

The Power To Take Rights

*—V. Kasiratnam,
secretary of the Telugu
Desam women's wing,
reports on the progress of
the equal inheritance
legislation and other
women's programmes in
Andhra Pradesh*



THE Telugu Desam came to largely on the strength of women's vote. Many promises were made to women by N. T. Ramarao. How far have these promises been fulfilled?

Some welfare measures have been implemented, such as the Matrivedta Vidhan scheme under which 400,000 women receive free nutritious food for three months during pregnancy. Widows can get a monthly pension of Rs 50. Wherever the government constructs houses for the poor, the house is always registered in the woman's name so that even a drunkard husband cannot sell it off. All primary school children are entitled to free travel in state buses. Green card holding children also get free uniforms.

But there are certain other rights which need to be considered. These rights were conferred on paper but have they been implemented? The question leads one to consider the fact that not only those who give rights but also those who are to take them must have a certain power.

Take the example of property rights. In September 1985, the Hindu Succession Act, amended by the Andhra Pradesh government to give daughters equal inheritance rights in ancestral property including agricultural land, became law in Andhra Pradesh, having received the assent of president Zail Singh. But it seems that very few women have actually been able to take advantage of the law. In the villages, the practice is followed of putting a piece of land or a mango orchard in a daughter's name when she gets married. This is called "sumangali's right." The woman moves to her husband's village. The land is in her parental village. The husband thinks he should be given the income from the field, but the woman's brothers do not wish to give it. This leads to clashes and fights. No one thinks about the woman's right in all this. So far she has only had the right to shed tears.

As an experiment, a women's court

was set up in Hyderabad. It is the only court of its kind in the country. Every functionary from the judge to the attender is a woman. All dowry cases and cases of violence against women are brought to this court. Woman police officer Aruna Bahuguna has been appointed to handle these cases. Yet it is not easy to get justice for a woman. For example, recently, a young woman called Suvarna died under suspicious circumstances in Pattencheran near Hyderabad. We investigated the case on behalf of the women's wing. But we have not yet been able to establish whether it was suicide or murder. Suvarna's husband had been given a photo studio as dowry. Suvarna lived more or less confined to the kitchen in her marital home. She had a one year old daughter. There had been many fights and quarrels between husband and wife. One day Suvarna, burnt to death in the bathroom. Her parental family says it was murder and her in-laws say it was suicide. None of the neighbours are willing to testify in court. There are many such cases which fail in court for lack of evidence or witnesses.

Another scheme was that whereby 30 percent of all government jobs were reserved for women. It was hoped that the scheme would help make women self supporting and eliminate the dowry system which is widely prevalent in Andhra. But the scheme is not being fully implemented. Officers fill up vacancies with male candidates, claiming that women are not available. In fact, the officers are often inspired by prejudices such as the idea that women will become pregnant and take leave and that women often stay away to look after sick children. They do not recognise the fact that children are the responsibility of both parents and are also national wealth.

It will take time to empower women so that they can claim their rights. I do not mean to say that government has no responsibility to give rights. But until woman is in a position to take her rights, it is difficult to implement legislation in her favour.

(translated from Hindi)