

Swaminathan, Mina; Mangai A; Raja Samuel, S: Confronting Discrimination: Some Approaches to the Issue of Female Infanticide. Search Bulletin. July-Sept 1998. 13(3). P.64-74.

Confronting Discrimination: Some Approaches to the Issue of Female Infanticide

Mina Swaminathan, A. Mangai and S. Raja Samuel

It was in 1991, when we were invited to a dialogue on female infanticide by the then Minister for Social Welfare of Tamil Nadu, shortly after the publication of a study on the subject by Aditi, that the Foundation began its involvement with the issue. It became clear at the outset that there was a wide gap between the perceptions of the government and those of the NGOs. Soon after this meeting, the government announced measures like the Cradle Baby Scheme and the Girl Child Scheme which were severely criticized by the NGO sector for both concept and implementation. A few attempted dialogues followed, but the gap only widened and hostile attitudes on both sides, exacerbated by the media, became more firmly entrenched. We realized that as an institution with some credibility, but one which was also clearly seen to not be a direct 'player' in the field, we were uniquely, positioned to undertake some activities which would provide greater clarity and understanding, and might even help bring together all the concerned parties. We could only begin from our own areas of strength. Documentation and communication suggested themselves as entry points.*

Voicing Silence, a theatre project initiated to give voice to women, had taken root by 1993, and seemed the obvious way in. Interestingly, the second author, the director of this project was already deeply involved with this issue, having earlier done a series of plays with other groups on the same theme. Evolving through those experiences, yet embodying a new and different approach, the moment was ripe for the birth of Pacha Mannu an interactive street play which engaged the audience directly, dissolving boundaries and turning spectators into 'spect-actors'. Work Pacha Mannu began in 1994 and performance tours started in 1996, breaking new ground in communication.

In the first part we describe the methodology of this interaction and the outcomes. Later ('Towards a Shared Mission'), we narrate the process of documentation and networking for advocacy.

Exploration Through Theatre

"If, on the contrary the theatre's object is to set in motion the immobile, the eternal sphere of the illusory consciousness' mythical world, then the play is really the development, the production of a new consciousness in the spectator - incomplete, like any other consciousness, but moved by this incompleteness itself, this distance achieved, this inexhaustible work of criticism in action; the play is really the production of a new spectator, an actor who starts where the performance ends, who only starts so as to complete it, but in life [1]".

While addressing the issue from a sociological perspective is the most essential task at hand, one also realizes that social realities are deeply embedded, reified and nurtured by cultural values. Therefore, it becomes mandatory to address the issue from a cultural perspective as well. Pacha Mannu is one such venture attempted by Voicing Silence.

Entry Point

In an era resounding with the communication explosion, Pacha Mannu moved around the interior villages of Tamil Nadu aiming to instigate its own communication implosion. Drawing audience is the first task for the group. Moving through the village streets, beating the drum to draw attention, announcing the performance to be held, singing various songs, the group gathers its 'primary audience' in every village i.e. children, like the Pied Piper. Having reached the site chosen for performance, a song; to set the tone of the context of women's lives in our system, which is divided into haves and have-nots in terms of caste and class, is sung. This gives the audience time to settle down.

But the play not only had to gather but also hold its audience. Unlike social organizations - activists groups, NGOs - which have their own cultural wing to spread their views, Voicing Silence faces the audience solely as cultural activists' group. This is not easy for a group whose audience is not already 'educated' about ongoing debates on the issue, especially when it does not have the support of a local organizer. Voicing Silence had a guest status and if the villagers were hospitable, could enjoy their hospitality after the show. Otherwise, it was up to the performance to communicate itself. In a way, this lack of preordained views and audiences helped the spectators to come out openly and say exactly what they felt or thought.

The Scope/The Reach

The shows held at over 18 venues across the state, attracted audiences ranging from villagers to school and college students, literary and theatre people and activists. Having had about 50 shows in a span of eleven months, Pancha Mannu has thrown open several questions regarding the role of cultural activism in our society. A detailed description of the type of responses evoked by the play is bound to throw light on the - complexity of the whole exercise.

Themes

The performance took the audience through the experience by visualization and connection of various individual experiences of gender discrimination throughout a 'woman's life; silent experiences, which serve to isolate women from themselves and further degrade them as second class citizens; experiences, which are never voiced because they are implicitly understood as truths of nature. The recognition that these incidents are not unique to oneself but are part of a greater societal dysfunctionality, the seeds of conscientisation and empowerment and the realization of how the personal is directly linked to the political - it would be too tall a claim to say that these were expected from this one play. At most, one could hope for a few responses, which underlined at least one of these aspects.

The strength of the play was in the powerful use of imagery. With a few props - simple and mobile - the play visually concretized the deep personal experiences of gender socialization.

The way the audience participated in the plays discussion of various means to solve this problem made one realize that often what is needed is just to create a platform. Discussing the role of performers, Augusto Boal [2] in his Rainbow of Desire says that the performers are not merely 'facilitators' of discussions, but are the 'difficultators' who make the spectators realize the, complex spectrum of the issue at hand; at the same time, they make the spectators realize that it is not impossible to rise up to action.

Confronting Attitudes

Pacha Mannu's capacity to provoke the audience was unquestionable. The glaring truth of male superiority inscribed in our society was resisted mostly by women; most men,

on the other hand laughed it off, thereby escaping the sense of guilt. It was surprising to note that women participated more in the discussions - perhaps strengthened by the number of women present in the group. In Elummichana Halli (Dharmapuri district) Lakshmi, a teenager who has been taken out of school after the 8th standard, confronted the male actor threatening his wife that he would marry another woman who could give him a male child, saying 'Go on! Even if you marry 20 women, you may not have the capacity to beget a male child, if it is not there in your sperm'.

An old woman commented, 'If you don't want girls, go live with men; you'll have no danger; you can have men wrapped, in a saree.' Sometimes, they had to be reminded that this was just a play and the group consisted of actors.

Responses of the young men at Salem were terribly frightening. Most said that they have to depend on dowry to pay a bribe, start a business etc. And with no qualms, they said, 'Yes, of course I will take a dowry'.

Areas of Unease

It was an eye-opener to all of us to know how deeply ingrained our discriminatory values regarding gender were! In Salem, this was blatantly obvious with the young men who argued for dowry. Men dodged the issue of female infanticide/foeticide by saying, 'Tell us one instance where a man has killed a child; it is only the women who do it.' This argument is brought forward in the case of dowry as well: 'After all, isn't it the mother-in-law who demands dowry?' Group members frequently countered such arguments by saying, 'Would you accept it if your mother ordered you not to smoke or come home late? Why do you behave as tame creatures only when it comes to the question of dowry?'

When the play pointed out that the sex of the child is decided by the 'Y' chromosome in the sperm and not by the 'X' chromosome in the ovum, uneasiness prevailed. Talk about birth-control measures too evoked varied responses. In Nalukalpalam, a man burst out blaming the woman for dragging him into a sexual relationship: 'If I sleep on the, thinnai (raised platform in the front portion of the house), she blames me for having been disloyal to her in our conjugal relationship'. In Belukurichi, an old man who sat far away from the performance space commented when the group walked past him, 'May be there will not be any woman in this area for our men in about 10 years time'. Sometimes, uneasy silence prevailed in the crowd, as in Rakkiampatti, where there had been an infanticide just two days before the play was performed.

How and Why

The lessons of this exercise have led us to redefine the methodology of, consciousness-raising and shown us varied ways of understanding and subverting cultural expressions. I wish to focus on the tone, idiom, mode and scope of this exercise for convenience of analysis, emphasizing the need for an inclusive tone, localized idiom, participatory mode and a flexible, open-ended spectrum of expression, which are valid for any endeavor on awareness, mobilization and articulation.

Inclusive Tone

Pacha Mannu consciously tried to avoid the 'us' and 'them' divide by, staying within recognizable cultural modes of expression. Nowhere is the viewer 'shocked' but he is made to see everyday realities depicted with a subtle critique of the same. None of the role's towers above the ordinary but retains average fears, doubts, desires and hopes. Pacha Mannu 'refuses to comment directly, but only' through ironic juxtapositions of scenes. The play has no real villains either; when villainy needs to be represented (in the dowry harassment scene, for example) the actors are masked, raising this villainy into a non-gender-specific abstraction, a structural problem of patriarchal societies [3] The spectators are expected to come to terms with their own consciousness regarding the issues raised through these scenes, ranging from justification, as in the case of one youth in Salem who proudly proclaimed that he would demand dowry since he is unemployed; or escaping the accusation like the men who blamed women for committing female infanticide; or frustration like the woman who brought up her girl single-handedly but then had her daughter sent back for more dowry; or distrust, like the woman who blamed us for having triggered off a discussion and then leaving without providing any solutions. Not adopting a didactic tone does not necessarily mean just openness to accommodate everything uttered. Most often, the openness was countered by other viewers or challenged by the actors, leading to arguments. While the actual show was about 35 minutes long, the discussions would go on from 30 to 60 minutes. One of the actors said, 'It often seemed as if we had a framework chalked out while entering into a discussion. We could not answer all their questions. May be we need to go beyond theatre into social movements as well'. The tone of the play therefore demanded responses, spontaneous and impromptu, from audiences and actors.

Localized Idiom

The play is firmly rooted within the Tamil socio-linguistic-cultural context. Since the play aims to touch the female viewers in particular, and re-present the existence of

women, it explores female-specific ceremonies and rituals. It is structured around the life cycle rituals of women within this milieu, from birth to giving birth. These are represented through songs, commentary and aphorisms reflecting the value systems and cultural codes the operation. The concern was not simply to reflect women's experiences, but to explore the explicit ways in which gender roles are reinforced and embedded in cultural institutions. These ceremonies and rituals are vital aspects of community living. Women-related ceremonies provide a space for women to congregate, celebrate and share female experiences. They are, however, outlets sanctioned within a patriarchal system over which the growing commercialization of a consumerist society is also superscribed. This duality in understanding these ceremonies led to both a celebration of these traditional spaces and a critique of the values ingrained in them.

Each community has specific ways of recognizing the biological changes in women. Their reproductive ideologies are expressed through these ceremonies. This is an area where the most crucial attributes in the cultural perception of differences between the sexuality of women and men are inscribed. The other differences are orchestrated around this. In fact, these ceremonies have implications for the mechanisms and processes of socialization. Proper social behavior, ideal familial roles and purity as a virtue are all drilled into girls, through these. Leela Dube has dealt with the implications of these rituals and their relationship to caste structures at length [4]

Cultural Exploration

The ways in which Pacha Mannu negotiated with these expressions need to be illustrated. K.A. Gunasekaran, a theatre academician and practitioner, helped us in this process. We collected the songs and ritual practices of ceremonies conducted during puberty, marriage and first pregnancy. Valai Kappu, the bangle ceremony held during the seventh or ninth month of the first pregnancy, is an all-female ceremony of celebrating fertility and blessing the woman. It tries to keep the pregnant woman happy and applauds her for continuing the family lineage. Being made the center of attention boosts her self-esteem. Within this female celebration is inscribed the patriarchal preference for a male child, voiced by the women themselves. We retained the song, which expresses the superiority of a male child and enumerates the blessings, which would be showered on the mother of a male child.

The puberty ritual, on the other hand, is both auspicious and impure. The fact that the girl is now a sexual being is celebrated. At the same time this is seen as threatening and therefore requiring control. We chose a traditional song describing each part of a

woman's body, from head to toe, praying for purification. Although we retained its tune, the lyric was changed to express the values of socialization implicit in that ritual.

Participatory Mode and Flexible Structure

At a certain point, abandoning the cathartic momentum building up feelings of isolation, the narrative is broken and the onus of deciding the fate of the unborn foetus is left to the audience. If the play had culminated with the oppari, it would have relieved the spectators from knowing what lay behind. The audience is taken by surprise when given the responsibility of deciding the fate of the mother and her foetus. The unresolved ending heightened the audience's sense of irritation and unease, and 'conversations sometimes erupted simply as an instinctive attempt to bridge the lacunae, to overcome the dissatisfaction of an inconclusive narrative [5]

The border between audience interaction and the play proper was deliberately collapsed at some points because in this theatre mode, actors are merely facilitators or agents provocateurs. The actors, however, have their own stock of alternatives ready at hand; these are enacted whenever indicated by the discussions. There is a popular grandmother figure who condemns dowry and applauds bride price, glorifies the daughter as a caring and nurturing figure and vehemently criticizes consumerist culture. Another woman, a young wife, tries at first to rationally and emotionally argue against having her foetus aborted. When her plea fails, she decides to walk out on her recalcitrant husband and take care of her child herself. Discussions move on to dowry, the status of women and value systems, both at the abstract level and through concrete personal histories.

Pacha Mannu can claim to be one of the more successful attempts to combine Frierian ideology with Boalian techniques [6] The play demanded both conviction and commitment on the part of the actors to communicate its expressed concern. The flexibility of its structure demanded that the actors improvise, interact, and participate.

The Lessons

The scope of this effort in the sociopolitical context needs close analysis. Pacha Mannu can be classified as a street/agit-prop/political theatre while it simultaneously defies all these descriptions. It is street theatre, which does not make any immediate demand. It is agit-prop calling for change but not action. Addressing consciousness and awareness do not seem protest at first. However, without them protest cannot be meaningful.

Pacha Mannu helps us to deepen our discussions, alter our modes of functioning into a more democratic one, provide a space for bringing out not altogether favorable views and conflicts into the open and to complicate the issues and solutions without relying on easy, fixed notions.

Towards a Shared Mission - Documentation and Networking

The focus of programs at MSSRF on young children (0-6 years) led to the issue of discrimination against the girl child, first indirectly through the situation of the older girl child who has to take care of her younger siblings, and later to its direct expression as female infanticide.

In recent years, a series of reports and articles on 'missing females' have produced overwhelming evidence of systematic discrimination against the girl child. 'Missing females' implied a high mortality rate among girls and women, and sex disaggregated analysis of different age groups indicated that the number of missing females is higher among the lower age groups. In the context of falling maternal mortality rates, the needle of suspicion pointed at the widespread practice of female infanticide.

Posing the Problem

A study conducted in three districts of Tamil Nadu uncovered some essential aspects of -female infanticide, euphemistically termed 'death by social causes' in PHC records (Box 1) While the issue was being hotly debated in various fora, a clear picture of the actual causes of female infanticide failed to emerge. Studies indicated that the practice was not confined to one single caste and that it was prevalent among the both the rich and the poor. Strategies to tackle female infanticide also varied, since each tried to tackle the issue from a particular perspective. However, most of them focused directly on the problem.

Box 1: Female Infanticide in Madurai, Periyar and Salem Districts of Tamil Nadu

This study was conducted for the State Social Welfare Board in 1993. It covered about 300 women in the three districts. These were all mothers whose girl children were victims of this practice. Preliminary analysis of the rate of infant births and deaths presented a graphic picture. Between 1988 and 1992, the IMR of female babies in Usilampatti block was consistently higher than that for male babies, the average being 72.8 for boys and 126 for girls. Even more surprising, the number of female births in the

block was lower than the number of male births, leading to a suspicion that the elimination process begins even before birth.

In Konganapuram block, Salem district, the number of girl infant deaths in 1990-91 was much higher than that of boys, though male births were higher. Nearly 60% of female infant deaths took place within 7 days of birth, suggesting infanticide. In the PHC records, a majority of female infants were stated to have died due to social causes [7] - a euphemism for infanticide.

The practice seemed to be spreading outwardly, from the Vellala Gounder community in which it is alleged to have originated. There also seemed to be a change in the methods used, with a shift to female foeticide, particularly in the prosperous belts of Salem and Periyar districts.

The Practice is grounded in a complex mix of economic, cultural and social factors. Dowry, poverty and expenditure on girls were claimed to be the primary reasons. The strong desire for a male child to perform the last rites for the parents, or to keep inheritance intact, the belief that only sons can take care of parents when they are old, as well as social pressure to conform, which is very intense in a rural community, were the other factors.

M. R. Arulraj, A Sarvesan & S. Raja Samuel; unpublished work, MSSRF Study, 1993.

Z. Negi, Elizabeth Francina, (1997), Death By Social Causes- Perceptions and Responses to Female Infanticide in Tamil Nadu, Monograph #5, MS Swaminathan Research Foundation, Chennai.

Gathering the Strands

The multiplicity of identified causes and strategies prompted us to put them together in the form of a review based on secondary sources entitled 'Death by Social Causes', to see if we could come to a better overall understanding of the issue (Box 2).

Box 2: Death by 'Social Causes'

Perceptions of and Responses to Female Infanticide in Tamil Nadu

- Introduction and backdrop geographical, historical, legal and social background.
- The extent - juvenile sex ratio and gender gap in IMR, especially in neonatal deaths, are the most important indicators.
- The reasons - economic burden of the girl child, dowry, inheritance systems, poverty, caste, social pressure, expenditure incurred on ceremonies, cultural values and beliefs - all lead to son preference.
- Impact of the media both positive and negative, pressure, but also sensationalism and driving the problem underground.
- The legal side - IPC defines infanticide as murder and new legislation makes selective foeticide a criminal offence, but laws are hard to enforce and mostly ineffective.
- Government action - Cradle Baby Scheme and Girl Child Scheme - ameliorative rather than revolutionary in character, and insufficiently known.
- NGO response - ranges from advocacy and lobbying, socio-economic development, gender sensitization, social action and networking, to working with village elders, monitoring high-risk mothers, providing temporary care/adoption and legal remedies.
- What next? - The need for information, research, documentation of success stories, sharing resources and gender sensitization.

Source: Elizabeth Negi, 'Death by Social Causes' MSSRF Monograph #5.

A few important conclusions emerged from this review.

- Female infanticide is just one symptom of the deeper malaise of gender discrimination.

- The problem has been defying all attempts to contain it.
- No single factor such as poverty, culture etc. can be pinned down as the primary reason.
- Efforts to tackle the problem were so fragmented that they failed to address the issue comprehensively.
- The government, though an important player, has been cosmetic in its approach.
- Most of the strategies followed by NGOs attempted to tackle the problem directly.
- Legislative and coercive measures forced the problem underground.

Responses of the government and NGOs to the problem and the reaction of the target communities to these responses reaffirmed that the issue had to be dealt with at a much more global level, focusing on the general pattern of discrimination prevailing in society.

Media Perspectives

Media plays a crucial role in the chronology of female infanticide with a plethora of articles ever since the problem was first reported by a magazine in 1986, providing a variety of views on the issue. The potential of media to influence opinion prompted us on a journey to understand both the response and the impact of media, in the form of a study on media perspectives on female infanticide, focusing on media projections of the problem and the consequences. The analysis, which included different communication media and their impact, was enriched by the intense experience of theatre in *Voicing Silence*. Sensationalism in portrayal, the position of the media vis a vis the perpetrators of female infanticide, media interpretations, impact on the community and approaches in cultural interventions were some of the key areas covered by the study (Box 3).

Box 3: Watering the Neighbor's Plant

Media Perspective on Female Infanticide in Tamil Nadu

This paper is both a study of female infanticide as represented by the media and of how different media represent female infanticide. A wide range of media representations are examined and analyzed to understand the way the formal characteristics of each shape the presentation. Special focus is given to three case studies: Let Her Die (video documentary), Karuthamma (feature film) and Pacha Mannu (street play).

- Introduction - the role and impact of media and the methodology of the study.
- Presenting the issue - the structural devices used to introduce the problem and construct its appearance.
- Locating the issue - the technical devices used to 'distance' the viewer/reader from the phenomenon.
- Ethical dilemmas - female foeticide falls into a Grey area, while female infanticide is considered a crime.
- Social compulsions - belief systems, cultural values, economic and social pressures, and other factors like family planning, and consumerism, which underlie the phenomenon, are interpreted by the media.
- Following up - media can be categorized into those concerned with following up, monitoring and assessing government and NGO action, and those involved in cultural interventions to change attitudes.
- Conclusions - even within media, certain structural divides exist, between forms, between audiences and between media consumers and producers ('us' and 'them') which need to be addressed.

Source: Sarada Natarajan, MSSRF Monograph #6.

Reaching the Stakeholders

It gradually became apparent that female infanticide is an issue requiring both urgent and large-scale action - action focused not merely on alleviating symptoms, but on shaking the fundamental attitudes constructed and reinforced over centuries. We also understood that the key was to reach all the stakeholders through communication at various levels. With the experience of setting up and running for five years the Tamil Nadu Forum for Crèche and Child Care Services (TN-FORCES), a network of 73 organizations, working on issues related to the young child, we realized that for effective communication and advocacy, coalitions and networks would be a powerful tool.

In this context it might be relevant to mention the impact of networked and sustained communication on another issue TN-FORCES has been working on for several years - the burden on the preschool child. The preschool child today faces a tremendous burden in the form of pressures to read, write, and know numbers, all of which should be introduced only after 5 years of age. A campaign against this was initiated to reach key stakeholders, such as parents, teachers, school management's and policy-makers, including bureaucrats and legislators, through face-to-face meetings, memoranda, seminars, fact sheets, training programs, 'spots' on Doordarshan etc.

There has been a tremendous public response to this campaign, as well as signs of change in the thinking of the government as reflected in some recent programs and policies. While it may take some time for this groundswell of community opinion on the issue to crystallize into action, a beginning has definitely been made. A major lesson that emerged from this experience was the importance of identifying key stakeholders and targeting communication activities at them in a non-threatening way. Methodology and convinced us of the value of positive communication strategies, the experience in networking and advocacy on issues related to the young child showed the way to shared exploration of networking possibilities along with other NGOs. It was felt that a network of NGOs working on these issues would be in a stronger position to initiate sustained campaigning to bring about attitudinal changes, rather than sporadic and isolated activities by individual NGOs.

Impact of the Media

The practice of selectively destroying female infants caught the public's eye in Tamil Nadu, with the publication of two path breaking articles: Soundarapandian's 'Varadatchanaikkup Payandu Pen Kuzhandaigalai Kolgirargal' in the Tamil bi-weekly

Junior Vikatan (December 4, 1985) and Venkataramani's 'Born to Die' in the English fortnightly India Today (15 June, 1986). With this media focus, certain areas in Tamil Nadu, notably Usilampatti in Madurai district and later, the rural belt in Salem, acquired the kind of notoriety reserved until then for regions 'elsewhere' in the country... The media's role has not been confined to the crucial part of bringing the practice of female infanticide in Tamil Nadu to public attention. Newspapers, magazines, television documentaries street theatre and, recently, even feature films, have all continued to mediate the issue for public consumption, orchestrate the expression of opinion, evaluate the efforts of NGOs; and have set out the implications of this practice for other issues as well as for gender relations in general. In addition the media have constituted a communication link between Journalists..., activist and NGOs working in isolated pockets..., novelists, film-makers, and theatre groups involved with social issues, helping them keep in touch with one another and with strategies or developments at various levels.

The effects of media intervention have also penetrated "inwards", in that they have affected the communities in which female infanticide occurs. They have been held responsible for many changes within these communities not all of them desirable. The media have been accused of sensationalizing the issue and blowing it out of all proportion. Further awareness of being in the public gaze and fear of legal action has combined to push the practice of female infanticide underground. Community members guilty of the crime have become secretive and inventive in their methods.

Whatever their drawbacks, the media have established a precedent of sorts by dragging the subject out into the open and giving it the dimension of a social problem. They have mobilized the usually sluggish public opinion against this social evil, and have tried to sustain its interest in, and vigilance of, the issue. The media continue to play an important role both directly and indirectly in preventing the killing of girls (thereby justifying the need for studies analyzing their strategies and impact).

Source: 'Introduction', Watering the Neighbor's Plant by Sarada Natarajan, Monograph No. 6, M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation, 1997.

The Beginning

The first step was an exploratory meeting of NGOs from the Salem and Madurai regions (regions officially known as infanticide-prone) organized jointly with the Indian Council for Child Welfare-TN, to take a fresh look at the strategies adopted by NGOs, explore opportunities for collective action, and test basic assumptions. The broad theme

of the meeting was the 'survival of the girl child'. Though initially the participants focused on the perceived and direct causes of female infanticide, they gradually moved on to analyzing the deeper attitudes behind the causes. From initially identified visible causes such as poverty, son preference due to inheritance rights, dowry, social custom, protection from suffering etc., they went on to identify 'negative attitudes against women prevailing in society' as the single-most important factor. A sample list of the negative attitudes was generated:

- Women should be dependent on men; slaves to men
- Women should be in an inferior position to men always
- Women should be treated as glamour objects
- Women are a reproductive device
- Women are the property of men
- Only women should be chaste/symbolize culture
- Women's work is worthless
- Women cannot inherit the family name

Moving into Networking

It was generally agreed that female infanticide is only one manifestation of attitudes which cut across class, caste, occupation, urban-rural divides, age and gender. Hence, strategies too have to be broad-based, targeting different sections of communities. Experience has shown that a direct portrayal of the issue, such as visual projections of infanticide, results in opposition, hardening the stance of the community concerned. The need is for communication which tackles the attitudes of the various groups and individuals in the community. This requires a long-term perspective, as attitudinal changes do not take place overnight. A campaign mode may be helpful in providing the

necessary momentum and to cover a large area, but in order to sustain it, the 'vibrations' of the movement must continue long after the activities die down.

A significant new insight was that this change is strategic, in that it aims at fundamental changes in the position of women. The long-term output expected is the elimination not only of female infanticide, but also of gender discrimination itself. Networking would be an excellent possible option for moving towards strategic changes, as it would offer the strength and larger base required for effective and widespread action.

Subsequent meetings helped refine the mission of the network which was stated as 'ensuring the right to life of girls and women', with strategies like:

- a. Meetings for sharing ideas and information - between members
- b. Joint activities mostly related to awareness generation
- c. Communication
 - Development of appropriate communication material
 - Planned dissemination
 - Celebration of special days, and
- d. Inter-NGO collaboration.

Consolidating Gains

Further interactions emphasized some of the key aspects in networking such as the importance of being non-judgmental about individuals, groups or communities involved, reducing emphasis on financial aspects and more sharing of available resources, moving away from a target approach to micro and macro-level communication strategies, achieving clarity on the network's role and resolving differences to concentrate on issue-based activities.

The network partners are now in the process of consolidating they're thinking and working out detailed plans. In time, the network will need to transform itself by drawing on more and more sectors as allies into a broad-based and sustained movement to confront the threats to the survival of the girl child.

The five-year experience has strengthened our perception that female infanticide is only the tip of the iceberg, one manifestation of a pervasive discrimination against the girl child. Pacha Mannu started with this premise. Its central theme is gender bias and the oppression of women at all ages, cutting across categories of class and caste, and its climax is a haunting image of female foeticide. The wider implications became even more apparent as the study proceeded, with mounting evidence from all parts of the country confirming that with increasing affluence, female infanticide is gradually being transformed into female foeticide. Such an insight naturally implies the need for new strategies to tackle the issue; again communication and advocacy seem to be the key, with media in close partnership, at different levels and in different forms.

In this phase, we see a continuing role for ourselves. This would include, at one level, supporting and nurturing the NGO network in its efforts, helping to link NGOs with government policies and programs and to broaden the scope of the movement by involving new allies; at another level, it would mean offering training and support in developing communication methods and materials and building links with the media. The issue is now too widespread and too threatening to be contained or handled by simple answers.

References

[1] Althusser, Louis (1977), *For Marx*, Verso, London.

[2] *Rainbow of desire* by Augusto Boal is a collection of techniques practiced by him to explore the attitudinal aspects at both conscious and sub-conscious levels. It is an extension of his Forum and invisible theatre games and exercises.

[3] Natarajan, Sarada, (1997), *Watering the Neighbor's Plant - Media Perspectives on Female Infanticide*, Monograph No. 6, M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation, Chennai.

[4] Dube, Leela, 'Caste and Women'; Srinivas, M.N.(ed.), 1996, Caste: Its Twentieth Century Avatar, Viking Publishers, New Delhi.

[5]. Natarajan, Sarada (ibid).

[6]. Rainbow of Desire, by Augusto Boal (see n. 2).

[7]. Negi, Elizabeth Francina, (1997), Death By Social Causes - Perceptions and Responses to Female Infanticide in Tamil Nadu, Monograph # 5, MS Swaminathan Research Foundation, Chennai.