

# Women's Movements and Political Fields: A Comparison of Two Indian Cities\*

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*This paper reconceptualizes the political environment within which a social movement organization operates by offering the concept of political fields, arguing that the actions, rhetoric, and effectiveness of organizations are best understood within the context of the fields within which they are situated. By examining the issue of violence against women in two different fields within the same country, India, it suggests that the structure of the field and an organization's position within it 1) shape the discourse and practice of SMOs; 2) mediate the effects of organization type (politically affiliated or autonomous); and 3) determine whether or not organizations within the same movement (and field) converge or differentiate. The data for this paper comes from fieldwork conducted between 1990 and 1994, as well as newspaper accounts, and movement archives.*

The international literature on women's movements, views women's groups affiliated with left political parties (particularly in the Third World) as tending to focus on general issues of poverty and inequality, bringing gender along when convenient, but often subordinating the interests of women to the larger interests of class. Politically autonomous groups, on the other hand, are seen as more explicitly feminist. They do not have to subordinate women's interests to others, and thus are able to focus more centrally on gender, especially issues of the body and violence. These issues are often considered the central thematic of second wave women's movements (Alvarez 1990; Basu 1992; Gelb 1989; Hellman 1987; Kruks, Rapp and Young 1989; Molyneux 1990).

However, my ethnographic work with women's movements in Calcutta and Bombay, two of India's largest cities, revealed three interesting anomalies to this generalization.<sup>1</sup> First, while autonomous feminist groups in Bombay did indeed consider violence against women a crucial issue, they did not do so in Calcutta, although the two cities had comparable levels of violence. Second, autonomous feminist organizations in Calcutta considered important exactly the same issues as did the city's left-wing women's groups—employment, poverty, literacy, and ideology—but autonomous feminist groups in Bombay did not do so despite Bombay's comparable levels of poverty, unemployment, and illiteracy. Finally, left-wing women's organizations in Bombay adopted the same rhetoric towards violence against women as did Bombay's autonomous feminist groups, a rhetoric that was not paralleled in left-wing women's organizations in Calcutta.<sup>2</sup>

This essay argues that these anomalies can be accounted for if we understand that social movement organizations (SMOs) exist in relationship to other organizations. That is, SMOs inhabit a field inhabited and bounded by other organizations in a "political field." Their rhetoric and actions, whatever their organizational form, must be understood within the constraints

\*I would like to thank Ashok Bardhan, Michael Burawoy, Neil Fligstein, Michael Goldman, Arlene Daniels, Seemin Qayum, Rachel Schurman, Barrie Thorne, Kim Voss, members of the CCOPS seminar, and the editors and anonymous reviewers of *Social Problems* for their thoughtful comments and suggestions on earlier versions of this paper. Direct correspondence to Raka Ray, Department of Sociology, 410 Barrows Hall #1980, Berkeley, California 94720-1980.

1. I refer to "women's movements" rather than to "feminist movements" to avoid entering into a discussion of which movements are more "feminist." Preconceived notions of "legitimate" feminist issues limit our ability to understand the profound gender implications of, and struggles around, every aspect of women's lives. I do use the term "feminist" for those who self-identify as such.

2. For a more detailed analysis of the women's movements in Bombay and Calcutta, see Ray (1998, in press).

of that field. Further, the strategies that SMOs adopt toward both their goals and each other are shaped by the nature of this field and by their position within it. While it is not the focus of this essay, the political field in turn is shaped by the actions of the actors within it.

That social movements are usually *multi-organizational* efforts has been explored by a variety of scholars, particularly those using a political process model (Clemens 1993; Conell and Voss 1990; Fligstein and McAdam 1993; Meyer and Staggenborg 1996; Minkoff 1994). The relationship between organizations within a social movement is an important component of an organization's political opportunity structure (McAdam 1982; Zald and McCarthy 1980), and the effects of pre-existing networks and ties (Conell and Voss 1990; Klandermans 1990; Morris 1984; Rupp and Taylor 1990; Staggenborg 1991), countermovements (Meyer and Staggenborg 1996), and alliance and conflict systems (della Porta and Rucht 1995; Klandermans 1992) have powerful effects on SMOs. However, analysts tend to view these relationships as limited to other organizations within the same social movement or other social movements, thus treating social movements as conceptually distinct from other forms of politics. Yet the environment in which social movements operate has much to do with the system of politics in which it is embedded, especially with the arena of formal politics. This essay develops the notion of "field" as an attempt to formalize the relationship between organizations and their environment, and provides a test of this theory by applying it to organizations within the *same* movement in two *different* fields.

The research and fieldwork for this paper were conducted between 1990 and 1994 during several extended stays in Calcutta and Bombay. After analyzing sixteen women's organizations, I chose four (two affiliated with left-wing parties and two autonomous) as the focus of my study. Interviews were my primary source of data. Starting with several well-known leaders, I used a snowball method to interview seventy activists in all, thirty-five from each city. Other data came from participation in and observation of women's movement meetings and events, and analysis of documents from movement archives, and newspaper coverage of the women's movement.

### Political Fields

Theorists such as Bourdieu (1991, 1992), Di Maggio and Powell (1991), and Fligstein and McAdam (1993) have used the concept of field in a variety of ways. For purposes of this article, I define a field as a structured and socially constructed environment *within* which organizations are embedded and *to* which organizations constantly respond. Organizations are not autonomous or free agents, but rather they inherit a field and its accompanying social relations, and when they act, they act in response to it and within it. In Pierre Bourdieu's use of the term, fields are understood both as configurations of forces and as sites of struggle to maintain or transform those forces (Bourdieu, 1992:101). While fields may exist in every sphere of social life, a political field involves actors such as the state, political parties, and social movement organizations, who are connected to each other in both friendly and antagonistic ways, some elements of which are more powerful than others. The stakes in this field are both the definition and elaboration of the "legitimate principle of the division of the social world" on the one hand, and control over the "use of objectified instruments of power" on the other (Bourdieu, 1991:181). In other words, the stakes in the political field are both symbolic and material.

Within a political field may lie smaller or even more localized political sub-fields. There may be also critical or oppositional sub-fields, which I call protest fields. Protest fields consist of groups and networks which oppose those who have the power in the formal political arena, and may or may not share the logic of politics in the larger political field, though they are con-

strained by it. Thus social movements that are oppositional to the state or the present government are embedded in a protest field, which is in turn, embedded in the wider political field.

I choose to use the terms "political fields" and "protest fields," and not "social movement fields," "social movement industry" or "social movement family" because protest movements are affected by the cultures, histories, and institutions of politics in general, not just by other social movements. The concept of social movement family, as used by della Porta and Rucht (1995) refers to a set of *movements* of a similar type, such as the family of left-libertarian movements. Social movement industry, as used by McCarthy and Zald (1977) refers to a set of *organizations* oriented towards the same goal. The concept of field is closer to social movement sector, as used by Garner and Zald (1987), which refers to all parties—including the media, pressure groups, and churches—that might affect a particular social movement organization. The division between political institutions and social movements has been too sharply drawn, and must be linked both theoretically and analytically if our understanding of people's agency and mobilization is to be furthered.

The structure of the field, together with the relative position of an organization within it, determines the degree of access that an organization has to policy decisions, its capacity to implement policies, the availability of allies, and ultimately its strategies. Fields can be structured in concentrated or dispersed ways, depending on both the strength and numbers of individual actors as well as the asymmetries between those actors. Some political fields are marked by several organizations able to mobilize equivalent amounts of resources and influence to promote their interests, such as in a relatively egalitarian, pluralist political system. These fields, which have a low concentration of power and where no organization is dominant, I call *fragmented*. Others are dominated by one or a few organizations that control the majority of mobilizable resources and are able to influence others. These fields, which have a high concentration of power, I call *hegemonic*.

Multiple organizations within the same social movement tend to compete with each other (Ferree and Hess 1985; Morris 1984; Zald and McCarthy 1987). Theorists conceptualize the strategies social movements and organizations follow, given this competition, in at least two distinct, opposing ways. Social movement theorists such as Tarrow (1989) argue that social movement organizations tend to differentiate, while organizational theorists Powell and DiMaggio (1991) argue that organizations in a similar environment tend to converge on a similar form. I suggest that in a hegemonic field, the most likely strategy for non-dominant groups is not differentiation but convergence. An organization is more likely to choose a strategy of differentiation in a fragmented field.

As I will argue, Calcutta's political field is hegemonic. That is, its reach is more powerful, it is more monolithic and less tolerant of diversity, and it is dominated by one main organization, the Communist Party of India [Marxist or CPI(M)], which heads the state. In consequence, the most powerful organization for women in Calcutta is the PBGMS, the women's wing of the CPI(M); all other women's organizations are subordinate to the PBGMS. Bombay's field on the other hand, is fragmented. It has a great dispersion of power, the nature of dominance in Bombay is tenuous and always partial, and a multiplicity of organizations and ideologies co-exist. There are no dominant organizations for women in Bombay. Instead, many small autonomous organizations co-exist in Bombay, along with larger organizations affiliated to trade unions and political parties.

Evidence of the different constructions of the women's movements in the two fields can be seen in the newspaper coverage of the movement in the two cities. An examination of the leading newspapers in Calcutta and Bombay over a ten year period (1980–1990) reveals that of the articles mentioning women's groups in Bombay, 28 percent referred solely to autonomous groups, 21 percent to both autonomous and politically affiliated organizations together, and only 7 percent mentioned only Bombay's politically affiliated organizations. Of the articles covering women's groups in Calcutta on the other hand, 63 percent referred solely to party-

**Table 1 • Representative Organizations in Calcutta and Bombay**

	<i>Affiliated</i>	<i>Autonomous</i>
Dominant organization	PBGMS (Calcutta)	Forum (Bombay)
Subordinate organization	JMS (Bombay)	Sachetana (Calcutta)

affiliated groups [most of them were about the CPI(M)], and 3 percent alluded to a mixture of Calcutta's politically affiliated and none to autonomous groups.<sup>3</sup>

The next section of the article looks closely at the two political fields, examining two organizations in each city. The groups have been chosen based on two criteria—affiliation/autonomy and dominance/subordination. (A dominant organization is one which either controls the majority of mobilizable resources or is able to influence others.) I use the issue of violence against women as a lens through which to examine the effects of fields on the four organizations in this study. While all four organizations are concerned about violence against women, the issue is not considered primary in Calcutta as it is in Bombay, and the discursive strategies employed, as well as the actions taken, reflect both the nature of the fields and the position of the organizations within them (see Table 1 for a categorization of the organizations).

### Violence Against Women

The second wave of the women's movement introduced, in many countries, discussion and debate concerning the politics of the body (Mies 1986). Reproductive rights and violence against women in its many manifestations became seen as central struggles for women, and in movement after movement, rape and domestic abuse were redefined, chronicled, analyzed, and protested. Battered women's shelters sprang up in many countries and rape crisis hotlines were established (Echols 1989; Kumar 1993; Rowbotham 1992). In various cities of India, the issue also spurred the creation of new groups.

Because such statistics are notoriously unreliable, it is difficult to make a determination about levels of violence against women in Calcutta and Bombay. However, violence against women, in particular domestic violence, assumes distinctive forms in India. In the early eighties, a spate of suspicious deaths of young married women in the middle and lower middle classes surfaced in the media. It became clear that these were young women who were either being murdered by their husbands or were being driven to commit suicide by their wretched married lives. The standard form these deaths took was burning after kerosene was poured over the woman's body. These murders came to be dubbed "dowry-deaths" or "bride-burning" by the media since they frequently occurred when the bride's family was unable to meet the continuous dowry demands of the groom's family. So prevalent did the phenomenon appear to be that eventually the courts ruled that there would be investigations in all cases of women who died within seven years of marriage.

There is reason to believe that the incidence of rape is somewhat higher in Bombay than in Calcutta, though there is ambiguity in the official accounts. For example, in 1986, *Crime in India*, the official publication of the National Crime Records Bureau of the National Government reported in 1986, 31 rapes in Calcutta and 102 in Bombay. However, another study estimated that there were on average .63 rapes per 100,000 population in Maharashtra (of which Bombay is the capital) and .97 per 100,000 in West Bengal (of which Calcutta is the capital; Desai and Krishnaraj 1987). Thus while the actual number of rapes was greater in Maharash-

3. These figures come from the analysis of *The Times of India*, *Indian Express*, *Loksatta* (all Bombay based) and *The Statesman*, *Ananda Bazaar Patrika* and *Ganashakti* (all Calcutta based) between the years 1980 and 1990. The figures do not add up to 100 percent because I have not included references to organizations such as women's organizations in other countries, religious organizations, and social work organizations.

tra, the rape rate was higher in West Bengal. Clearly, rape is not an unknown crime against women in either city. The statistics on rape in Calcutta and Bombay lead one to conclude that while the incidence is probably somewhat higher in Bombay, rape reporting itself is rare. For example, in 1986, *Crime in India*, the official publication of the National Crime Records Bureau of the Government of India, reported only 31 rapes in Calcutta and 102 in Bombay. However, another study estimated a higher rate of rape in Maharashtra (of which Bombay is the capital) than in West Bengal (of which Calcutta is the capital; Desai and Drishnaraj 1987). There is little question that the estimates are severely undercounted both because of the shame involved in reporting rape and the reluctance of the police to recognize it. I expect an increase in the rape reporting as the issue breaks out of the private sphere and becomes politicized.

"Bride burning" caught the imagination of the press in both cities and is surely reprehensible enough in and of itself to guarantee its place high on the agendas of the women's movements in both cities. In the light of the more egregious forms of violence, wife battering has not been given the attention it deserves, but is no doubt common in both the cities and villages of India. Suffice it to say that in both Bombay and Calcutta there is enough violence to keep women's organizations and courts overflowing with clients. It is not therefore the extent of the violence that has kept it off the agenda in one city and on the agenda in the other.

### Calcutta: A Hegemonic Field

While India has a parliamentary system of government, there are regional differences in the strength of party politics. Calcutta's political field is marked by the dominance of party politics with little space for non-party political formations and autonomous interest groups. The Communist Party of India-Marxist [CPI(M)], which governs the state of West Bengal as the major party within a Left Front coalition, is an oppositional party in most other parts of the country. It came to power in West Bengal in 1977, a year which changed the political map of both Calcutta and Bombay.

The "Emergency," a period of political repression unleashed by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi (from the Congress Party, the most powerful political party in India) from 1975 to 1977, had a profound impact on the fate of India's two parliamentary Communist parties. During the Emergency, the CPI(M), which had a larger base in Calcutta, strongly criticized and resisted the government, and built a reputation as a bulwark against authoritarianism. In contrast, the other communist party, the Communist Party of India (CPI), was stronger in Bombay and had closer ties to the Soviet Union; the CPI continued to ally with Indira Gandhi. When the Emergency was finally lifted, the CPI was thoroughly discredited, while the CPI(M) was considered the responsible, pro-democracy communist party. The elections of 1977 brought a victorious CPI(M) to power in Calcutta, and it has been there ever since.

While the political regime in West Bengal has limited power because it is a regional government, its mode of operation is as corporatist as it could be under the circumstances. Well entrenched in every sector of society, the CPI(M) operates in West Bengal with the help of its massive front organizations—the trade union, the student and youth wings, the peasant organization, and the women's wing, the All India Democratic Women's Association, known in West Bengal as Paschim Banga Ganatantrik Mahila Samiti (PBGMS). The CPI(M) also controls the most powerful teachers' unions and unions of artists and writers.

Twenty years after coming to power, the CPI(M) is unquestionably the most powerful and politically legitimate organization in the state. It has, in other words, accumulated a vast amount of political capital, thus continuing to strengthen its position in the field.<sup>4</sup> While the

4. Out of a total of 294 seats in the West Bengal Legislative Assembly, the Left Front Coalition won 230 in 1977 with the CPI(M) winning 177 of those. In 1991, the CPI(M) won 188 seats. These figures indicate that the CPI(M) is becoming increasingly dominant even within the Left Front coalition.

party is stronger in the countryside than in the cities, it has little competition from other political parties or other non-party political formations. The Congress (which until recently was in power at the federal level) is in shambles in West Bengal, and has never recovered from the debacle of the Emergency. The newer Hindu right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party is still insignificant, though it has won a few seats in recent elections. All intermediate organizations of interest representation are also affiliated with political parties.

The dominance and legitimacy of the Left Front has led to political parties of the left, rather than non-governmental organizations, being seen as the carriers of people's interests. Foreign and multi-national foundations, whether commercial or non-profit, are regarded with suspicion. In the particular vision of the world the Left Front has succeeded in constructing and maintaining in Calcutta, class conflict is the primary motor of history. There is ambivalence whether to treat "women's problems" as a separate phenomenon or as a subset of human problems caused by capitalism, a tendency to separate public and private, and a conviction that the transformation of the organization of production is the solution to many problems. While women's political participation is encouraged in gender specific struggles, first and foremost, both men and women should be foot soldiers in the "larger democratic movement."

Calcutta's political field can thus be described as one with a powerful, homogeneous, party-based left culture, and a semi-corporatist concentration of power in one particular political organization. In my terms, Calcutta has a hegemonic political field. What was once a protest organization now governs the state, and as yet there is no viable, alternative, protest field. Within Calcutta's political field, PBGMS, the women's wing of the CPI(M), has emerged as the dominant force of the women's movement, while autonomous groups such as Sachetana scramble for a toehold.

### ***PBGMS and Sachetana***

PBGMS was officially formed by the CPI(M) in 1981, though it has a history that predates Indian Independence. Today PBGMS has two million members.<sup>5</sup> A massive hierarchical organization structured on democratic centralist principles, PBGMS has offices in almost every Calcutta neighborhood. As a mass-based organization affiliated to a communist party, PBGMS faces two tasks. On the one hand, it must be responsive to women's expressed needs, yet on the other, it must carry out the party's agenda; it is after all, dependent upon the CPI(M) for resources and is accountable to it. The CPI(M) provides the PBGMS with three fundamental sources of power: formal recognition (PBGMS is empowered to take cases of dowry murder to court), access to resources (the state favors the PBGMS when distributing funds), and free publicity (through its widely read and circulated daily, *Ganashakti*). It is largely because of its affiliation to the CPI(M), that PBGMS is able to undertake and carry out successfully major campaigns and projects; thus, while PBGMS is the superordinate organization for women in Calcutta, it is subordinate to the CPI(M).

Sachetana is one of Calcutta's few autonomous women's organizations. Even though it was formed in 1980, when the PBGMS did not formally exist, Sachetana has struggled in the shadow of CPI(M)'s dominance ever since its inception. The group was formed by a handful of academics and journalists in order to provide an explicit alternative to the dominant discourses of social work and development within which women were inserted in Calcutta.<sup>6</sup>

5. The vast majority of the women I interviewed in the PBGMS were married and almost half lived in joint families (extended families in which multiple generations live under the same roof). More than 60 percent did paid work outside the home—employed mainly as school teachers or full time party workers. The distribution of household income was quite wide: household incomes of grassroots workers tended to be less than Rs. 3000 (\$80) a month, compared to over Rs 5000 (\$140) a month for the leadership.

6. Sachetana activists tend, like PBGMS activists, to be married, though unlike PBGMS, they live in nuclear families, are themselves professionals, and belong to middle- to high-income groups.

Sachetana (whose name means "self-awareness") offers legal aid and counseling services, holds discussions on both academic and political subjects, and publishes a magazine, *Sachetana*, intended to educate and inform readers of their views about gender. Sachetana members are primarily progressive and left-oriented intellectuals who have had considerable exposure to ideas about feminism generated both in other parts of India and abroad. In refining and evolving their own views over the past decade, they have remained open to influences from both international feminism and West Bengal's communism, even though they have not succeeded in creating a visible alternative to the dominant discourse of Calcutta's political field.

### *The Politics of Violence in Calcutta*

In its analysis of sexual violence, PBGMS women in Calcutta offer two views. First, rape in its "most violent and vindictive form take[s] place for political reasons" (AIDWA conference pamphlet, 1990). A former CPI(M) Member of Parliament views rape and other forms of sexual assault and harassment as stemming from criminals usually associated with the Congress Party (P1).<sup>7</sup> Second, rape is committed by abnormal men. The leader of the Calcutta district office of PBGMS declares that "healthy, normal people do not do this. There must be temporary insanity for this to happen" (P5). The reconceptualization of the phenomenon of rape (rather than a problem of law and order, or, depending on the circumstance, not a crime at all), is very crucial (as we shall see) to the development of the women's movement in Bombay, is significant by its absence in the public statements made by the PBGMS.

While PBGMS is unequivocal in its condemnation of domestic violence, its official rhetoric maintains that while a tragedy, domestic violence can only be stopped through economic measures. Thus, until there are viable economic alternatives, there is no point in focusing on domestic violence. In this view, only unemployed, frustrated men beat their wives and children, a perception which makes the economic solution sound even more promising. The overall attitude of PBGMS toward domestic abuse seems to be that if an individual woman comes to them for help, they will try to do their best for her, which might mean telling her that "she has to adjust." If, on the other hand, the woman is backed by her particular *community* then they are willing to organize a social boycott. "The washer man, the barber, the fruit and vegetable sellers—no one should go to a batterer's house" (P5). Ultimately, though, because Marxist-Leninist ideology frowns upon the separation of women's issues from broader human or democratic struggles, PBGMS tends to frame issues accordingly. Whatever the form of violence, PBGMS leaders urge people to see it "not just as a women's issue, but as part of the larger democratic struggle" (P1).

The CPI(M) co-opts the issue of domestic violence by resolving individual cases so as to eliminate the political edge. When domestic violence occurs in couples belonging to the party, the "party takes care of it." Sometimes they expel the husband; sometimes they separate husband and wife, and help the wife become independent. In one instance, the wife was given a party office job (P9). What the party does not do is politicize the issue. While it does not blame women for bringing the violence upon themselves—and in fact appears to have dealt fairly in many cases—it also ensures that domestic violence does not appear in the public arena as an "issue." Therefore party men are not fundamentally threatened, yet individual women feel that justice has been done and the party has stood by them in their hour of need.

While grassroots workers of the PBGMS do not necessarily agree with their leadership's assessment of domestic violence, they air their disagreements only in private. In their view, it is mistaken to consider it a working class issue; it is just that middle class women do not readily report the domestic violence in their lives. Several women confided that they knew that "middle class women don't talk about it even though it occurs more in the middle class." However, these activists, who once used to raise alternative constructions of domestic violence

7. I use code numbers to identify the subjects of my interviews to protect their anonymity.

at party meetings, now no longer do so. They may or may not accept the logic offered by the party, but they do abide by it. Thus the dominant construction of violence against women appears to go unchallenged. This dynamic is largely due to the relative position of the PBGMS vis-à-vis the CPI(M) in Calcutta, and is not, for example, seen with the CPI(M) and its women's wing in Bombay.

Even though the members of Sachetana, like the members of PBGMS, did not list violence against women as one of the top three issues of concern to women, their understanding of rape is far from that of PBGMS. While rape is understood by Sachetana activists as an act of violence by men against women—not an act of insanity or economic frustration and despair—they often attempt to emphasize connections between levels of political violence in society and violence against women. Sachetana activists also struggle with their own fears of rape and try to challenge the fear and stigma attached to that crime. Speaking at a women's college in Calcutta, for example, one Sachetana activist asked why society should regard rape as a fate worse than death for a woman:

When we tell a woman to come home early it's because we are trying to protect her from rape. Boys and girls can equally well fall under the wheels of a bus, after all. So a girl can get raped and what is one to do with that? If I am raped and still alive, why should I not think that I have gone through an accident, just as if my hand were cut off? I would not give up living if that were the case, would I? I would try to carry on with the rest of my life. (S4)

Sachetana rejects the PBGMS's solution to the problem of domestic violence and targets instead the belief system behind domestic violence, because as one activist argues, "before a woman gets beaten up comes the socialization that says a woman gets beaten up only if she is bad" (S4). When a woman comes to them for help, they focus on changing her consciousness, making her believe that she can live on her own, that she can be strong. This practice reflects both Sachetana's belief in the importance of consciousness and its lack of the necessary resources to actually change the life situation of individual women.

On their conceptualization of the issues of domestic violence and rape, then, the two groups are officially far apart, but it is PBGMS's analysis that better fits the culture of Calcutta's political field. Sachetana activists are well aware of this, and hope that their analysis will have some impact on public perceptions of violence against women and its consequences, but acknowledge that they have been more successful in rethinking and reworking their own assumptions around these issues than in influencing others.

While Sachetana is deeply critical of the CPI(M)'s stance toward violence against women, it is rarely openly critical of the CPI(M) as a party or as guardians of the state. This unwillingness to confront the state, which is generally understood as one of the missions of a social movement, often causes a paralysis in Sachetana. Its paralysis extends so far that even when the majority of its members agree on a particular criticism of the CPI(M), they do not take a public stand about it, as evidenced by Sachetana's response to the Bantala and Birati crimes in 1990. These two cases, the first a murder of health and social workers and the second a gang rape, occurred within a few months of each other, and CPI(M) cadre were implicated in both. Additionally, the government was slow, sometimes offensive, and fumbling in its handling of both events—the Chief Minister was reported to have said "these things happen." In the public mind, these cases came to represent the CPI(M)'s lack of attention to women's safety and well being, as well as its loss of control over its cadre.

Sachetana's response was also slow. One member complained:

The Bantala/Birati case—it's so important—it took so long to even figure out what we wanted to do and when. . . . They were all thinking, shall we do this against the CPI (M)? What will [a particular party member, who is also a friend.] think? (S1)

This unwillingness to challenge the CPI(M), even in such a clear-cut situation, stems from two distinct sources. First, the political identity of many of the Sachetana activists involves deep ties

to feminism, but was formed within Calcutta's political field, so that they see themselves as different from other feminist groups outside Calcutta. Second, they fear the power of the CPI(M). They know that as long as they are non-threatening to the CPI(M), they can survive. Indeed, several activists claim that they can be effective *because* the CPI(M) ignores them most of the time. But if they were to be too critical of the CPI(M)'s policies, the CPI(M) could use the considerable tools at its disposal (such as its widely-read newspaper) to discredit them completely. They wonder whether their quiescence stems from their desire to survive as a group (S3, S5).

Ironically, Sachetana does indeed want to act as a watchdog of the CPI(M). Some in Sachetana believe that their existence gives women within the CPI(M) the space they might need to articulate alternative visions of women's issues—the very space denied by the party. These activists conclude that the party line must be changed from within and Sachetana's role should be to change and draw out women in the party. However, as one activist, a strong supporter of the CPI(M), concludes ruefully, "I thought that if autonomous women's organizations brought up these issues (such as violence), then the PBGMS would realize its mistake and start working on those issues. But it has not happened, probably because the PBGMS is too smug" (S7). In Calcutta's hegemonic political field, the CPI(M) and its women's wing does not need to listen to Sachetana.

At a time when political rivals were weak or delegitimized, the CPI(M) emerged as dominant in Calcutta's political field, and along with the CPI(M), the PBGMS emerged as dominant in the women's movement. That the CPI(M) became powerful in Calcutta at precisely the time that the second wave of the women's movement began to arise throughout the country has resulted in a women's movement strongly shaped by the strength of that party. It resulted also in the line between the protest field and larger political field being blurred, such that there is little space for protest that is not linked to the CPI(M). Thus, though Sachetana is indeed an autonomous organization, and the literature on women's movements would lead us to expect to see differences between autonomous and affiliated organizations, we do not find these differences where the political field is hegemonic. We find instead, a subordinate, autonomous organization, unable to muster enough resources or allies to carve out an independent space of its own, conforming, at least outwardly, to the dominant, affiliated organization.

### **Bombay: A Fragmented Field**

The events in 1977 that brought the CPI(M) to power in Calcutta delegitimized the CPI in Bombay (the capital of Maharashtra). While one or the other faction of the Congress Party continued to govern Bombay until very recently, the discredited CPI left a vacuum in Bombay's protest field at the very moment that a victorious CPI(M) moved from domination in the protest field to domination over Calcutta's entire political field. In Bombay, non-party political formations and other progressive forces including peasant, ecological, civil liberties and women's organizations, as well as right-wing and regionally chauvinistic groups filled this vacuum. Today, there is no single dominant force in Bombay as there is in Calcutta; no one force controls its possibilities and destiny. Nonetheless, there are three main players in Bombay's political field—the Congress Party, the right-wing nativist Shiv Sena, and various coalitions on the left. These coalitions include both left parties and the newer non-party political formations. The only possibilities for holding state power lie with the Shiv Sena (which has it now, in conjunction with the Bharatiya Janata Party), and various factions of the Congress (which had it until 1994), not with the coalitions of the left.

Post-Emergency progressive politics in Bombay has been marked by questioning the tactics and goals of the traditional left, and the evolution of a politically autonomous, grassroots, issue-based coalitional style. The fragmentation of Bombay's political field makes it receptive to autonomous groups and leaders unaffiliated with political parties, in a manner unknown in Calcutta. Indeed, throughout the 1980s, the trade union movement, usually a bastion of party

politics, was led by individuals such as Datta Samant and J. P. Mehta, who disclaimed any allegiance to political parties (Ramaswamy 1988). Because of this fragmentation, Bombay is receptive to change from sources external to its field (such as international feminism, economic liberalization, and MTV). In short Bombay's political field is permeable, changeable, receptive, and lacks one supreme power—either in the protest field or in the larger political field.

The activists in the post-1977 autonomous women's movement have little to gain by allying with the Congress or the Communist parties. They do not trust the Congress, and the Communist parties, are ineffectual, unlikely ever to become "parties of government." When coalitions are required, activists are far more likely to forge them with other autonomous grassroots movements around the state. There is, for example, a state-wide forum to press for changes in women's rights and to defend existing rights. Issue-based, temporary, politically autonomous coalitions such as the Forum Against Sex Determination and Sex Preselection (against selective abortions based on amniocentesis tests) and *Ektaa* (against ethnic and religious conflict) are common in Bombay.

Bombay's field is a hotly contested terrain, where disparate outsiders battle over meanings and resources with the insiders. While the increasing strength of Hindu right wing parties in the late 1990s has been shifting the balance of power in the field, it is within this field that Forum, an autonomous feminist group, emerged as partially dominant in the women's movement in the early 1980s. Janwadi Mahila Sanghatana (JMS), the women's wing of the CPI(M) in Bombay, is one of the many other women's organizations, but has far less power here than its sister group in Calcutta. I begin the subsequent discussion with the more dominant Forum.

### *Forum and JMS*

The Forum Against Oppression of Women is a small, highly visible, autonomous group which has come to represent, if not all of the women's movement in Bombay, at least the most "feminist" section of it.<sup>8</sup> Forum is the group that journalists consistently call for feedback and "feminist" opinions on various matters—whether it be sexist remarks by a Chief Justice or the creation of better rape legislation. While Forum has only ten to fifteen active members, it has been effective precisely because Bombay's fragmented field allows disparate voices to be heard and is conducive to partial, incremental change.

Forum was born out of a combination of rage at violence against women and a frustration with left organizations that did not take women's issues seriously. While women from various left and far-left groups had begun to come together by 1977, the formative moment for the women's movement in Bombay came in 1979, when the Supreme Court acquitted two policemen accused of raping a young tribal girl in Maharashtra. Women, representing grassroots organizations, political parties, and themselves, came together to fill what they saw as Bombay's need for an umbrella organization that would fight injustice against women. This was the beginning of the Forum Against Oppression of Women (at that time called Forum Against Rape). The campaigns to recognize and legislate the crimes of domestic violence and rape, and to regulate amniocentesis tests in order to prevent sex-selective abortions, have been Forum's largest, and most visible, campaigns.

While Forum is an important voice in the progressive arena, it is not the sole voice of the Bombay women's movement. The movement's field developed rapidly in a fragmented, dispersed way through the 1980s, including many autonomous groups (including Forum), groups linked to the traditional left (such as the CPI(M) affiliated Janwadi Mahila Sanghatana), groups linked to other regional left parties (such as Stree Mukti Sanghatana), and social welfare organizations such as the YWCA. In addition, women who are active in other issue-

8. Forum's members tend to come from both middle and upper-middle class backgrounds, and have college and post-graduate degrees, with a tiny minority from the working class. A smaller percentage of Forum members are married than in the other three groups in this study.

based groups such the Chhatra Yuva Sangharsh Samiti (a radical Gandhian group) also count themselves as part of the women's movement. These groups usually work separately, and different subsets of them coalesce around specific issues. One activist estimates that there are about fifteen organizations that share ideas and resources around women's issues in Bombay. "When all is said and done" she says, "Bombay is the only city where this happens" (F3).<sup>9</sup>

As the women's wing of the CPI(M), the JMS, formed in 1988, is tied to the party's policies in much the same way as Calcutta's PBGMS, yet it entered a field already partially shaped by the Forum.<sup>10</sup> Today JMS has many members, but only eight core activists in Bombay. While the JMS is not strong, it does have influence in those pockets of Bombay which have a history of CPI(M) strength. It is organized in a fashion similar to the PBGMS in Calcutta, with state committees at the highest level, joint secretaries (36 women who meet once every two or three months), district committees, and area committees. But in Bombay's political field, together with the comparative weakness of the CPI(M) in Bombay, changes the dynamic between the CPI(M) and the JMS. The fragmented field also means that the JMS's position in the field is not as weak as Sachetana's in Calcutta. JMS seems to have chosen a strategy of sometimes peaceful and sometimes contentious co-existence with the rest of the women's movement, sometimes working with Forum and sometimes differentiating itself from it. It thus works on issues and campaigns organized by both left parties and autonomous women's organizations.

### *The Politics of Violence in Bombay*

The issue of rape mobilized the second wave of Bombay feminists. While the target of protest was initially rape by the powerful—policemen and landlords—of the powerless, groups like the Forum soon moved to developing its own analysis of rape, an analysis strongly reminiscent of that of U.S. radical feminists. "The main issue facing women is violence in its many manifestations—not just rape but the entire system—the fear of everything around you and how that curtails your life" (F1). Forum saw rape as an instrument of power used by all men to keep all women in their place. All women were potential rape victims, irrespective of age, dress, or conduct. Rape was redefined, not as a spontaneous outburst of lust or passion, but a pre-planned, pre-meditated action of violence and humiliation. It was an extreme manifestation of the unequal relations between men and women (Flavia, 1992).

Forum activists focused their initial energies on publicizing and reinterpreting rape, and in getting tougher laws against rape passed. Entering a field in which rape was defined as a problem of "law and order," it sought to shift the discourse to rape as a problem of "violence against women," to name it as a social problem and analyze it accordingly. Forum activists had access to ideas about rape being generated in the U.S., and were able to use those ideas to build analyses of violence more appropriate to India.<sup>11</sup>

9. A typical report of a women's movement event in Bombay newspapers reads: "In a protest against the Supreme Court order acquitting Sharad Sarda after he had been convicted for the murder of his wife Manjushree by the Poona Sessions Court and the Bombay High Court, about 200 women belonging to various women's organizations under the banner of 'Mahila Sangharsha Manch' (MSM) on Wednesday took out a Morcha (demonstration) to Mantralaya and presented a memorandum to Chief Minister Vasantrao Patil. . . . The women's organizations represented by Samajwadi Mahila Sabha, National Federation of Indian Women, All India Women's Conference, All India Association of Democratic Women, North Bombay Women's Joint Committee and Forum Against Oppression of Women, intend to meet Governor I. H. Latif and appeal for a review" (Indian Express, 9/20/84).

10. Because JMS is new, there are only eight core activists, though many hundreds of members. Of the six I interviewed in depth, four had college degrees and worked as full-time party activists or journalists, and one was from a much poorer background and had not completed high school. All were married.

11. Consciousness of feminist work in the West and connections with the international feminist community are often revealed in the writings of Bombay's feminists. "Rape has been quite a sensitive and sensational issue for the women's movement in the West for quite some time. Some of us, feminists in Bombay have received posters and books from feminist friends abroad, but we had never thought that an effective campaign could be built up in India" (Datar 1988:13).

It was a member of Forum who first spoke out publicly about being battered, thus introducing into Bombay's political field the possibility of speaking out about one's own experiences, and allowing women to step out from behind the veil of shame that accompanied domestic violence. She pushed for the creation of the Women's Centre where abused women could go for advice and safety. Forum and the Centre together organized protest marches and demonstrations around particularly egregious cases of domestic violence. They used street demonstrations, marches in the victim's neighborhood, slogans against husbands and in-laws, and appeals for a social boycott in order to win attention for this issue. On several instances, the JMS marched with them.

The discourse used by the JMS reflects Forum's efforts. None of the women in JMS has any doubt that violence against women is a fundamental expression of men's power over women—not stray acts of crazed or sick individuals, as their counterparts in Calcutta claim. In the resolution of domestic violence cases, JMS activists distinguish themselves from other political parties, who, they claim, do not really have women's interests at heart. In discussing reasons for the abuse of wives by their husbands, one grassroots worker decried what she termed men's "machismo and will to dominate," noting that, in her experience, men sometimes falsely accused their wives of having extra-marital affairs "just to establish [their] dominance" (J3). The sense of men possessing a will to power, *an interest in domination that is separate from the economic*, pervades the discussions of the JMS. Such a view is markedly absent in their Calcutta counterpart, the CPI(M)-affiliated PBGMS.

A curious turn of phrase used by one JMS leader alerted me to the way the CPI(M) has adapted its rhetoric around sexual violence in Bombay. In criticizing activists in autonomous groups, she said, "these feminists deal only with rape and they don't like the fact that we say that rape is not just a sexual atrocity, but is used as a class weapon" (JMS 1). But, in fact, this activist's formulation is not a formulation that autonomous feminists would find objectionable. It is *her* articulation of the issue that has changed: from "rape is *fundamentally* a class weapon"; to "rape is not just a sexual atrocity, it is *also* a class weapon." This change reveals the permeability of Bombay's political field, as well as Forum's effectiveness within it.

In their recent book on the contemporary women's movement in India, two members of Forum reject the "economic reductionist" arguments of the left in favor of the claim that "all women, regardless of their class and caste, are oppressed and that violence is as political an issue as price rise and peace" (Gandhi and Shah, 1991:88). This claim is reflected, albeit in a modified way, in an article in the pamphlet produced by AIDWA (the parent group of JMS and PBGMS) for their third national conference (1990), in which the General Secretary of AIDWA wrote:

Issues like domestic violence, wife beating, dowry murders, rapes, sexual harassment etc. which are on the increase throughout the country and reflect in the most dramatic way the deteriorating status of women cannot be ignored as being "politically soft" issues. On the other hand attacks on democracy, issues concerning government . . . are of equal concern to [us] and must be emphasized. (Karat 1990)

This appeal to the party reflects the concerted drive in Bombay to get the CPI(M) to recognize domestic violence as a political issue "equal" to democracy. That is, there is an attempt to maintain that there is a "political" nature to domestic violence that is related to but distinct from class oppression. This is precisely what the Calcutta-based PBGMS does not wish, nor yet need, to do.

Forum's analysis of the culture of violence has led it to reject the violent slogans of street demonstrations, such as "*Jo humse takrayega, mitti me miljayega*" (we will crush into the ground anyone who challenges us), popularly used and sanctioned by both the left and the right. This issue places autonomous groups in Bombay, belonging to a variety of social movements, at odds with left-party activists whose demonstrations and marches against domestic violence are liberally sprinkled with threats to the opposition.

The JMS uses strategies that the autonomous women's movement in Bombay would never agree to use, but it deploys them with impunity because it has the party's backing. Ahalya Rangnekar, a highly respected, older member of the JMS, gleefully recounted to me tales of confronting violence with violence, of groups of women lying in wait for and beating up known harassers and wife beaters. These are methods with which the Forum is uncomfortable, yet they can be used both because the fragmented nature of the field allows for the existence of a wide repertoire of action and because the relative positions of the JMS and Forum are not as far apart as those of PBGMS and Sachetana.

Forum has introduced to Bombay a new way of thinking about violence against women, and violence in general. It has made visible an alternative "cultural coding" of this issue, which, in Ann Swidler's words, "is one of the most powerful ways social movements actually bring about change" (1995:33). Other autonomous groups and eventually some politically-affiliated groups have absorbed parts of Forum's analysis, and the political culture of Bombay has been at least partially transformed. JMS may deplore the "feminism" of Forum, and may pride itself on having a broader approach to women, but in a myriad of ways, Forum has become the politically legitimate organization representing women's interests. Thus, JMS will never call itself feminist, but will incorporate elements of Forum's analysis into its own understandings of male domination, an understanding that sets it apart from its sister organization in Calcutta. This has been Forum's most profound achievement, possible only in a fragmented field. Yet changes are also partial, precisely because the field is fragmented.

## Conclusion

The editors of a recent volume about feminist organizations note, "feminist organizations are outcomes of situationally and historically specific processes. In each time and place, feminism reflects its history and prior developments, as well as present opportunities and constraints" (Ferree and Martin, 1995:2). The concept of political fields gives us the tools to bring definition and analytical clarity to these "situationally and historically specific processes."

Political fields, which are the dynamic outcome of local and regional processes, shape the possibilities for social movement organizations. This article moves beyond the assumptions typically made by and about both groups, as well as the accusations hurled back and forth about which type of organization truly represents women's interests. It does so by understanding the properties of both types of groups as intertwined with their location and interactions within political fields. It is clear that the *decision* to organize autonomously or not and the *effects* of the type of organizing can only be judged within the context of the localized political field and that organizational characteristics cannot be judged free of context. The nature of Political fields constrains organizations' ability to represent women.

This essay has also mediated between theorists of social movements who argue that competition drives SMOs within the same movement (and field) to diverge from each other, and organizational theorists who argue that the same process produces isomorphism. The strategies of SMOs (whether divergence or convergence or somewhere in the middle) depend on the nature of the field and their position within it. Under hegemonic conditions, subordinate SMOs will tend to converge goals and strategies with those of the dominant SMOs, but may, like Sachetana, carve out an oppositional space which does not threaten the dominant groups. Under the more egalitarian conditions of a fragmented field, on the other hand, SMOs are freer to differentiate themselves openly from each other.

In the interests of time and space, I have dealt only with the question of the field's effects on organizations within it. However, since the construction and maintenance of fields is a dynamic process, their contours shift because of the actions of the organizations within it, as well as in response to forces from the outside. One major source of change lies in the rapidly globalizing world. With the quickening pace of economic liberalization and India's increased

openness to the world economy, there is a substantial increase in the amount of money available to non-governmental organizations (NGOs) from international bilateral and multilateral aid sources, and, at the same time, less state regulation and intervention. This means that there now exists the possibility of resource rich NGOs that can offer more effective alternative ideologies to those of the PBGMS and CPI(M), than those which presently exist. Thus while the impact of globalization will vary from field to field, it may well be powerful enough to alter the contours of a hegemonic field like Calcutta.

Globally, events such as the re-unification of Germany (Ferree 1995), the transition from military to democratic government in Brazil (Alvarez 1990), resurgent ideologies such as Islam (Moghadam 1993), and the "new world order" economic liberalization and globalization have fundamentally shifted the political fields for the social movements within them. These changes are felt in the shifting alignments between the state, political parties, and social movement organizations. In some fields, the changes point toward a greater degree of fragmentation and pluralism (Brazil and South Africa), but in others (Eastern Europe), new forms of hegemony are emerging, closing off possibilities once open. Within these transformed circumstances, activists must reevaluate their options, for the new fields may require the replacement of old strategies by new ones. Discourses and strategies that were once successful may cease to be so, and indeed familiar organizational forms may take on new meanings.

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