

AS a result of the movement launched by the Chhatra Yuva Sangharsh Vahini, 8,000 out of the 12,000 acres owned by the Gaya Math are now in the control of the labourers. The Math has also lost its social prestige. In four blocks, Sherghati, Barachatti, Bodhgaya and Mohanpur, the movement has closed down the offices of the Math.

In 1981, the movement succeeded in pressurising government to seize 1,500 acres that were illegally held by the Math and to redistribute this land amongst the labourers. A consensus had been arrived at within the movement, as a result of demands put forward by women, that land should be registered in women's names, since they had participated fully in the struggle, and since it was necessary to combat women's oppression by ensuring their access to basic resources.

However, the government administration officers refused to give the land in women's names. Their argument was that land must be given in the name of the head of the household who, according to them, could only be a man. In 1982, women of Sherghati *gheraoed* the district authorities and argued with them. The authorities said the land was to be given to landless labourers. The

This is a follow up report on the Bodhgaya struggle of the landless poor for land, reported in Manushi No. 14. Many women's issues such as women's right to land, wife beating and sharing of housework were raised in the course of the struggle that began in 1979 and continues today.

When Women Get Land

— A Report from Bodhgaya by Alaka and Chetna

women pointed out that they too were landless labourers. When asked if they would plough the land, they replied that while men plough, women reap. Both have equal rights, both have the right to vote; they are equally entitled to own property.

The authorities threatened not to distribute the land at all. The women said that the villagers had collectively decided to accept land only in women's names but added that even if men went back on this decision, women would still fight for it. The authorities asked what would happen if a woman left her husband and remarried. The women replied that men were far more likely to desert their wives.

They showed their arms on which their husband's names were tattooed

along with their own, and said that they wore the symbols of marriage such as *sindur* and bangles. It is much easier for a man to abandon his wife. Therefore, land to women entails less risk for men than giving it to men entails for women.

After this agitation, about 150 acres of land were given in women's names in Kusa and Beeja villages of Sherghati. Women of these villages have not acquired complete decision making control over the crop or the land. They are not, for instance, in a position to sell the land. We held discussions with the women to ask whether getting the land in their names had made any difference to their lives. Some of their reactions are given below.

"Didi, we have got just an acre of



Labourers of Bodhgaya in a protest march

land. It isn't as if we have got a lot to eat but how can we say it has made no difference. It has made a difference", Malan said "Before, we used to work for a wage on the Math's land. The men could beat us up and snatch away our wages. Now, we are at least able to feed our children from the produce of the field."

"Didi, the men cannot so easily throw us out of the house now. They are afraid lest if they trouble us too much and we leave, the land too will go with us and they will get nothing."

"Didi, earlier, we had tongues but could not speak, we had feet but could not walk. Now that we have got the land, we have got the strength to speak and to walk."

In June 1985, bank loans to buy bullocks were made available under a development scheme. The men in Kosa and Beeja villages began to say to the activists in the course of everyday conversations: "Land being in women's names causes

"Earlier, we had tongues but could not speak, we had feet but could not walk. Wow that we have got the land, we have got the strength to speak and to walk."

difficulties. Women have to walk long distances to get bank loans or to get seeds. In future, land should not be in women's names."

We held a women's meeting in Beeja village and asked the women whether this was true. Sheela immediately said: "Didi, don't get taken in by what they say. When we used to go to work for a wage, didn't we walk long distances? Have we lost the use of our legs now?"

Badki interrupted: "I'll tell you what difficulty they are facing. My husband wanted to get the loan

money in his hands so that he could waste it. I didn't give him the money, I bought a bullock. This, is what has happened in the whole village. None of the men got any money, each family got a bullock. That's the only difficulty they are facing. If the land is in women's names, the loan money cannot be spent on drink or frittered away."

A third added: "What right do they have to say that women's having the land creates problems and that land should not be in women's names in future?"

Even after getting the land, women's struggles continue for the establishment of their identity in the movement, and against the subordination of women's issues to so called general issues. But getting the land is the first step in the struggle for women's right to property. It has established an important precedent in the movement.

(translated from Hindi)

Circle Of Fire

Red she wore
and beads
Of black and
gold,

Anointed
bedecked
bejewelled
i saw my sister
encircle
the ghee and the
fire.

Behind her
the stranger,
flushed
with the
heat.

Red she wore
and beads
of black and gold.
He held her shoulder
touched her ankle.
She put out the oil lamps
with her intricately

hennaed feet.
Red she wore
and
seven circles
walked.
Behind her,
the stranger.

Red her dress
and red
in the parting
of her
black
soft
hair.
Red and red
and black
and
gold.
And now the stranger led.

Anointed
bedecked
bejewelled
weighed down

by finery
and fear,
i saw my sister go,
not knowing
she would return
only to tell
of inhuman
greed.

Shrivelled leaf,
scorched flower
tender still
i saw my sister close
those eyes of agony
Gone now
tortured
released.
Red the anger,
red the flames
and black
black
the memories.

—Ranjana Thapalyal