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Reflections from Contemporary Women's Movements in India

Manisha Desai

> Our position was: rape is an instrument of power used by all men to keep all women in their place, all women are potential rape victims, irrespective of age, manner of dressing or conduct. Rape is not a spontaneous outburst of lust and passion but a preplanned, premeditated action of violence and humiliation, it is an extreme manifestation of the unequal power relationship between men and women.

> The experience of investigating rape cases made us realize the complexity of the issues and its entanglement not only with the patriarchal structures of a community but also with the class and caste structures. A support to the women could not be evolved outside this basic framework.

> (Flavia Agnes, 'The anti-rape campaign')

The above two passages, written a decade apart (see Agnes, 1993: 132, 137), reflect what Anna Marie Smith (1994), following Stuart Hall (1988), calls two moments in the discourses of new social movements: one, the moment of making liberatory demands based on essentialized identities and, the second, a complementary yet contradictory moment, when such essentialized identities are deconstructed to reveal multiple identities. Smith (1994: 173) sees these two moments 'not as separate phases, not as "incorrect/correct" alternatives, but as supplements, in a manner analogous to the relation between the metaphysics of presence and that of deconstruction'.

This dialectical perspective marks a departure from the common tendency of contemporary feminist theorists to favor one or the other side of the essential/constructed debate regarding the nature of political identities. For example, many post-colonial theorists, such as Chandra Mohanty (1988), problematize the category 'Third World women' and focus on revealing the theoretical and political dangers of essentialized, homogenized, victimized 'women'. By contrast, others (for example, Di Stefano, 1988; Hartsock, 1990) fear that such deconstruction in a deeply unequal world can only lead to a paralysis of action. Such a perceived opposition between the essentialists and social constructionists has led to a theoretical impasse, and also has weakened the ability of women's movements to challenge the rise of undemocratic forces in many parts of the world. In order to move beyond these unproductive oppositions, I analyse the contemporary women's movement in India to understand the implications of constructing and deconstructing the category 'women', and to outline an alternative way to understand and act around women's issues.

The contemporary women's movement in India, also called the autonomous women's movement, contained the two moments – the moment of making liberatory demands based on essentialized identities, and the complementary moment of deconstructing these identities – right from its beginning in the mid-1970s. These moments were a reflection of the activists' ideologies and their class background. The activists honed their political skills in 'non-party political formations', an Indian variant of new left groups in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Sethi and Kothari, 1983). In these groups the emphasis was on political autonomy from parties, participatory democracy and, most importantly, recognizing multiple sources of oppression such as class, gender, caste and religion. Given such an emphasis, a plurality of identities emerged as a staple of the Indian activists' political learning. Furthermore, most of the activists were urban, educated and middle class, while the women they worked with were often poor, rural and without formal education. These stark differences among women, in the same group, made activists wary of monolithic identities.

This intimate understanding of plurality, however, often remained theoretical: movement practices of seeking legal changes and providing services to abused women were based on such essence-claims as 'all women are oppressed because of their gender.' This essentialism does not diminish movement practices' value as expressions of resistance. It does, however, reduce the effectiveness of such practices as counter-hegemonic measures because they can easily be co-opted by mainstream institutions to support hegemonic ends. Moreover, the construction of the identity 'women' allowed left-affiliated groups within the movement, and fundamentalist forces outside the movement, to deconstruct it and thereby challenge the legitimacy of the autonomous women's movement.

What follows is a reflection on the consequences of such construction and deconstruction for the women's movement and to transnational feminist dialogues and practices. I begin by first analyzing the constructive efforts of the autonomous movement, then focus on the deconstructive efforts within and outside the movement, and finally outline alternative possibilities for feminist interventions.

'All Women are Oppressed because of their Gender'

The autonomous women's movement began around 1974 in a latent manner[1] when women activists from various protest movements of the 1960s and early 1970s[2] began to meet in small groups. Formation of these women's groups was a response to several factors. The most important of these were the experiences of women activists in the protest movements. These included a gendered division of labor in the movement. Women activists addressed women's issues, while male activists worked on the more important class or

caste issues. Similarly, despite the emphasis on multiple sources of oppression, women's oppression was seen as secondary to class oppression.

At the same time that women activists were experiencing such treatment, they were reading Western feminist discourses, especially Marxist and socialist feminist theories, made available through their movement connections. While at first they questioned the relevance of this discourse to their realities, they soon recognized the importance of using some of the theories to address their own experiences in the movements. It was during this time that the Report of the National Committee on the Status of Women, set up by the Indian government in preparation for the 1975 International Women's Year, was published.

This document acted as a catalyst, leading to the formation of many informal women's groups in the country. It vividly and unequivocally portrayed the deteriorating conditions of women: low and declining female participation in the labor force, high unemployment and underemployment of women, an increasing literacy gap between men and women, and, most shocking of all, the declining sex ratio in favor of males (ICSSR, 1975). The Report attributed these developments to 'the process of modernization and uneven development that has deprived women of their traditional productive roles and protection . . . women have become devalued and subject to increased violence' (ICSSR, 1975: 72).

The newly formed informal women's groups functioned mainly as study circles in which women discussed alternative ways of understanding women's oppression 'autonomously' from class oppression. For women activists, autonomy meant organizational independence from political parties and other social/political organizations as well as theoretical autonomy of gender 'oppression, exploitation, injustice, and discrimination' from class, caste and religious inequalities (Patel, 1985: 16). Thus, women wanted to organize and lead the movement for women's liberation.

In 1975, International Women's Year, when women activists had just begun such deliberations, the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi declared a state of national emergency. Mrs Gandhi hoped that this would curb the numerous protests that rocked every sector of Indian society and challenged her authority. Because of the international context, however, and because women were not seen as a political threat, women's groups were allowed to organize, while workers, peasants and other groups had to stop all political mobilizations. What transformed the latent network of small women's groups into an active, highly visible nationwide movement was the political opportunity provided by the lifting of national emergency in 1977.

As soon as the emergency was lifted in 1977, reports of 'excesses', such as police beatings and rape of the poor and political activists, began to appear in the newspapers (Patel, 1985; Bakshi, 1986). In response to these reports, several civil liberties and democratic rights groups emerged in the country. Their main aim was to provide legal justice to the survivors of such atrocities (Rubin, 1987).

It was in this process of seeking legal justice that, in November 1979, four

law professors from the University of New Delhi came across the 1977 Supreme Court judgment in the Mathura case which had first come to trial in 1972 (Datar, 1981). In 1972, Mathura, a 14-year-old tribal girl, had been raped by two policemen while in police custody. The policemen were acquitted by a local court, indicted by the Bombay High Court and, again, acquitted by the Supreme Court in 1977 on the grounds that Mathura was not physically coerced – as evident from the lack of bruises on her body – and had a history of sexual activity (Bakshi and Patel, 1983).

The law professors were so outraged by the blatant injustice of the case that they wrote an open letter to the Supreme Court in November 1979, condemning the judgment, pointing out the legal flaws and the sexist bias, and demanding an immediate reopening of the case (Datar, 1981). They circulated copies of this letter to groups and activists all over India, seeking to pressure the Supreme Court into reopening the case.

The circulation of this letter led to the formation of new groups and launched the activist stage of the autonomous movement. Most of the autonomous groups arose at this time: for example, the Forum against Rape in Bombay, Saheli in New Delhi, Vimochana in Bangalore, and Chingari in Ahmedabad. In addition to activists from the previous movements, many of these groups also attracted middle-class professional women, academics and left party women. Besides rape, these groups also launched campaigns against dowry deaths,[3] wife-battering, sex-selective abortions, *sati*,[4] and violence against women during communal riots (Gandhi and Shah, 1991; Kumar, 1993).

Groups throughout the country followed a three-pronged strategy for all the campaigns. First, they organized protest marches in various cities and launched a public consciousness-raising campaign. Through slide shows, poster exhibitions, street theater and 'public shaming', they highlighted the various ways in which women are oppressed in Indian society. 'Public shaming' involved small groups of women going to a neighborhood where violence had occurred, condemning the act through a skit or street-play performance, and singing songs of women's liberation exhorting women and men in the neighborhood to take up the struggle. Sometimes there would be a follow-up but, given the small size of most groups and the high number of atrocities, consistent follow-up was difficult. As Kishwar and Vanita (1987) noted, groups acted as 'fire-fighters' without really doing much to prevent fires.

Secondly, women's groups sought changes to the legal system. Beginning with the rape case, groups across the country lobbied together to demand changes in the law as well as the practices of the criminal justice system. For example, the autonomous movement pressured the government into strengthening existing laws related to the prevention of rape, dowry death and *sati*. Influenced by the movement, the government also passed new legislation to prevent the use of amniocentesis for sex-selective abortions and to criminalize the death of any woman within seven years of marriage. In addition, many police departments in major cities developed relationships with women's groups to assist them in dealing with domestic violence and dowry deaths.

Activists, are, however, ambivalent about this legal reform strategy for it increases the power of an already powerful, patriarchal state to intervene in women's daily lives. As theorists such as Habermas (1981) and Melucci (1984) note, increasing state intervention in the lifeworld is one of the major reasons for the rise of many contemporary movements. Furthermore, despite the legal changes of the past decade, lack of implementation has meant a minimal impact on women's lives. Thus, the radical edge of legal reform can be easily subverted by the state.

Thirdly, in many cases the protest groups led to the formation of women's self-help groups that would provide more consistent help to women. Unlike the experience of women in the West, lack of resources prevented the formation of rape crisis centers and battered women's shelters. More importantly, however, given most activists' politicization in left-wing movements, they saw such centers as reformist – that is, doing 'band-aid' work – and not really engaged in the radical task of transforming society. Moreover, this strategy was co-opted by the state and other mainstream reform institutions, who did not share the radical commitment of women's liberation. This neutralized the militancy of the strategy in the eyes of the autonomous feminists. None the less, even without the demands of an organized network of victim services, and because of the urgency and needs of individual women, by the mid-1980s many groups felt that they were spending more time on 'case-work' than on consciousness-raising.

After a decade of providing services, activists found that it was not just the patriarchal family of the husband that was responsible for violence against women. The victims' natal families also contributed to it by not supporting women, either emotionally or materially, so that they could leave abusive situations and live independently or in the natal family. Women's groups came to be seen as the sole agency responsible for helping women resist abuse.

At a workshop (September 6, 1995) at the NGO Forum in Huairou, China, on 'Violence against Women in India', organizers emphasized the need to seek new answers. They noted that the old strategies were not working. Women's groups have neither the resources nor the ability to empower women on a long-term basis. Families, communities and governments have to become involved, not only in providing resources but in changing their attitudes and behaviors toward girls and women. Organizers also stressed the need for a new understanding of violence in the context of new transnational capital and cultural flows into the liberalizing Indian economy. For example, they indicated that there was an increase in violence against women as well as the gruesomeness of that violence. They linked this change to increasing consumerism and tendencies of the market to see women as commodities to be bought/sold, even destroyed, if they do not fulfill male desires.

The underlying assumption in all the campaigns against violence against women was that women experienced violence because of their gender. Such patriarchal oppression had to be fought autonomously from other oppressions. It could not merely be one of several issues vying for attention. This exclusive, or essential, understanding of violence against women can be seen in the position taken in the report of the National Conference on Women's Liberation in 1988 (p. 16).

> We started with the basic insight that violence is inherent in all social structures of society like class, caste, religion, ethnicity etc., and in the way the state controls people. However, within all those general structures of violence, women suffer violence in a gender specific way and patriarchal violence permeates and promotes other forms of violence.

This essentialized understanding is in part a consequence of the near total silence of previous movements on the issues of violence. Compounded with the seemingly all pervasive existence of violence in so many forms, this silence suggested that violence is universal to the female condition. Given the context in which the campaigns occurred, these essence claims were radical. Before the autonomous groups, violence against women, if acknowledged, was seen as an individual/private problem, not a social one. And those who did see it as a social problem attributed it to traditional, feudal values or the economic exploitation inherent in capitalism. For the autonomous women's movement, however, rape is 'a violation of a human right of a woman to have control over her body. It is not just a sexual offense, it is an exhibition and confirmation of power' (Abraham, 1983: 4).

Thus, naming a private trouble and turning it into a public issue, with structural origins not in class but in patriarchy, was indeed a radical, discursive step. It introduced a whole new language of patriarchy not only into movement politics, which were until then dominated by Marxist categories of class contradictions and economic exploitation, but also into the mainstream as well. Furthermore, as Bunting (1993: 12), following Spivak (1987) and Fuss (1989), argues, 'essentialism from a dominant position can perpetuate oppression while, as a means of challenging dominant ideologies, it can be necessary and persuasive.' Or, to paraphrase Audre Lorde, sometimes we need the master's tools to dismantle the master's house.

'The Simultaneity and Specificity of Women's Oppression'

While the identity 'women' allowed the autonomous movement to highlight violence against women in Indian public discourse and enabled many individual women to leave situations of abuse, it also allowed others, within and outside the movement, to deconstruct this very identity. The two major actors involved in this process were women of the left within the movement, and Hindu and Muslim fundamentalists outside the movement.

The deconstruction undertaken by left-affiliated women's groups – most of which are mass-based unions of industrial, agricultural and tribal women – highlights the middle-class and gender bias of the autonomous movement. Most left-affiliated activists refuse to identify as feminists and accuse the autonomous feminists of privileging patriarchy over class and caste, and of private violence against women over the public 'structural violence' of poverty.

Although the left-wing groups have also begun to address what they call

family issues, for example, dowry death and wife-battering, their main issues continue to be those of social oppression; that is, equal wages, right to land, health care, preventing environmental degradation, and alternative development. In the final analysis, for the left-affiliated groups, class contradiction is still primary and shapes the secondary sex contradiction. Thus, these activists deconstruct the autonomous movement's monolithic identity 'women', but replace it with their own homogeneous identity, the 'toiling women' of India: 'We have gathered here to discuss our problems as women and as rural poor . . . not only do we work twice as hard as men but we also do not get equal wages, no child care . . . we have to organize as women with other oppressed toilers in urban and rural areas.'[5]

Despite their claim of opposing the autonomous movement's class and gender bias, closer scrutiny reveals that what the left-wing activists find really problematic is the movement's emphasis on participatory democracy and multiple strategies of change. For example, at the National Women's Liberation Conference in 1988, activists from the left-wing groups complained: 'they [the autonomous feminists] emphasized group discussions to the exclusion of practically everything else, such as plenary sessions oriented towards articulating a common position' (Omvedt et al., 1988: 19).

The same activists further accused autonomous feminists of using 'group discussions as the main fora to spread their own concepts of patriarchy, class, religion, sexuality and so on among the mass of women, and were reluctant to submit these concepts to the dynamics of a mass movement' (Omvedt et al., 1988: 21). Finally, they lamented:

> consciously or unconsciously they consider themselves to be spearheading the feminist movement in India. Yet, in their autonomy they tend to make the women's question unpolitical and separated from the problems of class and state oppression which are central to the exploitation of toiling women. (Omvedt et al., 1988: 19)

For the left-wing activists, especially those from orthodox left-wing party organizations, the way to bring about social change is, primarily, through mass mobilization against the state and, only secondarily, through new structures and communities. It is clear that they are uneasy with the uncertain process orientation of the autonomous groups: ' Yet, collective organizing has its own necessities – including organizational structure, leadership, the foundation of a common programme or agenda for action and acceptance of a common strategy and at least some common discipline' (Omvedt et al., 1988: 22).

Most left-affiliated mass-based groups seem uncomfortable with democratic participation, fluid structures and varied strategies. Often, they disrupted group discussions at the 1988 and 1991 national conferences by insisting on one correct analysis and one correct strategy. Although not true of all grassroots groups, most are frustrated with the autonomous movement for not organizing mass-based groups and believing that discursive politics, legal changes, protest marches and individual services can bring about real change in the condition of women in India.

In contrast to the deconstruction of the left-wing groups, which at least

supports the goals of liberation, the deconstruction of religious fundamentalist forces not only blocks women's liberation but seeks to reverse the gains made by women. If the left-wing forces raise the specter of class, then the fundamentalist forces raise that of Western imperialism. Muslim and Hindu fundamentalist forces alike play the 'culture card' and accuse the autonomous feminists of being Westernized, upper-class women who do not speak for the masses of 'real' Indian women. For example, Hindu fundamentalists claim that the more spiritual Indian women would rather raise their children with the proper Hindu moral values than march on the streets for equal rights. Like the accusations leveled against Indian feminists at the turn of the century, contemporary anti-patriotic accusations are meant to stifle protest and protect the hegemony of Hindu men at home and in the public arena.

Playing the cultural card, both Hindu and Muslim fundamentalists were able to win significant victories in the late 1980s. In 1986, despite active mobilization by autonomous groups, the Muslim fundamentalist lobby was able to mobilize against the Supreme Court judgment in the Shah Bano case. Shah Bano is a 75-year-old Muslim woman who had been abandoned by her husband. Because under Muslim personal law[6] she is not entitled to maintenance, she sought legal redress under Indian criminal law which requires maintenance to prevent destitution among women. While the case was in court, her husband divorced her and returned her dowry which fulfilled his obligation under Muslim personal law. The Supreme Court ruled in her favor. It also lamented the injustices in Hindu and Muslim personal law and asked parliament to pass a common civil code. But, displaying the anti-Muslim sentiments common among many upper-caste Hindus, the judgment also focused on the 'backward' nature of Muslim personal laws that treated women so unjustly.

The judgment was criticized by feminists, liberals and Muslim fundamentalists for its anti-Muslim bias. But the fundamentalists proclaimed that 'Islam itself was under attack.' Given the rise of majority Hindu fundamentalism during this time, it is easy to understand this response from minorities. The proclamation launched a nationwide communal agitation against the verdict, which was seen as interference in religious personal laws, and against the anti-Muslim statements of the highest court in the land.

A Muslim member of parliament introduced the Muslim Women's Protection Bill as the only appropriate response to the judgment. This bill excludes Muslim women from the protection of civil laws in personal matters. The ruling Congress party, which had recently lost elections in Muslim-dominated constituencies, could not afford to alienate the important Muslim vote. Hence, despite the mobilization of the autonomous movement and other progressive forces and the constitutional guarantees of equality, the parliament passed the bill. In the communal unrest that ensued, Shah Bano was pressured to give up her rights and stand in support of her community.

This was a great setback for the autonomous movement, which until then had been very successful in passing pro-women legislation. It was also distressing that during this time the Hindu fundamentalists actually sided with

the autonomous movement in seeking a uniform civil code. Of course, the fundamentalist motivation was not equal legal protection for all women, but the opportunity to homogenize all laws under a nominally civil but actually Hindu law.

The Hindu fundamentalists' growing strength was soon evident when a year later, in 1987, 18-year-old Roop Kanwar, a Rajput woman, was forced to become a *sati* on the funeral pyre of her college-educated husband. While there have been incidences of *sati* in post-independent India, most of them in the state of Rajasthan, none attracted the attention this case did. Unlike others, this case occurred in an urban, educated, well-to-do family. Despite prior knowledge, the police did not act to prevent it. While such acts had been condemned by state politicians in the past, now they supported it as part of their ethnic heritage (Kumar, 1995).

When outraged women's groups and other liberal and secular groups protested this occurrence, Hindu fundamentalists mobilized a nationwide march in support of the 'honorable cultural and religious tradition of the Rajputs'. Feminists were portrayed as 'Westernists, colonialists, and cultural imperialists imposing crass, selfish market values' over women who draw their identity from noble, spiritual values. As supporters of the liberal values of equality and liberty, feminists were also seen as supporters of capitalist ideology (Kumar, 1994). In direct imitation of the Muslim strategy, Hindu fundamentalists cried that Hinduism was in danger from the 'pseudo-secular' state that believed in appeasing minority rights at the cost of the Hindus.

Although feminists were able to pressure the government to strengthen the existing anti-*sati* legislation, it was a bitter victory. Roop Kanwar's in-laws, who had coerced the young woman onto the pyre, remained free; among the supporters of the Hindu fundamentalists were large numbers of women. Since then, Hindu fundamentalists have been successful in mobilizing thousands of women around a monolithic, brahmanic Hindu identity in opposition to other religious identities, especially the Muslim identity. Hindu fundamentalist women encouraged the men who destroyed the Ayodhaya mosque in 1992 as well as participated in violent acts against Muslims during riots that followed the destruction of the mosque.

Thus, both Hindu and Muslim fundamentalists were able to challenge the feminist claims made on behalf of 'women'. Both groups could show that women from their communities supported the men of their communities and their religious and cultural practices, and did not support the 'pseudo-secular' feminists who made claims based on notions of equality derived from Western feminism. The feminists, they claimed, were not in touch with the 'real' women of India. This was particularly difficult for feminists to address as most of the autonomous groups are small, and composed of middle-class members and do not have a mass base of religiously identified support in either the Hindu or Muslim communities. Thus, it did appear that they were not speaking for 'real women' but for a highly select group.

The autonomous feminists have learned some painful lessons from the fundamentalist challenge. Among them is the need for the movement to engage in critical deconstruction. Thus, during the debate around the Muslim Women's Bill, feminists refused to be silenced by Muslim fundamentalists. First, they showed that a majority of the Muslims were opposed to this Bill and that the fundamentalists did not speak for all Muslims. Secondly, along with Muslim supporters, feminists noted that the Bill differentially undermined the Muslim communities' desire to be equal to other Indians by making Muslim women more unequal than other Indian women. Muslim men, however, were not as much affected because of the nature of personal law.

Similarly, during the *sati* incidence, feminists deconstructed the support of 'real' women for *sati*. For example, drawing upon interviews of women who took part in pro-*sati* demonstrations, feminists showed that these women supported the 'ideal' of *sati* but not the actual practice of *sati*. Furthermore, they showed that, like the feminists, most women who participated in the marches were also urban, upper-caste women. Moreover, feminists also mobilized support among rural and urban women in Rajasthan against *sati*.

In addition to such discursive dialogue with others, many feminists have begun to recognize the need to communicatively engage 'real women' (for example, Omvedt, 1993; Kumar, 1994). For example, Kishwar (1994) noted the need to work within communities to understand why most women support practices that activists oppose and to learn the reasons for resistance to change. Others have also expressed the need to engage women in the community and the 'need to develop methods which can sustain both our character [autonomous and participatory] as well as our need for feedback . . . We have made a conscious choice and no matter how arduous and slow the journey or painful the process, we will move on' (Forum, 1990: 55). Thus, feminists recognize the need to question their own assumptions and engage with the communities of 'women' and together create solidarities that can lead to equality and justice for all women.

The Road Ahead

My analysis shows the need for both creating identities and unraveling them. Identity claims are not a problem *per se*. As Smith (1994) reminds us, identity claims have to be judged based on who makes them, for what purpose and in what context. Only when Indian feminists organized autonomously from the New Left did issues of violence against women become part of the public discourse. Only when women organized as women did they achieve legal and material changes. Moreover, as Frankenberg and Mani (1993) caution, while other essential identities are effective in the world we have to engage them; we cannot act as though the world is non-essentialized because social theory has shown that to be the case.

But the Indian case also shows the importance of critical deconstruction by feminists to prevent undemocratic forces from deploying harmful, essentialized identities. Thus, feminists in India had to critically review their understanding and strategies to address the fundamentalist challenge that

they did not represent 'real' Indian women. Thus, construction and deconstruction are not two mutually exclusive strategies. Movements have to engage in both simultaneously to be dynamic and historically relevant.

Yet, many feminists, both Western and Indian, have often been suspicious of the post-structuralist turn in social theory. They claim that just when white women, people of color and other marginalized others are claiming their subjectivity, the subject is suddenly *passé* in the world of social theory, dominated by privileged, male, Western academics. Apart from the empirical fact that this rarefied world is also populated by Third World men and women and white women, there are theoretical and practical reasons for these suspicions to be unfounded.

Theoretically, as Laclau and Mouffe (1985), Butler (1992) and McClure (1992), among others, have shown, calling the subject into question does not herald the end of political agency. Rather, it shows the limitations of the subject position, which is only a limited form of agency directed against the state. In fact, this questioning expands the concept of political agency by making political the whole terrain of the social and the cultural. Isn't that what the slogan 'the personal is political' is all about?

In practice, new social movements have flourished around many new identities and in multiple sites. There has been no decline in activism despite the conservative 1980s. So perhaps what feminists have to fear is not a decline in activism but their own hegemony in setting the agenda. Now, there are many groups challenging many issues in different ways. This has undoubtedly led to a diffusion of resources and public attention. But the response to this ought not to be the reassertion of a primary contradiction. Rather, it should lead to a recognition of the interconnection between these varied issues, of the multiple axes of domination.

But what do multiple, conjectural axes of domination mean for politics? As the Indian case shows, it means that political organizing has to be along multiple axes. Women have to organize autonomously for their own interests. But because these interests intersect with others, women have also to organize with other groups. This is not simply coalition politics where you temporarily work with other groups for some instrumental ends. It is a continuing process of building 'solidarities of difference' (Dean, 1995) or 'transnational feminist solidarities' (Grewal and Kaplan, 1994). To do so, we need to undertake what María Lugones calls 'world travel', travelling to other people's worlds so that we see them in their contexts as lively subjects and active agents of history. This form of travel is not one of cultural imperialism or appropriation, of reaching rapport or unconditional acceptance, or even of the 'nomadic' travel so fashionable in recent theorizing. Rather, it is a connection between women based on the actual histories of their differences.

Such solidarity among women was seen during the UN-sponsored International Women's Decade (1975–85), when women's groups from around the world met and engaged in 'practical discourse'. As the UN World conferences in Mexico City in 1975 and Copenhagen in 1980 showed, such solidarities can be fraught with conflicts and contentions. But, as the conference in Beijing demonstrated, such continuing negotiations can also lead to real changes (Desai, 1996).

Acknowledgments

Notes

1 According to Melucci (1984), new social movements oscillate between a 'latent' and 'visible' phase, both of which are correlated. During latency, a network of people, submerged in everyday life, meet to create and experience new cultural modes and identities which then lead to a visible phase of public activity that includes mobilization and confrontation with political authority.

2 In the late 1960s and early 1970s there was a wave of protest in India by students, peasants, tribals, workers, government employees and women (see Kothari, 1970; Frankel, 1978; Sethi and Kothari, 1983). Most of these protests were in response to the economic crisis which led to rising unemployment, landlessness and high inflation. Combined with the political crisis set off by a split in the ruling Congress party, the time was ripe for mobilization. The opposition parties, along with other voluntary organizations, mobilized young, urban, college-educated men and women who, in turn, organized the urban and rural poor.

3 Dowry deaths or bride-burning are murders of newly married women, usually by their mother-in-law and sisters-in-law, for not continuing to provide dowry after marriage. Such murders are usually performed by setting the bride on fire in the kitchen and calling them accidents. The groom usually remarries for another dowry. Such deaths were first reported in the mid- and late 1970s and have been occurring regularly since then (see, for example, Kumar, 1993).

4 *Sati*, meaning the honored one, was an upper-caste Hindu practice in which the widow immolated herself on her dead husband's funeral pyre. The practice was outlawed in 1848 and in independent India's constitution. There have been, however, about 50 incidences of *sati* since independence in 1947.

5 From a speech made by an activist at a rural women's gathering in May 1986.

6 India has no common civil law in personal matters; that is, matters relating to marriage, divorce, maintenance, inheritance and child custody. People are bound by the personal laws of their religious community. At independence, the constitutional assembly saw this as the only way to protect the religious rights of the different minorities in India. The chair of the assembly, an 'untouchable', resigned in protest against such manipulation of religious differences. It is noteworthy that only in personal matters – those which most affect women – were religious differences respected. In other civil and criminal matters, religious practices were subordinate to the secular laws of the land.

7 The use of 'pseudo-secular' by Hindu fundamentalists became a way to attack liberals and other progressives for aping Western values without any understanding of 'real' Hindu values.

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