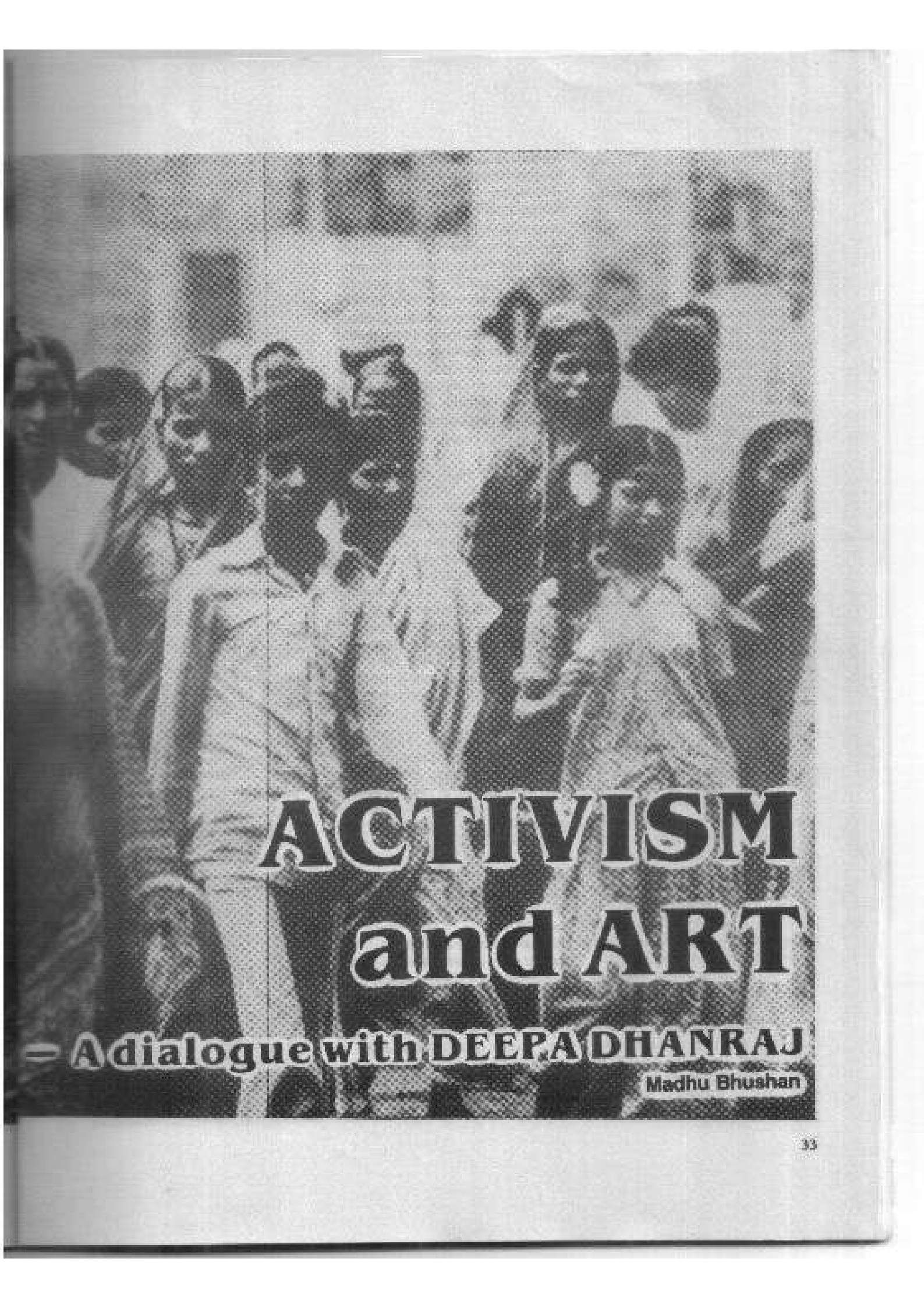




Deepa Gharia is a woman who has at various levels been working with women's groups. (Not so much as a worker, she confesses frequently, and also having a passion for the film medium, has chosen to as her mode of communication, professionally. As part of Yuganitha, a film collective, (other members of which were Alka Bharya, Navroz and Sumita), she has made four documentaries on women — two of them being specific instances of organising and collective action, one on marital violence and the other a character portrait of an activist. Apart from a few international films made in the 1980s, she has also been involved in making a film on communal violence in Hyderabad and at the moment is deeply involved in spinning out images of women in the Telangana movement — which is the theme of her next film.



ACTIVISM and ART

= A dialogue with DEEPA DHANRAJ

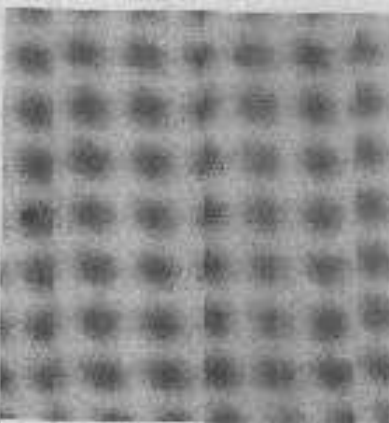
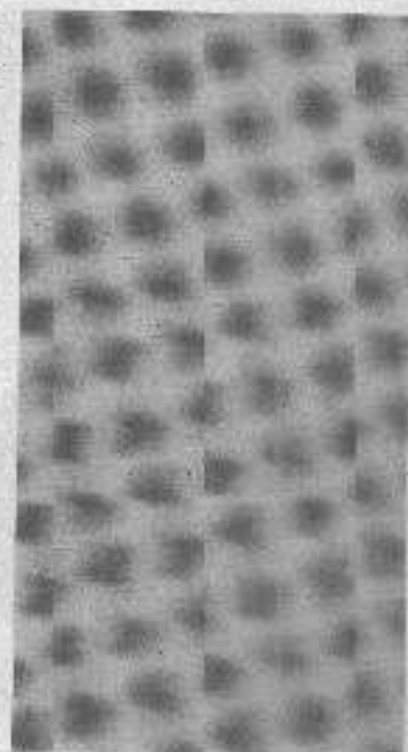
Madhu Bhushan

ACTIVISM and art, it is traditionally felt, rarely ever keep good company. Critically evaluating films emerging from the realm of social movements in India over the past decade, which seek to document and highlight the various currently politically sensitive issues like communalism, violence against women, nuclear hazards, class conflicts and the like, the statement seems to flow from a rather sound logic. It gets further reiterated when we also look at films, both feature and documentary, made by independent film makers who display some commitment to a 'cause'.

It seemed to be a worthwhile idea to get together with Deepa to talk on what seemed to emerge as the central problematic in this context, the nexus between creativity and political action as located within the larger canvas of 'alternative political culture' — a phenomena rooted in the milieu and ethos of the radicalism of the post seventies which in turn bred a plethora of voluntary and social action groups. To begin the exercise it seemed quite safe to hazard the generalisation that this culture evolved both in terms of form and content, in direct opposition to the 'mainstream'. From this emerged other more provocative questions. Has this culture ended up creating an esperantist language that can only be spoken and understood among a very select and already converted circle? In our overzealous bid to turn our radical backs to a hopelessly retrograde popular culture, have we forsaken some of the most vital and organic elements of our dramatic tradition — the passions, the myths, the dreams, the humour, the simplicity...? Committed as it appears, to capture reality at its starkest has this culture been successful in terms of being able to touch and sense the multilayered reality of victimhood — be it of women,

workers or dalits — or has it merely objectified and trapped these very same 'victims' into 'alternative' equally stifling stereotypes? When we did sit down to draw out the outlines for this discussion there was this initial hesitation on both our parts to call this an interview (quite normal among those of us who have had even the slightest brush with anything alternative!). Agreeing to her suggestion of "why don't you also talk of your experience of being part of a women's group (Vimochana) screening and using these kind of films in your work", we managed to semantically circumvent the problem by terming this a dialogue; a joint exercise during which we would draw upon and reflect on our mutual experiences to bounce ideas and perceptions of each other. And so a dialogue/interview, it was — conducted over three explorative, meandering sessions — disrupted only by five month old Mana, Deepa's remarkably patient daughter, who on the rare occasion sought to impose her own immediate personal needs on her mother's political preoccupations!

Madhu Bhushan: The film medium today is increasingly being used in the arena of social action as a means of raising issues and stimulating debates. In the early 80's from 'Yuganhar' you made four films i.e., MOLLKARIN, on the unionising of domestic workers in Poona; TAMBAKU KI AAG on the struggle of the Tobacco workers in Nippani; YEH SIRF KAHANI NAHIN HAI a story of marital violence and SUDESHA — a portrait of a woman who was an activist in the CHIPKO movement. This was perhaps one of the earliest attempts at integrating film making with activism in India. These films were also, I understand, made with some idea of democratising the film making process — and therefore you did the work with the active col-



laboration and participation of both the domestic workers and the Tobacco workers union. **YEH SIRF KAHANI NAHIN HAI** was made along with **Stree Shakthi Sanghatana** a women's group from Hyderabad. It would be interesting if you could reflect on the process you went through while making these films and on what your own personal motivation were. Did you see yourself as an activist first and then a film maker?

Deepa Dhanraj: Well, I started as being an assistant to a feature film director and knew that I wanted to make films. I was also motivated by a very clear concern for women's issues. However, in our group we never saw ourselves as only professionals — some of us were already involved in women's movement, in women's groups participating in debates, sharing personal experiences. So at the point when we made these films it was a happy meshing — a very organic way of expressing my concerns along with my work. But the atmosphere in which we were working, this divide seemed irrelevant. It was like an osmosis from both sides. While the ideas did stem from there, we internalised them with the same ferocity. We saw films as a way of documenting and expressing a certain thinking. We also saw the making of the films and viewing it as an emotional experience for other women. Why we chose film specifically as the medium as opposed to something like theatre we were really not very clear about. We were unhappy with the films around us and we did feel the need to reach out for and generate images that never existed and could counter the negative portrayals and manipulation of women in the visual media. India having such a strong audience tradition, film seemed to be a good medium to enable us to go into a community and draw people together. That we were not going to


screen these films to a neutral audience was very clear, so our audience was fixed. The whole process was an alliance with the people who helped us make the film. So both in production and conception, the themes and concerns of the films originated with the activists of that area.

Making the film must have been a truly empowering experience and you must have had difficulties with the logistics of production itself i.e. financing and distribution?

Initially it seemed important to offer our technical skills for people to 'speak from below' — to provide a platform for voices to be heard. As our work progressed, our naive understanding was constantly being confronted by the political implications of the materialist reality we were working in. For one, funding for the films had to be raised not in the 'market' but through alternative sympathetic sources. Often this meant obtaining grants from foreign donor agencies who fund most voluntary agencies. This as you know is a sensitive point with many radical groups. Even if one could rationalise this, the audiences for alternative distribution were then automatically from the same sector. The other problem was of obtaining critical feedback which was erratic or just simply absent. Our films were 'consumed' in the same way as other films. Changing people's expectations of a film is a very long term programme; film appreciation has to be undertaken on a very consistent and serious level.

Did you have any problem with the State agencies?

Apart from the distribution problem, the most crucial state intervention or control in the form of censorship, still remained. Here we were caught in a contradiction we have still not resolved. If one worked with the spectre of finally obtaining a censor certificate, the film suffered. Subtly this anxiety



The reason I feel for not many individual film makers breaking out from the standardised mode is the insidious peer pressure from the Left, which is still a strong reference point.

influenced the whole film. Even though one could go to court and fight the powers that be (incidentally all our films have had censor trouble) it is a tedious and draining battle, diverting all one's time, energy and resources. The correct subversive position is to reject certification entirely, but that ridiculous piece of paper is often the only protection that can ensure that a street screening continues uninterrupted.

In terms of both the content and the treatment, there seems to be an evolution in the four films that you made. The first clearly looks on the women as workers first and then as women — the focus therefore remaining by and large on the economic basis of their exploitation and the solution also

open ended and there is no dogmatic closure.

You must remember that when we started making these films, the movement was still young. While now I do feel that much more introspection and inversion is required, at that time it did seem necessary even if one was being unashamedly partisan, to exclude the whole dark side — to avoid the grey and problematic areas. It seemed necessary to ignore the relationship of women workers with their families and husbands and stick more to their material conditions of work. We did not go into areas like the sexual exploitation in the factory or the Devadasi system which is part of their everyday life. The Union infact became the heroine of the film and women

as normal part of married life — also perhaps since her husband was old and not so strong. This was a fantastic statement which we couldn't explore further because it did not have a place in the logic of the film as we had conceived it. We could not include it as a token reference to these issues either as we would have had to restructure not just the film but our own perspective also. We were clearly middle class women making films for the working class women full of grand ideas of what they wanted to see and giving them our solutions for change. But tell me what have your own experiences been while screening these kind of films in your work with women?

We have been screening various documentaries produced within



falling within a very clear left paradigm of unionising and fighting for their rights — no other aspect of their lives are explored. In the other two, an attempt is made to look at the more subtle pressures working on the woman in the personal realm which leads to various forms of direct and indirect marital violence. The answers and solutions too are left

were put into faceless brackets. There was this woman for example — the most militant organizer who was regularly being beaten by her husband. She however stated that she did not feel it necessary to leave her husband since being married gave her the space and respect to actively participate in the union. The physical beatings were then something she tolerated

the alternative sector including your films — in different places like slums and colleges. We have been reflecting both on our experience of screening and having discussions on these films and on the content of these films themselves. At one level we are beginning to feel that the 'alternative' media (it could even be street theatre) is only being reduc-

ed to becoming a tool for social activists who just use it as one element in a larger 'political programme'. In this context a film could become just an illustration of verbally articulated views and theories. To this extent perhaps the potential of the form itself becomes secondary. At another level, we are also beginning to feel the limitations of what can be perceived as the dominant motif of most of these films, which in turn is of course a reflection of the dominant discourse in the field of social action itself i.e. the progression of the narrative which unfolds in a traditionally linear manner... i.e., posing of problem, portrayal of conflict, sharp polarisation of issues, resolution through collective action. This does not provide any space for exploring other dynamics and facets of either the issues or the individuals/characters involved. The overwhelming logic of 'effective communication' reduced complex characters to cardboard cut outs and provides ultimately for excellent sloganised spectacles. The audiences then become passive recipients of a message which is all geared towards inflaming them to action...

Unfortunately, what has happened is that all these communication forms like theatre or film have become ritualised to the point of absurdity. However I do not regret my own experience of making and showing the two Yuganhar films. The Nippani film was relevant to the extent that it had a celebratory aspect and it really enthused anybody who watched it. I supposed this is the limitation of all such films. However the experience of making YEH SIRF KAHANI NAHIN HAI was something quite different (it was, what Navroz calls, our 'box office hit!'). It somewhere touches an emotional chord in all those who watch it and the most remarkable thing is that it really cuts across all classes of audience.



I believe that subversion has not been possible because we have no documentary film movement in India which will sustain & integrate individual efforts.

I guess this is because of the subject — an introspection on the structure of the family. It talks of a corrosive violence perpetrated on a woman whose self worth is gradually being eroded. Making the film itself was an exhilarating experience — as the problem was something close to all of us and there was no difference between an 'us' and a 'them'. We prepared the script along with other members of Stree Shakthi Sanghatana (some of them even acted in the film) after a month of intense discussions — and I think this intensity communicated. For example we debated for one week over one dialogue in the film! This is the scene where the wife has walked out of her husband's house and is in the hospital after attempting suicide. Her friend with whom she had shared only a professional relationship is beginning to reach out to her in her moment of personal crisis. We did not want to say that walking out of a traumatic domestic situation is the only answer, but that the woman can perhaps rediscover her strengthened identity within the situation in order to transform it as well as her own self. We had to keep an open ending so the women watching it would be motivated to seek for their own specific solutions.

Even if it appears that we are being too harsh on ourselves don't you feel that we are ironically enough, replicating many of the 'top down' mechanisms and structures we are most critical of in the 'mainstream'? For instance we have social action groups confidentially determining what 'the people' would like to see; this in turn is supported by the funding sources who are quite active in backing all the right and the latest causes be it women or ecology; and then of course we have 'the people' who are also 'the objects' of the social change get somewhere excluded in the whole process. One is increasingly

beginning to feel that these films have limitations in terms of making any perceptible dent in the social fabric basically because they are not subversive enough. They do not seem to have the potential to seep into the social dynamic, into the everyday lives of people, in an attempt to creatively transform it — which is what the popular cinema, however perverse it may be, excels in doing. In our search for 'alternative' images have we got alienated from the grammar and syntax of existing reality to get sucked into the business of processing a synthetic radicalism?

I believe that subversion has not been possible also because we have no documentary film movement in India which will sustain and integrate individual efforts. In places like Chile, using film was as a form of political activism. Feminist groups in the West saw the process of film making and distribution as a coherent whole. Something of this approach was used by ODESSA in Kerala but I don't know how successful they have been.

In India what has also happened is that we have got stuck with the form of socialist realism without the environment of revolution — which bred this form in the first place. If you look at Soviet Russia, just after the Revolution, the Soviet State decided to deliberately use film as an educational tool. Whether it was stating party policy or disseminating information, film makers were seen as workers who were furthering the cause of and making the revolution. Many film forms which they created then have become radical genres which 'political' film-makers have used and are still using in toto. Socialist realism is one of them. Here in India the prevailing ideological climate is reactionary and we seem to have got stuck with these forms without the specific historical circumstances that bred them in the

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first place. Today by and large these films only illustrate the individual film maker's political position but does not really move into the realm of political activity. Infact the only political act seems to be getting it into a festival. While I am against the propagation of any single ideology I do regret the fact that there is on the other hand no generative climate for dialogue and debate, only individuals working in isolation. Don't you think so?

Yes there does seem to be no creative plurality. Infact it appears to be that all seeming attempts at plurality are in reality contained within a given notion of politics and change — of oppression and liberation.

The reason I feel for not many individual film makers attempting to break out from this standardised mode is the insidious and unspoken peer pressure from The Left — which is still a strong reference point. The ideology is internalised so perfectly that there is total self censorship. Everybody is so painstakingly playing the purity game that the issue or subject becomes secondary and the anxiety that the film maker will be exposed as politically incorrect takes precedence. The penalisation from the 'straight and narrow' is subtle but nevertheless real — nobody wants to be expelled from the security of the new family.

You sound as if you have yourself been the object of such pressure!

Take for instance my film SUDESHA which is the portrait of a woman by that name who was actively involved in the CHIPKO movement. Its a quiet film about how someone lives. But it was dismissed as not being 'political'. The tragedy was that we could not be true to Sudesha's own personal conflicts due to various constraints. Sudesha was in Jail for sometime and when she came out she could not get back to the movement and nor was she able to slip back into the 'mainstream' — not only because

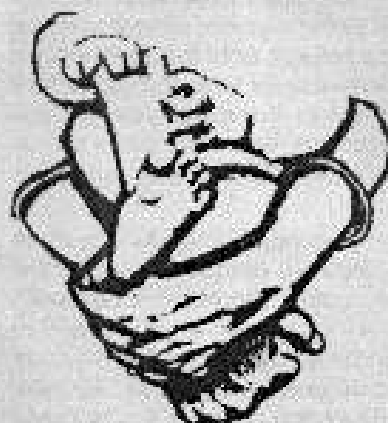
people now looked upon her with suspicion but because her thinking itself had changed. Again we could not raise the question of Sudesha's alienation even within the film because of the repercussions that she would have to face in her village.

You are planning a film on women's participation in the Telangana struggle based on a series of interview with women who have been part of the movement. Do you think you will be able to break away from the mould set by the kind of films we were talking about earlier. Are you going to concentrate this time purely on the personal aspect of the struggle of women within in the movement?

I don't want to talk too much on the form as I want to experiment with something different which is as yet still in my head. But within the film I would certainly want to raise questions about certain notions of radicalism and revolution which have today totally lost their relevance. For instance 'Lal Salaam' which was conceived of at a particular historical juncture had a certain meaning then — but has today been reduced to an empty slogan. The main focus however, of the film itself will be the issue of sexuality with the Telangana struggle as the backdrop. If the feudal analysis takes precedence then it will become like any other film on the land issue or on revolution.

Yes, there was for instance this blatantly propagandist feature film in Telugu called ARDHA RATRI SWATANTRAM in which the characterisation of women vis-a-vis the revolution is still stuck within a stereotypically male paradigm. There are two main women characters — one turns totally radical and becomes in a sense asexual — she does not and cannot have a relationship with any of the male revolutionaries — she has transcended mortal weaknesses to gain the stature of

a Kali — and therefore she ultimately has to die having served her purpose. The other one survives only because she has to live out her role as a conjugal partner. She lives only because she has to breed future revolutionaries! In your film even while focusing of sexuality, how will you be able to avoid the political rhetoric — as the Telangana movement will, by the force of its powerful presence, take centre stage?



In my film I want to explore both the personal and political aspects of being in a situation of stress. If I project the theme only in terms of the participation of women in the Telangana movement then it could very much become the *saga of a war in a male sense* which is what impresses people; that they ran away into the forests from their families... fought with weapons, did gun running... etc. If you really listen to the women who spoke in the interviews, the situation emerges as something more complex than this unidimensional 'heroism'. They seemed to be trapped within a particularly vicious circle. The first movement was away from the home and therefore alienating themselves from a 'settled' married life. Once they were in

the 'dalams' they were seen as potential problems and so the single women were married off — 'new' families were created. Once the children came, they had to either go back to their village — a life from which they were already alienated — or make the hard choice of sending the child back. The circle was complete. There was no recognition or accommodation of their problems or feelings. The other thing that I feel crucial is to reclaim an important point in our history — why is it that whenever women have left the 'small' realm of the family to take part in any public activity it is always seen as erratic spurts, independently with no past or future — We seldom see women's struggles as linked in a long tradition which has been continuous. The amnesia that strikes for all the interim periods is remarkable. It is important for us to know our past to inherit the future.

It must have been difficult to thread all these individual stories together.

Yes the material is very rich and it has been difficult to make a selection. But this is a film I am looking forward to making. It has been delayed because in the meantime I went and had a baby...!

The joys of motherhood it is apparent, wane fast. The eloquence and euphoria with which Deepa had expounded on the same at the beginning of the three days had notably diminished as we reached the end!

The discussion of course remains incomplete. While a lot of questions were flung around with gay abandon, a lot remained unarticulated... a lot of answers remained unclarified. However to be true to the spirit with which we ventured into this dialogue, we would like to extend this into a debate to which we are sure you would like to contribute your experiences, perceptions and criticisms.