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POWER OF THE PEOPLE'S MOVEMENT THE CASE OF THE VAIGAI WOMEN RIGHTS MOVEMENT IN TAMIL NADU, INDIA

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General Introduction

In 1984, when I was studying 12th standard in Britto Higher Secondary boarding School, Madurai, I went home, as usual, after the half-yearly examinations. One evening during dinnertime my mother hurried me up to eat my evening meal as early as possible so that she could go and participate in the Mahalir Mandram (village level women's group) meeting. The Mahalir Mandram was something new for me and I asked her many questions on such new reality. She declined to answer my queries at that time. But after the meeting she told me that the women from our village had joined together as a Mandram and decided to meet on the first Sunday of every month. As this process had just begun, I could not have answers to all my questions, like: What made the women come together and meet every month? Will these women be able to sustain their initial enthusiasm? Can Mahalir Mandram achieve anything in my village, which is dominated by the male traditional leaders and caste hierarchy?

I went home again for two months on summer holidays. This time I had adequate time to meet the whole group and to interact with them. We used to celebrate the church festival every year on the 27th of May. In that year, before the festival, the women engaged themselves in cleaning the village pond from where they fetch drinking water. They also cleaned the route for the car procession of the festival. This was the first public activity of the women group through which the villagers themselves came to know about such a group. From that time onwards, time to time, they do some or the other development activities. Thus they irrevocably stamped their public and collective presence on the social consciousness of the villagers. This led the women to exert influence on the social structures and the social relations in the village level.

From that year onwards whenever I went home for holidays, I used to meet them, encourage them and had a close follow-up of their activities. After my studies, when I

was appointed as the deputy director of the Sivagangai Multipurpose Social Service Society in 1998, I compared my own village in 1984 and then in 1998. Tremendous changes had taken place in the social, political, cultural and economical plane. These changes, the result of the collective praxis of women, irresistibly compelled me to reflect more upon them. The mobilisation of women in my village to redress the injustice done to them and to work for the common good was not an isolated reality. Women were also animated and organised in many other villages towards the same goal. All these women groups have been federated into as the Vaigai Women Rights Movement. Their main goal was to achieve human dignity through mutual respect and equality.

As noted by Motcham[1], one of the leaders of the movement:

> Human dignity is our fundamental claim. Every woman and every person must be respected. Our aim is to build a society based on mutual respect and equality. We feel confident. No one can break our unity in this effort.

The perspective of this activist is similar to many others who have been involved in collective action and struggling for the rights of women. Vandana Shiva, the environmentalist scholar and activist quotes the courageous actions exhibited by the women of Chipko movement for the protection of forests, soil and water resources:

> We have offered ourselves even at the cost of our lives, for a peaceful protest to close this mine. They (the contractors) stoned us but they could not destroy our Shakti[2] (Shiva: 1986,208).

Women from the most marginalised sections of Indian society are emerging to the fore with force. They have carved for themselves a place in society affirming their presence. They are determined to build a future that is humane for all persons. The poor, who are awakened and motivated, are emerging in countries in the South. They refuse to be

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[1] An activist of one women's group from Uppoor village told this quote to the participants in a seminar on the 17th January 2000, in R.S Mangalam.

[2] Shakti means strength or power in the local language.

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ignored any longer. They stake their claim to have their rightful place in society. What has caused these people to assert themselves with such an assertive power? How were they motivated to change their thinking? Who was instrumental in initiating such a change? What do these women want to achieve in life? These are some of the questions raised by this emerging power of the poor who have been animated.

CHAPTER – ONE
Women and Social Mobilisation

1.1 Social and Political Concerns of Women's Movements in India

Social movements in general, and Women's movements in particular, have played important roles in the recent decades in empowering marginalised groups and women in society. There has also been considerable discussions at both conceptual and policy levels on the political, economic and social concerns motivating the different actors involved, as well as the role of catalysts such as external agencies in stimulating the process of mobilisation and organisation. The different women's movements have challenged the status quo not only in respect to the negative biases against women, but also the framework of decision making, and the basis of organisation and power in society.

The 1920s and 1930s was the period when women began to organise and mobilise on issues of social reform, and civil and political rights. It was a phase of remarkable unity, albeit one achieved at the cost of major social and ideological exclusions. The focus of the movement dissipated in the 1940s: the urgency of the nationalist struggle overrode the priorities of the feminist agenda, and the variety and range of activities in which women began to participate shattered unity (Sen, 2000: 23).

Among the early all-India women's organisations, the All-India Women's Conference had the closest links with the Indian National Congress. But all the organisations were to some extent committed to a 'harmonious alliance' with the male nationalist leadership. As a result, these organisations accepted the independent Indian State as an alley. In their critique of patriarchy, identification of oppressive male agency was muted. The enemy was the system, not men. This political position meshed well with the organisations' welfare orientation and charitable work (Sen, 2000:24).

From the 1940s, however, women began broadening their scope far beyond women's organisations to the freedom struggle and peasant, worker, trade union movements. As a result the 'harmonious alliance' with Congress faced new stress and claims. Women began to articulate a more diverse, radical, and nuanced critique of patriarchy, reaching toward a new and more politicised gender identity.

Since Independence in India in 1947, increasing numbers of women have participated in the political process as voters in the elections, candidates in contesting elections, and as elected members in the National Parliament and State Legislative Assemblies. Despite the empowerment of women on the political domain, the atrocities against women on the social scale has remained much the same, at times it has even worsened. There has been an increase in various types of crimes against women, such as rape, kidnapping and abduction, molestation, torture and sexual harassment. More than 80 per cent rape victims are women under 30 years of age.

The turning point came in 1970s, when several events, some within and some outside India, gave a radical turn to the women's movement. The 'new feminism' in developed Western countries led in 1971 to the international year and then decade of women. Although the New Women's Movement gathered momentum, the declaration of emergency by Indira Gandhi in 1975 drove many radical leftist women underground, and their networks fragmented. After the emergency, however, new forces emerged. From around 1978, city-based women's groups were founded; some of which had strong roots in leftist politics. These autonomous organisations focused on raising consciousness about gender issues (Patel, 1985:86). There were also localised struggles, such as the Chipko movement and the Bodhgaya movement (Shiva, 1986:42).

In the mid-1980s the women's movement encountered several challenges. The challenges fragmented the broad perceptions of unity that had underwritten notions of sisterhood and political alliances with low castes and the poor. They demonstrated how fragile was the

collectivity based on gender politics and how vulnerable it was to challenges of community, class and caste interests.

Many women's movements have been active in fighting against the violence against women as well as caste, class, ethnic and other forms of social discrimination. The strength and power of these movements has often been their focus on local and personal concerns, the nature of their alliances with larger structures, and linking their personal lives and experiences with their political struggles for change. Despite such mobilisation of women's power, it is obvious that prejudices and intolerance against women continue to exist in our society.

The developments of many women's movements have often been supported by like-minded NGOs. In their experience in alleviating poverty and bringing about social justice, they identified women to be one of the most vulnerable groups in society. In India, particularly from the 1970s, many NGOs who, far from involving themselves in charitable services and social services of education, health and income generation activities, opted for social action. They could win the support of women in this regard because of their closeness to people, flexible nature, non-bureaucratic functioning, immediate intervention and bottom up approach (Sarkar, 2001:71). They were involved in education, conscientisation and mobilisation of marginalised groups and the oppressed poor (Dhanagare, 1993:154). They perceived that women's lives were closely linked to with the problems of agricultural and industrial workers, scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. (Sharma, 1996:30)

1.2 Aim of the Research Paper

This research paper analyses the development of one such relatively new women's movement, the Vaigai Women Rights Movement (hereafter called as VWRM), located in the Southern Indian State of Tamil Nadu. The paper studies the problems confronted by the women and the organisation, the nature of their alliances and networks, and the ways

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and means by which the problems experienced by these women have been challenged. It is hoped that this analysis will contribute to the understanding of women's mobilisation and empowerment and come up with suggestions to strengthen the movement.

The VWRM emerged in the rural area of Tamil Nadu, South India, a region where caste and class stratification has compounded the biases against poor women. This movement has benefited the support of the Sivagangai Multipurpose Social Service Society (henceforth called as SMSSS), a church-based NGO, which operates within a secular framework and works with the marginalised and the poor since 1985.

1.3 Guiding Hypotheses

- Mobilisation and collective action on critical local concerns result in the empowerment of the individuals involved as well as the movement as a whole.
- The economic and political demands of the women's movements are linked to the problems women experience in their personal lives.
- Empowering poor women results in the empowerment of the members of the household and the community at large.
- Joining together with other social movements, NGOs and network working for common concern or issue result in greater mobilisation and negotiating power.

1.4 Methodology

The development and potential of the VWRM has been viewed in the context of how movements are empowered through collective action of its members. This involves an understanding of the different issues that need to be taken in the process of the different struggles that the members are engaged in. In order to develop this perspective, the research paper initially studies the available theoretical literature on social movements and mobilisation process. On the basis of this, a theoretical framework of analysis is developed which guides the subsequent study.

The research paper then analyses the actual experience of the VWRM over a period of 15 years from 1985 till the present. Attention is given to how local struggles have contributed to the process of organising and strengthening of the women members. The support developed with and received from sympathetic and like-minded networks and movements is also studied. The problems experienced by the women and how they managed to overcome some of them is also highlighted.

This includes the case studies of individual women who have been active in the process of building up the VWRM. Some 15 women occupying key positions in the movement, those who were the instruments for the emergence of the movement and still continue to be members in it, were interviewed from 4th to 22nd August, 2001 with regard to their experiences and perspectives on how the movement has empowered themselves and the women at large. Based on this analysis conclusion is drawn with regard to future thrust and potential of the movements.

The methodology of the research study is both historical and of an anthropological nature. The paper looks at the historical development of the movement, which includes a period of two years when I was personally involved in supporting it. In this sense, I was able to provide insights I had gained from my past experience. At the same time the interviews with individual women involved in the movement provides an insight into the ways in which women have personally participated in the movement.

1.5 Sources of Data

The study is based on both *secondary* and *primary* data.
- The *secondary* data consists largely of published and grey materials including evaluation reports, policy papers, and annual reports of the SMSSS and relevant literature from the library for the theoretical section.
- The *primary* data is from two sources.

> The *first* is my personal experience during the period when I have been working in the SMSSS since 1998 in my capacity as deputy director. As I have been involved in supporting the people's movement, I have been able to gain anthropological insights into the whole process of the women's movement.

> The *second* primary source is the interviews. These were conducted with 15 women who have been active in the process of building up the VWRM. These discussions were dealt with the perceptions and historical involvement of the VWRM. In the course of these discussions the following issues were covered:

1. *The economic, social and political benefits of the VWRM members and their family.*
2. *The problems with participation in the VWRM.*
3. *The significance of the VWRM in comparison with other movements.*
4. *The possibilities for strengthening the movements.*
5. *The favourable relationship, alliances and networks with other movements.*
6. *The hindrances in evolving the movement exclusively for women.*
7. *The goals and objectives, and their relevance.*

1.6 Scope and Limitations of the Research Paper

The research paper is a contribution to understand the dynamics of social movements and in particular women's movements in contemporary India. Based on the life experiences of the women it shows the problems and the potential of political mobilisation. It provides a framework for the mobilisation and empowerment of women as well as the potential of NGOs to support this process.

The study is limited by the time framework, as well as by the fact that it is a single movement, which is being analysed. Again the interviews reflect the ideas of only a small group of women, and cannot be considered to be representative in all cases. Thus, it might be difficult to generalise or theorise on the basis of this study.

1.7 Organisation of the Paper

This research paper is divided into four chapters. After the general introduction, the first chapter introduces the nature of the research study, aim, background information, methodology and sources of data of the study. The second chapter is on the theoretical study on the potentials and limitations of the social mobilisation theories to get to know why and how movements emerge and how they are sustained. The third chapter deals with the empirical study of the VWRM to learn the analysis, social context, objectivity, history, success and failures of this movement. This method is both descriptive and analytical. The last chapter ends with the conclusions and outlining recommendations for future perspectives for social movements in general and in particular to the VWRM nurtured by the SMSSS.

CHAPTER -TWO

Potentials and Limitations of Social Mobilisation Theories

2.1 Introduction

There are two aspects in understanding the nature and potential of social movements to bring about structural and political change in society. The first aspect concerns the reasons as to 'why' social movements emerge. The second aspect concerns 'how' such movements can be strengthened and what sort of support structures can help this process. In line with this need, this chapter examines selected theories of social movements and mobilisation process to understand the main causes and forms of social mobilisation.

It then studies the different aspects involved in the process of mobilisation and the links between different actors and movements in this process. As the VWRM is a women's movement in India attention is also given to the relevance of these theories to India as well as the gender implications in these theories. Since the scope is limited by the particular perspective, that is to know as why and how movements have emerged and how they are sustained and to learn only the concerns of the social movements from the point of view of their origin, I do not attempt here to give a detailed sociological analysis of such theories. Therefore, in this chapter, I shall explain the selected theories of social movements. At the end of this chapter, I shall bring out the aspect of mobilisation process and the way to strengthen the social movements.

2.2 Definitions and Relevant theories of Social Movements

The root word for movement seems to be the Latin word '*Movimentum*' or the French word '*Mouvoir*' which means to move, stir or impel. Another source could be found in a different but obsolete term to denote certain 'liberal' 'innovatory' or 'progressive' parties or functions as in '*parti du mouvement*' or 'movement party' in early nineteenth century Britain (Wilkinson, 1971: 11)

Most classical definitions of social movements underscore the political basis of collective action. They focus on the need to change established social relations and create a new order. For example: Ron Eyerman (1991:16) speaking for Marxists opines: 'Marxist have tended to view social movements with expectation and anticipation, signs of an impending collapse of an existing capitalist order and as the potential source of its replacement by socialism. Movements, for Marxists, were thus taken as collective expressions of discontent and potential bases for social change'. Charles Tilly (1985:735) says: 'The proper analogy to social movements is neither a party nor a union but a political campaign. What we call social movements actually consists in a series of demands or challenges to power-holders in the name of a social category that lacks an established political position'.

Further, we can see few other definitions that renew the same spirit, namely, Bert Klandermans (1991:34) words it thus: 'Social movements create a new political reality to which the polity has no immediate answer either in terms of repression or in terms of reform. The longer this indeterminate situation continues the longer the movement lasts. Sometimes this new reality is created by a tactical innovation'. Sidney Tarrow (1994:7) comments: 'when we look at the amount of collective action in Europe today, there is little doubt that it has grown since the 1960s. First the student and the anti-war movements of the 60s, then the women's and environmental movements of the 1970s, then the enormously powerful peace movement of the 1980s involved hundreds of thousands of Europeans in sustained sequences of contentious direct action with authorities, elites and opponents which, incidentally, is my definition of social movements'.

Many of the theories of social movements have dealt with the roots and causes for such movements, the models of collective action, and the importance of resources and identity in social mobilisation. Among the various theories of social movements, four main types of theories of social movements can be identified from the elaborate study. These include:

(a) Systemic Theory

(b) Resource Mobilisation Theory

(c) Identity Oriented Theory

(d) Political Process Theory.

As each of these theories contain elements which are of importance in analysing social movements, the section below will briefly identify their main features.

2.2.1 Systemic Theory

Systemic Theory locates the causative forces of the social movements in social structures. It has three different versions, namely: mass society, status inconsistency and collective behaviour. Mass society version of systemic theory attributes the emergence of the social movements to the collective attempts of the alienated, atomised and anxiety-filled individuals in the wake of modernity, urbanisation and secularisation in order to vent their feelings of frustration. According to the status inconsistency paradigm, collective protest takes place primarily because of the discrepancy between a person's rankings on a variety of status dimensions, i.e. education, income and occupation. The cumulative subjective tensions in one way or the other necessitate collective protests leading to the emergence of the movements.

Of the three, collective behaviour model was more prominent till late 1960s. This model says social movements originate not primarily because of the presence of dislocated and disgruntled individuals and the discrepancy in one's status but are generally due to social strains. For Smelser (1966:48), one of the main exponents of this model, 'some form of strain must be present if an episode of collective behaviour is to occur. The more severe the strain, the more likely is such an episode to appear'. The social strains can be caused by any new ideas, technologies, procedures, group migration and intrusions that have a disruptive and disturbing effect (Gusfield 1970:9). Here collective behaviour is seen and

interpreted through the prism of the functionalist sociological tradition will shed more light on the systemic theory.

Social movements, according to functionalism, are external agencies, which emerge at any point of these processes. Structural differentiation is a reality of any given society. It means that a society is made up of different but harmoniously organised units, which when maintaining equilibrium ensures the normal functioning of the society. However, it is also part of the organisational dynamics of a society that with the means of increasing specialisation, new and efficient units are introduced for a maximum control over the environment. This causes further differentiation in the structure, leading at times to the deprivation of some particular unit. Deprivation gives rise to imbalance in the equilibrium of the society, which is called disintegration. As the society is capable of reorganising itself in the face of disintegration, a process of reintegration follows.

Durkheim presents the vision of a society continuously strained by forces of integration and disintegration and derives the models of three kinds of collective action, which may be called routine, anomic and restorative collective action (Panda and Sharma, 1996:113). At the end of this process, the society adapts the deprived units to it and consequently achieves equilibrium again. Any effort from outside to effect changes in the society at any stage of this process disrupts the inherent capacity of the society to change itself by itself. According to functionalism, Social movements are external agencies, which emerge at any point of this process, and therefore they are basically disruptive in nature. Oommen, (1990:29) succinctly summarises the perspective of functionalism thus:

> Emergence of specialised or autonomous units, elaboration of division of labour and intensification of role specialisation may release considerable stresses and strains in the system rendering one or another social category socially deprived, which in turn inspire movements.

Understood in this way, the emergence of the movements is perceived as a temporary aberration, primarily pathological, and incapable of effecting any long-term change in the

society. Hence Oommen (1990:29) describes the nature of social movements from the point of view of functionalism thus:

> In this tradition, then, movements are viewed as necessary accompaniments of the tension released by structural differentiation and movement manipulation as a tension-management mechanism by specialised role incumbents.

Here, movements, in spite of being temporally disruptive, are perceived to be essentially adaptive mechanic social movements in a rapidly changing society.

Since the entire analysis is done from the perspective of classes in the society, the whole process of social change was reduced to fit into the frame of class struggle. In the same vein, class struggle was projected to be the only means by which struggle changes can be realised. Therefore, a movement is judged in terms of its class character: what classes are involved and the interest of which class predominates the movement? Any movement that does not explicitly reflect this class struggle cannot be called a movement. This means that movements centred on the issues of ethnicity, nationality and occupation are not really movements.

2.2.2 Resource Mobilisation Theory

Resource Mobilisation Theory attempts to establish how together with the constraints in the structures, perceived as deprivation, a great deal of strategic activities need to be manoeuvred for the coming up of movements. This is due to the dissatisfaction with the theoretical centrality assigned to the frustration or grievances of the collectively of actors, for the emergence of social movements. That is why Touraine (1985: 771) calls it as 'strategic school'. John D. McCarthy, Mayer N.Zald, Adrian Aveni, Joseph C. Jenkins, Charles Perrow and Antony Obershall are the main advocates of this model.

Resource Mobilisation Theory, as constructed by Jenkins and Perrow (1977: 266), assumes that grievances are relatively constant and pervasive and therefore they alone cannot account for the emergence of the movements. Rather, the elements that give rise to insurgence is ' the amount of social resources available to unorganised but aggrieved groups, making it possible to launch an organised demand for change (Jenkins and Perrow, 1977:250). One of the fundamental assumptions of this theory is that the poor or the aggrieved population are politically powerless and inexperienced, and lack adequate material and organisational resources to initiate and carry on a movement (Cohen, 1985:675) [3]. They need resources from external sources to do so. Hence Oberschall (1973: 214) opines that:

> One must realise that a negatively privileged minority is in a poor position
> to initiate a social protest movement through its own efforts alone.

Jenkins and Perrow (1977:251) bring out the importance of the external resources saying that 'collective action is rarely a viable option because of lack of resources and the threat of repression'. And they continue to affirm that ' when deprived groups do mobilise, it is due to the interjection of external resources'. On a par with the availability of resources in terms of recruitment networks, the costs and benefits of participation, funding and the availability of professionals the theorists of the resource mobilisation theory insist on the effective and creative utilisation of the pre-existing native organisations for the rise and enhancement of the movements. Local level social institutions such as neighbourhood

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[3] For Jean L. Cohen, the following are the salient characteristics of the resource mobilisation theory: (1) Social movements must be understood in terms of conflict model of collective action; (2) There is no fundamental difference between institutional and non-institutional collective action; (3) Both entail conflicts of interest built into institutionalised power relations; (4) Collective action involves the rational pursuit of interest by groups; (5) Goals and grievances are permanent products of power relations and can not account for the formation of movements; (6) This depends instead on changes in resources, organisations and opportunities for collective action; (7) Success is evidenced by the recognition of the group as a political actor or by increased material benefits; (8) Mobilisation involves large-scale, special purpose, bureaucratic, formal organisations.

clubs, union locals and community churches can be counted as many such organisations (Zirakzadeh, 1997: 13)[4].

McAdam (1982:23) is of the opinion that those social movements' dependence on external elite group will lead in the long run to co-optation of the movements and to the loss of insurgency energy. Yet, in spite of these reservations, resource mobilisation theory interests us to a certain degree, in the context of this research, as it suggests that the pre-existing network of institutions should be tapped for the emergence and the development of the social movements. My concern is also that the pre-existing socio-cultural potentialities have to be selectively and creatively employed to sustain and advance the interest of the social movement, if a theory of the social movement is to take the actors seriously.

2.2.3 Identity-Oriented Theory

The main exponents of Identity Oriented Theory in Western Europe are Melucci, Touraine and Offe (1985: 817). Let me examine the thoughts of Melucci here as he had made a breakthrough in the search for a relatively more suitable theory of the social movements, with innovative and perceptive concepts.

Melucci, being dissatisfied with the existing theories, embarks on the task of constructing an alternative theory of the social movements in reference to the identity of the actors involved. This new endeavour is premised on the innovative concept of 'complex society', which sheds more light on his identity theory itself. 'Complex society' is a description given to the present society by Melucci (1997: 45). It is characterised by a shift in accent from material production to the 'production of signs and social relations'. 'Complex societies are networks of high-density information and are dependent upon a

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[4] Cyrus E. Zirakzadeh goes to the extent of labelling this approach as 'indigenous-community approach'. Though he distinguishes indigenous-community approach from resource mobilisation approach, in a broader sense the latter approach is accommodative of the former. That is why I do not treat the indigenous-community approach as a separate tradition.

degree of autonomy for their constituent elements'. In complex societies power is anonymous, neutral (Melucci 1997: 88). It is dispersed, invisible and 'hides itself behind the administrative or organisational procedures or the 'show-business' aspect of politics.

The main concern of Melucci is that the new analytical concept proposed by him should accommodate the heterogeneity of the social movements and explain how that heterogeneity is sustained. In his opinion, the concept of 'collective identity' accomplishes this mission. In general, almost every model of collective action is centred on the theory of 'expectations'[5]. Hence he argues, 'any theory of collective action which incorporates the concept of expectations presupposes a theory of identity' (Melucci 1997:32). For, 'expectations are constructed and compared with reality only by actors who are capable of defining themselves and the field of their action'. The result of this process of constructing an action system is collective identity as he describes thus:

> Collective identity is an interactive and shared definition produced by several interacting individuals who are concerned with the orientations of their action as well as the field or opportunities in which their action takes places (Melucci 1997: 34).

To put in different terms, collective identity is an unfinished end product of the process in which the actors constantly interact among themselves to establish a common orientation for their action in dialogue with opportunities and constraints, presented by the social milieu in which they operate. Nevertheless, this identity is not static and frozen. It cannot be constructed once and for all and left to fend for itself. Rather, it has to be nurtured, adapted and altered. It means that the construction of collective identity is a process. This process embodies three closely interwoven and complex components such as 'formulating cognitive frameworks concerning the goals, means and the environment of action, activating relationships among the actors, who communicate, negotiate and make

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[5] The theory of expectation means that every model of collective action, i.e., rise and fall, rising expectations, relative deprivation, downward mobility and status inconsistency, is built upon the dynamics of one's previous experience or on a comparison with other groups. Based on such experiences and comparisons they construct their own expectations.

decisions, and making emotional investments, which enable individuals to recognise themselves in each other'. Unlike the description of collective action as a 'given' and 'unified empirical datum', collective action viewed in terms of 'collective identity', is a product of continual tensions, negotiations and cognitive processes. Hence Melucci (1997: 26) stresses that collective action is situated within a 'multi-polar action system'.

2.2.4 Political Process Theory

As the very name suggests, every social movement, according to McAdam, is a political phenomenon in which politics is understood as the exercise of power among competing interests. This 'represents a continuous process, from generation to decline, rather than a discrete series of development stages' (McAdam 1999: 36). This process model indicates three important variables, which play a decisive and irrefutable role in the emergence and the life course of the movements: political opportunity, organisational strength and insurgent consciousness. Political opportunity refers to a salutary ambience for the birth and functioning of a movement. It is caused by 'any event or broad social process that serves to undermine the calculations and assumptions on which the political establishment is structured' (McAdam, 1999: 41)[6]. When this happens, a shift in political opportunity is measured in three possible forms: political instability, enhanced political positions for movements and ideological openness. All three forms of political opportunity contribute in their own way to the emergence and life course of the movements.

Organisational strength is the second component of the political process theory. Organisational networking is in itself a power in a social movement. It integrates the otherwise isolated individuals into a homogeneous interest group and binds them with a bond of solidarity into a relational network. It creates leaders who can articulate the

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[6] For McAdam, the event or process that can cause alteration in the political environment is, for example, wars, industrialisation, international political realignments, prolonged unemployment, and widespread demographic changes.

issues, goals and strategies. It provides intra-group communication to nurture and consolidate existing solidarity and to efficiently and effectively propagate the vision and the message of the group. It entertains among its members a sense of bearing responsibility for others as the source of motivation for action. For McAdam (1999: 48), the pre-existing native organisations of the society become revitalised and gain momentum in the environment of increased political opportunities. Thus organisational strength, even feeding on pre-existing structures, is one of the vital nerves of the movement.

The third and the most important constitutive unit of the political process model is 'insurgent consciousness'. The other two units, - expanded political opportunities and increased organisational strength - characterised by McAdam as 'structural conductivity', are necessary but insufficient for the emergence and functioning of the movement. Drawing on McAdam's view of insurgent consciousness, Smith (1991:62)) describes the same thus:

> Essentially, insurgent consciousness is a collective state of understanding, which recognises that social change is both imperative and viable. It combines the pressing and necessity for social change to produce decisive actions to effect change....Insurgent consciousness is not simply a rational, self-interested calculation, but an experience that involves the human mind, will, and emotion. Insurgent consciousness entails a mental awareness and reasoned evaluation; it involves a choice, a decision, a commitment; and it entails an emotional involvement, a sense of anger or moral outrage.

McAdam contends that insurgent consciousness informed by moral perspective, transforms passive grievances into active grievances. Passive grievances, for McAdam (1999:51), are the grievances resulting from structural injustices and are generally believed to be unchangeable or self-changing. Though they are real and felt injuries; they do not generate social movements. When passive grievances are converted into active ones, meaning that the grievances reach a stage where they begin to mobilise the sufferers into collective action to root out the causes of grievances, then social movements begin to

emerge. But the transformation of passive grievances into active ones take place when the existing situation is interpreted from a particular interpretive frame leading to insurgent consciousness.

2.3 Social Movement theories and their Relevance to the Indian Context

While the theories discussed above might have relevance in a Western context, the movements in many developing countries, including India, have witnessed a broader basis for collective action and social mobilisation. Women's and ecological movements, for example, are not merely the challenges of oppressive cultures. Equally important, women's movements demand their due share in the political and public domain. Ecological movements vehemently criticise the developmental models adopted by the State, and thus the economic policies of the government in general. Different movements, spearheaded by the minority groups, compete with each other to occupy thus far denied political space in order to affirm their political rights. Further, the emergence of social movements in India is directly related to the masses' loss of hope in the State because the State has failed to fulfil its promises of building a just and egalitarian society (Desrochers, 1991: 11, Ghosh, 1989: 36, Kothari, 1990: 233).

Understood thus, every new social movement is necessarily also a political project. Thus, though culture plays a leading role in the formation of a movement, politics and economics play an important role in the functioning of the movement. Therefore it is arbitrary, says Chandoke[7], to categorise the new social movements exclusively either in terms of culture or politics. In many movements, the primary concern is not merely the politics of identity but that of survival coupled with identity (Mayer, 1991: 105). In many women's movements of the developing world divorce and abortions are not primary issues. For example, in India different women's movements are forging together to secure 33% of parliamentary seats for women together with many demands on cultural and

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[7] The culture-centric approach is arbitrary in two senses. First, because it denies the traditional struggle for the status of social movements; the very watertight distinction between the cultural and the political does

economic domains. The dalit and tribal movements in India are acquiring more and more a political character. Therefore we cannot reduce the social movements just to cultural movements.

Having analysed the different attempts made by the Indian sociological tradition to conceptualise the social movements on Indian soil, Omvedt (1998:112) comments that they lack the material rootage for the social movements. That is why, on her part, she creatively blends the identity paradigm with the economic base and suggests a new 'mixed' interactive frame to conceptualise social movements. She questions the plausibility of the restricted economic assumptions of the classical Marxist paradigm and then enlarges it to include in its domain all those cultural productive labour forces and powers which were as yet outside its central stage. Further, she brings to light the links between such labour powers and their identities.

To conclude this section of social movements, it is clear from Melucci's identity theory, McAdam's political process theory, and Omvedt's insistence on the economic rootage of the social movements that the phenomena of social movements on Indian soil are very complex. The socio-cultural, political and economic determinants are intricately linked in the emergence and the functioning of the social movements. No one can construct fitting analytical concepts of such movements at the cost of any of these factors. Reiterating this view, in a search for reconstructing the theory of social movements in India, Panda and Sharma (1993:25) assert:

> A comprehensive theory of these movements needs to incorporate the cultural totality and the perspective of the actor's identity. In this respect, a combination of the traditional sociological wisdom and the emerging theory of identity-orientation should be welded into a single theoretical system to yield an adequate theory of contemporary social movements.

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not hold water. Second, it pays attention to one aspect of the movement and constructs the identity o f the movement only on that aspect.

Thus, our research for a better theoretical foundation for the social movements suggests that it should accommodate the emerging identity-centred issues with the conventional political paradigm, with a sufficient accent on class struggle. Having seen the selected theories of social movements and their relevance in India, let us see further here, as how the process of mobilisation is strengthened in the social movements developed in this context, in the following section.

2.4 Mobilisation Process and the Strengthening of Social Movements

I have indicated earlier that seeing the injustices in the socio-economic, political and religio-cultural systems in the Indian society several NGOs are involved in the process of organising people at the grassroots level. There are thousands of such people's movements at present in India. These people's movements are very much involved and dynamic at the grassroots level as well as at the inter-village levels to transform the unjust social system. They are in the line of social action. In the first part of this chapter we saw the reasons as why social movements emerged and the aspects concerned their influence in the movement formation. Here, in this section, let us see as how such movements can be strengthened and what sort of support structures can be adopted in this process of mobilisation.

The major step in the movement building is the mobilisation process of a social movement. The Resource Mobilisation Theory proposed by John D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald has been critically studied by several social scientists who have contributed to its understanding in several ways and have even suggested modifications to make it more relevant.

Jenkins (1977:266) emphasised the continuities between movement and institutionalised actions, the rationality of movement actors, the strategic problems confronted by

movements and the role of movements as agencies for social change. In specific, he argues that:

♦ *movement actions are rational, adaptive responses to the costs and rewards of different lines of action,*

♦ *the basic goals of movements are defined by conflicts of interest built into institutionalised power relations,*

♦ *the grievances generated by such conflicts are sufficiently ubiquitous that the formation and mobilisation of movement depend on changes in the resources , group organisations and opportunities for collective action,*

♦ *centralised, formally structured movement organisations are more typical of modern Social movements and more effective at mobilising resources and mounting sustained challenges than decentralised , informal movement structures,*

♦ *the success of movements is largely determined by strategic factors and the political processes in which they become enmeshed'.*

Jenkin's summary brings out three important dimensions of a mobilisation process through organisational forms:

     ❑ *Consensus mobilisation*

     ❑ *Action mobilisation*

     ❑ *Political mobilisation*

2.4.1 Consensus Mobilisation

Social movement activists try to persuade people to believe in their version of the world. Individuals in a society behave within a perceived reality. They perceive the different actors in a social conflict, the actors' stance on relevant issues and how rewarding support for these actors may be. Social reality, being complex, allows different interpretations of what is happening. The same situation can produce a variety of interpretations by another. In such cases, actors try to persuade individuals to take their side (Jenkins, 1977:278).

Government agencies, competing challengers, movement and counter movement organisations all contend for the hearts and minds of people. It is in this context that consensus mobilisation becomes an important step towards the direction of movement formation.

Attempts to spread the views of a social actor among various sectors of the population have been called consensus mobilisation. It involves:

  a) *Collective good,*

  b) *A movement strategy*

  c) *Confrontation with the opponent*

  d) *Results achieved.*

In this context we must keep in mind that neither collective goods nor types of action are fixed entities. They keep changing and therefore this requires renewed consensus mobilisation. Secondly, consensus mobilisation takes place only in the interaction of forces and not in a vacuum. Collective goods and actions are often controversial. Opponents, counter movements and rival organisations counter the arguments of Social movements. Such interaction can take several shapes: paper war, campaigns, etc., but the degree of success with which consensus is mobilised around the collective goods can be measured by the extent to which these goods are known and valued. Whether people value a collective good or not depends on the extent to which consensus mobilisation succeeded in making them believe that this good is instrumental for valued social changes (Klandermans, 1984:586).

Building up the credibility of the movement in the public sphere is a kind of litmus test function towards consensus mobilisation. It includes the expertise of movement leaders and intellectuals, and sacrifices made by the movement participants and cadres for the cause of the movement. Enlisting attractive and prestigious person to speak on behalf of the movement is another major tactic used. This strategy can be very effective, especially if the persuasive message is not in the communicator's best interest.

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2.4.2 Action Mobilisation

At the very outset we remind ourselves once again that the distinction we point out between consensus and action mobilisation is for heuristic reasons and to understand them with clarity. They are not watertight compartments. In such a spirit we can see now the relationship and the differences between consensus and action mobilisation.

Klandermans (1984: 586) points out, by making the distinction between consensus and action mobilisation we separate the processes of convincing and activating. Action mobilisation is the process by which an organisation in a social movement calls up people to participate. Ideally, social movement organisations will take a variety of approaches , appealing both to collective and to social and reward motives. A mobilising organisation will try to make the benefits of participation and the loss of non-participation as high as possible, and the costs of participation and the benefits of non-participation as low as possible. There are various ways of doing this:

- ❖ *Choosing the type of action*
- ❖ *Choosing a scene*
- ❖ *Influencing the motives to participate.*

This must be viewed in the contest of manoeuvre by the opponent and external events, which may influence the costs and benefits of participation. The degree of success achieved in an action-mobilisation campaign can be read from the willingness to take action.

A movement can choose among several types of action, from moderate to militant. With its choice of type of action, a movement can determine to a large extent the costs and benefits of participation (Klandermans, 1984:588). A movement can fight where it is strongest, that is, in sectors of society with strong movement networks where it can organise many people. Resource mobilisation theory has shown that people are more

easily mobilised in such sectors. The premise here is that this is probably because a more favourable cost-benefit ratio can be created in such sectors.

Participation in movement activities denotes several types of activities, ranging from signing a petition, marching in the streets, collective protest, etc., to sabotage. The involvement may be part-time, one-time to full-time activity. The intensity as well as the modality of participation changes according to different interactive forces.

2.4.3 Political Mobilisation

Social movements directly interact with the political system operative in their context and try to influence the decision-making process in various ways in order to enact new laws or conditions that would bring about the desired goal of the movement. This is what we call political mobilisation.

In spite of the close connection of social movements with political system, only from 1980s more systematic studies have been made on this aspect. Surveying the matter we find that political mobilisation has six elements in it: the internationalisation of protest, protest as an important device, political opportunity structure, alliance and conflict systems, cycles of protest and political effectiveness (McAdam, 1999: 48).

Several successful social movements get politicised so much that they eventually become a separate political party. Thus getting absorbed into a political system may range from the efforts of influencing the governing of modern society, thereby struggling to be recognised as legitimate political behaviour to those of getting drawn into accepted political channels and forced to redefine their conflict and their issues in conventional terms (Klandermans, 1984: 586).

Practically all the labour movements have been absorbed into political parties or political organisations. The environmental movements have also turned out to be political party

system - the green parties. But once they enter the arena of political parties they also tend to fragment on the lines of ideological stands of left, right and centrist tendencies.

2.5 The Gender Dimensions in the Theories of Social Movements and Mobilisation Process

The discussions so far on the theories of social movements and means of mobilisation process have been important in highlighting the potential of social movements to bring about structural and political change in the society. However, most of the theories have focussed on power struggles in the so-called public realm, with little attention being paid to power relations between men and women, the latter being considered to be in the more private realm. This lack of gender sensitivity implied that often issues such as discrimination against women, the violence that is experienced by many in terms of rape and sexual abuse, as well as different forms of social humiliation experienced by women were not taken on board in these theories and movements. Therefore, while these theories are valuable in general in understanding the mobilisation process they do not contribute to the understanding of empowerment of women as a particular marginalised category in society.

It is in this context that several feminists and women's movements have discussed strategies of social mobilisation that focus on women's rights and dignity. A central message in these strategies is that the "personal is political" and that activists working on social movements should not separate their political actions from their personal lives and commitments. Autonomous women's organisations are often seen as an important means of encouraging women to build up their strength as women in a context where generally men dominate the leadership of both organisation and movements.

2.6 Concluding Observations

In this chapter we have seen the prominent theories of social movements and the mobilisation process through which the movements have come up. The contentious forms of collective actions are different from market relations, lobbying, or representative politics because they bring ordinary people into confrontation with opponents, elites or authorities. They have power because they challenge power holders, produce solidarities. They are meaningful within particular population groups, situations, and national cultures.

In particular, we have seen in the theories of social movements and mobilisation process that bringing people together in sustained interaction with opponents requires a social solutions, aggregating people with different demands and identities and in different locations in concerted campaigns of collective action. This solution involves, first, mounting collective challenges; second, drawing on social networks, common purposes, and cultural frameworks; and, third, building solidarity through connective structures and collective identities to sustain collective action. These are the main processes of social movements.

The conventional and classical theories of social movements, though they provide very important insights into the process and forms of social mobilisation, they often fail to theoretically concentrate on the specific gender problems that permeated these movements. Not examining the practical aspect of the social movement theories and mobilisation process in relation to a social movement may question the merits and validity of the theories themselves. Therefore, the following chapter will analyse the VWRM from this perspective.

CHAPTER – THREE

The Vaigai Women Rights Movement – A Case Study and Analysis

3.1 Introduction

This chapter deals with the development of the VWRM. It examines the strategies adopted by the movement, the various activities it has pursued, the networks and alliances that has strengthened it. In doing so the chapter highlights the problems experienced by the women themselves, both in their personal and public lives, as well as the ways in which the movement has contributed to their empowerment. The role of NGOs to help this process is provided by considering the work done by the SMSSS, an NGO working in this region.

3.2 Vital Information on the SMSSS and the VWRM

Since its origin in 1985, the NGO, the Sivagangai Multipurpose Social Service Society (SMSSS) has been involved in initiating and supporting different grassroots people's organisations. These different organisations were networked in early 1990s into unit level federation, union level federation and district level federation. Thus Agricultural Labourers Development Movement, Vaigai Women Rights Movement and Fish-workers Development Movement came into existence since 1991.

The SMSSS has been operating largely in the two civil districts namely Ramanathapuram and Sivagangai, in Tamil Nadu, India. These districts are drought prone and face an uncertain rainfall. There are no perennial rivers. Rain-fed tanks are the only source for irrigation. Drinking water problem is acute in all places of these districts. Due to drought,

the poor migrate to the cities for food and employment. Further the unscrupulous moneylenders and the middlemen exploit the poor. The literacy rate is 48.45%.

The social relationship of caste with the 'Varnasharama Dharma'[8] of the Indian social system is quite remarkable and deep-rooted in these districts. Caste-wise the dwellings have been divided in the villages and this system influence the economic, political and religious activities. The high caste that constitutes 32.8% of the total population enjoys the monopoly of the decision making process almost on all matters in a village. The low caste 'Harijans[9]' constitute nearly 38% of the total population. These people have no power or assets. In several places, the clashes arise when the Harijans fight for their rights against their oppression. Few areas, like Devakottai, Kamuthi and Muthukulathur, where there is a growing unrest among the high and low castes, have been declared as trouble prone areas by the government and special security forces are deployed. Government programmes against casteism and untounchability remain only on paper.

The SMSSS is executing people's welfare and developmental projects since 1985. Over the years, it has been serving the people through people's movements. It has been administering three major movements, namely:

1. *Agricultural Labourers Development Movement*

2. *Vaigai Women Rights Movement*

3. *Fish workers Development Movement*

Besides people's movements, the SMSSS had extended help to the needy and the target people through various projects, aided by government or non-governmental funding agencies. The people's development projects are given below:

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[8] Varnasrama-dharma - the system of four spiritual orders and four social orders of life according to Hindu tradition.

[9] Harijans, in India, are individuals who are at the bottom of the caste system. Until the Indian constitution of 1950, Harijans were subject to discrimination and social restrictions. Under the new constitution, the Harijans are recognised as scheduled castes and tribes entitled to educational opportunities and representation in Parliament.

1. *Family Counselling centre*

2. *Functional Vocational Training Programme*

3. *Social Life Education Programme for girls*

4. *Crèche programme for Children*

5. *Relief and Rehabilitation programme for the Sri Lankan Refugees*

6. *Watershed Management programme*

7. *Paddy and Fish co-operatives*

8. *Income generating programme for the poor*

9. *Tuition centres for the school going poor students*

10. *Women Development programmes called 'Mathi'.*

People's Movements in the SMSSS – an overview

S.No	Names of the Movement	Number of Blocks	Number of Groups	Total Members
1.	Agricultural Labourers Development Movement.	09	82	1042
2.	Vaigai Women Rights Movement	16	210	3018
3.	Community Health Movement	04	60	973
4.	Fishworkers Development Movement.	02	85	2539
	Total	31	437	7572

Source: The Annual report of SMSSS 2000-2001.

3.3 Genesis and History of the Vaigai Women Rights Movement

The name **'VAIGAI'** was metaphorically christened to the Women Rights Movement as the name as such stands to denote the river 'Vaigai' which has been intertwined with the lives of the people especially the women, agricultural wage earners, small and marginal

farmers of Ramanathapuram and Sivagangai districts. The other meaning of 'Vai-Gai'[10] is: wherever injustice and oppression takes place against the just interests of marginalised women, the movement will put its stronger arm to free the victims and to safeguard their interests with the support of all. The last three letters of the two districts namely Muga<u>vai</u> (other name of Ramanathapuram) and Sivaga<u>ngai</u> joined together and called as the **Vaigai** Women Rights Movement. Thus the VWRM came into existence on the 15th December 1991.

The key leaders of the VWRM framed byelaws and the same was approved and adopted by the general body. The members of the VWRM have elected the governing body members. In the budding years of women's organisations grassroots level people's organisations thrived in great number and they had been involving in people's welfare activities such as ensuring protected drinking water, proper roads to villages, involving in small savings, rotating the amount of savings among themselves for credit needs etc. As they swell in number, they started networking the people's organisations and fight for their rights. The village level organs had taken up the common issues of the people and just solutions had been attained with the concerted effort of all. The VWRM is the pioneer movement to take up the cause of the target people and to give its voice for the emancipation of women. Further, it collaborates with other movements and takes a lead in all the social action programmes.

3.4 Goals and Objectives of the Vaigai Women Rights Movement

➤ *Goals*

Women, particularly the economically unsound, socially oppressed and politically voiceless ones, organise themselves in groups irrespective of caste, creed and work for establishing a just society where men and women would have equal rights and duties for developing the humanity.

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[10] Source taken from the policy papers of the SMSSS.

➤ *Objectives*

- To liberate the women from socio, economic, cultural and political bondage.

- To empower the women to take up the issues and problems, which affect them, most.

- To organise the women in groups and guide them to grow in village, union, taluk and district level federations.

- To create women leaders and to train them in development dynamics.

- To empower the women and to give awareness education to the general public to resist women oppression in all forms.

- To shatter the cultural forms of oppression which annihilate the humanitarian values.

- To collaborate with the like minded people's movements to attain women liberation.

- To shed off the evil practices against womanhood such as female feticide, infanticide etc.

- To fight against human right violation and to safeguard the rights of individuals.

The VWRM shows genuine interest to follow its own goals and objectives. The members of the movement put into practice the objectives of the movement in their own villages. The practices of widowhood rites, eve teasing, sexual assault on women etc., have considerably decreased in the target villages where the movement is very active and vibrant. The members, besides following the goals and objectives of the movement, educate the non-members about their rights and duties towards women emancipation. The goals and objectives, which had been framed at the birth of the VWRM on 15th December 1991, are kept intact.

3.5 Need for Autonomy for the VWRM

In the beginning, as stated earlier, the people's organisations emerged according to the needs of the people. As the people's groups grew in number, they felt the need to organise the groups according to their occupation and so: Agricultural Labourers Development Movement and Fish-workers Development Movement came into existence. The women, though majority of them are agricultural farmers by occupation, since they had been oppressed a lot on account of their gender difference, did not feel free to associate with the men-folk, because they could not articulate their issues in front of men. The dominance of men in leadership and management of movements forced the women to have a separate movement. So the vibrant women members of the organisation took the decision of having a separate movement for women to cater specifically to the special needs of women from all sections of society. To the question as why the VWRM was started when regional forums like Karpagam, Rupam[11] were there, Michaellammal, a governing body member from Mullikundu replied sharply as follows:

> Oh, that was a great task for us. We could convince the members, the
> director of the SMSSS and others involved. It was a difficult task for us to
> tackle the male animators. They were running the show with the female
> crowd for any meeting. So they thought having a separate movement for
> women would be a risk for their survival. So they persuaded us to be with
> others. In fact, there was a serious conflict within the animators, but in
> course of time it was amicably settled. There is a real and gradual growth
> in every movement now.

3.6.Activities against Discriminations suffered by Women in the VWRM

The VWRM carves out a separate identity through its activities. Largely due to its activities women are respected even in the upper caste dominant villages where some twenty years back the women experienced untold miseries both physically and mentally due to the hegemony of the casteist groups. For all their needs, the women were earlier

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[11] There were five regions in the jurisdiction of the SMSSS for training and other organisational work.
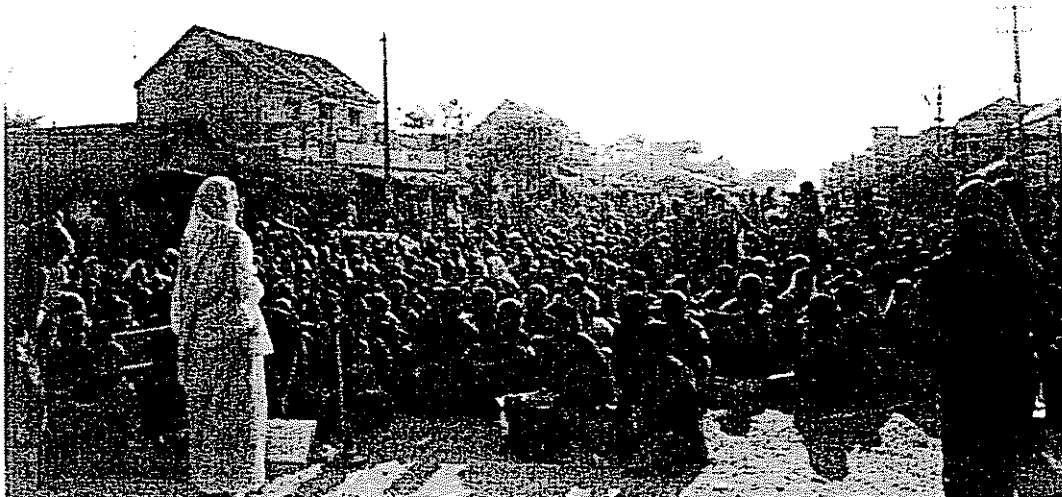Some of the names of such centres were Karpagam and Rupam.

forced to depend on men but now a gradual change in the situation could be witnessed due to the presence and growth of the VWRM. The women in the movement are no more the mere dependent on men rather they show their independence through many ways. Here, I shall bring out some prominent factors presented by the women during the interviews on their activities against discriminations.

◆ *Widowhood and Change of Life*

'Widowhood is a curse' according to the Indian culture. The widows generally are considered as ill ominous human beings. The VWRM has an objective of abolishing the widowhood practice from the society. So, the activists of the VWRM created awareness among its members and made them take a pledge not to practice anything that offends widows greatly. All the members are observing this pledge, and the widows who are in the VWRM live like other women. They wear colour saries, ornaments and flowers at their head similar to other women. In the marriages of movement activists, it is the widows who bless the 'Thali'[12] and give it to the bridegroom in Hindu marriages. Most of the members are also under the opinion that they do not receive dowry[13] for their son's marriages. All these above said activities are a taboo according to the customs prevalent in India.

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[12] Instead of wedding ring, in the Indian tradition, Thali is used as the mark of marriage.

[13] A dowry includes money and other consumables, as well as assets like shares or real estate, given by the bride's family to the groom's family at the time of marriage. Traditionally an upper-caste Hindu custom, the practice has widened to all classes and castes since the beginning of the century. In recent years it has also become common among non-Hindus.

Normally widows do not come to the stage for any function. Photo shows a widow, by name Kalidashiya, addressing the members in Thiruvadanai on the occasion of Women's day, 2000 on 11th April.

♦ *Sexual Intimidation against Women and Increased Commitment*

Perumal, the vice-president of the local Panchayat[14] molested a young widow by name Pappa in the village Gopalapuram, near Sarugani in Ramanathapuram district. This culprit tried many times to make Pappa oblige to his sexual desire but in vain. This made him angry. On the 3rd April 1999, he accused the victim as polygamist and induced the villagers to tie her in the lamppost and did all ignominious deeds like cutting the hair forcefully as the mark of disregard and punishment to her. When heard about this atrocity, the Community Health Movement, a branch of the VWRM, in which the victim is a member, came to the scene and sought the help from other movements and made a dharna[15]in the State highway in order to arrest the culprit and to pay compensation for the victim. As time passed, the members from nearby villages, where the VWRM and Community Health Movement groups function vibrantly, thronged the incident spot and

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[14] The Indian Constitution defines a panchayat as 'an institution of self-government' and provides for panchayats to be constituted in every State at three levels: village, intermediate and district levels.

[15] Dharna means Protest without violence

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extended their un-stinted co-operation and solidarity for the noble cause. Finally, the police gave in to their demands and arrested the culprit and put him behind the bars. A compensation of Rs. 50,000/- was paid to the victim.

As a result of the support extended by the movement to bring the culprit to the book Pappa, already an active member, realised the importance of promoting such struggles in the community. She became a volunteer for the movement, which implied that she was responsible for the needs of a much larger group in her community. She mobilised more people to come together to fight against caste differences and sexual harassment. In this process she was able to overcome some of the reservations from her family and also make more persons feel committed to protecting the rights of all women regardless of caste and class. As noted in her comment:

> My own relatives were telling me not to go for the VWRM meetings because the members were not of my own caste people. My relatives even tried to hinder me not to come for their marriages and other family affairs. I took it as a challenge and now all my relatives and villagers are in the movement again after seeing the wide spread growth.

❖ *Fight Against Humiliation*

It is the culture, which dehumanises the human beings, especially the women. The Indian culture extols women as Goddesses and deities. The life giving rivers, the earth and the mountains are all named after the Goddesses. But in practice, the conditions of the women are far worse. They are considered as mere objects. In many ways, their birthrights are neglected. In this critical scenario, the VWRM strives hard to create an alternative culture wherein both men and women are equal partners, where there is no superiority or inferiority complex between them. It awakens the people about the myths, wrong notions, proverbs, etc., which humiliate women to the core. Mary, the new secretary of the VWRM while replying about the objectives, told as follows:

The objectives have to be modified and sharpened. We are planning to convene the general body meeting in the next summer (2002) to do this. But note the 6th objective which discusses about the egalitarian values and we are very alert about it. Those days are gone, where there were proverbs and sayings against women to suppress us. Now with the slogan of the Tamil poet Bharathi, *"Come out of the kitchen and fight for your right"*, we are trying to rewrite the history. For that new proverbs and sayings are used in seminars, trainings and all programmes to insist the value based activities.

Traditionally, Men and women do not sit equally for any discussion. This photo was taken in a meeting in Vettukulam on 22nd November 2000 when Secours Catholic agency visited from France.

3.7 Empowerment through Relevant Networks and Mobilisation

As noted in first and second chapters, women's struggles in India are often linked to wider social problems. An important one is the way in which women have fought against the caste discrimination prevalent in many regions. A few examples are given here from the experiences of the members of the VWRM.

- *Caste problems and Women's Struggles*

In the village Andakudi, in Sivagangai district, the practice of untouchability was prevalent. According to it, the so-called lower caste men and women were not permitted to wear slippers in the public places and to drink coffee or tea in the teashops like others. Separate earthen tumblers were maintained for the lower caste people. This practice had been in vogue till April 2000. The VWRM while celebrating the women's day on the 19th April 2000 at the block level in Salaigramam brought out this unjust practice and called upon the district administration to wipe out this practice of untouchability from the public places. The local high caste men intimidated the women activists through various ways of threatening not to change this practice, but the women stood firmly and now untouchability is no more practised in public places in that area. The importance of uniting and struggling together to attain this goal is illustrated in the quote by Savariammal of Andakudi who has joined the movement in the year 1996:

> Once an action programme is undertaken collectively, this dynamics starts the process of bringing about a 'we' feeling in the group. We realise that as individuals we are powerless and ineffective. Only when we unite to work together we are able to change the situation. We also realise that it is not enough to act as a single group as my own village Andakudi. We must gather more groups together in block and district levels and build momentum in our actions questioning and challenging the status quo. I am happy today that this unjust practice is eliminated from not only my village but also the villages around due to the collective action of the VWRM.

- *Links to Government Programmes as the Effective Strategy*

The VWRM leaders devised many strategies for achieving consensus mobilisation that led to action and political mobilisation. From 1995, the programme of Tamil Nadu Women Development Corporation, a government organ, was taken as the entry point to start several groups in different villages. About 1336 groups[16] were started, with a component of literacy, numeric and functional education. In order to make the functional

education the literacy programmes more effective, the movement leaders decided to follow new methods. Before stepping inside this government programme, the SMSSS had a very long discussion concerning the modalities that must be followed in keeping up the uniqueness of the VWRM. At last to get the strength and power for the success of the initiatives for the VWRM this task was taken up to strengthen the movement formation. But even now, the identity of the VWRM is kept up to keep a leading mark. Jeya, an activist, from the village Susaiapparpattanam asserts during the interview:

> The growth of membership is an added advantage for us. Earlier the government officials, who used to look for the percentage of the members, now give attention to our demands immediately having a serious thought about our number. Moreover, we used to go for grassroots group training to share our experiences to the new groups. I have been doing this not for any remuneration but out of involvement in the movement. That is the joy that I have got from this work.

Thus there was a mechanism of multiplying the groups launched, towards the process of consensus mobilisation on the new cognitive space created by the SMSSS. This mechanism has brought its due effect. By now there are over 1600 groups formed by the existing groups and the process of consensus mobilisation is being widespread by the educative process said above.

- *Networking and Alliances for Economic, Social and Human Rights Activities*

The VWRM also mobilised its members to fight for their economic, social and human rights. This often meant that they had alliances with other groups in society that were concerned with similar demands. The VWRM demonstrated with other groups, such as Agricultural Labourers Development Movement and Community Health Movement for basic needs like water tanks, potable water, road, electricity, housing and other basic amenities. For example, according to the narration of Rani, an active member from the village Vettukulam:

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[16] The SMSSS annual report – 2001 & 2002.

A joined dharna was conducted on the 20th September 1999, where the members from the VWRM, Agricultural Development Movement and Community Health Movement gathered in front of the collector office of Sivagangai asking for three demands, namely: road facility to Thidackottai, use of the common path against the hegemonic Kallar[17] community in Sahayapuram and a human rights issue in Kalladithidal. Police force came and tried to negotiate with them, as there was law and order problem. But the members showed the prior notice and permission. Then the Personnel Assistant (PA) to the Collector came and tried to persuade them to go. Since they have seen such actions earlier, the members did not move from the place. At last, a delegation was formed to meet the collector in person and got in writing from him to complete all their demands within six months. Of course, two of their demands were fulfilled as promised by the district collector.

- *Involvement in Electoral Offices and Greater Mobilisation*

As far this aspect of Political Mobilisation is concerned, the SMSSS interacts with the executive machinery of the political system in the micro level i.e. Panchayat or semi-macro level i.e. Union level. People take collective action to obtain government programmes to improve their economic condition, to improve their basic amenities like drinking water, roads, bus, electricity and housing. They also aim at certain offices at micro level or semi-macro level such as Panchayat ward member, Panchayat president or Union Councillor. Thus the VWRM touches the political machinery at the micro level in a very effective way and semi-macro level in a rather weak way. Political mobilisation at the macro-level has not born much fruit. Perianayagam, an elected Panchayat vice president, told:

> I am elected now for the second time for this office. During the first election I was not the member of the VWRM. So I do not remember anything solid we have done at that time. Now in the second time, as a member of the VWRM, I myself came to know about my role and used to share with other the VWRM members. I find a vast difference between the two terms.

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[17] One of the hegemonic and dominating castes in Tamil Nadu.

This is an area the VWRM aims to directly interact with the political system operative in their context and find the ways to influence their decision making process in various ways to bring about laws or conditions that could effectively address themselves to the vision objectives of the VWRM. So the strategies of protest potential, political opportunity structure, alliances and conflict systems are very much lacking to become politically effective to bring about the desired changes in the society.

The active members and leaders of the VWRM captured power in local Panchayat bodies and gave a clean and efficient administration to the people. 29 members won the election and became ward members in eight blocks. There are seven Panchayat presidents from the movement and one chairman for Kallal[18] union. When asked from the people about the difference between the members of the VWRM as elected member in Panchayat system, Arockiammal of M.Savariarpattanam said that:

> I could get the feed back from the people and with the collective opinion
> all the developmental projects are done. Four times a year 'Grama Shaba'
> meeting is called for to discuss the need of the Panchayat.

Besides political participation, the VWRM takes effort to politicise people's issues and needs so as to find suitable solutions for them. Collaborating with other like minded movements it takes up the women issues and does necessary advocacy and lobbying for the cause, for example, 33% reservation for women in local bodies, legislative assemblies and parliament.

3.8 Economic and Social Activities of the VWRM

Aside struggle against forms of discrimination, the VWRM is also aware that poor people and poor women in particular have to be mobilised to attain economic and social empowerment. It, therefore, undertakes activities that will enhance the social and

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[18] Name of the union in Sivagangai district.

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economic upliftment in the society. Herein, a few narration of experiences are given below to understand this.

■ *Basic Amenities and Group Consciousness*

Basic amenities include laying roads in the villages and colonies, cleaning of the drainage and construction of drainage, personal and surrounding cleanliness, getting bus facility to their locality and so on. In the interview, Prakasiammal, the president of the VWRM, narrated the list of basic amenities got through the help of the movement in various villages. She produced the following break-up:

* *Laying roads in villages and colonies* -19
* *Got drinking water bore wells and construction of water tanks* -34
* *VWRM members have taken a contract to lay the water pipes* -22
* *Got bus facility* -25
* *Got electric poles, street lights,* -36
* *Personal and surrounding cleanliness* -18
* *Constructed culverts* -07

In Mudukulathur, on the 11th March 2000, the VWRM members were on the march to obtain the basic necessities like electricity, drinking water and allocation of houses for the scheduled caste people.

- *Social Welfare Programmes and Awareness Education*

The movement takes up social activities like promoting inter-caste and inter-religious marriages. It involves in protecting the natural assets and preserving them for the progeny. Since the districts of Ramanathapuram and Sivagangai are drought prone, the movement trains the members and the people to take up environment friendly methods in agriculture, afforestation, etc. The members, addressing the people's needs in long term and short-term perspectives, have taken up drought management and watershed management programmes. Arulammal from Sengudi said that with the help of the VWRM and the local bank they have taken collective activities, she expressed:

> Our eyes were closed, now they are open. Now we know our strength. We have not only learnt the ways to get in touch with the government projects but we are sure now to be aware of the day to day activities of the government and the various departments in the collectorate.

- *Income Generation Programmes and Economic Empowerment*

Small savings and credit facilities for minimum interest are one of the major activities of the VWRM. In the total savings of the SMSSS Rs.7, 831,885/-, the VWRM alone has the savings amount of Rs.3, 215,942/-, which is the major share. From the savings the members get credit loans, for their income generating ventures like: *Charcoal making, Goat rearing, Milch animal rearing, Petty shop and Dairy co-operatives.*

Besides the above purposes, they get considerable amount of loan for agriculture and allied activities. As most of them are small and marginal farmers, they get loans for cultivating paddy, chilly, millets, cotton, etc. Rosali from Ponnakarai village, the vice-secretary of the VWRM, said in the interview that:

Three units of the VWRM used the DWACRA government schemes and handicraft-training courses were conducted in six different villages as part of income generation programmes.

3.9 The Role of the SMSSS in Supporting the VWRM

The SMSSS involves itself in several ways to motivate people to participate in collective action to change the unjust structures and practices. It involves itself in a steady educative process through groups and occasional campaigns on the new meaning system it has created. It propagates its view that certain state of affairs is unacceptable and can be changed and that collective action is the only way to enforce changes. Thus a mobilisation potential is created among the scheduled caste people, the poor women and the oppressed in the society. The VWRM has several songs to enable this mobilisation potential by strongly and emotionally motivating people to have recourse of collective action.

The VWRM creates also networking of the groups in all villages where such conscientisation work is going on. These networks were made with the groups in the same locality around the Panchayat. Thus a Unit Co-ordinating Committee consisting of 5 to 10 villages was formed. Secondly, five to seven units are again federated as Block Co-ordinating Committee at block level. Such networks enable the SMSSS to take actions collectively with a numerical strength. In order to build a social movement, the SMSSS could learn to extend this networking to other similar NGOs.

3.10 Concluding Remarks

In the course of second chapter attempts were made to draw a theoretical framework on the methods of action in a movement formation with the analysis of the same in chapter three. Accordingly, we have seen movement formation as a process wherein there are different stages and factors, which could be understood, only in a dialectical interaction among them. We deal usually with the planned and guided factors but the unplanned and

coinciding factors, which are not systematically treated, have an equal importance in the movement formation.

Social movements, as cognitive praxis, show that a society is continuously being recreated through complex process of interactions and innovations in a particular socio-political and cultural context. Thus, as we have seen, mobilisation of people in a society has to take into account three forms of mobilisation through organisational networks. They are Consensus, Action and Political Mobilisations.

Social movements have become a sort of permanent phenomena happening in every society. Several attempts have been made to understand such a phenomenon in all its multiple dimensions. There are a lot of new measures used by the SMSSS. They have given new meaning as we have seen in the case study of the VWRM. A process of awakening and empowering to see how such a new meaning will liberate the members from several unjust practices, from poverty and from suffering were initiated. The activists and animators by means of training and awareness programmes introduced such a process in every group. Thus the process of consensus mobilisation had a great effect in the SMSSS.

We can further remark that the SMSSS used the dynamics of drama, and street plays and folk songs both in the public and in every group as a strategy. The SMSSS adopted this technique to initiate a group discussion and to educate the people concerning the forces active in their lives to exploit them. Mostly uneducated women came forward to the stages to enact dramas, which gave best results. The leaders of the existing groups used such methods to start new groups. Thus there is a wider conscientisation and consensus mobilisation that is being systematically carried out. Hence we can say that the SMSSS has an effective method of consensus mobilisation among the VWRM members who are oppressed, by creating groups of people ready for collective action. This can be said to be the base for a social movement.

Tamil Nadu is known for its cultural heritage. There are village feasts celebrated in every village, regional and national feasts like Deepawali (festival of light) and Pongal (festival of harvest). The SMSSS also could have celebrated one day every year as the SMSSS or the VWRM day in every village where there are groups. On such occasions the entire village as well as the surroundings can be reached through cultural programmes such as, drama, puppet show etc.

Thus the VWRM attempts to go miles to change the present status quo and to empower the teeming member of womenfolk who experience all forms of oppression in their day to day lives. The SMSSS works for the liberation of the target women who belong to dalit and backward caste communities by associating and collaborating with other like-minded movements in the districts of Ramanathapuram and Sivagangai. Having the social movement theories and case study of the VWRM in mind, now, in the following chapter let me propose the recommendations for the future development of the VWRM in particular and other movements in general who are trying to organise the poor and the oppressed to transform the society with the aim of movement formation.

CHAPTER- FOUR

Conclusions and Recommendations for the Future Perspectives

of People's Movements

'Human Progress is neither automatic nor inevitable. Even a superficial look at history reveals that no social advance rolls in on the wheels of inevitability. Every step towards the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering and struggle; the tireless and passionate concern of dedicated individuals. Without persistent effort, time itself becomes an alley of the insurgent and primitive forces of irrational emotionalism and social destruction. This is no time for apathy or complacency. This is the time for vigorous and positive action'[19].

4.1 Conclusions

The research paper examined the potential of social movements in bettering the lives of poor and vulnerable groups in society with the objective to understand the formation and development of one particular women's movement, the VWRM in South India. We saw that many of the classical and conventional theories of social movements, while providing important insights into the process and forms of social mobilisation, often failed to theoretically take on board the specific gender problems that permeated these movements. We also saw that women's movements often originated from the need of women to move away from male domination. In this process women developed their own agendas, their means of mobilisation, alliances and networks. What was particularly important in all these respects, was that the needs of poor women were often linked to wider problems of social and class discrimination. In addition women's political pursuits were closely linked to their personal lives. Furthermore, the study showed that it was possible for such women's movements to forge links and work with other like-minded NGOs and networks on several economic, social and political concerns.

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[19] This is an extract from a speech delivered by Martin Luther King selected by Coretta Scott King (1984:59).

In particular, from the above study, the following can be concluded:

❑ Collective action and mobilisation of the members of the VWRM were a vital force for their success in unit, block and district level.

❑ The individual empowerment of the women has brought better results to the family, village and the society at large.

❑ The economic and political demands of the women were linked to the problems that they have experienced in their daily lives.

❑ Alliances and networking with other movements and NGOs for common concern have resulted in greater mobilisation and better power and strength of the members and the movement on the whole.

4.2 The Recommendations and Strategies for Strengthening the VWRM

In the light of above analysis and conclusions, it is possible to provide some recommendations, which could both empower poor women and strengthen the VWRM. The recommendations given below reflect the need to further enhance the on-going process of mobilisation.

4.2.1 Mobilisation from Below

This strategy of mobilisation is related to the further strengthening of the process of empowerment and formation of people's movements at the grassroots level This means that the VWRM animators, while animating the people as catalysts or enablers (Lewis, 2001:71), will become part of their lives and struggles. Such a strategy involves direct involvement with and of the people through analysis and awareness building, issue based struggles and organisation, leadership and cadre formation, the people's participation and self-governance. Their solidarity concerns the cause but also the aspirations and hopes, survival and struggles, successes and failures, and the way of life of the people, which is

simple and minimally structured. The life of the activists and animators of the VWRM had to be accommodative and flexible in tune with that of the marginalised.

4.2.2 Strategic Collaboration for Enhancing Resources

The situation of the marginalised women requires urgent attention and the response is undeniable. However, the stark reality is, that the human and material resources and potentials of the movement, not adequate to meet these challenges. There is thus a need to link the movement to other movements and organisations initiated and run by other like-minded priority groups and other NGOs at the micro and macro levels. A wide variety of people's movements at the grassroots women's movements, civil and political rights organisations, various other social and democratic movements, human rights monitoring agencies, social advocacy institutes, training and research centres, all such efforts managed and run by others offer ample scope today for collaborations. This can be done in the jurisdiction of the SMSSS in Sivagangai and Ramanathapuram districts and outside as well.

This strategy has the prospect of producing a multiplier effect in a situation when the resources are limited. It gives a wider space for the VWRM to adopt a more secular approach in a multi-religious and pluri-cultural context (Irudayam: 1999: 149). The intended impact of the involvement can be both extensive and intensive. The minority syndrome in the VWRM and the allegations of fundamentalist traits in the work can be warded off in good measure through the adoption of this strategy.

4.2.3 Building Alliances among Movements

The need for effective and sustained impact on the socio-political system demands that alliances are to be forged among various like-minded people's movements and non-party political formations. The basis for such alliances along with other movements that are nurtured by the SMSSS like Agricultural Movement, Fishworkers Movement,

Community Health Movement and Government sponsored programme, will be the critical issues of common interest or the agenda of demands and action commonly agreed upon by these movements and formations. It can be for short term or long term purposes. Alliances forged as tactical moves in the process of empowerment and struggles, besides focusing on power relations in the social system, also bring in the factor of solidarity among various movements.

4.2.4 Social Advocacy Strategy

The use of different forms of social advocacy can be a useful tool to make the State institutions responsive to the rights of the marginalised in terms of legislation, policies and programmes both at the formation and implementation levels. This complements and supports mobilisation, collaboration and alliance strategies. In fact, the reach of social advocacy is wider as its focus on the priority groups and communities is meant not only to provide support to their cause and issues but also to draw the attention of the public in general, to the injustice done to them and, accordingly, to elicit their support as well.

All these dimensions of social advocacy strategy require expertise and professionalism, not of a mere academic nature but as one that has an activist orientation. As such social advocacy efforts must be grounded in grassroots concerns and experiences, it must inter-relate micro-level movements, like Tamil Nadu Social Service Society (TASOOS), with the macro-level institutions, like Caritas India, so that the agenda of the former finds adequate place in the processes of the latter. Expertise and professionalism, therefore, will be needed in the areas of investigative, analytic and data base research, and to work out appropriate strategies in order to make competing interests and forces interact with each other. Although these efforts and experience in the use of social advocacy strategy is insignificant at the moment, its operational scope for the social centres at the Mandal (Madurai Mandal), Regional (TASOOS, Trichy) and National (Caritas India, New Delhi) levels opens up uncharted avenues for exploration and wider possibilities for relevant and effective interventions.
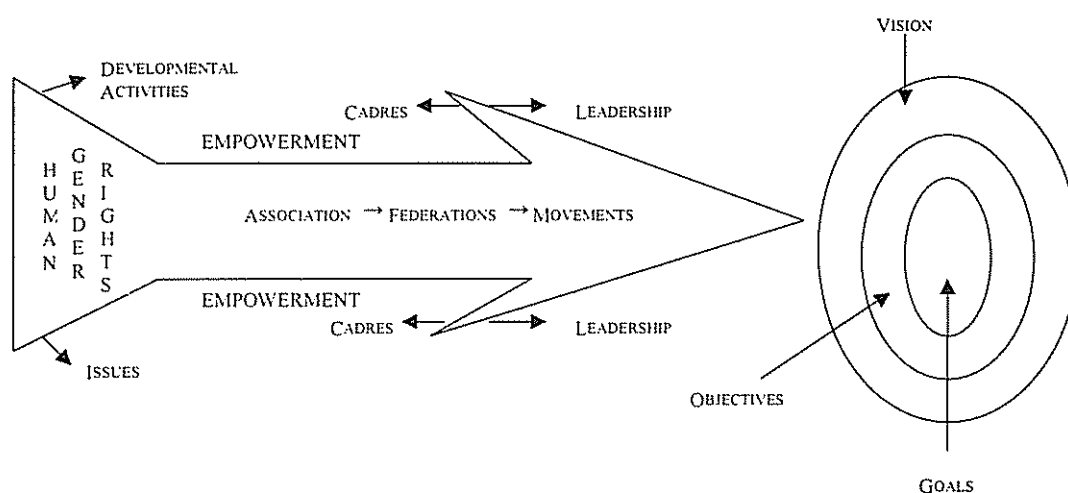
4.2.5 Networking

To augment our efforts in social advocacy, social action opens up further possibilities in terms of organisational and issue-based networking with various organisations and institutions at the local, regional, national and international levels. Similar ideological orientations and strategic approaches will form the basis for such networking. In fact, there are a number of Institutes like Bosco Maiyam, Colleges like Keelakarai and Sarugani and Organisations like Palmera and Mahalir Thittam, which network in a large way for advocacy purposes. These institutions range from semi-governmental to other non-governmental organisations, academic to action oriented efforts, and micro to macro level concerns. Joint ventures among them ensure complimentarity of efforts, assure concerted and comprehensive impact on the socio-political system. It also enhances unified responses to issues and policies connected with the cause of the marginalised. Although the VWRM's performance in networking in the past is minimal, the available opportunities for the area and other movements and NGOs indicate immensely exciting and enterprising challenges. In this respect, the VWRM can very well tie up with other institutions of higher learning as well and an effective documentation centre is an urgent priority in the office premise of the SMSSS.

4.2.6 From Association to Federation

The study of the VWRM has underscored the importance of strengthening the movement through building alliances and networks. A possible extension of this same process is developing an organisational structure that could link the different like minded groups at the grassroots level in a federated structure moving from the unit level to the block level and then to the district level. This could be done once the grassroots level groups have good foundation. In principle and in course of time, other movements like Agricultural Labourers Development Movement and Fishermen Development Movement could be part of this federation thereby strengthening the basis and influence of the VWRM.

4.2.7 A suggested Framework for the Empowerment Process

Many of the ideas suggested previously can be captured in the following diagram.

With human and gender rights as the focus, the VWRM can mobilise the women at the grassroots level in the three phases. First, through the formation of women's associations or organisations at the village level, as for example the new Suya Udavi Kuzhu (Self-Help Group). Second, through the inter-linkages, these organisations form themselves into federations. Third, the network of these federations is then geared towards the building up of women's movement at a higher level. An important point for consideration here is that from the organisational point of view, while the leadership provides the forward thrust to the movements, it is the selected, trained and committed cadres who maintain cohesion and ensure sustainability of the movements (Irudayam, 2000:21). Issue-based interventions and participatory developmental activities with human and gender rights perspective serve as the inner dynamics of the movements, propelling them towards enlarging the space of women's involvement and facilitating the desired changes in society at various levels. The vision, goal and specific objectives provide the horizon

for the movements to make the forward steps in order to achieve the purpose for which the movements originated.

The Self Help Groups serves as apt illustration here. Their engagement in economic activities in the early stage of their formation must be considered only as an entry or starting points, and not as the end or finishing points. Even in the early stage, the economic activities have to be looked at from the human and gender rights perspective. Any development activity or issue becomes a matter of rights of the women.

In course of time these rights-oriented Self Help Groups organisationally inter-link to become federations, which then integrate in order to emerge as movements. Again in course of time the leadership and cadres sustain the momentum of the movements not by carrying out mere economic activities or development programmes, nor by ad hoc interventions, but by continually ragging themselves on rights-oriented issues. In other words, in order to become a women's movement the Self Help Groups cannot and should not limit their functioning to mere economic activities like: savings and credit, watershed management, etc., nor to mere ad hoc responses to issues like: alcoholism. They have to transcend these limits to any areas of life, such as, economic, social, political, religious and cultural, and in a sustained and continuous manner they take on the human and gender rights perspective.

4.3 The Role of the SMSSS in Empowering the VWRM

As mentioned previously, it is commendable that the SMSSS was involved in supporting the VWRM and the poor women in particular since 1985. However, there is ample scope to make further progress in this support. An important element is to give priority to pursuing and enhancing 'women's dignity' defined as women's self-respect and women being respected by others in society. Claims of equal rights with men and acceptance of duties and responsibilities are based on dignity. Both rights and responsibilities are not merely meant to promote only individual well being. They acquire meaning and

relevance in so far as they are community oriented. This necessitates, therefore, the process of women organising themselves in solidarity at different levels, resulting in the formation of movement of women, managed and run by women and working for women and for the community at the local level and in the society at large.

4.3.1 The Foundation of the SMSSS

The dignity of women needs to be underscored as a foundational principle, motivating those interested in working for changes regarding the oppressive condition of women and the society at large. Awareness and acceptance of this principle is two-dimensional: a) women's self-affirmation of their dignity, and b) the affirmation by others of women's dignity and viewing this as part of the basic human rights agenda. Such rights (and responsibilities) promote only individual well being but they acquire meaning and relevance in so far as they are community oriented. As such one needs to accept this reality as one's belief and facilitates the development and growth of this reality, not by any engineering process but by providing the appropriate environment conducive to its emergence and blossoming. It is incumbent, therefore, on the VWRM activists and animators of the SMSSS to affirm their belief in the inborn dignity of women and to acknowledge the capacity of women to become conscious of their dignity and develop it to the full, and to consider themselves as enablers of this process.

4.3.2 The Proposed Future Focus of the SMSSS

Human rights in general, gender rights in particular, constitute the focus of any women's programme meant to affirm their dignity in word and action. In fact, on the one hand these rights emerge from the wellspring of dignity and on the other actualise the same, whenever affirmations of women's are made by the women themselves or by the others. The implication is that whatever and whenever programmes are planned and implemented, these are to be viewed form the rights perspective (Doss, 2000: 17).

Needless to say, therefore, that it is this perspective that should permeate and sustain the following:

a) **Organisational Dynamics**, such as, the formation of women's associations, their participation in deliberations and decision-making, the formulation of rules and procedures of these associations.

b) **Projects and Programmes**, such as, savings and credit schemes, governmental welfare schemes, agricultural and allied activities.

c) **Issue-based Struggles** related to land and labour, wage and compensation, gender violence and atrocities, child and bonded labour.

d) **Local self-governance system**, such as, contesting for electoral offices in the Panchayat elections, forming women federation at a broader level, striking coalitions and alliances with other secular and democratic socio-political formations.

It is only by strategizing and implementing their activities and by carrying our programmes on the basis of rights can women affirm their identity as women and their interdependence with men as partners having freedom, autonomy and responsibility. In this respect, the idea of duty, which is to be understood only in relations to rights and not vice versa, assumes the meaning of women's co-responsibility with men in managing all the affairs of their life in both the domestic as well as the external spheres.

4.3.3 The Enabling or Facilitating System of the SMSSS

As an organ of the civil society, the SMSSS plays an important role in the empowerment process of women, resulting in the formation of movements. This role can best be described as 'enabling or facilitating' women to become empowered in order to build up a movement. Due to certain circumstances, like high degree of oppressive situation of caste, gender issues, the VWRM may have to assume a more active role in the early phase of the empowerment process. Notwithstanding such tactical considerations, in all empowerment process, the SMSSS limits itself to functioning as an enabling or facilitating agency, while respecting women as subjects who can freely and independently

shape their own destiny in course of their empowerment process. What is underlined here is that the **process** of women becoming empowered by them is more important and beneficial than the **product** achieved in a short time. In fact, it is the enabling nature of the empowerment process, which ensures in the long run full participation of women in the movement building work, gradual withdrawal and adoption of new approach by the SMSSS and consequently the independent sustainability of the VWRM.

The enabling or the facilitating role of the SMSSS has two dimensions:

$\Rightarrow$ **Initiating catalyst**

$\Rightarrow$ **Support System**

As a **catalyst** the SMSSS initiates the empowerment process through the efforts of its own animators, always keeping in mind that the latter's function in animating women is temporary and that sooner or later this task would be taken over by the VWRM itself through its cadres. The selection and training of the cadres, therefore, becomes very crucial in the empowerment process and in the movement-building efforts at the grassroots or micro level.

By the time the individual women groups coalesce to form themselves into federations, one can assume that the catalyst agency has enabled the formation of cadres who will take over the functions and responsibilities of the SMSSS's animators. At this juncture, a shift takes place in the role of the enabling agency , namely, that it functions as a Support System for the federations or movements. It can also happen that the SMSSS totally withdraws its roles and functions from the area of the federations or movements, and focuses its attention elsewhere, where the need of empowering other women is greater.

In the event of continuing its existence in the area (in the changed role) of a **Support System**, the SMSSS engages itself with the federation or the VWRM on a partnership basis by providing social advocacy services in the form of training and documentation;

monitoring trends and events; campaign and lobbying for the issues having broader significance; providing legal assistance and networking facilities; enabling the forging of coalitions and alliances. As mentioned earlier, the process is characterised by reciprocity and partnership between two independent structures, that is, the agency as the supportive system and the federation or the movement entering into an inter-dependent relationship.

4.4 A Final Note

It is our sincere hope and dream that since the process of empowerment of the poor and the oppressed women has been effective in several areas in India at a micro levels, it will make progress and bring about change also at the macro levels. This dream and aspiration is also what is dormant in the poor women and is awakened by a process of empowerment. It is hoped that this study, by providing an analysis of mobilisation and social change, is a contribution to this process of empowerment.

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