WE live in interesting times, so goes the ancient Chinese curse. A series of new trends – liberalisation, globalisation, privatisation, assertion of the Right, challenges to the secular and liberal – face us as we enter the new millennium. Their implications for the poor, the marginalised and, in particular, women are only now beginning to get delineated and articulated. How has the women’s movement engaged to influence and change the manner in which these processes are likely to affect women?

Looking back at the last quarter of the 20th century, it is clear that of the several people’s movements, the women’s movement helped set an agenda which could not be ignored, in turn influencing and shaping state policy and programmes for women. A key turning point was the study on the status of women in post-independent India, Towards Equality (1974) which set the stage for the women’s movement to engage with the state.

From at least the 19th century the role of the state in defining and influencing the status of women has informed the many struggles for women’s equality. The state, its policies and programmes continue to be the focus of much of the energies of the women’s movement in post-independent India as well. These are perceived as critical elements that need change if the position of women is to change. The relationship with the state has been fraught with conflicting emotions – fears of co-option, subversion of the feminist agenda, of becoming reformist rather than enabling radical social change. The dilemmas of this interaction have not, however, prevented an interaction with the state. What has varied is the nature of issues and the degree of involvement.

From the 1970s the women’s movement has tried to establish an autonomous identity for itself and attempted to bring about change through a process of influencing and pressurizing the state and its structures. Though there were several strands of continuity from the pre-independence era, the foci now is more sharply on gender inequity and oppression that affects a wider class/caste of women. A concern with violence against women, although not with the earlier issues of sati and ill-treatment of widows but with rape and wife
battering; with marriage, not widow or child marriages but divorce, maintenance and child custody; with legislative reform, not the enactment of more laws but with bringing in amendments that facilitate implementation of existing ones; with education, not only spreading educational facilities but attacking sexist and stereotyped textbooks; with equality, not only equal rights, but equal opportunities to work and with equal pay.¹

This dialectical relationship resulted in some remarkable outcomes: legislative provisions to protect the rights of women – viz. the laws on dowry, rape and domestic violence; setting up of women’s protection cells; reservations in panchayat bodies; earmarked allocation of funds for women in development projects; making more visible women’s work through the national census and economic surveys; creation of departments to address women’s development issues; re-designing of development programmes to address the issues of women’s equality and empowerment. The list could go on.

The 1980s saw substantial progress in the women’s movement. The changed political scenario and the agency of key people within and outside government ensured that women’s groups and activists played an important role in the formulation of the New Education Policy, the National Perspective Plan for Women and the setting up of various national commissions. The pioneering work of SEWA in organising women in the unorganised sector contributed to the setting up of a National Commission for Self-Employed Women that made wide-ranging recommendations to ensure the security and rights of women in the informal sector, a sector that is growing by the day. The setting up of women’s studies centres by the UGC provided legitimate space within formal academia for university women to contribute to the movement’s understanding of the status of women in various fields.

The more visible engagement, however, took the form of opposition to various laws, in particular relating to rape and dowry. The struggles against the population policies and contraceptive injectibles too drew a remarkable resonance from diverse autonomous women’s groups across the country. Much of this engagement involved lobbying, pressurising and highlighting women’s issues/contributions to inform policy formulation and, in the health sector, using judicial structures to challenge state policy.

There were fewer examples of a direct involvement with the government and its development programmes. Nevertheless, despite fear of co-option by the state, a few women both as individuals and in groups decided to participate in government sponsored programmes as a means to mainstream the gender question. This, it was expected, would expand outreach to women on a scale that individual voluntary organisations or women’s groups could never
achieve.

The Women’s Development Programme (WDP) in Rajasthan launched in the early 1980s and the subsequent Mahila Samakhya programme launched towards the end of the 7th Plan period demonstrated that spaces were available even within the formal state structures to try and bring about change from within. Women’s groups were involved from the very beginning in the design of these programmes – in the case of Mahila Samakhya, ensuring a clear policy commitment to women’s education and empowerment, in training and in implementation. There were some differences, however, that were to have long term implications for the nature of this involvement.

The experiences of these two programmes provide ample learning on the possibilities and frustrations of working directly with the government. In the case of WDP, located within the institutional structure of the Department of Women and Child Development, a partnership that had worked well for nearly a decade fell apart, when challenges to custom and traditional patriarchal leadership became evident. The state government chose to withdraw all support, highlighting once again the fragility and limitations of such partnerships. Even though the retrogressive stand of the state government in the ‘infamous’ Bhanwari case did elicit strong protests from women’s groups, surprisingly or not so, the subsequent slow demise of WDP did not generate any worthwhile reaction except strengthening the view that direct engagement with government programmes was an exercise in futility.

Considerations about the future of the programme highlighted some basic contradictions, particularly relating to the security and survival of the field functionaries as also the overall framework of such programmes. Expectedly, the former concerns totally outweighed the latter. Women’s groups were unable to successfully present a case for the continuation of the programme. Today the WDP survives only as a token with little substance or support, abandoned as it was both by the women’s movement and the government.

The deeply emotional response, articulating a sense of betrayal by the state, has not resulted in a critical analysis of the framework of such partnerships. If such programmes are to be designed in the future, the discussion has to be on the need for systemic safeguards rather than banking on the support of progressive individuals in the government, on large scale mobilisation and empowerment rather than a focus on individual catalysts of change. Fortunately, though some aspects of this emotional response continue to dog the women’s movement in its engagement with the state, the lessons learnt from the WDP experience have had some impact on other programmes.
In the case of Mahila Samakhya, for instance, a greater degree of autonomy from the government was achieved by shifting the locus of implementation from a government department to a registered society, with the close involvement of women from outside the government. This institutional autonomy has ensured that women’s groups and activists continue to be closely involved in the programme in the different states, even as the effective functioning of national advisory bodies such as the National Resource Group, remains at the mercy of the vagaries of the bureaucracy and government.

Despite the close involvement of some women’s groups in Mahila Samakhya, the bitter experience of WDP had made many in the movement suspicious of such programmes. This perhaps was a result of the programme itself not making a serious enough effort to forge a direct linkage with the larger women’s movement, a position that has at times been interpreted to suggest a muzzling of the autonomy of the programme by the government. As for the programme itself, a low profile enabled it to avert any direct control by the government. The participation of Mahila Samakhya in the recently held Indian Association of Women’s Studies Conference, the only forum that brings together diverse women’s groups, academics and activists, may help establish a more organic link with a wider cross-section of the women’s movement.

Both the WDP and Mahila Samakhya experiences have raised some thorny questions that remain unaddressed. The partnerships were built on the premise that the women’s movement would demonstrate the manner in which women’s issues and development could be conceptualised and addressed within the government framework. Ensuring spaces for women to participate on a larger scale unleashed creative initiative and energy. This has been clearly demonstrated. However, with the withdrawal of state government support for WDP and the future of Mahila Samakhya remaining uncertain, questions related to the security of programme personnel are threatening to overshadow the issues of the large number of poor women mobilised under these programmes. These experiences have raised questions of the desirable life of such programmes, whether the programme personnel ought to be absorbed within the government or seek alternative futures. Mahila Samakhya is only now considering some alternatives.

The experience of the ICDS programme is a telling one where concern about the security of *anganwadi* personnel has completely marginalised any critical examination of the nature and impact of the services to be delivered to poor children and women. For various groups within the women’s movement, the critical issue seems to be the manner in which the state uses women’s labour as cheap labour, confirming once again the view that the state has little real concern for women and their security. In an ironical twist, the
larger constituencies of women the programmes work with seem to remain invisible for the women’s movement as well.

The question of the movement’s engagement with state initiatives for women has come in for renewed discussion in the changed scenario of the ’90s. At a 1993 consultation on Gender and Development, jointly organised by Centre for Women’s Development Studies and HIVOS, Vina Mazumdar, argued that the new economic policies were likely to negatively affect women across the social spectrum, sharpen inequalities, increase poverty and unemployment and decrease access to public services, threatening the survival not only of poor women but activists in the Indian women’s movement as well. In the changed circumstances, ‘Sections of the women’s movement, which had ideological objections to participating in state interventions in support of women, may have to rethink their strategies. However badly they may be designed, they still offer some legitimacy and space to help women organise, obtain some inputs and access power structures. These may be the only channels for struggle for empowerment.’

This plea came at a time when official programmes and schemes were being articulated in progressively radical terms such as empowerment, and social and gender equity. The ‘significance’ of this cannot be underestimated in an environment where ideologically divergent groups, ranging from peoples’ organisations to the World Bank, share the idiom of empowerment, even though it carries radically different meanings for each of them. Unfortunately, while women’s groups have responded with a broad critique of the liberalisation policy, their involvement in designing programmes that affect women has become marginal.

Programmes such as the District Primary Education Programme with a marked gender focus, and Swashakthi, a micro-credit programme for rural women’s empowerment, are more the result of bureaucratic initiatives and have evoked little response from women’s groups either in terms of a direct involvement or a critique. This phase has also seen the incorporation of a gender focus in all development programmes, compelled to a great extent by the requirements of foreign funding that underpins these programmes. While at one level this is seen as a positive development, these initiatives have come in for sharp criticism from women’s groups and activists on grounds that they promote an instrumentalist logic of women’s development and empowerment as essential for development in itself, simultaneously marginalising issues of gender equality and equity.

A critical element of several of these initiatives that posits savings and micro-credit as the main strategy for women’s empowerment, equality and escape from poverty has not been as sharply critiqued or addressed. Currently, the best funded and largest programmes in
the government sector promote the view that organising poor women around an agenda of thrift, micro-credit and micro-finance, serves not only the larger development agenda of the country, it is also the most effective means of empowering women.

In most programmes, be it rural development, education or health, women are being mobilised around thrift and credit. The use of the term empowerment obfuscates the reality that thrift and micro-credit programmes in themselves do not equip women to challenge gender discrimination and fight for their rights, or ensure their access and control over resources.

In Andhra Pradesh, the home as it were of the self-help strategy, even the celebrated Nellore example, where women moved from strength to strength through literacy, struggles against arrack and mobilising savings, has yet to be fully researched to establish the sustainability of the gains made by women. Though autonomous women’s groups joined their rural sisters to push the prohibition agenda, there has been little engagement with what is happening in the lives of the self-help group members. Are they empowered? Do they control the money they save? Will it help them get out of the debt trap? Has some measure of gender equity and equality been achieved? The questions are many.

Meanwhile, the strategy continues to inform every one of the state’s initiatives for women – be it rural development in general, the UNDP Poverty Alleviation Programme or its successor, the World Bank supported District Poverty Initiative Programme. They threaten to engulf the entire state over the next few years with unfortunately little of the empowering processes of the Total Literacy Campaign that energised the Nellore women.

One reason why women activists and groups have been slow in reacting to such programmes is that they have insufficiently engaged with issues of livelihood, largely leaving them to be dealt with by the voluntary sector. Instead, the issues that witnessed large scale networking and mobilisation across ideological divides and brought diverse groups together were the agitations and campaigns against price rise, state violence and custodial rape as in the Rameeza Bee case, and the campaigns to change the rape law. The links between the women’s groups, perceived as providing the leadership of the movement, the voluntary sector and women organised in the rural areas were and remain tenuous at best. Barring a few exceptions, like the Bankura project of the Centre for Women’s Development Studies, this is the scenario across the country.

However, the women’s movement that had, by and large, neglected strategic planning and shied away from the politicisation of issues, is finally, though gradually, moving in this direction in some areas. The experiences of the National Alliance of Women (NAWO),
Health Watch and the networks built around participation of women in panchayati raj are indicative of these new trends.

The process of decentralisation to panchayat raj institutions has opened exciting possibilities for women’s participation in the political field. It has led to the building of countrywide linkages between women’s groups, activists, the voluntary sector and poor women in rural areas to give teeth to the 73rd and 74th amendments to ensure a real and effective participation of women. The Singamma Foundation in Karnataka, for example, is attempting to bridge the divide between the Indian women’s movement and its urban leadership and the vast number of poor rural women who are coming into positions of leadership by creating networks for advocacy at national, regional and local levels, and developing support mechanisms for elected women. However, just how sustainable these linkages will be in the long run remains to be seen.

Health is one area in which the debates and protests against the population policies of the country have translated into the setting up of an independent ombudsman agency, Health Watch, comprising of independent researchers and activists from across the country. Building on the campaigns for a change in government health policy, Health Watch maintains close links with the Ministry of Health to facilitate the transition from a target based approach to a holistic reproductive and child health strategy. The interaction with the government has gone beyond suggestions for policy reform to a more long term involvement in policy review and programme planning. Implementation and impact are assessed through studies and research, which in turn are used to suggest changes. The linkages with implementers of this strategy in the government and non-government sector, however, continue to remain ad hoc and individual based.

NAWO, that came into existence post the Beijing Conference, plays the role of ombudsman, using international fora to pressurise the government into fulfilling its commitments to the Platform of Action agreed to at the Beijing Conference. Most recently it has submitted its own report to CEDAW as an alternative to the one presented by the government. The occasion, however, was not used to launch a massive countrywide debate on the country’s performance on the commitments made at Beijing, thereby missing out on the opportunity to educate and create an informed lobby outside the usual restrictive and exclusive networks of the women’s movement. This once again highlights not only the limited outreach but also a mindset that does not recognise the importance of large scale mobilization, a throwback to older modes of mobilisation and organisation based on a small circle presuming the leadership of the masses.

Women’s education, another key concern that has never fully
captured the imagination of the women’s movement, was the focus of a recent consultation organised by Nirantar to strategise for the 10th Plan period. This consultation involving a wide range of groups and institutions, represented a positive initiative by civil society groups to lobby and ensure that woman’s education is once again not subverted in the next Plan period and receives its due share of funding and focus.

Notwithstanding these positive strands, in general the issues that have captured the attention and energy of the women’s movements raise disturbing questions about the intrinsic character of the movement. The women’s movement includes a broad spectrum of women operating within a loose ideological framework – autonomous women’s groups, party based activists, academics and to some extent women in the voluntary sector, almost all upper class and urban. Often left out of its ambit is the large mass of rural women who are mobilised and organised through the plethora of development projects and programmes via mahila mandals and NGOs. This highlights the need for the women’s movement to not only network with these groups but also help foster a critical understanding of state initiatives to facilitate an informed participation, an area that has received little attention.

There are other dilemmas. The focus on decentralisation and the involvement of the voluntary sector in the delivery of services and the design and implementation of key elements in several development projects, has once again heightened fears of cooption. The leadership of the movement – primarily urban, English speaking and upper class – perceives involvement in implementation and monitoring as marking complicity with state agendas, a fear that has grown in the current political configuration of a right wing fundamentalist party in power.

This fear of cooption and complicity, however, is neither sharply articulated nor does it inform the engagement with global sisterhood forums or international donors. There is little critical appraisal of agendas set by the Northern forums/donors, except in the case of the World Bank that is perceived in the same light as the state. There are other problematic concerns. Given the class character of the leadership of the women’s movement, its language, idiom and ideas are more understood by global forums than by the vast number of women within the country. This is a harsh reality we all need to confront.

This inability to transcend its urban character is reflected in the types of issues that have captured the imagination of the movement, as also the areas in which its energies are concentrated, leading to an unstated hierarchy of issues. Advocacy for policy reform focuses on state violence against women, women’s sexuality and reproductive rights, often to the detriment of other concerns.
Though at an ideational level, the movement seems aware of the threats to women from the shifts in economic policy and the rise of fundamentalism in society and polity, it still shies away from evolving a public position on engagement with government programmes that are affecting the lives and livelihoods of the vast majority of women in India.

As we enter the new millennium, it is clear that state initiatives will continue to play a prominent role in affecting the vast majority in the country. The situation is much too complex and riddled with contradictions to permit a simplistic either-or stance. All strands of engagement have a place – the lobbyists, thinkers, researchers and doers.

Further, there is a vast subaltern leadership in the making – large numbers of women elected to local governance bodies and those mobilised through various development programmes – that needs the intellectual insights of the larger women’s movement. Unfortunately there are few attempts to link up and network these different strands, a situation that we can ill-afford given the challenges that threaten the survival and dignity of our sisters.

Footnotes:
