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Lokayan

BULLETIN

Women
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 Towards Beijing

**Voices
 from
 India**

July - October '95

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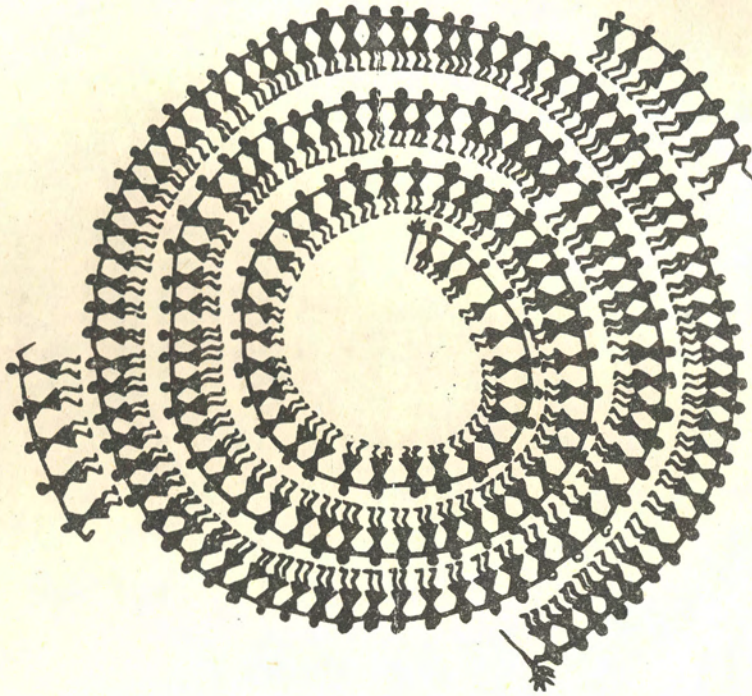
Women
~
Towards Beijing

Voices from India

To the Women of India

EDITORIAL

Nairobi, Beijing and the Women's Movement



This special issue of the *Lokayan Bulletin* focusses on the 4th World Conference on Women, to be held in Beijing in September 1995. The question may well be asked: why focus on a conference? What do conferences have to do with grassroots activism, with movements on the ground? A decade ago, when a similar--albeit smaller--conference took place at Nairobi, UN member governments came up with a document entitled *Forward Looking Strategies*, which prioritised action for women the world over. It is widely known that little has changed since then. The Nairobi conference also led to a widespread belief among academics and researchers from countries of the North that women's movements in Southern countries were the direct *result* of this international attention to women's issues. This rather blinkered view wiped out whole histories of women's struggle and political mobilisation in countries of the South. If this was what such a major international conference resulted in a decade ago, why should things be any different now? Thus, again, the question: why focus on a conference?

To some extent, the two major conferences, Nairobi and Beijing, do provide important markers for women's movements the world over. While governments may have reneged on many of their commitments to the cause of women, women's movements, particularly in countries of the South, have gone from strength to strength. There is hardly an electoral manifesto these days that can ignore women--even if many

may only pay lip service to them. Policies and plans now have to take women into account. Whether it is in Asia, or Africa, or Latin America, women's groups and individuals are engaged in a variety of activities relating to health, economic and political empowerment, education, structural adjustment, to name only a few. This is one reason why it becomes important to take stock, and indeed to take heart from the range of activities that are taking place.

The *Lokayan Bulletin* special issue on the Beijing conference has another focus. For the first time, with an international conference, participation and activities leading up to it have been coordinated. In December 1993, a group of donors in India provided the funds for the setting up of what has come to be known among women's groups as the CU (the Co-ordination Unit for Beijing). The CU's brief was to set in motion a process by which participation from the grassroots could be ensured at the Beijing conference, and women from all over--not only urban, middle class women--could have information about the Beijing conference, and could make an input into it. The process has not been without problems and opposition: questions relate to how widely the work of a small organisation such as the CU can spread in a country the size of India, why and how can donors be allowed to set the agenda for Beijing, or indeed for any other activism, and so on. If the women's movement is to be true to the spirit of openness that has informed it so far, there is a need for a frank debate on these questions. However, that is not the focus of this issue of the *Bulletin*.

The process set in motion by the CU saw an unprecedented mobilisation: in the short space of less than two years, meetings, dialogues, discussions, consultations, workshops were held all over the country on a wide range of issues. Many were in the nature of exploratory meetings: what, for example, did minority women, hitherto invisible, feel about the current situation? How did they relate to other women and women's groups in the country? What were the priorities and special needs of women from the northeastern states--an area torn apart by ethnic strife and state violence, and all too often left out of development plans and policies. What was the position of Dalit women and other women of "special categories", and what were their special needs?

Using the funds at their disposal CU members and supporting activists from the movement were able to actually go out in search of women from marginalised groups, something that overstretched and poorly resourced women's groups have often found difficult to do. Again, the semi-official middle ground occupied by the CU--being an institution set up by donors, supposedly with the tacit approval of the state, but being at the same time close to, and in empathy with, the movement (from where many CU members were drawn)--gave them some special

leverage. This was used to advantage in meetings with state officials and for lobbying and change at the international level.

The process produced a wealth of information and documentation that reflects the concerns of a wide range of women in different parts of the country. It is perhaps the first time that such an exercise has been carried out systematically. Equally, for the first time the perspective has shifted--a welcome move--from the north and voices from the south are heard in all their richness and variety in these documents. Nor, as these documents tell us, can the urban, middle class or upper caste (usually Hindu) woman be called the only spokesperson of the women's movement. Rather, we need to listen to the voices of the Muslim, the Dalit, the Naga, the Mizo, the weavers, the fisherwomen, and a multitude of others. In putting together this issue of the *Lokayan Bulletin*, we have tried to provide some reflection of these myriad voices.

This has not been a simple exercise. Sifting through the mountains of reports and documentation collected by the CU was a marathon task. There was no way every single dialogue/discussion could be represented. Our selection then, was based on certain--perhaps arbitrary--criteria. We chose those areas and voices that had had little representation before, and in some cases, time constraints and the 'readiness' or otherwise of some materials, dictated their choice. All decisions were collective ones, and every single piece was discussed and debated by the editorial group before it was finalised. Time constraints, and constraints of space, did however mean that a great deal had to be left out, and the last minute rush meant that some reports had to be hurriedly edited. All responsibility for any lapses then, rests with us.

If the CU process was a rich one, there was also opposition to their approach, and a number of different processes were set in motion. It is important that these be recorded and documented: the women's movement has always been open to debate and difference. Unfortunately, constraints of space have prevented us from carrying as much of these different voices as we would have liked to. The main introductory paper, by Vina Mazumdar and Indu Agnihotri, however, as well as the excerpt from what can be called an "alternative country paper" (drafted by seven women's organisations but signed by many more) form part of these voices.

For the moment, the discussions and document are at a standstill as women prepare to travel to the Beijing conference that is barely a few weeks away. In the last week, more than a thousand women came together in Delhi at what was called a "conference of commitment" to reiterate their faith in, and to get the government to affirm its commitment to, the women's movement.

Perhaps, then, it is time to ask where this commitment will take us.

Many challenges lie ahead. The CU as a body will be disbanded shortly after the Beijing conference. To what use, then, will the vast and rich information that has been collected, be put? How will this initiative be sustained? Indeed, is it possible for such an event-focussed mobilisation to be sustained? Many of the convergences we have seen taking place in the CU process have been facilitated by an external event. What challenges does this pose to women's movements? Could such a mobilisation have taken place without these kinds of resources? Once the event is over, how will consolidation of this important process and the sharing of experiences it has generated, be done--not only intellectually, but also politically, strategically? How will the wealth of material generated be collated, disseminated; translated, made accessible, reached to the many women who have been part of its making? In India, elections loom round the corner, and there is a very real danger of the forces of the right assuming power. Where will this place the women's movement?

As always, there are no easy answers to these questions. But one question, posed at the beginning of this piece, can perhaps be answered. And that is that an international conference of this nature can perhaps be seen not as an end, nor as a beginning (for the beginnings already exist), but as a step along the path that more and more women have chosen for their lives, and for the kind of society they wish to live in. 4 Beijing will come and go. For us in India the process the conference set in motion has a value, the information generated by it can play a part in our struggle. But in the end, the future will have to be shaped by us, using our own resources, and drawing on our own history in which the Nairobis and Beijings will have but a small, albeit important, part to play.

August 1995

Urvashi Butalia