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## ‘It’s About Changing Our Lives’ -Himachali Women Organise

*This second and concluding part of the article on women in Solan district,, Himachal Pradesh, describes how the antiliquor campaign mobilised women from many villages to undertake new forms of action. The first part of the article appeared in Manushi No. 39.*

ONE of the women’s growing concerns has been the increase in the number of liquor vends in their villages over the last 20 years with a consequent increase in alcoholism which has negative effects on the life of women and children. One of the women reminisced : “When I was young, just married, there were only three liquor stores in the area and they were miles away from each other, but now you find liquor shops in nearly every village.”

Individual women’s groups had taken up the issue at a local level. In Bharotiwalla, for example, they approached the chief minister for closure of a nearby vend. In Narayani and Jakharota, women fought against the brewing of illicit liquor, but were

defeated by the combined force of village and political leaders.

In 1985, the Society For Upliftment Through Rural Action (SUTRA) received a grant from the ministry for human resource development under the title of “Raising public awareness against alcoholism.” They ran a series of village level camps at which women were able to discuss the problems that liquor creates in their lives and to learn more about the government’s role in licensing and sanctioning the sale of liquor at the state level.

In December 1985 a group of Mahila Mandal leaders and village midwives came together for their regular three monthly meeting and discussed the state of health in their villages. One midwife said: “What is

the point of our discussing health problems when the biggest problem we face at present in many villages is that of alcohol ? Our lives are being ruined by our men drinking.”

After much discussion, the women agreed, that a meeting should be held at SUTRA in February to which they would invite women from all the Mahila Mandals and where they would discuss what steps they could take.

### **Government Gains Women Lose**

SUTRA conducted investigations and found that, in 1985, a figure in the region of Rs 68 crores must have been raised by the state government from the sale of licences alone. Depending on whether a vend is in

an interior area or on one of the main roads, a licence will sell for anything from a lakh to a crore rupees. The sale of licences alone brings in an income equivalent to about Rs 100 per person in the state, which indicates how lucrative a business it is both for the government and for the businessmen.

Before the increase in official sale of *desi* liquor, there was a strong tradition of brewing liquor in the villages. This continues to the present day, but has never incited liquor consumption on the scale at which it now exists. The brew was traditionally made from distilled, fermented *gur*, and would be used especially for weddings and other festivals, selling at about Rs 10 a bottle. There have been the inevitable deaths from it, but the local women say : "It was never the problem that the shop selling *desi* liquor is. People tended to drink less, and less often."

What are the effects of this increasing availability of liquor ? The 2,000 women who attended the meeting at Jagjitnagar on February 23, 1986, were very clear about its negative impact. After an introductory speech by the director of SUTRA, they came to the microphone to share their experiences. As one woman succinctly put it : "Our villages have no proper roads, poor water supply and irregular electricity, and yet they have a liquor shop. Where do this government's priorities lie ?" By the end of the meeting it was clear that the women did not feel that the government was concerned about them.

They were also critical of the men. "Our men go to market to sell vegetables or spend their days working on the roads but what do we ever see of the money ? It all goes on liquor long before they reach home in the evening. When they do come back, drunk, they beat the children and then complain that there is no food for the evening meal. Where can we

get food if there is no money in the house?" The women go hungry as do the children, and inevitably, the growing drunkenness has led to a dramatic increase in the amount of violence against women, something they are reluctant to admit as they feel it reflects on their ability to play the

women that they are afraid to go out of their homes after dark. No woman will willingly return home by the last bus of the evening as it is always crowded with drunken men from the driver and conductor down. On the one hand, women's freedom to move around without fear in their home

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**"Our villages have no proper roads, water supply or electricity, yet they have liquor shops. Where do this government's priorities lie ?"**

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role of good wife and mother. It is becoming more openly acknowledged as women realise they are not alone in this situation.

Violence grows not only within

villages has been destroyed and on the other hand, there is increasing pressure on women to finish their field and domestic work during daylight hours.



—SUTRA

the home but also outside it and although the incidence of direct assault outside the home is very low, there is a growing amount of eve teasing and hassling of women which is building such a fear psychosis in

The economic costs of liquor consumption for a family are high. A bottle of *desi* liquor costs in the region of Rs 28. Since the minimum daily wages paid to labourers is Rs 12, it is obvious that liquor is a commodity





**Carrying the major burden of fieldwork**

far beyond the financial reach of many who buy it. This particularly affects families from the interior villages — their menfolk may have to walk 10 or 15 kilometres to get labouring work, and then, being far from home, they will spend it all on alcohol in the evenings, thus wasting their day's wages.

Groups of men club together to buy a bottle, and with about one third of the male population sharing a bottle two or three times a week regularly, over Rs 1,000 per family

annually is easily swallowed up. This is a low estimate when you look at drinking patterns. For example, during the vegetable selling season, the men who drink regularly will be drunk almost every night, and even those men who rarely drink for the rest of the year will do so during this time.

The actual economics can be worked out if we take the example of one village, Patta Mahlog, which has a population, including the surrounding area, of about 1,300 families. The licence here sold for Rs

100,000 in 1985, which means that the licensee has to make at least Rs 400,000 before he shows a profit. This is equivalent to about 13,000 bottles or roughly 10 bottles per family.

If only a third of the men drink on a regular basis, this means that at least 30 bottles per year are purchased in drinking families, equivalent to about Rs 900. If we accept that this expenditure is necessary simply for the licensee to break even, and it is well known that they actually make very good profits from the stores, it gives some indication of what a large drain on family income alcohol now constitutes.

In certain areas, it is not only the men who drink. Particularly amongst the poor population, the women too drink. In Purla, a village occupied by basket maker families, there are days when the women will leave their baskets and sit and get drunk together. At weddings too people get drunk and this can put people in debt to the tune of anything from Rs 1,000 to Rs 5,000.

The Himachal Pradesh excise regulations are framed in such a way that they allow no provision for the closure of a liquor shop once it is licensed for the year, and although there is a paragraph which states that public opinion should be assessed before a licence is granted, there is nothing that makes it incumbent upon the licensing authorities either to assess opinion or to follow its dictates.

There are legal limits to the siting of vends close to temples or schools, but these are often flouted, and once a vend is sited it is almost impossible to get it moved. The state government makes large amounts of money from liquor and is yearly increasing the number of licences granted.

In 1983, the issue of siting of liquor vends was taken up in Simla high court as a public interest litigation

case, following the receipt of an anonymous letter by the chief Justice. This letter stated that the state had set up liquor vends in Simla and other places in violation of the state's declared policy, locating them near educational institutions, places of worship, hospitals and defined colonies. The letter stated that the petitioners could not approach the court by regular means because "the moment we will do so we are sure that the alcohol kings would storm our business and our residence and make ours and our children's lives miserable with the influence of their purses and the army of *goondas* at their beck and call."

The court decided in favour of the petitioner, noting that: "It is intriguing indeed to find the state conniving at the breach of its own rules. It seems that the lust for money has overclouded all reason." The matter, however, was not resolved despite the court's findings, and in 1983-84 the court again entertained a petition about the location of liquor vends. In its judgment, it directed the state to ensure that the vends in the state are located at a distance of 200 yards from educational institutions and places of worship. However, the state appealed to the supreme court where the case awaits hearing.

### Women Organise

At the February 23 meeting, when possibilities for future action were being discussed, SUTRA suggested to the women that rather than demanding prohibition and closure of all liquor shops, which would only drive the problem underground, they request that the state excise provisions be altered to make it compulsory for licensing authorities to assess public opinion before granting licences.

The demands they put forward were that before any vend is opened a vote should be taken to assess public opinion, and that only if the

resolution is backed by two thirds of the population of a village should the government license a vend at that site. This vote should be made an annual feature, upon which the renewal of all licences should be dependent. A copy of these demands was forwarded to the relevant authorities.

Despite sending reminders, the women received no reply to their memorandum, so on March 20, 500 women, representing all the Mahila Mandals with which SUTRA was working in Dharampur block, staged a demonstration outside the office of the district commissioner in Solan. He

closure of a small number of liquor shops, the provision of police guard at others, and the moving of yet others to different locations.

Dissatisfied with his response, but uncertain of what more they could expect from him, the women prepared to return home. It was at this stage that the meeting began to run into problems. Members of local political parties saw it as an ideal opportunity to hitch on to what could prove to be a very effective campaign. A woman politician from Congress (I) demanded the right to speak as a "woman and a sister." She had planted



Preparing cowdung paste to plaster the walls

said he was unable to help the women because this was primarily the concern of the excise and taxation department, and also that the women's demands pertained to a policy matter upon which the council of ministers was the only authority competent to take decisions. He handed the women a copy of a letter written by him, recommending the

supporters in the crowd who insisted that she be given an opportunity to speak. From this stage onwards, the meeting degenerated into political jargon and vote raising as other political parties took the stage, pushing the women who had organised the demonstration into the background.

This had repercussions later, in

—SUTRA



that stories were spread around the area about SUTRA's political involvement. The director of SUTRA was accused of having started the campaign with the motive of becoming an MLA. It was also alleged that the funds for the campaign came from foreign sources who were out to destabilise things.

As the end of March approached and the women realised that they had received no firm commitment in answer to their demands, they decided to hold a night vigil outside three of the worst liquor shops, which the district commissioner had promised to move. The new licences came into force on April 1, so on March 31, about 100 women gathered in the village of Patta Mahlog and marched up to where the vend was sited, singing and playing drums as they went.

They sat huddled together against the cold, waiting to see if the district commissioner had kept his promise. As midnight approached, it became clear that the new licensee was preparing to open up and the women realised they had been betrayed again. They stayed there, singing songs to keep them awake throughout the night. The following day, when a truck drove up bringing fresh supplies of liquor, the women surrounded it and prevented the driver from unloading.

The situation seemed to have reached a deadlock, when a police jeep drove up. The director of SUTRA was asked to climb in and the jeep whisked off. The women, thinking he had been arrested, went chasing down the load after him. As one said: "If he had been arrested we were all determined to go with him."

Negotiations with the district commissioner's office and the owner of the liquor shop eventually produced a compromise. The owner agreed to shift the vend to the outskirts of the *panchayat* boundaries, thus removing it from the

vicinity of the bus stand and the main road. Encouraged by their partial victory, the women went on to join their sisters in Gunai. The situation here became very unpleasant when the men from the upper caste village in which the shop was situated turned against the mainly lower caste women who were demonstrating. The "police guard" stood by and watched as the women were beaten up by local ruffians. The agitated women returned to the district commissioner's office and handed in a written complaint about the hooliganism and the police failure to protect them.

Over the next few months, there was a lull in activity as the women talked more about the problem in their own villages, and as SUTRA made attempts to gain the support of women's groups in neighbouring blocks. A large meeting of 500 women representing the 40 Mahila Mandals of Dharampur block, 12 from neighbouring Nalagadh block, and five from Nahan block, took place in September.

The meeting was chaired by Bimla, a local woman who had worked

with SUTRA in the smoke-less *chulha* programme as a *chulha mistri*. She had become recognised by the women as their leader and readily took over the role that up till now had been filled by the SUTRA staff. The women took up the suggestion made by SUTRA for a march to Simla to press their demands with the chief minister.

### **Walking Together**

The idea of a *padyatra* was raised by SUTRA's director following the rumours that had flown round the area after the women's trip to Solan. Women have little control over money and it seemed unlikely that many husbands would be willing to hand over money for bus fares both ways to Simla. If the event was to be partly self financing, a *padyatra* was the only answer. Most important of all was the chance this would offer the women to spend several days together away from the pressures of home and family, getting to know each other and sharing their struggle with other women along the way.

On the evening of November 13, 120 women gathered in the small village of Samanu just off one of the



**Harvesting peas in the fields around SUTRA office**

—SUTRA

main highways to Simla, as guests of Samanu Mahila Mandal, in whose name the *padyatra* was being held. Mahila Mandal and SUTRA staff had made all arrangements for travel including trucks to carry the women's bedding, cooks to prepare meals for the 200 participants, and places to stay for the night.

The following morning, they wound their way out of the village in single file, singing, waving placards and shouting slogans as they started their four day, 55 km walk to Simla. The first night at Kunnihar, they received a warm welcome from the women of eight local Mahila Mandals, who had joined together to offer them dinner, and who joined them in their meeting and singing. Sixty women accompanied them when they went on their way the following morning.

During the second night it rained heavily and the women who were sleeping in tents were completely flooded out. Bedding soaked but spirits undampened, they set out on the final leg of their march, which brought them to just outside Simla, so that by 10.30 on the morning of November 17, they were winding their way up the road to the chief minister's residence. In response to the police enforcement of the Public Order Act, the songs and slogans that had been an intrinsic part of the march were quietened.

The women strode through the streets, led by Soma Devi, an old woman bent double with arthritis. She carried a lighted lantern in her hand to symbolise the women's hopes and struggle for freedom. The march was accompanied throughout by police, and it was they who diverted the women from the main road through Simla's centre which led to the secretariat, their ultimate destination, and pushed them out of view on to a "short cut" which led past the chief minister's house.

As they approached, a message



On their way to a meeting

reached them that the chief minister was prepared to meet them, so the 185 women marched in and sat down in the front yard of his home. An eight member deputation of representatives went to meet him with their demands for an assessment of public opinion and the institution of democratic procedures for opening liquor vends. The chief minister accepted the memorandum and, without reading it, told the women he would consider the demands and let them know his views. The women demanded to be given a straight answer. "What new ideas do you need ? We've told you what we want."

The chief minister beat a hurried retreat. The women continued vociferously to state their dissatisfaction with his verbal reply, having learnt to their cost in Solan and Patta of the danger of trusting officials words. The meeting became a sit-in and the chief minister, unwilling to return himself, sent the excise commissioner to meet the women. This was an ineffectual exercise since he had no powers to grant the women's demands.

In an attempt to pacify the women, the excise commissioner requested a list of the most troublesome liquor

stores, 12 in all, and promised to investigate them. At this point, a letter from the chief minister arrived, saying that their demands would be considered sympathetically. The chief minister's staff hurriedly passed round tea and snacks, hoping that the women would agree to leave. Incensed, they threw the tea away. "Are we children that you think we'll keep quiet if you feed us ?" They continued to demand a proper commitment from the chief minister.

A deadlock had obviously been reached and, beginning to grow restless, a small group of women suggested that they should accept the chief minister's pledge and return home. The remainder were adamant that further assurances should be given, so they prepared to stage a sit-in outside the secretariat.

The police closed in and roped off all exits from the chief minister's grounds, to prevent the women from going to the secretariat. Negotiations through SUTRA produced a compromise and the women accepted a commitment from the chief minister to inform them of any decision taken before the opening or relicensing of liquor vends on April 1, 1987. Partially satisfied, the women caught buses back to their homes.



## Building Strength

What was it that made these 185 women leave their homes in the winter to walk 65 kms to Simla ? Tara Devi, President of Ghursi Mahila Mandal said : "It's not just a question of closing liquor shops, is it ? This whole campaign is about building women's unity and strength, about us organising around issues that are important to us, and realising that united we have the strength that we will never have alone."

The five days the women spent together, proved a unique experience for them, building a strong sense of unity and support. Women ate together food prepared by women from all castes, without questioning who had helped in the cooking. They sat late into the night, sharing experiences and drawing strength from each other's struggles.

For some women, the antiliquor aspect of the march was obviously its most important feature. Nanga Devi, a midwife, said : "I went because I want the liquor shop in my village shut. It's near our school, the children can't study properly because of the drunkards and if they can't study, how will they ever get on in life ?" Not only for the children but for themselves : "We're no longer safe going out at night in the village, we can't travel on the last bus because of the drunkards. Life around the village is being made miserable by them."

In addition to the antiliquor struggle, many women went with a strong desire to support women from other villages, to join together as a group, to experience being away from the watchful eye of their relatives for a few days. "I would have felt ashamed not to come and support the other women. It would have been a shame on our Mahila Mandal." "We have to support each other in this ; there's no shop in our village, but who knows when it might come ? Or we may need support from other Mahila Mandals for some other problem. How can we ask them for help later if we don't support them now ?"

SUTRA had predicted there would be about 500 women on the *padyatra*, as at the meeting in September at least that many women had indicated their readiness to come. But only 200 turned up. As Bimla said : "It's the women who most need our support, the women who suffer most, who are not here. Their husbands won't let them come—and they have no money because all the household money goes on liquor."

For many women, it was this

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***With their heavy workload, and few husbands willing to take over responsibility, most women could go for the padyatra only if another woman, such as a sister-in-law, was willing to take over responsibility***

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pressure from their menfolk that prevented their coming : "The women wanted to come. There were a lot of quarrels about it, but what could the women do ?" Some of the resistance came from the men who were themselves drinkers. Some other men were unwilling to give the women any freedom. In other cases, heavy pressure was applied on the men by local politicians and village leaders who did not want to see the women's strength grow, particularly against liquor vending from which they gain much of their power.

Other women had more personal problems. Santi Devi, a midwife, explained : "I really wanted to go, but my husband is too old to work, my son is sick, and my grandson has broken his arm. There's only me in the house to work, and this harvest was late. So there's the new seed to sow, grass to cut for the cattle over the winter months, I have to milk the buffalo and there are two women in the village expecting babies. What will happen to them if I go ?"

With their heavy workload, and few husbands willing to take over the responsibility, most women could go only if another woman, such as a sister-in-law was willing to take over the load. Some women were sick. Bimla, the leader, had been suffering from severe ear infection which flamed up just before

the march and left her in too much pain to do anything. Women who did not know about this illness felt betrayed by her non-appearance.

## Learning Experience

What did the experience mean to those who did go ? "It's the first time I've been away from home like this and had a chance to spend five days with other women, talking to them, sharing ideas—it was a great experience."

One said : "One of the things I've really learnt from this is that there's no

need to be frightened of the police—there's nothing they can do to stop us." This feeling was echoed by many women around her.

Women's experience during the previous 18 months of the campaign, particularly in Solan, struggling with officials, had taught them the importance of ensuring that all the promises they received be in writing. But this knowledge was not sufficient to help them deal with the machinations in Simla.

The combined force of male politicians succeeded in creating a split in the group so that it ultimately accepted the less than satisfactory compromise offered by the chief minister rather than continuing to sit in *dharna* until its demands were fully met.

Their feelings about the results. of the *padyatra* were realistic. "We'll have to wait and see what happens now. It's not had any effect yet. He (the chief minister) told us to wait for four months. Nothing may happen. They may just open new shops." "If we'd reached the secretariat everyone would have heard about it and we would have been more successful. But when the police stopped us by tying ropes across the exits, some women got frightened and thought we might be arrested, so they gave in and wanted to return home." "If we're to have any success we'll have



to follow it up, write letters to the chief minister every month from each Mahila Mandal and demand a proper reply from him.”

The chief minister had promised the women an answer by March 31. This date was chosen cleverly as it is on April 1 that the new licences come into force. By this date all the auctions and negotiations over licences were to be completed.

In February, a deputation of 10 women was sent to Simla to meet the chief minister. He merely reiterated his promise to answer their demands by March 31.

In the interim period, the women were busy planning an annual *mela* at Jagjitnagar. But many men opposed their plans, spreading rumours against SUTRA and threatening to beat their wives if they attended. The *mela* was held on February 22. The turnout was

much lower than last year. About 600 women from five blocks, representing over 60 Mahila Mandals, gathered. They shared their views and experiences of local struggles. A memorandum signed by 500 women was handed over to the subdivisional magistrate who had come on behalf of the state government.

By March 31 no answer had been received. Prices of licences doubled and in some cases even tripled from the previous year. A group of women had filed a writ petition in the Simla high court, but the hearing was postponed to April 6.

So the women could not prevent the new licences coming into force on April 1. They found that all of the 12 shops which they had particularly requested should be shut down, had received fresh licences.

Women of Dholer, bordering the Haryana plains, decided to picket the

shop in Barotiwala, an industrial township. They visited neighbouring villages and gathered support. About 200 women promised to attend but only 40 turned up. Despite active efforts of local politicians to oppose the action, the *dharna* took place on March 31 and continued overnight into April 1.

By midday, local truck drivers and factory hands began to get restless, and went in search of the director of SUTRA to vent their anger on him. The shopkeeper offered minor concessions, such as to post a guard to prevent violence, to move the shop a few hundred yards away, or to abide by the Simla high court decision, whenever it should come through. The women eventually accepted these pledges and left.

A similar action at Jabli ended similarly. About 30 women there had stopped trucks on the national highway. In Nahan block, the subdivisional magistrate came to the aid of the women, and responded to a phone call on April 1 by having the shop locked to prevent further sales.

The women are now awaiting the Simla high court's decision.

### Men's Reactions

Since the *padyatra*, and the increase in publicity for the women's campaign, there has been a clear division in many areas, indicating the support and opposition the women and SUTRA face. In one village, Gorthi, the Mahila Mandal president presented SUTRA with a letter demanding that staff stop attending Mahila Mandal meetings, that the creche be closed down, that SUTRA discontinue its other schemes in the village.

On further enquiry, it turned out that many of the men in Gorthi had government jobs, and they were pressuring the women to drop their association with SUTRA, as they feared the campaign was anti-government, and that they would run into problems in their jobs. Two weeks later, a second petition reached SUTRA from the other



half of the Mahila Mandal members, requesting that they continue to work there, particularly to run the creche from which women greatly benefit.

About one third of village men are violently opposed to the campaign. About the same number are strongly in favour and the remainder are still standing on the sidelines. Amongst the womenfolk, there are clearly half who are supportive of the move, while the remainder are silent.

The inevitable rumours float around that the campaign is anti-government. But, in fact, SUTRA has been very clear from the start that it is not prepared to be involved in any anti government moves. SUTRA has always been sponsored by the government of India in running the antiliquor camps in the local villages, and the women's demands are clearly in line with the directive principles of the Constitution.

This is not, however, accepted by certain state level politicians who realise that if the women's campaign is successful, they will lose a lot of money and power. Thus, there are people in state level politics who, although they have to pretend to support the sentiments behind the women's campaign, are attempting to find ways of reducing SUTRA's credibility as an organisation, and even to get it closed down.

Although SUTRA has been working with the Mahila Mandals for over five years now, liquor is the first issue that the women have taken up together. Liquor is coming to have a greater impact on the lives of Himachali hill women and is increasing their exploitation, both physical and economic.

Since liquor is still not acceptable in the social mores of many communities, the women have a solid moral framework to support them in their struggle. The fight against liquor does not challenge women's perceptions of their traditional role as mothers and caretakers of the home—rather, it serves

in some ways to reinforce it. This helps women feel justified in participating in the fight.

In building this movement, women are not only challenging their own exploitation within their homes and villages, but also the role of liquor in society. They are raising vital questions about who controls the resources that produce liquor, who benefits from its license and sale, and who are further impoverished by it.

The women have seen how menfolk are rendered passive by alcoholism and become a quiescent population, unwilling to challenge the local power structures. Behind these men are the capitalists and politicians, who spread and support the sale of liquor, who realise that a drunken population is not one that will challenge the existing powers.

The profits from the sale of liquor pass to the hands of wealthy brewers, many of whom have political connections. Thus, the struggle against liquor is not only a women's struggle against forces that exploit them specifically, but a struggle against those who control the lives of the people at village level.

### **Other Issues Raised**

Through becoming involved in the campaign, women have begun to ask many other questions about their lives and their traditional position in society.

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**Women are raising questions about who owns the resources that produce liquor, who benefits from its sale, and who are further impoverished by it.**

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They have realised how completely they have been excluded from gaining any knowledge that would help them in their struggle. The campaign brought them face to face with local politicians and showed them the true nature of many of these men.

It has also had the very positive effect of bringing women together and allowing them to gain strength from working as a group. Women are

beginning to ask questions about the rest of their lives. Why is it that they work from dawn to dusk in their homes and fields, yet do not even have the cash for a trip to Solan or Simla ? Why is it that government subsidy programmes always bypass women, denying them access to loans and agricultural inputs although women do most of the field work ? Though they are far from arriving at answers to these questions, the women's awareness that they can make changes in their lives is growing.

SUTRA started as an agency for providing services to people. However, it soon became evident that these services were being monopolised by the richer members of the village community. They also realised that many development schemes, whether funded by government or by other external sources, are not geared to the needs of the people. Either local power structures prevent those most in need from gaining access to the programmes or the programmes are designed in such a way as to suit the needs of the implementing agency which has to show results to satisfy the funders.

A large number of SUTRA staff still believe in service oriented work, and are not prepared to face the implications of the women organising, nor are they prepared to accept that village women

are intelligent and capable of planning and organising on their own behalf.

The organisation has been able to offer the women ideas on how to run the campaign, the benefit of their experience, institutional support and some financial input. However, without the involvement of the women, their commitment to the issues and their belief that together, they are capable of achieving changes, all the institutional



**Singing at a Mahila Mandal meeting**

support and ideas of the organisation would get nowhere.

Thus, the role played by SUTRA has been very much that of a support group. The skills SUTRA has, need to be passed on to the women so that the next time an issue is raised, the women will have the capabilities to respond to it fully themselves. This can only happen if SUTRA continues to make a conscious effort to pass on skills to women and itself withdraw into the background.

The role of men in organising women is also pertinent. As has been described, there are many limitations in terms of men's inability to discuss some of the more sensitive issues openly, their own condition—which prevents them seeing and understanding some of the qualities of women's oppression, and in many cases, unwillingness to rock the boat too far and to make the personal sacrifices and changes that are required if they carry analysis of women's oppression through to its logical conclusion. Despite this, they can play a very important role in helping women begin to organise, in raising their awareness of certain issues and providing them with the space so that they can begin to move forward on their own.

The real test of men's intentions comes at the point where they should

hand power over to women so that they can become leaders of their own movement. Many groups are far too ready to use the excuses of social customs, women's moral safety or their heavy workload at home, to exclude them from working as equal partners and ultimately leaders.

The most difficult question to answer is why did the women come together? Their isolation, the realisation of their strength together, the fact that although overburdened by work they were not overburdened by worries of starvation, the fact that the outside world was beginning to impinge upon their hill villages, and they had had enough of being hidden and shut off from the world?

All these factors, and probably many more, influenced these women to come together, and it was their strength, emerging in the Mahila Mandals, that sparked off the movement. As Tara Devi said: "It's about women organising together, about changing our lives." □

### **Protest In Vijayawada**

About 300 men, women and children staged a demonstration outside the venue of a beauty contest held by Thums Up and Vijayawada bottling company at Vijayawada on March 29. The police-arrested 100 of the demonstrators. The others proceeded to hold a public meeting in the premises

of the police station. The police treated the women roughly, and also attacked the press photographers.

After the contest was over, the protestors were released. They then proceeded to the collector's office, where they presented a memorandum. That evening, a public meeting was held. About 15 organisations ranging from left wing to the right wing, were involved.

—Jagan

### **Why Daughters Are Better Than Sons**

While visiting a relative in a government hospital in New Delhi I got into conversation with a nurse. She asked me to write an application for transfer of her daughter from one school to another. When I asked why she wanted the transfer, since the school her daughter was in is known to be much better than the one to which she wanted the transfer, she replied: "I have two daughters and one son. The son is the youngest and he is the first grandson of my husband's parents, so he is pampered and doesn't study. I am very worried about him. I know my daughter's school is much better than my son's. There is a girls' school so he can't be transferred there. At this age, it is difficult to get him admitted to any other school, either. He is much attached to my second daughter and won't study unless she studies with him. Exams and vacations in the two schools don't coincide exactly. When the girls have finished their exams and are free, his exams begin. He doesn't feel like studying on his own. So I decided to transfer my daughter to his school so that they will have exams at the same time. I know I am spoiling my daughter's education by taking her out of a better school but what to do? She also understands. She says: 'Never mind, Mummy, I will change the school for my brother's sake.' Daughters are better than sons—they are much more understanding."

—Lata