To Deny Our Fullness: Asian Women in the Making of History

Parita Trivedi

We find ourselves
in the debris of poverty ridden alleys
Children of an enterprise seeking class
the underclass
of a metropolis
Migrants fleeing cast iron bonds
We leave the comforting embrace of our families
Seek solace freedom in the
cold slums of long decaying cities

Transients exchange smiles words
Ask no name nor caste
Breathe in the contradiction
of alienation and liberation
in the waste ground of dock land
and
in the creaking of doors in the
back yards of an area designed for demolition
Inhabited by the ill-clad ill-fed
for a century or more

Hunger defies historical platitudes
Poverty the lost ambitions
of a shifting past
Alienation crystallizes
Seeks its contradiction
in the cold slums of long decaying cities

Parita Trivedi

Feminist Review No17, July 1984
Conjure up a picture of an Asian woman: what comes in your mind’s eye? Reflect on it a moment: write it down: draw it. Have the words ‘passive, submissive’, been a part of your portrayal? Have you imagined a woman beaten down and subjugated by the arranged marriage system — a woman ruled by the wishes of her family — a woman not able to assert her own ambitions and desires — let alone fight against poverty, degradation, repression? If so — this portrayal of an Asian woman is a figment of your imaginings. Racist imaginings which have taken strands from oppressive Hindu practices, imperialist ventures, capitalist projections, and welded these into an inhumane whole which shackles us down. Your task is to un-learn and re-learn. Our task is to create new imaginings.

This task is made the much more difficult for us by the fact that the history of peasants, of workers, of migrants (and particularly the women from these communities) is unrecorded, unwritten, and therefore not easily accessible. Committed historical writings from the Indian subcontinent (eg Kosambi 1975; Guha, undated) and, more recently, writings on women’s history (Manushi Journal Collective; Asthana, undated), have not become widely distributed in Britain. Instead, what has remained generally available are archaic portrayals of Indian people by colonial administrators, imperialist scholars and social anthropologists — aspects of which have been incorporated into orthodox left and feminist thinking in this country. In the absence of any organic links between Asian activists in this country and those involved in struggle in their countries of origin, the process of analysing the similarities and differences in the ways of organizing, and different forms of struggle, as well as the process of launching an ideological offensive against outmoded depictions and stereotypes, has been slow in coming. There exists a large gap between significant advances made in the recovery and reclaiming of the real history of the masses of Indian people, utilizing these insights to shed light on the structure of the Asian communities in Britain (in terms of caste, kinship, religion etc), and making links between the various forms of struggle in India and those in which we are engaged in Britain today against racial and sexual oppression and class exploitation.

Imperialist formulations have dogged (in fact preceded) our footsteps Westwards. It is not my intention, however, to analyse the various means by which the ideology of passivity, created as a means of subjugation by colonialists, is continued and ever perpetuated in this country today vis-à-vis the Asian communities — through TV, films, newspaper reports, the moves towards multicultural curriculum etc. These latter day moves serve a useful function in a society where racism in institutionalised. The state, with the backing of the media, attempts to create divisions within the Black community (Asian = passive, law-abiding; Afro-Caribbean = violent, aggressive) and in a much more complex way, attempts to co-opt the emerging Asian youth and women’s organizations by offering material support to these ‘modern’ forms of organization which they portray in simplistic terms to be against the ‘elderly’ and ‘orthodox’ sections of the community. I think it is important that these questions be analysed in depth. For the purposes of this article though I have confined myself to pointing to traditions of revolutionary protest in the Indian subcontinent, to bely the myth of passivity — and have drawn upon some of the struggles in which women in India have historically been involved. The purpose of the first part of the article is twofold: to point out, albeit briefly, the complex ways in which different and often varying writings have depicted us as a people (which still governs the way the outside world perceives us today) — and, much more important, to contrast this with the reality of the lives of the peoples in India.

Secondly it will also point to crucial areas of struggle and demonstrate that we have a long history of protest to draw upon. The second part of the article will concentrate on some of the ways in which Asian women have organized over the years in Britain.
General Note

In the historical section of this article, I have concentrated on the history of the Indian subcontinent, and in terms of an analysis of socio-religious ideology, on Hinduism. India and Pakistan came into existence as distinct countries only after independence, of course. Bangladesh came into being in December 1971. I think there are enough similarities in the position of Hindu and Muslim women from the different countries for them to be bracketed together under the term 'Asian' in the latter part of this article. Though there are some forms peculiar to Muslim societies (for example polygamy) on the whole, both groups of women share common forms of sexual oppression; and in Britain, a common racism. This is in defence. On the other hand, for a comprehensive and detailed understanding of the lives of Asian women, a more thorough analysis of the complexities that govern day-to-day reality is needed. If I have not succeeded in doing this — I hope other women (Asian women!) will follow.

In Britain in the various organizations and campaigns, Asian women have consistently come together on a common platform regardless of country of origin, caste, religion. To do otherwise would be suicidal.

Passive, Acquiescent Human Beings

I shall look first at some of the socio-historical writings. Romila Thapar in The Past and Prejudice (1975) points to two differing, but interrelated depictions of Indian history. One was that Indian society had always been an unchanging society based on a cohesive caste structure, which made it oppressive and adverse to any form of change. Alternatively, India was portrayed as an idyllic society, characterized by a harmony and an absence of social tension, whose people were described as being essentially spiritual and unconcerned with material gains. (It is obvious that these two contrasting views are not mutually antagonistic, but contradictorily buttress each other). The first set of views were propagated by colonial administrators and anthropologists, the second, by Indiologists such as Max Muller, and Indian nationalists too who were seeking to regenerate the indigenous culture under attack by colonial rule. The absence of conflict between various social groups was noted, as was the emphasis on a passive world view, and this was lauded and condemned at one and the same time. Thapar (1975) points out that two other dichotomies were used on Indian society, dichotomies which had not existed earlier, but which were imposed by colonialists, and which served a crucial political purpose in aiding and facilitating colonial rule. H.H. Risley, a British Census Commissioner, propagated the Aryan/non-Aryan distinction, based on a supposed racial difference. In India, the Brahmins, through the caste system, were looked upon as preserving an Aryan strain, and ultimately preserving an Aryan (Indian-European) culture from corruption. In classifying social groups in India, a clear distinction was made between the Aryans and the non-Aryans, (to the latter belong the vast majority of Indian peasants and labourers). This European defined imperialist claim was seized upon by Brahmin intellectuals to prove their racial equality with the colonialists and to prove their superiority over the low castes within India (Omvedt, 1976). Thapar (1975) additionally makes the point that the myth of two separate nations — Aryan and non-Aryan — was developed to explain away, and even justify, the tensions between Hindus and Muslims. This era of imperialism produced multi-faceted drives and forces, which while breaking existing social relations, reinforced and reinterpreted certain structures and values, lending credence and legitimacy to existing forms of oppression.

Political economists too, pointed out that the societies in the Indian subcontinent had been reproducing themselves cyclically over centuries, without incurring any
development from within. (The theory of Oriental Despotism, and Asiatic Mode of Production both derive from this view.) They pointed out that when change did come, it was brought from the outside, by colonialists. They saw colonial capitalism as injecting dynamism into a static structure and saw the Raj as bringing the subcontinent into the vortex of capitalist development. They saw this process as opening up the way for an advance towards socialism. Marx himself viewed the colonial process as one which, though brutal in many respects, would break up the self sufficiency and dormancy of the Indian village communities and he saw the forces of colonial capitalism as being progressive ones for India. The Indian subcontinent and its people were thus seen to emerge into the full history of humanity only in and through the colonial encounter.

These differing and stereotypical views of Indian rural communities are no longer accepted by those engaged in a serious study of history. However, these terrible projections of a people unchanging, quiescent and accepting in the face of a brutally exploitative and coercive system has had a lasting effect on the way we continue to be viewed as a people by others. To eulogize the integrative functions of the caste system and the spirituality of the masses was useless: for it was obvious that this 'symbiosis' did not work equally in favour of every caste or every social grouping. The adherents of this view believed that those exploited and downtrodden who did not rebel, did not want change, had accepted the notions of dharma and karma and were quietly waiting for this life to end, in order to receive just dues in their next life. The deep-seated contradictions, splits and tensions within Indian society along caste, religious and tribal lines were glossed over and a superficially well-regulated world was presented. The clear picture that emerged was that the carrion-carrier, the bonded labourer, the tribal woman were abject human beings unable to look up or strive for a betterment of their conditions. Of course this portrayal of the exploited is not limited solely to the Indian masses, but nowhere else in the world has this portrayal been systematized, reinforced and continued, as in the case of the Indian peoples, by using scriptural writings, religious doctrines, anthropological tracts and colonialist ambitions as proofs. I would argue that this colonial ideology served as an essential legitimating tool of subjugation, and it is this that is responsible for the deeply ingrained view that Indian people are passive, non-violent, and self-negating beings, rather than the Gandhian political philosophy which emerged during the nationalist era. The latter advocated passive resistance and though it was passive, it was resistance nevertheless — an important dialectic.

Today the Western world continues to gain a sense of Indian reality from the writings of Western travellers, anthropologists, novelists and intrepid film makers — who continue imposing centuries-old slick falsehoods, merrily disregarding advances made in both historical understandings and political practice. This disjunction continues to be compounded by the fact that most of the Indian writings which are widely available in Britain are again those which are a part of the 'great tradition'. Very few records exist of the day-to-day struggles of those living in pre-colonial India. Consequently a large part of our history is lost to us — although attempts continue to be made to reclaim it through documenting folktales, poems, mythology and oral history. When peasants, artisans, lower castes and whole sections of a society, have been denied a role in the workings of history, it is not surprising to find that the women from these communities too have been effectively silenced.

Living Currents: Women in Social Movements in India

There is now available an important and growing body of literature, which points to
the fact that the peoples of India did not live as fossilized, unchanging objects, but participated in various forms of revolt, the reverberations of which are still evident today. The deep-seated splits in Indian society have erupted at various times in uprisings against exploitative rulers. I cannot do justice to these movements, or to the evidence pointing to them: what I will do is point to the different kinds of protest before moving on to the specific question of women’s participation in struggle.

Kathleen Gough’s short and salutary essay called ‘Indian Peasant Uprisings’ (1974) examines the various types of peasant uprisings in India from the seventeenth century onwards (and bemoans the paucity of evidence available, prior to this period). Gough argues, contrary to Hobsbawm and Worsley, that religious millenarian movements — movements by the dispossessed seeking a millenarian religious bliss here on earth — were not rare in India. She states that a number of millenarian movements arose among Hindus, Muslims, and tribal peoples in the past two centuries, and probably earlier, but until recently their prevalence was overlooked by researchers. She points to the rise in social banditry (a different form of protest, involving individuals and groups in search of social justice) from 1650 in the area between Delhi and Agra, and shows that these multiplied in Mughal times as revenue extraction became harsher. The thugees (bandits) were recruited from the most oppressed sections of society, and operated within strict moral political principles. They were forbidden to kill women, children, youth, cripples, dancers, sweepers, water carriers — that is to say those who were at the bottom rung of society. Instead, thugees waylaid wealthy travellers (merchants, soldiers, moneylenders and servants of the company), strangling them with a yellow scarf and distributing loot to villagers, who in turn provided them with refuge and shelter. Restorative movements, the goals of which were complete annihilation or expulsion of the British, occurred between 1765-1887, and had peasant backing.

All in all, Gough points to the existence of at least seventy-seven revolts in the past two hundred years, the smallest of which she says probably engaged several thousand peasants in active support or in combat. She judges thirty revolts to have affected several thousands of peasants, and twelve revolts to have affected several hundreds of thousands of peasants. These differing protest movements show that the exploited had engaged in the search for social justice in various ways over various periods in history.

These wide ranging forms of protest, from millenarian movements, to social banditry, to important movements by the lower castes against Brahminic domination, and economic and social exploitation (for example the Satya-Shodhais Movement) demonstrate clearly that the search for human dignity, equality and emancipation have important roots in Indian history, and have been a means whereby the dispossessed have attempted to improve their material position and their worth in society. These forms of protest of course were not limited to the Indian subcontinent, but were present in all countries which suffered imperial domination, particularly Asia, Africa and the Caribbean.

The history and continuity in those struggles is apparent today in the range of political activity in Britain’s Black communities. Black people have brought their combined experience of those protests to the streets of Britain.

**Militant Women**

It is only recently that women have started to make inroads into the obscurities and bias of historical writings, which have negated the participation of women in the living and making of present day reality.

The 1940s witnessed several peasant uprisings in various parts of India, and
women were involved in important ways. The Bengal Tebhaga Movement, the Telangana uprising, and the Warli Adivasi revolt were peasant struggles in which women participated in a range of activities, from courier services to armed struggle. These precipitated too the formation of Mahila Samitis which dealt specifically with the forms of oppression suffered by peasant women. The Warli peasant agitation was directed by Adivasi men and women against landlords and moneylenders who kept them as debt slaves. In the Telangana movement women participated actively in the land struggles, agricultural wage struggles, and in seizure of landlords’ grain. They fought alongside the men against the repression of the Razakars and Nizan police, and were later crushed by the Congress and Nehru’s armies.

It is clear too that women participated in the revolutionary ranks of the freedom movement (which was later overtaken by the Gandhi Congress Front). In the 1920s, there was a period of violent action for the achievement of national independence. The Punjab revolutionary, Bhagat Singh, had several women collaborators including Sushila Devi, who was jailed several times, and Durge Devi, who had joined the freedom movement at sixteen, and had shot a policeman in Bombay. In Calcutta in 1928, a women students group (Chatri Sangha) recruited and trained women revolutionaries, organised study circles, and gave lessons in cycling, driving and armed combat. Some of them lived in a hostel where bombs were hidden and delivered to revolutionaries. Kalpana Dutt, for example, who often put on male attire, was arrested and deported for life for her role in the Chittagong Armoury raid. Preeiti Waddadar led a raid on a railway officers club; Bina Das fired on the British Governor of Bengal at a college convocation in 1932, and was imprisoned, and Kamala Das Gupta used to act as courier carrying bombs in Calcutta (Jayawardena, 1982).

Ghandi’s Role

The role of women in revolutionary forms of protest is not acknowledged enough. What has been acknowledged though is Gandhi’s role in the nationalist movement in curbing the power of women, and since Gandhi played a decisive role in formulating practices and values governing women’s role in Indian society, it is important to analyse this.

Women from the middle classes, as well as peasant and low caste women, participated in Gandhi’s programme of non-cooperation, salt satyagraha and boycott of
British goods, with his active encouragement. 'If non-violence is the law of our being, the future is with women', was one of his maxims, so, too: 'To me, the female sex is not the weaker sex, it is the nobler of the two: for it is even today the embodiment of sacrifice, silent suffering, humility, faith and knowledge'. It has generally been recognised that Gandhi played a contradictory role which made it possible for millions of women to participate politically, whilst at the same time, he encouraged a view of Indian womanhood which was elitist and reactionary.

He criticized vehemently the practices of untouchability and child marriage, and the status of widows in society, but ultimately, 'the particular mode in which women's participation in anti-colonial movement was drawn under the hegemony of Gandhian ideology, had a similar conservative impact on women as it did on newly activated oppressed groups, such as peasant workers and untouchables' (Kalpana Ram quoted in Hariharan, undated). Gandhi propagated an ideal of Indian womanhood which had its roots in the myth of Ram and Sita — Sita the ideal wife, Ram the ideal husband (sic). When some women in the National Congress complained to Gandhi about molestation and acts of violence by men against women, he posited Sita as a model (See Mies, 1980). He firmly believed, and advocated that the inner purity of women (and men) would suffice to resist violence (even sexual violence). Gandhi was evasive too, on the issue of economic rights for women. He favoured spinning and weaving as occupations for women because these were 'religious' acts to conform to the 'nature' of women.

The ideology, that women have to be subordinate to their husbands (who symbolizes God incarnate) is a Brahminic creation. It continues to be propagated in the Indian subcontinent and in Britain, and has affected the consciousness of all castes and classes (certainly both sexes too). This does not mean that it is adhered to and practised by all alike. There are important differences between lower caste tribal women and middle class women, and the ruling class ideology of Indian womanhood is increasingly being challenged by women active in political struggle.

This upper caste and class ideology was created and sustained by religion, by liberals and even by social reformers, who sought to improve women's position within the existing social and family structures. This ideology is accepted by Western socialist feminists and still directs the perceptions of those throughout the world who perceive Asian women as submissive, passive, self-sacrificing beings. The oppressive ideology governing women's role in society is grounded in specific relations to men, is a product of unequal structures and practices arising from within Indian society itself, and is lent weight by colonialism. It needs to be understood as such.

To conclude this section, let me reiterate that the characterization of Indian history, Indian society, and the Indian peoples continues to affect the way events in India are viewed today and continues to affect the way Asian communities in Britain are viewed. We need to understand the way political economists and social scientists have reproduced and legitimized certain elite ideologies and structures which we need to break from, in order to point to traditions which will enable us to build a progressive alternative.

Asian Women in Britain

Asian women in Britain have continued the tradition of resistance and struggle against their oppression as women, as workers, and as Black people.

As Black people, the growing unity of the Afro-Caribbean and Asian communities is a mark of rising strength and confidence in a bid to break with the divisive ethnic boundaries and evolve common political strategies to face institutionalized racism and
right-wing attacks. We have drawn inspiration from the same founts — Angela Davis, Frantz Fanon, Winnie Mandela — and have a shared rage against the conditions that face us here in Britain. The youths who were killed in Deptford¹, Altab Ali², Colin Roach³, Gurdip Singh Chagger⁴, were part of us, killed by racists, while their killers were protected by the police and the judiciary.

Just as women engaged in national liberation struggles have affirmed their common interests with the men of their class, in opposition to a common enemy, so too have we. The struggle (for survival) against racism in this country has often assumed priority in our political work. And in a conscious effort to raise the question of our subordination as women, many Asian women have participated in the formation of autonomous women’s organizations which address the whole range of exploitation and oppression that we face.

While Asian and African/Caribbean women have been in the forefront of the initiative to evolve African-Asian unity (within the Organization of Women of African and Asian Descent, Birmingham Black Sisters and Southall Black Sisters), discussion and debate still continues as to the best form of organizing on such a united platform. The crucial question is, what is the most effective way of organizing in order to tackle the specificities of our oppression without any of those specificities becoming subsumed in our wider political fight?

There is no one correct answer to this: the localities in which these groups are based, the composition of the local community, the political evolution of a specific group, as well as the perspectives that the individuals within the group adopt, all inform the political bases of organizing.

There is no doubt that there is a need to consolidate joint action and joint work between the Asian and African/Caribbean communities, either at a coordinating level or within specific political campaigns. However, while consolidating such joint work, Asian women have seen the necessity to organize autonomously, as well as to address the specificity of their historical references and present day realities.

Asian women who have started organizing and struggling, have faced the prospect of being portrayed as ‘different’ from their community. The immense problems faced in being politically active, as well as the sources from which we have drawn nurturance and strength have been denied and negated. Most of us have rejected these attempts to individualize us and insisted that we be seen as a part of a collective protest: drawn from the family and the community.
In conceptual terms, Asian women have not been seen as part of the ‘working-class’. In real terms the economics of imperialism, underdevelopment, sexual inequality, and racism here have meant that the majority of women who came here direct from the subcontinent or from East Africa had no particular work skills and were pushed into unskilled and semi-skilled jobs: in small organized sweatshops or doing homeworking. They fulfill capital’s insatiable need for cheap labour, but have defined orthodox thinking by being in the forefront of the struggle to organize and gain better wages and working conditions, for example at Grunwick and Chix. Asian women have increasingly joined the ranks of wage-earners, making important economic contributions within their families and thus growing in self-reliance, and have posed important challenges to forms of political organization and struggles.

Under successive Immigration Acts, Asian women have only been allowed entry into Britain as dependents of a male worker. Various Immigration Acts have been imposed to control the numbers of workers entering Britain and also to control the process of settlement taking place here. The process of defining and restricting rights of entry, settlement and citizenship culminated in the enforcement of the Nationality Act (1982). This was the logical extension of the State’s attempt to ensure that those who entered Britain retained the status of migrants who could be expelled back to their countries of origin which had nurtured their labour power, when this was no longer needed in this country. In this way the rights of settlement and citizenship were stripped from existing British passport holders from the ex-colonies. Asian women have fought against the institutionalized racism of the state and resisted the State’s attempts to institutionalize their position as dependents of men without an independent political existence of their own.

The machinations and complexities of immigration legislation have affected relations between Black men and women. The struggle to oppose national boundaries and racial exploitation, the struggle to seek and obtain work regardless of race or sex, and the struggle against street racism, have put Asian women in a contradictory position vis-a-vis capital, the state, and the family. Here I will concentrate on two important sites of struggle — the state and the family — in order to explore two important areas in which Asian women have been politically active since 1971.

Asian Women organize

Asian women have fought against racist and sexually-discriminatory immigration rules and practices because these have put them in a vulnerable and unviable situation. The intense harassment faced by those attempting to gain entry as dependents has hit women and children hard. Women have had to undergo humiliating and coercive interrogations to ‘prove’ their legal status as a wife or a fiancée and have even had to undergo virginity tests to prove that the children they wish to have join them are theirs. Some women, such as Anwar Ditta’, have had to fight a long, arduous struggle, and submit to blood tests to prove maternity. Because certain immigration legislation allows women entry to Britain only as dependents of a male worker, their dependency on men has been entrenched and perpetuated. Asian women have participated in campaigns and struggles to ensure that the limited number of women and children who are allowed entry can actualize this right. They have also struggled to ensure that a woman who comes as a dependant of a male worker and who subsequently finds herself unable to live with him, is not deported by the state — which does not give a woman any independent political right of existence here. Lastly, but most importantly, these campaigns around an individual woman’s attempts to have her children join her, or around individual deportation cases, have acted as important organiz-
ational forms which have given Asian women political experience and expression and provided an opportunity to draw together sections of the Asian community in a concerted attack on institutionalized racism. This experience within individual-based campaigns has focussed on the role of the state in particular, and by linking up the workings of immigration rules with the passport raids in homes and work places, and passport checks in welfare agencies, Asian women have been able radically to transform and politicize relations within the Asian community. Through the political experience of campaigning and participating in important struggles, Asian women have broken away from the set roles prescribed to them by society, and provided essential organizational support and political back-up to individual women who are fighting for independent political status in this country.

Nasreen Akhtar, Parveen Khan, Najat Chaffee, Manjeet Kaur have all faced deportation because their marriages fell through and the state decided that they were not entitled to live here. Many white women’s groups have supported campaigns around these individuals because they have seen this as a ‘women’s issue’. Within particular campaigns, it has created tensions because they have failed to see that in reality racial and sexual oppressions operate at one and the same time, in one and the same situation. Let me give an example: Najat Chaffee had faced battering by her husband and had lived in a women’s refuge for some time. Her husband had not applied to have her status regularized, so that she retained an impermanent status in this country. For this reason she faced deportation. The campaign’s main aims were to have Najat granted the right of stay, and to campaign against the immigration rules which are biased against Third World women. In trying to centre the campaign around male violence, rape, and general violence against women, the main issues involved become fudged. Yet this is what some organizations attempted to do. For us, the luxury of separating out ‘women’s issues’ from those of race and class does not exist, and it is only when the specificities of the different forms of oppression are tackled as they manifest themselves in particular realities and particular situations, can we begin to force links and alliances in a rigorous and meaningful manner.

While many individual cases have been won, the legislation remains racist and sexually discriminatory. Our resistance continues.

The State is not our Protector

The state has attempted to pose as a protective apparatus, legislating in favour of Asian women's interests. The ban on the entry of male fiancés (1979-1980), was patently an attempt to limit primary immigration: immigration of young male workers who would join the ranks of the Black working class, and increase its members. It was part of Thatcher’s promise to the white electorate to curb primary immigration, which she fulfilled. The ban on male fiancés was presented as a benign act by the government — to ‘protect’ young Asian women from the ‘horrors’ of the arranged marriage system. It was however, challenged by Asian women because it was patently a racist weapon not to allow entry of potential workers into this country introduced to assure xenophobic fears whipped up by the state. We challenged it not because we wanted to defend ‘cultural practices’ within our community (arranged marriage has nothing to do with ‘culture’ and everything to do with maintaining caste boundaries) but because we refused to abet the state in its racist ploys. We do not invoke the power of a racist state to deny people the right of entry into this country, or deny other women their choice of partner. Whether some of us decide to marry at all, let alone have an arranged marriage, is an issue we define and act upon autonomously of the state. We do not require the racist state to intervene on our behalf. To ally and collude with the racist
state in a pseudo-feminist struggle would be crass and misguided. This has been one issue in which we have had to be clear about how the two areas of oppression — racial and sexual — operate. Today’s arranged marriage system is qualitatively different from that of yester-year and given that the choices open to Asian women are limited, some actually do support the practice. This system of marriage has operated over a long period of time and cannot be wiped away by legislation. In fact the legislation was never intended to get rid of it. The state utilizes whichever weapons best serve its purpose. The state that attempted to ‘protect’ helpless Asian women, from ‘barbaric’ customs, is the very same state that conducted virginity tests on Asian women at Heathrow.

The State and the Family

The particular form that struggle takes, the particular circumstances in which relations are fought out, are historically specific. Nowhere is this more evident than in the discussions of the ‘family’ within the Asian community. There are various ways in which innumerable Asian families have been divided by the operations of immigration regulations; children have been separated from parents and elderly parents from their main supporters. Reuniting people of a particular family and attempting to overthrow the racist legislation have been important struggles for Asian women.

The particular Asian family form has been systematically under attack by the state not only through the workings of immigration rules, but also in other ideological ways, for example through the media and by welfare administrators who characterize the Asian families as being pathological (Parmar, 1982). Activists from within the Asian community (men and women) have come out strongly against this. Asian women have found themselves put in the position of resisting the state in its attempts to control and define our relations within the Asian community. The goal of the state is the control of the Asian community through repression and attack on one of its strongest institutions, the family, with its wide network of ties. Our goal is to resist racial and sexual oppression, and class exploitation. These goals are contradictory not complementary ones. The struggle against the state’s intrusion into our political and personal lives has provided an arena of debate and discussion, as well as organizational impetus, in which the particular issues affecting us in their specificities have been taken
up. In fact this is the most powerful argument for the setting up of autonomous Asian women’s organizations.

The state cannot — and will not — legislate in our favour. This much is clear. Asian women involved in political work have been acutely aware of the co-opting role of the state, and the role of the media in sensationalizing the plight of individual Asian women in this country. Perhaps we have been too conscious of this: for it has hampered public debate and discussion on the specific oppression of Asian women from within the community. In a sense, this has been unavoidable: one cannot escape the constraints imposed on political work when one is living in an intensely xenophobic, hostile society. However, if we are to move forward, the process of public debate has to begin: and is beginning. The fact that there are autonomous Asian women’s groups with important bases in particular localities, who are engaged in struggle on several fronts — against racism, class exploitation, state repression, as well as against sexual inequality within the community — is a sign of growing strength and confidence, which will enable us to engage in concerted action to combat the various facets of oppression and exploitation.

Asian Women in the Community

Domestic violence is an area round which Asian women have organized autonomously to confront an overt form of subordination. Separate refuges have been set up for Asian women facing domestic violence.

The setting up of refuges by battered Asian women has been opposed by various sections from within the community. I must put the emphasis on organized opinion. Organized opinion has in certain circumstances, (for example in Leicester) managed to close hostels for young women, as well as opposed the establishment of refuges for battered women. Local state politics, particularly in the sphere of ‘race relations’ have come to be dominated by organizations which have formed on religious, caste and cultural basis (for example Hindu and Islamic Associations). The setting up of associations on this basis is a measure of their politics. Such associations are consistently controlled by business interests, and are peculiarly male dominated. The local (and national) state when it seeks ‘ethnic’ opinion, turns to these bodies in an attempt at ‘consultation’, but in fact these organizations cannot claim to speak for the people they are supposed to represent. Similarly the growth of race and ethnic advisers acts as a buffer between the local state and black community.

Autonomous Asian women’s organizations have had to fight hard against these narrowly sectarian class interests, which have been the most vociferous in denying Asian women organizational autonomy and independence. Where these bodies have not tried to close refuges for Asian women, they have attempted to control their running and functions, by assuming managerial power. We have had to struggle to ensure that the refuges operate on a basis where the battered woman is able to assume responsibility for her future course — instead of being forced into accepting existing patterns of relations, and returning to the marital home.

It is important to recognize that within a marriage, it is not just the relationship that the Asian woman has to her husband that is the source of tension and inequality. The relationship of the woman to her husband’s parents, brothers, sisters, lends a totally different dimension to the kind of force and violence she experiences. Add to this that she may not have any life of her own in this country or support, nor any friendship network, and it can be seen that Asian women’s refuges have to perform substantially different functions from traditional women’s aid refuges.

Even in the sphere of domestic violence, where it is obvious that it is the family
which is the major site of oppression for battered women, it would still be difficult to argue that it is the only site of oppression. Very few Asian women have the necessary resources to contemplate life on their own with anything but trepidation. With employment prospects grim, welfare benefits inadequate, it is above all fear of economic insecurity which drives some women back to the marital home and not cultural traditions. The tendency by western women to see the oppression faced by Asian women in terms of their ‘culture’ and ‘traditional practices’ lays the roots of this subordination onto a super-structural ‘backward’ plane. The solution which flows from this is that ‘modernity’ — the change in attitudes to correspond to western-industrialized mores — is what is needed. This analysis is inadequate because it does not point to the means of eradicating fundamental inequalities in society. It becomes clear that even without the aid of western feminists, capitalist relations are penetrating societies and communities to a great extent.

Within the Asian communities, there is now a consolidation of class interests and different class practices. The previous consensus, based on the notion of the ‘community’ no longer exists. This means that the forms that racial, sexual and class exploitation assume will be of a different order from those of the past twenty years.

Conclusion

This article has attempted to demonstrate the long tradition in Indian history of the search for social justice, freedom, equality — a search which is still continuing in the subcontinent in complex forms, and is being continued in Britain today in different ways. The invisibility that Asian women have long faced in being negated their role as active social beings, participating in protests and revolts, transforming social relations, is slowly being unveiled.

In the British context, Asian women have, in important ways, paved the path for the beginnings of Afro-Asian unity having passionately fought against racial oppression, while at the same time insisting that their subordination as women be recognized and tackled. They have walked the tight rope of existence in Britain with dignity and principle, fiercely rejecting the state’s attempts at cooperation while caught in a whirlpool of contradictory relations. They have evolved tactics which address issues particular to their experience. For those of us seeking a socialist transformation of society — faced with a national chauvinistic, xenophobic working class, an elitist, often racist indigenous women’s movement and an opportunistic left, the struggle ahead is a hard one. Despite these odds though, we will continue to put ourselves, as women, into the makings of history, for it is only in interacting with the world and changing it that we can realize our full potential. It has been denied to us for far too long. The process of extricating from history that which has been negated and the struggle for the creation of a fuller identity, a fuller society, continues.

Notes

1. Manushi is a journal which reflects women’s lives and struggles in India, and is available from: Manushi (UK) Distributors, 17 Colworth Road, London E11 1JA.

2. In the ‘Harijan’ (1.3.42) Gandhi wrote “When a woman is assaulted, she may not stop to think in terms of Himsa or Ahimsa. Her primary duty is self protection. She is at liberty to employ every method or means that come to her mind to defend her honour... The man or woman who has shed all fear of death will be able not only to protect himself and herself but others also through laying down his life”, (cited in Jayawardena, 1982).

The Gandhian philosophy was a more complex one than is often portrayed. The crux
comes of course not in what it advocated ideologically, but its political practice and political impact.

For those not familiar with the epic *Ramayana*: Sita followed her royal husband Ram, when he was banished to the forests for fourteen years. She was abducted by Ravana to his abode in Sri Lanka and resisted his advances by remaining steadfastly devoted to Ram's name and memory (Ram was also considered an incarnation of Vishnu). When Ram did eventually succeed in rescuing Sita, slaying Ravana in the process, Sita sat on a burning pyre to prove that she had not lost her purity whilst with Rava. The flames did not devour her: thus, Sita was proved virtuous.

3 Thirteen youths were killed in a fire started in a house in Deptford at which many black youth were present at a party.

4 Ahtab Ali was killed in the east end of London.

5 Colin Roach was shot dead in Stoke Newington Police Station, London.

6 Girdip Singh Chaggar was stabbed to death in Southall.

7 Anwar Ditta has continued her tireless struggle against the immigration legislation, even after succeeding in having her children join her.

Bibliography

ASTHANA, Pratima *Women's Movement in India* (no publisher or date available).


GOUGH, Kathleen (1974) 'Indian Peasant Uprisings' in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Special Number.

GUHA, Ranjit: *Sub-altentr Studies* (no publisher or date available).

HARIHARAN, Gita: 'Women and Political Participation: an Emerging Perspective', unpublished article.


m/f no 9

equality and inequality

Premenstrual Tension and the Law – Hilary Allen
Incomes Policies and Women’s Wages – Jim Tomlinson
Translation – Michèle Le Doeuff on Women and Public Office
Translation – Moustafa Safouan on Men and Women
The Structures of Fantasy in Film – Elizabeth Cowie

Subscription for two issues: £4.00 inland £4.75 Europe £5.50 USA and elsewhere. Payable to m/f 24 Ellerdale Road, London NW3 6BB England