CHAPTER-7

ACTIVISM : ACHIEVEMENTS AND FAILINGS

The present chapter is an attempt to analyse and assess the successes and failures of the activists. Though the activists do not claim to have done much, nevertheless their efforts have met with some success. They talked about some positive developments their actions have resulted in.

Achievements

1. Awareness: One of the most important achievements according to more than half of the respondents is the creation of awareness of women's oppression. Activists have generated consciousness among women who are subjected to unjust treatment. They have been able to mobilise them think and move against the oppressive system. They have successfully drawn public attention to the issue of rape and sexual harassment which earlier were social taboos.

   Women's problems are now made visible, causes of her oppression have been identified and strategies amounting to help them are worked out. The result is heightened sensitivities to gender injustice at least among the enlightened people, and strong pressure on State, judiciary, bureaucracy and media to increase their social accountability. Awareness of women's issues according to the activists, has also increased the number of women's groups and activists. Centres for women's studies and development have been established in different universities and crimes against women cells have been opened in major cities.

2. Legal Amendment: The activists are equally successful in their push for amendments in various laws related to women
(however inadequate they may be). It has to be kept in mind that had the activists not intervened, raised the issue and acted as a pressure group, these changes in laws would not have occurred.

Rape law was amended as a result of activists' protests and pressure to reopen the Mathura rape case who was raped by policemen in Maharashtra in 1979. Law Commission was asked to remove the inadequacies in rape law after discussion with activists. Criminal Law (Amendment) Act 1983, came into being which imposes ten years sentence on the rapist. For the first time, amendment included "custodial rape" as a new category of offence. It puts burden of proof on the man accused of rape. These changes have been introduced in custodial rape only. Activists' demands include similar change in non-custodial rape, speedy law, non-bailable offence, disassociation of women's character with rape, and redefinition of 'rape' according to woman's experience who undergoes it. They want that oral or anal penetration should also be considered rape.

At activists' demand Family Courts Act (1984) has been passed for quick disposal of cases. Amendments in Indian Penal Code and the code of Criminal Procedure, have made cruelty and abetment to suicide by husband or his family members punishable with three years imprisonment plus fine.

Media have also brought desired change to some extent. Activists acknowledge that now-a-days it is playing significant role in creating awareness about women's problems and her rights. One can find an increasing number of articles on women in newspapers and thought-provoking serials and social advertisements on T.V. (though woman is still used to sell
Another achievement of the activists is that they have created alternative media (against sexist media) to communicate and mobilise masses like street plays, skits, feminist songs, mobile exhibitions and poster campaigns etc.

3. Moral Support to Women Victims: The activists' intervention has given emotional support to women in distress. They have provided them a platform where victims can be heard and given counselling. It helps women victims to regain self-confidence. Though activists have not been able to provide something very concrete yet those engaged in case work claim to have solved many cases.

Four activists said that they helped around 100 women, five activists helped around 50 women and another two activists claim to have rehabilitated 500 women. Others said that it was difficult to give number but their guidance did provide strength to women who approached them for help. Newsletter of one organization reads "we have till date solved more than 1100 cases" (Kalyani 1984). Many victims of family and social violence have been rehabilitated by giving protection in shelter homes.

4. Emergence of a New Academic Discipline: Activists action has produced a new discipline of women's studies in India. Some universities have introduced women's studies in M.A. and M.Phil courses. A lot of research is being done on women examining critically sexist bias in socio-economic and political system. Women's studies in return has led to the formation of Indian Association for Women's Studies (IAWS), comprising of both activists and academicians. Feminist magazines (like Manushi,
Bharti, Sananda etc.) and special interest groups (like women's libraries, documentation centres and cultural groups) have come up.

Researchers have become dependent on activists to probe women's problems and vice-versa. "Women activists in order to fight oppression look up to women's studies for conceptual and analytical tools, that would enable them to interpret the origin and forms of their oppression and mechanism, through which it was perpetuated" (Pandhe 1988).

5. Slum Women Organised: The activists working at the grass-root level said that they had organised and mobilised slum women to assert their rights. These women have been successful in getting slum people civil amenities and other basic amenities in their colonies.

Attitude of these women has changed and the activists reported that many of them have lifted veil (which was their family norm) and have also started sending their daughters to schools after coming in contact with the activists. Slum women have made cultural groups in "bastis" and produce street plays based on their everyday problems.

6. Women in Informal Sector Organised: The activists engaged in organizing women workers of unorganised economy claim that petty women traders have become aware of their rights. They have learnt to read and write. They have become mobile. All workers (who used veil) have done away with purdha. Mediators (all men) have been removed from their business. This has resulted not only in direct interaction with their customers but has also reduced their vulnerability to male domination and exploitation.
Activists' intervention has led to quality of their production and has increased their income. The issue of home-based work has become visible.

7. National Commission on Women: National Commission on Women has been formed which is the result of activists hard fought battle. The activists believe that women suffer not only because of the drawback of the legal system but also because of its non-implementation. National Commission on Women would work as an effective machinery not only to oversee the implementation concerning women but also as monitoring mechanism for the evaluation of the legal machinery.

Thus, whatever little change in law one witnesses, is due to several rounds of demonstrations to move the government to take action. According to the activists their frequent campaigning and conscientization have moved women from apathy to action.

Thus, though there is no dramatic change in women's status, some inroads have been made into the entrenched inequalities. However, an assessment of the extent and the nature of the change among the beneficiaries needs an independent research to evaluate the result of women activism.

Achievements in Personal Lives

Activists are thought to be relatively less oppressed than women in general as they are activists only because they refused to be oppressed. As noted earlier, most of them joined activism due to their awareness and sensitivity to women's problems.

Nevertheless, activists also go through a process of change
so far as their personal lives are concerned. Involvement in women's struggle has been an empowering experience for most of them.

As it is, self-change through personal action is the basis for social action. Ten activists told this researcher that becoming an activist had brought a transformation in their lives. They have become aware, vocal and assertive. They do not let others determine their priorities. Three of them discarded purdha after joining activism. Other activists said that they were gradually practising to accommodate feminist ideas in their own lives.

Most of the activists' husbands' participation in household chores (45%), activists control on expenditure (69.23%) and right in decision making (73.85%) along with their husbands shows some equality between husband wife relationship. Moreover, no married activist (barring a few) mentioned any problem in her marital relationship.

Most activists have challenged dominant male ideas by developing a non-conservative attitude toward sexual morality. Some of them deviate from the traditional norms of marriage and family. One 70 year old activist told this researcher that she had only one son married out of her four children. Another son and two daughters are activists and have decided not to marry. She said that she and her husband never objected to their decision. Another activist said that her son had live-in-arrangement with a woman. They have decided to live together without marriage. "This is known to everybody and nobody objects because I do not object", says she.
The extent to which activists have challenged male control over their sexuality can be judged by their marriage patterns also. There are eight cases of voluntary childlessness among whom two activists (one is unmarried) have adopted girl child. There are 63.08 per cent activists who rejected arranged marriage (most of these are inter-caste and inter-religious), and 18.75 per cent activists rejected marriage of any sort. Voluntary childlessness, adoption of girl child, non-marriage, and prevalence of self arranged and late marriages show their deviation from the traditional concept of wifehood and motherhood. The extent of activists' resistance to their oppression within the family can be seen by relatively high percentage of divorce in the sample (8%) as compared with the percentage of divorce in India which is 0.41 (1981 Census).

Activists do not fear breaking the established norms of behaviour. They follow western patterns. They participate in alien forms of behaviour such as smoking (20 cases) and drinking (2 cases) without feeling that their modesty is violated.

Significantly, almost all activists have discarded cosmetics, sindoor, mangal sutra etc., symbols presumed to be the most elementary of Indian woman's life. This reveals their endeavour to reject male tendency of presenting woman as a sex object and the concept of woman as male property.

A movement needs interaction between collective social change and individual personal change. Personal change can be a vehicle to concrete social change. Though activists are not successful in bringing the desired social change yet in their personal struggle they have been able to strike effectively in
changing their position within the family. This, however, does not ensure complete absence of exploitation and oppression.

**Failings**

Despite dissenting voice by women activists, atrocities on women are on an increase. Their action, in fact, appears to be negligible if one looks at the rising crime rate. Activists have failed as a watch-group so far as violence on women is concerned. Child abuse (Newstrack Oct. 1991), sexual harassment and rape are on the increase.

Activists' intervention does help to punish the accused in some cases but these being bailable offences, the accused are released on bail. The moral character of the rape victim is still brought into question and it is rather the victim who is put on trial. Despite the changes brought out by the criminal law (Amendment) Act, 1983, the Supreme Court reduced the sentence from ten years to seven years to the Haryana police men accused of raping Suman Rani. The sentence was reduced because the victim was alleged to be of easy virtue. When the activists protested against the Supreme Court decision, they were silenced with the argument that sentence was reduced because the victim reported five days after the crime took place.

The incidence of dowry has not decreased despite the issue having been raised by women activists. Dowry does exist in the guise of gifts not only in public at large but among activists also. The activists' action (protest activities and case work) shows that they emphasise more on stopping bridegroom's party to take dowry than stopping bride's party to give it. Inheritance right as an important and essential aspect for women's
emancipation is only a recent realization.

Reconciliation between the two parties through persuasion or mild threats does not assure normal relationship between the husband and the wife. Separation is also at the cost of wife without any support structure to her. There is hardly any concrete action on the part of activists to get the victim her share in parental property. Share in the husband's property to the deserted wife has been achieved in very few cases. Family courts have been established in few States only and that too with improper infrastructure. Family courts have not made much difference to women in either speed, procedure or procuring justice (Gandhi and Shah 1992 p.226).

News of bride burning appears frequently in newspapers. Case work has not brought any miraculous succor to the victims of family violence. There has been very few convictions in cases of wife deaths for want of conclusive evidence. In the popular case of Sudha Goel, the Delhi High Court reversed the Judgement of the Sessions Court which had awarded life imprisonment to the husband and the mother-in-law of the victim. This way the court demonstrated its patriarchal bias by reducing the punishment of Sudha's murderers.

The activists' campaign for central legislation to ban sex-determination test (amniocentesis) which results in perpetuating prejudice against the female child has met with little success. Sex Determination Act has been introduced in Maharashtra only. National government has not taken any action in this regard and Medical Council of India is also silent on the issue.

So far as women's image in media is concerned, there is
Quantitative but not much qualitative change. Electronic media still carry distorted and obscene portrayal of women. This is especially true of South Indian films. Some magazines (like Debonair) carry nude portraits of women, despite the Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act 1986. The activists action against sexist portrayal of women in films brought about temporary results because of the absence of a follow-up action. (activists however said that of late electronic media have become little sensitized to women's problems).

Thus, the changes brought about in law are neither adequate nor implemented properly as acknowledged by activists themselves. Moreover, knowledge of these laws is not available to the public at large -- not even to women for whom these laws have been enacted.

The activists' demand for a uniform civil code has met with failure. The activists are also confronted with the impact of communal violence on women who have to bear the brunt though it is engineered and led by men. They have done piecemeal work to help the victims of communal violence (e.g. after anti-Sikh riots in 1984). Rallies and public meetings are largely confined to Babri Masjid issue ignoring the sufferings of women of Kashmir and Punjab. There have been reports of rapes by militants in Kashmir, Punjab and Assam. Militants in Kashmir are reported to have given a call for women in Kashmir to wear veil or face dire consequences. This implies fundamentalists' endeavour to take women back into the medieval era, confining them to the four walls of the house. Similarly, militants in Punjab also issued a dress code for women. Assaults on Punjabi women wearing jeans or
skirts in an attempt to impose the dress code have been reported (The Tribune Oct. 10, 1991). Unfortunately, this attack on women's liberty and dignity is not highlighted by the activists. It has been observed that no concerted voice, let alone strong action, has been taken by the activists to build public opinion against this.

This researcher herself participated in four rallies on communalism where there was no mention of either rapes committed or dress codes issued by militants in the disturbed states.

Women activists have ignored some of the important issues such as caste which oppress women within the Indian social structure. Caste hierarchy has not only made lower caste women vulnerable to discrimination (The Tribune, Aug. 30, 1992), stripping (The Tribune, Sept. 25, 1991) rape and physical violence particularly in rural areas but has also made higher caste women to live in a shell by preventing their exposure to the outer world. Higher caste women are victims of male oppression within the family.

Another aspect that has been completely ignored by women activists is the role played by women themselves in the oppression of women folk. It does not mean, however, that they always blame men for women's oppression (In fact, not a single activist considered man responsible for women's oppression). Oppression and exploitation of women by women and perpetuation of gender inequality through women can be seen in mother-daughter relationship, in mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationship, and between the housewife and her maid servant. The activists have not tried to probe female collaboration to patriarchy. Though the activists have provided piecemeal support to lower
class women through income generating activities yet according to Omvedt (1988), there has so far been no sustained movement or campaign organised on issues such as equal wages and work for women agricultural labourers or rural and urban toiling women (e.g. domestic servants and construction workers), even though many left organizations have made these a theoretical priority.

**Reasons of Failure**

1. **Lack of Commitment on Part of Activists**: It has been observed that activists are also responsible for their own failure to some extent. They take up only a few cases of atrocities on women out of the thousands that occur everyday.

   It needs to be examined what criteria do they use to pick up one case and ignore the other. Moreover, cases are not pursued constantly. The activists lose interest after sometime and ultimately it remains the victim's battle alone. Mukti Datta, an environment activist from Uttar Pradesh, who was molested by Z.R. Ansari, the then minister for Environment, said in her interview to the press, "The women activists backed out after the publicity was over. If they had wanted to help, they knew the courtroom in which the case was heard.... If women organisations take up a case, they should see it through" (Indian Express. March 1, 1992).

   The activists' militancy is short-termed and there is an absence of constant pressure on the government. When activists lower their voice and withdraw action, the case is hushed up. The activists do not try to re-open the case and they switch over to some other case which also meets the same fate.
Absence of zeal among activists has been acknowledged by activists themselves also. In the words of an activist "At present there is a lull and a gap in the movement". Loss of their interest and commitment in activism is also evident from the fact that many organizations and committees formed jointly by different activists in the late seventies are no more in existence. Stree Sangrash, Dahej Virodhi Chetna Manch, Nagrik Ekta Manch, Committe on the Portrayal of Women in Media and Joint Action Committe against Rape and Sexual Harassment etc. have disappeared without achieving the objects for which they had been formed.

It will not be out of place to mention here the casual way in which activism is taken today. Funding from foreign and indigenous sources has promoted a culture of "occupationalization" of activism. Educated, enlightened and committed women who formed coalition on different occasions, especially rape and dowry in the late seventies (beginning of contemporary women's movement), had no plan of establishing formal action groups. Difficulty in carrying out action without money forced them for group registration which brought in a flow of funds to carry out their different activities. (Groups were also registered to formalise their structure and functioning). Regular workers started getting money from these funds and activism became a full-time occupation for some. It has been observed that tempo built up for an issue is lost when funds stop coming because funding is generally for a particular project and for a specific period. Besides, funding results in a loss of autonomy making activists not to speak morally against the
funding agencies which may have their own vested interests.

2. Problem of Co-ordination: Another reason for their failure is their weak networking and coordination (See chapter 6). There have been instances where activists have displayed their differences rather than solidarity. For example, activists of several organizations staged a protest demonstration in the premises of the Delhi High Court in Nov. 1983 when the accused in the Sudha goel Dowry murder case was acquitted. When the activists were accused of bringing the court into contempt by their speeches and slogans, activists of different organizations argued their cases separately. "It seemed a pity that the organizations refused to have a joint defence even though the demonstration had been jointly organised" (Manushi 21, p.13).

3. Non-Involvement of Men: Another important reason for their failure is the non-involvement of men in their struggle against gender injustice. Though they have been supported by male sympathisers in different ways (Saheli 1988, Kalyani 1984), it was observed by the researcher that all the programmes of the activists are woman oriented. Whereas the crying need of the time is participation by the mass of population, especially by men. Male participation is important because women (urban women) are changing with strides in education and employment and after being conscientized become assertive which is not acceptable to man in and outside the family who is relatively tradition-bound. This results in broken selves and broken families.

There are other factors which contribute to their failure. Women activists have their own limitations. They have lack of time. An activist, like any other human being, is tied down by
her family and occupation responsibilities and is therefore left with little time and energy to work for social change. The activists face paucity of economic and human resources. Moreover, a handful of activists cannot take care of half of the population of the country. Activism is a full-time job and cannot achieve much if it is done in a half-hearted way.

One can argue that activists, though few, scattered and busy in other engagements, were committed to women's cause in the beginning of the current phase of the women's movement. Why has their enthusiasm of late seventees dampened? In other words, why has activism paralysed during the last few years? The unanimous answer of women activists to this question is male chauvinism of state and its extended patriarchal structure. Criminalization of police, immunity of law, apathetic attitude of administration (as has been discussed in chapter 5) and lack of political will do not let them achieve success.

Since empowerment of women is a threat to the patriarchal structure, activism is met with stiff resistance from its deep-rooted values. Moreover, decisions at the bureaucratic level are taken by men who belong to the generation which looks upon woman as a property and her emancipation is a threat to their citadel. Hence, its efforts to resist women's struggle and lower their morale. "Internalised oppression" (Pheterson 1986) forcing the victim not to come forward is another contributory factor to their failure.

This follows that activists' encounter with failure on different fronts has made them lose their energy and patience to pursue the cases. Prolonged struggle to help the victim get
justice has left them with little stamina and hope, and many have become passive and lethargic so far as activism is concerned. Disillusioned and disguised many were forced to leave activism. Their encounter with the State has revealed its impolite, inhuman and corrupt nature so much so that one action group named Saheli has stopped taking individual cases in order to concentrate more on consciousness raising through campaigning because members believe that subjective change proceeds objective change.

Output of activists' action strikes a pessimistic note. This, however, does not discourage them. If there is despair, there is also a hope. Most of the activists (86%) are optimistic and say that measures will work slowly but surely in liberating women. Four activists doubt the women's emancipation at all. One said, "Women's emancipation is a utopia."

Does all this show that women activism is a failure? The answer is no. It is a step toward social change. Though the change brought about by the activists is only a drop in the ocean yet they do have capability to usher it. They can be successful in achieving their aim if they do not look back, channelise their energy regularly and dent the male citadels repeatedly.