

**For AIDWA
(April 2005)**

Breaking Barriers contains the stories of twelve women who, among many other critical roles that they played through their lives – were also the joint founders of the All India Democratic Women’s Association (AIDWA). To set the **historical location of this remarkable event straight** (since it is strangely missing in both the Preface and the Introduction) – let me claim my self appointed role as the chronicler of the Second Wave of the Women’s Movement in India, especially as I had the privilege of being present on the occasion of AIDWA’s formal inauguration

The year was 1981, the first half of March. Unfortunately, I cannot remember the exact date but the event was in Madras (pre Chennai identity). After participating in the inaugural function, I departed the same day – for Bombay (pre Mumbai identity), to join Prof. Neera Desai and her colleagues in the hectic preparations for the Ist National Conference on Women’s Studies.

The closeness of the two events in time represents for me not a freaky coincidence, but a fact of historical significance.

The Bombay Conference resolved to create the Indian Association for Women’s Studies. Apart from being acknowledged as the ‘Siamese Twin’ or ‘the academic arm of the Women’s Movement’ this development was eventually destined to play a major (but not dominant) role in policy interventions by the Women’s Movement at the Centre and at State levels.

This history of the Women’s Movement in India – in both the ‘waves’ is deeply embedded within the changes affecting the Indian people. Since the emergence of the second wave coincided with the International Women’s Decade, [proclaimed by the United Nations], it has been fashionable among some critics, or enemies of the Movements ideology and objectives – to criticize it as “foreign inspired” or “foreign funded”.

The stories recorded in this book will help considerably to confront such propaganda head on. **Given the enormous diversity** - regional, linguistic, religious **as well as the hierarchy** of caste and class – perfected through a very ‘successful maintenance of three monopolies – of economic, political and knowledge power’ – the founders of AIDWA present a remarkable and inspiring record of courage, determination and creativity. Unlike most other women’s organisations, these twelve founders include women from the peasantry, tribal, and socially rebellious or reformist families/backgrounds. All had connections with the struggles against imperialism, some had been active in labour/trade union movements, and only some could be described, as coming from a ‘privileged’ background – of the more educated, urban intelligentsia.

The degrees of individual rebellion – against familial heritage or expectations however show substantial differences – **to some extent in inverse proportion to the extent of privilege enjoyed**. The stories are too sketchy, to permit even an analyst notorious for “wild hypotheses” to elaborate this argument further. The need that I must articulate is for more detailed documentation – especially by persons/familiar with the **variety of sources** for which India is well-known.

This comment should not be understood as an attempt to decry the value of interviews, but as **acknowledgement of difference – in the capacity, even willingness** among Indian women – to articulate their own stories. If documentation is inadequate, it would be worthwhile to draw on the memories of persons who knew these women over some period of time I was privileged to work in close collaboration with three of them for a period of well over a decade. The Indian Association for Women’s Studies, video-recorded Swarajyam’s story in 1997, in a special Conference, to celebrate the 50th year of India’s independence, (published as a document in 1998). I also remember hearing Udayam’s vivid account of her struggles at a very very special seminar held at Trivandrum towards the end of 1975, special because it took place within the shadow of the National Emergency. Some time later, Meera Velayudhan and I jointly interviewed Susheela at some length, for a paper which we had to prepare for some international conference. Rohini Gawankar, an activist and scholar, has published a full length biography of Lakshmi only a few months back. A general appeal to Women’s Studies scholars and institutions in different regions, I am sure, will reveal more sources to enrich this record.

I have argued elsewhere that the Indian Women’s Movement in both its waves, had indigenous roots – which gave primacy to its own ideology over sectarian differences. The stories of the founders of AIDWA are living examples of our increasing realization that for Indian feminists – “it is the political that becomes increasingly personal” rather than the other way.

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