

# AIDWA



**NEWSLETTER-4**

**October-2020**

## **Editorial Communication**

Dear comrades, friends and well-wishers,

On 26<sup>th</sup> September this year, the second centenary of the birth of Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar was completed. Vidyasagar is known as one of the foremost leaders of social reform movements in colonial Bengal in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. While, however, he is mostly remembered as the one who legalised widow remarriage in Hindu society, less attention is paid to his contribution to the education of women which points to a much more holistic perception of the subjection of women in a traditional society disintegrating under the impact of colonialism.

But the most important characteristic which Vidyasagar shared with other social reformers like Rammohan Roy, Jyotirao Phule, or Ramasamy Peryar in the next generation was his modernity. This indigenous modernity engaged freely with Western thought, but was by no means part of a derivative discourse. On the other hand, it fiercely opposed mindless submission to traditional as well as colonial hegemony and freely adopted for its purpose multiple legacies of debate and critical thought. This spirit of free enquiry and courageous questioning of established authority has been found to be the very basis of struggles for equality and justice—whether it is for women, for dalits, for black lives or for deprived people —everywhere in the world.

Vidyasagar did not live to see subsequent generations of Indians rising to challenge colonial rule; the alternative of independence which alone enables such indigenous modernity to fructify in the life of a nation remained beyond his ken. But now at a time when the secular democratic state which arose out of many struggles for equality and justice is in the process of being dismantled

brick by brick by ruling powers using fascistic tactics, the spirit of free enquiry championed by reformers like Vidyasagar is also being crushed underfoot. The question 'why' is seen as the most dangerous weapon against the authority of fear and fraud and must be suppressed. We, the women of India, who have made advances only through such struggles for the emancipation of the mind, have to take the pledge today to go ahead with it against all odds.

**Malini Bhattacharya, President, All India Democratic Association for Women**

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## **One Lakh AIDWA Women Hit the Streets in Protest on August 28**

**-Mariam Dhawale, General Secretary, AIDWA**

The year 2020 will never be forgotten by the people of our country for generations to come. It has been the worst in the lives of all except the top 10 per cent wealthy people. It has been the year when the government in power has been totally exposed for its heartlessness and insensitivity towards the poor, that too in the midst of the worst Covid-19 pandemic. An arrogant government which thinks it is not accountable to its citizens!

Masses of the poor and marginalized sections are still trying to put the pieces of their lives together. Everyone is trying to find ways and means of adjusting their daily lives to overcome the obstacles caused by the unprecedented Covid-19 upheaval. The stories of the disaster caused in women's lives are heart wrenching. There is no thermometer that can measure the despair of women when facing the tormenting faces of hungry, starving children and the pressures to keep the home fires burning, while coping with illnesses and deaths.

The All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA) is trying hard to take up these myriad challenges in multiple ways as mass mobilisations are restricted due to physical distancing. In many places, women are prohibited by their family members from going out of the house for fear of contracting the virus. Yet the situation demands the proliferation of protests to hold the government accountable. Anger and frustration among women is palpable whenever they participate in the demonstrations. Thousands of AIDWA activists all over the country are doing commendable work in these most difficult of times.

### **Massive Joint Women's Nationwide Protest**

With the aim of strengthening our struggle against the arrogant, undemocratic and repressive BJP regime, conscious steps are being taken to forge united actions with like-minded women's organisations at the national level as well as in the states.

Six national women's organisations, namely AIDWA, NFIW, AIPWA, AIMSS, PMS and AIAMS held joint nationwide protests on August 28 for 'Life, Livelihood and Democratic Rights'. The thrust was on organising local protests with the participation of maximum number of women. The enthusiastic response to the August 28 protest actions has clearly brought out the need for joint activities. This has been a very encouraging experience.



In a significant nationwide action, which was the largest women’s show of strength since the Covid lockdown began over one lakh women under the AIDWA banner took part in the August 28 protest demonstrations in 23 states all over India. The mobilisation by other organisations was in addition to this.

Kerala led the protests with a massive mobilisation of women at the booth level. A total of 76,534 women in 20,747 centres came out on the roads. West Bengal held protests in nearly 130 centres with a participation of around 5,500 women. Tripura saw hundreds of women participate in 53 places in 8 districts. Undeterred by police *lathi* charge in Belonia, women continued to protest. In Tamilnadu 3,026 women in 324 centres in 24 districts held protests. These are all AIDWA mobilization figures. Similarly, thousands of women in hundreds of places were in struggle in Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Jharkhand, Delhi, Assam, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Odisha, Punjab, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Chhattisgarh and Manipur.

A joint protest which included the central leaders of all the participating women’s organisations was held outside Shram Shakti Bhawan in New Delhi. A joint memorandum with a charter of demands was sent to the Prime Minister. Memoranda were submitted to the collectors, tehsildars, BDOs and

other concerned officials in various parts of the country. Many of the local issues could be solved due to these interventions.

### **AIDWA-AIPSN Joint Campaign against Obscurantism**

A month long nationwide campaign from July 23, Captain Lakshmi Sahgal Memorial Day to August 20, Dr Narendra Dabholkar martyrdom day was enthusiastically carried out demanding the strengthening of the public health system and to combat obscurantist and superstitious beliefs regarding the Corona virus propagated by the RSS-BJP combine. AIDWA activists conducted numerous seminars, meetings and discussions at the local level to encourage scientific and rational thought. It was by no means an easy task, especially as the Manuwadi forces use religion and communal propaganda to mislead women. Yet, AIDWA-AIPSN activists took up this campaign as a challenge and it helped in exposing the falsehoods of the ruling regime.

Memoranda were sent to the Prime Minister, Chief Ministers, Health Ministers, Collectors and local authorities by AIDWA state and district committees. Anganwadi and Asha workers participated in this campaign in some states. More than 3,000 women participated in the demonstrations in front of more than 200 government hospitals and primary health centres demanding better health facilities in Telangana. Protests outside government hospitals were also held in Bihar and Madhya Pradesh. A free health check-up camp was held in Karnataka.

We have to continue all our efforts in reaching out to maximum number of women. The Modi government has launched an all-out attack on the hard earned rights of all sections of the people, workers in the organized and the unorganized sector, farmers, agricultural labourers, youth, students, etc. Women in all these sections will be the worst affected with the dilution of laws that protect people's rights. So let us resolve to strengthen our struggles in intensity involving larger and larger sections of women to fight this Manuwadi regime.

## *Ruth Bader Ginsberg: Homage to an Extraordinary Woman*



Ruth Bader Ginsberg, who breathed her last recently at the age of 87, was only the second woman to serve as a justice in the Supreme Court of America. A history-making jurist and a fearless spokesperson for gender justice all her life in a set-up overtly dominated by patriarchy, she was born to Jewish immigrant parents in Brooklyn, New York City at the height of the Great Depression and graduated in 1955 from Cornell University, where she also met her life-partner Martin 'Marty' Ginsberg.

A victim of the discrimination prevalent against pregnant women at the time, she was demoted in her job at a social security office while carrying her first child. This experience led her to conceal her second pregnancy at her place of work in 1965. In 1956, she became one of the 9 women students to get admission to Harvard Law School out of a class of about 500. After they were selected, the women were apparently asked by the Dean how they could justify taking the place of a man at his school! Ruth completed her third and final year in law from Columbia Law School, but in spite of being top of her class she did not get a single job after her graduation. In her own words: 'I stuck out on three grounds, I was Jewish, a woman and a mother'.

It was only later, in the background of a resurgent women's movement in North America that she became a professor at Rutgers Law School where she taught some of the first classes on women and the law. It was in 1971 that she argued the case of Reed versus Reed which examined whether a

man can be automatically preferred over a woman as an estate executor. She won the case leading the Supreme Court to strike down for the first time a law based on gender-discrimination. In 1972, she co-founded the Women's Rights Project at the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and also became the first tenured woman professor at Columbia Law School. In 1975, while arguing the case of a young widower who was denied benefits after his wife's death at childbirth, she said: 'His case was the perfect example of how gender-based discrimination hurts everyone'. About the decades of the 1960s and 1970s in the US churned by strong feminist movements which inspired her, she said: 'For the first time in history it became possible to argue before the courts successfully that equal justice under law requires all arms of government to regard women as persons equal in stature to men'.

She was nominated to the Supreme Court in 1993 by President Bill Clinton after a lengthy search process, the second woman to be confirmed to that bench after Sandra Day O'Connor in 1981. One of her most significant, early sentences was one which struck down the men-only admission policy at the Virginia Military Institute. During her tenure, she moved noticeably to the left and particularly in the regime of Donald Trump when the number of conservative judges grew, she provided effective counter-balance. She was one of the six judges to uphold a crucial component of the 2010 Affordable Care Act commonly known as Obamacare. In another landmark judgment, she sided with the 5-4 majority, legalising same-sex marriage in all the 50 states of the US.

A judge who also became a feminist icon through her consistent stand for gender justice in a male-dominated world, she was one of those who used a dynamic moment in American juridical history to make history herself on behalf of women's equality. AIDWA pays homage to the memory of this extraordinary woman.

## **Women's Studies: A Perspective to Interrogate Social Inequalities and Cultural Prejudices**

-Indu Agnihotri, Former Director, Centre for Women's Development Studies

The 1970s in India laid bare many of the hollow claims made by India's political establishment. Apart from the repression which preceded and marked the period of the Emergency itself, the decade witnessed countless incidents of atrocities, particularly on women, *dalits* and minorities, providing a context for the emergence of popular movements and resistance focusing on civil liberties and the need to uphold constitutional rights and guarantees. Women were drawn into these struggles and the immediate post- Emergency years saw a spurt in the setting up of new women's groups and organizations. AIDWA itself emerged in 1981 as a national women's organization amidst this heightened consciousness and the need felt for organized struggles for political rights and social transformation. Democratic women's organizations which had existed in some states-- such as West Bengal, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Tripura --merged with the newly- founded all India organization. These years saw a new energy in people's struggles and, more specifically, agitations on the rights of women, to confront age- old prejudices, structures which perpetuated social inequalities and ideologies which upheld discriminatory practices.

While the Emergency had pointed to the fragility of the democratic foundations, other developments drew attention to the persistent denial of equal rights for women in the path of development adopted in independent India. *Towards Equality*, the Report of the government- appointed Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI), published in 1975, the year of the First UN World Conference on Women held in Mexico, highlighted the glaring gaps in progress nearly twenty five years after attaining freedom with regard to women's equal rights guaranteed in the Constitution of India. Read by some of India's leading women activists including Ahilya Rangnekar, Mrinal Gore and Pramila Dandavate, while they were in prison during the days of the Emergency, it helped them focus on issues of structural inequalities initially sought to be brushed aside as gaps in implementation. *Towards Equality* offered a trenchant critique, highlighted the need for systematic documentation and appraisal of women's experiences, alongside the need to critically evaluate official policies and their impact on women.

Debates at the international level during the observance of the International Women's Year, 1975 and the Women's Decade also focused attention on mainstreaming women's concerns within development policies. All these

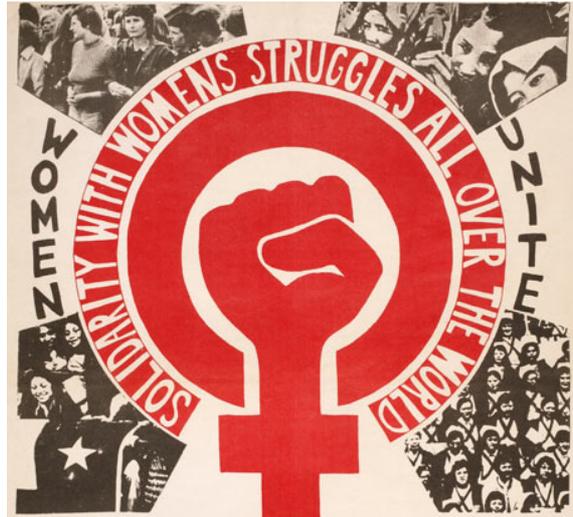
helped to turn the lens on women's concerns within the sphere of policy and planning. These efforts, however, would have come to naught, had the vibrant women's movement of the 1980s not kept up a sustained pressure, highlighting atrocities as well as the insensitivity of the policy establishment which reflected a persistent lack of political will, cutting across successive governments at the Centre and by and large in the states.



*First National Conference on Women's Studies, Bombay, 1981*

This was the context wherein scholars and academicians, including women who had benefited from opportunities opened up in the early years of Independence came under pressure to examine their own 'gender blindness' in the name of objectivity. These issues came to the fore at the first National Conference on Women's Studies, held at SNTU University, Bombay in 1981, where over five hundred women gathered to discuss different aspects of women's oppression, experiences of denial of justice and violence as also women's role and contribution within the curriculum and syllabi of disciplines taught in the Universities. This initiative taken by Neera Desai, Vina Mazumdar, Lotika Sarkar, Madhuri Shah and many more, provided a platform for consulting several generations of women all over India, including some from neighbouring South Asian countries, to find out what had gone wrong after such a hard -won battle for freedom.

The origins of Women's Studies in India can thus be traced to the burgeoning women's movement from the 1970s and the pioneering role played by the individuals mentioned above. Given their location within institutions of higher education they succeeded in drawing support from bodies such as the University Grants Commission and the Indian Council for Social Science



Research. It needs to be remembered that in the post-Emergency environment such bodies showed an element of responsiveness to initiatives from the ground. The UGC, under the guidance of Prof. Madhuri Shah, set up Women's Studies Centres (WSCs) in the Universities to promote research and extension activities and Women's Development Cells (WDCs) in Colleges, with provision for promoting activities to address problems faced by young women students. Starting with six Centres in the mid -1980s, today there are nearly 700 Women's Studies Centres and Cells across India. Meanwhile, the SNDT University, Bombay and Centre for Women's Development Studies, New Delhi, followed up these early initiatives to set up the Indian Association for Women's Studies (IAWS) in 1982. The IAWS has, since, emerged as the foremost body of professional Women's Studies scholars in India, organizing national level conferences, regional workshops and a host of other activities in collaboration with other academic institutions at regular intervals.

Interactions at the IAWS reflected the widening scope of research, discussion and activism around women's issues in the wider society, going beyond debates on whether Women's Studies should be promoted as a perspective within existing disciplines or as a separate branch of study. With the spread of WSCs, these debates followed their own trajectory, carving out their own space within academic institutions. These Centres have in the meantime emerged as a focal point for gathering information on socio-cultural traditions and practices, linguistic and community based diversities, the evolution, implementation and experience of the interface between official policy and the outcomes vis a vis women and other social groups sought to be covered. From the vantage point of their location, the Centres have often succeeded in transcending gaps which exist between academic institutions and the larger community of women outside, especially those who may have never had the chance to step inside these hallowed institutions.

The Women's Studies perspective has, in the meantime, had a significant impact on research and scholarship in academia, especially in the Social Sciences and Humanities. It has established women and gender as a central issue of critical enquiry. This has been accompanied by the recognition of the role played by women in social movements, as also the neglect of women's experiences and concerns in earlier studies. There is no doubt that the Women's Studies Perspective has established itself as critical to the writing of social history, as also studies centering on social and human development. It has also developed in these decades to strengthen its linkages with wider concerns of social enquiry and intellectual trends.

Like that of women's movements, the arena of Women's Studies is not an uncontested, homogeneously constituted arena. Those active in the women's movement are aware of the diverse ideological influences that seek to shape and steer the discourse on women's rights. Women's Studies too, while engaging with policies and practices from the standpoint of women, provide space for internal debates. Side by side with those who work within the feminist methodological frame seeking to expand the scope of concepts like Gender and Patriarchy to address entrenched hierarchies there are others who argue that while these are key concepts to capture women's experiences, analysis needs to draw upon other concepts to capture different forms of discrimination and oppression. There are overlaps between these different approaches also.

However, as compared to the 1980s when a section of the women's movement sought to posit a universal category of Woman and Sisterhood, today there is acceptance that women are themselves located in different castes, classes and other social groups which need to be factored in to frame the feminist world and identity. The Dalit standpoint, for example, has emerged as a powerful intervention, focusing on histories of discrimination and suppression of experiences which foreground and confront Brahminical domination in social and intellectual traditions. Given the lead taken by 'autonomous' feminists in research and compilation of their experience, however, the initiatives in mass struggles taken by women's organizations with a left orientation are not reflected adequately in the writing and teaching of the history of women's movements. Such organizations need not only to engage with different perspectives within the women's movement, but to explore the Women's Studies perspective giving more priority to documentation and compilation so that the history of mass movements and struggles launched by women in the left do not remain unwritten.

What explains the success and the spread of Women's Studies? A list of the themes of successive Women's Studies conferences (see box) highlight its concerns sharpening the focus into women's lives and experiences in a world that is fast changing, even as it becomes more unequal. As women in society face increased inequality and violence perpetrated on multiple sites, Women's Studies scholars have struggled to generate knowledge which offers tools to understand and analyze these emerging trends. They draw upon interactions that take place in the conferences with women working on the ground, in struggles in complex spheres, to understand what obstructs women's flight to freedom in contemporary India. Sometimes the language is dense and difficult, but the concerns are genuine and the analysis complex, as is the social reality it seeks to interrogate. This journey, undertaken jointly by scholars and activists has not always been smooth and conferences have been occasions for heated debates, reflecting a larger engagement with issues emerging in society as well as differences in political responses within the movement. But the conferences also provide a platform for engagement with a wider community of scholars and activists, more importantly with those who may not always hold set positions, may be in an early phase of enquiry and wanting to explore the field.

Today, Women's Studies, being part of the higher education institutions, faces more specific challenges which are linked to problems of funding, autonomy and the future of academic institutions in India. While these are specific to the contemporary context, this is not the first time this is happening in the history of Women's Studies as a discipline or of Women's Studies Centres. There have been attempts in the past to cast the WSCs within the roles society sees for women, in their primary location in the family. Characteristically political regimes are uncomfortable with the persistent and difficult questions the youth poses and neo-liberal frameworks are not known to encourage autonomy or the freedom to disagree. This is more so when the trend is to enlist institutions to further specific agendas which deny and disrespect diversity, which has provided strength and resilience to Indian society and culture. Recent years have seen growing turmoil and unrest on the campus. This reflects the sharpening of social conflict in society. There are uncertainties plaguing Women's Studies Centres, which are part of the challenges facing Higher Education in India.

The present juncture underlines the need to build linkages between Women's Studies and women's movements for their democratic rights. The need for platforms to engage in serious critical debates on the complex challenges facing contemporary society, including those posed by the current pandemic,

is greater today. Based on past experience, it can be said that both Women's Studies scholars and activists shall be enriched with these exchanges.

The list of conferences that have been organized by IAWS is provided below:

1. [1981 Mumbai: First National Conference](#)
2. [1984 Thiruvananthapuram: Gender Justice](#)
3. [1986 Chandigarh: Women's Struggles and Movements](#)
4. [1988 Vishakapatnam: Rural Women: Poverty, Survival, Struggle and Change](#)
5. [1991 Kolkata: Religion, Culture and Politics](#)
6. [1993 Mysore: The New Economic Policy and Women](#)
7. [1995 Jaipur: Looking Forward, Looking Back: In Search of Feminist Visions, Alternatives, Paradigms and Practices](#)
8. [1998 Pune: Survival and Sovereignty: Challenges to Women's Studies](#)
9. [2000 Hyderabad: Women's Perspectives on Public Policy](#)
10. [2002 Bhubaneswar: Sustaining Democracy: Challenges in the New Millennium](#)
11. [2005 Dona Paula, Goa: Sovereignty, Citizenship and Gender](#)
12. 2008 Lucknow: Feminism, Education and the Transformation of Knowledges
13. [2011 Wardha: Resisting marginalizations, Challenging hegemonies: Re-visioning Gender Politics](#)
14. [2014 Guwahati: Equality, Pluralism and the State: Perspectives from the Women's Movement](#)
15. [2017 Chennai: Women in a Changing World: Restructured Inequalities, Countercurrents and Sites of Resistance](#)
16. [2020 Delhi: Constitutional Principles in 21<sup>st</sup> Century India: Visions for Emancipation](#)

## **AIDWA Tripura: Pledging to Conquer Fear**

**-Krishna Rakshit, Member, CEC, AIDWA**

AIDWA in Tripura has a long history of struggle. But since the assumption of power by the BJP-IPFT alliance, a regime of unprecedented repression has started. Our leaders and workers in Agartala and the districts are prevented from moving around in the locality. If they are seen moving around, they have to answer for their movements to BJP hoodlums. So we have to tactically remain unexposed while doing organizational work and enrolling members. We are taking advantage of social functions where there is a gathering of many people to do our work and doing membership campaign under the pretext of visiting the marketplace. In all eight districts of the state we are fighting to keep the organization alive in this way.



Due to direct fascistic attacks in which the administration works in cahoots with hoodlums, our membership has decreased. But with women and men facing starvation, pauperization and unemployment, discontent is seething under the surface. The BJP government curtailed the numbers of pension/wage holders many of whom having no other alternative are on the verge of starvation. The Left Front Government had managed to provide 90 to 95 days work under MGNREGA. A large number of women, particularly tribal and Scheduled Caste women had been beneficiaries of this. The present government cannot even give 30-32 days' work under the scheme. The system has further become riddled with corruption and nepotism. Even those getting work hardly ever get full wages. The Tripura Urban Employment Programme (TUEP) introduced by the LF government is almost defunct.

AIDWA takes the responsibility to channelize these grievances and to mobilize women on the path of struggle to get their most immediate demands fulfilled. There are many women who have been deprived of benefits like MGNREGA or TUEP work. Our combating attitude in facing the administration to rectify such deprivations is yielding some results. In spite of hurdles our leaders and workers are stepping forward to bring new women in the organisational periphery.

In the midst of this situation, the Covid 19 pandemic has created further problems in moving around. In the state, as cases are increasing and the government is only keen to keep the real picture under wraps, healthcare facilities have virtually collapsed. Pregnant women are not getting treatment and deaths of new-born babies are reported as taking place due to the callousness of the government. Those who are going on membership campaign/ organizational campaign are taking all precautions to protect themselves from the pandemic; they are taking that risk to keep the organization active. But they also know very well that there are other risks if the work they are doing is discovered by the ruling powers. Apart from the fear of violence there is also the fear that those who are working for the organization or those who are becoming members may be deprived of all government benefits, particularly those which accrue to the tribal population. This government has no compunction in snatching away such basic rights from those who are suspected of going against them. But many women are still coming with us.

In this period of pandemic and lockdown, violence against women, rape, murder etc. have increased manifold. On 13<sup>th</sup> March 2020, a graduate student was gang- raped and burnt to death at Mohanpur, in West Tripura district. Between March 2020 and May 2020, 36 incidents were reported to have taken place of rape, gang rape and murder after raping. Recently, in Teliamura in Khoai district a tribal girl was gang-raped. Our activists have been holding protests there, but even now the culprits have not been apprehended. In almost all cases, involvement of miscreants linked with the ruling BJP have been alleged. Maximum numbers of incidents are not registered with the police. Those who dare to lodge FIR are being threatened and tortured by the culprits; persons who are not withdrawing the cases are getting death- threats. Even in most cases of miscreants being arrested, they are being set free within a short time due to weak reporting by the police. Incidents of acid-throwing are on the increase, a crime which was rare in Tripura.

On these issues the call of AIDWA All India Committee on 1st June was taken up and 535 women participated in 21 localities. There was a confrontation with the massive police forces deployed at the central venue in the name of law and order. The police tried to drag away a woman coming to the gathering and put her on a police vehicle; but she was rescued by our activists, sustaining injuries in the scuffle. We filed a writ in Tripura High Court when the police refused to take our FIR against the police officer in this case and the Court has given an order in our favour.

On 1st July, 2356 women participated in 125 spots demanding work, food and health care. It may be pointed out that in the distant hilly areas where the percentage of tribal population is very high, food supply has become a major problem. This combined with lack of employment is creating havoc in these areas where our organisation is working together with Gana Mukti Parishad to organise tribal people with demands for food and work.

On 28<sup>th</sup> August, together with other Left women's organisations we observed Demands Day in 46 places with 1968 women participants from AIDWA. In several places miscreants tried to prevent women from participating, but most of the women took roundabout routes and reached the venue much before the scheduled time, thus foiling attempts to disturb the programme. There was a ferocious lathi-charge by the police in Belonia on this day on our women; in some sub-divisions, women were arrested and brought to temporary jails, but they did not back down. The police and administration are combining with RSS-BJP bike squads to disrupt all our gatherings, but we are also finding that activists are taking the pledge to conquer fear overcoming threats, physical attacks, arson and looting of their homes.

**AIDWA Maharashtra: Tribal Women Fight Dual Pandemics, Nature-made and Modi-made!**

**-Prachi Hatiwlekar, Secretary, AIDWA Maharashtra**

The Covid Lockdown began for us at a time when following the enthusiastic conclusion of the AIDWA 12<sup>th</sup> National Conference in Mumbai on the eve of the New Year, AIDWA women started agitating in Mumbai, Thane, Sangli, Solapur and Pune in support of the Shaheen Baug protest. I shall here concentrate mainly on the situation during lockdown as it unfolded for the Adivasi women of Thane-Palghar district, which has our highest membership and the most intense organizational activities.

This tribal society has been socio-economically very poor, deprived and backward. Till 75 years ago when the famous Adivasi Revolt began in 1945, it had been plagued by landlords and moneylenders. The All India Kisan Sabha under the exemplary leadership of Godavari Parulekar fought hard to free them from slavery. Women are still more backward with an extremely simple life, having just the bare minimum means to survive. Most of them survive on just dal- rice, that too only twice a day. They cannot even afford the luxury of making varieties of curries. If vegetables are available, they are put in the dal and eaten with rice. Many times they cook without oil. Not for any fancy dieting fad but for the obvious reason of unaffordability.

Agriculture here is just paddy farming with whatever small forest land they have in their possession. 16 years after passing the Forest Rights Act by the then Central Government, they are still waiting to get it registered in their names. The struggle for this land is still on. Women are in the forefront of it, directly facing the repression of forest officers. With the aggressive anti-farmer measures of the Modi regime, this fight has become more intense.

Apart from sowing paddy in heavy rains, there is hardly any employment available in the villages. Men go out in search of work leaving women at home for harvesting and threshing, only to return home directly in the next rainy season. Nearly half the tribal population migrates after the monsoon for livelihood, with or without their families. Thousands of tribals go for fishing in the sea. Women run their houses with whatever work is available like selling of fruits and vegetables.

The declaration of the sudden lockdown proved terrible. All the migrants lost their jobs and had to come back. Their earnings stopped. Local workers and agricultural labourers, a large number of whom were women, also lost their

jobs. Migrants somehow returned with whatever vehicles they could find or were forced to walk for miles. In the Dahanu coastal area, thousands of fishermen were stranded in the sea. Our activists supplied them food for three weeks until they could be brought back. For this, women had to wade through 3-4 feet of sea water to the small boats.

Many women were forced to liquidate their savings, borrow money from moneylenders just to raise money for transport to enable their men to return home. The question of what to eat arose after they came back. They had to subsist on free ration supplied by government and NGOs.

In addition, the monsoon was delayed. Corona patients, meanwhile, began to be found. There were no proper facilities in government hospitals. The public health system for diseases other than Corona was non-functional. This affected pregnant women the most.

Then came the shocking news from the remote Jawhar tehsil of the 30 year old tribal woman Mangala Wagh committing suicide after strangling her three year-old daughter Roshni to save themselves from starvation.



In this overall alarming situation, AIDWA resolved to step in, irrespective of all lockdown restrictions. We organized conventions in seven tehsils of Thane-Palghar district. Initially, our activists were sceptical about their success. However, our women moved from village to village and distributed 5,000 leaflets. This campaign made us aware of the frightening ground reality. The questions raised by helpless women traumatized our activists.

The AIDWA tehsil conventions were held in the first week of September and the response was impressive, despite the lockdown. Palghar (570), Talasari (400), Shahapur (400), Wada (360), Vikramgad (350), Jawhar (100) and Dahanu (100), made a total of over 2,300 women. Other than our leaders, women from all villages were encouraged to speak. These speeches if documented are the real voice of Indian women, even the non-tribals. Their comments could be an eye-opener for our insensitive and shameless rulers.

Women said that they would prefer to die during protests, than from the virus. 'Now, we are less afraid of the disease', they said, 'and more of starvation'. Gulab Rayat from village Awdhani said, "Their Ram has gone to sit in the mandir at Ayodhya. He will never give us food. It is only our women's organization that will help us to solve our problems." Many demands about ration, employment and public health facilities were discussed.

Young girls expressed their fear of being denied education due to the online system. Most of them cannot afford smartphones. With 2-3 children in the family and little cash available, only boys are privileged to study. Naturally, girls who are the first to be denied online education, would also be the first to be forced to leave their education half way to reduce family expenses.

In all these conventions, we raised through the Demand Charter of 28th August, the demand for Khawti (free grain and cash subsidy by the state government to tribal people in natural calamities) of Rs. 5,000, to be handed out only to the woman of the house. This demand was granted and now all tribal families in the state have been granted Khawti worth Rs. 4000. AIDWA in Thane, Palghar and Nashik districts took the initiative of filling up these forms for the women. This is a big victory for them, but there is much more which is yet to be achieved.

Our experience in the unprecedented situation created by the Corona pandemic and the lockdown is that the anti-people, anti-women policies and patriarchal ideology of the BJP-led central government were never before exposed so starkly. But AIDWA Maharashtra is committed to fight against this in the coming days as our women have fought it during the lockdown.

## **AIDWA on the Proposed Amendment of Age of Marriage 2020: a Note for Our Activists**

In his Independence Day speech this year, the Prime Minister announced that a committee has been set up to reconsider the minimum age of marriage of women, at present fixed by law at 18 years (Special Marriage Act, 1954 and Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006).

The committee referred to by him had been set up on June 2, 2020 to examine matters pertaining to the age of motherhood, maternal mortality levels and nutritional status of women under the Ministry of Women and Child Development in tune with an announcement of the Finance Minister in her last budget speech. The committee is headed by Jaya Jaitley. Apart from MMR, the other issues it has been assigned to look into are Total Fertility Rates, Sex Ratio at birth and Child Sex ratio. It also has to consider the question of raising the minimum age of marriage of women from 18 to 21 years. But this last agenda seems to have assumed absolute priority for the government.

The arguments for this are as follows: a) certain international studies have shown that children born to adolescent mothers (10-19) years are more likely to be stunted and of low weight than those born to young adults (21-24); b) at the moment there is no parity between the minimum age of marriage of women (18) and of men (21). By raising the former to the same level, the cause of gender equality is served.

AIDWA considers this proposal to be not merely arbitrary but reeking of bad faith. Therefore we have to campaign not just against this arbitrary proposal but also for certain urgent positive measures by taking which the government, if it has the political will, might truly address the issues of maternal mortality and low nutritional status of our women.

If the nutritional status of women remains low from birth onwards, getting married at 21 and having their first child at 22 cannot much improve the possibility of maternal and child survival. Even if the children survive, the likelihood of their being stunted and of low weight still cannot be avoided.

Talking of raising the age of marriage to address maternal and child health issues while diminishing allocations to nutritional programmes like ICDS in one budget after another is not only like putting the cart before the horse but tends to turn into a cruel joke on the part of the government against deprived women, adolescents and children. So our demand should be that as proof of its good will the government must strengthen and enhance nutritional programmes and public health facilities like the primary health centre where

safe births may be ensured. At the same time, arresting drop-out of girl-children at the middle school stage would be a sure prescription for reducing the incidence of child-marriage. The government must extend the RTE Act to include children up to 18 years as an important measure for reducing drop-out. Without addressing these issues first, only raising the age of marriage will remain nothing but window-dressing.

Another important area in which we demand safe women-friendly measures is that of contraception and family planning. Unsafe abortions take away the lives of many would-be mothers in our country and the government has not yet shown any initiative in providing safe abortion facilities and in empowering women to plan their families according to their choice. Contrary to the predictions of alarmists, the Total Fertility Rate in India has in fact been declining with growth of education and awareness and has even gone below replacement levels in some states, in spite of some of them still having a high rate of child marriage.

Even then government-run 'population control' programmes turn out to be a punishment for women and women with more than 2 children continue to be deprived of some of their basic rights as well as to be excluded from welfare projects and schemes. Let the government remove such punitive measures and make short-term family planning safer and more sensitive to women's needs; then getting married at 18 would not necessarily mean having the first child within a year. Merely raising women's age of marriage cannot achieve this.

Why then is the government so insistent on this step being taken precipitately? We feel that at one level it is meant to be a window-dressing in the name of 'science' and 'progressive thought' while its real purpose is to turn our eyes away from the abysmal record of this government in nutrition, health and public education facilities, in fact from the reality that it has reduced to shambles whatever little had been there before.

But there is also another deeper ideological reason which goes very well with this government's consistent design of controlling the lives of young people and criminalising their freedom of choice. Thus a couple of years back, in spite of the vehement opposition of AIDWA and other organisations, the government amended the 'age of consent' (16) raising it to the same level as the 'age of majority' (18), thus criminalising even consensual sexual activities between adolescents and giving the male partner the stamp of a 'rapist'. The amendment has merely increased the number of those charged with the crime of rape even in a consensual relationship if the girl is between 16 to 18 years.

It has allowed familial and social control of a kind which is meant to wreck young lives instead of treating physiological and emotional developments in adolescent persons seriously and with human concern. It is this same government which has also consistently refused to bring in a separate law to punish rising cases of so-called 'honour crime' as demanded by AIDWA!

The government is also talking of promoting the cause of gender equality. If 21 is the minimum age of marriage for men, why should women not have the same right? While it is true that this disparity proceeds from the commonly-observed custom of the bride being somewhat younger than the bridegroom, 18 is merely the minimum age of marriage for a woman. While women may become sexually active even before 18, the existing law does not debar them from delaying marriage after 18 if they so wish or even from not getting married at all. On the other hand, we cannot overlook the fact that the proposed enforcement would criminalise all marriages in which the woman is below 21 years as 'child marriage'. It is likely that the number of under-aged married girls bereft of legal protection and pushed outside the formal reproductive healthcare network will greatly increase.

The law for prescribing the age of marriage has evolved through different stages. The Indian Penal Code enacted in 1860 criminalised sexual intercourse with a girl below the age of 10. The provision of rape was amended in 1927 through The Age of Consent Bill 1927, which declared that marriage with a girl under 12 would be invalid. In 1929, The Child Marriage Restraint Act set 16 and 18 years as the minimum age of marriage for girls and boys respectively. This law is popularly known as the Sarda Act. It was amended in 1978 to prescribe 18 and 21 years as the age of marriage for a woman and a man respectively.

The Law Commission report of 2008, on reforming family law, recommended a uniform age of marriage for boys and girls at 18 and not 21. The Commission noted that, "the age difference in age for husband and wife has no basis in law as spouses entering into a marriage are by all means equals and their partnership must also be that of equals". The Indian Majority Act, 1875 is equal for men and women and grants the right to enter into contracts for those who attain the age of 18. The CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women) also recommends 18 as the age of marriage.

To increase the age of marriage to 21 years would mean that girls will have no say in their personal matters until they are 21. The child marriage law is used by parents against eloping daughters. It becomes a tool for family control and

punishment of boys whom girls choose as their husbands. The basic right that the child rights convention bestows upon minors – the right to be heard, the right for their views to be considered – will be denied to girls up till 21, beyond adulthood. Increasing the legal age of marriage for girls will only artificially expand the numbers of persons deemed underage and criminalise them and render underage married girls without legal protection.

Actually AIDWA had demanded a decrease in the age of marriage of the boy to 18 and bring about parity and remove an unnatural age limit which has been set at 21. This will also stop him from being subjected to various criminal penalties for getting married between 18 and 21 as it is the boy who gets punished for marrying an underage girl. Also, at a time when it is being increasingly recognised around the world that young people should be allowed to choose their partners and encouraged to be together, this proposal is extremely draconian and seems to flow from a skewed perspective. It will also act as a way and means to control the sexuality of a young girl who already faces an uphill task to marry someone of her choice. In both urban and rural India young girls are beginning to assert this choice.

A blanket law which will only introduce undesirable restraints can but create more problems than it can solve. Some reports say that teen-age marriages in India have come down by 51% since 2000; if this is true, it was achieved without legally enforcing a raise in the woman's minimum age of marriage. It has been established, however, that it is not religion alone which is the ultimate factor in deciding the age of marriage, but rather economic and educational status of the women concerned. If the government is really concerned about the persistence of child-marriage in many of the states and about the health of mothers and children, its priority should be eradication of poverty as well as improving nutritional, educational and healthcare services.

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