

Uphold the Glorious Legacy of International Women's Day

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8 March 2010 marks the centenary of International Women's Day – a hundred years from the time when the working class women's movement first thought to observe 'Women's Day' to celebrate their day-to-day struggles and assert the goal of women's liberation.

International Women's Day (IWD) inherits and represents the legacy of a glorious struggle for equality, dignity and emancipation that started long before the formal adoption of this day by women's wings of socialist and communist parties—in fact well before the first socialist/communist parties were born. Even if we leave apart the previous periods of history, we cannot forget that the French Revolution of 1789, that great harbinger of modernity, was started by plebeian and semi-proletarian women of Paris. It was the same contingent that literally woke up and mobilised their men folk in the wee hours of 18 March 1871 against conspiratorial activities of the Versailles government, thereby launching the struggle for Paris Commune.

What communism did to this centuries-old struggle for women's enlightenment and emancipation was to raise it to a qualitatively new level by consciously integrating it, both politically and organisationally, with the united movement of all the downtrodden for revolutionary transformation of the entire oppressive social order. IWD, a product of this integration, served to mobilise more and more women in the communist movement. The democratic revolution in Russia that overthrew the Tsarist monarchy in 1917 was actually started on IWD, with women workers in Petrograd spontaneously going on strike and demonstration. Guided by their proletarian class instinct, they ignored local Bolsheviks who advised restraint, and started the offensive. In our country we observe Naxalbari Day on 25 May to pay tribute to the eight women comrades who along with two babies they carried and one male comrade became the first martyrs of Naxalbari in 1967.

These are but a few of numerous historic instances of working women playing vanguard roles in epoch-making emancipatory struggles involving both sexes. Today, simultaneously with their growing involvement in productive activities, women are brilliantly carrying forward this legacy — not just in the arena of various mass movements, but in all walks of life from politics to sports, in academic, artistic, scientific and literary pursuits, and so on. Like in the past – and here lies the great merit, the special significance, of women's struggles and achievements – they are doing this in the face of tremendous negative discrimination and all sorts of resistance offered by semi-feudal and capitalist patriarchy.

In the centenary year of IWD, the issues and slogans raised by the revolutionary women's movement a hundred years ago continue to resonate with renewed relevance in the women's movement of today. The first Women's Day was marked by militant women workers raising demands for women's rights at the workplace as well as the right to vote. Today, in the wake of the global economic crisis and policies of liberalisation, women are bearing the brunt of retrenchment and also being disproportionately represented in the most exploitative sectors of the economy.

While women's political participation has increased, full and equal participation continues to be a far cry. In India, the slogan of enhanced political participation has found expression in the demand for

33% reservation in Parliament and Assemblies that successive governments have betrayed for the past decade. 'Bread, Land, Peace' – the rallying cry for Russian women on March 8 1917 – assumes great significance today: not only in the context of women's resistance against imperialist wars and occupation in Palestine, Iraq, Afghanistan, but also for women in India resisting price rise and hunger, repression in the course of struggles against land grab, and state repression.

In keeping with the growing assertion of women, especially toiling women, their active participation in the communist movement has increased manifold. But has there been a corresponding increase in the role of women in the communist organisation? Do we see larger numbers and enhanced activism of women members, organisers and leaders? In spite of years of efforts and some partial success, we cannot really claim that. The IWD Centenary is an occasion for renewed and energetic efforts in this direction.

A hundred years ago, communists imparted a new revolutionary dimension to the women's movement of the period. Today, the occasion of the centenary of IWD should serve to highlight and reassert that legacy – and also to take the legacy of IWD and the historical achievements of the women's movement as a precious resource and inspiration to meet the challenges for the women's movement today.

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Inspiring Women: Savitribai Phule, Rakhmabai

Savitribai Phule

In the mid-19th century, Dalit writer and activist Savitribai Phule pioneered education for women, defying the feudal forces who would molest and abuse her and throw filth at her. Along with her husband Jotiba Phule, Savitribai also challenged the abhorrent and discriminatory social customs to which upper caste Hindu widows were subject.

More than 150 years later, in 2009, a Dalit schoolgirl in Chandigarh was stripped in class, because her father availed of a fee concession and did not pay fees. This incident is a grim reminder of how commercialisation of education acts not only deters girls' access to education but intensifies the humiliation of those from Dalit and poor families, even if they manage to reach school. The literacy rate for women in India (53%) is still only two-thirds that of men (76%). Almost twice as many girls as boys are pulled out of school or never sent to school. As we demand the right to education and equality for women, Savitribai's legacy inspires us.

Rakhmabai

Rakhmabai is an inspiring icon for women's choice in matters of marriage and personal relations – extremely relevant in times when child marriage is common (India accounts for over 40 per cent of child marriages globally) and young couples are being attacked by obscurantist forces like the Sangh Parivar and khaap panchayats for marrying in defiance of caste and community norms.

Nowadays, the popular TV serial 'Balika Vadhu' with the tagline 'Kacchi umar ke pakke rishte' (binding ties of tender years) claims to oppose child marriage. Compared to the remarkably bold

legacy Rakhmabai, the real-life heroine of India's women's movement of the 19th century, this serial appears pale and lifeless. Rakhmabai, a woman from the carpenter caste was married when she was 13 years old - but refused to honour this child marriage once she became an adult.

She became the rallying point for social reformers, and earned the attack of the orthodox sections of society. In an editorial in the Kesari dated 21 March 1887, Tilak attacked Rakhmabai as a woman who, "dazzled with the flame of knowledge" was corrupting Hindu society. He wrote: "...we agree that the upliftment of our women is necessary. We would, however, like to say to these reformers that this will never be achieved by women like Rakhmabai who have turned yellow with half a piece of turmeric. Today thousands of men are living happily with their underage wives. When that is the case, is it not surprising (as in, is it not a bit much) when a woman dazzled by the flame of knowledge demands in court that she be granted a divorce now that her husband is no longer good enough for her?"

Rakhmabai refused to buckle even in the face of such a virulent backlash from powerful and respected figures. She declared publicly that she would never accept a 'kacchi umar ka rishta' (tie of tender years) as 'pakka' (binding) - even when she lost her case in Court, she declared she would rather go to jail than join her husband. She went on to become one of India's first women doctors.

P.S.

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