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# The violence of capitalist development and underdevelopment: The impact on poor women's lives in India.

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**THE VIOLENCE OF CAPITALIST DEVELOPMENT AND UNDERDEVELOPMENT:  
THE IMPACT ON POOR WOMEN'S LIVES IN INDIA**

**By**

**Gurwinder Chaggar**

**A Thesis  
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research  
through the Department of Sociology and Anthropology in  
Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Degree of Master of Arts at the  
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## ABSTRACT

### THE VIOLENCE OF CAPITALIST DEVELOPMENT AND UNDERDEVELOPMENT: THE IMPACT ON POOR WOMEN'S LIVES IN INDIA

by

Gurwinder Chaggar

The deterioration in the life conditions of poor women in India, particularly in rural areas, is often dismissed as the lack of 'modernity', their experiences being subsumed under 'modernization/integrationist' perspectives. The view taken in this thesis is that the destruction of self-sufficient and self-sustaining means of production under British colonial rule and the post-colonial State has impoverished small-scale peasant households. Under such conditions poor women are bearing the brunt of poverty because they must often undertake various types of work and services in order to ensure the day-to-day survival of their families. The intensification in their work-burden, inadequate nutrition, and the burden of bearing many children because of economic necessity as well as the persistence of sexist attitudes is taking a significant toll on the health of poor females. The mortality rates for women are higher during

early childhood and childbearing years, and presently India is one of few countries where the female population has decreased significantly in comparison to males. In this thesis it is argued that the brutality of capitalist development and underdevelopment on the lives women in India is a form of violence related to the destruction of the embodied self upon which capital accumulation is dependent.

From our own 'privileged' positions in the north within the global economic hierarchy, feminists also experiences, but take for granted the destruction of nature and men's and women's lives under capital accumulation, and the increasing antihumanist face of modern day society. It is suggested here that in order to develop and/or recover alternative approaches to existing relations of production and reproduction, feminists can begin by exploring the nature of their own disembodiment—their own inner detachment. This can be an important step towards empowerment for feminists and perhaps the foundation for a sisterhood that is based on co-operation and reciprocity. This inquiry is just one small step towards this direction.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The inspiration for this inquiry was an unconscious desire to gain a better understanding of the nature of my own disembodiment and why there is so much animosity towards women within the Indian culture. I did not realize this until I was well into the writing process. It was often difficult to see the purpose of this work, especially when budding sociologists are asked--"so what kind of work will you get once you are done?"

This difficult task would not have been completed without the support of DR. Lynne Phillips. Her patience, encouragement, and sympathetic ear are rare qualities. I would also like to thank DR. Tanya Basok for assisting me on the thesis as well as the pep talk regarding 'perceived expectations'. I would also like to acknowledge the external committee member DR. Mahesh Mehta.

The long-winded conversations with H. Gill assisted me significantly throughout this research. I would also like to thank my family for their love and support.



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"Most people connect violence solely with physical action against other human beings, but Indian sages perceived it in a much wider sense.

They considered all life sacred, and in their concern for self-perfection, the killing of any living being, human or non-human, was sinful. Further, causing harm to other creatures was also thought wrong ... Harm was defined widely to include not only physical injury, but also all forms of pain, including depriving persons of their livelihood or intimidating them. Violence could be committed personally, it could be instigated or aided, or it could be condoned by observing it without protest. However, it is not possible to survive in this world without at least some violence, for we depend on other living beings for our food. Avoiding all killing results in our own death.

Our sages were deeply concerned that humans must necessarily be involved in violence and death and that absolute innocence was unattainable. They understood the concept *ahimsa* to mean the minimum or least possible violence. While causing some harm is inevitable, we do not have a licence to kill other creatures ruthlessly, to act on the basis of the 'survival of the fittest', which in effect means survival of the most violent. Rather, we should have greater respect for those beings whose lives must be sacrificed in order that we may survive. ... <sup>1</sup>

Gandhi extended the traditional concept of *ahimsa* further. He said that violence could also be committed by participating in or benefiting from a harmful practice. *Ahimsa* demanded compassion and love; it was not merely a negative virtue of avoiding injury to others, but a positive one of stopping harm being done to them and helping those who have been hurt. Identifying oneself with all other living beings helps immensely in putting this into practice.

The difficulty in living up to these ideals was recognized by Gandhi; but this difficulty is no reason either to run away from the world, or to give up all hope of changing it" (Pereira and Seabrook, 1990: 130-131).

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*Ahimsa* can be defined as an action that does not involve harm or any form of violence to one self, other human beings, as well as animals (Basham, 1959: 54).

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION:

In the past few decades the globalization of capitalism has created a hierarchical and parasitic interdependency between the developed and developing worlds (Mies, 1986). As the academic debates concerning women's gains and losses under the capital accumulation model continue, the lives of poor women in the peripheries of the Third World are deteriorating at an alarming rate (APWRCN, 1989; Beneria, 1982; Heyzer, 1986; Matsui, 1989; Mies et al., 1988; Mies, 1986; Sen and Grown, 1987; Young, 1989). When compared with other societies nowhere is the dehumanization of women more visible than in the ongoing exploitation and violence against poor women in India.

In this inquiry the harsh realities of poor Indian women indicate that very little has been gained from the capitalist mode(s) of subsistence aimed at the destruction of nature and non-market-oriented social relations (Gallin and Ferguson, 1991; Mies et al., 1988; Sen and Grown, 1987; 1986; Young, 1989). In such modes of subsistence, the spheres of production and reproduction are coercively transformed to satisfy the demands of capital accumulation, as if economic growth was the ultimate aim of human life (Mies, 1986; O'Neill, 1985). As O'Neill (1985) argues, capital accumulation or

modernization is, in fact, dependent on the destruction of the core of the human self, with the disembodiment of human beings from their own selves, from each other, and from their own histories. In current development discussions there has been no significant concern with the disembodiment of poor Indian women under exploitative, oppressive, alienating, and violent relations of production and reproduction due to the destructive nature of capitalist development and underdevelopment. In this thesis it will be shown that this process is central to understanding the deteriorating health of poor Indian women.

#### STATEMENT OF PURPOSE:

This study will examine how reproductive control policies, as an integral aspect of integrating women into capitalist development in India, constitutes a form of violence against poor women. Ongoing development discussions have not yet taken serious note of the violence against poor women under the guise of so-called economic 'development.' The great majority of poor women in India have not benefited from the decades of 'trickle down' growth-oriented schemes (Banerjee, 1984: 1982; Bhav, 1988; Gulati, 1981; Hobson, 1982; Kishwar, 1984; Mukhopadhyay, 1984; Sen and Grown, 1987; Zurbrigg,

1984). A significant issue that must be addressed is how the population control programme in India is further destroying the health of poor Indian women in the name of making them accessible to the needs of capital accumulation.

While many believe that the forced sterilization period of Indira Gandhi's Government in the mid-seventies is history, many poor women are still being coerced to undergo sterilization with the use of various incentives and disincentives. There is an inbuilt potential for abuse and coercion of poor women in India's target-oriented population control programme. The State's rampant use of incentives and disincentives has created an environment in which family planning and health care workers are often denied salaries, promotions, and threatened with suspension if sterilization targets are not met on time (Balasubrahmanyam, 1984a; 1984; Bhate, et al., 1987; Dyson and Crook, 1984; Karkal and Pandey, 1989). Under such conditions poor women's bodies and health are

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It is estimated that some eleven million poor men and women (many of whom were adolescents) were coercively sterilized under the 'emergency period' of Indira Gandhi's Government (Dyson and Crook, 1984: 43). A state of national emergency was declared by Indira Gandhi in an attempt to deal with various social and economic problems plaguing India at the time (for example, poverty, religious and ethnic conflicts) (See Guha, 1979; Sharma, 1975; Sinha, 1982).

being sacrificed to suit the needs of the modernization/capital accumulation model of development. International development agencies also play a significant role in pressuring Third World countries towards stringent population control policies (Gregory, 1988; Hartmann, 1987; Omvedt, 1982a; Saha, 1989), instead of creating greater access to safe family planning and health care services for the poor.

The Indian Government's relentless emphasis on the sterilization of poor Indian women raises serious concerns about the patriarchal nature of Indian culture and the racist and sexist implications of new reproductive technologies in a society where religious, caste and class, and ethnic differences are embedded rigidly. It has been suggested that the State's

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Discussion of the patriarchal nature of Indian culture is not the main objective of this thesis. For studies by others see Jeffery et al., (1989), Kishwar and Vanita (1984), Kishwar (1987), Liddle and Joshi (1986), Mies (1987), Miller (1985; 1981), and Omvedt (1980a). Although 'culture' is seen to be a peripheral concern from class-based feminist perspectives, the feminist scholarship of some Indian women suggests that gender ideologies are central to understanding the experiences of Indian women (See Bhave, 1988; Chatterji, 1988; Gulati, 1981; Gupta, 1988; Kaushik, 1985; Kishwar and Vanita, 1984; Liddle and Joshi, 1986). The concept of sexism is used in this thesis to refer to oppressive gender ideologies in the Indian culture and the degradation of females, especially in the case of childbearing (See Jeffery et al., 1989; Thompson, 1985). These gender ideologies are mentioned throughout this thesis, but particularly in Chapter Four to show their relevance to understanding the life-conditions of poor women.

reproductive control programme may not be just oriented towards population control of the poor and the alleviation of poverty (Mies, 1987; Pettigrew, 1984). Under the impact of capitalist development there has been a significant rise in dowry demands even among the poor classes and the increasing indebtedness of these households has perpetuated the patriarchal demand on Indian women to bear male children. In a society where a woman's dignity is dependent on her ability to bear male children (Pettigrew, 1984), India's neo-Malthusian family planning/population control programme has grossly underestimated the significance of childbearing and the absolute necessity of children's labour to the survival of poor households.

In fact, in many Third World countries people are poor not because they have many children but, rather, they have many children because they are poor (Hartmann, 1987; Karkal and Pandey, 1989). Furthermore, the problem is not scarcity of resources because of 'overpopulation', but the unequal distribution of means of production (for example, land) that makes it virtually impossible for the great majority of people in the Third World to adequately fulfill daily human subsistence needs (Hartmann, 1987). Since many poor children in the Third World die before they reach the age of four, poor

families continue to have children in order to ensure their own survival, as well as the patrilineal line of security and inheritance (Karkal and Pandey, 1989: 24). At the present time India has the highest female mortality rates for early childhood and during the childbearing years amongst the developing countries (Ibid).

In poor rural and urban households children's labour is essential to a family's survival, and the exclusion of women from productive spheres (for example, land and skills) makes them dependent on male children. Accordingly, in the underdeveloped peripheries of the Third World such as India, having a large family is a very rational strategy in the day-to-day struggle for the basic subsistence needs for human survival--food--and clean water--yet children's labour is often underestimated, if not excluded, by individuals who argue that India's development problems can be alleviated by curbing the birth rate of the impoverished.

Females in India are especially expected to take on the burden of adult work at a very young age. Throughout their lives they not only contribute to the day-to-day survival of their families but must often also undertake various types of work and services (Mies, 1986). However, the contribution of females to the survival of the poor household remains unrecognized because of sexist attitudes about



women's work and the 'hidden' nature of wage and non-wage work done by women and children. A great deal of the wage and non-wage labour performed by poor women and children has been easily dismissed under the so-called 'informal/formal' or 'pre-capitalist/capitalist' dichotomy because it is often done in non-market exchange relationships and is difficult to measure (Beneria, 1982; Bennholdt-Thomsen, 1982). Moreover, the destruction of subsistence-oriented production in many areas of India, under the impact of capitalist development and underdevelopment, has intensified the burden of women's work in poor households. The disproportionate share of this work-load has taken a significant toll on the well-being of poor women. The deterioration in their health is also exacerbated by the burden of having to bear many children because of economic necessity and patriarchal norms regarding the need for male children.

The vast majority of poor Indian females are labouring for low wages under abnormal conditions, where they are particularly vulnerable to unlimited exploitation and violence. Whether this work consists of domestic services, sexual services, handicraft production, or activities in what is generally referred to as the 'hidden/informal' economy, the health of poor females continues to degenerate due to unhealthy working and living conditions because their wage and

non-wage labour does not adequately cover their daily subsistence needs. Under such conditions poor females suffer greatly because of existing gender and caste and class relations. In fact, we know of very few other societies where ethnicity, gender, caste, and class relations have involved such overwhelming exploitation and violence, and where oppressive attitudes have been so well internalized by women themselves (Mies, 1975). It is often the female child who is prevented from getting an education because she is expected to take on the burden of both wage and non-wage labour at a very young age. She is the one who is bonded or sold first, and she is the last one to eat when there is not enough food. She is also often the one who is expected to endure physical discomfort and ignore her health problems because of lack of accessible health care services (Bhave, 1988; Gulati, 1981; Hobson, 1982; Miller, 1981; Zurbrigg, 1984). Through a focus on the State's unrelenting emphasis on population control of the poor, this inquiry will show that we can no longer ignore the destruction of women's lives under the impact of capitalist development and underdevelopment in the peripheries of India.

In order to examine the impact of India's population control programme on the bodies and health

of poor females, it is necessary to draw critically upon available theoretical perspectives to see what they have to offer regarding this issue.

DEVELOPMENT THEORY: A BRIEF OVERVIEW:

Initial construction of development theory can be traced both to the needs of the industrialized West when attempts were made to secure economic alliances at a crucial time (the end of World War II), and to the threat of political instability because of the emergence of independence movements in Africa and Asia (Alavi and Shanin, 1982; Blomstrom and Hettne, 1984; Harris, 1987). At this time the U.S. was particularly preoccupied with the idea of growth, modernization, and industrialization. What was characterized as economic growth for the industrialized West became development for some of the impoverished nations of the Third World (Alavi and Shanin, 1982; Harris, 1987). During this period Anglo-Americans dominated development discussions and development policies, as their agenda was to mold the world's economy in their own image. In fact, even before the second World War was over American policy makers started working on an economic order where they had the upper hand in international trade (Harris, 1987). As Harris points out, "by the late forties, the United States had acquired

an unprecedented domination of the world economy. It [was] ... able to determine the world business cycle ..., and oblige the periphery to conform to the interests of Washington" (1987: 16).

Perceiving the world as a homogeneous reality, early economic growth theories assumed that economic progress at the macro level would eventually 'trickle down' to the poor as well. The modernization model of development was based on paralleling the industrialization of the West, and economic growth was primarily viewed by Western policy makers as the path to curing the impoverished conditions in the newly independent nations of Africa, Asia, and Latin America (Harris, 1987). The newly independent countries were, in fact, encouraged, if not coerced, in the direction of a monetized economic order and Western institutions (such as health care services) through development aid (Alavi and Shanin, 1982). Initial development discussions were ethnocentric, gender blind, and ahistorical because the concept of modernity was situated within a framework that characterized non-capitalist societies as 'backward' and lacking a sense of history and culture (Ibid). Alavi and Shanin argue that implicit in the modernization perspective is the assumption that:

all countries had to "develop" along a single upward slope to become like the United States, the idealized model and ultimate goal of

"development." To do so, they had to identify and remove social and ideological obstacles to such development. The image of such transformation was in its essence that of transfer of Western technology and rationality in order to increase production without changing class structure (1982: 2).

Such attempts to modernize rural Third World societies devalued, marginalized, or made invisible women's work (Heyzer, 1986). The significant contribution of women in the maintenance of rural life was completely ignored in the neo-classical economic growth theories of development (Ibid). Heyzer explains that since a great deal of women's work in rural societies is done without pay and in non-market exchange relationships, modernization theories "... equated the whole spectrum of productivity with the narrow concept of productivity measured in the monetized terms of a cash-based economy" (1986: 2).<sup>4</sup> Although subsistence production had already been drastically transformed under colonial capital accumulation schemes, the move towards large-scale commercialization and the growth of cash crops for exports in the post-colonial period further deteriorated rural markets organized on the basis of reciprocity,

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<sup>4</sup> Many of these early economic development theories were influenced by the thoughts of nineteenth century classical economists (for example, Adam Smith and Thomas Malthus) (Blomstrom and Hettne, 1984) and attempted to apply theories formulated for industrialized societies to the social and economic problems facing various Third World countries (Ibid).

redistribution, and bartering in many areas of the Third World (Heyzer, 1986).

Despite the emphasis on economic growth, poverty continued to increase in the newly independent countries (Blomstrom and Hettne, 1984). The failure of 'trickle down' modernization theories, under the test of reality, paved the way for a flurry of theoretical activity in search of obstacles to economic development. Subsequent development discussions also remained within a eurocentric modernization model, as attempts were made to close the immense gap between theory and reality, by identifying specific rigidities, lags, and other characteristics of developed and developing economies (Heyzer, 1986). These economic conditions and characteristics (for example, the rate of literacy and population growth) were then scrutinized and compared with the economies of the Third World in order to pinpoint their obstacles to development (Fitzgerald, 1981; Heyzer, 1986).

As these theoretical debates continued in the West, there was increasing discontent in many parts of the Third World with the ruling bourgeois classes that were interested in securing their own power, and the belief that a modern infrastructure, specifically economic growth, would provide a better life for the impoverished masses (Harris, 1987). Development discussions that

eventually emerged from Third World perspectives were somewhat more fruitful than modernization or 'diffusionist' theories, and linkages that were drawn between the deterioration of the Third World under the coercive impact of colonial and post-colonial capital accumulation schemes paved the way for the dependency school of thought.

This theoretical school explored the specific nature of the development and underdevelopment of Latin America, Asia, and Africa. These debates on the mode(s) of production in non-European colonized peripheries show the destructive nature of colonial rule, as well as the impact of modernization on peasant societies. Although a discussion of these ongoing debates is beyond the scope of this thesis, it is important to recognize that the specific impact of underdevelopment and capitalist development on women's work in subsistence production and reproduction remains invisible in dependency perspectives. Bennholdt-Thomsen points out that in these gender blind debates on the mode(s) of production in non-European societies there is no concern with women's significant contribution to subsistence production because:

the way to avoid the concrete analysis of subsistence production is to drive it out of the capitalist mode ... and to call these forms pre-capitalist or non-capitalist (1982: 247).

WOMEN IN DEVELOPMENT APPROACHES:

Since the mid-1970s there has been a proliferation of research, policies, and programs specifically focusing on the impact of development and underdevelopment on women throughout the Third World. While these initial liberal attempts did shed some light on the impact of capitalist development in various corners of the Third World, the impoverished reality for the majority of women was primarily seen as a lack of 'modernity', and the failure to 'integrate' women into the development process (McFarland, 1988; Sen and Grown, 1987; 1986). Although the integration of women into developing economies varies considerably, it is apparent that the vast majority of poor women in the Third World have not benefited from the decades of 'trickle down' growth-oriented schemes. In fact, in many areas of the Third World the problem is not the lack of 'integration' of women into the development process but, as Heyzer suggests, it is the very "... nature of women's integration, the concept of development itself, and the strategies put forth at different levels to bring about capital accumulation" (1986: vii-viii).

From rural subsistence production to exploitative and labour-intensive work in the 'hidden/informal' economies



and the newly formed free trade zones,<sup>5</sup> the experiences of many poor women in the peripheries of the Third World clearly indicates that there has been an increase in pauperization, marginalization, and deterioration in their health and overall well-being. (Afshar, 1987; 1985; APWRCN, 1989; Beneria and Roldan, 1987; Beneria, 1982; Charlton, 1984; Gallin and Ferguson, 1991; Heyzer, 1987; 1986; Jahan, 1989; Matsui, 1989; Mies et al., 1988; Mies, 1986; Safa, 1982; Sen and Grown, 1987; 1986; Young, 1989).

Ester Boserup pioneered the way for theoretical activity in the broadly defined area of women and Third World development by providing an overview of the negative impact of colonial rule and capitalist development on subsistence production, and specifically the nature of women's work in rural households (Beneria and Sen, 1981). Although Boserup drew attention to the unequal participation of women in the development process and the gender biases of growth-oriented development models, her pioneering work has been criticized

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In 'free trade' or 'production zones' multinationals are often assured that there will be no unions, health, safety, and wage regulations. In these labour-intensive manufacturing zones women are often hired at a young age and labouring under such conditions can lead to serious health problems. Some argue that wage labour offers some independence, but at what expense?

widely (Ibid). For example, while she focuses on gender in her analysis on the impact of development on rural households, she also assumes that women are a homogeneous category (Ibid). Boserup's failure to look at the issue of race, class, and imperialism, and her assumption that the modernization process can be beneficial to all women in the Third World weakens her theoretical framework. Beneria and Sen point out that although Boserup focuses on gender, her work lacks a feminist perspective.

Although a great deal has been revealed about the nature of women's integration into the development processes of labour and capital accumulation in many Third World peripheries, liberal-feminism has not been very critical of the coercive tactics used by various international development agencies and Third World government's under the banner of 'modernization' (Bennholdt-Thomsen, 1988; Gregory, 1988; Omvedt, 1982b), or the degradation of subsistence production and reproduction and its impact on women's bodies and health. Omvedt (1982b) has found that India's development policies in the past few years have been specifically geared towards export-oriented schemes, and that the bourgeois State has placed a great deal of emphasis on foreign capital and Western technology in drastic attempts to deal with the country's increasing development problems. India's significant reliance on institutions

such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund,

... reveals a situation where IMF "conditions", specifically the maintenance of a capitalist path, are (in diluted form) not simply forced on Third World nations but acceded to without much disagreement as a result of the crisis coming from the nature of their own capitalist development (Omvedt, 1982b: 137).

The liberal perspective of Women in Development has also failed to acknowledge the coercive and abusive aspects of many economic growth schemes throughout the Third World and their impact on the poor. Women in Development perspectives have become too preoccupied with mapping the subordination of women in wage and non-wage labour, considering whether or not women are benefiting from the various capital accumulation schemes, and asking how to better integrate women into development processes (Bould, 1983; 1982; Charlton, 1984; Hale, 1987; Kandiyoti, 1988; Papanek, 1981).

It is within this theoretical framework that a great deal of the Indian literature examining the impact of development on poor women can be placed, and it is within this 'integrationist/diffusionist' perspective that India's family planning/population control and health care programmes are situated. Since most of the initial research examining the impact of development policies on the poor was funded by the Indian Government, as well as various international development agencies, there is a great deal of bias in the

literature towards the needs of the bourgeois State and its capitalist development goals. Many of these studies not only fail to look at the colonial and post-colonial roots of the poverty in rural and urban areas throughout India, but the poor are often viewed as the 'obstacle' to modernization. This perspective is still very dominant in the Indian society and continues to be argued by many individuals working in the area of family planning and health care services (See Chandra, 1987; D'Souza, 1984; Karkar, 1984; Pai, 1978; Palk, 1978).

#### SOCIALIST-FEMINIST APPROACHES TO DEVELOPMENT ISSUES:

In this thesis a socialist-feminist approach will be used to highlight the class-based experiences of poor women in India. This perspective can be characterized as a progressive approach to development issues because of the concern with subjective understanding of the needs of Third World women, as experienced and voiced by Third World women themselves (Beneria and Roldan, 1987; Mies, 1986; Sen and Grown, 1987). Although the issues of race, class, and imperialism are now being brought to the forefront of development discussions and the feminist scholarship of various Indian women (See Amos and Parmar, 1984; Jayawardena, 1986; Kishwar

and Vanita, 1984; Liddle and Joshi, 1986; Kishwar and Vanita, 1984; Liddle and Joshi, 1986; Mohanty, 1988; Trivedi, 1984), the voices of poor women are still silenced by the concerns of middle/upper class women. In current development discussions by various women's groups throughout India, a great deal of emphasis has been placed on the problems confronting middle/upper class women in areas such as education and employment. Very few women's groups have made an attempt to bridge the gap between the realities of upper/middle class and poor women by bringing the experiences of poor women to the forefront of the women's liberation movement in India.

Although socialist-feminists criticize liberal-feminists for failing to go beyond the point that poor Third World women are oppressed and suffering, in general socialist-feminists have failed to emphasize how the globalization of production and consumption is based on the destruction of women's health--  
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 their embodied selves. Socialist-feminist approaches, when

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The notion of embodiment is a rejection of the Cartesian split between mind/body/self (Marshall, 1989; O'Neill, 1985). Critical theorists from the Frankfurt School challenging this split see liberation not only in economic terms, but also in terms of the complexity of human needs (Marshall, 1989). Marshall's (1989) exploration of embodiment and disembodiment as gendered shows how various strands of feminist thought have conceptualized the mind/body dualism and the possibility of critical theory in restructuring socialist-feminist theory for a clearer understanding of the nature of women's disembodiment, as well as the basis for a socialist transformation (See also Marshall, 1988).

compared with Women in Development perspectives, can make a significant contribution to development and feminist theory by emphasizing that women in the First World, as well as middle/upper class women's movements throughout India, understand the experiences of poor women in India as central to the issue of women's empowerment and in this sense are related to their own struggles and experiences.

While it may be difficult to fathom the experiences of poor Indian women from our own 'privileged' positions in the global economic hierarchy, the dehumanization and destruction of capitalist development and underdevelopment in many regions of India can not be isolated from our own struggles and experiences. This is especially the case for middle/upper class women's organizations that have emerged throughout India in the past few years. The inclusion of poor women into India's women's liberation movement can begin with the recognition that poor women's lives are threatened with abominable destruction and that it is only from their experiences that middle/upper class women's groups can truly understand the reality of human suffering. As one socialist-feminist development group (DAWN-Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era) emphatically points out, whether it is impoverishment and inequality, environmental degradation,

food shortages, or state repression and aggression, middle/upper class women's groups can only truly understand the reality of these as well as various other important issues through the eyes of poor Third World women themselves (Sen and Grown, 1987).

Once the ill-health of poor Third World women is recognized as a form of violence, developing alternative approaches to issues which specifically address their needs and concerns, as well as possible avenues for their empowerment, becomes a necessity. Mies' comment about development's 'growth model' seems particularly appropriate for poor women:

today, it is more than evident that the accumulation process itself is [destroying] the core of the human essence everywhere, because it is based on the destruction of women's autarky over their own lives and bodies. As women have nothing to gain in their humanity from the continuation of the growth model, they are able to develop a perspective of a society which is not based on exploitation ... (Mies, 1986: 2).

Participation of poor Third World women in the creation and/or recovery of non-exploitative, non-alienating, and non-oppressive relations of production and reproduction is essential in future discussions of development and international feminism.

It is apparent in the appeal from some socialist-feminists for an exploration of concepts and values of work, social relations and institutions which can nurture individuals as whole human beings (See Beneria

Roldan, 1987; Beneria and Sen, 1982; Mies et al., 1988; Mies, 1986; Sen and Grown, 1987) that socialist-feminists can play a significant role in the transformation of oppressive relations of production and reproduction. However, in the attempts being made by these socialist-feminists to find alternative development models based on justice, equality, and non-oppression, the issue of women's health (and their disembodiment) has to become more central to ongoing development discussions. This issue can be brought to the forefront of future development discussions by emphasizing that socialist-feminists have become too comfortable with the destruction of nature and men's and women's lives under capital accumulation, especially with the increasing antihumanist face of modern day society. It is suggested that socialist-feminists must recognize their own inner detachment and examine the nature of their own disembodiment in order to develop alternative approaches that will enable women to restore their embodied selves.

In this inquiry it is argued that the life conditions of poor Indian women will enable women in the West, as well as middle/upper class women's groups in India, to recognize the violence incurred against themselves, and the nature of their own dehumanization under the impact of capitalist



development and underdevelopment. This is viewed as an essential step in a post-colonial feminist perspective.

METHODOLOGICAL CONCERNS:

For poor women in India development issues are situated in a complex reality of contradictions that vary considerably according to one's caste and class, age, ethnicity, and position within the family (Omvedt, 1975). Analysis of the impact of capitalist development and underdevelopment on the lives of poor women is further complicated by the fact that the deterioration in subsistence production varies considerably because of geographical, historical, and socio-political factors (Mies et al., 1986). The immense socio-economic disparity from region-to-region has roots in the uneven impact of British colonial policies as well as in the attempts to 'modernize' rural areas by the post-colonial bourgeois State (Omvedt, 1982a). For example, many areas of eastern India were not only bypassed by development programmes such as the 'Green Revolution', but those areas that were specifically targeted for market-oriented agricultural production

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See the following section for a discussion of caste and class and their implications for women in India.

have mainly benefited middle/upper class farmers (Kelkar, 1987; Mies et al., 1986; Sharma, 1975). The striking disparities from one region to another also has roots in the way the colonial State integrated specific areas into local and international markets (Charlesworth, 1982; Rothermund, 1988). For example, Rothermund (Ibid) points out that the colonial State developed eastern regions of India for the purpose of exporting agricultural and industrial goods, whereas production in many of the western regions (such as Bombay and Ahmedabad) was essentially geared towards local Indian markets.

The great diversity in socio-economic patterns is further complicated by an intricate web of caste, class, and ethnic differences which also vary considerably from one geographical area to another (Kishwar and Vanita, 1984). It is, therefore, very difficult to generalize the impact of capitalist development and underdevelopment on the lives of poor Indian women. Capitalist development throughout India has not followed a unidirectional path and, as Beneria and Roldan further add, "it [has] instead [followed] a variety of forms in a continuum ranging from the re-creation of non-capitalist forms to varying degrees of labour absorption in the so-called informal and formal sectors of the economy" (1987: 7). Kishwar and Vanita (1984) state that

the vast differences in socio-economic patterns from region-to-region as well as from caste-to-caste has led to fragmented information regarding the life conditions of poor women, especially in rural areas, and that the task of revealing and politicizing their day-to-day struggles for adequate subsistence and the impact of such brutality on their bodies and health has just begun to be voiced.

The various ways in which poor households must often undertake several sources of income and services in order to meet daily subsistence needs has also posed theoretical and methodological problems. Explanations for the lack of systematic research on women's work in subsistence production also has roots in the theoretical and methodological tools of analysis, modernization and dependency perspectives dominating the development literature on Indian society (Mies, 1986). In these two perspectives a great deal of women's wage and non-wage labour has often been greatly underestimated, if not excluded, in India's labour force statistics (Agarwal, 1989). Much of the non-wage labour has been characterized as the 'informal' economy because it is done within the sphere of non-market exchange and is often difficult to quantify (Beneria, 1982; Heyzer, 1986). In poor peasant households females often have to pool their labour in order to complete day-to-day household

tasks, especially during peak periods of the planting and harvesting seasons (Mies et al., 1986). These kinds of subsistence strategies have been easily dismissed in 'top down' development perspectives (Agarwal, 1990; 1989), but as Heyzer explains:

Women are central to processes of change as much as the maintenance of life. Much of this work is done without pay ... and as such has frequently been overlooked by policy-makers ... Yet, many structures of society would collapse if non-market relationships and women's work were withdrawn (1986: vii).

Mies et al., in their case study, point out that many of the tasks performed by women in peasant households often had the characteristics of collectivity, co-operation, and co-ordination (1986: 91). Households that had more resources required a greater degree of collective labour not only amongst women, but also between men and women (Ibid).

Since a great deal of income-generating work also takes place within many rural households, it is often difficult to delineate between household work that is primarily done for the family and work that is specifically directed at the market (Heyzer, 1987; 1986). In a case study of poor peasant and agricultural labourers' households in three villages in Andhra Pradesh, Mies et al., (1986) found that it is often difficult to draw a clear line between a sphere of production

and reproduction in rural societies and that such categories are of little use in understanding the nature of women's work. Beneria and Sen (1981) also point out that the separation between productive and reproductive work essentially becomes artificial since females in peasant households undertake various inter-related tasks in their day-to-day subsistence needs. For example, is it productive or reproductive work when a woman nurses her child while labouring in the fields, or cuts grass after her field-work in order to feed the buffalo which will provide milk for her own family's needs, or be sold for extra income? (Beneria and Sen, 1981; Mies et al., 1986).<sup>8</sup> The nature of women's work varies considerably from household-to-household, region-to-region, season-to-season, as well as from caste-to-caste and, as Deere et al., (1982) further point out, it is access to the means of production in peasant societies that determines the range of activities undertaken by women. From the numerous studies looking at women's lives in various rural regions of India (Bhave, 1988; Hale, 1987;

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Many poor households often cultivate areas around the house itself for their own consumption and to sell and/or barter produce at local markets (Mies et al., 1986). These 'kitchen gardens' as well as the raising of poultry or other animals can provide poor peasants and landless labourers with little extra income (Ibid).

Hobson, 1982; Jeffery et al., 1989; Kishwar and Vanita, 1984; Mies et al., 1986; Mukhopadhyay, 1984; Omvedt, 1980a; Sharma, 1980; Srinivas, 1990), there is an enormous diversity in the nature of women's subsistence work from household-to-household and from caste-to-caste. This diversity, as well as the significant contribution of females to the day-to-day subsistence needs of their families, is often lost in definitions and statistical analysis of women's wage and non-wage labour, which have a tendency to "... [obscure] the amount, the intensity, and the productivity of female work" (Mies et al., 1986: 3).

#### A NOTE ON THE CASTE/CLASS SYSTEM:

The impact of capitalist development and underdevelopment on poor women's lives has been severely underestimated, if not silenced, because of

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Agarwal (1989) has found that one has to be very cautious of statistical approaches attempting to quantify subsistence work done by females in rural areas of India. There have been significant problems with the State's census definitions and classifications of who comprises the categories of 'workers' and 'non-workers' (Ibid). For example, Agarwal points out that women have often been classified as 'housewives' even though they are dependent on some form of wage labour (Ibid). Agarwal further argues that the biases in census statistics are often based on factors such as "... the gender of the respondent and the enumerator, cultural perceptions of women's roles, and the type of questions asked, including the words used to frame the questions" (1989: 6).

the subsumption of caste under class. Various studies suggest that the life conditions of Indian women cannot be fully understood within the context of class and that their experiences are also shaped by the caste system (See Kishwar and Vanita, 1984; Mukhopadhyay, 1984; Zurbrigg, 1984). In order to reveal and politicize the nature of poor women's oppression, their exploitation, and the violence against them, the caste system cannot be dismissed as a remnant of pre-capitalist relations or feudalism. There is a danger in generalizing the experiences all poor Indian women under the umbrella of 'class' because it fails to capture the total impact of capitalist development and underdevelopment on women's bodies—on their embodied selves.

The correlation between caste and class remains contentious in post-colonial India. Chapter Two of this thesis shows how the colonial State transformed the caste/class system by instituting formal rights to property, education, and wage labour in the emerging factories. However, caste and class are not necessarily synonymous in modern-day India. Although the high castes continue to dominate many rural and urban areas because they have monopolized large parcels of land, capitalist development and underdevelopment has had a range of affects on

the so-called lower castes and classes.

Mies (1980) has found that in recent years some low-caste communities such as shepherds and potters have been able to raise their status to middle peasants and in some cases they can be considered as part of the rich peasantry. Members of these communities were in a position to take advantage of the educational and employment opportunities offered under British colonial rule and the post-independent Government (Omvedt, 1988). Since some individuals from the low-castes and classes have been able to raise their socio-economic status, one has to be cautious of equating low caste and class with impoverishment—that is landlessness or agricultural labour. There are many middle and upper - middle peasant households whose members are agricultural labourers and/or landless labourers, particularly in southern and western regions of India (Ibid).

The migration of poor peasants to rural and urban areas in search of work, whether it be on a permanent or seasonal basis, also makes it difficult to distinguish between castes. This is especially the case for poor women who must often undertake various types of work and services for their family's survival. Poor women deserted by their family's often flock to the cities in order to survive and can be found in a range of exploitative work (Mies, 1980). These migrant



labourers, as Mies (Ibid) has found, are exploited both sexually and as workers by labor contractors, landlords, and even the police.

Although it is difficult to discuss the deterioration in the life conditions of poor women from caste-to-caste in this general inquiry, the reference to poor women herein is based on recent data that suggests that the poor classes are primarily comprised of low-caste communities such as the 'untouchables' as well as various other ethnic groups. Despite the theoretical and methodological problems in examining the impact of capitalist development and underdevelopment on the lives of poor Indian women, in this inquiry it is essential to look at the relationship between the struggles of poor females for basic subsistence needs of their families and the deterioration in their bodies and health.

The central concern of this thesis is to examine the factors contributing to the ill-health of poor Indian females and their high mortality rates. Since the history of productive relations is an important aspect of poor women's lives today, the following chapter examines the profound impact of colonial capital accumulation schemes on India's 'self sufficient' peasant production. Then chapter three focuses on the deterioration of

subsistence production and reproduction in various rural and urban areas of India and why poor households are dependent on several sources of income for survival. In many areas of India the wage and non-wage labour performed by poor females is essential to the survival of their families and the intensification of women's work-burden has had a significant impact on their bodies and health. The State's drastic attempts at reducing the fertility levels of poor women and the impact of the population control programme on their health is discussed in chapter four. Chapter five looks at the emergence of women's movements in India and the possibility of constraints on the empowerment of poor women at the grass roots level. The need for alternative models of development is discussed in the concluding section. It is argued that the experiences of poor Indian females pose some fundamental questions for women living under exploitative, alienating and violent relations of production and reproduction. In order to develop and/or recover alternative concepts of development feminists in both the First and Third World must consider the nature of their own disembodiment. It is only by recognizing the nature of their own fragmented selves that feminists can build

the foundation for a global sisterhood based  
on appreciation of human diversity.

## CHAPTER II

### NATURE OF PRODUCTION IN PRE-COLONIAL INDIA: THE IMPACT OF COLONIAL CAPITAL ACCUMULATION ON THE DEVELOPMENT AND UNDERDEVELOPMENT OF INDIAN SOCIETY

In the early 1970s within India there were intensive interdisciplinary attempts to carve a Marxist methodology for understanding the Indian case (Thorner, 1982). Initial attempts to define the precise nature of the mode(s) of production of Indian agriculture were abstract and theoretical (McEachern, 1976). The academic preoccupation with this specific question raised several issues in the elaborate discussions that followed. For example, there were attempts to clarify the nature of mode(s) of production in colonial and post-colonial areas of India, its deindustrialization under the colonial regime, as well as the transformation in relations of production under the impact of colonial capital accumulation. Although this extensive debate on the nature of India's mode(s) of production under colonial and post-colonial rule is beyond the scope of this inquiry, the destructive impact of colonial policies on the development and underdevelopment of Indian society cannot be ignored (Alavi, 1982; 1981; 1980; Byres, 1985; Carter-Foster, 1978; Chandra, 1980; Davidson, 1989; Mukhia, 1981; Rothermund, 1988; 1983; Sharma, 1985).

In order to examine both why poor women in

India are being targeted by the State's population control programme and the alarming deterioration in the health of females in poor households, it is necessary to look at the nature of 'self sufficient' economies under British rule, and how production was coercively geared towards the capital accumulation needs of the colonial State in the nineteenth century (Bharadwaj, 1986; Charlesworth, 1982). Forced commercialization in agriculturally-rich areas for the purpose of cash crops and the saturation of British manufactured goods into India, made it clear by the nineteenth century that Britain was molding its imperial machinery to meet its own needs (Alavi, 1982; 1981; 1980; Chandra, 1980; Omvedt, 1980).

Under the impact of colonial rule and capital accumulation policies (for example, land revenue systems) there was increasing pauperization of India's caste-based 'self sufficient' villages, and census reports indicate that the last century of British rule created the largest class of landless labourers in India (Charlesworth, 1982). Caste and class relations also intensified by the late nineteenth century as the lives of poor (low-caste) peasants deteriorated further under the lucrative capital accumulation schemes of the colonial State and the emerging Indian bourgeoisie. It has

been suggested that this period was perhaps the 'golden age' for a handful of India's upper caste peasantry (Ibid). The upper caste peasants were able to capitalize on the trading activities of the colonial regime who eventually legalized the most important means of production —land— at the time of the British conquest, in order to secure political and economic alliances with feudal landlords.

Although there were several forms of subsistence patterns throughout India when the British arrived, the great majority of pre-capitalist Indian villages essentially functioned along rigidly defined caste relations embedded in a hierarchy of exploitative relations<sup>10</sup> (Alavi, 1980; Gupta, 1980). The *jatis* (castes) were the

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The development of the *jatis* can be traced to the invasion of the Indian sub-continent by Aryan groups, who distinguished themselves from indigenous groups on the basis of racial differences, specifically *varna* (colour) (Gupta, 1980; Hiro, 1982). The *jatis* eventually evolved into an intricate web of rules of 'pollution and purity' and *dharma* (one's duty/labour in life) and *karma* (deeds or retributions) (Hiro, 1982). The ideology of *karma* and *dharma* is based on complex Hindu religious beliefs and stress that an individual will reap the benefits of deeds performed in one's lifetime in the next life. This belief perfectly justified the exploitation of the low-castes, who were ingrained with the idea that they must have undertaken 'bad' deeds in their past life, and that in order to be born into a higher caste 'good' deeds must be performed (Ibid). The caste system has developed into complex social, economic, and religious rules which vary tremendously from one region to another throughout India (Donnelly, 1990).

basis for division of labour and ascribed one's place in a complex and oppressive mode of production (Alavi, 1981), where "unpaid surplus labour [was] pumped out of direct producers" (Omvedt, 1982a: 17).

The Indian pre-capitalist village can be distinguished from European feudalism on the basis of rigid caste relations, which "... structured the very nature and existence of the exploiting and exploited sections" (Omvedt, 1982a: 14). The foundation of the landowning peasantry in India was based on an intricate web of exploitative exchange of services that enabled the upper castes to extract specific types of labour from the lower castes, and rules of associations amongst the *jatis* were also controlled by feudal lords. Gupta suggests that the Indian caste system eventually developed into an hierarchy of elaborate rules of 'exchange and intercourse' because of the "dependence of the lower exploited classes on each other and on their masters in a closed society ..." (1980: 262).

There was an hierarchy of well-defined relations not only amongst the exploiting classes (for example, priests, landlords, and merchants), but also amongst the exploited peasantry (such as artisans and cultivators) (Gupta, 1980). In this localized and self-sufficient structure of exploitation, the development of the

caste system further stratified the hierarchy of powers amongst the ruling castes and also amongst the *jatis* that served them (Ibid). For example, peasants were stratified according to the status of their feudal lords (*zamindars*),<sup>11</sup> the allotment of land to free peasants, as well as the distribution of crops upon completion of one's duties throughout the year (Ibid). In these self-sufficient (non-market) villages the *jatis* were the foundation for specialized hereditary services, where "each peasant was required by custom to pay to each of the 'village servants' a customary prescribed fraction of his harvested crop" (Alavi, 1980: 367).

Alavi (1980) points out that the very foundation of Indian feudalism rested on the 'sweat and blood' of the peasants controlled by local *zamindars*. These village *zamindars* had considerable control over the extraction of the peasant's labour, and it was the village *zamindar* who allocated the share of crops, as well as "...enjoyed the right to restrain the tenants from leaving their lands and to compel them to cultivate

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The term *zamindar* refers to Indian feudal lords with varying power and status that was rigidly embedded in highly stratified, elaborate, and exploitative relations of production (Alavi, 1980). In northern India *zamindars* at the village level maintained the day-to-day life of the peasantry in a self-sufficient system of production, and military services to superior *zamindars* was also present at all levels of the Indian feudal structure (Ibid).



all arable land held by them" (Hasan, 1964: cited in Alavi, 1981: 479).

Escaped peasants were welcomed by other *zamindars* because it gave them the opportunity to extract more labor. Under this kind of non-market subsistence production land itself had very little value in the hierarchy of powerful *zamindars*. What was more valuable<sup>12</sup> was the labour provided by the peasantry. The coercive control of the labour of the unfree peasantry not only enabled the *zamindar* class directly involved at the village level to dominate agriculture and handicraft production to flourishing urban centres in India as well as abroad, but they were also in a position to take advantage of the capital accumulation schemes of the colonial state.<sup>13</sup>

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In addition to peasants who were subjects of feudal lords, there was also a large class of landless peasants who provided menial tasks in exchange for minimal subsistence needs, as well as an abundant class of independent peasants (Alavi, 1981). Alavi states that the "independence" of this latter class of peasants is difficult to delineate because it "would be contingent on the constellation of power within which they [were] located" (1981: 370). These peasants were primarily located in *raiyati* villages which had slightly different hierarchical structures from villages controlled by *zamindars* in northern India.

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Although pre-capitalist Indian society is often depicted as static and backward when the British arrived, for many centuries India was exporting fine cotton textiles to the Middle East, Africa and the Far East. Most of this lucrative activity was channelled through large urban centres controlled by the Indian nobility whose elaborate consumption patterns were based on the extraction of surplus labour of the poor peasantry (Alavi, 1980).

The British also utilized the increasing tensions between the crumbling Mughal empire and *zamindars* at various levels of the feudal hierarchy, and as a class it was the *zamindars* who "... became the mainstay of the empire. Most of the difficulties which the Mughal emperor had to face were the result of the activities of the *zamindars*" (Hasan, 1964: cited in Alavi, 1980: 369).

While it is difficult to generalize the nature of two hundred years of British rule on different areas of India, there is no doubt that colonialism had a destructive impact on the development of Indian society overall (Alavi, 1981; 1980; Chandra, 1980; Mukhia, 1981; Omvedt, 1982a; 1980a; Rothermund, 1988; 1983). The colonial regime drastically transformed the self-sufficient (caste-based) nature of rural villages by institutionalizing various capital accumulation schemes which promoted the needs of the colonial State, but "... were inimical to indigenous development ..." (Alavi, 1980: 361). This prospect leads Alavi to postulate a strong case for a 'colonial mode of production' in India.

With the institutionalization of a Western legal concept of property, the colonial State radically changed the relations of production between the *zamindars* and the exploited peasantry. The colonial regime formed alliances with powerful *zamindars* by giving

them legal possession of the land for political and economic reasons, and land revenue was now collected "... with a rapacity and ruthlessness that India had not experienced before" (Alavi, 1980: 374). Although there is evidence that land revenue was also collected in cash in some areas of India centuries before the British arrived, a significant amount of the revenue collected by the colonial regime was transferred out of India to meet the needs of the colonial empire (Alavi, 1981; 1980).

A clear distinction between caste and class also emerged under colonial rule as access to means of production, specifically land, was no longer based on the *jati* system (Omvedt, 1982a). The peasant was no longer under the direct physical coercion of the village *zamindar* because land was now more valuable than the labour that upheld the Indian feudal hierarchy. Under this colonial scheme a significant number of peasants were made landless at an unprecedented scale (Omvedt, 1980), and they faced unlimited exploitation and oppression because their livelihood now depended on the sale of their labour power (Alavi, 1980). As Alavi points out:

the main impact of the change brought about by the colonial dispensation was the elimination of petty sovereignties of chieftains and *zamindars* who

ruled the land, as much as they owned it. Thus the 'fusion of economic and political power at the point of production.' ... [T]he power of the landlord over the peasant, was dissolved and was reconstituted in the form of bourgeois landed property, under the authority of the colonial state which marked a separation of economic and political power (1980: 371).

Although the great majority of the Indian peasantry was dependent on agriculture for their day-to-day subsistence, conditions for the artisan caste also deteriorated as the colonial State deindustrialized India's household industries while nurturing the needs of the industrial bourgeoisie in Britain (Rothermund, 1988; 1983; Saha, 1989). Prior to the arrival of the British, artisans mainly produced luxury goods for the flamboyant demands of the Indian aristocracy, and this production was based along hierarchical, non-market, and exploitative patron-client relationships (Saha, 1989). However, this localized extraction of labour was transformed as the colonial State coercively geared various self-sufficient villages towards capital accumulation and market exchange. Under this calculated process many traditional industries were destroyed, forcing artisans to take on work as agricultural labourers, since the thrust of the colonial policy in this particular area was to meet the demands of the British merchants and eventually the emerging Indian bourgeois class.

The implementation of a Western based infrastructure

(promoting bureaucratic, transportation, and communication networks) was aimed at securing the colonial regime's hold on the politically and economically lucrative areas of India. Rothermund (1983) states that this infrastructure subjected some areas of India to the world market when they were not even integrated into the local markets within India. In some areas of India agriculture was increasingly pushed towards the production of crops for world markets, especially cotton, jute, and indigo, and tea was produced on colonial plantations (Alavi, 1981). In other areas peasants were also forced to produce crops to feed the burgeoning colonial towns of India, as well as for those peasants who were specifically growing cash crops for export to world markets (Ibid).

In order to meet the demands of the industrial bourgeoisie in England, by the nineteenth century India's manufacturing base was also placed on a destructive path as the colonial regime imported English-made goods on a significant scale. By the eighteenth century vehement demands to undercut India's manufacturing base, specifically cotton textiles, were being voiced in England (Alavi, 1981; 1980). It is interesting to note that as Britain's industries emerged on a world scale Indian exports collapsed and, as Alavi (1980) points out, the country that was at the centre of world trade route for centuries, supplying superior cotton textiles and

other manufactured goods, was now dependent on importing textiles from the colonial State itself.

With the deterioration of subsistence production under the impact of the colonial State, the plight of the poor increased significantly. However, the colonial State was not the only exploitative and oppressive force facing the poor Indian peasant. The emerging Indian bourgeoisie (for example, moneylenders and merchants), mainly from the upper castes, also exercised coercive control over poor peasants. The great majority of Indian villages continued to function along the *jati* system, where labour (specifically labour for wages) was extracted along caste lines. For example, the work that the low-castes performed 'traditionally' was integrated into the colonial capital accumulation process as 'unskilled' labour and transformed into extremely low-paid wage labour. Furthermore, caste continued to determine the livelihood of poor peasants as they were marginalized from traditional (self-sufficient and subsistence-based) production and coercively integrated into the wage labour process. Under colonial rule, factories, mines and plantations thrived on the so-called cheap labour provided by the poor low-castes and classes such as the Untouchables.

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The Indo-Aryans did not include the Untouchables in their caste hierarchy because they were considered to (continued ...)

Omvedt has found that even today caste remains a significant ideological tool used by the middle and upper classes to exploit, oppress, and divide the the rural poor (1982a; 1980a; 1978; 1973).

The colonial State's capital accumulation schemes, in fact, did not completely transform the ideology of the caste system (that is, *karma* and *dharma*), but rather successfully reinforced it. New classes of exploiters emerged under the impact of capital accumulation, and those castes that were once oppressed and exploited by the *zamindar* class were now part of the new petty bourgeoisie (Alavi, 1980). The new classes of landlords, tenants, and labourers not only created new patterns of rural stratification, but, ironically, also enabled an emerging bourgeoisie to participate in the future demands for independence (Charlesworth, 1980; Omvedt, 1982a; 1980; 1978; 1973).

Charlesworth (1980) states that in the last thirty years of colonial rule, agrarian protests increased

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<sup>14</sup> (... continued)

be 'polluted' individuals (for example, they ate meat). This (out) caste was re-classified by Gandhi who coined a euphemistic term which literally means the children of god—*Harijan* (Hiro, 1982). In the past few years there has been increasing awareness of the exploitation and violence against this community and the term *Harijan* is now looked upon as being derogatory. Individuals belonging to this class now refer to themselves as *Dalits* (*Dalit* means oppression) (Ibid). The reality of the oppression and violence against the *Dalits* in India's so-called democracy is well illustrated by Dangle (1992).

significantly in various areas of India. Since the Indian elite is often depicted as the instigators of the voice of independence, the support of the poor rural masses in undermining the colonial regime in many areas of India is easily dismissed. Under colonial rule the correlation between caste and class intensified as the upper castes continued to exploit and prevent the poor classes from mobilizing against the Indian bourgeoisie, while simultaneously relying on the strength of the poor rural masses in their own demand for independence from the colonial regime.

Omvedt argues that:

the concrete form in which colonial rule served the seeds of capitalist development as well as maintained semi-feudal structures in existence in India provided the conditions under which anti-feudal as well as anti-imperialist movements developed ... (1982a: 19).

Upon independence the colonial regime was replaced by a bourgeois State that theoretically advocated harmony and equality for all Indians, while implementing capitalist development schemes that were clearly in the interest of a handful of middle/upper class capitalists and various international development organizations (Guha, 1979; Harrison, 1987). The bourgeois State continued to be dominated by conservative-thinking rich peasants well after independence and there were very few serious attempts to put into practice the socialist principles of the



initial five year development policy (Bhattacharya, 1989: 1973).

In principle, post-colonial India's initial attempts at modernization were aimed at alleviating the impoverished conditions of the poor classes. Indian state policy specifically outlined that it was going to "... promote with special care the educational and economic interests of weaker sections of the people, and, in particular, ... protect them from social injustices and all forms of exploitation" (The Indian Constitution and Indian Planning Documents, cited in Bhattacharya, 1989: 151). However, the Indian government's attempts at implementing a development policy based on justice and equality was significantly curtailed by foreign interests as well. Bhattacharya argues that modernization in India was achieved at the expense of the poor masses, and that coercive pressure from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund succeeded in ushering in a very different type of "a socialistic pattern of society" than originally outlined in the Indian Constitution and the five year development plans (1989: 160).

Today the poor classes continue to be exploited and oppressed by the upper classes and there has been an increase in the violence against the poor under the impact of capitalist development

and underdevelopment, particularly in rural areas where the ideology of the caste system, religious, and ethnic differences dominate daily life (Donnelly, 1990; Guha, 1979; Gupta, 1990; Joshi, 1990; Kishwar and Vanita, 1984; Mukhopadhyay, 1984; Omvedt, 1982a; 1980a).

Attempts to ameliorate the impoverished conditions facing India's poor has often resulted in blatant violence. The rural rich are often the most audible voice of opposition to development policies aimed at improving the life conditions of the poor. It is within this context that the increasing impoverishment and the violence against poor women is situated.

Hiro (1982) argues that the Indian government has done very little to enforce laws that have been implemented to protect the poor from exploitation and violence (See also Sinha, 1982). The State's rhetoric of equality and justice has also been questioned by women's groups throughout India who have organized on the platform of violence against women (Ahuja, 1987; Gupta, 1988; Kumari, 1989). Although women's groups have focused a great deal of attention on blatant violence such as 'bride burning', the Indian women's movement has not been very critical of the alarming deterioration in the bodies and general health of poor females under the impact of modernization. Specifically, what needs to

be addressed is how the deterioration in the sphere of production and reproduction under post-colonial capital accumulation, as well as the oppression of females in the Indian culture, is contributing to the ill-health and violence against poor women. By placing the myriad of experiences of poor Indian females under the umbrella of violence, urgent issues such as hunger and population control can be brought to the forefront of development discussions by urban-based women's organizations that have emerged throughout India in the past few years. However, there is a drawback to this approach. As we will see in Chapter five the heterogeneous and factionalized nature of many middle/upper class women's groups in India have a tendency to distort or silence the interests of poor women involved in grass roots movements.

In order to gain a fuller understanding of the nature of the issues being raised by poor women at the grass roots level, the following chapter focuses more specifically on the various kinds of work and services poor Indian females are undertaking in order to ensure the survival of their families.

## CHAPTER III

### CAPITALIST DEVELOPMENT AND UNDERDEVELOPMENT: THE DETERIORATION IN SUBSISTENCE PRODUCTION AND REPRODUCTION AND THE IMPACT ON POOR WOMEN:

"I have been rolling beedis for the past 30 years", says 45-year old Neela Narsaiah. "I was married at the age of eleven and was a mother at 16. I have six daughters and a son, and was sterilized after my son was born. ... I roll 1000 to 1500 beedis a day. ... The Seth paid 1.5 rupees for 1000 beedis at first, but now it is 5 rupees. I am still reeling under debt. You see, I had to spend 3-4 thousand rupees for each of my daughters' weddings. My health is now failing me. I am not able to roll more than 700 beedis. My arms are swollen from continuous cutting of the leaves. I resort to massage, without effect. My eyes burn and continuous breathing in of tobacco has made me asthmatic. When can I rest? My day begins at 5.30 a.m. and ends at 11.30 p.m. "My life began with beedi rolling, and perhaps it is going to end doing just the same" (Quoted in Mukhopadhyay, 1984: 53). <sup>15</sup>

This chapter will draw upon the voices of marginalized and pauperized women such as Neela Narsaiah in order to demonstrate the exploitative, oppressive, and very often violent conditions under which they are labouring for the day-to-day subsistence needs of their families. It will become clear that women's bodies and health suffer because the overwhelming burden of wage and non-wage labour is placed on their shoulders.

The ill-health of poor Indian women has roots in several factors which have been exacerbated by

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Beedis are cigarettes. One rupee is approximately five cents in Canadian currency.

the modernization and commercialization of subsistence-oriented production throughout India. By subsistence or 'self-sufficient' production I am referring to what Bennholdt-Thomsen and Mies characterize as the "... production of life in its widest sense, the production of use values for day-to-day sustenance as well as the production of new life" (Mies et al., 1986: 5). Most of this work is primarily done by women. From women's point of view, there is no distinction between a sphere of 'production' (for example, preparation of food, cleaning) and 'reproduction' (that is, pregnancy, childbirth, socialization, and satisfaction of emotional and sexual needs) (Mies et al., 1986). Subsistence production is, in fact, a 'continuum between the two processes' (Ibid: 5).

Under the impact of capitalist development and underdevelopment various areas of subsistence-oriented production have been undermined and the marginalized and pauperized landless labourers and small peasants are no longer able to fulfill their most basic consumption needs. As poor households lose control over their most essential means of production—land—several sources of income are now required. Mies has found that it is women who are the "...last guarantors of the survival of the family through various types of work and services" (Mies, 1986: 6; See also Chatterjee, 1990;

Gulati, 1981; Hobson, 1982; Kishwar and Vanita, 1984). The burden of worrying over the day-to-day survival needs of one's family, as well as women's unequal access to and lack of control over the means of production and other resources in many peasant households, is reflected in the following comment by Raj Kumari, a poor woman from the Uttar Pradesh region:

Land is passed on from father to son. Even the jewellery that is a gift to a woman on her marriage is not given to her, it is kept by her parents-in-law. If a man dies or marries, the woman is completely dependent on others for her survival. A man can gamble or drink away his land but a woman is always concerned about her children. She can never see them starve, she would do all in her power to raise them to the best of her ability (Quoted in Kelkar, 1987: 57).

Heyzer (1987) states that in many poor households the allocation of scarce resources (for example, income) is a major source of conflict and that women often bear the responsibility of day-to-day provision for the household (that is, food, clothing, education, and health care). Since the distribution of wages in many poor households usually follows a sexist pattern, men will often keep a significant portion of their earnings for their own consumption (for example, alcohol and cigarettes), while women have no option but to spend their daily wages to purchase food and other necessities (Gulati, 1981; Heyzer, 1987; Kishwar and Vanita, 1984; Mies et al., 1986). In many rural areas the migration of men to cities in search of work has

also placed the burden of the household exclusively on women (Srinivas, 1990). The overwhelming physical and mental strain of the struggle for daily consumption needs, as well as verbal and physical abuse from spouses, in-laws, employers, and landlords are a common theme in many of the case studies which look at the experiences of poor women under the impact of capitalist development (Ahuja, 1987; Bhave, 1988; Chatterji, 1988; Gulati, 1981; Gupta, 1988; Gupta, 1986; Hobson, 1982; Mies et al., 1986; Mukhopadhyay, 1984; Omvedt, 1980a; Singh, 1990; 1988; Zurbrigg, 1984).

#### NATURE OF WOMEN'S WORK:

Since 1951 the Indian Government has implemented a series of five year development schemes in an attempt to achieve economic growth and help alleviate the impoverished conditions of the rural masses marginalized by colonial rule. However, India's modest economic growth has been uneven and only a very small segment of the Indian population has benefited from the 'trickle down' development planning (Bharadwaj, 1986; Bhattacharya, 1989; 1973; Desai, 1981; Deshpande and Deshpande, 1985; Ghosh, 1983; Johnson, 1983; Mies et al., 1988; Mies, 1986; Mukhopadhyay, 1984; Saha, 1989; Singh and Viitanen-Kelles, 1987; Sinha, 1982; Srinivas, 1990).

As examined in the previous chapter, the increase in poverty throughout rural and urban areas of India has roots in the destruction of subsistence production under the impact of modernization during colonial rule. However, also to blame are the development schemes that have mainly been geared towards industrial growth and the commercialization of agriculture since independence (Bharadwaj, 1986). The slow pace of industrial growth has made it virtually impossible for those who have been displaced from subsistence production to find employment in the cities from season-to-season or on a permanent basis (Ghosh, 1983; Sinha, 1982). Unlike the case of nineteenth century capitalism in Western Europe, poor peasants in India who have been marginalized and pauperized are not being absorbed into the so-called 'formal' wage labour process and continue to live below subsistence levels (Mies, 1986). Bennholdt-Thomsen argues that these marginalized and impoverished masses who are unable to sell their labour for adequate wages are not "... an aberration of the capitalist accumulation process which will disappear with 'full-fledged' capitalism, but are a necessary precondition and result of this mode of production" (Mies et al., 1988: 29).

That the marginalized peasantry is unable to adequately cover reproductive costs because of



insufficient wages and the lack of wage work itself sheds a significant light on the issue of exploitation and violence against poor women in India. As we shall see in the following chapter, the Indian Government, instead of dealing with the roots of poverty (for example, unequal distribution of resources, poor wages and working conditions, and increasing indebtedness of poor peasants to village money lenders), has set out to achieve modernization by reducing the population size of the poor.

Capitalism has not only emerged from the violent destruction of self-sufficient and self-sustaining means of subsistence throughout Europe and the Third World, but violence against women remains at the the foundation of capital accumulation and the sexual division of labour (Mies et al., 1988). The blatant violence against poor women in the underdeveloped peripheries of the Third World has come in the form of "... mass rapes, dowry killings, forced sterilization, sex tourism, use of Third World women as guinea pigs for testing drugs, pro-natal and anti-natal technology by transnational concerns" (Cited in Salleh, 1988: 132; See also Mies et al., 1988; Mies, 1986).

Under the impact of capitalist development and underdevelopment in India, violence against women from the

marginalized classes has increased significantly (Agarwal, 1990; 1988; 1986; Banerjee, 1984; Mies et al.,<sup>16</sup> 1986; Mies, 1984; 1980; 1975). Mies (1975) has found that the modernization process has further sharpened class and caste conflicts, particularly between the rural rich and the rural poor. Poor rural women are increasingly confronting the various faces of coercion and violence: the violence from husbands and families because of sexist attitudes (visible in the pressure on women to produce male children), the spread of the dowry system even among the poor peasants and agricultural labourers<sup>17</sup> (Mies, 1986), and the exploitation and violence from middle/upper class peasants and landlords because of increasing indebtedness and lack of sufficient wage work in many rural areas (Gregory, 1988).

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In using the term marginalized classes I am referring to the low-castes that have been marginalized in the Hindu caste hierarchy and the marginalization processes taking place in subsistence production throughout many rural areas of India.

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The dowry-system was primarily practised amongst the upper caste(s) Hindu families where the bride's family provided the in-laws with clothing and other goods upon marriage (Matsui, 1989). However, under the impact of capitalism the demand for exorbitant dowries has intensified. In the past few years females, whose families have not been able to satisfy the dowry demands of their in-laws, have been viciously burned alive by their  
(continued ...)

About eighty per cent of India's female population can be found in rural areas where the vast majority of households can be characterized as small peasants and/or landless agricultural labourers who are further dependent on a range of wage and non-wage work from day-to-day and from season-to-season (Kishwar and Vanita, 1984: 1). Though it is important to keep in mind the methodological concerns outlined in Chapter One regarding generalizations about Indian women, the numerous studies examining the impact of capitalist development and underdevelopment in various rural areas of India, indicate that economic growth has mainly benefited a small coterie of middle/upper class women (Chatterji, 1988; D'Souza, 1985; Gupta, 1988; Mukhopadhyay, 1984). These women have been able to capitalize on their family's resources and do not have to struggle for their daily subsistence needs. In order to gain a clearer understanding of the increasing poverty and ill-health of poor Indian females, a brief overview of the deterioration

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17 (... continued)

husbands and/or in-laws, and such 'bride burning' atrocities against women continue to appear in local newspapers (Ahuja, 1987). Although subsistence-oriented communities also had a nominal bride-price, dowry demands amongst poor peasants have also increased under the banner of 'modernization' and mass consumption (Mies et al., 1988).

of subsistence production including some of the attempts to integrate poor rural households into the market economy is necessary here.

Mies (1984) has found that whether one is looking at the situation of artisans, small traders, cultivators, or any other form of subsistence production throughout India, there has been increasing pauperization and marginalization under the impact of capitalist development and underdevelopment (See also Mies et al., 1986). Although many poor women continue to be employed as agricultural labourers, they have been pushed out of non-agricultural work, traditional household industries, as well as various other occupations (Mies et al., 1986). The income that poor women receive from the market and non-market exchange of their labour, products, and services is no longer sufficient and several sources of income are now essential in order to guarantee a family's survival (Mies, 1986; Mies et al., 1986; Saha, 1989).

Not only has there been increasing intensification of socio-economic constraints for the households of poor peasants and landless labourers under the impact of capitalist development and underdevelopment but the various development efforts aimed at alleviating the impoverished conditions in rural areas have only benefited middle/upper class peasants. In the past few decades several large and small

scale rural development projects have been implemented in many areas throughout India. However, they have essentially been geared towards market-oriented production (Heyzer, 1987; Kelkar, 1987; Mies et al., 1986; Mies, 1982). Whether it is the introduction of advanced agricultural technology (for example, irrigation systems, chemical fertilizers, high grade seeds, or hydro-electric dams), land distribution schemes, or the implementation of health care centres, "... the collusion between government functionaries and the rural rich has helped to perpetuate inequality ..." (Heyzer, 1987: 28). This collusion is perhaps the most significant obstacle preventing poor peasants, especially women, from benefiting from the various rural development projects. It is estimated that the concentration of socio-economic power is in the hands of some ten per cent of the middle/upper class peasants who control most of the arable land, including markets, and the flow of credits (Kelkar, 1987: 54).

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There are approximately 700 million peasant households in India and about 60 per cent are comprised of poor peasants and agricultural labourers, many of whom are landless and some who own less than three acres of land (Misra, 1981; cited in Kelkar, 1987: 54). About 30 per cent of small peasants own about three to ten acres (Ibid). Less than 11 per cent of the peasantry owns more than half of the "... total operated land area, possess 61 per cent of total assets, ... command about 63 per cent of the gross value of output and 67 per cent of the total amount of marketable surplus" (Ibid).

Initial attempts to develop rural areas were, in fact, situated in caste, class, gender, and regional biases (Ibid). Although the strategy of rural development throughout the 1950s and 1960s theoretically advocated the Gandhian philosophy of "... mutual co-operation and profound outlook for the development of all ..." (Kelkar, 1987: 55), in reality the State was securing the interests of the rural rich. For example, the *Zamindari* Abolition Act did not change the foundation of the Indian agrarian structure or caste based relations (Ibid). Social and economic power continues to be concentrated in the hands of powerful landowners who remain a dominant force at the local (village) and national levels of the State. It is within this highly stratified and unequal system of socio-economic power that many of India's development efforts can be placed.

In the early five year development plans attempts to 'integrate' women into rural development projects consisted of a Western middle-class bias. Women in peasant households were given training in areas such as crafts, sewing, hygiene, nutrition, child care, and gardening by the *Mahila Mandals* (Upper and middle class Rural Women's Organizations) (Kelkar, 1987). The objective of such programmes, as outlined by the Directorate of Women's Programmes, was "to help the

rural woman become a good wife, a wise mother, a competent housewife and a responsible member of the village community" (Das, 1959; quoted in Kelkar, 1987: 61). Such programmes were, in fact, irrelevant to the day-to-day concerns of poor rural women in subsistence production who were struggling to meet the most basic needs of survival--food and water.

The implementation of the Integrated rural Development Programme (IRDP) in the late 1970s was another attempt to improve the deteriorating situation of poor peasants by providing loans, employment, as well as training in agriculture-oriented activities (Kelkar, 1987). In examining this package of strategies for rural development, Kelkar (Ibid) argues that only a very small segment of the peasantry owning a reasonable amount of land and other assets were able to benefit from this particular programme. For example, in one district 670 loans were provided under the IRDP programme to poor peasants for agriculture improvement and it was found that "... the families of [middle/upper] caste Hindus usurped most of the facilities and only a few poorer ... women, who were under the patronage of the rural rich, were included in the programmes" (Kelkar, 1987: 62). Many poor women were also often reluctant to approach credit facilities under this development programme because

of sexist attitudes, lack of assets, and the general bias of money lending institutions against small-scale enterprises (Ibid).

As the conditions in rural areas continue to deteriorate for landless and small-scale peasants today, the wage and non-wage labour performed by women and children has become crucial to the survival of the poor household. Under the uneven impact of capitalist development and underdevelopment there has been an intensification of subsistence work performed by women and children. This intensification has taken place because of the concentration of resources in the hands of a few, the poor wages paid to workers, the lack of sufficient wage work in rural and urban areas, as well as the persistence of sexist attitudes and the increase in environmental destruction. The increasing destruction of the environment has made the search for fuel, fodder, and water an overwhelming daily task in most areas of India. For example, it is estimated that in eastern Uttar Pradesh, women spend up to four hours a day fetching water, and in the Udaipur district of Rajasthan women spend three to four hours a day securing firewood (Centre For Women's Development Studies, 1984; cited in Kelkar, 1987: 64). Shortage of firewood has led to fewer hot meals and uncooked stale food



has increased the risk of infection and illness (Ibid). Kelkar (Ibid) states that in certain areas the increasing depletion of firewood, water, and other resources has forced some poor women to commit suicide and many more are being forced into the trade of sexual services, particularly where capitalist development has impoverished subsistence-oriented communities (See also Singh, 1988).

Under such conditions poor households are forced to undertake various strategies for survival. One prevalent strategy is the reduction in meals, especially by women, who not only receive the smallest share of the food, but will often go hungry in order to ensure that the children and other members in the household are fed (Agarwal, 1990; Kishwar and Vanita, 1984). In times of severe shortages poor households have also undertaken other measures such as borrowing from neighbours, employers, and changing the very content of their meals (for example, eating rice gruel instead of boiled rice and drinking tea and water in order to kill hunger) (Agarwal, 1990). The profound impact of the day-to-day struggle for subsistence on the mental and physical health of children in many poor households is apparent in the following moving account of one woman.

We sold pots and plates and made do on tea and, at times, water. Finally there was nothing. We

had some red chili powder and salt so we ate that for four days. We were all at our last ounce of strength; my little brother was dying for want of milk. We could not sleep. I looked at my mother and I thought she was at death's door. So, finally, I ran out and called the neighbours. ... And they gave us tea. I asked my mother, "shall I ask for some bread please?" And she said weeping, "yes." I asked for some bread and the neighbours gave us bread and we ate that with tea. But what were we going to do the next day? ... (Quoted in Bhavé, 1988: 111).

With the decrease in subsistence-oriented production and reproduction under capitalist development, the day-to-day struggle of the great majority of poor Indian women is dependent on the 'informal/hidden' economy. By informal economy I am referring to wage and non-wage labour that is done by the poor under very exploitative conditions, for wages and services that cannot adequately cover daily human subsistence needs, and where health and wage regulations are not enforced.<sup>19</sup> Under such conditions poor women are particularly vulnerable to a great deal of exploitation and violence from employers. The high unemployment rate amongst the poor classes

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The concept of 'informal/hidden' economy has been greatly debated in development circles. Some argue that this concept has no theoretical and analytical value and that it is essentially descriptive in examining the various types of wage and non-wage labour that the poor in the peripheries of the Third World are dependent on for their day-to-day subsistence needs. It is suggested that this concept is problematic, especially in the examination of women's wage and non-wage labour in poor households (Agarwal, 1989; Banerjee, 1982; Beneria, 1982; Feldman, 1991).

provides employers with an upper hand because they can demand the cheapest labour from an abundant labour pool. Poor women are forced to endure the tactics used by many employers because their wages and/or services are essential to their family's survival. As Kishwar and Vanita have found in their study of female bonded labourers, most of the women would rather go back to the same kind of work than starve themselves and their families (1984: 22). The coercive and dehumanizing strategies of the State to recruit the cheapest (female) labour for various kinds of work and services can be seen in the following disturbing description by a woman working at the grass roots level<sup>20</sup> with poor females from an *Adivasi* community.

The months of August and September are particularly [harsh] for the impoverished tribal peasantry. ... In the villages it is much harder for them to earn cash income for buying the simplest of ... necessities. They lose their mental balance due to hunger and starvation. At such times, recruiting agents are sent to villages. The agents get in touch with ... young men in the villages. These men are provided with liquor, food and other bribes. These village men in turn entice young tribal women to accept bonded conditions of labour. The

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These poor women are referred to as the *adivasis*, which literally means 'original inhabitant' (Omvedt, 1980a: 181). This term is used to distinguish communities who were excluded from the Hindu caste system and practiced hunting and gathering and/or shifting cultivation, as well as other forms of subsistence prior to the arrival of the British (Ibid).

*munshis* offer money advances to the parents of young *adivasi* women. Each tribal woman is booked under a woman agent ... Thus they lose the right to work for any other employer, and cannot refuse to work for the kiln which has originally booked them. ... In the brick kilns they are mainly given the job of carrying head-loads of unbaked and baked bricks, for which they are usually paid less than the minimum wage. Even out of this meagre amount a part of their payment is held back by the owners saying they would get it as lump sum during the monsoon when the workers go home. However, this money is seldom given to them. All they get at the time of leaving is a sari and railway fare. These women are seldom allowed to step out of the work sites without armed guards following them. The huts provided to them are worse than pigsties. They have to live close to the blazing hot brick kilns even during the peak heat of the summer months. They work seven days a week, 12 to 14 hours a day. There are no rest days, no holidays. There is no provision for clean drinking water at these work sites. There is also no provision for latrines and urinals, so women have to squat in the open space round the work sites to relieve themselves. If they are injured while working, even first aid treatment is not provided, let alone any other medical facilities. These women are routinely subjected to various forms of sexual exploitation ranging from rape, to being forced to pay sexual bribes for small favours, to living as mistresses of owners or supervisors. Many of [the] experienced women are also made to act as recruiting agents for other women (Quoted in Kishwar and Vanita, 1984: 21-22).

Here, as well as elsewhere in India, there is a strong linkage between decreasing subsistence production and the poor living and working conditions of poor women. As pointed out earlier, these women not only contribute significantly to the survival of their families with various kinds of wage and non-wage work, but that they are also contributing to the survival of numerous

manufacturing and service industries that are oriented towards mass consumption by the local middle/upper classes and the international market (Ahojja-Patel, 1985; Matsui, 1989; Mies, 1986; 1982; 1981a; Singh and Viitanen-Kelles, 1987). Some estimate that only six per cent of India's total female 'working' population is theoretically protected by the State's labour legislation, and only about two per cent of these women belong to trade unions (Hale, 1987: 8). This estimate does not take into consideration the wage and non-wage labour provided by young children (especially females) in poor households, who often take on the burden of adult work at a very young age.

While it is difficult to generalize the various ways in which poor households are trying to survive, in what follows I draw upon a few case studies that reveal how some poor Indian females are being integrated into the macro processes of labour and capital accumulation and the overwhelming decline in their well-being.

Poor women can be found in various types of wage labour such as embroidery work, domestic services, handicraft production, labour intensive construction work, as well as in the trade of sexual services. Bhatta argues that throughout India very little is known about the various kinds of work that poor

women are dependent on because of the magnitude of the so-called 'informal' economies and "... the elusive definition of 'work' given by economists and census commissioners" (1987: 35).

In examining the working conditions of *beedi* (cigarette) rollers, one of the largest manufacturing industries that mainly employs women and children throughout India, Bhatta found that most of the work is being done at home by women working well below the State's minimum wage level (Ibid). These women were not only paid on a piece rate basis but had no protection against their employers and, as Bhatta points out, these poor women were essentially "... at the mercy of contractors" (1987: 36). Saha (1989), in her study of *beedi* rollers in factories, also found that there were a significant number of women and children labouring under hazardous conditions with poor lighting, ventilation, and sanitation facilities. The absolute necessity of children's labour in the survival of poor households is clearly apparent in the following comment:

Six year old Shahid is dragged out of bed every morning by his father, Mohammad Ishaque, 55 ... he works from eight to six, with a brief break for lunch. At the end of the day he collects Rs. 2 for his labour. Says Ishaque: He started working when he was only four years old but the contractor still considers him a learner. If he does not work, he will not eat (Quoted in Saha, 1989: 138). <sup>21</sup>

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Rs. 2 is approximately ten cents in Canadian currency.

Rao and Husain (1987), in their study of the textile and garment industry, found that with the decrease in subsistence production throughout many areas of India, local manufacturers have built lucrative links with international markets on the basis of labour provided by young females from poor and lower middle classes. Rao and Husain point out that most of this work is not only being performed along the lines of caste, class, age, ethnicity, and gender, but that it is being done in the most underdeveloped peripheries of India. That is, there is a continuous search for the cheapest labour, especially in poor rural areas, by a hierarchy of local and international exploiters.

Whether these women were employed in a factory setting or were producing piece work at home, the decline in their health and bodies is apparent in Rao and Husain's inquiry. Many women not only had the burden of wage labour but also non-wage labour (for example, cooking, cleaning and taking care of children). Women often had to meet unreasonable quotas in order to obtain even a minimal wage. The work burden under such exploitative conditions forced women to work without any rest. Although women's work-load varied with age and size of their families, they often had to pool their energy in order to meet the demands of the

household and employers. The lack of rest and the physical and mental burden of this kind of labouring was clearly visible in the impaired health of females interviewed by Rao and Husain. As Rao and Husain explain:

in effect, most women had next to no rest at all. They would start the day at 5 a.m. and do a round of cooking and cleaning and settle down to work on the garments ... In the evening, another round of cooking and cleaning and washing was undertaken. In households which had electricity, women worked on rush orders till late at night. Some of the older women who suffered from eye-strain and headaches due to piece work taught their daughters the work, while they themselves attended to housework (1987: 63).

The disproportionate share of this kind of work-load has not only taken a significant toll on the bodies of poor Indian females, but their low nutritional intake and the burden of bearing many children has also had deleterious consequences on their health (Ehate et al., 1987; Chatterjee, 1990; Karkal and Pandey, 1989; Zurbrigg, 1984). This is apparent in the high mortality rates for poor females. India is one of few countries where the female population is decreasing at a faster rate in comparison to men (Zurbrigg, 1984). In the next chapter I further contextualize these alarming data by focusing on the impact of the State's population control and health care programme on the health of poor women.



## CHAPTER IV

### POPULATION CONTROL: COERCION, SEXISM, AND THE IMPACT ON POOR WOMEN'S LIVES:

This chapter examines how population control policies, as an integral aspect of integrating poor women into the capitalist development framework in India, constitutes a form of violence against women. As India's social and economic problems continue to deteriorate, it is poor women who are being targeted by the neo-Malthusian family planning programme and whose fertility is overwhelmingly perceived as a significant obstacle to development (Gwatkin, 1979). The hysteria that has been created over India's so-called development crisis is apparent in the State's characterization of poor women as backward, suffering, and ignorant (Shiva, 1992), as well as in the increasing number of sterilization targets pursued in the recent five year development plans. Ongoing discussions by various women's groups throughout India, about women's gains and losses under the impact of capitalist development and underdevelopment, have not yet taken serious note of the coercive and sexist aspects of the population control programme and the State's drastic attempts to make poor women accessible to the needs of capital accumulation.

Over the past few decades India has been radically shifting development efforts that were originally

geared towards providing accessible family planning and health care services to all Indians, to population/reproductive control of the impoverished masses (Dyson and Crook, 1984; Karkal and Pandey, 1989). Since the mid-1970s, the Indian government, particularly in the area of family planning and health care, has aggressively advocated that the impoverished are jeopardizing the State's development efforts, and that the country cannot move forward unless there is a stringent population control programme (Gwatkin, 1979). The State's preoccupation with population growth has not only led to an influx of reproductive technologies, but has also exposed poor women to both blatant and subtle forms of coercion and abuse from family planning and health care establishments (APWRCN, 1989; Balasubrahmanyam, 1984a; 1984; Bhate et al., 1987; Hartmann, 1987; McDonnell, 1986; Mies, 1987a; 1987; Young, 1989).

With each five year development plan since the mid-1960s, and especially since the 'emergency' period under Indira Gandhi's rule, the Indian government has increased its population targets and, at the same time, has also taken very drastic measures to fill sterilization quotas. Under the seventh (1985-1990) five year plan the Indian government was seeking some 31 million sterilizations and had a distribution target

rate of about 36 million contraceptives of various types (Chatterji, 1988: 230). Balasubrahmanyam (1984a; 1984) states that under the target-oriented nature of India's family planning programme many women have been carelessly sterilized, as well as given various types of contraceptives (for example, Depo-Provera and Intra Uterine Devices), without any concern for the impact of the various family planning products and the State's health care services on the bodies and health of poor women (See also Bunkle, 1984). Young (1989)

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In the past few years some women's groups in India have made an attempt to draw attention to the use of poor women to test reproductive technologies (APWRCN, 1989; Bhate et al., 1987). In 1984, a nation-wide campaign was launched by women's groups such as the Women's Centre of Bombay, Saheli, in New Delhi, and Stree Shakti Sanghatna on the use of Net-Rn and other contraceptives in the family planning programme (APWRCN, 1989: 96). Although some awareness has been raised regarding the impact of various reproductive technologies on women's bodies and health, Saheli notes that despite this increasing awareness, all "... women's organizations, consumer groups and human rights organizations need to urgently pool their resources to monitor these technologies and act as a watch-dog" (Quoted in APWRCN, 1989: 95). However, this call for collective action has been subverted by the caste and class divisions amongst the various women's groups, as well as the State's resources in the area of population control.

Depo-Provera is an injectable contraceptive that is widely promoted in India's family planning programme by the Upjohn Corporation (Spallone and Steinberg, 1987). Although there is insufficient information on the long-term effects of this product, it has been known to cause irregular or excessive bleeding for some women, and it can also result in birth defects if it remains within the body during pregnancy (Ibid: 225; See also Balasubrahmanyam, 1984a; Bunkle, 1984; Hartmann, 1987; McDonnel, 1986).

states that this inundation approach to reproductive technology, where "training personnel can be bypassed: educational programmes can be dispensed with" (Khrenrich et al., 1979; Quoted in Young, 1989: 104), clearly places the issue of population/reproductive control within a political and economic context, rather than the sphere of population dynamics.

While liberal feminists, as well as many women's groups within India, have accepted population control as part and parcel of modernity, Mies (1986) points out that in many areas of the Third World the destruction of subsistence production and reproduction and the ongoing integration of poor women into the processes of labour and capital accumulation has been an abusive affair. She suggests that we must recognize that:

whatever the difference between the various production relations through which women are 'integrated into development', ... the common feature of all the production and labour relations ... is the use of structural or direct violence and coercion by which women are exploited and superexploited (1986: 145; see also Mies et al., 1988).

In the following examination of India's population control programme, Mies' observation of the coercive and violent integration of poor females into capitalist development in this specific region of the Third World becomes significant.

THE POLITICAL-ECONOMY OF POPULATION CONTROL IN INDIA:

In the mid-1950s India became the first nation in the world to initiate a national family planning programme as part of its overall socialist development model, and with the objective of providing accessible family planning and health care services to the poor (Karkal and Pandey, 1989; Palk, 1978). However, by the mid-1960s the Indian government began to pursue family planning vigorously with a significant shift towards population control (Bose and Desai, 1983; Chatterjee, 1990; Dyson and Crook, 1984; Karkal and Pandey, 1989). This shift towards population control of the poor was influenced by several factors. Jeffery (1988) argues that since India's post-independent period was primarily a preoccupation with ideological debates regarding the structure of the new Indian society, there was a lack of consensus on the type of social and economic development programmes the bourgeois State should pursue. Although various development programmes (for example, maternal and child health services) were theoretically embedded in a socialist framework that was specifically aimed at alleviating the impoverished conditions for the vast majority of Indians, Jeffery states that in reality the "... most leading members of Congress wanted to operate the levers of power ...in ways not radically different from the

British in the decade or so before they left" (1988: 105). As the Indian ruling elite built alliances with the governments of the First World, they also paved the way for the introduction of a population control ideology, imported along with the Western based concepts of social and economic development.

The shift from a micro-level perspective on maternal and child health care services to a macro-

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Although the population explosion ideology did not become dominant in India until the hysteria created by the West, Ramusack (1989) states that by the nineteenth century there were a handful of upper class Indians who were advocating neo-Malthusian and eugenic theories. This group of Indians not only sought population/reproductive control of the poor classes in the name of economic and eugenic improvement of the Indian society, but were also instrumental in lobbying for a shift from "... women's health issues to family planning as the justification for a program for reproductive control" (Ramusack, 1989: 37).

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The micro level perspective on maternal and child health care in the post-independent period was based on the notion that development/modernization will not be achieved unless there are healthy workers (Bhate et al., 1987). This was argued by the National Health Committee and the Bhore Report of 1946, which equated women's health with childbearing (Ibid: 31). These reports stated that India's health care establishment should be the vanguard for motherhood, and that maternal and child health care centres have an essential role to play in the economic and social re-construction being envisaged (Ibid). Thus, family planning was also seen as vital to the protection of motherhood and to be promoted so that middle/upper class females could produce healthy children (middle/upper class labour force) for the development of a 'new' society.

level concern with population growth numbers was also aided by the political and economic interests of the First World, and particularly the United States (Jeffery, 1988). Once India gained its independence, the U.S. began to pursue their own agenda and particularly encouraged the Indian government to change its policy on foreign investment and agriculture, as well as the family planning and health care programme (Jeffery, 1988: 105).

At the end of World War II the United States had emerged as a leading world power. As it attempted to mold the world's economy to meet its own needs, there was a preoccupation over the vulnerability of valuable resources because of the emergence of independence movements, and the rapid growth of the population of Third World countries (Harris, 1987). By the mid-1960's both private and government-funded population control programmes emerged in the West, mainly because of the overpopulation hysteria created by Western policy makers. Hartmann (1987) states that the Malthusian notion of overpopulation was overwhelmingly seen by the West as the primary cause of poverty and political instability throughout the Third World, and population control became an integral part of, if not a prerequisite for, Western development aid.

In the very early stages of development aid from the West, institutions such as the Ford

Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the Population Council established population research centres, trained Third World officials in population control of the poor, and also sent personnel to help establish population control policies throughout the Third World (Hartmann, 1987). The Ford Foundation has played a crucial role in India's population control programme financially and some argue that they, in fact, also had a significant part in distorting the initial socialist goals and structure of India's family planning and health care programme (Bose, 1988; Karkal and Pandey, 1989).

Between 1952 and 1983 the Ford Foundation spent approximately 260 million (U.S.) dollars on population control activities and continues to finance contraceptive research under the auspices of 'health care' (Hartmann, 1987: 115). The Agency for International Development has a budget of about 200 million (U.S.) dollars and India receives the bulk of these funds (Ibid: 112). Japan has also become a powerful player in population control funding in many areas of the Third World and countries such as Britain, Sweden, and Canada also contribute significantly (Ibid).

Although it is difficult to specify the amount of funding that is specifically going to India from various countries in the First World, it is important to recognize that at the present time the Indian government



is among the leading spenders on a national family planning programme, with a strong emphasis on sterilization of the poor (Hartmann, 1987; Karkal and Pandey, 1989). Instead of creating greater access to family planning and health care services that are designed from poor women's point of view, the emphasis from many international development agencies (for example, the U.S. Agency For

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Various studies have found that the Westernized model of health care is grossly inadequate and inappropriate for the needs of poor women, particularly in rural areas (APWRCN, 1989; Bhatte et al., 1987; Chatterjee, 1990; 1988; Jeffery, 1988; Zurbrigg, 1984). Although a great deal of resources have been spent on establishing health care centres in rural areas, they remain out of the reach of those individuals who desperately need accessible health care the most—poor women. The great majority of the State's rural health care facilities are not only underfunded, but health care workers also often perceive poor women as ignorant and living in the "twilight of superstition" (Landman, 1977: 108). The Director of Family Planning and Maternal and Child Health Care services for Bombay states that the doctors assigned to work in rural health care centres of the State "often regard duty there as an affront to their dignity, to their position" (Quoted in Landman, 1977: 108). Poor women also do not have the luxury of travelling to the State's health care centres in the cities and cannot afford the exorbitant services of private physicians. Zurbrigg (1984) has found that poor families often have to borrow money to pay for private or State operated health care services when traditional healing methods are exhausted. Many poor families, particularly in rural areas, often cannot afford to take time away from their day-to-day wage work to seek health care services in urban areas and, as one poor woman, Rashida Bibi, explains: "my daughter is often ill, but I do not want to take her to hospital because if they admit her there, who would earn the money for the house? We cannot afford to miss even one day's earning" (Quoted in Mukhopadhyay, 1984: 61).

International Development, the United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA) and The World Bank) continues to be on population control (Hartmann, 1987; Patterson and Shrestha, 1988a; 1988). Many international development agencies not only direct Third World countries towards specific types of development planning (Gregory, 1988; Omvedt, 1982b), but often make financing for development projects dependent upon the implementation of stringent population control programmes (Patterson and Shrestha, 1988a). As one senior official in the Population, Health and Nutrition Department for the World Bank revealingly points out:

when you talk about the bank, you must realize that everything we do is supportive of fertility decline. Maybe we aren't doling out contraceptives, but governments take free population money first, not bank loans (Quoted in Hartmann, 1987: 114).

#### INCENTIVES, DISINCENTIVES AND REPRODUCTIVE CONTROL:

For the past few decades population control of impoverished Indians has become the panacea for the country's continuing social and economic problems. Since the mid-1970s there has been an intensive campaign for reduction in India's population growth rate and the use of incentives and disincentives has increased the potential for abusing poor women's

bodies. This process raises a great deal of concern regarding violence against poor women because of increasing caste conflicts, especially along the lines of religion (See Ahuja, 1987; Joshi, 1990; Kishwar and Vanita, 1984). The use of incentives and disincentives also raises serious concern regarding the conditions under which poor women are consenting to sterilization because of the sexist nature of Indian society and the struggles of poor families in fulfilling basic food and shelter needs when, as demonstrated in the preceding chapters, subsistence-oriented production and reproduction have been debased by capitalist development and underdevelopment.

The Malthusian notion that society's resources will be depleted if the poor are allowed to breed too many poor has become integral to India's family planning programme (Kamal 1987; Mies, 1987).<sup>27</sup> In the frenzy to clean up

The term disincentive is used here to distinguish between incentives rewarding individuals and those containing penalties for failing to adhere to the State's demands. Although there has been an array of incentives offered by the State, the vast majority have been coercive measures penalizing the poor, but rewarding family planning and health care workers as well as employers.

Thomas Malthus (1766-1834), an economist, in his "Essay on the Principle of Population," states that poverty cannot be alleviated by distributing society's  
(continued ...)

India's cities of "... beggars, cows, and shantytowns ..." (Gwatkin, 1979: 29), drastic measures have been proposed and implemented at various times. Although a broad range of incentives and disincentives have always been present in the family planning programme since it was implemented, Landman states that under the brief emergency period incentives and disincentives were enforced "... with a vigor rarely evidenced in the 25 years that India has had a population/family planning program" (1977: 102). During this period it was not only poor men and women who were coercively sterilized, but many individuals (for example, teachers, village governing bodies and physicians) working in various areas of the Indian bureaucracy also became the targets of the population control programme.

Many civil servants working in low-ranked positions of the Indian bureaucracy were coerced to recruit the poor for sterilization, and were also required to limit the size of their own families or face severe penalties. Gupta,

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<sup>27</sup> (... continued)

resources (property) since the poor will remain poor because they breed too many children (Kamal, 1987: 149). Malthus argued that an increase in the population of the poor will ultimately outstrip society's resources. Kamal states that the Malthusian notion that the poor will never be able to obtain a higher standard of living and that their numbers must be controlled is "... still the basic underlying principle of all nations and international population programs" (1987: 149; see also Patterson and Shrestha, 1988a; 1988).

a family planning worker, states that women working in the family planning and health care establishments faced unbearable harassment and lost their wages and employment when they failed to fill their sterilization targets (Cited in Chattterji, 1988: 240). Some villages were threatened with loss of government subsidies, and were denied access to state health care facilities, electricity, and water, if village leaders failed to produce enough individuals for sterilization (Gwatkin, 1979). In the state of Himachal Pradesh civil servants with more than two children were declared ineligible for food items such as rice, wheat, sugar, and cooking oil at subsidized prices (Landman, 1977: 103). In addition to this, the local government, in this impoverished area, also offered up to one hundred thousand rupees to districts/villages with the highest number of sterilizations (Ibid). The government of Madhya Pradesh, in a drastic attempt to deal with the poor, decided that land would not be distributed to landless families unless they agreed to be sterilized (Ibid). In the state of Maharashtra compulsory sterilization of men and women with more than three children was vigorously pursued by legislators. However, this legislation was never implemented because of lack of political and economic support from the

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This is approximately five thousand dollars in Canadian currency.

national/central government (Landman, 1977: 102). While Indira Gandhi and her government disassociated themselves from the use of violence and coercion in dealing with the country's social and economic problems, especially poverty, Landman states that "she is reported to have sent letters to all of [her political allies] urging them to take "necessary measures" to make family planning an integral part of all state activities" (India News, August, 20, 1976: 1; Quoted in Landman, 1977: 102).

The governing bodies at the national, state, and village levels proposed and enforced an array of incentives and disincentives and, in many cases, used abusive and violent measures to recruit the poor for mass sterilization programmes. The use of coercion resulted in the sterilization of more than eight million men and women within a matter of a few months (Gwatkin, 1979: 29). An Indian journalist provides the following account of the coercive tactics used by local officials in a primarily Moslem village near Delhi where:

the villagers of Uttawar were shaken from their sleep by loudspeakers ordering the menfolk--all above 15- to assemble at the bus-stop ... When they emerged, they found the whole village surrounded by the police. ... As the villagers tell it, the men on the road were sorted out into eligible cases ... and about 400 were taken to various *thanas* [town's headquarters], ... Many had cases registered against them--a large number for alleged possession of illicit arms but most on the suspicion of the threat of violence--and they were taken from there to clinics to be sterilized (Quoted in Gwatkin, 1979: 46).

This is just one illustration of the degree of blatant violence against the poor from the various classes and religions during this period of India's history. Judicial inquiries held subsequent to the emergency period found that the population control programme under Gandhi's government resulted in the death of hundreds of individuals during anti-family planning demonstrations and infections from sterilization (Gwatkin, 1979: 47).<sup>28</sup> Various studies show that the population control programme continues to function under coercion and abuse from individuals, working at various levels of the family planning and health care establishment, who are interested in filling as many sterilization targets as possible (Balasubrahmanyam, 1984; Khate et al., 1987; Chatterji, 1988; Karkal and Pandey, 1989).

Many of the incentives that were implemented during the mid-1970s were, in fact, proposed by various local governments many years prior to the

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Gandhi's government, under political pressure, decided to compensate individual who died from sterilization within ten days of the procedure, in the amount of 5,000 rupees or approximately 250 Canadian dollars (Gwatkin, 1979: 47). Inquiries held by Janata's government found that out of the 1,800 applications filed only 700 cases were actually compensated (Ibid). Numerous cases showing the blatant violence against the poor, particularly in rural areas, are provided by Desai (1986).

state of emergency (Gwatkin, 1979). In the state of Maharashtra, for example, in 1967, the local government proposed legislation that restricted various benefits such as loans, free medical care, education and subsidies, to those families who had less than three children (Gwatkin, 1979: 33-34). This not only excluded many poor families from these benefits, but it also shows the State's failure to understand the roots of poverty in rural and urban areas of India and the sheer necessity of children's labour in the survival of poor households. Not only are the mortality rates of poor Indian children very high during the period of early childhood (Karkal and Pandey, 1984; Zurbrigg, 1984), but the patriarchal demand on Indian women to produce male children is relentless, a fact which has been underemphasized by the population control establishment. In many areas of India, as Pettigrew states, "a woman's right to practice family planning [is] limited by the presence of a husband and mother-in-law who [are] interested not in her welfare but in that of the wider family unit" (1984: 999).

The use of incentives to recruit poor women raises serious concerns regarding the potential for violence against women in the underdeveloped peripheries of India. Since many poor women are faced with the day-to-day struggle for survival, they are often powerless



when confronted by the demands of employers, landlords, in-laws, and the State's bureaucracy (that is, family planning and health care workers and the police) (Kishwar and Vanita, 1984). Balasubrahmanyam (1984) points out that various studies have found poor women consenting to sterilization in exchange for money, food, as well as health care services for themselves and their children.<sup>30</sup> In the following passage, a poor woman, Indrani, shares her experience of family planning workers and indicates the coercive tactics used by her employer and, by implication, an international development agency.

I was living and working in the tea estate area ... The only birth control method we know is sterilization ...

All medical and social welfare staff, including foreign people, are forcing us to be sterilized ... The tea plantation is given 500 rupees for a female sterilization, and in the rest of the country half of this amount is given.<sup>31</sup> When there is a serious illness, the factory management are supposed to provide transport to the hospital. But even if someone is unconscious, they are not given transport. But when a woman decides to say yes for sterilization, immediately the lorry is ready to go to the hospital.

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In 1988, Ram found that in the state of Rajasthan, many poor women desperate to feed their children were undergoing sterilization, and often without telling their husband's/family's (Cited in APWRCN, 1989: 75). While many of these women were promised a cash incentive of two thousand rupees to undergo sterilization, Ram states that most of them never received this money (Ibid).

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This is approximately 25 Canadian dollars.

During or soon after childbirth, women are asked if they want sterilization. When a woman does not agree, she can be refused work in the fields and she may be refused Thriposha (a protein-enriched flour, provided free by CARE). During work in the fields, the supervisors are also encouraging women to be sterilized. If you do not agree to sterilization after your second child, you are not admitted to hospital for your next delivery. After sterilization, women feel weak, and after years many still have complaints (Quoted in Hartmann, 1987: 37).

Since the mid-1970s there have been about thirty two thousand sterilization camps held throughout poor rural and urban areas (Dyson and Crook, 1984: 147). Dyson and Crook (Ibid) state that since the emergency period sterilization of poor men has been reduced significantly and that over eighty per cent of the sterilizations performed today are of poor women. Poor women have become easy targets for those seeking a permanent solution to the so-called population explosion because of a combination of oppressive gender ideologies, ethnocentrism towards the poor because of the hindu caste system, and the ever-growing scientific advances in the area of reproductive technology. As Mies points out:

The contraceptive technology developed for these women increasingly reduces elements of individual choice, and places more and more control over them in the hands of medical experts and health personnel; and the women are increasingly subjugated through political, economic and cultural coercion (1987: 336).

The laparoscopy method of sterilization has been used extensively in India's population control programme, and it

is also greatly advocated by international development agencies because it is expedient and permanent (Chatterji, 1988; Dyson and Crook, 1984). However, a number of concerns have been raised regarding the impact of this sterilization method on the bodies and health of poor women. The unsanitary nature of many sterilization camps reveals a disturbing picture of the conditions under which poor women are undergoing sterilization and the possibility of deliberate negligence during the procedure because of sexist and ethnocentric attitudes of the family planning and health care establishments towards poor women (Pettigrew, 1984). Furthermore, since the sterilization camps and many health care centres are mainly geared towards filling as many sterilization quotas as possible, poor women are very often not screened for any illnesses in order to determine possible reactions to medication and the sterilization procedure itself (Chatterji, 1988). The vast majority of poor females are underweight, malnourished and anaemic. When these kinds

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Laparoscopic sterilization is being promoted by India's family planning establishment as a 'band aid' surgery because of its simplicity (Chatterji, 1988). In this procedure a laparoscope is used to place a band made of siliconised rubber around the fallopian tube (Ibid). This method of sterilization takes only a few minutes and has been popular in India's family planning programme since the mid-1970s.

of factors are not taken into consideration, there is a strong possibility of serious health problems for women if they undergo sterilization, abortion, or are given<sup>33</sup> other forms of fertility control (Zurbrigg, 1984).

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In 1971 abortion was legalized in India under specific conditions (Ehate et al., 1987: 51). These conditions were outlined in "The Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act" (MTP), which was patterned after the British abortion Act of 1967 (Ibid). The MTP Act allowed women to undergo abortion in private and State operated health care facilities under a broad range of health and so-called humanitarian reasons. Although this Act legalized abortion the concept of motherhood and childbearing remained implicit within the language used by the State. Chatterji states that the word abortion was not only replaced by the phrase "Medical Termination of Pregnancy", but that the Act specifically noted that the termination of pregnancy results in a waste of the mother's health, strength, and sometimes life (1988: 208). Such services also remain out of the reach of the great majority of poor women because of the lack of adequate health care services provided by the State.

Private physicians have capitalized on the legalization of abortion by offering sex-selection tests as well. Chatterji states that a significant number of the abortions performed by private health care centres are done after a sex determination test, which can range from 500 to 5000 rupees in the cities (1988: 209), and some studies state that as low as 70 rupees in some rural areas (Mies, 1986: 152). In the 1984/85 period a clinic in Dadar was reported to have performed 15, 914 abortions because the fetuses were female (Chatterji, 1988: 209).

Various women's groups have brought attention to the use of sex selection technology in aborting female fetuses. However, the State has done very little because abortion has now become part and parcel of the population control agenda (APWRCN, 1989; Kishwar, 1987).

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO THE ILL-HEALTH OF POOR FEMALES AND THEIR HIGH MORTALITY RATES:

Various studies have found that the mortality rates of poor females in rural areas are higher than for those living in urban areas (APWRCN, 1989; Chatterjee, 1990; Zurbrigg, 1984). In order to gain a better understanding of the impact of the family planning and health care programmes on the lives of poor women, a inquiry into some of the factors contributing to this high mortality rate and the alarming ill-health of poor Indian females is essential.

Pettigrew (1984), in her brief case study of the impact of tubectomy operations in a rural area of Punjab, found that there are several factors that can contribute to poor women's health problems from laparoscopic sterilization, especially during the crucial post-operative period. In following the day-to-day tasks of one poor woman and her family, Pettigrew states that the labour-intensive tasks performed by women in peasant households, in addition to lack of rest, malnourishment and unhygienic living conditions, can result in various kinds of health problems.

The labour-intensive tasks performed by women in rural areas of Punjab consists of a great deal of bending, stretching, and walking long distances for water, firewood and fodder. As a result of these kinds

of labour-intensive tasks, many women that Pettigrew talked to complained of chronic pain in the pelvic and lower back regions after their sterilizations. The handling of mud and cow-dung and lack of personal hygiene also exposed poor women to infections in the crucial post-operative stage. Pettigrew also found that when women complained to health care workers about their health problems after undergoing sterilization, their pain was often ignored, if not dismissed, as being psychological. Many women also complained that their spouses and/or in-laws were also indifferent when they had difficulty completing their day-to-day tasks because of ill-health. One woman states that after her sterilization she experienced chronic pain for two months and when she could not work her husband would often say to her "... go and die" (Quoted in Pettigrew, 1984: 996). Although many women that Pettigrew spoke to desperately wanted to end their childbearing years permanently, the demand for male children in this northern area of India is so strong that Pettigrew found that she never came across a voluntary tubectomy and that "... there were pressures ... from the husband or his kin group and the state medical apparatus" (1984: 996).

In a recent study examining the deterioration in women's health because of the demand for male

children in another rural area in northern India (Utter Pradesh), we are provided with a closer look at the patriarchal perceptions of women's sexuality, child-bearing, and midwifery from the point of view of peasant women (Jeffery et al., 1989). In this study it was found that many poor women had limited access to the State's health care and family planning services and that they could not afford to pay for such services in the private sector. Many of these women also could not travel freely in public spheres because of purdah, which further made women reluctant to talk to male practitioners about 'embarrassing matters' such as menstruation and pregnancy. In this particular area it was also found that the State's maternal and child health care programme/family planning had been either minimal or almost non-existent (Jeffery et al., 1987).

This raises the question of whether access to family planning and health care services varies along the lines of caste and class, state and region, and gender and age, and if poor women are more vulnerable to the coercive and sexist aspects of the population control programme because they cannot afford to observe purdah. Purdah or female seclusion exists in various forms and degrees throughout India. The seclusion of women from certain spheres both within

and outside the household is found amongst various classes and ethnic groups (Kabeer, 1985; Sharma, 1980).

While some form of purdah is adhered to by many Muslim and Hindu women in India, there are some differences that have roots in two distinct religious systems and their cultural practices. Jeffery (1979) states that not only do Muslim women veil themselves differently than Hindu women, but for Hindus purdah is observed after marriage and only in the patrilocal household. Unlike Muslim women, who begin to observe purdah upon reaching puberty, Hindu women do not veil themselves in the household where they were born, except in the presence of older male in-laws. In such households young unmarried women are often under the control of their fathers and upon marriage the mother-in-law takes on the responsibility of her daughter-in-law's purdah. Many of these elder women (that is, the mother-in-law) often wield a great deal of power over the daughter-in-law until they establish their own place within the patrilocal household by bearing male children. Jeffery et al., state that in northern India "women have remained largely under the control of domestic authorities (males and elderly females) and subjected neither to the direct control nor the protection of the Indian State" (1987: 160). Sen (1984) also points out that the



guardians of the sexuality of young females amongst the propertied classes are often older women--mothers and mothers-in-law--whose position within the hierarchy of the peasant household is based on their essential role in the recruitment and channelling of female labour.

Despite the differences in the various forms and degrees of seclusion practiced by many women throughout India, concepts such as 'pollution' and 'purity', 'honour' and 'prestige', and 'dependence' and 'deference' comprise the Indian 'ideal' of womanhood (Mies, 1975). Indian women are portrayed in contradictory images that range from devotion, self sacrifice, fidelity, and obedience according to Hindu and Islamic dogma, to Western/European based notions of the 'liberated' woman (Sen, 1984).

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Sen (1984) offers an interesting comparison of the objectification of the female sexuality in the Western society for the purpose of capital accumulation (that is, to sell products for mass consumption) and the contradictory images of Indian women. Sen locates the rigid control of females and their bodies from the higher classes within the ideology of the Hindu caste system and shows how the perceptions of the 'ideal' Indian woman are being transformed under the impact of capitalist development and underdevelopment. Mies (1986) has also found that these contradictory images of Indian women are not only aimed at creating a market for mass consumption in the urban areas where middle/upper class women are depicted as symbols of 'progress' in order to sell commodities but that

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Thompson (1985), in exploring the caste-based perceptions of 'pollution' and 'purity' in a Hindu village in India, states that these beliefs not only denigrate certain aspects of female sexuality (such as menstruation and child-bearing), but that females are seen as having the power to 'pollute' and 'purify' males/ life-cycles depending on their association with or estrangement from males.

Placing upper caste females under purdah upheld the ideology of the caste system and the notions of 'purity' and 'pollution'. Limiting the sexuality of upper caste women is based on the belief that if they are allowed to have sexual associations with

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<sup>34</sup> (... continued)

these symbols of 'modernity' are also appearing on a grand scale in rural areas by the media, the movie industry, development workers, some middle class women's groups, as well as the educational system. While middle/ upper class women are being mobilized to engage in mass consumption in order to make them the 'ideal' homemakers, Mies argues that as this ideology of the middle-class housewife spreads into "... the rural and slum areas, [where] the problem is not only its intrinsic devaluation of the woman, but also that for most poor and rural urban women, these images will never become reality" (1986: 208).

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Thompson (1985) argues that not all aspects of the female biology are perceived in a negative manner and that except for menstruation and the period during and subsequent to childbirth, men do not perceive women as a source of 'pollution' (See also Jeffery et al., 1989; 1987).

males from the lower castes, not only do they have the power to 'pollute' males within their own castes, but the parentage of the child becomes questionable (Mody and Mhatre, 1975). Thus, the rigid placement of upper caste women under purdah and its institutionalization through religion and law ensured the continuation of the power/resources for the upper castes in the Indian society. Thompson also points out that while perceptions of 'pollution' and 'purity' became symbolized by the female body, there are no taboos against upper caste men having sexual relations with females from the low-castes since "men's roles in procreation do not make them symbols of caste purity in the way that women's do" (1985: 703).

These perceptions of 'pollution' and 'purity' also play a significant role in the abuse of women from the poor classes. Poor women are seen by middle/upper class men as being more accessible because they are not under purdah and, as Hale suggests, "to the extent that sheltered women embody family honour, unsheltered women symbolize prostitutes" (1988: 280). This belief can also be seen in comments such as "Harijans have always been raped in India. They are meant to be raped" (A male police officer in the Koraput area of Western Orissa;

Quoted in Chatterji, 1988: 68). This kind of violence against poor women can also be traced to the 'Devadasi' system, which continues to be practiced in many areas of India (Palk, 1978). Traditionally, this custom consisted of the dedication of young females to various deities for lifelong religious service in the temples and enabled upper caste men, as well the priests of the temples, to have sexual relations with the females dedicated to various deities (Ibid). Palk states that today this practice is used to lure poor women into prostitution, especially for brothels in the cities, during religious festivals (1978: 73). These women often undergo elaborate rites and rituals to give the appearance that they are being dedicated to various temples and then sold to prostitution houses in major urban centres, as well as to various other employers (Ibid).

While there are various degrees of seclusion and control of the bodies and sexuality of Indian females that can range from concealing one's face and/or body in public/ male spheres, to displaying complete silence in the presence of a spouse and elder males within the patrilocal household, these oppressive customs primarily exist in households that do not have to struggle for the most basic subsistence needs (Kishwar and Vanita, 1984).

Kishwar and Vanita state that poor peasant families "... cannot really afford to dispense with women's labour in agriculture. In such a household, the link between private domestic work and the public sphere of economic production is so thin as to be almost invisible" (1984: 11).

Although purdah is primarily found amongst those classes that can economically afford to observe it, Everett (1983) has found that under the impact of capitalist development and underdevelopment various sexist practices have been undermined, re-inforced, or transformed and new forms of female oppression have appeared in various regions of India. It appears that as middle/upper class women are

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In some rural areas of India there has been a resurgence of *Sati*, which was primarily practiced by some upper caste Hindus (particularly by the *Kshatriyas*), for religious and economic reasons (Omvedt, 1980a: 184; See also Liddle and Joshi, 1985). This custom consists of women burning themselves on the funeral pyres of their husband's. Liddle and Joshi state that in some areas the success/achievement of a prince was measured by the number of women he took to the funeral pyre with him (1985: 523). While twenty women was considered an average number, the highest number on record is eighty four women (Baig, 1976; Cited in Liddle and Joshi, 1985: 523). Kishwar has found that under the impact of 'modernization' young urban and well-educated males are campaigning for a revival of *Sati* (Cited in Salleh, 1988: 133). The burning of widows not only leads to the building of new shrines and temples, but also donations from tourists and pilgrims (See also Everett, 1983).

being drawn towards Western/European notions of the 'liberated' woman by the culture of mass consumption, some poor women are emulating the bourgeois notions of the 'ideal' Indian woman, particularly in those households that are withdrawing women from labouring in the public sphere because they can afford to hire labour for field-work (Everett, 1983).

Kishwar and Vanita (1984) have found that, in northern areas of India, men are withdrawing women from laboring outside the sphere of the household in order to enhance their own status. Many of these women who are being placed under some form of purdah usually undertake various forms of wage and non-wage work that can be done within the private sphere. There are various case studies drawing attention to the exploitation of poor females under purdah by the local and international markets geared towards mass production and consumption (See Ahojja-Patel, 1985; Bhatt, 1987; Mies, 1981a; Rao and Husain, 1987; Saha, 1989; Singh and Viitanen-Kelles, 1987). Bhatt (1987) has found that, in Uttar Pradesh, the vast majority of *beedi* work is being done within the private sphere of the household by poor Muslim women under purdah and that many of them also complained about various health problems such as chronic backaches, exhaustion, dizziness, and blurred vision (See also APWRCN, 1989). Mies's (1981a) study of the

lace-workers of Narsapur, in the state of Andhra Pradesh, also shows how poor females under purdah are the invisible hands behind a lucrative industry that is also destroying their health. Mies states that:

The lacemaking industry is a classical case of the putting-out system. The crocheting is done entirely by girls and women of all ages. The mothers teach their daughters around the age of five to six years how to make simple patterns, and then they continue until they are old or their eyes are ruined, because they continue to make lace in the evening, by the light of a dim oil lamp. Many women complain of bad eyesight, headaches, and muscle pains (1981a: 10).

The decline in women's health is also being exacerbated by the increase in dowry demands in communities where a nominal bride-price was once a common practice. Bride-price existed because females played an essential role in subsistence production (Mies et al., 1988). In these communities activities ranged from hunting and gathering, slash and burn, and small-scale agriculture to wage work and artisanry (Kishwar and Vanita, 1984; Mies, 1986; Singh, 1988). Females in these communities performed a variety of tasks both within and outside the household which included sowing, harvesting, threshing, weeding, and marketing handicrafts and produce (Kishwar and Vanita, 1984).

Many of these agricultural tasks performed by females in subsistence-oriented communities have been eliminated with the implementation of various kinds of

agricultural technology. For example, a study in a village in western Uttar Pradesh has found that a simple irrigation system has displaced poor women from a labour-intensive task that provided some income (Kishwar and Vanita, 1984: 17). In this village poor females were paid to irrigate fields manually, where water was collected in ditches and carried in buckets to the fields, for landowners who could afford to hire wage labour (Ibid). In many areas of India poor peasant females were also hired to fertilize fields manually (by spreading cow-dung) before the introduction of chemical fertilizers. Similarly, their work in harvesting and threshing has also been reduced significantly in areas where large landowners have implemented various kinds of agricultural technology (See Agarwal, 1988; 1986; Bagchi, 1982; Hobson, 1982; Mies, 1986; 1984; Sen, 1982).

These women were able to undertake a more active role in subsistence production and reproduction because they were not under purdah and there were few, if any, constraints on their sexuality. Moreover, the

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There are various studies showing the lack of rigid control of the sexuality of females from the low-castes and classes (See Bhave, 1988; Gulati, 1981; Kishwar and Vanita, 1984; Mody and Mhatre, 1975). In these communities there are no restrictions against males having more than one spouse (Kishwar and Vanita, 1984). Men often abandon their families which further increases the (continued ...)



practice of dowry has essentially been absent in their communities. The labour provided by females in the production and reproduction processes was the basis for the bride-price. However, with the destruction of subsistence production, under the impact of capitalist development, this idea of productive labour has been drastically transformed and, as poor men migrate to the cities and improve their economic status, they are demanding high dowries from prospective father-in-laws (Mies et al., 1988).

Under these conditions poor families now often have to borrow money at exorbitant rates in order to marry female members of the household. Gregory has found that life-cycle rituals such as marriages often consume large sums of the household income in peasant societies and that "... their economic condition renders the problem of finding money for basic consumption purposes a central preoccupation" (1988: 53). Kishwar and Vanita (1984) state that in

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<sup>37</sup> (... continued)

burden of the household for women (Ibid). While females in these communities are not as dependent on males as middle/upper class women are (that is, through the ideology of the dependent/bourgeois housewife), Mody and Mhatre, in their study of a group of women in a Bombay slum, found that many of the women were angry about the burden of trying to feed their children on their own because their spouse/family had abandoned them (1975: 55).

the Uttarkhand region of Northern India, for example, as well as in many other subsistence-oriented communities, the increasing demand for high dowries (primarily consumer goods such as radios and watches) is further devaluating females. This devaluation can be seen in the discriminatory practices which begin in early childhood, and continue throughout the lives of many poor females, because of the re-inforcement of various oppressive practices under the impact of capitalist development and underdevelopment. The high mortality rates of Indian females are often dismissed as being the result of a lack of development or the failure of poor women to

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This region of India is generally referred to as being 'backward' because it is comprised of 'tribals' (Sharma, 1988). These communities practiced various forms of subsistence production prior to the arrival of the British (Omvedt, 1980a). The term 'tribal' within the Indian context does not mean a racial or ethnic category, but rather a legal classification of Indians who were excluded from the Hindu caste system (Sharma, 1988: 489). This classification is problematic because it is difficult to distinguish between 'tribal' and non-'tribal' communities under the impact of modernization. Sharma has found that the criteria used to classify 'scheduled tribes' has "... an uncertain mix of elements of race, ethnicity, social, economic, and educational backwardness. Groups that are classified as tribes in one province may not be listed in the schedule of the adjoining province" (1988: 489).

understand the medical reasons for their ill-health. The 'top down' approach to the needs and concerns of poor Indian females is often based on the belief that they are not capable of understanding the wonders of modern medicine because they are 'ignorant' and 'backward' (See Bhate et al., 1987). These ethnocentric and sexist perceptions cannot be easily dismissed in examining why the health of poor Indian females continues to deteriorate and how the population control and health care programmes are contributing to this deterioration. As the feminist magazine *Manushi* points out, oppressive sexist norms cannot be overlooked and, especially in

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In many rural areas of India an illness is seen as a punishment for the failure to observe a religious ritual or some other wrong-doing such as neglecting a dead ancestor and casting an evil spirit on someone else (Sathyamala et al., cited in (APWRCN, 1989: 7). Traditional forms of health care are sought when religious rituals fail to cure the illness, which can be seen as "... the result of falling out of harmony with the universe" (Ibid). Under the impact of capitalist modernization traditional healing practices are being subsumed by the capitalist model of health care. Deforestation has destroyed a great deal of the herbs and oils used in traditional medicines (Basu, 1987; Pereira and Seabrook, 1990). Serious concerns are being raised regarding the 'medicalization' of women's bodies in order to suit the needs of capital accumulation, as well as the issue of the role of medical technology in dominating women and nature (See APWRCN, 1989; Mies, 1987a; O'Neill, 1985; Spallone and Steinberg, 1987).

the case of poor women, because:

In India, we have a glorious heritage of systematic violence [against] women within the family itself. Sati, the custom of self-immolation in which the wife is burned alive on the funeral pyre of her husband and female infanticide ... Today, we do not kill girls at birth; we let them die through systematic neglect. The mortality rate among female children is thirty to sixty percent higher than among male children. Today, we do not wait until a woman is widowed before we burn her to death. We burn her during the lifetime of her husband so that he can get a new bride with a fatter dowry (Quoted in Matsui, 1989: 78).

Miller (1981; 1980) has found that the neglect of females was essentially absent in subsistence-oriented communities because females had a significant productive role in the sphere of production and reproduction. Since females performed various tasks essential to the survival of the household, as mentioned earlier, in these communities there was no reason to neglect females. Miller (1981) has found that female neglect as well as infanticide was primarily practiced by the upper castes because the practice of dowry often drained the resources of families with property. Many of these practices can now be found in new communities because of the deterioration in the sphere of production and reproduction. The uneven impact of capitalist development and underdevelopment has created a situation where females are seen as being

'expendable' even though they have always been essential to the survival of the household (Kishwar and Vanita, 1984: 5). As one woman working at the grass roots level in a rural area of Rajasthan states:

... in the village hierarchy a woman's life is in many ways valued at less than an animal's. The logic is simple: it takes money to replace an animal, whereas to replace a woman is not only easy but under certain circumstances even remunerative. Thus, not only men take precedence over women, but often even animals (Kishwar and Vanita, 1984: 6).

Various studies have found that the deterioration in the health and bodies of Indian females begins during the infancy stage, where they are being breast-fed for shorter periods in comparison to males, and this pattern of poor nutrition continues throughout their lives (See APWRCN, 1989; Bhate et al., 1987; Chatterjee, 1990; Hale, 1987; Hobson, 1982; Zurbrigg, 1984). Lack of adequate nutrition in the early childhood years can lead to severe malnutrition (Bhate et al., 1987), which is exacerbated as females in poor households undergo a long cycle of childbearing because of the demand for male children, as well as the high mortality rates of children under the age of four (Karkal and Pandey, 1989: 24).

RAKKU'S JOURNEY:

The journey of one woman to save her dying child shows that the lack of concern to make health care and family planning services accessible to poor women in India threatens their lives, especially those women living in rural areas. Rakku's journey (Zurbrigg, 1984) is not an isolated case, but a common experience for many poor families struggling for the most basic subsistence needs.

Rakku's journey begins with a severely dehydrated male child who is close to dying because of his recurring diarrhea. Rakku works as an agricultural labourer and her family is barely surviving on the wages earned by her and her husband. Rakku's family cannot afford to borrow any more money from the village moneylenders because they will need this money to fix their roof since it will not last another season of heavy rain. While Rakku is labouring in the fields, her daughter is responsible for the baby and other activities such as collecting firewood, water, and tending to animals. As Rakku leaves for her work in the fields she hands her daughter a small amount of porridge to feed the baby at noon and, as her daughter anxiously looks at this small portion, Rakku shakes her head and replies—"for the

baby, dear child, not for you" (Cited in Zurbrigg, 1984: 22).

As Rakku returns from labouring in the fields at the end of the day she finds her infant crying and being comforted in the arms of her five year old daughter who quickly states---"Mummy, he's been having diarrhea all day. Each time I cleaned him and washed the clothes, more would come. When I tried to give him some porridge he would only vomit it out again" (Cited in Zurbrigg, 1984: 26). Rakku immediately unties a few rupees that she has tucked away tightly under her sari and gives it to her daughter to buy a spoonful of powder medicine for diarrhea, as well as some flowers for prayers for her son's illness at the local temple (Ibid).

As the child's diarrhea continues throughout the night Rakku realizes that another dose of the powder medicine is not going to help her son. Rakku ponders for a minute whether her family can afford to take out another loan to see the doctor who is about fifteen kilometers away. Her husband had visited this private doctor sometime ago. However, he charges a great deal of money. Since many of Rakku's neighbours are unable to lend much money, she can only ask the local landowners or other moneylenders in the village who charge up to

twenty-five rupees a month for every rupee borrowed.

By the morning Rakku decides that she will take her child to the village midwife. Since Rakku will not get her share of the grain from the fields where she labours if she fails to appear for work even for a day, she sends her daughter to get the midwife. The midwife offers Rakku some herbs but tells her that her child should also be seen by the doctor in the nearby town. The midwife realizes Rakku's hesitation because she sees the problems confronting poor families in the villages all the time. She offers Rakku a few rupees and tries to provide some comfort by telling her "there was a delivery in the next village last night—a son, first-born. So they gave me a rupee. When you are earning daily wages again you can return it to me then" (Cited in Zurbrigg, 1984: 30).

Rakku and her husband immediately head to the nearest city to see the doctor who gives their child an injection. This city doctor is not a condescending man where the poor villagers are concerned, but his services are very expensive. Although there is a State run clinic nearby, it is of no use to the poor villagers because it is often closed during the evenings and they are also known for handing out yellow pills for every ailment. On her way back from the doctor Rakku is somewhat tired herself because she has not eaten all day



and she cannot eat because the rice cakes that she brought with her for the journey to the city are barely enough to fill the stomachs of her children.

The following day Rakku's child appears to be doing a little better. However, as the injection begins to wear off his condition worsens. Rakku makes another trip to the midwife who tells her that the child is severely dehydrated and that she should immediately take him to the hospital in the city. Rakku laughs at the midwife and replies—"Meena don't plague me with such talk. The city is forty kilometers away. Where would we get the bus fare to make such a journey? And who could possibly spare a day to go? It hurts me to hear you speak like that!" (Ibid). As Rakku tells her husband about going to the city, he is also concerned about having to borrow more money to save this child and, desperately looking for an answer, remarks—"haven't the gods taken our second son? Must they not decide for this son also" (Ibid).

When Rakku finally reaches the State's hospital in the city she finds many other poor women standing outside the enormous iron gates at the entrance. These gates are only open for the poor for a few hours in the early morning period. Rakku manages to get on the other side of the iron gates by giving the guard some rupees. Rakku sees a nurse and tells her "sister, my

child is sick. Please, who will see him?" The nurse replies--"the out-patients' clinic is closed now. Why didn't you bring him earlier? You must come back tomorrow morning by seven". As Rakku attempts to stop the nurse again by telling her how weak her child is, the nurse impatiently tells her to go to another ward. Rakku is frightened by the alienating surroundings as she looks for the appropriate ward, but also finds some comfort in the many other poor faces that she sees around her.

When a doctor finally comes around to examining Rakku's child he asks her how long he has had diarrhea. Rakku replies three days and the doctor admonishes her for not seeking health care for the child sooner (Ibid). Rakku is startled by this comment and does not know how to respond. How does she tell him about her struggle to save her child again? How does she tell him that she will not be given her portion of the grain that she has been labouring for at the end of the planting season or her daily wages that her family cannot do without. Rakku does not say anything to the doctor and she bows her head because she is hurt by his comment that she does not care for her child. By the next morning Rakku's child is allowed to go home because there is not enough room as the next

group of dehydrated poor children come in, as soon as the iron gates are unlocked. As Rakku prepares for her journey back to the village she becomes aware of her own hunger pangs because she has not eaten for days. She barely has enough money to get back to the village but somehow manages to buy two very small rice cakes.

By the time Rakku reaches the village, her child's diarrhea starts again, which convinces Rakku that her son has been cursed by an evil spirit. The midwife also visits Rakku to hear about her journey to the city and whether her child's condition has improved. The midwife looks at the dry lips of Rakku's son and comments—"let us see by morning, Rakku...let us see by morning" (Cited in Zurbrigg, 1984: 40-41). That same evening Rakku undertakes her day-to-day duties around the household while keeping a constant watch on her son. Throughout the night Rakku rocks her son trying to provide some comfort as her family sleeps and by the early morning she is quietly singing a death song for another son that she will bury, as soon as the others get up.

## CHAPTER V

### EMERGENCE OF WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS IN INDIA:

The experiences of poor Indian women such as Rakku are disturbing ones. This chapter looks at the emergence of the women's movement in India and the extent to which issues being addressed by women's groups at various levels are relevant to the plight of women like Rakku. We can assess the various strands of activism, loosely characterized as the new Indian women's movement (Omvedt, 1985), in terms of their potential for empowering poor women within existing mode(s) of production and reproduction. The conditions under which grass roots movements have emerged draws attention to the reality of the violence of capitalist development and underdevelopment on the lives of poor women. Although there has been a great deal of discussion regarding the issue of violence against women within the context of body politics by the feminist movements in both the First World and in many Third World countries (Mies, 1986), it is argued here that the concept of violence has to be broadened in order to include the destruction of the bodies and health of females, particularly poor Third World women, labouring under exploitative relations of production and reproduction. This violence is destroying women's bodies and health, as

well as their dignity, subjectivity, and autonomy, by robbing them of the very essence of their humanity (Mies, 1987a).

Since the early 1970s various women's groups have emerged throughout India to deal with a wide range of issues. The platforms of many of these groups were initially dismissed as 'women's issues' until the mobilization of nationwide demonstrations against rape, 'bride burning' (dowry deaths), sexual harassment, and the increase in female foeticide because of the availability of sex-selection technology (Kishwar and Vanita, 1984; Mies, 1986; Omvedt, 1985). While these nationwide demonstrations by urban based middle/upper class women's groups have brought a great deal of attention to issues primarily affecting *them*, their higher visibility and status effectively marginalize/silence the experiences of poor women in their day-to-day struggle for subsistence.

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Although sex-selection technology is not accessible to poor women because of the high cost and the location of these centres, (most of them are located in the cities and primarily cater to middle/upper class women), some studies have found that this lucrative industry is slowly moving into rural areas as well (Mies, 1986). Patel (1984) has found that a survey taken in the slums of Bombay revealed that many poor women are also aborting female fetuses after taking a sex-selection test (Cited in Mies, 1986: 152). Many of these poor women argued that it is better for them to spend some money now rather than pay a larger sum for a dowry (Ibid). Many of these sex-selection and abortion clinics located in the cities are decreasing the cost of their services, as more clinics are established, in order to take advantage of this burgeoning market.

(Butalia, 1985). The immediate needs and concerns of poor women (for example, lack of access to resources such as land and water, inadequate wages, work and health care services) have been excluded from the general definition of violence against women.

Mainstream women's groups that emerged during the independence period have also done very little, if anything<sup>41</sup> at all, to politicize the voices of poor women. Many

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Support for the development of women's groups in the pre-independence period came from religious organizations such as the Arya Samaj, various political bodies seeking social reform and/or independence, as well as the colonial State (Desai, 1989: 185). Some of the activities supported by the State ranged from providing classes in education (especially in Hindi and English), organizing handicraft workers in order to market their products efficiently and establishing shelters for abused women (Ibid: 187). Desai states that many of these activities were aimed at improving the status of middle/upper class women through education and legal reform in order to "... improve [their] efficiency as wives and mothers and strengthen the hold of traditional values" (1989: 184). The AIWC, for example, emphasized the role of motherhood and encouraged women to adhere to certain 'feminine' qualities (selflessness, non-violence and love) in their development towards the ideals of womanhood. This organization also played a significant role in pressuring for legislation such as the Sarda Act (prohibiting child marriage) and the dissolution of the Muslim Marriage Act (Desai, 1989: 186). Other women's organizations that were also directly involved with the independence movement pressured for reform in various areas. The Desh Sevika Sangh (National Women's Volunteer Organization), for example, concentrated their activities specifically for the purpose of self-rule (Ibid: 187). Some of their activities included a ban on foreign made goods being imported into India (especially cloth) and the sale of liquor (Ibid).

of these women's groups (for example, the Women's Indian Association (WIA) and the All-India Women's Conference (AIWC)) remain embedded in elitism and continue to have a significant voice because they are aligned with male and/or elite dominated political parties or institutions which offer support in order to fulfill their own agendas (Butalia, 1985; Everett, 1983). Bald (1983) argues that women's organizations that are affiliated with political parties are primarily used to recruit women's votes. A small number of upper class urban women that were at the forefront of the independence movement and addressed issues that mainly affected their own class (for example, purdah and inheritance laws) abandoned their reformist platform after independence, and instead became the vanguards of elite/bourgeois interests (Bald, 1983; Everett, 1983; Liddle and Joshi, 1985). In the post-independence period Gandhian ideology of women's roles in family and society significantly influenced the interests of women involved in the independence movement (Mies, 1975). Women's groups that emerged in the post-independence period not only espoused the traditional notions of the 'ideal' Indian female, but they also protected the privileges of their own class. Indira Gandhi is just one example of a handful of women who emerged in leadership positions in the post-independence period and

became the vanguards of the interests of the ruling elite, instead of raising concerns of poor women.

Some of the upper class women involved in the politics of the independence period were rewarded with political portfolios that were essentially along the lines of what the male dominated State characterized as 'women's work', (for example, 'health and welfare') while other members essentially returned to the traditional roles of Hindu wife, daughter, and mother (Jayawardena, <sup>42</sup>1986). Jayawardena argues that although these upper class women drew attention to certain issues, their

... movement gave the illusion of change while women were kept within the structural confines of family and society. Revolutionary alternatives or radical changes affecting women's lives did not become an essential part of the demands of the nationalist movement at any stage of the long struggle for independence, and a revolutionary feminist consciousness did not arise within the movement for national liberation. Women in the nationalist struggle did not use the occasion to raise issues that affected them as women (1986: 107-108).

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Many of the achievements of the women's movement in the nationalist period (for example, the vote and the right to education) were gained on the basis that it would make women better mothers and wives (Bald, 1983). Mohandas Gandhi's significant role in the independence movement further stressed the traditional Hindu role of 'mother', 'wife', and 'helpmate' (Ibid). Gandhi believed that women have an infinite capacity for self sacrifice, love, and patience and that these so-called inherent qualities of intuition, self sacrifice, and self preservation made women the ideal homemakers. As Sharma points out, "... in no case were women supposed to neglect their primary duty of managing the home and taking care of the children. Primacy of home and family life was of fundamental importance in Gandhian philosophy ..." (1982: 60-61).



In comparing some of the women's groups and grass movements that have emerged over the past few years with the earlier upper class bourgeois women's organizations, Everett (1983) has found that although there has been an increasing awareness of the issues of sexism, class, and imperialism, the linkages between these kinds of issues continue to be subverted by the heterogeneous interests of liberal feminist groups whose experiences differ from that of poor women.

The socio-economic benefits of the nationalist period for some women, as well as the consolidation of these gains, becomes apparent when one examines the family histories of the women involved in the political sphere at the national level. However, a significant number of the women holding political portfolios and giving the impression of leadership in the area of women's issues, are, in fact, unable to exercise any power on their own. Hale suggests that the apparent lack of concern for women's issues, especially for the voices of poor women, by this group of elite women can perhaps be explained by the fact that "... they have to placate the opposition of male politicians, and petition them to try to obtain influential [support] in order to accomplish anything" (1987: 7). Some of

the women politicians working on women's issues are relegated to an area that is far removed from the centre of major policy decisions and "...remain largely ignored as politically unimportant" (Hale, 1987: 16).

The immense gap between the reality of middle/upper class women and the daily struggles of the vast majority of poor women is reflected in the nature of the issues that are being addressed by the various women's groups that have emerged in the past two decades. Many of these organizations have developed around specific issues and those groups that have survived are broadening their feminist platforms to include a broad range of concerns (Everett, 1983). The activities of these organizations range from organizing women for demonstrations, providing legal and medical assistance, seeking employment and housing, as well as discussions and counselling on various issues (Kishwar and Vanita, 1984). For example, *Saheli* (sister), a woman's group based in a middle-class residential area of Delhi provides various services that includes counselling on issues that range from dowries, employment, family planning, as well as discussing feelings regarding motherhood with new mothers (Ibid). However, although many of these urban based middle/upper class women's

groups are tackling more than just one or two issues, the immediate concerns of poor women are not at the forefront of their agenda. Support for the concerns of poor women by many of these organizations fluctuates according to the politics of the day. Desai (1989) states that the conservative or more traditional women's groups have hindered the new Indian women's movement because they are concerned to reinforce traditional/bourgeois notions of the 'ideal' Indian female. Many of these groups, including the AIWC, "... try to attract more members by vying with each other in organizing cultural and recreational activities. They provide classes in hair styling, dancing, and fancy cooking..." (Desai, 1989: 196), and also hold discussions on topics such as the "'advantages of joint family', 'curse of old age homes', 'should women go out to work?', [and] 'problems of adolescence'" (Ibid).

The hierarchical nature of many of these women's groups also indicates that there is a patronizing 'top down' approach to the voices of poor women, and the concern with legal issues by

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Many middle/upper class women's organizations (for example, the All India Women's Conference) are (continued ...)

some of the organizations reflects the pattern of the nationalist period (Everett, 1983). As Everett states, "legal reforms may aid middle-class women, but law" (1983: 24). The vast majority of poor women have gained very little from legal reforms, changes in the judicial system, and the so-called equality and welfare provisions under the Indian Constitution (Hale, 1987; Mukhopadhyay, 1984). Many of the equalities and legal reforms achieved by women's groups in recent history are impressive on paper, but have aided little in alleviating the impoverished living and working conditions of poor females, as well as other forms of violence against them.

Women's organizations attempting to ameliorate the increasing violence against Indian women through legal channels fail to see that laws are not

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<sup>43</sup> (... continued)

bureaucratic, hierarchical, and centralized structures (Mies, 1975: 57). Mies (Ibid) has found that those women who have emerged in leadership positions in politics, business, and education appear to have adopted a bureaucratic style of leadership. These women not only deal with women's issues with a 'top down' approach, but the fact that "... women cannot define their own interests in these organizations and institutions, nor evolve an adequate concept of leadership with regard to these interests, has put them into the straight jacket of an authoritarian bureaucratic structure [in which] many of them have become as sterile, dull, unimaginative and legalistic as any male functionary" (Mies, 1975: 57).

effective unless they are enforced. The anti-dowry law, for example, was implemented in 1961 (Ahuja, 1987). However, it is rarely enforced and females, primarily from the middle and poor classes, continue to be burned when their families fail to provide a large dowry (Mies, 1986: 150; See also Kishwar and Vanita, 1984; Kumari, 1989). These dowry-deaths are often dismissed as 'suspicious' suicides by the State and the vast majority are never investigated (Mies, 1986). Various women's groups have been campaigning for stringent enforcement of the anti-dowry law over the past few years because many females continue to be harassed and burned by their spouses and/or in-laws. In 1983, the Supreme Court of India imposed a death penalty on the husband, mother-in-law, and brother-in-law of a pregnant female who was burned to death because she did not provide her in-law's with an adequate dowry (Ibid: 150). However, such penalties have accomplished very little; this violence continues to appear daily in local Indian newspapers disguised as: "woman commits suicide" or "woman burnt to death in cooking accident" (Ibid).

The State's failure to enforce laws which in theory protect all Indian females, regardless of class or ethnicity can be seen in the experience of Rameeza Bee. In 1978, in the state of Andhra Pradesh, Rameeza Bee and her spouse were taken into

police custody under false accusations (Chatterji, 1988: 70; See also Kishwar and Vanita, 1984). Rameeza Bee was raped by at least three police officers who also forced her spouse to pay them four hundred rupees (Muktadar Commission Report, 1978; Cited in Mies, 1986: 153). When Rameeza Bee's spouse attempted to protest against police brutality, he was beaten to death by the three police officers. Mass protests against police brutality by various women's organizations led to a judicial inquiry that was primarily aimed at appeasing tensions that emerged as a result of the ongoing exploitation and violence against the poor. The men involved in raping Rameeza Bee and murdering her husband were eventually acquitted. Chatterji states that the judge argued that, in his judgement, the "...rape story was a myth because of the evidence [that] Rameeza Bee was polluted and therefore did not command any indulgence" (1988: 70).

The case that brought nationwide attention to violence against women and enabled various women's groups to join forces regardless of caste, class, age, ethnicity, and geographical boundaries was that of Mathura, a poor adolescent labourer, who was raped by a group policemen in the state of Maharashtra (Mies, 1986: 154). These men were also acquitted of rape and attempts by a small group of women in Bombay to appeal the decision were

unsuccessful (this small group of women eventually established the Forum Against Rape (FAR)) (Ibid). The issue of rape is one area where various women's groups are trying to bridge the gap between poor and middle/upper class women, as well as bring together heterogeneous women's organizations plagued with factionalism (Everett, 1983).

Explanations for the lack of cohesiveness in the Indian women's movement can perhaps be found in the diversity of caste and class, regional cultures and languages, age, position within the patrilocal family, educational and occupational levels, as well as the uneven impact of capitalist development and underdevelopment on the lives of Indian females. This diversity is a significant obstacle preventing the autonomous women's groups from establishing a "... national umbrella organization to co-ordinate the activities and concerns of ... women's groups that have mushroomed in India in the last ten to twelve years" (Bald, 1983: 13). A coalition of this kind can perhaps be more fruitful in politicizing the voices of poor women than the factionalized and hierarchical organizations, which have a tendency of fading away as quickly as they emerge.

One group of feminists who are making great strides to politicize the concerns of poor women,

within the broad sphere of the Indian women's movement, is *Manushi* (woman). This magazine/collective was established subsequent to the 'emergency' period by a small group of university-educated middle class women influenced by the emergence of the women's movement in the West in the sixties and seventies (Kishwar and Vanita, 1984). Everett (1983) states that there are several factors that led to the emergence of various women's groups during this time which gave a new momentum to the Indian women's movement.

During this period many Indian students were influenced by the worldwide student activism as well as the emergence of peasant movements in various rural areas throughout India (Ibid). Everett argues that "a small number of women students were radicalized, too, but they were not particularly sensitive to women's oppression or to women's capacity to struggle for liberation" (1983: 19). Many of these well-educated urban women, as they were influenced by various political ideologies, became involved with grass roots movements as sporadic reports began to emerge about poor women organizing in various rural areas. Kishwar and Vanita state that until the 'emergency' period the struggles of poor rural women were generally dismissed by the media as the lack of 'law and order' and the State usually concealed the "... instances where



rural women organized to challenge the power of the rural elite" (1984: 302).

It was during this period that some middle and upper class women, influenced by the social and political thought of the sixties and seventies, began to organize around the issues raised by poor women in rural regions of India. Everett states that "the women organized against wife-beating and rape as well as against the economic exploitation of their communities by the upper castes/classes" (1983: 19). However, various middle/upper class women's groups and many political parties quickly utilized the 'militancy' of poor women to fulfill their own political agendas (Omvedt, 1980a; 1978). For example, women involved in Socialist and Communist parties organized the Women's Anti-Price Rise Front in Bombay in 1973 (Everett, 1983: 20). About twenty thousand poor women were organized to protest against high prices of essential food items with the aid of songs and slogans (Ibid). In this grass root movement poor women organized around their collective experiences by addressing the overwhelming gap between the rich and impoverished; calling for a sisterhood that cuts across caste, class, and religious boundaries in order to alleviate their impoverished conditions,

which can be seen in the following song:

All our life is on fire, all the prices rising, give us an answer, O rulers of the country!

A handful of American wheat, a kilo of *milo* mixed with chaff, doesn't our country grow crops or do we have only mud-mixed grains? Give us an answer ...

We have forgotten the colour of milk, coconuts and fruit have gone underground, our children have only *jaggery* tea to feed on, Give us an answer ...

Sweet oil for cooking is the price of gold, coconut oil for our hair cannot be found, without rock oil for lamps we have grown familiar with darkness, Give us an answer ...

We burn in the summer, we are drenched in the rains, we bear the rigor of winter without any clothes, why don't we have any shelter? Give us an answer ...

We toil night and day and sleep half-starved while the parasites fill their bellies with butter—why does the thief get food while the owner is cheated? Give us an answer ...

There are pastures for the cattle of the rich, for forest development land is preserved, why is there no land to support living men? Give us an answer ...

Tall buildings rise before our eyes, the roads cannot contain their motorcycles and cars, on whose labour has such development been built? Give us an answer ...

We filled the jails for independence, we hurled bombs into the cars of white men, did we do it to fatten the sacred cow? Give us an answer ...

When we ask for a rise in wages, for work for the unemployed, when we demand land for cultivation why are we met with jail, beatings and bullets? Give us an answer ...

Now you have taken a new disguise and appear in the colours of socialism, but we no longer want for today the promises of tomorrow! Give us an answer ...

Now we will stand on our own feet, we will throw caste and religious differences to the winds, we call for the brotherhood and sisterhood of all toilers! We vow today to fight with our lives, we will bury capitalism in the grave and sound the drums of our own state!

All our life is on fire, all the prices rising, Give us an answer, O rulers of the country! (Bhaskar Jadhav and Lal Nishan; Quoted in Omvedt, 1980a: 7-8). (a song written to organize poor peasant women in the state of Maharashtra in the early 1970s by left-wing organizers).

The use of songs has become a prevalent strategy in organizing poor women around their collective experiences. Since the 1970s there has been an increasing awareness of the deteriorating situation of many poor women and women's oppression in general. Omvedt states that there has been a "significant spread of consciousness about the oppression of women ... a fair amount of activity continuing in the form of marches, demonstrations, sit-ins, new magazines, conferences, programmes" (1980a: 163). However, there is not a great deal of concern with issues confronting poor women by mainstream political parties, including those leaning to the left, except when they are needed for marches (Ibid).

The question of whether middle/upper class women's groups can aid in the empowerment of poor women cannot be fully tackled without an examination of the nature of the issues being raised by poor women in various regions throughout India. This is examined in the following section.

POTENTIAL AND LIMITATIONS OF GRASS ROOTS MOVEMENTS:

With the waving of subsistence-oriented production, increase in deforestation, shortages of arable land and water and the payment of poor wages, a number of grass roots movements have emerged in India out of the struggle for immediate needs. These grass roots movements not only show the nature of the polarization between the rural rich and the rural poor, but also draw attention to the daily needs and concerns of poor women. The issues being addressed by women at the grass roots level are widening the boundaries of the Indian women's movement and making it more inclusive. Everett states that the experiences of poor women "have widened the scope of issues raised to include physical and verbal assault on women, alcohol, and to a more limited extent housework and health" (1986: 17). Poor women have also undertaken innovative methods of protest against the various faces of violence against them under the impact of modernization. A brief exploration of some of the grass roots movements that have emerged in various areas of India will be undertaken in order to determine the potential for women's empowerment at this level.

The Chipko movement is perhaps one of the most famous grass roots movements to have emerged out of the immediate

concerns of a small group of women dependent on self-sufficient production. This movement emerged in the late nineteenth century in the Himalayan area in an attempt to prevent massive deforestation by the State and resurfaced again in the early seventies (Basu, 1987). Women involved in this movement not only devised the term Chipko (meaning embrace), but were at the forefront of the movement to save their means of subsistence from destruction (Ibid). Since females are responsible for gathering fodder, water, and fuel on a daily basis in regions such as the Uttarkhand, the increasing commercialization of this area is depleting the basic necessities of life in subsistence production. The Chipko movement is not only an innovative response to capitalist destruction, but women's slogans such as—"Soil, water and vegetation are the gifts of the forest; soil, water and vegetation are the basis of life" (Bahuguna, 1980; Quoted in Everett, 1986: 20) also clearly show that the movement is based on a strong linkage of immediate survival needs and the concerns of poor men and women.

Although poor women have been central to this movement, Sharma has found that they are often used and then ignored when male dominated groups organize them (Cited in Bardhan, 1986). Sharma points out that the activism of the women involved in the Chipko

movement has been specifically channelled so that existing structures of power in the villages are challenged, but not threatened (Ibid). Women's activism has been directed against outside interests (for example, non-local loggers) rather than the local hierarchy of power and exploitation (Bardhan, 1986). Although many poor and urban educated women have been involved in the Chipko movement, only a handful of the older and/or single women have been able to sustain it actively in some areas (Ibid). Bardhan (1986) states that these women are often less constrained by family responsibilities and authority figures. In the Reni village, for example, Sharma found that "when the men returned and heard of the heroic struggle of women, some of them who had hoped that the [logging] contract would bring them jobs...disapproved of the women's actions. Their wrath fell on Gaura Devi who had led the direct action. Only a small number of women [came forth and] supported her" (Cited in Bardhan, 1986: 15).

Kishwar (1984) states that in addition to the issue of deforestation, women also challenged local authorities of the State to examine development policies which directly or indirectly had deleterious consequences for their communities. Women chanted slogans such as "planning without fuel, fodder and water is blind planning" in front of government buildings (Kishwar,

1984: 119). In the village of Khurat, the villagers made the State aware of their intention to destroy a water pumping station that was diverting water from their area (Ibid).

Poor women in the Uttarkhand region have also organized on the issue of alcoholism and the availability of liquor in their communities (Kishwar, 1984). In this region the sale of liquor is regulated by the State. However, it is the illegal market that concerned these women (Ibid). In the Pundasa village, for example, women picketed stores selling liquor illegally and undertook innovative actions. As Kishwar explains, "... women surrounded the house of a distiller, tied him to the buffalo pole, and then walked ten miles to the town to call the police" (1984: 119). Women involved in these protests often confronted physical and verbal abuse from men selling the liquor as well as from members from their own communities (Ibid). In 1971, well over ten thousand females from various communities organized to protest against alcoholism and at least fifty women were jailed for picketing in front of liquor stores (Ibid).

Various other movements have also emerged in the past few years in rural areas and urban slums (for example, the Dalit movement<sup>44</sup>). It appears that at the foundation

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Omvedt (1973) has found that in the past few years there has been a great deal of "student unrest" in the non- (continued ...)

of these movements is a resistance to the violent destruction of capitalist development and underdevelopment on the lives of the poor. Since poor women often bear the brunt of poverty and cannot escape the reality of having to provide for their families, Mies has found that "they have no easy escape into drinking, as men have, when their children are starving" (1975: 65). The voices of poor women and their attempts at collective action against the brutality of capitalist development have been far more effective in highlighting the issues of caste, class and gender oppression than many of the middle/upper class women's groups. As Mies has found in her study of peasant uprisings in the state of Maharashtra:

[these] women do not subordinate their own specific interests and grievances to some abstract greater cause. Their mobilization, on the contrary, started from their own exploitation as women and

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<sup>44</sup> (... continued)

elite rural and urban colleges. These students are from peasant families and have organized unions, committees, and movements (for example, the Dalit Panthers) in various rural and urban areas (Hiro, 1982). These movements have developed in light of the increasing problems facing middle class peasants, especially unemployment, and are oriented towards a range of leftist ideologies (Omvedt, 1973). While some of these movements (such as the Naxalites) are more directly involved with an armed struggle, in spite of the State's increasing resources, for other groups "armed struggle is no longer a serious insurrectionary strategy ..., but arms are maintained, movements protected, and violent gun battles still occasionally break out" (Omvedt, 1973: 173; See also Omvedt, 1978).



as laborers, but they do not stop at their specific female oppression, as it is concretely interwoven with the oppression of their class. Class struggle and struggle for their liberation as women are one and the same process for peasant women. One cannot be separated from the other (1975: 65).

The Self - Employed Women's Association (SEWA) is another grass root movement that is making great strides in empowering poor women struggling to meet their daily subsistence needs. This organization was established in 1972 by various grass root workers in the state of Gujarat in order to improve the working and living conditions of the poor labouring in the 'hidden/informal' economy (Bhatt, 1989: 1059).

Bhatt, a founding member of this grass root collective, states that SEWA is unique because it is not restricted to just one or two issues. An examination of the activities of this organization indicates that it takes a liberal-feminist approach aimed at integrating poor women into the capitalist development framework by improving their access to valuable resources. SEWA has attempted to organize *beedi* rollers, petty vendors, agricultural and landless labourers, and housekeepers in six states (Bhatt, 1989: 1061). Bhatt states that in addition to improving the working and living conditions of labourers in urban areas, SEWA has also attempted to create alternative forms of employment in both rural and urban areas (Ibid). A co-operative bank for

the poor is one example where self-sufficiency and working capital are provided so that poor households can improve their chances of survival (Ibid). In politicizing the immediate needs and concerns of the poor, Bhatt argues that SKWA has faced an unrelenting battle with the State's bureaucracy, employers, and mainstream political parties (Ibid).

Although many of these grass roots movements have been successful in mobilizing poor men and women across caste and class, religious, and geographical boundaries, Basu (1987) states that the very conditions that have given birth to such grass roots movements are also undermining them. For example, in trying to meet the day-to-day subsistence needs of their families poor women often do not have the time to attend to other matters. Everett (1986) argues that men often also prevent their spouses, as well as other females in the household, from attending women's groups through the use of verbal and physical violence. Poor women have also

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Omvedt (1980a) has found that there is a pattern to the grass roots movements in rural areas. Most of the active organizers of poor women are women without husbands, wives of politicians, young urban female students "... who are perceived as external to the community and not much of a threat as female role models [since they] are more readily accepted as mobilizers than young married women from the same community (continued ...)

faced violence from landlords, employers, and the police who have, in many instances, used violence to prevent them from mobilizing. The divide and rule tactics of the State, as well as middle/upper classes, has resulted in an increase in the atrocities against the poor under the impact of modernization. For example, in a district in Andhra Pradesh:

... 500 caste Hindus, mostly landlords belonging to the Reddy Caste, attacked a Harijan village with axes, swords and guns. They wounded 30 Harijans, including old people and pregnant women, and burnt 118 huts to ashes with all the belongings of the Harijans. ... these atrocities were the landlords' answer to the Harijan labourers' demands for higher wages. The Harijans also demanded the right to cultivate a plot of fallow land which the government had allotted them for distribution. Yet, when they tried to occupy the land, they were driven away by the landlords. ... (Mies et al., 1988: 135).

Concern for the safety of poor women mobilizing to challenge the rural and urban elite has also been raised by some women's groups. Since many of the urban women's groups are comprised of women from well-connected families, their actions are not treated in the same manner that poor women are treated. Kishwar and Vanita state that the publicity given to the actions

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<sup>45</sup> (... continued)

...” (Bardhan, 1986: 12). Some poor women who have emerged in leadership positions in grass roots movements also tend to be older women who have fulfilled their duties as daughters, mothers, and wives and also continue to “.. uphold the patriarchal order and its control” (Feldman and McCarthy, 1986; Cited in Bardhan, 1986: 12).

of urban based women's organizations acts as a deterrent to the police and that "despite the consistent anti-police protest actions by the urban middle-class women's organizations and groups in the course of anti-dowry and anti-rape actions, [upper class women] in the big cities have seldom had to face government repression or police brutality as a result" (1984: 34).

This brutality has become a significant obstacle preventing women's organizations at the grass roots level from organizing poor women. Yet there is a great deal of potential for the empowerment of women at the grass roots level, particularly for poor women, who confront the various faces of oppression, exploitation, and violence in their day-to-day struggles. Mies states that the grass root struggles of poor women shows more potential for revolutionary change than middle/upper class women's groups or the "... wishful thinking of a few Western radical feminists" (1975: 65). The non-hierarchical nature of many of these grass roots movements also indicates that there is a different picture of leadership when compared with the urban based middle/upper class women's organizations. Poor women often mobilize on a collective basis and their actions emerge out of their immediate survival needs, transcending gender, caste, class and regional boundaries that have

factionalized middle/upper class women's groups.

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In comparing the concept of leadership of middle/upper class women with grass roots movements and organizations, Everett (1986) and Mies et al., (1988) have found that since women's subsistence work in rural areas is often based on collectivity amongst females of the peasant household, as well as with neighbors and others in the village/community, females in rural areas are not isolated from each other as they are in urban areas. Mies, in her study of peasants in the Bhongir area of Andhra Pradesh, found that the poor women worked as a team, which were comprised of neighbours, friends and relatives and "that these teams developed a spirit of solidarity and mutual help which transcended the egoism of the individual family" (Mies et al., 1988: 129).

This collective effort can also be seen in women's movements and groups at the grass roots level. Poor women are organizing around the experiences they share with other poor women. It is their collective experiences that creates a sense of common leadership, enabling women to "... discover and develop their own ideas and strategies..." (Mies, 1983; Quoted in Everett, 1986:20), without being told what to think and do from 'top-down' middle/upper class women's groups. Many of these 'top-down' women's groups often approach poor women with the idea that they need to make them aware of their exploitation and oppression. However, Mies has found that poor women are quite aware of their oppression as females and as poor labourers and that once these women are able to organize themselves there is a great deal of potential for their empowerment (Mies et al., 1988). Mies (1975) argues that since the great majority of poor women are unlikely to achieve the image of the 'ideal' Indian female and be co-opted by the promises of happiness, self worth, and upward mobility because of the reality of their impoverishment, their participation in some grass roots movements suggests that poor women are more likely to get involved in class struggle. However, since there are poor women who are being integrated into the dominant culture, as seen in the case of poor females who have been withdrawn from labouring in male spheres, Mies' argument does not hold true for all poor women in India.

CONCLUSION: DIRECTION OF FUTURE DEVELOPMENT DISCUSSIONS:

In this inquiry the experiences of poor Indian women who face the day-to-day brutality of capitalist development and underdevelopment pose some fundamental questions for future discussions on development. As the globalization of production and reproduction integrates the world's markets into an interdependent political-economy, perspectives on Women and Development cannot afford to overlook the fact that so-called development/modernization cannot exist without underdevelopment, domination without subjugation, or wealth without poverty (Mies et al., 1988; Mies, 1986).

The irony of present day overaccumulation is that while those in the industrialized world, as well as the middle and upper classes in the developing world, are being bombarded with images of false needs, the vast majority of people in the developing and underdeveloped peripheries of the Third World are being denied the most basic necessities of life.

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By false needs I am referring to the nature of consumption in the industrialized world as well as throughout the Third World. We are constantly bombarded with images that seek to persuade us that we will find true happiness, self worth, and the meaning of life by engaging in mass consumption. O'Neill (1985) states that  
(continued ...)

As the industrialized world struggles to restructure capitalism, the concerns of poor Third World women no longer remain their own. This is especially true with the issue of hunger. Given the decreasing standard of living for the majority of the world's population, and in light of the economic crises confronting the West, we cannot continue to see the world in isolation. Nor can we afford to view it from narrow economic growth perspectives that are dependent on the destruction of human beings and the environment.

From their 'privileged' positions in the global economic hierarchy, liberal-feminists ignore how poor females in the peripheries of the Third World are being integrated into the local and international markets of labour and capital accumulation, and the exploitative conditions under which they are labouring. Liberal feminists have also overlooked the fact that the ideology of mass production and consumption

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<sup>47</sup> (... continued)

this constant bombardment of images is molding human beings in such a dehumanizing manner that we are no longer able to distinguish between 'subsistence' and 'prestige' economics. Mies makes a similar statement by arguing that this illusion of happiness and self-fulfillment--the 'ideal' life--is based on mass consumption of dead commodities that are destroying the consumer as well as the producer because "... they are based on exploitation and contain in themselves the murdered, destroyed, robbed, degraded life of other people and the destruction of nature ..." (Mies, 1987a: 37).

is increasingly becoming dependent on the marginalized and impoverished masses in the so-called 'cheap labour' peripheries of the Third World and, as Mies adamantly points out, we must open our eyes to the fact that the standard of living for all women in the industrialized world, and for middle and upper class women in the Third World, is "... based on the ongoing exploitation of poor women and men in the underdeveloped regions and classes" (Mies, 1986: 1).

In many of the peripheral areas of the Third World poor women are not only barely surviving on the labour-intensive wage and non-wage work for local and international markets of capital accumulation, but they also remain alienated from the work they are doing. Explanations for this alienation can be found in the production process itself, in poor women's inability to purchase the goods they are producing themselves, especially food, as well as in the futility of poor women producing items for the West in order to meet their family's most basic subsistence needs (See Mies et al., 1988; Mies, 1986; Singh and Viitanen-Kelles, 1987).

In assessing the debates on women's gains and losses in the local and international markets of labour and capital accumulation, liberal-feminists have become too preoccupied with integrating poor women into the



development process (or market-oriented schemes), without questioning the very nature of their integration--- the social fragmentation of women's bodies and the decline of their health. In contrast, the urgent call by socialist-feminist groups (for example, Development Alternatives for a New Era (DAWN)) for alternative approaches to development and women's issues attempts to go beyond the examination of some external enemy such as the State, 'patriarchy', the market economy and males (Mies, 1987a).

However, perhaps the inability in practice of both liberal and socialist-feminists to go beyond the external enemy that they often blame lies not so much in the powerlessness that women feel when confronting male dominated structures of power, but rather in the increasing inability to examine their own position within the global economic hierarchy. Middle and upper class liberal and socialist-feminists are seldom cognizant of their 'privileged' positions in the global hierarchy of exploitation, oppression, and violence, and therefore fail to recognize their own disembodiment. However, not until feminists begin with an examination of their own disembodiment, can alternative forms of living, creating, and being be successfully developed. As Mies suggests, "... we must begin right now with our inner detachment. We must reject our participation in this system, we [must]

no longer allow it to define what a human being is, what a woman is, what work is, what life is" (Mies, 1987a: 45).

Liberal and socialist-feminists have failed to look at these crucial questions. They have failed to consider the issue of how work or labouring could be an activity that can allow women to satisfy their subsistence needs, without endangering their health, others, or nature. They have also failed to reconceptualize work and human relationships in a way that would enable women to control their own bodies and define their own place in society. If, for example, we could allow ourselves to define work as life affirming, as that which enables us to fulfill our basic subsistence needs in a non-exploitative and non-violent manner, we find that it is possible to imagine a kind of labouring that is not beneficial to the needs of capital accumulation. It also becomes an activity that is more than just the current feminist objectives of a symmetric division of labour or ensuring women's control over their own bodies.

The concept of empowerment for liberal and many socialist-feminists is confined to the needs of the market economy and suggests that issues such as racism, poverty, and sexism can be alleviated by implementing equality, peace and justice. The distribution of women's access to resources within the household

and in the market economy, or the alleviation of their work-burden, does not address the *nature* of women's labour under capital accumulation.

What I am suggesting here is the possibility of a broader definition of empowerment. In this inquiry the experiences of poor Indian women has revealed the need to think differently about this term. Whether this new concept of empowerment is labelled as 'holistic', 'embodied', or 'feminist', future development discussions must make an attempt to go beyond capitalist-oriented approaches by emphasizing that there is an urgent need to create and/or recover alternative means of production and reproduction. While I am not taking issue with the attempts by liberal and socialist-feminists to reveal and politicize the specific nature of women's exploitation and oppression, this study has shown the importance of emphasizing a concept of labour that is based on co-operation and reciprocity between women, men and nature and that which is oriented towards fulfilling subsistence needs, rather than on, as Mies suggests, the endless production and consumption of dead commodities. Creating such alternative frameworks for development "... is the only way in which women [can] restore their bodily integrity and wholeness, their dignity and their sovereignty over life

processes" (Mies, cited in Salleh, 1988: 135).

The possibilities for this kind of labouring cannot be realized unless we comprehend how the present structures of production and reproduction continue to disembody ourselves, our relationships with other human beings, as well as with nature. In order to create non-alienating, non-exploitative, and non-violent forms of production and reproduction, we must first examine what exploitative, alienating, oppressive and violent labouring is and then determine what the 'ideal' or 'good' life should consist of. This study is just one small step in this direction. Future studies must entail, for example, a more specific analysis of how technology is increasingly being used to dominate men, women, and nature and whether there is any room for such tools in a self-sufficient, unalienated, exploitation-free, and embodying concept of labour.

The experiences of poor Indian women, as examined in this thesis, show that the endless need for growth inherent in capital accumulation is, in fact, dependent on the destruction of the very core of their being. It is dependent on the remolding of women's bodies and health--of their embodied selves--by antihumanist means of production and reproduction in order to satisfy the demands of the State and economy. (Mies et al., 1988; O'Neill, 1985). Women's

movements around the world cannot afford to ignore the deterioration in the lives of females. If there is any basis for a 'global' sisterhood that does not reduce race, gender, and culture to identity and inequality, it will depend on the ability of feminist movements to recognize and explore the nature of women's disembodiment. This is an essential step towards empowerment for feminists in order to overcome the sense of powerlessness and the illusion that nothing can be done as long as capitalism continues to exist. As Heyzer puts it:

emancipation eventually will depend on the ability of women to create sufficient consciousness and strength at the international, national and local levels to introduce, sustain and reproduce new concepts and values of human relationships, work and alternative structures in society so that exploitative social formations, systems and institutions of subordination can no longer exist because the social climate or culture refuses to allow their maintenance and because there are more attractive alternatives for living (1986: 133).

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