

Women's Movement and Media in India: Reshaping Notions of Power

By Kiran Prasad

In third-world countries, women's activism has historical roots in the struggle for nationalism, workers' rights and peasant struggles. The international women's movement has had an impact on women in India, enabling them to focus on their depressing condition. The impact has taken different directions to evolve into multifarious strategies that, in themselves, challenged the framework of the women's movement in the country. Inherent paradoxes beset the contemporary women's movement in India, but it still shows some promise. In this article, we will analyse mass media's reflection on the power relations and struggles within the women's/feminist movement of India. The article will also throw light on new directions for the media to take so as to help sustain the momentum of the women's struggle for their rights.

The Women in India—Paradoxes

India occupies a strategic position in Asia being the largest of the South Asian countries, with a population of over one billion. Women constitute a population of 495.74 million, with 360.52 million in the rural areas and 135.22 million in the urban areas. The human development status of women shows wide interstate and intrastate variations. India's human development is marked by a paradox that has seen a systematic decline in women's status despite recent advances in women's education and economic status. It is indeed puzzling that the economic development of the women has not brought commensurate change in their social development. Women in India continue to

labour under the brunt of oppressive traditions, exploitation, and lack of self-worth or identity. They are routinely subjected to violence even at home. It is absurd that in a country where even women's dress is dictated by tradition, women must take responsibility for family planning, for measures against AIDS (Acquired Immuno Deficiency Syndrome) and for a host of other maladies affecting society (Prasad, 2004a: v).

The social reform movement in India targets several social practices that are against women such as child marriage, *sati* (self-immolation by the widow on the funeral pyre of the husband, a social practice among some Hindu communities), widow remarriage restriction, polygamy, the *purdah* system (use of veil as shield) and female infanticide. In 1929, an all-India Act banning *sati* was passed. It is truly paradoxical that Roop Kanwar, a young widow, was burnt alive to become a *sati* in 1987 in Deorala, Rajasthan. The tradition of *sati* thrives in parts of North and North West India where women worship the patron female god of *sati* in temples.

The gender discrimination and violence against women have had a profound effect on the sex ratio in India. The child sex ratio (female children per 1000 male children under five years of age) has been dropping for the past 50 years with the decade of 1991-2001 registering a steep decline from 945 to 927. The existing social relations have reinforced crimes on girl-children and women beginning, in many cases, even before birth in the form of foeticide, infanticide, dowry deaths, and honour killings.

Women in India, like in other developing countries, truly live a life of ironies. On one side lie the roles enforced by patriarchal structures; on the other lie those backed by tradition-bound women who also try to enforce them on others who try to break away.

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Women of the new generation, particularly in the post-reform era, are facing great challenges wherein they have to reconcile their “traditional roots” with the “modern values” of a global culture. Surely, economic reforms alone cannot transform the social landscape of India. There must be a parallel attitude change, imbuing of new values and progressive action that must be communicated to each and every citizen at an early age if the coming generation of women are to be empowered.

Communication for Empowerment

Being able to speak and to be heard is a powerful experience for those who have something to say and want to initiate change. Being able to hear what needs to be heard is likewise a forceful experience for those who are seeking learning and motivation that leads to action for change. For women, communication is empowering as it brings forth evidence on the issues affecting them as well as a complete view of their life situation. Communication enables women to constantly focus on their choices and actively pursue courses of action that will better their status. The different media of communication should be able to help the women’s movement build solidarity among women and men, and to bring about gender equality.

Women in India are largely gaining empowerment through collective strategies. But they continue to be too weak to make any significant impact on their personal worth and social status. The process of women’s empowerment must necessarily proceed from the individual to the collective. The collective movement for gender equality cannot be sustained without firm individual conviction and commitment. It is necessary to be able to defend oneself before being able to support others. Women’s participation in development can be sustainable only when each of them can stand on their own strength, as several life-situations will demand individual resistance and personal action (Prasad, 2004a: vi-vii)

The women’s movement gave rise to the anti-alcohol agitation in various parts of the country in the seventies and eighties. Various women’s groups in Himachal Pradesh, Uttaranchal, Tehri Garhwal and Pithoragarh had waged a war against the liquor trade and alcohol abuse. The magazine *Baini* (younger sister) covers information on the anti-liquor agitation and

confiscation of alcohol along with other development-oriented information (see Joshi, 2004). But when the mainstream media had not been supportive, women invented new channels of communication to empower themselves. The anti-arrack movement in Andhra Pradesh grew out the inspiration gained by women in adult literacy classes. In 1992, women of Dubagunta village in Nellore, one of the poor drought prone districts of Southern Andhra Pradesh, organised and agitated to force the closure of the *arrack* (liquor) shop in the village. Newspapers published this story, and women all over the state marched to *arrack* shops and sought to stop the auction of contracts to sell *arrack*. The press, in particular, *Eenadu*, the largest circulating Telugu daily, covered the anti-*arrack* movement that was spearheaded by the women for a year (Gopalakrishnaiah, 1997: 19). But the prohibition imposed by the State in 1993 on *arrack* was withdrawn in 1994 as the it wanted additional revenue generated by liquor sales. The experience, however, gave the women’s groups in Andhra Pradesh new confidence and power to check the alcohol abuse by men in their families, and to prevent domestic violence by alcoholic husbands. The women’s experience of collective action has led to a reshaping of power relations in the family and in the community with women acquiring new decision-making powers to protest against social evils and, in some cases, even putting an end to oppression.

Women’s activities and women’s groups in several parts of the country continue to crusade against alcoholism and often bring pressure to close the liquor trade in their communities and villages. These successes are projected in the mass media. Women power through collective efforts has also been effective in protesting against “anti-women” policies of the government. For instance, women’s groups in Karnataka were able to achieve the closure of several online lottery shops such as “Playwin” outlets that have become gambling dens for many men who squandered away hard-earned family income.

India declared year 2001 as Women’s Empowerment Year for the country, and the National Policy for Empowerment of Women of India was released also in 2001. Women’s empowerment depends to a large extent on the degree of access to and control of women over different means of communication or mass media. The oppressed and marginalised groups,

including women, are often excluded in the coverage by communication channels. Communication for women's empowerment is a participatory process wherein women activists and women's groups have begun to break away from their state of powerlessness to question the *status quo* that oppresses them when negative social values and cultural norms are disseminated through different media. India's National Policy for Empowerment of Women, an official policy document of the Government of India, includes measures to promote societal awareness to gender issues and human rights, and the use of different forms of mass media to communicate social messages related to women's equality and empowerment.

Media's Take on the Women's Movement—Some Cases

Women's participation in local governance in India has been hailed as a significant step towards women's empowerment. But preliminary findings of a study commissioned by the country's Union Ministry of Health and Family Welfare and conducted by the UN Population Fund in the states of Andhra Pradesh, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, and Rajasthan (2001-2002) revealed that many members of the *panchayat* (institutions of local self-government in India), especially the women, prefer disqualification for election over not having a son. Parents with more than two children are barred from contesting elections to local bodies such as the village *panchayat*. Women are adversely affected as their desire to participate in local governance must take a back seat in view of the family's preference for a son who is often the third or subsequent child in the family. The power of political participation of women is thus often constrained by the high social value attached to sons: The high socio-cultural preference for sons in several regions of South Asia, including India, has led to systematic medical and social interventions that terminate female births. Families in India would go to any extent to have sons, particularly because they are regarded as a means of social security in old age (of the parents), and also because of the religious (Hindu) sanction that sons get to enjoy to perform the last rites (death ceremony) of their parents. This has led many women, especially those whose children are all females, to undergo multiple pregnancies till they give birth to a son.

The women's movement is not to be perceived as powered by women alone, of women and for women; the reshaping of power relations must include men...who must unite to strengthen the lives of girls and women and to achieve the vision of India as a developed country. ...the mass media must play a critical role in widening the discourse on gender equality and in challenging the social and political order that systematically devalues women.

However, despite the constraints on women's participation in the *panchayat*, this body has managed to enable the voice of women to be heard in the ordering of affairs at the grassroots levels. This is an essential step in the empowerment of women. Karnataka in South India led the way in 1987, bringing about sweeping changes in the programme of self-government (*Panchayat Raj*) by reserving for women 25 percent of the seats in *panchayat* bodies at the village, sub-district and district levels. Several workshops are being organised for women *panchayat* leaders and members to make them aware of the benefits of government schemes and funds, and how they can exercise their power independently (Bharmal, 2002). But the role of women in the political life of India is still marginal. The mainstream media has highlighted the low level of participation of women but has little analysis of the reasons for this trend. The women's movement has enabled women to make a headway in political participation but is relatively powerless in changing

the familial and social values that continue to devalue and neglect girl-children.

Women in India have realised that the key to their problems lies in mobilising themselves against social forces that oppress and target them. For instance, the rising violence against women in the North East India led the North East Network, Shillong to issue a signed petition to aspiring politicians and parties in February 2003 to recognise violence against women as an urgent problem for redress in the state (Choudhury, 2004). The alleged rape, torture and murder of Thangjam Manorama Devi by security forces in Manipur sparked off a widespread, long drawn, violent, unprecedented and historic protest in this state. About 40 women, 12 of them nude, staged a *dharna*¹ in front of the Assam Rifles Range Office, Imphal to protest the rape and killing of Manorama. The women carried a banner stating “Indian Army, Rape Us” (“The Hindu, July 17, 2004). This was an unprecedented expression of power in the history of the women’s movement in India, which had conformed to traditional ways of protests. This protest shocked the state government, which immediately ordered all television channels not to show these visuals as they would lead to further tension and violence in the state. Manorama’s case was only one of the alleged many human rights violations in Manipur that are said to be, in fact, sanctioned by the state in the form of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA) of 1958, which gives enormous powers to security forces. The AFSPA has been operative in Manipur for over four decades and has given unaccounted power to the security forces to search, arrest, detain or kill anyone on the basis of suspicion—all in the name of “maintaining public order.” The alleged abuse of power by security forces has resulted in incidents of arbitrary detention, torture, rape and killing. The systematic misuse of AFSPA has been discussed at great lengths by Amnesty International in the report “Official Sanction for Killing in Manipur” (1998). (Tukdeo, 2004).

All the newspapers gave wide coverage to the nude women’s protest, complete with photographs. But later reports of further protests had no photographs of torch-bearing women who were in the rallies. The media found sensational the nude protest of the women but their next protests were regarded less newsworthy and exciting. Women’s organisations, particularly the Meira Paibi (torch-bearing women), defied the

indefinite curfew and staged sit-in protests in Manipur. Manipur Chief Minister Okram Ibobi was severely critical of the women vigilantes and other non-government organisations (NGOs) for destroying government property (*The Hindu*, July 24, 2004). Chowdhury (2004) noted that although the state of Manipur has a long history of women’s activism, the nature of the women’s protest showed the depth of their desperation. But she also noted that the rest of India failed to reach out to Manipur’s women. Except for some expression of solidarity from the Mahila Samakhya, Andhra Pradesh, there was dead silence from all the women’s groups, the National Commission of Women, women parliamentarians and leaders. The mass media highlights rape cases concerning starlets and models only for the sensational effect but without focus on the crime against women.

In yet another unprecedented incident in Nagpur in August 2004, a huge mob of women lynched serial rapist and dreaded criminal Akku Yadav and killed him on his way to a local court. When the court arrested four women for the crime, four hundred women volunteered to surrender before the court to secure the release of the women who were charged with the criminal’s murder. Most media presented the incident as a “bizarre legal case” rather than focusing on the suffering and anger of the women against the legal-judicial system that gives little justice to women affected by violence, such as rape and torture. But even women’s groups are divided on the emerging power of women to settle scores with criminals using violent means. Some regard this response as a powerful strategy to restructure the insensitive police and legal structures. Others believe that there is the danger of women also being branded criminals if they engage in murder as justice for the crimes suffered by them.

One of the cases of violence against women that received extensive media coverage in recent times is the rape and murder of schoolgirl Hetal Parekh in Kolkata by Dhananjay Chatterjee. After more than a decade of litigation, Chatterjee was hanged to death on August 14, 2004. This case was not debated in the media in the context of growing violence against women and girl-children but rather turned into a debate on human rights issue against capital punishment. There was tremendous media sympathy for Chatterjee but hardly any coverage of the turmoil of Hetal’s parents and family. Many human rights groups campaigned

against the hanging of Chatterjee, disregarding the heinous crime committed by him while maintaining a stony silence on the human rights of women. Amnesty International even ran a campaign on its website calling all its members to organise protests against the meting out of capital punishment to Chatterjee. Stranger even was the case of Maninder Pal Singh Kohli who nonchalantly confessed over NDTV (a popular television news channel) to his crime of having raped and murdered British schoolgirl Hannah Foster. The mass media has a tendency to pay greater attention to criminals rather than to the crime itself. This practice results in greater sympathy for the criminal and not for the victim. Whenever the police uncover a sex racket, it is the women who are focused on by the media, again as sensational news, leaving the male clients scot-free and unbesmirched. In India, human rights groups campaign for the rights of animals and criminals but ignore the plight of millions of oppressed, mutilated and battered women. It is indeed a paradox that women's rights have still not been accepted as human rights. Women's groups are increasingly being convinced that only violent means of protest can register on the state and attract its attention rather than the notion of long suffering attributed to them. The media has captured the challenge posed by the women's movement to grow into a hard line violent/extremist organisation and has also implied in its discourse that this image may be used to threaten state actors, particularly the police and the judiciary, to review their gender-insensitive structures and modes of operations. The women's movement challenges the police and judiciary primarily as patriarchal structures of power and reshapes the potential of a powerful community of women who would turn the tide against an unjust social order. The reshaping of the movement with greater power and leadership of women may enable them to create better lives for their community.

The national leadership of the women's movement in India as in several other countries has largely been in the hands of highly educated, high caste Hindu women from an urban background. But at the regional levels several women's organisations often take highly polarised positions on women's issues on dimensions of tradition and modernity. One debate that never dies down is the dress patterns of women. Many states require women teachers and women employees of

several institutions to strictly adhere to a dress code. There are no such dress codes for men who can freely adopt western dress styles. The debate on women's dress has seen gone to the courts as in the case of school teachers of Kolkata. The mass media rarely brings out the point that women can be dressed in a dignified manner in several attires including western ones that are designed for comfort and the convenience of working women. If the women's movement in India can at least throw out these dress codes and allow women to wear what is comfortable to them, it will be a singular achievement of women. But it is not to be so, as many women's groups themselves criticise the free choice of dress by women who boldly take a stand against such outdated codes that pressure them to conform to traditional norms guided by patriarchal ideology.

There is the polarisation of issues taken up by urban and rural women's groups. The rural women have campaigned extensively against deforestation, the right to basic needs of food, safe drinking water, and livelihood opportunities. They have been in the forefront of ecological movements and anti-alcohol movements. The ecological movement spearheaded by women's groups at regional levels has received attention by policymakers on the environment as a national issue. In contrast, women's groups in urban areas focus on economic policies, sexual harassment at the workplace, safety of the public transport system, discrimination in educational and employment opportunities, and urge greater representation of women in policy-making positions.

There are rare occasions where the activism of urban women and rural women converge in the national women's movement. One important area that has witnessed this activism is gender-just budget and domestic violence. The adoption of liberalisation policies in education, health care and sanitation, and the withdrawal of the state from several welfare programmes in the name of structural adjustment policies have also been an area of convergent action by urban- and rural-based women's groups. The mass media, to its credit, has given focus on several innovative responses of women in education, health, environment and sanitation that are equally important to urban and rural women.

The Road Ahead

There remains a whole range of women's problems from female foeticide, female infanticide, child marriage, female abuse, female labour, forcing girls into the sex trade by selling them, rising preference for sons over daughters, marital rape, unfair burden of population policy and AIDS campaign on women, problems of single women, branding rural women as witches in several parts of the north India, to the legal rights of women regarding property, divorce and succession that have yet to see concerted action by women's groups on the national level.

There is great need for the spirit of solidarity and rejection of particularism among various women's organisations. The cases of the Manipur women and of the women in Nagpur, whatever their legal pros and cons, are the silver lining in the women's movement. There is a strange silence on women's issues even in the relatively developed states of South India, especially Kerala, where women's health, education and basic socio-economic indicators match those of the advanced countries in the world. Women's activism for gender equality is quite weak even where women enjoy situational advantage. Highly educated and financially independent women are seen succumbing to dowry demands, son-preference, domestic violence and sexual harassment at the work place. The women's movement in India is in need of greater networking, sisterhood and cohesion in goals if activism must be able to logically progress from women's development to women's empowerment. The women's movement is not to be perceived as powered by women alone, of women and for women; the reshaping of power relations must include men as fathers, husbands, brothers and sons who must unite to strengthen the lives of girls and women and to achieve the vision of India as a developed country. In all of this, the mass media must play a critical role in widening the discourse on gender equality and in challenging the social and political order that systematically devalues women.)

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(Footnote)

¹ A fast conducted at the door of an offender in India as a means of obtaining compliance with a demand for justice

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