

ACTIVITY REPORT OF MAJLIS

April 2001-March 2002

This is twelfth year of Majlis' existence. This is an important fact to keep in mind while assessing the work of the whole year. The year of 2001-02 marks an important transition in the works of Majlis. On one hand it has facilitated a logical end to a phase of activities, on the other hand it has prepared a ground to usher in a new area/discipline of activities. The changes were prompted by two reasons: one internal and the other external. After twelve years of hectic activities and reasonable visibility we felt a need to refurbish and rechannelise our energy and resources. The motivation for such a change came mainly from the need to avoid a possible stalemate at the level of ideas and ideologies. The external reason was prompted by the declining socio-political situation in the country. With the rise of xenophobia in the public offices, increasing ideological bankruptcy within the civil society and the attack on all educational and cultural institutions, we had to re-work on some of our previous agendas. 2001-02 was the year when slowly this transition took place.

FINANCIAL PROFILE

In the financial year April 2001-March 2002 Majlis activities were supported mainly by two donor partners: HIVOS and Ford Foundation. HIVOS provided a composite grant of Dfl. 680,240 for the projects of the cultural centre, which were spread over the four-year span of April 1998-March 2002. The projects include fellowship to artists and culture studies scholars, production of short films and plays, cultural appraisal courses for students, para-legal training workshops, study and publication on city and development and one international symposium.

The Ford Foundation has sanctioned US\$100,000 for the activities of the legal centre for a period of two years starting from April 2000. The activities under this grant include legal counselling and litigation for women's rights and minority rights, training for young

law graduates and law students, research and campaign for various rights discourses and informal publications.

Majlis has also raised Rs.4,95,000/- through local initiatives such as donations, sale of its video cassettes and publications and awards.

LEGAL CENTRE

Our concern during the last decade has been to redefine the agenda of the women's movement within a secular framework. While consistently addressing issues of women's rights through innovative legal strategies, we have simultaneously tried to unravel the communal undertones of the seemingly pro-women demand of the right wing political parties for a Uniform Civil Code. In the same vein, we have also attempted to pierce the bogey of the *Shahbano controversy* and expose the subtle communal rhetoric written into it, without compromising our commitment to gender justice.

As the financial year comes to an end amidst the news of continued violence against minorities in the State of Gujarat, blatantly carried on with active collusion from the state machinery, a feeling of despair and helplessness is spreading among NGOs. Though some instances of NGO intervention have been initiated within Gujarat, confronted with the magnitude of the problem, this is just a drop in the ocean. The communal carnage has resulted in a psychological paralysis among the progressive groups and a need for a serious collective analysis of our role and interventions has been expressed.

While these are broader concerns, which need long term probing, at the immediate level, based on our past experience, our response has been to initiate a short-term legal initiative programme in relief camps of Ahmedabad. The focus of the programme is to document the widespread sexual violence unleashed upon Muslim women during the recent carnage and to explore the legal options available to victims in such a situation. A call for volunteers, especially from the students body of the law colleges and financial donations have received with a tremendous initial response. Justice Suresh, the member of the board of trustees of Majlis is a panelist of the citizen's fact finding tribunal

entrusted to probe the violence in Gujarat. We hope to take advantage of his experience in our legal venture.

a. Institutional Linkages:

Apart from the usual work of meeting the needs of the individual litigants, the year was significant for building institutional linkages with various institutions. Majlis evolved as the legal consultant for the hospital based counselling centres such as Dilassa, situated at the Bhabha Hospital, Bandra and Arohi, situated at Thane municipal hospital. Majlis lawyers visit these centres every week and address the legal issues concerning the people who approach them in the hospital. Besides, we conduct para-legal workshops in regular intervals for the social workers employed with Dilassa, Arohi and other hospital based counselling Initiatives.

The mutual relationship with the Special Cell for Helping Women and Children, a Tata Institute project based in police stations, is almost a decade old. While we extend our legal expertise and services for the women who approach the Special cell, their access to police and other state agencies often compliment our ability to help the women. Trupti Panchal, a member of the board of trustees in Majlis and senior coordinator of the special cell project, often functions as a vital link and facilitator between the two organisations. With the expansion of the Cells into the districts and Majlis' new plan of training lawyers from small towns in gender based litigation, hopefully newer and wider collaborative projects will emerge.

Aawaz-e-Niswan, a Muslim women's support group, remains one of our focal points of work. Majlis has been consistently providing training and support to this group and meeting the litigation needs of the women who approach them. This close tie with the group has been particularly beneficial for everyone concerned – the group, the women and also us. It provides us with probing insights into the lives and problems of Muslim women and helps us to counter the communal biases prevailing in the society and which are deliberately spread by right wing Hindutva forces i.e. Muslims reproduce indiscriminately or that Muslim men are per se bigamous. Our experience has been that

the problems of Muslim women of a social class are identical to those of Hindu women from the similar social strata.

b. Litigation:

The newer institutional linkages, which were established during the year, had a direct impact on the litigation work. It broadened our outreach and resulted in more number of women approaching us for legal redressal. Since the last twelve years Majlis had evolved innovative strategies within the realm of matrimonial law. These strategies have now become normalized and well integrated within our work. The lawyers at Majlis have become well versed with them and are able to execute them with ease.

Due to various socio-political and economic reasons the district court at Thane has emerged as a major litigating centre for women. As the metro city of Mumbai being developed to be a global centre, middle and lower class families living in south and central Mumbai are pushed out into the suburbs beyond the city limits of Mumbai. In this new scenario, the jurisdiction of the more congenial and informal Family Courts of Mumbai is being denied to the people who have migrated from the city limits in recent time. It is indeed a misfortune that the neighbouring Thane district does not have the advantages of a family court and cases are heard in the regular district courts, which makes litigation more cumbersome. Issues of gender justice have not been focused upon and the struggle for women to access justice is even greater. It is within this framework, we have been compelled to take on more cases in Thane court in recent times. Two lawyers are specially assigned for this task and go to Thane Court on a regular basis.

Majlis has also been taking some cases in Pune family court, but this work is not yet regularized and has remained at the level of occasional cases. In contrast, the work in Nagpur is at a sustained level and we have been able to break new grounds there. Apart from the regular litigation work, other supportive activities like regular client meetings and network with various social agencies have been well established in the Nagpur branch.

One important concern addressed during the year has been the issue of dual sexual morality, which operates in cases of child custody. In a number of cases of child custody, the husbands used the issue of women's adultery to deny her the custody of the children. Since this problem has been one of the major obstacles for women to gain custody, Majlis conducted a survey among family court judges to understand their views on this subject. We were surprised by the responses of the judges. All but one judge (a woman judge) maintained that if there were serious allegations of adultery against the woman, they would not grant custody of children to her on moral grounds. It is our experience that the husband's adultery or remarriage does not seem to have the same effect upon the judges while deciding issues of custody and access.

c. Campaigns:

ia) Minority Identity And Gender Concerns

Campaign for reform in personal laws of minorities has been a primary concern of Majlis. We are happy to state that two important campaigns carried out by us over several years finally bore fruit this year and have brought about sweeping changes, strengthening gender justice. The first is the amendment to the Indian Divorce Act passed by the Lok Sabha on 30th August 2001. The second is the path breaking Supreme Court decision delivered on 28th September 2001, upholding the Constitutional validity of the controversial Muslim Women's Act. These two historic events lend validity to the premise that small and significant reforms within personal laws governing minority communities have greater relevance to minority women than the rhetoric of an all encompassing and over arching Uniform Civil Code with its communal undertones.

Amendment to the Indian Divorce Act:

The amendment passed by both houses of Parliament in the last week of August, 2001 is a culmination of two decades of struggle of Christian women to bring changes into the archaic and outdated Act which is a relic of India's colonial past. Enacted in 1869 the Act continued to oppress Christian women for a century and a half. The amendments are a milestone in the direction of 'reform from within' in the realm of personal laws.

A bill was drafted with consensus of all church denominations but it was gathering dust in the Prime Minister's Office for nearly a decade. But suddenly, in 2000, the NDA government introduced a bill in the Parliament after making some changes, which would encroach upon the power of the church over the laity. This bill caused a furore and the government was finally constrained to withdraw the bill. While the issue of interference with the minority governance was at the centre of controversy, upon closer scrutiny, we realized that the proposed bill also contains several provisions of gender discrimination. To highlight this aspect, Majlis brought out a publication, titled *Church, State and Women: Christian Marriage Bill 2000*. The publication also recommended a list of amendments after scrutinising all aspects of the issue from a practical point of view of women's rights in the court of law. Majlis also decided to launch a campaign among the Christian population, Church hierarchy and Members of Parliament. The campaign started in Nagpur where the National Council of Churches in India (NCCI) has its head office. This was followed by several public meetings in other cities e.g. Mumbai, Bangalore, Hyderabad and Delhi. A number of negotiating sessions were held between the church representatives, Christian women members of parliament, ministry of law and us.

Majlis representatives also met the church authorities of the highest order and urged them to consent to the proposed amendments as they did not hinge upon any religious tenet and were in fact matters of practical concern for women. After several false starts and fake assurances finally a new amendment bill was drafted which met with the cabinet approval in mid-August and was passed by the Rajya Sabha on 27th August, 2001 and by the Lok Sabha on 30th August, 2001 and came into effect in September, 2001.

ib) Constitutional Validity of the Muslim Women's Act:

The path breaking Supreme Court decision delivered on of 28th September 2001, upholding the Constitutional validity of the controversial Muslim Women's Act is the second important mile stone in the realm of minority identity and gender concerns. Following the controversial judgement in the Shah Bano case, a new statute was enacted in 1986, which prescribed certain new remedies to divorced Muslim woman. But since

this statute, the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act, 1986 (MWA for short) was enacted amidst protests from women's rights groups, it was viewed with suspicion and foreboding. Hence the first response of the protesting groups was to challenge its Constitutionality.

While the writ petitions were pending in the Supreme Court, the Act gradually unfolded itself in the lower courts. Appeals from the decisions of various High Courts gradually started accumulating, along with the original writ petitions. What was intriguing was that while the writ petitions were filed by groups agitating for women's rights, the appeals were from husbands aggrieved by the verdicts of various High Courts. This fascinating phenomenon provided the first indication that perhaps the ill-famed Act could be invoked to secure the rights of divorced Muslim women. Over the years, several High Courts upheld the Muslim women's right to permanent maintenance. But the ambiguity persisted with several other High Courts holding a contrary position.

Finally the Supreme Court decided to hear the Writ Petitions and appeals and bring to an end to the controversy. Our concern at Majlis was that if the new Act were struck off as unconstitutional, it would erase the gains of all these years, where a substantial number of divorced Muslim women were granted lump sum maintenance under this Act. In the absence of this Act the Muslim woman would be confined only to the remedy of a monthly maintenance dole of Rs.500/- at the upper level. On the other hand, if the position of the Muslim Personal Law Board is upheld, then the Act would be held constitutional but the right of maintenance would be confined to only three months. Since we were not a party to the litigation before the Supreme Court, we decided to bring out a monograph on this issue.

The monograph, titled, ***Judgement Call*** was brought out, with analysis of the judgements of various High Courts in the decade and a half and countered the myth that the Act was anti-women. It provided the concrete proof regarding the beneficial aspects of this Act to Muslim women. The Act provided Muslim women with a more viable and feasible alternative to the prevailing remedy under S.125 Cr.P.C. by invoking Islamic principles

of a 'fair and reasonable' maintenance. To publicise the issue we decided to hold a meeting in Delhi and seek public support to this position.

On 6th & 7th May, 2001, Majlis along with Centre for Women's Development Studies (CWDS), Delhi organized a two day seminar titled, 'Maintenance Rights of Muslim Women - Issues and Concerns' at the Indian Social Institute, New Delhi. The two-day seminar was inaugurated by the ex-Chief Justice of India, Justice A. M. Ahmedi. The various panellists included, renowned Islamic Scholar Tahir Mahmood, Muslim Lawyers Ms.Sona Khan, Mr.Badar Ahmed, Mr.Mushtaq Ahmed, who had argued the case before the Supreme Court, Ms. Syeda Hameed, Member, National Women's Commission, Ms. Haseena Hashia, member, Muslim Personal Law Board and Prof. Iqbal Ansari, a renowned Social Scientist, and Ms. Hasina Khan, representative of the Mumbai based Aawaz-e-Niswan, and women's studies scholar, Ms. Zarina Bhatti. Efforts were made to bring a wide spectrum of Muslim representation into this debate. The seminar received wide media publicity. We then circulated the publication to the Supreme Court Judges who had heard the matter.

Finally the judgement, delivered on 28th September, 2001, by the Constitutional Bench of the Supreme Court, headed by Justice G. B. Patanaik, unanimously declared that the Act is Constitutional and clarified that the right of divorced Muslim woman for a 'fair and reasonable provision' extends beyond the three month *iddat* period, thus providing a life long security and protection to them. We were overjoyed to find that the decision had endorsed the position advocated by us.

These two successful campaigns provide an interesting study in the realm of gender justice for minority women within a communally vitiated atmosphere. The process is slow and gradual and at each juncture a new strategy would have to be evolved. But the complex issue of rights of minority women, entrenched in broader political processes, must evoke a adequately complex debate. The positive outcome of these two campaigns will hopefully pave the way for many more struggles for empowerment of women in the years to follow.

ii. Right to Matrimonial Home:

Based on our experience of litigating on behalf of women, it is our firm conviction that the right to matrimonial home and right to shelter are the primary concerns of women in distress situation. Lack of adequate protective measures in this arena has rendered women destitute. Despite the legislative vacuum, Majlis has been working to protect women's property rights and the right of residence, for well over a decade within the confines of the existing laws and procedures using innovative strategies. The struggle has been to create small spaces for recognition of women's right to property through larger principles of right to life and equality.

But these efforts have been a drop in the ocean of need. Within the broad patriarchal ideology, the home remains the exclusive domain of the husband, and at his whims and fancy, the wife can be turned out of the home. This makes the position of married women extremely vulnerable. The insecurity stems from the fact that the legal mechanism to recognize her contribution are lacking in our family laws. It is in view of this lacuna that we have been campaigning for a separate law on matrimonial home.

In April 2001, the Maharashtra State Women's Commission approached us with a request to draft a bill to this effect. Since all aspects of property rights could not be addressed through a single statute, the draft focused only on the right to reside in the matrimonial home or shared household. But simultaneously, we felt the need to discuss the wider aspects of women's property rights with a group of eminent lawyers, legal scholars and activists.

So on 4th August, 2001, Majlis organized a seminar to discuss the changing concept of property like tenancy rights, shares in co-operative societies, stocks and securities, permits and licenses and its impact on women's lives. The meeting was chaired by Justice D.Y.Chandrachud of the Bombay High Court. Mr. Suresh Kumar, Principal Secretary, Department of Women & Child Welfare and Advocate Flavia Agnes were the

panellists. The meeting was attended by eminent lawyers of the city and the issue of property rights of women in the changing socio-economical situation and the relevant strategies were discussed in detail. Thereafter, in the following month, Majlis submitted the draft of the legislation to the Maharashtra Women's Commission. The commission assures us that it will receive cabinet approval in the coming year.

iii. Campaign for Amending the Rape Laws:

Along with other women's organizations, Majlis has been actively involved in the campaign for reform in rape laws. After the in-famous Mathura judgment the country wide campaign had led to some reforms in rape laws in 1983. But at that time issues of child sexual abuse and incest were not addressed. The definition of rape was confined within the patriarchal parameters of penetration and hence could not deal with sexual violations of young children through non-penetrative sexual abuse. It is in this context, a campaign had been built over the years to bring in amendments within the rape laws. In the process of addressing the issues of violation of young boys, the 172nd report of the Law Commission proposed a gender neutral rape law.

This created a controversy and a clash of interest between three contesting groups – child rights, women's rights and gay-lesbian groups. To resolve the controversy it was important to bring all the contenders on a common platform and provide a thorough historic background to the issue before suggestions for change could be submitted. The meeting was organized by various women's groups as well as other human rights organizations and was held in Mumbai on 23-24 June 2001. Majlis was invited to present a perspective paper on this issue to provide the theoretical framework. The perspective paper has since then published in several legal and academic journals. While the controversy still persists, at least there is a consensus among various groups that a gender-neutral rape law will be more detrimental to the interest of women as well as homosexuals.

d. Para-legal training and legal literacy

a) National Legal Literacy Workshop on Muslim Law:

Majlis conducted a four day National Legal Literacy Workshop for Women organized by *Aaawaz-e-Niswaan*. Around 75 participants from various grass root level NGOs and women's organization and women's groups attended the meeting. The main purpose of the workshop was to understand the provisions of Muslim Personal Law and effectively use its provision in the course of counselling and legal aid programmes. Since the issue of Muslim Personal Laws is entrenched in communal rhetoric and anti-women aspect of Muslim practices have been highlighted and are being propagated as 'Muslim Law', many groups felt the need to gain a better understanding of the true principles of Islam and its pro-women ideology and use these provisions to counter the existing anti-women notions. A large number of participants at this workshop were Muslim women and others working with Muslim women.

The four day workshop discussed various provisions of Muslim law like the essential ingredients of a Muslim marriage, the right of *mehr* and its use as constrain on arbitrary divorce, the rights of women in bigamous marriages, the validity of arbitrary oral divorce, essential ingredients of a Muslim divorce under the law, the remedy of divorce provided under the Dissolution of Muslim Marriages Act (1939) the concept of *muta* and *mahruf* (maintenance and fair and reasonable settlement) under the Islamic law, the limitations of the provision of maintenance under S.125 CrPC, issues of custody of children under the Muslim law and the Guardians & Wards Act etc.

The recent developments under the Muslim Women Protection of Rights on Divorce Act, 1986 were explained at length and how a Muslim woman can be protected even after divorce through these provisions was explained at length and copies of the recent Majlis publication *Judgement Call* were distributed among the participants.

b. Gender Sensitisation Workshops for Excise Department:

The National Academy for Excise and Narcotics, Western Region, Bandup, Mumbai organized a series of workshops throughout the year, for Gender Sensitisation of their

staff at various level, right from Senior Officers and Commissioners to Inspectors, Supervisory Staff, Clerical and Administrative Staff and Class IV employees. Majlis was one of the main resources for all the workshops, which were conducted at regular intervals during the year. Veena Gowda of Majlis conducted several sessions on the issues of Sexual Harassment at Workplace, Personal Laws and Women's Rights and Labour Law and Women's Rights and conducted a few practical classes to dispel the myth surrounding the legal system. The documentary films produced by Majlis were screened during the workshops and were highly appreciated by the participants.

c. Orientation for Teachers to Start Women's Cells in Colleges

Majlis was invited to conduct an orientation session for Teachers and the Academic Staff Refresher Programme of the Bombay University. The programme was held to train middle and senior level university teachers to start women's cell in their respective colleges. The workshop was held at a suburban college and around 50 teachers from various colleges in the city attended the workshop. The sessions were on various campaigns taken up by the women's movement, personal laws and legal strategies, sexual harassment at work place, the technicalities of starting women's cells etc. The workshop provided the exposure for basic legal strategies and the back up resource to the teachers in the event of a more serious legal problem.

d. Legal Resource for NGOs & Grass Root Organisations

Two workshops were conducted with FACSE – a broad network of agencies working on child sexual abuse on laws and procedures concerning child sexual abuse. The aim of these workshops was also to understand the current campaign for rape law reforms and to situate the experience of FACSE within the proposed reforms. Many child rights and gay rights groups are actively campaigning for a rape law reform on the basis of gender neutrality. From our experience of practically litigating for the rights of women and children, we find this demand as impractical and devoid of any sense of actual reality. We believe that the issue of sexual violence such as rape needs to be positioned within the gender discriminatory context of the society. The demand for gender neutrality in the rape law will become a double burden on the women, in general. A paper prepared by

Majlis on the implications of a gender-neutral rape law was circulated during the workshop and was debated extensively during the workshop. Majlis has continued to provide litigation support to this group on all issues concerning child sexual abuse.

e. Networking programme with affected women

For several years now it has become a convention for Majlis to provide a common platform to the women who come to us for legal help. The need for such a platform was first aroused when we realised that the emotional support that those women need in order to re-build their lives cannot be provided either within the legal frame work or within the formal relationship that they share with the staff of Majlis. Hence we planned for programmes where the women can meet each other in a more congenial atmosphere and share their misfortunes and courage with each other. The programmes are always designed around a broad theme of common concern in order to expose the women to the larger world and help them in placing their lives in the context.

This year a special programme was designed around 8th March, the international women's day, to address the issue of gender and education. Meenal Patel of Majlis conceived a theatrical presentation of the autobiographical fiction of the dalit writer Urmila Pawar. The narrative deals with a dalit girl child's desire to be educated, the society's collective effort to throttle it and the final triumph of her will. The one woman play by Meenal poignantly relate this individual's story to the larger issue of women's struggle for an identity. Some of the litigant women (across different social strata) were specifically requested to respond to the play and relate it to their own world of struggle. Ms. Sonal Shukla, feminist activist and educationist was the resource person for the programme.

f. Workshops for High School Students

By a series of coincidences, this year, many invitations for conducting workshops broadly on the theme of Gender and Legal rights have come from some high school authorities. On one hand it was overwhelming to see that even the school authorities are waking up to the reality of gender discrimination and feeling a need for special workshops on legal

rights. But more often than not while conducting the workshops for students of an average age of 12-15, we realised that we were not adequately prepared for the occasion. All our resource material (films, games, books, papers and metaphors) were garnered towards addressing the college students and above and they often did not work in school. We realised that in order to address this section of the populace we would need to refurbish our infrastructure and redesign the training procedures.

CULTURAL CENTRE

Project 1: Fellowship for Artists and Researchers

The fellowship programme for the 2001-02 term ended in the month of January '02. The five projects commenced under the fellowship programme are varied in nature and in their locations, which in turn reflect the widest concern of Majlis cultural centre. While Ayisha Abraham, the Bangalore based visual artist, has worked on an artistic-academic project like revisiting the old film footage shot by amateur filmmakers in the newly independent country; the tribal filmmaker Biju Toppo from Jharkhand chronicled the politics and the endangered culture of the tribal land. Below is a brief summary of the projects done by each fellow.

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

Akhara

Meghnath and Biju are part of the cultural organisation *Akhara*, which is involved in protecting and enhancing tribal cultural identity in Jharkhand. The organisation has been taking active part in the movements against destructive development in the area. *Akhara's* contribution has mainly been in the field of communication, such as writing for the newspaper, documenting on video, holding workshops and film screenings etc.

As part of their fellowship they have shot two video films. One is a collection of five stories of people's movements against the state sponsored development projects, which are environmentally hazardous for the indigenous people. The other film is on a group of Chhau (a traditional dance-theatre form) performers- their struggle for survival against

the onslaught of satellite media. Both the films are made on cheap and user friendly S-VHS format with a unit of two people. The films are being screened through various community organisations in the tribal areas. *Akhara's* films are one of the very few screen initiatives made by the tribals themselves. It is a matter of honour for Majlis to be associated in such an initiative.

2. Nandita Bhavnani, Mumbai **Study on the post-partition Sindhi community**

Nandita Bhavnani's project with Majlis fellowship is part of a wider study. With the Majlis fellowship she ties up her three-year long research on the post partition Sindhi community, the effect of migration on its culture and language, the status of a cultural minority in contemporary India and the Sindhi sentiment in the context of rising Hindu militancy.

As part of her study Nandita toured extensively in Pakistan, India and Dubai, where the Sindhi community lives in large numbers and is in a position to influence the socio-economical scenario. Quite like the Kashmiris, the Sindhis in the pre-partition days and to a certain extent even to the present day, believed in a composite culture of *Sindhiyat* and not in dominant Hindu or Muslim culture. Hence the partition, on one hand had destroyed the notion of a secular *Sindhiyat* and on the other hand led to huge exodus to other countries for trading. Many Sindhi families migrated to Arab countries, Africa and Europe.

Nandita, a Bombay bred Sindhi who learned the language mainly for this study, travelled around to understand the idea of home and homeland and the role of property and class politics in Partition-related events. She also attempts to understand the complex identity of *Sindhiyat*, which had at times countered the religious identities and searches for its reminiscence in today's Sindhi community in both India and Pakistan.

3. Narayanan A. V., Trissur, Kerala **Reviving and preparing production manual of the *Kodiyattam* play *Nagananam***

A graduate of film institute of Pune, Narayanan, is a member of the illustrious Chakyar family, the traditional *Kudiyattam* performers and a trained *Kudiyattam* performer himself. His project stems from his concern towards the increasing marginalisation of the traditional *Kudiyattam* form in the face of the media onslaught. His project was to revive the production of *Nagananam*, a Sanskrit play, which was last performed 45 years ago. Narayanan believes that the play, which is substantially different from the standard good and evil sagas, is an eternal expression of benevolence and provides a counter to the contemporary culture of polemics and polarisation.

The old classic was painstakingly revived under the guidance of Guru Madhava Chakiyar in its original form and duration of six and a half hour and premiered it at Trissur, Kerala in the month of September. It was heartening to see the large number of audience watch the six and a half hour long traditional play in rapt attention. Many scholar and former exponents of *Kudiyattam* and Kathakali were also present in the audience. This performance and some of the rehearsal sessions were video documented in detail. An edited version of the play has been prepared and tapes are being sold to dance schools, archives and interested individuals.

An abridged, two and a half hour version of the play later travelled to Bombay and Delhi. The play also took part in the National theatre festival in Delhi. With the recent development of *Kudiyattam* being declared as a heritage art form by the UN committee, one hopes that new energy and patronage will come to its way.

4. 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 has been using old photographs and objects to illuminate contemporary ideas and concerns.

Under the fellowship project she unearthed a large amount of film footage shot using super 8, 16 mm, 8mm cameras by amateur cinematographers in the period of 1940-1970.

These cans of celluloid bear the testimony of a forgotten visual culture and the elements of the emerging middle class in post-independence India.

Ayisha discovered the footage from the dusty lofts of people's houses, godowns of closed laboratories and other unsuspecting sources; fighting against the inertia and disinterest of family members of the filmmakers. Then she converted all the footage into digital format and categorised them as family albums, sociological statements, fictional works etc. She has also video interviewed some of the filmmakers who are still alive and somewhat alert enough to remember the chronicle of their filmmaking ventures. These interviews would be very important in the history of evaluation in film technology and images. Ayisha has also made/recreated a couple of new fictions using excerpts from her archive of old footage. With the technical challenge of discovering and reviving old film footage, intellectual and artistic engagement of re-editing them, academic vigour of theorising the then prevalent visual culture and much more, this project has gone far beyond its own boundaries mentioned in the project proposal.

5. 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 85 mills and 2.5 lakh workers in 1980 and went on a strike under the trade union leader, Datta Samant, in 1983, have been reduced to a dismal 35,000 - 40,000 workers in the year 2000.

Under the fellowship Jayant Pawar has started writing a novel on the textile strike. He compares the fate of the workers of the textile industry as that of the heroes of Greek tragedies. Jayant's novel in Marathi runs through the events of the last twenty years in the life of the textile workers who have all migrated to the city from the rural areas of Maharashtra. The landless peasants of yesterday, whose new identity is of jobless workers in the metropolis are heroes of his novel.

Jayant is presently negotiating with the publishers. As part of our long standing association with the issue of City and Development, we feel honoured to be associated in the making of this novel.

Highly inspired by the volume and the quality of works commenced under the fellowship programme we are eager to continue with this project. This project has dramatically widened the outreach of Majlis to both in the circle of art practitioners and the non-mainstream section of the populace. Geographically too, this project has carried Majlis activities to all over the country and in return brought works from all over to Majlis repertoire. In practice, so far, we may have been able to support only ten artists/scholars, but the impact of the project is recognised by a much wider section.

Project 2: Works with debutante directors

This year marks a special trend in the production pattern with two major projects being conducted by young debutante directors.

2a. Film on Child Sexual Abuse

Though the film **Colours Black** got completed in March 2001, its potential has been fully realised only in this year. The film which has been based on the case studies collected from various child rights groups and NGOs is aimed to be a resource material for those groups itself.

Colours Black has been appreciated by the people working for counselling and legal rights of the children. Many groups all over the country have acquired VHS copies of the film for use in their workshops. The film has also been an important resource material for gender workshops with college students. Since the grey area addressed in the film lies between the past memory and the present consciousness, the neo-adult generation relate to it very well. Hence extra care is being taken to screen the film in colleges.

Colours Black has been screened in the Festival of Moving Images in Geneva and won the Grand Prix award as the best documentary. It has also been screened in the Film South Asia festival in Kathmandu and presently travelling all over the world as part of the Travelling Film South Asia package. This travelling film festival visits around fifty cities of the world with special emphasis on university crowd. **Colours Black** was also featured in the Kala Ghoda festival, the annual art festival of Bombay, in December 2001

It is heartening to see that the issue of child sexual abuse is slowly gaining social recognition and political attention. It was not the case when we first thought of making this film.

2b. Play on Thathri Trial

The play *Thathri: Realising Self* is based on the famous chastity trial of a Nambiar woman *Thathri* in the early 20-th century Kerala, is the work of young director J. Shailaja. The trial of *Thathri* who was accused of infidelity and who named 65 eminent male members of the village as her accomplices provoked various literary narratives throughout the century. Majlis' production of *Thathri: Realising Self* is the latest in that list.

The design of the play was a generous blend of indigenous material and motifs and post-modern installation works. The set, costume and properties were design by the local art college students and faculty members who worked with the actors during the whole five weeks of rehearsal. The inaugural show of the play in September in Trivandrum received an unprecedented public response and was widely covered by the local press and television channels. After initial five shows in Kerala, the play was performed in Delhi. Later the play was also invited to take part in the National theatre festival in Delhi, National theatre festival of young artists in Kolkata and in Chandigarh and Bhopal. We hope that the play will continue to have more shows in the coming year too.

The play has been developed as a first person narrative of *Thathri* flowing as a stream of consciousness through the childhood experiences of gender discrimination and sexual

abuse to the humiliating customs of Namboodri family tradition to the gender hypocrisy of the legal system. But all these streams are tied together with an invisible bond of female solidarity. The story of Thathri also documents a strong context for the works of Majlis in the field of women's rights and legal practices.

Project 3. International Symposium

Due to unforeseen political development in the sub-continent we had to cancel the international symposium on **Globalisation and Politics of Funding**. This programme was scheduled to be held in February'02 and all the preparatory work, including numerous meetings with experts in the field, structuring and detailed planning of the workshop, distribution of the concept note, confirmation from resource persons both at the national and the international level had been completed by December'01. But with the worsening of the political situation in the sub-continent, it was generally felt that it would not only be technically impossible to get official permission to hold such a conference, but also be politically naïve to discuss issues such as insurgency, development and role of funding in the current hostile atmosphere where all the progressive thoughts and attempts are being branded as foreign initiatives and anti-national. The issue of getting visa clearance for the international scholars, many of whom are known for their radical works and views, also posed a serious problem. Hence it was decided to temporarily shelf the project.

Project 4a. Cultural Appraisal Course

This year for the annual workshop for students we decided to make a departure from our tradition of dealing with socio-cultural disciplines. In last few years the focus of the workshops were visual art, performing art, history, literature etc. The choice of such disciplines was also determined by the fact that the students whom we could reach out to are mainly humanities students. But this year we decided to make a shift and chose science as the central theme.

Though the project was still designed mainly for the humanities students, we decided to make an attempt to understand the sociology of the science practices. Hence the

workshop was titled as **Science as a Site of Culture**. Unfortunately there was an immediate fall in the number of participants in comparison to the last year, which was fifty and more. This year only twenty-six students registered. Though the number is actually quite adequate and ideally we do not want to have more than thirty students in the workshop, it is interesting to note how the mention of science immediately inhibit the humanities students to opt for such a workshop.

The workshop was inaugurated by the eminent scientist and environment activist Dr. Vandana Shiva and her two hours long lecture set the right mood for the entire workshop. The next six days were series of exploration, deliberation and contemplation. The high points of the workshop were a session by Prof. J. P. S. Uberoi on Science in the coming millennium: a sociological reading; lecture on the relationship between Science, its history and the theory of history by Dr. Dhruv Raina; a practical class on the mapping of History and Science and a reading session on the lives of scientists Ramanujan and Chandrashekhar.

The overlapping boundaries of science and culture got best demonstrated in the session on Science, popular beliefs and cinema conducted by Gayatri Chatterjee. She explained the double-edged relationship that the 'make belief world' of popular cinema and the 'rational' of science share. The film *Structure of Crystal* by Zanussi was also screened in the workshop. This is the first feature film of the eminent humanist director and it is structured around the ethics of science and the morale of the science practitioners. Another such animated session was on Science, astrology and national identity by Dr. S. Balachandra Rao. The Bangalore based mathematician, who has also authored a couple of books on that theme, exposed the recent agenda of the right wing govt. to promote astrology as an ancient Indian science. Speaking through a lot of anecdotes from the world of science and politics he traced the relationship between aggressive nationalism and the campaign in favour of Vedic science.

Another interesting event in the workshop was an installation titled *Leap across and into* by the eminent visual artist Baiju Parthan and the physicist from TIFR (Tata Institute of

Fundamental Research) Dr. K. Sridhar. The installation, specially conceived for the workshop, was a collaboration of scientific rationale and artistic interpretation of the role of gravity in daily life. The installation proved to be a great medium to expose the students to the concept of multi-culturalism. The installation and the audience's response has been video documented in detail for future use in places where the installation cannot be reproduced for technical reasons.

The finale of the workshop was a dance performance *Lilavati* by the group of Orissi dancer Jhelum Paranjpe. This performance was based on the riddles that guru Bhaskaracharyya posed to his daughter Lilavati in order to teach her mathematics. The performance was participatory with the students becoming Lilavati and attempting to solve the riddles.

Though this project is one of Majlis' longest running projects and has been rated as very successful we have decided to slowly close it down. Though our commitment to art education and the over all need for it are still very much there, we feel a strong need to change the format of it. Hence we plan to conceive some different project towards cultural literacy in the coming year and wind up the current project by the next year. The proceedings of the last six years' workshops will be transcribed and edited as a manual for art and cultural literacy programmes.

OLD PROJECTS

a. Scribbles on Akka, the film made in 2000 has received the National award of 2001. This is the second national award for Majlis. In 1996 we received our first national award for Memories of Fear. **Scribbles on Akka** was screened at the Film South Asia festival 2001 in Kathmandu and MIFF 2002 (Mumbai International Film Festival). It has also been featured at Message to Man festival in St. Petersburg, Russia.

b. The study on the textile mills and its workers in Bombay has been culminated in the book titled **Voices over hundred years: testimonies from the textile district**. The authors of the book Neera Adarkar and Meena Menon have signed a contract with

Seagull publication for the English version and with the reputed *Mouj* publication for the Marathi version. Both the versions of the book are expected to be in the market by the end of this year.

OTHER INITIATIVES

a. At the beginning of the year, Mattela, a Pakistan based group of filmmakers launched a video programme *Goongi filmein (mute films)*. They invited fellow filmmakers from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal to make silent films of five minutes duration to be screened as a single event in a show of solidarity of people in the sub-continent. Majlis co-ordinated the India chapter for Mattela and also produced two films for the occasion. Twenty three films, with nine from Pakistan, nine from India, three from Nepal and two from Bangladesh, were made and premiered at the Film South Asia in Kathmandu on 4th October '01. The premier was a very emotionally charged affair with almost hundred filmmakers from the sub-continent present and the cloud of the US attack on Afghanistan looming large in the horizon. Ironically, the US attack on Afghanistan started precisely four days after that event and the political situation in the sub-continent has never been the same again. Subsequently the *goongi* films are screened in the short film festival of Lahore. Unfortunately, our attempt to get the package screened at the MIFF (Mumbai short film festival) failed as the authority declared that they would not encourage such activities, which had a connection with Pakistan. Presently, we are planning to screen it privately in Bombay. But the recent development over the requirement of censor certificate for any video show (a dubious attempt to stop screening of any footage from Gujarat) has made it even more difficult.

b. While in Berlin in the month of September '01, Madhusree attended various meetings and demonstrations against the impending war. In one such meeting of women's groups it was decided to request women's media groups all over the world to make short video letters on women's views on war. It was decided to collate all those programmes in one tape and send it back to all the participating groups. The project was named **Second Text on War: Video Letters from Women**. Majlis was entrusted to work on the project in south Asian region. While the subsequent political situation in the region prevented us

from technically spreading the campaign to other countries, Majlis had completed its commitment of sending a video note from India. We assigned young filmmaker Tejal Shah to document and edit a video piece on the peace campaign that the women's groups in Bombay were conducting in the local trains in October-November '2001. She has successfully made the video letter and it had been sent to the host group of women's collective in Berlin. Five other letters from Germany, Mexico, Canada, USA and Poland have also arrived to the host group. We are now waiting for the collated tape to arrive from Berlin.

FUTURE PLAN

Considering the contemporary political scenario in the country and Majlis' ideological positioning in the cultural and rights discourse, the following areas have been chosen as new areas of work:

1. a video archive on the current affairs issues
2. a website oriented cultural production/education project
3. collaboration with international groups engaged in various sub-cultural activities for joint productions and distributions
4. persuade the issue of sexual crime and attempted ethnic cleansing in Gujarat to the maximum possible extent
5. extend training and practice facilities in feminist legal theories to the selected women's lawyers in the district towns of Maharashtra.

Flavia Agnes

Secretary.