II

VIRTUAL IMAGE

Visibility of the Women's Question in the Media

Equality before law

Power and visibility of women

Pak Feminists Fight for Equal Rights

Laws don't deter crime against women

Diverse nature of feminism

None of these are headings from any feminist journal or women's magazine. Nor are they from the women's pages of the daily newspapers.

The first is a front-page report in the Delhi *Statesman* on the landmark Saira Banu (alias Subanu) case judgement. The second is a review of six feminist books in the *Hindustan Times* literary page. The third is an edit page article in the *Free Press Journal*. The fourth is a front-page 'news analysis' feature in the Delhi *Times of India*. And the fifth is a top article on the edit page of the *Hindu* around the time of the UN conference in Nairobi, to mark the end of the Women's Decade in 1985.

Women's issues are not invisible anymore in the general mass media. Nobody would describe the *Hindu* as a feminist or radical paper, yet the Sunday magazine section on July 12, 1987, actually had five separate items on topics pertaining to women. Nobody would describe the *Telegraph* either as feminist or radical, but this is the paper which published on its edit page, *Manushi* editor Madhu Kishwar's perceptive analysis of the Shah Bano issue, reproducing in two or three parts from the original article in her feminist journal.

The fact that serious discussions with a feminist perspective on a range of issues (and not just the so-called women's issues) appear regularly in progressive left-wing journals and papers is not surprising. For, progressive movements, their struggles for social change, and the questions they raise on oppression and exploitation inevitably get coverage in the anti-establishment media.

What is noteworthy about the women's question is its high visibility today in the establishment media. Where it exists side-by-side with the old sexist images — the stereotypes, the back-page pin-ups and centrespreads.

The Media Mix

Women's issues are today as much a part of the "media-mix" as, say, bonded labour, the environment and exploitation of tribals. Papers like the *Telegraph*, *Deccan Chronicle* and the *Statesman* all have a weekly women's page. The Hyderabad edition of *Indian Express* had a weekly page on women until around August 1987 but since then the page has been dropped and a column, 'Women's Voice', started in its Saturday 'Weekend' feature.

Other papers which, at the time of writing, have a regular women's column are the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* ('Gender Theme') and the *Deccan Herald* ('On Women, For Women'). The Delhi *Statesman* had a weekly 'Women's World' feature until around September 1987, written by a staffer. After she left, the paper has replaced it with a weekly slot for an article on women's issues.

Women's columns in some papers are written by one regular contributor while others have a variety of contributors. Though not all such columns have a radical perspective, and though the women's pages still have a beauty-cookery formula, a certain amount of feminist writing too gets included in most of these pages and columns.

New glossies have made their appearance in the women's magazine category, like *Flair* and *Savvy*. Neither the old nor the new women's magazines have abandoned the traditional formula features but both types also publish articles with a feminist perspective and give coverage to the activities of women's groups. Besides this, all the mass circulation current affairs magazines publish serious topical reports on women's issues.

Legitimation of the Women's Question

The women's question gained legitimation in the general establishment media rather tentatively during the early years of the Decade but very substantially by its close in 1985. A major reason has been the high *audibility* of women's issues,

particularly during the latter half of the Decade, with the validity of these issues getting acknowledged in national and international forums. Governments and UN agencies announce schemes for women, and policies in areas like health, education and employment. Social science reports analysing women's conditions get published. Activist women's groups stage protests and launch campaigns. All these make news, and get reported in the news columns, commented upon in editorials and analysed in feature articles.

The Progressive Journals

Newsletters and magazines brought out by progressive activist groups have been meaningfully highlighting the women's dimension in a variety of radical causes. For example [illegible] l of health, the *medico friend circle bulletin*, the Voluntary Health Asso[illegible] ndia's journal, *Health for the Millions*, and the *Radical Journal of Health* have all brought out issues on the topic of women and health with articles by feminist writers. Journals like *Social Scientist* and *Lokayan Bulletin* have published special issues focusing on the women's movement.

In addition, a number of feminist newsletters in English and the regional languages have come into existence, published by activist groups and mainly reaching activist circles. Two women's studies centres, Research Centre for Women's Studies at the SNDT University of Bombay and the Centre for Women's Development Studies in New Delhi bring out newsletters. The latter also publishes an annual journal, *Samya Shakti*, each issue being devoted to a central theme.

Manushi, a bi-monthly English language feminist journal published from New Delhi is the only major magazine of its kind with a national readership.

A radical journal like *Economic and Political Weekly* (EPW) periodically brings out a *Review of Women's Studies* in addition to frequent articles and editorials on topical women's issues. The left-wing *Mainstream* has a 'Women's World' section which used to be fairly regular but has become sporadic of late, mainly because, I suspect, of a shortage of appropriate contributions. These two journals reach a larger readership than the radical, progressive movement journals mentioned earlier, and are also read in influential academic and administrative circles.

The Left Media and the Women's Movement

The language and perspective of writings on women's issues in left-wing journals are similar to those in the feminist media, and are very often written by feminist writers active in the movement. These writings are obviously far more radical than the kind which appear in the establishment media. Journals like *Mainstream* and *EPW* have consistently been used as forums for highlighting the questions raised by the movement in the major recent campaigns — for the amendment of the rape law, and the campaigns against female foeticide and injectable contraceptives — as well as to focus on a range of issues like sexism and violence against women.

A left-wing newspaper like *Patriot* has shown a strong commitment to the women's question. It has prominently displayed articles on feminist issues on the

edit page, published editorials taking a strong stand on various topical issues, and has frequently carried full-page lead features on women's issues in the Sunday magazine section. *Patriot* used to have a fine women's page, refreshingly different from women's pages in the establishment media, but for some reason it discontinued it in 1984 when the paper switched over to phototypesetting. But it still continues to give positive coverage to radical issues and events.

All the above are examples of left-oriented media which are supportive of the left political parties but are independent and do not act as their official organs. On the other hand, the attitude of the *orthodox* political left and its media appears to be ambivalent. Unfortunately, this study could not be extended to the official media organs of the left parties, but the experience of one feminist activist, who has links with some left political groups, suggests that this is an area deserving study.

This activist says that her feminist outlook (she is also associated with autonomous women's groups) has been a source of tension between her and and the orthodox left.[1] Some of her writings and activities have been criticised in official party organs. It is well-known that the orthodox left has misgivings about feminist ideology, but the fact remains that the women's wings of left parties have taken the same kind of stand on a number of issues as the autonomous women's groups have done. It is an uneasy relationship, and a study of how the orthodox left media projects the women's movement should prove to be interesting.

Fight against dowry, exploitation, their main task

NATIONAL FEDERATION OF INDIAN WOMEN

Economic independence, welfare measures, need of the hour

What has been achieved during Women's Decade?

Coverage of Women's Issues in Progressive Paper

Elevating the Women's Question

One may mention here that progressive left-oriented journals in the West, like *New Statesman*, *New Society* and *New Internationalist* in the UK and *Mother Jones* and *Nation* in the US, have all regularly given prominence to feminist issues. Such writings have been integrated into the news, comment and features pages instead of being marginalised into women's pages or columns. This has helped to *elevate* the women's question to the same level of importance as other current affairs topics and political commentaries. Interestingly, while most such writing is still done by activist women and feminist writers, writings with a sympathetic perspective on women have also come from male writers.

In India, while the movement has support from many (but not all) progressive males, and while a number of media men do subscribe to the aims of the movement, by and large radical writings on women's issues have been mainly from women. There may be reportage, editorials, TV or book reviews and an occasional academic piece from male writers, but rarely ever any detailed analytical writing, sympathetically examining the women's question.

In this context, the point made by Madhu Jain, who was the 1987 *Eve's Weekly* Woman Journalist of the Year award winner, is relevant.[2] Acknowledging that it is important to encourage women writing on women's issues, she suggests that the time should come when such awards are thrown open to men too — so that more such issues get written about in the general magazines and are given the same importance as writings on political issues.

Regional Language Media

Information from activists in different parts of the country suggests that the regional press has mostly remained conservative, tradition-bound and hostile to feminist ideas.[3] In her analysis of women writers of Tamil fiction, C.S.Lakshmi has shown that most of them uphold conventional social norms in their writings.[4] The few who have departed from the traditional have never done so radically. She comments that all the writers in her study cater to the big market in Tamil magazines which more or less perpetuates the same values about women as the commercial Tamil cinema.

As for non-fiction, a friend who reads Tamil magazines tells me that a few serious articles on topical women's issues have begun to appear in the serious, small-circulation Tamil journals. However, when even mildly feminist ideas are expressed in the mass-circulation magazines, there is usually an onslaught of adverse male opinion attacking such writers. This is a comment based only on a brief reading of a variety of Tamil magazines during 1986-87, and the issue clearly deserves more exhaustive study.

Altogether, not much information was available on the regional language media for this study. (A short piece by Vibhuti Patel in *Countermedia*, No.4, 1987 describes conservatism in the Gujarati press.) The dominant images of women in different regional media, the attitude of this media to the movement, and the experiences of progressive writers in getting feminist writings published — all these are areas which need to be researched.

"Women's Dimension"

Coming back to the general English language media on which this study has concentrated, one immediately notices the lack of perspective characterising this media's focus on women's issues. This will be dealt with in detail in the next section but it would be relevant to mention here that the establishment media has sometimes missed the point badly.

To give an example, between 1984 and 1986, *Science Today* had a monthly feature on 'Women and Science' but none of these articles threw any light on any real *feminist* aspect of science or science policy. Instead, articles in this feature were on topics like: cooking gas, health and nutrition, perfumes, rangoli, how to make cut flowers last longer and the healing qualities of haldi. They deviated only slightly from the traditional beauty-cookery-house-making formula and were at the most dressed up to provide a little technical information.

The women's cause would have been far better served if *Science Today* had confined itself to its serious science and technology articles and had not felt compelled to pay lip-service to the mood of the Decade.

As absurd as the *Science Today* approach was a recent 'Weekend' feature in the Hyderabad *Indian Express* (August 15, 1987) in which "women's reactions to the VP wave" were put together in an article on V.P.Singh's visit to the city soon after he fell out with Rajiv Gandhi. It was, of course, not surprising to come across such an irrelevant and superficial approach, because women's page articles in this paper have often been simply "by women" or "on women" regardless of whether there is any special women's dimension to the topic or event discussed.

Impact of the Decade

On the positive side, the climate of thinking generated by the Decade has indeed helped to improve, though not fully transform, the perspective of some

"Of interest for women"

In October 1980, *Indian Express* (Hyderabad) started a weekly women's page and printed the following announcement:

"We invite our women readers to write about their problems and experiences in the various professions they are in and about their life at home. Questions will be answered in these columns by a doctor, beautician and cookery expert."

A repeat notice in July 1982 inviting contributions for the page said:

"Articles bearing on subjects of interest for women viz., house-keeping, careerism (sic), cookery, interior decoration, maternity and child welfare, health education, hobbies, festivals, etc, are invited for publication."

of the mass circulation glossies. Of course they still retain their old sexist images, but their idea of what constitutes a special focus on the women's question is certainly changing.

For example, the *Sunday* issue titled 'How Wronged is the Indian Woman?' (December 22, 1985) is, by that magazine's standards at least, a great leap forward compared to its 1981 Annual on 'The Indian Woman'. The former had articles by activists and academics from the movement even if it also had typical establishment-oriented reports. It was *not* a feminist focus but it did provide space for the expression of a feminist standpoint.

The Annual, on the other hand, was an unabashed "masala" issue, guest-edited by self-confessed MCP Pritish Nandy (as he insists in his editor's note).

It presented a male's eye-view of the Indian woman, with actress Rekha on the cover, some predictable articles inside on Indira Gandhi and Mother Teresa, along with some erotica and typical humour. The editorial note proclaimed that the Indian women "wins" not by "battling for her rights" but by "winning you over".

It is the impact of the Decade which has resulted in many of the national dailies and glossies publishing radical articles by feminist activists. Recent winners of the Media Foundation 'Woman Journalist' award have been radical writers — Madhu Kishwar in 1986 and Kalpana Sharma in 1987. *Eve's Weekly* may still be a traditional women's magazine (which now includes some feminist fare), but winners of the *Eve's Weekly* award since it was started in 1984 have all won it for writings with a feminist viewpoint.

It is the impact of the Decade that a magazine like *Newsweek* prominently included, in its coverage on the Gary Hart controversy, an article with a feminist analysis on the issue of philandering by men running for key administrative posts.[5]

Because of the ideas propagated by the Decade, articles critiquing sexism in the mass media have been published by the same sexist media even if the latter has not felt constrained to change its own sexist policies and images in its columns or in its ads. But some responses have indeed been made to these critiques. There have been some policy statements from the government at least, on positive media portrayal of women, and within the media some women have taken successful initiatives towards changing sexist policies and images.

Women's Lib and all that

Media personality Rami Chhabra recalls, during a panel discussion organised by the Centre for Women's Development Studies, how in 1957, a leading national newspaper refused to give her a job though it published her articles.

"Ten years later, the same newspaper offered me a women's column. And then began another battle, as another editor, equally eminent, frequently found the column too 'serious'. What about fashion, beauty, consumer interests, which is what women's columns should cater to, was a frequent reminder.

"Came 1975 — International Women's Year — and some murmurs down the newspaper grapevine of an exhaustive report on women's status, painstakingly compiled and submitted to the government but not brought into public circulation for it documented the devastating condition of the mass of Indian women even as the nation basked in the glory of a woman Prime Minister. Some of us ferreted out the facts brought to light by this report, thus forcing a larger public debate. writing about these facts became a turning point in my life...

"But talking of 1975 I can't resist sharing with you my encounters with the media as I set out with a UN fellowship to cover the international conference at Mexico city. 'UN Conference on Women?' asked one editor in amazement and disbelief. 'Well, perhaps we could take a short one on its opening.' 'Not its outcome?' 'Well, perhaps a short one on the conclusion.' 'And if there are important developments during its three-week course?' 'Well, maybe a piece or two, but we don't want to be flooded.' I made my own telex arrangements and eventually the newspaper front-paged each despatch on Arab-Israeli confrontation and the North-South arguments, but the final recommendations on the condition of women ran tucked into the magazine section headlined 'Women's Lib and All That.' "

— *Samya Shakti*, 1985

How "Real" is the Media's New Image of Women?

In the past the establishment media has been criticised for: 1) Neglect of women's issues in coverage and comment; 2) Perpetuation of sex-role stereotypes; 3) Sexual exploitation of women's bodies.

The second and third charges are as valid today as they were before the start of the Women's Decade. On the face of it, the first charge doesn't seem to hold water anymore. Indeed, there is a school of thought among readers and media people that what they are getting today is an overdose of women's issues.

And yet, what we find today in media's reflection of the women's question is not the real image but a virtual one.

There is a glaring difference between the establishment media's depiction of women's issues, the women's movement and the women's question as a whole, and the progressive media's depiction of the same. Mass media's present focus on women is important and to be welcomed whenever it serves to inform without distortion. But because it also distorts, or tells a partial tale, or sometimes subverts the question, the images it presents have to be looked at closely and critically.

Certainly there is enhanced coverage today but is this enhanced coverage totally wholesome? Does it give the real picture and the full picture? And is it in tune with the aspirations of the women's movement?

Subsequent sections in this book will try to examine these and other questions flowing from the legitimation of the women's question as seen in the media — aspects which go *beyond* the undoubted sexism in the media. Stereotypes and sexploitation of women, about which much analysis is already available, need not be duplicated here.

References and Notes

1. Personal communication.
2. Interview with Madhu Jain published in *Eve's Weekly*, May 16, 1987.
3. At the December 1985 national conference of activist groups in Bombay, during the workshop on communication it was stated that the Gujarati and Hindi press had generally been hostile to the movement. The Marathi press had been more positive. One reason for this is the frequent contributions to the media by activists. In Tamil Nadu, some activists had initiated the use of translations of good English language articles for the local Tamil media. On the whole there was agreement that the English media had projected a more favourable image of the movement compared with the vernacular media. (FAOW-a, 1985)
4. *The Face Behind the Mask: Women in Tamil Literature* by C.S.Lakshmi, Shakti Books, Vikas 1984.
5. 'The Issue was Women' by Suzannah Lessard in *Newsweek* May 18, 1987. This was one of several articles in the cover feature on Gary Hart. The author is described as having earlier, in 1979, written a "controversial" article in *Washington Monthly* on Senator Edward Kennedy and 'Womanising as a political issue'.