

Nari Mukti Sangharsh Sammelan, Patna

The third national Nari Mukti Sangharsh Sammelan took place in Patna from February 5 to 7. It concluded with a rally at Gandhi Maidan, the city's nerve centre, on February 8.

Organised by a national coordination committee comprising individuals and members of organisations from Bihar, Delhi, Kanpur, Madhya Pradesh, Madras, Bangalore, Maharashtra and Assam, it was open to women's organisations as well as individual women "who believe that ...the struggle for women's liberation is a struggle against the entire existing exploitative socioeconomic and political structure..."

In five sessions spread over three days the following themes were discussed : women, work and property; women and violence; women, health and ecology; women, communalism, culture and religion; and women, patriarchy and struggles. Each of them was further divided into subthemes.

Over 700 women from organisations like Janwadi Mahila Manch, Mahila Sangharsh Morcha, Maitreyee (Bombay), Kisan Sabha (Patna), Chhatisgarh Mahila Jagriti Sangharsh, Prayas, Pragatishil Mahila Manch, Sahiyar (Baroda), Disha (Lucknow), Women's Centre (Bombay), Kashtakari Sanghatna (Maharashtra), Theeredesha Mahila Vedi (Trivandrum), and Rural Women's Liberation Front (Tamil Nadu), besides many others, and unaffiliated journalists and college students, attended the sessions.

The participants were asked to form small discussion groups of their choice. Discussion on each subtheme of the main themes was initiated by moderators. Depending on the capability of individual

moderators, some discussions gave ample scope to participants to trade lessons from their personal struggles, while others were bogged down by jargon that went above the heads of many listeners and even inhibited those ignorant of ideological stands and terms from contributing to the general debate. The presence of different language groups necessitated translation between Hindi and English and into Tamil, Gujarati and even dialects in the case of Rajasthan and Bihar. This allowed discussion to move at only a moderate pace—Also, the wide gulf in understanding and knowledge of women's issues which separated the minority of articulate speakers (often, but not always from urban based groups) from the different majority of listeners, contributed to slackening the pace. Frequently, too much time was taken up in spelling out the basics of the theme. This was felt necessary as there were several categories of participants—rural women having their first exposure to a debate on women's issues, rural women with some interaction with urban activists, and women working solely in urban areas.

Not infrequently, a peasant woman, on being coaxed to air her views on peasant struggles or property rights of women or patriarchy — depending on the theme under discussion—would admit that though she partially understood the speakers, her immediate problem was either getting sufficient employment (for a wage) to survive, or housing for her family.

Each discussion, apart from having a moderator and bilingual translators, was provided with a rapporteur who reported the discussions at the plenary session.

The gap between sessions was utilised

by certain groups to display their publications but, by and large, this time-space gave everyone a chance to get acquainted with one another.

The plenary session passed 18 resolutions. Many condemned particular instances of rape, violence, repression and other atrocities against women and other oppressed people. Some opposed exploitation of women in the media, in development programmes, in the health care system and in employment. A few criticised destruction of the environment by nuclear plants and by inappropriate industrialisation. Communalism was opposed; solidarity was expressed with the Jharkhand, Bodhgaya and other struggles of oppressed groups.

The resolution opposing violence was particularly eloquent : "Women face specific forms of violence: rape and other forms of sexual abuse, female foeticide, witch killing, Sati, dowry murders, wife beating. Such violence and the continued sense of insecurity that is instilled in women as a result keeps them bound to the home, economically exploited and socially suppressed. In the ongoing struggle against violence in the family, society and the State, we recognise that the State is one of the main sources of violence and stands behind the violence committed by men against women in the family, the workplace and the neighbourhood. For these reasons a mass women's movement should focus on the struggle against State violence while building the strength of women to confront all those who use violence against them in the home or out of it."

On the day of the rally, over 6,000 people went in a procession through Patna city's streets, distributing leaflets about the meet. There was a public meeting at Gandhi Maidan where many resolutions taken during the three day meet were read out. This was rounded off with a cultural programme comprising plays, songs and dances. On the day of the rally, the participants at the meet were outnumbered by people brought by political groups. Many college students from Patna also took part in the procession.

—Poonam Kaul