



Rural Women's Force

...The Shetkari Sanghatana's meeting at Chandwad brought the power of women as a major force against ruffianism and communalism. The result may well be an effective mass action by men and women peasants coming from Maharashtra and elsewhere against the perpetrators of the 1984 pogroms.

The meeting was the largest I have seen and I was pleasantly surprised by the open stress on the specificity of women's oppression and patriarchy. It was pointed out that even if peasants get higher prices it will not necessarily affect women. A hard hitting theoretical booklet and resolution dealing with issues ranging from property rights to compensation for housework was distributed.

Sharad Joshi put forward an immediate action programme for tillages : provision for tapwater supplies and an end to physical beating and murder of women. At the state level : support to all-women panels for district boards. And at the national level : *gherao* Rajiv Gandhi if those responsible for the atrocities of November 1984 are not brought to book. The reasoning behind this is that violence is the main factor in the subordination of women and today the main sources of violence and ruffianism are government policies and politicians.

...There were some problematic aspects, for instance, organisational sectarianism was evident in the re-luctance to let other women's songs be sung as was. the personality cult.

But, on the whole, it made me feel as if "the second women's decade" may belong to the rural women.

Gail Omvedt, Kasegaon

A True Story

This is the true story of a woman from my mother's village in Bihar. The village has a population of about 200. Gauri was barely 14 when she came there as a bride. Her husband was two years older than she. They were very poor, having an acre of land and a small hut. Despite the hardships of poverty, Gauri blossomed into a beauty. Her husband became very jealous and ordered her to observe strict *parda*. ...

At 24, she was still childless. Her husband began to abuse and even spit on her, threatening to take another wife. No one intervened to help her. When she was 30, her husband died. She got no sympathy as everyone termed her unlucky, and even accused her of having caused his death. Her parents refused to have her back, so she had to stay with her old mother-in-law and husband's younger brother.

Her brother-in-law wanted her as his mistress. When she refused he began to beat her black and blue. Nobody helped her. The mother-in-law was helpless to oppose her son. Gauri was forced by circumstances to give in to him. The villagers now ostracised her and spat at her when she walked down the road. ...

When she was aged about 40 her mother-in-law died. Then her brother-in-

law top died due to cirrhosis of the liver. He was an alcoholic. She was now alone in a hostile village. The more she suffered, the more they dubbed her unlucky and shunned her. ...

One night, a village hoodlum broke into her hut and raped her, after gagging her. She found that she was pregnant as a result of the rape. She knew the villagers would lynch her. At night, she tied a large stone to her feet and jumped into the well....

The entire village turned up at her cremation. They stood with eyes downcast. Today, they do not feel very proud of themselves when reminded of her....

Uma Chopra, Delhi

Alcoholism And Violence

...Alcoholism is closely linked, I feel, to violence against wives. Under the influence of liquor, a man becomes sexually aroused and if his wife does not satisfy him, he turns to other women. He may also demand more dowry to meet the expenses of his liquor consumption.

Close friends, relatives and neighbours refuse to interfere even to save the lives of the woman and children. I am a sufferer so I know what I am talking about. I have learnt to fight for myself alone, because I realised that no one dares interfere. Alcohol can be a big drain on the family resources, when women and children have to go without the bare necessities of life. How can children grow up as healthy human beings under unhealthy conditions. I wish to extend my sympathies

to all those women who have to face such a situation, and to assure them that with courage it is possible to face a drunkard.

Name withheld, Delhi

Lost Identity

Sunita's letter has been lying on my table for more than a week. Sunita was my friend in college. I have been postponing replying. I am not sure what I should write. This is an extract from her letter: "At home, things are as usual. My father has stopped talking to me and my mother. He is the main reason for my being tense. I can't understand how mom could tolerate him all these years, and is still tolerating him. I don't like to contemplate marriage because I feel all men are like him. I don't feel guilty to say such things about him."

Sunita is the youngest of three children. Her father is highly placed in the state electricity board. Her mother was a high school teacher before marriage. She liked her job and wanted to continue, but Sunita's father said her income was not required and she should devote herself to the children. So she gave up her job.

In the process of rearing the children, she learnt to be totally dependent on her husband for everything. A beautiful woman in her youth, she now, in middle age, looks old and haggard. Her husband has been promiscuous through the 22 years of their marriage. She thought it was mere flirtatiousness but four years ago, he started an open affair with his secretary, which still continues. He is indifferent to the opinion of society and of his children.

What solution can be suggested? Having lost her identity in that of a wife and become a shadow to her husband, Sunita's mother is now probably unable to conceive of any other life for herself. There are thousands of cases like this one. I feel that retaining one's independence throughout one's life is crucially important...

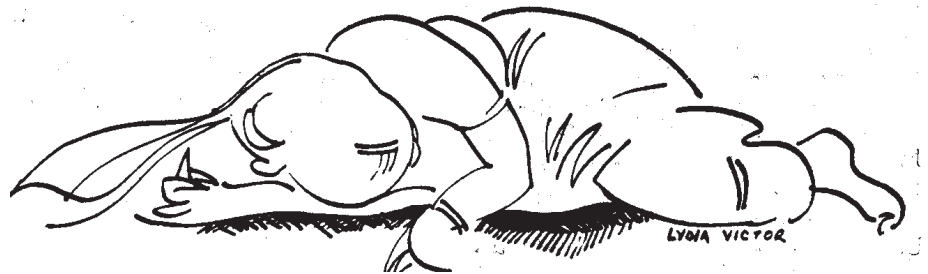
Anuradha Arora, Bangalore

A Public Outcry

On August 12, 1986, at Barhalganj Bazar, district Gorakhpur, Uttara, wife of

Suresh, a shopkeeper, was killed. Uttara, married in March 1985, had brought a sizeable dowry. She had told her mother that she was being harassed to procure an additional Rs 50,000 from her parents. The next thing her parents heard was that she had committed suicide. They are certain that she was murdered.

Neighbours who came to help after hearing Uttara scream, despite the video being turned on loud to drown her voice, were turned away by her family members. The killers loaded her body on a jeep and threw it away at a distant spot. Next day, they paid Rs 25,000 to the subinspector and head constable at the local police station. The police took down their statement which read: "Uttara was mad.



She committed suicide after sprinkling kerosene on herself. We are registering her death after performing her last rites." The police did not object to a suicide case having been cremated without being sent for post mortem.

Besides securing police support, Uttara's in-laws secured tacit political protection for their action. The president of the regional Congress party and the MP of the constituency, Mahavir Prasad, attended a lunch hosted by Harishankar Prasad, a relative of Uttara's in-laws and himself the president of the local Congress party. Several organisational members attended the lunch. The entire exercise was an attempt by Uttara's in-laws to demonstrate their political connections in high places.

Chetna, a social service organisation, has launched a campaign against the murderers. A pamphlet "Punish the Guilty"

was published and an agitation to boycott the killer family was started. On October 8, Chetna organised a demonstration in which several other groups participated, to demand punishment for the guilty policemen, and arrest of the killers of Uttara. The rally evoked wide public interest but the police have not heeded any of the demands. Chetna is carrying on a signature campaign and plans further action.

Amarnath Saraswat, Gorakhpur
(translated from Hindi)

Just Talk ?

...Today, there is much talk of equality, but how many guardians of girls allow them the freedom that boys have? When

a marriage is to be arranged, and the boy's party comes to see the girl, she is advised by her family not to laugh loudly, not to stare at the boy, to speak only when spoken to. On the other hand, the boy is advised to ask whatever he wants to, and to indicate to his parents if he wants to talk to the girl alone.

It is the boy's approval or disapproval which decides whether the marriage will take place. Yet, later, if anything goes wrong, all the blame falls on the girl.

Why should a girl not be given the right to decide her own life? How long will the standards of morality be different for boys and girls?...

Raj Saugani, Rajasthan
(translated from Hindi)

Unjust Campaign

On January 15, four Indian security men dressed as gun toting Sikh terrorists,

conducted a mock hijacking of an Indian Airlines flight. This drill to test the security response to an air piracy seeks to portray all Sikhs as public enemies. ...

Impersonations are nothing new. Sikhs have been complaining, all along, that some of the killings are the work of non Sikhs. Anyone can masquerade as a Sikh simply by growing a beard and wearing a turban. ...

There seems to be a campaign to portray Sikhs as anti India and anti Hindu. It is a pity that Sikhs are being made to feel like strangers in their own home.

B.S. Mahal, Quebec

On Respecting Women

From my childhood to the time I grew up I internalised many sayings in praise of women : "Gods reside where women are respected"; "Woman, thy name is reverence"; "A woman symbolises the wealth of her home." Many Hindu myths centre around ideal women : Sita, Savitri, Ahilya, Durgabai.

But though Sita was held up as an ideal, her purity was questioned when she had to undergo the chastity test. This double face of our hypocritical male centred society survives to this day.

Women have come a long way and today they can be seen in offices, working shoulder to shoulder with men, and on playgrounds. Men's behaviour has, however, not changed according to the times. A husband who returns from office before his wife, will not prepare tea for himself but awaits his wife's return.

Even today, 90 percent of wives are ignorant of their husbands' bank balance, account number and insurance policy number. If the husband should suddenly pass away, most women would lose their bearings. Yet, few husbands prepare their wives for such an eventuality and the wife is content with her dependence. This is true even of women, with formal education. The wife of a friend of mine had this to tell me. While talking to some women when she mentioned that every wife ought to prepare herself mentally to stay without

her husband if the need arose, they received her words with shocked disbelief, as if she had uttered a blasphemy.

Most women consider it their duty and vocation to slave for their husbands. If a husband attempts to share her work burden, the wife feels guilty of having committed a sacrilege. This is the result of centuries of conditioning.

Today, imbibing alcoholic drinks is catching on but if a married woman indulges in it, many people shake their heads in despair and foretell doom for the home in which the mother drinks. However, an inebriate father's conduct is not seen to affect the family. What inconceivable logic!

Though we revere Sita and Savitri, a lone woman is vulnerable to sexual harassment, even molestation. If men did not fear police or legal reprisal, they would reveal their true colours, the base self that lurks beneath the veneer of respectability.

Religion too has been exploited to oppress women. Each year a new goddess is born and women unquestioningly begin to worship these Devis and Matas. Husbands are happy with this situation

because the day their wives understand their true identity, they will refuse to continue equating them with god.

Kundan Singh Paribar, Jabalpur
(translated from Hindi)

Our Task, Our Dream

Against the myth of women's capacity for suffering we have to create the reality of women's infinite capacity to rebel and to struggle.

We have to unmask the hypocrisy of society's attitude which makes us goddesses while our homes are funeral pyres. We have to break the fear that in creating autonomous movements, we are "breaking the unity" of wider movements. The problems of women are not problems concerning only women but human problems affecting all human beings.

We must go deeper into the issue of the intersection of race, gender and class oppression.

I can see the day when tribal and Dalit women will rise. In them, the oppression of class, gender and social identity intersect. This will shake the real foundations of our Indian society...

Pilar, Lonjo