

Women Mobilise in Raipur

Shweta Sharma, 11 year old student of class seven, was playing near her house in Byron Bazar, Raipur, on January 9, when she disappeared. When her father, a school teacher in the government high school, went to the police station to file a report, he was curtly told that nothing could be done that day as the entire police force was busy making security arrangements for the chief minister's visit to town the next day. The day after, a police official said the force was too tired to take action on this "routine matter."

On January 13, residents of Lalpur village, five kilometres away, reported that the body of a small girl was floating in a well. The post mortem report confirmed multiple rape. Shweta was alive for three days before her tormentors throttled her to death.

Shweta's death shook up the city in an unprecedented manner. On January 20, a total *bandh* was observed. The next day, women students held a 2,000 strong silent procession culminating in a tearful condolence meeting at Shweta's home. At a public meeting that afternoon, about 24 organisations expressed their concern over the fact that while crores of rupees are spent on the security of the rulers of the country, the life and liberty of ordinary people are at stake.

From January 22, women students began a relay hunger strike. They sat on a platform in the marketplace to draw public attention to their demands which included handing over of the case to the CBI, ban on bars, strict implementation of the law banning obscene display of women's

bodies in advertisements, ban on sale of indecent literature, closing down of *pan* shops and hotels after 10.30 p.m., and posting of policewomen round the clock at key places like schools, colleges and cinemas.

Many women's organisations such as Mahila Mandals of various localities in Raipur, who have been involved primarily in religious and social activities, joined the protest. Women began to turn up in large numbers to join the relay hunger strike. Often, there was not enough space on the platform to accommodate all the volunteers. Brothers, fathers and husbands would hover around the platform, day and night, looking unnerved.

The authorities too tried their best to persuade the women to withdraw the

agitation, advising them that it was not seemly for them to agitate in public. Male principals of colleges pressured the woman principal of the women's degree college to stop hostellers from sitting on hunger strike at night. However, she continued to support them.

The local police subtly attempted to propagate a theory that Shweta was "of loose morals." "This is totally absurd", said Shweta's teacher, Asha Manav of Dani Girls' School. The police subjected Shweta's classmates to gruelling interrogations. They are also believed to have tortured her maternal uncle. It was feared that they might torture and implicate innocent persons just to pacify the agitators. It was also suspected that they might be sheltering the real culprits.



School and college students demonstrating

CID officials, summoned on January 21 by the chief minister, reportedly rejected all theories presented by the local police.

The apathetic attitude of government is best summed up in a remark reportedly made by chief minister Motilal Vora to a group of women students on January 20 : "There are many such incidents occurring daily. Why are you making such a hue and cry about this only ?"

On January 26, the authorities convened a meeting of concerned citizens and tried to persuade them to withdraw the agitation. But, the public outcry continued to mount. On January 28, class III and IV employees of the state government went on a day's strike. About 3,000 workers took out a silent procession. Schoolgirls including Shweta's sisters, joined the hunger strike from January 27.

On January 29, the police informed the public that two 19 year old boys had been arrested. Police hurriedly convened a press conference and sent a note to the striking women. They said the boys lived in the same locality and were studying in school. The boys had confessed their guilt but only a chemical examination could confirm this.

However, people tended to disbelieve this story. They believe that the police have arrested these boys just to diffuse mounting public anger. A group of women met the mother of one of the boys.

His father is a rickshaw puller. The mother narrated how she used to meet her son in the police lock-up where he was kept for eight days and badly beaten up. The boys have no earlier criminal history. It seems strange that the police took eight days to extract a confession from them.

The women's organisations and students' union refused to call off the hunger strike because their demands were broader. Also, no one had been held responsible for police negligence. They declared they would continue the strike till February 2 and would then give a statewide call for a strike by women on March 8, to highlight the growing violence on women. □

Mine Workers Resist Retrenchment

A two day women's meeting was held at Hirri Mines, district Bilaspur, Madhya Pradesh, on December 17 and 18, 1986, at the initiative of the Chhattisgarh Mines Shramik Sangh (CMSS) and the Mahila Mukti Morcha. About 200 women participated. Delegates from different units of CMSS were present, and students' unions from other parts of Madhya Pradesh.

The discussion centred mainly on the threat to which women's employment is subject in the mines and industries of Chhattisgarh. While Chhattisgarh region is a mineral rich area, housing public sector industries such as the Bhilai Steel Plant, Bharat Aluminium Corporation, and the National Thermal Power Corporation, the employment policy in these undertakings consistently discriminates against the local population. Most regular skilled jobs are given to male workers from outside the region, and only the most hazardous and insecure jobs are available to local men and women.

In the early days of industrialisation, large numbers of Chhattisgarhi men and women were employed under the contractual system. Today, they face the threat of retrenchment in the wake of increasing mechanisation.

In particular, women face selective attack. Management has floated schemes such as "voluntary retirement" for women with over 20 years of service left. It has also completely stopped recruiting women workers. In Hirri mines, over 200 women were forced out of work. Their husbands and they were piece rate workers. The husbands were regularised and transferred to Bhilai on condition that the wives accepted voluntary retirement.

Several speakers highlighted the fact that this situation was a threat both to

working class unity and to women's status. The historical mass displacement of women workers from the textile industry* was recalled, and a joint strategy was formulated for a united struggle by working class, women's and student's organisations.

A poster exhibition on the problems of mechanisation in industry was arranged. Songs, *katha* recitals and dances were performed by women participants.

The meeting concluded with a charter of four demands :

1. Halt mechanisation in mines and industries until the unemployment problem is resolved.
2. Scrap the voluntary retirement scheme.
3. In all public sector undertakings, where husband and wife are working together, they should be posted at the same place. A transfer of one partner must be accompanied by the transfer of the other to the same place.
4. Only women should be recruited to jobs vacated by women workers.

At the end of the meeting a lively procession of about 500 women walked the entire length of Hirri Mines township shouting slogans like "*Mahila Mukti Morcha Zindabad*" (Long live Mahila Mukti Morcha) ; "*Hum Chhattisgarh ki nari hain, Phool nahin, Chingari hain*" (We, the women of Chhattisgarh, are sparks, not flowers) ; *Mahilaon ki chhatni karke, mashini-karan nahin chalegi*" (No mechanisation that involves retrenchment of women); "*Adha sansar hamara hai*" (Half the world is ours).

*See *Manushi* No. 26 for a detailed account of this phenomenon