

## Vina Mazumdar's Speech at AGM, CWDS

My task has been made a lot easier by Elabehn, Subhash and Vidya. I only need to remind people that studying the dynamics of SEWA, Working Women's Forum (WWF) and Annapurana Mahila Mandal (AMM) gave us in the CWDS a head start. CWDS' experiment in action research - organizing poor peasant women in Bankura and other districts in West Bengal - could build on these earlier struggles. Lessons from them on the one hand, and from the CSWI's<sup>1</sup> questions on the other had shaped some clear objectives. *Why must we organise poor women?* Because poor women's organisations like SEW A, WWF or Annurana Mahila Mandal, had demonstrated far greater political dynamism, and a desire to bring about broader changes, than middle class women's organisations, whether before or after independence. This was the lesson that i had drawn by the time we started CWDS.

The second lesson, clear to us as social scientists - battered by the CSWI's experience - was our knowledge of the power of the sanskritisation process, strengthened by the education system and other elements of modernisation that we would have to fight. Being a social science research institute was thus a point of strength, that gave us an advantage over other organisations.

In the late 70s, when we were starting to participate in policy-debates, national or international - these organisations were being viewed in three roles:

- a) For poor women to acquire *identity or visibility* as a target group for development assistance, along with other groups like small migrant farmers/other poverty groups;
- b) *as delivery mechanisms*, for needed social services - (the BSRD approach);
- c) *as pressure groups*

The first two appeared in various policy documents<sup>2</sup> - national and international - by the early 80s. These debates themselves threw up a set of activists - within the government, within international agencies or somewhere outside like ourselves. Many such persons are present, or represent here today. The point I am trying to Working Group on Village Level Organisations of Rural Women, Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India, 1977-78

Report of the National Committee on the Role and Participation of Rural Women in Agriculture and Rural Development" Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India, 1977-78.

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1. Committee on the Status of Women in India, 1971-1974: Report titled Towards Equality, published by Ministry of Education and Social Welfare, Government of India, 1975.
2. Working group on Employment of Women, 1977-78. Planning Commission/Department of Social Welfare, Government of India.

Indian Women in the '80s: Development Imperatives, AIWC, 1980. make is that the debate forged an *alliance, which acted as pressure groups initially - and then managed to squeeze in a fourth, then unstated role for the organisations:*

(d) *to encourage women's articulation:- not only as potential beneficiaries but as agents of change.*

Women's studies was an academic arena where we could talk about ourselves as agents of change, but within policy debates 'the agents of change' view was not encouraged. However, women's studies practitioners could hardly be viewed as beneficiaries of anti - poverty development programmes. At best, we were 'intermediaries between development assistance and the women, who 'needed' or 'were entitled to' such support. So in defining our role we could use political language right from the beginning.

### **Outcomes : - Expectations and Reality**

But when it came to expectations of *outcomes from organising* - there were diverse expectations among the same set of people who had worked so hard together to move towards a policy for supporting organisations. Most tended to view them in economic terms only, as targets of anti - poverty programmes - to accelerate and diversify rural economic growth (I am talking only about organising rural women's groups); some (e.g. the 7<sup>th</sup> Plan approach paper) added the element of *collective bargaining* to reduce exploitation - which came out strongly in Vidya's presentation. Now this, I suppose, can be interpreted as glimmerings in the heads of some enlightened bureaucrats - *of the concept of gender justice within the frame-work of labour rights. The BSRD approach, on the other hand got tarred from the beginning with the population and development discourse.*

International agencies are very good at coining jargon whose real meanings disappear, or get mystified as the historical or development context - at different levels - change with shifts in global politics. The shifts (a) from Role of Women in Development to WID/WAD; (b) Gender - from equality to equity, then to efficiency for development; (c) from entitlement or human right, to the theory of necessity for fertility or population control/stabilisation are the most prominent examples. All of us have learnt to cope with such shifts.

Within the women's movement, and among research activists - *I am making a straight statement of fact: our expectations regarding the outcomes - evolved as organising advanced. They gradually evolved because all of us were busy 'doing work' - as Subhash said with so much passio -, we were busy unlearning and learning from the soil.*

The first driving need was to combat the *invisibility syndrome*, and the second was to *expand the base of the movement*. Very selfish objectives --- since the movement's survival depended on the expansion of its base, that is why we needed these groups at the grass roots level. The third was consciousness *raising of the peasant women as workers, as women and as political beings*. Ela Behn referred to these, but I would differ slightly from her present position. Let me take the concepts of self-reliance and linkage. In 1985 I wrote a comment on an ILO draft paper on organising rural women - which posed these two concepts on similar lines, for a workshop in Madurai. Before the workshop, the ILO

office in Geneva asked me to comment on the draft paper that they had prepared. I find that I wrote there that *self reliance and linkages are not ends in themselves but means to achieve these broader objectives - to transform the broader social process and its instruments - trade unions, village councils etc. by first transforming women's own consciousness, overthrowing the inferiority, lack of confidence, dependency syndrome and making their participation better informed, more deliberate and more effective in articulating the women's perspectives in development decisions and strategies. Unless we developed that level of efficiency and information base amongst the organisations, how could we cope with all these complex machineries?*

For the CWDS atleast, consciousness raising was even more necessary for those in power and influence. Consciousness raising amongst the members of the grassroot organisation was one thing, may even have had initially an instrumentalist approach, but consciousness raising of the policy makers, those who commanded power or influence, and those who controlled the educational process, was altogether different. Within five years since we started organising peasant women in Bankura, *we realised that the leaders of these organisations were going to prove far more capable in achieving the second set of consciousness raising, because people like us had achieved very little in changing the attitude or consciousness of any policy makers in over a decade.*

In 1986 the first request came from Mr. D. Bandyopadhyay, Secretary, Ministry of Rural Development-to develop a training strategy for their functionaries - "if the provision for minimum 30% beneficiaries of the anti - poverty programmes being women was to be implemented successfully". We agreed, provided we were allowed to experiment - *by using the women from the target group, as trainers.* The rest of us would be facilitators. The basic truth was - *the unreality in middle class educated women trying to talk to bureaucrats and elected leaders about poor women's lives to break the "invisibility barriers" that prevented the poor women workers even from being 'seen' by the educated intelligentsia - men or women.*

The moment we placed the actual poor peasant women face to face with Rural Development officials at State and District levels - or Forest officers from three Eastern States - the results were fantastic. Within the first two days the women had managed to convert the administrators - at least partially.

*These were outcomes, that we had not anticipated when we started. We thought the women would find the organisation itself of high value, and did not conceptualise the impact of just the act of organising itself. Because we thought of them mainly as poor women with certain needs which we began to list. I do not want to repeat what Subhash said except to emphasise the intellectual challenges that we had to face as the process of organisation advanced. The courage with which they would pick up the challenge, the resistance coming off the soil from their families, their communities and the local power structures that had to be "factored in" to our plans, strategies and research-local and regional, difference between different tribes, castes - were fortunately not so unfamiliar to Narayan - because of his anthropology and Census background.*

We were not prepared at all for the *sheer intellectual and personal development demonstrated by so many of the women.* The linguistic ability that they developed, the analytical and imaginative capacity to articulate and to adapt their statements/presentations *after assessing the receiving or the absorption capacity of the people to whom they were talking -*

demonstrated extraordinary mental and communication skills. I have been a teacher for 16 years, and was supposed to be a good communicator, but the way these women changed their presentations to *changing audiences left me utterly amazed and thrilled*. The way they interacted with scholars and other members of the educated classes, Indian and non - Indian - demonstrated an attitude of equality.

*The third unexpected outcome was our discovery - of their inherited knowledge - based on their own experiences, of managing natural resources, and sheer practical ability to find solutions, to problems that cropped up frequently.* These were areas of role reversal, where we had to learn from them. The advantage of being a research institution was that Narayan, I and other colleagues were very ready to tell them 'this is something we do not know, we do not understand so explain it to us'. This transformed the relationship from one of dependence to one of mutual respect and of equality. *The fact that we valued their knowledge so much, gave them greater self-confidence, and the courage to value their own knowledge.*

Now I am going to stop my analysis and just quote from some recorded discussions: - one in March, and one in June 2000. For the first one I was present, I was asking the question of men from the local communities. They are leaders of the 'Ranibandh Banabasi Sangh' which is the federation of Forest Protection Committees. The FPCs have 50% women among their members. Over the years, the women from the Nari Bikash Sangh have persuaded the FPCs to follow the same track, in designing structures that they themselves have, so just as Nari Bikash Sangh came out as a federation of the village level Gramin Mahila Sramik Unnayan Samitis, Ranibandh Banabasi Sangh (RBS) is a federation of the FPCs. I had a discussion with men from its Executive Committee. I had never met them before. I just asked a few questions, telling them that I have to write a paper for the UNIFEM, on the whole Bankura experience. I first quote the president, an elderly man.

Neither the government nor we, men, in our society, were ready to accept women's knowledge of forests or forest products There was also a persistence of social ideas regarding women's low capacity. But NBS had asserted their claims to this expertise and demonstrated their capacity to improve their conditions. Since we started working closely with the NBS, first in the FPCs and later in the RBS, our ideas have changed altogether. We have acknowledged their competence, determination - and clarity of thinking. *The NBS leaders (Didis) have given us a new consciousness of people's rights and the meaning of participation.* We have recognised women's greater awareness, courage and sense of responsibility. Now we have learnt to respect the way they have sustained their organisations and have tried to learn from them. *This has brought more balance in gender relations.*

Here is a *change in the perception*, may be of a limited set of people in the community - not all - but this respect that is coming to women also brings out an important lesson, which I think we tend to forget. On long term basis, women, atleast the women we are working with, *do not want to lose their membership of the household, the family, or their community. They want to retain all these, but want to make changes in these institutions - so that they can feel empowered, and express their empowered ideas.*

The next quotes are from a recorded discussion where I was not present. I had asked the leaders of the Nari Bikas Sangh to send me their comments and views on two recent documents of the ILO - (a) the Declaration on Fundamental Principles of Rights at Work (1998), and (b) Decent Work (1999). I had an invitation from the ILO to go and speak during the Copenhagen plus five sessions in Geneva in July 2000. ILO was organising a discussion on these two documents, they wanted me to speak. I asked in what capacity should I come? I did not want to go for an academic discussion. But since ILO was the initial sponsor of the whole Bankura experiment, would they be interested in listening to the comments of the Bankura Samiti women? Then I could come as their spokesperson. ILO's acceptance was immediate. So the women assembled at Jhilimili and recorded their views. I got the cassettes. The language is mine - because I was translating to a form intelligible to the ILO. I quote,

"Our organisations are the source of our collective identity and consciousness, which enable us to strive for status and social acknowledgement of our value and dignity as human beings and workers, our entitlement to human rights - especially our rights to equality, dignity and justice. Our organisations have expanded our capacity and encouraged us to think about broader social responsibilities in the processes of change taking place in our society and in the world today".

Since it was an ILO demand for their comments, women, on their own - brought in globalisation. I did not talk about it.

"We certainly would accept the responsibility to assist all other workers to organise themselves but our previous experience as part of *larger labour organisations warns us that in order to make men understand and respect our need for equality and dignity as women, women must have a platform of their own even if they are part of larger workers' organisations.* Today most men in the forest protection committees are re-thinking women's capacities and organisational skills. *It takes time first to empower ourselves through our own organisations and then to interact with other sections of the society, so that other people, men and women equally can transform themselves and take on wider social responsibility from a human rights perspective ..*

"*Poverty is not the only handicap.*" "*Our location in the social order and the dominance of certain social attitudes towards women and children are also the source of very severe handicaps for women*".

"*We can only make an effort to intervene against the oppression of women in our local areas where we now enjoy some acceptance and reputation for socially responsible behaviour. The panchayats, members of different households, sometimes even the police call on our services to settle serious conflicts within and between families. We have even been invited by traditional authorities of various tribes or castes to which we belong, when they do not succeed*".

It is important to realise how they value this acceptance. Whether we value it or not does not matter, they value, and that is something we have to accept. I must acknowledge

that Narayan, the anthropologist, was much better at predicting this than I was. Rounding off their discussion, they sent a message and challenge to the ILO.

'The sexual division of labour in traditional agriculture enabled women like us as well as our ancestors to develop some specialised skills and knowledge, which we have now learnt to value - *as part of our identity today. We see them as of our self-esteem* '.

It is the traditional sexual division of labour within the household to which they take objection.

*"Caring for the family, the children and the old should not be only the responsibility of women. Labour, be it for the care of the family, or earning a livelihood, cannot be done alone. It is a social activity. We believe in the organisation of labour but men must understand and respect our need for equal sharing of responsibilities and dignity. If we have to maintain our present roles of productive, familial and social responsibilities then the un-equal burden of responsibilities within the household must be reduced and shared. "*

They had heard that in other parts of the world the peasant mode of production had virtually ended. They asked if the ILO is aware of this. "Then why did the ILO adopt a Convention for organising rural labour and come to our rescue, help us to organise ourselves, and build up our consciousness so much? If the ILO is going to allow the peasant mode of production to disappear today, what happens to our peasant identity, this is the question? What happens to all the sources of self-esteem that we have found as peasant women?

The last question they raised is a challenge to all of us -

"will such models of partnership in learning and action between sections of society hitherto viewed as unequal and distinctly incapable of sharing such responsibilities, have to be abandoned?"

Following the women, I also ask - have we found these relationships of value? All of us who had been working with peasant women in rural areas, what happens to them and to us if the peasant mode of production disappears altogether? This is the challenge that they have thrown out and we have to think of our responsibilities. I have communicated the challenge to the ILO officials. They said that during 90s, when ILO went through a major reorganisation several Conventions were declared as out of date which ILO need not pursue. There had been a proposal to include Convention 141 (1976 - Organisations of Rural Workers) also in the discarded baggage, but protests from developing countries prevented that. Some old friends from the ILO's (old) Rural Employment Policies Branch did help me to reach the women's message to the Director - General ILO. But follow - up is a crying need. Perhaps all of us need to apply our minds to that.