

WE were surprised and pleased to see this calendar and bought it with enthusiasm, but as we went through it page by page, we were really appalled by its contents. Women's history in this country has barely begun to be written, therefore those of us who begin to do it have a greater responsibility. This is our movement, our own past; and we owe it to ourselves to put serious thought, study and research into our presentation of it.

This calendar supposedly records landmarks of women's history in this country. We have to guess at the intentions of the calendar makers because there is no explanatory note to tell us why and how they went about the task, and what their process of selection or omission has been. For instance, no historical event before the nineteenth century is recorded, but we are not told whether this is deliberate or accidental – whether it was because they could not find definite dates before then, or because they thought nothing significant happened before. One is left with the impression that women's history begins in 1820. Also, it is not clear whether the purpose is to give women general knowledge of various events such as world wars and national movement, or is the emphasis to be on woman's action and struggle?

From Mere Tokenism to Anti-women Measures

One set of events recorded is the doing and misdoing of government. All these are uncritically mentioned and hence sound equally positive. They range from "Emergency declared" to "First five all-women post offices started" to "Dowry Prohibition Act." On the one hand, by projecting government tokenism, like the opening of all-women post offices to inaugurate international women's year, as some kind of feminist victory, are we not giving credibility to the myth that we are free and equal under our glorious constitution? On the other hand, is it not strange that legislation which was fought for and won by women, like the Age of Consent Bill and the Sharada Act, is

A Women's Calendar

Little Knowledge, More Prejudice

Brought out by "Reaching Out" – a group in Bombay

nowhere mentioned? How is it that violently anti-women legislation like the Suppression of Immoral Traffic in Girls and Women Act finds place in a calendar brought out by "feminists"? This act proposes to suppress prostitution by penalizing prostitutes, that is it attacks the workers in the sex industry rather than its patrons and promoters. Since its name sounds pro-women, its presence here (December 30) is highly misleading.

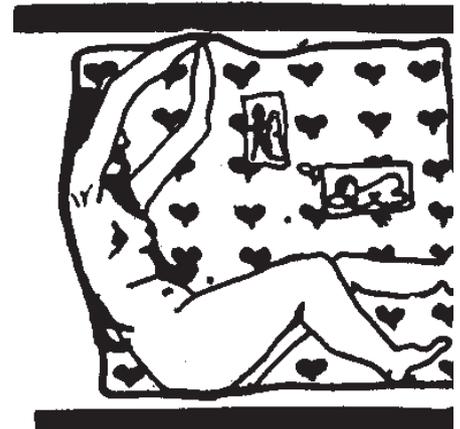
Emergency-Pro-Women Event?

The second set of events seems to be wholly unconnected with feminism. In what way was the declaration of emergency (June 25) a pro-women event? Are we succumbing to the myth that greater repression in the name of discipline meant less violence against women? Or is it because a woman PM was the agent of this authoritarian regime? So also, we are informed that the second world war broke out in 1939. We fail to understand how this was significant for women. And if the second, why not the first world war?

We are told of a strike here, a census report there, a massacre somewhere else or a technological importation nowhere in particular – none of these having any connection with women. For instance, why "Quit India Resolution, 1942" as an entry for August 8? Are we to gather that it was passed by women? Was every resolution of the Indian National Congress a women's event? Why not the doings of the Communist party or the Hindu Mahasabha? If Jallianwala Bagh is worth recording (April 13), why not Chauri Chaura or the Moplah rebellion? If the 1974

railway strike is recorded (May 2), why not the Pantnagar or the Kanpur Swadeshi mill workers' struggles and the firing by police on workers? Why not the JP movement in which many women participated and which, along with the railway strike, threw the country into turmoil in 1974?

We are told of "the first largescale textile workers' strike in Ahmedabad in 1881" (February 22) but what did it have to do with women? Why not the first school teachers', coal miners' or bank employees' strike? Then again on April 3, we have "30,000 peasants, agricultural



*Criticism or Glorification?
—it's not clear*

labourers, city workers go on giant march, Bombay, 1975." Do we not need to be told what this march was for or against and whether women participated? Then on July 7, we are suddenly intimated of the "Arrival of cinema, 1896." Would not the first daily newspaper or the arrival of radio or television be equally relevant or irrelevant? Just as puzzling is "First ever agricultural

census report, 1975" (December 24). Again, why is only Mahatama Gandhi's birth date remembered? It is because he was a supporter of women's rights – in which case why not Ishwar Chandra, Jotiba Phule, Rammohan Roy and other such early pioneers? On the other hand, if he is being remembered as a national leader, then why not all the rest from Lala Lajpat Rai to Sardar Patel?

The lack of relevance and logic is stupefying. More dangerously, it leads to a flattening out of history in the reader's mind. One is led to believe that the railway strike of 1974 and the subsequent declaration of emergency were unconnected and equally positive events – for women! We are bombarded with fragmented facts and there is no discernible standard of value. It is not clear why anything is chosen as important, or from whose point of view history is being looked at – whether from women's or workers' or the government's point of view.

No Whys, No Wheres

The same kind of selection with no sense of the more significant and the less significant is extended to the choice of women's struggle events. Women's struggle is on the one hand, projected as a matter of the births and deaths of various women, mostly fighters for national freedom. Scarcely any information is given about these women's life or work so all one is left with is another name and date in the worst history text book tradition. On January 8 : "S. Ambujammal, freedom fighter born 1889"; on March 11 : "Kamala Dasgupta, freedom fighter, born 1907"; on May 26: "Anne Mascrene, freedom fighter, born 1902." Each of these women fought in a different context, contributed in a different way. Unless some effort is made to introduce her contribution, what is the use of telling us her name? The well known ones like Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya remain in the mind and we are left as ignorant of the others as we were before. For instance : "Hazrat Mahal fights against the British, 1858." It is not clear how she could have fought specifically on February 25. Who was she and was her fight during



Such contempt for ourselves-women shown enjoying thier oppression

the 1857 revolt or an independent one? Can we assume that all the buyers of the calendar will be history students?

We are told about some individual actions but these are chosen with no discrimination. On the one hand, a number for women dancers, one painter and one singer are mentioned but not a single woman scientist, historian novelist, poet – not even women like Shakuntala Devi the mathematician, Sarojini Naidu the poet and freedom fighter, or M.S. Subbalakshmi the famous singer. On the other hand, there are isolated actions, assassination and flag-hoisting being favourites: "Bina Das attempts to kill the governor, 1932" (February 6); "Shanti Ghose shoots district magistrate of Comilla, 1931" (December 14). We are not told a word about the background of these actions and are left with the impression that terrorism and demonstrative gestures was all women did during the national movement. Even movements in which women played an important role are thus indicated: "Salt Satyagraha 1930" (April 6) without a mention of incidents like the storming of the Dharasana salt works under the leadership of Kamaladevi.

Bhagat Singh's Mother, Not Sarojini Naidu?

There are inexplicable omissions – Preetilata Waddedar of the terrorist movement is mentioned but not Kalpana Joshi of the same movement. There are even more inexplicable inclusions: "Death of Bhagat Singh's mother, 1975" (June 1). Are we to consider this a significant event for women? Why not the mothers of every

national leader? Does this not strengthen the old idea that women contribute to history only as mothers and wives of great men?

The calendar emphasizes "first women" rather than what they were the first to do. Thus we have the bizarre entry: "First woman prime minister, 1966" (January 19). Is our battle to be directed at getting entry for a few women into male-dominated power structures or at the elimination of those structures? Are we to rejoice at one or two women being allowed in as figureheads? Does this not strengthen the false argument which we are all so familiar with: "Oh, Indian women won equality long ago- don't we have a woman prime minister?"

Government-Oriented Or Women-Oriented?

This unsureness as to what would be a step forward for women results in the actions reported being overwhelmingly government-oriented. Thus Ramabai being appointed by the government to investigate prospects of women's education (September 5) is included but not her radical work among prostitutes and widows. We are told of the first entrance exam for women and the first women's college but nothing of the struggles that went before, so that it appears as if government handed out pro-women measures on a silver platter. The first woman lawyer Cornelia Sorabjee, first woman doctor Anandibai Joshi, the educationist Mai Bhagwati in Punjab, Rukmabai whose struggle for a legal divorce set ablaze the age of consent

controversy – these women who became symbols of the collective battles to win right of entry into forbidden spheres – are nowhere on the calendar.

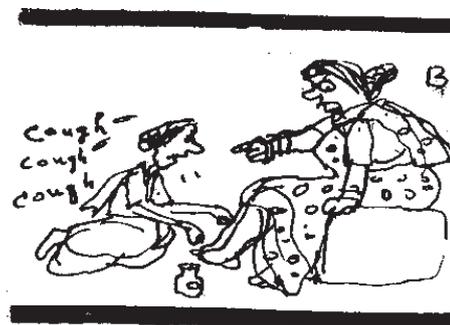
Blatant Inaccuracies

This confusion finds its climax in the references to organized women's action. Last year's anti-rape campaign around the Mathura case is thus introduced: "Open letter to Chief Justice of India on Mathura rape case by *four women lawyers*" (September 16), when it is a well known fact that they were *two women and two men lawyers!* Such blatant inaccuracies are scattered through the calendar, for instance it tells us that the first widows' home was founded in 1912 whereas actually there were widows' homes before the turn of the century in Punjab, Bengal, Maharashtra and many other parts of the country.

There seems to be no ideas as to what constitutes a significant step forward. Only one 1979 anti-dowry march in Delhi is mentioned though there were many others that year in several cities.

And Blatant Omissions

The Mahila Dakshata Samiti was the first to point out that the so-called suicides and accidental death of young brides were often dowry murders. They were the first to produce documented evidence of this and to organize a morcha on the issue in Delhi, November 1978. Yet far from their consistent anti-dowry work being acknowledged, their name is not mentioned. Similarly, the first systematic document on rape produced by the National Federation of Indian Women, one of the oldest women's organizations in the country, is ignored though pamphlets on rape brought out by one small group are



Strengthening Oppressive Stereotypes

painstakingly recorded (February 23, July 18, May 1). Why only these and not the scores of pamphlets and reports brought out by groups in the same city and other cities in the course of the anti-rape campaign? How is it that a small report by one group on one rape case is worth a mention but not the report of the committee on the status of women in India, 1976, the single most useful document on women's living and working conditions in the country? A local Maharashtrian party bringing out one issue of a magazine on women (March 8, 1975) is considered worthy of mention but not any of the alternative women's media, not even *Bayaza*, a Marathi women's magazine of whose existence the calendar makers must surely have been aware.

So also, a small strike by Pharma lab workers in Bombay finds a place but not the massive CITU led women's trade union struggles such as that of 3,000 women bidi workers in Tumkur, Karnataka, who gheraoed the manager and won a wage increase of Rs. 2 per day or the struggle of Darjeeling women plantation workers in 1975 for crèches and increased rations.

On April 17, we have "Coordination committee of dalits in Patiala to look into Seema-Darshana case, 1979." This assumes that the reader knows it was a rape case and omits to mention that not a single woman, not even the rape victims, were allowed to be on the committee. Why is it that the Shakilabee and Rameezabee cases which became rallying points for widespread protests against violence on women find no place here? Many such struggles, small and big, are completely missed out – Tebhaga and Andhra agricultural labourer women's struggles, to give only two examples.

We also find a distressing tendency to centre the movement around Maharashtra by reporting the smallest events in the province, and totally ignoring Punjab, Orissa, Nagaland, Rajasthan, Jammu and Kashmir, and giving bare mentions to Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Bengal, Kerala. Even reporting on events during the national movement is mostly about western India. At the international level too, the few events mentioned are government affairs

like conferences at Mexico or Paris, not truly historic women's meetings like the 1848 Seneca Falls convention in USA.

Incomplete To The Point Of Absurdity

The non-serious approach to women's history is most glaringly evident in the fact that more than half of the entries are so incomplete as to be absurd. To take a random sample: "Massive peace procession by Rashtriya Stri Sabha, 12.02.1930," Where? Who and what was the Sabha?

Or "All India Women's Day 02.02.1975." Celebrated by whom? Government or women's organizations – in India or abroad? Similarly "Stri Jagriti Sangharsh Samiti report on rape, 1980." Where is this organization? Is it to be assumed that every woman who see the calendar will be familiar with the names of all these groups? "Most massive meeting of Desh Sevika Sangh, 20.06.1939." The Sangh is mentioned several times but no



One of the few determined actions shown by a woman! That too historically incorrect. Since when have women been allowed to light funeral pyres?

more information vouchsafed. Then we have: "Women municipal employees demonstrate against eviction notices 12.3.1980." Where? Are we to assume that it was Maharashtra? Or even stranger: "Rural women's gathering at Banage, 02.06.1975." Did they gather for a *mela* or a *mahila mandal* or an agitation or what? Similarly: "Pune march of clerks workers, women sweepers, 01.05.1975." Does the mere fact, of people marching constitute an event in women's history? Or does its significance derive from what it was all

about? "International conference of women, America, 16-22.07.1933." Where in the whole continent of America, what was it for and organized by whom? "Stri Zarathosti Mandal formed, 07.08.1903." Where? "Madam Cama brings out first issue of Bande Matram, 17.09.1909." What was Bande Matram? Most people have heard this name only as Tagore's song. "United Women's Liberation Struggle Conference, 18.10.1975." Where did this take place? "United women's anti-price rise committee formed, 3.10.1972." Thus is a movement that brought thousands of women onto the streets and paralysed administration for weeks, dismissed in the mention of a committee and we are not even told where the committee was – it could be anywhere in the world! One could go on and on multiplying such examples.

This kind of shorthand can only put off a serious reader and the entries serve a purely decorative purpose – they adorn the page at suitable intervals.

One Negative Image After Another

When one says "A Women's Calendar" one thinks of something, which if hung on the wall, would daily inspire one with a positive image of what it means to be a woman, to struggle as a woman.



Auspicious start to the new year! Entry for January 1

This calendar presents us with one negative visual after another. The first picture for January 1 shows a woman dangling helplessly like a puppet from strings held by anonymous hands. After this auspicious beginning, the pictures are nearly all of women in postures of defeat, ugliness, distortion, and plenty of men in grinning victorious positions. No strong women, no women emerging strengthened by struggle. The only image of protest is women on a demonstration, carrying placards. There is an identical picture of men on a demonstration. Why is there not a single image of the new forms of struggle thrown up by women in Chipko, Nupi Lan, Shahada, for example the public humiliation of rapists and wife-beaters?

There are some very damaging pictures of women as oppressors like one of a

woman torturing her daughter-in-law. Such a picture without any attempt to show how women are divided against each other and ultimately are victims of this division, how both mother-in-law and daughter-in-law are trapped in dependence and compete for the favour of those on whom they depend, tends to strengthen the old argument used against feminists: "Women are the worst enemies of women."

The folk songs are also all about women's despair and misery except for two songs which are introduced as "women's songs" but are actually written by men for women, as is clear even from the words: "...we are wives of peasants, we are wives of workers...we will no longer remain helpless as the cows..." Apart from the fact that women have always fought back, and the comparison to cows is an insult, are women not peasants and workers in their own right? Would any man sing: "We are husbands of peasants, we are husbands of workers"?

This calendar raises a lot of questions. Do we not need to engage in more serious discussion and study before we begin to sell our ignorance – at such fancy prices?

—*Manushi*

Were you one of them?

Even since **Manushi** has started we've been getting complaints from various people that they have not been receiving their copies of **Manushi** even though they had subscribed. We are truly sorry for this state of affairs. When we first began work on **Manushi** many people in Delhi and in other cities outside Delhi offered to collect subscriptions for **Manushi** and asked for receipt books. A NUMBER OF THESE RECEIPT BOOKS HAVE NEVER BEEN RETURNED, and we have no way of knowing whether any subscriptions were collected on them or not. We have sent constant reminders to these people but to no avail and so we

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We are also printing the numbers of most of these missing receipt books so that those of you who paid subscriptions on them will know they never reached us and will understand now why you have not received **Manushi**. In our next issue we will give information about some more missing ones and some of these that may in the meantime come back. The numbers are: 76-100, 301-350, 601-700, 901-950, 1001-1050, 1126-1150, 1226-1250, 1351-1400, 1451-1475, 1576-1600, 1676-1700,

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