

CHAPTER FOUR

MAPPING THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT IN INDIA

This chapter maps the issues concerning the autonomous women's movement in India from its earliest traceable origins to contemporary times. This is not merely a chronological account of campaigns and struggles, nor is it a statement of the 'achievements' of the movement; it is an attempt to sketch the evolution of the movement and the transitions within it.

We will not, like those scholars before us, argue whether there is, in fact, a women's movement, or multiple women's movements (Menon 1999) or none at all. We will include in our discussion on 'women's movement' in India, the whole range of protests in which women have participated. No doubt there have been and still are several shades and hues to what we very broadly refer to as the 'women's movement'. Today, it comprises of both organisations that are working to conserve women's position and those aspiring to change women's position. Therefore, in tracing the development of the women's movement in India, one would undoubtedly have to highlight the shifting concerns and strategies that have been an outcome of the plurality of perspectives that exists within the movement.

Within the women's movement there have been divergent understandings of patriarchal oppression and its outcomes and, therefore, also varied strategies to combat it. Some organisations have been small intellectual groups while there have been some that have had mass support. Some have emerged in support of certain causes or for the purpose of a focussed campaign, while there are some that have existed for years with evolving agendas. The ideologies also vary from radical, liberal, socialist, Marxist and Gandhian, to the new fundamentalist. Our concern, however, is primarily the work of those working towards change, those organisations that acknowledge women's specific oppression in relation to men in both personal and public life and do not allow this to be subsumed within all other unequal relationships that exist in society. This does not mean

that these organisations do not have different and sometimes even conflicting emphases and perspectives.

The women's movement has a long history in India. Much longer than the current 'second wave' movement, or even the 'first wave' of earlier this century. The Shakti cults go back centuries, and the concept of Shakti – the female power principle – was recognised thousands of years ago. In this form the women's movement represents, not merely an oppositional force fuelled by anger, a rather negative reaction to oppression, but the development of a distinctive female culture, a positive creative force inspiring men and women alike (Liddle et al. 1986: 5).

The changes or rather the transitions that have taken place within the women's movement in India have not followed a chronological or linear pattern, but have at all stages involved a collage of influences, local, national and international.

4.1. Social Reform Movement and Pre Independent India: *Women – Passive Recipients of Emancipation?*

Urvashi Butalia (1998) and Ritu Menon and Kamala Bhasin (1998) have discussed the deliberate absence of a record of women's voice and contribution to political situations in pre-independent India and of the patriarchal nature of our documented history. Given the fact that in our history there is sufficient evidence that women were excluded from the formal education system, it is not surprising that their voices have not been reflected in the written texts that stand as testimonies of our history. We do not argue, therefore, about the general gender-biased nature of our history, but take that as a given.

There are records, however, of cases of 'exceptional' women, women who challenged the norm of that time such as Rassundari Devi, a housewife in Bengal, when she wrote her autobiography in Bengali in 1876 called *Amar Jibon* (My Life) (Tharu and Niranjana 1994). Having never attended formal school, Rassundari was self-taught. Her book is a passionate description of the deplorable condition of women at the time as well as a secret plea to women to stand up from their seat of subservience to be critical of their own lives including the prevalent social customs and practices.

Swarnakumari Devi, less heard of than her brother Rabindranath Tagore, started the Ladies Theosophical Society (a multi-religion association of women) way back in 1882 and later became a member of the Indian National Congress. The Theosophical Society was later associated more with Annie Besant, a British woman supporter of the Indian nationalist movement. Swarnakumari's daughter Sarala Devi started training women in the use of the sword and *lathi* in 1903, as she was actively involved in nationalism of a militant kind (Kumar 1993).

Then there was the case of Pandita Ramabai, whose father was an unconventional social reformer who began with social transformation in his own home by educating his wife Lakshmibai even at the cost of being exiled by his own community for this. Lakshmibai subsequently taught her daughter Sanskrit in the forests as is recorded in Pandita's book (1886) *The High Caste Hindu Woman*. The book is a critique of women's oppression, religion and colonialism (Ramabai 1887). Pandita Ramabai was one of the 10 women delegates to the Indian National Congress in 1889 and she was instrumental in the setting up of several women's organisations, schools for girls, and homes for widows, apart from a host of her other contributions to society.

In 1916, the Begum of Bhopal founded the All India Muslim Women's Conference with education of women as a prime agenda, apart from provisions of other remedial services for women and changing oppressive practices such as polygamy (Liddle and Joshi 1986). We can cite many such instances or special cases where individual women have been leaders in a struggle for women's rights, but whose voices have been accounted for in the patriarchal recording of history.

Women's leadership in the nationalist phase however, emerged from a small section of the urban, middle-class, who had their education in English and invariably was in some way linked to movements or organisations in the west. The Women's Indian Association, which had links with the British women's movement for suffrage, was started in 1917 by Margaret Cousins, Dorothy Jinarjadasa and Annie Besant. The National Council of Women, a branch of the International Council of Women, was founded by Lady Tata and Lady Aberdeen in 1925. In 1927, the All India Women's Conference was set up by Margaret Cousins which later merged with the Women's Indian Association in the 1930s (ibid.: 21).

According to Geraldine Forbes (1982: 525), the 'first wave' of feminism in India was the period between the years 1880–1940. At this time several organisations formed women's wings which not only took up the cause of women but gave women space and opportunity to secure the desired changes. In 1904, a women's wing was started in the National Social Conference, which was later called the Indian Women's Conference. The All India Women's Conference started branches in several smaller states in India, including Goa, where our case study is based. However, if we are to go by what has been recorded more prominently in the mainstream texts (Natarajan 1962; Sinha 1967), what we are made to understand about the social reform movement of pre-independent India is that the leaders were mostly men and therefore even the early champions of the cause of women were men and that during the 19th century social reform movement there was a preoccupation with protectionism. Besides, several issues that were taken up as concerns for social reform were, in fact, issues that exclusively benefited women of the upper social classes or those of higher castes. At this time, the issues concerning women's social emancipation that were prime on the agenda of social reformers were issues such as sati, the plight of widows, polygamy, child marriage and women's education. These were some of the causes taken up by leaders such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Dayanand Saraswati, M.G. Ranade and others.

In 1887, M.G. Ranade established the National Social Conference, which did have women's emancipation on its agenda, as he worked for the introduction of widow remarriage, for the abolishment of child marriage and other issues like education for girls (ibid.). While the National Social Conference focussed on social issues, the Indian National Congress was concerned with the political administration (Liddle and Joshi 1986). Between 1772 and 1947, the British introduced several laws which aimed to liberate women in India. Some of the laws prohibited practices such as female infanticide, sati and child marriage. 1891 saw the institution of the Age of Consent Act which raised the legal age at marriage from 10 years to 12 years for girls. Other laws gave women rights such as widow remarriage.

Although records of the independent initiative of Indian women during this phase are sketchy, as already discussed earlier, we know that they did participate in the Swadeshi Movement in the early 1900s and continued to play a crucial role in the

struggle for independence from British colonial power. During the years of Mahatma Gandhi's leadership in particular, women's participation in the political struggle was encouraged (Kumar 1993).

According to Joanna Liddle and Rama Joshi (1986) and Vina Mazumdar (1976), the class-caste bias of the early women's movement impacted the kind of issues taken up for 'change'. The issues of concern were those that largely impacted the higher castes and middle classes such as widow remarriage, dowry, polygamy and property rights. Besides, the larger question was always the 'national' during this phase and if the women's question got addressed it might have been because it was seen to enhance the larger cause. For example, women's suffrage meant an increase in 'Indian' representation which no doubt would be in the longer run unfavourable to the British.

It must be noted that while issues that meant a change in the public life were accepted, the very notion of equal citizens in both caste and sex terms was not. Particularly, equality in the private sphere was not accepted. Any change that would threaten the Indian male privilege or position in the private sphere was left unchanged such as, for example, inheritance rights, issues relating to domestic violence, etc.

Jana Matson Everett (1981: 155-62) discusses how issues which critiqued the domestic or private lives such as marriage and inheritance faced much resistance while issues concerning political or economic life such as suffrage and employment were received with less resistance from the male population in pre-Independent India. The sections of the Hindu Code Bill which talked of equal property rights to wives, daughters and widows, the sections that banned polygamy, legalised inter-caste marriages and made divorce possible on certain grounds were not accepted. Even the following statement that existed in the draft '*the State shall endeavour to secure that marriage shall be based only on the mutual consent of both sexes and shall be maintained through mutual cooperation, with the equal rights of husband and wife as a basis*' never saw its place in the Constitution. The Hindu Code Bill represented a challenge to male domination, not to British colonialism; therefore, it was not received well.

4.2. Women's Participation in the Struggle for Independence

The following quote from Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru's *Discovery of India* best illustrates the role of women in the struggle for Independence:

Most of us menfolk were in prison. And then a remarkable thing happened. Our women came to the front and took charge of the struggle. Women had always been there, of course, but now there was an avalanche of them, which took not only the British government but their own menfolk by surprise. Here were these women, women of the upper or middle classes, leading sheltered lives in their homes, peasant women, working class women, rich women, poor women, pouring out in their tens of thousands in defiance of government order and police lathi (2003: 29).

The liberal ideas of the individual right to freedom and equality were particularly championed by Mahatma Gandhi and that laid the foundations of what later developed within the women's movement as autonomous women's organisations fostering similar aims of self-determination and independence. It was during this period that we have clear records of women's participation in struggle, although the enemy at that time was colonialism and not patriarchy. In the early years, however, Gandhi's definition of women's nature and role in the freedom struggle was deep rooted in Hindu patriarchy. By the 1920s, however, he began acknowledging the important role women could play in the struggle for freedom, and called women to participate in the civil disobedience movement. Women's participation was not without restrictions, as politics dealt with the public life making it 'unsuitable' for women. Radha Kumar (1993) has prepared an excellent documentation of women's political participation through involvement in the 'Rights Movement' during this period to the 1990s in her book *The History of Doing*. What is immediately striking to any reader is the fact that names of exemplary women leaders of our past and their specific involvements and experiences are documented to illustrate the significant role played by women in the nationalist and anti-colonial struggle.

Women criticized their exclusion in the salt satyagraha led by Gandhi (ibid.) which subsequently led to Gandhi's reconsideration of his view against women's participation in 1930. About the civil disobedience movement Gandhi wrote 'the women in India tore down the purdah and came forward to work for the nation. They saw that the country demanded something more than their looking after their homes ...' (Gandhi 1954: 18). Some of the names of women who were involved in satyagrahas against colonial rule

subsequently were Sarojini Naidu, Lado Rani Zutshi, Rani Gudiallo, Kamala Nehru, Hansa Mehta, Anantikabai Gokhale, Satyavati, Parvathibai, Rukmini Lakshmiapaty, Lilavati Munshi, Durgabai Deshmukh and Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya - to name just a few as thousands of women joined in the manufacturing and selling of salt all over the country. This is remembered as the turning point for women's participation in struggle. Talking of the incident (of April 6, 1930), Radha Kumar (1993: 78) says 'On that memorable day thousands of women strode down to the sea like proud warriors. But instead of weapons, they bore pitchers of clay, brass and copper; and, instead of uniforms, the simple cotton saris of village India'. The reform and nationalist movements in India saw the growth of liberalism and in many ways marked the beginning of ideas of individual freedom and equality. Of all the leaders and reformers, Gandhi was most forceful in his conviction that women should and have the right to individuality and the freedom from violation of their personal dignity.

Women's organisations such as Desh Sevika Sangh, Nari Satyagraha Samiti, Mahila Rashtriya Sangh, Ladies Picketing Board, Stri Swarajya Sangh and Swayam Sevika Sangh began mushrooming at this time to organise the mass boycott of foreign cloth and liquor (ibid.: 79). The strategy of non-violence at this time became the standard protest tactic as the government continued with *lathi* charges and mass arrests. When women were jailed, feelings of solidarity developed between women satyagrahis of different classes, linguistic and caste backgrounds. In 1954, Gandhi wrote about women's participation in satyagraha thus: 'It is given her to teach the art of peace to the warring world thirsting for that nectar. She can become the leader in satyagraha which does not require the learning that books give but does require the stout heart that comes from suffering and faith' (Gandhi 1954: 27). But the protest that women participated in was not always non-violent (Kumar 1993: 86). It must be mentioned here that, although the ideas of individual freedom propagated by the reform and nationalist movements was accepted by women in their personal and organisational lives, they did meet with resistance from society and even their own families (Gandhi and Shah 1992: 308).

4.3. The Western vs Ethnic Critique of the Indian Women's Movement

Mainstream history texts in India link the social reform movement of the 19th century with the dominating British presence in India. Maybe the root of this linkage of social change to a 'western' colonial critique of ethnic cultures lies in the memory of imperialism. With colonial rule came the critique of local practices such as caste system, polytheism, idolatry, animism, purdah, child marriage and sati. These customs were held by the British as 'primitive' and 'barbaric' aspects of Hindu society that had to be changed. This could have led to resistance from local societies, particularly the revivalist nationalists to this imposed change of 'Indian tradition' by imperialism (Nandy 1983). Shaila Desouza (2003) has shown how colonialism is sometimes the cause for the persistence of traditions resulting from indigenous resistance and awakened consciousness of identity, due to the perception of threat from this external 'force'. This perception of 'social change' as being of western origin could have percolated down to the women's movement in particular as it demands for social transformation through its struggle for equality.

From as far back as is traceable within the women's movement, this dilemma has existed. The movement has been concerned with the politics of social change and has therefore necessarily had to deal with issues not only concerning patriarchal relations but also that of cultural practices, social values and political and economic structures. Change is often viewed in conflict with 'tradition' no matter how invented this very concept itself might be. There is a strong belief in most societies that anything that has earned itself the name 'tradition' has stood the test of time and, therefore, has several benefits that explain its persistence. This is another argument against change. More generally speaking, any critique of the oppressive institutional structures within Indian culture runs the risk of being labelled 'western', 'alien' and even 'anti-national'.

Then there is the whole issue of 'feminism' itself. Even within the movement there are some who have disassociated themselves from the term 'feminist' (see, for instance Kishwar 1991). Others (see Bhasin and Khan 1986; Chauduri 2005; Beasley 1999) have clarified that "'feminism' stands for universal sisterhood in the demand for women's rights and in protest against oppression and exploitation. While the western origin of the term is not denied, the concept is not un-Indian. While accusations of this kind are

common against the women's movement, it is difficult to accept that these accusations are not without a strong patriarchal bias as other concepts such as 'democracy', 'socialism' and 'Marxism' have been freely borrowed from the west without having to face the continual barrage of being alien and 'anti-national'.

Although India is proudly the largest democracy and has several testaments in history to our involvement with concepts of equality having it clearly included in the Indian Constitution as well, there was and continues to be a debate on the Indian-ness of the women's movement when the demand of the women's movement is also for 'equality'. Whether or not the women's involvement in a campaign for equality and rights was a product of 'western influence' was a nationalist concern (Chatterjee 1989). Indian women were seen as the embodiment of 'spiritual values' and the 'essence' of Indian cultural heritage and, therefore, its preservation was seen as prime in the protest against colonialism and western domination. To combat the attacks on the movement as being an alien concept to India culture, feminists have tried to combat the attacks in various ways '... ranging from a rejection of everything Western to a more strategic and selective engagement with Indian tradition itself' (Niranjana 2001: 279). There have been occasions when women's organisations have felt it necessary then to highlight the proximity of their ideas to traditional Indian views while at the same time being critical of oppressive traditional structures. The women's movement has tried to be conscious of not perpetuating a stereotype in its celebration of the power of the Indian woman as 'goddess', 'Sita', 'stree-shakti', 'mother India', etc.

In the initial years of the growth of the autonomous women's movement, the proliferation of organisations was noticed in urban India. This coupled with the fact that campaign material, posters and handouts were in the English language resulted in accusations that the women's movement did not reach out to the masses in India and in the reiteration of the argument that feminism was a western concept. Even today, however, there remains a section of Indian society that considers the views of the women's movement as being western and unsuitable in the Indian context.

Then the kind of work that the women's organisations were doing and the nature of issues that were being taken up were seen as being anti-men, disrupting to the family unit, breaking traditional family structures, etc. When the women's movement began to

focus on the private sphere, the domestic relationship between spouses, family violence, marital rape, and when women voiced a protest against dowry and other oppressive social practices, demanded property rights, provided shelters for women victims of violent marriages, etc., the movement was up against further resistance. The growth of non-governmental organisations, the large funds now available to them, and the 'professionalisation' of activism, have only added fuel to the fire.

The current developments in the Indian political scenario, namely, the entry of Hindutva, fundamentalism, communalism, caste and religious conflicts, and the new economic policy of liberalization, privatization and globalization the western versus ethnic debate has taken on new forms. New challenges face the women's movement as the language of the movement has been appropriated by political parties including the extreme Right while at the same time there is a glorifying of the traditional Indian woman stereotype as 'stree-shakti'. The contradictions these images pose make it difficult to pin down the ideology behind the voices. Identity politics has taken on a new meaning while the women's movement continues to face the onslaught of attack.

4.4. Post-Independent India

According to Vina Mazumdar (1985: 4), after Indian independence, 'for all practical purposes, the women's question disappeared from the public arena for ... over twenty years'. With the Constitution guaranteeing 'equality' to all citizens irrespective of caste, creed or gender (Articles 14 and 16), the need for the same demand from the women's movement seemed redundant. Then the new government development programmes temporarily silenced the militant feelings of unrest that prevailed pre-independence. However, from the mid 1960s onwards, we see the birth of new socio-political movements as poverty and unemployment were widespread and people grew disillusioned with government development policies, the prevalent economic rights, land rights and the price rise. India saw a series of struggles and peasant movements in the early 1970s such as the anti-price-rise agitation in Bombay and Gujarat between 1972 and 1975 and the Chipko Movement which began in 1973. Of particular importance to the women's movement were the agitations such as the Shahada agitation and the subsequent formation of the Shramik Sangatana in the 1970s of the Bhil (tribal) landless labourers

against the exploitative landlords which was triggered off after the rape of two Bhil women. Radha Kumar (1993: 100) describes the militant role played by women in this agitation: 'They led the demonstrations, invented and shouted militant slogans, sang revolutionary songs and mobilized the masses. They went from hut to hut to agitate the men and persuade them of the necessity to join the Shramik Sangatana.' The problem of family violence, wife beating and alcoholism became issues of grave concern around this time and the strategy of retaliation was adopted.

The Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) movement in Ahmedabad led by Ela Bhatt, which was a sort of pioneering women's trade union movement that began in 1972, was another such landmark in the history of the contemporary women's movement. Women involved in various trades in the informal sector were brought together by their shared experiences such as low earnings, harassment at home, harassment by contractors and the police, poor work conditions, non-recognition of their labour to list just a few. Apart from collective bargaining, the movement strove to improve working conditions through training.

The Nav Nirman movement of 1974, which began as a student movement in Gujarat, chiefly against corruption, was another such turning point in the history of agitations for 'rights' and 'lokniti' (people's rule of law). Influenced by concepts of 'revolution', the movement critiqued the caste system and religious rituals. Besides involvement in political and economic issues it was also concerned with those that were considered private such as family violence, domestic roles and challenged patriarchal stereotypes.

The Progressive Organisation of Women (POW), developed in Hyderabad in the year 1974, worked towards organising women against gender oppressive structures in society, namely, the sexual division of labour and the culture that rationalised this discrimination. The organisation promoted the ideology of 'equality' and opposed the economic dependence of women on men.

4.5. 'Towards Equality' Report: A New Beginning

Conceding to the representations made by the international women's movement, the United Nations declared 1975–1985 as the International Decade of the Woman and

organised the World Conference on Women in Mexico (1975). The *World Plan of Action* formulated during the Conference stressed the need for research, documentation and analyses into processes in society that create structures of gender inequalities. In India, the National Committee on the Status of Women had been set up to examine the status of women in the country and to investigate into the extent to which the constitutional and legal provisions had impacted on women's status including their employment and education. The Committee was the first major attempt to review and evaluate data on various aspects of women's status. It was also empowered to comment on the directions of change in women's roles, rights and opportunities due to development.

The Committee came out with its findings in the form of a report, popularly known as the *Towards Equality* Report (1974), which became a major landmark for the women's movement. The beginnings of the women's movement in India, has often been traced back to this report. The report revealed the deplorable condition of women in the country evident from demographic data, an analysis of the socio-cultural conditions prevalent, the legal provisions and safeguards, economic role played by women in all sectors, women's access to education, political participation, the policies and programmes for welfare and development, the impact of mass media, etc. The report also made several recommendations which included stressing the important role of the State and the community in the achievement of 'gender equality'. It highlighted the need for a concerted effort to eradicate oppressive practices such as dowry, polygamy, bigamy, child marriage, ostentatious expenditure on weddings, and it emphasised the need for a campaign on legal awareness, the provisions of crèches, better working conditions for women including equal remuneration for equal work, the compulsory registration of marriages, law reform on aspects concerning divorce, maintenance, inheritance, adoption, guardianship maternity benefits, the universalisation of education, etc. The report reiterated the constitutional goal of a Uniform Civil Code for the country.

It might be pertinent to say, albeit briefly, at this juncture, that much of these recommendations are yet to see the light and there remains much to be implemented although a quarter century has passed. The report of the National Commission for Women in 2002, *Towards Equality: The Unfinished Agenda, the Status of Women in India 2001* laments this (GOI 2002).

4.6. Birth of the 'Autonomous' Women's Movement

'Autonomy' was not a new concept in India's political scenario in the 1970s, as India had already experienced the influence of liberalism on the reform and nationalist movements. Although we have already traced the origins of the autonomous women's movement to the period of Gandhi, when the concepts of freedom, independence and equality were being championed, post-1975 saw the growth of 'autonomous' women's organisations with expanding base in both urban and rural India. In spite of the existing familiarity with the idea of assertion of autonomy, the autonomous women's groups were largely denigrated in the larger Indian society as being 'anti-male' and were even viewed by the left parties as being separatist. This is despite the fact that many of these organisations did ally themselves with the Left parties and trade unions while maintaining at the same time their distinction on the ground that the other organisations were patriarchal in their structure. There was, therefore, a tension which invariably developed between the party or main body and the 'wing'.

These organisations particularly in the towns and cities had a specific 'feminist' focus and there were attempts by women's groups that were dissatisfied with their marginalization as well as the hierarchy and bureaucracy they experienced with organisations that they had had affiliation to, to create alternate and more decentralized organisation structures. These organisations rejected formal structure and traditional leadership styles and despite having no prototype to follow, they experimented with leaderless collectives with decision making by consensus, a volunteering of tasks and rotation of responsibility. 'The variety of organisations usually listed as belonging to the present phase of the IWM are support groups, agitational groups, grassroots groups, wings of political parties, professional women's groups and research and documentation centres' (Gandhi and Shah 1992: 274). Several of these organisations did not have any party affiliations, even if individual members did have party connections. Besides, most of these organisations had no formal hierarchical structure. 'Most of the women's groups, new or old, service or agitational, had to opt for an organisational structure which best suited their politics' (ibid.: 274). Gandhi and Shah, however, state that it is mainly women's groups which have seriously tried to work out alternative organisational structures based on the principles of decentralization and collective participation (ibid.:

275). But these groups were 'mainly urban based' and formed a small part of the IWM but their existence was important as they made a political statement and projected a vision of an alternative (ibid.: 285). We also see nation-wide campaigns beginning in the 1980s on issues such as dowry and rape (which led to the formation of the Forum Against Rape and later the Forum Against Oppression of Women (FAOW), following the Supreme Court judgement in the Mathura case in the late 1970s which brought isolated protests across the country together with one voice on the issue of violence against women. The main focus of this campaign against rape was to create awareness and to lobby for a change in the existing laws.

What probably made women activists of the 1980s more amenable to submerging their political differences and making common cause in the 'autonomous' movement was the realisation that no political party had understood or realised the latent militancy and consciousness of women which had so resoundingly revealed itself throughout the 1970s. Perhaps it was necessary for women to distance themselves from traditional, accepted theories and practices, draw on each other's political experiences, to go back to the subjective and rethink their positions and actions (ibid.: 287).

Around the country, in the early 1980s, women's groups were formed in protest against the rising incidence of dowry deaths and other forms of violence against women. Some like Saheli, which was formed in 1981, were formed by women who had been involved with Left parties and socialist formations and who had experienced marginalization within those groups which also lacked focus on women's issues (Saheli 2006: 7). Saheli and FAOW are examples of organisations that remained committed to functioning without a hierarchical structure through collective activity and consciousness raising. We will discuss these two organisations in some detail in Chapter 9, when we attempt to draw comparative insights with Bailancho Saad, the Women's Collective in Goa.

Other issues which saw national-level collaborations were the issue of Sati following Roop Kanwar's immolation in 1987, the Muslim Women's Bill in 1986, alcoholism, wife-beating, sexual harassment, etc. (Kumar 1993). Women's organisations also got very involved in environment crises such as the Bhopal Gas Tragedy of 1985. At this time, analysis of women's oppression took on a caste and class perspective. Some of these 'autonomous' organisations aimed not only at creating awareness on the issues, but

also to provide women with alternate support structures. Legal aid, counselling, short-stay homes were part of the work of some of these women's organisations.

The movement has come a long way, no doubt. But the struggle is far from over. Today the battle the movement is fighting is against the forces which site culture as the reason for policing women's sexuality, curb women's freedom and try to undo the work that has been achieved by the women's movement until now. Rising communalism, the possible effects of economic reforms on women's position, the issue around the increasing violence in our society may have roots in the past but have new emanations today for the women's movement. The co-option of the language of the movement by not only the government but by the fundamentalists has made the situation not only difficult but daunting. Besides, large funding, now available to the groups, has in many cases influenced the programmes and research priorities. Many organisations have moved from demands of radical change to a dilution or compromise of their earlier political position. However, one noteworthy feature of the contemporary women's movement is that it draws its resources from the experiences of diverse groups of women.

The most illustrative example of the appropriation of the language of the movement is in connection with women's health and the official policies to deal with it. Right up to the 1990s, the prime agenda of India's family health and welfare programme was to increase the number of women who were sterilized and to motivate 'eligible' women to use family planning methods (that is, those between 15 and 45 years). Population control was the focus even at the cost of neglecting other health issues. Even the name of the health policy was indicative of its agenda. It was called *Family Planning*. Then, it was changed to *Family Welfare*. This became *Safe Motherhood and Child Survival* programme and then the *Reproductive and Child Health* programme which included also in its framework a *Community Needs Assessment*. This, no doubt, was to attract less criticism from the women's movement that had become quite critical about the androcentric and blinkered understanding of health and wellbeing. It was in 1994, after the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), Cairo which was influenced by the demands of the women's movement for a more holistic approach to health, that a need for global change to health policy was articulated. A total of 179 countries ratified the resolutions of the ICPD of which India was one. These resolutions

thus facilitated a shift in the 'stated' focus of health policy from population control to reproductive health and rights. Shaila Desouza (2006) shows how this was just a change in nomenclature.

4.7. Women's Studies

Responding to both the findings of the *Towards Equality Report* (GOI 1974) and the United Nation's call for action, the Government of India drew up the *Plan of Action* for the country. Research was highlighted as a strategy to expose the social structures/processes in the way of gender equality. The Indian Council of Social Science Research pioneered research in this area. Following the 'Towards Equality' report, a number of micro-studies were conducted all over the country which paved the way for the emergence of the new area, 'Women's Studies', in the Indian university system beginning in 1975. The rationale behind this new area of study was to make university education more relevant to social realities prevalent in society with a clear commitment to gender equality and secular values.

The 1st National Conference on Women's Studies was held in 1981 and it stressed the need for establishment of Women's Studies at universities. At this time there were only a few Women's Studies centres at universities like the Research Centre for Women's Studies at the SNDT Women's University, Mumbai and the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, also in Mumbai. Due primarily to the struggles of the women's movement in the mid 1970s, the Women's Studies centres/programmes within institutions of higher education and research expanded. The University Grants Commission, under the chairpersonship of Dr. Madhuri Shah, introduced Women's Studies in the universities with a mandate which included: research, teaching, extension, documentation, dissemination, and advocacy. While these centres were largely envisaged as research and documentation centres which would provide a database for policy intervention, they did have diverse histories and trajectories for growth. In the State of Goa, the University sent a proposal to the University Grants Commission for funding a Centre for Women's Studies and a centre was established in 1988.

Through Women's Studies we would see the crystallization of the educational philosophy that higher education had hoped to achieve since Independence (Desai et al.

1999), namely, making knowledge generation and transmission sensitive to the needs of the new 'egalitarian' society. However, the demands of the international and national women's movement influenced the agenda of these centres.

We see a whole host of writings from these Women's Studies centres from across the country which is evident from the papers at the national conferences held almost every three years by the Indian Association for Women's Studies.

Feminist 'theory' has always resisted the implied dichotomy with 'practice', and has therefore continuously been in a dynamic relationship with politics on the ground. Thus, there are very real stakes involved, and the debates and disagreements within the women's movement in India are as significant as its opposition to what it struggles against. Nevertheless, despite these complex internal critiques, it is possible to discern a shared concern about the ways in which 'gender' gets defined, institutionalized and mobilized in perpetuating inequality and injustice. It is this concern which marks out a field which can be called feminist politics (Menon 1999: 32).

Some of the specific features of Women's Studies have been (a) to incorporate action into the concept of Women's Studies, (b) to link academics and the grass root level issues, (c) to sensitize students and members of the public on gender issues, and (d) to involve men in the process of change.

Women's Studies, has largely been acknowledged as the 'academic arm' of the women's movement with a clear political commitment to establish gender equality in society. It is this 'commitment' which is the foundation of the area which sets it apart from most other disciplines as well as defines its engagement with 'change' and, its critical perspective of mainstream scholarship. Women's Studies scholarship strives to validate women's everyday experiences and women's voices which have for long remained silenced.

The 1990s saw a spate of Women's Studies publications with the establishment of a number of feminist publication houses and the establishment of a separate section on gender by mainstream publishing houses, for example, journals like the *Economic and Political Weekly* since 1985 published Reviews of Women's Studies in its April and October issues. Unfortunately for many of the centres, their activities consisted of setting up of documentation centres, publishing newsletters or journals and doing some gender training which replaced real grass-root mobilization and 'extension'.

There have been dramatic shifts that have occurred in the last three decades within Women's Studies as a result of feminist politics. In the 1970s, Women's Studies engaged with understanding the roots of women's subordination. That is, is gender biologically determined or rooted in the process of socialization? What was the economic basis of women's subordination and sexual division of work? Could women's subordination be traced to production or reproduction systems? Based on the various ideological and theoretical perspectives that existed within feminist discourse, various different explanations were offered. Broadly, however, it identified the prevailing production, reproduction and sexual relationships as the foundational basis of women's inequalities.

In the 1980s, caste, class and ethnic issues became a major concern as is reflected in the response to cases such as the Shah Bano Case, the sati of Roop Kanwar, the Mandal agitation, etc. Women's Studies scholarship indicated the complex ways in which these diverse identities intersect in the lives of women. Women's Studies scholarship at this time reached new theoretical heights, it has analysed the concepts of sex, gender, power, identity, agency, etc. and uncovered the prevailing differences among women. Women's Studies scholarship now opted for an analysis of the local, culturally specific and particular, drawing close, therefore, to post-structural/postmodern positions.

In the 1990s, the women's movement saw new challenges with the socio-economic and political realities, the free market economy and growing religious conservatism. The concept of welfare state had been eroded. Overwhelming poverty of local communities, particularly the feminization of poverty was a prime concern of the women's movement. Focus now shifted to people's livelihood rights due to the destruction of the environment, religious fundamentalism and its 'use', 'misuse' and 'abuse' of women. The Gujarat riots, for instance, was a case in point. Questions were raised within the movement about women's participation in communal violence and their articulation of retrograde ideologies. Women's Studies Centres themselves were faced with the challenge of being renamed as Women and Family Studies in a move from the University Grants Commission against which it struggled.

However, the divergent feminist positions that exist within Women's Studies pose a real challenge to the area of study given its commitment to values of secularism and

equity. Women are divided by their class/caste/religious identities and have diverse political leanings. How then can Women Studies accommodate differences without undermining its foundational values as an area of study?

4.8. Law and its relationship with Empowerment

Much hope has been pinned on law and legal reform by feminists in India in the early period of their struggle for gender equality, particularly those influenced by the liberal ideology. They have looked towards the law as a protective machinery for women's rights as well as a change agent through which conventional roles and practices in society can be questioned and transformed.

According to Mazumdar (2000), the women's movement's engagement with the law can be divided into two wings, namely, the 'Rights Wing' and the 'Empowerment Wing'. The former refers to those who have targeted their demands on the state and seek legislative mandates for women's advancement, while the latter refers to those who place more emphasis on empowering women from 'within' themselves. However, one cannot make such a clear distinction in reality, as even within those who might largely fall under the first group, namely, the 'Rights Wing', there might be sections that question the implementation of the very law that has been demanded. Therefore, another school of thought has co-existed within the women's movement that has questioned the role of the law in social transformation (Desouza 2007). Some feminists have taken the debate a step further to attribute the law with being a symbol of patriarchy. They argue that most often the law has been framed by men, the legal interpretations have been male centric, there are prevailing gender biases amongst the law enforcers and gender stereotypes built into the courtroom procedures which, therefore, make one's confidence in the law seem misplaced.

While trying to understand the relationship of the women's movement with law, it is important also to examine the relationship between the women's movement and the State. This has been rather ambivalent. At times seen as a friend, at other times a foe, sometimes looked towards as benefactor, at other times an equal partner and not seldom also as an adversary. The women's movement has, in the past, looked towards the state for welfare programmes for women, has made demands for positive discrimination for

women while at the same time has been wary of the designs of the State. The reason for the latter might have been the patriarchal nature of the State. On welfare issues there has been on and off cooperation from the State. However, in recent years, the movement has become fearful of the co-option of members of the women's movement and of the language of the movement which has meant loss of bargaining power of the movement.

Much debate within the movement has been generated over the demand for a gender-just family code. The earlier position was an almost unanimous consensus in favour of a common civil code in place of the personal laws that regulate private or civil matters. Today this demand has been replaced by a demand for reform of existing laws rather than an overhaul. Goa's experience with the Common Civil Code has no small role to play in this transformation coupled with the present political tensions which have given a different colour to the issue of 'identity politics'.

The women's movement's experience with the law over the past twenty years, its ineffective and often ambivalent nature, has lowered the expectations of expeditious and adequate justice. According to Ritu Menon, 'this does not mean that we discontinue working for legal change in order to claim women's rights – by no means; it does mean that we look beyond the law to effect even minimal change' (2005: no page number). However, more generally speaking, the women's movement in India does hold legal safeguards and rights as important ingredients for the achievement of gender equality and failure of the law to achieve its purpose has been ascribed to either lack of awareness of the provisions of the law, poor access to the law (including economic restrictions), faulty implementation mechanisms, etc. The law prohibiting Pre-Natal Diagnostic Tests and the Domestic Violence Act of 2005 are examples of laws that have come into existence due to pressure from the women's movement but which are yet to be implemented in the spirit and letter under which they were drafted.

The 73rd and the 74th Amendments to the Constitution, however, are examples of legislations that have transformed the lives of women not only in this generation but has given women a reason to be optimistic for a more egalitarian society in future. With the provision of 33 per cent reservation of seats in panchayat and nagarpalika bodies, women at the so called 'grass roots' of Indian society have been given the opportunity to be in formal decision making and governance. However, the fact that, the Women's

Reservation Bill or the 81st Constitutional Amendment Bill 1996, which seeks to reserve one-third seats for women in Parliament, is yet to see enactment is indicative that we are still up against resistance.

4.9. Birth of the Women's Movement in Goa

Women in Goa have been involved in social action in the past and have played an important role in the liberation movement. However, until the 1980s, apart from branches of all-India organisations like the All India Women's Conference, and two small local organisations, the Women Writers Organisation and the All Goa Muslim Women's Association (which have now ceased to exist), there were no organised women's activist groups or collectives in Goa. It has often been said that there was no women's movement in Goa prior to the formation of Bailancho Saad which came into existence in 1986 and was the first women's collective in the State. In fact, the women's movement only became visible with the setting up of Bailancho Saad as only post-1986 we see press reports on women's concerns and these were press notes of Bailancho Saad. We will discuss the origin of Bailancho Saad in more detail in the next chapter. However, Bailancho Saad continued to be the only women's activist group right up to October 1992 when Auda Viegas founded the Bailancho Ekvott which was primarily aimed at political empowerment of women. Although Bailancho Ekvott like Bailancho Saad was working towards women's empowerment, the organisation differed from Bailancho Saad in that it had a hierarchical organisation structure. Auda Viegas was the President of the organisation. Later in March 1993, Bailancho Manch was launched by Caroline Colasso and Vidhya Prabhu. Bailancho Manch was more similar to Bailancho Saad as its aims and objectives were similar and it was planned as a collective which again was similar to Bailancho Saad. It may be pertinent to mention here that Caroline Colasso had been an active member of Bailancho Saad prior to the setting up of Bailancho Manch.

In the mid 1990s several other initiatives for women sprang up all over Goa though nearly a decade later than they did in the rest of the country. Some of the other initiatives for women that were established, which, however, were not activist in nature, were Women's Cell set up by Diocesan Cell for Social Action, Nari Anyaya Nirmulan Samiti (started by Adv. Ashraf Agha who was an advocate for the re-enforcement of the

Shariat Act in Goa and therefore never considered as an advocate of women's empowerment by other women's activist groups and NGO's), Shakti, Women Entrepreneurs Association, Family Service Centre, Mahila Mandals, and groups that were associated with Bailancho Saad through their outreach programmes in the villages for example, Pilgaon Yuvak Kala Manch, Zuwarwada Mahila Samiti and Cakra Nagrik Nivas Samiti.

Today it is not possible to list all the interventions for women as there are not only numerous NGOs, Mahila Mandals, self help groups, village-based groups but also college cells, groups backed by some political parties and also initiatives by individual women who do not belonging to any organisation. In many ways this says a lot for the women's movement in the State of Goa and the way it has grown since the inception of Bailancho Saad in 1986. We shall look more closely at the contribution and work of Bailancho Saad in the subsequent chapters.

4.10. Times and Tides of Change within the Women's Movement

Today, when we discuss the women's movement or women's collective action, we should consider the contribution of feminists scholars as well as the widespread and growing involvement of women in global politics, the participation of women in popular movements together with men, the ongoing women's specific demands and the work of women in their 'autonomous' and 'not so autonomous' organisations. Women's struggles today and in the past have not only been about women-specific needs and concerns. In the same breath we can also say that none of the issues of the women's movement in the 1970s and 1980s in India have ceased to be concerns of the women's movement today. In fact, some issues have become more complex with the developments that have taken place in our society such as the growing communalism, globalization, militarism, etc. However, it does seem that the activism and the level of engagement with the struggle have under gone so much change that it does seem like a thing of the past. While saying this, on the one hand, one cannot, on the other hand, say with absolute confidence that this is not the voice of a nostalgic activist.

What is noticeable through this mapping exercise is that the recording of the women's movement began with the listing of 'exceptional' women and their experiences.

As we progress chronologically, we see the number of such 'exceptional' women increasing and then finally it has become next to impossible to list out those who have contributed and are contributing to the women's movement today. This implies above all else that the movement has grown in size and scope of its activities. Then the volume of literature that is available today on the women's movement can be seen as an indicator of the success of the movement in carving a niche in society and creating space for women's voice.

Looking back at the last four decades we can say with a fair amount of certainty that women's position in Indian society has changed. This change has been to women's advantage. There has no doubt been a wider recognition of women's rights, several steps taken towards equality among genders, a greater sensitivity towards gender discrimination, etc. The women's movement comprising of autonomous women's organisations, other women's groups, women's studies centres, etc., has played no small role in the bringing about of this change. We can, therefore, say without hesitation that, over the last 40 years, the women's movement has affected the socio-political environment in India. However, this change has been at a gradual pace and has even affected certain sections more than others leaving yet much to be desired.

Despite the current fragmentation, women's groups have come together with one concerted voice on certain issues such as violence, health, employment conditions including wages, legal rights and law reform. The issues today are sexual harassment at the work place, the violence of development, caste and communal violence, lobbying for increased political participation of women in the highest levels of decision-making, etc. The list will go on as long as there is a women's movement. Indu Agnihotri and Vina Mazumdar (1995) have illustrated how the women's movement has not been static but has been compelled to respond to changing political, social, economic and other national realities and not exclusively influenced by women-specific issues and problems.