

The Shetkari Sanghatana, a peasant organisation in Maharashtra, headed by Sharad Joshi, has been active in raising women's issues and has a women's front, the Shetkari Sanghatana Manila Aghadi. It has now taken the initiative for the formation of a broader and more autonomous women's front which will put up women candidates for election to local government bodies this year.

Preparing Women For Political Power

—Gail Omvedt reports on the Ambethan camp

FROM June 27 to 30, a women's camp was held at Ambethan, a village 30 miles away from Pune. This camp was a follow up of the Shetkari Sanghatana's women's conference held at Chandwad in November 1986 (see Manushi No. 37). The conference had resolved to sponsor all-women panels for the upcoming Zila Parishad elections in Maharashtra, scheduled for November 1987. This resolution was part of the Sanghatana's campaign against violence, insecurity and ruffianism.

Nearly 40 women were present at the camp, from about half the districts of Maharashtra, from rich, poor and middle peasant families. Many were long time activists of the Shetkari Sanghatana. Several women activists from other organisations also took part in the camp.

The programme included lectures by college professors on the functioning of *panchayati raj* as well as talks by Sanghatana leaders, discussions amongst the women and songs. The women discussed how they would select candidates, how they would answer the

questions put to anyone who comes onto a political platform, how they would face the slander that is used as a weapon against women who venture into the

public arena and what issues would be taken up in their manifesto.

Since most of the women are from middle and rich peasant families and from



Members of the Shetkari Sanghatana

the middle castes, their contact with the majority of rural women, the poor and uneducated, was slight. But their movement towards a new perspective could be seen in the proposal put forward by Suman Bade for selection of candidates : *paksh nako, purushi drishtikon nako, jatiwad nako* (no party bias, no male perspective, no casteism).

To cover one district, between 40 and 50 women candidates will have to be put up for Zila Parishad seats and about 100 for Panchayat Samiti seats. The committee proposes to cover several districts. In order to have a choice in selecting women, they would like to have at least three applications per seat. Since the Shetkari Sanghatana, although strong, is not so wide ranging, the committee decided to hold district meetings to which all women, including members of every party, would be welcome. It was agreed that no distinctions would be drawn on organisational lines and no privileges accorded to Sanghatana members.

During the discussions, some doubts had developed. Given the way Zila Parishads are controlled from the top, is the fight worthwhile? Are we equipped for the fight? Speaking on these issues, Sharad Joshi emphasised the need to fight the growing ruffianism and resulting insecurity in rural areas, and the increasing centralisation of power in the State: "Mahatma Gandhi's thought was that power should flow from the bottom to the top ; instead, it is flowing top to bottom." He also stated that from now on, the front would be a women's front, not linked to the Sanghatana, or to any party.

In the following discussion, a new name was taken for the front: Samagra Mahila Aghadi, and the manifesto is to include :

1. protection from village hoodlums and violence;
2. water tap facilities in every village;
3. alternative energy sources;

*Let us go into politics
Let us take the lead in struggle
We don't want male power now
O Venubai
Why are you staying oppressed,
suppressed:
Come to the demonstration!*

(Song by Waharu Sanavane, male tribal activist, which was a favourite at the camp)

4. health programmes including pro-women family planning, anti-alcoholism;
5. efforts to create new employment other than the rock-breaking usually given as drought relief work;
6. search for alternative funding to free the Zila Parishads from complete economic dependence on and hence control by the State.

Apart from the Shetkari Sanghatana,

it is hoped that all other parties, particularly left and Dalit forces, will support the women's front. There is a certain amount of opposition within the Sanghatana to the programme. Sanghatana men would like to see Sanghatana women in the Parishads, but when it comes to his wife, a man forgets that she is a Sanghatana member and only sees her as a woman moving towards autonomy. Almost every woman, when asked if she would stand for the elections, replied: "My husband says 'You don't stand, we'll find other women.'"

"What are the chances for the new women's front? They are good in the districts where the Shetkari Sanghatana is especially strong. The formation of the front is itself a historical step, particularly as it has emerged from rural areas where patriarchal relations are strongest in India.

Mother

*'Which will you choose—madness
or death?'*

*'I will', said the good woman
'pray for sanity.'
I didn't mimic her quivering tones
this time
—her pain killed my amusement.
She lived after all, never quite mad
neither quite dead—
chanting childhood prayers at
auspicious hours
for a cruel husband
and some crazy children.*

*She lived, after all,
till that morning
when neighbours peered out to see
the corpse somebody
had kicked out of the door.*

—M Geetha

Agni Pariksha

*They say, Seeta the chaste
emerged from the fire
radiant and beautiful*

*There was a Seeta I knew
chaste enough, till yesterday,
a foul, charred corpse today*

*Her husband's hallucinations
lit the fire that consumed
her throbbing flesh.*

*This kerosene and matches test
is something the Seetas of today
invariably fail.*

—M. Geetha