

Established in 1984, Jagori (awaken, women) is a women's training, documentation, communication and resource centre which aims to carry feminist consciousness to a wider audience using creative media. They are also involved in: action-research on a range of women's issues, direct support to women in situations of violence and working with communities in Kangra district of Himachal Pradesh to initiate and support women's collectives.

Jagori: Women Making a Difference

What makes an ideology-based organisation, specifically a feminist one, different? Three women from Jagori-Abha Bhaiya, founding member, Kalpana Viswanath, coordinator, and Nandini Rao, team manager, violence intervention-share their views and experiences on being a feminist organisation.

Could you please define and explain Jagori's view of feminism. How does this influence the kind of work that you do?

ABHA- Let me take you back to the beginnings of the organisation because we believe we are part of the new wave of feminism. That is a defining moment for us. We also call ourselves autonomous women's groups-autonomous of political parties and government, and in terms of our decision making.

When we started we did not really have any motive to say how a feminist organisation should run, but we had some commitment to a very democratic collective structure. So we did not really have designations in the organisation. Everybody did everything together and a lot of work was really shared collectively.

Jagori's areas of work

We started calling ourselves a collective.... Basic commitment to issues was very clear to us. One was how do we take feminist consciousness to the rural areas? And, how do we make activism and theory come close to each other?

The third and significant aspect of our work was how we look at the entire issue of creativity, activism and our constituency

which is primarily illiterate. We wanted to reach out to the most marginalised groups of people and especially women, since they are the ones who have no literacy skills. We needed to evolve communication differently, so there was a lot of emphasis on parallel communication methods like feminist music which became central to our work.

Training. We did not call our training gender training. We always said this was feminist training based on feminist learning methodologies...The principles are not only participatory, they are centred around women's ways of learning, which we think are different. They are close to everyday situations because they are the life line of households as well as society...We start with their life situations rather than from broader issues, calling out collective experiences so that we can look at structures around their lives whether it is violence or globalisation, whether it is caste or class issues. We learn intuitively. We sat and chat with very poor women, women healers, sea preservers, midwives, and women who had a lot of knowledge but were not literate....

In the 20 years of Jagori's existence what have been the organisation's challenges and breakthroughs?

Two tragedies

ABHA- When we started two big tragedies happened: the Bhopal Gas Tragedy in the 80s and the other was Indira Gandhi's assassination and the carnage against the Sikhs. Both of them affected us significantly...We did not bother what we were supposed to do. For us the political situation inside and outside us dictated what we were doing. We broke those boundaries and did

at that time what women and society needed: to keep women's rights central to all services and rehabilitation-all issues of entitlement were our strength.

For example, we insisted that bank accounts be in the name of the woman, not in the name of the father or brother-in-law. That became very important and to that extent of course that had an impact on government policies at the national level. We struggled with our sister organisations on the issues of dowry murders, domestic violence and the right of women to hold ration cards in their names.

We are a pioneering organisation as far as bringing the issue of single women to centre stage in the agenda of women's movements. We made it very important that single women figure prominently into popular discourses (not only limited to married women). We decided not to use the terms widows and divorcee. Single women are those who are outside the institution of marriage...If women are being murdered, killed, beaten, being thrown out of their houses, then let's not glorify that institution but look at it more critically and ask why there is so much silence. So one of the gains was really breaking the silence and making the issue visible.

What difference does it make to be a feminist organisation in terms of governing the organisation?

ABHA- One very important principle of feminist organisations is that personal is political. For example, I had a very difficult night with my husband. I cannot come to office and set that issue aside. A feminist organisation must create a space for that

woman to be able to talk about it before she sits at her desk. It is central to us that we do not create a division between our political work and what we are as individual women and individual team members. For our team it's very important to see what's going on in our personal lives because our lives are a reflection of minority women.

A woman needs a confidant and when she comes to work she can just be herself. That depends on the sensitivity that an organisation builds around it. These are the intangible issues when it comes to running a feminist organisation.

The second is hierarchies. Somehow no organisation runs without hierarchies. It's very difficult to say there are no hierarchies even when we are a collective. We also feel that we have to acknowledge our powers and privileges, not to hide them. There is a woman from the slums who works with Jagori. Her realities and my realities are different and those must be recognised. My privileges must be put out on the table: that I have advantages in this society because of my class, education and experience. But, we can be equal; the treatment has to be equal. No privilege can be given to me just because of my class.

We believe in complementarities rather than competition. We cannot survive without complementing each other. Only when I recognise how good you are at something will I allow or create the possibility for you to flourish...Until you know what I am good at, then it's the responsibility of the group to say 'I want you to do it.' That gives people a sense of confidence and invitation that you are valuable. So it's treating everyone as a valuable member of the team.

We give a lot of value to relationships and interpersonal communication: sitting together, chatting, talking and eating together. Everybody eats together. That time is very precious because you laugh, you cry, you share what's going on in our lives.

Also being aware of marginalities in our societies. You have to sharpen your sensibilities towards people with disabilities, different sexual orientation, people with mental and emotional issues. For example, I notice that a household has a child with polio. I must go and see whether the child needs help or is already getting treated. We do not differentiate between men and women; they both need attention and we will support them.

What challenges do ideology-based organisations face?

ABHA- We had been on the opposite side with the State when it came to contraceptive politics/policies, the forceful use of contraceptives. We have had fights with the State because they had been pushing anti-people population policies, and especially targeting the poorest of the poor and also other minority communities like Muslims and dalits. We filed a case against the State on the issues of contraceptive and right to consent in the Supreme Court.

Ideology-based organisations have this difficulty of the State going against you all the time. They can use our politics against us.

We are now working closely with Sheila Dikshit's, chief minister of Delhi, on the issue of safety for women. Our interests

coincide. We are telling them it is your responsibility to see that women and marginalised communities are safe in the city. We collaborate with them on this issue but not in their population policy.

Their repressive policies we will oppose.

We would like to know how Jagori went through the process of institutionalising its programmes and processes.

(Abha Bhaiya, referred the interviewers to Nandini Rao and Kalpana Viswanath to answer this question.)

KALPANA- I think it was from the nineties that we embarked upon the process to bring in some structures. Earlier Abha Bhaiya was running it as a coordinator for almost ten years. Sometime in 1993 we began to look at other forms of working and Abha also wanted to move out.



Experiments

We did a couple of things like having people who took on the role of coordinator. The role was not like having executive powers in that sense, but it was more that you build the strengths of people to do everything from financial management to leading the teams under the guidance of senior members. That was the kind of model we adopted for a while. Jagori was still a small group and this model worked.

The other experiment was in 1997-98 when we had a group of five people coordinating the organisation. Then we realised the need for structure. We were already growing and people joining us had different expectations from Jagori.

We tried this structure for about a year and a half. It was a very interesting experiment because it built the capacities of many people in the organisation. We began looking at the wider picture: our funding and division of work. Earlier it was a loose group where everyone did everything; after that exercise we felt the need for specialisation.

How did you manage the process of change in the organisation, where both new and old members have different sets of expectations?

KALPANA- Like other organisations we had a growing number of younger people joining us. At the same time founding members felt that we needed to find a way for this organisation to grow. Lots of NGOs are stuck on this issue and their identities are dependent on the founding members. We are struggling with it at the same time we have moved on. We are at the point where for the past ten years the organisation has been run by the second generation, with lots of support from the founding members.

Abha is not involved anymore with the day to day running of the organisation. We have different teams and team leaders like Nandini.

NANDINI- What does help is an open mindset. Usually when change happens there is a feeling of threat. What I find in Jagori is that an open mindset has helped us to move

from one phase to another. It is not about the old members and new ones; it is that we all are dependent on each other as team. It is not that there is no resistance; people do resist change but we work our way around that resistance. We are able to understand why the change is happening.

It is also a matter of trusting each other and the person who is running the organisation. The process of decision making is not a collective process anymore but is collaborative. It is not that we make decisions collectively; we do discuss the issues and all of us are able to give our opinion. We leave the decisions to whoever has to make it in that particular situation.

KALPANA- I would like to add to what she is saying. As long as people know who takes

which decision that is empowering...We are transparent about who is taking which decision and at what level; that is important.

You are leading Jagori's programme on violence against women. How is your work linked to Jagori's feminist ideology and perspective?

NANDINI- Whatever work we do, we do it from a feminist perspective. One way of doing it is to give the woman a space to express what she would like to say. I am talking about the women who approach us with various kinds of violence they have

faced. We do not filter what they say. Their voice is their voice...

KALPANA- Other thing about feminism is that there is no boundary line and it is not a dogma. Within the organisation we are constantly discussing issues. We do not have a restrictive and narrow stand on it. So it is not like: 'this is a feminist position, take it or leave it'. The whole ideology is linked to experience.

Is the voluntary sector gender friendly?

ABHA- Not yet. Our experience is quite pathetic in terms of what goes on in voluntary organisations. There's a lot of sexual harassment, sexual abuse, and economic exploitation in these organisations, particularly of women. They are paid less and they have to sign on vouchers. All these bad practices go on and on. We are fighting cases of women who are sexually harassed in big NGOs that are being funded by multilateral organisations and big donors. And it keeps coming to our notice again and again that women are not safe in those organisations.

Very few NGOs have sexual harassment committees in place. If they have a committee, the committee is non-functional. They

talk (about the issue) and do something else. And most of these organisations are men-headed, obviously.

Many of these organisations become family enterprises. Their wives, brother, or brother-in-law will be there. And then it makes it more difficult for people to demand democratic rights, transparency and gender justice.

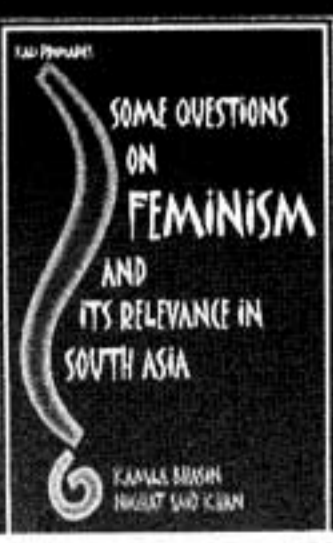
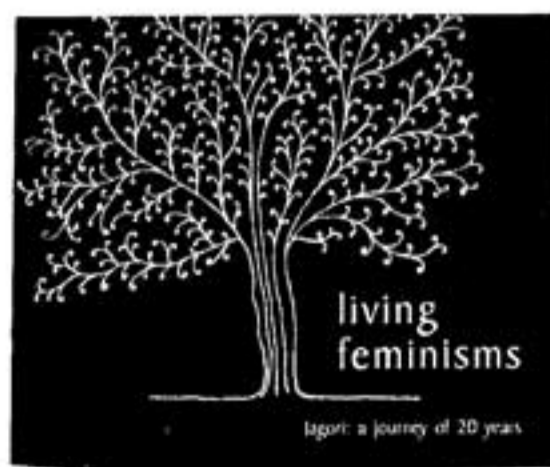
I do not see any issue in isolation with each other. I cannot look at gender

minorities without looking at caste issues, sexual minorities and communal violence.

It does not only happen to men-headed organisations, does it?

ABHA- Violence is by women as well. Look at some of our women politicians, they are patriarchal. A man can be a feminist, provided he believes in feminist ideology and practices it. ■

As told to Anjo Lorenzana and Roshni Mallik.



Sample titles of Jagori's publications

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