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For A Life Without Fear

—Women Organise In Himachal Pradesh

This is the first parr of an article on the life of women in Solan district, Himachal Pradesh, and so organise them. The second part will appear in Manushi *No. 40.*

ON November 17, 1986, the morning meeting of the chief minister of Himachal Pradesh was interrupted by a group of 185 rural women sitting in *dharna* outside his residence to protest at the opening of liquor shops in their mountain villages.

These representatives of over 40 Mahila Mandals had come from Nahan and Solan districts in the south of the state. For some women, the four day journey on foot was a major break with the system of seclusion that is prevalent in those villages closest to the plains. For others from the interior hill villages, this was the first time they had been away from their marital homes since they moved in at the time of marriage. Ranging in age from 13 to 75, the oldest amongst them bent double with arthritis, they covered the 65 kilometres to Simla, determined to make the chief minister listen to their demands.

Dharampur Block

Most of the women had come from Dharampur block, Solan district, which borders Punjab and Haryana on its southeastern side. Its population is about 60,000. The terrain is steep and, in places, rocky, rising to a height of 2,000 metres, with sparse forest cover, the hillsides being cut with small, terraced fields or covered with grass.

Villages consist of only 10 to 20 households on an average. A population of 100 to 150 persons lives spread out across a couple of kilometres of hillside. Their homes are built of stone to protect them against the freezing temperatures in winter.Although some villages are situated on the roadside. There are still many that are two to three hours walk from the nearest dirt road. Bus services are irregular and liable to disruption by the weather. Villages in the interior remain cut off from most services, with poor water supply, unirrigated land, and a lack of health care and schooling facilities.

About 40 percent of the population is scheduled caste, 30 percent belong to the backward classes and 30 percent are Rajputs and Brahmans. The official statistics of families living below the poverty line are difficult to interpret as they take little note of the high level of expenditure required here for sheer survival. The temperature is just above freezing for about a quarter of the year, hence shoes, warm clothing and stone built houses are necessities of life, not luxuries.

A rough estimate suggests that about 30 percent of the population lives in poverty, two thirds of these being scheduled caste and inhabiting mainly the interior areas.

About 10 percent of families are landless, 50 percent own up to two hectares each, and the remainder own larger areas. These figures are somewhat misleading, as they include the scrub and grassland owned by families, which

The President of a Mahila Mandal

All photographs accompanying this article are by Sheba Chhachi and all sketches by Eiana.

provide cattle fodder but are not agriculturally productive.

It is calculated that for an average family of six, one hectare of irrigated or two of unirrigated land provides the basic grain requirement for a year, plus a few additional crops such as lentils and oilseeds. By this standard, about 60 percent of families have sufficient land to provide their basic food requirements, the main differentiating factor in their wealth being the amount of irrigated land they own. The main subsistence crops grown in the low lying areas are wheat, maize and a little rice. Women are responsible for most of the agricultural work. Men do the ploughing as it is still considered shameful for a woman to plough and it is only in the direst necessity that she will do so. The remainder of the work—sowing, weeding, watering, hoeing, harvesting, threshing and grain processing, is almost exclusively done by the women. The men's major role at these times seems to be that of supervisors— standing at the edge of the field, encouraging the women, and making an occasional contribution to the labour.

Because the average field size is so small and the terrain so hilly, all the fanning is still done by hand with implements that have been handed down over the generations. This makes farming a very labour intensive occupation.

In the roadside villages, irrigated fields are increasingly used to grow vegetables such as tomatoes, peas and ginger. These cash crops are sold out of the area to Chandigarh and beyond. During the season, local contractors bring trucks to the villages several times a day and even at night.

The men carry the basketloads of vegetables to the roadside for sale, or, on rarer occasions, even take them to the local market. Thus, the marketing network is controlled by men, and the sales proceeds go to the men of each family, although the women do most of the field work.

With two harvests a year, a family may earn anything from Rs 1,000 to Rs 5,000 a year from the sale, income that now comes to about 60 percent of families in the region. Families living in the interior remain untouched by this upturn in the local economy,

Only about lO percent of families rely totally on the land for survival. In most families, at least one member works outside the home for some part of the year, whether in a service job or on labouring work.

The Public Works Department is a major employer, offering work for about

a quarter of the year, particularly in road building. Men come even from the most interior villages for this work. With a daily wage of Rs 12, they earn about Rs 1,200 to Rs 1,500 annually. However, a proportion of this is whittled away before it reaches their hands, as the contractors usually demand bribes before they will employ people-- anything from a meal to a bottle or two of liquor which can cost up to Rs 60. Thus, a man has to work for three or four days simply to earn the bribe he paid to get the work. It is very rare to find local women working on the roads, although during the winter, women from ther northern reaches of the state come south to find work, avoiding the snow in their own areas. Local women have an incredibly heavy agricultural workload which keeps them busy all year. It is also considered shameful for a local woman to do manual work of this sort outside her own family land.

Women's Work Problems

In addition to their work in the fields, the woman bear all the burden of domestic work and childcare. They spend a large part of their day collecting water. The major sources are springs *(bowris)*, which in some villages have a built up surround, but in others are still highly contaminated. About half the villages of Dhararnpur block are now classified as having a piped water supply, but this does not always save the women from long walks to the tap. Supply is usually very irregular, and in the hot season dries up completely. Women then have to go back to using the traditional sources which, in times of shortage, can lead to conflict.

Kaushalya says : "Our *bowri* nearly dries up in the summer, it has to serve 25 families. What happens is that the first person there usually drains it. Some women even take along 15 to 20 containers and fill them all, without any thought for others." These villages are so laid out that the homes of Rajputs and Brahmans are located closest to the permanent water supplies. It is common for water to become a bone of contention in the villages.

Collection of firewood is also a growing though scarcely recognised problem for the women. The forest and scrub cover is rapidly disappearing due to uncontrolled felling by forest contractors and timber smugglers. The latter come at night, fell trees and truck them out of Himachal to Haryana which is only one and a half hours drive-away from the foothill forests. The forest guards, even when informed of this smuggling, make little attempt to prevent it as they usually receive handsome payoffs from the smugglers.

Sweeping forest fires in the summer also have a serious impact on the hillsides. Women have to go farther and

farther a field to collect both firewood and green fodder, though Dharampur block has not yet been as seriously affected as some of the neighbouring blocks, in which women may spend all day collecting fuel to keep their cooking fires burning the following day,

In addition to green fodder, women also collect grass. Before the onset of winter, they have to cut enough to see them through the months before the spring grass grows. The women sweep their way across the hillside, bent double, as they cut the grass with their shorthandled sickles. Then they headload the 25 kilo bundles of grass back to their homes. They are helped in these tasks by the-young children, but there comes a point when boys no longer accept this as work they should do, and it is rare to find adult men helping with it.

Cooking, cleaning and childcare occupy any remaining time the women may have. The smaller children are under foot most of the day since houses are connected to each other by rocky and steep paths, and it is difficult for children to meet and play.

A combination of their heavy workload and the scattered nature of the villages leads to one of the greatest but most unrecognised problems the women face—isolation. There is no meeting place for women, and they do not get the opportunity to pass other homes on their way to and from the fields, as happens in the plains villages which are more compact. It is not unusual for them to meet no one outside of their family for weeks on end, and, as many of them readily admit, their home comes to feel like a prison from which they cannot escape.

Sunita Devi said : "I work here day after day, spending a lot of time on my own. The road is only 10 minutes' walk away, but I feel so isolated, I never get the chance to meet anyone." Women in the interior villages may not leave the village from the day they enter on marriage to the day they are carried out to be cremated. This situation is slowly changing for women who live close to the roadside but even they have little time and no money of their own, so where can they go ?

Money And Property

Within the home, it is usually the men who control all the money. Tara Devi said : "We work from dawn to dusk and beyond, without a single holiday in the year, and all we get for our work is our *rotis* and the clothes we stand up in. Even the cloth is chosen for us by the men."

The women feel they have no control over or ability to claim money as their own. None of those I spoke to felt she had any decision making power in the spending of money. Even in the rare cases where the women are given money by the men to run the household, they have to account for every paisa spent. "If we go to Kasauli, we'll bring back half of the money we took plus all the shopping. If the men go, they spend what's left on tea and *bidis."*

Cutting grass on the slopes

When a girl leaves her parents' home, she as good as forfeits any right to claim a share in their land. Leela Devi was deserted by her husband three months ago. She has to bring up three children on the proceeds of her husband's small plot of land. She said: "It is only one in a hundred women who can claim her legal right to her father's land when he dies. We are three sisters and two brothers. My father had about 30 *bighas* of land. It was not the best but we grew vegetables on it for most of the year and it provided us with a reasonable income. My father put all the land in my brothers' names and paid us sisters off with Rs 500 a piece."

Often, no legal provisions are made to pass land on to sons but daughters forfeit their rights almost automatically. "We're living away from the land in our in-laws' home. What's the point of antagonising our brothers by demanding a share in the land ? If I asked my brother, he'd really be angry. Our brothers give us support at the time of our wedding. They pay Rs 5,000 to Rs 7,000 towards the cost of food, jewellery and other things. They always give something at the birth of our children, usually about Rs 500 or so in presents. How can we ask for more ? Also, we'll get a share in the in-laws' land when the father-in-law dies."

Women are very aware of their vulnerability as daughters-in-law, particularly in the early years of marriage, and of the fact that their brothers may act as their only support in times of need. This insecurity in the maternal home, together with their parents' and brothers' resistance to the idea of girls inheriting land, results in their relinquishing their claims in their brothers favour.

Thus, the traditional patriarchal system of land inheritance has been little affected by recent changes in law. Men's primary right to land ownership is still the norm. It is usually only as widows that women may get some control over their dead husband's property. Even this control is usually shared with their sons.

Marital Situation

Moving to the in-laws' home is a big break for most women. They have to move from the relative security and freedom of their parents' home to the limits and insecurities of their husband's. Although family groups of parents, sons

and daughters-in-law usually share a common house, they frequently live as separate units each nuclear family having its own room and separate cooking arrangements. The daughters-in-law find it difficult to share work, are left without support in times of sickness and their isolation is exacerbated.

In other families, the joint family situation is followed. Here, women's, particularly young brides, lowly position in the hierarchy makes life a constant struggle. Abuse by mothers-in-law, both verbal and physical, is not uncommon. Geeta says: "My mother-in-law is a drunkard, and she makes my life unbearable. I have two young kids and a third on the way. Many days, she doesn't even let me eat in the house, and she constantly showers abuse on me. She has not hit me yet but she doesn't need to. The things she says are painful enough. I'd like to leave, I'm so miserable, but I have nowhere to go,"

Although moral standards are very strict, there are many stories of women, both married and unmarried, having been made pregnant by a brother-in-law. Such pregnancies are usually hushed up, by marrying off the woman. If she is unmarried, or by passing off the child as her husband's if she is married.

There are cases of men taking a second wife, particularly if the first wife has no child, and the two will then live together. This produces many tensions and much distress for the women.

Many women are beaten by their husbands, particularly when the men come home drunk and force sex upon their wives. "We know nothing about our bodies. They exist for men to take their pleasure, and leave us to bear the consequences The kids just keep coming, year after year. Most women suffer badly from vaginal discharge at sometime, and, if our periods are irregular, we get really worried because we don't know whether or not something is wrong."

Santi Devi says: "'I was married at the age of nine and spent the next 30 years of my life in fear of my husband. It is only now, at the age of 50, that I feel I have some control over my life. My husband is old and can't work so all the burden of the fields falls on me. I now have to think about my daughters. They are married and I worry that they will spend as much of their lives in fear as I did,"

A few women have greater freedom and security, Soma Devi was married and then returned to her parents house after being thrown out by her husband. A lively, commanding figure, she was left ten *bighas* of land by her maternal grandfather and received another five after her father died—equal shares with her brothers. She now farms her own land, is able to take loans, and can take her own decisions about how she spends her money.

Social Services

People are ready to limit their families but it is usually women who have the sterilisation operation. There was a spate of cases in which men were sterilised and their wives subsequently got pregnant—either due to ineffective operating techniques or to the women's having slept with other men. Whatever the cause the social repercussions for women are such that women now prefer to have the operation themselves, so that there is no chance of their being accused of infidelity.

In Dharampur block, women comprise 46 percent and men 54 percent of the population. These figures are skewed by the high proportion of army personnel living in the area, but, even accounting for this, women's health status and life expectancy is lower than men's. The heavy physical work load, the malnutrition many of them suffer from childhood, the heavy toll taken by child bearing, the unhealthy smoky conditions in which they cook, and their lack of access to health services, all have a negative impact on women's health.

Respiratory diseases are particularly prevalent. The cold winters and smoke from the woodfires start. The damage which is compounded by the fact that most of the older women smoke *bidis.* Shanti says : "It is the only pleasure I have in life. Ask me to stop eating, stop drinking tea, anything, but don't ask me to give up my *bidis."*

Government health services are totally inadequate for the needs of the area. With such a scattered population, and difficult communications, the standard applied in the plains of one health worker per 1,000 persons, is inevitably inappropriate. Add to this women's lack of access to money, and the reasons, for their lack of access to health care become obvious.

Although the literacy rate for women is 32 percent (men's 57 per cent), this figure disguises almost universal illiteracy of village women over the age of 36. Amongst young girls, there is a relatively higher rate of school attendance, but a very high drop out rate after the first year or two, when girls are withdrawn to help with housework before they are married off.

It is rare to find an elected woman *panchayat* member. The majority of women members are co-opted by the men as nominal representatives and thus, almost invariably, puppets of the powerful male members.

Village level power structures revolve around the men, particularly such figures as the *panchayat pradhan,* the *gram sewak* and the land registration officers. The patronage of these individuals and their control over the disbursement of loans, subsidies and

At a meeting

other government schemes make the majority of middle level income villagers try to keep in favour with them. Men rapidly become caught up in this local network of corruption from which women are excluded. This has led to women's exclusion from positions of power, but also, on a more positive note, to their remaining relatively uncorrupted by the political system prevailing in the villages.

Work Of Sutra

In 1977, Society For Social Up-lift Through Rural Action (SUTRA), an offshoot of the Social Work and Research Centre, Tilonia, Rajasthan, started work at Jagjitnagar, a tiny village in Dharampur block. A staff of local men and women from the surrounding districts slowly built up.

Said the director : "In the first few years, we had no other ideas besides provision of service. If people didn't have seeds, we would provide seeds ; if there was no dispensary, we would open one ; if they wanted a creche, we tried to provide it. Our programmes were very much dependent on whether we could get funding. We would prepare proposals for projects and if the money came, fine ; if not we looked elsewhere. At this stage, we were mainly supported by government funds. Our basic idea was to gain the trust of the people and also to demonstrate the difference between the way we implemented service programmes and the way block level officials did so. We hoped that people would begin to pressurise government to provide them with effective services at low cost."

By 1982, SUTRA was working in over 20 different programmes with an annual budget of about Rs 15 lakhs and about 50 staff. At this stage, the senior staff began to wonder what success they were really achieving. Their initial aim had been to concentrate on working with the poor and backward classes. Now they found that schemes for seeds and fertilisers had been more readily taken up by rich farmers who could afford to take risks, while poor farmers had been bypassed. The income generating schemes for women—making chalk, soap and matches—increased the women's workload while giving them a small training stipend not commensurate with the hours they put in. Local markets for the goods produced were unreliable and the programme was thus based on uncertainties. SUTRA's efforts to encourage self reliance amongst the people were thwarted by people's expectation that all schemes would be heavily subsidised.

Analysing their work, the staff realised that the service and input model of development was an inadequate one, since it took no account of the vested interests and power brokers that influence village life, or of the gradually increasing presence of a capitalist market economy. The women were particularly affected by these changes. They had to work harder on the cash crop, yet were not allowed to reap the full benefits of their labour. Their thwarted expectations had bred a certain unrest.

Over the previous years, SUTRA had conducted a number of village level women's camps without any follow up afterwards. In 1984-85, the staff decided to put more energy into helping people organise at the village level, and the women, who were already partly formed into groups through the camps, were an obvious starting point for this.

Mahila Mandals Grow

These camps had covered topics such as health, sanitation, cattle care and government schemes. They were run for 10 days and, for many women, offered the first ever opportunity to spend time with other women in an atmosphere free of domestic responsibility.

Following up the camps, women from 10 villages came forward to request help in setting up Mahila Mandals. With their sketchy knowledge of the way the block development workers ran Mahila Mandals, the women were expecting organisations through which they would be able to buy vessels for weddings and would receive a monthly lecture on how to make pickles or how to improve village sanitation. Some also hoped they would receive money for a building in which women could MEET.

This was the first chance that SUTRA's predominantly male staff had to work, on a concentrated scale with women. They decided to take up organisation of Mahila Mandals as a major programme, following up all the villages where camps had been held. They hoped to make each group socially acceptable within village politics and also a forum for debating issues and planning change.

As the Mahila Mandals grew, their attention turned towards such issues as the lack of good water supplies, roads, electricity and schools. The women. with the support of the SUTRA staff, began to write letters to government and public services departments, demanding that their villages be provided with these services. They met with many setbacks and insults from officials, not least from the block development officers, who obstructed their work at every step. Part of the block workers' job is to set up Mahila Mandals a task at which they had been singularly unsuccessful. Embarrassed by the growing number of groups connected with SUTRA they continually tried to prevent the Mandals getting registered, a procedure necessary to enable them to get access to further schemes.

Through the Mandals, women broke their isolation and were able to share their problems with each other, a trend that had begun in the camps. The issues they look up such as water, schools and roads, were those that affected their daily lives. Campaigning around these issues brought women in contact with the village power structures, since these are matters generally dealt with by the *panchayats.*

Getting Women Staff

At this stage, most of SUTRA's staff were men. They were mainly from Himachal Pradesh. With a couple of exceptions, they were matriculates, and had initially joined the organisation simply to earn money. SUTRA also had a couple of women staff working in the health programme and as *balse-vikas.*

Because most of the staff were men, the issues taken up tended in be those they could freely discuss with women without breaking social taboos. Areas such as women's health and physical exploitation, their subordinate position in the family, their personal rights, and the social taboos affecting them, were rarely discussed.

SUTRA's male dominated staff was in many ways a contradiction in the struggle for women to take control of their lives. How could they take control if the workers running the schemes and taking decisions about the Mandals were all men ? The women had to struggle to prove their abilities. This slow process was limited by the resistance of the male staff as well as by the women's fears and lack of confidence.

The low number of women staff was also a reflection of this situation. Few local families were initially prepared to allow women to join as workers. The work involved travelling long distances by bus, motorbike, or on foot, often to remote villages, staying away from home at night and coming in contact with men. In an area where few women travel, let alone work outside their villages, the set up was seen as damaging to the moral status of women. Young unmarried women faced problems because their chances of marriage could be ruined if they got a bad reputation because of their work. For older women, this was a lesser problem, but they faced the double disadvantage of being heavily weighed down with work and of being illilerate. In many parts of India, a long tradition of voluntary work exists and this makes social work an acceptable vocation for women. But in Himachal, the concept of voluntary work is little understood and few of the educated women would be prepared to or allowed to work in such a setting.

As time has gone on, SUTRA has become more established in the area. Its reputation as an organisation that supports villagers has grown, without any scandal attached to it. Thus, the problem of getting women staff has taken on a different complexion. Village women such as mid wives and *chulha mistris,* who have been involved in SUTRA's programmes, have expressed an interest in working more particularly with the Mahila Mandals.

There has been a clear reluctance on the part of some of the senior male staff to encourage women to take a fuller part in the organisation's work. If women work, it has been expected that they should do so on exactly the same terms as men. with no consideration for their double workload or for the insecurities they face as women who are just beginning to move beyond household work.

The Women Recruits

Soma Devi was one of the *chulha mistris* who had expressed an interest in working full time, She was one of the few women in the area who already had a full time job, working in a fruit bottling factory. Married at the age of 12, she had her first and only child when she was 14, she was in labour for four days, had a breach delivery, and was rendered sterile by the complications of this birth. Her husband took a second wife, partly encouraged by her, and Soma's wages from the factory were used to buy all the household necessities for her cowife

and children, and to pay for her own daughter's dowry. Whatever was left, her husband drank away, coming home to beat her. Soma eventually reached the stage or wanting to break away and live on her own. Although she was offered work at SUTRA, little attention was paid to the other problems she faced, and when she did not turn up on the appointed day, it was put down to her indecisiveness. Little consideration seemed to be given to the fact that despite the problems she faced at home, her hesitation to leave was natural, given that the presence of a husband offered her some degree of social security. About three months later, she came again, and this time was able to summon up the

courage to leave home, creeping out with only her clothes, her long years of contribution to the family economy having yielded nothing she could call her own property.

A gradual change is coming in to the organisation and there are now more women staff. Of the four full time workers one is a local girl who passed her matric and was sent for health training at a sister organisation. This was nine years ago. She now works with the midwives and creches and is one of the most senior and respected members of staff. She has made a decision not to marry and has saved enough from her salary to buy land and start building a house of her own, Savitri first started work as a teacher in the creche programme. She came from a town about 80 kilometres away. She has worked for the last eight years, taking short breaks for the births of her two youngest children. Her husband now stays with the children, leaving her free to work. She takes a few days off each month to visit her family.

Urmil has worked intermittently over the last five years,sometimes as a *balsevika* and now on the *chulha* programme. She is on the point of leaving to get married as her family will not entertain the idea of her continuing to work after marriage.

Nirmala, like all the others, a local person, was sent with another local girl on a nine month Gandhian training course for development workers. Within weeks of their return, the other girl's parents arranged her marriage, and Nirmala has spent much of her time fighting off the same threat. She wants time to work rather than be rushed into marriage.

Three part time women staff have recently joined the Mahila Mandal programme. Their work consists of visiting Mandals in their area. They are successful in being able to discuss women's problems from the perspective of their own personal experience, touching on areas that the men have been unable to deal with.

Confronting Power Structures

As the Mahila Mandals have grown in strength and number, they have begun to initiate programmes on their own and also to raise issues that affect their lives. In Zanghar, a scheduled caste village, the government provided water supply in 1981 that was cut off by nearby upper caste villagers within a few days of its installation. The women of the Mahila Mandal wrote to the deputy commissioner, to demand his intervention. When he did not reply, they waylaid him on a visit to a nearby village, and *gheraoed* his car, until he agreed to help them. Clashes of this kind with government officials are quite common and women are increasingly ready to confront them directly if letters bring no response. Over the last few years, women have sent many deputations to the block development officers and other authorities.

In one village on the edge of the local industrial belt, pollution of the water supply to the Harijan area was a major problem. Ihe women wrote strong letters to government and factory officials, but got no response. Eventually, with the help of SUTRA, the women built a protected spring *(bowri)*. Although SUTRA contributed toward the cost, a large share of the physical work was done by the villagers, including the women, and they also contributed a substantial part of the financial cost. In other villages, women have played a large role in the plantation of fodder trees around their homes and fields, in an attempt to recover some of the land that has been laid bare by excess felling of timber by contractors.

Women have developed a growing awareness of their financial insecurity. All land is in the husband's name and the wife has no rights over it. Neither do women have access to earnings from cash crop agriculture. The women of Kamli decided to take loans from the bank to enable them to purchase buffaloes of their own and then through the sale of the milk to establish a degree of economic independence.

But when they approached the local banks, they were refused loans on the ground that their names were not on the block list of families living below poverty line, nor were they household heads. Only widows are considered household heads, and are able to offer land as security for the loan. One woman said: "It seems they design the schemes in such a way that we need to kill our husbands before they will give us a loan." They then approached SUTRA who obtained a grant to provide the women with loans. Those who bought buffaloes now enjoy a degree of financial independence. Contrary to the popular belief that women who take loans are unreliable, to date the majority of instalments have been paid on a regular basis. Of 17 women in Kamli village who had borrowed Rs 4,000 each in August 1985, all have paid back at least Rs 2,000, despite the fact that the dry season has begun, when buffaloes give less milk. Full repayment should be made by the end of 1987. However, Kamli is a village where families are comparatively better off and where men allow women to retain control of their earnings. The real test will come when loan repayments fall due in villages where men are likely to take away the money from the women.

Women have also taken up issues that affect their position in village life. They have fought *panchayat* elections, though due to the lack of support from many village women who still tend to be swayed to vote as their husbands do, and to the greater strength and experience of male politicians, no woman has so far succeeded in obtaining an elected seat in the *panchayat.* In Kharota, the women wrote to the government, demanding that their voting booth, which was situated five kilometres away, be shifted to the local village school, to make it easier for women to cast their votes.

Social restriction on women have also come under attack. In Surajpur, situated on the edge of the plains, heavily influenced by *parda,*women decided they would no longer accept all the

restrictions placed on them and would now speak in front of even the village headman without veiling themselves.

Women's awareness of the inequalities perpetrated by the caste structure is also growing. Many of the Mahila Mandals which were initiated by upper caste women have made conscious efforts to encourage scheduled caste women to join. The caste structure is still reflected in the fact that in the mixed caste villages, it is usually an upper caste woman who heads the Mahila Mandal. In Khasrot, when a new drinking water scheme was offered to the upper caste villagers under a government scheme, they decided it should go to the Harijan quarter first, and that the rest of the village would have its supply improved at a later date.

Some Problem

The history has not, however, been one of unmixed success. As the groups have grown in strength, men's resistance has also grown. In many villages, men have waged a campaign against SUTRA, and have ultimately persuaded women to stop attending the meetings.

From the men's point of view, if women's groups do not bring visible benefits in terms of large subsidies and schemes, they are of no use— and it is precisely this kind of a programme that SUTRA has avoided. In Gorthi the men have recently tried to stop SUTRA's work and pressurised the women into demanding that all progammes be withdrawn. They asked : "What benefits have you gained from SUTRA's work? What schemes have you brought to the village?" The local midwife, Savitri Devi, immediately threw the question back at them: "You sit in your meetings week after week— what benefits have you brought to the village? None."

Organised women constitute a force outside the control of men. Therefore, men try to break their unity or take over their group. The latter tactic has been employed in some villages where women were persuaded to appoint the wives of *panchayat pradhans* or other political leaders as their own leaders, the women's group became an extension of the existing network of corruption.

In Zanghar, a group that for many years had been one of the strongest, was divided and broken by the machinations of the *panchayat pradhan*. Land had been granted both to this man and to the Mahila Mandal for development of fodder plantations but the Mandal land was of superior quality. Though his wife was president of the Mandal, he took the better land for himself, leaving the inferior plot for the women. Accusations against his wife were not slow to follow, and the Mahila Mandal split into camps—those who thought that the wife had been unwillingly used by her husband, and those who refused to believe she was an innocent party. Whatever the truth, he achieved his aim which was to break the strength of the women in a way that advantaged him.

In Thimber village too, the president of the Mahila Mandal was the wife of a village leader. She was encouraged by her family to feel that she should gain extra benefits due to her position. She demanded that any purchases that had to be made should be directed through her son's shop. The members refused as they all knew his prices were higher. In retaliation, she refused to release any of the Mahila Mandal funds and ultimately broke the group.

In other places internal feuds amongst the women have resulted in Mandals splitting, or women have decided to try to play SUTRA off against the block officials, thus creating splits in their groups and breaking their links with SUTRA. ❐