

# Engaging With The State

Veena Gowda

**WOMEN SURVIVORS OF VIOLENCE: GENESIS AND GROWTH OF A STATE SUPPORT SYSTEM**

By Anjali Dave

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**T**he Special Cells are located in the police system to draw on the power of the law and the Constitution to aid abused women to rebuild their lives, but *this power is neither benign nor apolitical* writes Anjali Dave in *Women Survivors of Violence; Genesis and Growth of a State Support System*. There is no one better qualified than Anjali Dave—a feminist activist, social worker and teacher—to critically look at the course and consequence of engaging with the state to address the issue of violence against women.

Special Cell for Women and Children, a field action project of the Tata Institute of Social Sciences that started in the office of the Commissioner of Police in 1984 is today a Government project functioning in more than 7 states with over 300 cells. It is this historical journey that Anjali traces in her book drawing from personal experiences of working with the state, institutions, organizations, groups and above all women. The book becomes an interesting read as she weaves her own growth and development as a feminist with that of organization and its vision.

For young feminists and social workers wanting to work on the issue of violence against women this book would be a good primer into understanding not only how state and patriarchy work but in also understanding how women themselves look at violence and relationships in their lives. For activists/social workers building organizations and negotiating/lobbying with the state, the experiences of the author in identifying and overcoming road blocks created by individuals, state agencies and other organizations are very insightful.

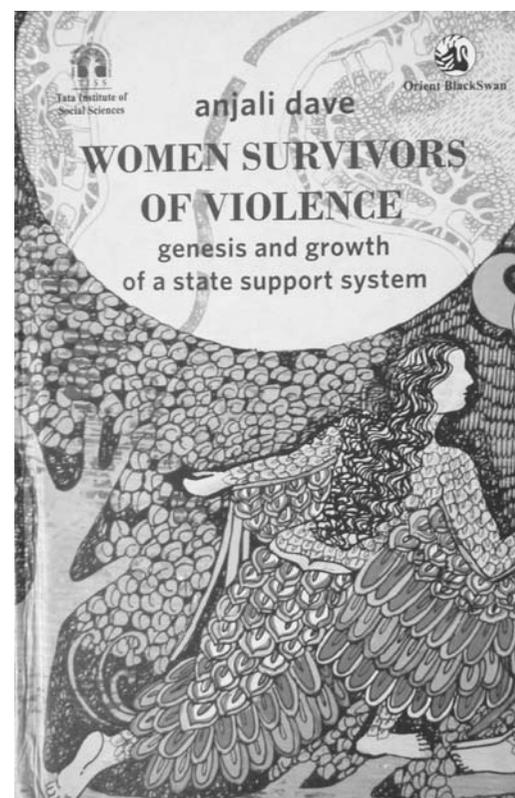
The Special Cell, a coordinated multi-agency, provides professional social services to women survivors of violence within the police system. This relationship not only meant that the social workers understand the police structure and functioning but the police understand and acknowledge the need for such socio-legal work. The book discusses (with personal anecdotes and a critical eye) this relationship of learning and manoeuvring between the social workers and the police—conceding to hierarchies that social work abhors and challenging ideas/under-

standing of the police that they are unaccustomed to but constantly being aware that the state is neither benign nor apolitical.

Laws have always been seen as a tool to address the issues of violence against women in society. Around the time the Special Cell was set up the Indian Penal Code was also amended for the first time, recognizing domestic violence as a criminal offence under Indian law. Soon thereafter, the family courts were set up in Mumbai. The hope and belief was that law and access to justice would transform women's lives. While the number of women who approached the police and the Special Cell increased, so did the number of women approaching the family courts. The voices of women captured in the book add to understanding of women's expectation from law and the state. The author writes that the Special Cell has played an important role in defining oppression, violence, and rights while trying to maintain feminist politics. Discussing with the police, the victim, the accused, the possibilities of various solutions was not contemplated or anticipated by the law. The realization that courts and law alone cannot transform society is not new, but the successful experiment of the Special Cell and the data provided to substantiate their work only reinforces it. With the passing of the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005 the work of the Special Cell is now further validated.

Legal and social intervention in women's lives is incomplete if the same is not documented and studied. In depth research, documentation of experiences and theoretical understanding is imperative if our everyday work has to have a more long term impact and feed into more creative approaches to addressing the issue of violence. The work and development of the Resource Center for Interventions on Violence Against Women (RCI-VAW) and the symbiotic nature of research and practice that is brought out in this book is also valuable.

The special marker in this book is the author's attempt to acknowledge and appreciate every influence that has made her who she is, and the organization as it stands today. This adds greatly to the understanding of what is required for building a coordinated multi-agency practice to deal with issues of



violence against women. In marking the vision and effort of her teacher and mentor Professor Meenakshi Apte and recognizing the contribution and growth of the workers in the Cell, Anjali acknowledges all the players in this building block. In articulating the criticisms from women's groups and women's movements about the Cell she also constantly talks about the influence of these groups and movements on sharpening the Cell's work and approach to structural oppression and violence.

On the whole, the book documents and takes us through several journeys across many layers of visualizing and starting projects, of reworking and re-visualizing, negotiating departments and power centers, day-to-day issues of infrastructure and politics, personal doubts and travails. At times, the book is repetitive but this seems more the failings of an editor rather than the author. The author wants to document and hold for posterity her and the project's experience and wisdom of more than 25 years (it is a project worth replicating and holding for posterity) but the editor ought to have reined it in and plumbed deeper into certain issues which seem like they have been skimmed through.

Anyone wanting to read and understand the various efforts and attempts of the Indian women's movement in addressing the issue of violence against women this work would be essential.

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