Social registers pasted on walls

By Avijit Ghosh/TNN

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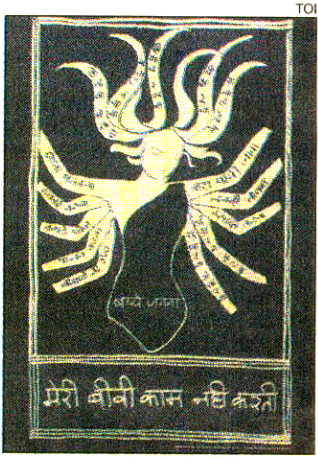

New Delhi: Enthused by an idea and rallying around a common social or political cause, men and women often express themselves through slogans and pamphlets. The ubiquitous poster too is a vital but rather underrated mode of articulating one's view. Pasted on unsympathetic walls, often hanging awkwardly from bus stops, posters are silent but invaluable social registers of any people's movement.

In India though, posters have been treated as objects of utility rather than a potential archive of social expressions. In recent times, Hindi film posters have been occasionally used to explain the evolving nature of Bollywood. However, the political poster has escaped the collector and the curator's attention. For instance, narrating the history of Bhopal Gas tragedy through the posters that helped built a global campaign for justice can be imaginative and evocative in equal parts. But such initiatives are rare.

Poster Women, an ongoing exhibition of posters from women's movement in India at the Lalit Kala Akademi (till April 5), seeks to make a beginning in this direction. A background note to the exhibition explains that "the idea was to look at how the women's movement and its concerns could be mapped visually to ask what the history of the movement would look like through its posters and the visual images it had used." Over 1,200 posters were collected from over 200 groups and individuals from all over the country.

Most of these posters are about issues taken up by women's groups: violence against women, rape, dowry, gender sensitive laws. One poster points out, "Violence against women is a silent war. Women breaking the silence refuse all forms of violence inside our homes and outside." Another shows a women's weightlifter in action and says, "Be like Karnam Malleswari".

From the cheekily-named vamps — *Veshya Anyay Mukti Parishad, Sangli* — to *Mahila Samakhya, Tehri*, from Parma, a lesbian support group of Baroda to Prerna Bharti of Jharkhand — the small-town is eloquent in its presence. South India, though, is inadequately represented. By its own admission, anti-alcohol movements and widow immolation have been overlooked in the exhibition. Going through the collection one hardly gets a clear picture of the evolution of women's movement in India: either chronologically or in terms of ideas. Conceived and coordinated by Zubaan, the collection appears to be like a scrambled jigsaw puzzle that informs in parts but fails to illuminate.