

Empowering Women – An Alternative Strategy from Rural India by Sakuntala Narasimhan, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1999. Pp.236. £27.50 (hardback). ISBN 0 7619 9340 1

This book focuses on the well-known NGO AWARE (Action for Welfare and Awakening in Rural Environment) and its work among scheduled caste (SC) and scheduled tribe (ST) women in more than 8,000 villages in the state of Andhra Pradesh in South India. AWARE was founded in 1975. The author offers, first, an outline of the plight of Indian women generally, and SC and ST women particularly, and the inadequacy of state action to improve women's situation. The author then discusses AWARE's projects and activities. Her main argument is that AWARE's strategy for development is novel, has proved to be highly successful and should be replicated elsewhere. While the conventional approaches usually adopted by the government address issues of poverty first and women's powerlessness and subordinate status second, AWARE turns this sequence on its head. Women must first be psychologically empowered in the sense of being made conscious of their legal and human rights. Then, when they have reached a higher level of consciousness, AWARE offers them guidance, partly in the form of modest economic incentives, so that they can improve their material situation.

The author conducted her fieldwork in 1994 and 1995. She used a combination of participatory interaction, personal interviews and a collection of narratives from the villagers; a total of 33 villages in five Andhra Pradesh districts. In all, she interviewed 117 women and 33 men, nearly all illiterate. She also did research in a number of villages where no AWARE projects had been initiated, to compare her findings. To further convince the reader of AWARE's successes, the author compares her findings with the assessment done by another research team, which conducted its work during the same period. This team came to similar conclusions.

A substantial part of the book describes in detail AWARE's work among poor women, such as the helping of bonded labourers, particularly women, to freedom; the setting up of health and medical centres; and the offering of vocational training to previously bonded labourers. The starting point for AWARE's work is women's mental frame of mind, their apathy and hopelessness and their apparent acceptance of a life in dire poverty and bondage. To empower the poor and marginalised women, an AWARE volunteer will acquaint himself or herself with the villagers through numerous visits, listen to the people, and gradually begin to ask questions about their situation. The author argues that this kind of gradual intervention has proved greatly successful. Women realise they have rights that are worth fighting for, and men are encouraged to stop drinking and to treat women better.

The author found that in general, women from AWARE villages were more assertive than women from other villages. Women exposed to AWARE's strategy developed a sense of solidarity and social confidence, were ready to go to the police to report injustice and to stand up against harassment from upper caste men, were willing to beat up any *arrack* (liquor) contractor in their village, and were prepared to organise protests to get back land appropriated by upper castes. This awareness had also brought about greater equality between men and women.

The book, which includes a number of case studies, offers a good introduction to the situation of SC and ST women in India today, and an NGO's attempt to redress an extremely serious situation of exploitation. Having read this book, few will doubt that AWARE's work is desperately needed, and that its efforts have met with considerable success. However, the uncritical attitude to AWARE is one main weakness of the book. The author comes across as a main spokesperson of the AWARE ideology, ready to embrace characteristics such as 'a gigantic social experiment' and to describe the strategy as 'one of the most powerful and effective in the country' (p.86). But how novel is the strategy? For years, women's groups and activist oriented NGOs all across India have talked about empowerment in the sense of consciousness raising. Poor men and women must unite, organise, and protest in order to fight for their rights. NGOs can assist them in articulating their demands, but the poor themselves must be the initiators of action. Delivery of material goods in the sense of traditional welfare has been secondary in most of these strategies for development at least since the 1980s. Making women conscious of their rights and assisting them in becoming mentally empowered to stand up against injustice is hardly a new and hitherto untried developmental model in India.

A subject that is mainly left unexplored, is the question of funding. The author mentions briefly that AWARE receives regular funding from European aid organisations; the Dutch Novib and the Belgian NCOS, as well as smaller grants from the Indian government. She does however not go into the often problematic donor-receiver relationship, such as the discrepancy (if any) of what the donor expects and the receiver produces in the way of results. How have the donors assessed AWARE's work in the form of evaluations and reports? This would have made interesting additional reading.