



Women,  
Public Policy  
and the  
New World Order

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# Women, Public Policy and the New World Order

## The Crossroads

It seems to me that this is a crucial juncture in the history of this nation and of women's engagement with this history. For there is still space and opportunity for those of us in the women's movement, those who worry about equality and social justice, to turn around the traffic and deflect the march of current policy in political economy. The time has come, I believe, for women's movements to renew the power and politics of their foremothers, to sharpen their tools, demonstrate the power of their collective action, and bring themselves from the margins to the centre where a great void is visible. And should we choose not to stand up and be counted we would be unworthy of the remarkable, brilliant, and brave journeys we have ourselves undertaken. We would be unworthy of the identity we claim for ourselves, one defined against discrimination, the demeaning gaze and the prejudices which cut across class, caste, creed, race and location.

In April 2006, a wide range of people – political leaders, concerned citizens, lawyers and artists – could be seen to demonstrate their support of Medha Patkar's stand and the work of the NBA at the ground level. It is evident that we still have a live constituency of those who "care", even as the democratic space for the negotiation of justice and honour is rapidly shrinking.<sup>1</sup>

There has been a dramatic shift of the very sky - not merely the landscape, but the sky underneath which we live. What I am saying is not new. Thinkers national and international have commented on the changes in global politics and global economics since 9/11, as September 11, 2001, is often referred to.<sup>2</sup> People have underscored the shifts in coalitions, the rise of narrow identities, what Amartya Sen calls the miniaturizing of people.<sup>3</sup>



Arundhati Roy has offered her own perspective on the narrowing of the concept of civilisation into exclusively religious identity.

Increasingly, Indian Nationalism has come to mean Hindu Nationalism, which defines itself not through a respect or regard for itself, but through a hatred of the Other. And the Other, for the moment, is not just Pakistan, it's Muslim. It's disturbing to see how neatly nationalism dovetails into fascism. . . . Fascism's firm footprint has appeared in India. Let's mark the date: Spring, 2002. While we can thank the American President and the Coalition Against Terror for creating a congenial international atmosphere for its ghastly debut, we cannot credit them for the years it has been brewing in our public and private lives. . . . In no time at all, the godsquadders from hell have colonised the public imagination. And we allowed them in.<sup>4</sup>

"Democracy: Who's She when She's at Home?" Outlook, 6 May, 2002.

There has been a sharp increase in inequalities everywhere, in every theatre – within nations, between nations and between regions. That is one dimension of the sky. It has been mapped by the reports of such prominent actors as the World Bank. The World Development Report 2005 states in bold terms, "inequality is not only unfair – it also wastes resources and stifles economic progress."<sup>5</sup> It warns nations who imagine that, given time, the effects of "trickle-down" will be apparent, that the source of the trickle will dry up. Let us illustrate this.

As a global society emerges, inequalities of income and distances between people are increasing. We see this by looking at poverty rates between 1985 and 1998. While they did decline slightly in South Asia, the absolute numbers of those below the poverty-line increased. Poverty rates in Africa rose, and there was an especially sharp rise within the so-called "transition" economies of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. In Latin America, poverty rates doubled before they declined. In other words, the overall decline was far less than had been projected by the majority of development economists. And wherever a decline was apparent, it was much slower in the 1990s than in earlier decades.<sup>6</sup>

As indicated above, outside the rich countries, the numbers of those living in poverty in the less developed countries (LDCs) rose steadily during the last two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This increase is part



of the phenomenon of growing global economic inequality, both between and within countries. The incomes of LDCs and transition economies have stagnated while those of rich industrialized countries have risen, producing increased inequality.<sup>7</sup>

Again, within most countries, the less well off became poorer while the rich got richer. This is confirmed even by traditional measures of household income or consumption, which, as will become evident, miss crucial aspects of impoverishment. Summing up the trends visible in many countries over an extended period of time, Ravi Kanbur and Lyn Squire stated, "inequality has been surprisingly persistent, and where inequality has changed rapidly, it has increased."<sup>8</sup>

Investigations of ground realities confirm the increase in immiseration and disparities. Statistics on inequality have been provided by Abhijit Sen and Himanshu<sup>9</sup>, vivid descriptions of the debt-ridden turning to suicide are found in the articles of P. Sainath<sup>10</sup> and increasingly also on television.

Another great change in the sky is the unrolling of thrust areas of an economic program based on what I would call acute liberalization, where trade-led growth is made the mantra for all problems.

In such a sky, how and where are interventions made on behalf of women and justice? What do data and reports reveal on the location and condition of women, especially the deprived majority? To pose my question differently, in what ways and to what degree has the women's movement been able to bear upon this sky? This new sky and the phenomena it is generating, the viruses it is breeding, makes it imperative that we work out the position of the women's movement in relation to it.

I have reflected on my own history to decide what constitutes my USP (to use the latest jargon) - in which domains my participation has been valued, to see how my individual experience suggests insights into these questions. Given the number of sites in India where information is currently processed - listservs, blogs and big-scale information dissemination programmes addressing every topic possible, including women, policy and the new world order - it is necessary for me to situate myself for my words to carry significance.





I have identified some contexts for learning I might claim as unique. One relates to my age. The second has been my involvement in the politics of affirmation of nations of the South (that is, areas formerly under colonial empires). This brought me into the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), not just at conferences on women's issues, but also as a Government delegate at the NAM Conference on Culture in Columbia in 1991. The third related item is my considerable participation in international spaces, including high profile confederations like the South Commission. Fourth, my involvement in the population policy, which was launched in 1992 on what proved to be a bumpy journey, and continued to weave in and out of my life until 2003.

The fact of my having been born in 1933 and having attained adulthood in 1953 is responsible for more than what is often said about those like Vina Mazumdar, Neera Desai and myself – that we were pioneers of women's studies, who made prominent the "equal but different" debate in the landscape of knowledge. It has also influenced how the idea of India entered my imagination. Belonging to the generation before "midnight's children" made certain political ideas part of our lives, regardless of whether we arrived at these via the journey of the formal Left, Gandhi's passage to India, or the early years of internationalism in the women's movement. The India of our dreams is actually the India that we lived in. On returning in 1956 from my first educational experience in Oxford, India was represented for me by Nehru and Gandhi. Gandhi, as in the idealist vision of Vinobha Bhave and Nehru, as establishing a role for India on the international stage.

It was at this time I undertook a comparative study of government programmes for rural India – the area-based planning of the Khadi and Village Industries Commission, the government's Community Development and National Extension Service programme and, for my second sponsor, the Indian Cooperative Union (ICU) headed by Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya), the Gramdaan reconstruction programme.

This study entailed extensive travel all over Bihar, Orissa, Andhra and Maharashtra. It was thrilling to be walking in India's fields of reconstruction – the atmosphere was charged with dedication and hope.





When we met visitors from other South Asian countries or attended meetings of delegates from Palestine and South Africa, we realized that, despite colonization, India had developed extraordinary capacities for self-reliance during the freedom struggle and after. In Thailand and Bangladesh, they were using Nestlé's condensed milk, imported soap and imported cars with air conditioning for people like us. While there was India, producing its own milk, soap, cars, bicycles. We were the envy of liberated countries who had not yet achieved what Gandhi called the 'second freedom' of liberation from economic colonization.

There was in this period an embarrassment, what we may call a 'sankocham', at the idea of living ostentatiously while surrounded by the poverty starkly manifest in malnutrition and high mortality rates. Indian bureaucrats were reluctant to display their wealth through consumption, and money was not valued as a means to a lifestyle fitted out with luxurious consumer goods. There were, of course, those who hoarded wealth or were concerned only to accumulate it, but this too was accompanied by an overlay of embarrassment.

What I call the 'Gandhi touch' made for the belief that consumer preferences could be directed to benefit the have-nots. The conscious favouring of khadi shops and the revival of handicrafts were aspects of this policy, which extended to mandating state governments to buy exclusively from producers identified as especially deprived. Municipal Schools were supposed to buy their school uniforms from the refugee women's cooperative which had an outlet in the old building of the Cottage Industries Emporium. Many government departments made their purchases from certain groups of producers in the same way as Congressmen were expected to show their patronage of khadi spinners by wearing khadi suits and caps. Distinctions were introduced in the textile industry to ensure a market for the labour intensive handloom sector, which had the exclusive right to produce bordered sarees. In this way, public policy sought to secure a more substantial share in the national income to those of its contributors who belonged to the 'classes living in poverty'. The vision behind the plans was the protection and promotion of employment and livelihood.

Turning our attention from policy makers to producers, there emerged at that time, remarkable trade unions and associations of workers,



like the Mazdoor Mahajan of Ahmedabad (whose first President was Anasuya Sarabai) and the Dastakar Anjuman of Kashmir. Some of these associations had been set up by Gandhi.

This was a fascinating India and if you look back today, it does seem difficult to not be attracted to it. But it could also be said that we failed India, as what I see now of the nation is not comforting. More on this later but it is enough to suggest that we failed to engage fully in the reconstruction of India by using what we learned from our historical experience. We enjoyed what our history had given us and stood by. My generation has come to rethink the course we followed, whether as regards the technologies we adopted, the economic policies we allowed or the political processes we ignored. These have led to the pollution of both nature and people, for it has destroyed our rivers and our soil, created chaotic towns and steeped us in corrupt practices, whether life taking like counterfeit drugs or financially threatening like stamp paper. This has generated disparities that hold within themselves time bombs waiting to blast away what is left of peace and security in the Indian landscape. We should have unselfconsciously gone into politics, and tried to initiate mass participatory dialogues, as indeed the Narmada Bachao Andolan is now doing.

Apart from the era in which I grew up, another part of my history I cherish was my participation in the South Commission set up in 1987. I cannot begin to tell you what an experience it was to be a member of a Commission meant solely for economists from developing countries, led by a man like Julius Nyerere, who drew inspiration from the socialist vision and was also a leader of a remarkable freedom movement in Tanganyika (now Tanzania). We represented a cross-section of experience, for besides economists there were people who had retired as heads of state or heads of banks or as members of the UN or the Foreign Service. We three women ( Marie Angelique Savané, Solita Collos-Monsod and myself) represented the academic activism that characterised the feminist movement.

It was a serious attempt at what I call 'striking back at the empire', prompted by the need to respond to the Brandt Commission, which had initiated the process of making rich countries into an economic club. Interestingly, it was Mugabe who as Chair of the NAM mooted the idea of having a South-South Economic Commission. This idea of



"retaliation" was developed into a constructive proposal by Julius Nyerere. He proposed we develop our sinews by sharing knowledge, cooperating on economic matters and setting up new institutions like a debtor's forum, a bank for nations of the South as well as information systems within the South. This would enable us to harness our power and to overcome our differences.

We had consultations in Cuba, China, India, Kuwait, Mozambique, Malaysia and Tanzania. In Mozambique, we learned of the extraordinary way the Portuguese pulled out. Before leaving, they destroyed all infrastructure that would have been of use to the 'free Mozambiquans', such as power lines and basement pipes in high rise buildings. When I left Mozambique I swore that I would never again admire Portugal for the maritime genius that is celebrated in their museums and their history books. They were the worst of the colonizers.

In East Africa, Nyerere appealed to leaders to abandon their turf-wars and fight the enemy together. This carried resonances of the trade union language – just as the workers of the world had been exhorted to unite and overthrow their chains, leaders and people of the South were being asked to unite against all odds. We were shown the way by Cuba, which we visited towards the close of our term. As we were listening and learning from various voices in Cuba, in the company of Fidel Castro, with whom I had such memorable conversations and came to feel such affection, Nyerere looked at us and said, "We have the South Report here". In other words, we had what we wanted to say - Cuba had done it. And in China, Nyerere shared his hopes openly. He urged me to tell the Premier that if China and India combined, the South would have no difficulty in proving its power against the North.

It is worth analyzing the failure of our work to achieve its aims. First of all, it may have been too late. Many countries in Africa were already entangled in structural adjustment programs, or what is called economic reform, and their leaders had been 'bought over'. As Latin America was reeling under debt, here too it was impossible to unknot the process. Second, many of the Commission's members being retired 'leaders', they had little or no experience of what we now call people's movements. Their understanding of governance was limited to their own area of jurisdiction, and did not comprehend the





extraordinary energy, clarity, and ability to identify the 'how' of institutions that characterized the groundswell of people's movements.

Interestingly, this recognition of the need to abandon Western intellectualism and forge a separate identity to rethink development from the vantage point of the poor and marginalized in former colonies had been identified much earlier in the 1980s by those of us in the women's movement. It was this that led to the founding of Development Alternatives with Women in a New Era (DAWN).<sup>11</sup>

The UN's framework of gender equality measured progress by comparing statistics in education, wages and political participation, without going behind the scenes to investigate what was responsible for the disparities between men and women and between the rich and the poor. What DAWN brought into the discourse on women and development in 1984-85 was this will to uncover the roots of inequality. At the founding meeting, representatives identified their regional crises in a matter of minute, within which it was possible to situate the problems of poor women. Thus DAWN shifted the discussion from what we call the 'ladder game' to harnessing macro economic policy for the advancement of women.

The South Commission in many ways followed up on DAWN in trying to recast the development paradigm. The interesting issue is that what DAWN could do, the South Commission could not do. And this has lessons for us.

Firstly, the fact that without the backing of a huge commission or the UN, a group of women had created an intellectual ferment and developed a new analytical frame which was widely celebrated and used, shows that women are capable of collective strategizing, overcoming inhibitions and establishing what are called the necessary conditions for making 'a strike'. This confirms the willingness and eagerness of women to come together if there is a possibility of creative efforts at transformation and their energetic use of new ideas. It also affirms their collective concern about poverty and inequality – a kind of ethical imperative. It also reveals the fact that women's creative intellect is often in advance of men's intellect, given that DAWN preceded the South Commission.





The South Commission could not come up with what it sought, namely a pathbreaking development theory which was intellectually acceptable and could be sold to leaders and people. It was hamstrung by its lack of unity and by the inherited understanding of its members that the old order had to be actually discarded. It was also trapped in men's ways of working, which demanded big structures with posts and funds, a 'big deal' to squeeze the toothpaste out of the tube. Following the South Commission's Report<sup>12</sup>, the South Centre that had been set up as a hub for energizing the South collapsed and was replaced by bureaucratic management of South-South communication.

In my view, unless we dismantle the symbols of the New Economic Order that carry such overwhelming power and forge new structures through processes that are democratic and inclusive – and only learned by plunging into the women's movement – there is no way of holding back the collapse of the sky we see around us. Although I came out of the South Commission disappointed, I also came out of it knowing that the way forward would be shown by women-only spaces and collective strategies led by women. Brought up against the old dilemma that public policy is given, is not for us to shape or negotiate, I affirmed the need to create new public policy.

This said, I will now gather these points under the three heads addressed by the title – women, public policy and the New World Order. Under women, I propose to take up both the political story of women's history that is bound up with issues of identity, as well as the intellectual story of women's engagement with knowledge. I will illustrate engagements with public policy through stories of women's work. I will also deal with the dilemmas, what I call the problematiques, of women's participation in public policy and especially of what is now called 'gendering public policy'. Finally, I will share with you my ideas, as indeed my anxieties, regarding the New World Order.

The experiences I will be drawing on to address my topic include my years of work at the Institute of Social Studies Trust (ISST) and the research for my recent book, an 'intellectual history' of development thought in the UN, illuminated by the parallel history of the struggle of women to be addressed on more equal terms in the international theatre of justice.<sup>13</sup> Work on this book helped me discover much about intellectual domination.

Those like myself, who have been associated with the women's movement for over 30 years, keep struggling to reconcile two of the most visible realities of today's world. On the one hand, there is the strong political presence assumed by the women's movement, locally and globally. There is now widespread recognition that a gendered analysis bringing out difference and inequality is necessary to development design. Yet we cannot escape the fact that development thought has been unable to prevent the situation on the ground from having worsened sharply in recent years for many women, particularly those living in poverty or in sites of conflict.

I suggest we need to ponder on what our response to this disjunction is to be.

My lecture comprises five sections:

- I. The Women's Movement
- II. Knowledge
- III. Women and Work
- IV. The New World Order
- V. Engaging in Public Policy: Some Reflections



## The Women's Movement

Representing what even several "outsiders" have acknowledged to be the last surviving global social movement<sup>14</sup> and the most sustained in its reflection on such a wide spectrum of issues, the women's movement's most remarkable achievement consists of having established the reality of women as a social configuration over and above their plural identities. We have old and new examples of how women have transcended differences of class, caste, religion, ideology or location. They have mobilized around issues, like the anti-arrack struggle in Andhra Pradesh, or within other struggles, like the Dalit Women's Federation. Once I even suggested that identity is like a liquid, for it flows into differently shaped containers depending on its use, although I have subsequently abandoned that "model."

In my presidential address to the National Conference on Women Studies in 1993 (Mysore), I presented a chart of collective action by Indian women to highlight the issues they are raising at the ground level, the strategies they adopt and what that tells us about the 'what and how' of development. A long and diverse list, it referred, among others, to vegetable vendors in Manek Chowk in Ahmedabad, market women in Imphal, the anti-arrack movement in Andhra Pradesh, women in a settlement in Assam and the Chipko movement.

The review described how women experiencing poverty and other forms of deprivation are putting their bodies on the line.<sup>15</sup> Their struggle could be for livelihood, for the preservation of their shacks, for water or for protection from physical violence. The review suggested that such collective action found opportunity and indeed success only when organized as women. Put the other way, they have to organize themselves as women, across other social divisions and political formations, in order to survive, to find a "way out".<sup>16</sup> This finding was decisively confirmed during my research for the book mentioned above.

Writing history from the perspective of the 'South' is a rewarding but challenging task. The available knowledge base is overwhelmingly Eurocentric, both in its choice of sources and in its presentation of





history, so that it is easy for such perceptions to dominate discourse elsewhere. Yet if World War II constituted a defining event for the Northern hemisphere and provided the context for founding the United Nations, such events were not the most significant externalities for nations of the South.

The histories of the colonised countries were defined by slavery and indentured labor, by economic exploitation and the denial of cultural and intellectual recognition. Historical landmarks for black citizens of South Africa are the dates punctuating the period of apartheid, like the years 1952 and 1990 which mark the twenty-seven years Nelson Mandela was incarcerated on Robben Island.

Eurocentrism is also true of the history of ideas. Accounts of the course of intellectual currents and claims for the influence of intellectual contributions refer to a world whose contours are viewed from the West. Yet to Indians experiencing the everyday economic constraints that were a condition of colonial rule, Mahatma Gandhi appeared more relevant than John Maynard Keynes.

I learned a great deal on how women claim power for themselves. I found that whenever women did achieve success and broke through male bastions of knowledge and power, it was by building on their collective identity as woman. I called this 'a place of one's own' or the women's tent, both powerhouse and ghetto. As Virginia Woolf argued, a room of one's own is where we women are free to think and can husband our resources to confront the world outside.<sup>17</sup> From such a powerhouse if even one woman is enabled to represent the political will of women, she can make that difference.

My book provides examples of such strategizing, beginning with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), through the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) conferences all the way to the Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and to Beijing. It often provides a perspective from the inside out, describing how women bureaucrats collaborated with women in civil society, or occasions when North and South came together to achieve their larger goal of equal rights together with equal treatment. The politics behind these celebrated interventions reads almost like a thriller. Minerva Bernadino from San Domingo, Helvi Sippila from Finland, Vida Tomsic from the former Yugoslavia and our own Hansa





Mehta at international fora, and Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya, Renuka Chakravarty, Sarojini Naidu and Durgabai Deshmukh among others from India concerned with the liberation of both the nation and of women – all their tireless political activism was directed towards getting what really should not have needed so much time and energy to establish, that we exist, have minds, that we are different but must be treated as equal citizens.<sup>18</sup> A disgraceful revelation, that we needed to do so much just to prove that.

Collective strategizing through a place of one's own has now become a feature of all world gatherings, such as the World Social summit, or the 'peace tent', which I would like to suggest is an extension of the women's tent, the symbol of women's politics. The caucus, the bonding across conventional divides of region, ideology, race and position was and continues to be a powerful tool.

But dilemmas persist. While the place of one's own was necessary to work out plans and develop the confidence to face the bigger world, it made 'outsiders' see our 'tent' as a separate enclave. This perception perpetuates the "women for women by women to women" formula, which prevents women from revisioning development and withholds from development discourse learnings from the lived experience of women.

Thus, the place of one's own can be a powerhouse or a ghetto... or both. We need to be on our guard against simplistic solutions such as increased funds for women, for it can go into the basket that is a means of hiving off women and simultaneously impoverishing movements for equality and justice.

The tenability of the political identity 'woman' is constantly contested by many women themselves, who insist that identity is determined by caste, class, race and sexuality at the same time – and to at least the same degree – as it is by gender. The very sophistication of the feminist movement has come to challenge this identity as "essentialist".

Yet the reading of history has convinced me that there is a strong case for affirming such an identity. Lord Meghnad Desai speaks of the various ethnic, religious, regional, and linguistic identities within the Indian nation and says that "Indian democracy was shaped by



these ignored identities as they asserted themselves in the daily course of electoral politics.”<sup>19</sup> He asserts that the growing assertion of multiple nations within the Indian state is the reason the country lags in development. He traces the changes in definitions of nationhood from subjecthood to citizenship. In a debate on these ideas of his, I suggested that women’s identity has not been recognized as a boundary for citizenship.<sup>20</sup>

This predicament of a group still in the state of subjecthood is similar – though not the same – to another set of people whose nation ‘is also a question’. Here I refer to the Dalits. Partha Chatterjee and Lata Mani have shown how women’s bodies were central to both colonial and nationalist discourse on India. I suggest we have not yet set out a theoretical basis for understanding how women constitute their own nation within India.

Another less discussed aspect of the elusiveness of the possibility of theorizing women – or the elusiveness even of women theorizing – is what I call the nethi nethi syndrome. In the Upanishads, the quest for ‘truth’ proceeds by rejecting every provisional definition with the phrase “not this, not this”. In other words, it is definition by negation. It often occurs to me that feminists deny every attempt at a definition or a conclusive statement of their politics. It is extremely difficult to navigate gendered spaces and to unpack gendered concepts. The recognition that women are located within nested hierarchies throws into question conventional political alignments. In an entire book contesting one-dimensional identities, Amartya Sen has not addressed this complex issue of women’s identity, which one cannot help feeling would have enriched his discussion.<sup>21</sup>

Current today is the celebration of pluralism – the affirmation of identities based on colour, caste, class and gender, of shifting identities and of unpredictable intersections between identities. It seems to reflect the pressure for representation, for democracy, but also could be a consequence of the deepening of divisions based on colour, class, religion, caste, gender and location. When coupled with increased deprivation, this leads to a search for quick escape routes, so that solidarity occurs around the more obvious givens of ethnicity or religion, rather than through creative coalitions across these categories. Such thinking has made inroads into both the women’s movement and government bodies, making consensus-building more



difficult. The fragmentation of women's identity as a collective has led to some reluctance within the UN to emphasize gender. This trend also makes room for expressions of cultural relativism – an unwelcome development.

To consolidate forces in the battle against racism, the 'other' had to anchor identity on a single pole. Attempts to highlight differences between male and female, rich and poor, urban and rural, educated and uneducated or Christian and non-Christian would have impeded the mobilization of political will. It was this will which made possible the acts of courage and sacrifice that eventually undid the power of the white regime in South Africa. The more the oppressor strained to assert power, the more the weakness and absurdity of his or her position was apparent to the oppressed. It was the power of this knowledge that the adversary was creating myths, or trying to seek protection in a glass cage which inspired the anti-apartheid movement and eroded the self-confidence of the white minority.

It may be stretching a point, but the women's movement needs to learn from this singleminded politics the strategic value of mobilizing around a single identity when the walk to liberation is going to be a long one. Just as white supremacy was sustained by the belief that customary ethical constraints could be set aside in interactions with black people who were used and abused – as was brought home to me the year I lived in South Africa – the mindset that women are valueless and deserve ill treatment is deeply embedded worldwide. It is true we have made many dents in this rock. The history of the world is full of heroines and rebels who challenged these perceptions and values. Fatema Mernissi and Elizabeth Amoah have described cases from Morocco and Ghana where strong women who become leaders were branded as witches, so that they could be burned as Joan of Arc had been, or removed from the scene in other ways.<sup>22</sup>

I believe that to achieve women's emancipation the many identities we bear must be transcended by bonding, by emphasising the identity of woman. The challenge is to use this identity, without granting it enduring relevance, to make the larger claim for liberation from discrimination and exclusion. This strategy has to be considered if we are to make a more significant dent, if not in fact undermine the powers against which we are pitted.





## II

# Knowledge

The problems of knowledge are central to feminist theorizing, which has sought to destabilize androcentric, mainstream thinking in the humanities and in the social and natural sciences.

Longino, Helen "Feminist Standpoint Theory and the Problems of Knowledge." *Signs* 19. 1 (Autumn 1993).

While researching my book, one of the areas I found most fascinating to read up on was women's engagement with knowledge – their production of new knowledge, often by exposing fallacies in existing knowledge, but also by developing new methodologies for deriving and processing knowledge. These discoveries were empowering in themselves, but they also did much to convince the 'other' of the salience of that (not simple) slogan "equal but different."

Analyzing the foundations of modern scientific knowledge, the feminist philosopher Sandra Harding claims that traditional social science has typically asked questions about nature and social life that certain (usually privileged) men wish to see answered.<sup>23</sup> Harding traces the relationship between the development of modern western science and the history of European expansion. Challenging the claim of modern science to value-neutrality, she argues that European voyages of discovery went hand in hand with the development of modern science and technology. Europeans who were colonizing the world needed to know about winds, tides, maps and navigation, the construction of ships and firearms, as well as botany and the means of survival in harsh environments. Such questions acquired intellectual interest because of the need to solve colonialism's everyday exigencies.<sup>24</sup>

To quote Ann Tinkner,

"Feminists in all the disciplines have been acutely aware of the relationship between knowledge and power and the ways that traditional knowledge has been constructed in the interests of the powerful. Feminist scholarship has emerged from a deep skepticism about knowledge which, while it claims to be universal and objective,





is not. In reality, such knowledge is usually partial, created by men and based on men's lives. Sensitive to gendered differences in these regards, feminists see their scholarly responsibility as creating new knowledge that is less androcentric, more genuinely universal, and that produces research that is useful to women."<sup>25</sup>

It was in this realm of ideas that women fighting different battles found themselves on common ground. They came together to protest against untenable distinctions – between public and private or between theory and practice – and false hierarchies – between development and human rights or between human rights and women's rights. They found they could create alliances with 'the umbrella of thought' providing a shared space.

One of the few advantages of exclusion from history is the determination to end exclusion; thus women's history has tended to be more inclusive by race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, religion, ability and region than other histories.<sup>26</sup>

However, 'bringing women in' was no simple act of insertion. It meant that the fields of study had to change in multiple ways, which included the unpacking of certain central assumptions of the discipline. Divisions between disciplines were also shown to disable investigation. Such questioning created a "politics of disturbance."<sup>27</sup> It meant undertaking to "plough up inherited turfs without planting the same old seeds in the field."<sup>28</sup> Feminists insist that it is the experiential and the collective that gives birth to an idea. And further, that no one theoretical construct can do justice to all situations. The revelation and unpeeling of the several layers around the notion of equality, for example, challenge the notion of one dominant construct.<sup>29</sup>

The contribution of Women's Studies has been critical. Women have redefined the meaning of work. They have questioned the models of development being promoted and even revisioned what the new world order should be. Knowledge has been created and disseminated through multiple sources. It came from those working in communities as well as those debating the givens of the academy. There was research that documented grassroots success stories and research that provided wider contexts and more sophisticated theories.



I argue that it is their very difference from men in the realm of thought that has prevented women's views from being accommodated within policy, and also inhibited women from participating in the framing of policy. For a long time, this difference in their perceptions of knowledge/truth and women's rejection of the idea of the 'final word' made for a conscious distancing from the world of the mind.<sup>30</sup> This changed as women's research on subjects related to development started to draw attention to how patriarchy operated in all its sites. A gendered perspective questioned the very premises of theories. In all fields of inquiry, it transformed the definition of categories, the tools of measurement and the interpretation of data, which came to have major implications for policy and practice. For when the difference that defines gender was uncovered, the seemingly self-evident categories of 'work', 'the household' and 'the poor'; measures such as money, the domestic product and caloric requirements for types of work and the valuation of contributions to economic, social, political spaces and intellectual spaces were all revealed as inadequate and in need of substitution, and were in fact replaced by Women's Studies.

The perspective provided by gendered experience revealed the presence of other economies such as the unpaid economy. Then there are other political spaces – there is politics behind the closed doors of the household, in terms of both discrimination in the provision of basic amenities, and the power to take decisions. There are other social relations and behaviors, other values and other measures of value, as we see when women's collective actions, whether economic, social or political, whether covert or overt, reveal choices different from the choices of their "own" men.<sup>31</sup> In the realm of medicine, it is now recognized that women's diseases are often trivialized or misdiagnosed.<sup>32</sup> As women succeeded in unsettling the definitions provided by the establishment, there were consequences at the level of policy, like the adoption of social indicators, the prioritization of human development and the reclassification of domestic space as open to judicial intervention.

Gender as an analytical tool had a revelatory quality. When a 'gender lens' is applied to matters of inequality and discrimination – central to issues of governance and in the social sciences – there become visible not only the many instances and dimensions of inequality, but also the many difficulties of doing away with them. For inequalities of



gender work within more encompassing domains of inequality, whether mapped by class, race, caste, age or occupation. Among minorities, indigenous peoples and refugees, the experience of women needs to be specifically addressed. Gender inequalities are also brought to light by studying agency in different locations – the family, institutions and the power to access services like food, health, education. Discrimination works on multiple levels.

We may say that almost all the debates and events of the last fifty years are captured in the single notion or aspiration of equality. The women's movement traces numerous configurations of this kaleidoscopic concept. Women's Studies has exposed the many facets of inequality, its pervasive presence as well as its particular circumstances. In doing so, it sometimes seemed that 'equality' may be understood better without our being closer to achieving it, as it retreats like a will-o'-the-wisp before attempts at theoretical definition or actual establishment. Legal and extra-legal struggles and theories drawing on both philosophy and politics, both economics and sociology served to enrich the understanding of the equality but did not always achieve it. But the exposition was worth the journey, for it illuminated other inequalities and sought to redress these.

Perhaps the defining feature of these explorations is that women are at the centre of the theories discussed and also the active practitioners of these theories. Women are both subjects of study and agents. Theory then is not an "abstract intellectual idea divorced from the lives of women, but seeks to explain how those lives are lived."<sup>33</sup>

Yet on the other hand, one disturbing feature was that most of this new knowledge was produced by women. It did not attract the participation of both sexes. On the other hand, research or politics that addresses class or race has been taken up by those outside the race or class in question as well by its members.

I would like to conclude by saying that it is crucial that all examples of the entrenchment of patriarchal thought in the theory and terminology of every discipline be made accessible to women engaged in struggles and action. It would give them the confidence that their own objections to the system are legitimate. As Gerda Lerner has said, "Every thinking woman had to argue with the 'great man' in her head, instead of being strengthened and encouraged by her foremothers."<sup>34</sup>





### III

## Women and Work

I first undertook research to investigate women's work, and in my view it is still this area that shows us how the cookie crumbles as far as poverty, inequality and the condition of women are concerned.

An understanding of inequality and discrimination requires us to probe and unravel what has been called the gender knot.<sup>35</sup>

The core issue is taking women into account as a subset of all social categories, whose roles are decided by both biology and the interpretation of the biological role by cultural tradition and by religion, and appraised according to a hierarchy of values. The re-evaluation of women's work is an area of knowledge consolidated over the last 50 years in which all players have participated. The UN and national bodies have considered and sometimes adopted the ideas generated. These range from the immediately intelligible – the value of non-monetised work, the dignity of care work and the reproduction of humans – to new measures of work such as the time invested in it; new modes of research, through collective identification of a measure; and even to renaming domains of experience, as in formal and informal economies. The modes and hierarchies of valuation in different domains of knowledge – economics, statistics and other social and physical sciences – are to my mind the keys to understanding why women, girls and female infants still experience incarceration of different kinds.

The Institute of Social Studies Trust (ISST), supported by the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), conducted between 1975 and 1977 a study of time allocation by men and women in the households of six villages which exposed many dimensions of valuation.<sup>36</sup> The study was partnered by the National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO), where everyone was absorbed in the implementation and outcome of the study, from field investigators up to the Chairman and the Chief Executive Officer. This was a pioneering study in many ways. The hypothesis was that female work participation rates are underestimated in India owing to methodological inadequacy, what we may call a failure of measurement. The first field trial,





conducted by Professor Ashok Rudra in Muluk, a village in Santiniketan, established that women and girls earned bread in ways not accounted for, since it was accomplished under various species of 'subterfuge'.

The study described how among the poor, the work participation of women was greater than that of men. It showed that children, especially girl children between the ages of eight and twelve, were engaged in significant economic activities. It also showed that the activity code, "domestic activity", canvassed in the opening block of the NSSO schedule, was a stumbling block for women for it created the perception that the activity that took up most of their time was only 'housework', even if it meant four hours a day weeding, or six hours a day attending to animals and milking, or 12 hours a day chopping mulberry to feed silk worms. The study did not just call attention to the invisibilising of women's work but sought to devise research methods which did justice to this work.

The discovery that among the poorest (usually landless) households women's work participation rates were higher than that of men, led us to conclude that "all poor women are women workers." No poor woman can afford not to work, as she and her family would perish. Women were responsible for the household's survival and would do anything, including sell their bodies, to bring home that daily bread.

ISST teams led by our first and very worthy research assistant Malini Chand (now Sheth) lived in the villages for a year and recorded what poor people – women and men and children – were actually doing. The information was shocking. Women and girls were working eighteen hours a day. While boys played or went to school, girls cooked, cleaned, and carried. Among the poor, girls were often the breadwinners for the entire household. 'Development interventions' had often led to an increase in the workload of women with no accompanying increase in their incomes or well being. The realization that men preferred to be idle rather than work for poor wages explained intriguing statements about the low rate of the labour participation of females in West Bengal. Poor women and girls in West Bengal were working, but "under cover" of "feminine" work – as domestic help, as beggars rather than in the fields, often for non-monetary rewards.



This 'time-use' study, which challenged assessments of women's economic contribution and concentrated on the poorest, attracted the interest of many well known economists and social scientists apart from Prof. Asok Rudra. Professors Pranab Bardhan, Pradhan Prasad and Asok Mitra offered suggestions for stratifying the sample by class. Prof. V. M. Dandekar directed the NSSO to partner with us in the selection of villages and households and in canvassing the questionnaire of the 32<sup>nd</sup> round, with which our field workers visited the same households as the NSSO. He also saw to it that we had access to the raw schedules of the NSSO. This allowed us to present our (not strictly comparable) data in columns alongside NSSO data for the 27<sup>th</sup> round as well as on the tables for the 32<sup>nd</sup> round. This strengthened our case for under enumeration and its causes.

This single study by the ISST had considerable impact, as it came to be known by a constituency of people expert in the collection and use of data, especially that concerning employment outside and inside the official system. We participated in all the conferences of the NSSO, CSO and Census. Our contribution in terms of action as well as in the redesigning of systems of data collection consolidated our position as the focal point for women and work concerns. The Padmaja Naidu Memorial Lecture in 1982 was a chance to challenge social scientists by, so to speak, waving these facts from the rooftops. What was the sociological family they spoke of? What were all these tracings of kinship organizations with their rules and regulations? These were fragmented non-families in which women were struggling for survival. Who were these workers being counted and placed in hierarchies of work by statisticians? Among asset-less households, rates of work participation were higher for women than for men.

These differences came to be understood as the gender differentiation which was to underpin all the research and advocacy of ISST. This uncovering of women as a "class" by themselves within the poverty sets was of crucial importance in our journey, as it challenged political ideology besides economic programmes.<sup>37</sup>

The next point of entry was into spaces where women predominated as workers, and where their engagement in work had been recognised and organised to increase their economic and social power. This research was initiated following a case study of SEWA funded by the



ICSSR. SEWA was at that time the women's wing of the Textile Labour Association, a strong trade union in Ahmedabad, and in organizing workers in the informal sector it had given them vital negotiating power. This led the ICSSR in 1979 to sponsor a survey of similar successful endeavors to organise masses of women, which was published in 1980.<sup>38</sup>

The design of the book pioneered a style of case study research – investigating experience on the ground, introducing primary data from field surveys of households and following these with the narratives of women. It proposed that poor women were able identify spaces where they could eke out a bare livelihood, but that their incomes would multiply considerably if they were provided linkages back and forth such as organisation, market intelligence and access to raw materials or wholesale goods through collective purchase. It was thus a critique of current income generating projects for women like DWCRA that were supported by the government and even agencies like CSWB and UNICEF. The suggestion was essentially that development design could learn from the survival strategies of poor women.

Thus began the search for clusters of women already in a particular occupation, so that that particular space could be expanded. This led to a Government of India programme called STEP (Support Team for Employment Promotion). It also led to the birth of the 'Mahila Haat' at ISST, a market for women producers, based on the idea of starting with the traditional haats, viable market places where the turnover of trade was greater than in modern markets. Here women could usually sell their products, the suggestion for what was to be produced having come from the marketplace.

The fact that ISST's first study was partnered by mainstream agencies including the Planning Commission enabled them in 1980 to hold a Round Table with 50 to 60 senior economists at the Institute of Economic Growth, Delhi University. It was called a 'statistical dialogue between micro and macro', and, being a first, some of the economists were initially sceptical. Microstudies were presented by different agencies to official bodies concerned with data collection which led to the inclusion of a gender focus in the CSO, NSSO, the National Board of Statistics as well as by the Registrar General.



This partnership with official bodies continued and the ISST was part of the Indian delegation at the first International Conference on Household Survey convened by ESCAP in Bangkok. We carried the day, arguing that women as should feature a subject not just in the category 'social welfare' but in their economic and social roles. This was the seed of the recognition the household cannot be the primary unit of analysis, given that within households individuals hold different occupations and may experience development differently.

These 'micro-macro interactions' on data encouraged us to form a network of economists called EIWIG, a clumsy acronym but one that sought to be inclusive of both women and men involved in gendered research and economists interested in women's issues.

The core of our work were field studies concerned with poor women's work in different industries and sectors: forest based, marine products, handlooms, khadi and village industries, mulberry and tassar sericulture and public works programmes. The households at which we looked were stratified according to class (in terms of land ownership or its lack). The most elaborate study attempted to understand female-headed households, choosing field sites that pointed to different 'causes' for this phenomenon.<sup>39</sup> This study was commissioned by the ILO, just as many others were commissioned by the government or by UN agencies.

The findings gave a clear message regarding hierarchies of value. For a worker without assets, it is her time rather than her wage that is a measure of her labour. The adoption of time as a measure of value would entail a reversal of the values ascribed to men and women's work. Women would always come on "top" given that they spend more hours working than men, as shown even by the Human Development Report (HDR) of 1995, in its Time Allocation Survey (TAS).<sup>40</sup>

While many attempts have been made to put a value on the non-monetized and invisible transactions, these are still measured against the "standard" of money. Valuating women's work is related to but not the same as estimating the labour force or producing figures for unemployment. For all women's work yields an output but all women's work does not provide an income.





Today CSO and many other agencies try to gather more statistics on "time spent" in their various categories. This tool has also helped in conducting a gender audit at the district and sub-district level. It remains difficult to measure the inequality between males and females within the household in all matters including those of nutrition and health which affect life and death. The sex ratio is being recommended as a factor to be included for the South Asian Region. Similarly we need to integrate into national and international statistics the different rates of infant mortality for males and females and quantitative measures of female drudgery and hard labour. These will transform the quantitative picture and call attention to what is needed in terms of interventions. They also reorder the hierarchies defining the indices.

These studies led to increased awareness of the many other hierarchies embedded in the terminology of various theories.<sup>41</sup> Classificatory systems and definitions contain implied hierarchies which place women lower down the scale than men. Take household work and work of economic value done within the home. If we call the home a workplace, every homemaker or home-based producer becomes a worker and may therefore avail of labour laws and thus social security.<sup>42</sup> Comparisons can be drawn with the way in which the recent International Convention on Torture recognised the home as a possible site of torture and enslavement, which had to be covered by the laws for custodial violence that apply to police stations.

### The Nature of Inequality

Here is the profile of a little girl that I presented in 1982.

Naini is an eleven-year-old Mina girl of Etrampura, a small village of 57 households in Baharatpur, Rajasthan. Hers is a joint family of nine people, including her parents, uncles, an aunt and a younger brother. The family lives by the produce of the eight bighas of land it owns. Depending on the season, they hire outside labour or hire out their own labour. The father and the uncles plough and dig land which Naini, her mother and aunt weed and pack together.

Naini's uncle, nineteen-year-old Kardiram, attends high school in Bhusawar, five kilometres away, and her younger brother Chuttanlal is in the third standard of the school in the neighbouring village,



Chentoli. Naini, who assists her parents in household chores, asks when questioned, "Who will do all this if I go to school?"

Rising at six in the morning, Naini's first task is to spend an hour making cowdung cakes. This is followed by going to the well to fetch water. Returning to the house she sweeps the courtyard. At 7.30, she sieves the wheat flour, lights the fire and assists her mother in preparing rotis. The family sits down to eat daliya and bajra rotis in brass thalis. It is Naini's daily task to clean the utensils after breakfast. After packing some lunch for the family, she sets out with her mother to their field which lies on the border of Mehtoli and Etrampura, about 3 kms away. In September, a quarter of the field is covered with capsicum while the rest is ploughed and made ready for the next crop. She and her mother are assigned the task of weeding the field. She does this from nine in the morning to noon, then goes home with her mother to cook lunch while her father and her uncle remain back and in the field.

She cuts the potatoes while her mother prepares the rotis. After eating lunch, she washes the utensils and again goes to the well to fill another pitcher of water. From quarter to three in the afternoon Naini is once more to be seen on her field, cutting grass for her cattle. By four in the evening, she has collected a big bundle which she ties up and carries home to deposit in the cattle-shed. Her uncle will cut it later and feed it to the cattle. Adjoining their mud-hut next to the cattle-shed is a little store-room, from where Naini takes out the cowdung cakes which are prepared by her every morning, and the firewood which she and her aunt had collected last week. With the help of these cowdung cakes Naini fires the oven and cooks daliya. She then sweeps the house for the second time.

The food is usually prepared by her aunt. As she is very sick these days, the task is shared by Naini and her mother. Once dinner is ready and Naini's daily tasks are completed, she finally finds half an hour to sit down and relax, chatting and teasing her brother Chuttan who has set aside his books. At 7.30, she serves a dinner of daliya, boiled milk and bajra rotis to all the family before sitting down herself. After cleaning the fireplace at 8.30, Naini rolls out her own and Chuttanlal's mattress and gets ready to sleep, to prepare herself for another such day of work.<sup>43</sup>

Such patterns of labour are found even today, for example in the study conducted by Seiro Ito, a Japanese economist, on the time use of children in some villages of Andhra Pradesh.<sup>44</sup>



Time as a measure of value has taken hold in all domains of the social sciences. ISST continued its investigation into the domain of work, undertaking studies of women in various sectors of production – dairying, pappad making, bidi making, sericulture, the gathering of minor forest produce, the manufacture of envelopes, Zardosi, chikan, carpets, prawn peeling and vendors and the workers in SEWA and what were called emergency sites (in this case, the Maharashtra Employment Guarantee sites).<sup>45</sup> We found many concealed hierarchies persisting in even the formal domain of economic measurement, which especially affected acknowledgement of the work of women.

I have indicated other areas where language or vocabulary implies hierarchies which neglect important values, and affect marginalized groups in particular.<sup>46</sup> I argued there was a lack of fit between ground realities and descriptive categories. This was because the definitions and classificatory systems emerge from economic and social organisation and processes appropriate to the North, to 'organised' industrial economies. The entire research in Women's Studies has served to expose this disjuncture. Small businesses, the producers and vendors who dominate the private sector and form the backbone of trade in countries like Ghana, in regions like the Caribbean, or states like Manipur in India, have been marginalised as 'petty vendors'. But this is the manufacturing and trading sector of the South, not the big businesses, private and public, that occupy center-stage in accounts and in policy decisions. It should be renamed the business sector. In fact in Liberia, which liberated itself from a dictator just a few months ago and elected a woman president, it was the women vendors, called the 'market women', who brought about this change. What is more, they hold the economy together – they are the business hub and the bankers and money rollers of Liberia.<sup>47</sup>

It is now well established that in India and the rest of the third world, the volume and value of what are called 'minor' forest products are greater than those of 'major' forest produce. Minor forest produce sustains an economy in which the masses are the main contributors as well as the main users. Its impact on tree cover is also less violent than that of industries concerned with major forest produce. Workers in this sector are not recognized as workers, their wages are not negotiated, most of them are forest dwellers and are women. Today, because of the increased interest in plant-based medicine, their products are in demand, but all this has meant is that they are being





exploited terribly. Yet the use of the words 'minor' and 'major' continues, and such vocabulary serves to occlude the degree to which those gathering or processing 'minor forest produce' are being exploited.<sup>48</sup>

The very definition of economic activities must be transformed. 'Production for self-consumption' may need to be given a new status. It is usually not accounted for, as only the production of surplus for sale is seen to have economic relevance. Collection of waste (for example, some items of minor forest produce) is considered insignificant but in fact offers a vast employment pool and is a substantial component of domestic production.

Another instance of the entrenchment of linguistic hierarchies is the term 'informal' sector for modes of production or trade that lack a shop floor or waged work. This sector contains more workers, indeed 92% of women workers belong here. At a conference on the informal sector convened by the UNESCO and the APCD in Kuala Lumpur in Bangalore, the participants named this sector the first sector. Not only does it contain the largest proportion of workers, in the history of production and trade it also appeared earlier than factory work and waged work! It is another misnomer to describe such workers as "unorganized". This term is misleading for even if the workers may not be unionized, the putting out of work is highly organized by contractors and enterprises, as we see in the bidi industry in Karnataka.

The household had been the primary unit of classification during the collection of data concerning the poor (including estimating numbers), and was also the target of programmes for the poor, like the provision of employment and services such as credit and food. When research started to investigate this 'black box', it was found that within the household differences prevailed in every area for women and children, whether with regard to bread-earning activities, access to services like health or education, or the availability of time or leisure. Concepts like household level food security were changed to individual food security within the household as the practice of sequential feeding in several cultures meant that a smaller share of food was given to children, especially female children, and to women among the adults. This was discussed at the World Food Conference organized by the FAO, where ISST presented a paper arguing that it had been a mistake to see the household as the primary unit of analysis and one should recast the





proposition thus: "The food security of a household is dependent on the food security of its individual members."<sup>49</sup>

Further, it is necessary to recognize that households among the poor may not consist of closely bonded individuals collectively optimizing their activities. They are often fragmented and scattered. Many are headed by women who have to fend for their own and the family's survival.<sup>50</sup>

This attention to intra-household inequality in every aspect – power, earnings, service utilization, workload and the availability of time and leisure, and finally mortality rates – led to many transformations in the perception of "development as freedom," to borrow from Amartya Sen.<sup>51</sup> For example, the importance of individual rights affected the perception of the family as unjust in its dealings with its members. The condition of women revealed the importance of universalization, a vision that characterized the human rights approach. Also affirmed was the necessity of social inputs and social security, public goods that would go some way to redress embedded inequalities. Recognition that conventional assessments of economic achievement obscure achievements in social protection, and that the two often do not go together, directed attention towards social development, going onto human development and its deviation from standard economic growth paths.<sup>52</sup>

To sum up the implications of the above, the fact that women often work within the household, sometimes as self-employed traders, drew attention to the importance of what is known as the informal sector of the economy.<sup>53</sup> And the recognition of gender difference within poor households – essentially the individuation of household members – effected changes in the collection of statistics, the nature of employment offers, the understanding of employment trends, efforts to unionize labor and the nature of credit offers, including demands for collateral.

Another area where the understanding of the economy expanded was with regard to the 'gift economy'. The concept arises from the fact that the logic of the market, of the exchange of equivalents, takes the place of and conceals the logic of gift giving. The system of gift giving is omnipresent, and is as creative as it is unrecognized. The direct satisfaction of another's need appears to be so simple as to be

uninformative. Yet it is transitive, whereas exchange is intransitive. That is, it gives value to the other and creates bonds between giver and receiver making the receiver as important as the giver (an idea with resonances of Gandhian thought). According to the theory of gift giving, exchange places people in adversarial positions and emphasizes self-interest and separation, whereas gift giving emphasizes connection and community. Proponents of this idea say that women's free labour in the home, which if it were counted would add at least 40% to the GNP of most countries, is actually gift labor. Women have been assigned the social role of mothering, which entails unilateral gift giving. It is this experience or practice that they suggest could be developed into an alternative to the market.<sup>54</sup>

The valuation of voluntary tasks, including free job training and home-building organizations, are harder to classify than other activities associated with charity. In 1984, women in New Zealand argued that while monetary contributions to charity (made largely by men) are tax-deductible, this is not true of the contribution of time (made largely by women). This mobilization led to the introduction of a question concerning "time dedicated to volunteer work" in the 1986 Census on Population.<sup>55</sup>

Each of these ideas seeks to create a space less destructive of human relationships and the environment, and less vulnerable in the face of shocks to the system, than could be envisaged within earlier theories of production and trade. In all the ways outlined above, distortions of value and hierarchies implicit in terminology were brought out by exploring the work spaces and narratives of women, and through the investigative methods and the style of researchers on women's issues. Their re-assessment of the usefulness of the available measuring tools led women to become vital participants in inscribing justice and equality in development design and implementation.



## IV

### Women, Public Policy and the New World Order

"We're an empire now and when we act we create our own reality."<sup>56</sup>

(A senior Adviser to President George W. Bush)

"Definitions belonged to the definers – not the defined."<sup>57</sup>

(Toni Morrison)

"The role of the intellectual is to say truth to power, to address the central authority in every society without hypocrisy, and to choose the method, the style, the critique best suited for these purposes. This is so because the intellectual produces a kind of performance that continues for years, whose main goal is to give utterance not to mere fashion and passing fads but to real ideas and values."<sup>58</sup>

(Edward Said)

#### The New Global Order: Debates on Definition

For many, the new global order is more than globalization. It is the economic strength of what is now known as the coalition against terror. An apt description of this new powerdom was offered by the editor of The New Indian Express in January 2002.

"The important thing is not that we have changed. But that everything, the world around us, has changed so completely that no one, not China not Russia, not even Cuba, is protesting. There is, however, more to this new world than mere unipolarity. That would have been simpler to deal with. You can always stand up to hegemony. But what do you do with a world where the big boys cartelise in a manner unprecedented in history? They think and act together, with a remarkable common sense of purpose and, ostensibly, towards greater common good. ... The US, China, United Europe and Russia, are the four powers that circumscribe this world."<sup>59</sup>

I call it the new 'powerdom',<sup>60</sup> to emphasise that the controlling regime is more like a monarchical than like a democratic regime. I propose



that describing the new face of power this way is most relevant to considering women's location in the general landscape and how she can link with the elements in the sky, even if it is to bring them down and replace them with more elements that sustain peace.

I have also asserted that what started as the modernization project in the form of bailing out developing nations through offers of capital was later formalized into the new liberal paradigm.<sup>61</sup> Here, capital-driven economic growth was offered as the panacea for all times and all "problems." The modernization project thereby reinvented itself as Empire. I use the term 'Empire' to refer to the overwhelming power of one culture and one set of values, a symptom of which is the use of the term 'civilization' with fundamentalist overtones.<sup>62</sup>

"Empire" is now an intelligible word. It has emerged from various gatherings of those concerned with the overwhelming domination of some global forces, political and economic, as a new avatar of older imperial conquest. As a term it has been used more recently at Social Forums, in Brazil, Hyderabad, Mumbai.<sup>63</sup> However it has been used in two opposite senses. I have used Empire to refer to the resistance movement. For example, in my piece on the value of the Social Forum, I invoke science fiction with the phrase, 'Empire Strikes Back', i.e. the "good" strikes the evil. But, as Ann Tickner has observed, "The term 'empire' is now being used with approbation by neo-conservatives in the Bush administration and by its critics with alarm."<sup>64</sup>

Empire has spawned a new wave of scholarship which marks the early stage of imperial self-recognition. This was not apparent for the first time with the Bush administration, but as far back as 1945, when the US emerged from the Second World War with enormous power and self-confidence.<sup>65</sup> Following the events of September 11, 2001, the United States has been engaged in a global war against evil which demands a full spectrum global response to any imminent threat. This strategy, articulated in the National Security Strategy of 2002, has been backed by military budget outlays of \$465.9 billion in 2005, with an additional total of \$346 billion in special supplementary funding appropriations for the war on terrorism between 2001 and 2006.<sup>66</sup> Besides its military component, this strategy calls for the promotion of a neoliberal global economy and the globalization of western-style democracy.<sup>67</sup>





**As Ronald Steel sums it up:**

"A nation possessing this kind of power – the world's dominant economy, the currency with which the world reckons and pays its bills, the most powerful armed force with bases around the globe and a budget that nearly exceeds that of all other nations combined, and with a messianic desire to spread its ideology and to mold the lives and minds of the rest of the world in its image – is, by any honest reckoning, an imperial state."<sup>68</sup>

**Ben Fine affirms that macroeconomics is being pressed into the service of imperialism:**

"... a third intellectual trend, is the emergence of a new virulent strain of economics imperialism based on market, especially informational failure. Whilst mainstream economics has become absolutely intolerant of dissent within its own discipline, it has increasingly sought to colonise other disciplines, understanding both market and non-market phenomena as the rational, historically evolved response to market failures. ... this approach has been applied to development, alongside more or less everything else, and underpins the shifting rhetoric and scholarship of the World Bank in its move from Washington to post-Washington consensus."<sup>69</sup>

We can now see how the sky has been collapsing on people, as I opened my lecture by declaring. This collapse of the sky has most severely affected the less privileged, and among these the women, as we shall now examine.

## **Impact of the New Global Order on Women**

**Shahra Razavi suggests that**

"the consolidation of a market-led development model denies vast groups of women the opportunity to claim entitlements and achieve more secure livelihoods." Macroeconomic decision-making remains "particularly resistant to feminist incursions."<sup>70</sup>

One finding that emerged from the UNRISD research is the tendency for women to be confined to the less lucrative segments of the non-farm sector, in the form of survivalist strategies, which do not offer good long-term prospects.



Economist Diane Elson points to the shrinking of public dialogue on macroeconomic policy. "Macro-economic policy is constructed in neoclassical economics as something beyond social dialogue and public debate." She adds, "Technocratic calculation has become independent of democratic deliberation."<sup>71</sup>

Data on women's employment in the developing world reveals that in the period 1970 to 1990 their absorption into the labour force increased dramatically. Regions like South Asia show a leap from 25 percent to 44 percent, while in Latin America it rises from 22 percent to 30 percent. In the same regions, the male percentage declined from 88 to 78 percent, and 85 to 84 percent respectively. Most of this addition is in the service sector, but also in the informal economy. The nature of the expansion in employment opportunities globally is such that women are preferred as workers in many of the fast-growing sectors of production and export.<sup>72</sup>

The flip side to this "absorption" is that the work is usually under the most exploitative, unprotected and underpaid schemes. A UNICEF study of five Asian countries found that job slots often emerge for home-based women workers only because of the retrenchment of men from what is called the low end of the production pyramid.<sup>73</sup>

Informal occupations provide the livelihood (paid or otherwise) of more than 80 percent of women in low-income countries and 40 percent of those in middle-income countries. These countries combined account for 85 percent of the world's population.<sup>74</sup> Yet these jobs are sought by women because of the primary importance of sustaining their families.

The overriding importance of this is declared again and again, in interviews with and hearings of a wide range of women, whether they are in Sonagachi, in Mumbai's dance bars, in interior villages, or the participants in the MEGS, willing to take up hard labour. Reporting the words of women in relief camps following the riots of 2002 in Gujarat, Ela Bhatt said all they wanted was "kaam" - any work, wherever it be.

Women are in the worst spots in even the fast growing export sectors. They are also confined to the worst spots in the agricultural sector. A



study conducted by the World Bank in Uttar Pradesh, which, with 160 million people, is India's most populous state, reveals that female workers form the greater proportion of those involved in low-paid casual work, primarily in the agricultural sector. This means that there has been a feminisation of the agricultural workforce, as the relative proportions of both female cultivators and female agricultural labourers have grown. Three-fourth of women's employment days are spent doing agricultural work, as compared to only 40 percent for men. Women are also three times more likely than men to work as agricultural labourers - work that is backbreaking, insecure and of low status. In contrast to men, women rarely held regular jobs or jobs in the non-farm sector as these activities are left to men. When they do obtain such employment, women are again underpaid and confined to unskilled activities.<sup>75</sup>

The statistical profile below shows how deep run the relations between women, agricultural work, informal work, landlessness and poverty:

According to the Census of 2001, there are 107.5 lakh agricultural workers in India. 99.4% of them work in the informal sector. Conversely, 64% of the informal sector workforce depends on agriculture. More than 90% of the rural poor engage in agriculture. 38% of agricultural workers are women. Although women constitute over one-third of the agricultural workforce, they own less than one-tenth of agriculture land. Dalit and tribal women account for half of female agricultural labor and almost half of them are landless.<sup>76</sup>

The shift from farm to non-farm employment in the agricultural sector among men has not occurred among women. This has been a disadvantage, as they have lost out on higher wages in the non-farm sector. It also indicates that they enjoy less mobility than men.

A close look at "backward" districts and regions would confirm what is even otherwise well-established: the links between low literacy for women and high rates of unemployment; poor water and sanitation facilities and high maternal and infant mortality; and most importantly, a high proportion of households living in extreme poverty and high fertility. If we took a map of India, and, having drawn a circle in the centre around the four BIMARU states, coloured the map in increasingly dark shades of grey to correspond to the proportion of





the population to whom the "negative" indicators above apply, the circle in the centre would be black. All 'bad' roads lead to this black hole. I once called this configuration of states "the black heart of Mother India", as it was right at the center of the map of India. And data reveals that women are at the bottom of this black hole."<sup>77</sup>

### The Mark of India's new Macroeconomic Policies on this Landscape

The sine qua non of India's economic development has historically been the small farm and the small business. These have been not only the most important sources of employment in India, but they have shown their sustainability, and it is so moving to see how people take a little credit and open a shop, or vend on a pavement, as if there were always space for one more vendor – and yet they survive and they take home something. Ela Bhatt has been declared the business woman of the millennium by the CII and that is because she drew attention to the values of such traders – own account petty traders and vendors

But now the State wishes to open retail trade to foreign direct investment (FDI).<sup>78</sup> It is my view that if we open it to FDI, the WALMART syndrome will exterminate us. It is a monster and is eating up other small monsters like K. Mart in America. This has been admitted by the monster itself, and I quote from the journal of the retail trade consortium:

"India is the hottest retail spot.... India's retail industry, both food and non-food, is the second largest employer, after agriculture, and the second largest untapped market.... Retail market worth 330 billion dollars.... As grand ambitions materialize (i.e. the entry of global players), the retail space will become increasingly concentrated, as smaller players are forced out or bought up by larger companies and the new companies change the face of the market ... capture non food spending ..."<sup>79</sup> [emphases added.]

This was unselfconsciously affirmed by Bush, during his recent visit to India in March, 2006. Trying to appease the discontent of US citizens about job slots in the US being given over to Indians, he said this would be overwhelmingly compensated by the market for US products in India:





“We just have to find out what Indians want, and then produce it, and then we have million consumers buying it! It is a great and expanding market for US”.

He went on to say:

“We see those opportunities here in India. Americans who come to this country will see Indian consumers buying McCurry Meals from McDonald’s, home appliances from Whirlpool. They will see Indian businesses buying American products like the 68 planes that Air India recently order from Boeing. They will also see American businesses like General Electric and Microsoft and Intel who are in India to learn about the needs of local customers and do vital research that makes their products more competitive in world markets. The United States will not give into the protectionists and lose these opportunities. For the sake of workers in both our countries, America will trade with confidence.”<sup>80</sup>

Here is some rough data on the current values of retail trade in India. There is more data available, disaggregated according to gender as well as size and ownership, but I am presenting this data only to give an indication of the treasure we have built up.

Percentage of Retail Trade in Enterprise	
Total	: 39.8 %
Rural Enterprise	: 36.1 %
Urban Enterprise	: 44.2 %

Number of Workers (in millions)	
Retail trade	: 18.54
Rural	: 7.88
Urban	: 10.65

Further out of 30.35 million enterprises, 80.4 percent are self-financing, 5.15 percent do not use fuel of any kind and 5.14 percent do not need premises. The percentage of those financed by institutional finance, IRDP and other poverty alleviation programmes was less than one percent! It is incredible what is done despite shortages of power and other infrastructure!

The entry of FDI would exterminate this treasure, and not just our traders but our scattered consumers may well figure in the statistics



of suicides. We would have thrown away our sine qua non, small farms and small businesses.

Opposing FDI is a cause that those gathered here can rally around.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, over two million women were estimated to be working in East and Southeast (hereafter E/SE) Asia. They accounted for one third of its migrant population. Most female migrants are in reproductive occupations – domestic work and sex work, in private households and informal commercial sectors. Despite the great need to protect their welfare and human rights, governments of their destination countries view migrants merely as a workforce which meets labour shortages, and disclaim responsibilities for undertaking protective measures and gender sensitive policies.<sup>81</sup>

Feminized migration in E/SE Asia has its roots in the region's rapid but uneven economic development, which is marked by the inequalities and conflicts produced by differences of gender, class and nationality.<sup>82</sup> Existing gender inequalities and economic injustice have been exacerbated and ethnic discrimination has increased with the migration of women from low-income economies like the Philippines, Indonesia, Vietnam, Pakistan, Bangladesh to high-income economies like Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR), Taiwan Province of China, the Republic of Korea and Japan.

The latest report of INSTRAW on women migrants confirms that women are the majority of the migrant workers. It accounted for 69 percent of overseas migrant workers in the Philippines and 70% in Indonesia in 2000.<sup>83</sup>

Hair raising facts are presented in the latest report on employment of the ILO and the report from UNIFEM.<sup>84</sup> Junya Lek Yimprasert, a woman trade union leader from Thailand, gives a chilling description of how TNCs like Nike stride across the globe looking for cheaper and cheaper labour at increasingly more vulnerable terms of employment, dropping one country and moving to another, thereby pushing those women to migrate with the company for a poorer deal in terms of wage rate and security rather than lose their livelihood.<sup>85</sup> So we have the free



movement of capital looking for profit, being followed by endangered, unprotected female labour.

We may imagine this phenomenon not as an Asian Drama (after Gunnar Myrdal) but the international drama of corporate capital.<sup>86</sup> As capital tramples down the people of country after country, in its hunger for cheaper and cheaper labour, its behavior is essentially similar to that of the predator of ancient legends, or of Hollywood's 'Exterminator'. The phenomenon began with 'putting out' work in Latin America, where what happened in the sweatshops is well known, and in Hong Kong. It moved to East Asia, then China, followed by Thailand, afterwards to Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, and is now moving into Pakistan and India. In each case the multinational is looking for cheaper and less organized labour.

And each country offers more and more incentives to the TNC to invest – land tax relief and other exemptions from nationally binding laws including those for the protection of labour. All over the world these predators, in collusion with our leaders, are driving down labour protection and eroding national sovereignty.

### Regionalism: An extension of the trade led growth model

Another area that needs our attention is the trend towards economic regionalism. We must make it more widely understood that this trend develops from the trade-led growth model that is currently the paradigm within which all our economies are functioning. The world is increasingly moving towards regional agreements and as neighbours realize that the Indian economy is taking off, there is greater interest in working out a South Asian arrangement. I suggest that we examine some of the trade agreements, especially IBSA, SAFTA, MERCOSUR and perhaps SADC, to see how we can build in a strategy for absorbing "people" particularly women into the outcomes planned.

Why focus on women? First, they are already in some senses gaining from the opportunities offered by the processes of free trade and globalisation. I say "in some senses", having just discussed at length the adverse implications of this, but we must recognize that these are still seen as worthwhile opportunities by the women who avail of them.





Second, women also actively participate in opportunities for collective employment like self-help groups (SHGs). They have also networked across countries to change policies. Apart from building coalitions like Home Net and Women in Informal Employment Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO), such mobilization also helped to frame policy (Home Workers Convention, ILO) and the establishment of resources like Women's World Banking.<sup>87</sup> If the women's movement manages to use what has been achieved so far as the thin end of the wedge, it might indeed be able to use reports, analysis and advocacy to overturn the existing paradigm.

I think such subversion would be important even for the other struggles of countries of the South. If it is carried out by the women's movement, women's leadership in ideas would be visible, which is what I think would really succeed in countering male prejudice against women.

### Dilemmas of Involvement in Public Policy

There are inbuilt difficulties in gendering public policy. We first face the question of how the term "woman" can be the basis for coherent identity, given the heterogeneity it represents. How is it possible to forge an identity that can claim a political voice and can effect change? Women belong to all classes, castes, religions, political ideologies and cultural configurations. Thus 'woman' ceases to be a meaningful identity, except when defined by physiological difference from men, which is mostly associated with the womb, with reproduction and its concomitants. It is thus simpler to forge an identity on reproductive rights, or even violence against women, as these are related to the body. When it comes to mainstream political choices, there are irreducible differences. Since the voice that women need to develop to influence public policy has to be political and have a presence in power structures, these strong differences in their primary political identity impedes solidarity. For women to forge an identity in terms of ideology appears unviable.

From the time women began to group themselves together as an international and national women's movement around the 1970s, they were forced to confront the implications of 'development'. Development can be defined as any kind of design for the improvement of the well-being of human beings, whether in the North or the South. For the women's movement, the basic approach or argument has been





that people on the ground do not just know what they want best but also know best how to achieve it. They built the 'development house' around two pillars: collective viewpoints and locally designed 'development' programs. That was the core of women's policy proposals and became known as the 'bottom up approach' in engineering national economic progress.

A mass base and ground level struggles can bring us once again into what we are looking for – influence in the public space. If we want to make a difference, in my view the politics for us is not being visible in the top zone of macroeconomics, but to represent the poor in the top zone.

Another issue concerns participation, also seen as mainstreaming. Does effective participation mean sitting at the table of power or separately? The question that haunts those who wish to jump on to what is called the mainstream, and "integrate into existing policies" is captured in Hamlet's timeless words, "To be or not to be?" Translated into the concerns of this paper, this is "Do we join the mainstream or remain apart, contesting its legitimacy and its values?"<sup>88</sup> Trying to integrate oneself within an existing framework has problems. If the the nature of public policy arising from the given theories and frameworks of data and analysis are unacceptable to women or to Dalits, then, as Gopal Guru argues, integrating into that set-up is surrender. Apart from being flawed in principle, it may lead to undesirable results.<sup>89</sup>

But this abstention from participation has its own negative effects in terms of exclusion. In the language of the feminists the dilemma is often formulated as "Do we want a piece of the poisoned cake?"<sup>90</sup> Or put another way, do women want to join the "polluted stream?"<sup>91</sup>

There are innumerable dilemmas in attempts to 'gender' macro economic policy. Even as I lay out my arguments, I would like to present my conclusion - that the concept of gendering, valuable as it may be in many domains, cannot, when it comes to the domain of development and public policy, work as a way to achieving women's quest for equality.<sup>92</sup>

I would say gendering as an idea has obstructed our movement because it brings us into an existing macroeconomic frame. For



example there is now a desire to 'gender' the 11<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan. Many of us have taken up this cause with enthusiasm. We have even shown ourselves to have learned from the experience of trying to gender the previous Five Year Plan, in resisting ghettoisation in the form of a chapter by women for women. There should instead be a way of including women in the design as both subject and object of sectoral planning. We are trying to have a gender-perspective inform different sections of the Five Year Plan. We have even conceived the idea of seeing India's major outlays during the 11<sup>th</sup> Plan directed towards the poor and social development, such as the outlay on the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, the Development Fund for Backward Areas and the National Rural Health Mission (see the chart below for the main outlays). We are looking at it as a canvas and thinking out how we can put women's footprints on the canvas. We would like to ensure that the ideas of women brush onto the canvas a life which permeates it throughout.

Heads of Expenditure	Rs. in Crores
National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme	14300
Rajiv Gandhi National Drinking Water Mission	4680
National Rural Health Mission	8207
Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan	10041
Midday Meal Scheme	4813
Total Sanitation Campaign	720
Integrated Child Development Services	4087

Source: Extracts from the budget speech for 2006-'07, Government of India

Looking back, I would say gendering public policy is a trap. Our involvement in development plans prevents our rethinking the whole idea of development. In the past, our brilliance consisted of drawing on women's experience to challenge prevailing wisdom. Entering into the exercise of gendering this or that item preempts that possibility. It is like sleeping with the enemy.

But we would then be left with the problem of exclusion. If you do not participate, the likelihood is that you will be left behind. That is why I value the opportunity for reflection offered to us today within the atmosphere generated by the NBA's protest in Delhi. We can recharge



ourselves for the task of building another India, whether we speak of the legal system, the criteria guiding our development choices or the prevailing perception of people and the environment.

Today as women ask to be included there is no clear ideological vision with which they are associated. They are instead often associated with complaints of being excluded or appeals for money for their economic, political and social security. We are not yet known as a world wide movement for justice, although our efforts since 9/11 against war did in fact signal a worldwide revolutionary movement.





## Towards a Conclusion: Cry the Beloved India... ...or *Desh Bachao*

"If you are not with us, you are against us". This is the logic President Bush introduced into the world, a simple either/or that leaves no space for other positions or for debate. This simplistic categorization has crept into our own political analysis.

Harish Khare has used the phrase 'nationalist ethos' to describe an ethos nurtured during the anti-colonial struggle but still widely prevalent in India.<sup>93</sup> He declares that "the middle classes in India remain wedded to the Nehruvian ideal of total autonomy in the pursuit of science and technology." I would add that this constituency includes those concerned also with economic policy and foreign policy, among whom I belong.

There are a whole range of people and agencies, who belong to neither the Left nor the Right and may have no clear politics at all, who are in favour of safeguarding natural resources and livelihoods and the principles of sovereignty and social justice. Those who hold such viewpoints do not necessarily belong to people's movements but may be academics, civil servants or members of business houses. It is extremely important for those who influence public policy in India – including the media – to see this kind of opinion as a genuine, fact-based, nationalistic opinion that is held by a very broad range of actors.

There is need to make room for this other space, for opinions that move India away from 'Bush-ism'. Given that this is an energetic and vocal society, one that protests when squeezed, it is not only unjust but dangerous to abandon the established tracks of our economic development. In another ten years, we will not have with us even the few of us who experienced the excitement of the India of the 50's and 60's. With that loss of memory there will disappear an important dissenting voice against what appears to be the unthinking exposure of India and its struggling citizens to the overwhelming power of corporate capital.





In terms of the metaphor of the sky I have been using throughout, this would correspond to the naked forces of the cosmos. And if there continues the present trend of issues becoming so polarized as to shrink the space where difference can be sorted out openly, we will lose the space that defines our ethos as "argumentative Indians," to use Amartya Sen's idiom. All these may lead to civic breakdowns that hamstring our democratic culture. In other words, the democracy that has sustained India would be threatened.

In his inaugural speech at the meeting of Asian Parliamentarians to discuss population and development, Lok Sabha Speaker Somnath Chatterjee observed that the forces driving the New World Order "must recognize that there is no easy solution. Each country has to develop its own approach based on its native realities, historical factors and social mores."<sup>94</sup>

Decades ago, in the 1970s, Thandike Mkandawe (an eminent African economist who now heads UNRISD) described Africa's predicament in the throes of what was then called structural adjustment. He said that capital markets, including lending agencies like IMP and World Bank, would put pressure on the State to engage in market driven economic policy as well as improve what we call 'governance'. This led to the State assuming disproportionate power, pushing African countries from a semblance of democracy towards fascism.

We can see this happening in India today. While on the one hand there is the rhetoric of liberalization, of building competitive markets both internal and external, the State has become the major arbitrator of matters affecting the private sector. Without the State today, no corporate, national or multinational can take a step. State policy determines positions regarding the capital market, currency, land allocation, preferences to be given to some sectors over others or to large over small sectors. Therefore it is understandable that everyone including the children of wealthy business families would like to join politics, as it is through the State that they can access the benefits of the liberal economy.

These policies were first adopted in Africa, then in Latin America. They led to widespread corruption in politics, to disparities and finally



to a breakdown of civic order. Street battles were succeeded by dictatorial regimes, which gave way before revolution, which was followed by revival by way of the return of a semi-socialist state. This cycle has been enacted in Brazil, Chile and Venezuela.

These examples have lessons for India which boasts of being a knowledge-driven country, a thoughtful country. Yet with her eyes wide open, India is entering the same historical process that led to convulsions in neighbouring continents. The senior economists who currently hold power in the government are aware of the international theatre and aware of the experience of other countries. Does it not seem treacherous to use the hope of prosperity to force into such tracks India, that much more vulnerable because of its huge population, its extraordinary diversity, its many scars through history and the great proportion of the poor?

Many have said this is the most culturally democratic country, accommodating, tolerant of pluralism, capable of producing everything under the sun, and with a market which can absorb its own entire supply of goods and services. The Indian economy can accommodate the production and consumption cycle within itself if it wished, and so give everyone at least enough food and livelihood before thinking of other lands. However, even if a more modern system of production, trade and consumption had been possible, it would seem bizarre to invite man-made disaster, the likelihood of which is so tangible and proximate. It is the same tangible inequality that has led to civic and economic breakdown in many Latin American countries.

Unrest and violence is fermenting in Karnataka, pinnacle of the IT industry. Scams on land-use are proliferating. Land was obtained from the three-month-old H. D. Kumaraswamy government by Gandhi City for Advanced R & D Ltd., under the pretence of being concerned with IT. One of the Company's directors is M. S. Balaji, a student's union leader from the BJP. Land was received by another little known company, Sapphire Infrastructure Developers, promoted by the well known contractor Reddy Veeranna who has several contracts to his credit including those for the Krishna Bhagya Jala Nigam. The two companies together are now in possession of 2, 200 acres of land.<sup>s95</sup>



The recent violence and riots in Bangalore after the death of the matinee idol Dr. Raj Kumar has been attributed to the increasingly visible disparities in the city. Those who have prospered from the IT industry include young people with large disposable incomes, working in banks and multi-storey business houses through whose glass windows a whole range of consumer goods and fashions are visible to those outside – who might be called the “indigenous” population, less privileged, educated only upto matriculation and unemployed. Both Prof. Ananathamurthy and one of the senior executives of the Infosys saw the riots as a product of sharp inequalities and its effects on the psyche. The riots expressed the frustration and also the anger of the poor.

The increase in Naxalism in parts of the country is evidence of the unwillingness of the young people in these areas to accept the oppression and exclusion they are experiencing. As confirmed by the council of ministers looking at Naxalism, it is a phenomenon concentrated in tribal areas. In its characteristically un-even-handed way, the Government wants to protect itself from the increasing violence of the Naxalites and wants, on the other hand, to push land now occupied by tribal people into the hands of corporates.

In my opinion it is not too late to withdraw from such a ‘progrum’ – I say ‘progrum’ deliberately, as this kind of devastation of densely populated areas of India through an vision of development in terms of mega-projects, mega-roads, capital inducement and FDI inducement will destroy these populations and their sense of self and hope. This will turn them from tolerant, beautiful citizens into the terrorists we have seen in so many regions.

Recently we have heard that if the height of the Sardar Sarovar Dam is raised by another 10 meters, it will lead to the submergence of the land occupied by 35,000 families, who will have to move out of the Narmada valley. But this is only one example. There are many other areas in India where there has been massive displacement from existing livelihood spaces. According to the mid-term appraisal of the Planning Commission in 2000, 25 million people, mainly tribals, have been displaced. Half of them have not been rehabilitated - they have in fact been pauperized. Just a few days ago the police opened fire





on fisher folk on the Vizag coast, to protect the transfer of a government yard on the coastline to a private company. Bullets summoned in aid of development.

I saw this in Brazil, at the public hearing organized by the World Commission on Dams.<sup>96</sup> A whole clan of forest dwellers was shot dead when they objected to the construction of a dam... and Brazil had plans to build another fifty in their valleys and forests.

The recent public dialogue initiated by the protest of the NBA has raised the consciousness of a wide range of people in India. They demand that the process of development respect the aim of the Indian Constitution to provide justice to its citizens, that it be transparent and democratic and work to remove poverty. It has made people question the process through which such decisions are taken as well as the extraordinary neglect of the knowledge pouring out not just from the NBA and the extensive data India has on the value of small water-harvesting projects, but from the government's own reviews. This includes the knowledge of the adverse impact of, for example, the Bhakra Dam and the salination of some of the fields it was meant to irrigate.

India is rich in its experience of water management, whether through check dams, ponds or lakes. It has developed incredible water harvesting and water management techniques that are locally created, locally owned and locally used. There is also a persuasive argument that people make optimum use what is locally developed and owned, whereas they waste what comes through no effort of their own.

As we have marched for Parliamentary quotas or for the famous Mathura case – as we have managed to get passed Bills on domestic violence and on rape, we need now to engage with the politics of development. We also need to battle with increased vigour the trends towards inequality. We have to restore a sky that protects our people and does not collapse on them.

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I would like to end with a request for a discussion of some ideas that strike me as possible bases on which the women's movement can rebuild its political presence and make the best use of its ability to build concepts from ground level realities and to work together despite differences. While there may be other priorities in each of your minds, I am putting down some of those that concern me in the domains of action and theory.

**Action:** Of primary importance is worker protection and preventing the dismantling of trade unionism. In an era of corporatisation, the only countervailing power available belongs to those who work for the corporate sector or even the state. The larger and stronger their organization, the greater their capacity to resist. Many of us may feel that trade unions have often been irresponsible as regards what are called the needs of the public when public services break down, or feel that issues related to remuneration are secondary when there are so many without even the basis for remuneration. But such criticisms should not distract us. We have to strengthen the institution as an institution and prevent any erosion of its power. This is going to be extremely difficult, given that the trend is for "flexi-labour", something even some workers have learned to find convenient (certainly workers in the higher levels of employment prefer it). However difficult, I believe that women must stand solidly behind worker organizations.

We have before us much scope to build worker organizations from below. The National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (EGS) is going to generate millions of wage labourers, who will be located in areas analogous to the shop floor, namely the gram panchayat. A substantial proportion will be women workers. It is necessary that they organize into cooperatives and associations, initially to make sure that the package arrives as promised, that their wages are paid and the laws related to compensation and facilities such as water and crèches are adhered to. One can then build up a massive federation of EGS workers across the nation, within which women's unions may lead, which would be the revolutionary force that bears upon current economic and political ideologies.

The second task is unhesitating resistance to the entry of foreign direct investment (FDI) in retail trade and in projects of "linking the farmer



to the supermarket". We need to understand the implications of, and argue against, free currency convertibility.

Here is an area for those gathered here to carry out a satyagraha, a "fistful of salt" for the women's movement today.

Third, I believe that however anti-national it appears we need to address the issue of militarisation. Various protocols India has been signing – with South Africa, Russia and Israel – concern largely defence items. These deals are necessarily bound up in secrecy. The militarisation of international relations has led to a loss of transparency that betrays democratic principles. We are definitely giving way on this front. And it is one of the major causes of the increase in the power of the state, of corruption and the deflection of finances from investment in basic amenities.

Thought: Feminists have marshalled examples from every discipline, including theology, of the hierarchies embedded in theory and language and it is crucial that this critique leads to a rearrangement of hierarchies. It should also be made available as a body of knowledge to women engaged in ground-level struggles or public action. It would give them both the confidence that their own critique of the injustice of the system is legitimate, besides equipping them with the new language and theories for their struggle. The reconstruction of theory can be a unifying agenda for women, an umbrella of thought.

Further, what is needed now and can be attained if women put their minds together, is establishing the brilliant struggles of women as a body of knowledge, chiseled into theory, which challenges the dominant ideas of national advancement. We cannot minimize the importance of gaining acceptance for theory grounded in experience. This exercise should lead to a book which would be as profound and as illuminating and have as powerful an impact as, for example, Marx's 'Das Kapital' or Adam Smith's 'Wealth of Nations', two classics of economic thought whose enduring influence has in many ways led to the circumscription of thought.

This paper could not have been written, as well as completed on time without the untiring help of M.V. Jagadeesh and Perce Bloomer.



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- <sup>7</sup> William Easterly, "The Lost Decades: Developing Countries' Stagnation in spite of Policy Reform, 1950-1999" (Washington D.C: World Bank, 2000), p. 7.
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<sup>65</sup> Ronald Steel claims that there is widespread acceptance of the idea that the US is an empire, defined not in terms of formal acquisition of territory, as was the case with earlier European empires, but in terms of economic and political control. He traces this imperial legacy back to the early days of American history and claims that it became global after 1945. See "Totem and Taboo", *The Nation* 279.8 (2004).

<sup>66</sup> These figures were given out by the International Institute for Strategic Studies and by the Stockholm Institute for Peace Research (SIPRI) in 2005. The report of the International Institute for Strategic Studies puts supplementary defense-related spending at \$346 billion since the attacks of September 11, 2001. The Stockholm Institute for Peace Research (2005) breaks down supplementary spending on the war on terrorism by year: in the fiscal year 2001, it was \$20 billion; in 2002, \$44 billion; in 2003, \$88 billion; in 2004, \$87 billion; in 2005, \$107 billion.

<sup>67</sup> In a recent article, neoconservative Francis Fukuyama writes that the second Bush administration has been distancing itself from the policies articulated in the Strategy and is in the process of rewriting it. He terms the neoconservative foreign policy, described in the Strategy, as "benevolent hegemony" but admits that neoconservatism has become associated with coercive regime change, unilateralism, and American hegemony and, therefore, is unacceptable to and unpopular in much of the rest of the world. He claims that he himself can no longer support neoconservatism. See "After Neoconservatism", *New York Times*, 19 February, 2006. Since Fukuyama's article appeared, the new National Security has been released. Its military component remains largely unchanged.

<sup>68</sup> "Totem and Taboo", *The Nation* 279.8 (2004), 29.

<sup>69</sup> "Globalisation and Development: The Imperative of Political Economy," paper presented at the Conference "Towards a New Political Economy of Development: Globalisation and Governance", Sheffield, July, 2002 < <http://mercury.soas.ac.uk/economics/econimp/docs/globdev.pdf>.>

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Devaki Jain (born 1933) is a feminist development economist. After graduating from the University of Oxford, she started her career as a teacher in the University of Delhi but soon moved to a wider engagement with research, advocacy and public policy. Her life and work have been deeply influenced by Gandhian ideals. A pioneer of the women's movement in India and globally, she is one of the founders of the Institute of Social Studies Trust and DAWN (Development Action by Women for a New Era), a network that has had a profound influence on development thinking and feminist discourse. She now lives in Bangalore where she heads the Singamma Sreenivasan Foundation and works with women in grassroots institutions of governance.

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