



INDIAN WOMEN ON AN ARDUOUS ROAD TO EQUALITY



Dossier n° 45
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This dossier features portraits of the daily struggles of Indian women, primarily drawn by women artists from India and across the Global South based on photographs by Indian photographers. These are scenes of life in the fuller sense of the word – of joy, labour, anger, and resistance – along the arduous path towards women’s emancipation. They are images of a fuller humanity that is owed to all workers, peasants, women, mothers, and daughters.

COVER IMAGE

‘She had worn her best saree to come and learn cycling. At a “cycling training camp” in Pudukkottai, Tamil Nadu. She was exuberant with good cause. Some 4,000 very poor women in her district had come to control the quarries where they were once bonded labourers. Their organised struggle, combined with a politically conscious literacy movement, made Pudukkottai a better place’. – P. Sainath

Illustration: [Vikas Thakur \(India\)](#) / [Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research](#)
Reference photo: [P. Sainath](#) / [People’s Archive of Rural India \(PARI\)](#) (Madhya Pradesh, July 2014)

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Brick work, locally known as 'pakka me kaam'.

Illustration: [Karuna Pious P \(India\)](#) / [Young Socialist Artists](#)

Reference photo: [Khabar Lahariya](#) / [People's Archive Of Rural India \(PARI\)](#) (Uttar Pradesh, February 2017)

A few centuries ago, the Telugu poet Baddena wrote a lyrical paean to the role of a wife: someone who works like a servant, feeds like a mother, looks like a goddess, pleasures like a prostitute, and has the forbearance of the earth. These ‘womanly virtues’ strung into poetry in the 13th century resonate so much with modern Indian society that this poem is often glorified in movies, music, and literature even today.

For Indian women, each of these ‘virtues’ translates into facets of oppression representing domestic drudgery, the objectification of the body and sexuality, and the expectation that women should accept abuse, violence, and exploitation as their fate, fulfilling their socially ordained role as mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters; they are never supposed to be human beings with their own independent agency. In fact, the *Manusmriti* (The Lawbook of Manu; 200 BCE–200 CE), a widely quoted and beloved text of the Hindu right wing which essentially codifies oppression on the basis of caste, class, and gender in Indian society, unambiguously states that women need to be under the control of their fathers during their childhood, their husbands during adulthood, and their sons during old age, and that they do not have independent existence beyond these roles in relation to men. Such oppression finds acceptance across communities (including non-Hindus) in India.

In modern India, there is a pervasive culture of justification of an array of restrictions on women’s behaviour, appearance, movement, and societal interactions, as well as acceptance of a wide variety of atrocities against them – such as domestic violence, sexual abuse,

and rape – which are seen as the result of women’s violations of these cultural norms.

Country-wide data shows that at least one-third of married Indian women have suffered domestic violence at the hands of their husbands.¹ Such violence has deep-rooted acceptance in Indian communities and families – so much so that many women themselves have internalised the justifications for the violence inflicted upon them. Fifty-two percent of Indian women aged 15-49 believe that a man is entitled to hit and beat his wife for at least one of these reasons: the wife leaves the house without informing the husband, the man thinks that she is neglecting her children, she argues with him, she refuses to have sex with him, she doesn’t cook food properly, he suspects her of being unfaithful, or he feels that she disrespects her in-laws.

It has been two millennia since Manu and nearly eight centuries since Baddena and yet, as the survey results show, women of 21st century India who probably have never read Manu or heard of Baddena nonetheless seem to have a similar sense of obligation to their husbands and families. This internalisation is not surprising in a society which widely condones such violence and where the major political parties are implacably opposed to criminalising marital rape. Indian law holds that sexual intercourse between a man and his wife who has reached the age of majority cannot be considered to be rape, irrespective of whether or not the wife has consented to the act. As recently as August 2021, the High Court of Chhattisgarh refused to prosecute a man for marital rape, holding that ‘sexual intercourse or any sexual act with her [the wife] by the husband would not

constitute an offence of rape, even if it was by force or against her wish'. Even when progressive judges recognised a married woman's complete right over her own sexuality, their hands were largely tied by the regressive law which is implicitly enforced by the Indian state and tacitly supported by most political parties.

There are, of course, certain things that have changed for the better over the years. In 1911, only one percent of women could read and write.² A little more than a century later, the literacy rate among Indian women stands at 70 percent.³ Prospects for women in education today are more hopeful: the literacy rate among females below 24 years-old is about 90 percent and is almost on par with the literacy rate of males in the same age group.⁴ Today, the enrolment of women in higher education is comparable to that of men. Forty-nine percent of students currently enrolled in higher education are women, though their presence is more sparse in fields such as engineering and medicine where courses are more expensive and are likely to pave the way to more lucrative jobs.⁵

Despite this progress made by women in literacy and education, the designated domestic roles of women seem to have changed little. Working-age women spend on average five hours and fifteen minutes in a day doing domestic chores such as cooking, cleaning, and washing.⁶ This is the average time spent on domestic work by more than 92 percent of women of working age. In addition to the time taken for domestic chores, one third of the women, mostly those with young children, spend on average two hours and seventeen minutes every day caring for and instructing children. By contrast, less than 30 percent of men lend a hand in domestic chores and

only 16 percent of men spend any time on childcare and instruction. This minority of men who do undertake domestic work and childcare still spend only a fraction of the time that women expend on these activities.⁷ Educated men are no different than the rest when it comes to their negligible participation in these responsibilities. Similarly, the burden of such work on women who received higher education is not significantly different than for other women.

It is clear that Indian women in general carry out very significant productive activities in the form of domestic work and care work in their own families. Yet, this contribution of Indian women to the very necessary process of social reproduction goes unrecognised and unrewarded. If anything, women's primary role in their families in social reproduction – of bearing children, caring for them and instructing them, and reproducing the worker's family not only for the next day through cooking, cleaning etc., but also for future demands by the capitalist class – seems closely associated with multiple problems that women face in society.





A woman working in the koral fields, where women often work from a young age to earn a living.

Illustration: Junaina Muhammed (India) / Young Socialist Artists

Reference photo: M. Palani Kumar / [People's Archive of Rural India \(PARI\)](#) (Tamil Nadu, April 2021)

Women as Workers

Statistics show that the presence of women in the work force has come down drastically in the past three decades of neoliberal capitalism in India. Women's participation in the work force, which was at 41 percent in 1999-2000, came down to 32 percent in 2011-12; by 2018-19, it had fallen steeply to 25 percent. Effectively, in 2018-19, while three-fourths of working-age men were employed in paid occupations, three-fourth of working-age women were not earning a living but were instead involved in unpaid domestic and care work.⁸ The percentage of women not employed in paid occupations is likely to go up further due to the pandemic-induced economic crisis as women's mobility gets restricted even further.

Many votaries of government policies attribute the decreasing presence of women in the work force to the 'income effect' – a positive sign that India's economic growth is bringing families out of poverty, allowing women to depend on the increased earnings of men without themselves having to work. In Indian society, the argument goes, when a family's income increases, they prefer that the women stay at home and not work; women not working is seen as a sign of higher social status.

The reality, of course, is anything but this. The pseudo-sociological rationalisations for the relative shrinking of the female work force gloss over the fact that women are being forced out of the work force rather than choosing to leave it in order to live in comfort. Rather,

women have been forced out of work because of structural changes in the Indian economy over the years – particularly since liberalisation from 1991 onwards – and the impact that these changes have had on the rural economy.

While the work participation rates of urban women have always been low and more or less stagnant for decades, the work participation rates of rural women were higher in the pre-liberalisation era, though not on par with those of men. Even today, the majority of women in the work force are from rural areas and most of them are employed in agriculture and related activities.

When the level of mechanisation in agriculture is low, marginal and small peasant families that subsist on agriculture utilise family labour to the maximum extent; as a result, peasant women do as much work or often more work in the fields than men. Moreover, the seasonal nature of agricultural work ensures that there would be a high demand for workers during labour-intensive seasonal operations, making women workers indispensable to agriculture.

In India's embrace of unfettered and unregulated capitalism or neoliberal capitalism, agriculture was the sector that was the most adversely affected. In the last three decades, increasing landlessness, changing cropping patterns, and increased mechanisation coupled with widespread use of weedicides greatly reduced employment in seasonal agricultural operations like harvesting, transplanting, and weeding that provided the bulk of paid employment to women of peasant families as well as to female agricultural workers.

The kind of high economic growth that India experienced from the early 2000s to the early 2010s has not created any sustainable alternative employment in the villages. Instead, village-oriented cottage industries like weaving, handloom, soap-making, food preparation, etc. which provided some non-agricultural employment to rural women have been decimated, with corporate industries taking over most of the markets for such goods. The modern industries that developed over the years were not only unable to compensate for the loss of agricultural employment; they also largely stayed away from rural India. Such industries were mostly concentrated in select industrial pockets of certain states and regions, to which workers from largely poor agricultural states like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, West Bengal, Odisha, and Madhya Pradesh migrated to make a living.

The displaced male agricultural workers increasingly shifted to non-agricultural work during the years of high growth in the non-agricultural economy. Non-agricultural work inevitably implied a shift of the workplace away from the village, as is the case with many rural men who migrate for either the short term or the long term to urban and metropolitan areas to work in construction, hospitality, transport, retail trade, and other sectors that employ the bulk of India's informal work force.⁹ Women find it much more difficult to make this shift successfully.

The reduction in agricultural employment which is not compensated by any other avenue of employment meant that a significant proportion of rural women who remained in villages were forced into long-term unemployment. This created the perception that women were not available for work outside of the home. Those who

are still officially part of the rural work force are mostly in poorly compensated semi-employment, completely dependent on the little work that is available – such as agricultural tasks that are not yet mechanised, rural construction work, work that is part of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, poorly paid domestic services to better-off peasant families, etc. Most women who migrate with their families and become part of the urban milieu have few options of employment outside of the lowest-paid and most exploitative jobs such as cooking, cleaning, and other domestic work, or in very low-paid, outsourced, home-based work such as sewing, embroidery, and packing.

India's high economic growth rates have not contributed to a commensurate increase in employment. As a result, Indian workers face serious unemployment and underemployment. The percentage of regularly employed workers is very low, and urban workers are mostly employed in informal and ephemeral activities. Apart from prejudice and discrimination towards women, such high levels of unemployment even among men ensure that, except for what is seen as female-specific work, employers will almost always hire a man instead of a woman.

Women with young children spend seven hours and thirty-two minutes per day on average for household and care work. If we also consider the time for travelling to one's place of work (60-90 minutes is the daily average commute time for men), women find it difficult to settle into a workplace with a working day of eight hours or more and with a demanding employer. Informal work is even harder for women who have to attend to domestic responsibilities, since it

often requires workers to move around seeking work and frequently shift to various work sites based on the availability of work.

Though the wages women receive for agricultural work are the lowest compared to other sectors, this sector has the advantage of affording women flexibility for childcare and domestic work and it has lower commute times. Therefore, to a certain extent, rural women are able to reconcile their role as primary care givers of the family while taking up outside employment.

In urban India, offices mostly do not have the culture of providing childcare and crèches. In the informal sector, the issue is not even on the agenda. Governments do not provide free or affordable neighbourhood crèches at an adequate scale for working women with low incomes. In India, the idea of maternal leave in the informal sector does not exist. In fact, labour laws that make maternity leave and crèches mandatory have resulted in women losing jobs, as employers simply avoid hiring women instead of providing these facilities. Today, in order to access employment in the IT sector, women are compelled to agree to work night shifts, foregoing hard-won legal benefits that mandate that women shall not be required to work night shifts.

In urban areas, women's work participation rates are often higher both among the small minority of very highly educated women and among illiterate and semi-literate women. At one end of this spectrum are women who are largely compelled to work due to serious poverty, often a week's wages away from hunger. Among other jobs, many such women take up domestic work in multiple households

at very low wages. At the other end of the spectrum are women in professions whose salaries are high enough so that they can employ domestic workers to undertake much of the domestic work women usually carry out for their families. It is ironic that the ability of a segment of middle-class women to work and gain economic independence, freedom from drudgery, and the feeling of a sense of achievement and emancipation is dependent on the availability of immiserated women of the working class whose conditions are desperate enough to force them to work for rock-bottom wages.

It is generally accepted that economic independence is a necessary though insufficient condition for women to attain equal status in society. At present, economic independence is absent for the 75 percent of Indian women who are unemployed. The majority of the remaining 25 percent of women earn such low wages that it is difficult to stave off hunger, let alone attain economic independence.¹⁰ In such a situation, can a minority of women from the middle classes and upper class who can be said to be economically independent attain equality when their struggle for equality is divorced from the conditions of the rest of the women?

There is also ample evidence of physical and sexual abuse as well as workplace discrimination towards women working in white collar professional jobs. If anything, violence is particularly targeted at working women and at women who dare to engage in public spaces, a patriarchal retaliation for the violation of gender roles. Statistics show that working women in India have a higher likelihood of being subjected to physical violence: nearly 40 percent of working

women have experienced physical violence compared to 26 percent of non-working women.¹¹

The lack of economic independence for the majority of women plays a vital role in sustaining regressive attitudes towards women in families and communities in the long run. Irrespective of their stature, class, and income, all women are subject to this.

These are the socio-economic conditions under which Indian women struggle and fight for their dignity, freedom, and rights as human beings.



Combatants in the Telangana Armed Struggle (1946–51), a communist-led insurrection of peasants against the autocratic rule of the Nizam (monarch) of the princely state of Hyderabad and against feudal exploitation by landlords.

Illustration: [Navya](#) (India)/ [Young Socialist Artists](#)

Reference photo: Sundarayya Vignana Kendram (Telangana, 1948)

Women's Struggle for Equality

Despite the constraints that their socio-economic conditions impose on them time and again, Indian women have found their collective voice to fight for their rights. A vibrant women's movement exists in various parts of India, which over the years has fought the apathy of the state towards the condition of women in general, attaining big and small victories in asserting the constitutional rights of women as citizens and workers.

In India, just as in many other Third World nations that were born out of struggles against colonial oppression, the birth of the women's movement is closely intertwined with struggles against all kinds of oppression and exploitation – so much so that any talk of the women's movement necessarily involves talk of the anti-colonial struggles, peasant struggles, workers' movements, and movements against caste oppression. The first significant and clear articulation of women as independent political beings took place in these struggles.

When the anti-colonial struggle in India was at its peak in different parts of the country, women mobilised in large numbers in demonstrations against British rule, boycotting British goods, defying colonial tax laws, and defending their villages against police atrocities. The participation of women contributed to the larger democratic appeal of the movement for India's independence; in turn, the independence movement had to acknowledge women in political spaces and commit to accepting their citizenship rights as being on

par with those of men. Though these rights were anathema to large sections of the Indian population, the leaders of the freedom movement who eventually became leaders of independent India had to accept the claims of equality of those who fought hand-in-hand with them, resulting in the incorporation of equal rights to women into the Constitution of independent India in 1950.

Peasant struggles against colonial and feudal exploitation had an even deeper impact on the political awakening of women. While the freedom movement led by the Indian National Congress attracted large numbers of women from the middle classes, the militant agrarian struggles led largely by the Communist Party – the Telangana armed struggle, the Tebhaga Movement, the Warli Adivasi Revolt, and other such mobilisations in different regions – brought women from working-class and peasant backgrounds into militant emancipatory struggles. The rural women who took part in these struggles not only mobilised against the exploitation of landlords but were also able to understand and articulate their own issues as women, peasants, and workers in a class society. More than anything, for the first time, women in rural India experienced the power of their own collective action and realised their role beyond what is circumscribed by a feudal patriarchal society. These struggles can be said to have laid the foundation for the Indian women's movement and contributed to its deep presence among the exploited classes of society.

From the beginning, the Indian women's movement has had two broad strands in the way it approaches the question of women's equality. The first strand carries the legacy of the Indian freedom movement and builds women's struggles largely around political

and citizenship rights. This approach is taken by autonomous women's organisations and independent activists who largely campaign and lobby on distinct issues like progressive legislation to deal with domestic violence, rape, sexual violence, harassment for dowries, property rights, and human rights violations against women. Each organisation or activist often specialises in a particular issue. While the number of such organisations and activists is significant, they lack a rooted presence among the masses. Their functioning is limited largely to propaganda among the middle classes and to lobbying in policy circles. Though it has been of value to the women's movement in general, it is nonetheless limited in its potential and in its long-term vision for women's emancipation.

The second approach to the women's question was born out of women's mobilisations in various peasant and workers' movements. This approach is not contradictory or dichotomous to the first approach; rather, it amalgamates that approach with the understanding that women's struggle against patriarchy necessarily involves a confrontation with exploitative class structures and that women are not just women but are also peasants, agricultural workers, industrial workers, and so on.

Over the years, the organisations which followed the second approach evolved into a robust left women's movement in India. Today, these are the most militant, active women's organisations with a significant presence among rural peasant and working-class women as well as among the urban working class and the lower middle class. In regions where they are present, these women's organisations work independently on women's issues while at the same time struggling

alongside peasant and labour movements. The presence of left-wing peasant and working-class movements within communities aids and creates an enabling environment for activists of the women's movement within their own families and communities. This is reflected in the fact that regions where the women's movement has made significant inroads and has undertaken large mobilisations are largely regions with a notable historical presence of peasant and working-class movements. Further, working together with these class organisations allows the women's movement to build support for its demands beyond its own followers. On the other hand, the women's movement also incorporates demands specific to women workers into the charters of demands of other movements, such as equal wages for equal work, maternity leave for workers, crèches in workplaces, and redressal and prevention mechanisms against sexual harassment in workplaces.

Despite the two differing approaches, women's organisations and activists of all orientations have come together and coordinated frequently on various demands and issues as well as in specific struggles. This is largely because the left movement itself understands the importance of taking up the issues of human rights and citizenship rights of women while at the same time confronting the class foundations of society.



A protestor raising slogans at a march in New Delhi organised jointly by the All India Democratic Women's Association, the Students' Federation of India, the Democratic Youth Federation of India, and the Centre of Indian Trade Unions demanding action to stop sexual violence against women in India. The march was part of a massive movement following the gang rape of a young woman in New Delhi on 16 December 2012.

Illustration: Tings Chak (China) / Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research

Reference photo: Subin Dennis (India) / Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research (Delhi, 23 December 2012)

Confronting Patriarchal Violence

Most incidents of sexual violence are perpetrated by either intimate partners (86 percent) or by relatives and friends.¹² Thirty percent of married Indian women have been beaten by their husbands, a type of violence that finds social acceptance within families; the economic and psychological dependence of women on their families makes speaking up difficult. Often, women seek help only when violence reaches what is seen to be intolerable levels. Only two percent of cases reach the police station.¹³ At that point, the police often try to persuade women to compromise and settle with their assailants. It takes the intervention of neighbourhood women or women's organisations to force the police to act. Many victims choose to avoid the legal route because the police and legal proceedings are onerous and uncertain and, very often, they and their children are completely dependent on the perpetrator of violence for their survival. In addition, the fear of social stigma is very influential in restraining women from taking legal recourse. In cases where women do approach the police and the courts, they are often only able to do so because women's organisations provide legal aid and counselling to encourage action.

Due to the familial nature of most gender-based violence, women's organisations find it hard to intervene directly. Thus, the women's movement has fought through the political and juridical processes to push for laws that support women who are struggling with physical and sexual violence. It has taken horrific incidents of violence to

mobilise people behind the demand to enact legislation in support of women's rights.

[Mathura] In 1972, the rape of Mathura, a fourteen-year-old girl from a tribal community in Maharashtra, by two policemen triggered widespread outcry among women. Mathura, who went to the police station to testify in a case filed against the boy she was in a relationship with, was raped by the police personnel who summoned her. Her seven-year-long legal battle exposed the inadequacy, prejudices, ignorance, and sheer misogyny of the judiciary and the police. The final judgement of the Supreme Court of India concluded that the fourteen-year-old Mathura could not have been raped, as she was a tribal girl of lax morals who was not a virgin, she didn't raise alarm, she didn't suffer visible injuries on her body, and she very likely incited the inebriated policemen to intercourse. The custodial rape by the police and the acute misogyny and anti-tribal bias displayed by the highest court of the nation towards Mathura prompted what is probably the first country-wide mobilisation against sexual violence, led by women's organisations and a range of activists. The protests, coupled with subsequent efforts by activists and women parliamentarians from left parties, compelled the parliament to amend the penal code and to enact laws to shift the burden of proof of sexual assault away from the victim to the accused and to recognise custodial rape as a distinct offence.

[Dowry Deaths] In the early 1980s, a spate of violent and widely publicised dowry deaths took place across the country. Women were pressured for more dowry after their wedding and, if they could not fulfil such demands, were frequently burnt to death by their

husbands and in-laws. The perpetrators claimed that these murders were suicides or accidental deaths due to kitchen fires. Though dowry-related violence and deaths were not new, the expansion of women's organisations and groups during this time led to a country-wide movement with women taking to the streets. This in turn led to the enactment of a law that placed the onus on the husband and in-laws to prove their innocence if a woman dies within seven years of marriage through burns or bodily injury. However, such attacks continue to this day

[Gang Rape] In 1992, Bhanwari Devi, a low-paid government social worker, was gang-raped by dominant caste men in her village. One of her responsibilities as a social worker was to prevent child marriage, and so she tried to prevent the marriage of a nine-year-old girl. For this she faced harassment, starting with the social and economic boycott of her family, and then violence against her family. Five men then gang-raped Bhanwari Devi in front of her husband, who was beaten by the assailants.

The police delayed registering the case, medical examiners initially refused to examine her (and then took so long to conduct the examination that the evidence was diluted), five judges were inexplicably changed in the case, and in 1995 the sixth judge acquitted the assailants on ridiculous grounds (that upper caste men would not have raped a lower caste woman and that she could not have been raped in the presence of her husband). Support for the rapists by people of the dominant caste was such that the local member of parliament belonging to the far-right Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) organised a victory rally for the assailants upon their acquittal. Bhanwari Devi's

employer, the state government of Rajasthan, failed to take any steps to support her or to prevent sexual violence in the future. Her own courageous stand and the support of thousands of women who rallied to her cause put pressure on the parliament and the judiciary, paving the way to a historic judgment by the Supreme Court of India known as the Vishaka judgement which laid down guidelines to deal with cases of sexual harassment in the workplace.

The Vishaka judgment of 1997 holds employers responsible for ensuring a safe working environment for women and for providing a mechanism to address workplace sexual harassment. Over the years, students in many universities have led struggles for these guidelines to be implemented in their institutions. Even today, working women demand and struggle to get these guidelines implemented in their workplaces.

Though rape is widespread in India, less than one percent of victims of sexual assault report the cases to the police. The kind of brutal sexual violence inflicted on women like Bhanwari Devi is an instrument of patriarchy aimed at them for daring to step beyond their traditional roles in a conservative society. What is remarkable is that these women show extraordinary determination in their fight, which has allowed the larger women's movement the space to campaign, lobby, and pressure the establishment to enact progressive legislation.

For Indian women, half of whom are not allowed to go out on their own, the de jure rights won by the women's movement seldom attain a de facto existence. Their isolation from the public sphere and the

collective prevents the redressal of cases of sexual violence. That is why the acts of women such as Bhanwari Devi are extraordinary. While the battles for new legislation are important in opening up possibilities for women who are prepared and equipped to advance these struggles, these battles do not replace the necessity for women to collectively take on the violence, harassment, and discrimination that they are faced with in their own communities on a daily basis. The left women's movement proved the possibility of such collective mobilisations – despite the constraints it faced.

[The Anti-Arrack Movement] In the 1990s in Andhra Pradesh, women mobilised collectively against domestic violence and against arrack, a cheap, distilled alcoholic spirit. At that time, the state recorded the highest consumption of alcohol. State governments, their revenues squeezed as a result of the implementation of neo-liberal policies, turned to excise duties on alcohol to raise funds. In India, nearly 30 percent of men and about one percent of women consume alcohol. The data shows a connection between alcohol consumption and patriarchal violence; 71 percent of women whose husbands drink often report domestic violence, compared to 22 percent of women whose spouses don't drink.¹⁴ When the government pushed the sale of arrack, domestic and sexual violence in village communities increased. Women from households of agricultural workers – predominantly Dalits – took on the men in their families, the liquor business, and the state machinery.

The anti-arrack movement began during the time when the left women's movement and the people's science movement had taken up the adult literacy campaign in numerous villages. When women

got together in the process of the literacy campaign, their discussions soon turned to their own problems, particularly the alcohol-fuelled violence at home. Domestic violence was not the only issue: the large portion of wages that go into the consumption of alcohol, including women's own wages which are often snatched for the purchase of liquor by men, also meant that feeding the children and running the household became difficult.

In Dubbaka village, where particularly violent episodes took place under the influence of alcohol, women who got together during the literacy campaign destroyed the local liquor shop. Soon, the women's movement across the state adopted this method and women mobilised in village after village to destroy liquor shops, smash liquor supplies, disrupt the auctions of liquor licenses by the government, and sometimes lock up the men at home as well as to engage in physical confrontations with men in the community, the police, and the goons employed by liquor businesses. Women continued this movement for two years until the state government was forced to prohibit the sale of alcohol (though the ban was lifted after a few years).

The anti-arrack movement is still a powerful mobilising point for women across many states and communities, though mobilisations today may not always reach the scale that the 1992 agitation did, as prohibitions were often diluted and subsequently lifted by state governments. An important factor that aided the anti-arrack movement of 1992 was the presence of left peasant and working-class organisations in the state which strongly supported the agitating women and activists in the villages.



A Muslim woman protests the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA).

Illustration: Jazila Lulu (India) / [Young Socialist Artists](#)

Reference photo: Vikas Thakur (India) / [Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research](#) (Delhi, December 2019)

Women in Politics

Rising literacy and education levels, wider exposure to visual and print media, and involvement in movements against arrack, dowries, rising prices, and declining incomes – among other issues – have deepened women’s involvement in political activity, including in elections. Political parties have developed mechanisms to appeal to women through promises that target them, such as schemes for the provision of cooking gas, construction of toilets, delivery of pensions for women, access to credit, and subsidies for self-help groups. Though this is not an immense budgetary burden for governments, for women with low family incomes and little economic independence, even these small gestures can be starting points to alleviate their distress.

However, women’s increased participation in politics has not led to a substantial increase of women in elected positions or in the leadership of political parties, including in left parties. Only 14 percent of the members of the current Indian parliament (2019-2024) are women. For decades, women’s organisations have been demanding 33 percent reservation for women in legislatures. Most parties – except the Left – only pay lip service to this demand while actually working to undermine it. For example, the current prime minister, Narendra Modi of the BJP, promised before the elections to reserve 33 percent of parliament seats for women. However, despite the brute majority his party enjoys in the present parliament, he maintained a studious silence on the issue after the elections.

When it came to elections to local self-government institutions in villages and urban areas, the Indian government agreed to the demand to reserve 33 percent of the seats for women (since 1992, such reservations have been implemented at this level). A number of states went beyond 33 percent and reserved 50 percent of the seats for women. Many anticipated that reservation for women in state legislatures and the parliament would follow, but that has not happened.

Local self-government institutions receive only a small fraction of government funds, but the impact of women in politics at this level has been significant. While it is true that in many cases women who are related to men who are local political leaders contest these seats, it is also true that they often develop their own political careers and sometimes set important new standards. The visibility of women in spaces of local power alone has been revolutionary for village societies. The autonomy of women's participation in local self-government institutions is more in regions where there is a presence of women's, peasants', and workers' movements.



Childcare workers protest the Modi government's unfair treatment of women and workers.

Illustration: Daniela Ruggeri (Argentina) / Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research

Reference photo: Sumedha Pal / [Newsclick](#) (Delhi, February 2019)

In the Neoliberal Era

Over the past thirty years, the left women's movement in India has made significant interventions among women, intensifying their mobilisations on a wide range of issues and confronting neoliberalism. The movement adopted a two-pronged strategy: it mobilised women on issues related to social wages and, in the process, forged the resistance of women against violence and discrimination in their own families and communities. In 1981, several left-wing women's organisations with their origin in peasant and working-class struggles across India came together to form the All-India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA). Today, AIDWA is the largest women's organisation in India in terms of its membership, geographical spread, and capacity to take up a range of new issues that have come up in this period.

The Women's Movement in Self-Help Groups

The intense agrarian distress, widespread economic misery, and increasing poverty during the period of neoliberal reforms galvanised the women's movement into organising around the issue of social wages. When governments tried to cut spending on the public distribution system (PDS) by reducing the number of ration cards and the amount of grain and provisions disbursed through the PDS, the left women's movement took the initiative to mobilise women locally as well as across the country against the fund cuts.

In states such as Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, and Karnataka, the left organised women in working-class neighbourhoods and villages to demand that ration shops be set up in localities and to fight for ration cards and adequate rations. Women learned to deal with local authorities through demanding rations as well as amenities like water, streetlights, and roads.

Similarly, women mobilised when the prices of essential commodities rose, as they understood that price rises directly impact their kitchens, and they fought at the local level for government schemes to be implemented. Though large sections of women withdrew from the workforce due to the decreasing availability of jobs, they were nonetheless on the forefront of the struggles to shore up the social wages of families and communities. Activists evolved from the process of these struggles.

Meanwhile, as part of its neoliberal strategy, the World Bank advocated microfinance schemes for working-class communities that would become new customers for the financial sector. Microfinance was put forward as an antidote to economic distress and to deflated consumption among the working class. The Bank presented this expansion of finance capital as 'empowerment' for women. Non-government organisations entered the sector to bring women together, gather their meagre savings, and apply for credit which had not been accessible to them before. This credit was to be used for income-generating activities that would bring them out of poverty. The Indian government set up Self-Help Groups (SHGs) which are a form of microcredit groups financed by public sector banks as well as state and central governments. Currently, the membership of

SHGs stands at nearly 60 million, or more than 12 percent of India's adult women population.

Initially, the women's movement had apprehensions about SHGs, which are a form of microcredit groups. These apprehensions were not unfounded. There is an increasing trend of women's microcredit groups being formed under the patronage of microfinance companies that have wreaked havoc among women. Unlike the government-supported SHGs, these new set of microcredit groups are neither financed by public sector banks nor supported by government. The companies lend to these groups at exorbitant interest rates. Since all members of the group are jointly liable for the timely repayments, the resulting dynamic destroys the social bonds between women. The inability of a member to service her loan results in censure, mistrust, and violence from other women of the group as well as the thugs of the microfinance companies.

Such social coercion coupled with usurious interest rates (sometimes as high as 60 percent) has led to immense suffering, including a spate of suicides, and – not surprisingly – to women's opposition to such microfinance companies.

The left women's movements has worked with the SHGs to fight against the exploitative functioning of microfinance companies and to use them as sites of mobilisation. In the absence of collective workplaces as women have been pushed out of the labour force, these SHGs afford avenues for organising women. The left has organised women in the SHGs around demands for lower interest rates, higher government subsidies to SHGs, and a moratorium

on loan and interest payments during difficult times such as the COVID-19 pandemic, when women with little or no incomes are unable to pay back their loans. In regions where the women's movement has intervened in SHGs, they are highly political and active in fighting against dowry harassment, arrack, and superstition, as well as participating in village meetings and taking up other issues in the communities. In Kerala, Kudumbashree – which is a highly evolved system of SHGs with substantial encouragement and support from the left government and a membership of 4.5 million women – has become a model for developing economic and political agency and power among women. Rural women, who constitute the majority of the membership of left women's organisations, have been at the forefront against the forcible acquisition of agricultural land in various states demanding more employment and better wages through the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme. Both the campaign inside the SHGs and the fight for the implementation of schemes are the strongest where the women's movement has developed in conjunction with left and democratic movements. In contrast, the women's movement has been weak where such broader movements are absent, pointing towards the necessity of movements against class exploitation for the development of a robust women's movement.

Confronting Caste

Caste is a wretched, all-encompassing system of social hierarchy. Dalits, the most discriminated communities in the system, face daily visible and invisible humiliations. Although such discrimination is

illegal, these practices continue in various, ever-evolving forms in both rural and urban societies. The list of humiliations is long: no entry into the village temple; no walking on certain streets, even with shoes and neat clothes; no drinking water from specific wells; no celebrations for good examination results; no drinking from certain kinds of glasses; no asking for higher wages. If any Dalit breaks these 'rules', then not only will the person face punishment; their community will also face collective punishment, including sexual violence against women and children. The violence of the dominant castes always finds soft targets in Dalit women's bodies. Incidents of Dalit women being raped, paraded naked, brutally beaten up, and forced to drink urine for any number of supposed violations of caste norms are all too common.

Despite several laws that are supposed to protect them, Dalit women and men – dependent on upper castes for livelihoods, as many Dalits are landless casual workers – have little recourse against oppression and violence. Even when a Dalit family manages to attain relative prosperity, that itself becomes a reason for violence.

Dalit women, who are largely agricultural labourers, are among the lowest-paid workers in the Indian economy. Despite their triple subjugation along the lines of caste, class, and gender, an unacknowledged fact is that they have been one of the most militant sections of the women's movement and make up a significant proportion of the membership of large left women's organisations such as AIDWA. Despite being soft targets of violence of various kinds, Dalit women have militantly mobilised in various local struggles of the women's movement that do not appear in the national media.

However, even though there is a large presence of Dalit women in the membership of left women's organisations, the issues of Dalit women that pertain to their caste position were not taken up in any meaningful way. Though the women's movement reacted to specific atrocities against Dalit women through legal and other support and carried out protests demanding judicial action, these were not sustained mobilisations on such issues.

This changed in the neoliberal era, when a better organised left women's movement began to take up issues particular to Dalit women in a significant manner in states like Tamil Nadu. When they did so, women activists from Dalit communities, along with their comrades from other communities, took up the fight against the various forms of untouchability and discriminations they faced in daily life and led struggles highlighting the lack of drinking water, community halls, and graveyards in Dalit neighbourhoods. They have confronted the police, district administrations, and the state with the solidarity and support of the larger left movement in those regions. Though discriminatory practices still continue since the material basis for caste oppression remains, Dalit women have grown into activism and leadership in movements and politics, which is highly important for the women's movement. While AIDWA and other women's organisations have regularly intervened during incidents of caste violence across India, the Tamil Nadu example is still yet to be replicated in its full potential elsewhere in the country.

The period after the ascendancy to power of the BJP, an avowedly Manuvadi party, has seen a huge spurt in the violence that Dalit

women, girls, and female infants are subjected to in many parts of the country, especially in states ruled by the BJP.¹⁵ There have been several instances where the perpetrators of the crimes have been BJP leaders who have received the full support of the government. There have also been cases such as the one in Hathras, Uttar Pradesh, where a young woman belonging to the Balmiki caste (a Dalit caste) community was gang-raped by four upper caste men. She died soon after. The government of the state of Uttar Pradesh, where this incident occurred, repeatedly took the stand that no rape had taken place. It was only after angry demonstrations all over the country that the accused were arrested. The family of the victim is still to receive compensation and is living in an atmosphere of fear and insecurity.

*Confronting Communalism*¹⁶

The rise of the Hindu right wing to political dominance has posed a significant challenge and roadblock to the women's movement. One instance of this is the emergence of a strong anti-Muslim rhetoric centred around the control of women's bodies and the denial of autonomy to both Hindu and Muslim women. The concept of 'love jihad' has been developed by the right wing to delegitimise inter-religious marriages, attack the choices of young women, and criminalise Muslim men. A combination of state and para-statal vigilante groups have taken on the 'responsibility' of teaching inter-religious couples a 'lesson' through violence and humiliation with complete impunity. Laws have been passed by several BJP-led

state governments which render inter-community marriages invalid. While these laws are used to victimise and harass Muslim men and families, they enable the torture and different kinds of ill-treatment of Hindu women while depriving them of their right to choose their life partners. They reinforce the belief that women are the property of their families, to be disposed of in any fashion that the family chooses. Though the judiciary has largely taken a strong stand in favour of the right of adults to choose their partners, right-wing threats and violence against youth who choose partners from communities different from their own continue unabated.

The horror inflicted upon Muslim women's bodies during the Gujarat pogrom of 2002 when Narendra Modi was the chief minister of the state is still fresh in the minds of those in the women's movement. The gruesome violence – which included gang rapes and murder, splitting open the wombs of pregnant women, and smashing children's heads – shook women across the country. When Modi became the prime minister in 2014, he brought these attitudes to the central government. The BJP dances between a disingenuous rhetoric about development and economic growth and harsh attacks on minorities and women.

Yet, this is also a period of unprecedented visibility and prominence for Muslim women in public spaces in India. They won the battle against the practice of Triple Talaq, which allowed a Muslim man to divorce his wife by uttering the word *talaq* (the Arabic word for 'divorce') three times, even over a phone – without negotiations or any other preliminary steps. An end to this practice had been

a decades-old demand of Muslim women and the women's movement, which finally materialised in 2017 when the Supreme Court of India deemed the practice to be a violation of the Constitution. But instead of simply implementing the Supreme Court judgement, Modi's government used the judgement as a weapon against the Muslim men by enacting Triple Talaq law which *criminalised* the civil procedure of divorce in Muslim communities. This law simply targeted Muslim men without protecting the rights of the divorced Muslim women.

In 2020, there was a widespread mobilisation of Muslim women against the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), which constituted the Modi government's game plan to take away the citizenship rights of Indian Muslims. In the early months of 2020, Muslim women took to the streets in the hundreds of thousands for several weeks, staging sit-ins and demonstrations against the CAA-NRC. The presence of such large numbers of Muslim women in public spaces raising political demands was perhaps unprecedented in India and held a glimmer of hope for the women's movement, which stood in complete solidarity with them.

As these mobilisations gained immense support across the country, the Modi government was caught in a cleft, neither willing to withdraw the CAA-NRC nor able to ram it through in the face of the immovable women on the frontlines. However, many of these struggles came to a standstill as the pandemic swept the country.

Looking Ahead

The government's inept handling of the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in hundreds of thousands of casualties, with catastrophic images of death and hopelessness dancing across screens as Indians gasped for air. The Indian economy is in shambles with no prospect of immediate recovery. The crisis of migrants who returned home to unemployment continues. Working-class women are lining up for employment guarantee work that is inadequate and are demanding more. Once again, issues of hunger and unemployment are back on their plates. Tens of thousands of women community health and childcare workers who were at the forefront fighting the pandemic, and who received universal appreciation, are yet to be paid their wages and are gearing up to fight the budget cuts to the community schemes that employ them.

Though the Indian women's movement has seen many ups and downs over the decades, it has remained resilient, adapted to changing socioeconomic conditions, and even expanded. The current situation might present an opportunity to strengthen mass movements and to steer the focus towards the rights and livelihoods of women and workers. The ongoing Indian farmers' movement, which started before the pandemic and continues to stay strong, offers the opportunity to steer the national discourse towards such an agenda. The tremendous participation of rural women, who travelled from different states to take turns sitting at the borders of the national capital for days, is a historic phenomenon. Their presence in the farmers' movement provides hope for the women's movement in a post-pandemic future.





A seaweed harvester facing the rough seas.

Illustration: [Ingrid Neves](#) (Brazil) / [Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research](#)

Reference photo: [M. Palani Kumar](#) / [People's Archive of Rural India \(PARI\)](#) (Tamil Nadu, October 2019)

Endnotes

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- 15 Manuvadi: someone who venerates the regressive laws on caste, gender, and religion laid down in the *Manusmriti*.

- 16 Communalism in South Asia refers to the idea that religious communities are political communities with secular interests that are opposed to each other. Political parties that subscribe to the worldview of communalism are called communal parties; terms like ‘communal violence’ and ‘communal riots’ are used to refer to clashes between people belonging to different religious communities in the context of an atmosphere charged with communalism.

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