

FEMINIST MOVEMENTS IN INDIA

A Study of Stree Sangharsh, Forum Against Oppression of Women, Vimochana, and Saheli

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Abstract: The present paper is an attempt at feminist historiography that revisits the role of post 1970s women organizations, specifically focusing on Stree Sangharsh, Forum Against Oppression of Women, Vimochana, and Saheli. Indian women adopted the mechanism of 'gendered resistance' against the vilified society in various anti-patriarchal agitations, like anti-alcohol and anti-price rise movements, campaigns against sati, dowry, and rape, and campaigned to raise the consciousness of women towards their rights through protest march, legislative debate, street theatre and other interactive modes. Analyzing activist feminist movements juxtaposed with theorizations, the paper concludes with the Indian feminists' attempt to create feminist solidarity of *bhaginivarg* (sisterhood) as posited by Padma Anagol, which resounds bell hooks' idea of sisterhood.

Keywords: Feminist Activism, Feminist Historiography, *Bhaginivarg*, Feminine Genius.

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1. Introduction

A feminist historiography rethinks historiography as a whole and discards the idea of women as something to be *framed* by a context, in order to be able to think of gender difference as both structuring and structured by the wide set of social relations.¹

Feminist historiography aims at reconstituting history critiquing the systematic exclusion of women from 'his story' and relocating new subjective position for women. The illustrious history of Indian women's organized activism has been largely undermined by the academia. Although the women's organizations had made significant contributions in the nationalist period, Partha Chatterjee points out the "seeming absence of autonomous struggle by women themselves for equality and freedom."² The present paper deals with feminist historiography to showcase the feminine genius in the pioneering work of post 1970s women's organizations, specifically focusing on Stree Sangharsh (New Delhi), Forum Against Oppression of Women (Maharashtra), Vimochana (Bangalore), and Saheli (New Delhi), through their audacious campaigns against myriad forms of sexual violence and state mandated violence against women along with campaigns for women's rights. The members of these four groups were the pioneers for transforming lives of those women who were provided no aid, be it from the family or the society. These groups went to the grass-roots level undertaking women issues of the middleclass and lower class and galvanized the government. These four women's groups stand as ambassadors for women's issues, representing women as a whole.

¹Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, "Introduction" in *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History*, eds. Sangari and Vaid, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989, 3.

²Partha Chatterjee, "The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question" in *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History*, eds. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989, 329.

The study brings in a brief account of the emergence of the Indian women's movement in order to prepare a background for the four women's organizations under discussion, highlighting their achievements. The members of the groups are no less than feminine geniuses who work in consonance to establish social unity and turn out to be instrumental in changing the social order. By building up an analogy between the previous phases of feminist activities and the feminist activities of the current time, an effort is made to draw the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and challenges these organizations face.

2. The Emergence of Women's Movements in India

In the 1940s, women's movements merged with Nationalist, Tebhaga and Telangana movements, but women's issues were not highlighted because these movements were primarily with political agenda. Moreover, political and ideological differences created divisions among the feminists. Women's consciousness for their own rights became noticeable only in 1972-73 when movements, such as Shahada and Anti-price rise movements, set up demonstrations against anti-alcoholism and wife-beating. The movements, with their agenda of raising social consciousness, organized women of different villages to protest against such acts; they broke alcohol pots and publicly humiliated wife-beaters. It was the first movement in which women organized themselves against social ills and the leadership also remained with them.

The instances of budding autonomous women's movements gradually developed to focus more on problems and oppressions specific to women. Women from the factory also mobilized themselves and formed women's trade union, like Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA, 1972) which campaigned for anti-alcoholism and urged for women's self-reliance. In 1973, the United Women's Anti-Price Rise front, a nationwide agitation, evolved to combat against inflation; its effects were seen in Gujarat. This movement paved way to Nav Nirman movement (1974) and eventually influenced latter day feminist activism. These movements formulated the ground for a

new wave of feminism, which largely focused on women's equity and rights. The Committee, which was set up on UN recommendations to analyze the status of women in India, published "Towards Equality" (1974) which revealed the plight of women and the equity of the sexes as sham.³ This eye-opening report led to considerable outpourings of feminist activities in the years to follow.

The late 1970s and 1980s saw the emergence of diverse heterogeneous feminist groups that did not cluster women's problems but perceived it on the basis of differences of class, caste, and religion. The recognition of differences gave rise to debates regarding the methodology of action, and as a result, women from all sections of the society, including housewives and working women, were pooled in the consciousness raising programs. Stree Sangharsh, Vimochana, Forum against Oppression of Women, and Saheli were among the many pioneering women organizations of the late 1970s and early 1980s of the new movement, which swept the socio-political arena of the nation. These groups actively took up women question by raising hitherto unaddressed issues of rape, sexual harassment at workplaces, dowry-related crimes, and female foeticide among other issues.

3. Stree Sangharsh

The first protest against dowry started from Hyderabad in 1975 by the Progressive Organization of Women. However, the Emergency period nipped all sorts of protest, due to which crime cases against women grew increasingly. Stree Sangharsh, a feminist group of Delhi, emerged in 1979 to put a check on such crimes. Its members, like Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, studied many cases of dowry deaths and decided to organize a

³"Towards Equality: Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India," Government of India, Ministry of Education & Social Welfare, Department of Social Welfare, December 1974, <<http://pldindia.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/Towards-Equality-1974-Part-1.pdf>> (3.4.2016).

campaign against the death of Tarvinder Kaur.⁴ After the incident, they performed a street play, *Om Swaha* (performed by Theatre Union, the cultural wing of Stree Sangharsh), to protest against dowry. Eventually, the play was performed by other feminist organizations in "mohallas, colleges, parks and genteel residential areas"⁵ and also in areas where cases of dowry deaths occurred. Theatre was used as a medium to propagate social messages and to sensitize the masses. The dialogues of *Om Swaha* had a very sharp weighted tone interrogating the audience: "fight raises questions for all of us—how long are we going to watch women live and die like this? ... support the struggles of the Hardeeps and Kanchans of our society."⁶ This protest created a new landmark in the history of women's rights as slogans for Hardeeps and Kanchans were raised for the first time which depicted the condition of these victims, thus, representing the plight of women in general. Recollecting the audience reception of the play, Anuradha Kapur said:

A young woman had been burnt near Delhi University. We performed right in front of the house where it had happened ... Afterwards, tears were streaming down the women's faces. It was enough to halt any further disturbances the macho gang might have contemplated.⁷

In spite of facing many deterrents from politicians, policemen, and patriarchy, the women activists of Stree Sangharsh did not

⁴Her in-laws murdered Tarvinder Kaur, a young girl from Delhi, for not fulfilling the dowry demands. When Tarvinder declared that both her mother-in-law and sister-in-law set her on fire, the police nullified it and registered it as a suicidal case.

⁵Uma Chakravarti, "Cultures of Resistance: Women's Movement as Performance" in *Women Contesting Cultures*, eds., Kavita Panjabi and Paromita Chakravarti, Kolkata: School of Women's Studies and Stree, 2012, 63.

⁶Stree Sangharsh, "Following Up Anti-Dowry," *Manushi* 4 (December 1979 - January 1980), 36, <http://www.manushi-india.org/issues/issue_cover4.htm> (3.4.2016).

⁷Eugène van Erven, *The Playful Revolution: Theatre and Liberation in Asia*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992, 119.

deter themselves from marching ahead with their mission. Their voices were carried forward by other female activist groups through the play *Om Swaha*. The ruffle created in the society through this play was a kind of achievement which helped the activists get the support from media. Women from all walks of life came under the banner of Stree Sangharsh, which provided them a platform not only for active participation but also for asserting their muffled voices. They also extended aid to the victims in legal matters. The mass agitations compelled the government to take a call on dowry-related crimes and as a result anti-dowry cells were established.

Followed by the formation of the anti-dowry cells, Stree Sangharsh was equally involved in protesting against rape cases. A street play, *Dafa 180*, was performed in 1981, which critically exposed the loopholes of anti-rape law and demanded for amendments in it along with the tightening of the judiciary and police investigations. Stree Sangharsh exposed the system by performing the play and condemned the treatment of the public towards rape victims. After operating for a decade, the journey of Stree Sangharsh came to a standstill. The founder members of the group, Sudesh Vaid and Kumkum Sangari, oriented their discussions towards academics by teaching and publishing books on women's issues. They extensively researched on the practice of sati in Rajasthan. Likewise, Maya Rao and Anuradha Kapur, the members of the cultural wing of Stree Sangharsh, contributed to Indian feminist theatre.

Though Stree Sangharsh which was born as a result of certain crisis that prevailed among the women in the society, has in the course of time become more academic and performative. Nevertheless, its achievement is twofold: first, it took up issues related to women in an age which was not so open to women's issues; and secondly, through its mass agitations and performances it brought social awareness among the masses and also compelled the government and the state to take preventive measures to provide them justice. The key player for implementation of the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961 was Stree Sangharsh and its contribution to women question is indeed

commendable. This group's campaigning against dowry murders made it a "household term."⁸

4. Vimochana Forum for Women's Rights

Vimochana Forum for Women's Rights started with a few members who initially worked in slums for women and "came in a more organized way later, in '79."⁹ Taking the help of the judiciary, the members of the group tried to provide justice to the victims. The prominent members of the group were Donna Fernandes, Madhu Bhushan, Celine Suguna, Kalpana and Shakun Mohini. In an age where cases related to domestic violence were suppressed within the four walls, Vimochana took a loud stand to help the victims. With a slogan of "personal being political,"¹⁰ this group advocated for the rights of women both inside and outside home, thus, framing the idea that peace originates from the home itself.

After a survey of the unnatural deaths of married women in 1997-1998, Vimochana took preventive measures in two urban communities in Bangalore where there was highest rate of women's death. Therefore, new intervention centres, such as Angala (Courtyard) and Kuteera (Refuge), were formed. Angala alone responded to 450-500 women and provided them shelter. To create awareness, the group also prepared documentaries which exposed the atrocities levied by the patriarchal social structure.

Vimochana also raised its voice on the issues of female foeticide. The members of the group undertook a campaign in

⁸Radha Kumar, *The History of Doing: An Illustrated Account of Movements for Women's Rights and Feminism in India 1800-1990*, New Delhi: Zubaan, 2006, 118.

⁹Laxmi Murthy, "Transcript of the Interview with Vimochana," Poster Women, <http://www.posterwomen.org/Poster_women/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Transcript-of-the-interview-with-Vimochana.pdf> (14.3.2016).

¹⁰Vimochana Forum for Women's Rights, "About Us: Our Vision," Vimochana Forum for Women's Rights, <<http://www.vimochana.net.in/about.html>> (14.3.2016).

2001, protesting against sex-selective abortions and abusive use of the technologies by the medical professionals. They also promoted their agenda through training sessions and workshops with all sorts of women, including anganawadi members, medical and nursing students, and even Gram Panchayat, Zilla Panchayats. The group conducted raids to sack rackets involved in sex-selective abortions. Its presence was also registered among the college students through organizing street-theatre, poster making competitions, essay and elocution competitions.

Vimochana collaborated with other groups, like Centre for Informal Education and Development Society, bringing marginalized women to the mainstream and creating a dialogue for social transformation. Motivated by the 'Women in Black' movement which aimed at achieving world peace across the globe, Vimochana, too, started a similar wing in Bangalore which carried out demonstrations, rallies in front of the diagnostic centres to protest against sex-selective abortions in Mandya taluk. The Women in Black also staged peace marches during Ayodhya riot.

In collaboration with other groups, Vimochana organized Courts of Women in Bangalore with a design to hold a talk on the strategies to combat violence against women. This program has provided a platform to both rural and urban women to voice their personal struggles and come out of the oppressive domains. Vimochana took dowry murders as structural violence in its courts. In recent times, this group has internationally collaborated with El Taller, an NGO organization based in Tunisia, to develop Courts of Women in India and throughout Asia. One of the members of Vimochana, Donna Fernandes is a faculty of trainers in the UNICEF and works for quick implementation of laws so that justice is not delayed in such cases.

Domestic violence and physical assaults were also the prominent concerns taken up by Vimochana. In 1990s, Vimochana, along with Sumanahalli Ashram, helped the victims of domestic violence. It was actively involved in voicing the rights of women workers of the garment factories in

Nayandahalli and Bomanhalli (Mysore). The factory workers who suffered from tuberculosis and fatal diseases like HIV were supported by Vimochana. Members of Vimochana are also part of the sexual Harassment Grievances Committee in various states, including public and private sectors, to provide assistance to women. Through Sadhana Mahila Gumpu, Vimochana has fostered support to women in prostitution. The counselling centres of Vimochana provide personal care to women. Vimochana not only conducts training programs on gender sensitivity in various educational institutes, but it also provides public space to women through initiatives such as Courts of Women, Nyaya Panchyats and others to redefine the true form of justice for women.

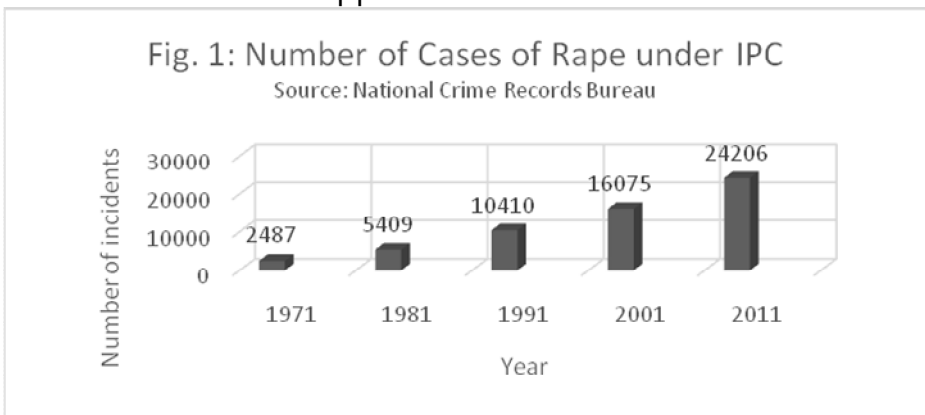
5. Forum Against Oppression of Women

In the late 1970s Post-Emergency period in India, the issue of rape, particularly custodial rape, garnered the attention of the feminist organizations and women's movement achieved national importance with anti-rape mobilizations in the political firmament. Fuelled by numerous rape cases in the Emergency period which coalesced into the most infamous Mathura rape case¹¹ followed by the judgement of the Supreme Court,¹² anti-rape campaigns started in different cities (the increasing number of reported rapes is given in Fig. 1). Forum Against Rape (FAR) was formed in 1980 in Mumbai by Sonal Shukla, Sujata Gothoska, Shalini Mahajan, and Apoorva Kaiwar. FAR decided to re-open

¹¹Mathura was a young orphan Dalit girl who loved a boy named Ashok but her brother did not give his consent and he filed a complaint against Ashok. Both the families were brought to the police station for general investigation but Mathura was told to stay back while the others were told to wait outside the police station where Mathura was raped by the policemen.

¹²The judgment of the Supreme Court noted: "Because she was used to sex, she might have incited the cops (they were drunk on duty) to have intercourse with her." Sujata Anandan, "Remember Mathura?" *Hindustan Times*, 26 December 2012, <<http://www.hindustantimes.com/columns/remember-mathura/story-20s5V27y2cHKCbTNCy9XII.html>> (3.4.2016).

Mathura's case and wrote to all the feminist groups in India to protest against the injustice done to Mathura following an open letter written by four senior lawyers against the judgment of the Supreme Court. They decided to march together in the streets on International Women's Day asking for the re-trial of the case. FAR later re-organized as Forum Against Oppression of Women (FAOW) in 1982 to include in its purview various women's issues, like sexual harassment, dowry crimes, domestic violence, representation of women in media, rights of working class women as well as sex workers and Lesbian and Bisexual women, class and caste based oppressions.



FAOW followed radical feminist analysis of rape (they shouted slogans like "All men are potential rapists"¹³) intertwined with socialist assumptions of class distinctions to apply in the Indian context. Analyzing Indian social system they realized the need for different methodologies to combat violence against women in India: "A women's movement exists and will develop, but it would have to take a different trajectory from the movement in the West."¹⁴ They analyzed rape as a way of feminizing women through the retaliatory force in order to maintain the hegemonic hold of patriarchy and power hierarchy. The Forum saw cultural codification of women's bodies as a way

¹³Geetanjali Gangoli, *Indian Feminisms: Law, Patriarchies and Violence in India*, Hampshire: Ashgate, 2007, 25.

¹⁴Sujata Gothoskar et al., "Documents from the Indian Women's Movement," *Feminist Review* 12, 1 (1982), 101.

of conditioning and restricting their mobility. Their analysis of rape recognized that

Any struggle against rape will necessarily have to challenge this particular idea of *Abru* – honour – of a woman's honour being invested in her body being unused or used 'properly', ('properness' being decided by today's male dominated society). Too often we fight against rape but share these attitudes about women and their worth.¹⁵

The Forum individuated different types of rape — rapes in custody, during wartime, communal/caste riot, and class struggles — and opted different methodologies to combat such crimes.

Women's Centre (1981), a crisis intervention centre of the Forum, not only helped the victims of sexual and domestic violence but also supported labour class women by providing them an alternative space outside the patriarchal domain. The victims were provided a home where they stayed together which created a bonding among them: "Few had experienced violence in our own lives and wanted to share the experience with the other women who were in similar situations."¹⁶ The group also tried to recover dowry from the families accused of domestic violence to financially aid the victims. Due to certain differences, Women's Centre disassociated with FAOW in 1987.

Stereotyping of women in media was also addressed by the Forum through a letter to Doordarshan against a TV serial "Swayamsiddha" in which a divorced woman was ridiculed along with a feminist group.¹⁷ After the Nirbhaya case, the Forum propelled a discussion in bringing amendments in anti-rape law to ensure fair investigation, speedy trial and justice,

¹⁵Gothoskar et al., "Documents," 98.

¹⁶Forum Against Oppression of Women, "Moving ... But Not Quite There – Evaluation Report of One Decade 1980-1990," Mumbai: Forum Against Oppression of Women, 1991, 4.

¹⁷Gangoli, *Indian Feminisms*, 76.

and demanded that sexual violence be considered as gendered crime by men.¹⁸

The Forum has also voiced for the rights of Lesbian-Bisexual-Transsexual communities. By supporting lesbianism, they criticized hetero-normative structure and believed lesbianism could be an effective way of escaping heterosexual violence. Through their exemplary support to the bar dancers in 2005, FAOW moved away from the mainstream feminist agenda. It filed a petition in the Bombay High Court along with the Mumbai bar dancers' union for removing the ban: "... the ban on dancing in bars would deprive thousands of women of their livelihood, and make them and their families vulnerable in more ways than one."¹⁹

The achievement of this group is manifold. The Forum was successful in mobilizing women across the nation unitedly to fight for justice for the first time in the history of Indian feminism. The Forum, among all the existing women's organizations, took up specific cases and campaigned against the injustices meted out to the victim. Eventually, the campaigning against Mathura rape case led the Government of India to amend rape laws i.e., the Criminal Law (Second Amendment) Act 1983 (No. 46) in the face of 114 (A) on 25th December, 1983. Although the bill partially accepted the demands of the feminists, many new laws were amended and the Section 376 of IPC was subjected to change which added other sections making custodial rape a punishable offence and the burden of proof for

¹⁸"Submissions to Justice Verma Committee by Forum Against the Oppression of Women (FAOW), Aawaaz-e-Niswaan (voice of women) (AEN) Lesbians and Bisexuals in Action (LABIA), Mumbai," *Feminists India*, <<http://feministsindia.com/women-and-law/justice-verma-submissions/faowlabiaaen/>> (14.3.2016).

¹⁹Forum against the Oppression of Women, "Feminist Contributions from the Margins: Shifting Conceptions of Work and Performance of the Bar Dancers of Mumbai," *Economic & Political Weekly* xlv, 44 (October 30 2010), 49, <<http://www.epw.in/journal/2010/44-45/specials/feminist-contributions-marginsshifting-conceptions-work-and-performance>> (3.4.2016).

rape charges was shifted to the accused in case of custodial rapes. The joint campaigning against rape established new landmark in the development of feminism in India drawing feminism in the mainstream political activism. The nationwide agitation regarding domestic violence ensured the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act in 2005. Today, FAOW actively takes up issues concerning gender discrimination and women's health. It drafts bills against sex determination check-ups, sex-selective abortions, sexual assault and domestic violence.

6. Saheli Women's Resource Centre

Started as a crisis intervention centre in Delhi (1981), Saheli was founded by Kalpana Mehta, V. Rukmini Rao, Amiya, Bharati, Buchy, Gouri, Vichitra, and Vidya who campaigned against the forced sterilization program initiated by the government during the Emergency period. Saheli questioned the drive through protests, rallies and performing street-plays. Inspired by *Om Swaha*, Saheli staged *Norplant* (1990s), which focused the poor women of Delhi slums, to spread awareness amongst the masses against the government's merciless decision of subjecting 20,000 women for trials of the hormonal implant, which might prove fatal to their lives. Later, the play was staged nationwide forcing the government to ban unnatural contraceptives.

Critiquing the stereotypical notion of "private family matters",²⁰ Saheli mobilized against sati, rape, sex-selective abortions, and honour killings among other issues of violence against women. It questioned the practice of sati following Roop Kanwar case.²¹ For the first time, issues of religion and community identity were raised in public forum. After several agitations, the convicts were arrested but later they were

²⁰Saheli Women's Resource Centre, "Violence," *Saheli Women's Resource Centre*, <<https://sites.google.com/site/saheliorgsite/violence>> (14.3.2016).

²¹In 1987, Roop Kanwar, a young widow, was burnt in the funeral pyre of her husband in Rajasthan, which gathered attention all over the country.

acquitted by the court. Along with several women's groups, Saheli organized demonstrations, rallies against the practice of sati, and finally, the Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act was passed in 1988. At Jhunjhunu in 1996, Saheli protested against the celebration of four hundred years of Sri Sati Dadi and lodged complaints against the organizers for glorifying Sati, which was criminalized in the 1988 Act.

Focusing on sexual harassment, Saheli conducted a survey on working women in 1998 to figure out cases of molestation at workplace. Through a street play *Mahaul Badalna Hai*, performed during 1999-2000 in Delhi, it held discussions on women's safety at workplace. This consciousness raising agenda was carried through conferences and seminars as well. It also counselled the victimized women and extended help in legal matters. It worked for establishing 'women's space' where women could break their silences against all sorts of atrocities. Saheli strived hard to help the victims of domestic violence in particular. All these efforts of Saheli aimed at changing the perception of society towards women. Their extensive campaigns included distribution of pamphlets in markets, streets, university campuses, with slogans, such as "NO MORE VIOLENCE", "Speak up, Delhi, Stop Rape", "Dilli Chuppi Todo! Hinsa Roko". Saheli actively participated and contributed for the implementation of new rape laws. Recently, it came forward to support a young victim, but it was accused by the police for abducting the girl and for running a brothel. In the Delhi gang rape (2012), women's organizations and franchises along with Saheli came to protest against the rapists. The group wrote letter to the Justice Verma Committee in 2012 suggesting amendments in rape law along with amendments in non-penetrative sexual assaults.

Since the late 1990s, the group has been actively working for Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual-Transgender community. In 2004, the members of Saheli joined the Voice Against 377, an alliance with the NGOs and other progressive groups that registered a petition in Delhi High Court which criminalized adult consensual sexual relations by reading Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code. Campaigns and rallies were carried out in the

streets by Saheli at the Delhi Queer Pride events (2008, 2009) which worked hand-in-hand with women's movement so that sex workers' job would be defined as a job, dancers in bars would be able to walk freely, *hijras* and *kothis* would live with self-dignity and murders would stop in the name of honour killing. Songs like "Uth Jaag Meri Behna", "Hindu Mandir Mandir Bol, Muslim Masjid Masjid Bol", "Kaisi Neeti Hai" were played during rallies which helped in re-kindling the thought of oneness amongst women. Despite several hurdles, Saheli endeavoured for the security of prostitutes and transgender people, normally abandoned by the society. Talking about the achievements of the group, Kalpana Mehta said:

... 25 years have gone by, and we are still here. When Saheli started in 1981, we did not know how far we would come. The values have not changed... I want to congratulate ourselves, those who have gone by and those who are here, as well as those who will come, for keeping us going for a long long time.²²

From a crisis intervention centre, Saheli has now turned into an official body that works for women empowerment by drafting letters and staging protests. Today, Saheli is also a part of nationwide alliance called Women Against Sexual Violence and State Repression which works to stop terror against women by the state.

7. Changing Lives, Changing Feminist Directions

The nineteenth century women's/feminist movements concerned mostly upper and upper middle class women interspersed with communal identity rather than becoming a movement for all women. According to Sumit Sarkar, the attempts at improving material condition of women and their "controlled emancipation" by the early nineteenth century

²²Saheli Women's Resource Centre, "25 Years of Saheli: Celebration & Struggle. Strengthening Autonomous Politics," *Saheli Women's Resource Centre*, December 2006, <<https://sites.google.com/site/saheliorgsite/autonomy-funding/25-years-of-saheli-celebration-and-struggle-strengthening-autonomous-politics>> (3.4.2016).

western educated male reformers were purely "personal necessity" to survive "social ostracism" and alienation from the common mass.²³ The lower middle class and lower class women were merely the object of nationalist construction of the woman-subject as according to Mrinalini Sinha, "... between both colonial and male nationalist constructs of the colonized female, a so-called 'authentic voice of modern Indian womanhood' [as claimed by Sarojini Naidu] had emerged."²⁴ However, the members of the feminist activist groups of the late 1970s and 1980s were more from the middle class and lower middle class background who took up issues directly associated with the lives of the common masses. The involvement of the poor, rural, working class women, who sometimes were the pioneers of some widespread movements, like the anti-alcohol agitation in Andhra Pradesh, Shahada movement in Maharashtra, to name a few, remained unnoticed.

The feminist movements of the past century had neither any seeming connection between the localized struggles nor any pan-Indian leadership. There was little consensus among the activists regarding the methodologies and subjects of protests. The attempt at forming all India women's groups was also met with failure, largely due to the variance in caste-class-religion as well as the hegemonic hold of the patriarchal system that is so deeply rooted in the culture of the Indian society that it is difficult to understand it to be the cause of women's oppression, unlike the western society. Therefore, there is no clear consensus formed on feminism and this might be the reason behind non-availability of distinct feminist theory in India. However, the principal weakness of the past movements might have been, in an ironical way, its greatest strength. These feminist organizations differed in varied perspectives/methodologies

²³Sumit Sarkar, "The Women's Question in Nineteenth Century Bengal" in *Women and Culture*, eds. Kumkum Sangari and SudeshVaid, Bombay: SNDT Women's University, 1985, 157-172.

²⁴Mrinalini Sinha, "Reading Mother India: Empire, Nation, and the Female Voice," *Journal of Women's History* 6. 2 (Summer 1994), 6, *Project Muse* (12.3.2016).

and were separated by geometric boundaries, still their polyphonic voices shared a common vision — to fight for women's rights both in and outside the family promoting empowerment of women. Despite having some leftist lineage, these groups kept themselves away from direct political interventions to work as autonomous bodies. At the surface level, these groups may appear like isolated bodies, but in practice, they were well coordinated. Even today, they have been marching collectively with the idea of changing lives and transforming the society. Women from all sections of the society joined the movement and the urban middle class was able to unite them under a common objective, although it differed geographically. The plurality of issues that were taken up by the women's groups speak for the broad range of Indian feminist purview.

Unbarring all the constraints and boundaries, these women came together for women's rights combating against the myriads forms of sexual violence and state mandated violence. This collectiveness has given rise to the spirit of *Bhaginivarg*²⁵ (sisterhood) and this common identification has bred feminist solidarity to transgress gender discrimination and androcentrism. The concept of *Bhaginivarg* coincided with the idea of Black women's notion of sisterhood where feminists, such as bell hooks, inspired Black women to create their own bonds, which "strengthened part of resistance struggle."²⁶ Similar kinds of gender violence – regardless of caste, community and culture – served as a bonding for women to collectively protest against the atrocities done on women as a whole. Women's organizations became the agents for changing the condition of women, motivating other women to work collectively in a more vigorous way. As transition faces fatal blows, these feminist groups, too, have encountered difficulties in accomplishing

²⁵Padma Anagol, *The Emergence of Feminism in India, 1850-1920*, Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2005, 219.

²⁶bell hooks, *Where We Stand: Class Matters*, New York: Routledge, 2012, 151.

women's equality, but by working unitedly they have enriched the ties amongst themselves bringing in social change.

The four groups, Stree Sangharsh, Vimochana, FOAW, and Saheli, were amongst a few primary feminist organizations, which became model for other such organizations to help the weak, submissive and muted voices. Until 1970s, women's issues were not in the forefront but after the emergence of these feminist movements, women's issues became more visible. Through protests and campaigns, women were empowered and they created their own space embarking on their own individuality. The groups offered counselling and support services and with the aid of these groups, many women sought help and gained the courage to start their life anew. These groups gained its credibility when women stepped out of their private domain to speak for themselves. Efforts made by these organizations stand distinct which created a better environment for women. While the groups launched agitations, they also rendered courage to women who broke their silence and fought for their rights. Later several feminist organizations, such as Anweshi, and Asmita in Hyderabad, Jagori, Tarshi and others in Delhi, Sachetana in Kolkata, Gulabi Gang in Uttar Pradesh and many more NGOs and Women's cells, cropped up to safeguard the rights of women and to empower them. Despite more openness in the society and advancement in technology, women's problems have multiplied variously: cases related to rape, sex trafficking, eve-teasing, witch-hunting, exploitation of women in work place, child-marriage, acid-attack, physical assaults, cyber-crime, forced abortions amongst many have increased in recent times. These problems have become a potential threat to women's safety and dignity, yet numerous feminist organizations have been working in concurrence with each other to help women come out of adverse/untoward situations. The sole motto of these organizations is to empower women, to establish a balance, just, and compassionate society where male/female could work in harmony and solidarity.

The protests against custodial rape of Mathura as well as the campaigns against dowry in different parts of the country had

been landmarks in the history of feminist movements in India in the sense that it gained a national status and implemented stringent laws. Building on the successes of the activist movements of the previous century, feminist organizations should look forward to the implementation of such laws for effective changes in the society. The groups should embark on consciousness raising agenda, more specifically amidst rural women, and offer more support centres to battered women.

8. Conclusion

Women were largely seen as "victims of social practices or targets for development ... never as participants in development"²⁷ because of the patriarchal social order. The activist feminist movement of the last quarter of the twentieth century brought women into the subject position, making them sisters-in-arms. Eventually, various strategies used by women's organizations, taking up the feminist motto of "personal is political,"²⁸ ranging from marching protest, legislative debate to using street theatre as part of consciousness raising agenda, were instrumental in building strong bonding among women to effectively curb gender violence way of legal amendments and promoting women's empowerment that redefined women's movement in India. Politicizing personal saga of victimization, these groups solicited platforms where women identified with each other through their individual experiences in understanding political dimension of their subjugation and organized women against patriarchal social structure that operates through the finely disguised power dynamics in the private sphere. The feminists of these groups had a distant vision of creating an unbiased society for women, which the governments were not successful to promote. These women are the real makers of the society and left no stone unturned to make

²⁷Neera Desai and Maithreyi Krishnaraj, eds., *Women and Society in India*, New Delhi: Ajanta, 1987, 6.

²⁸Carol Hanish, "The personal is political," *Notes from the second year: Women's liberation* (1970), 76-78, <<http://www.carolhanisch.org/CHwritings/PIP.html>> (11.4.2015).

the government hear their appeals. History has recorded many genius men but it has not been accommodative to women excellence. The compounding of the feminine with genius is quite rare expression. However, now it is time to look at the feminist historiography in order to re-instate those who have contributed to women's development and have posited exemplary courage in coming out to the public spheres in an age governed by conservative mind-set for women. The feminine minds behind the formation of such groups may aptly be called feminine genius, if at all the present day society is ready to register the word 'feminine genius' in its social dictionary. The women founders of these groups proceed with the burden of history at their back and try to improve the material condition of the 'weaker sex' which raise them above ordinary human beings and thus, can be hailed by the "provocative hyperbole"²⁹ of genius "... to the extent that ... [they] are able to challenge the sociohistorical conditions of ... [their] identity."³⁰

²⁹Julia Kristeva, "Is There a Feminine Genius?" *Critical Inquiry* 30, 3 (Spring 2004), 493.

³⁰Kristeva, "Feminine Genius?" 504.