

Not Part of the Plan? Women, State Feminism and Indian Socialism in the Nehru Years

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Abstract

The 1950s are often derided in the scholarship as a period of welfarist policies, which reinforced women's role in the family and entrenched women's economic dependence. This paper examines the Central Social Welfare Board, and, in particular, its Welfare Extension Projects, to provide a new characterisation of the approach to women's issues in the period. It argues that the Central Social Welfare Board, with its unique administrative structure, its preference for voluntary activity, and its adherence to persuasion as a mode of action, reflected many of the characteristics of Indian socialism of the time. It also sketches, from this angle, a partial picture of state feminism in India. In the Central Social Welfare Board, state feminism was concerned with the gradual transformation of women and a radical, if short-lived, makeover of the state.

Keywords: state feminism, socialism, self-help, welfare-state, everyday state, community development, decentralisation, postcolonial nationalism, Durgabai Deshmukh

Introduction

Among an earlier generation of scholarship on women in independent India, there was a consensus about the Nehruvian period. Progress, such as it was, came in the realm of the law: the Constitution established universal franchise and promised equality before the law, and within a decade of independence the Lok Sabha had also passed the Hindu Succession Act, the Special Marriage Bill, and the Hindu Marriage Bill. While these legal changes were important, it is agreed that the social and economic position of women stagnated or even deteriorated compared with the achievements during the time of the anti-colonial movement. The scholarship provides a few explanations for why this occurred. This may have been because the mainstream segments of the women's movement looked to the state to improve women's lives through the law, and were blinded to the real problems of women by their incorporation

into official institutions and their proximity to government.¹ Or perhaps it was because planners, focused as they were on increasing production, were indifferent to the conditions of ordinary women.² It has also been suggested that the women's movement was unable to resist the lurch to the right in gender ideology because it was fragmented and disconnected from the masses. Instead, the energies of the mainstream women's organisations were channelled into 'welfarist' activities, which accepted the place of women in the home, and reinforced women's economic dependence.³

A newer generation of scholars have moved away from blanket assessments of government policy towards all women, but even as they have examined specific government initiatives, their conclusions have been no more favourable. The legal reforms lauded by earlier scholars are now understood to have produced new forms of patriarchy. Moreover, by standardising rights within the Hindu family along North Indian norms, these laws eroded rights enjoyed by women elsewhere in India.⁴ Scholars examining official schemes for refugee rehabilitation have found that the regime was based on providing aid to male heads of household, belittling women's contribution to the economic life of the family, and removing most refugee women from the purview of rehabilitation. 'Unattached' women, especially widows with no brothers or grown sons, were consigned to homes as 'permanent liabilities' of the state, while the training provided to them reinforced their position as dependents.⁵ Unable to eke out a living using their rehabilitation training in 'women's work' such as weaving or embroidery, many refugee women turned to the informal sector, juggling multiple jobs while raising their children.⁶ In other words, even as the postcolonial 'state' expanded its remit to cover the

¹ Geraldine Forbes, *Women in Modern India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp.223-226.

² Nirmala Banerjee, 'Whatever Happened to the Dreams of Modernity?' *Economic and Political Weekly* 33:17 (1998), pp.WS2-7.

³ Samita Sen, 'Toward a Feminist Politics? The Indian Women's Movement in Historical Perspective' *World Bank Policy Research Report* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2000).

⁴ Eleanor Newbigin, *The Hindu Family and the Emergence of Modern India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

⁵ Udit Sen, *Citizen Refugee: Forging the Indian Nation After Partition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), ch.5.

⁶ Anjali Bhardwaj Datta, "'Useful' and 'Earning' Citizens? Gender, State, and the Market in Post-Colonial Delhi' *Modern Asian Studies* 53:6 (2019), pp.1924-55.

welfare of women, its initiatives are still seen to have widely let down India's women, re-inscribing patriarchy in new ways in the postcolonial period.

This superb new scholarship is silent on two surprising fronts, however. Firstly, there is a lack of engagement with the wider global literature on state feminism. Over the past thirty years, scholars have charted the origins, content and politics of women's programmes conducted by governments across the globe. Though many of these programmes eschewed the label 'feminism', as was the case in India, the scholarship has adopted the overarching label state feminism as a useful analytical frame. Originating in Turkey and the Nordic countries virtually simultaneously, feminist scholars have shown the huge variety of forms state feminism has taken.⁷ For the socialist world and for countries outside of North-Western Europe, a first generation of scholars tended to emphasise the top-down nature of state-led efforts at women's emancipation.⁸ More recent work has stressed the ways in which women's organisations, even if incorporated by the state, have bargained with the official patriarchy⁹ to achieve their goals relating to women's concerns, often facing opposition from the men running the show.¹⁰ While the existing scholarship on women in postcolonial India is not a prominent part of this conversation, the two fields share a tendency to take the state for granted. While parsing women's institutions from the state more broadly, both tend to assume the rest of the 'state' acted as a monolith.¹¹ Neither field of scholarship has examined the ways in which programmes

⁷ Dorothy E. McBride and Amy G. Mazur (eds.) *The Politics of State Feminism: Innovation in Comparative Research* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2010); Hanne Marlene Dahl, 'An Old Map of State Feminism and an Insufficient Recognition of Care' *NORA—Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, 18:3 (2010), pp.152-166.

⁸ e.g. Jenny B. White, 'State Feminism, Modernization, and the Turkish Republican Woman' *NWSA Journal* 15:3 (2003), pp.145-159.

⁹ Deniz Kandiyoti, 'Bargaining with Patriarchy' *Gender & Society*, 2:3 (1988), pp.274-290

¹⁰ Wang Zheng, '"State Feminism"? Gender and Socialist State Formation in Maoist China', *Feminist Studies*, 31:3 (2005), pp.519-551; Katherine Libal, 'Staging Turkish Women's Emancipation: Istanbul, 1935' *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 4:1 (2008), pp.31-52; Kirsten Ghodsee, 'Pressuring the Politburo: The Committee of the Bulgarian Women's Movement and State Socialist Feminism' *Slavic Review* 73:3 (2014), pp.538-562; Rosa Moneiro, and Virgínia Ferreira, 'Women's Movements and the State in Portugal: a State Feminism Approach', *Revista Sociedade e Estado*, 31:2 (2016), pp.459-486.

¹¹ cf. Sen, who takes a few steps towards disaggregating the state, noting tensions between the Ministries which devised refugee rehabilitation programmes, and the volunteers tasked with implementing them, *Citizen Refugee*, ch.5

designed for women re-imagined the forms bureaucracy might take, as part of their larger project of furthering women's social reform.

This article aims to bring these two fields into conversation within one another. At the same time, rather than taking the state as given, this research disaggregates it,¹² revealing one of the surprising forms it took in independent India. It does this through an exploration of one of the most prominent of the official welfarist institutions of the period, the Central Social Welfare Board (CSWB). The Board was established in 1953 to coordinate efforts among India's many voluntary and charitable organisations in the field of social welfare. Its mission quickly expanded, however, so that the Board itself began directly providing some rural welfare services, especially for women. Without lionising this institution, the paper challenges the idea that the CSWB was solely a force for conservatism, as the first generation of scholars tended to argue. Instead, the CSWB pursued an approach to women's liberation that was decentralised, incrementalist, consensual, and focused on inspiring women to help themselves. The activities of the CSWB can best be understood as conforming to the socialism of the time.

Until recently, Indian socialism had long been conflated with the five-year plans, which were primarily concerned with pursuing industrial modernisation.¹³ At the same time, it was often assumed that Indian socialists were keen to see the state progressively take control over as much of India's economic life as possible.¹⁴ Any programme aimed at social equality but incorporating the continuation of private property and individual freedoms was dismissed as a contradictory mix of 'pure' socialism and liberalism.¹⁵ Scholarship that has questioned these assumptions about early postcolonial India has come from two directions.

¹² Akhil Gupta, *Red Tape: Bureaucracy, Structural Violence and Poverty in India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), ch.2.

¹³ Partha Chatterjee, 'Development Planning and the Indian State' in *State and Politics in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp.271-297; Sunil Khilnani, *The Idea of India* (New Delhi: Penguin India, 1997), ch.2. Gyanesh Kudaisya, *A Republic in the Making: India in the 1950s* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2017), ch.5.

¹⁴ Uday Singh Mehta, 'Indian Constitutionalism: the Articulation of a Political Vision', in Chakrabarty, Dipesh, Rochana Majumdar and Andrew Sartori (eds.), *From the Colonial to the Postcolonial: India and Pakistan in Transition* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp.13-30.

¹⁵ Maitreyee Chaudhuri, 'Citizens, Workers and Emblems of Culture: an Analysis of the First Plan Document on Women', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 29: 1&2 (1995), pp.211-235

From one side, recent research on development after independence has revealed an abiding concern for rural production, if not for rural life more broadly.¹⁶ As independent India strived for economic independence, its programmes in the countryside did not seek to upend existing social structures or eliminate private property rights. Because these programmes were often spearheaded by American development aid, scholars have understood them as anti-communist, which they were.¹⁷ It is then assumed – incorrectly – that these initiatives were antithetical to Indian socialism. However, by the 1950s, those who called themselves socialists in India were committed to the continuation of private property rights, and to pursuing change through voluntary or self-help initiatives, often by re-deploying existing social hierarchies.¹⁸

From the other side, scholars have demonstrated that planning was limited in important ways. For example, Vivek Chibber has shown that India's Planners were never given the administrative machinery or fiscal control to implement their plans.¹⁹ This critique assumes that without the limitations imposed by external parties such as domestic business magnates or international financiers, India's planning would have been not only more effective, but more expansive. However, it is essential to understand that Indian planning was self-circumscribed in important ways. Even during the second plan, where the ambitions of the planners were at their supposed height, P.C. Mahalanobis acknowledged that planning was not meant for what he called the 'diffuse' sector of the economy.²⁰ In other words, the ambition of state control over the economy did not extend to what today is known as the informal or unorganised sector, which includes agriculture, unincorporated enterprises, and ventures not governed by industrial legislation. To give a rough indication of how much of the economy was not planned, Nirmala

¹⁶ Benjamin Robert Siegel, *Hungry Nation: Food, Famine and the Making of Modern India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

¹⁷ Daniel Immerwahr, *Thinking Small: The United States and the Lure of Community Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015); David Engerman, *The Price of Aid the Economic Cold War in India* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018); Nicole Sackley, 'The Village as Cold War Site: Experts, Development and the History of Rural Reconstruction' *Journal of Global History* 6 (2011), pp.481-504.

¹⁸ For a fully fleshed out version of this argument, see Taylor C. Sherman, "'A New Type of Revolution': Socialist Thought in India, 1940s-1960s' *Postcolonial Studies* 21:4 (2018), pp.485-504.

¹⁹ Vivek Chibber, *Locked in Place: State-Building and Late Industrialisation in India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), Ch.6.

²⁰ P.C. Mahalanobis, 'Address delivered as President of the National Institute of Sciences of India', 8 January 1958, *Talks on Planning*, (London: Asia Publishing House, 1961), p 70.

Banerjee estimated that the unorganised sector comprised around 90% of total employment of the workforce, and provided 84% of gross national product in 1951.²¹

For the vast spheres of economic and social life that were not directly under state control, the planners imagined not a command economy, but rather they urged corporate and community action. Private and voluntary actors were expected to fund their own activities in aid of the aims of the Plan. The line between the planned economy and the rest was fuzzy, therefore. The result was not state control, homogenisation or centralisation, but a plurality of initiatives.²² This pluralism – the proliferation of projects and the multitude of outcomes – is a central feature of The Central Social Welfare Board’s work, as it was of Indian socialism as a whole.

Situated within this intermediary space where the state drew up schematic plans but did not exercise centralised control, the CSWB was sculpted as a new form of official organisation, overseen by volunteers and geared towards spurring communities of women to help themselves. Working on the basis that progress could only be secured through consensus, its programmes aimed to help women of various means take the ‘next step’ on the road towards their own liberation. The decentralised and incrementalist approach means one cannot rule out pockets of progressive ideas, or even radical practice, even if the overall results were hardly revolutionary. Although designed to transform the lives of those at the receiving end of its welfare work, the CSWB’s greatest transformative effects may have been on the women it employed to help others.

Social welfare in the Middle Decades of the Twentieth Century

Social welfare services changed rapidly between the 1930s and the 1960s. For one, welfare emerged as a field government activity distinct from social services. The latter were provided to everyone, and were limited to education and healthcare, but social welfare work was defined as services for ‘handicapped and maladjusted individuals’ who were unable to support themselves.²³ This included work with disabled people, Adivasi communities, as well as with

²¹ Nirmala Banerjee, ‘The Unorganized Sector and the Planner’ in Amiya Kumar Bagchi (ed.), *Economy, Society and Polity: Essays in the Political Economy of Indian Planning in Honour of Professor Bhabatosh Datta* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp.71-103, at p.75.

²² Sherman, ‘A New Type of Revolution’; For a related argument see Nikhil Menon, ‘Help the Plan - Help Yourself: Making India Plan-Conscious’ in Gyan Prakash, Nikhil Menon, Michael Laffan (eds.) *The Postcolonial Moment in South and Southeast Asia* (London: Bloomsbury Books, 2018).

²³ P.D. Kulkarni, ‘Social Welfare in Five-Year Plans’, in A.R. Wadia (ed.), *History and Philosophy of Social Work in India: a Souvenir Volume of the Silver Jubilee Celebrations of the Tata Institute of*

women and children. Of course, this positioned all of these different groups as inherently weak or backward, without interrogating the structures and ideologies which produced this backwardness.

Social welfare practitioners in the early decades after independence tended to argue that their work was not new: there were ancient traditions of charity among India's religious communities, and modern social welfare pioneers included everyone from Rammohan Roy to M.K. Gandhi. However, from the 1930s, social welfare was being transformed. Firstly, it began to be professionalised. The Sir Dorabji Tata Graduate School of Social Work had opened in 1936, providing training courses for waged work in social welfare.²⁴ In 1945 the Kasturba Gandhi National Memorial Trust was founded to provide training specifically for constructive work, both voluntary and paid, with women and children. By the 1960s there was near unanimity on the idea that social workers – even volunteers – ought to have some training.²⁵ Concurrently, social welfare work was also being integrated into the social sciences, as its practitioners called for data to be collected, and for social science research to be integrated into policy and practice.²⁶ As it became professionalised, social welfare provision diversified, with avenues opening up for work putatively unconcerned with politics. Some of those most strongly associated with the Tata school, for example, argued that social welfare workers were 'not revolutionaries'. They tried to distinguish themselves from Gandhian constructive social workers who were trying to propagate a particular way of life. As one non-Gandhian social worker, Vinayak Martand Kulkarni argued, 'A doctor lives like any one else in the community, so could the professional social worker.'²⁷ As a whole, therefore, the period witnessed an increase in the diversity of providers and approaches.

Social Sciences (Bombay: Allied Publishers, Pvt Ltd, 1961), pp.469-480 at p.472; M.S. Gore, 'Historical Background of Social Work in India' in *Social Welfare in India* (New Delhi: Planning Commission, Government of India, 1955), pp.135-147, at p.19

²⁴ In 1964 it became the Tata Institute of Social Sciences

²⁵ Even Jayaprakash Narayan was calling for 'scientific training' for Gandhian constructive workers. Jayaprakash Narayan, 'Speech at Concluding Session', in *Report of the Seminar on Social Welfare in a Developing Economy 22nd-26th September, 1963* (New Delhi: Planning Commission, Government of India, 1964), pp.103-110, at p.108.

²⁶ Durgabai Deshmukh, 'Presidential Address', in *Report of the Seminar on Social Welfare*, pp.7-14 at p.11-12.

²⁷ V.M. Kulkarni, 'Social Workers are Not Revolutionaries', in Sugata Dasgupta (ed.) *Towards a Philosophy of Social Work in India* (New Delhi: Popular Book Services, 1967), pp.112-120, at p.119.

After independence, social welfare work faced new challenges: princely patronage dropped, and at the same time partition brought into existence new communities of need. Perhaps one of the greatest changes after 1947 was the introduction of state involvement in social reform.²⁸ In the 1950s there was a proliferation of social projects coming from the state, from the National Extension Service and Community Development, to programmes targeting Adivasi and Denotified communities. Although these programmes were initiated and funded by the government, they often contained striking ideas about the purposes of the state and their own role in social welfare provision.

Perhaps the largest of these social welfare projects was the Central Social Welfare Board. The CSWB appears to have been the brainchild of Durgabai Deshmukh. Born in Rajahmundry, Durgabai had been a child bride, who had refused to consummate her marriage. That act began a career in social reform, as she campaigned for the abolition of the devadasi system (the practice of ‘marrying’ young girls to an idol, deity or temple), against domestic violence, and on many other issues. Later she was a founding member of the Andhra Mahila Sabha, where the focus was not only on training in craft work for women’s employment, but also on educating women for access to university. Although she served in the Constituent Assembly, she made an unsuccessful bid to join Parliament in the first general election. At that point, she was invited to join the Planning Commission in 1952. There, she met C.D. Deshmukh, who as Finance Minister in Nehru’s Government, was described as India’s second most eligible widower (the first being the Prime Minister himself).²⁹ Durgabai convinced Deshmukh to make the case to the Planning Commission to create and fund the Central Social Welfare Board.³⁰ In 1953, not long after the two married, she became the first chairperson of the Board.

Durgabai’s established reputation as a social reformer and her position among India’s policy elite is important to understanding the origins of the CSWB. Scholars tend to regard Nehru as *the* architect of postcolonial India, but this posthumously invests the first prime minister with levels of ambition and ability (to say nothing of time) that he simply did not have. Although Nehru shaped important parts of postcolonial Indian policy, one of the ways he did so was through supporting projects that were proposed and carried out by other able and far-sighted

²⁸ Durgabai Deshmukh, *Chintaman and I* (New Delhi: Allied Publishers Pvt Ltd, 1980), p.61 https://archive.org/stream/in.ernet.dli.2015.172432/2015.172432.Chintaman-And-I_djvu.txt

²⁹ *Times of India*, 28 December 1952.

³⁰ Durgabai Deshmukh, *Chintaman and I*, p.37

visionaries. From S.K. Dey to Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, brilliant men and women, who earned the Prime Minister's respect and esteem were given the encouragement and support necessary to build the institutions they imagined independent India required. Durgabai had earned Nehru's esteem before her marriage. Her position as wife of the Finance Minister doubly secured her place in a charmed circle of capable and enthusiastic people who were given the freedom and resources to conduct their own 'experiments' in the policy field of their choice. Indeed, experiment was a word often used by these charismatic and energetic individuals to describe their own activities.

More welfare than state: experiments in building the Indian welfare-state

In the 1950s, Indian socialists, including Dr Deshmukh, regularly expressed the desire to build a welfare state.³¹ However, their vision for this was often more concerned with welfare than with the state. This was because, firstly, India's rulers repeatedly argued that the state did not have the resources to commit to social welfare when the problems were so vast.³² This is a common theme of the period: when a problem of overwhelming scope and complexity arose – even if closely tied to socialist goals – governments often abjured responsibility for it, instead insisting that popular participation was the answer.³³ It is not coincidental that these large problems tended to be in the social or cultural sphere. Solving them would have had only an indirect impact on economic production. In the gendered hierarchy of labour, as elaborated by India's socialists, productive work took precedence over caring work, and India's scarce resources were directed towards increasing production.³⁴ For everything else, it was believed that rousing popular enthusiasm and encouraging public contributions would be enough to bring about change.

Secondly, Indian socialists, for all their different parties and agendas, were concerned with reforming the individual in the community through collective, voluntary effort. After the

³¹ Durgabai Deshmukh, 'Presidential Address', p.8.

³² This chimes with Srirupa Roy's characterisation of the postcolonial state as 'needy', Srirupa Roy, *Beyond Belief: India and the Politics of Postcolonial Nationalism* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2007), p.111

³³ This was the case, for example, in the push for universal education where school-building was required, but as soon as the scale of the building project was recognised, it was devolved to local communities. See Sherman, 'Education in Early Postcolonial India: Expansion, Experimentation and Planned Self-Help', *History of Education*, 47(4), 2018, pp.504-520.

³⁴ Sherman, 'A New Type of Revolution'

successes of the national movement, it was widely believed that popular self-help was not only necessary because the state lacked resources, but also because it was the best way of building the new Indian citizen and the new Indian community. In this thinking, hard work not only built worthy personalities but it produced strong communities.³⁵ Emphasising voluntary effort seemed to provide an answer to the question of what ought to become of nationalist energies after independence. It provided a channel into which nationalist organisations could direct their energies.

Finally, with respect to social welfare, there was a pervasive discourse that voluntary effort was best suited to this kind of work. The attributes of a successful social worker included humility and hard work, but also the desire to work without seeking personal gain, without exercising coercion, and without patronising the subjects of one's work.³⁶ Social work was designated as particularly suited to channelling the energies of women. In other words, women's social service was part of the answer to the problem of postcolonial nationalism for women.

If social work was gendered feminine, the state bureaucracy was understood in masculine terms. Social workers provided a 'human touch' instead of the 'impersonal' logic of government bureaucracy.³⁷ Social workers displayed 'flexibility' in contrast to the state's 'rigidity.' Certainly we see here the re-inscription of gender norms, associating caring work with women. But we also uncover an important insight into nationalists' approach to the state in this period. Historians have long assumed that India's early postcolonial leaders relied on a 'strong, centralized state' to pursue their socialist projects.³⁸ My argument comes close to asserting the opposite: many (though not all) of the builders of postcolonial India were sceptical of the state they had inherited. From the Planning Commission to Community Development, from the Damodar Valley Corporation to the Faridabad Development Board, those who led

³⁵ Sherman, "New Type of Revolution", pp.490-2

³⁶ For two of many descriptions of the attributes of social workers, see Billmoria, Gulestan R., 'Voluntary Social Work' in A.R. Wadia (ed.) *History and Philosophy of Social Work*, pp.59-70, at pp.59-60; Lalita Kumarappa Kotwal, 'Change of Attitudes', *Times of India*, 15 August 1956.

³⁷ Rajendra Prasad, *Times of India*, 12 November 1954,

³⁸ One more recent example of this common argument is Gyan Prakash, 'Anxious Constitution-Making' in Prakash, Gyan, Michael Laffan and Nikhil Menon (eds.) *The Postcolonial Moment in South and Southeast Asia* (2018), pp.141-161, at p.147

India's early experiments in development and socialism repeatedly set up institutions *at a distance* from the existing bureaucracy.³⁹

The Central Social Welfare Board was one such experiment in a novel kind of institution building, one that entailed creating a new 'pluralistic democratic administrative machinery'.⁴⁰ As such, the CSWB had an anomalous legal and administrative structure. It was established by a resolution of the Government of India. It had not been brought into existence by Act of Parliament, so it was not a statutory body. It was not a Society registered under the Societies Registration Act, nor was it a Joint-Stock Company. Technically, therefore, it had no juristic personality. As such, it was subject to only a minimum of parliamentary, administrative and financial controls.⁴¹ Durgabai Deshmukh argued that this arrangement was essential for the smooth functioning of the Board: the Board had 'flexibility' whereas government ministries were burdened by 'rigidity'.⁴² The Board was chaired by a non-official, Dr Deshmukh, and its twelve members included four more non-officials, all of whom were women. The remaining members were official representatives of various Government Ministries concerned with the activities covered by the board. This structure was replicated on State Social Welfare Boards, which were established in March 1954.

The CSWB and the 'Next Step' Approach

Although the original intention was that the CSWB would only fund, coordinate and oversee efforts undertaken by other voluntary groups, its mission soon expanded. The Board discovered that most of the non-official social welfare organisations working in the country were in urban areas, leaving the vast rural population without such services. The CSWB, therefore, devised a scheme to bring social welfare to women and children in rural areas, called Welfare Extension Projects (WEPs). Activities under the extension programme began in the second half of 1954. The initial aim was to establish one project in each of India's 330 districts, by the end of the

³⁹ Taylor C. Sherman, *Nehru's India: Seven Myths* (Princeton University Press, forthcoming)

⁴⁰ P.D. Kulkarni, *The Central Social Welfare Board*, p.72

⁴¹ P.D. Kulkarni, *The Central Social Welfare Board: A New Experiment in Welfare Administration* (London: Asia Publishing House, 1961), pp.68-69. This may also explain why it is not often found in official archival records.

⁴² *Times of India*, 8 April 1958

First Plan.⁴³ As they prepared for the Second Plan, the CSWB looked to expand to open two more WEPs in each district. These local projects were overseen by a Project Implementation Committee, a mixed body of official and non-official members, where, once again, the non-officials were women volunteers. Below the Project Implementation Committee was one paid Mukhiya Sevika (this Hindi term was rather inelegantly glossed as Chief Organiser in the officialese of the time), and then three paid village-level workers at each site: a Gram Sevika, a Craft Teacher, and a Dai (midwife trained in indigenous methods), again, all of whom were women.

Though a break from the model of merely supporting voluntary effort, Welfare Extension Projects still adhered to the belief in the importance of self-help and voluntary contribution. The Central Board provided 50% of funding and State boards 25% of funding to each centre. The local population was expected to contribute the final quarter of funds for each centre. Through craft production and even some agricultural work, the women who benefitted from WEPs were encouraged to try to make their project self-sufficient.

The Welfare Extension Programme was an interesting mix of bold innovation, and apparently conservative practice. On the one hand, earlier scholars have critiqued the ‘safe and innocuous welfarism’ of schemes like this one because the training provided to rural women hardly seemed the basis for female emancipation.⁴⁴ Welfare Extension Projects tended to focus on health, hygiene and nutrition, as well as crafts and adult literacy. There is much in this curriculum to suggest that the WEPs propagated an understanding of women as primarily or even solely wives and mothers, ignoring the work they did in agriculture and trade. Their position of dependence seems to have been reinforced by limiting them to earning supplemental income through selling crafts made in their spare time.

The picture is not quite so simple, however, because looking at the structure of the Central Social Welfare Board and the WEPs, we see a significant amount of decentralisation. From State Boards to Project Implementation Committees, to individual village level workers, the flexibility of the projects meant there was a great deal of autonomy. As such, there was room for more radical ideas. For example, the Maharani of Patiala was the Chair of PEPSU State Social Welfare Advisory Board in 1955. Under her leadership, the PEPSU training programme

⁴³ by March 1956 they had established 294 PICs. Kulkarni, *The Central Social Welfare Board*, p.14

⁴⁴ Banerjee, ‘Whatever happened’, p.WS3

for village workers included the usual material on health, hygiene and literacy. But it also included plans for village workers to organise women's clubs: 'Clubs will promote mixing socially among women of all classes. It will create consciousness that women must stand on their feet and shake off dependence on men.'⁴⁵ It is unclear what exactly happened with this ambitious plan, but a later report by I. Randhawa on the working of WEP projects in PEPSU included no mention of it.⁴⁶ Decentralisation, and a lack of standardisation may have created opportunities for more progressive projects to arise, but these same characteristics also opened up space for these different ideas to fail, to be ignored as irrelevant, or to succeed without then being replicated.

The key was that the flexibility of the programme was supposed to make it more responsive to the 'felt needs' of the women where these were observed to be different from the standard provision related to health, nutrition and crafts. In rural areas this extended to building pit latrines, or providing clothes for poorer children. In urban areas the flexibility took the WEPs in different directions. For example, in major cities the CSWB helped establish social welfare match making cooperatives. One such factory opened in Poona in July 1957. Its workers had been found through a house-to-house survey of 'middle class families' in the city. After 30 days of training, those women who were chosen to join the factory began work. As a report on the factory by P.R. Shinde explained, 'Not all the 533 women workers who underwent training work at the factory premises. Those women who prefer to work in their homes collect raw materials from depots located at suitable centres in the city.' Around 80% of the women worked from home, in fact, with only 20% attending the factory, despite the fact that factory workers earned Rs1.50/day, while those at home earned only Rs1.25/day.⁴⁷

Looking at the broad sweep of welfare extension activities, we can begin to see a pattern. Where village women were in purdah, they were encouraged to give up the practice. Where they did not gather outside of relatives' houses, the Gram Sevika began to organise bhajans (devotional songs) and festival celebrations where the women of a village could gather together for the first time. Where they were not in the habit of accessing any medical facilities for themselves or their children, they were guided towards very basic care, especially for maternity services.

⁴⁵ Maharani of Patiala. 'Training of Rural Welfare Workers', *Social Welfare*, 1:12 (1955), pp.26-7

⁴⁶ I. Randhawa, 'A New Start for PEPSU villages' *Social Welfare*, 3:3 (1956), pp.29-31

⁴⁷ P.R. Shinde, 'Poona Match Factory' *Social Welfare*, 6:7 (1959), p.35

Where women were not earning any money for the family, they were asked to ‘think that there is more in one’s life than just cooking and bearing children’, and then given the opportunity to make a supplemental income by producing crafts.⁴⁸ Where they wanted to earn some income, the CSWB helped them form cooperatives. Few, if any, of these steps were a radical break from existing local practices. Instead, the idea was to ‘tempt and encourage’ women to take ‘the next step’ on a very long walk towards female emancipation.⁴⁹ This incrementalist approach was not radical, but it also did not put a ceiling on the abstract possibilities for Indian women.

While the WEPs were meant to respond to the ‘felt needs’ of the community, the hitch was that the pervasive narrative about the rural population, especially women, was that they were unaware of their own needs. As a result, social workers often emphasised the imperative of winning over otherwise ‘cynical’ women, usually in more remote areas. Gram Sevikas, Dais and Craft Teachers set out ‘to convince the people, through service.’⁵⁰ The pages of the journal *Social Welfare*, produced by the Central Social Welfare Board, were full of stories of reluctant villagers who were converted to participating in their local project when a Dai helped with a difficult birth, or a Gram Sevika supplied someone with simple medicines. Most often these stories were recounted in panegyric mode, lauding the successes of the softly-softly methods of village workers. Occasionally, a different narrative came through on the pages of *Social Welfare*: in Saurashtra, Dr Jadhav explained, the ‘benefits’ of attending WEP sponsored initiatives, ‘had to be forced on ignorant mothers’.⁵¹

Whether the benefits had to be proven through service or forced on an unwilling population, we witness a tension here. This was a top-down approach to inducing women to articulate their needs from the bottom up. While it has long been noted that Gandhian constructive work was predicated upon and reinforced social hierarchies, the dynamic here is not quite the same. Social workers, usually middle-class, upper-caste, urban-dwellers reached out to those whom the CSWB identified as needy. But as they did so, they engaged in a complicated dance where

⁴⁸ Senapatty, Dolly, ‘Orissa Chairman Talks About Day-to-Day WEP Work’ *Social Welfare*, 3:9 (1956), p.13

⁴⁹ Tara B. Jadhav, ‘The Story of a Welfare Centre in Saurashtra’, *Social Welfare*, 2:1 (1955), pp.78-9, at p.79.

⁵⁰ ‘WEP News – Winning Over Villagers in Assam’, *Social Welfare*, 3:4, pp.29.34 (1956)

⁵¹ Tara B. Jadhav, ‘The Story of a Welfare Centre in Saurashtra’, *Social Welfare*, 2:1 (1955), pp.78-9.

the social worker tried to convince the target of her efforts that she – the rural woman – was demanding improvements in her life herself. This was a defining feature of CSWB approaches to women's issues in the 1950s. Indeed, given the way it mirrored the language and the activities of the Community Development Programme, this tension – the attempt to convince the needy to demand what social workers were willing to give them – was a larger feature of early postcolonial socialism in India.

The difference between an inherently conservative programme and one that ended up with rather conservative outcomes is important. Its achievements were limited because India's social welfare workers, like India's socialists, insisted that social reform had to be both non-violent, and democratic. Above all these requirements meant moving forward by what they termed consensus. The result was often deference to elites and existing power structures.⁵² Making the distinction between means and ends gives us a more accurate picture of the ideas that underpinned women's emancipation at the time. While the overall picture was not of dramatic change, the decentralised structure coupled with the 'next step' approach means that one cannot rule out the possibility that genuine transformation may have taken place, albeit in pockets.

Indeed, one of these pockets may have been created by the fact that the WEP called for the employment of women on a massive scale. Less than a year into the programme, Durgabai Deshmukh appealed for 100,000 women to come forward to work in the Welfare Extension Projects.⁵³ It is hard to garner information about these women workers, but the fragments of information available present a diverse but also sometimes tantalizing picture of independent women. Initially, these women included trained workers as well as untrained enthusiasts, but the intention was that all workers ought to be trained, preferably at one of the Kasturba Gandhi ashrams. In other words, they were educated. These women tended to be young and unmarried, and they were posted in groups of three to rural areas. While some of them lived together, distinctions of caste meant they sometimes chose to live separately. Although they established their WEP Centre in one village, they were encouraged to travel between villages, meaning they were often on the move. An evaluation report from the Planning Commission, published in 1959, provides a few clues about these women. It noted that they tended to be from urban areas and were 'generally better turned out than the common run of village women', as such,

⁵² Sherman, "New Type of Revolution", p.496

⁵³ *Times of India*, 3 July 1955.

they roused ‘the curiosity of the women and the admiration of the men’. The report also noted that the younger village-level workers were popular with children, but ‘sometimes a little too forward and bold to be liked by the village women’.⁵⁴ One such village worker was pictured in an issue of *Social Welfare* in 1955. Seated on a motorbike, with her hair cut short and glancing almost cheekily out of the side of her eye at the camera, she is identified as Miss Mainianath [sic] Sultan, Organiser of the Oakhla WEP, Delhi. The caption notes that she finds it ‘easy to meet villagers. She does her round on this motorcycle.’⁵⁵

With her short hair, her motorbike and her arresting gaze, was she, perhaps, a picture of a new Indian woman? One must be careful not to overstate the liberating potential in evidence here. On the one hand, although Durgabai Deshmukh called for 100,000 workers to staff the projects, State Boards repeatedly faced a shortage of women workers.⁵⁶ On the eve of its absorption into one of the Ministries of the Central Government, the CSWB’s 3340 welfare centres had reached only 20 million people.⁵⁷ On the other hand, it is worth issuing a word of caution about the new Indian woman who was part of the cadre that worked on these projects. Her pioneering spirit, though important, was rarely enough to shield her from the overwhelming patriarchal forces she encountered. Young female workers sent to villages were often shadowed by local boys or found themselves subject to pressures by unscrupulous village headmen. In one case, the local Chairwoman ‘had to intervene’ to secure a ‘successful marriage’ between one of the women workers and a local man. On another site ‘one of the village level workers had to be sent to a maternity home.’⁵⁸ Economic liberation without social emancipation had its limits. The focus of those in charge was on finding ‘protection for these young girls’, without disrupting the attitudes behind threatening male behaviour, or challenging assumptions about female sexuality.

This pattern was repeated more broadly across the work of the CSWB. The pages of *Social Welfare* lauded the arrival of middle-class women in the workforce and not just in social

⁵⁴ Projects Evaluation Organisation, *Evaluation Report on the Working of the Welfare Extension Projects of the Central Social Welfare Board* (New Delhi: Planning Commission, Government of India, 1959), p.15.

⁵⁵ *Social Welfare*, 2:8 (1955), p.28. See the photo at <https://lse.academia.edu/TaylorCSherman>

⁵⁶ *Times of India*, 16 may 1958; Randhawa, ‘New Start for PEPSU’, p.30.

⁵⁷ *Times of India*, 15 March 1962

⁵⁸ *Evaluation Report*, p.15

welfare work. In 1954, Lalitha Bhat celebrated 'India's New Working Girls' with a feature on the young women employed by Telephone Industries, Ltd., in Bangalore.⁵⁹ The following year, Margaret Chatterjee noted that the Government of India employed more than 20,000 women, with the largest numbers in the Railways (8000) and the Ministry of Defence (3000).⁶⁰ In 1956, a five-page photo essay by P.N. Sharma celebrated 'India's Working Women', from nurses and broadcasters, to construction workers.⁶¹

The CSWB did go beyond celebrating middle-class women, but not without a heavy dose of middle-class pedagogy. In 1957 the CSWB began to provide capital funding for hostels for working women. Here is how the step was explained in the pages of *Social Welfare*: 'It is, therefore, hoped, that these grants will be able to help the working girls not only in getting encouragement in seeking employment at a place other than their home town but also in getting comfortable place to live, at minimum charges, without any fear of moral danger.'⁶² The project was framed partly as an inducement to work far from home, and partly as a preventive measure to remove the problem of 'fallen women', as the moral panic around women's sexuality was framed at the time.⁶³ As was common in mainstream, mid-century feminist initiatives across the world, many of these programmes helped women take the next step towards earning an independent income, and at the same time reinforced middle-class norms of 'moral hygiene'.

Conclusion: the End of the Experiment

Was this a bold programme or a conservative one? The answer lies beyond such simplistic dichotomies. Seeing the programme as part of a decentralised and incremental approach to women's liberation can help us understand the wide variety of aims and outcomes arising from it. Above all, the CSWB was an experiment, or rather, a series of them. Like many of the social and economic experiments of the Nehru era, this one had a mixed record. This became apparent

⁵⁹ Lalitha Bhat, 'India's new Working Girls', *Social Welfare* 1:8 (1954), p.45

⁶⁰ Margaret Chatterjee, 'Trends of Progress in Employment and Welfare of Women', *Social Welfare* 2:5 (1955) pp.6-7.

⁶¹ Sharma, P.N. 'India's Working Women', *Social Welfare*, Annual Number (1956), pp.85-90.

⁶² D.P.C., 'Hostels for Working Women' *Social Welfare*, 3:10 (1957), p.6

⁶³ *Ibid*, p.6.

when the Planning Commission's Project Evaluation Organisation (PEO) surveyed the work of the CSWB in 1958.

Perhaps the boldest experiment was not in the field of women's social reform, but in the way the CSWB had attempted to reimagine the state, or rather, this small segment of the bureaucracy. Though there was much good work being done, the PEO recorded a number of serious concerns with respect to the institutions established by the CSWB. To begin with, the irregular structure of the Boards and Project Implementation Committees, with their mix of volunteers and officials, raised problems. Although this administrative arrangement had its defenders, including the Prime Minister, it lacked accountability.⁶⁴ The PEO noted instances where workers were not paid by the voluntary boards that oversaw them. When they visited Bihar in April 1958, for example, the PEO found that 'not a single village level worker, Chief Organiser, Accountant or Jeep Driver' had been paid for six months. The CSWB had sent money to the State Board, but 'for some reason or other, the amount had not been disbursed by the Chairwomen of the State Board'.⁶⁵

Secondly, from the Central Board down to village women, the CSWB put great store in voluntary contributions, but the PEO found that although the women volunteers who acted as Chairwomen on Project Implementation Committees had been active in community service before their appointment, 'The same enthusiasm was not in evidence' for the WEPs.⁶⁶ The enthusiasm of the people, so often lauded, failed to materialise even among this small class of self-professed enthusiasts. At the next level down, requiring voluntary contributions from villagers posed its own problems. It seems that projects tended to be located in areas based on the likelihood of obtaining matching contributions from the villagers. The PEO found that often a WEP was located in a 'well-to-do area which had many amenities already, while the neighbouring areas remained poor and neglected as before'.⁶⁷ Moreover, when it was found that villagers were unwilling to contribute, the Centre was simply moved to a more co-operative village, or as one article in *Social Welfare* put it, 'Centres not prepared to fully receive the

⁶⁴ *Times of India*, 19 March 1959

⁶⁵ *Evaluation Report*, p.8

⁶⁶ *Evaluation Report*, p.9

⁶⁷ *Evaluation Report*, p.22

benefits of the scheme [have been] changed.’⁶⁸ Far from levelling India’s wide inequalities, this version of self-help socialism would have exacerbated existing inequalities.⁶⁹

Even before the full critique of the CSWB’s structures was published, its Welfare Extension Projects were incorporated into Community Development Blocks in 1957, bringing an end to this experiment in a new form state. The CSWB retained oversight over the Extension Projects, but as with so much Community Development work, their responsibilities were spread thinly. The CSWB did not last long as an autonomous entity subject to little accountability. The Government of India decided to make the CSWB into a Statutory Body in 1962.⁷⁰

This examination of the Central Social Welfare Board facilitates a number of revelations about the early postcolonial period. Firstly, those working for women’s social reform were not as reliant on the state as scholars have assumed.⁷¹ Like many of those in power, Durgabai Deshmukh and the women of the Social Welfare Boards tended to be sceptical of the state and enthusiastic about the potential of collective voluntary action to transform Indian society. This focus on voluntary effort was a solution to the problem of postcolonial nationalism. In other words, it was part of the answer to the question of what to do with nationalist energies and organisations after independence had been achieved. Channelling existing enthusiasm was also part of what was behind the desire to work according to rural women’s ‘felt needs’. However, this produced a contradiction: social welfare workers, operating on a scheme designed from the top-down, were tasked with persuading women to demand the services that social workers were willing to provide. Both aspects of the programme, voluntarism and responding to the needs of communities, required decentralisation, and the CSWB’s dramatically novel structure was an experiment in redesigning state structures to meet the new needs of independent India. State feminism in postcolonial India combined a radical re-imagining of the state with an incremental approach to women’s social reform.

The conservative outcomes of the project can be understood in a number of ways. Firstly, they were a product of its working methods: women were not encouraged to leap into the unknown, but rather to take the ‘next step’ towards a slightly different life. Progress, such as it was,

⁶⁸ I. Randhawa, ‘A New Start for PEPSU Villages’ *Social Welfare*, 3:3 (1956), pp.29-31, at p.31

⁶⁹ Sherman, ‘Education’

⁷⁰ *Times of India*, 15 March 1962

⁷¹ Sen, ‘Toward a Feminist Politics?’ p.4.

required moving forward by what was known in the lexicon of the day as consensus, but what might also be understood as deference to existing power structures. Secondly, this gradualist approach meant most of the effort went towards liberation from economic distress, without challenging the social norms which structured so many aspects of women's lives. The results of this decentralised, incremental approach were extremely uneven. In some places, they seemed to fail to come together at all. In others, transformation may just have moved into view on the horizon, best glimpsed, perhaps, from the seat of a motorbike.

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