri Lanka or the Naga Mothers' Union in India, demonstrate how well women realise the potential of symbolic resources that are embedded in a particular social and cultural formation.

The development of various sets of relationships with the State and with the State apparatus has resulted in a politicisation of the women's movement in many parts of the region in a way that has had both a positive and a negative impact on the movement. In some cases, activist women leaders who moved into positions within the government apparatus and within the UN and other international agencies became caught up in the dynamics and politics of those institutions. In other cases, for example, through the formation of strong networks such as NAWO in India and the SLWNGOF in Sri Lanka, members of the women's movement have been able to influence policy and have moved into 'consultative' status with State, regional and international institutions.

The process of globalisation has also had an impact on funding for women's activism. Funding agencies insist on professionalism and specialisation from recipients of their funds, seriously threatening the autonomy of some groups. The accusation that some women's groups are 'funder-driven' in the identification of both their goals and their strategies is often heard from within the movement itself. Undoubtedly, the challenge of becoming self-sustaining remains a key to the future.

The number of women's groups in South Asia has grown remarkably over the past decade, and they now cover a wide

range of activities and activism. The most significant advance of this period could well be the linking of women's rights with human rights, which has opened doors for lobbying and advocacy in many arenas.

An interesting observation of contemporary women's movements in South Asia is their focus on transparency and accountability, principles of governance that have come into these movements in a very strong way. Issues of representation and the 'legitimate voice' have created dissonance at times, no doubt, but the emphasis on 'process' over result also leads to an ongoing critique of activism that have promising impact on the movements. Melucci has described new social movements as those that give equal weight to the journey as to the destination. Thus, the intense internal conflicts that sometimes arise within the women's movements of the region, and which are paralleled by similar debates in other parts of the world, could be viewed as positive in that they compel a deeper examination of the processes of each organisation and network. There is also a growing critique of the structure and formation of groups themselves, from the point of view of democratic and representative decision-making, and the coalescence of public commitments and private lives.

A major problem with the women's movements in the region continues to be the separations that exist within the spectrum of social movements and the difficulty of informing all the different struggles for social justice with a gender perspective. For instance, despite the affirmation that women's rights are human rights, issues such as abortion, criminalisation of prostitution, victimisation of trafficked women and related issues are not perceived as 'human rights' issues by the human rights community in general. Discrimination against people living with HIV/AIDS is not perceived as an issue for struggle by people who work against discrimination based on caste, race or language. Creating linkages at the conceptual and practical level between these different spheres of existence and different levels of struggle remains a major challenge for all the social movements of the region.

At the same time, there are many divisions within the women's movements in the region that are based on differences in the perception and analysis of current issues. The wide range of problems faced by women in conflict situations, for example, has been at the root of many separations in the women's movements. Other divisive issues have been those related to funding, working at the international level, and prioritising issues linked to globalisation. While in some ways, the class divisions critical to the women's movements in the early years have been diffused, the new divisions on the basis of age, race, religion, ethnicity, language and sexual orientation create tensions and conflicts that are so rooted in the broader political realities that they cannot simply be addressed at the level of the women's movement.

Following the various formulations of "violence against women as a development issue" and of "poverty as an abuse of human rights," it becomes clear that the issue of discrimination against women can no longer be viewed as a separate phenomenon that can be addressed through actions that have an impact only on women. Our understanding of the role and position of women within the family and within the community has extended our understanding of the policy and legal changes that need to be made if women are to be treated as equals. At the same time, the realisation that the subordination of women cannot be legislated away, and that many economic and cultural processes need to change if women are to be treated with dignity and equality, has brought about many changes in project and programme formulation, not only within women's groups but within other institutions and agencies as well.

However, the trend toward a 'gender' analysis that is devoid of the politics of understanding patriarchy and power poses a major obstacle to our ability to create an analytical framework that encompasses the totality of woman, as mother and as citizen. For all South Asian women's groups committed to bring about a process of social transformation, the creation of a more democratic and plural system of government based on concepts of the inherent dignity, rights and integrity of every person remains a challenge for the future.

References:

Calman, Leslie J. "Women and Political Movements in India." *Asia Survey* 29, No. 10, October 1989. California: University of California.

Dahlerup, Drude. "Introduction." In *The New Women's Movement: Feminism and Political Power in Europe and the USA,* Dahlerup, ed. New Delhi: Sage, 1986.

Lateef, Shahida. *Muslim Women in India: Political and Private Realities: 1980s - 1980s.* New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1990.

Melucci, Alberto. "Nomads of the Present." Interview by Keane and Mier. In *Radius.* London, 1989.

Menon, Ritu and Kamla Bhasin. *Borders and Boundaries.* New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1988.

Pateman, Carol. *The Sexual Contract.* Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988.

Shaheed, Farida, Zia Asma and Warraich, Sohail. *Women in Politics: Participation and Representation in Pakistan.* WLUML Special Bulletin: Shirkat Gah for WLUML, 1998.

Stree Shakthi Sanghatan. "We Were Making History: Women in the Telengana Struggle." In *A Space Within the Struggle,* Ilina Sen, ed. New Delhi: Kali for Women.

SLWNGOF, NEN and NAWO: Various documents on the Beijing +5 process.