

# Annual report on activities of Majlis 2006-07

## Financial Profile

In the previous financial year Majlis has received fund from The Action Aid and UNDP for the running of Fellowship and Training to Women Lawyers project. Additionally we have also received a grant from Christian Aid to develop text Books on Law and Gender. This project is being commenced in collaboration with Advani Law college. Though this grant was remitted in the last financial year, the actual work and expenses on this project took place in 2006-07.

HIVOS, the funding agency to support Majlis for the longest period, has signed a new contract with Majlis for a four year project period of 2006-10. As part of their phasing out policy they have committed to support cent percent of the project expenditure on 2006-07, 80% of the project expenditure on 2007-08, 70% on 2008-09 and 60% on 2009-2010. So April 2007 onwards we need to raise the additional amount. In this contract period HIVOS grant will support the Litigation unit, Fellowship to Artists project, Godaam: digital archive project and general administration. HIVOS has also supported our project in WSF 2007 at Nairobi titled **Moving People: Africa-Asia Interface on Migration / Refuge / Exile / Diaspora**. The WSF project also received additional fund from Cordaid and Doen foundation.

We have also received a grant from the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation for the project of Community based educational programme for empowering Muslim girls in Jogeswari.

## Cultural Centre

### I. Fellowship to Artists

This is one of Majlis' longest running projects. The project started in 1999 where in each term 5 artists are awarded fellowship for 12 months. Each term of the fellowship includes announcement of the programme, soliciting proposals, categorising the proposals by

Majlis staff, short listing the proposals by the committee of resource people, interviewing the short listed applicants, supervising the projects under each fellowship, half-yearly report from the fellows and its evaluation and the public presentations by the fellows at the end of the term. The full cycle of the term takes two years. This is the fifth term of this project.

This project is conceived as part of rendering support and collaboration among artists from different disciplines and geographical areas. We take immense care to reach out to wide number of artists located in diverse places through art groups, theatre groups, film societies, journals, culture institutions, academic institutions, community groups, civil society groups and websites. This year we had received 116 proposals. In the last term the number of proposals received were 107. The number of proposals that came from the border states and other under developed places are 35. The number of proposals in the same category in the last term was 23.

### **Brief note on the works of the fellows**

#### **Archana Hande, Bombay: *www dot arrange your own marriage***

A study and documentation project of the arranged marriage industry, both old and new age ones, culminating into contemporary art works.

#### **Ranjit Kandalgaonkar, Aditya Potluri, Saurabh Vaidya, Bombay: *New Maps of Mumbai***

It is a visual art project to develop multi-disciplinary maps of localities in Mumbai which will represent the multiple narratives of the sites.

#### **Merajur Rahman Baruha, Guwahati: *Pageant in Painted Scenes***

A film on the last commercial public theatre of India – the Mobile theatre of Assam.

#### **Sushma Veerappa, Bangalore: *Look Sir, this is how we live***

A film on the public transport of Auto Rickshaw in Bangalore and the public image of a deceased superstar who had iconised the character of rickshaw driver in his film in 1982.

**Sabeena Gadihoke, Delhi: *Uncovering Histories: Stories from Official and Unofficial: Photographic Archive***

A research study to look at the areas of intersection and departures within photographic archives of various scales, statures and relevance.

In order to achieve greater outreach in the areas from the fringes, namely from the border states and other under developed areas we took special initiatives. Many of these regions are not very well connected by internet services. So we developed personal contact with people in the metropolises who have worked on people oriented projects in those regions. People in this category were researchers, filmmakers and activists. We requested them to introduce us to the local cultural groups who in turn would help us in disseminating information about the fellowship. We had also approached various university departments to use their mailing list. The fellows of the previous term also helped us in the outreach of the project.

There has been a 7% increase in the number of proposals received from the intended areas from the fringes. The entire growth may not be only due to these special initiatives. The general popularity of this project too has been increasing steadily over the years. But the problem that faces us now is that in the under-developed areas, specially in the border states the under privileged education system do not encourage new art initiatives. Hence though the number of applications are increasing, it is difficult to find worthy projects from those areas to award fellowship.

**II. Godaam: Digital Video Archive**

This too is an ongoing project. The archive, like any such documentation and reference library, is a project of slow growth, but its substances are tangible and somewhat measurable.

**Collection:** This year we have not added any substantial material to the collection of Bombay images. Instead we have made the Bombay collection partly available to the

public and working towards making it available online. A detail consultation has taken place with people who are engaged with contemporary issues of information architecture. Accordingly a guideline has been set and a group of young software writers engaged. Eminent culture study scholars Ashish Rajadhyaksh, Rahul Srivastava and Sabeena Gadihoke are members of the advisory board.

The Kashmir part of the archive is going through an opposite motion of the Bombay section. This year we have procured 25 hours of material from the noted filmmaker Saeed Mirza. Mr. Mirza had shot extensively in Kashmir for a television programme on the occasion of 50 years of India's independence. The material contains hours of interviews with ordinary Kashmiri people from various walks of life talking about what India's 50 years of independence meant to them.

It has been decided not to put the Kashmir archive online at the moment. The political complexity attached to Kashmir may make our retainers and other associates vulnerable, if we made the whole collection open to public. It has been decided to make the Kashmir material available only at the Majlis office and upon prior request.

**Pedagogy and dissemination:** Pedagogy has always been Majlis' primary concern and an integral part of all its project. The archive always had a strong pedagogical element, both in terms of collecting material and in dissemination. This year we have proactively negotiated with some media colleges. Hopefully early next year we shall be able to put in a syllabus on 'found footage' designed by us with the material in the archive to be taught in some colleges. This is a new dimension in the sphere of dissemination as set in the indicator.

We have developed a new scheme for the dissemination and pedagogy for the Kashmir section. We have set up a team of visual artists, filmmakers and social scientists to attend a workshop titled Reading Kashmir. The group would view the material collected by the archive, discuss its various possibility with the authors of the material and among themselves and finally produce art works based on it.

In this project period we have realized that active negotiation needs to be initiated in activities around using the archive. So far our activities were around collecting the material. This year sees a change in the focus. Hence the profile of the people engaged in the archive has also expanded. Other than visual artists and media people, more social scientists are getting involved. Specially in the case of Kashmir the archive project enters into a new area of dealing with the text of conflict. With increasing trend of violence in conflict ridden regions all over the world we hope to initiate major works, both in art and social sciences, through this project. This is a direct variance from our earlier focus which was only pedagogical.

### **III. World Social Forum 2007**

The world social forum 2007 project is a culmination of our initiative in mobilising artists and culture activists against the phenomena of globalization and its various effects. The work in this area started in 2003 as a preparation for world social forum 2004 which took place in Mumbai. Through the process of working towards the 2004 edition in India and 2005 edition in Porte Alegre we developed a forum of art groups and individual artists in India, informally called @Culture Network. For the 2007 edition in Nairobi we took initiative to expand the base of the network by mobilising groups and individual artists from many countries in Asia and Africa. The final organizing body was comprised of @Culture, India (a network of Majlis, Magic Lantern Foundation, Point of View and independent artists) with Focus on Global South; Centre for Creative Arts (UKZN), Durban; GoDown Arts Centre & Kwani Trust, Nairobi. The theme of the programme was Africa Asia Interface on Refuge / Migration / Exile / Dispora.

**Below is an excerpt from the press note that we prepared for the 2007 edition:**

*The cusp of post colonial and neo-colonial phases in countries of Africa and Asia is resulting in more and more people 'moving'. In this time when the global village is a much applauded market phenomena, people's physical movement in relation to space and its ownership has grown to be the nucleus of political realities.*

*Migration, refugee, diaspora, exile, trafficking, slavery, captivity, invasion – each poses a myriad of questions and also exposes the current world order. We aim to explore this phenomenon to its various roots, implications, overlaps, alteration and also the resistance to it. The programme will also witness inter-disciplinary dialogues among practitioners of various art forms, academics and activists as well as collaboration amongst groups and individuals from 18 countries.*

### **Background**

*The World Social Forum has reached the continent of Africa. The most laudable and voluminous resistance to the onslaught of Globalisation and market and invasion oriented homogenization in the world is WSF. Started in 2001 at Porto Alegre, Brazil, the forum is the broadest platform of solidarity, networking and alliance making of millions of formal and informal groups working in their local spaces/processes to resist the forces championed by WEO and the World Bank.*

*Since 2001, every year the forum takes place in the month of January while the WEO meets at Davos, Switzerland. After three consecutive years in Brazil, in the year 2004 the forum was held in India. While the earlier editions witnessed the South American political finesse and robust energy, the Indian edition brought a distinct change in the texture of the forum. The change was in the realm of layered multiplicity and an innovative process/structure to accommodate myriad forms of representation. One of the main highlights of Mumbai forum was that for the first time Culture as a voice of protest and political discourse was foregrounded at par with theories and action within the scheme. 3000 artists participated from all over the world, art works became a major source of political mobilizations and the gap between art practices and political activism was narrowed dramatically. In short, a new era of protest culture and political art practices had begun.*

*After having one more edition of WSF in Porte Alegre in 2005 and three smaller polycentric forums in Venezuela, Pakistan and Mali in 2006, the forum is going to*

*take place in Africa in 2007, hopefully opening yet another new chapter in world history. As the Forum process gathered momentum we were overwhelmed by the commonality within the cultural-political-economic realities between Asia and Africa. Our historical dependence, both in intellectual and political spheres, on the colonial initiatives has barred us so far to evolve an effective Asia-Africa interface. We believe that time has come.*

## **Notes on Each Programme**

### ***Follow the Arrows: Investigating Movement, video & art show***

This multidisciplinary art show presents over 45 works on courses charted by movement of people across Africa and Asia. Set on an improvised caravan, the show reflects the motion and uprootedness in its subjects – the migrants, the displaced, the refugees and the exiled. Included are installations, videos, photographs, prints and a video game, which map the geographies of conflicts that govern movement. Between slavery records and family pictures, desert graves and migrant shacks, missing people's lists and homeland music – a series of narratives of exclusions and assertions emerge.

### ***Memories in Transit, Collaborative Sculpture Tableaux***

Three artists from Africa and three artists from Asia worked together in Nairobi, to create portable sculptures. Two of them, (one each from either continent) are artisans skilled in the use of traditional methods and media for creating lightweight structures. The collaborative works that were produced in the ten day camp are a mix of traditional and contemporary concepts and approaches of cultural production.

The mobile nature of the artworks embodies the idea of transit and forced movement among the people of the world. The use of traditional and junk material in the project is an attempt to counter the invasion of homogenizing market forces into the world of art.

### ***International film Festival***

Dignity, respect, justice, compassion are swept aside when the profit motive is life's central organizing principle, and when human development is crippled by poverty. The movement of peoples, the clash of cultures and economies and increasing

commodification of human activity, represent massive challenges of today. These films articulate degradation and desperation, yet through intimate focus and abstract metaphor, their constructive struggles leverage understanding, mobilize renewal and redress, and seed hope of a different future:

**Workingman's Death**, Michael Glawogger, Austria; **Bamako (THE COURT)**, Abderrahmane Sissako, France/Mali/USA; **Bushman's Secret**, Rehad Desai, South Africa.

### **Durban International Film Festival / CCA (UKZN)**

A core conundrum of our times regards the issue of citizenship. Humanity has developed so far as to question our sense of belonging, the right to exercise certain liberties within state defined borders, and whether this state of constant journeying is a privilege, right or indeed responsibility. The sometimes indescribable conditions and experiences that these complex realities unveil also herald new and mitigated records of memory and values through films here presented:

**Streetcar From Zanzibar**, Karen Yarosky, Canada; **Real Saharawi**, Caroline Kanya, Uganda; **Hyena Square**, Tanzania; **Kidnapped Childhood**, Uganda; **Lyarn Ngarn** Australia/Tanzania; **Maangamizi**, Tanzania/USA

### **Zanzibar International Film Festival**

In this time when the global village is the much applauded market phenomena, people's physical movement in relation to space and its ownership has grown to be the nucleolus of political realities. Migration, refugee, diaspora, exile, trafficking, slavery, captivity, invasion etc. – each poses a myriad of questions and also exposes the current world order. We aim to explore this phenomenon to its various roots, implications, overlaps, alterations and also the resistance to it. These films from Asia intimately engage with the myriad issues related to Moving People:

**Words on Water**, Sanjay Kak, India; **My Migrant Soul**, Yasmine Kabir, Bangladesh; **Seruppu (Footwear)**, Amudhan R. P, India; **7 Islands and a Metro**, Madhusree Dutta, India; **SUICIDE JUMPERS: "Modern-day heroes"** by Migrant Forum Asia and Focus on the Global South, **Komol Gandhar**, Ritwik Ghatak, India



## **Magic Lantern Foundation, India**

### **International Festival of Performances**

#### **Poetry Africa: Poetic Perspectives on Migration**

Poetic Perspectives on Migration is a satellite project of the Poetry Africa festival, of Centre for Creative Arts (UKZN, Durban, South Africa). It offers a powerful experiential dimension, as a mix of distinctive east and southern African voices dynamically express and explore the complexities of migration through the vivid language of poetry and performance.

**Return to Sender - ~~Letters from Tentland~~** In *Letters from Tentland*, six Iranian actresses captured the audience with their anger, their wishes and dreams, but also their call for tolerance and cultural difference – performed 43 times in 17 countries, this piece was banned in Iran in 2005. In *Return to Sender*, six exiled Iranian women formulate a passionate plea for freedom.

**Centaurs** is based on a text by Heiner Müller, *Die Kentauren*, which in turn is a variation of Kafka's *Metamorphosis* is interleaved with passages from Mahmood Mamdani's *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror*. *Centaurs* reflects the shifts in the notion of identity in an era where the term 'nation' is equated with 'religion' and 'security' with 'surveillance'.

**Migritude** explores global themes - heritage, war, freedom - by making intimate family treasures public. Similarly, it expresses universal experiences of colonised peoples through the journeys of the performer's own diasporic Indian family. Shailja Patel is an Asian African poet and theater artist.

#### **Reflection**

We expected around 30,000 people to attend the site at the forum venue. The estimate was based on our experience in the previous forums. But this year the general

mobilization of the forum itself was low due to several reasons which are specific to the realities of Africa. The reality of lack of civil society movements and greater invasion of globalised market and neo- imperialism of Africa had been greatly reflected in the pattern of mobilization of WSF 2007. The attendance was not only thin compared to other editions, the political articulation was also not sharp enough in many instances. The problem got further compounded as the connectivity between countries and regions within Africa is highly inadequate and very expensive. The contemporary development politics makes certain regions inaccessible and land locked as part of its design. Hence many interested people either could not reach the venue or could not afford the fare. This resulted in a crowd majorly dominated by rich international NGOs attending WSF 2007. This reality has affected our programme as much as other activities of the forum. Additionally the venue allotted to us turned out be an inconvenient one. Hence the number of audience who visited our site could not rise above 5000.

But the Moving People project was generally considered as one of the best sites in the forum. It was listed as a special attraction in the printed schedule and on the website of the forum. The Nairobi press and international media have also made special features on this project. The main English daily in Nairobi carried a special Sunday supplement on our programme just prior to the forum. The collaborative sculpture tableaux in the opening and closing rally were extensively covered by the international channels all over the world. BBC carried a special feature on the Poetry Africa programme. Besides many independent filmmakers and journalists made featurates on Moving People Project.

The main purpose of this project was to mobilize artists from Africa and Asia into collaborative projects and thus forge a long standing alliance. We created public sculptures made jointly by three African and three Asian artists, prepared video and art show where 45 artists from 8 countries in Asia and 42 artists from 11 countries in Africa sent their works as copy-left public arts. There were also an international film festival jointly curated by two African curators and two Asian curators. The conference sessions were addressed by equal number of speakers from Africa and Asia.

In some sense this has been the first major international project that Majlis had initiated. Though we had some other international liason in the past, this is the first time we have been the central initiator of a project which include many countries and which took place in another country in another continent. This has also been our first experience in initiating a South-South collaboration. This has helped us in developing new kinds of skill and negotiation strategies at the international scale. Even as an art group we have learnt much about diversity and region specificity of art works. This will definitely further facilitate and influence our own works of art and future collaborative projects.

#### **IV. Film on Bombay: 7 Islands and a Metro**

This film which got ready in the previous year has been distributed and exhibited in this project period. It was premiered in Bombay on 2<sup>nd</sup> June 2006 to an unprecedented crowd of 700. Following this we received an offer from the office of a film distributor for releasing the film in theatres. This is the first time such an offer was made to a non-fiction film in India. The film was released in one hall in Calcutta and three multiplexes in Bombay. Around 2000 general audience watched the film in theatres. By itself it may not be a big achievement, but this incident is historical in the sense it has opened up new avenue for documentaries in the country.

The film has also been screened widely in universities and film schools in India and the USA. It was invited to the International Film Festival of Urban Films in Teheran. The film is considered as a major text in urban studies.

This development has further strengthened our resolve to intervene into the market phenomena as a niche and subversive production unit. The work which has started with the launch of the Children's CDrom project got further enhanced by the theatrical release of '7 Islands and a Metro'. It has been proved that it is possible to exploit the contradiction within the contemporary market and make small yet substantial intervention without compromising the ideology of the art works.

## LEGAL CENTRE

### V. Litigation Unit

7. Majlis litigation unit which is the spine of its ideological and material strength becomes 17 years old in 2007. The years are marked by legal and social help in rehabilitating thousands of individual women facing matrimonial and sexual harassment issues, concrete changes in gender related laws; awareness on women's rights through campaigns in media and among the politicians, bureaucrats and judiciary; pedagogical programme among lawyers, law institutions, feminist activists and community workers; academic initiatives through symposiums and publications in order to raise the bar of the discourses etc.

### Records of cases handled in April-September 2006

a. From the Majlis office premise

Month	No. Of	
	Clients Met	Petitions Filed
April 06	17	5
May 06	23	4
June 06	19	2
July 06	17	1
August 06	30	4
September 06	32	1
October 06	24	2
November 06	39	5
December 06	19	6
January 07	23	4
February 07	29	8
March 07	32	4

**No. Of Halfway Matters – 15 (cases which are referred to us after being initiated by some other lawyers)**

**Total No. Of Cases Filed (Petitions, Written Statement And Halfway Matters):65**

**b. Through other referral agencies**

**DILASA (a community health organisation)**

Month	No. Of Clients		No. Of Petitions	
	Met		Filed	
April 06		6		1
May 06		3		2 Half Way Matters
June 06		5		
July 06		1		
August 06		6		3
September 06		5		1
October 06				
November 06		7		
December 06		6		
January 07		2		
February 07				
March 07				

**The State Women's Commission**

Month	No. Of Clients		No. Of Petitions	
	Met		Filed	
July 06		6		

September 06	2	2
November 06	8	1
December 06	2	
January 07	12	2
February 07	5	
March 07	5	

**Total No. Of Cases Pending In The Court                    147**

Family Court -            130

High Court        -            6

Thane Court       -            9

City Civil Court        -            2

**Total No. Of Disposed Of Cases :                    74**

**Brief Note on Special Cases**

**Cheryl D'Silva:**

Cheryl D'Silva who was a British citizen was married to Dominic D'Silva in India under the Special Marriage Act. Cheryl fell in love with this boy in Goa when she had come on deputation to work in India. Cheryl thereafter stayed back in India and got married to Dominic. Cheryl took up odd jobs like training airline people in India and Dominic was jobless. Dominic fell in love with another woman while Cheryl was pregnant which made the marriage situation volatile. As Dominic did not take care of her she went back to UK and gave birth to a daughter named Isabella.

After about a year she returned back to India but by then Dominic had left Goa and his whereabouts were not known. Cheryl traced him and filed a Petition for Restitution of conjugal rights. As a counterblast Dominic filed for Divorce. Interim Maintenance orders were passed for her and the child.

After litigating for about five years in the Family court she approached Majlis and we intervened in the matter. Through our intervention the case started progressing after being dormant for five years. Cheryl received a lump-sum amount as alimony to her, child's monthly maintenance and custody of the child.

It was not an easy task for us to convince a foreigner litigant to settle the matter. Cheryl was not ready to accept the Court system in India. She also found it difficult that the system of sharing the entire assets equally in the case of alimony and maintenance is not the normative practice in India. The legal fraternity was deeply surprised that we could finally clinch a deal in favour of a woman who was not even citizen of India.

**Najma Bibi:** This is one of the most challenging cases handled by Majlis during the year. Najma and her husband were residing in Dubai. Her husband was an extremely violent man. Due to this she left her home and filed for divorce and custody of her son in a court in Dubai. Though she was able to obtain the divorce, before the order could be passed the husband sent the son aged 11 years to Mumbai and subsequently he too came to Mumbai. Few months later, Najma came down to Mumbai and as per the advice given to her by some lawyer, she took away the child from the husband's custody. Both she and her husband filed for custody in the Family Court but the case was dismissed on the issue of jurisdiction as the child ordinarily resides in Dubai. Thereafter, she left her son in the custody of her mother and left for Dubai.

It is then that her troubles started. Her husband filed a criminal complaint against her and her parents and sisters in a Magistrate's court for kidnapping the child. Arrest warrants were issued against her entire family. He also filed a petition for habeas corpus against Najma in the High Court and she was asked to come down from Dubai and be present in court. She was also asked to deposit her passport in court.

We started handling the case half way, when it seemed that all was lost and it seemed that the custody would be handed over to the husband. The child who had complained of beatings at the hands of the father and parental grand mother was petrified of having to return to the father's custody. Najma approached us and requested us to appear for her on the day the order of custody was to be passed. The heart rending sobs of mother and son moved the entire court room.

Only through strategic legal acumen we could save the day for her and pleaded the court to refer the matter for mediation. This was done primarily to buy time so we could evolve a strategy that would work. The mediation efforts failed and the matter was back in court. By this time, the mid-term report was out and that showed the child had done well in his study and we pleaded with the court that the child be allowed to complete the school term. The matter went on and it was no longer possible for Najma to continue living in Bombay as this would mean loss of the means of livelihood for her. So we had to take the risk and file an application that Najma would be permitted to leave the country. There was every chance that the court may ask us to hand over the child to the father. But by this time, the matter was heard by a different bench who were sympathetic towards Najma. The judges interviewed the child and ascertained his wishes and finally Najma's passport was returned to her and she was allowed to leave the country. The custody of the child was given to the maternal grand mother and subsequently the habeas corpus case filed by the husband was dismissed. We consider this a landmark ruling where the custody of a Muslim male child of over 10 years was given to the grand mother as against the father.

**Ramadevi Pillai:** This woman has two children and a schizophrenic husband. Rama used to run a canteen in an industrial area. But when the business started doing well the husband and his sister took over the canteen and stopped her from entering the canteen.

Rama's husband used to harass and not give her any money for sustenance. She filed for divorce and the husband litigated for nearly five years in the court and finally she withdrew her case. The Judge passed an order barring her from filing any more case in future as she had wasted court's time for the last five years.

After a year her husband filed a case for divorce as well as for possession of the matrimonial home. She approached Majlis and we had to make elaborate arguments before the court demonstrating the proclaimed policy of the state regarding joint ownership of married couples over matrimonial homes. Once the joint ownership over the house in favour of Rama was established the husband immediately approached for a settlement and the matter was resolved.

**Shafiqua** : Married for-19 years. Has three children, two daughters of 16 and 8 years and a 15 years old son. An year back she left the matrimonial home due to severe harassment, leaving the children back. Subsequently the older children came under the influence of the husband and hence were not willing to meet her. She started meeting the youngest daughter in the school and one day she brought the daughter to her place. Once with the mother the daughter refused to go back to the father. Shafiqua admitted the daughter into a new school. We filed for custody and injunction but decided not to move it urgently, as in the middle of the academic year it would have been difficult to get an order which resulted in a shift of school for the child. Such small strategic decisions often prove to be crucial in matrimonial cases.

**Razia Baldiwala** : Raziya came to us through the organisation Awaz-e- Niswan. The husband was very abusive and would not maintain her and the minor daughter. Raziya was thrown out of the matrimonial house and she was out of the house for nearly one and half year. The social workers of Awaz-e-Niswan made efforts and put her back in the house. Subsequently we prepared her case for injunction restraining the husband from throwing her out of the house. We got an interim injunction order in Raziya's favour. The case is going on in the court but Raziya is residing at the matrimonial house and the husband is paying her some nominal amount towards her and her daughter's expenses. This case could become an important precedence of Muslim women's rights over matrimonial home.

Other than the above mentioned cases the trend setting case for the Right of Bar Dancers is also pending in the Supreme court. The state of Maharashtra has banned dancing in bars and eateries in 2005 which rendered 75000 women jobless. Majlis represented the union of the bar dancers in the Bombay high court and obtained a favourable judgement which nullified the ban. The state govt. has appealed in the Supreme Court and presently got a stay order. The case is pending in the supreme Court.

In the four years of this project period of 2006-10 we proposed to slowly make the litigation unit independent of Majlis central office. Towards this aim we planned to open women's rights litigation units within law colleges and also develop panel lawyering. While the initiative of developing panel of independent lawyers to work with Majlis as retainers met with some success, the project of opening litigation unit within law colleges



did not progress much. The bureaucracy and pro status-quo mind set involved with large academic institutions have proved to be the main hindrance. However, we are still persuading this project. But the project of Training and Fellowship to Women Lawyers in District of Maharashtra working as a most successful attempt in disseminating the ideology and expertise of Majlis. The fellow lawyers while working in remote areas function as active agents towards our proposed aim of decentralization and autonomous litigation units of women's rights. The relationship between the Majlis litigation unit and the women lawyers' fellowship project is multi-layered and mutually benefiting. Majlis lawyers train the fellow lawyers into litigation and current academic and social issues. While the fellows enrich Majlis' repertoire through their experiences at the grass root level.

## **VI. Fellowships and Training to Women Lawyers**

This is a five years old project. Presently this project is supported by Action Aid and UNDP. The project started in 2003 in order to facilitate the process of **Access to Justice**. Under this project Majlis awards fellowship to women lawyers in smaller towns of Maharashtra. The aim of the project is to combat human rights violations of women, and evolve support mechanisms, which will help women to access justice delivery systems and to spread legal awareness to women from marginalized sections. In order to counter the violations, the project aims to evolve a group of community based women lawyers equipped with feminist legal ideology and a practical knowledge of Constitutional mandates, International Conventions, domestic statutes and court skills to deal with issues of rights violations of women. The project also hopes to create machinery in district courts so that the gains of public interest litigations initiated in the higher courts and newer enactments can be made accessible to the district towns to facilitate their implementation.

The current term is the fourth edition of the fellowship. In the current year 30 women are awarded the fellowship. The fellows are chosen from around 80 applicants in every term. The selection of the fellows are done by a resource committee through a five day long orientation workshop. The workshops are designed to provide basic exposure and

skill to all applicants. But additionally it also helps us in observing the applicants and identify the best candidates. The fellows receive financial help, theoretical inputs and practical guidance from Majlis in their works located in their own regions. The fellows also organize training workshops for other lawyers and activists in their work areas with the help from Majlis. Previous years' fellows are invited to help us in aiding the project and in choosing the new fellows. Some of the earlier fellows have become coordinators of the project and the rest work as retainers for Majlis in various small town courts.

At the end of the fellowship, the fellows are invited for an award ceremony to receive certificate of successful completion of the fellowship. The previous years' fellows were encouraged to work along with the fellows selected for the next year, wherever feasible, to ensure continuity.

In 2005 the orientation workshop was attended by 60 candidates and the number grew in 2006 to 80. In the first year the fellows were chosen from 9 districts of Maharashtra, in the second year the number of districts grew to 12, in the third year it became 13. In the current year 30 fellows are selected from 22 districts.

This programme has realized our aim to spread the culture of legal rights beyond the big cities and also bridge the gap between the city based rights discourse and grass root realities. Additionally the project has also brought visibility to practicing women lawyers in local courts. Association with a premier legal rights institution such as Majlis, has facilitated the women lawyers in small towns in achieving validity and visibility in their own regions and profession. By making the previous fellows working as retainers we have also managed to spread the outreach of the project and develop a sustainable continuity.

During the current year we had conducted special workshops with the fellows on themes of Sex Selective Abortions and the PCPNDT Act, Counselling Techniques and Mediation Skills, Statewise Campaign Against Domestic Violence, Women in the

Unorganised Sector, Interactive Session with Lawyers from Gujarat. These workshops had helped in creating coalition between people active in these issues, Majlis and individual fellows. Many fellows have become active in one of these issues. Through the fellows we have also established active contact with bar association in various small courts.

## **VII. Gender and Law Text Book**

This is a new project started in this financial year and has been funded by Christian Aid. The lack of adequate and contemporary text books became starkly revealing while scanning the text books used for teaching gender and law in law colleges. Since the law text books are written primarily by law teachers who lack practical experience of campaigns and litigation, the books are devoid of dynamism and do not reflect the strategies adopted by law practitioners and legal campaigners. The style of writing the text books remains archaic and dogmatic and fails to attract the law students to study Family Law as a subject of serious academic pursuit. Additionally, in many instances communal stereotypes and gender biases are being reproduced mechanically and thus reinforced. In particular, the recent positive developments in the context of Muslim women's rights were obviated from Gender and Law curriculum. It is within this prevailing situation, an acute need has arisen to prepare a comprehensive text book on Gender and Law, which can be used by teachers for imparting legal education in colleges.

The research project hopes to fulfill the existing void in legal education and provide an exposure to students to the dynamism of law as it evolves in day to day litigation, contextualise legal campaigns initiated by the women's movement and include ground level experience and strategies adopted by innovative law practitioners. Overall it will aid in making the Gender and Law course more interesting to students and hopefully will encourage more young lawyers to get engaged with gender specific laws. We consider this project to be a proactive measure towards evolving a gender sensitive ambience within the legal practice and court premises.

## Other Programme

### VIII. Community based educational programme for empowering Muslim Girls

This project started in 2001. The programme runs under the name of *Darakht-E-Ilm* (Tree of Knowledge) and is supported by the Rajiv Gandhi foundation. It stemmed from our basic engagement with women's rights and concerns of minorities. In the course of our works we came across this existing initiative where Muslim girls are encouraged and supported to acquire education and enter the mainstream. The programme is structured on the principle of earner-learner, where older girls are involved with teaching the younger students and in the process are supported and persuaded to complete graduation and encouraged into skill development. The programme is located in the slums of Jogeshwari which is a predominantly Muslim area.

Though it is essentially a community initiative, Majlis helps them ideologically, infrastructurally and financially. We help them in developing human resources by providing resource persons and resource material. We periodically conduct various workshops towards consciousness raising and skill building. One of the Majlis lawyers visits the community centers to help women in their crisis. This act also helps in building greater confidence and acceptability in the community. After Majlis' involvement with the project it had acquired a community center and a library in the locality.

This project has brought some much needed freshness in Majlis. Dealing with high tension legal cases and production hassles we are often on the verge of being burnt out. This project with the young girls with aspiration and tentativeness, refreshes our energy and belief. Though it is not exactly in tune with Majlis' other activities, it works as a little breather for the organization.

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