

Women's Rights and Naxalite Groups

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by the so-called protagonists of techno-managerial packages. The rural health mission would greatly benefit if it follows the vision of those that scripted India's

health service system based on an integrated and unified approach as against the selective interventions being proposed in recent years. **EPW**

## ANDHRA PRADESH

# Women's Rights and Naxalite Groups

*For over two decades, the feminist critique of revolutionary left movements in Andhra Pradesh has questioned the lack of visibility for gender concerns on the party agenda. The recent meeting and exchange of views between women's groups and parties on the radical left, however, provided cause for optimism on feminist politics and its impact on revolutionary movements.*

VASANTH KANNABIRAN, VOLGA,  
KALPANA KANNABIRAN

The meeting between women's groups and the CPI (Maoist) and CPI (Janashakti) on October 19, 2004 provided reason for optimism on the question of feminist politics and its impact on revolutionary movements. A week before the talks commenced, Ratnamala, former president of AP Civil Liberties Committee and a founding member of Stree Shakti Sanghatana in the early 1980s published an article in Telugu in *Vaaritha* on October 9 where she raised the issue of lack of visibility for gender concerns within the party agenda. Total prohibition was the only demand on the revolutionary agenda, she said, that women had achieved through a historic struggle, but she went on to ask, 'Is the women's question limited only to prohibition?' Revolutionary perspectives, according to Ratnamala define our society as neo-colonial and semi feudal only, whereas they ought to speak of it as being defined in terms of patriarchy, caste, class, religion and class. Discussing the indicators of women's status in Indian society today, she placed 12 issues that she felt needed the parties' attention for mobilisation: Equal wages; mobile crèches and crèches in neighbourhoods; rehabilitation of sex workers; working women's hostels and student hostels in the districts; shelters for women at the district level; prohibition; implementation of the Supreme Court judgment on sexual harassment at the workplace;

media portrayal of women; identity cards and ESI for domestic workers; prohibition of amniocentesis.

Around the same time, Jayaprabha, a feminist poet published a satire in *Andhra Jyothy*, "Does War<sup>1</sup> Mean Only Men's War?" (October 4, 2004). Both these articles in fact reflected the feminist critique of revolutionary left movements in AP over the past two decades and more.

The issues raised in the meeting appear to have generated a demand for further dialogue from women comrades in the party. With the first phase of peace talks coming to an end, the party following Ratnamala's initiative, sent out invitations to women's groups, activists and writers for a dialogue on women's issues. Many women at short notice turned up at the venue well prepared with a barrage of questions and doubts. Groups like Chaitanya Mahila Samakhya, Progressive Organisation for Women, Stree Shakti, All India Praja Pratighatana and other individuals, writers, activists and journalists attended the meeting.

On arrival we were welcomed by three unarmed women guerrillas of the People's Guerrilla Liberation Army (PGLF) in their early twenties. The two banners on the stage declared 'no revolution without women' and "there can be no women's liberation without the liberation of the working class".<sup>2</sup> Everyone was given literature, including a red book, which stated the CPI (Maoist) position on the women's question. It is worthwhile at this point to mention key areas of concern in

the little red book. The first chapter speaks of the social system and the origin of patriarchy, stating, interestingly that while socialist feminists locate patriarchy in the superstructure, the party believe that patriarchy is at the base and must be destroyed to achieve an equitable social order. The second chapter speaks of the economic system, of which the first section deals with housework, and the rest with women's role in social production, the role of family and marriage in women's oppression. The third chapter looks at culture and the perpetuation of discrimination against women through education, media, religion and religious fundamentalism, caste, and goes on to speak of the role of law, motherhood, the position of single women, the issue of sexual orientation, etc. The fourth chapter speaks of politics, beginning with an analysis of violence against women, and then goes on to delineate various trends in feminist politics today. While the document itself merits a detailed discussion and dialogue with the party leadership and cadre, just the diversity of issues that it attempts to grapple with and the prioritisation of issues speaks volumes about the influence of feminist discourse in Andhra.

As feminists who have engaged critically with revolutionary politics and writing in the state on the one hand and have been actively involved in human rights advocacy on the other, we went to the meeting with a written statement voicing our concerns on the relationship between revolutionary praxis and women's lives/feminism.

### Open Letter to Revolutionary Parties<sup>3</sup>

The discussions today with women's groups come at the end of twenty-five years of incessant efforts at democratisation by women within parties and groups outside concerned about the position of women within political structures. This marks a watershed in the demand by women to be recognised as citizens and the demand for treatment as agents in the creation of new and radical political structures. We sincerely welcome your effort to understand women political concerns particularly relating to equal citizenship.

While governance is something that is immediately relevant in the public realm of the state and civil society, it also proliferates to the other niches of civil society and politics, the same basic principles governing all realms. And representation is critical to effective governance. While it is generally true that leadership is drawn in movements and the state from the middle

classes, the movement towards a radicalisation of the polity inevitably involves the gradual and increasing delegation of power and authority to those classes whose interests must be represented in order to eliminate oppression. For us as women, this immediately raises our central concern. Why is there no significant representation of women in the upper echelons of your political structure and leadership? If the number of women in leadership reflects a corresponding disproportion in membership, our question is, what is it about the questions you are raising or the manner that these questions are being articulated that does not draw women in significant numbers. If there is a parity of membership among women and men, why is it that women are unable to rise to the position of intellectual and political leaders of the movement?

We have been raising the concerns stated here for two decades now, as is evident from our writing and work over this entire period. Even when the Concerned Citizens' Committee was set up four years ago, we asked why it was that there was only one woman on the committee at that time who dropped out very soon, when in fact there were so many in the state who had an active interest in various aspects of this issue. When the talks were fixed and all sides chose their representatives, none thought of inviting women to be part of deliberations that by your own admission affected thousands of women who lived in remote areas and were victims of the conflict. Yet after the peace process commenced, we were asked by one of the mediators what women's groups were doing in the peace process. We would also like to state that as women we have an active interest in processes of democratisation, and secularisation of civil society. We believe that women's survival rests on the complete abatement of conflict and the elimination of all forms of conservatism and orthodoxy. Gujarat 2002 is a stark reminder of the grave assaults that women must bear in situations of conflict and moral policing. And this has more to do with patriarchal ideologies than to do with any specific religious ideology. All ideological apparatuses predicated on an understanding of the subordinate status of women during periods of crisis exhibit a range of unanticipated and uncontrollable assaults on women. And these assaults and threats of assaults are viewed even by visionaries and leaders as part of larger cultural questions that cannot have immediate remedies and not as the simple derogation of the life and security of person of women which must be handed over to the due process of law. We hope therefore that in engaging in this dialogue, we are beginning to work towards a transparent, democratic public space that will fulfil the promise of true equality for women.

The questions we have raised in the past have often been dismissed as diversionary and bourgeois. What are these questions?

– Why are women confined to marginal roles in struggles? Even where they wield arms, responsibilities for caring and providing reproductive labour is still that of women. While we have information that there has been some change with men also sharing in the cooking and fetching of food, the sexual division of labour has not significantly altered. And this is visible in the fact that women are completely absent from any accounts of intellectual creativity or agency in the struggle and consequently in the leadership as is evident from the composition of the front face of the parties.

– What is the exact nature of the part played by women in the struggle, and how has this participation been theorised by the party?

– Women's questions are generally dismissed as devoid of ideology and political perspective. Yet, it is our belief that a political perspective that is not nuanced by an understanding of gender as a structural and ideological fact is a seriously flawed perspective.

– By not taking questions raised by women seriously and by not dealing with those questions both at the ideological and programmatic levels, by dismissing women's questions as trivial and 'personal', there is an active disempowerment of women as a class within the movement.

– While parties are willing to examine power relationships between classes, castes and the state, the more fundamental and ubiquitous power relationship between men and women never enters the account. This serves to mask the power that men wield over women and guarantees immunity especially to perpetrators of violence against women both within the party and outside.

The control of sexuality, which is the cornerstone of patriarchy operates not only in feudal neo-colonialist societies, but also in semi-feudal patriarchal revolutionary attitudes. The inherent belief that female sexuality must be controlled to maintain social order is responsible for the multi-layered oppression of women, which revolutions have been totally unable to eradicate. This results in forced marriages, the belief in the inevitability of marriage for women, abduction of minor girls for marriage and sexual harassment of women. Sexual harassment includes accusations of sexual and moral-ethical misconduct when women refuse to conform or when they ask questions related to democratic governance within parties.

At a more pernicious level, this internal ideology of male domination gets projected onto grass roots work, with similar

solutions being implemented outside. Witness accounts of the marriages of rapists to victims as the solution to rape.

We strongly recommend that the terms 'veeramatha' and 'veerapatni' be expunged from revolutionary vocabulary, as they are extremely sexist terms. The glorification of motherhood masks the active denial of entitlements and equal citizenship in practice, while idealising sacrifice, service and unquestioning surrender to sons. This glorification of motherhood is a mirror image of the simultaneous worship of the mother goddess and the debasement of women in reality. This mystification of reproductive labour serves to keep women in chains. Finally the collapsing of all issues of women's rights into liquor and prohibition reflects a blindness to the much larger, much more pervasive violence against women. In order to address the issue we must begin to understand it. This effort is particularly important because the climate is now conducive for revolutionary parties to mobilise and work with mass organisations. We hope that this will mark the beginning of the process to write women into public discourse in more meaningful and far-reaching – truly revolutionary – ways.

## The Revolutionary Position

The party leadership, Ramakrishna, Sudhakar and Ganesh from CPI (Maoist) and Amar and Riyaz from CPI (Janashakti), personally met each participant and sought detailed introductions, before going on to state their respective party positions on the women's question. The position as delineated both in the individual statements and as a response to the discussion that followed may be simply stated as follows:

Although there has been a significant increase in the number of women coming into the movement, and also a significant increase in women's leadership at the mandal and district level, the situation still left much to be desired. The spokesperson for the Maoist group, Ramakrishna was candid in his observation that the internal structure of the party was bound to reflect a patriarchal orientation as the cadre is drawn from different sections of society and draw from their knowledge and

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consciousness from those backgrounds. However, since the process of change is continuous and dynamic, transformation cannot be seen as a one-time measure. Since it is easier to gain political authority than it is to eliminate patriarchy, the revolutionary route will make more deep-rooted change easier. While there was a feeling that women writers and activists who had written on this issue had done so without factual information and irresponsibly, there was simultaneously an undisguised concern about the persistence of patriarchy within the party. The question was an ideological one. The problems women face are ideological, but yet there are 'practical problems' in women's situation arising from 'natural factors' ('prakrutiparamaiyna ibbandulu') that constrained women's full, efficient and equal participation in party leadership. A possible reason, it was suggested, was the failure of women's movements to provide support to women within the party in terms that enabled them to destroy patriarchy within the parties. Even in mass mobilisation, Janashakti, for instance, was able to address questions related to labour without difficulty, but found itself unable to address patriarchal oppression effectively. Further, during times of extreme state repression, several issues are pushed back to deal with immediate contingencies.

The concerted opposition to patriarchy is part of a larger democratic process. Given the encrustation of patriarchy within party structures and personal lives within the party, women a decade ago organised themselves separately and apart from the men, primarily as supports rather than as independent agents. The year 1995 witnessed the beginning of more open discussion on the fact that the family ideology governed gender relations within party and on the need to bring personal issues out into the open. The People's War Group in that year undertook a 'diddubaatu karyakramam'<sup>4</sup> (rectification programme) to bring about awareness on issues of patriarchy and to eliminate it. The demand for this programme came from women comrades. Although as a result of this campaign, the number of women coming into the party today is higher than the number of men, women are not yet able to transcend the limitations of family ideology. The solution to the problem does not lie in the formalising of representation through reservations, as there is a difference in capabilities between women and men, women's understanding and development is necessarily limited by their

exclusion from the public domain prior to their entry into the movement, creating an 'efficiency problem'. So the effort of the party would be to focus on the creation of leadership that would alter the character of the base within the party. "It is only when all other sites of oppression are eliminated that the family can be wiped out, and that would be the road to women's liberation." But, "it is easier to eliminate imperialism, and feudalism than to eliminate patriarchy".

### The Feminist Response

The discussion then grew very animated with each group firing questions at the leadership.

One point that was emphasised was the fact that it was because of a faith in the movement and a shared vision of a just social order that women were present at the meeting. The faith in revolutionary politics went hand in hand with the right to question and critique every flaw in the party's programme or perspective. The glaring lack of women at leadership levels and their lack of visibility needed to be addressed. The deaths of women leaders in encounters cannot account fully for the absence of women's leadership. Then there were questions about the silence of women in the party that put them out of reach. There were also questions about how far feminist writing and criticism has influenced the party's thinking. The women present pointed to the need to look at the institution of the family, what happened to women and children in the areas of conflict, particularly children born to cadre after they had joined the party, they pointed also to the need for diversity. Also the centrality of land and exploitation of dalit women in the 'devadasi system' could be effectively addressed, women activists felt, by asking the government to allocate endowment lands to dalit women trapped in this system. The use of extremely demeaning images and language about women that either spoke of 'barrenness' or glorified motherhood by people as distinguished as the peoples' poet Gaddar did tremendous disservice to women's struggles for dignity and recognition.

Many women who had left the party were working with poor women and for the party to build alliances and working relationships with people and groups engaged in similar work would, it was felt, strengthen democratic processes generally. Women felt that they had plenty to contribute practically and intellectually and that

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this potential could be drawn upon by revolutionary parties. But for this, the party had to be willing to engage with criticism on its treatment of various aspects of the women's question. It was also pointed out the women's movement could only provide impetus, support and intellectual tools to dismantle patriarchal biases within the party, but it cannot actually break the patriarchy within the party. Since the parties had repeatedly asserted in the course of the peace process that they would function within the constitutional framework, representation in terms of physical numbers at every level formed an intrinsic part of democratic structures. And in a situation where there is a concentration of power and authority in a certain class, (in this case men), bringing about equal representation would mean that women could only assume leadership to the extent that men are willing to relinquish the authority already with them. The failure to do this would only mean an unequal struggle and further concentration of power in the hands of men. If the parties were actually mobilising the masses on women's issues as well, and if the resistance included a resistance to patriarchy, the rule of equal participation in governance must first be applied and achieved within the party before being applied outside, as it is only the actual application of the rule that would result in an understanding of it and a commitment to it. Finally the question of class, caste and patriarchy as interlinked systems of oppression, was yet to figure in revolutionary discourse, especially in revolutionary writing.

### Unresolved Questions

A step back briefly into time by half a century and statements from the leaders of the Telangana Peasant Struggle with regard to their women comrades, seem identical to the present. It is as if the women's question is on a treadmill rather than on a revolutionary track. And still, there is a distinct sense of a shift, a quiet attentiveness, modesty and careful reflection on the part of the leaders that is disarming, a willingness for a more involved, continuing debate, and an admission of failure to democratise male-female relations within and without.

The delineation of the party position was far from linear and unequivocal. There were disjunctures and gaps that reflected a struggle with ideas and received knowledge systems, as also a grappling with new, unfamiliar ideological frameworks

that seemed to have answers and yet were cause for discomfort, if not hostility. The fixing of 'women's natural constraints' and its natural opposition to men's ease in public domains, the generalising of 'knowledge' and 'understanding' to mean knowledge from a male standpoint and the assumption of an unconstrained male experience as normal exposes an ignorance of the long-standing feminist critique of this separation. There is also the more difficult question of the relationship between masculinity and the bearing of arms, which did not figure in the debate, but remains a critical feminist question, particularly relevant in this context because the impasse in the peace process was caused by their assertion that the weapons they carried were extensions of their bodies, the analogy between the farmer's plough and the revolutionary's gun being particularly problematic. This inability to think through issues of gender in any far-reaching way is reflected in the prioritisation of the agenda for struggle as well, the critique of which has still not ruptured their traditional formula of women's liberation only after the liberation of the working class. There is no engagement with the

contradiction between admitting the resilience of patriarchy and pushing the most difficult struggle to the bitter end. And finally, even while recognising the problem of inequality within, the firm denial of the need for mandatory sharing of leadership with women, positing instead a long term struggle with cultural questions, in philosophical rather than material terms, tends to blur the distinction between these and parliamentary parties on the issue of women's representation in governance. But let us hope that this is only the beginning of a long awaited dialogue that will yield results sooner rather than later. **EPW**

### Notes

- 1 The reference is to People's War, which in Andhra is often referred to as 'War'.
- 2 The second banner, it appeared to us, was an unconscious inversion of the original Lenin quote 'there can be no liberation for the working class unless women are completely liberated'.
- 3 This letter was given [in Telugu] to the leaders of the two parties at the commencement of the dialogue on October 19, 2004 by the authors.
- 4 'Diddubaatu' is also the title of noted early 20th century Telugu writer-social reformer, Gurajada Appa Rao's short story about a woman who reforms her husband.

## The Revolving Door of the IMF/World Bank

*The revolving door between financial firms, the US government and the IMF/World Bank, raises a disturbing question about the legitimacy, advisability and appropriateness of allowing senior policy-making officials of the Indian government to immediately take up post-retirement jobs with the IMF/World Bank or with global 'consultants' at huge salaries, or inviting persons who have been working with them to occupy senior policy-making positions in the government.*

PRASHANT BHUSHAN

The disbanding of the consultative panels by the Planning Commission in response to the objections of the Left to the inclusion of representatives of the IMF/World Bank/ADB and international consultants has only partially set the controversy to rest. The issues continue to be relevant, particularly when the Planning Commission itself is headed by one whom Jyoti Basu called 'a World Bank man'.

The objection of the Left to these foreign experts was that they represent agencies and organisations who owe allegiance to and push the agenda of the rich countries, especially the United States, and in particular their multinational corporations. Our English-language business press, which led the chorus against the Left on this issue, saw nothing wrong with representatives of these organisations' becoming part of our official decision-making process. These representatives are mostly Indian citizens, said one paper, in