

Aalochana: *Documenting Women's Lives*

else who wishes to avail of them. The centre aims to give library (books, journals, newspaper clippings and articles) facilities, xeroxing facilities, as well as access to re-

This week saw the launching of a new women's organisation, Aalochana, in Pune.

But Aalochana proposes to be something quite different, providing documenting and research backing to activists, researchers and workers alike....

Much of what women have done has gone unrecognised. What they have done has not been recorded. Apart from two centres in Bombay — at the SNDT University and the Tata Institute of Social Sciences — there is no such place in Maharashtra where women's work has been documented. We hope to fill this gap," says Medha Kotwal-Lele, one of the office bearers of Aalochana, The Centre for Documentation and Research on Women.

"There are a number of women's sanghatanas in Pune and in Maharashtra, who have been doing good work for many years. There are activists in many areas, involved in the movement, but they do not have the time or resources to sit down and document it. They do the work, now we will record it," explained Vandana Sonalkar, another office bearer, at the launching of Aalochana's first project, a film on the thoughts and ideals of nonagenarian educationist and social worker, Gangubai Patwardhan, by Haimanti Banerjee, another founder member of Aalochana.

"Now a number of centres for women's studies have been set up, as a branch of

social science. Such studies cannot grow if we have no documented material on what women think, feel, perceive on social issues, about themselves, about their relationships — within the family, with men, and society at large," says Ms. Kotwal Lele.

"Even to understand the changes that have come about, or even to bring about such changes, recorded material becomes most essential." The scope is not limited to such writing alone. "The perceptions and personal experiences of individual women have always remained unexpressed and undocumented. The main objective of Aalochana will be to compile and document all such information and data" says the Aalochana brochure, listing its objectives.

For such recording, the centre solicits material of all kinds from the public — writings, research papers, clippings, books, audio material, even old letters and photographs of female relatives. In fact, "anything that is on record."

Such research material is to be made available to people working in the field, to activists, to research students, and anyone

ports of their own research and surveys. "Funds from any source are welcome. We hope to get grants from the government for our projects, from the Social Welfare and Human Resource Development ministries. Individual donations will also be accepted. Now for instance, for our xeroxing facility — we would certainly welcome any industrial house giving it to us", a hopeful Ms. Kotwal-Lele enthuses.

The research and documentation to be conducted by Aalochana will be in media traditional as well as modern — surveys, research papers, oral history projects as well as educational films. These will focus on four major areas — women and family, women and work, women and organisation and women and feminist theory.

"The family is fundamental to women. Their place in the family, how they perceive themselves within it and in relation to other members are important factors for an assessment of their development. "The very basis of family in India — patriarchy — has its own effect — of exploitation, power relations, division of labour," explain Aalochana's spokeswomen. Hence the focus of Aalochana in this field.

Women and work will be another focus of research. "This is the area where women are exploited to the hilt. First of all, women are given secondary jobs. Even in white collar jobs where the work and pay are on par with that of men, the gender bias, and sexual harassment in subtle or obvious ways can never be ruled out," elaborates Ms. Kotwal-Lele.

With regard to women and organisation, Aalochana hopes to collect information on women's bodies, groups and movements, about work done in different fields, educational,

Mahawashtra Women's Herald

Vol. 1 # 26

P. T. D. J.

political, health, etc; the role that these organisations play, whatever their convictions, whatever their status, autonomous or otherwise.

While the basic research conducted by Aalochana will be restricted to Maharashtra, material on women and organisation will have a wider, national perspective.

On the issue of feminist theory, however, the sky is the limit. "Patriarchy, socialism, everything — our ambit will cut across all limitations. It will include what we ourselves do in Maharashtra, as well as research material on work done outside," elaborates Ms. Kotwal-Lele.

Aalochana which was registered in December '89 is the brainchild of five activists and research workers — Vandana Sonalkar, Urmila Mohite, Medha Kotwal-Lele, Haimanti Banerjee and Simrita Gopal Singh. It will soon have more members on its body.

The scope of Aalochana is rather ambitious. They hope to have material on the whole gamut of women's activity — anything that comes to have a bearing on women's lives.

The centre hopes to be able to offer its service to workers and researchers in another six months. By that time it will have made some progress in collecting material on women, documenting it for posterity.

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