

AIDWA



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Editorial Communication

Dear comrades, friends and well-wishers,

There is a saying in English that Satan finds some mischief still for idle hands to do. Such is the idleness that has befallen the Chairman of the University Grants Commission in this country. Under the Modi regime, the UGC has lost both its power and whatever autonomy it had possessed. Disbursement of government funds for the development of university education and research across the country has itself come to a virtual standstill. The UGC has also lost its financial authority and all that was left for Chairman Jagadhish Kumar was to sit in his office and twiddle his thumbs. But no, he cannot bear to be inactive.

No one could have blamed him for being inactive even in his JNU days. He was rather a powerhouse of mischief destroying day by day an academic and administrative system put in place through years of committed efforts of the University community which had made JNU an example of scholarly excellence. Being now at the head of the UGC he has assumed the moral authority to decide how universities across the country should observe Constitution Day.

In its recently issued directive from the heights, UGC has reportedly sent the message to Central universities, deemed universities and to Governors in the states, many of them also chancellors of the state universities, that it would sponsor a series of academic events to be organized by these academic institutions on the theme 'India, the Mother of Democracy' to celebrate the occasion.

One may recall that the phrase was actually mouthed by the Prime Minister himself from the Red Fort on our Independence Day; the UGC Chairman has picked it up deliberately not as a tribute to the dreams of those who had shed

their blood in the Freedom Struggle, nor as a reference to the founders of our Constitution who had wanted India to be re-invented as a secular democratic nation. In fact, we suspect that it is with the intention of turning the whole history of India on its head to glorify the RSS concept of a 'Hindu Rashtra' that the step has been taken. It has also been reported that the Indian Council of Historical Research, another government-funded autonomous body, is itself busy putting together a book in Hindi titled 'Bharat: Loktantra ki Janani'.

It is for historians to rebut or corroborate claims made in the reported UGC directive on behalf of the thesis of democracy having originated in ancient India in Vedic times. There has been enough painstaking research in our universities on the so-called 'ganarajyas' and the evolution of the notion of kingship. The scheme to hide all such evidence culled by historians of caste, class and gender hierarchies in ancient India so that a model of 'Hindu Rashtra' in its pristine innocence may be offered is familiar and can be dealt with adequately only by historians on the battlefield.

As a women's organization we may merely ask whether in the ancient 'ganarajya' of Vaishali, it was perceived as a matter of her own choice for a talented woman like Ambapali to become a courtesan or whether it was the decree of the heads of the city-state? Was the subservience of the woman and the 'shudra' not necessary for such a state? Is such subservience in consonance with what we understand by democracy? It is precisely such subservience that BJP-RSS is desperate to enforce through its continuous abuse of history.

The stranglehold of caste and patriarchy, the tyranny of the family and the community in khap panchayats is the other model of 'democracy' for them closer to our times; this is the reason why they wish to uphold it on Constitution Day obliterating the fact that our Constitution sets us the task of breaking all such hierarchies meant to enslave women economically, socially and ideologically. As a women's organization this breaking of social boundaries has always been our primary task and the Constitution is not just our shield but our sword in this struggle. There can be no compromise for us with RSS' attempts to obfuscate the history of this struggle.

We are moving now towards our 13th Conference to be held in Thiruvananthapuram from 6th to 9th January, 2023. The new committee emerging from the Conference shall take further in more effective ways this task which we have been seeking to facilitate through this Newsletter. We must succeed in this!

Malini Bhattacharya

President, All India Democratic Women's Association

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Towards the 13th National Conference - Struggle in Unity for Equality

-Mariam Dhawale, General Secretary, AIDWA



We are approaching the 13th All India Conference of the All India Democratic Women's Association with the slogan, "Struggle in Unity for Equality". This conference will be held after thousands of unit conferences, hundreds of district conferences and 22 state conferences.

Thousands of women have been a part of the deliberations reviewing the impact of the anti-women and anti-people policies of the Modi government. These deliberations have taken place in thousands of villages/mohallas conferences to the state level.

There is anger as well as despondency. Anger as women feel cheated from being able to live a life with dignity. Women express anger as the government has failed even to see their miseries, let alone doing something about them. Despondency because they are afraid that there will be no improvement in their situation. They come to AIDWA with the hope that building struggles together only can bring about some change.

There is the BJP-RSS government in power which has made numerous promises which are correctly termed as "jumlas". Women still remember acche din, Rs 15 lakhs, 2 crore jobs, etc. etc. It is making a mockery of the poverty of the poor. Show them dreams of a better life and get their votes. This has been the tactics of the

pro-corporate and anti-people BJP-RSS government. And when the poor stop being fooled by these tactics, the weapons of communal polarisation are brought out. Corporate communalism is the BJP-RSS brand today.

Women are being targeted for building the ground for the implementation of the Manuwadi regressive ideology. It is making education so expensive that the poor and women will not be able to avail it. It is dismantling the rights won by the women's movement. The Modi government is systematically working towards its plan of strengthening the communal divide and the caste system. The huge increase in violence, especially domestic violence has made women's lives very insecure. Denial of rights to a large section of the people, rubbishing the concept of equality, justifying the attacks on Dalits, Adivasis, minorities and women, etc. – women have seen how the politics of hatred is destroying the lives of crores of people.

The challenge is to unite everyone against this onslaught in order to defeat it. Alternative campaigns for explaining the need to build an equal society have to be taken up. It is only in an equal world free of discrimination can women be able to live as equal human beings. Hundreds of women spoke in the above conferences of the need to popularise scientific and rational thought. They expressed the urgency of countering the RSS propaganda of increasing superstitions. Growing liquor and drug addiction is destroying the youth of the country. AIDWA will organise discussions among the youth, especially young women to expose the dangers of such addictions and come forward to fight for a better world.

The 13th national conference of AIDWA at Thiruvananthapuram in Kerala from 6 to 9 January 2023 will discuss the above and many more issues. Nearly 850 delegates from 25 states and union territories will deliberate and plan for building a stronger women's movement and organisation in India. Let us "Struggle in Unity for Equality".

Who Killed Ankita Bhandari? The AIDWA Experience

-Maimoona Mollah, President, AIDWA Delhi Committee

In a Nutshell

In the three days the team spent there, we visited Ankita's parents in their village, went around the resort and met the women who are still sitting in dharna. Also met the hoteliers and resort owners in that area. We also met a number of civil society representatives in Rishikesh. Back in Dehradun we met the SIT chief, the Chief Secretary, the officials of the tourism department, the Chairperson of Uttarakhand Women's Commission and the DGP of Uttarakhand.

We held a press conference in Dehradun and also had a meeting with representatives of a number of organisations. The visit has brought the Uttarakhand government officials on the back foot. They now seem to be on the defensive. It's quite probable that this is because of the furore the fact-finding team has been able to create. Let's hope a movement builds up on this issue and Ankita Bhandari and her family get justice and the criminals are brought to justice.



Background of the Case

Ankita Bhandari was the 19-year-old daughter of Soni Devi and Birendra Singh Bhandari from Srikot, district Pauri in Uttarakhand. A brilliant student, Ankita passed her Intermediate in 2020 from Bhagatram Modern School scoring 88% marks. In 2021, she joined Sriram Institute of Hotel Management in Dehradun and all but completed a certificate course in Hotel Management. Her father is currently

unemployed and the mother is an anganwadi worker. The brother is studying. The family lives in a kachcha house in the hills of Pauri with a small cultivable land, barely able to make ends meet. Ankita had to leave her hotel management course because the institute was asking for another Rs 40,000 as fees which the family could not afford. But kudos to her – in spite of the odds, she was bent on supporting her family so she learnt stenography online and eventually landed a job.

On 18 August 2022, Ankita started working as a receptionist in Vanantara Resort, Gangabhogpur, Tehsil Yamkeshwar, district Pauri. She was allotted a one-room accommodation in the resort.

On 18 September 2022, Ankita was seen by hotel employees going out of the resort with Pulkit Arya (the resort owner), Saurabh and Ankit on two-wheelers. The cook was asked to prepare dinner for all of them but when they came back Ankita was not with them. The employees were told that she was in her room and that she'd have dinner in her room. Pulkit Arya filed a missing report on the 20th with the Patwari (revenue director) Vaibhav Pratap Singh who purportedly went on leave. Apparently, Pulkit Arya did not have Ankita's father's phone number which he got from the Gram Pradhan and called Mr Bhandari informing him about Ankita's "disappearance". On the 20th, the acting Patwari Vivek Kumar registered the case based on Pulkit's complaint. After much running around by the father, the case was transferred from revenue police to regular police on the 21st.

Vanantara Resort was functioning illegally on the land that was registered for an Ayurvedic company in the name of Vinod Arya (Pulkit's father). The CCTV cameras were found to be non-functional – many wires cut as per Mr Bhandari's testimony. The local MLA is reported to have a hand in bulldozing a part of the building – Ankita's room? A tweet from the CM's twitter handle confirmed the report about bulldozing. There are conflicting reports of who ordered the bulldozing a part of the Resort. DM of Pauri has denied giving orders. Some parts were reportedly burnt. The police arrested Pulkit Arya, Saurabh Bhaskar, and Ankit who are reported to have said that Ankita fell in the Chilla canal during a scuffle. They were later (on the 23rd) remanded to judicial custody. It was learnt Pulkit was forcing Ankita to provide "special service" to a VIP. When we asked who the VIP was, the query was practically dismissed – there are rooms in the resort with different price range and the occupants of the rooms of higher range are, in their parlance, referred to as VIPS. Later DM Pauri suspended the Patwari Vaibhav Pratap Singh and acting patwari Vivek Kumar.

Ankita's body was found and recovered from the Chilla barrage on the 24th. Post-mortem was done the same day in AIIMS Rishikesh. An SIT has been setup under DIG P Renuka Devi. Vinod Arya and Ankit have been expelled from the BJP. Pulkit's brother was also dismissed from the post of vice president of the OBC Commission.

On the 25th, in spite of public protests, Ankita's body was cremated at 6 pm. This was done against the norms – a) it was done after sunset and b) an unmarried girl's

body is not cremated; it is buried. Perhaps, this also served as sealing a possibility for any future exhumation of the body for further evidence.

A preliminary post mortem report gives its “provisional opinion” but has not confirmed sexual assault.

- There are findings of antemortem injuries on the body, suggestive of blunt force trauma
- Cause of death in this case is asphyxia consequent upon antemortem drowning
- Details of the injuries and other findings will be given in the detailed Post Mortem report

Team Activities

In Rishikesh, the fact-finding team was divided into 2 groups – one group went to meet the family and a few concerned citizens and the other went visiting the resort site.

Meeting Ankita’s Family

Meeting Ankita’s parents was the most heart-rending of all the meetings. The father, Mr Birendra Bhandari, dignified, terribly in trauma but was composed enough to be able to speak with us and convey his anguish. The mother Sona Devi was crying, too traumatised to speak. The grandmother, Sarti Devi, was nonplussed and a mute spectator.

The father told us that a friend of hers named Pushp who is from Jammu informed her about the vacant post in Vanantara resort. Ankita's mother and brother used to speak with Ankita every so often on conference calls. They did have a conference call up to 17th of September. On the 18th the mother messaged her if she had food but she did not respond. The same day at 8:30 her phone was switched off. On the 19th Pushp was the first to inform them that Ankita was missing; later Pulkit too called to give the same information. The father immediately arranged a vehicle and rushed to Pauri thana but was told that their jurisdiction was under revenue police. They went around to a number of thanas then stayed in Rishikesh overnight. On the 20th when the father reached the revenue police, Pulkit, his wife and his friends Saurabh, Ankit were already there. But Mr Bhandari was not allowed inside and was told to come later so he waited about 2 1/2 hours and went back again that's when the patwari told them that your complaint is not required because Pulkit’s complaint has always already been admitted. I made an application against them and asked for a received copy which was refused. Pulkit later called me to the resort and told me about the CCTVs in the resort but he saw that the CCTV wires were snapped. Pulkit also told him that Ankita had some mental issues and we had taken her out to cheer her up and gave her gol gappas (*uska mind theek nahin tha*

isliye usko khush karne ke liye humne golgappe khilaye). He was called by the patwari but was been up when he asked them to listen to the audio clips of from Ankita to Pushp. On the 22nd the case was transferred to Laxman Jhula regular police station, the resort was raided and Saurabh was arrested; the Arya's absconded. Later, on the 23rd, the father Vinod Arya brought Pulkit and Ankit supposedly to surrender. On the 23rd women (Pramila Rawat and others from UKD) sat on a dharna demanding the girl's whereabouts. After so much mayhem, the DM threatened to shut the barrage which he did; on the 24th when the water levels reduced, they found Ankita; the accused then made-up a story saying Ankita had jumped in the Chilla barrage. Ankita's front tooth was broken, there were scratches on her hands and dark marks on the palms. Apparently, the hotel was sealed but was bulldozed on the 23rd night and 24th after the protest it was set on fire.

Though there are claims about having sealed the site of crime, we are not sure when that was done (if at all). How did the Yamkeshwar MLA Renu Bisht get access to a bulldozer and how did she get the site bulldozed. How and who set it on fire. Where are Ankita's phone and the call records? Apart from the forensic team, the media too was able to visit the site.

The body was kept in Srinagar hospital; they separated the members of the family and spoke with them separately one not knowing with the what the other was saying in terms of permission for cremation.

They tried to placate the mother saying the Anganwadi she was working with will be upgraded. The father said he was under immense pressure from the authorities to permit cremation ASAP. He was told that his wife has taken ill and that she was in an ICU implying thereby that she was in no position to talk.

Visit to Vanantara Resort and the Dharna Site (27 October 2022)

One of the groups visited the site of crime – the Vanantara Resort – but were not allowed anywhere near it. A posse of policemen and women were guarding the site.

The group members spoke with several hoteliers in the vicinity who had no knowledge of ICC or LCC. They asked our group to help them with setting up of ICCs.

A number of them said henceforth we won't employ women –given the already dwindling employment opportunities for women, this would prove ominous.

An inspiring dharna is continuing in the leadership of Pramila Rawat of UKD who have resolutely stated that their protest would continue until justice is done.

Meeting with Concerned Citizens in Rishikesh that gave us positive vibes in terms of carrying on the struggle for justice.

In Dehradun (28-29 October 2022)

Apart from meeting with the authorities, we held a largely attended Press Conference that gave wide coverage in Uttarakhand.

The visit ended with a meeting with representatives of several organisations who have hitherto stood by Ankita and her family and are insistent the fight should go on.

When the Team Met the Authorities

We had many questions –

- Ankita's father was made to run from pillar to post to citing jurisdiction. Why was there a delay in lodging even a zero FIR?
- Why was the scene of crime was not sealed and all and sundry were allowed to go
- How was the MLA Renu Bisht allowed to bulldoze the place destroying Ankita's room?
- Did the Pauri DM give her permission to destroy the scene of crime?
- Will the police examine the role of the MLA and of the DM, Pauri?
- What was the tearing hurry to "dispose of" the body in the absence of the mother?
- How, in the first place, licences are given to such illegal resorts without proper due diligence?

We demanded –

- A fair and just investigation and the murderers should not go scot-free.
- Dismissal of both the revenue police officials and
- Strict action against the DM for failure of due diligence and not acting swiftly on the report lodged on the 19th.
- The SIT must examine thread bare the role of MLA Renu Bisht in destroying critical evidence. She needs to be booked and arrested.
- Protection of Witnesses: We would like to know whether the key witnesses in this matter, the friend of Ankita Bhandari called Pushp, who is the key link in this case, the staff in Vantara resort, the former staff, the couple Ishita and Vivek from Meerut, (we hope they have been taken into the loop of investigation by the SIT, their video clearly shows the antecedents of Pulkit and his management team at Vantara) the father Birendra Singh, and others who are important to establish the

crime of murder, have been provided with witness protection, if not then it should be done at the earliest.

- A new comprehensive gendered State Policy on Tourism.
- A State Plan of Action and Standard Operating Procedures.
- Protection of women employees specifically in tourism industry.
- Since the Government is promoting tourism, it is important that there be a gendered comprehensive policy on tourism in Uttarakhand addressing issues of sexual harassment at workplace, employment, wages and other attendant issues.
- Ensure the ICCs within the private sector also; examine if LCCs exist in all the districts. Monitor their functioning.
- Though Mr Birendra Bhandari has indeed been given a cheque of Rs 25 lacs, what is needed is a comprehensive reparation and rehabilitation policy.

The Authorities' Response –

The Chief Secretary, The DIG in charge of SIT and the Chairperson of the State Women's Commission were beating about the bush, gave no specific information or assurance to the team.

The tourism officials did give assurance to the suggestions given by the team wrt the protection of women at workplace etc.

The DGP also gave warped assurances. He divulged the date of murder: 18 Sept 2022. He also told us that the accused was arrested under IPC 302. When we asked him to ensure that this be treated as murder all the way, obviously he didn't categorically reply in the affirmative.

Post Facto

Tourism Minister Satpal Maharaj announced that there'd soon be ruled for the security of women working in the hotel industry. The CM promised to take action against unauthorised construction of hotels and resorts on forest land.

An ex-employee couple of Vanantara (Ishita and Vivek, residents of Meerut) has testified wrt the nefarious activities in the hotel.

The lawyers of Kotdwar have refused to take up cases on behalf of the accused. Kotdwar Bar Association President is reported to have said they'd oppose lawyers from outside who might represent the accused.

After the Team Returned

There are reports of fire in the crime site on the 30th – whether that was an accident or it was set on fire, we do not know. But it justifiably raises questions about further destruction of evidence, of shielding the accused. That strengthens our demand to investigate the case without the bias in favour of the highly politically connected accused men. It is well-known that Pulkit's father is an ex-MLA and a BJP leader in Uttarakhand.

A Few Observations

- Girls who have been considered a burden on the family, destroyed in the foetus or later burnt for dowry are time and again proving the myth of burden wrong. Here was Ankita, who broke the proverbial glass ceiling, took up a residential assignment to ensure that her brother could complete his CA.
- Victim blaming is a culturally accepted form of oppression of the vulnerable – Ankita, hate and hearty and resolute enough to take up a job away from home was reportedly declared by their tormentors as under depression who needed to be “cheered up”, oh how so considerate!
- How forest land is usurped by people in power in the name of the V word – vikas – in this case to enhance tourism in Uttarakhand. The resort, Vanantara, was illegally functioning as are apparently many a resort/hotel in the area. Ostensibly, “tourists wish to be close to nature”. How is this allowed to happen? Are there no audits, no rule of law?

The Team

The participant organisations and their representatives were as follows:



AIDWA	Damyanti Negi and Indu Naudiyal from Uttarakhand Maimoona from the centre Sunita Pandey had to drop out because of a health exigency in the family.
Uttarakhand Mahila Manch	Uma Bhatt, Nirmala Bisht, Adv Chandrakala, Pushpa Chauhan, Maya Chilwal, Shruti Jain, Padma Gupta
BGVS	Uma Bhatt
Mahila Kisan Adhikar Manch	Heera
Jagori	Mehvish
AISA	Shiwani Pandey
PUCL	Kavita Shrivastava
NFIW	Deepti Bharti
NAPM	Richa Singh
A Tourism Expert	Aditi
Karnataka with Bilkis Bano	June, Yogesh
PUCL intern, student NLSIU, Bengaluru	Divyanshi Sharma

Disclaimer: The report of the joint fact-finding team of women's organisations that visited Uttarakhand wrt the Ankita Bhandari murder case is currently being drafted. The full report will be shared with the public after completion. These are only the initial impressions of the AIDWA participants which have been sent as inputs to the overall report.

From the Archives of AIDWA

Susheela Gopalan's Speech on National Commission for Minorities Bill, 1992

Speech Delivered in Lok Sabha on 11 May 1992



[Source: Lok Sabha Proceedings, p. 142-148, 11 May 1992]

Mr Chairman, at least the Government has taken the courage to introduce a Bill to constitute the National Commission for Minorities, with statutory power.

This is a right step in the right direction. This, if properly implemented, because we have the experience of other two Commissions, that is why I am telling. If it is properly implemented, it will help minorities to a certain extent to end some of the discriminations they are suffering from.

If this was done years back we could have helped them to come to the mainstream. We failed and at present they are feeling alienated from the national mainstream. We did not learn from the martyrdom of Mahatma Gandhi. But what happened? Actually, even after that, the Congress Party in power did not learn from that. How many years did it take them to constitute a National Commission for Minorities? After independence it took 31 years. To help them, how much time did it take for the Government? Thirty-one years though not with statutory status, but anyhow the commission was formed.

By dealing [with] it [like this] you were denying them an opportunity to merge with the mainstream. The minorities were suffering so much of discrimination and inequalities in the country. I still remember that when the Communist Ministry came to power in Kerala in 1957, we had taken note of some of these

discriminations and taken step for their rectification. Till then, for ten years the Congress Ministry was in power and they could not allow even Muslim Mosque to be repaired when it was broken and it was a very bad state of affairs. You did not grant them right to rebuild it. Only after Mr E.M.S. came to power, it was allowed.

In Malabar Special Police, the Muslims were not recruited and that also the Communist Ministry rectified.

When our Ministry came to power, Urdu and Arabic were gradually accepted as second language. What were the Congress Party doing all these years? We know that by giving them equal opportunities only they can be brought into the mainstream. That is why we did all these things.

Also in the civil services, their number was less. So, we took steps to bring more number of Muslims into the civil services also. Many such things were done. We thought that this would only help them to end the feeling of discrimination. But you were, instead of conceding to the genuine demands of the democratic sections, yielded to the fundamentalists in all these communities; even major community or minor community, you were always yielding to them. That is why, so much has been talked about Shah Bano case. What have you done? Our organisation collected signature from 47000 Muslim women. How did they sign? There was so much threat. Even their lives were in danger. But the Muslim women signed it. We brought that and gave it to the Government. It was for the first time in the history of India that one thousand women demonstrated in Delhi and then gave a memorandum to the Government asking them not to pass the law relating to women's right to divorce and also not to implement that law.

But you yielded to the pressure of the fundamentalists in the community. That will not help that section to [integrate with] the mainstream. What little common rights they have, you took away. Then what did you do? Actually, Shila Nyas was allowed to be done at the disputed place to please the majority and community and the fundamentalists. Did you not do that? By doing all these things you can not solve the problem in the disputed place of Ram Janma Bhoomi Babri Masjid so far. You were yielding to the pressure of one community and then yielding to the pressure of the other. That is not going to solve the problems of the country. You have to stick to principles. Then only you will be able to solve the problems.

I still remember one thing. When the Sikhs raised a problem about their Personnel Law [sic]. In this House the Government announced that it will consider the question of the Sikh Personnel Law, which will take our countries centuries back. But because of the pressure from the women's organisations and other sections, who were actually for the progress of the country, that was actually not conceded. What is now happening in the country, particularly States like Punjab? We had veteran leaders from Punjab in the independence

movement who fought for the country. They were the biggest patriots. But what is happening in Punjab today? This the result of succumbing to the pressures of these fundamentalists and not accepting the democratic rights of the people. Likewise in Kashmir also we have seen, during the time of Independence. It was not the Hindus who fought for unification of Kashmir with India. They were with the Rajas, the landlords. These fundamentalists said that there should be an independent Kashmir. But the Muslims in the State stood with rest of the country. The safety of their life they found in secular India. Now we do not have that spirit in our country. Had it been there we could have done so many things; we could have won the Muslim minorities in this country. That is not what we have done. That is why Kashmir problem is so acute. They are alienated from the mainstream.

In the Ekta Yatra, the Government took the leaders in the aeroplane to take part in the flag hoisting ceremony in Kashmir. Did it actually help the Muslims feel one with us? Were we able to remove the feeling of alienation? Instead, the feeling of alienation has actually been accentuated. In Kashmir, now how many people are with us? Those who are with us are afraid to say that they are with us because they are afraid and they know there are no principles with Congress Party in power. Even now they are dilly-dallying with these problems. They want help for keeping their power, they want help from the BJP for implementing their economic programmes. This is the tacit understanding between them. There is no use of talking and passing resolutions against communalism. Even now they are having alliance with Muslim League in Kerala. What is the use of passing a resolution that we are anti-communal and for giving a new version of communalism. We had united with the Muslim League. At that time communalism in our country was not so grave. The Congress was the main enemy doing so much against the people of the country. Even along with Janta we worked during the time of emergency....[Today] communalism is the real danger. It was not at that time.

Communalism is a great danger to the country. You have to fight both, the fundamentalists in the majority community and also against minority community. Please take a principled stand that we will be able to do something for the unity of the country. The step of forming of this Commission for the minorities with statutory powers is a very good step in the right direction. That will help them to join the mainstream. I agree with most of the provisions in this Bill. But one major drawback is there in this Bill that there is no provision for ensuring their participation in the planning process. It is very important. Many legislations were actually passed but they were not implemented. Many of the programmes were chalked out but not completed. I want to know what are the programmes that are going to be taken up by the proposed Commission? If this proposed Commission sits with the planning commission in the planning process, it will actually lead to

chalking out programmes beneficial to the minorities. In the Women's Commission they have a role to play in the planning process. It is very important that they should be associated with planning process of the country. On the other aspects of the Bill my colleagues will be talking in more detail.

In the proposed Commission you should include men of standing and also secular people who will do real service to the nation. The Commission should also be given ample opportunity to function properly. I want to know as to what happened to the SC and ST Commission after giving it statutory powers. Has it started functioning in the right direction? That is being delayed. Even the Women's Commission is in search of a room. They have no money for proper functioning. Passing a Resolution or constituting a Commission alone is not enough. You have to give them all powers and money for proper functioning and then can then function properly. If you want the proposed Commission please consider these aspects.

On the amendments also one member will be speaking. I only say this it is a right step and will have to be continued. For effective functioning they should be given enough facilities and money to function. Then only it can function effectively. With these words I support the Bill. Thank you for giving me the opportunity.

Women's Struggles across the World

A new Brazil, a Brazil of hope

Interview with Adriana Vieira from the World March of Women in Brazil

-Surangya, AIDWA, Delhi

On October 30th, thousands across Brazil took to the streets to celebrate as Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva was elected president of the country. Lula, the candidate representing the Workers' Party, defeated far-right incumbent candidate Jair Bolsonaro of the Liberal Party with 50.9% of the votes. The closely contested race was marked by a divisive and polarising campaign led by the right, several incidents of political violence against progressive candidates, and a campaign of widespread misinformation and fake news against candidates of the left.

The main slogan of Lula's campaign was: "Bringing hope back to Brazil." In the weeks and months leading to the final round of the elections, this hope of imminent change could be felt on the streets as people's movements regularly mobilised to build support for Lula.



Women in São Paulo participate in a rally in support of Lula. The sign reads: "Lula president and for the lives of women".

Adriana Vieira from the World March of Women in Brazil told AIDWA that "Lula's election was decisive for women, people with disabilities, Black people, the LGBT population, indigenous peoples, and the working class as a whole. This victory was the result of four years of mobilization in the streets, online, and in rural areas to defeat Bolsonaro and authoritarianism. It means there is a possibility of people actually being happy again, as Lula's campaign slogan says, and also the possibility of rebuilding an anti-racist, feminist, ecological, agroecological and pro-LGBT country."

Apart from the presidential victory, it should be highlighted that for the first time, the Brazilian Congress will have two trans women: Erika Hilton from PSOL in São Paulo, and Duda Salabert from PDT in Minas Gerais.

Women in Bolsonaro's Brazil

The six years since the 2016 coup in Brazil against Dilma Rousseff (former president from the Workers' Party) have witnessed a dramatic cutback of social and economic rights. Brazil was among the countries with the worst management of the pandemic resulting in at least 700,000 deaths. Bolsonaro's tenure also saw an increase in violence against women, slashing of important welfare policies, deterioration of the country's public health system, and decline of food sovereignty. Deforestation of the Amazon forest reached record levels under Bolsonaro.

“Those four years were filled with evil and cruelty. We saw budget cuts in strategic projects meant to combat racism, LGBT-phobia, and violence against women. According to INESC (Institute of Socioeconomic Studies), in the last four years there has been a 94% cut in the budget compared to the four years of the previous government. This means advancing conservatism. It has meant increased control of women's bodies (by the church, but also by the state), decrease in women's autonomy, racism — which particularly targets Black women resulting in precarious living conditions.”

Talking about the state of violence against women in Brazil under Bolsonaro Vieira said, “With Bolsonaro, incidents of violence against women in Brazilian society began to be seen as trivial. There was an increase in domestic violence and in the rate of threats. There was also a new form of violence that has not been seen so much before: political violence. In several states in the country, women who hold positions as councilors or deputies, whether in legislative power or in the executive, have been threatened and intimidated.”

In 2014, Brazil was removed from the hunger map. Now hunger is raging again in the country. According to recent UN data, 61.3 million Brazilians are facing food insecurity. This is a direct consequence of Bolsonaro's unbridled support to agribusiness. This has not only led to exploitation of land, but also massive inequality in ownership of land, with 1% of landowners controlling almost 50% of the land in rural Brazil according to a 2017 census.

“Bolsonaro's government was in total alliance with agribusiness, which it favored in different ways: debt forgiveness, approval of pesticides, loans to millionaires. 1,629 pesticides were approved, the majority of which are restricted or banned in the European Union and the USA.

“On the other hand, Bolsonaro ended programs that created real possibilities of organizing agroecology in the country. His administration banned the National Program of Agroecology and Organic Production (PLANAPO), ended the Minha Primeira Terra (My First Land) program, cut down the PRONAF program (directed

at family agriculture), among others. All these cuts had a direct impact on the lives of the women who are in rural territories because their food production and health were surrounded by pesticides and poison, preventing them from producing organic food. Their health is affected by both — the poisoned food and rains of poison being sprayed by planes over their territories. People have to leave their territories, there are impacts on women's health, food and economic autonomy.”

Lula’s progressive agenda

Lula ran his election campaign on a progressive plank, promising to not cut down one more tree in the Amazon, increasing social spending, increasing taxes on the rich, and removing hunger from Brazil again.

After securing his victory, Lula stated in a public address, “The first priority is, once again, the same speech that I gave in December 2002 [after first becoming president]. ... If when I finish this term, every single Brazilian person is able to have breakfast, is able to have lunch and is able to have dinner, once again I'd have accomplished the mission of my life.”



Lula’s previous stint as president was marked with a dramatic improvement in social indicators. He has worked closely with popular movements and recognises the importance of popular agrarian reform and family-based agriculture in democratising access to land.

Vieira talks about the broad set of demands presented by women’s movements in the country, some of which include:

- revoking several decrees, both on the budget and aspects related to restructuring SUS (national public health system),
- providing resources to combat violence against women,

- restructuring agroecology in Brazil so that women can regain their territories and produce food that guarantees health,
- creating and implementing mechanisms for socialisation of care work, both for children and also for the elderly and sick, whether it is a day hospital or other public infrastructure that provides care.

“And it is very important to have an economy which places sustainability of life at its centre. Another very important thing is the aspect of the body and sexuality: we need to demand laws that talk about abortion in Brazil. We need to strengthen the fight for the legalisation of abortion that has been repeatedly attacked in recent years with the criminalisation of women who resort to abortion in any situation.”

However, implementing a progressive policy will be fraught with challenges for the Lula government and for people’s movements.

“The first big challenge we are going to face is a very conservative Congress, aligned with the extreme right. We had an increase in the extreme right in these elections. Moreover, implementing a progressive policy will only be possible by rebuilding Brazil, completely destroyed since the 2016 coup from the point of view of public policies and social projects. In order to rebuild Brazil, we need a strong democracy, which alters the relations of gender and race inequalities, which are also relations that structure oppression. This involves creating spaces for popular participation. In these spaces, we need to build collective processes for the recovery and reformulation of public policies.

“Other challenges we are also going to deal with are the criminalisation of social movements, especially the women's movement and the criminalisation of women who resort to abortion. We are going to confront those who are against women’s right to decide about their bodies and want to avoid legalisation of abortion, transforming any type of possibility of abortion into a crime. We will deal with these challenges by putting people on the street, in the networks and in the rural areas/ small farms because only with a collective process and popular organisation will we actually be able to build a progressive policy that includes a project that is popular, anti-racist, feminist, agroecological, that is against LGBT-phobia, that places sustainability of life in the centre of the economy. These are big challenges, but it is with women on the streets that we are going to build this project.”

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