

Report on the first woman journalist conference in Patna

By Payal Kumar

THE BIHAR CHAPTER

The Bihar Woman Journalists' Forum (BWJF) was born on May 1, 2001 (appropriately Labour Day). There was an informal meeting of about 15 women journalists, largely from the print media and also the electronic media. Although there was no agenda as such, there proved to be a lot of hard talking over hot samosas, and several issues were raised from poor work conditions for women to sexual harassment. One woman broke down while recounting that she had not been paid over the last three months and was not even being given a day off in a week.

After this meeting there were others, in which it was decided that while a get-together in Patna of woman journalists was a first step, this ought to be followed up by a state-level conference.

GREAT EXPECTATIONS: THE LIST

The Patna conference in 2001 proved to be an overwhelming success. When compiling the database of woman journalists in Bihar, we decided that Jharkhand should also be included in our search, since Patna and Ranchi were the two main epi-centers of print journalism. Although there had been a bifurcation of Bihar in 2000, it was felt that the problems faced by women of both the states was common.

At a very rough estimate we felt that there would hardly be 60 women altogether in both States put together. Names were gathered simply by asking colleagues if they knew of any woman journalists, and also by taking a peek at the payment registers in main newspaper offices. Soon we realized that perhaps we had bitten off more than we could chew! The list grew a little every day, till the eve of the conference, and in all we discovered that there were approximately 120 women of our tribe (print media, electronic media, AIR and also serious freelancers).

COUNTDOWN: RUNNING AROUND TOWN

While we are greatly indebted to UNICEF and Action Aid for the financial support, without which the conference would have remained only a dream, we really missed a supporting body to give us logistical support. So, our forum members had to do everything, from drafting letters, pasting envelopes, arranging hotel accommodation for our guests (Ammu Joseph from Bangalore, Kalpna Sharma from Mumbai and Sunita Aron from Lucknow) and delegates, to organizing snacks for the big day, conference folders with the forum logo, reimbursements of train fares etc.

We received some strange reactions from some of the women we contacted, with some of them quite suspicious of our intentions and interrogating us to no end. One young girl from Gaya insisted that she bring her father along, while another wanted to know if there would be any gift available.

We also went around all the press offices with press releases, personally invited the officials of UNICEF and Actionaid and visited Chief Minister Rabri Devi to invite her as the chief guest. Getting an appointment at 1 Aney Marg proved an uphill task. After a few attempts we received feedback that she was a little apprehensive about why on earth five women journalists wanted to meet her. It was only after reassuring her PA that we were not

hounding her as investigative reporters, but inviting her to an event which was the first of its kind in Patna, that we were able to put our foot in the door. When she did give us an audience, she listened to us most attentively while offering us lemon tea. She finally said yes to our proposal, but only after glancing at her spouse, the then RJD chief Laloo Prasad Yadav, who nodded his head in approval.

THE BIG DAY

It was far beyond our expectations when 68 delegates poured into the conference hall at A N Sinha Institute, Patna. When Rabri Devi, Laloo Prasad Yadav and their entourage turned up and all of Patna's photographers began clicking their shutterbugs furiously, we could understand a little how Princess Diana must have felt when she was hounded by the paparazzi. Laloo Prasad Yadav in no uncertain terms told the cameramen to calm down and be seated.

The Chief Minister Rabri Devi set the ball rolling by saying that something concrete ought to be done for women journalists of the state by the State Government. She first began laboriously reading a prepared speech in Hindi, and then after some time began speaking on her own steam. She appealed to woman journalists to paint the "true picture" of Bihar in both print and electronic media, which she said was often distorted by their male counterparts. She said that men often sensationalize news instead of presenting facts. Laloo Yadav was quick to interrupt, telling her under his breath to round up her speech. He soon took over the dais and promised land for press club and one woman journalist representative in the State Commission for Women. Whether this was empty rhetoric or a promise to be kept remains to be seen. Presently he is see-sawing between bail and jail, which has put a spanner in the works.

CONFERENCE AGENDA

The agenda was finalized as follows:

- a. Are women treated at par to men in terms of terms and conditions of jobs?
- b. Are women reporters given soft beats, and also sub-editors relegated to mundane editing work?
- c. Are there any problems regarding night shift vehicles and toilet facilities?
- d. Is sexual harassment a real problem?
- e. Is the coverage of issues relation to women, from rape to female foeticide, presented in an unbiased manner?
- f. How has the globalization affected women working in print and electronic media?

The discussions were fast and furious. A senior journalist of the *The Times of India* spoke of harassment by the editor for the last one year, and said that she had been restrained from writing news stories. She claimed that another female colleague was undergoing similar treatment. A freelancer complained that women were not given important assignments, but were given soft beats related to fashion, cookery etc. She added that some of her articles had been published, but in someone else's name, and that she also did not receive any payment.

Regarding news coverage the participants stressed the need to bring in sensitivity among editors and journalist about presenting news stories relating to rape and dowry death.

There was consensus that journalists in general have to unite in opposing the contract system and employment on casual basis. Sunita Aron called for unity among journalists to oppose the contract system.

Kalpna Sharma stressed the need for a national forum for woman journalists to oppose gender discrimination and sexual harassment, while Ammu Joseph stressed the need for independent committees in newspaper offices for looking into charges of sexual harassment.

One participant working in a Hindi daily said that in her eight years as sub-editor, she had never faced discrimination or harassment by male colleagues. Kalpana was quick to point out that this was not the same for all. Many other details were discussed, including about the status of Doordarshan newsreaders in the media.

Taking our cue from the Jaipur conference two young journalists were delegated the task of rushing off to the nearest cybercafé and typing up the details of all those that attended the conference, including name, address, telephone numbers and e-mail address. A copy of this was then circulated to all, to make networking in the Bihar/Jharkhand area a concrete reality.

THE JHARKHAND CHAPTER

It was encouraging to meet many enthusiastic participants from outside Patna. Two delegates from Ranchi, namely Vasavi and Soumi Dad, showed an interest in setting up a similar forum in Jharkhand.

Since the conference we have been in constant touch by e-mail, and the preparation of a database of woman journalists has begun. I hope that the four delegates that have come from Jharkhand will learn a lot from this conference, and then open up a chapter of their own soon. We will be there to encourage and offer assistance if and when required.

GOOD PRESS AND BAD

Regarding press coverage, news of the conference was covered in all the English and Hindi dailies. Some were accurate and others not so. *Hindustan Times* was the only newspaper which carried the piece on the front page (anchor), while in others it was tucked inside. *The Times of India* reported only Rabri Devi's speech, and there was not a word about the raison d'être of the conference. A report published in a Hindi daily read more like an editorial piece. Another reporter wrote that there had been a coverage of women's issued with a "heady dose of male-bashing." We felt that this was rather lop-sided reporting. It was sad to learn that some of our members faced harassment from the management on their return to work. One of them said she had been branded 'a trade unionist,' and couldn't shake off the label.

BALL START ROLLING

The Bihar Woman Journalists' Forum has had several other meetings since the conference and organized two seminars too. On 7th October there was a seminar on "Terrorism and world politics" in which the speakers were Resident Editor, *Hindustan*, Girish Mishra, head of political science L N Sharma and lecturer R K Lal.

Then on 22nd December there was a seminar on "POTO and human rights" in which the speakers were Resident Editor, *Hindustan Times*, N R Mohanty and lawyer Asfar Hasan. Throughout the year, we have been in constant touch with Voices and Ammu Joseph, not only informing of our activities, but seeking advice whenever needed.

Payal Kumar was one of the founding members of the Bihar chapter of NWM India, and a co-chair of the woman journalist conference in Patna in 2001.