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Women and Social Movements in Modern Empires Since 1820
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"A Brief Introduction: Indian Women's Activism in the 19th and 20th Century"

Elisabeth B. Armstrong

Kumari Kumudini Mitra and her sister Basanti Mitra founded the monthly Bengali-language journal *Suprabhat* in 1907 to support revolutionary nationalism in India. The journal, which was edited by Kumudini Mitra for three years, was one of many Bengali, Hindi and Urdu language women's journals that emerged across the country in the early years of the 20th century.¹ It was named after a Tagore poem that idealized death in the face of militant activism. This was the era of violent and non-violent activism to expel the British from the subcontinent.² Throughout the journal, therefore, the editors called upon Bengali women to support the rise of revolutionary nationalism and provide covert support to the underground terrorist movement.³

One of Kumudini Mitra's own poems published in the second issue of *Suprabhat* gave voice to the homeland of India as Mother – and demanded a violent overthrow of the existing order.

The Mother's worship can no longer be performed with fruit and flowers.
The Mother's hunger can no longer be appeased with words only.
Blood is wanted!
Heads are wanted!
Workers are wanted!
Warriors and heroes are wanted!⁴

Far from the nurturing maternal invocation, the Mother in Mitra's poem demanded justice by violent means. But this invocation of action came alongside other calls for women's rights. It was not uncommon to see the same journal call for revolutionary terrorism and for women's education, for women's rights in marriage and outside of the marriage contract, for women's rights in the national struggle and in the law. These complex of rights and actions formed the revolutionary nationalist movement's horizon, or at least as far as journals such as *Suprabhat* configured it. The writers and editors of these journals drew from an older trajectory of women's activism in the subcontinent that goes back to the 19th century, where different movements fought against caste injustice and against landowner abuse of women – mainly Dalit and Adivasi women who worked on their land and in their homes – as well as fought for a girl's right to education and against discriminatory marriage customs. These myriad strands danced through these movements, at times in harmony and other times discordantly.

From its inception, the Indian women's movement had three overlapping strands: leftist feminism, social reform feminism and nationalist feminism.⁵ These three strands – leftist, social reformist and nationalist feminism – are often portrayed as historical phases of the Indian women's movement. In fact, throughout the 20th century these strands have nourished and clashed with each other in generative ways.

Social Reform Feminism.

This strand of feminism focuses on changing gendered cultural mores, such as fighting for girls' access to education, and for banning child marriage and dowry provided by the bride's family.⁶ Christian British colonial officials and men from the educated Muslim and Hindu Indian elite challenged gendered, hierarchal religious practices and social relations. Social reform movements focused predominantly on improving the conditions of Indian women's lives as wives, widows and daughters, often through an attention to reformist religious movements, such as Arya Samaj and Brahmo Samaj movements within Hinduism.

While often characterized simply as a means to justify colonial rule through the British "civilizing mission," social reformism could not exhaust all women's issues. Some issues – such as the demands of landless women – did not come under the purview of these reform efforts. They were largely confined to the old nobility and the new middle class formed by the colonial state. Men such as Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833) fought to ban the upper-caste custom of *sati*, while Vidyasagar (1820-1891) fought to allow widows to remarry. Indian women from these elevated classes gave early support to these campaigns and took visible roles in them by the 1880s.⁷ The narrowness of the class concerns of the social reformers widened when it came to education and health care. Kaikhusrau Jahan (1858-1930), the Begum of Bhopal, created a range of educational institutions for girls, and sought to transform public health access for ordinary people. Because these initiatives worked their way into the arenas of education and health, they were often constrained to work along the grain of religious communities. There were, therefore, social reform efforts for Muslim girls, Hindu girls and Christian girls – with some overlap possible in certain more 'progressive' schools.

The outcome of these educational developments exceeded the modesty of their origins. Rashid Jahan was educated in a girls' school in Aligarh that had been started by her parents, Shaikh Abdullah and Waheeda Begum. She went on to study at Isabella Thoburn College (Lucknow) and then at Lady Hardinge Medical College (Delhi).⁸ These institutions gave her the education that social reform had crafted, but her own imagination and the revolutionary times of the early 20th century took her on an alternative journey. Rashid Jahan, along with Ismat Chughtai, shaped Urdu literature in a feminist direction with their frank portrayal of women's sexuality and desire – memorably in *Angarey* (1930). She was one of the founding members of the Progressive Writers' Association (PWA) – a far cry from the ambitions of social reformism.

Due to the active participation of Indian women, social reformist feminism gained significant traction that undermined rather than shored up the legitimacy of English rule over India. Activists like Pandita Ramabai (1858-1922) began the Arya Mahila

Samaj (Arya Women's Society) in 1882 to promote women's education and fight child marriage.⁹ She linked her commitment to gender issues in the social reform movement to India's self-governance organizing, and was one of ten women delegates at the Indian National Congress' fifth meeting in 1889. As more women joined the social reform movement, it became increasingly inter-communal, and shared the leadership among Muslim, Christian and Hindu women as well as women from a wide range of caste backgrounds. It linked women from different religions and regions to focus on alleviating women's dependence on men, and to a certain degree, on their families and their communities.

Nationalist Feminism.

Nationalist feminism emerged most powerfully in the latter part of the 1800s to challenge British imperial rule over India, and champion women's civic and legal rights. Indian, British, American and Irish women were all prominent nationalist feminists at its inception.¹⁰ Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay (1903-1988) was born in South India and worked alongside British and Irish suffragists such as Annie Besant (1847-1933) and Margaret Cousins (1878-1954). The movement sought women's equal rights in the context of the fight for India's governance by Indians. They also fought for women's right to full participation in public life. "The right to exercise the vote or enter legislatures," Chattopadhyay wrote, "counts for little so long as power is entrenched safely in the hands of vested interest which draws its wealth out of the sweated labor of the masses."¹¹

Nationalist feminism maintained close ties to the social reform movement in the late 19th C. The movement gained strength during the 1930s as women's public participation in anti-British protest became more acceptable among elite and some middle class Indian families.¹² Nationalist feminism had wide ideological diversity and included disparate modes for women's activism by the 1930s.¹³

In 1917, Sarojini Naidu (1879-1949), read a statement to the Viceroy of India - Lord Chelmsford – and the Secretary of State for India – Edwin Montagu - signed by women across India in favor of women's franchise. The statement demanded India's self-rule and that women be included among India's full citizens. Signed by dozens of Indian women, it stated, "the voice of India approves of its women being considered responsible and acknowledged citizens; and we urgently claim that, in drawing up of all provisions regarding representation, our sex shall not be made a disqualification for the exercise of the franchise or for service in public life."¹⁴ Naidu, a life-long feminist nationalist and close friend of Mahatma Gandhi, was one of the founding members of the All India Women's Conference (AIWC) in 1927.¹⁵ She addressed the special meeting of the Indian National Congress in 1918 to support the resolution in favor of women's right to vote. "Gentlemen," she said, "this resolution can be treated from the standpoint of national ideals, or from the standpoint of economic considerations which must be dealt with in a modern age. No matter in which way one deals with the question, I still claim that sex is not a disqualification to the primal right of franchise; it is a human right and not a monopoly of one sex only. I put it before you ...from the standpoint of the National ideal of India."¹⁶ The 1919 Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms

failed to quell rising resistance when it advocated a ten-year transitional period towards India's self rule. Instead, the British government added fuel to the fire for Indian independence with the punitive Rowlatt Acts that sought to curb press freedom and political protest.

Leftist Feminism.

Leftist feminism within the Indian women's movement placed issues faced by the masses of Indian women at its center – such as caste violence to further disenfranchise low caste and non-caste Hindus, sexual violence faced by working-class and peasant women, and endemic starvation, reliance on upper castes to survive due to landlessness and lack of access to the tools of production experienced by agricultural workers, peasants, and industrial workers. The vast majority of Indian women worked, either for wages, for exchange of goods, or on their family plots of land, and these struggles formed the nucleus of their survival and their dignity.

Savitribai Phule (1831-1897) was an Indian activist who challenged the caste system and sought to educate *adivasi* (indigenous) and *dalit* (oppressed caste) women in a caste-mixed girls' school that she founded in 1848. She also opened up a house for raped girls and women who were pregnant to provide a place to give birth and care for their children. Leftist feminism included agricultural women's struggles that often combatted the sexual violence that accompanied class and caste abuses. Because indigenous *adivasi* women and non-caste *dalit* women were often agricultural workers, these rural struggles took on gender, caste and class issues. Their direct opponents in the 19th and 20th C. were princely rulers, large landowners, upper caste as well as upper class people who held significant material resources and cultural power over daily existence. Their mass struggles included strong anti-imperial components, since British rule gained its legitimacy as well as its stability from these same powerful, landed Indian elites.

Naidu's leadership in AIWC allied her with other nationalist women in revolutionary terrorist movements, such as Kalpana Datta (1913-1995) who participated in the Chittagong Armory raid in 1930 and gained her fame as an anti-colonial terrorist in the Meerut Conspiracy Case in the 1930s.¹⁷ Datta joined the Communist Party in the 1940s after her release from prison and worked actively in leftist and nationalist women's organizations in the northern city of Chittagong, one of India's largest military bases during World War II.¹⁸ In the revolutionary tradition of Kumudini Mitra, Datta joined high-profile communists like Rashid Jahan of the Progressive Writers Association, Hajrah Begum who edited the Urdu/Hindi edition of the AIWC journal, *Roshni*, and Renu Chakravartty and Manikuntala Sen who organized the Mahila Atmaraksha Samiti (MARS) during the Bengal famine of the 1940s.¹⁹ The peasant movements of Tebhaga in Bengal and Telengana in Andhra Pradesh, the *adivasi* movements of the Tonka in Bengal and the Warli uprising in Maharashtra were also women's movements that galvanized disenfranchised women from these communities to demand better lives.²⁰

Before Indian Independence in 1947, the three strands of social reformist, nationalist and leftist feminism were a combustible mix.

Indian Women's Franchise and the Indian Independence Movement

Four years before Naidu's address, in 1913, Kumadini Mitra sent supportive greetings to the International Woman Suffrage Alliance (IWSA) conference held in Budapest (in the Ottoman Empire). She could not attend the meeting, although she was to have been the Indian delegate. The IWSA conference in Budapest announced its new chapter in China, the first chapter they had welcomed from outside the West. It was clear to many around the IWSA that context mattered -- all women did not share an identical politics of suffrage. For instance, Indian women's demand for the right to vote could not possibly be separated from the Indian self-rule movement.²¹ For Indian women to gain the right to vote, all Indians needed the right to vote, and British colonial rule had to cease. From 1918 onward, the Indian National Congress (INC) and the Muslim League explicitly supported the right of women's franchise and brought it into the mainstream of the nationalist project.

Indian women's issues, including their right to vote, received more checkered support overseas from internationalist groups such as the International Alliance for Women (IAW) and the suffrage movement within England.²² The reliance by many western women activists on orientalist tropes of the oppressed women of the East downplayed the importance of movements in places like Egypt and India. Activists promoting different strategies to gain the vote both mobilized the British imperial mission, with claims that British women could better support imperialism if they had the vote, and an orientalist vision of Indian women's more appalling submission to sexism in order to support their demands.²³ The work of scholars like Asha Nadkarni trace the troubling use of eugenics, particularly around which women gain access to unfettered reproduction, in both Western and Indian nationalist feminist movements.²⁴ The rise of the women's movement in India struggled to draw together elite women who were part of nationalist feminism and social reform feminism with rural and urban poor working-women who peopled leftist movements for dignity, rights, and survival. On the international stage, activists Carrie Chapman Catt, from the United States and Aletta Jacobs, from the Netherlands, toured the world in 1911-12 to promote suffrage and disabuse western women of their racist stereotypes of eastern women with some success.²⁵

Annie Besant was a member of the Indian National Congress and President of the Theosophical Society from 1909 until her death in 1933. She founded *The Commonweal* in 1914 to publicize national reform issues in India and progressive struggles in Europe. Besant fought forcefully for what she called the Indian home-rule movement. At the close of first world war, Besant argued that Indian and African soldiers bore the brunt of its hypocrisy, without the gains of democracy or rights. She wrote, "these colored hosts poured out their blood to the free white men in Europe; they returned to their own lands to find white men dominating their own people, as the Kaiser had sought to dominate Europe...The issue which statesmen should have strained every nerve to avoid, the issue of the world-domination of the white races over the colored,

has been forced to the front, and has to be determined, ere the great struggle that began in 1914 can find its ending in a world of peace."²⁶

As a suffragist and women's rights activist, she immediately addressed the British women's rights movement in her journal.²⁷ The first and second issue, published January 2 and 9, 1914, provided two perspectives in favor of the British suffrage movement. These essays show the very different contexts of suffrage in colonized India and colonizing England.²⁸ The debate between the two authors, who were described as the "militant" and the "suffragist," outline the fissures in the British movement for women's right to vote.

The militant's article described the use of civil disobedience methods in the suffrage movement, attributed to the leadership of Emmeline Pankhurst (1858-1928). Activists who had given up on building support within the government and the media used hunger strikes, and physical confrontation with the police to show the brutality of a system that refused universal franchise. The second article by the "suffragist" argued against public shows of resistance as undermining decades of women's work signing petitions, lobbying their representatives and providing testimony to government panels on the vote. The strategic disagreement between civil disobedience and institutional reform from within did not emerge in the Indian colonial context. Instead, women's right to vote gained mainstream support within the Indian nationalist movement when women voiced the demand. Their politics could not remain within the extant colonial political and legal framework; instead they had to change the very character of these institutions.

Emergence of the All India Women's Conference (AIWC)

The All-India Women's Conference was founded in 1927 as a nonsectarian, social reform organization to promote Indian women's education and health.²⁹ Within the first years of its formation it added other women's issues, such as support for the Sarda Bill to prevent child marriage, the Maternity Benefit Act and laws for women's right to inheritance. Its membership included royalty from princely states, women from big landowning and politically powerful families, Gandhians, nationalists and communists. It also included Europeans, such as Margaret Cousins, who was a member of the Theosophical Society.

At its founding, the AIWC's primary goal was to represent women across India. Party politics of the day usually required political allegiances along women's communal identities (whether religious, linguistic, caste-based or regional), an assumption the AIWC confronted head-on. Issues like women's education and health provided AIWC a common platform to strengthen its non-sectarian "All-India" mandate. But there were major tactical differences within the AIWC. Annie Besant, a key player in the early AIWC, refused to endorse Gandhi's tactics of civil disobedience. A new leadership emerged that followed Gandhi into the streets to fight the British. By the early 1930s, Sarojini Naidu and Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay courted arrest during the Salt Satyagraha; during the 1940s, many of the AIWC activists joined the Quit India

movement. In 1941, AIWC published its journal *Rosbni* in Hindi and in English. It reflected the militantly nationalist mood of the women in the organization.

The Politics of the AIWC, 1920s-1940s

Before Indian Independence in 1947, the three strands of social reform, nationalism and revolutionary-leftist feminism fractured due to their different visions for an independent nation-state. Revolutionary, mass-based feminism had some commonalities with nationalist feminism, in that it too advocated women's full citizenship and rights to property. Both strands in the AIWC, for a nationalist feminist and a mass-based leftist women's movement, were fiercely anti-colonial. Both also supported the transformation of the Hindu personal laws that governed women's rights around marriage, divorce, and property rights. Their strategies for affecting this change, however, were quite different. Nationalist feminists sought to mobilize, educate and provide *for* the masses of women. Communist advocates of a mass-based women's movement sought to create a movement *led and peopled by* rural, peasant, working-class and middle class women. The fracture between nationalist feminists and communists in the AIWC centered around the fight to support working class women's activism in rural and urban struggles, indeed around the leadership of workers and peasants in their organization.

Until 1939, AIWC held onto its social reformist "non-political" character in one regard. Publicly, it did not ally itself to the Indian National Congress Party (INC) or to the Indian independence movement. By the end of the 1930s, political neutrality became less and less tenable to many of AIWC's members. With greater success, revolutionary, communist and nationalist women sought to expand AIWC's support for Indian independence from Britain. In the face of anti-communism within the INC, AIWC members like Chattopadhyay and Naidu mobilized the language of AIWC as a 'non-political' group to mean an omni-political one. All women, they argued, were welcome. The conditions of colonialism, and the decision by the Churchill government to commandeer grains from colonial countries to the European war front, meant that AIWC had to make choices that would alienate some of its members.

By the end of WWII, at least three and a half million people in India died of starvation and disease, while ten million left their land in search of food. During the Bengal Famine over 900,000 families sold off their land holdings, and fifty to eighty percent of small landholders and sharecroppers sold off their plough cattle. Potters, basketweavers and people from fishing communities fared even worse and were the first to lose the tools of their trades. These losses of the rural poor meant that forty percent of the population in rural areas became landless due to the famine. Middle and large landholders (called *jotedars* and *zamindars* respectively) gained in all of these transactions, with the *jotedars*, who lived in rural areas and also acted as moneylenders, reaping the largest share of the spoils. Even after the immediate food shortage subsided in 1944, the devastation continued for those people stripped of the tools of their livelihoods and their land.

By the beginning of 1943, the conditions of the Bengal Famine had morphed into what one of the founders of MARS, Renu Chakravartty, defined as “defense of the people from starvation and death.”³⁰ Large landowners hoarded grain as prices for rice and wheat tripled and quadrupled in the almost empty markets. Japanese occupation of Burma shut down the usual importation of rice from Burma. The British government bought up food staples at sharply higher prices to feed to soldiers along the frontlines of India, and exported the rest to troops in Europe. In 1941, Bengal imported 296,000 tons of rice, yet by 1942 the flow had reversed to an exported 185,000 tons of rice.³¹ As in other food-producing colonies during the war, like Morocco, Algeria and Vietnam, rural people worked and starved to feed European troops.

Peasant women forged their activism and their militancy in the wake of a complete reordering of daily life as the ideologies of hierarchical care that supported the status quo in rural areas lay in tatters.³² The famine also undermined women’s long-standing social constraints like purdah and the seclusion of middle class women from public life. Women who lost their husbands and extended families had to seek food and work. During the war, the greatest call for women’s work was sex work to service the men in the military along the India-Burma front.

In 1944, Sarojini Naidu defended the right of communists and members from the Muslim League to participate in the Indian National Congress. “In times of great crisis,’ she said, ‘humanity is greater than all political parties.”³³ Addressing Congress Party members she added, “Why did you not organize — ban or no ban — to give relief to the distressed? Why did you leave the work of relief to the communists?”³⁴ The distrust of communism in the AIWC was not simply about abstract principles, nor was it uniform. For example, communist members like Perin Chandra in the Punjab (1919-2015), Renu Chakravartty in Bengal (1917-1994) and Hajrah Begum in Uttar Pradesh (1910-2003) worked alongside non-communist women to found regional leftist, yet politically non-affiliated united front groups such as the Mahila Atma Rakshi Samiti (MARS) in Bengal and the Women’s Self-Defense League of Punjab. Even as they organized regional anti-fascist women’s groups, they continued to work actively to organize women into the AIWC and tie AIWC to area relief work.³⁵ Yet in her speech from 1944, Naidu pointedly named the discomfiting power of communists within the independence movement — a power derived by their active relief work in the countryside and cities during the Bengal famine that began in 1943.

During the famine, MARS activists in the countryside felt firsthand the long-standing sexual vulnerability of rural, landless, adivasi and Dalit women at the hands of jotedars and zamindars, the large landowning classes. MARS led the fight against widespread trafficking of women and children mostly as sex workers for the military, large landholders and moneylenders. By late 1943, the MARS campaign for women’s self-defense sought the criminalization of trafficking, and women’s self-sufficiency through jobs and housing for trafficked women. Through these goals, MARS leaders sought to build self-respect, economic independence, and even social respect for trafficked women. In the process, they created powerful networks of rural women organizers where none had existed before.

Fractures in the AIWC during 1940s and 1950s

From the vantage of the West, the end of the World War II signified the beginning of the Cold War between the forces of capitalism and socialism. In the colonies of Europe and Japan, however, the end of World War II did not ease Asian battles. The British, Australian, North African and American troops stationed in Bengal since 1942 mostly departed by 1946, but many colonial regiments were simply shifted to Vietnam, Malaysia or Indonesia to quell popular movements for full national independence. Even in Bengal, the war was not over for everyone. Nationally, Indian 'self-defense' groups during the World War II solidified into an over-whelming resistance to British colonialism. Women's and people's self-defense organizations hardened into an unavoidable truth: even the British knew their colonial control of India was over. As this inevitability dawned in the early forties, the communists and anti-colonial nationalist women's movement in India stood politically united.

When British-controlled troops moved from India to fight the communist-led anti-colonial insurgency in Malaysia, ties of pan-Asian solidarity strengthened. AIWC's journal *Roshni* published an appeal for pan-Asian solidarity by the Singapore Women's Federation in their shared anti-colonial struggles. It began, "The people of India and Malaya have suffered severe oppression and are fighting for the ideals of human dignity and political liberty. We have to join hands together to break the chain of oppression and to be able to effectuate our ideals on a brighter road."³⁶ The anti-colonial women's movement in India was a fierce, vocal and united force against Indian troops fighting to maintain imperial rule in Asia. They also stood firmly against the Indian colonial forces that militarily supported the Dutch in Indonesia and the French in Vietnam. Colonial imperialism was the enemy of anti-colonial nationalist movements, and they framed this enemy as a fascist ideological force.

The two strands of feminism within AIWC – communist and bourgeois nationalist – had a tenuous unity after World War II ended. In December 1945, at the Hyderabad conference, AIWC delegates explicitly endorsed the independence movement in India and anti-colonial movements around the world. On this point, both sides agreed emphatically. But they disagreed on the question of membership dues. The symbolic issue was the cost of AIWC membership – but the symbolism held a real significance.³⁷ With more affordable dues, AIWC could become a mass-based rather than an elite women's organization. In 1946, at AIWC's Akola conference, the organization refused to change its national policy regarding a more open membership. Instead, they voted to allow *local* clubs to decide whether to reduce their fees to four annas, and thus admit more rural and working class women to join. Without the explicit support for the fee reduction at the national level, communist members lost the possibility of creating a mass-based national women's organization from AIWC. After this defeat, most of its most left-wing members withdrew from AIWC to concentrate their efforts organizing a mass-based women's movement in regional leftist women's groups.

Women's Activism After Indian Independence, 1947

The energy of nationalist women after Indian independence focused on nation building in the face of severe communal tension between the large Muslim minority and the Hindu majority. The deeply traumatizing communal violence of Partition when the British split the subcontinent into two nations: India and Pakistan (including the territory of East Pakistan, that became Bangladesh in 1971). Many members of AIWC and leftist women's organizations, like Rajkumari Amrit Kaur (1889-1964), another co-founder of AIWC, who became the country's first health minister, dove into refugee relief work for violently displaced women, children and families. Sarojini Naidu became the governor of the large state of Uttar Pradesh. Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit headed the Indian delegation to the United Nations. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay sought to revive Indian handicrafts and weaving through founding the Indian Cooperative Union. Important members of the AIWC went to Pakistan (in the North) and East Pakistan (territory in Eastern South Asia that became Bangladesh in 1971) and tried to build statist feminism from within the new government.

Leftist women faced different challenges in their activism. For several years after independence, the Nehru government sought to impede the activism by Left parties, particularly the Communist Party of India (CPI). Women like Renu Chakravartty, however, continued to organize rural women in Bengal to gain access to land. She and other leftist women provided relief for the post-partition refugees from East Pakistan who flooded the cities. Similarly, Hajrah Begum organized women in North India, working to secure affordable food access to poor urban women during a time of severe shortages.

By 1954, the Communist Party of India was no longer underground. Two CPI members who remained active in the women's movement, Renu Chakravartty and Hajrah Begum, joined other leftist feminists formerly members of AIWC, like Aruna Asaf Ali (1909-1996), to found the National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW). The NFIW took an active role in campaigns with nationalist feminists to support the Hindu Code Bill (1955) and the Dowry Prohibition Act passed in 1961. By the 1980s, this coalition of national women's rights groups became known as the seven sisters, and included the AIWC, NFIW, Young Christian Women's Association (YWCA), the All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA), Mahila Dakshata Samiti, the Indian Federation of University Women's Associations (later known as the Joint Women's Program), the Coordination Committee of Women Workers and the Center for Women's Development Studies (CWDS).⁵⁸

Nationalist and leftist feminists actively sought positive changes in the fabric of Indian society, law and economics throughout the 1950s and 1960s. The Indian women's movement gained new momentum in the 1970s, with new actors, new demands and new strategies emerging from anger about women's worsening living conditions and status, and disappointment with the abuse of power by the ruling government of the Congress Party.⁵⁹ Two spurs to the explosion of activism by Indian women were the publication of a report for the United Nations about the status of Indian women, called *Towards Equality* (1977). The second was almost two years of Emergency rule that suspended civil and political rights between 1975 and 1977, declared by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, the daughter of Jawarhlal Nehru. Women's activism

exploded in 1977 after Emergency rule ended, with powerful effects for the Indian women's movement.

New Energy, New Activism in the 1970s-1980s

The 1972 rape of an *adivasi* woman in police custody – one of many such incidents – broke through the wall of silence and galvanized a new generation of women's activists. Mathura was a minor from an *adivasi* community in rural Maharashtra. One afternoon the police picked up Mathura for questioning, took her to the police station, where she was held overnight. This fourteen year-old girl was raped by two police officers. Mathura, with the support of her family and her community, lodged a case against the police officers in 1972. The Sessions judge ruled in favor of the police officers. The Nagpur branch of the Bombay High Court overturned the ruling and charged the men with rape and sentenced them to jail. The case hinged on whether Mathura had consented to sexual relations, not to whether sex had occurred. Seven years later, the Supreme Court reached its verdict on the case. The previous ruling was overturned; and again, the police officers were deemed innocent of forcible rape. The Supreme Court's decision opined, "(s)ince Mathura is a tribal girl, there is no question of her being violated."⁴⁰

Lotika Sarkar, a member of the panel that researched and wrote *Towards Equality*, publicly protested the decision and demanded a review in an open letter to the chief justice (first published in 1979).⁴¹ From local injustice to national spotlight, Mathura's legal case transformed overnight into the rallying cry for women across the country. In February 1980, the letter galvanized the Forum Against Rape, a women's group in Mumbai (Bombay), to act. The Forum demanded that the case be reopened. Women's groups affiliated with left parties as well as unaffiliated women's groups joined forces across the country in support of this demand, convening two large public meetings and signing petitions to change the rape law. On International Women's Day, March 8, 1980, women's groups marched and rallied to demand a retrial in cities and towns such as Mumbai, Delhi, Nagpur, Pune, Ahmedabad, Bengaluru and Hyderabad.

The upsurge of women's activism challenged endemic issues of violence against women, including dowry murders, rape and domestic violence, bringing together coalitional groups like Dahej Virodh Chetna Manch in New Delhi, labor-based groups like Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in Gujarat, and the Maoist group, Progressive Organization of Women (POW) in Hyderabad. These groups published articles about their activism and shared debates in the early editions of *Manushi*. Published in Hindi and English, *Manushi* framed its mandate as "autonomous," that is, independent from government organizations and political parties. In its first issue, the *Manushi* editorial collective stated its political vision as one wider than simply for women's rights: "Today we no longer say – Give us more jobs, more rights, consider us your 'equals' or even 'allow us to compete with you better.' But rather – Let us re-examine the whole question, all the questions. Let us take nothing for granted. Let us not only re-define ourselves, our role, our image – but also the kind of society we want to live in."⁴²

Manushi, particularly in its early years, opened its doors to all feminist campaigns and women's groups. Its pages provided an invaluable resource to spotlight little known rural struggles and newly-formed feminist groups. In addition to reports about ongoing campaigns for the rights of homeless people, women working in the coir industry, anti-Muslim and caste violence, *Manushi* also published letters, poetry and interviews of ordinary women awakened to their feminist consciousness. The magazine focused on women's voices and their daily lives alongside feminist politics that intersected with caste, religion and class. It played an important role spreading information and connecting the mushrooming regional and local feminist politics across India.

The All India Democratic Women's Association

The All India Democratic Women's Association or AIDWA, began in the heady year of 1981 when the Indian women's movement exploded with energy and militancy. Ahilya Rangnekar, a leader of the Hindu Code Bill struggle in the 1950s, was AIDWA's first president. At its founding conference, she described its aims succinctly, "AIDWA will represent the hopes and aspirations of some of the poorest and most exploited sections of our society."⁴³ AIDWA formed as a left-wing, mass women's organization linked to the Communist Party of India (Marxist), but independent from the party in its decisions, its campaigns, its strategies, and its leadership to a large degree. At its inception in 1981, AIDWA consolidated leftist women's groups that had formed in many states during the anti-colonial movements of the 1930s and 1940s. It also drew together housewives' groups and working women's groups that emerged after India's independence in 1947 during the 1960s and 1970s. Its initial membership in 1981 was 590,000 women across the country. On its 25th anniversary in 2006, its membership was over 10 million women.⁴⁴

AIDWA's organizing methods during the 1980s sought to run coalitional campaigns with other women's groups as well as allied organizations of leftwing young people, students, peasants, workers and agricultural workers unions. AIDWA activists created these coalitional campaigns around common issues that could bring all people together across divisions of community, caste, class, language and religion. AIDWA organized fights for a better public distribution system of essential commodities, for affordable food, for universal education and against sexual and familial violence against women.

During the 1980s, AIDWA was widely known for its uncompromising stance on the dowry murders of young women by the family of the man she married. AIDWA fought this campaign legally, by creating better laws to protect women, and economically by creating better material support for women to leave abusive marital families. They also fought dowry murders socially through organizing women, including mothers-in-law and by using their fraternal organizations like trade unions and farmers' union to fight for women's right to live without violence. They led neighborhood campaigns in their units across the country to pressure all families to end dowry, and treat daughters-in-law with dignity. AIDWA activists became known for their fearlessness, fighting powerful people and institutions, and dogged in their

pursuit of justice. These qualities characterize AIDWA's activists and campaigns today.

From its inception, AIDWA also built feminist infrastructure for women, such as a free, parallel legal system through legal clinics staffed across the country that addressed issues of violence, divorce, child custody and maintenance. The organization fought for legal reform and public policy reform through drafting progressive legislation and policies (Right to Food bill, the Mid-day Meal, childcare facilities for working women, National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, among many others). It also strengthened women's right to property ownership, the reservation of government seats for women, and women's right to sexual autonomy and right to live without violence.

What made AIDWA unique in the Indian women's movement during the early 1980s was its attention to the lives of rural women. Susheela Gopalan in the 1987 opening issue of *Equality* noted: 75% of India's population lived in rural areas; and 90% of rural women workers are agricultural workers and cultivators. To ignore the rural areas and their agricultural economies was to ignore the majority of Indian women. What Gopalan didn't say then, but what became all too apparent by 1984, was that most of the vibrant, proliferating sections of the Indian women's movement – outside AIDWA - *were* ignoring rural women in their membership, their campaigns and their visions for a better future.

The anti-Sikh riots in 1984, planned and executed by the ruling Congress government shed a harsh spotlight on the weaknesses in the Indian women's movement. For example, pamphlets, like Kamla Bhasin and Nighat Said Khan's *Some Questions on Feminism and its Relevance in South Asia*, first published in 1989, contain almost no mention of the differences that separate South Asian women, such as caste, religion, community, language or class.⁴⁵ These lessons also provided a wake-up call to better organize to support Indian feminist ideals for a secular and religiously inclusive movement; one that also addressed, at its core, the deep injustice of caste hierarchy among its participants.

Indian Feminist Activism in the 1980s and 1990s during the Rise of Neoliberalism and Religious Bigotry

Rajiv Gandhi's government in the mid-1980s launched the opening salvos of liberalization through the New Economic Policy (NEP). Indira Gandhi's son had begun to dabble in the IMF/WB debt tracks through development projects such as developing power plants through dam projects with the World Bank, and IMF loans to bolster governmental technology and military purchases.⁴⁶ The NEP began in the mid-eighties as a sort of structural adjustments light; a program that targeted unions (with limited success particularly in the banking sector) and attempted to dismantle the government's post-independence policies of building up India's manufacturing base and import substitution policy at large. The effects of these policies were twofold: the stagnation of wages and jobs for industrial workers, and rising immiseration of rural areas.

The burst of deeply gendered and violent communalism drove a stake into the heart of an imagined secular feminism. The anti-Sikh riots of 1984, orchestrated by the central government after the assassination of Indira Gandhi revealed, revealed the hidden Hindu, middle class and urban dominance of the Indian women's movement. Too few women's groups had paid attention to issues of India's multi-religious polity. Nor had they predicted the communal biases of their majority Hindu membership. Thus, too many women's groups had difficulty effectively responding to the ensuing violence. This lesson was driven home throughout the 1980s with the Shah Bano case over Muslim Women's Rights in 1985, as well as the Roop Kanwar sati case of 1987.

Brinda Karat, leader of AIDWA from 1993-2004, has written about AIDWA's vision for organizing around Muslim women's issues, as defined and led by Muslim women. In her collection of writings called *Survival and Emancipation: Notes from Indian Women's Struggles*, she described how AIDWA supported progressive demands emerging from Muslim women as a counterweight to "the popular perception the (minority or Muslim) community means its fundamentalists."⁴⁷ Instead, AIDWA sought to amplify progressive Muslim women's voices. "In a series of meetings Muslim women have been discussing a charter which they propose to campaign on within the community, highlighting certain immediate issues like a ban on bigamy, end to arbitrary divorce, and so on. This is a significant development and strengthens the struggle of all women, including Hindu women, for change in their personal laws as a step forward for gender-just legal foundations," Brinda Karat wrote.⁴⁸ Her last point is worth emphasizing. While Muslim women were at the forefront of these campaigns, *all women*, including the majority Hindu women stood to gain from these struggles.

The women's movement as a whole had little foundation among Muslim women in rural or urban areas. And among Hindu women, it was an upper-caste, urban movement because it had neglected to organize agricultural women. The weaknesses of an urban, upper-caste, middle-class and Hindu bias did not hold true in AIDWA's case, even in the mid-1980s. However, they could not survive the rise of communalism and rural impoverishment unscathed. Within AIDWA, even its deeply multi-religious, multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic and cross-caste and class membership reverberated from the seismic shifts from liberalism to neoliberalism, and from an outwardly secular national ideology to a communal ideology of a Hinduized polity. The fissures developing in India as a whole were tearing at the fabric of AIDWA from within.

In the late 1980s, AIDWA developed an analysis in response to these trends.⁴⁹ First, the nascent neoliberal order of governance, with its debt-fueled development and interest-based tribute to the IMF-WB combine was achieved at the expense of the nation's social safety net and universal support for basic needs such as food, health and education. Second, their own activists' alarm call predicting increased rural destitution heralded two serious consequences: the increasing out-migration, primarily of able-bodied men, from rural areas (often to other distant rural areas as hired agricultural laborers but also to urban centers as informal sector workers), as well as the official abandonment of even desultory land reform to landless people. Third, sectarian communalism was gaining power as the lynchpin of identity formation among women

and men – whether a sectarian identity of language, religion, caste, or ethnic community. Changing class relations complicated all of these formations in hard-to-predict ways, but one trend was clear: all classes were susceptible to the emboldened Hindu fundamentalism.

AIDWA felt the blows by these forces in particular ways since unlike the majority of the Indian women's movement, they had a strong and very developed rural and working class base of members from the full range of religions and castes across India. Instead, AIDWA needed to *shore up* the unity among this breadth of membership due to widening fissures of caste, class, religion, language and region. AIDWA could not do this reconstructive work by relying solely on its historically successful method of organizing: that is, developing campaigns around a common issue that brought women together across divisions, such as campaigns fought around the cost of essential commodities in Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu from the 1970s through the early 1980s, or the fight against domestic violence that galvanized North India during the early 1980s. Instead they drew on a series of experiments in Tamil Nadu that organized Dalit women to confront caste oppression alongside caste-Hindu women.⁵⁰ Mythily Sivaraman, R. Chandra and U. Vasuki drew on AIDWA's pre-history in the state among communist women organizers who supported the leadership among Dalit (oppressed caste) rural women to confront sexual violence and disrespect, as well as wage and land theft. They took on hierarchical practices, such as restrictions against Dalit people (primarily women) entering Hindu temples to worship, and the different glasses in tea stalls used for different castes, or the right of Dalit people to wear shoes, to press for Dalit women's lived equality. Led by Dalit women, these struggles showed the importance of shaping AIDWA's activism from those issues faced by its most oppressed members – but issues that affected *all* of its members as sites of injustice and inequality, yet sites experienced differently depending on women's religion, class or caste location.

With the rise of economic liberalization and sectarianism, organizers within AIDWA realized the inadequacy of building alliances among women around common issues that primarily mobilized women as citizens and as consumers/reproducers. They recognized that the common cause method of organizing stifled the concerns and leadership of their large Dalit membership in rural and urban areas. They also saw its effects in marginalizing the specificity of issues faced by their smaller but substantive Muslim membership. The sustained quality of AIDWA's campaigns, in local terms where they fight for justice in one case, and in national terms when they fight to re-write laws, led to substantive victories. In August 2017, the Supreme Court of India banned the "triple talaq" practice that allowed unilateral and instant divorce by married Muslim men. Muslim women's leadership within AIDWA prioritized this demand out of workshops they held across the country to listen to Muslim women's issues.

AIDWA's organizational challenges led to their decision to turn to the village, a decision they made without knowing what they would find or how it might change their activism.

In late 1992, the Ayodhya riots broke out in Uttar Pradesh and spread to other areas of the country, with particular brutality in Mumbai. The Hindu rightwing manufactured the conflict manufactured since the mid-1980s over the site of the Babri Masjid, a mosque, the Hindu fundamentalist parties and militia said was built on top of a temple dedicated to the Hindu god Ram. The conflict itself was manufactured as was the destruction of the mosque, brick by brick, and the calculated murder of thousands of Muslims across the country. In a little over a month of violence, homes were destroyed, businesses ransacked, families displaced, and people murdered with ruthless brutality.

In New Delhi, AIDWA alongside the seven sister women's groups organized the first massive demonstrations against the Congress government-abetted destruction. They drew on their activism among Muslim women and their education among Hindu women to build a multi-religious coalition of activists committed to fighting for a secular social fabric. AIDWA members also organized a joint delegation of national women's organizations to visit riot-torn areas, interview survivors and create an unbiased assessment of the anti-Muslim violence.⁵¹

AIDWA's Turn to the Village, 1990s-2000s

AIDWA's readiness to meet the chaos and violence of the Ayodhya riots drew from a decision in the late 1980s to focus their energy in the rural parts of the country. What Brinda Karat called "the turn to the village" in the late 1980s and early 1990s was a pivotal one. It led to the development of new tactics, such as using activist research to mobilize of rural women. Their activist research methods built leaders among disenfranchised women in the countryside, and educated AIDWA members about the context of rural issues to AIDWA units around the country. Their focus on rural areas also led to new strategies, what AIDWA's leadership called "inter-sectoral" praxis, to foster unity among increasingly atomized and communalized members.

Intersectoral praxis had two parts. First, a "sectoral" focus on the most disenfranchised groups of people and their core issues. A sectoral theory of women's lives embeds an understanding of those social groupings in a systemic and historical class analysis. Second, an inter-sectoral method of organizing that brought the campaigns of the most disenfranchised people into the heart of AIDWA's vision and focus. Inter-sectoral organizing refers to how this sectoral analysis of women in neoliberal India produced specific strategies, tactics and even goals in AIDWA's political practices. Inter-sectoral organizing methods paid heed to the overlapping rather than discrete or bounded facets of women's lives. AIDWA members at the state and national levels combined their attention to specific women's issues with inter-sectoral organizing between these often porous and inter-related groups of women.

Inter-sectoral praxis took the lived conflicts around women's differences as the daily stuff of women's inequality. During the 1990s to the present, AIDWA has centered Muslim women's issues and Dalit (oppressed caste) women's issues across the country. In the case of rural Dalit women's oppression, understanding and effectively challenging it required a complex analysis of rural systems of power that held that

oppression in place. First, AIDWA members, many of whom are Dalit women, developed a class analysis of agricultural day-laborers, bonded workers, and land holders of very small plots of land. They included a gendered analysis of the sexual politics of power and the gendered untouchability practices in rural localities. In addition, they took into account the sites where overlapping structures of casteist and feudal hierarchies met class exploitation and time-honored patriarchal systems of gender oppression.

The campaigns AIDWA began to lead in the late 1990s, and deepen throughout the 2000s, fought Dalit women's oppression through flouting these norms openly. In South India they fought an unwritten ban on Dalit women riding bicycles. Caste and non-caste Hindus rode cycles together through their own town's streets to protest the discriminatory untouchability practice. These campaigns sought to dismantle of accepted caste norms through laws on the books alongside careful ideological work within the organization itself so that anti-casteist activism became every AIDWA member's struggle, not just a Dalit women's issue.

AIDWA's Inter-sectoral Organizing Campaigns in the 1990s and 2000s

With these new organizing methods developed in the 1990s, AIDWA began to grow. By the early 2000s AIDWA was one of the largest, if not the largest women's organization in India. Second, rural poor women alongside working poor urban women formed the largest base of its membership – roughly 75%. AIDWA grew most quickly during the decade of the 1990s, during the rise and the consolidation of neoliberalism in India. AIDWA's membership grew not through appeasement or negotiation with the agents of the Washington consensus, as neoliberalism was sometimes called. Instead AIDWA built its membership and its reputation for taking on the most knotted and dangerous issues out of its direct opposition to the neoliberal economic and political ideologies of growth and good living. Its growth increased as it campaigned for concrete policy alternatives to the neoliberal social policies of starving the governmental beast and the people this government represented.

In preparation for the 1995 U.N. Conference for Women, held in Beijing, AIDWA mobilized the now six sisters of national women's organizations to confront the neoliberal assault on poor and working women. Sidelined from the UN organized meetings with non-governmental women's organizations, the national women's groups pushed their own agenda against the International Monetary Fund (IMF)/World Bank (WB) demands that they linked to their loans. Ultimately over 800 women's groups in India signed onto the protest document that AIDWA presented to the Indian government. Called, "Towards Beijing: A Perspective from the Indian Women's Movement," the statement demanded recognition that IMF/World Bank development policies hurt women first and most detrimentally.

Malini Bhattacharya, an AIDWA office holder and member of parliament who attended the meeting as part of the Indian government delegation, worked inside the UN official meetings to finalize the "Plan for Action" document signed by all UN member nations. An additional AIDWA delegation of eight women attended the non-

governmental organization meetings in Huairou. AIDWA members at both locations saw the importance of their gendered critique of structural adjustment policies. Women's organizations from the Philippines, Kenya, South Africa, and across Latin America vociferously opposed the IMF/WB policies in their own nations. AIDWA continued to host conversations and analysis of globalization within India after the 1995 UN conference.

During the 2000s, they sought to develop a counter-strategy to the Hindu fundamentalist vision for a Hindu Indian nation. They created progressive struggles to change discriminatory personal laws for Muslim women. They organized among *adivasi* women to fight for *adivasi* rights to their land and natural resources. Their struggles among *adivasi* women have fought against encroachments and theft by international corporations – corporate actions that are aided by the Indian government and neoliberal governance.

In the North of India, primarily in the agriculturally rich state of Haryana, AIDWA launched a campaign against so-called “honor crimes” in the early 1990s that continues to reverberate across the country. Honor crimes, are rulings set by local *khap panchayats*, groups made up of men from the local ruling castes that do not have the legal right to set or enact punishments. In Haryana, AIDWA discovered the widespread brutality of *khap panchayat* rulings were usually about women and men's marital and personal relationships; particularly those that crossed caste and religious communities. These decisions demanded overt violence, death, public humiliation or community expulsion or boycotts involving the woman/couple's entire families for transgressions of caste and religious segregation.

AIDWA's members in the state challenged powerful people in their towns and villages as they gathered information about the prevalence of honor crimes, and directed media attention towards the crimes through their protest and legal actions. They analyzed their findings in regional gatherings of AIDWA members to develop strategies to gain justice. They educated their membership in the process, opened avenues for new committed members to join, and made honor crimes an object to condemn openly and publicly. In the process, campaigns against honor crimes spread out past AIDWA's networks to their allied organizations like the Kisan Sabha (Small Landholders' Union), the All India Agricultural Workers Union, CITU trade union and the CPI(M).

At AIDWA's public meetings about honor crimes, women testified about their own experiences. *Khap panchayat* members were invited to listen to women's testimony. Some tried to explain their actions to the crowd. Once campaigns began across the state of Haryana, particularly after 2004, AIDWA used public venues and national media outlets to air subtle ideological differences around gendered inequities. In the case of “honor murders,” that policed women's sexual norms and behavior, they brought the *panchayat* members to a public conversation around women's equality, about how girl children are loved as much as boy children to remind community members about alternate discourses and values of women. This step did not bring

consensus, but opened up common sense alternate norms that coexisted with repressive norms and could be developed to challenge them.

In this context, AIDWA members sought to fight for justice: the prosecution for a woman's murder, a family's right to move back into their home, or for a cross-caste relationship to continue. When the massive protests erupted in 2012 across the country against a young woman's gang rape in a private bus, AIDWA's ongoing work against gendered violence placed them once again on the frontlines. Their work has also led to some victories as well. In October, 2017 the Supreme Court banned sex with young women under the age of 18, even those who are married, and defined underage married sex as rape – a shift in the legal framework of Indian law that until now has not recognized the women's demand that rape can occur between married people. In addition, the long-standing work of Kirti Singh, among other lawyers who are members of AIDWA, to draft the language for progressive laws on women's rights after divorce, and to live without violence, has garnered important tools for ongoing struggles for justice.

The Indian women's movement continues to be widespread, politically active and committed to a secular feminism that includes *all* women. AIDWA is one part of that larger movement. What makes AIDWA unique is its willingness to combine three aspects of feminist work in a nationwide organization: legal work, policy formation, and grassroots women's organizing. AIDWA's legal strategy drafts progressive laws for women, fights for progressive rulings in the courts, provides free legal counsel to women and develops alternative court systems to uphold progressive rulings for women. Their policy-based strategy demands fair government practices for women, in the government's distribution of subsidized food for widows or the fair implementation of work-schemes for unemployed people to include women in the higher paid jobs. The organization also crafts and fights for better policies, such as the policy to provide a mid-day meal free for all school children. At the core of both aspects of its work, legal and governmental, is AIDWA's organization of the most disenfranchised women in rural, town-based and city-based locations. Any gains in governmental or legal policies depend on the power of the women who fuel AIDWA, take to the streets and demand justice.

¹ For example, Muhummedi Begum and her husband Syed Mumtaz Ali co-founded *Tabzib un-Niswan* in 1898, the first Urdu language women's journal. For more materials about regional women's journals, see Sonal Shukla, "Cultivating Minds: 19th Century Gujarati Women's Journals," *Economic and Political Weekly*. 26:43(October 26, 1991): 63-66; Mytheli Sreenivas, "Emotion, Identity, and the Female Subject: Tamil Women's Magazines in Colonial India, 1890-1940," *Journal of Women's History*. 14:4(2003): 59-82; Azra Asghar Ali, "Recovery of Female Voice Through Women's Journals in Urdu in British India 1898-1947," *South Asia* 21:2(1998): 61-68. For a riveting first-hand account of the Bengali context of literate, politically active women, see Sarala Devi Chaudhurani, *The Many Worlds of Sarala Devi: A Diary*. Sukhendu Rau, trans. (New Delhi: Social Science Press 2010).

² Maya Gupta and Amit Kumar Gupta (eds.), *Defying Death: Struggles Against Imperialism and Feudalism*. (New Delhi: Tulika, 2001).

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- ¹³ Kumari Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World*. (London: Zed Books, 1986).
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