

Perspectives on Independence : Through Women's Eyes  
Selections from a National Seminar on  
**The Early Years of Indian Independence**

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**Introduction**

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I was very happy to learn that the Indian Association of Women's Studies had decided to celebrate the 50th anniversary of Independence by organising a seminar focusing on the first two decades of the Indian Republic. This was not a sudden, ad hoc decision. Many of us, as participant observers of the growth of the women's movement since the seventies, and the shifts in intellectual concerns and priorities within women's studies had been experiencing increasing discomfort with some presumptions carried over from the earlier period.

The Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI) — anxious to lay responsibility for the marginalisation of the Women's Question by the mid-fifties, had lamented the death of the women's movement after Independence with the cooption of many of the leaders within the ruling political establishment. Even before the CSWI, some scholars on the social reform movement of the 19th century usually viewed as the precursor of the demand for gender equality in India, had observed that the social debate on the women's question got subsumed by the national movement and lost its cutting edge'. Another trend, reported by some political scientists in the studies commissioned for the CSWI, was of withdrawal by many women from active political life into social work or spiritual activities after Independence.

Yet another mystery was the instance of large women's organisations, born before and after Independence, to define themselves as 'non-political'. The CSWI, already handicapped by the absence of the word political in its terms of reference, and other evidence of the loss of

• a political perspective on the issue of gender equality within the government and political parties, was also reeling under its discoveries — of the increasing burden of inequality and contradictions, accelerated by changes in the economy and society the 'modernisation process'.

Lucia Dube taught us that status was realised through roles But we didn't have the theory, the concepts or the language to adequately articulate the 'massive contradictions' in the evidence that came to us — between Women's roles that were socially perceived,

accepted and recognised, and the real, actual, varied and multiple roles that women in different classes played.

The Committee's decision — to lay the blame on colonial education and urban middle class bias of the intelligentsia, and planners in particular — for, this 'invisibility syndrome' or 'intellectual purdah' was a desperate attempt to get out of a theoretical vacuum. But my

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Discomfort increased further with the progress of women's studies and the galvanising of the women's movement. Our perceptions began to change — discovering women's agency, and the great variety in forms of protest, strategies, setting goals and priorities among women in different contexts and classes. To cite only a few of these that tried to bridge the gap between the present and the past, I would mention: peasant women's reactions to the environmental crisis the challenge thrown at academics by the members of SEWA — "why do you define us (the majority), in terms of the minority (the 5% of women workers in the formal sector)?" the painful recovery of women's role in various people's struggles both before and after Independence.

As evidence piled up of non-acceptance of their subordinate status by many sections of women; some of us began to catch glimpses of the complex diversity in women's perception and understanding of their social, familial, occupational and ideological or political obligations

— sometimes dormant, sometimes manifest and vigorously articulated.

Multiple roles meant multiple identities. Was conflict inevitable within this multiplicity? Sociologists had vigorously argued so, to explain the secondary status of women in work or professional roles. Did the work of the CSWI, as we demolished myth after myth about women's roles, values and condition — and began to question the meaning of tradition, social norms and cultural values that were supposed to control and regulate women's and men's lives in our 'traditional' society, we had to confront several dilemmas about our understanding of Indian society and our own identities — as Indian women, as academics, social scientists, as political activists or social workers — since the Committee was composed of members from all three groups.

All of us had vivid memories of colonial rule and the freedom movement. Some had been fully active in the struggle. Those of us who were younger — had only partial experience as students, during the last phase. We were 'the daughters of Independence' the first generation beneficiaries of the equality promised by the Constitution. We had been free to choose our post-Independence lives — our careers, beliefs, and to some extent our aspirations. Any restraints on these we believed, had been self-imposed — the outcome of our good sense, educated wisdom, and acceptance of our responsibilities.

The shattering of this complacency brought in its wake a sense of shame and outrage — driving us "to question our own beliefs, choices, and self-assessment. What had we done to justify and deserve our new freedoms? We had seen ourselves as good teachers and reasonably competent social scientists, yet we had remained so ignorant — that we had helped to perpetuate the same myths that we now had to demolish. We took pride in our

nationalist arrogance but found we had done nothing to get to know what was happening to that nation in the two decades that had followed Independence. What had happened to our democratic responsibility?

Some of us had refused to work with women's organisations —preferring our identity as professional teachers. We could be active in teachers' associations, which for us represented the outer boundaries of our social responsibility, manageable without too much problem with our familial and personal lives. Phurenu-di (Phulrenu Guha) had however combined political and

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social work, and Maniben remained active in trade unionism and the Samajwadi Mahila Sabha. Most of our discussions with political activists and social workers in women's organisations

were disappointing. They were from the same class as ourselves and only a few could throw some light on the unexpected trends of decline in women's conditions in livelihood, health, access to education, and the right to life with dignity — that our data hunt had brought out in stark, quantitative terms.

None knew of the decline in sex-ratio or its implications. Demographers had been arguing about it, but we would not have known of it but for the fact that Padmini Sengupta - an old war horse from pre-Independence days of struggle, incorporated it in a paper on women workers that she prepared for Phulrenu-di.

Among the rest, a few demonstrated some real concern - Vimal Ranàdive, who had been struggling within the CITU to raise the worsening conditions of women in the bidi industry; Sahodara Uai and Pramila Dandavate who were angry with increasing insecurity and hostility faced by young women political workers, and some junior political cadres of different parties who felt excluded and discriminated against in the race for representational tickets.'

In contrast — the anger among poor women or women facing absolute insecurity, of all communities and sectors was tangible and vigorous. They were the victims — of acute poverty and insecurity, of unemployment, exploitation, wage discrimination and powerlessness — against oppression by employers, society and their families. What was this much-vaunted independence and whose independence was it — only of rich, and irresponsible men? How much independence did women have even in affluent families? Why had dowry become such a menace that it was now threatening even poor families, who could not afford it? How could such women preserve any sense of dignity or security when they could be kicked around, or thrown out because they could not bring enough dowry? And why should such practices enter their own communities where they had not been customary before? The mothers felt that they had enjoyed more dignity and security in their families through their labour in the family and livelihood, which was now going out of reach of their daughters.

- It was clear to some of us that these women had a level of social awareness and perspectives on independence that we had not demonstrated — cocooned as we had been in our protected and privileged lives — confined by our class experience. As a teacher in Bihar through the fifties and sixties, I had been aware of my students' enjoying 'father-

in-law scholarships' with a tot of humour, but it had not impelled me to instil a sense of revolt among them as my mother had done with all of us from three decades before Independence. The practice was carefully avoided since then within our vast joint family, through the later years. Attending a niece's marriage during the CSWI's tour in West Bengal, I asked my uncle and my old cousins what they felt about dowry. All of them thought the practice had 'died down' — no one in 'our family' would dream of either demanding or paying dowry! Yet, by middle class standards, all of them were well-informed men with some social conscience who were taking some indulgent pleasure in a daughter of the family (whom they still saw as very young) having 'made it' to the membership of a national investigating committee —

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thus justifying their indirect support to her prolonged education.

Through the seventies and eighties the women's movement acquired many new and shifting foci. Violence against women dominated the public eye because it was the rallying point for all protests. On the studies front however there were many avenues being opened — with increased scrutiny and critique of the dominant economic development strategies — at national and international levels; on the education (literacy-cultural-values) front; questioning state laws and policies vis-a-vis the conditions of the people, with greater focus on their impact on women and children, — intervening on the national agenda on many fronts.

There were many differences — at the ideological, operational and choice of priorities and alliances levels — which many of us viewed as evidence of greater strength and vitality —

- but two trends were becoming clear increasingly. The movement(s) had taken on the mantle of political, constructive responsibility to alter and redirect the processes of change at national and local levels. In spite of repeated rebuffs, disappointments, and decreasing or stagnant resource support, women's studies became a vital part of the women's movement, calling for the same kind of activism on many fronts of the reinvigorated, or new women's organisations.

The Indian Association of Women's Studies' during its earlier years had to repeatedly face the conflict of identities among members. Were they to view themselves primarily as academics or as activists? Some felt the divide was unbridgeable, but many of us didn't agree. We were challenging not only established beliefs, stereotypes and myths about Indian women, but also the theory of academic-neutrality, and value-free, non-judgmental role of academic disciplines - social sciences in particular. By the mid-eighties, M N Srinivas - the doyen of post-Independence development of social sciences in India - acknowledged the political nature of the challenge by describing women's studies as 'a thrust from below', and 'the most significant development in Indian social sciences during the last decade'

We were all committed to 'change' government's development policies, laws, institutions and procedures; behavioral and learning patterns; the education system; media, socio-cultural values and institutions, dominant mindsets of men and women who would not listen to women's needs, hopes, or despair and continue supporting (often unconsciously)

— myths, that covered the reality of oppression — exploitation, humiliation, undervaluation, abuse, and fears — of all kinds of powerlessness, incapacities and failures: Our methods and areas

- of struggle could differ along with our skills, vocations and other reasons — but we were all parts of the same movement — with multiple identities, priorities, and preferences.

Working with seasonally migrant peasant women in Bankura, I learnt that multiple identities, like bio-diversity, or plural cultures, could be a source of strength, not of weakness. The formats and blueprints for nation-building inherited from the past needed questioning, and our assumptions about the collapse, or 'silence' of women's agency during the early decades after Independence needed reassessment. It was in this context that we called for 'personal testimonies' of women who had viewed Independence not as the end, but as the beginning of new struggles for a better, more just, and free India.

The decision brought an unforgettable experience, whose impact was visible on every

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participant young and old, from different regions of our vast country, with only vague ideas about the different faces of Indian women's struggle for freedom and search for meaningful

. social roles for themselves. They came from diverse backgrounds — cultural economic and 'ethnic they spoke in different languages and modes but symbolised for us the richness of

the experience of struggle — the heroic courage against repression, and the camaraderie across classes that promoted the spirit of human equality, showing and learning from each other to forge a mutually reinforcing sense of solidarity and empowerment

Did any of us learn that Kasturba Gandhi acquired literacy from a young adivasi girl, or played mid-wife to the latter's sister-in-law in jail? Born into a family of constructive reformers, Dasri-ben was a natural follower of the Mahatma, using her joyous youth, singing skills and total lack of fear to organise other women and defy repression, shaming both police and courts. After Independence; she found her role in teaching and family life, preferring a local board school to one run by the legates of the movement, possibly because she recoiled at the evidence of corruption that had already set in. The spirit of patriotism and protest continues in her son.

Manavati Arya, offered us her understanding of 'total mobilisation' - and the story of her common sense approach to operational details. She had the capacity to be a planner and executive, but like Dasri-ben, she too felt uncomfortable about party politics and preferred family life and social service, focusing increasingly on children deprived of a childhood.

Ila Mitra, and Rani Dasgupta played leadership roles in Tebliaga, suffered physical and mental repression, long separations from their families, and shattered health. A chance to return to family life was 'bliss', but the shattered economy of their families called for more active roles for a livelihood. They see themselves as tools of 'history' at a point of time, and are surprised that their stories should arouse so much interest among young people today, as they feel they were 'very ordinary women'.

Swarajyam and Mrina are eternal activists who cannot withdraw from a life of continuous struggle. Born rebels, they are used to the ups and downs, the ebb and flow, and the hazards of political activism. There is no bitterness — but the passion to “set the world right” remains undaunted and in’spiring. Both have played active roles in the resurgent contemporary women’s movement, but feel embarrassed when young researchers in women’s history try to unearth their life

I offer my grateful. congratulations to the same young researchers for uncovering these forg histories. They are vital today — when the future looks bleak an4 uncertain, and cynicism is in the air. I do not like models or role models as concepts, but I am sure many will find inspiration and hope for the future in the stories of these women; for their integrity of spirit in upholding a vision of independence and nation-building — still to be realised — but notunattainable — if the courage to struggle is maintained.

I thank the Executive Committee of LAWS for giving me the chance to introduce this volume. As teaching material for the young — these stories are of as much value as the records of the ‘achievers’, which is the usual method pursued by textbook writers to appease the women’s studies movement.

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Nit inj in This was the position put forward by S Natatrajan, Social Reform in India and by Charles

l-leiths.ath in Social Reform Movement in India . I contested this thesis in two papers (1) “Social Reform

Movement from Ranade to Nehru” in B.B. Lal (Ed) - Women: From Purdah to Modernity Dethi Vikas

1975 and (2) “The Women’s Question in India and the Role of Women’s Studies.” - CWDS, Occasional Paper

1985;

It was rather disturbing to find the old thesis resurrected - though in .i new language of discourse by some younger scholars - Partha Chatterjee and Sumit Sarkar in the eighties. See Kumkum Sangari and

Sudesh Vaid (E↑ ) - Recasting Women’s History,also MM. and Leela Kasturi (Ed) - Introduction to Women and Indian Nationalism Delhi Vikas, 1992.

2 See Vina Mazumdar (Ed) - of Power Delhi, Allied Publishers 1978 for a collection of these studies.

3 2 Report of the Coi on the Status of Women hi India, GOI, 1975- Chapter I.

4 See “Making of a Report:”.Indian Iqp of Gender Studies - CWDS and Sage India -April 1998.

S CSE - Si India's Environment Delhi 1981; Kumud Sharma - "Women in Struggle (Chipko)" - CWDS

1984; Voices of Peasant Women CWDS - 1992 and 94; also, "Who Will Save the Earth? Report of a Workshop"

CWDS 1987; V Mazumdar - "Embracing the Earth: SouthAsian Peasant Women's Views on the Environmental

Crisis" - UNFAO, FFHC - Delhi 1992; Report of the National Colloquium on Women and Water Resource

Management"; CWDS 1991.

6 Self-Employed Women's Association, Ahmedabad, at a Workshop on 'Women in the Informal Sector, at Delhi in the early eighties..

7 Susie Tharu and K. Lalita - We Were Mahila Women in the Telengana Movement, Sunil Sen - "Role of Women in Popular Struggles" CWDS 1984; "Rural Women's Initiatives"

(Technical papers edited by Shimayi Muntemytra ILO 1984. Rounaqjahan - "Women, Resources and Power:

Report of an Afro-Asian Inter-regional Workshop"; ILO 1985.

8 See Towards Equality pp. cit.

9 Joanna Liddle and Rama Joshi ed - Daughters of Independence, Kali for Women, Delhi 1986.

10 Unofficially commissioned by Phulrenudi through the Indian Council of Social Science Research.. During the first two years of its existence, (1971-73) the Committee's Secretariat was reluctant to avail of the ICSSR's offer to sponsor research for the Committee. Individual members who realised the necessity, followed the method - to involve over a 100 social scientists to scan available studies and other sources of information - giving towards Equality the reputation of being "the most well-documented Report on Women" by the UN System, salvaging our nationalist arrogance to some extent.

11 Scheduled Caste Member of Parliament from Madhya Pradesh (Congress Party).

12 A founder of the Samajwadi Mahila Sabha and later of the Mahila Dakshata Samiti, active in the Anti-Price

Rise Movement in Maharashtra: jailed during the Emergency (75-77). Elected to parliament in 1989 National

Front). an active member of a coalition of National Women's Organisations, popularly known as the Seven

Sisters.

13 See dissent Note by Lotika Sarkar and Viazumdar on the issue of political reservation in Towards Equality and Seitunar - September 1997.

t4 My uncle was acknowledged as one of the doys of nationalist historians who was out of tune v'ith the ruling establishment for its one-sided view n' the Freedom Struggle. My cousin had dabbled with revolutionaries during his student days, and edited a journal after independence which w s critical of Congress n in West Bengal.

15 Es:ablismed in 1982, following the man' ate give!' by the First N- ion 1 Conference ea Women's : (SNDT, Women's Univ. Bombay, 1981 - to pnivde a forum fo a:nd and 2ctivists of different backgrounds- political/social work, tradt unions, go'-ernment, edun (tonal eformers, wtnnen's organisations etc.

.16 InauguralAddress - World Conference 0 ocsology, 'elhi 1986 pulished inEconomfc and Political Weekly Jan. 2& 1987 vol. XXII, No.4.