Women Teachers And The DUTA Strike — Some Impressions

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THE recently concluded teachers' strike at Delhi University was a prolonged, bitter one. For the second time in three years, university lecturers were striking again. The strike affected not only the 6,000 university teachers but the 150,000 students enrolled in the university's colleges.

The strike had support from teachers throughout its 75 day period. Women form a sizeable component of the teaching community and the strike raised some interesting questions about the nature and extent of the participation of women in the affairs of the community.

In this essay, we offer an account of the nature and extent of the participation of women's colleges in the strike; an analysis of the gender, class and family situation of the woman teacher and an account of women's responses to the strike. These lead us to a number of exploratory observations regarding the position of women lecturers vis a vis their social, political and professional roles.

Methodology

Our thinking was shaped by the following—interviews with teachers from a random sampling of colleges, chiefly women's colleges; perusal of staff association resolutions; attendance at general body meetings, extended and executive meetings of the DUTA; press reports. We wish to make clear that we, the writers of this article, are also teachers, and were on strike during the entire period. So this report is not "us" writing about "them", it cannot make claims to objectivity. We write from shared doubt, confusion, self questioning.

The second source of material came from staff association resolutions of women's colleges. The lack of manpower and filing facilities in the DUTA office, the largely verbal communication between colleges and the DUTA executive, the cryptic and incomplete resolutions (lacking information on numbers attending, dissenting members) have all to be taken into account as major handicaps in "reading" the documents.

A word about press reports. These served as much as the objects of our study as aids to it. Since.we were in a position to compare the events of the strike with reports of them, we witnessed the distortions that took place. The media played a crucial role in communicating government responses, in issuing editorial comments, in printing letters to the editor, and in creating or alienating public sympathy. Press reports are far from being objective sources.

Our major difficulty has been in quantifying various responses and generalising on the basis of them. We do not wish to divide women teachers into two camps or categories, the strikers and the nonstrikers. Most teachers changed their positions as a result of changes in consciousness and strike conditions and therefore there are no fixed positions. Every woman's consciousness may be seen as a position on a continuum. Although we collaborated on this article, we ourselves do not think alike on all the issues the strike brought up. If we have not accounted for the differences between, striking and nonstriking teachers, it is because the reasons are far too complex certainly they are not to be seen as the differences between women who are liberated or unliberated, radical or reactionary. We have tried to analyse both the causes for many women's increased participation and the powerful constraints

At a general body meeting

Some Facts About The Strike

January 1983 : After a 109 day strike by the teachers of Delhi University, the authorities (Delhi University,[1] the Education Ministry and University Grants Commission) conceded four major demands :

(i) promotion scheme from lecturers' to readers' grade;

(ii) provision of nine crore rupees for a housing scheme;

(iii) removal of stagnation for selection grade;

(iv) professors' grade on the basis of merit.

March 1985 : The **UGC** withdrew the merit promotion scheme (promotion of lecturers to readers' grade), which was the only part of the earlier agreement which had been implemented.

March—November 1985 : Negotiations between DUTA and uni-versity authorities on restoration of the earlier demands broke down.

December 10,1985 : Delhi University teachers went on strike.

January 22,1986 : The first three of the four demands were con-ceded afresh.But DU teachers decided at a general body meeting to continue the strike to press for the outstanding demand, the professors' grade.

January 21-27,1986 : Relay hunger strike by teachers.

January 30,1986 : The vice chancellor orders that striking teachers are not to be paid for the month of January.

February 3,1986 : Letter is sent by the vice chancellor to striking teachers, urging them to return to work and suggesting that concessions may be made only to such teachers and not to others.

February 4, 5, 6, 1986 : Teachers court arrest.

February 10,1986 : Delhi's lieutenant governor undertakes to work out a formula on the professors' grade.

February 12,1986 : DUTA does not find the lieutenant governor's "vertical mobility" promotion scheme acceptable. Strike continues.

February 22,1986 : Silent march to parliament by teachers.

February 24, 1986 : Strike called off, and teaching resumed in colleges. No agreement reached on professors' grade.

on other women's participation in the strike.

We did not find it possible to construct any picture of a "typical striker" on the basis of age, class, campus or noncampus college. Traditional tools of analysis like statistical data, formal interviews and questionnaires were also unsuitable. Many women hesitated to speak on the record, insisted upon anonymity, were afraid to be seen speaking to us, and would communicate in whispers, "asides" when colleagues were not listening. Therefore, we found ourselves using flexible and informal methods.

This, ultimately, is an exercise in stocktaking for ourselves, and on behalf of our women colleagues—an exercise that has involved both self-criticism and celebration.

Women's Colleges

Fifteen of the 54 or so colleges in Delhi University are women's colleges, and women teachers in these and other coeducational colleges form approximately 40 to 50 percent of the total strength of the teaching community. Their participation or otherwise in the teachers' strike could not therefore be merely a token one. If women's colleges have a distinct identity, it is in their origins: by and large, they arose as an answer to the problem of women's higher education in a still largely conservative middle class society. But the tendency to club women's colleges together on this account is no longer valid, since these colleges vary widely according to their location, reputation, degree of autonomy, courses offered, and size. It is likely that the variety of teachers' responses to the strike is linked to these factors. But the general tendency has been to ignore differences among women's colleges and treat them as if they were a single entity.

This tendency is most clearly seen in the singling out of women's colleges, as a possible strikebreaking component, by the authorities and the media; the failure of the tactic may be due to the fact that they did not all respond in the same way. Early in January, the vice chancellor had called together the principals of women's colleges for a meeting: undoubtedly, women's colleges were seen as being more persuadable. Teachers in women's colleges also received letters from governing body chairmen, individual phone calls from their principals, and other such threats and persuasions. The press also persistently highlighted women's colleges. The morning after the pay cut, the first repressive measure announced by the authorities during the strike, *The Times of India* (January 31, 1986) carried the following press note: "In what is seen widely as a loss of faith in Delhi University Teachers Association leadership, teachers of several Delhi colleges, *chiefly those of women*, have favoured the resumption of teaching: immediately, even as the long drawn agitation of the DUTA continued in some other form.' (italics ours) This report is representative of the press notes which consistently conveyed the message that women's colleges were caving in. A sequence of reports in the same newspaper even carried figures of the number of classes reputedly being held in women's colleges.

The DUTA executive members we spoke to admitted to having directed much of their energy to bringing and keeping women's colleges within the strike. The DUTA president said that women's sense of justice had been touched by the betrayal of an agreement. Yet their mobilisation was time consuming for the DUTA activists. Their involvement in the family obstructed them, as also their position as second wage earners. Often, lack of awareness, information and involvement was observed. Yet this strike was notable, he

felt, for the high visibility of women teachers and for their role in raising the morale of the movement. They were also the most vulnerable to bullying by college authorities and principals, and, therefore, at crucial points in the strike, required greater protection and persuasion. On our observation that many women objected to the role of party politics in the strike, the DUTA president stressed the need for women to educate themselves politically since no movement could be apolitical.

Indeed, the participation of women in this strike was a highly visible affair. General body meetings were well attended by women throughout the months of January and February, and off campus colleges formed a large component. Women teachers' participation in the hunger strike, sit-ins and the march were prominently covered by the press. The court arrests (February 4-6) reflected dramatically the very real involvement of women courted arrest on the first day, but as many as 96 women courted arrest on the third and final day (the tallies were kept by the press). Women's Colleges also held frequent staff association meetings, and some —colleges sent in resolutions that discussed each of the demands in .great detail. Frequently, staff association resolutions included suggestions for alternative methods of protest.

Later staff association resolutions from women's colleges do reveal restlessness with the prolongation of the strike and, consequently, they exerted pressure upon the DUTA to call off the strike. There was thus an active engagement with the tactics of the strike. There is no clear agreement on whether such pressures were responsible for the strike being called off (with the fourth demand for professors' grade still unfulfilled). DUTA activists were divided on whether it was women's colleges or public opinion which influenced their decision. Actual numbers have been difficult to get, but at least half the total number of women's colleges were united in their total support of the strike. In the remaining colleges, about half the staff resumed teaching in mid February. However this may be, there is no doubt that because of their numbers, their visibility, their participation or non-participation, women teachers significantly shaped the course of the strike.

Family And The Woman Teacher

Teaching as a service profession has frequently been seen as an ex-tension of the traditional domestic role of a woman. The institution of all women colleges makes the teaching career even more unobjectionable for a woman since it serves as a *parda* like enclosure, a supposedly safe working place. More practically, the flexible working hours and long vacations which invariably coincide with children's school vacations, have made it possible for women to combine domesticity with employment with greater ease than in any other profession. It is not difficult to understand why teaching shows such a large percentage of women even though it is a professional category.

Further, since teaching is socially regarded as a respectable profession, it attracts a number of middle class, highly educated, and even elite women to its ranks. Apart from the traditional prestige attached to the profession (which is being revived due to the increasingly higher educational qualifications demanded of teachers), the pay structure, which is based upon that of Class 1 employees of the government, puts the lecturing profession on par with the Class I services. There are marked and important differences in the promotion avenues, but these are generally overlooked. Since, in many middle class families, the woman's salary is an additional and secondary income, the pay structure has been perceived as quite satisfactory, in spite of (or, even because of ?) the lack of scope for advancement. In any case, wometf traditionally derive their class status from their affiliation with male members of the family. The social determinants of the teach-ing profession are for women thus largely mediated by the family. As pointed out, the family would permit and even encourage teaching, as long as it remained

Demonstration outside vice chancellor's office

"I don't think we women have altogether overcome guilt at becoming working women. So we like to keep it a secondary consideration. I have resigned three times to follow my husband on his postings."

within the bounds of place (the women's college) and time (home by 4 o'clock).

These observations, regarding class and gender implications of the teaching profession, should not be taken to imply that it is in any sense an amateurish activity, undertaken as a mere hobby by women. On the contrary, women's colleges function with a high degree of efficiency and achieve excellent results. Women teachers have undoubtedly great professional competence. The point that is being made here is that they, as a group, nevertheless, paradoxically, lack professional self interest.

Women And The Strike

Both men and women participated in the strike, but women opted out of the strike in visibly larger numbers than men did. One seeks the reasons for the latter, therefore, in specifically gender related terms. The reasons for their participation are, however, the same as those of men: identification with the issues at stake, anger against the authorities, and solidarity with their organisation and colleagues. But the lived experience of the strike was a very different one for women teachers. For it is important to realise that, barring a small number of women who were already radicalised— DUTA activists, civil rights activists, women's group activists, left activists—all women teachers were in the same boat, in that they all had limited experience of agitation. After a stage, they found themselves, daily questioning the validity of their position as strikers. For women who continued on strike, the daily anguish of having to decide whether or not to stay on strike, to square guilty, uncomfortable feelings towards their suffering students with angry frustrated responses to the authorities, created a severe schizophrenia.

For many women, the direct conflict created by the strike situation, between their family and professional commitments, was an unpleasant experience, and served as a deterrent to their participation. Initially, women teachers looked upon the strike as a holiday, a time to catch up on domestic commitments, free of the tensions of preparing for lectures, catching specials, and observing the usual deadlines. Given the nature of the double burden on women, this is not surprising. But as women teachers were drawn into active participation—long hours spent at the GBMs, sitins—they confronted problems raised by hitherto unspoken family strictures.

"I think my family didn't like my being on strike, certainly my son didn't. He is 11 years old, and he has teachers at school, and he has an image of them. I think I was breaking his images of both mother and teacher."

Families were tested by their willingness to support women at a time of crisis. For good or ill, the strike brought women teachers face to face with the ideology of the family with regard to their careers. One of the women we interviewed recounted how a friend whose in-laws are otherwise progressive opposed her continuing on strike, so that finally she went back to work. Another woman said that in her college an unmarried lecturer was bullied by her father and therefore she went back to work despite the fact that the overwhelming majority of her colleagues in the college stayed on strike. That women always spoke of a friend's family and never of their own and requested us not to quote them, tells something of social pressures for women's silence even when the women in question are educated and financially independent.

Women teachers confessed to a great deal of embarrassment and inhibition in actively participating in the strike. Not only is there family opposition to counter, but the media coverage of rallies, meetings and arrests brought them in full view of the public. Women teachers appeared to be very sensitive to the public lack of sympathy for the modes of agitation employed in this crisis. The "public", in their case, is not an anonymous entity "out there", but is made up of their family, neighbours and friends. The public and the private cannot be separated in the experience of women. The family influenced women's participation in the strike in a more direct fashion than it did men's. Many women, being novices in strike situations, admitted to being unable to make decisions regarding participation without consulting their husbands, fathers, or brothers. In such cases, this guidance prevailed over collective decisions, either amongst women colleagues or in the DUTA.

Just as for men strikers, loss of pay brought the strike into collision with the family situation, so also for women strikers, it created temporary economic hardships and loss of pride. For families where both the husband and wife were university teachers, the pay cut was a double burden but the sense of sharing was a source of strength. For one woman who found herself for the first time dependent on her husband's income, the experience was a painful loss of self esteem.

But for some of us, the reassessment of our role within the family was a liberating one. We were thrown back on individual decision making or on collective action, which proved strengthening. The questioning of the compulsory unity of husband and wife led to a new understanding. We asked ourselves: "What am I if I am not a wage earner? Is it enough to be just a wife and mother?" We realised that our so called privileged position was in reality quite precarious. Many of us have been made to feel guilty because the public perceives women teachers as silk clad ladies who work a few hours a day for pin money. For some of us, it was the first time we were at odds with the powers that be in the university, and had a direct apprehension of oppression.

The strike unmasked women's role in the family. While in some families, husbands or fathers outright forbade women to join the strike, other families were open to discussion and finally quite supportive. It seemed to us that when a woman took a determined stand, her family tended to go along with it, but when a woman was uncertain, her family would try hard to disluade her from participation.

The most frequent phrase that appeared on the lips of those teachers who did not join the strike, or extended qualified

support, or abandoned it halfway, was their moral commitment to their students. The women teachers whom we interviewed seemed to be greatly exercised about this question: some felt that teaching is an extension of a woman's maternal function. Many were distressed that students, with whom they have after all no quarrel, were deprived of their lessons and that their academic year was put in jeopardy. In many cases the nonstriking teachers were senior members of the staff, who viewed the teaching profession as a vocation and social service, and claimed that the tradition of their college was inimical to strikes. Certainly, the major section of the public, comprising parents, students, the media and the authorities, never ceased to use the argument about moral commitment against striking teachers.

Women teachers responded to this argument in a variety of ways. Many felt a good deal of guilt because it was hard to resist the notion that the strike was a dereliction of duty. Through discussions, some women worked through this position to question the rhetoric that prohibited teachers from agitation on moral grounds. While such questioning was not gender specific, it was more crucial for women since they had internalised this moral predicate more thoroughly than men. The struggle, by focusing on economic demands, drew attention to women as wage earners—a fact that embarrassed some, but enabled others to be frank about their wage earning status. This can only be inter-preted as a step towards professionalism.

Closely related to the perception of teaching as a vocation by many women is their eschewal of professional ambition. Much of the backsliding that occurred after January 22 had to do with the fact that only one demand—for professors' grade—remained unfulfilled. A number of women felt that the demand had no broad base since it would benefit only a few. Many women expressed no ambition for such promotion, often citing the more rigorous nature of their husbands' work (civil servants,businessmen, managers) in defence of their humility. One teacher pointed out that the only person in the professors' grade in undergraduate colleges is the principal, who would "understandably like to preserve that privilege for herself." A great deal of ignorance still prevails about whether the DUTA has asked for the professors' grade as a matter of right or as an opportunity.

"In many women's colleges a cocooned atmosphere prevails, that dismisses professionalism as vulgar. Despite the high academic standards, the desire for upward mobility dulls with each passing year.

Yet another alienating factor experienced by women teachers was the intrusion of party politics into the DUTA, which was felt to be alien to an academic struggle. Several women teachers felt a good deal of reluctance about involvement with party politics. Since the dignity of the teaching profession is seen as a cloak of protection for middle class women, striking is perceived as a trade union activity appropriate to workers and not teachers. The way a strike is conducted, with raucous speeches and clicked slogans, confirms some women teachers' prejudice that strikers are lumpen elements or rabble. Others felt outrage at being used as pawns in the party struggle going on at the higher echelons of the organisation, and expressed no further obligation to participate in the strike. Many women felt distressed that the unity of a professional association was being jeopardised by political in fighting. While it may be true that this was precisely the impression that the ruling party was trying to foster, the consequence of this perception was a split along gender and class lines within the teaching community which was reinforced by political differences.

But this same perception also brought home to many women teachers the political nature of all struggles. The apolitical stance had to be surrendered. The somewhat elitist nature of some women's colleges does seem to foster an atmosphere of political naivete. Through this strike, many women teachers came to an understanding, however simple, of the political dimension of the agitation, the role played by parties and also the linkages with the larger political situation.

At this point, they were being called on to cease differentiating themselves from DUTA, and to identify themselves as socio-political beings with a sociopolitical body. This identifisation was a vital felt experience cutting across other obligations.

For example, some women said that whereas they routinely consulted the men in their families about practical matters like tax returns and other administrative dealings with the government, when they found these male relatives trying to dissuade them from active involvement in the strike and in such activities as courting of arrest, they gradually began to take their own decisions, trusting more to tbeir

discussions with their colleagues.

In contrast to the loyalty towards the association experienced by a great many women teachers, a great deal of hostility was also vented upon it. One of the most frequently heard complaints against DUTA was about the prolongation of the strike beyond January 22. Another was regarding the suspicion that the leadership had planned to continue the strike until the parliament session but had not taken the teachers into confidence about the progress of the strike. Yet another complaint concerned the attitude of DUTA activists and their modus operandi, which were felt to be simplistic and overbearing. DUTA leadership was considered coercive or, at its best, paternalistic. For women teachers, the leaders became embodiments of patriarchal authority, victims of an easy displacement of the hostility against the hidden and invisible authority of principals, governing bodies, vice chancellors, UGC and the government.

But once the DUTA was divested of its benign tyrannical or patriarchal colours, and subjected to objective questioning and appraisal, many saw themselves as equally constituting the body and influencing its decisions. The sense of belonging to a movement was a necessary factor in countering repressive measures. Along with their sense of affiliation to an organisation, women also had an idealistic or moral realisation of initiating social change. This belief lent justification to their continued involvement in the strike.

"When 1 rejoined my college after three years' absence, it didn't occur to me to ask for a higher start even though I had eight years' teaching experience. 1 am not proud of that kind of naivete anymore."

For many women teachers, loyalty to DUTA had its origins in a sense of obligation to it. DUTA has served as a grievance cell for many teachers; apart from the victories of the 1982 strike, it had also successfully fought for such benefits as maternity leave specifically aimed at women teachers. Some credit goes to the DUTA leadership for having been able to involve women in the strike.

The final rally

Many of the women who did not go on strike, when asked for their reasons, said that they did not wish to associate with "rabble rousers" and defined their stand as an individualistic one. We got this reaction from a number of women, both young and old. Was the decision a completely independent and individualist one? Or does it have something to do with the premium society places on a woman's segregation from public and political activity? Such segregation is seen as a sign of a woman's and her family's privileged status.

Participation in any agitation leads to a consciousness raising that can only be beneficial to women in claiming their own rights. In the present strike, the powerlessness of the striking teachers was shown up by the virtual exclusion of their voices from press and TV coverage. When one leading daily published a particularly biased report, misrepresenting the staff resolutions of women's colleges, six women lecturers wrote a letter of protest to the editor. When they went to the newspaper office, the reporter concerned was openly rude and hostile but finally agreed to accept the letter as. a chivalric gesture to one woman in the group whom he happened to have met before.

The apprehension of authoritarianism was not unique to women; but for many women, acting in defiance of authority was a new and exhilarating experience. Women's activity in trade unions or professional associations, therefore, gives them a stronger sense of professional identity, gives such activities a larger base from which to operate, and, above all, gives or should give a different complexion to the modes of agitation. This exercise would be futile if we only called upon women to overcome or transcend their problems in order to become political beings. It is equally the responsibility of the parent organisation to facilitate the participation of women members in its activities. DUTA's workings, as we saw, aroused both hostility and loyalty in women teachers. But women teachers of both persuasions pressed DUTA to adopt alternative and plural modes of agitation. They argued that a strike is precisely the mode of agitation which severs the day to day connection between teachers and students which is essential for mustering support for a strike. Political activism is not defined only by the activity (sit-ins,

marches, court arrests) but rather the context in which any activity takes place. So women teachers suggested such solutions as informal teaching on the UGC lawns or wearing black badges.

Experienced activists argue that the mode of agitation is dictated by the authorities. One adopts the forms that are most easily recognisable and effective; further they must be easily followed by all. In effect, every party plays predetermined roles in the drama of a strike. But it would be worthwhile to consider whether a more diversified, decentralised, flexible programme of agitation which is more practical and appealing to women would not be more successful in the long run.

Alternative Methods Of Agitation

These alternative methods to the orthodox striking method of not teaching, were put forth by women teachers in staff association resolutions, and communications to DUTA through letters and speeches, or expressed to us in conversation.

1. Wearing black bands as a token of protest while teaching.
2. Refusing to take attendance or to perform any administrative or extracurricular activities.
3. Teaching only those students who would be appearing for other entrance exams (first year science students, final year students).
4. Relay strikes (which would ensure the presence of students in the college)—could supply occasion for teacher-student contact.
5. Teaching without pay—informal teaching.
6. Teaching outside the classroom—on the lawns, outside UGC, in community halls, homes of teachers.
7. Boycott of exam duties.

"No the strike wasn't an easy time but one thing is clear we have to fight to get what we want . Why we even had to fight to get maternity leave for women teachers. It was one of the first issues we fought for through the DUTA."

The process of radicalisation, if defined as merely plunging into activity the way men activists do, can end up placing a woman under tremendous strain. While it may win the approval of male colleagues, it also puts on her the pressure of dealing with the conflicting claims of housework, childcare and activism. To talk of radicalisation of women can only be meaningful if we simultaneously talk of men's radicalisation, that is, their learning to take responsibility for home based activity that has so far been reserved for women.

But both women teachers and the DUTA function within a larger context, defined by the authoritarian structures of society, in this case college principals, the vice chancellor, UGC and the education ministry. The powers of the state are usually hidden: they become apparent only at moments of crisis. The various carrot and stick methods used by the authorities in this strike made their power play very evident. It was this finally revealed and naked use of power that aroused indignation and passion in many women teachers. Women, who are normally quiescent and supportive of government policies and thereby prove to be a reliable vote bank for the government, are, on account of such confrontations, liable to become significant opponents of the *status quo.*

(Quotations placed in bold type between rules in this article are excerpts from c»if versations with teachers who wish to remain anonymous).

Women Demolish Liquor Shops

On March 8, international women's day, about 250 women from Manila Nyay Andolan Samiti raided and demolished two infamous liquor shops in the city. The action was planned in secrecy to avoid interference by the police who appear to be hand in glove with the shopowners.

These two liquor shops have been running for more than 20 years. The women living in their vicinity were exposed to the misbehaviour of drunken men in the area. Also, men would squander their own and family earnings at these shops and then come horns and beat their wives. Complaints to the police proved futile.

When the shopkeepers came to know of the impending raid by women, they grabbed their raw materials and ran away in dread. As the women's rally approached the shops, five women grass cutters watched with interest. On being informed of the rally's aim, they laid down their bundles of grass and readily joined the rally.

The women poured the liquor on the road. Many children joined the rally and expressed happiness that "mothers" would not be beaten in future. The rally was much talked of in the city and was well covered by the press. Women in Miraj soon followed suit and dealt similarly with a liquor shop in their area. The women insisted that the police arrest the shop owners before confiscating the stock of liqifor. But the police refused to arrest them for "lack of evidence." By their direct action, women put the inactive police to shame.

- Dilip Shikhare
(translated from hindi)