

OF CRITICAL REVIEWS



Business as usual at Aalochana

PHOTOGRAPH: BUNTY AND PRASHANT

Promoting the women's movement in a unique way is Aalochana, a centre for documentation and research on women and the women's movement. PRIYA NAIR finds out more

THE flurry of activity is ceaseless at Aalochana, situated on the second floor of an innocuous looking building in Pune. Journalists are not a novelty here, after all, there's always one of that tribe trooping in to do some homework before putting pen to paper. Besides, of course, a number of film makers, anxious research students, heads of different organisations, editors, students from the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII), social activists, foreigners and anyone who's interested in the women's movement — all looking for information they can't find elsewhere. For, other than the S. N. D. T. University and the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, both in Mumbai, Aalochana is probably the only place in India which provides such extensive documentation and research backing to those who require it.

The racks, which extend from floor to ceiling, are chock-a-block with files (on no less than 62 topics and no, they aren't dusty!) that hold clippings on women in the news. Considering that the centre subscribes to every newspaper published in Maharashtra and over 50 national magazines and periodicals, one can only imagine how extensive those chronicles are!

In the next room, volunteers get together a new set of

clippings to go into files marked drug addiction and abuse, or even beauty contests! Computer keyboards clack loudly as the data, that would one day be a page in history (at least that's what Aalochana hopes for), is fed in. And it's for history that they're painstakingly recording and documenting every event, occasion and incident that makes a difference, in however big or small a way, to the lives of Indian women, hoping that someone in the future can use the information to make a change.

Aalochana, meaning 'critical review', was set up in 1989 as a non-profit resource centre for women with the aim of re-examining, re-defining and re-evaluating life experiences, skills and beliefs through extensive research and a thorough documentation of their lives. The centre visualised a future that would be emancipatory for all. "There's a history to the women's movement in India," enthuses Medha Kotwal-Lele, a founder-member of Aalochana. "In 1973 - 1974, there was an upsurge in the social and political life of the country as a whole, and many of us were drawn to the movement with our concern for human and women's rights. All of us were involved in the women's movement, at either the grassroots or the campaign level. Some worked with domestic violence or civic issues, with tribals or students, and we were all part

of the 'Purogami Stree Sangathan' of Pune. After working for a decade in the field, some of us felt that it was time to look back, review what had been done and document what we'd been doing, so that we could learn for the future. That's when the idea of setting up an organisation began taking shape," says Medha, as she traces the history of Aalochana.

Like-minded women — Nirmala Sathe, Urmila Sonalkar, Haimanti Bannerjee, Medha Kotwal-Lele, Simrita Gopal Singh — decided it was time to bridge the gap. "We needed to see where we were falling short. We had to examine our own concepts and determine whether we were reaching out to people, why younger women were not joining the movement and so on. As women's studies also became an important branch in academia, we began to realise the importance of generating our own literature. We now know that it is by writing about women's lives, their perceptions, their experiences, skills and knowledge, and by recording and documenting the movement, that we can research the issues of the future," enthuses Medha, who gave up teaching political science in one of Pune's oldest colleges to put her heart and soul into the organisation.

Besides comprehensive profiles of women from the Left or the 'Gandhiwadi' movement (it is movements such as these that work towards social transformation), their resources — in the form of films, audio tapes, photographs, news clippings and books — we also cover a vast range of topics like health, law, politics and profiles of women. Recordings of lectures and discussions

that are held all over the country, highly appreciated films like 'On The Threshold', (produced for the Beijing Conference about the political empowerment of women in the context of reservations), rare photographs of women who left their mark in the women's movement or the freedom struggle, feminist literature translated from English to Marathi, material collected through field work in the rural areas and detailed profiles of organisations working at that level — all form the gold mine of information available under Aalochana's roof.

One of their first projects was a film on Gangu'tai' Patwardhan, an eminent educationist and social worker, directed by Haimanti Bannerjee. Produced for the Department of Women and Child Development of the Union Ministry of Human Resources Development, the film met with much critical acclaim. Later, in 1993, in an attempt to create awareness and generate funds, Aalochana also held a film festival in Pune where they screened six films by women directors — among them Sai Paranjpe's 'Sparsh', Vijaya Mehta's 'Raosaheb', Sumitra Bhavé's 'Chakori' and Haimanti Bannerjee's 'Towards Joy and Freedom'. "We never thought Aalochana would become such a popular centre but,

I guess, it's because we were fulfilling a need, that it has. This is really reassuring and the feedback keeps us going," avers Medha.

Besides the primary activity of recording and documenting issues related to the social, legal and personal aspects of women's lives and researching the different facets and situations in their lives, the centre also aims to provide a congenial forum where all those interested in women's issues can meet and discuss matters of common concern. They also undertake translation work from English and other regional languages to Marathi in a bid to reach relevant information and literature to more women without confining it to the urban, English speaking areas. Their aim is to disseminate the results of their research and documentation through films, posters, lectures, etc. and to network with various women's groups and like-minded centres at all levels. "It's going to be a very difficult task ahead," admits Medha, "In our opinion, there seems to be an anti-woman sentiment arising under the guise of fighting for women's rights. There's a kind of backlash from certain quarters and an attempt is being made

to co-opt the issues and even the rhetoric of the women's movement. I guess we have a real fight ahead of us!"

Supported by grants from the government, some institutions and even the Netherland Embassy, Aalochana is nevertheless forging ahead. Far from resting on its laurels, it is now expanding its activities to include training women for the Panchayat Raj. "This year, on the

occasion of 50 years of

independence, we're also putting together an exhibition on the status of women. It will open in Mumbai and then move to the other metros and smaller towns. We hope to take it to the villages too. We're also compiling a diary for Savitribai Phule's centenary celebrations. It's going to be based on the history of women's education in Maharashtra and other states to be used as research material in schools. There's still such a paucity of information on everything... It's only with sufficient information that women who have done so much for our country will stop being mere names to most people," insists Medha.

Does being labelled feminists irk them? "Not in the least! Yes, we are feminist — because we oppose oppression of any kind. We're neither the anti-men, bra-burning type nor are we trying to break up families. That's not what feminism is all about. In my opinion, it's the media that has misused the word. Feminism is nothing but the ideology that fights women's oppression. And I guess it's a very subversive ideology because it makes people change — which they rarely want to do. It touches everyone at a very personal level. No strata of society is free from oppression or abuse, but then, that's another story," states Medha emphatically.



Medha (right)
and Nirmala Sathe:
The mainstays of Aalochana

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