

# Women's Conference in Bombay

A conference was organised in Bombay between December 23 and 26 by the Forum Against Oppression of Women. It attempted to generate discussion among the numerous women's organisations scattered all over India. The conference was split into six workshops in which six predetermined subjects were discussed. The topics ranged from relationship of women's organisations with the State to the cooperation of these organisations with 'mass' organisations. Papers were presented by women, representing various women's groups, on subjects of their choice.

It emerged, from the various formal and informal discussions among the groups, which had arrived from both cosmopolitan cities and from smaller towns, that each group had, at various points of their development, to take a decision on whether or not to cooperate with 'mass' organisations. The term 'mass' was used loosely to describe organisations where the men were larger in number and which may have a programme of action which related to both sexes. But it was not clear if it was presumed that all such male dominated organisations have a mass base or that women's organisations are not mass organisations. After all, there are women's organisations which have a mass base.

Many groups from small towns sought guidance from groups and individuals operating in cities like Bombay and Delhi. I felt that urban groups are not equipped to play this role and moreover decisions are often forced by immediate circumstances and no one is better equipped to tackle them than the women who, by virtue of their having worked in that

area, have an understanding of the political and social scene.

Moreover, sharing of experiences has to be mutual and urban women would have much to learn from small town or rural women.

It was felt that the relationship of women's groups with the state was both antagonistic and conciliatory.



That is, while it became necessary to cooperate with the State in various fields, either with the police or the civil bureaucracy, very often women's groups have to oppose the State for its policies. Many expressed the fear that the government by taking apparently pro-women stances on women's issues was trying to coopt militant women activists.

The judgment of the Supreme Court in the Shahbano case and the subsequent developments were a matter of deep concern to all in the conference. But there were differences of opinion regarding the stand to be taken by the conference in this matter. The issue was perceived differently by different people. Finally two points of view got expressed when two resolutions were drafted. One demanded a

common civil code and felt that religion should be a personal matter and should not get entangled with politics. It also expressed support for Shahbano in her struggle. But another resolution that was drafted, while supporting Shahbano and all women of any religion who are fighting for their rights, condemned the derogatory statements made by justice Chandrachud about the Muslim community. This resolution did not ask for a common civil code. It was argued when the resolution was debated that the Shahbano issue was being used by the Hindus as an excuse to attack the Muslim community. It was feared that a demand for a common civil code from a women's platform at this juncture could also be seen as an attack by them on the Muslim community. It was further argued that the common civil code demand could, if not defined more specifically, end up being no more than an oppressive code that adversely affected all women uniformly.

Finally, the resolutions were put to vote and the first was passed with 55 for and 15 against. There were 22 supporting the second resolution. Though the conference had a strength of 300 during the day it had come down to just about 75 at 8.30 p.m. when the resolution was passed. There were not more than five Muslim women and one of them who came to the mike supported the first resolution.

Perhaps it is significant that the only resolution passed was over the Shahbano case. It was decided that no resolution would be passed that had not been worded during the workshops.

—Prabha Rani