

ACTIVITY REPORT OF MAJLIS : YEAR 2000-01

CULTURAL CENTRE

The activities of the cultural centre in the year 2000-01 were high pitched. With one new film in the making with a freshers' unit, another one just being distributed, old productions still in circulation, a new theatre project with a debutante director, a new manuscript to be negotiated with the publishers, a new term of the fellowship programme while the old term is still being wound up and request for conducting more students' workshops and cultural programmes. In fact, often we felt burnt out. Majlis, as a production and distribution unit of alternative culture and Majlis, as an academic centre for culture often jostled with each other for space and attention, producing fair amount of tension among its thin staff. It was often felt that working at such pace and on such wide range may take a toll on the centre. But this is something which can only be reflected in the functioning of the next year.

Fellowships for Artists

In this year the fellowship programme has crystalized and taken a definite shape and direction. On 1st June, 2000 an evaluation programme was organized with the selection committee members and the fellows who had completed the term in December 2000. The programme was also attended by the larger members of Majlis, trustees, members of HIVOS from both Bangalore and head office and a few well wishers of Majlis.

It was decided to continue with the same selection committee for the year 2001-02. The committee members are:

Gulam Mohammad Sheikh	Painter and Poet
Girish Kasravalli	Filmmaker
Anuradha Kapur	Theatre Director
Jashodhara Bagchi	Literary Critic and Women's Studies Scholar
Shanta Gokhale	Writer and Journalist

Among the fellows, Sabitri Heisnaam, the actress and dancer from Manipur, could not attend the programme due to ill health. The first presentation was by Rashmi Doraiswami on *Changing Narrative Strategies in Hindi Commercial Cinema*. Her presentation was punctuated with clippings from popular films of various genre. As some members in the audience found the presentation too broad and scattered, Rashmi informed us that the final book would go through one more draft and editing schedule. We have just come to know that the final draft of the book is ready and is being evaluated by three publishing houses.

The second was a rich audio-visual presentation by Narendra Srimali on *The regional lineages and linear interactions in the Evolution of Indian theatre and film music from 1902-1950*. Narendra presented only a part of his massive archival collection through slides of old record covers, booklets of songs from plays, photographs and hand bills of old productions and records of old theatre and film songs in Gujrati and Hindi. The astonishing volume of his collections and the depth of the material collected itself had overwhelmed every member in the audience. Though while evaluating the project some members had expressed slight discomfort about Narendra's lack of academic methodology in categorising and analysing the material collected. But yet some other members argued that Narendra's role is in collecting and building up the archive, while academic writings based on the archive needs to be commenced by other academicians. It was generally felt that by training and inclination Narendra is a genius collector and restorer of history of sound and music in performing art. The responsibility of a forum like Majlis is to help him in maximising the possibilities of his findings. It was unanimously decided that this was the most successful project under the fellowship programme and Majlis has made a significant contribution to the history of theatre and musical performance by supporting Narendra Srimali.

The third presentation was by Shikha Jingan on *Study and Documentation of the Wedding Songs of Punjab*. Mirasaans are the women of the community of professional singers in western Punjab. While the male members of the community perform for all public programmes in the community, the women are mainly restricted to wedding,

child birth and occasionally funeral. The closeness of their performances (mainly restricted to the women in the Zenana) has brought a texture of sexuality which is otherwise forbidden, in their lyrics. She supported her findings with audio recording of the songs by Mirasaans. Though her evidential material were more than substantial, some members of the audience found them somewhat repetitive and uni-lateral. Shikha has just finished making a documentary film on the Mirasaans based on the study that she has commenced under Majlis fellowship programme.

The last presentation of the day was by Sai Heradia on *A Book on the travels through India, With a Television Crew*. Her partner in the project Saina Anand was away on a higher study trip. Sai read three selected chapters from the manuscript. A fluid language, engaging style and caustic humor at the cost of themselves and the rest of the world mark the manuscript. At the same time, it also displays some amount of opinionative attitude which was youthful yet insensitive to its surrounding. Some members of the selection committee felt that this particular project failed to rise upto the expectation and purpose of the fellowship project.

Anuradha Kapur, member of the selection committee, made a brief presentation on the work commenced by Sabitri Heisnam under the fellowship programme. Jashodhara Bagchi too had witnessed the work in a festival cum workshop in Calcutta and submitted a written report to the committee. Sabitri through her acting laboratory developed a solo performance titled *Death of Two Women*. The performance includes the life of the original woman (Adi Stree), Sita and Marilyn Monroe. By putting Sita and Marilyn Monroe back to back on the same acting body Sabitri tried to question the specificity of any anthropological narration of female sexuality. The performance piece has gone through a few modification in last one year and finally performed on the prestigious forum of the National Theatre Festival 2001 in New Delhi.

On 2nd June the committee met again to evaluate the project in detail. The general observation was that the project for the first year had been commenced with good amount of success and certain amount of grace. But it was felt unanimously that it is

unfair to award the fellowships without meeting the applicants. It was agreed upon to organise an interview session with the shortlisted candidates in the next term.

The fellowship programme 2001 was announced in July 2000. The announcement was disseminated through 300 theatre groups, film societies, music and dance schools, art galleries, theatre halls, academic institutions on art and culture, literary and art magazines, women's groups and NGOs. However, in order to avoid an unrealistic rush we restrained from advertising the programme in the newspaper. Eighty proposals were received.

The process of short listing proved to be more difficult as the general quality of the proposals were substantially better than that of the last year. We had also received an overwhelming number of proposals from senior artists, which proves the intense need for a programme like this. However, after much deliberations and running to and fro, twelve applicants were shortlisted for an interview. Caution has been exercised to keep a balance between senior, experienced artists and newcomers, on one hand and on the other, between metropolises and small towns.

The interview with the twelve applicants in six categories took place on 20th November 2000. The selected fellows of the fellowship project 2001 are:

1. Meghnath And Biju Toppo, Ranchi Video inputs for the tribal organisation

Akhra

Meghnath and Biju are part of the cultural organisation Akhra, which is involved in protecting and enhancing tribal cultural identity in Jharkhand. The organisation has been taking active part in the movement against destructive development in the area. Akhra's contribution has mainly been in the field of communication, such as writing for the newspaper, documenting on video etc. The project under the fellowship will formalise and improve upon the video input into the group.

2. **Narayanan A. V., Trichur** **Reviving and preparing production manual of the Kodyattam play *Nagananam***

A graduate of film institute of Pune, Narayanan, is a member of the illustrious Chakyar family, the traditional Kudiyaattam performers. His project stems from his concern towards the increasing marginalisation of the traditional Kudiyaattam form in the face of the media onslaught. He plans to revive the production of *Nagananam*, a Sankrit play which was last performed 45 years ago. He plans to revive the play with the eminent actor Madhav Chakiyar and his troupe and document a production manual of the same.

3. **Jayant Rajaram Pawar, Mumbai** **Novel on the 1983 textile industry strike in Bombay**

A journalist by profession and an occasional fiction writer, Jayant has been witnessing and chronicling the fall of the Mumbai textile industry. The textile industry which comprised of 65 mills and 2.5 lakh workers went on a strike under the militant but individualist trade union leader, Datta Samant, in 1983. Most of the mills did not open since then and the mill land is being sold to the infamous real estate lobby of Mumbai. Workers in the textile village (Girangaon) have been reduced to a dismal 35,000 - 40,000. Jayant proposes to write a novel on the strike, its reason, its explosion and its disastrous end with reference to the common man.

4. **Nandita Bhavnani, Mumbai** **Study on the language of post-partition Sindhi community**

Nandita Bhavnani's project with Majlis fellowship is part of a wider study. Her study of the Sindhi community, a more silent victim of the partition and communal unrest in the sub-continent than the Punjabis and Bengalis, is in its last leg. With the Majlis fellowship she plans to tie up her three years long research on the post partition Sindhi community, the effect of migration on its culture and language, the status of a cultural

minority in the contemporary India and the Sindhi sentiment in the context of the rising Hindu militancy.

5. **Ayisha Abraham, Bangalore** Series of short duration films using found Super 8 film footage

A visual artist of repute, Ayisha has been working for a long time on photographs and video images as part of installation projects. She mainly uses old photographs and objects to illuminate contemporary ideas and concerns. Under the fellowship project she plans to develop a series of short duration films using old super 8 footage (mainly, from family collections in post-independence era) collected from various sources.

The projects start from January 2001 and run till December 2001. The fellows are requested to submit a mid-term report by 15th July 2001 and final report by 15th February 2002. A formal contract laying the basic rules and regulation regarding time frame, accounting, copy right etc. have been signed by the fellows and Majlis.

Colours Black: Film on Child Sexual Abuse

Researched, planned and shot entirely by the younger members of Majlis, production of **Colour Black** introduces the first group of artists trained within Majlis. The research and field work was generously guided and facilitated by Trupti Panchal, faculty member of TISS and trustee of Majlis.

The film has four narratives of young children who are abused within the extended family and attempting to communicate that to their immediate family. The stories are based on the case studies prepared by various NGOs and Majlis' legal cases. The main hurdle in structuring these stories was to overcome or work around the apparent inarticulation of children. The research commenced as preparation for this film showed that the silence around the issue of child sexual abuse is mainly stemmed from the language disparity between the children and the adults. Councilors and activists alike expressed the need to develop a culture where children's expression will not be

overridden as incongruous and thus insignificant. In the context of this need, we took a decision of not making a film entirely based on the interviews of adults who have been abused in their childhood. We attempted to portray the moments of agony and trauma of the childhood itself.

Extensive research was conducted with NGOs working with the issue. Mental health experts and creative artists working on children arts. The script of the four narratives that arose from these interactions are a combination of elementary expressions like colour, sound, toys, bedtime stories and fantasy. It was a tough task to convey the complexities of the issues while maintaining the autonomy of its protagonists. The fact that the film is not primarily meant for children, but for their parents and guardians made it even more difficult a project. Hence the stories were told from the point of view of the children and to the average adults in the audience.

Once the narratives are shot and edited, the next task was to connect it with adults' world, with their own memories. We decided to juxtapose the children's stories with the interviews of the adults. As against the all visual treatment of the children's section the interviews are dealt only with audio. As a strategic style the interviews sometime become specific and independent and yet at another time get overlapped and entangled with each other and become a mass of voice.

We plan to hold screenings in various cities through NGOs working in this area as screenings of a film like this may always need follow up counselling and discussion sessions. The first public screening will be held in Mumbai in the month of June-July. Depending on the response to the first few screenings we may develop and print a manual with recommendations from experts and basic instructions on how to handle the post-screening discussions.

Cultural Appraisal Course

The main cultural appraisal course for college students was on Literature and Literary Practices held on 18th-22nd October 2001. The programme was organised in

collaboration with the Y. V. Chavan Centre, a premier cultural centre in the city, in their premises.

The workshop, this year, had seen an unprecedented participation from the students community. The expected no. of participants was 35/40, but a week before itself the number reached 50. As we stopped accepting applications after it reached 50 due to technical reasons, many students gate crashed during the inaugural lecture by Susie Tharu. But whether it was a sign of a steady increase in the popularity of the programme or the choice of the subject and speakers in this particular workshop is difficult to judge.

The Workshop on Literature and Literary Practices was one of the rare successful blend of academic and the popular. It had in its schedule scholars like Susie Tharu, Amiya Dev, Mitra Parikh, Tejaswini Niranjana and Rimli Bhattacharyya speaking on various aspects of literature on one hand and on the other hand had demonstration of popular practices like Varkari (a community based musical form of the working class of Maharashtra), writing for popular cinema (by Javed Akhtar) and evolving popular literature for children (Radhika Menon of Tulika publication). The five days workshop were punctuated with practical classes on translation, face to face sessions with practicing writers and poets, screening of films on classical and folk texts, exploring the relationship of literature with allied art forms and performing arts, an exhibition on the role of visuals in literature and an exhibition of Sahitya Akademi publications with a special emphasis on translation and literature in regional languages.

Other major workshops of the year were around the International Women's Day in March. On 8th March Majlis organised a two day workshop with Maxmueller Bhavan, Mumbai. The workshop, titled *Expression as Empowerment* was structured for the young women artists and students. Four sessions were planned around Literature, Visual art, Music and Narrative (theatre and cinema) with representatives of two generations of artists. The idea was to explore the concept of feminine inheritance and its burden in the context of contemporary young artists. In each session the speakers

were requested to display/read/perform their selected works and discuss their challenges, desire, anxiety, memory etc. in the context of female inheritance. It was a delight to see the full house of MMB mainly filled by the younger generation of artists and art students. The day long workshop turned out to be more dramatic and full of swings of emotion than expected.

The next day showcased four films on women artists by women filmmakers. The films were **Kamlabai**, 1990 by Reena Mohan, on the life of the pioneer actress of the Marathi stage and the first actress of Indian screen; **Scribbles on Akka**, 2000 by Madhusree Dutta, a musical on the life and works of the 12th century saint poet Mahadevi Akka; **Three Women and a Camera**, 1999 by Sabeena Gadihoke, on three women photographers of the post-independent India and their pre-occupation with images and the nation; **Flowering Tree**, 1997 by Ein Lal on the legendary dancer Leela Samson. It was the first time a festival of films was organised on a niche theme like bio-pic on women artists. The four films adequately displayed the plurality involved in the gender concerns in the works of women artists and filmmakers. It was overwhelming to see that both the days in the workshop were attended by a substantial number of students who had participated in our cultural appraisal courses over the years.

The next workshop was 23rd-25th March in Nagpur, hosted by the Nagpur wing of Majlis. This workshop was planned with the aim of providing an exposure to the work and philosophy behind the two wings of Majlis i.e. why and how legal and cultural concerns work together and compliment each other. Or, putting it differently why a right discourse needs to be addressed with an informed alertness about art and culture. In order to demonstrate such a concept the schedule was worked out as a combination of various sessions and programmes. The invitees were women's groups, NGOs, human rights lawyers, faculty members of the Social Work college, film society members and local theatre groups. Because of our earlier association with them during the campaign on Christian Marriage Bill, large number of church officials too attended the programme. Majlis mounted a theatre production for the occasion. An one woman

play based on the script of Nobel laureate Italian playwright Dario Fo and Franca Rame, was enacted by Meenal Patel (eminent actress of Gujarati stage and trustee and founder member of Majlis) and directed by Madhusree Dutta. The play is a black comedy on the double burden of working women. The production was structured around the slides of the contemporary women painters' works.

The workshop was inaugurated by Flavia Agnes with a speech on **Challenges to Gender Politics: A Journey From 80s to 2000**. Mapping the journey of the women's movement; from the role of the pressure groups for legal amendments and state intervention for protection to social welfare agencies as part of the NGO movements to at the centre of the current identity politics and state sponsored ideological terrorism. Flavia stressed the need for shifting gender politics and its related issues at the middle of the nation, state discourse. The talk was followed by the screening of *I Live in Behrampada*, a film on a Muslim ghetto in the context of the communal riots in 1992-93.

The next two days were panel discussions on *Surviving Media and Memories and Identities: Where Were the Women* and relevant film screenings and the play *Waking up*. Films and the play selected were of wide range and genre. The idea was to display the plurality in conceiving and addressing an issue which is related to the current academic and social debates. The speakers in the panel include eminent scholars and activists like Pushpa Bhave, Vidya Bal, Yashwanr Manohar, Neera Adarkar, Rupa Kulkarni etc. An exhibition with panels on autobiographies by women, stages in women's movements, films and plays by women directors and women in freedom struggle was also mounted at the foyer of the venue.

Old Projects:

Scribbles on Akka: The film on the 12th century saint poet Mahadevi Akka got premiered on 2nd July in Mumbai. Subsequently it has been screened in Delhi, Calcutta, London, Bangalore, Hyderabad, Ahmedabad, Pune, Baroda, Kathmandu, Madras, Madurai etc. The film has been screened in more than twenty five public

screenings and around fifteen colleges. The audience turn out almost everywhere was far beyond our expectation and earlier experiences. The cause for such audience patronage can be multiple: the choice of the subject and Mahadevi Akka's own followings, the presence of well known artists and technicians in the film, the experimental nature of the production, the increasing good will of Majlis etc. It has received a National award for the year 2000 and was selected as one of the best practices in non-feature films in Asia, a forum which meets in Kathmandu.

The film works extremely well with the younger people- one of the objectives behind choosing the contemporary musical form for the production. Besides, it has been very well accepted by artists of other disciplines such as visual art and literature.

One of the main worries that we carried during making the film was a possible allegation of disrespect to the Kannada culture as most members of the unit were not Kannada speaking. Though initially there were some such complaints regarding the pronunciation and music score, finally it was welcomed in Karnataka too. Specially eminent scholars of Karnataka like Ananthmurthy, B. V. Karanth and K. V. Subbana have held the film in high esteem.

Voices From Hundred Years: The manuscript which was part of the City and Development project on the marginalised textile industry and its culture by Neera Adarkar and Meena Menon is finally ready for publication. The presence of a considerable number of visual plates in the book has made it compulsory to work with an establish publisher.

Two eminent publishers Oxford University Press and Seagull Publication both have agreed to publish the work. Besides, Mouj, a renowned Marathi publisher wants to publish it in Marathi. Presently the authors are busy in negotiating with OUP and translating the manuscript in Marathi.

Whose City is it Anyway, the other part of the project by Arvind Adarkar on the history of the development policy of Mumbai, is still going through the process of fine tuning and editing. But he has already shared his findings with the scholars and activists through various citizen forums and architecture colleges.

The volume of Majlis works that is available in publications and cassettes has finally reached an impressive size. Around ten publications on rights discourse in English and other regional languages and seven films on various issues and forms adequately represent the wide area of Majlis' concerns and also brings some local revenues every year.

LEGAL CENTRE

The work of the legal centre has considerably modified this year with the emergence of two distinct departments of lawyering and research. For the first time we are able to divide the staff and the infrastructure into two different cells. As Sumitra Acharya, a post graduate of the National Law School, Bangalore joined us as a full time legal researcher, the research cell evolved an independent identity. While the research cell comprise of senior researcher, Sumitra and law students who join us as interns with Flavia Agnes as the head; the litigation section has five full time lawyers.

A lot of energy and resources of the legal centre has been spend on the making of the Nagpur office. Presently Nagpur office has one faculty member of the social work college functioning as the co-ordinator, one lawyer, one social worker, one research assistant and one administrative staff.

Litigation:

The litigation work of providing women with immediate relief from local courts continues to be one of the major thrust of Majlis activity. But increasingly Majlis is also making interventions in the Higher Courts for the protection of women's rights. Presently a team of junior lawyers conduct regular case work, while the student volunteers and interns assist in the research projects. The more experienced lawyers

divide their time between campaign related activities and public interest litigations in higher courts which have wider social repercussions.

The statistical profile of the new and pending cases at the end of the year is as follows:

Family Court, Mumbai

New Cases : 57

Pending cases : 85

Family Court, Nagpur

New Cases : 22

District Court, Thane

New Cases : 5

City Civil Court, Mumbai

New Cases : 2

Bombay High Court

New Cases : 15

Pending cases : 23

Supreme Court

New Cases : 3

Pending cases : 4

Some of the important cases handled by Majlis during this year are revolved around the following concerns:

- a) Women's right to property within marriage,
- b) Wife's right over matrimonial home in the case of domestic violence,
- c) Family abuse and mental health in the context of property,
- d) Women's right to employment and the discriminatory State policies in this respect,
- e) Mental health, morality and child custody,
- f) Right to safe residence in the case of child sexual abuse
- g) Women's Right to Life versus AIDS Patients' Right to Marry etc.

During the year, the Nagpur office took shape with a considerable number of cases being filed. The twenty five cases filed by the Nagpur office in the Family Court of Nagpur addressed issues of maintenance, child custody and divorce. As the centre in Nagpur is co-ordinated and supervised by the alumni and faculty members of the local social work college, a support network of NGOs, police stations and women's organisations has been evolved quite spontaneously around Majlis. The litigation work there mainly stems through these sources.

However, in both offices, the number of the cases filed do not actually represent the amount of work carried out both at the pre-litigation and post litigation phases. As an alternative law forum and as a women's rights group, Majlis is committed to protect the rights of women, children and minority people both within the court and outside in society at large. And more often than not, the rights of ordinary people are better protected through out of court settlements than a prolonged litigation. Infact, often the litigation process, mainly instigated by the unscrupulous legal professionals, drain the people out of their life resources and precious time than the problem itself. Hence, a major part of the litigation activity in Majlis is directed towards protecting women from litigation itself. But sometimes the energy, skill and sustenance required for the out of court settlements prove to be more than the routine round of litigation.

The lawyers and para-legal personnel in Majlis are constantly engaged in counselling. At the time of initiating litigation, a lot of time and energy is spent preparing women for litigation. During litigation, the lawyers are constantly engaged in helping the women to keep up their morale through the long and winding path of court litigation. But at the same time, lawyers also have to be on guard to explore the possibilities of settlement and preparing women for negotiating favourable settlement terms with realistic expectation. This activity which the group is constantly engaged with does not reflect in the number of cases which are filed each year.

Campaigns:

Christian Marriage Bill 2000: The main campaign of the year was on and around Christian Marriage Bill 2000. The campaign was triggered off by a public statement from the law minister of India the month of May, 2000, that the archaic law governing Christian community would be changed soon, as a bill prepared by the Law Ministry with the community consensus is ready to be tabled in the monsoon session. The bill met with hostility from the religious leaders as certain anti-community provisions had been included in the new bill. But upon a careful reading, the bill also revealed to contain several anti-women provisions. To discuss its implications upon Christian women, a meeting was called in June 2000 by Ms. Virginia Saldanha of Women's Desk of Council of Catholic Women of India (CCWI). The meeting was attended by around 15 special invitees including religious leaders, women's groups, legal scholars within the community. At the discussion which followed, it became obvious that in the power struggle between the church and the state, the bill was all set to compromise the rights of the Christian women. A need was felt to place the debate away from both the communal state and the patriarchal church and make fresh recommendations based on the practical knowledge of the hardship of the Christian women.

In order to clarify the issue and to make legal implications of the new bill accessible to the ordinary people, Majlis conducted the research and brought out a booklet, titled

Church, State and Women: Christian Marriage Bill 2000 by Flavia and Veena Gowda. Majlis also decided to launch a campaign among the Christian population and elected members of the parliament and brought an information sheet as resource material for the campaign. The campaign started in Nagpur where the National Council of Churches in India (NCCI) has its head office. A public meeting and two smaller discussion sessions were organised which were attended by a large number of Christian religious and lay representatives, community organisations and women's groups. This was followed by another public meeting in Mumbai which was chaired by a sitting High Court judge, Justice F. I. Rebello. Meetings were also held in Bangalore and Hyderabad followed by meetings with Members of Parliament in Delhi.

The booklet has been distributed through NGOs, women's groups and Christian MPs. Number of special meetings were convened with the Christian women MPs of all political parties, scholars of Christianity, members of judiciary from the Christian community, National Commission for Women and the Law Minister, Mr. Arun Jailtey. The issue received a lot of publicity and articles appeared in newspapers and magazines. Majlis representatives were also invited to participate in debates over the issue on television. Though the recommendation made by Majlis finally garnered support, the bill itself has got shelved for the time being. But the campaign had helped us to bring the issue of Christian women in the lime light and helped to consolidate a forum of Christian people from all spheres of work to support the cause of Christian women against the vested interest of the state and the church.

Maharashtra State Protection of Women Bill, 2000: The second campaign was around the proposed Maharashtra State Protection of Women Bill, 2000. In September, 2000 the Maharashtra State declared that as part of the preparation for the forthcoming International Year of Empowerment of Women (2001), the State would introduce a new bill for the protection of women. Various non-government agencies responded to the bill by proposing marginal changes. But when Majlis obtained a copy of the bill and studied it, various provisions of the bill which amounted to violation of human rights, curtailment of the rights of civil society and tampering with the criminal

justice system were found. Issues like trial in the absence of the accused or disclosure of the defence strategy right at the time of framing of charges seemed to be a gross violation of the established principles of criminal law. Also the state was trying to project an image of itself as defenders of women without having to set up more family courts or more staff to address the issue and was trying to evolve a complex structure of voluntary groups to deal with the issue. Though the proposal looked lofty on paper the whole strategy was full of loopholes.

With the experience of analysing various law reforms in the realm of criminal law during the past two decades, Majlis could make a timely intervention before the bill was sent for final approval of the cabinet committee. We organised a meeting on 4th November inviting the chairperson of the Maharashtra State Women's Commission for a detailed discussion on the issue. Our detailed comments were also forwarded to the Secretary, Law, Judiciary and Company Affairs and to the Secretary, Women and Child Welfare Department.

The meeting was well attended by representatives of women's organisations, lawyers, academicians. The presentations were followed by extensive discussions. At the end of the meeting a resolution was passed urging the state government to withdraw the bill in its present form. Due to these intervention, the bill was recalled and was sent back for fresh drafting. We felt that this development was positive as the bill, if enacted, would have caused more harm to women than bestowed any concrete gains.

A Discussion on Muslim Women's Rights: In the month of August-September, 2000 a Constitutional Bench of the Supreme Court of India heard the Constitutional challenges to the Muslim Women's Act, 1986, which was enacted in the aftermath of the controversial Shahbano judgement. Since most of the lawyers who had argued the case were from Delhi, in order to keep the women's organisations in Mumbai informed of the debate Majlis organised a meeting to discuss the issue and also undertook a study of the reported judgements from various High Courts which have innovatively interpreted the wordings in the statute, 'fair and reasonable provision' to protect

women's rights of support after divorce. The meeting was attended by a large number of Muslim women and secular and human rights groups. Ms. Hasina Khan of Aawaz-e-Niswan, a Muslim women's organisation; Ms. Uzma Naheed, an Islamic scholar and Ms. Niloufer Akhtar a lawyer practising in the family court made significant interventions. The meeting has led Majlis to undertake a more in-dept study on the judicial pronouncements of various High Courts which will soon be published as a booklet, to disseminate more information.

Para-Legal Training

A special emphasis was put on Nagpur in terms training and campaign. In continuation of the work commenced in last three years in Nagpur, a workshop was conducted on **Rape law: need for amendment** in collaboration with the Institute of Social Work. The workshop was conducted by Apurva Parsekar, Veena Gowda and Flavia Agnes. The participants were social workers, marriage councillors, police officials and young advocates from and around Nagpur. We collated relevant material into a kit for the use of the grass root workers. But one of the earlier Majlis publications on rape law in Marathi proved to be much more useful for this workshop. These workshops not only helped Majlis to gain an identity in Nagpur, but also created an ambiance where issues of women's rights can be discussed beyond the rhetoric.

Following this workshop Majlis conducted an advance course on **National Identity and Gender** for the Majlis staff in Nagpur, some of their associates and colleagues and members of the Special cell for women in distress in Mumbai. Around twenty-five people attended the workshop in Mumbai. The two days workshop conducted by resource people from Bombay, included exposure trips to matrimonial courts and police stations.

Another important workshop conducted by Majlis was the session on **Property rights of women** in the Human rights' conference in Panchgani. Majlis took the responsibility of organising a day long session on property rights and its implications to women. Dr. Bina Agarwal, a scholar from Delhi and author of the renowned book, 'A

Field of One's Home'; Ms. Madhu Kishwar, editor of Manushi who had initiated a case in the Supreme Court on tribal women's land rights; Vyjayanthi Rao, a scholar from University of Chicago who has studied women's concerns during displacements and advocate Veena Gowda of Majlis made significant contributions in this session. The session was chaired by Flavia Agnes.

Three short term workshops were conducted on The State and Issues of Human Rights with the practicing sex workers in Mumbai. These workshops are conducted in collaboration with Prerana, a voluntary group working with the sex workers and their children for a long time. One of the workshops was organised in Nasik where sex worker from other districts of Maharashtra also participated.

A day long workshop was conducted for the women who had come to Majlis with for their legal problems on 17th March 2001. The workshop was on the theme of *History of Women's movement* and was organised on occasion of International Women's Day. It was an attempt to link the lives of the women who are seeking justice through various court procedures with the general history of women's struggle for empowerment. The main speaker in the workshop was the eminent trade unionist and women's rights activist Geeta Mahajan and members of Majlis.

Besides, this major workshops regular and occasional collaboration happened with Awaz-E-Nishwan, FACSE (Forum against child sexual exploitation), Burn Association (Forum for burn victims), Research Unit for women's studies in SNDT University, India Centre for Human Rights, Tata Institute for Social Science, Special Cell for women in distress, Sangat in Goa and Rahi in Delhi (both child rights groups) and National Law School University in Bangalore.

Student Internships:

This year two students from the Government Law College, Mumbai joined us for research on a year long assignment. The students worked mainly on research but also received an exposure to litigation and court procedures. One student from the

National Law School, Bangalore joined us on a two month assignment. We have now received requests from other law universities, more particularly in Calcutta and Hyderabad to provide internship to students. The atmosphere in Majlis provides a stimulating environment for law students and exposes them both to legal research and court procedures.