"Your Story will Also Be History..."

—Interview With Kamalamma, Activist In The Telangana Struggle

By Stree Shakti Sanghatana Working Group On Telangana Struggle, Hyderabad

TIME and again, women have played an important role in political movements. Yet, after the event, they have invariably fallen back into the private and fragmented existence that is typical of women's lives. If the Telangana armed struggle of 1946-52 is now something of a legend, so is the participation of women in it. In a recent interview, one of the leaders said that as many as half the seats in village as many as half the seats in village meetings used to be reserved for women. It seems possible that at the height of the struggle, one in 10 of the active cadre was female.

Considering that *parda* was the norm in the cities and, among Muslims, even in villages, it is all the more amazing that women were able to leave their homes, camp in the open, wear trousers, travel alone and even take up arms, as readily as they did. Women fought in the squads, provided shelter, acted as couriers and took leadership in the medical and cultural fields. One woman we interviewed was a barefoot doctor at the age of 16. She was only just literate but she learnt how to treat illnesses, suture, clean and dress wounds, organise balanced diets for the cadres, and attend to health problems in the villages.

The Telangana movement, significant not only in its achievements, but for the issues, theoretical and ideological, that it raised, has inspired other agrarian and student movements. The questions it raises for the women's movement, however, have by the large, been passed over.

Existing accounts indicate that the basic feature of the life of the people in Hyderabad state under Nizam was a grotesque form of feudal exploitation that persisted till the uprising of the Telangana peasants. Sixty percent of the land in Hyderabad state during the Nizam's rule was under the government's land revenue system, about 30 percent under the Jagirdari system and about 10 percent was the Nizam's own direct estate. The peasant men and women in the personal estate were nothing but bonded slaves to the ruler.

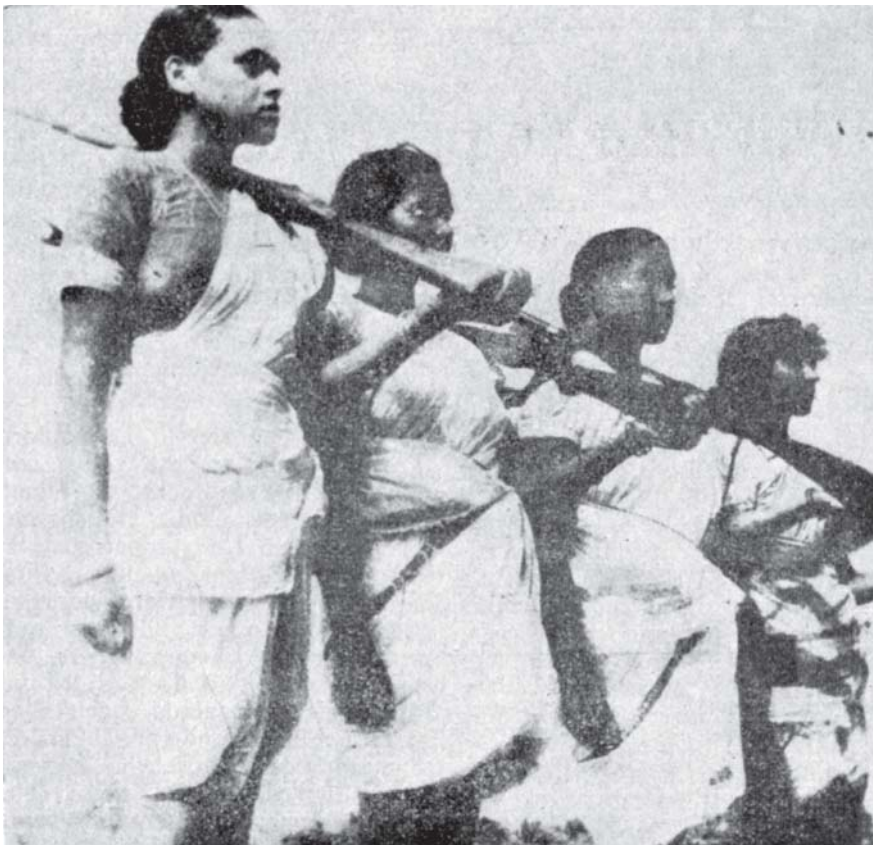
Under the Jagirdari system, various kinds of landlords, Inamdars, Jagirdars, Muktedars and so on, exacted illegal taxes and forced labour from peasants. They had their own police, revenue, civil and criminal system. There were also the Deshmukhs and Deshpandes who earlier were the Nizam's tax collectors, but later grabbed thousands of acres of the best land under the government's land revenue system, and made it their own property. Peasants became tenants-at-will.

Enslaved Peasantry

One common social phenomenon was the system of *vetti* or forced labour and exactions, which pervaded all peasant sections in varying degres. Each harijan family had to send one person to do *vetti*. This had to be done in the houses of the different landlords as well as those of the village officers. In the oral history that follows, Kamalamma tells of these experiences. They had to collect wood for fuel, carry post to other villages, carry supplies and so on. All those who produced footwear, agricultural implements, pots, and cloth, had to supply them free to the landlord. Peasants had to use their own ploughs and bullocks to plough the landlord's land. Washermen had to wash free, others had to carry palanquins, and harijan servants had to run along with the landlord's horse or bullock cart to act as escorts.Toddy tappers had to give toddy, barbers had to give free service, shepherds free sheep, fishermen fish, and merchants all commodities. Those who opposed or disobeyed any of these rules were subjected to inhuman torture.

Another system that prevailed was the keeping of peasant girls as slaves in the landlord's house. When the landlord's daughters were married, these girls were sent with them to serve in the in-laws' house. These *adipapas* were actually concubines.

There is a prevailing misconception that the struggle was essentially against the Nizam's fundamentalist police, the Razakars. But, in fact, the struggle was against both the Muslim Nizam and the Hindu landlords. The peasant struggle had its beginnings in the 40 villages controlled



Women activists undergoing training

by the Visumuri landlord. Chakali Illamma, of Palakurti village in Visumuri domain, was the first person to resist the attempts of the landlord forcibly to seize the harvest and land. Her husband and two sons were arrested and tortured, her daughter was raped and the whole house was destroyed and looted by the landlord's men and the police. But she consistently fought, with the support of other villagers and the Sangam, and she succeeded.

Activities of the party Sangams spread to other parts of Telangana, and peasants in large numbers started coming out in protest against the landlords' domination. Conflict between the peasants and the landlords became widespread and intense. Deshmukhs and others retaliated by getting villages burnt, looting property and raping women. The peasants did not stop their struggle.

In order to protect the Nizam's as well as the landlords' interests, squads of armed men called Razakars or volunteers were formed in 1946. These Muslim fundamentalists worked under the leadership of the notorious Khasim Razvi. One of the major tasks allotted to them was to join with the police in attacking villages and terrorising the Sangams. The Sangams were forced to take up arms in self defence. As we see it, armed struggle in Telangana was an immediate fight against the repression of the Nizam and feudal landlords rather than the result of a decision made by a centralised leadership within any long term perspective of armed revolution in the country.

Reclaiming Lineage

Ordinarily, when the history of such movements is written, women are seen either as heroines who fought alongside the men, or as victims who suffered and were supportive women who were raped and tortured, women who endured the loss of sons and husbands, who provided food, shelter and affection, often at great personal cost. The stress is on what women contributed to the movement.

In such accounts, rarely do we get a glimpse of what women themselves thought, felt, or experienced. The ways in which women were affected by the movement, their struggle for survival, the growth of their consciousness, in other words, the movement's contribution to women, has hardly been explored. Many of the women who took part in the struggle are alive and articulate. A few are still active politically. For us, as a women's group, it seemed a rare opportunity to record their stories and to reclaim our lineage.

In the history of the movement that the Stree Shakti Sanghatana working group on the Telangana movement is writing, women are not written about - they speak for themselves. As they tell us the stories of their lives, we learn what the movement meant to women, the possibilities it provided, the opportunities women welcomed and used and the problems they ran into. Mothers have always passed down knowledge to daughters thus, not through the written forms of patriarchal culture, but verbally and personally. There was a definite sense, as we interviewed, of lineage and inheritance, of exchange. If the wealth of their story was ours, so was the commitment to fight and to grow. We reproduce here an edited version of one of the 40 or so interviews we did in various parts of Andhra Pradesh.

Kamalamma At Home

Kamalamma was a member of a cultural squad. The squad went round the villages, singing songs and doing plays. They wove the experience of the people into the tunes of old shepherds' songs and held discussions in the song dance sequence of the *Okku Katha*. Even today, Kamalamma's voice rings loud and clear. She holds a high note without a quiver. We asked her whether she had a copy of the songs they sang. She looked, but found only one book. The sadness in her voice was evident. "Books were our life then", she said. "Now I don't even know where they have been put away." Unlike

some of the other women who were in the movement, Kamalamma still goes to meetings, and even sings. But it was clear from the way she spoke about it that today is a pale copy of those times. She spends most of her time at home.

It was late afternoon when we met Kamalamma in her house on the outskirts of Warangal. It is only a short walk from the rail junction to her house. Divali was round the corner and all the houses on the street had just been whitewashed. The small courtyard where we sat was obviously in the process of being roofed over. It was a small house, spartan and neat.

She had oiled her hair and was just going for a bath when we arrived unannounced. It wasn't long before we had settled down. Kamalamma is about 50 and strikingly self possessed. She used to be a member of the cultural squad and can still hold an audience rapt as she sings songs, set to the tune of shepherds' chants, about the movement, about Pratap Reddy, one of the richest and most cruel, about life today, about the future she hopes will soon be here. Several times during the session, she sang for us, as though song was her way of holding memories and reliving experiences.

Her Story

"My name is Kamalamma. I come from the village Mainela in Maniketa *taluk.* My husband is from Ramapuram. Our life was a very troubled one. It is painful to tell the story of my life. My mother was a slave in the house of the landlords. For many generations, my mother's people had worked as slaves in the big houses. Three generations had existed like this. My mother, her mother and grandmother, all had been slaves in the same landlord's house. They say my grandmother's name was Venkamma. My mother's sister too had lived in that landlord's house. She died in that house. They were used as slaves in those houses.

It seems we were Telagas originally. Many years ago, in a time of hardship, my mother's grandmother was sold for a measure of rice and a rupee to a brahman family. She stayed as a slave in that house, working there, kept by one or the other of the landlords.

Kamalamma

My father was a landlord. He had come to live with his cousin who was wealthy. My mother was his cousin's slave and, when she came of age, my father said he would keep her. They lived together and you can call it marriage or being kept or whatever you will.

Anyway, they were happy and he looked after us, his children, quite well. He did not marry anyone else. My mother bore 14 children. Only five of us survived. When I was 15, my father died.

The mistress of the household wanted to send my elder sister as a companion with one of her daughters when she was married. That was the custom in the family. But one of her nephews raped my sister and she became pregnant. Although he raped her, she was not given any separate maintenance or house. Her life was ruined. She could not be sent along with the daughter because the companion had to be a virgin who had not attained puberty. She had to be just like a bride. So my sister was not sent, and she had to stay behind with her child.

My father was different. Although he was a brahman, he came and lived with us and gave my mother whatever he earned. In the end, he came to me when I was in Pasera village in Maniketa *taluk.* He died there, and my son performed the last rites. In those days, very few landlords looked after the bonded women's children like that. Instead, they simply swallowed the woman's youth, drank her blood, and left her without food to eat or a roof over her head. My father was somewhat progressive. He educated us up to the fourth class. He did not want to ruin our lives but to make us useful. So my sister, my brother and I learnt Urdu, Telugu, English and Hindi.

My mother-in-law too was bonded to a powerful Reddy family. The landlord's name was Ravula Rama Reddy. My husband, Appana, had to work for them, cooking and serving them. As the family we worked for was brahman, we had to do only the outdoor work, the sweeping and washing, but my husband had to do the cooking too.

Unable to bear our sufferings in these landlords' houses, we joined the struggle. Although my husband was a grown man, the mistress used to beat him. The landlords ate meat but found it difficult even to give us a little tamarind paste for the night meal. That was the life of a bonded labourer. Graze the buffaloes, collect dung, cook the food - one had to do everything. Go to another village and fetch so and so and he would go. Go and kick that fellow and he would do it. They even used my husband as a hoodlum.

I didn't suffer like that but he suffered that way. My mother, sister and my brother all had to do this kind of work. The mistress wanted to make my younger brother and sister and me slaves, but my father did not allow it. Those landlord women were really something. They sat on their fine chairs and cots and we were at their feet, cleaning their vomit and shit and doing every chore for them. Nothing but dirt. It was because of the Communist Party that my learning stood me in good stead. But my sister has forgotten everything and it is all just wasted.

When we became nubile, where could they find good families for us ? We could

be married off only to other people working like this in big houses. I was eight years old. This was 49 years ago. There was no question of dowry. They usually asked: "What will you give our girl?" If we combed our hair neatly and walked down the street and a landlord saw us, he would not leave us alone.

There was one goldsmith woman, a widow aged about 30 years. The landlord had a middle aged friend. This woman went to the landlord's house for a pickaxe. The landlord's friend pulled her by the hand. She did not say anything to him but came out and told his wife that he had behaved like this. The man was furious with her and complained to the landlord. The landlord sent five or six men who waylaid her and raped her on the way to her sister's village which was about three miles away. This happened near a clump of palm trees. They were drunk when they caught her and tortured her. They even poured sand into her vagina. She did not die. But her private parts were swollen up and sore. Someone brought her home, cared for her and fomented her.

It was when we were unable to bear sufferings like these that we came into the party. First, my brother joined the movement. Then he became the commander of a group of 20. That was in the days of the Nizam. They used to move around, blocking the levy that the Nizam's government was collecting and take it away. They tried to set fire to the wagons carrying the levy. So the Razakars and police came in large numbers and set fire to my mother's village. There were nearly eight comrades in that village and their houses were burnt down. My son was three months old then and I was 16 years old. The repression on my husband increased.

Unable to put up with the landlords on the one side and the police on the other, he too joined my brother in the party. I stayed behind until my son was a little older. Then I felt that there was no point staying on. I was young. My husband was away, and what with the police raids and burnings and killings in the village, I felt it was better for me to join him. I was afraid of what they would do to me. So I too left. My son was looked after by my father. My second brother was arrested in Ganuga Benda, when he was carrying ammunition from Bezwada. He was beaten and jailed for five and a half months. He now gets a freedom fighter's pension. My elder brother was arrested after two years—after the Union Armies came. He does not get any pension.

-Bula

My work in the party was in the cultural squad. My voice is quite good. I used to move around, telling stories and singing songs. Later, I used to write circulars, in the Area Committee and Regional Committee Centres. Then the movement expanded considerably. Every village had a police camp. The comrades could not move about. They were being shot at sight. At such a time, even the villagers would not let us come near them. Then we became a group again and started doing cultural work, travelling through the villages.

The Koya tribals were very uncivilised then. The men wore a small loin cloth. The women wore a loin cloth inside and another piece of cloth across the body. It was only after we went there that they learnt some civilised behaviour. Women learnt to wear some clothes. No government cared for the forest people. Neither the Nizam's

government, nor the Congress government. Only when the movement spread could we work among these tribals.

I did mainly cultural work. I was in the hospital centres. I learnt how to give first aid and injections. The doctor held classes for us. I worked in Manukota *taluk*. I wandered around Khammam. I roamed around the Gorla Jagir. All that was forest

area. Then . I went to Manthana and Mandharapur. I did not go to Suryapet. Later Swarajyam, I and Tirumala Seshayya's wife, Achamamba, met in the forest.

Once, when the doctor was taking classes in a village in Suryapet, all of us, men and women, were listening to the lecture. My 10 month old son began to cry. I felt very bad. I was embarrassed. The doctor said : "Don't feel bad, the future is his." But I could not bear it. There was a comrade called Gaddom Pullaya from my village. I gave him the child and said: "Take him to my sister-in-law." She had just lost an infant child and so she suckled my child and reared him. My milk dried up after some days.

The raids increased. The Union Armies came. The hunt for communists started. First we were fighting the Razakars. Now it was this new enemy. This seemed to be the bigger enemy. The party instructed us to retreat and so we retreated into the forest. I was hesitant to go deep into the forest. Then my husband said : "If I go alone and you are caught, you will be killed. It is better we stay together." I melted at these words and went with him. The reason I hesitated was that there was no guarantee that the ones who went would return.

After that, I roamed about with them in the forest for about six months. Then, I wanted to see my son and I asked them to let me go. They agreed. The night I neared the village, the information came that the union government would be surrounding the entire area. Then the party leaders asked me to leave immediately. It would be difficult for me, a woman, to run in the night. If I was caught, I would be killed. So they asked me to go. I set out the same night and walked and walked till sunrise. I managed to reach the deep forest. There was an attack on some of our people who escaped and they also reached the same place. And so it went on for a year and a half. By then, I was pregnant again. I kept moving around with them. It was time for the child to be born.

The Congress government had taken the people from the surrounding 10 villages and put them in one camp. We had no protection there. There was no hope of getting a midwife. I was very troubled by the thought of delivering the child. There was a village nearby called Sonpeta. That was not included in the camp. There was an old midwife there and they fetched her. I delivered under a cluster of bushes in the night and after the old woman had done her work, they drove her away before daybreak.

I reared that child for six months while I was moving around and working for the Party. Then, the Area Committee leaders said to me : "Kamalamma, either you must give this child away to someone or else you must leave us and go and live in a village with him." Among those who said this were Omkar and Kondeh Vasudeva Rao—do you hear? There was Tirumala Rao. I was under all of them. They said : "This six month old child will definitely cry sometimes. All the big leaders are with us here. So many lives will be lost because of this one child. Secondly, each one of us serves many thousands of people. This son of yours can't do any work. We can't bring him up in the hope that some day he will serve the people. You should give him away to someone or else take him away and live somewhere." But they added : "If you go, they will chop you to bits, they will put chilli powder on you. They will torture you, they will kill you. It is for you to decide. Think about it."

My husband was not then with me. He had gone to Manthana. I was alone with them. So when they asked me to decide, I thought hard about it. I was in no state to go. There was fear in my belly. If I died, I would die with them. So I decided to give away the child.

But there was no one to take the child. Even the Koya tribals refused. The child was very fair. So the Koyas said: 'No, sister, how can we hide him in our homes? They will ask us who he is, sister. They will kill us, sister. No, we won't take him." Then the party decided that the boy would be

taken to Boggutta, Pedda Tala Gadda. They would tie a note on his neck which said that we could not rear the child and so we were leaving him there. This was Omkar's suggestion. The police patrolling that area would find the child.

How can a mother bring herself to do

this ? I wept a little. I said I could not go. I asked them to call my husband and show him the child. Then Omkar said : "This is not correct working class consciousness." My head reeled. Why should I hear such accusations? I had not come into the struggle for a livelihood. I had come to do my share of work and die. I had no hope of surviving the struggle. So I thought: "Why should I be so attached to this little mite ?" I changed my mind and agreed to go, and leave the child. A comrade was sent with me. We walked two days. Then we met an organiser who said: "Why have you decided to throw away the child ? Let us find someone here to give the child to." The families there were those who had escaped being evacuated to camps and who had gone underground and were living in the forest. There was one man who worked in the coal mines. He had three sons who had died. We begged him to take this child and he agreed. I placed the child in his hands and left.

After that, neither my body nor my mind nor my eyes stayed in my control. There was just one torrent of tears from eyes to earth. Since then, 36 years have passed but I do not know what has happened to that child. Once, some revolutionaries came and asked me about my experiences, my life story. When they asked me about the child, I was full of grief. Really, about my own sacrifice, what can I say? Satyanarayana, who died, used to say: "We read the history of many countries. In our country, in our Telangana, you are the ideal of the model woman. Why do you lose heart? Why grieve that you have given away the child? Your story will also be history." Thus they comforted me, but how does one swallow a mother's grief?

I had several narrow escapes. Once, when I was expecting this child, we were in the Area Committee Centre. Appana had gone out to organise some other regions. Swarajyam, Tirumala Rao and several other comrades were together there. We sent a comrade with money to buy some necessities for us. He did not return at the fixed time on the fixed day. We didn't know what had happened. We were full of suspicion. So we decided to shift from that place.

We went across a hillock to the other side. When we moved, we did not observe the precautions and went together along one path. So we left tracks.

We sent a comrade called Basha to scout the village. I was suffering from morning sickness then and I lay there. A comrade was cooking. Another, Ramanarasayya, was writing circulars. Many years later, he was shot after he joined the Naxalite movement. The comrade who went for supplies was arrested and he brought the police to the spot where we had camped originally. The scout, Basha, saw him following our tracks and leading the police to the new centre to which we had moved. He broke into a run but the police shot him. Hearing the shot, we began to run. Ramanarasayya, a Suryapet comrade, and I, all ran in different directions. We ran for about four or five furlongs. I was weak and exhausted. Basha ran to the centre and took the things and notebooks and hid them. Then he ran after me and said : "Kamalakka, stop." I didn't stop because I thought the police were following us. I just kept running. When he said he was Basha, I joined him, then joined the other comrades.

There were other women I knew in the movement. One was called Venkatamma. She was from Lingala Kothagudem. She died some time ago. She was a good comrade. Once, just the two of us were alone in the forest. It was dark. We could not stay there or sleep there. We had to walk about two miles. We walked through the night and then made a small hollow in the grass and slept there. She was a woman of great courage. Once, near Manthana

Madavepur, the landlords in the village got together and killed one of our organisers.

Then our groups surrounded that village and killed the men who had killed our comrade. Venkatamma took part in that raid. She wore a man's clothes, put her weapon on her shoulder and went with them. No one could discover that she was a woman.

In the Allapalli fortification in Illendu, there was a police camp. They gathered all the village folk from the surrounding villages into that camp. They did not allow the people to leave the camp, which was guarded by home guards. Then, the party decided to set fire to that camp. The groups set out to do that. Venkatamma's group also went. They surrounded the camp and set fire to it. While they were doing this, one of the home guards saw Venkatamma and tried to catch her. She knocked him down with the butt of her gun and escaped. She took part in many guerilla attacks.

Once, we were in a village called Chityala. I was pregnant again. This was around 1952, after I had given away my child. The village folk reported to us that there was a stranger in the village. One man went and brought him to us. He did not know our tongue. He spoke Hindi. When we gave him a slate and pencil and asked him to write, he wrote only in Hindi but no other language. He kept weeping. He wept and wept till morning.

Appana was our group leader. All the others felt the man was a CID agent and should be killed. I felt very troubled. I was upset by his weeping. Since Appana was my husband, I pleaded with him the whole night. I said: "We don't know where he is from or who he is." I could not bear the thought of killing him. Then Appana, either because of my pleading, or the man's weeping, or his own humanity, decided to let him go. He fled. The next morning, the police arrived and set fire to the village. If others had come to know, I would have been penalised. In private, Appana criticised me a lot.

Soon after this, the party gave a call to stop the struggle. We were all very unhappy with this decision. The comrades refused to lay down their arms. They said that to surrender their weapons was to surrender their lives. It was very hard. The comrades said: "You take our guns and shoot us." We had lived for years without mats or vegetables or rice, drinking a cup of gruel between us. How could we lay down weapons after so many years of hardship?

Women engaged in rifle practice

But the big leaders came from Kerala and Bengal to tell us to give up the struggle. The whole All India Party spared no effort to stop the struggle in Telangana. 'If we had not stopped, would the movement have expanded or would it have been wiped out without a trace? It is difficult to say.

Even after we laid down arms, the Congress government shot two or three of our comrades. The comrades were very upset. After all, we knew that this was a government which had no principles. We knew that this government would not treat us with sympathy. After all, even before this government had come into power, we had sung songs about what it would do :

No, not for us brother peasant,
Not the Congress rule.
No, not for us brother coolie,
Not the Congress rule.
Taxes whether we are born or die,
Cuffs, thrashings and foul abuse.
The hell of debts and bonded slavery.
No, not for us the Congress rule.

And thus we returned to our ordinary lives. We had no means of livelihood. Neither my parents nor my mother-in-law. So the party gave us Rs 120. To some families they gave a pot or two. They gave me Rs 60 and my husband Rs 60. A bullock cost Rs 60 in those days. One could harness a plough to it. The land was divided among the people. Since we were party workers, we were a poor family. Later, my husband worked with Nagi Reddy's Naxalite party. He was convicted for four years and three months in the Nagi Reddy conspiracy case.

All the children were around my neck. He wrote, saying: "Sell the house and support yourself and the children." I went from house to house, begged for things, and kept my children fed and clothed. A lot of troubles can come to a person. It is not wealth that matters. It is your strength, your conviction. I had that strength. We still have not left the party. Our days have passed in this way.