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FROM SATYARTHA PRAKASH TO MANUSHI:
AN OVERVIEW OF THE "WOMEN'S MOVEMENT" IN INDIA

by

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Abstract: This paper examines the writings, public statements, and speeches of the protagonists of the Indian "women's movement" from its inception in the nineteenth century to the 1980s. It argues that in India the leadership of the "women's movement" and the definition of the "women's question" initially came from Western-educated, urban, upper class/caste men whose primary concern was to build a strong "modern" India fit for self-government. The "women's question" became defined within the context of the changing goals and strategies of the emerging Indian nation, and the women's movement became an appendage of the nationalist movement. Political independence, therefore, also marked the paternalistic "granting" of gender equality in the Constitution. The patriarchal social system that had remained untouched by the women's movement, however, continued to demand and expect gender hierarchy, thus negating the legal equality embodied in the Constitution. The paper notes that in the last ten to twelve years the deterioration of economic conditions and the resulting intensification of caste and class tensions have given impetus to the formation of several women's groups of varying degrees of radicalism and autonomy. The mainstream, more permanent women's organizations continue to be extensions of male-dominated political parties, but there is growing evidence that some groups are autonomous. These groups operate on the local level using issues like police rape or dowry "murder" to mobilize women and raise people's consciousness of women's oppression in a patriarchal, capitalist system of relationships. As yet there is no national umbrella organization to coordinate the activities and concerns of such women's groups, nor do the groups constitute a widespread, broad-based movement by and for women.

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FROM SATYARTHA FRAKASH TO MANUSHI:
AN OVERVIEW OF THE "WOMEN'S MOVEMENT" IN INDIA¹

The movement for improvement in the Indian woman's position in the home and society, loosely referred to in the literature² (and this paper) as the "women's movement," originated in the nineteenth century as part of a larger concern for reform in Indian society. A need for such improvement was first articulated by the social reformers. These men took it upon themselves to define the nature and source of disabilities under which Indian women lived and to provide leadership for organized activities that sought to address what they considered the women's question. As such, from its inception, what was perceived as the "women's movement" acquired the biases of its urban male, upper-caste, upper-class advocates.

These biases were further reinforced in the early decades of the twentieth century when the movement became intimately associated with the mainstream of Indian nationalism. Taking its direction from the leaders of the Indian nationalist movement, the women's movement tended to seek solutions for inequality in legal measures rather than structural change. It therefore saw in the acceptance of gender equality in the Indian Constitution, adopted after India became independent, a successful culmination of its efforts. Indeed, women political activists, most of them members of "five-star" political families of the nationalist struggle days, were adequately rewarded with ambassadorships, governorships, and even a ministership with the "appropriate" portfolio of Health and Welfare.

In the sixties, Mrs. Indira Gandhi stated that Indian women did not need to fight for their rights, they had them. In the seventies, however, a resurgence of feminism in the West and the intensification of class and caste tensions in India provided impetus for the formation of several women's groups of varying degrees of radicalism. One such group, an urban-based feminist collective, Samta, composed of educated, middle-class young women, publishes a radical feminist journal, Manushi. Others include left-wing organizations of Dalit and Adivasi women agricultural laborers,³ the Progressive Organization of Women, the United Women's Anti-Price Rise Committee,⁴ the Self Employed Women's Association,⁵ the policy-oriented Women's Studies section of the Indian Council of Social Science Research,⁶ and the women's groups organized around the issues of rape and dowry "murders."⁷ They do not yet constitute a widespread movement organized by women with feminist goals and aspirations.

This paper presents an overview of the Indian "women's movement" and the historical influences that made it elitist and contributory, rather than central to the interests of women. It examines the contradictions resulting from its political initiation to explain the wide discrepancy that exists today between the progressive laws that recognize gender equality and an environment that systematically denies women such equality in society, the family, and the workplace.

The nineteenth century saw the establishment of the British imperial bureaucratic state in India. Changes took place in rapid succession. Introduction of the English legal system, a formal system of education, a centralized administration, uniform currency, railways, and cash cropping all demanded new ways of organizing activities and time. For example, the

new economic and professional opportunities that these changes made available for Indians often required the use of the English language which meant some form of Western-type education and a willingness to leave the ancestral home to set up house with one's nuclear family in another location. [According to the 1881 census, the number of persons per house in India was 5.8. In 1911 this number decreased to 4.9.] In addition to the changes taking place, the increase in Christian missionary activities after 1813 and the increase in the inflow of manufactured goods and British residents after the opening of the Suez Canal in 1867 challenged existing customs and habits. The Indian social reformers were responding both to the challenges and demands of the British imperial presence. To prepare Indian society to cope with and benefit from "modernity," they pressed for reforms while emphasizing the greatness of India's ancient heritage.

This response had two important consequences: (1) the areas that were targeted for reform were those of concern to the Western-educated urban upper-caste men, the group most receptive to change because of its eagerness to benefit from the new system; and (2) presenting reforms in the spirit of revivalism often left untouched the ideology that had contributed both to the continued presence of customs and practices being attacked and the absence of those being supported. In the case of women, the reformers determined what was responsible for "the present deplorable condition of Indian womanhood" and how the situation could be remedied. This was not considered unusual for it fitted the traditional role of men as "protectors" and women as "dependents," men as initiators and givers and women as passive recipients. It thus perpetuated the system while supposedly attacking it.

Having acquired a faith in the rule of law from their British mentors, the social reformers sought legislation to end those practices affecting women that had been especially singled out by the Christian missionaries as "evil" and from which some of the reformers had themselves suffered. They were successful in getting laws passed abolishing Sati (1829), legalizing widow re-marriage (1856), setting the age of consent first to 10 years and then raising it to 12 years (1891); they denounced Purdah (seclusion) and polygamy, supported education of girls and women, and female rights to property, while all the time appealing to the Hindu ideals of womanhood.

The issues the reformers chose to address not only affected a limited section of Indian women, but some issues concerned men more than women. Purdah, a symbol of status, was practiced by the affluent classes; working-class families could not afford to seclude their women. Women's right to property obviously affected those who had property to bequeath. Raja Ram Mohun Roy made no pretext that his concern was for his caste and class members: "How distressing it must be to the female community and to those who interest themselves in their behalf to observe daily that several daughters in a rich family can prefer no claim to any portion of the property, whether real or personal, left by their deceased father if a single brother be alive" (Roy, 1822:32, emphasis added). Widow remarriage too concerned a relatively small number of upper-caste Hindus who insisted on widows' remaining faithful to the memory of their deceased husbands.

Advocacy of female education and condemnation of child marriage were issues affecting men and women. As Western-educated men, the social reformers were well aware of the intellectual gap that existed between men like themselves and their uneducated, often child, brides. At age 32, Justice Mahadev Govinda Ranade, a prominent social reformer, was married to a 13-year-old girl whom he then educated (Gedge, 1929:25-26). Demands for education of women, therefore, addressed the male need for companionship and understanding, a need which surfaced because of the exclusionary and alienating British Imperial state and the growing mobility in Indian society. Second to bridging the "gap between the levels of understanding, of the males (both husband and son), who had the benefit of modern education, and the women of the family" (Towards Equality, 1974:52), women's education was perceived as necessary for stable family life. Dayananda Saraswati, the founder of the reformist and revivalist Arya Samaj, argued, "If the master of a house be educated and his wife uneducated or vice versa, there will every day be a war between gods and devils in the house. How can there be joy in it? . . . Without knowledge a woman cannot discharge the domestic duties properly, such as the management of the household, just treatment of all, duties of married life, mutual satisfaction of husband and wife, domestic work under the control of the mistress of the house, and similar duties" (Dayananda, 1970: 73-74).

Moreover, education of women was necessary for the success of the reforms, that is, the regeneration of Indian society. If India was to "modernize," it was critical to enlist the support of its women. This was expressed quite forcefully by G. K. Gokhale in his speech to the Educational Section of the Victorian Era Exhibition in 1897 (1920:882-883):

A wide diffusion of female education in all its branches is a factor of the highest value to the well-being of every nation. In India it assumes additional importance by reason of the bondage of caste and custom which so often cripples all efforts at the most elementary reforms . . . every single act of our daily life is regarded as regulated by some religious notion or another. . . . And naturally these ideas have a far stronger hold on the minds of women than of men. . . . Combination of enforced ignorance and overdone religion not only makes them willing victims of customs unjust and hurtful in the highest degree but also makes them the most effective opponents of all attempts at change or innovation. . . . It is obvious that under the circumstances a wide diffusion of education with all its solvent influences among the women of India, . . . will not only restore our women to the honoured position which they at one time occupied in India, but will also facilitate more than anything else our assimilation of those elements of Western civilization without which all thought of Indian regeneration are mere idle dreams and all attempts at it are foredoomed to failure.

Thus, requirements of modernization and preservation of traditional roles came together in the justifications of demands for women's education. Education for women was good for the country, it was good for the husbands and for the children. It was good for women only because it helped them become good wives and mothers and trained them to perform their roles more effectively in the modern context. Women's education was not seen as a means toward a profession or a career. Though Arya Samaj was very active in the promotion of women's education, setting up schools and universities for girls and women (Kanya Pathshalas and Kanya Mahavidyalas), Dayananda Saraswati was very clear about a woman's role: "The woman should do the domestic duties in obedience to her husband. The work outside should belong to the province of the man's duties" (1970:105).

In 1883, Calcutta University conferred degrees on its first two women graduates. In 1907, 3.6 percent of all school-age females were enrolled in a school in contrast to 23.1 percent of all school-age males who were enrolled. By 1912 the percentage of females enrolled had increased to 5 percent, with 318 women attending universities in India and a handful in England (The Indian Year Book, 1915:357). Gradually a group of highly educated women emerged, some of whom entered the political arena. They, by and large, replaced their caste and class brothers and fathers in defining women's issues and goals. Nevertheless, they continued to perceive men in the role of givers and women's education as "strengthen[ing] the hands of our men" (Naidu, n.d.:71). Sarojini Naidu, a forceful speaker and leading figure in the early twentieth century women's movement, in a speech to the Indian National Conference, December 30, 1914, reaffirmed the social reformists' expectations and hopes regarding education for women:

We ask for nothing that is foreign to our ideals, rather we ask for a restoration. . . . We [women] ask only that we may be given that chance to develop our body and spirit and mind in that evolution that will re-establish for you . . . ideal womanhood that will make noble wives who are helpmates, strong mothers, brave mothers, teaching their sons their first lesson of national service (emphasis added, n.d.:74).

Sarojini Naidu, along with other women from progressive, politicized Indian families, was very active in mobilizing support first for women's education, then for women's right to vote. Both these activities were intimately tied with the larger concern for self government and later total independence from British rule. The early twentieth century saw the founding of several women's organizations on both national and provincial levels. Bharat Stri Mahamandal was formed in 1910 but, according to Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, "It did not take deep root" (1929:7). In 1917 Dorothy Jinarajadasa, wife of the President of the Theosophical Society, was instrumental in starting the Women's Indian Association. All-India Women's Association was founded in 1926 and the National Council of Women of India, an affiliate of the International Council of Women, was established a year earlier.

The objectives of these organizations were to serve as special interest groups for women and children and to organize women for social service. They worked closely with the social reform-oriented Indian Social Conference and the more political Indian National Congress. There was considerable overlapping of membership. Women like Mrs. Sarojini Naidu, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, Mrs. Annie Besant, Mrs. Brijlal Nehru, Sarladevi Choudhrani, and Rajkumari Amrit Kaur were active in both the Indian National Congress and the women's organizations. Indeed, Mrs. Besant and Mrs. Naidu served as Presidents of the Indian National Congress and the Women's Indian Association and All-India Women's Conference respectively. The women's movement, as expressed by these women's organizations, bore a parent-child resemblance to the social reform movement that had given it birth and a sibling relationship with the Indian National Congress. This was especially apparent in the choice of issues and the manner in which these organizations pursued them.

Committed to the advancement of what these elite women considered vital to the interests of Indian women, the Women's Indian Association (WIA) turned its attention first to the question of women's franchise. In this it was complementing the demand for self government expressed by the educated Indian men who constituted the Indian National Congress. As Lakshmi Menon pointed out in her 1944 essay, The Position of Women, however, the problem for the majority of Indian women who "live in the villages, work in the fields and drudge in the factories . . ." was "not one of legal rights and civil liberties or even of political freedom, but the more insistent and inexorable one of eking out an existence" (1944:31).

Nevertheless, in 1917, when a Commission headed by Lords Montagu and Chelmsford was investigating and deliberating the possibilities of granting limited franchise to Indian men, an All India Deputation of Women was organized by Mrs. Margaret Cousins, an associate of the suffragette Mrs. Pankhurst, to present the case for women. Margaret Cousins was then active in the WIA. The Deputation, led by Mrs. Sarojini Naidu, met with Montagu to ask officially that women be granted franchise along with men. Montagu's response to the women's petition, according to Naidu, was, "Do you think that the men of India will allow such a thing [women's suffrage]?" (n.d.:232, emphasis added).

Not wanting to get involved in a controversial subject, the British government left the decision on women's franchise to the British Indian Provincial governments which were to be elected on the basis of a limited male suffrage. The leaders of the Women's Indian Association and Bharat Stri Mahamandal, therefore, launched a campaign to pressure Indian men to "allow" women to have voting rights. Mrs. Naidu introduced a resolution on women's franchise at the eighteenth session of the Bombay Provincial Conference held at Bijapur, with the recommendation that the resolution be forwarded to the Congress through the Provincial Congress Committee (Naidu, n.d.:231). On September 1, 1918, at the Bombay Special Congress, Mrs. Naidu moved a resolution stating, "Women possessing the same qualifications as are laid down for men . . . shall not be disqualified on account of sex" (Naidu, n.d.:235).

Her defense of the resolution is revealing of the way in which women's political rights were perceived at that time. First, she argued that a favorable vote on the resolution was important, "not from practical consideration, not from economic consideration, but rather from the standpoint of National ideal of India. We Indians have always boasted that we are followers of the Goddesses of our land. Our teachings always inculcated the worship of the mother even before the worship of the father. . . . Woman makes the Nation; on her worthiness or unworthiness, weakness or strength, ignorance or enlightenment, her cowardice or courage lies folded the destiny of her sons" (n.d.:235-236, emphasis added). Second, she assured the men that the vote for women was not the beginning of the end of traditional distribution of power and differentiation of roles between the sexes but the beginning of a new partnership in winning freedom and building the Indian Nation:

I do not think that any male need have apprehension that to extend the horizon of woman's labours is to break all her power in the home. I do not think that there need be any apprehension that in granting franchise to Indian womanhood, that Indian womanhood will wrench the power belonging to man. Never, never, for we realize that men and women have separate goals and separate destinies and that just as a man can never fulfill the responsibility of a woman, a woman cannot fulfill the responsibility of man. . . . We ask for franchise, we ask for vote, not that we might interfere with you in your official functions, your civic duties, your public place and power, but rather that we might lay the foundation of National character in the souls of the children that we hold upon our laps and instill them with the ideas of Nationality. . . . Gentlemen, will you not show your chivalry which is justice, your nobility which is gratitude by saying to them [Indian women], "you, who within the shelter of our homes are Goddesses, high priestesses, the inspirers of our faith, sustainers of our hopes, the flower of joy upon our breasts, O! mothers, O! sisters, O! wives, we have our feet set upon the path of freedom, we have our own vision, the distant vision of glory . . . accompany us to that distant goal to be the inspiration of progress and the reward of all our hope." -- (Cheers) (n.d.:237-238).

The vote, like education, was to make women more effective mothers and wives. Women's participation in politics was to serve as inspiration and support to the men. Men and women were naturally different but complementary and, therefore, both men and women were needed to build a strong Indian nation.

The Indian National Congress (1918) adopted a resolution in favor of women's franchise at its Calcutta session. The Muslim League passed a similar resolution. These resolutions accepted the principle of granting women suffrage without any restrictions or age limit. In 1920 Cochin and Travancore, both Indian princely states, granted franchise to women and also nominated two women each to their respective legislative councils (Gedge, 1929:8). In 1921 the British Indian provinces of Madras and Bombay gave

women the right to vote. The women of United Provinces won the franchise in 1923; and those in Central Provinces, the Punjab, and Bengal gained the right in 1926. But since the franchise was based on property qualifications, the number of women enfranchised was very small. Between 1921 and 1933, only 315,651 women had the vote compared to 6.8 million men who met the franchise requirements. Because of the combined efforts of the various women's organizations, the Indian Government Act of 1935 enfranchised 6 million women; the number of men enfranchised was 29 million (Menon, 1944:27-28). The 1950 Constitution of independent India implemented the Indian National Congress' 1918 resolution by granting all citizens, men and women above 21 years, the right to vote. The women had assured the Indian men that the vote was not going to change the relationship between men and women and it did not.

Women's entry into the male arena, be it education or politics, was always balanced in India by an emphasis on the differences between men and women, as if to forestall the fear of women occupying male space and taking away male rights and privileges. In the area of education, after female education was accepted, there ensued a debate on the type of education appropriate for women. The first All India Women's Conference, held in 1927, passed a resolution "that in education of girls and women, teaching in ideals of motherhood, beautifying of home as well as training in the methods of social service should be kept uppermost" (Indian Quarterly Register, 1927:427). The founding of Lady Irwin College (1932), a college for training women teachers in Home Science and allied subjects, was hailed as a great landmark in the women's movement (Shridevi, 1965:62; Indian Annual Register, 1933:276-277).

Concerning women's participation in politics, the granting of franchise to propertied women was followed by a demand for inclusion of women in legislative bodies. This demand was justified on the grounds that women, because of their sex, were better suited to provide input on questions relating to women and children. Since at that time the Central and provincial legislatures were deliberating on questions that concerned women, i.e., legal age of marriage and of consent, and changes in inheritance laws, divorce and custody of children, it was considered important that women represent the interests of their groups, and those of their children. At the 1928 All India Women's Conference Mrs. Cousins, representative from Madras, "introduced a resolution urging the Government to nominate at least two women to the Central Legislature to protect the interests of women, especially in regard to the pending legislation on Child Marriage and Devdasi children⁸. . . . Mrs. Rustumji (Hyderabad) who was one of those who represented the women's case before the Muddiman Committee,⁹ declared that women were absolutely necessary in the legislatures to safeguard their interests" (Indian Quarterly Register, 1928:462). When Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy, the first woman to sit in the Madras Legislative Council (1927), attended the first Council session, she was welcomed for the "'special' contribution she would make to the Council's proceedings: 'Now the presence of a lady doctor, of her position, in the Council would help the cause of women and children, in their education and physical welfare'" (Forbes, 1979:8). Women's presence in the legislative councils was necessary because

they were different from men, not because men and women were equal. It was this difference that made it possible for women to make a special contribution to Indian politics. Such a position was a natural outcome of the continuing emphasis on traditional gender-specific roles.

This emphasis on women's special attributes, to justify promotion of women's rights, did not go totally unchallenged. At the 1927 meeting of the All India Women's Conference, "Mrs. Menon, on behalf of the unmarried professional women, urged that the Conference should not lay too much stress on motherhood" (Indian Quarterly Register, 1927:427). At the 1929 meeting of the All India Women's Conference on Educational Reform, the President, Rani Lalita Kumari Saheba of Mandi, argued, "Women benefit by the highest education as much as men and it is a narrow view indeed which seeks to fit woman only for the needs of motherhood and domestic life, though it is not argued on parallel lines that man's education should be ordered so as to make him primarily a good father and a good husoand" (Indian Quarterly Register, 1929:421-422). V. Kamalabai Ammal objected to the manner in which women were given the right to vote. She maintained that giving men the right to decide whether or not women were to be enfranchised implied "the monopoly of the male sex not only to enjoy the privilege but also to confer it upon others--women--as a matter of charity" (Forbes, 1979:7). These voices of dissent, though soft and sporadic, suggested a fundamental ideological difference in the understanding of women's inequality. These women were challenging traditional power relations and societal roles, implying thereby that without such a challenge the question of gender equality could not be adequately addressed.

The questions being raised by women like V. Kamalabai Ammal, Mrs. Menon and Rani Lalita Kumari Saheba of Mandi posed a severe threat to the patriarchal Hindu tradition at a time when this tradition was being used, albeit selectively, by the colonized Hindu male to serve as an anchor and an inspiration for his self-image. It was, therefore, unlikely that those men who led the movement for reform, self government, and independence would recognize, let alone accept, the linkage being suggested by these women between gender inequality and traditional Hindu ideals of womanhood. On the contrary, references to these ideals which glorified woman as mother (nurturant), as wife--Ardhangini (complementary half), and as sahadharmini (helpmate), all non-threatening and supportive roles, were used by the protagonists of women's rights to justify the need for female education, female participation in politics, and changes in marriage, family, and inheritance laws. Therefore, discussion of the women's question without a critical examination of the patriarchal tradition inevitably emphasized differences between men and women, preserved traditional roles, and the male-female hierarchy.

The overpowering influence of Mahatama Gandhi in the Indian nationalist movement further ensured that these voices, which dissented from the mainstream handling of women's issues, would not be heard. Gandhi firmly believed in gender-specific roles: "The man should look to the maintenance of the family, the woman to household management; the two thus supplementing

and complementing each other's labours," he wrote, continuing, "Nor do I see in this any invasion of woman's rights or suppression of her freedom. . . . The woman who knows and fulfills her duty realizes her dignified status. She is the queen, not the slave, of the household over which she presides" (Gandhi, 1946:10-11).

These roles, Gandhi argued, were related to the differences in male and female attributes. "Whilst both (man and woman) are fundamentally one, it is also true that in the form there is a vital difference between the two. Hence, the vocations of the two must also be different. The duty of motherhood, which the vast majority of women will always undertake, requires qualities which man need not possess. She is passive, he is active. She is essentially mistress of the house. He is the bread-winner, she is the keeper and distributor of the bread. She is the care-taker in every sense of the term. The art of bringing up the infants of the race is her special and sole prerogative. Without her care, the race must become extinct. In my opinion, it is degrading (sic) both for man and woman, that woman should be called upon or induced to forsake the hearth. . . . In trying to ride the horse that man rides, she brings herself and him down" (Gandhi, 1946:27). At another point, Gandhi stated, "On principle, too, I believe in the two sexes functioning separately" (1946:223).

The attributes that distinguished women from men also made them more capable of participating in the Gandhian brand of politics. Gandhi believed that " . . . since resistance in satyagraha is offered through self-suffering, it is a weapon pre-eminently open to women" (1946:224). "Woman in the incarnation of ahimsa. Ahimsa means infinite love, which, again, means infinite capacity for suffering. Who but woman, the mother of man, shows this capacity in the largest measure? She shows it as she carries the infant and feeds it during nine months and derives joy in the suffering involved. What can beat the suffering caused by the pangs of labour? . . . Who again suffers daily so that her babe may wax from day to day? Let her transfer that love to the whole humanity. . . . It is given to 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" (1946:29). As he told a group of women in Italy, "Woman, I hold is the personification of self-sacrifice; . . . The beauty of non-violent war is that women can play the same part in it as men. . . . Non-violent war calls into play suffering to the largest extent, and who can suffer more purely and nobly than women?" (1946:34-35).

In addition to possessing the capacity to suffer and sacrifice, Gandhi considered women specially suited to spinning, an integral feature of his civil disobedience movement. "In spinning, they [women] have a natural advantage over men. . . . Men spinners are an exception . . . experience shows that spinning will remain woman's specialty. I believe there is a good reason behind the experience. Spinning is essentially a slow and comparatively silent process. Woman is the embodiment of sacrifice and, therefore, non-violence. Her occupation must, therefore, be, as they are, more conducive to peace than war" (1946:174-175).

But this acceptance of gender-specific roles came with Gandhi's potentially subversive belief that one's conscience was the final judge of right and wrong action. Placing a woman's conscience higher than male authority in a male-female relationship subverted the ideology of male superiority. He wrote: "The wife has a perfect right to take her own course, and meekly brave the consequences when she knows herself to be in the right, and when her resistance is for nobler purpose. . . . A wife is not bound to be an accomplice in her husband's crimes. . . . Hinduism leaves the individual absolutely free to do what he or she likes for the sake of self-realization, for which alone he or she is born" (1946:5-6).

To Gandhi, domination of one person by another denied each other's humanity; for all people, rich and poor, man and woman, were endowed with moral dignity and individuality. It was their moral strength that empowered them, not the material conditions of their lives. The emphasis on moral power made it possible for Gandhi to insist, "I do not believe in women working for a living, or undertaking commercial enterprises" (1946:21); that is, support woman's economic dependence on man which often gave man power over her, while maintaining, "I am uncompromising in the matter of woman's rights. In my opinion, she should labour under no legal disability not suffered by man. I should treat the daughters and sons on a footing of perfect equality" (1946:13).

In sum, Gandhi's politics, with its emphasis on self sacrifice, ability to suffer without protest or complaint, and endurance--all traits that according to Gandhi were traditionally associated with female behavior, made "femaleness" respectable. By stressing the connection between what Gandhi saw as female attributes and the requirements of his political campaign of Ahimsa and Satyagraha, he was able to mobilize women for political participation. To the extent that he drew distinctions between men and women on the basis of behavioral traits, he strengthened the forces of conservatism: He placed his seal of approval on gender-defined division of labor and reinforced those traditional expectations of women's behavior which had enabled men to sustain their power over them. But, by giving primacy to one's conscience and making politics accessible to women of all castes and classes, he also introduced a radical element in Indian thinking on women's position in family, society, and the state. Nevertheless, he predicated the appropriateness of women's participation in politics on only a certain type of political activity--one which demanded suffering and self sacrifice. Presumably, when politics of Ahimsa and Satyagraha came to an end and women's special attributes were no longer in demand, they were to return to the "hearth" to pursue their gender-ascribed suffering.

Jawaharlal Nehru, who inherited Gandhi's mantle, differed significantly from Gandhi's approach to gender equality. To Nehru, a self-avowed socialist, women's subordination to men had an economic basis. As he pointed out to the women students of Mahila Vidyapitha in 1934, "Freedom depends on economic conditions even more than political and if woman is not economically free and self-earning she will have to depend on her husband or someone else, and dependents are never free" (1974:220). He urged them,

therefore, not to look upon marriage "as a profession almost and as the sole economic refuge for woman," and "to free themselves from the tyranny of man-made customs and laws," a struggle that the women would have to carry on themselves for "man is not likely to help them" (1974:219). Though he saw economic, religio-cultural, and legal factors as combining to create a subordinate position for Indian women, as Prime Minister and one who dominated the first seventeen years of independent India's political life, Nehru, like the social reformers before him, focused primarily on legal measures to remedy the situation.

The Indian Constitution, adopted in 1950, recognized the principle of gender equality: article 15 specifically prohibits any discrimination and article 16 forbids discrimination in employment on the basis of sex; both men and women are accepted as being equal in the eyes of the law (article 14) and franchise is granted to men and women above 21 years of age. These provisions had essentially been accepted by the Indian National Congress in 1931 in recognition of women's contribution to the nationalist struggle. Indian women had proved their "fitness to rule" by participating in the politics of Ahimsa and Satyagraha, and the three national organizations of women had demonstrated their loyalty to the Indian National Congress and to Indian men by issuing a joint memorandum (1931) condemning reserved seats for women, a proposal being considered at that time but which was perceived as being divisive by the Indian National Congress.

The Indian Constitution was followed by a series of laws designed to further gender equality--Hindu Marriage Act, Hindu Succession Act, Dowry Prohibition Act, and Equal Remuneration Act. All were government efforts to achieve equality between the sexes. Nevertheless, since the women who had worked closely with the Indian National Congress during the nationalist struggle for independence came from the educated middle- and upper-middle-classes, it was not surprising that in the working of these laws, it was these women who tended to benefit more than their illiterate and poor sisters. For example, whereas women professionals and executives and high-level civil servants now receive salaries close to their male colleagues, the women agricultural laborers, who comprise almost 80 percent of the working Indian women, earn only 68 percent of what men receive. A study commissioned by the Indian Council of Social Science Research indicates that the Government itself is often in violation of the anti-discrimination laws. In their investigation of women's employment in public sector industries--coal, textile, pharmaceutical, electronic, heavy electrical and watch making--Hussain and Rao (n.d.) found evidence of women's being relegated to lower paid, dead-end jobs. Even when those women were experienced or had adequate qualifications, promotions tended to go more often to men than women.

Similarly, cultural factors work at cross purposes of the new inheritance legislation which grants daughters and sons an equal share in parents' property. Patriarchal marriages and the practice of marrying daughters into families from a village other than one's own make women's exercise of their rights difficult. The added need to preserve good relations with her

brother, a woman's only "protection" against potentially hostile in-laws, makes it politic to disclaim any share in the property being inherited by the brother. Moreover, Hindu rituals and folklore romanticize the special bond between brother and sister; twice a year Hindus observe special ceremonies to commemorate this relationship, thus making it unlikely a sister will "appropriate" what she is led to believe belongs to her brother. Her dowry is often perceived as her "share" of the parents' property/wealth. As Ursula Sharma's study, Women, Work, and Property in North-West India (1980) suggests, and as those of us familiar with the Indian scene can attest, daughters and sisters seldom exercise their right to parental property.

More importantly, low literacy rates (18.4 percent according to the 1971 census), lack of information regarding their legal rights, poverty, and a socialization that emphasizes gender-specific roles and continuous dependence on the father, brother, husband, and son, all combine to create a wide gap between law and reality. By and large, the beneficiaries of the progressive laws are the educated middle- and upper-middle class urban women, who both know the laws and possess the means to fight for their rights if they have to. At best, the laws promise improvement in the lives of a small group of women. For in the country where per capita income is \$120 and where 80 percent of the women work at home, inheritance rights and laws establishing equal pay for equal work have relevance for only a limited number of women. It therefore took issues like famine, rising prices, "eve-teasing,"¹⁰ rape and dowry "murders" to mobilize women to organize, demonstrate, picket, "gherao" (encircle), and demand better conditions.

In the early seventies, increasing commercialization of agriculture, internationalization of the Indian economy, drought and famine, and, later, sharp increases in energy costs drove prices sky high, making food scarce, while unemployment increased both in the rural and urban sectors. Rising food prices and scarcity of essential items for cooking--oil and kerosene--drove thousands of women into the streets in protest. In Maharashtra the women set up Gheraos (encirclements) around government offices and demanded that "government set up relief works because there were no crops and no jobs in the fields" (Omvedt, 1980:2). According to Omvedt's account, the Women's Anti-Price Rise Committee, formed in Bombay in 1972 and now spread all over India, brought women out of their homes in "tens of thousands not on the issues of cultural oppression and personal self-determination that affect many college students nor in efforts to get wages or work, but on consumer issues" (Omvedt, 1980:77). The Rolling Pin March involved twenty thousand women (ibid.:82). As one of the woman organizers pointed out, ". . . we have to care for the homes and feed our children, but there is nothing to fill our stomachs with, nothing to eat. Suppose tomorrow someone says, 'Mother, give me something!' What can we give? Where is the money? On 3 rupees [40 cents] a day how can we live? What shall we feed our husbands or children? . . . As women are beginning to feel solidarity" (Omvedt, 1980: 105). Scarcity of food and rising prices, central issues for women--the household managers, built links between women across castes and classes. Working-class and middle-class women marched together.

In Hyderabad, the Progressive Organization of Women marched against dowry "murder" and "eve-teasing," organized women in the slums, and "attack[ed] men who harass[ed] women students" (Omvedt, 1980:50). This organization has sister organizations in other Indian towns. The issue of rape, highlighted by Supreme Court verdict¹¹ on the 1972 case of police rape of Mathura--a 16 year old, scheduled caste, girl laborer--and the Court's handling of the 1978 case of Ramizabee led to the emergence of anti-rape women's groups around the nation. Mathura's case was especially significant for it illustrated the interfacing of caste, class, and gender and revealed the police, the arm of the state, as the perpetrator of the crime.¹² Demonstrations were organized in urban centers across the country. The mainstream and radical press have publicized police rape. India Today, a glossy news-magazine fashioned after Time, and Manushi, a feminist magazine, both have given considerable coverage to incidents of police rape.

Consumerism coupled with poverty has bred a bizarre, inhuman crime, one commonly referred to as dowry "murder." In 1979, over 300 cases were reported of brides, who having brought "unsatisfactory" dowries, died accidentally in their in-law's homes, leaving their husbands free to re-marry for another dowry. Giving and receiving of dowries was made illegal (though not a cognizable offense) in 1961, but reality tends to be shaped by custom not by law. The dowry "murders" have shocked India and, like the issue of police brutality against women, this too has built bonds of sisterhood among women of all ages, castes, and classes. On June 12, 1979, Nari Raksha Samiti of Delhi organized a large procession to protest dowry deaths and to present the Home minister with the women's demands. According to the report in Manushi, "There were working women, housewives with babes in arms, some burkah-clad women and washerwomen from as far away as Majnu ka Tila. A man came all the way from Punjab to voice his protest. His sister was reportedly burnt to death by her husband just 14 days after marriage. . . . What was highly significant was that they were swelled by passersby and by and by people coming out of their houses to join in. In fact, those who poured in spontaneously far outnumbered those brought by the organizers" (Manushi, July-August 1979:15).

Women's organizations in India follow two tracks: One set functions as an affiliate of a political party and serves as a party front for recruiting women and campaigning for women's vote. Each party has a women's front. In such organizations priorities continue to be set by the predominantly male leadership of the party. The other set consists of autonomous women's groups which operate on a local level and use an issue such as an incident of rape, dowry "murder," or "eve-teasing" to mobilize women with the twin objectives of publicizing the physical assault and raising people's consciousness of women's oppression in a patriarchal, capitalist system of relationships. As yet there is no national umbrella organization to coordinate the activities and concerns of these women's groups that have mushroomed in India in the last ten to twelve years.

The hopeful aspect of the Indian "women's movement," from the humanitarian and feminist points of view, is that the situation is open to change. The soft voices of criticism during the early days of upper-caste, male-

directed planning for the emancipation of women have slowly and intermittently increased in number and volume. The social pressures and the dialectic between law and custom have not ended; they are becoming more intense. Historically, during the twentieth century at least, there has been a receptivity to feminist reasoning--witness the moral and traditional arguments of Gandhi: On one hand he said (in local idiom) a woman's place is in the home; on the other, he claimed a woman's conscience is supreme. The pressure of hardship, of low wages and male-female differentials in industry affect and politicize women from lower and middle income groups; traces of conscience and political activism which grew during the struggle for Indian Independence still exist among the more privileged groups and can be shocked into activism by reports of police rape and dowry murders. Feminist organization and expression of specific social goals by and for women are at last becoming recognized as a political force with gathering momentum. While this momentum lasts, some advance of the Indian "women's movement" for removal of disabilities that characterize women's lives and for a reappraisal and restructuring of women's position in the home, society and the workplace seems likely.

NOTES

1. This paper was presented at the 1982 Annual Conference of Asian Studies on the Pacific Coast meeting in conjunction with the Conference on Independent India: The First Thirty-Five Years at Santa Cruz, California, June 25-27, 1982.
2. See S. Shridevi, A Century of Indian Womanhood, Mysore: Rao and Raghavan, 1964; E. C. Gedge and M. Choksi (eds.), Women in Modern India, Bombay: 1929; L. N. Menon, The Position of Women, Oxford: 1929.
3. See G. Omvedt, "Women and Rural Revolt in India," Occasional Papers No. 6 Program in Comparative Culture, Irvine, California, January 1978.
4. See G. Omvedt, We Will Smash This Prison, London: 1980.
5. See D. Jain, Women's Quest for Power, Delhi: 1979.
6. Under Dr. Vina Mazumdar's able leadership this organization has funded excellent research on women-related issues and themes.
7. The term refers to "accidental" deaths of brides who had brought what their in-laws considered unsatisfactory dowry. Sometimes these deaths were suicides; other times, the in-laws allegedly killed the daughter-in-law, making the death appear an accident.
8. Children born to women who as young girls were given by their parents to the temple to spend their lives in service of the temple priests. To the parents this act promised religious merit; to the daughter it meant living a life providing sex to several priests.
9. A government-appointed committee to investigate the practice of child marriages and inheritance rights of illegitimate children.
10. A term used in India for sexual harassment of women by men--it includes verbal and physical (pinching, etc.) harassment.
11. On March 26, 1972, Mathura was raped by the police constable Ganpat of Desaijung police station in the station latrine. Mathura's brother had taken her and her common-law husband, Ashok, to the police station to charge Ashok with having kidnapped Mathura, then a minor. The incident occurred while Mathura's brother and Ashok were waiting for Mathura to go to the latrine. The Sessions Court found Ganpat not guilty of rape and sentenced him to five years of rigorous imprisonment. The Supreme Court, however, reversed the decision of the High Court because of "absence of injuries" on Mathura's body. The Court inferred that the "intercourse was a peaceful affair" and not rape. See Manushi, December 1979-January 1980, pp. 42-46.

12. According to Lata Mani, a feminist and political activist from Bombay, who was active in organizing protests against the Supreme Court verdict, this was the way in which Mathura's case was perceived by women's groups.

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