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DISMANTLING THE NATIONALIST CONSENSUS: RALLYING AROUND SOCIETAL DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

The women's question after Independence was reframed in a context of widespread discontent with the development policies of the government. Development planning in India in the years after Independence continued to show a disregard for women's productive functions, placing women in atavistic roles as symbols of cohesion and continuity amidst the turbulent flux of modernity. The sexual difference inherent in 'welfare' measures envisioned for women did not dismantle structural inequalities and sexual hierarchies within public institutions and society. Significantly, this period, which is often erroneously seen as one in which women's activism was at a decline, saw the emergence of the National Federation of Indian Women in India (NFIW). Among the largest women's organizations in India today, NFIW was founded in 1954 as the women's wing of the Communist Party of India (CPI), with Aruna Asaf Ali among its prominent leaders.

Towards, Equality, the report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI), set up in 1971 to study the impact of development and nation-building on women, drew attention to the hierarchized and unequal status of women after three decades of planned development. Shattering the complacency which had accompanied the nationalist resolution of the women's question, Towards Equality drew on massive data to reveal the substantial erosion of women's political, social, and economic status after Independence, in particular the increasing marginalization of rural and poor women. The report was perhaps the first to identify a trend towards the declining child sex ratio and the 'missing women', an issue that has assumed enormous significance for the women's movement in recent years. The report was also instrumental in generating a renewed national debate on the women's question, particularly in the politics of development, and stimulated an academic concern over women's issues, which cumulated and led on to what may be seen as the emergence and subsequent consolidation of women's studies as a discipline in India (Mazumdar and agnihotri 1999). The report of the CSWI, its major recommendations, and the documents that were produced by various working groups set up under the pressure of the revelations made in the report formed the initial thrust of demands set out by a network of national women's organizations, which came into existence informally in 1980, 'demanding explicit provisions for the imperative development needs of women in the Sixth Five-Year Plan' (Agnihotri and Mazumdar 2005: 68).

Women's activism in the 1970s and 1980s was one among several democratic rights struggles in the period, all of which stressed the need to redefine development. Large-scale unemployment, poverty, and marginalization of the people had generated student uprisings, worker's agitations, and peasant, tribal, anti-caste, and consumer action movements. These movements spanned the political spectrum from Gandhian-socialists who espoused non-violent protest based on explicitly moral values over specific working or living conditions, to the far left, including the Maoists, who took recourse to violence to express discontentment with government policies (Kumar 1989: 20). Poor peasants and landless labourers, who faced increasing unemployment, stagnation of wages, and caste oppression, were drawn into regional struggles organized by the Left parties. Rural struggles became increasingly militant among groups united by economic and cultural oppression, including the Dalits and adivasis. With increasing expropriation of their agricultural lands and

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access to forest resources, many became industrial and agricultural wage labourers. The adivasi women, traditionally less restricted than caste Hindu and Muslim women initiated strong struggles, particularly in the Shahada movement in Maharashtra, against men's consumption of alcohol and against domestic violence. Middle-class women in urban Bihar and Gujarat, including students, housewives, and office workers, participated in a large scale movement against political corruption and the rising prices of food and fuel. The movement of the middle class became associated with the nav-nirman or total revolution movement led by Jayaprakash Narayan, a Gandhian leader. In Maharashtra, an anti-price rise movement was organized by a temporary coalition of women belonging to the CPI, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI[M]), and the social democratic Socialist Party. All these struggles precipitated the declaration of Emergency in 1975, under which non-parliamentary groups on both the Left and right of the political spectrum were banned, large numbers of political activists were imprisoned, and fundamental rights stood suspended (Gothoskar et al. 1982: 92-3).

The emergence of the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in 1972 is often cited as an important development of the decade. Women also participated actively in the peasant struggles in Bihar and the Chipko movement, which challenged developmental policies. It is interesting however, that while participation in these movements sharpened women's critique of development, a feminist analysis of development, which could lead to more focused demands, including women's land rights, failed to emerge.

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