

## **Living Feminisms**

*Jagori: a journey of 20 years*

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# living feminisms

Jagori: a journey of 20 years



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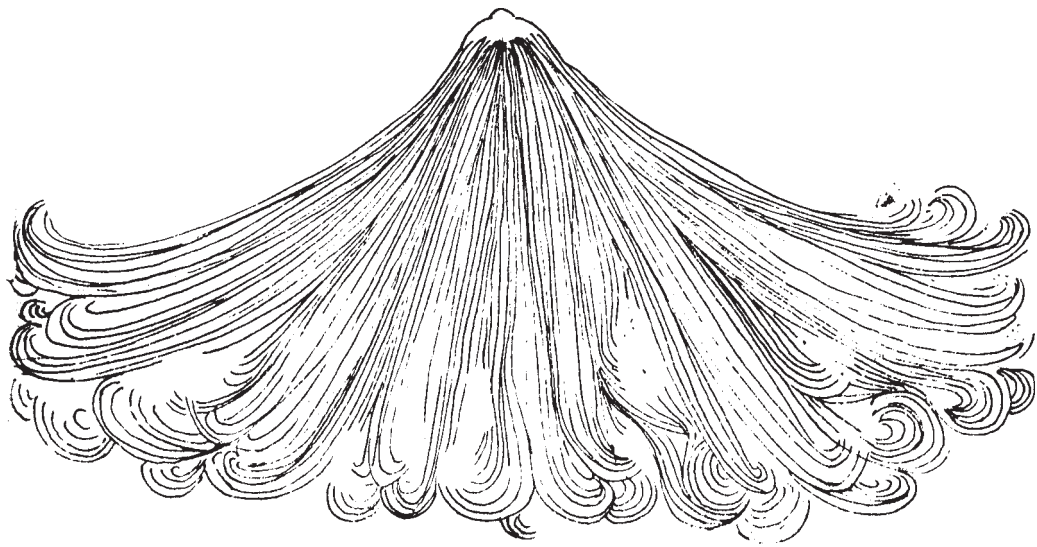
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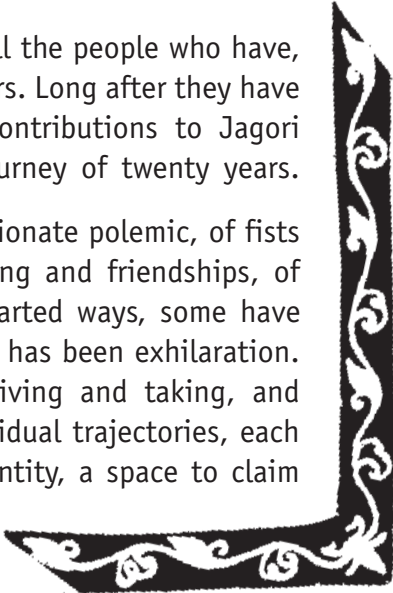




## **Jagori: a space of our own**

Jagori is not ours alone, but belongs to all the people who have, down the years, passed through these doors. Long after they have moved on, their thoughts, ideas and contributions to Jagori remain, like footprints that trace our journey of twenty years.

This is a space of heated debate and passionate polemic, of fists raised in defiance and protest, of bonding and friendships, of solidarity and safety. Some of us have parted ways, some have branched out. There has been pain, there has been exhilaration. There has been much learning, much giving and taking, and always, much talking! Whatever our individual trajectories, each of us found in Jagori a home, a new identity, a space to claim as our own.

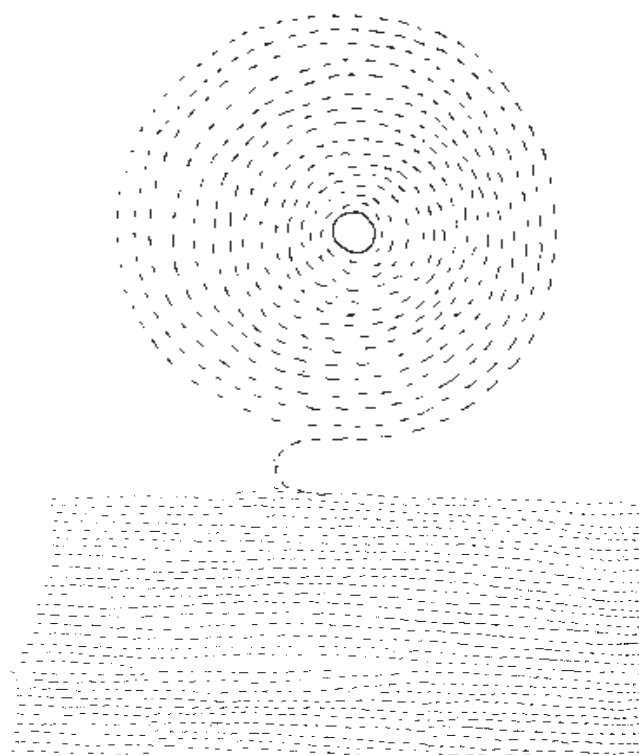
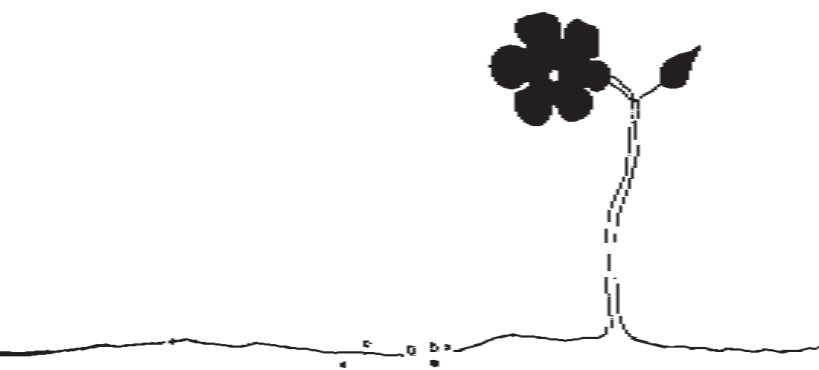


# Genesis – The Beginning

**Our Vision: “To spread feminist consciousness for the creation of a just society.”**

“JAGORI’s genesis lay in a perception of its founders that the feminist movement in India, such as it was in the beginning of 1980s, was urban-centred, and a conviction that without detriment to whatever foothold the movement had in urban India, it should fan out into the rural areas. Jagori started its work in August 1984 from Delhi as an unregistered society. It described itself as a “Women’s Resource and Training Centre”. The agenda for the new organisation was set by those times. Women’s groups and other NGOs were coming up and needed to develop a perspective to work on women’s issues and concerns. Soon after Jagori was set up, two major devastating events took place that determined Jagori’s work during the first two years – the Sikh carnage in Delhi after the assassination of Indira Gandhi and the disaster in Bhopal where thousands of people were killed in the Union Carbide gas tragedy. It also joined several other groups who got active in different resettlement colonies including the riot-affected areas to work with victims of violence.

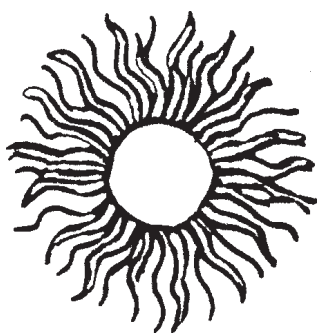
One of the first activities of Jagori was production of feminist songs and poems on the theme of oppression of women within the family and religion. These were distributed in cassettes and book forms to groups, not simply women's groups, not only in India but in neighbouring countries Nepal, Bangladesh and Pakistan. Along with this there was also work in the basti with other grassroots organisations, training on building feminist perspective with activists and NGO workers. Thus, even in the very early months of its existence, Jagori set its sights beyond the confines of any circumscribed definition of women's work that a new group may find convenient, and instead tried to relate with not only other women's groups but other general groups also, viewing work with women as necessarily extending beyond India's political frontiers.



... Jagori might have articulated its vision and mission only in 2001, but it is no sudden bright idea, and can be recognised as having been there all along from the time of its modest beginning in 1984."

*From 'Evaluation Report, 2002'*





Jagori was set up in 1984 by a group of seven people - Abha, Gouri, Jogi, Kamla, Manjari, Runu and Sheba - in response to a need within the women's movement. They decided to form what they envisioned as a 'creative space' for women to express their realities, "to articulate their experience of oppression, to know more about it and to find ways of fighting it".

In the late seventies, thousands of women were taking to the streets to protest against incidents of dowry murder and rape. These campaigns saw a heightened phase of activism, with protests, demonstrations, pushing for a law around dowry-related deaths, sitting up nights making posters, writing pamphlets and songs.

It was *Om Swaha*, a street-play on the issue of dowry, that brought together all the founder members of Jagori. The play was originally written by Maya Rao and Anu Kapoor, and it became a landmark in the women's movement. "*Om Swaha*' was such an interactive thing," remembers Kamla. Gouri says, "Even though it was originally written by Maya and Anu, it evolved in a very participatory manner with all of us, and so we all have a sense of ownership." By 1987 the play had been interpreted and reinterpreted several times, and there were seven or eight versions developed by the different groups who had performed it.

From the anti-dowry campaign there arose a need for a crisis intervention centre. Saheli, the first autonomous women's group in Delhi, was conceived to meet this need. Many women involved in the campaign were part of Saheli, even though they were also involved in various other groups. The feeling was one of being part of a movement, and being

## The Backdrop

driven to volunteer time at a dynamic feminist space like Saheli.

*"A lot of us brought our anger to that space. The more we did the play, the more the anger kept growing because we saw for the first time the horrific nature of the crime and also the complicity... to some extent even the family [was part of it], which was very frightening. Couple after couple would walk up Saheli's staircase and say 'here is the file - here are the letter she wrote to us'. We realised that the*



*pattern was repeating, continuously... and we asked 'But why didn't you respond when she told you that her life was in danger... why didn't you do something? And we always got the same answer. 'We have done our duty [in getting her married], after that it's in her fate...'"* Abha

Runu remembers the idealism and belief which characterised those years:

*"We found amongst ourselves, a family outside our families, which used to give us more pleasure, more energy, and a*

*more meaningful life. I used to feel that with just one more play, we would change the world! If we continued like this the dowry murders would stop... A lot of anger used to pour out... we would make a lot of noise; if a household was accused of demanding dowry, we would go and paint the walls black as a mark of protest. All this energy used to come from the solidarity we felt with one another."*

These times, then, formed the backdrop to the creation of Jagori.



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## Many Reasons, One Outcome: The Conception of Jagori

*"One thing that started coming out very strongly during these campaigns was the need for communication materials. We were all working on a voluntary basis and had very little money. Somehow we would cobble together paints and brushes... and manage to make things..."* Sheba

*"Around the same time, a study group on women and health was formed - to develop a feminist understanding and perspective on health, read feminist literature and debates and to contextualise issues; there was a growing understanding of the 'body as the battleground for patriarchy'. We felt that a resource centre was necessary, where all the documents could be collected and kept for reference.*

*There was also another question on our minds. Feminism was already quite visible in big cities with the creation of women's groups such as Forum Against Rape in Mumbai, Stree Shakti Sangathana in Hyderabad and Vimochana in Bangalore. How do we take feminism outside Delhi, and reach out to rural areas?"* Abha

With these objectives, Jagori was set up.

Abha talks about the different backgrounds from which the founding group came:

*"The question of legal reforms around the important issues of rape and dowry became very central to the women's movement at that time. And therefore we knew that the people we needed were those with a legal background, or a communication background. We also needed people who had worked with NGOs... or in different movements... Manjari was a lawyer; I was studying law in an evening college while working as a volunteer, I was also very interested in looking at the legal rights issue. Kamla and I came from an NGO background. Runu came from a student movement background as well as from an NGO. Gouri had extensive grassroots experience and Jogi and Sheba were development designers and communicators. So this was the team, and in 1983 itself we received our first donation of Rs.5000/- from Vikas Bhai."*

All the founder members remember the indomitable Vikas Bhai with great affection. Vikas Bhai was a Marxist Gandhian who influenced hundreds of people in getting involved in activism. His annual unstructured workshops at Sewapuri on

environment saw hundreds of activists come together to just discuss all kinds of issues, and build alliances, personal growth and friendships. *“Vikas Bhai was like a mother to us”,* says Abha.

The name “Jagori”, meaning “awaken woman” was given by Abha.

Abha had been responsible for naming Saheli as well. She remembers, *“I was traveling to Hyderabad on a train; the thought struck me that what women who are being tortured are looking for is really a female friend – a ‘saheli’. I quickly wrote the word on a postcard, got off and dropped it into a post box at one of the stations!”*

Runu recalls what happened when the postcard arrived in Delhi:

*“In the evening the postcard arrived at Gouri didi’s garage...”*

*and we started celebrating! Wow, we thought, what a name! So appropriate, just what we had been looking for!”*

Gouri points out:

*“In those days the name was really uncommon! Now, of course, you can find a ‘sakhi/sangini/saheli’ everywhere.”*

Although Jagori had been formed, the founding members continued to be part of Saheli as well.

*“The boundaries were fluid between organisations, there was never really a question of asserting a separate identity. And because Saheli was a primary location for activism, there was this intensity in our commitment to the work. In Saheli none of us took any money for work. If there was somewhere to go, or something to do, we would do it, even at the cost of something else.”* Abha

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## The Initial Years – Some Defining Moments

By the end of 1984 Jagori had taken up some activities.

*“As soon as Jagori was formed, we had to go to Bhopal, as the Union Carbide gas disaster had occurred. Then there was the anti Sikh carnage after the assassination of Indira Gandhi. So we became part of Nagrik Ekta Manch and threw ourselves into this work, primarily helping widows and children in relief camps, by organising health care, literacy and non-formal education classes, distribution of relief material and helping them with their various compensation claims. As a women’s group, we played a special role in identifying problems that women as an oppressed group within the community face.”* Abha

Founder members recalled some other activities. One was an exhibit called ‘Aurat ka Chamatkaar’ (The Magic of Woman) which aimed at demystifying women’s bodies by

visually depicting a feminist understanding of women’s reproductive function. It also raised the issue of how institutions like the family or the State look at women’s bodies. Finally it provided scientific information on reproductive health. This was the first time such an effort had been made.

Jagori was part of a national workshop on creativity called KRITI; this workshop really inspired the founder members and they resolved to use creativity as a central way of expression in their future work, especially with regard to communicating with non-literate women.

*“It was the first big national level conference, we were around 100-125 people, from different walks of life - artists, dancers, singers, activists...I think it was one of the finest things we did.”* Kamla

Another defining experience that the group undertook was to live for ten days with the *Musahar* community, identified as 'the poorest of the poor', in a village in the State of Bihar.

Abha recalls:

*"... that was the time when this whole issue of being middle class and working with the marginalised community was being debated. We were struggling inside ourselves with this. So we went and lived in a village. We*

*went to, and lived with a community called Musahars - the name means those who eat rats. We decided to take 2 pairs of clothing and eat the same things they did, we decided to work in the farms with them and earn whatever we got by doing that - we realised that it was quite a false thing. We knew of course that we would come back to our homes - but it was a good experiment. We had to learn by doing that... I think we did a very critical analysis of what we did there to know how to work with them."*

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## Diffused Boundaries

Their deep involvement in the women's movement was sometimes difficult to explain to their families. Runu, for instance, says:

*"To define my job was a very difficult thing for me! What job do I do? They would think, she is protesting against dowry, going to rallies, what kind of work is this?!"*

Many of the founder members admitted that their involvement in the movement had come at the cost of spending too little time in the home or with the family.

*"Our work never seemed to be a burden on us. Work and pleasure have always been together. These are our lives... there has always been an integration of work and pleasure, and work and friendship and therefore work and pain. I remember an occasion when I took my daughter Meeto (she was a child then) with me for a workshop... she observed the proceedings patiently for 3 days and then asked innocently, "But Amma when will your work start?!" Kamla*

The movement was built on foundations of friendships and solidarity, so much so that often women became part of one another's families and the lines between their personal and activist lives were completely blurred. Abha attributed this to the fact that there was no 'office' that time - Saheli operated out of Gouri's garage, Jagori was in her house... and most activism was on the street.

*"Most of our meetings used to be held at my house or Sheba's house... there used to be one bed there. We used to call them single-bed meetings! I don't know how we all managed to fit into that one bed - squeezing ourselves into that little space, we used to change the world sitting right there! All of Jagori's planning took place on that bed. We used to work a lot at nights... make posters, plan March 8 celebrations, or even just enjoy - everything used to happen at night!" Abha*

*"If we wanted to discuss something, we would go to Kamla's house, if we wanted to do something creative, we chose Abha's house, if it was some field related work, we went to Gouri's house... these were the houses where the women's movement actually grew during these periods" Kamla*



## An End and a Beginning

In spite of the close bonds amongst activists and the fact that people were often part of different groups simultaneously, differences emerged within Saheli, which divided the group.

*“There was a lot of overlap [in our work]... at what point was it Saheli, what point was it Action India and what point was it Jagori? In fact this was the first bone of contention, identifying who did what and where... I think the main issue with Saheli rose with the issue of whether to accept funding or not. The whole clash of identities kind of destroyed the cohesiveness, and destroyed friendships too - can't say it was only at the organisation level.”* Gouri

*“Organisations also started claiming their own issues, their own people, own resources, projects, areas ...”* Runu

*“I don't think territory was a problem at that time. I think*

*Saheli raised the issue of dual identity. Are we Jagori, Saheli, or Action India? And, to be honest, it was not so simple; it was a leadership clash as well, there was a difference in our styles of working. There were also very clear ideological differences - of being politically correct on the issue of class, funding. There were nine of us who parted ways from Saheli at that time, although we continue to have strong links. At any critical moment, even today, we look to them for support...”* Abha

*“... We always thought Saheli would be the think-tank, where feminist ideology would grow, Jagori would be the resource centre, Sabla Sangh would be the grassroots base... so we had all these grand plans of complementarity! We had very big dreams... I don't think the dreams have been destroyed, just that things did not go the way we had thought, and each entity grew on its own...”* Gouri



कभी कभी बातें  
ऐसी होती हैं  
जो निकल नहीं पातीं  
तुम्हीं से कहनी हैं  
तुम्हीं सुन नहीं पाते

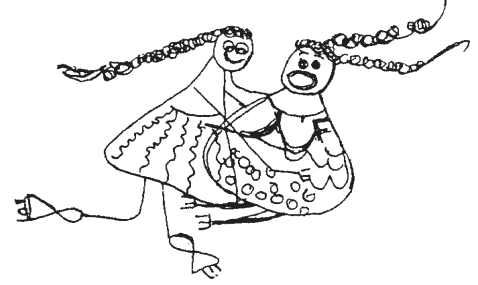
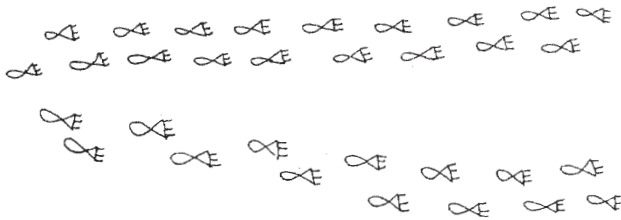
## Celebration of friendship

When you stand alone  
At a turning point unknown  
and ponder which way to go  
Know then, my friend  
Far away with hope  
I wait to meet you

When in darkness you grope  
Know then, my friend  
In that darkness, I too  
Reach out to touch you

When you are worn and tired  
Know then, my friend  
That the warmth of my eyes  
Revives you

And when you lose a battle  
Know then, my friend  
That my arms  
Will take over the battle for you



## दोस्ती के खातिर...

ज़िन्दगी के हर मोड़ पर...

जब खुद को अकेली खड़ी पाती हो  
तो जानो दूर कहीं मैं  
तुम से मिलने की आस में बैठी हूँ

जब अंधेरे में कुछ न देख पा रही हो...  
तो जानो मैं भी उस अंधेरे में  
तुम्हारे स्पर्श को टटोल रही हूँ

जब कभी थककर चूर हो जाओ...  
तो जानो मेरी आँखें तुम्हे सेंक रही हैं  
तुम में फिर से मस्ती जगाने के लिए

और जब कभी कोई लड़ाई हार जाती हो...  
तो जानो मेरे कंधे तुम्हारी अंगुली  
लड़ाई का सामना करने को तैयार हैं

आभा के जन्मदिन पर – ठीक से याद नहीं किस साल पर 1985 से पहले, जिसके बाद दंगों ने हमारे अन्दर और बाहर बहुत कुछ तोड़ा और बरबाद किया।

—रुनु

# Spreading Feminist Consciousness



“Feminism is the recognition of the structural nature of women’s subordination and a proactive attempt to change this.”

## The First Steps

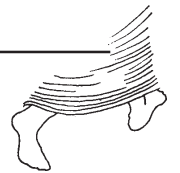
The formative years were a time of learning for those involved in Jagori.

*"We used to work on development issues, on poverty, and so on. Our feminist perspectives grew and deepened as we became strongly linked with the women's movement. It was when we all came together and started discussing, reading, hearing about all these different debates and issues that we began to realise how complicated patriarchy was, and applying this perspective to our work."* Kamla

Jagori's mandate became clearer as the founder members took their first steps forward. It was to be a 'documentation, training and communication' centre that would fulfill various needs of small action groups, primarily in rural areas

in the Hindi-speaking belt of North India. Through trainings, workshops, production of posters, songs, diaries, and other material, translation of material into Hindi and compilation of information packets, Jagori aimed to spread feminist consciousness in different ways to wider audiences and fill the gap of documentation and dissemination of information in the women's movement.

We saw rural women as our primary audience. The initial years saw the production of feminist material in different forms such as posters, songs, diaries and calendars. Reaching those who were not comfortable with words pushed everyone into constantly experimenting with different, innovative ways that went beyond the written word to disseminate the messages of the movement.



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## Creating Feminist Training Spaces

Training was a way of reaching out, especially in rural areas. It provided a space for mutual sharing. Rural women who came for the workshops discovered the joy of articulating shared realities and understanding the sources of external oppression and internal power. For Jagori, the voices and experiences of participants helped in sharpening the consciousness of multiple and evolving feminisms. Kamla quotes a rural woman who explains the concept of the relative power and position that men and women have in the family and society: *"Men in our families are like the sun, they have light of their own - they have resources, income, they are mobile, have the freedom to take decisions. Women are like satellites without any light of their own. They shine only if and when the sun's light touches them."*

"The training experience also helped in evolving the concept of feminist training and translating it into practice. Feminist training methodology moves beyond women's participation in placing gender at the centre of its analytical framework.

The objective is not merely to ensure women's involvement as actors in the process of learning, but to identify, locate and name the material and ideological factors responsible for women's subjugation, and thereby to initiate transformative changes in their lives."

*Feminist Training: Precepts and Practice (Experiences in the Mahila Samakhya Programme by Abha Bhaiya and Kalyani Menon-Sen)*

"Training is seen as a means of empowering all the women who participate, and guided by the understanding of the personal as political. This means that the experience of each woman serves as the starting point for understanding feminism as a political ideology and patriarchy as a conceptual tool. A wide variety of issues are covered in workshops ranging from women's status in the family, in relation to the State, health, violence, sexuality, women and work, and other contemporary issues."

*Kalpana Viswanath in her article "Spreading Feminist Consciousness" in the book "Living Collections" edited by ISIS International, Manila, 1997*



## Complex Contradictions - Spreading Feminism, Working with State Machinery

A defining moment came in 1988 with our decision to enter into a partnership with the Department of Education, Government of India, around the Mahila Samakhya programme. It was not an easy decision to take – on the one hand was the programme itself, conceptualised and brought into being by feminists and their allies within the bureaucracy. On the other, was our own critique of the state and the contradiction inherent in the notion of “empowerment by the state”. Viewpoints within the women’s movement were also sharply polarised – the debate, framed in terms of “in the state versus against the state”, faced the risk of becoming trapped in its own polemic.

For us, working in Mahila Samakhya was an opportunity to expand the boundaries of feminist solidarity – to give a new energy and force to feminist theory-building by linking it to the experiences and struggles of women who had so far remained on the margins of women’s movements. It was our chance to break the myth that feminism was an urban imposition with no relevance to the lives of “real” women, and challenge the assumption that development programmes being implemented by “malestream” organisations were addressing women’s realities.

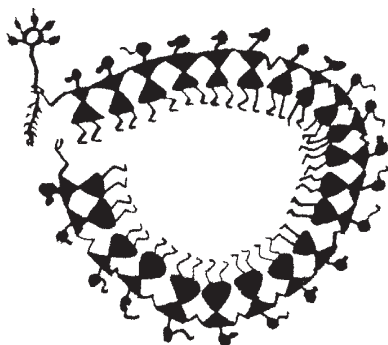
Like many other women’s organisations at the time, we were dismissed by development theorists as victims of “the small is beautiful” syndrome – processes that cannot be sustained at anything more than a tiny scale. Our work with Mahila

Samakhya challenged this analysis and demonstrated that it was possible to work with large numbers of women without compromising basic feminist values and ethics.

Even though the Mahila Samakhya programme was located within the Ministry of Education, it was built around feminist principles – not surprising, since feminist organisations were central to the long process of consultations in the lead-up to the programme. The vision of women’s education embodied in the programme was our own – not beginning and ending with literacy, but articulated as a process of learning, a continuous spiral of action and reflection, the outcome of which can be seen in the women’s increasing control over the realities of their lives. This was the same feminist vision of ‘conscientisation’ that we were working to realise through our activism, our materials, our campaigns, our training workshops.

The stand taken by Jagori at the time came in for criticism from several quarters. Many accused us of selling out, of allowing ourselves to be co-opted. We also came under attack from groups who saw our involvement with MS in Uttar Pradesh as an invasion by women allied to an alien philosophy and lacking sensitivity to the cultural context of Uttar Pradesh.

We shared our rationale and our analysis on several platforms – our writings and materials from this phase reflect these debates and are evidence of the richness of our praxis with Mahila Samakhya. Even at that time, we were under no illusions about MS – we were aware that a government programme, like an NGO, has its limits. For Jagori however, working with Mahila Samakhya became the bridge between struggles for survival at the grassroots and activism on the streets in Delhi – each drew on and gave meaning to the other. The MS experience also gave us invaluable insights on feminist organisation-building and feminist training, which are reflected in our functioning even today.



As Jagori continues to work with institutions – both state and non-state, these debates are constantly reiterated. We continue to negotiate for autonomous spaces, where our ideology and methodology prevail; we realise that while there are some spaces that demand specialists with

readymade ‘capsules’ or modules on ‘gender training’, there are still others where we continue to make innovative long-term interventions, combining conceptual understanding with activism and empowerment.

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## Every Issue is a Women’s Issue: Building Feminist Perspective

Jagori has constantly striven to respond to the needs of the times, believing that all issues are women’s issues and can be viewed through a feminist lens. Over the years, this belief has led us to engage in various feminist debates on issues that emerge from diverse struggles and movements.

A focus on building conceptual clarity and getting to the roots of any issue has always been central to Jagori’s work. Concepts of feminism and patriarchy and gender, and complex issues like trafficking, or contraception have been deconstructed and communicated in simple language without losing their complexity.

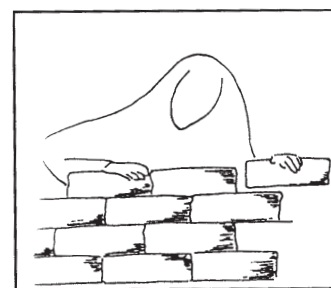
Jagori has been active in contributing to existing bodies of knowledge through action research using feminist research methodologies, which sees intervention as central to the research and a way of empowering those who are the ‘subject’.

Jagori’s action research project on Single Women was a conceptual breakthrough. It combined the building of a new conceptual category of ‘single women’ in a society that had so far invisibilised them, along with recognition for and strengthening of alternative support structures in their lives. As a part of the action research process, a number of women’s collectives were set up. One such outcome of this study was a single women’s collective in the working class settlement of Dakshinpuri, the ‘Ekal Aurat Mahila Sangathan’. This collective, over the years, has grown into an independent community group and today includes not only single women, but married women too, as well as young

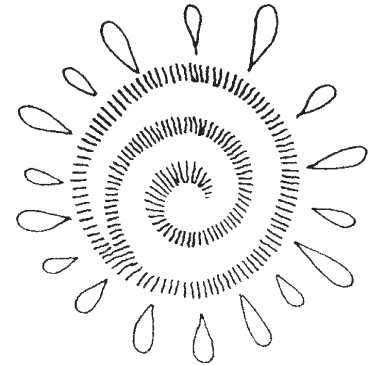
girls and boys. A prominent feature of the collective was the Tuesday night meetings they held in their office, situated in the home of one of the members. As the women worked in the informal sector, and were largely daily wage labourers, meetings in the daytime were ruled out. At these night meetings, cases and disputes would be resolved collectively through discussion and action. In addition, the night meetings also provided intimate spaces for celebration of friendship and solidarity between women.

Research, training and activism on women’s health was always conceptualised around the perception of women’s body as the battleground for patriarchy. Feminists sought to build a composite view of women’s physical, sexual, and mental health and wellbeing as compromised by patriarchal value systems and State policies while suggesting alternative models for healthcare and self help.

Jagori was the first group to organise a seminal conceptual clarity workshop on the issue of trafficking of women and children; this provided a platform for activists, academics and policy makers to build their understanding on these issues from a feminist perspective. Efforts are made to link with other groups and movements, such as the sex workers movement, with this understanding and perspective, and this in turn strengthens the movement.



Today, in addition to issues of violence against women, sexuality and communalism, Jagori is also involved in the creation of new feminist perspectives on issues such as globalisation, migration, women and work. It is also working towards a feminist conceptual understanding of peace, militarisation, masculinity and conflict.



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## Spreading the Message

Despite the progress that Jagori had made in various aspects of work, reaching out to the masses remains a challenge. Jagori and the women's movement have not been able to become household names. At one of the staff retreats held recently, 'expanding outreach' was defined as critical. In an effort to reach out to newer audiences, Jagori began to approach its goals in a more systematic manner, adapting to the times and trying different methods of spreading feminist consciousness.

The most recent effort was producing a set of three television spots on violence against women. These were broadcast on national and satellite television channels for well over two months, and screened at select cinema theatres as well. Not only was the medium new, but the messages were also chosen so as to enable people to perceive violence in new ways. One spot, therefore, looked at domestic violence – but not necessarily within the framework of marriage. The images were aimed at establishing the fact that violence occurs in various kinds of intimate relationships, and that it happens to young, educated,

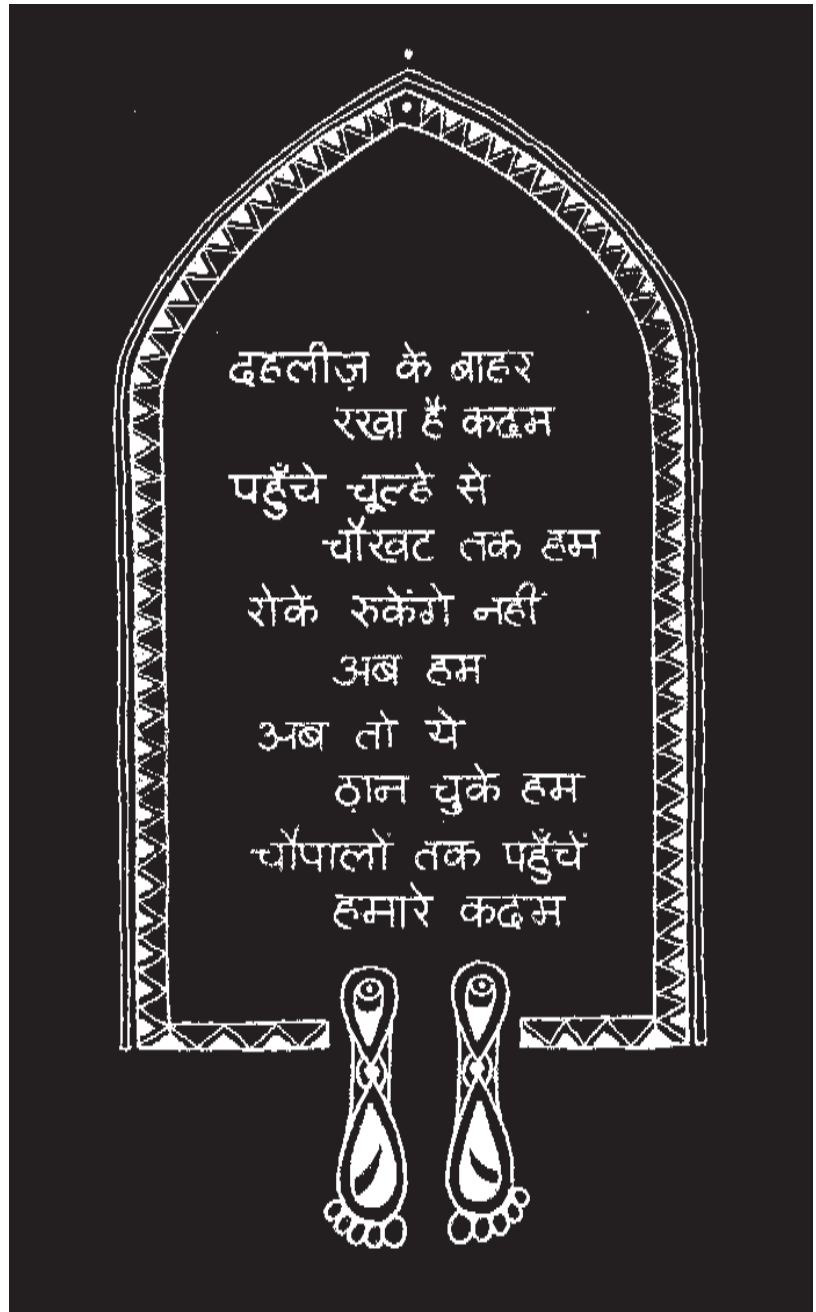
women in metropolitan cities. The aim was to establish violence against women as society's problem, not just a women's problem. Another spot looked at the violence we do to ourselves, the self-destruction of mind and body which is inherent to the search for a 'perfect figure'. The third spot focused on men, showing the socialisation of boys into 'men', and highlighting the role of men in working toward a life free from violence.

Jagori's website also offers a new way of influencing middle class women inside their homes. The unique StreeNet course, an internet course for activists on feminism and the women's movement in India, was co-designed by Jagori along with Akshara from Mumbai, Aalochna from Pune and Sakhi from Trivandrum.

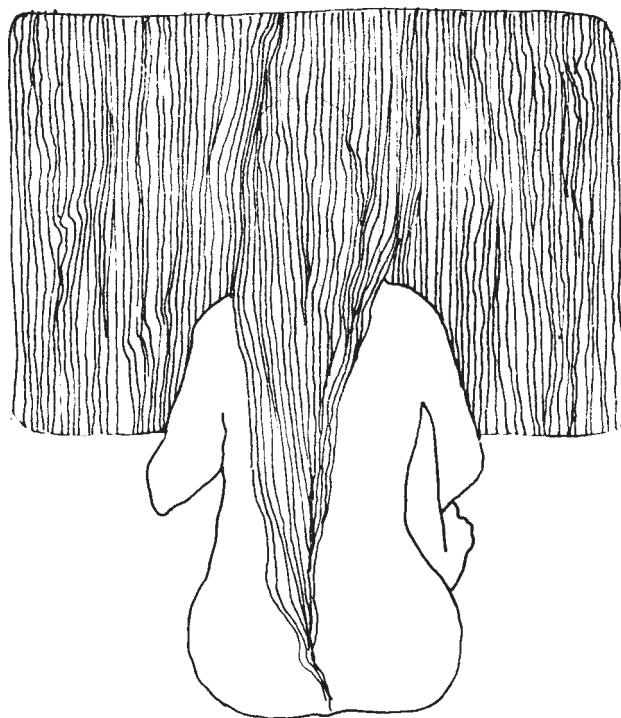
Training, production of material and research remain central to the vision of spreading feminist consciousness. However the overwhelming response to these newer methods have established the need for women's issues to be raised more prominently in mainstream media. The possibilities, now more so than before, are endless.



*I have stepped beyond  
the boundaries  
Traveled from the hearth  
to the threshold  
We cannot be stopped  
anymore  
We have pledged to  
conquer the world*



# Living Feminisms- Nurturing a Women's Space



“At its simplest, Jagori is where feminist theory meets practice.”

Through the years, the understanding of feminism and its application in every sphere has been the core of Jagori's work, its identity and its value systems. As the group was starting out, and grappling with the structure called patriarchy, it was faced with a critique that feminism was a Western word, a Western concept that only middle class women in the cities could espouse. In response, Jagori went in search of the many local feminisms which lived in each corner of the country, the 'narivad' in the rural areas, in village courtyards, in women's hearts, whispered over generations. We sought to bring it out into the open, giving a name to women's experiences of oppression and resistance, and enabling women to claim a language with which to express their lives.

Through its activities and political positions, Jagori evolved as an important 'feminist space', a space where women discovered and debated feminism, interpreted it in their own way, expanded its meaning, and tentatively tried to apply it in their lives and in their work. It remained dynamic, as a living feminism pervaded Jagori's politics and organisational structure. Jagori also saw as critical its role as a group bringing feminist perspectives to all issues, and building perspective of other groups and movements. Sometimes called 'too radical', sometimes not enough, the debates over the years have been dictated by the times and by the people who have contributed to Jagori.



There is no doubt that feminism is the most radical - 'ism' to touch our lives, as it questions basic power relations within the family, amongst intimate partners, husband and wife, within religion and other institutions in society. Though members of Jagori have always enjoyed a good, heated debate on feminist concerns and viewpoints, we have all faced some amount of discomfort and struggled with the contradictions this understanding brings. Although we may be chastened by the fact that we must pick our battles in our daily lives for our survival, and feel sometimes that we live two different lives - one within society and the other in our minds and hearts as feminists - the understanding has also brought out extraordinary courage in hundreds of women. Feminism continues to inspire us, rejuvenate us and keep us going.

## The Space...

### “JAGORI-A WOMEN’S SPACE”

‘Jagori in the last few years has increasingly become a women’s space. Many women and women’s groups visit us. They feel a sense of belonging and warmth here. We have been able to reach out and respond to the needs of groups working with rural and urban poor women. On the other hand, many people have come to us to help us with our work and find place for themselves. A place where woman can sit and discuss their personal and work problems, think about their future, pick up material to read and remain in contact and build friendships.

It is very heartening for us that although we have increased considerably in size, and are being looked upon as a resource centre, we still have not lost our old values and beliefs. Jagori is considered a space where women can find support, build long term relationships and turn to in times of crisis. In spite of all our work problems, tensions and feelings of dissatisfaction at not being able to fulfill all our aims and objectives, we continue to provide emotional and mental support to each other. Jagori provides a tremendous feeling of security and warmth - to an extent that for some of us it ceases to be merely a structure of bricks and cement, it is a space which has been created over the years through needs of people, mutual support and trust and a feeling of oneness with each other.

In the process we have grown and learnt from each other. All of us are committed to keeping this space open to women - a space that they can call their own. But that also means a lot of flexibility and freedom. Often our time is claimed by others and at the end of the day, we wonder what we have been doing the whole day!

### IN KALPANA’S WORDS -

“My first visit to Jagori were during the period of the March 8<sup>th</sup> 1991 Preparatory Meetings. At that time, I was also searching for a place for myself within the “autonomous women’s movement” and the women’s groups. Due to these preparatory meetings, I was coming to Jagori fairly frequently and during the last week, I spent quite a lot of time helping with posters and other things. I then decided to give a part-time commitment and spend around 2 hours in the afternoon. This I modified to a full time commitment in mid-April.

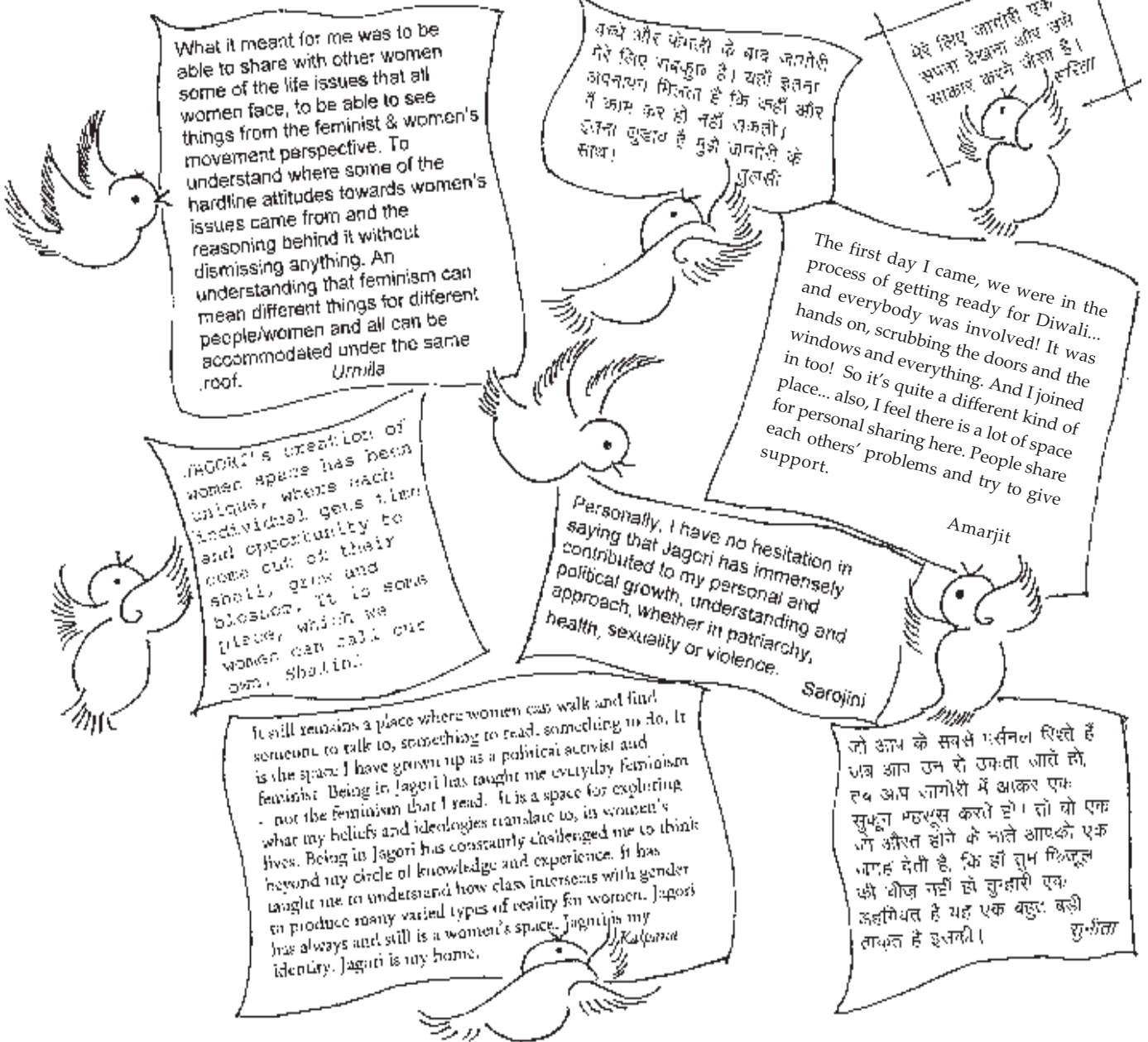
I chose Jagori both because it was very much part of the larger movement in Delhi and India, and because there was an openness within Jagori. Initially I was an outsider, but to my very pleasant surprise, this lasted only a few days.

Working within a setup like Jagori where people are experimenting with different forms of organising and managing has been a real experience. The feminism that Jagori and its members practice in their daily negotiations within the office slowly dawned upon me. Of course everyone’s level of belief and commitment differs, but almost everyone does believe in Jagori.

The feminist ideology results in time and energy being expended in discussion, defining spaces and rules. The result is more intensity in daily interactions. But the space is provided for sharing the good and the bad. Everyone can speak, can question, can define it as they choose to. For, along with rights come responsibilities. The disadvantage in this mode of functioning is that those with less or sometimes no commitment can completely evade responsibilities, not of their specific jobs, but of nurturing Jagori. But it is this nurturing and defining and negotiation that makes Jagori a special place which draws people towards it.”

*From ‘An Overview of Activities, 1988-1991’*

**Jagori members, past and present, voice their feelings about this feminist space....**



What it meant for me was to be able to share with other women some of the life issues that all women face, to be able to see things from the feminist & women's movement perspective. To understand where some of the hardline attitudes towards women's issues came from and the reasoning behind it without dismissing anything. An understanding that feminism can mean different things for different people/women and all can be accommodated under the same roof.  
*Urnila*

बच्चे और कंप्यूटर के बाद जगोरी मेरे लिए जन्मभूमि है। यहाँ इतना अपनापन मिलता है कि कहीं और मैं काम कर ही नहीं सकती। जगोरी सुखाल है मुझे जगोरी के साथ।  
*पुलसी*

ये लिए जागोरी एक अपना देखना और उसे साकार करने जैसा है।  
*सुरिता*

The first day I came, we were in the process of getting ready for Diwali... and everybody was involved! It was hands on, scrubbing the doors and the windows and everything. And I joined in too! So it's quite a different kind of place... also, I feel there is a lot of space for personal sharing here. People share each others' problems and try to give support.  
*Amarjit*

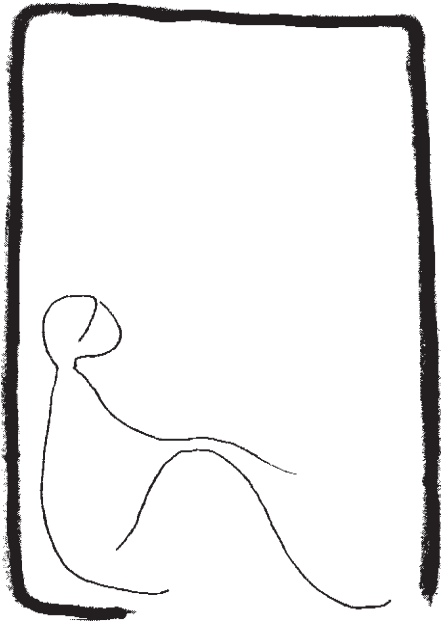
JAGORI's creation of women space has been unique, where each individual gets time and opportunity to come out of their shell, grow and blossom. It is some place, which we women can call our own. Shalini

Personally, I have no hesitation in saying that Jagori has immensely contributed to my personal and political growth, understanding and approach, whether in patriarchy, health, sexuality or violence.  
*Sarojini*

It still remains a place where women can walk and find someone to talk to, something to read, something to do. It is the space I have grown up as a political activist and feminist. Being in Jagori has taught me everyday feminism - not the feminism that I read. It is a space for exploring what my beliefs and ideologies translate to, in women's lives. Being in Jagori has constantly challenged me to think beyond my circle of knowledge and experience. It has taught me to understand how class intersects with gender to produce many varied types of reality for women. Jagori has always and still is a women's space. Jagori is my identity. Jagori is my home.  
*Kalpana*

जो आप के सबसे पर्सनल रिश्ते हैं जब आप उन से उफ़रते जाते हैं, तब आप जागोरी में आकर एक सुभूत महसूस करते हो। तो वो एक जो अंतरत होने के नाते आपको एक ग्राह देती है, कि हाँ वूम मिज़ल की चीज़ नहीं है बुझारी एक अहमियत है यह एक बहुत बड़ी ताकत है इसकी।  
*सुनीता*





*"I have a vision... a next step ready to be taken in the evolution of the women's movement, where the active mothers of sons and daughters have a greater responsibility in raising them as young people who will not so readily 'go to war' in all of the ways that society accepts and normalises. The principles of feminism will be taught and instilled in the home rather than packed up in a briefcase at the beginning of the day, taken out into the world, and returned to a home-life that is much the mimic of patriarchy.*

*These women will also consider caring for themselves as they do the rest of the world... while we have had to 'wake up the world for women!' the inner lives of many activists have been set aside in the hours, months and years of initiating crucial changes. Bodies, minds and spirits have been put on hold to do this work, and I see the next challenge as nurturing oneself as much as nurturing change."*

**Diane**

## The Debates and Dilemmas

Being in a feminist group creates a heightened awareness of our own socialised prejudices. There has never been a dearth of issues to debate! Even today, our lunch-time remains a special space for eating together and just chatting on all issues – professional, personal and political.

A founder member remembers the key debates of the early years, *“I think class was an issue that was confronted often. We were a mixed group with some women from the community, including a woman construction worker who was raped. The other thing that became quite a hot issue was that of single and married women and the privilege associated with these. There were a lot of single women here and we had these discussions regularly.”*

Both class and the single women/married women divide continue to be issues today. The understanding of class or marriage, or other unequal or oppressive institutions, does not necessarily empower us to disengage from it.

The issue of class is a difficult one, and the everyday interaction between people of different classes is both enriching and a challenge to us. Language too, the divide between Hindi and English, creates subtle hierarchies that must be recognised and constantly challenged.

On the institution of marriage, one member of the group feels that *“It is very clear that this is one of the institutions formed by patriarchal structures and systems, and I have great resistance to it. But I also understand that there are problems with this. There is one school of thought, that married women are perpetuating patriarchy by getting into it. But if we analyse our own context and culture and economic set-up, we feel it is so difficult to completely negate the reality of marriage in one’s life and exclude them (married women). I know they are privileged in some ways in society – (they have access to) many things, like material gains, social security – but there are dilemmas and problems also.”*

Another member says, *“It was a tremendously difficult decision for me to get married. Patriarchy really hits you in the face when you get married. I think I was much more brash before I was married. After entering it, I understood why some women do what they do... How we may not believe in something, but still have to do it. There’s so much at stake! I understood not to be judgemental... and that married women are feminists who are negotiating at the most basic level every single day.”*

Another member states that there should be no *“divide between good feminist/bad feminist, less feminist/more feminist. One has to understand that feminists are feminists. Everyone has their own feminism.”*

Others in the group are comfortable about their positions. *“I think I don’t want to make any judgements for anybody else, but, I feel that politically I am not for marriage. For myself, being single is the best way to be.”*

*“I have been single for the last 40 years. I think given the choice even tomorrow, I may even think about it. I like my life as it is, not that I don’t have responsibilities. There are more responsibilities as a single person because you do have to take care of... apart from yourself, your brothers, sisters, friends.”*

The term ‘single’ itself remains a point of contention. *“I have a problem with this word ‘single’. I feel it has a very ‘bechara’ kind of tone. It also has a political meaning I know, which we carry as a political identity. But I feel that the State or society does not recognise people like me, for example, I am in a relationship but still I will be considered a single woman! I am also a complete family, but why am I not in that category? Anything which is institutionalised is a problem, whether marriage or singlehood.”*

Being ‘single’ also has some difficulties. One member feels

that “because you are a single woman you are taken for granted. You can travel, no matter what. There are many more expectations and demands on time from the organisation on a single woman.”

Other issues that come up often for debate include sexuality, prostitution, pornography, morality, monogamy and lesbianism. Also likely to spark off debates are discussions around the ‘family’ and the possibilities of creating alternative families, the legitimacy of violence in response to violence, the ethics of funding, co-option and mainstreaming, and how to dispel myths about feminists!

Working in a feminist organisation has its own share of dilemmas. One member says, “People have so many myths about feminism. Because you are associated with a feminist organisation, you are labelled as a man-hater. Even in workshops this happens! At the first glance people will react to

you, question you. It’s very problematic, you have to prove yourself. First you are a woman, then you are a trainer, then you are young. It becomes a double burden to prove your calibre.”

Another member says, “Sometimes you have to strategise to avoid this. When I go into the villages for example, I don’t say ‘I am a feminist’ upfront. Because they will then block themselves off from me. I won’t be able to communicate with them. I use other words like ‘women’s perspective’, ‘women’s issues’ but I don’t dilute the politics of what I am saying.”

Our ideology also creates stumbling blocks in everyday working with other organisations. Despite many attempts, it has not been possible for us to work with some governmental departments or international organisations, due to divergent ideologies.

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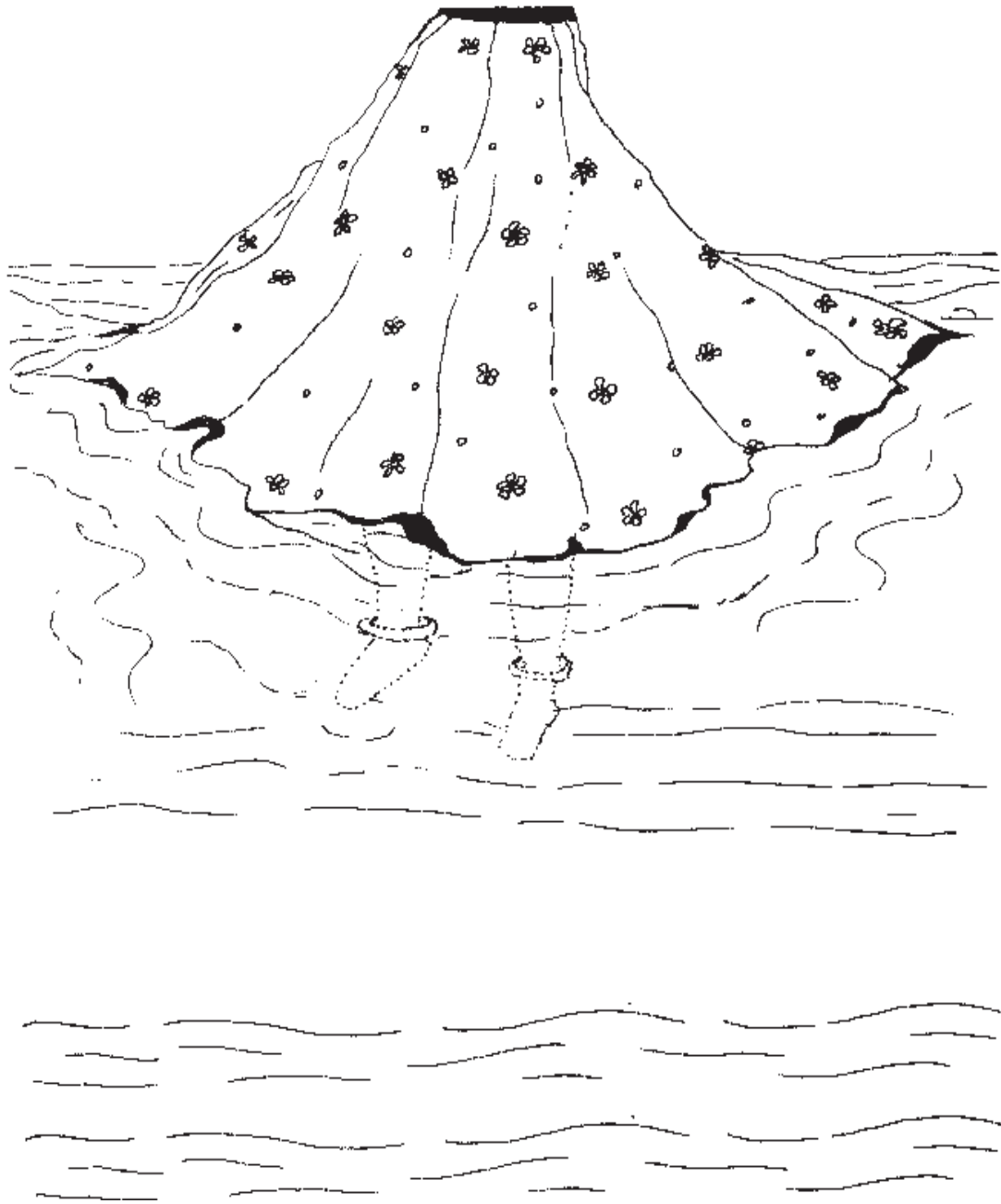
## Reshaping Feminism: A Moment of Reflection

At some points however, we all need time and space to make sure that our ideology has not made us inflexible, or static. Some time and space, away from the intensity that a political framework like feminism creates. The activists involved in making the first Jagori notebook, describe their experience: *‘The brush strokes of protest painted all our experiences into one colour.’*

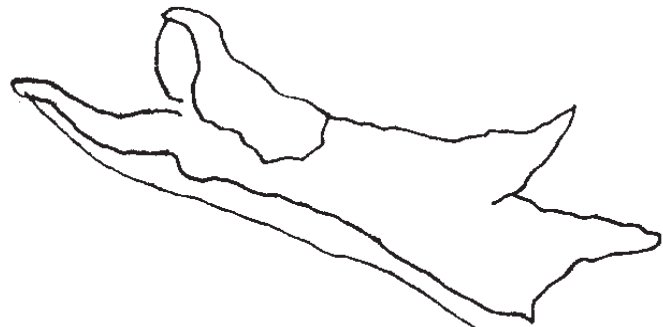
Kalpana writes: “Feminism provides a framework for women to understand their lives. But in embracing an –ism, they are bound to close themselves to some experiences. Instead of seeing life in various hues, they become one-sided.

Feminism helped break some silences, but created other ones within.”





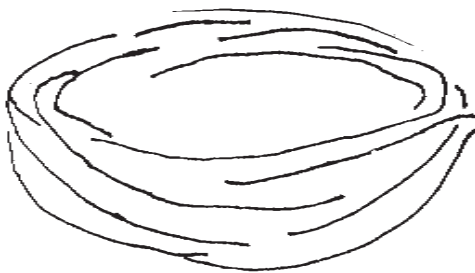
# Creativity as Empowerment



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"I used to write  
down my thoughts;  
later I came to know  
that it was poetry –  
you called it poetry"  
– *Shanti*

"Creative expression has been a very essential component of our identity as Jagori. Song cassettes, posters, calendars, 8<sup>th</sup> March documents or newsletters for the village level activists – we see all this as important ways to regain our identity and confidence and to project a strong collective image so we start valuing ourselves. Creativity is integral to women's work and life – and for our self assertion and empowerment, it is important to acknowledge it and share it with a wider group."



*From 'Jagori Report 1988-91'*

*Jagori is about words – the spoken and unspoken word. Words that are sometimes whispered in night sessions and intimate meetings, sometimes discovered, or spoken in workshops and intense debates, on occasion shouted or sung at a protest or 'dharna', and sometimes drawn, embroidered, written or even typed. It is also about music and moving images on audio, video and computer. But the unchanging metaphor is woman; the idiom and language are taken from women, and the medium that is selected is always the most popular, accessible and appropriate – the one that best mirrors women's experiences and draws them out of veiled silences.*



### तोड़ तोड़ के बंधनों

तोड़ तोड़ के बंधनों को देखो बहनें आती हैं  
ओ देखो लोगो देखो बहनें आती हैं  
आएंगी, जुल्म मिटाएंगे, वो तो नया जमाना लाएंगी  
तोड़ तोड़ के बंधनों को...

कमला भसीन



Jagori's songs, posters, notebook diaries, and other material have always been creative responses to the national political scenario at the time – whether it was the Jagori notebook on sexuality and reproductive health when women's reproductive rights were being violated by the State with impunity, or the notebook on women's participation in local governance following the 73<sup>rd</sup> constitutional amendment (reserving one third of seats in the *Panchayat* for women). The decision to use multiple media was a political one based on the need to reach out to different kinds of audiences. While the written word was crucial, our focus was to reach out beyond the literacy barrier. By using oral and visual media, we believed that we could disseminate the messages of the women's movement to non-literate masses in the most remote of villages.

### Jagori Song Cassettes: Springs of Inspiration

"Singing has been an important part of our culture, specially of women's culture. For centuries, through the medium of songs, women have expressed their anxieties, frustrations, joys and dreams. Using the same traditions, we created song out of our perceptions of reality, our new consciousness and our strength. The echoes of such songs come from different parts of our country and the world and they prove that our strength, creativity and links are growing!"

*From the introduction to the Jagori song book 'Let's Sing', 1986*

Jagori makes that critical link between theory and practice. Jagori's support, linkages and resource material have played a critical role in our struggles as a field-based group. Jagori has adapted the culture of song... and the song book has now become a part of feminist expression in every rural and urban setting across the Hindi speaking belt.

*Madhavi Kukreja*

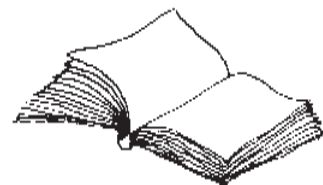
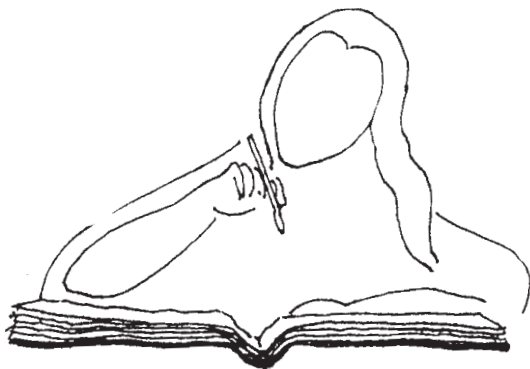
## The Jagori Notebooks: A Journey through 'Spaces'...

The Jagori notebooks, or diaries, as they are sometimes called, have been very special spaces for all the women who have been involved in producing them, for the women who have revealed their personal lives in them and for the women who have owned and used them.

The notebooks are a treasure chest of writings and drawings reflecting women's experiences in the context of the political climate of the time. They were a space for women to articulate their responses, using metaphors that invoked dormant realities for many readers.

The notebooks departed from conventional women's writing by bringing out vibrant, exuberant images of women discovering and celebrating their own strength and togetherness. They included information about menstruation and a menstrual calendar. Later, a fertility calendar was added. They also contained information about women's legal rights, listed names of women's groups in the Hindi speaking areas of India and included a calendar for women to keep track of their work schedule.

The Jagori notebooks symbolise, in a way, our journey of activism and creativity as they interweave through the last twenty years.



## A Glimpse of the Jagori Notebooks

### *Mere Andar Tak (Journey Into Myself)*

In 1988 we brought out our first notebook...

We had been looking into various registers, note books, loose sheets that women activists use to keep notes, to write their own poetry, or just to put down new thoughts – new ideas. Perhaps we could create a notebook that women could call their own, a notebook containing information that would be helpful in their personal and political lives?

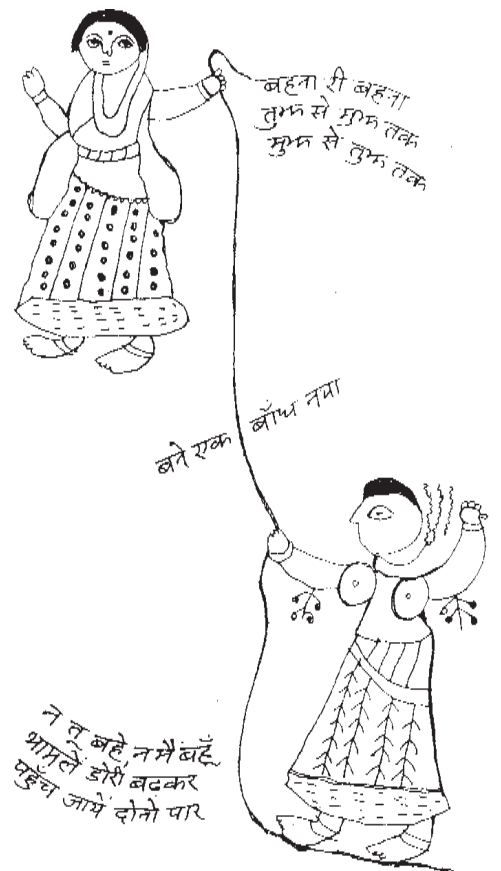
Some of us, who had been part of the movement, felt the need to explore our identities as women – we got together, shared our innermost feelings about 'my relationship with myself'. We wrote poetry and prose – the poetry and visuals were woven together.

This was a step towards mutual empowerment, of breaking silences around women's experiences, legitimising them, finding spaces to articulate them...

### *Mujh Se Tujh Tak (From Me to You)*

In 1989, we created the notebook 'Mujh Se Tujh Tak'- The writings in this notebook explored the multiple meanings and dimensions of friendship between women - the sharing, the companionship, the intimacies, the excitement of entering forbidden territories of loving and living. The process of making the notebook was different from the first. In the first notebook, it was the Jagori team that worked on it but this time it had moved into the hands of the community health workers. They wrote the poetry and drew the visuals – in their homes, in the slums and in collective work spaces. It was a joint effort of Jagori, Action India and the Community Health Programme.

"Last year's notebook reached some women. One friend wrote 'this notebook has become a part of my life. I can use it the way I wish! I write my thoughts in it. When I peeped into my friend's notebook and read her thoughts there, I saw that although she was bound, in the pages she was free. Her life is like mine – we are both bound, but in here we are free.'" *Notebook 1989*





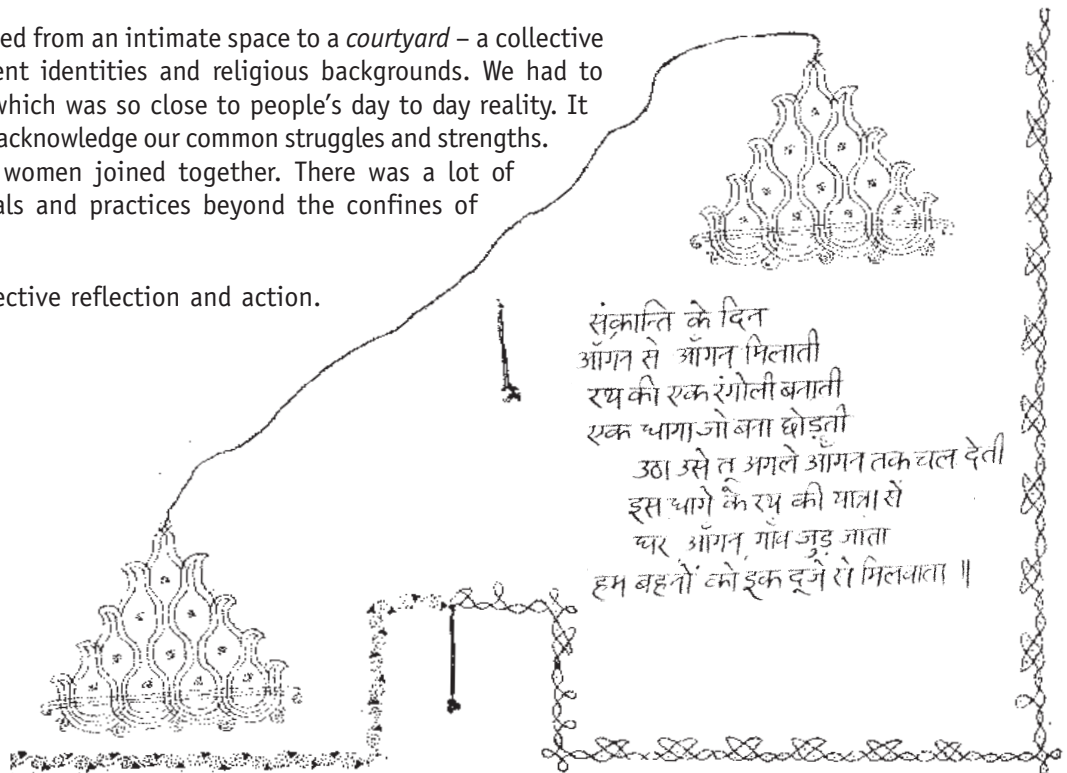
## ***Aangan Se Aangan Tak (From One Courtyard to Another)***

By 1990 the Jagori notebooks had become part of our day to day life. Women identified with them and treated them as their own - something that belonged exclusively to them.

In 1990, women and their struggle to shape a life of dignity was once again placed at the centre of the political canvas. Fundamentalist politics created deep rifts between communities - battles between men were fought on the bodies of women. And it was women who were asserting their strength and standing firm against violence - coming out on the streets to declare their feminist solidarity and insist on their right to claim a common identity as women. There were riots and tensions even as the notebook was in process - minority communities lived in fear and insecurity...

...And so the notebook moved from an intimate space to a *courtyard* - a collective space for women of different identities and religious backgrounds. We had to protect that togetherness which was so close to people's day to day reality. It was important to assert and acknowledge our common struggles and strengths. This time rural and urban women joined together. There was a lot of emphasis on common rituals and practices beyond the confines of religious identities.

It was an assertion of collective reflection and action.



## Chal Chalen Shabdon Ke Mele (Let Us Go to the Festival of Words)

'Let's go to the festival of words' – was the theme of the 1991 notebook. For two years we had been working with rural, poor women with no literacy skills, and had done training with nearly 350 of them. This year we wanted to talk about a new area of empowerment that was very close to their reality – literacy and knowledge for women.

At the national level, literacy was being seen as a critical issue. While we were apprehensive of the universalised model of literacy and education, and did not believe that lack of literacy skills could be equated with ignorance, we still needed to respond to the need for learning. We felt that it was important to first create an atmosphere for learning, for reading and writing.

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# जामन

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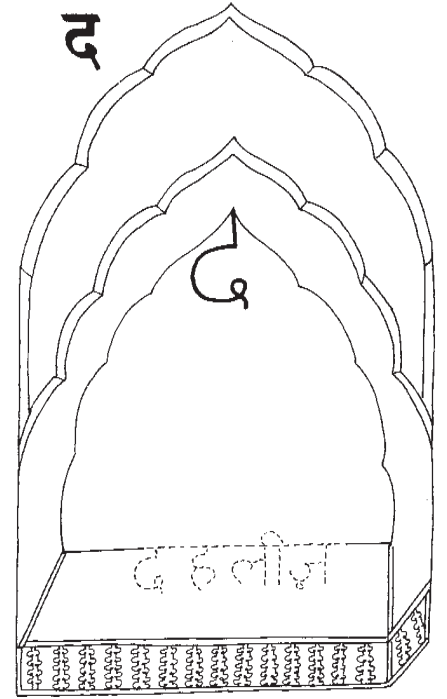
थै ज़मनि की क्या ही गया  
बच्चा जना मैने पति का कैसे ही गया  
जब पड़ोसन से जामन लाकर दही जमाया  
तो क्या दही पड़ोसन का ही गया

क क क क क क क क क

# जननी

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We visualised the notebook as an invitation - to those who feared the written word - to familiarise themselves with letters and words, touch them, smell them, experience them and gradually create their own words and meanings. For each alphabet we thought of three women-centred words, wrote poems on those words and did calligraphy. The rest we left for the user of the diary to create and write.



कब तक बाँधे रखोगे हमकी  
फर्ज़-प्यार की तकरीर से  
कभी न कभी जासंगे उस पार  
तुम्हारी बनाई दहलीज़ से

Our diaries have been in great demand because they gave lot of people a space to realise their creativity. I remember that I was supposed to go for the 'Calicut Conference' but was unable to do so because of this diary. This is the best document I have been part of producing.

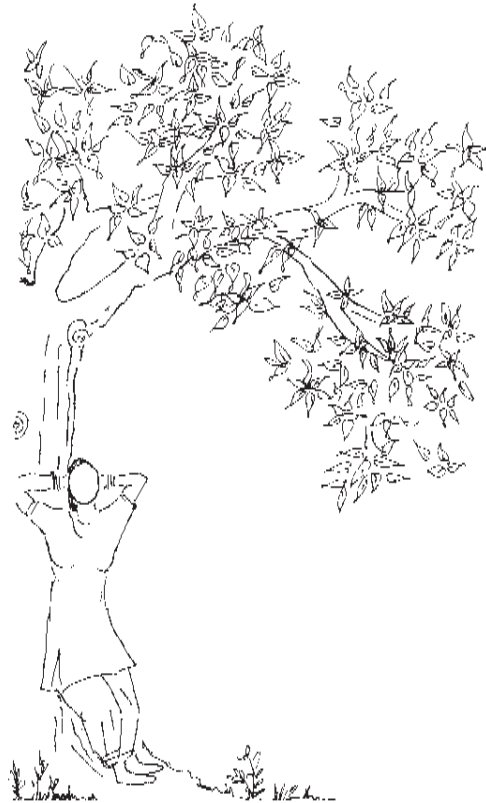
Juhi

## ***Tu Ekal Main Ekal*** **(You are Single, I am Single)**

By now, it was a part of our tradition - to document women's experience and the women's movement creatively in the form of a notebook. The 1991 notebook placed the spotlight on an identity that was slowly being unraveled in the Jagori space.

Until now, the women's movement had focused on the different kinds of oppression that women faced *within* situations of marriage such as dowry murders and domestic violence. But as we worked with the widows in the riot-hit areas following the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, or protested the murder of Roop Kanwar on the funeral pyre of her husband, in the name of 'Sati', or campaigned for the cause of Shah Bano, who approached the court for maintenance from her husband who had deserted and divorced her - we realised that there was very little understanding about the struggles of single women. The question that reverberated in our minds was, did a woman not have a right to live outside the institution of marriage? Did she not have the right to an identity of her own?

तेरी मुकती हुई डाली की कोपल  
अगर मेरे तन को छूले।  
तेरी जड़ों की गर्मीइश मिले मुझे  
तो मैं चौड़ा सा झराम कर लूँ



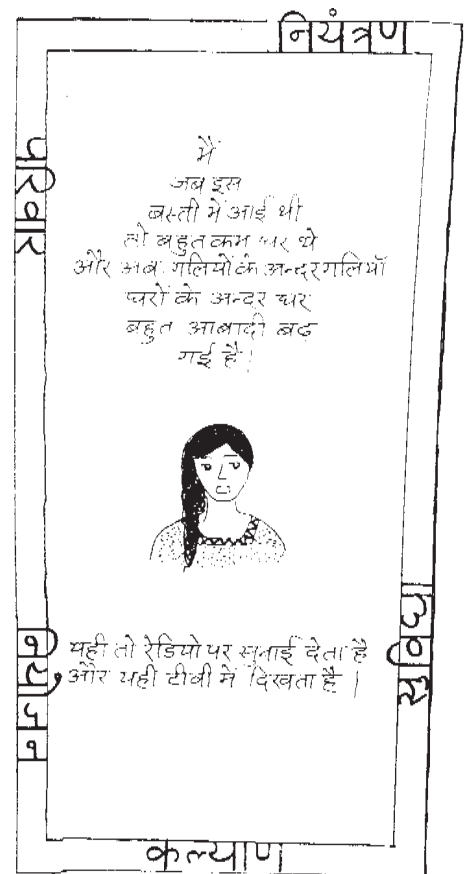
## **Tan Se Man Tak (From the Body to the Mind)**

In 1993, the idea for the diary was conceived from workshops, activism and campaigning around the subject of women's knowledge and autonomy over their own bodies, reproduction, health and sexuality. We saw women's lack of knowledge about the body and its processes, as well as the shame and silence that surrounded issues of the body and sexuality, as central to patriarchal control. We resolved to look at our bodies through our own eyes, beyond others' definitions and perceptions, and outside the framework of shame, 'honour', taboo.

This diary explored women's experiences of their bodies at different stages of their lives. It included experiences of adolescence, the awakening of sexual desire, pregnancy and illness. The motifs were powerful with graphic depictions of women's sexuality as a flower in bloom, and as the receptacle of the universe... Some of the graphics were controversial, and the content radical, because they exploded extant myths about women's sexuality and celebrated it.

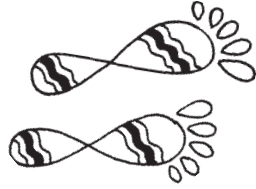
## **Mera Sharir Mere Phaisle (My Body, My Decisions)**

1994 – India's family planning programme, in its attempt to control fertility rates, often violates women's reproductive rights. Family planning is targeted towards the poor, and incentives and disincentives are used to make them produce fewer children. As women's groups we had been asking for a policy which would take into consideration wider factors such as resource distribution, high child mortality rates, son preference and status of women in the household. A number of sophisticated and expensive hormonal contraceptives such as Norplant, Net-en and Depo-Provera had been introduced in the Indian market on the pretext that it would increase women's choices. But in the name of choice, women were in fact losing control over their bodies and fertility. In a country like ours where the family planning programme is so coercive, these contraceptives can be easily misused and be given to women without her consent or without complete information. Also, our health infrastructure is not equipped to carry out proper screening and follow up, which would be essential for women using them. We had therefore been campaigning against these contraceptives.



The diary of 1994 was focused around these issues – once again we presented the view from the margins - thought-pieces that revealed women's experiences in the family planning programme.

## **Phaisle Aur Phaasle (Decisions and Distances)**



The 1998 notebook was a response to the outcome of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment, which reserved one third of seats in the *Panchayat* for women. Suddenly women were making their way to the political arena, without any preparations or support structures. Many questions and challenges confronted them. They were being ridiculed as “rubber stamps” by those who had a vested interest in seeing them fail.

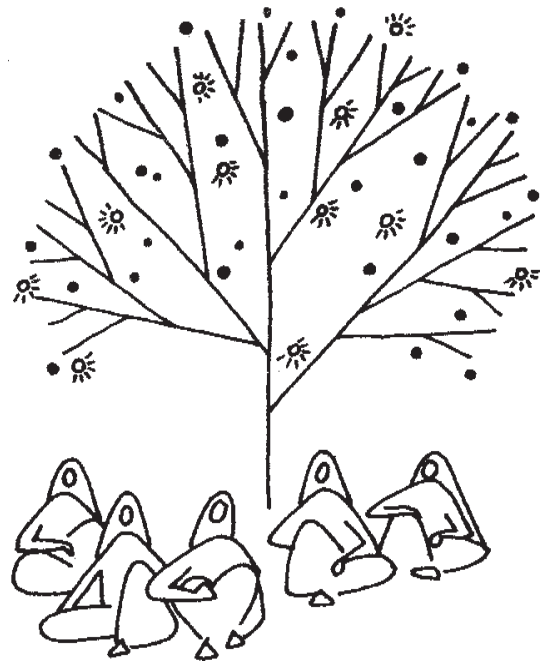
We saw the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment as another milestone in women’s ongoing struggle to claim political space. These women were hesitantly reaching out to the women’s movement - we felt we could not fail them.

The notebook traced the line from the inner courtyards to the ‘*chaupal*’ - the central platform in the village where the *Panchayat* traditionally meets. Our team traveled to remote villages and recorded the voices of women who had joined the *Panchayat*, and chronicled their struggle for rights and acknowledgement in the home as well as the struggle to face the complex machinations of politics.

## **Main Aur Mera Thikana (I and My Shelter)**

In the notebook of 1992, we chronicled the lives of individual women; this time our focus was on stories of women who had transformed their difficult circumstances into personal victories, and who had challenged traditional notions of ‘home’ in their lives to create safe, affirming spaces for themselves.

The motif that we chose for this notebook was ‘*thikana*’ or shelter. We questioned within ourselves the traditional meanings of shelter, and explored the possibility of finding anchor - anchor within ourselves, in structures other than the traditional family, in linkages with the women’s movement, and in our connection with nature.



योजना हमारी  
काम हमारा  
शासन हमारा  
राज हमारा

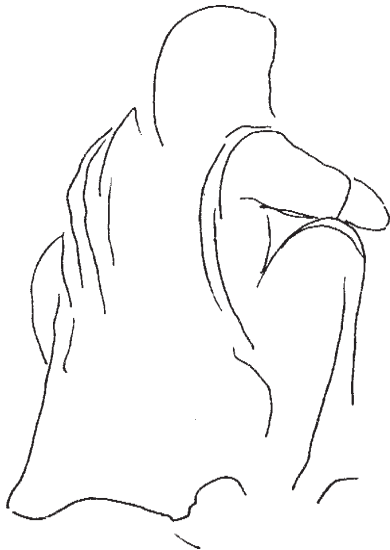
## Calendars

As the organisation grew older, many of us felt the need to dialogue among generations, on the issue of ageing... In a world where youth and beauty are at a premium, how do we view the beauty of wisdom, the wrinkles that life puts on our faces? Once again we found a whole ocean of truths beneath the surface.

The most recent calendar saw a change in form; it was a creative response to a deeply felt threat from the external world - that of the rise of right wing Hindu fundamentalist forces. The aim was to put back on record the historical worship of feminine sexual energy and its erasure from history and public memory.

"...This exploration of the past is located in our constant awareness of the present; a present where women live on the margins - where sati, dowry, female infanticide, witch-hunting, domestic violence, rape are a daily reality. The systematic defacement and erasure over time of these figures of independent, sexual, feminine power is an evidence not only of the centrality of female energy in our iconography, but its slow marginalisation in history, archaeology and the collective conscience."

*From the introduction to the Calendar "Adi Anadi- Excavation of Feminine Memory"*



*Sixty years  
Four floods  
Three daughters  
Fourteen grandchildren...*



*I look into my life and read the pages  
A very familiar book*

*I don't remember when  
life became the book  
experiences solidified  
feelings etched*

*almost as though  
it is me no longer.*



We are now facing challenges from a globalised media... and times are not what they used to be. The novelty of the notebook is no longer there, as many organisations produce planners and diaries each year; the calendar too, has limited takers. The professionalisation of production poses many questions to the *organic process of creation* that we have believed in and practised...

I am part of the material production team where I have been able to start writing, and designing, or doing a bit of layout and artwork, this is one place where I can actually experiment and do things, right from the start.

Dhivya

One strength of Jagori is its way of empowering women through feminist literature, which is touching and easy to understand across any boundaries and limits. Each of the materials published by Jagori has touched my life as it is very close to reality. Kamla's writings, songs and jokes are like oxygen that revive me and brighten up this tough path...

Nimisha

I would have joined a designing school, but I was asked to do my masters, as it is believed to be more formal... I still wished that I had some professional skills in this field.

But here in Jagori, I find myself doing the kind of things I have always wanted to do, my skill is valued; I learn new skills as I go along. The entire Jagori experience is something in itself.

Amrita

I still get goose pimples when I recall our meetings to do those diaries. Perhaps a moment would happen which would conspire to bring us to do an encore...

Jogi

I think Jagori culture is to be creative, to be vibrant... that's one thing that has not changed. It's still a creative space.

Manjima

...In each endeavour, it has been the collective process that has played a starring role while the product in itself has been secondary, an important affirmation of our ability to articulate, analyse and affect. This has encouraged us to look for new ways of expression – through the Internet and through visual media. Creativity has empowered us to speak our minds, bare our hearts, call for change. The creative spaces that Jagori offers and characterises will remain a hotbed of ideas and emotions, and this river has no end.

## मेरी लिखन जैसी मेरी पढ़ाई

- शान्ति

### मेरी पढ़ाई की सुरूआत

हूँ मैं अपना रास्ता निकालती। जब मैं बड़े-बड़े आकाशों की तरह बहने से थकती हूँ तो सड़क की पट्टी पर बैठकर लिखती हूँ जैसे सारा पढ़ाई के दुःखों को जैसी लिखती लिखती लेती हूँ।

जैसे तै: उमर, अरु अमरुती की/उल हूँ, तो मैं -उल्लेख हूँ और फेरे कतर / नराम, पूरा लिखती से लिखती कलम कि (गल / मेरे) जीवन में सौर खलक नई लड़ाई। सुन्दरी लिखती किताब को पढ़ती हूँ कष्टी यह सब अमरुत जैसी पाता पूरा है- उसका मतलब क्या है, लिखती हूँ।

जब मैं बहुत लिखती हूँ मेरे लिखन की दुनियाँ जैसी घेरे में साकारों को ले जाती हूँ। उरवा जै: तपन



सुन्दरी और सारा के दिनों में आराम में लिखती हूँ। जब मैं जै: उल्लेख हूँ: सब नया सौर, सारी को उरवा से सुन्दरी - उल्लेख पढ़ाई को पढ़ती हूँ।

क्या मेरी लिखती किताब को तुम सज्जोगी या मेरी तरफ उल्लेख करोगी ?



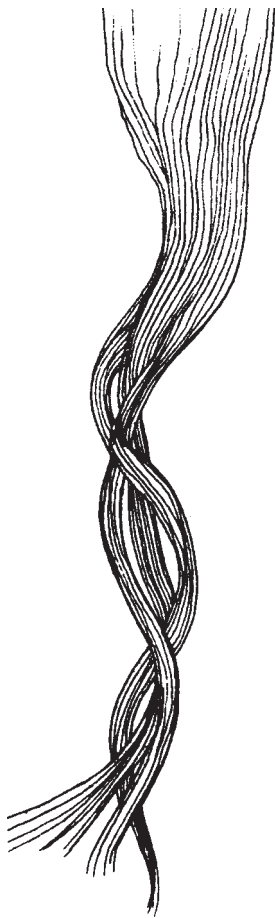


# Changing Tides- the Women's Movement

## Why we are part of the women's movement?

...Because a woman's work is never done and is underpaid or unpaid and is boring or repetitious and we are the first to get the sack and what we look like is more important than what we do and if we get raped its our fault and if we get bashed we must have provoked it and if we raise our voices we are nagging bitches and if we enjoy sex we are nymphos and if we don't we are frigid and if we love women its because we cant get a real man and if we want to get married we are out to trap a man and if we don't, we are unnatural and if we stand up for our rights we are aggressive and "unfeminine" and if we don't we are typical weak females and for lots and lots of other reasons we are part of the women's movement.

*Source: [www.now.org](http://www.now.org), adapted from a leaflet produced by a student group in England*



Jagori emerged from the women's movement, and continues to locate its work in its ambit. Having been part of various defining campaigns and struggles over the years, Jagori has also raised various issues and brought them into the movement. It has been a dialectical process - one in which the movement has shaped Jagori's work and politics, and Jagori in turn has shaped the issues and debates which have marked the movement.

Among the issues we have raised in the women's movement have been that of single women, sexuality, mental health of women, safe travel for women in the railways, and consistent advocacy on violence against women.

Jagori has also played a significant role as a member of the National Coordination Committee for conceptualisation and coordination of the biannual National Conference of Women's Movements in India.

Believing in synergies between women's activism and women's studies, Jagori has regularly engaged with the Indian Association of Women's Studies (IAWS), and housed the Secretariat in 1995. We saw this as an opportunity for building conceptual clarity and on building bridges between academic spaces and the grassroots. We have always believed that concepts must be based on the realities on the ground, and that the concepts influenced the form and direction of activism and political understanding for generations to come. Jagori has also supported women's resource centres in other parts of India, especially rural areas.

## The Political Identity of Single Women

Jagori's pioneering action research project in 1991 on single women marked a revolutionary step in the women's movement. For the first time, the issue of 'single women' ('ekal aurat') as a definitive category of women outside the structure of marriage was brought into the women's movement. What started off as an initiative of some organisations working in some slum areas became a critical part of the women's movement and Jagori's work. Not only was the issue consequently raised independently in workshops in the National Conferences of the Women's Movements, there was also churning within the movement when many groups began discussing this issue with political clarity.

The notion of solidarity based on shared oppression which underpinned the women's movement in the eighties gave way in the nineties to a gradual acceptance of the fact that our identities as women were built around multiple axes of difference. The rape and murder of Dalit women by men from the oppressor castes, communal violence, the appropriation of tribal lands by non-tribals – each incident compelled us to question the fragile foundations of our 'unity'.

Our understanding of identity politics became more complex through our exchanges and interactions with Dalit women from the poorest class, as they unravelled the intricate patterns of powerlessness in which they were enmeshed. The Mathura rape case and the Rameeza Bee rape case were terrifying demonstrations of the powerlessness conferred by multiple subordinations. In strategising and mobilising around these issues, women's groups had to steer a strategic course to bring the focus on the special vulnerabilities of women from tribal and minority communities.

In working with women from different class, caste and regional backgrounds, we saw our role as one of surfacing these differences rather than trying to submerge them. Creating the space for women to recognise and acknowledge

the fact that some of us derived greater privilege from our proximity to patriarchal power was a political act. Exploring and exposing the conceptual dimensions and real-life implications of difference was a strategy for subverting their divisive potential.

A series of events in the next few years compelled us to recognise yet another aspect of women's identity that was entwined in vulnerability and powerlessness.

In the anti-Sikh riots of 1984, more than 3,000 women of the Sikh community in Delhi lost their husbands in the violence. In supporting these women, it was clear to us that their collective identity as members of families and of the Sikh community gave them a sense of security and safety. Yet, it was impossible to ignore the oppression and subordination they were subjected to by the same families and community. The sharpest expression of this special vulnerability was the pressure faced by many of these women from their families, who wanted them to get married to a brother-in-law or other male relative of their husband, a traditional practice ostensibly designed to "keep family property within the family".

For hundreds of Sikh women, their determination to take control of their own lives brought them into direct conflict with their own families. Women were struggling – to claim compensation from the government, to get independent bank accounts and ration cards, to get their houses registered in their own names, to keep the government jobs that they were being offered from being claimed by men from their marital families. In the process, their identities as "single women" came into direct conflict with their identity as Sikh women and created turmoil in the community.

The Shahbano case in 1986 again exposed the special vulnerabilities of single women. The way in which the

government and religious leaders conspired to undermine the legal rights of Muslim women to claim maintenance, opened up a new debate on the rights of divorced women.

In 1986, a young woman, Roop Kanwar, was forced to share her husband's funeral pyre and was burnt to death. Her family and community claimed that she was a *sati*. Women's groups in Rajasthan led the movement to expose the crime and its origins in the common patriarchal and commercial interests of Rajputs and Brahmins. The issue was posed in stark terms – does a woman have the right to live after her husband dies?

Roop Kanwar's death was not an isolated incident. There was more and more documented evidence that women in Bengal and Bihar were being labelled as 'witches' and killed. The fact that all these were women who had lost their husbands and had inherited his property, women with some claim to an autonomous identity, exposed the patriarchal logic behind these murders.

We saw each of these incidents within the context of a larger patriarchal strategy to crush attempts by single women to claim an independent identity outside the institution of marriage. Their rights were being undermined and every attempt to break free of oppression within their families and communities was being ruthlessly crushed. These acts were an attempt to drive home a basic message – a woman without a husband has no right to exist. Attacks on single women were becoming more and more frequent – more and more, religious precepts were being invoked to justify murder and brutal violence against single women.

The women's movement could no longer ignore the issues of 'single women'. We were compelled to accept that our analyses and strategies had so far been developed primarily from the perspective of women living within the institution of marriage. It became necessary to build this new aspect of difference into our conceptual framework and strategising – to expose the multiple sources of vulnerability and



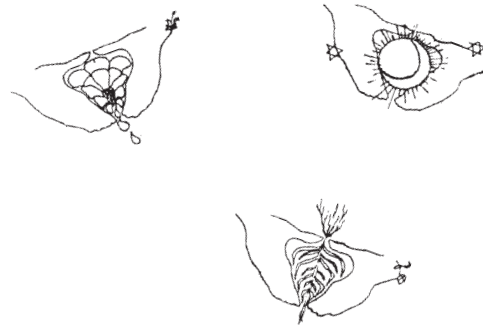
oppression in the lives of single women and to trace the convergent interests of their families, the state and religious institutions in suppressing their assertions and silencing their voices.

## Sexuality

Jagori organised a session on women's experiences of their sexuality in the Northern Regional Conference of Women's Movements at Kanpur in 1993. This was the first time any such session had been held. The report of activities, 1992-93 states, "The session on women and sexuality was approached differently. This issue is only beginning to be spoken about in the women's movement. We were able to get women to talk about their experiences and were able to put them into a political context. We hopefully helped women to recognise the negation and oppression of our sexuality through strong patriarchal control of our body and at the same time recognise the need to create possibilities, to assert our sexuality and see it as an empowering process."

The politics of sexuality has been central to Jagori's understanding of patriarchal control over women. Jagori's workshops, therefore, have been instrumental in talking about body and sexuality at various levels. The workshops create spaces for women to talk about their personal experiences around their bodies, sexualities and emotional and physical needs. Through literature and theatre they are also provided with information on sexuality, so that they are better equipped to take control over their bodies. A report of a workshop in Madras on single women and sexuality says, "The 3-day workshop... explored the difference between married women and single women, defined who a single woman is and identified different kinds of single women. The second part of the workshop focused on sexuality - through a "touching" game, we explored our relationship with our own bodies. We then focused on experiences of menstruation, the different parts of the woman's gynaecological/reproductive system, answering basic questions. Women also spoke about masturbation, relationships with men, lesbian relationships, bodily needs and desire... In spite of the language barrier, we were really able to communicate about issues of sexuality that are hidden, silent, and often painful, but which can also be joyful."

Jagori was also part of important campaigns on the issue of sexuality, especially the right to express sexual preference, such as the Leela-Urmila case, in which two policewomen married each other in the presence of their parents, and lost their jobs for this act; or the case of the seven schoolgirls in Kerala who were expelled from school for having written intimate letters to each other. The report of 1992-94 mentions another such campaign: "In November 1994 the National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW) issued a national statement condemning homosexuality as a Western disease. They appealed to the Prime Minister to cancel permission for a forthcoming conference of gay men on issues of HIV/AIDS and identity. We were shocked that a women's group, a sister organisation, with whom we have collaborated on many campaigns, could take such a retrograde and bigoted stand. We felt that women's groups had a responsibility to take a stand in defence of the fundamental right to sexual preference/choice as well as the fundamental right of a marginalised group to come together and organise for their rights. We circulated a letter of concern to other women's groups, including NFIW, human rights groups and other NGOs around the country. We received many letters supporting this stand and demanding that the conference be held."



## Celebrating March 8: Affirming Solidarity

March 8, International Women's Day, is important not just as a day to bring attention to women's issues, but also a day when solidarity is affirmed with other women's groups. Marches, rallies, sit-ins are organised jointly, campaigns on various issues are often launched on this occasion, enabling us to renew linkages and reiterate our support for one another.

Not only amongst groups, but it has been a tradition over the years for Jagori to celebrate March 8 also with women from communities in slum settlements in the city, and a special time of the year for building ties across the class divide, to sing songs from the movement, share special moments and form friendships.

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## Take Back the Night: Campaign against Violence on Women

Kalpana remembers a particularly special March 8 'Take Back the Night':

"Every year, on the night of March 7, Jagori would hold a poster workshop in the office in preparation for International Women's Day. It was usually an evening of sharing and creating. Women would be busy drawing, colouring, thinking up slogans or practicing their songs for the next day. This would go on into the early hours of the morning as a mood of protest and celebration filled the air.



In 1993, Jagori decided that, apart from the demonstration with all the other groups, they would also organise a play and protest march against increasing sexual violence. It would be done at night in one of the busy market areas of Delhi, along the lines of 'Take Back the Night' marches. The group had to plan the march, mobilise in the area and contact other women's groups, rehearse for the play, write and print a pamphlet. Many of the members had never acted in a street play before and had to learn to loosen their bodies and speak loud. Practice for the play began early in the morning before office hours and again after the day's work was completed, late into the evening. The play centred on the different movements of a woman from childhood to adolescence to womanhood, the different controls put on her and the different situations where she faces the danger of sexual harassment and abuse.

All dressed in black, the group assembled at the marketplace in the afternoon and walked around, holding up their posters and singing songs. They performed the play, then had a march carrying lit torches and candles. By the time the protestors reached the end of the march, the night air was alive with their songs and slogans – demanding freedom, claiming their right. They spontaneously formed a large circle, reveled in their strength and demonstrated their power for all to see. For a brief moment, they had taken back the night."

## Campaign for Safe Travel of Women in the Railways

In 1998, March 8 saw the beginning of another important campaign – the Railway Campaign, demanding the right of women to travel in the railways free of the fear of sexual harassment. This campaign resulted in some landmark directives by the National Human Rights

Commission in 2001 declaring it the duty of the State and the railways to make safer travel for women a priority, and to respond by initiating actions such as training their personnel and putting up signage regarding sexual harassment.

### “Some reactions

It was the first time any such thing was happening at New Delhi Railway Station. Apart from than the immense curiosity of the public (especially the male public), it was heartening to see passengers actually reading our material. However, we were saddened by the fact that women themselves were hesitant to receive information. While young men came to us demanding that they be given the written material, some women had to be convinced that the information wasn't a time bomb, but something that could be of help. Women who were with husbands/elder brothers/fathers passed on the paper to the men. Many husbands did not even allow their wives to talk to us, or made disapproving faces if they began to respond to us. We felt getting the information to women was very important because generally, the production and control of knowledge and information remains with men as does the right to read and process it. Once women start getting access to information, they begin to understand the problems in the existing system. New questions are raised, threatening established norms and structures.

There were also people who made comments revealing the kind of myths that exist. One gentleman said, “Why are you putting these things up in the Rajdhani? These things don't happen here...”

We spent eight hours putting up the posters and distributing pamphlets on the platform/trains. By the end of the day we had distributed approximately 4,000 pamphlets and put up 2,500 posters! Every wall in the station informed women of their right to free movement, and the consequences if that right was infringed upon. By 6 pm with sticky hands, clothes and hair and unable to move another muscle (except to smile), we wrapped up for the night... and promised to come back on the 8<sup>th</sup> of April for another evening of fervent campaigning.

... So similar campaigning ensued on the 8 April, again at New Delhi Railway Station (this time at night) and then on 8<sup>th</sup> May at Old Delhi Railway Station.

This time, as well as on the previous two occasions, the Railway Union (Hind Mazdoor Sabha) joined this effort; they have been an integral part of the campaign. In addition, the women's wing of Western Railway Employees Union, Kota and the South Eastern Employees Union, Vishakapatnam have initiated and conducted the campaign at their respective railway stations.

Another group in Rajasthan, Mukti-Dhar, also conducted the campaign in their area and we are happy at this show of solidarity as well as many letters of support we have received from various national groups.”

## 'In Celebration of our Journeys'



March 9 2002, when Jagori felicitated 14 pioneers of the women's movement in Delhi, stands out for us as a very special evening for the women's movement. It was planned at a time when the movement was at an ebb, and linkages between groups were weakening. However the energy of this evening, and the commitment and passion of those who had pioneered the movement, made it truly inspiring for everyone. The evening energised us and those who joined, and renewed our faith in the movement. Preparing for the event was also special, as it gave the younger generation an opportunity to learn about the older generation and their struggles.

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### Jagori and the Women's Movement: An Old Bond

With memories of standing in protest, an opportunity to be part of the movement, cementing friendships and bonds of solidarity - some long time associates of Jagori speak...

*"Some of the campaigns have been original, innovative and had strong impact. That 'Women in Black' campaign... I remember that we had come from Sarojini Nagar and did a chakka jam (blocked the road) at AIIMS. Shanti stood at the police booth. And we all took mashals (torches - these were allowed at that time). We took up the torches and blocked the whole chowk. You can't imagine these things now. The democratic spaces for people were a little wider than now. Jagori has tried to enter spaces that nobody thinks of, like for example the railway campaign - spaces that may not be available to women as such."* Jaya

*"My most significant experience at Jagori was the organising around Bhanwari's case; it is something I will never forget. So many other experiences... the Tirupati women's conference with its famous sexuality session and subsequent events; the times spent with Maya and Shanti, some of the contacts with other women's groups... Forum, Saheli... Jagori was certainly a marking experience all round."* Mita

*"We were an active player in the autonomous women's movement; we were labelled even by friends as funded and co-opted, especially when we decided to work with the MS. When Jagori took up sexuality, it was pioneering. But I remember being rather unfairly branded in the women's conference as a bunch of lesbians. Now, however, there is no such hesitation. In fact you have to be involved with these issues now. Otherwise you are not politically correct. Looking back, today we can actually see and appreciate the role and contribution of Jagori in the autonomous women's movement.*

*What is more important, I think, is the human bonding that all of us developed through the years. Today, even though I may not be there physically, I still draw a lot of inspiration from our personal interactions of those days. I know those intimate personal and collective experiences will never come back and it will never be the same. From the situation of the movement today... I can see the difference even within the women's movement itself. I am not nostalgic, but I really long to see that spirit, that force, that sense of belonging today. Although there were many individuals and groups who were all part of that collective spirit, I feel, Jagori had a significant contribution to it."* Sarojini



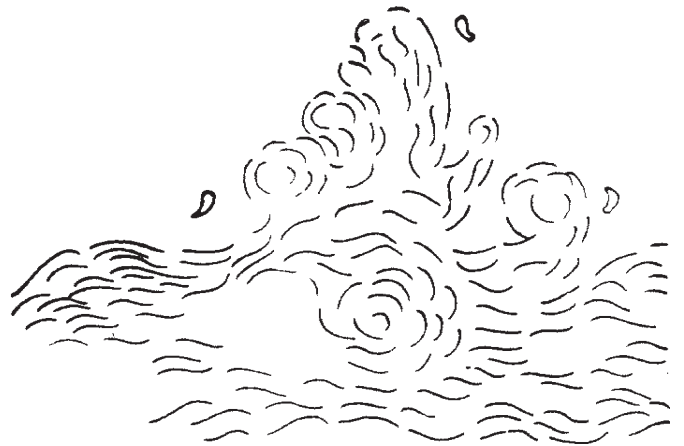
## The Changing Face of the Women's Movement

Things are not the way they used to be, lament older women in the movement. No more life-changing experiences like *Om Swaha*, no thousands of women on the streets protesting spontaneously. What exactly has changed? *"That was a time when street plays like Om Swaha could happen. That environment is no longer there, no?"* says Gouri, *"even though there are street plays nowadays, they are so... performance oriented. Also, at that time, the same people were dealing with cases, collecting money, helping the women, and enacting the play... As a result, there was continuity. We were totally part of the whole thing."*

*"Because of national crises and political events, we were outside such a lot. Bhopal, for example - we could go there for one month, stay on, day in and day out, and work there... I remember we used to sleep near the railway tracks on durries amidst the stones and ashes",* recalls Abha. *"One of the things that has happened is that earlier people worked for a living and came to the movement as volunteers. A lot of people have now gone full time into this alternative*

*kind of work. You are working for movements, for change, but it is WORK. And you have to deliver... so there is a change in the nature of work,"* feels Gouri. Kamla raises the issue of specialisation. *"There were no experts or specialists at that time,"* she says, *"Today you have experts for everything! When I used to write in those days, it used to be so spontaneous, but now there are so many 'professional' writers that I feel like I have an inferiority complex! There is a professionalisation which has taken place, even amongst organisations - so if one organisation works on media, another only on designing, another on education. There are also people now coming into the movement who have studied 'gender', something we never did! I feel that I write much less today because of these things, I feel I am not able to 'theorise' like the experts."* Runu agrees and adds that, *"I have my own regard for research, but the writing today by highly educated, academic people is very different from the writing based on ordinary experience. That kind of simple writing, and feminist writing, has been marginalised."*





The kind of things possible with activism and the relationships with other people has changed too. *“Even the printers used to support us,”* smiles Gouri, *“Mr. Rai, New Age Press... if we would say we need the pamphlet tomorrow, they would stay up the night and get it done.”* Runu recalls *“They used to come to the demonstration also!”* *“In fact,”* informs Gouri, *“Once we wrote a very strong leaflet against the State, and the printer was taken to court for printing it!”*

*“We had a Committee on the Portayal of Women in the Media in the 1980s,”* says Kamla, *“we would monitor textbooks, children’s books, films, ads and so on. If there was any offensive ad on All India Radio or Doordarshan, we used to go and meet the minister and the ad would be taken off air the following week! With globalisation of the media today, if you want to stop something today, where will you go? At least the State could be held accountable earlier, but now?”*

*“All I know is that what I do today is planned, what I did then was spontaneous,”* says Gouri. Runu feels they were more passionate about everything. *“Now we are trying to be efficient all the time!”* feels Gouri. Abha feels that *“It wasn’t that we did less! Anger was very visible. Sometimes now it seems like it is outside of you... there it was totally from the bottom of my stomach, my gut, my uterus.”*

The change in the movement is perhaps measured best by the status of the National Conference on the Women’s Movements, a bi-annual event that really brought the movement together and gave it direction. *“The last conference was in 1997, we have not been able to have one since. Somehow we always looked to this conference to give us a direction. One thing the conference would do was the whole politics, the socio-political events of the years and highlight where we had to put our attention, how to move forward. So there was a place to go to. Where do we go to now?”*, asks Gouri, *“And what has taken over now is a very UN agenda... gender issues, timelines, the language is different. I can’t say if it’s good or bad, but its different”.* Even those who entered the movement much later, but participated in the last conference, feel the gap. *“For me the National Conference, going to Ranchi, being part of a crowd of 4000 women – all kinds of women from all over the country – was really a high. Without a space like that how do you feel the realness of being part of a movement?”* says Manjima, *“But with the formation of the National Network of Autonomous Women’s Groups, there is hope that another National Conferences may be planned. Such landmark events are necessary to sustain the movement and would truly be an eye-opening experience for young activists in the movement.”*

## The Challenges Ahead

From fundamentalism and increasing violence against women, to the dangers of co-option and mainstreaming, what are the challenges ahead for the women's movement today?

*"... the right wing forces... they have the potential, with various propaganda machine in control to make a mockery of our work and vision to the common people." Amrita*

*"To widen outreach in a meaningful way without diluting the politics or the message - to give wings to the movement by maximising the use of available resources or technology." Geeta*

*"... environmental degradation, the growth and escalation of global violence and poverty... The (slow to transform) patriarchal structure and existing traditional belief systems attached to it will continue to be the obstacle most eroding to efforts toward change." Diane*

*"Fundamentalism... you never know when we lose our rights and regress, lose all that that the women's movement has gained. Also, the fact that fewer people come out onto the streets or are politically inclined to actively protest. Another thing is really the increasing violence against women, the backlash to the progress we have made." Manjima*

*"We get stuck in too many debates of identity, of ideology... in these we are divided and have little solidarity. Other small things which affect us... where is the space to protest nowadays? The other day I went to AIIMS and I saw, the structure has changed. No interaction is possible any more*

*with any person on the street. That was the place where we used to gather every Monday, we used to have one-to-one, public contact and that has disappeared. You can't even stand there.*

*I strongly feel that the new generation, i.e. us, the younger generation in different organisations, we don't know one another, or have friendships, like the previous generation. I feel this is a huge gap.*

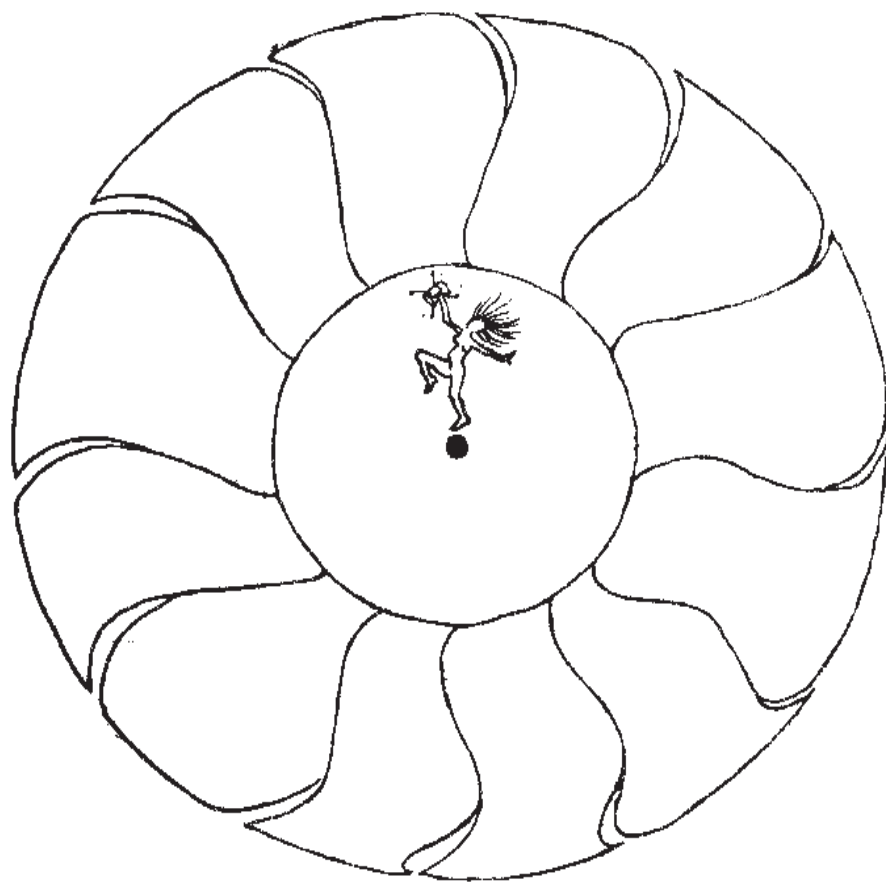
*Another thing is the dependency on funds, most of the women's groups and NGOs in various movements are funded; one issue is that agendas can be dictated very easily, and another is that people are now paid to be part of a movement - so how to retain them if funding is withdrawn?" Seema*

*"The movement has somehow gotten mainstreamed. Therefore most women's groups have got limited to being project based, and the challenge is to move the feminist movement to another level after the mainstreaming of gender." Madhavi*

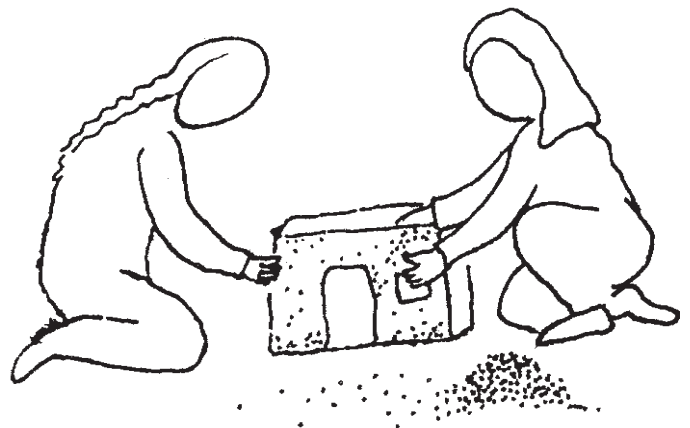
*"The struggle is becoming more complex..." Nimisha*

*"So many NGOs are mushrooming without perspective or commitment." Neelam*

*"The attacks on democratic institutions, the 'malestreaming' and depoliticisation of radical discourse, the way in which neo-liberal policies are taking over development, the increasing attempt to control and regulate democratic spaces - we are struggling to contest and challenge all of these. Sometimes it seems like there is a conspiracy to stamp out feminism!" Kalyani*



# Keeping the Faith: The Evolution of a Feminist Organisation



Jagori is not only “(its) structure or physical framework, but its architecture which includes spaces, ambience, relation to nature and overall social and emotional relations with the surroundings”

*From 'The Ranthambore Retreat Report 2003'*

“It has been 8 years since Jagori came into existence. In June 1988, we did an overview of our work and activities, reassessed our direction, and evaluated our weakness and failures. There always seems a considerable distance between what we desire to achieve and what happens in practice. Certain aspects of our work change according to the needs that arise due to various political and social crises. On the other hand, we consciously change our focus depending on our understanding of the changing needs of the women’s movement.

- ◆ Yes, we have grown in a quantitative sense. But, is there a qualitative change in the way we network, we conduct training, distribute and disseminate information, participate in issues and campaigns and respond to new demands?
- ◆ Can Jagori ever become a self-supporting group and not depend on foreign funds?
- ◆ Do we exist because we have a vested interest in our continuity? Are we getting institutionalised in the process?
- ◆ Should we not be working towards helping to create smaller rural women’s resource centres?
- ◆ Can a group like ours exist without some key people? What is the role of leadership in a collective/team?
- ◆ Will we ever be able to create a more stable and homogenous group? How can we reduce all kinds of inequalities within the group? How can we develop commitment among new people in the group and evolve a feminist perspective?
- ◆ Can we ensure economic security for people who have opted out to do this kind of work?

But, in fact certain questions never get answered—certain contradictions never get resolved. Ultimately, it’s the collective force of people working in a group that throw up these challenges and also take the responsibility of addressing them. We have, therefore continued with a faith in the possibility of change:

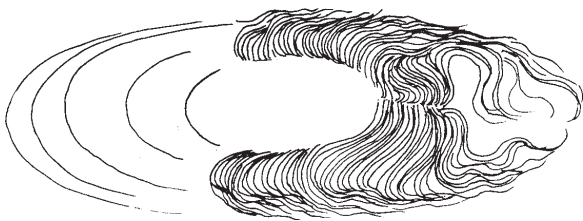
Change within ourselves  
Change in others and  
Change in society.”

*From “A time to look back and reflect an overview of Jagori’s work from 1988-1991”*

## Organisational Dilemmas

As a feminist organisation, Jagori has always believed in and followed certain core principles of working: collective decision-making, a non-hierarchical and democratic set-up, mutual respect and commitment to feminist values. Over the years, Jagori has been faced with the same challenges as many other ideology-based collectives struggling to cope with the demands of increasing numbers and a rapidly 'professionalising' environment. How do we institutionalise our activism? How do we build our core values into organisational structures and modes of functioning, achieving our goals while building solidarity and moving forward as a group? How do we ensure that hierarchies of age, class, and experience do not drown dissenting voices? How do we give shape and form to our vision of collective leadership and decision-making? How do we prevent our organisational structures from becoming traps that stifle our ideology?

Twenty years down the road, we still do not have definite answers to all these questions – if anything, we have more questions! We have learnt by doing, by experimenting with forms and functions. Our learning has not been painless. As feminists in a feminist space, we are also constantly confronted with the overlaps between the content of our work and the content of our lives. We have made mistakes and dealt with the consequences – sometimes, we have lost out on valuable friendships and mutually rewarding relationships.



*"We've not said that 'as a feminist organisation, we're non-hierarchical' and left it at that. We've been able to say that this is not acceptable. We want to last, we want to function and continue to be effective, so how do we find new models? This particular approach works because it is honest. Yes, some decisions will be taken by some people, some will be taken by others, the important thing is to be transparent".*

Manjima

Each of us came into Jagori with our own expectations and ideas of what it would be like to work in a feminist organisation. We shared a commitment to participative management and to some core feminist values – cooperation, collaboration, consensus, mutuality, democracy. But we have learnt that translating these values into principles of organisational functioning needs more than good intentions. We have discovered for ourselves that working in a consensus-based environment requires special skills at all levels - from the Jagori team to members of the Executive Board!

*"In the women's movement, Jagori has become mature, but it's been only 2-3 years that it has been consciously institutionalising. Today, I feel that we have healthy hierarchies. I have seen from up close that there are different backgrounds, experiences, qualifications, language, class and caste. There are definitely class*

*hierarchies, but it takes time to understand and deal with that.” Seema*

It is an ongoing struggle, but we are slowly but definitely moving ahead – we are better than we used to be at taking collective decisions without allowing ourselves to become paralysed by endless discussions. We are sharpening our ability to name and dissolve conflicts without denying each other the right to hold divergent views.

*“There definitely are structures within Jagori and we coined the term “creative institutionalisation” to explain these structures. We move towards institutionalisation but in a creative way that challenges the status quo... There are power relations everywhere, but what kind of power they are based on is important. What we have here is not power structures where there is subjugation. We are experimenting with different power structures. I think it is very important to have them, because we need leaders to take forward a team.” Amrita*



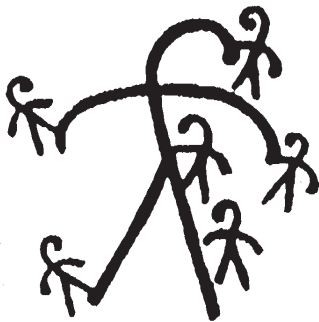
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## Passing the Torch: A New Rung of Leadership

Right from the start, Jagori has experimented with various models of leadership. From being a collective, it has attempted a model in which the coordinatorship would rotate from one member to another every year. This was based on the belief that all members can be leaders if they have the opportunity to develop leadership skills; such a model would enable women to gain the experience and the confidence to become a leader. Following this, other models such as the institution of a Core Group (essentially a smaller

collective but representative of the bigger Jagori group), with a Coordinator were tried.

For the past few years, we have also had several retreats and visioning workshops where we have tried to work out a common understanding about our shared ideologies and goals. These workshops also helped strengthen internal processes and self-consciously and self-critically grow in the direction we want.



The interesting thing is that all the women who have been coordinators – Abha, Sarojini, Juhi, Veena, Mita, Preeti, Shanti, Kalpana and Kalyani – only one is a founder member. All the others are from successive lines of leadership. This reveals an ability to trust and to let go, something we cherish and nurture.

Kalpana feels that creative institutionalisation has been to Jagori’s credit. Institutionalisation *per se* is not an end in itself, rather it is “creatively working towards an enduring organisation. While there has been increasing

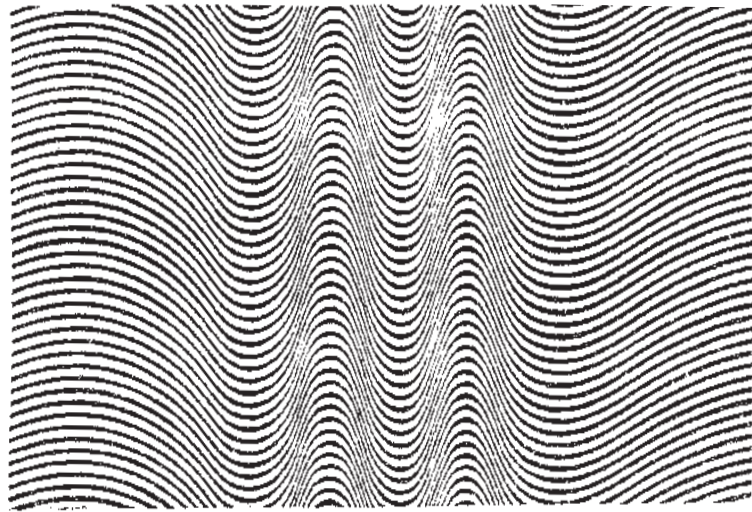


*professionalisation and creation of structures and systems, it has not been at the cost of the essence and ethos as envisaged by the founder members”.*

So then, has Jagori fulfilled the dreams of its founders? Abha, founder member, who has continued to be with Jagori

through the years, strongly stands by the fact that, *“one thing Jagori as definitely done is to take feminism forward... We have never compromised on our feminist politics. Whoever is in Jagori, that particular dream of saying that feminism has to be taken everywhere in every way, that continues.”*





The elements are compressed at the centre,  
creating an area of vibrating tension.  
Pushed to an extreme of curvature  
the line still does not break,  
and the discharged energy is  
contained in bands of shimmering motion

*Bridget Riely*

## Looking Back, Looking Ahead

I can only think of Jagori's failures and achievements as a long and difficult journey that is still hardly complete. Some parts of this journey have been exhilarating, some immensely enlightening, while other parts of the journey have made us all introspect, rethink and start over again. But not for one moment has this journey looked or felt meaningless.

Sarojini

I feel a very big achievement of Jagori is the counseling centre or unit...because even in the two years (that i have been here) I have found the way the cases are being handled, is quite meaningful. One gets to feel that women who are in desperate situations know a place to go, know where they can approach for any kind of help or assistance.

Sharmila

I feel having our own land, our own learning centre and community to work with in Himachal, is giving a sense of completion to the cycle of Jagori's activism. The old generation of Jagori began their activism by addressing grassroots issues, and now, we have again come back to that. Moreover, the fact that we still have so many lovely women working with us now is a big achievement.

Seema

सबसे बड़ी बात तो यही है कि हम मुहों को आवाज दे पाएं।

सुनीता

मैं समझती हूँ कि जागोरी का नाम इसलिए ज्यादा था क्योंकि ये ग्रासरूट व स्त्रमस के साथ काम करती थी वो इसकी ताकत व पहचान भी थी जो आज नहीं है।

अल्का

Jagori has not grown as much as it should have. I would put it down as a lack of creative entrepreneurship, and a general mistrust of such expansion.

Geeta

Jaya

बहनचारा जागोरी की सबसे बड़ी उपलब्धि रही है! औरतों में चेतना फैलाने का काम किया है जागोरी ने। हमारी जिंदगी में इतना बदलाव आया है एक मुसलमान परिवार से निकले हुए, मेरे बच्चों की जिंदगी में बदलाव आया है, मेरे परिवार की जिंदगी में बदलाव आया है, मेरे पड़ोस की जिंदगी में बदलाव आया है।

सावरा

Defining feminism in a rural context and setting a feminist training curriculum, which has given the theoretical basis to many activists, has been the biggest achievement of Jagori.

Madhavi

Our inability to become a household name. This is probably a failure of women's groups at large also - that though we have mainstreamed in many ways, we have not reached out to the large middle class and even upper middle class. We have done it in small ways, but not enough to be visible.

Kalpna

काम इतना बढ़ गया, हम इतने फैल गए, लोग कितने जुड़ गए— ये सब हमारे achievements हैं। पहले हम 6 स्टाफ थे, अब 31 हो गए!

तुलसी

Jagori's biggest achievement in these years is its ability to distribute seeds of feminism to many individuals and other sister organizations.

Nimisha

Jagori has been able to create a unique collective space, characterised by feminist reflections, dreams and activism. It is a space where you can be, a space where you can sing, care and belong.

Suneeta

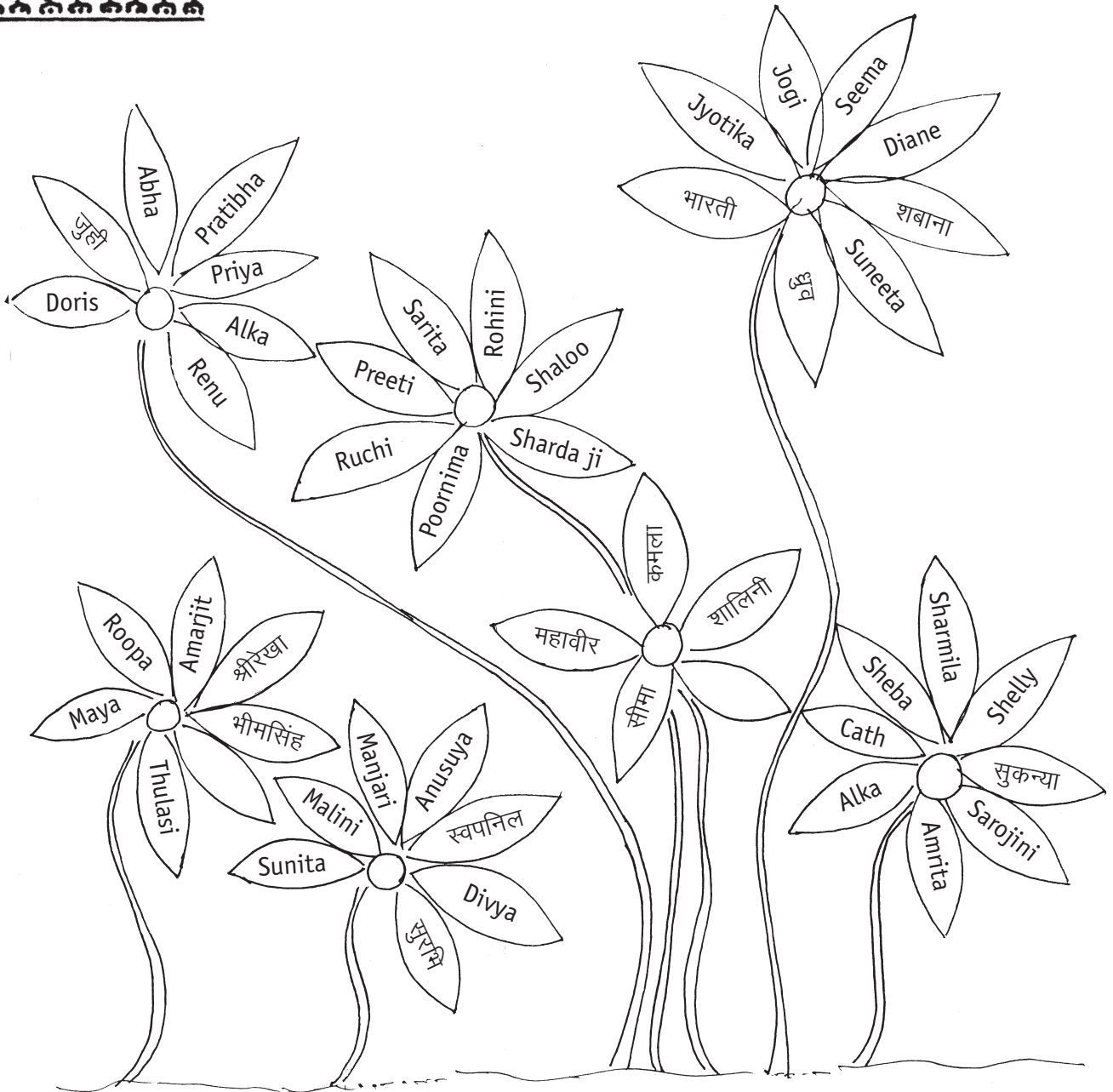
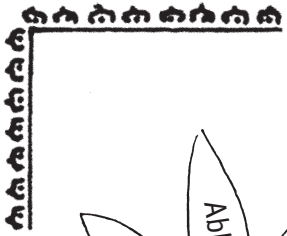
Jagori was not scared to use the word feminist, and that is great.

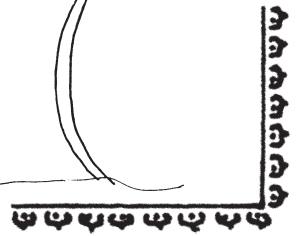
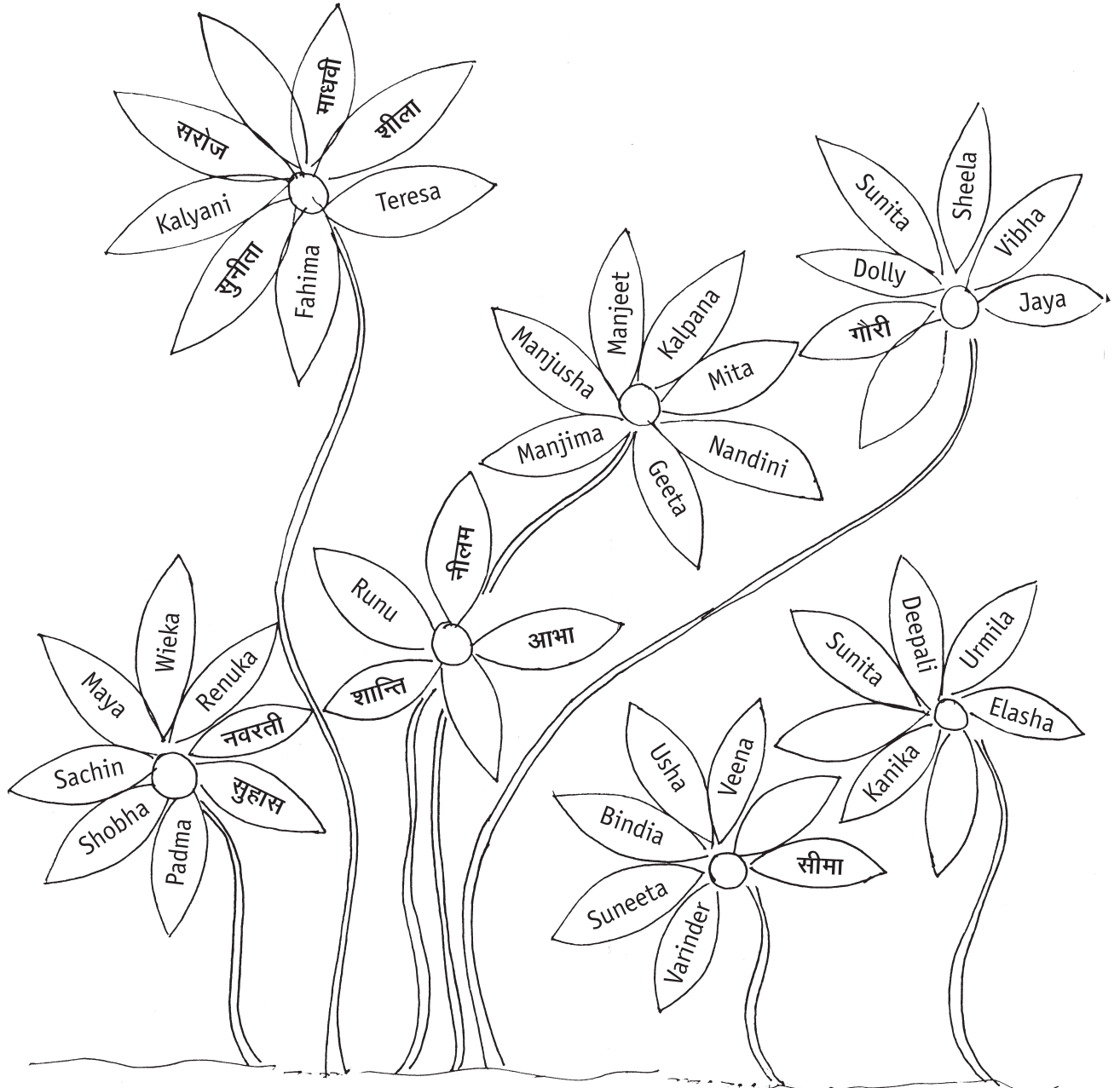
Jagori's achievements include the documentation centre, the many staff members it has helped and bringing women together across economic/social class.

Mita

The fact that we have survived at all, and survived without compromising on feminist principles, sometimes seems like a huge achievement in itself.

Kalyani







**NO TURNING BACK**  
celebrating 20 years of feminist activism