Whatever Happened to the Dreams of Modernity? The Nehruvian Era and Woman's Position

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Whatever Happened to the Dreams of Modernity?

The Nehruvian Era and Woman's Position

Nirmala Banerjee

The Nehruvian era, which has set the pattern of economic development for the next 40 years to follow, provides important clues for understanding the failure of modernisation project in getting rid of gender discrimination within the household and at the workplace. In spite of presiding in the 1930s over a committee on women's status, Nehru and the Planning Commission under his leadership in the post-independent India proceeded to discard the radical economic measures the committee had recommended to establish parity between men and women. Instead, the unproblematic tradition of regarding women as targets for household and motherhood-oriented welfare services was given recognition in official policy documents. Thus, challenging the patriarchal ethos of society has never been the agenda of the Indian state. But equally important, the article argues, has been the shortcomings of the women's movement in the Nehruvian period, which in its exclusive dependence on the state, neglected mass mobilisation and remained blind to subtle class and patriarchal barriers.

[The Indian Association of Women's Studies recognising the need for reexamining the early decades after independence from a women's perspective organised a seminar on The Early Years of Independence: A Women's Perspective in collaboration with the Centre for Women's Development Studies, New Delhi and Women's Studies Research Centre, Baroda in August 1977. Alongwith deliberations on the complex nature of the impact of Nehruvian paradigm on women's issues and the movement, the seminar also featured the narration of the experiences of women in the numerous struggles of the time. The following set of articles is a selection from the papers presented at the seminar. Also included are three of the testimonies of women activists.]

THE early years of India's independence have always been closely identified with Jawaharlal Nehru and his dreams of a modern India. It was under his leadership that, within the first 15-odd years, India had built most of the institutions including the Indian Constitution, a functioning parliamentary democracy and an independent judiciary that were to mark it as a modern state. Moreover, Nehru and his times as a prime minister left a specially lasting mark on India's economy by introducing the whole process of planned economic development. The first two or three five-year plans were easily the most optimistic of Indian policy ventures, not the least because of their ambitious efforts to circumvent the constraints imposed by a tradition-bound society and economy without any sweeping changes in the existing structure of either.

Looking back to those exciting years, it has to be admitted that most of us then had faith in those Nehruvian plans and designs; we did expect them to get rid of the discriminations that had long been built into our society and economy. Events in the subsequent years have however, shown that the reality fell far short of these expectations. Especially, as far as women are concerned, the data now available clearly indicate that the project of modernisation has never involved more than a small minority of them. Particularly, the process of economic empowerment has bypassed a large majority [Banerjee 1995]. The Nehruvian era provides some important clues for understanding the reasons for this, mainly because it set the basic pattern of economic development that the country was to follow for the next 40 years or so.

The gaping hiatus between Nehru's dreams for a modern, just India, and the reality of women's continuing subordination could possibly have been explained if the planners, along with Nehru, had no access to any systematic information about the reality of the lives of ordinary women. After all, for most of us, it was the report of the committee on the status of women in India – (henceforth CSWI [GOI 1974]) that first provided the data for a macro-perspective regarding the general situation of women in our country. And that was not before the mid-1970s, much after the Nehruvian era.

This paper argues that at least for Nehru and his contemporaries this excuse was not valid. Even before independence, there had been at least one serious effort to collate the available information on women's position in India and to recommend some measures for a rapid change. That effort had been in the decade immediately before independence and under the chairmanship of Jawaharlal Nehru himself. However, later, in independent India, the newly appointed Planning Commission, also under the leadership of Nehru, showed no awareness either of these earlier efforts or of their somewhat radical thinking. Instead, the official policies *vis-a-vis* women in India's plans for development continued to follow the unproblematic tradition of regarding them merely as targets for household and motherhood-oriented welfare services.

This paper suggests that the main reason for this officially promoted forgetfulness was the fact that then, as now, challenging the patriarchal ethos of our society had never been on the agenda of the Indian state. In such matters, there has always been a wide divergence between the professions and the practices of Indian politicians in power. The analysis further suggests to the Indian feminists that demands and appeals to the state for removing gender-based discrimination can be effective only when backed by a strong movement against patriarchal authorities whether in public or in the private sphere.

In the next section, I give a brief history as well as a summary of the thinking and recommendations of the document entitled, 'Women's Role in Planned Economy' (henceforth WRPE) that had been prepared in late 1930s for the Congress Party. I then go on to relate these to the treatment of the same issues in the post-independence Nehruvian plans. In the concluding section I attempt to reconstruct the processes through which those brief pre-independence stirrings of a demand for women's economic independence were effectively silenced. The conclusions are at best very tentative because this entire history is still to be fully explored.

I
Report of the Sub-Committee, 1939-40

The document in question was the report prepared by the sub-committee appointed in 1939 by the National Planning Committee (henceforth NPC) to work out the role of

women in planned economy. The NPC itself had been set up in 1938 by the Congress Party at the joint initiative of Subhas Chandra Bose and Jawaharlal Nehru under the chairmanship of the latter. The sub-committee entrusted with the work of the WRPE, had been chaired by Laxmibai Rajwade, and its member secretary, Mridula Sarabhai, had presented the final report before the plenary session of the NPC in 1940. As Forbes has shown, Nehru was fully familiar with the working of the sub-committee and had in fact been called to intervene in some of the misunderstandings amongst the members of the sub-committee [Forbes 1996:199-200]. In the chaotic conditions of the next several years, the entire work of the NPC, along with the whole issue of planning, had got side-tracked; it was only on the eve of independence, in July 1947, that the WRPE report, along with those of several other sub-committees of the NPC, was sent for publication under the editorship of K T Shah [NPC 1948].

The report of the WRPE is worth our notice if only because of its historical relevance: it shows that, even then, Indian women were by no means the icons awaiting male hand-outs as has been visualised by several scholars [Chatterjee 1988]. The editor, K T Shah, pointed out in the introduction to the published report that the group that took up the task of preparing the WRPE on behalf of the NPC had few who could be called experts on its theme. But, he went on to add in the final report, they did demonstrate a clear understanding of the issues at stake and an ability to put them in the framework of contemporary national and international thinking. They could also set up a network of working groups in different parts of the country in order to get regionwise inputs. The final report showed them to be fairly naive about the concept of planning and what it was likely to achieve. But, they had no illusions about the specific nature of the problems of Indian women and its deep-entrenched roots in the traditions of the patriarchal family and marriage systems.

The terms of reference given to the WRPE had been very broad and fairly conventional; so it was rather remarkable that the latter chose to concentrate heavily on the issue of women's economic rights which, incidentally, got the longest chapter. Much of the thinking in this area was obviously deeply influenced by the recommendations of international bodies like the ILO and also by a somewhat romantic account of the Russian experiments. But, the WRPE deserves credit for recognising right at the outset that economic rights for women were contingent on each woman being treated as a separate unit in the economic structure. Kapila Khandwalla, one of the members, in fact gave a note of dissent because, as she said, "The sub-committee has not made it (sufficiently) clear that in the future planned society, what would count and count alone, will be the individual personality of each woman...and no relationship that she or he may have to bear with their fellows" [NPC 1948:234].

Whether or not the WRPE was as forthright as required, many of the report's recommendations did reflect this point of view. Thus, it stated categorically that a worker woman should have full control over her earnings. Further, it condemned the practice of throwing women out of their jobs when they got married and pointed out that, "to be free, an independent income is a necessity" [NPC 1948:52]. With regard to night work and regarding work in many occupations which are often considered as unfit for women, the WRPE strongly suggested that, instead of barring women from such work, its organisation should be so altered that women can safely work there [NPC 1948:55]. There was a strong recommendation that "what is meant to safeguard a worker should not act to her detriment" [NPC 1948:81].

The WRPE was obviously very much against the tradition of making the family a unit of economic activities because it recognised that this made women the subsidiary or secondary earners; and that, they felt provided the justification for the relatively lower earnings of women. They had noted that trade unions in several industries had sacrificed married women's interests in favour of men's at times of wage negotiations or job rationalisation on grounds that the husbands of those women had jobs [NPC 1948:113-14]. The WRPE therefore recommended that instead of a family wage, a wage should strictly be fixed on the basis of the principle of equal pay for equal work – regardless of the "status of the worker, whether married or single, whether he or she has to support a family or not" [NPC 1948:62].

Perhaps the most radical recommendation of the WRPE had been concerned with women's unpaid labour both in the family's economic activities and in the household. About the first kind, it had recommended that the economic value of the work must be recognised and, in lieu of payment, "she should have the right to claim all facilities given by the state to other workers" [e g, medical help, creches, training, etc, NPC 1948:103]. As compensation for work at home – mainly housework – the woman should get absolute control over a part of the family income, and also an inalienable right to a share in the husband's property. The husband should pay on her behalf the contribution necessary for any social insurance scheme for workers that the state may introduce. There was also a mention that men should learn and practise household skills [NPC 1948:104-05]. It is indeed surprising how many of the WRPE recommendations, specially on issues relating to economic empowerment, are still a part of the unfulfilled demands of the Indian women.

The Aftermath

From these lofty heights of a radical ideology, the policy-makers' descent into a safe and innocuous welfarism started almost immediately. Already at the plenary of the NPC where the report was presented, there were signs of the quiet burial that was to be the ultimate fate of the report. The resolutions passed there approved of some of the more inane recommendations like "there should be cessation of all work during the day – so that the mid-day meal can be conveniently taken and the housewife released from the duties in kitchen" [NPC 1948:227, resolution 11b]. But it firmly left out the more radical and therefore dangerous sounding recommendations of the WRPE. Instead, it concentrated on issues that were of interest to men who obviously formed the mainstream. Among these were the thorny issues of imposing a common civil code as well as monogamy on all sections of the population: as was to be expected, there was a sharp difference of opinion among members on these issues. It was not always the men of minority communities who opposed these progressive measures. Similarly, regarding the question of providing creches, maternity benefits and nursery centres, the resolution was to accept the recommendations, not of the WRPE but of the labour sub-committee [NPC 1948:226, resolutions 7 and 8]. There was no mention of the WRPE's high-flying ideas of giving these benefits to unpaid family workers and housewives. Indeed, with regards to women's unpaid labour, whether in the family enterprise or as housewives, the resolutions merely mentioned that this work should be recognised as part of the national wealth. There was no mention of compensating women for it in any way [NPC 1948:228 resolution 10]. The WRPE had strongly condemned the usual practice of the trade unions to sacrifice women's interests in favour of men's; the final resolutions merely asked the unions to enrol and keep records of female and child labour [NPC 1948:228, resolution 17]. Altogether, there was every effort made to put women, gently but firmly, in their traditional place.

II
The Nehruvian Era

In the post-independence period, the WRPE got deeply buried; not even the CSWI report seemed to have any awareness of it although members of the committee had

deligently explored most available sources of information about the trajectory of women's status during this century. It was only in 1995 that Maitreyi Krishnaraj resurrected the report from archival sources. She brought it to public notice in the edited background volume of papers, *Remaking Society for Women: Visions from Past and Present*, which she had prepared for the 1995 national conference of the Indian Association of Women's Studies [Krishnaraj 1995]. The volume included the full texts of the recommendations of the sub-committee as also those of the NPC on that basis, along with the note of dissent given by Kapila Khandwalla. Krishnaraj's concluding remark on the WRPE was, "The committee too made demands on what women wanted but it did not ask questions of what model of economy is needed to fulfil them" [Krishnaraj 1995:9].

Maitreyi Chowdhuri has since done a cogent textual analysis of the WRPE [Chowdhuri 1996]. She stressed the surprising modernity of many of the concerns of the report as well as the sharp break it had made from the gender-blindness of liberal theory. At the same time, she highlighted the many contradictions that were built into the text: these apparently had arisen from the tensions that were inherent to the project of the WRPE. The latter, after all, was trying to make a very aggressive and unfamiliar individuality for women acceptable in a society which was totally unfamiliar with the idea. Moreover, the exercise was being carried out at the very juncture when people were engaged in the task of forging a new national identity out of the struggles emerging from a hated colonial rule. To protect its hurt and fragile pride, it had probably been considered necessary to glorify its own past traditions.

My interest in the WRPE is more limited: it is mainly to assess the knowledge and attitudes *vis-a-vis* the conditions of women against which the early planners of independent India had begun their exercises in economic planning. Given the fact that Nehru had been the chairman of the NPC and later, also of the Planning Commission, there was really no reason why the two exercises could not be connected. Therefore, we can assume that the planners, if they wanted to, could get all the necessary information on this topic. The considerable data collated by the WRPE from published sources as well as from their own enquiries had clearly shown that a third of the adult women in India were workers who toiled in the fields, factories or in mines. As workers, they faced discrimination from their employers, from the trade unions, and chiefly from their households which staked a pre-emptive claim on their labour. It had also shown that in most cases there were no valid objective grounds for these differences in the conditions of men and women workers: it was the patriarchal attitudes and the male-oriented power structures within the households and communities which were responsible for the discrimination. Early in the planning era in 1953, the Labour Bureau of the GOI [GOI 1953] had confirmed and reiterated similar findings in one of their reports concerned with the organised sector.

The Plans

Even more surprising is the fact that along with the WRPE report, the concerns and stances that had been voiced were also completely forgotton or rejected. The WRPE had achieved a major breakthrough by shifting, perhaps for the first time in Indian consciousness, the focus of policy concerns from their long-term preoccupation with middle class women to poor working women. Given that India was a practising democracy, public policies from the first plan onwards naturally had to be oriented to the masses, including the majority of working women who happened to be poor. However, official policies in independent India showed no interest in women as workers; instead, the first plan resolved to provide women with adequate services necessary to fulfil what was called a "woman's legitimate role in the family" [GOI 1974:306]. Women were back to their iconic roles within the family.

Similarly, while the second plan did mention women workers [GOI 1956:584], it was mainly to talk about protecting them from hazards for which they were physically unfit. It looked as if the Planning Commission had never heard of unpaid labour or of labour outside the organised sector. Even in the chapter on agricultural workers [GOI 1956, ch XVI] there was no awareness shown about the situation of the vast numbers of women working in agricultural sector. The third plan [GOI 1961], if anything, reached new heights of gender-blindness in the sphere of work. In chapter after chapter, even remotely concerned with workers – such as the ones on employment, on personnel requirements and training programmes [GOI 1961, chs X and XI] or on labour policy [GOI 1961, ch XV], or on agriculture, industry or village and cottage industries – there was no mention about women as a category of workers. The solitary mention found is about giving women training for family planning work and mid-wifery [GOI 1961:179]. The report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India mentions that the third plan's thrust for women's development was on girls' education [GOI 1974:307]. But it obviously was not for improving the latter's work prospects. Even more disheartening is the fact that the plan document, in talking about the gap between boys' and girls' educational achievements, had carefully avoided examining its causes; nor did it appear to consider that the state may have some responsibility for removing those.

The Plan Model

In general, this reversal can be linked with the basic character of the planning philosophy that had then been adopted. The aim was, first and foremost, to increase the national product and to build up a strong, self-reliant economy which in a few years' time would take its own place in the modern industrialised world. The second plan and the next two plans exhorted the small man to "put in his best in the interest of a higher standard for himself and increased prosperity for the country" [GOI 1956:22, para 3]. In other words, for the Nehruvian plans, increasing employment was not an objective. Right at the outset of the first plan, Nehru had lashed out at egalitarianism, the Luddite craze to have more employment by obstructing technological advance. The question of sharing the cake can arise, he said, only after it was made [Chatterjee and Sen 1988:198].

Apart from providing some welfare services, promoting equality or removing specific handicaps of disadvantaged groups was not on the agenda either of the official Five-Year Plans or of the state's economic policy as a whole. In fact, the plans themselves were designed in such a way that they aggravated the disparities between different sections of the economy. Planning exercises in India began seriously with the second plan when the four sector Mahalanobis model was adopted. This basic structure continued unchanged till about the mid-1970s through the third and the fourth plans. In this model, plan policies as well as investments were basically concerned with the material balances in the first and the second sectors; these together roughly corresponded to the organised sector activities producing physical goods. Another sector, covering services, referred mainly to the organised public and social services.

Agricultural activities as well as all wage good industries other than those in the factory sector were outside this charmed circle that formed the focus of the plans. So also were the remaining economic activities including trade, construction, unorganised services etc. As I have shown in an earlier article [Banerjee 1988] official plans took no financial or administrative responsibility for this last sector; there was no plan provision for supplying it with inputs like capital, skill training, or assistance for technological upgradation. On the other hand, in setting their sectorwise targets for employment, the plans put the onus of generating bulk of the jobs on this very unorganised sector. For example, for the second plan period, it had been estimated that an additional 80 million new jobs were needed if the backlog of those unemployed at the beginning of the plan plus

those newly added to the labour force during the plan's tenure were to be freshly employed. But, the planned sectors were expected to generate no more than 30-32 million jobs. The rest of the jobs were to come from somewhere else, presumably in the unorganised sector [Banerjee 1988:79-80]. There was no acknowledgement or regret expressed that, without any plans for provision of additional resources or skills for this set of activities, the employment in unorganised sector was bound to be much less productive and rewarding than in the planned sectors. This discrimination between the two sections of the economy – the traditional and the modern or the organised and the unorganised – remained built-in in the Indian plan policies. It was perhaps one of the main reasons for the sharp increase over the 1950s and the 1960s in the incidence of poverty, and in the skewness of income distribution that has been widely noted [Shrinivasan et al 1974; Bardhan 1984].

In the decades of the 1950s and the 1960s, the overall character of women's employment did not change very much; over 80 per cent of them continued to work in agriculture. Most of the remaining women worked in other unorganised activities [GOI 1970: 68-70, Table 13], and the lack of concern on the part of the planners no doubt contributed to the further deterioration in women's economic position. The changes that took place in specific sections of the economy mainly went to re-affirm women's continued subordination. For example, as trade spread over a wider area, women's employment in it went down sharply. In manufacturing industry, their employment increased during the 1950s, but largely in the capacity of unpaid family labour and that too only in few, mainly stagnant industries where women had a tradition of work. As Sinha noted, under the first three plans, women had found few openings in newer, faster growing industries that had come up through planned development [Sinha 1972:113-14, Tables 5, 5a and 6, p 120].

Importantly, even in the organised sector where there was state intervention, there was, if anything, an aggravation in the differences between male and female workers. The national commission of labour [GOI 1969] showed that in coal, mica and manganese mining, women's absolute and relative numbers had declined [GOI 1969:35-49]. In jute and cotton textile mills, the existing imbalance in the division of labour between men and women had become exacerbated. The unskilled tasks where women had been working were being rationalised which had led to a reduction in their relative numbers in those industries [GOI 1969:114-15, 129]. In most kinds of plantations, women continued to form 40 per cent or more of the total labour; but their wage rates, even when officially fixed, were still significantly below the male wage rates [GOI 1969:9-25].

The WRPE had dreamed of women being recognised as workers in their own rights, earning their own independent incomes; but the plans as well as actual trends in the economy indicated that they were being further pressurised into becoming subservient creatures of the household. As shown before, the plans emphasised their roles in the household and the community. The trends in the economy continued to take away their options of making an independent living.

Between the submission of the WRPE report and the beginning of the planning exercise in independent India, there were no doubt many changes in the outlook of the persons involved and in the relations between them. In 1949, Mridula Sarabhai, the erstwhile secretary of the WRPE, had fallen out of favour with Nehru because of her views on the Kashmir issue [Gopal 1993:90, vol 11]. Also, we have no evidence that she or her earlier colleagues in the WRPE were any longer interested in the fate of the WRPE or in the planning process. Even earlier, there appears to be no record of any protest from them when the NPC, in the 1940 resolutions, significantly diluted the stance they had taken in their report.

Nevertheless, this loss of interest in the NPC and the WRPE is not a sufficient explanation for the complete negation in later documents of the attitudes that the WRPE had adopted. The views expressed by the WRPE in 1939 were not the wild dreams of an individual, but a reflection of the ideas that were in circulation at that time among the politically conscious, and specially among those who had been familiar with international events. The complete disappearance from 1951 onwards of that past in the new planning team, including Nehru himself, suggests more a deliberate reversal of policy positions. And this requires a more satisfactory explanation.

The Elite and the Masses

Sarkar (1983:344) has noted, "the left advance during 1935-37 (was)...somewhat illusory and verbal insofar as crucial decision-making was concerned". After independence, this malaise appears to have spread to many more apparently modern, radical or even liberal values that challenged the hierarchical traditions of Indian society. We find many instances when the official policies of the new government deviated sharply from the noble ideals that had been professed during the freedom struggle. The most blatant of such deviations was surely in the field of education, J P Naik has described with great anguish this particular development [Naik 1966:1-19]. From the times of Dadabhai Naoroji, the Congress Party had lamented the colonial state's refusal to take the responsibility of providing primary education to all Indian children. Reformers from Gokhale to Gandhi had shared this agenda. In 1944, J Sargent was asked by the colonial government to formulate a scheme for a national system of education for India. Accordingly, he prepared a plan which phased the project of providing eight years of compulsory education to all Indian children over the next 40 years. The Congress Party vehemently objected to this long-drawn plan and came up with its own alternative plan – the B G Kher plan. This plan proposed to attain the same target in 16 years, i e, by 1960. The constituent assembly of independent India had accepted this Kher plan.

However, particularly from the second plan onwards, the government began to drag its feet in this matter. The reasons given were the fast growth of population, the government's financial difficulties, the apathy of the masses and so on. Naik, however, points out that there was a marked change in the educational priorities of the government during the 1950s. The pyramid of educational expenditure got even more skewed than in the British period. In 1947, elementary education got 40 per cent of the education budget. In 1961, this had come down to 35 per cent. The government continuously kept pushing back its targeted dates for universal primary education. Naik argues that this was because provision of elementary education to all was for "social justice, and not for economic growth". If it had indeed been a genuine priority for the ruling powers, he felt, funds by themselves would not have been a problem. After all, for the Chinese war, India did raise an additional Rs 1,000 million in 1962 and another Rs 4,400 million in the next year. At that time, attaining universal primary education would have needed an additional allocation of no more than Rs 4,000 million. Naik concluded that "In my opinion, the lower priority accorded to elementary education is due mainly to the fact that the intelligentsia which came to power at the end of the British rule, is now tending to transform itself from a service group to an exploiting group" [Naik 1966:19]. He suspected that the increasing distance between the masses and the intelligentsia was a part of India's hierarchical traditions. He said, "India has an ancient and strong intellectual tradition; but unfortunately, it has been too self-centred and has lacked a strong communion with the people at large" [Naik 1966:15]. History has proved Naik absolutely right. We still remain a long way away from the ideal of universalised education and we still find the elite providing excuses for this failure.

Regarding the ideas of the WRPE *vis-a-vis* women's economic independence, the

official policy could afford to be even more cavalier. After all, those ideas had never been a part of the policy agenda of Nehru and the party under him. After independence, as the leader of the government, Nehru was quite outspoken in this matter. In a speech at a girls' college in New Delhi in 1950, Nehru mentioned that women's education was important for making "better homes, better family and better society". He showed his displeasure at the "sloppy" way in which Indians keep their houses and said that "women are chiefly responsible for running the home and should know how to do this in an orderly and aesthetic way" [Gopal 1993:205, second series, vol 15, pt II]. Although he was talking to girl students engaged in higher education in the capital city of India, there was not a word about the need for them to play any role in the economy or to become efficient and productive workers.

To a large extent, many prominent women of the Nehruvian era also voiced similar views in the 1950s. For example, a volume edited by Tara Ali Baig in late 1950s [Ali Baig 1957] was patently designed to build up and eulogise the image of the woman as the keeper of the family. The foreword by Nehru is predictably condescending. He talks about our "revolution(!)" being basic because it had affected "the status and the living conditions of our women" [Baig 1957:VII] but does not mention what those revolutionary changes had been. Ali Baig's own piece is about women the home-maker through ages. The article on education by Muriel Wasi notes with pride that women's enrolment in universities had doubled. She also mentions the increase in girls' enrolment in secondary education; but does not show any interest in the educational needs of rural girls or of the ordinary woman. The only article in the volume to strike a different note was by Padmini Sengupta on 'Women in Trades and Professions' where the author notes with some concern the tendency to retrench women from industrial jobs in organised sector.

The most surprising piece in the volume, however, is by Durgabai Deshmukh who was then a member of the Planning Commission. Back in 1921, Durgabai, then a young girl of 12 years, had organised a meeting of 1,000 Devadasis with Gandhi in a small town of coastal Andhra Pradesh and had raised Rs 20,000 as donation for the Mahatma [Forbes 1996:127-28]. After independence, she had been the chairperson of the central social welfare board. As a planner, however, Durgabai perceived women as supplementary earners and welfare receivers. Her message to women, which concludes the volume, is worth quoting:

> While the field for women's participation in the work of nation-building is vast, much depends on effective exploitation of possibilities. In this context, the spirit that should inspire them should not be one of competition but of co-operation...a willingness to render unselfish service... leaving aside other fields, the field of social welfare and social service is itself so vast that most of us can find through participation the joy and satisfaction of having done something worthwhile, if we so desire [Baig 1958:272].

Women, in other words, were a different species who could and should find self-fulfilment only as selfless workers for the welfare of others. (One of Durgabai's suggestions was that women should save for financing the plan.) Poor needy women should be satisfied with some welfare schemes which would give them supplementary income to help the family survive.

It is this complete negation by women themselves of the ideas put forth by the WRPE that is so difficult to explain: how did that happen? Why was there absolutely no trace left of the ideas and attitudes which had gone into the WRPE? Many of the women who came to occupy various positions of importance in independent India had originally been members of the sub-committee set up for the WRPE. Just to name a few: Sarojini Naidu, Vijayalaxmi Pandit, Muthulaxmi Reddi, Hansa Mehta, Aruna Asaf Ali, Rameshwari Nehru, Mridula Sarabhai, Rani Rajwade, Durgabai Joshi (is she the same as Durgabai Deshmukh?). Even though all of them had not fully agreed with the earlier document, they were aware of it and there is no record that they had opposed it. So why was it that they never mentioned it or revived any of its ideas when they became a part of the country's power group? Also, as mentioned before, the WRPE had built up a fairly wide network of working groups to get facts and views from many parts of the country. Many of those who apparently had worked enthusiastically at that time must have been active in many capacities in the 1950s. While it is possible that memories of that exercise must have faded after a gap of 10-15 years, the complete blackout of the document does seem somewhat sinister.

The Realpolitik

A part of the explanation may lie in what Forbes has called the realpolitik of the Congress Party. Sarkar (1983) describes the Congress Party's "steady shift to the right" in its role in election politics during 1937-39. Forbes quotes him and points out that the party's new stance of trying to please the establishment also meant that it could not afford to entertain women's demands for any special help in the elections to the provincial assemblies in 1937. In reply to the AIWC's manifesto placing women's demands for the party's consideration, Nehru made it clear that the women should remain satisfied with few seats kept reserved for them. Nor would he entertain the demand of the AIWC for inclusion of a women's representative in the Congress Working Committee. Forbes quotes the "patronising" advice that he instead gave women, asking them to "help men in the struggle for political freedom". Forbes concludes that "Nationalist politics had been feminised but election politics remained male-dominated" [Forbes 1996:192-96].

There is an interesting sequel to this story. In the WRPE document, right at the outset of the chapter on civic rights, there is a bold statement to the effect that women did not want reservations of seats; they could contest on equal terms with men. This may have merely been a reflection of the euphoria born of the success that women apparently had enjoyed in the 1937 elections. But it could also be a way of ensuring, first and foremost, that the sub-committee did not annoy the chairman of the NPC by voicing what was obviously an unpopular demand. Otherwise, a document which was on the whole so deeply aware of women's handicaps might have been more circumspect about making such an unequivocal declaration.

It is possible that in the post-independence period the fear of getting a similar cavalier treatment prevented women leaders from bringing up issues that were not favoured by the high command. This timidity on the part of women, many of whom had been fearless participants in the freedom struggle, itself tells us something about the state of the women's movement and its leadership at that time. What J P Naik has said about the intelligentsia distancing itself from the common people, might have begun to work among women as well. Poor women, who had briefly emerged during the freedom struggle, were by then once again firmly back within the confines of their households. Their concerns were distant and unfamiliar. The prizes of power, on the other hand, were alluring and at hand, if only one toed the party line. The choice would not really have been a hard one.

This is perhaps too uncharitable a reading of the events. The platform on which women of different backgrounds had earlier come together had been provided by the nationalist movement. The urban educated women of the kind who had participated in the preparation of the WRPE had become aware of the problems of the poor; but they had found little opportunity to build their own communication channels with the latter in the whirlwind of the nationalist movement. Again, many of them had worked closely with the women victims of the great famine and the upheaval following the partition. But those crisis periods were not conducive to building a mutual understanding and respect

between the two groups regarding the gender-based commonalities they shared. So, whether the NPC watered down the recommendations of the WRPE or the party in power ignored the claims for justice of the ordinary women, it is clear that the women in the lead lacked the backing of an organised women's mass movement to challenge the decision-making authorities. They had to accept the dictates of the latter as final.

This also meant that the feminists could communicate with or appeal only to the state. Even if they knew, as the WRPE report indicates, that women's main oppressors were the patriarchal powers within the household, the society and the economy, they could not think of throwing the gauntlet at them. Instead, their only hope seemed to appeal to the state or the political authorities to take legal or administrative measures to curb the power of patriarchy over women – be it for routine things like timing of family meals or for some recognition of their unpaid labour.

For those of us in the women's movement today, it is a moment for reflection. Even after 50 years of independence, we are still following this strategy. We have no illusions about the patriarchal nature of the Indian state which continues to leave to household-based authorities the control over the lives of their women. And, in spite of a number of face-saving laws made by the state, practices like dowry-based violence or female foeticide are carried on with impunity within the household. In spite of this, the Indian women's movement is no more sure that it has the strength to frontally challenge household-based patriarchy than were those stalwarts working 60 years ago on the WRPE. We still are looking to the state to curb the patriarchal forces and to give women autonomy over their lives.

In the last analysis, it would be unfair to the leading women of the 1950s if one does not mention the euphoria the urban, educated women coming from economically comfortable backgrounds shared in the 1950s. We had got full citizenship and all the potential for political power it implied. There were clear policy directives to assure us that we would not be denied access to any kind of education or careers on grounds of gender. The Hindu code bill appeared to give us some property rights as well as some dignity in marriage. Our parents too, in most cases, were by then willing to let us spread our wings in all these directions. It took us a while to notice the many invisible barriers patriarchy continued to raise in our way to gain parity with men. It took even longer to realise, in spite of continuous pin-pricks that we were a small elite group among women. It was the euphoria about our gains in independent India that more than anything else had kept us blinkered and blind to the real situation of the average woman in India. The Nehruvian era was not so much the era of women's silence; it was the era of their euphoria.

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