MARIKA VICZIANY

Below The Poverty Line

Musahar And Chamar Women In A Bihar Village

RUKUN is a periurban village located about seven kilometres from Patna. According to the 1981 census, Bihar has a population of 70 million. During the last 10 years population has grown by 24 percent. The harijans are 14.5 percent of the state's population. They are distributed unevenly but the largest concentration occurs in four districts located south of Patna. Here they form between 20 and 25 percent of the total population.

In 1961, Rukun contained 246 acres and 118 households. The total population was 819 of which 120 were harijans. Assuming that there were about five persons per family, there must have been about 24 harijan households. During the last 20 years the harijan quarter has expanded rapidly. In early 1983, there were about 70 families of musahar, six of chamar and 10 dusadh. If each family had five members, the harijan quarter of Rukun now has a total population of 430 persons.

Until 1951 the scheduled castes of Bihar did not experience the rapid natural growth which occurred in the rest of the population. But the first decade of population explosion amongst them was indeed dramatic. Between 1951 and 1961 the general population growth rate in Bihar was 20 percent but that of the scheduled castes 33 percent. This growth has, I believe, had a major effect on the life of the musahars.

The musahars are harijans, although they do not do any particular work which is regarded as ritually polluting. In this, they are distinct from the chamars who are considered untouchable on account of their association with leatherworking. Despite this, musahars are vastly inferior to chamars and indeed are regarded as the bottom of the socio economic pyramid.

Origins Of Untouchability

At least three theories have been

*The author emphasises that this is an initial attempt to match impressions formed during a field trip to Patna in February 1983 with earlier anthropological and ethnographic accounts. The conclusions are tentative and subject to revision as the research*progresses. *An earlier version of this paper was presented at the second Women In Asia work-shop held at Monash University, Melbourne, in July 1983.*

advanced to explain the origins of untouchability. According to Ambedkar, untouchables were "broken men." Tribal warfare led to the disintegration of the vanquished tribes. The surviving men and women drifted towards the villages of India for protection from further tribal assault. These refugees were allowed to settle near villages but by mutual consent between the "broken men" and the peasants, settlement was confined to the out-skirts of the villages; in the case of walled villages, to just outside the wall. According to Ambedkar, this separation had social and economic roots. Tribal refugees were culturally distinct from the peasant societies to which they became attached. Segregated living quarters were an attempt by "broken men" to preserve their culture. This suited their hosts, because in return for allowing tribals to squat near them they demanded that the refugees perform the function of guarding the village and crops by night. Over time, what began as a mutually acceptable arrangement degenerated into the practice of untouchability as it is known today.

Furer von Haimendorf's account of the origin of untouchability begins in the urban centres of pre-modern India. He cannot believe that a peasant society which demands that all its productive members perform a wide variety of dirty tasks as a matter of daily routine could provide the conditions and attitudes necessary to foster untouchability. The idea of ritual pollution must therefore have developed in the cities. Like all cities those of premodern India fostered labour specialisation and threw up a range of arts and crafts. Some of these crafts became associated with ritual pollution because they required the handling of dead or dirty material. Haimendorf emphasises that many harijan castes are involved in artisan occupations—weaving and shoe-making, for example. Once established in urban areas, untouchability spread to the villages. This occurred because throughout history urban inventions, lifestyles and values have asserted themselves over village ways of life.

Nesfield, in his study of the musahars, provides a third alternative. The advantage of his explanation is that it derives from what the musahars themselves believed was happening to them : "The more our jungle was taken from us, the more we came to live near villages." The origin of untouchability is expressed by him as the growing dominance of a sedentary peasant economy based on large family units over the mobile hunter-gatherer economy of the musahars based on a different family system. Nesfield's account of the life of the plains musahars towards the end of the last century shares some common elements with Ambedkar's hypothesis. Whilst tribal culture disintegrated whenever it came into contact with peasants, the musahars preserved much of their tradition by living at a distance from the villages. This separation, initially determined by mutual regard, has in modern times degenerated into a pernicious untouchability.

Nesfield's explanation is consistent with evidence we have from other societies about the nature of cultural contact between peasant and tribal communities. Ambedkar's hypothesis is weak to the extent that it depends on continuous intertribal warfare on a scale sufficient to generate large numbers of "broken men." There is no evidence for conflict of such a scale throughout Indian history. Haimendorf's theory is clearly irrelevant to communities such as the musahars but it may yet prove to be useful in understanding how the chamars came to be regarded as untouchables.

By the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the status of chamar women in northern India was lower than that of men by various indicators. Chamar society was fundamentally patriarchal. Birth ceremonies distinguished between male and female children; son survivorship was important enough to compel sonless couples to adopt boys; an adulterous wife could be thrown out of her home but not an adulterous husband. In urban areas the better off chamars increasingly imitated the customs of the higher castes. They began to seclude their women, and infant marriages became the norm.

Full Economic Partners

Nevertheless, the status of women in the villages was preserved into the post independence era because women were economically important. In 1961, Bernard Cohn described the position of chamar women in eastern Uttar Pradesh in the following way. The woman "is a full economic partner of her husband." In agriculture "the economic roles of man and wife were interchangeable." Her earning capacity was as good as that of a man. She was accustomed to moving outside the house and mixing freely with labourers, both men and women. She thought of herself as an independent person. Her earning capacity gave her bargaining power in disputes with her mother-in-law. Threats to abandon the marital home had to be taken seriously because her own parents would welcome the return of a good earner. According to Cohn, with ageing, women retained their economic value more effectively than men. They could work as domestic servants while old men were relatively useless. Landlords preferred to employ young men to get the maximum amount of physical effort for the wages they were paying. The lack of male earning capacity,, together with high levels of mortality, prevented the emergence amongst the chamars of extended families ruled by old, domineering men.

Cohn's study was based on 122 chamar households. Of these, 80 were nuclear families and 42 were passing through the extended family phase of their lifestyles. Of the latter, only 14 had three generaticyis living together and Cohn predicted that these would break up in the near future. While I do not have the equivalent of Cohn's data base, what observed in Rukun suggests that major changes have been taking place in the last two decades. The extended family type is probably becoming more established ; male authority has grown; the authority of older people in general is increasing, and the position of young women has been falling. The decline of status appears to be common to literate and illiterate women, though for different reasons. Most importantly, because of the demographic effects,conjugal

intimacy appears to be falling.

Women Losing Ground

In Rukun, illiterate chamar women today are not the economic equivalents of the men. When employed in agriculture, they earn only Rs 4 or 5 per day compared with Rs 6 for a man. Nor do they find employment as easily as the men. A few years ago, Rukun was visited by a stranger who promised to find jobs for the women. A feast costing Rs 20 was held for his benefit but he never reappeared. The anger of the women two years after the event symbolises their eagerness for, and hopelessness of, finding continuous employment.

Women have been squeezed out of agricultural employment, partly because the availability of scheduled caste labour has expanded so rapidly since 1961. At the same time the proportion of landowners among scheduled castes has con-tracted. Between 1961 and 1971 the number of landless labourers per 1,000 increased from 345 to 518 whilst the number of cultivators per 1,000 fell from 378 to 279 (all India figures). According to one study, between 1951 and 1961 the redun-dant farm population grew signi-ficantly in Patna and other districts to the south which contain large numbers of harijans.

Education—Upward Mobility For Men

In the economic climate of modern Bihar, literacy promises to be a major transformer for the harijans. The more widespread, the higher the level of literacy, the greater the diversification of harijan employment may become. Land reform by itself will be insufficient. According to the Ministry Of Rural,Reconstruction there are only 4 9.95 lakh acres available in the whole of India but the National Sample Survey figure of 215.10 lakhs suggests that this is a massive underestimate. If we accept the higher figure, and if half of 215.10 lakh acres is given to scheduled castes and tribes, then the average distribution per agricultural labourer will only be 0.5 acres which is not enough for subsistence.

The present level of literacy among the chamars is very low. Only seven percent of them are literate after 30 years of independence, and half of those have acquired literacy skills without any formal education. Literacy amongst chamar women is even lower. Only one percent can read and write, and 60 percent of these acquired skills without formal schooling.

The education of a chamar girl is seen by her parents as a way of making a "good marriage", that is, one which can raise the social position of the family. In Bihar, this means finding an educated husband in a large town, preferably in the state capital of Patna. Education and big city location optimise the husband's chances of a government job. A civil service position offers permanent financial security. Highly educated grooms, however, are relatively scarce and command high prices even if they are unemployed and incapable of supporting their wives at the time of marrriage. The expectation of a job is almost as good as having one.

To find an educated husband of this kind requires an extensive search, and chamars enlist the help of a go-between or matchmaker. These men are usually known to, and trusted by, the bride's family. The search is not undertaken unless the bride's parents are confident that they have an acceptable dowry. Until recently, the custom of bride price amongst chamars acted as abarrier to the loss of independence suffered by women in castes where dowry was common. This is now changing. The marriage of Ravi's son, an MA student, fetched Rs 500, one watch, one suit, and one bicycle in addition to the usual utensils. The bride's father, a school teacher in Gaya, also paid Rs 1,500 for the wedding feast.

The bride, Gyanti, had completed three years of schooling and her father had also taught her something at home. But a young and poorly educated bride does not regard herself as independent. She has insufficient education to challenge the authority of her mother-in-law and she has less confidence than an illiterate bride who might be able to find work. Gyanti does not work for pay because this would undercut the status she brought into the family with her solid dowry, slight education and respectable background. For all these reasons, there are no disputes between her and her mother-in-law. The word of the older generation rules. Only a more confident young bride would fall to arguing with an older woman. Nor can she threaten to leave her husband's house. Indeed, she does not think of leaving under any circumstances. She has already cost her father a good deal — the income lost by withdrawing her from the labour pool, the money spent on her dowryand wedding. To abandon her husband's house would mean abandoning her

-Marika

Women from Musahar households

father's plans for a better future for all of them. If she were to return to her parents, she would only be a burden, for they, in their effort to maintain appearances, would not permit her to labour outside the house. The kind of independence described by Bernard Cohn in 1961 seems to be disappearing with upward mobility. Poorly educated chamar brides appear to be caught in a "low level literacy trap."

Family planning studies in third world countries show a positive relationship between the use of modern contraceptives, literacy and conjugal intimacy. The more educated the bride, the better husband and wife communication is likely to be. But a poorly educated bride like Gyanti seems to be no closer to her husband than if she were illiterate. Despite all the advantages of her marriage, she did not even know what her husband was studying at Patna University. Indeed, my impression was that conjugal intimacy in their case was less than that of a working couple. This in turn suggests that within the extended family, such a couple is less able to assert itself.

The one positive outcome, however, of even limited female education is that a semieducated chamar woman is committed to the education of her children, especially her sons. Thus the benefits of whatever literacy exists today will be noticeable in the next generation.

A Necessary Sacrifice ?

Poorly educated chamar women have lost their economic independence, but this has occurred in a situation where even illiterate chamar women have less independence now than in the past because employment opportunities have contracted. The increase in the status of chamars as a whole, via education, appears to require this kind of sacrifice. Female literacy can expand only as rapidly as male literacy. Bihari culture demands that harijan men be educated first. Attempts to promote female education without promoting male education first have already proven to be disruptive to other aspects of the movement to raise the socio-economic status of ex untouchables.

Paradoxically, the status of semiliterate women has increased relative to illiterate women in the family and the community as a whole. Gyanti has no power in her husband's family but she feels superior to the other women in the household. Even her personal belongings, her clothing and jewellery, set her apart from the rest.

The women without education and dowries feel ashamed about their less

-*Marika*

fortunate backgrounds. During our discussions the other women were embarrassed when telling us that on marriage they had brought only utensils with them.

The dowry system is not yet common amongst chamars, but its pernicious effect on the minds of the women is already noticeable. For the moment, there appears to be no way of preventing the spread of dowry. It is a concomitant of upward mobility for depressed groups like the chamars in a society which since independence has seen the beginnings of a consumer revolution. With development, a new materialism has emerged during the last 30 years. The wealth of the new middle class has made dowry more prominent and costly. In southern Bihar, for example, an IAS officer can fetch well over one lakh. Upwardly mobile groups like the chamars cannot but become enmeshed in the new value system.

The independence of chamar women seems to be on the decline, the more rapidly if the woman is semiliterate. The parents and parents-in-law are living longer and exercising more power over decision making. Marital fertility is unlikely to fall for some time, because the parents' perception of mortality is based on their past experience when mortality was higher than today. Mortality is still very high in this community. Some people think that fewer babies die now than in the past but opinion is divided. In such a situation, the more cautious approach, which maintains fertility at a high level, wilL Prevail. According to the midwives of Rukun, a woman still has, on an average, between four and eight births.

In 1971, there were eight million harijans in Bihar. Of them, 30 percent were chamars and the next two largest groups were dusadhs who constituted 26.5 percent and musahars who constituted 15 percent of the total. Little is known about the last group, which in Rukun today is the largest. The few references to musahars in the standard ethnographies are preoccupied with the meaning of musahar: does it or does it not mean rat catcher ?

Living From Day To Day

The musahars of the north Indian plain have lived on the periphery of villages for hundreds of years, but since independencechangesof unprecedented magnitude seem to have commenced. This can be guaged by comparing the present condition of musahars with Nesfield's account of the 1880s. The dense clustering of musahar house-holds in the village of Rukun today would have amazed Nesfield who wrote "the largest collection of households that I have ever seen consisted of four, the number of souls being from 12 to 16...It is not at all uncommon to find a single family living entirely by itself." In the last century, musahar settlements were small in size and scattered. Rapid population growth, together with surplus labour in Bihar's agriculture, have brought together large numbers of musahars in periurban villages such as Rukun. In Rukun, the musahars live from day to day in the hope of finding labouring jobs on trucks, construction sites or in agriculture.

A century ago, employment for musahars was diverse. They collected and sold a range of forest products—firewood, medical herbs, wild honey, leaves for making disposable plates, and even live lizards. Their special relationship to the forests of India also

secured thememployment in agricultural labour because "they alone are able to exorcise the older gods who have been driven away by the plough and resent the intrusion of the alien peasantry." (Stephen Fuchs, 1983) For the same reason, musahars were employed to guard crops and to light brick kilns. These avenues of employment have contracted with economic development and population growth. The forests of Bihar have receded, competition for all kinds of agricultural and non agricultural jobs has grown, and literacy, secularisation and the new materialism have made peasant culture indifferent to tribal gods. Their present location is a measure of the degree to which rnusahars have been economically displaced Today, they are concentrated in the northern parts of Bihar—18 percent in Purnea, 15 percent in Saharsa and 11 percent in Darbhanga. In the last century, they were reported as living mainly in "south Bihar, Benares and Mirzapur." Migration over relatively long distances by Indian standards appears to have begun in Nesfield's time: "the struggle for existence and the growth of towns and villages in their midst have forced them out in all directions to the west, east and north. A few stragglers have even penetrated into Assam, where, by the census of 1881 they numbered some 4,000; they are to be seen here and there in all the districts of northern India between Assam and Rohilkhand."

Nesfield believed that the musahars lacked a social structure which could bring them together in large numbers. The tribal bands characteristic of the jungle musahars survived among the musahars of the plains. Today, this tribal structure has gone but nothing has grown up in its place. Large clusterings of musahar households are the outcome of development processes which have flung them together. They do not represent organic growth generated from within. Thus the musahars of Rukun have no acknowledged leader. The village sarpanch is a musahar who has been educated to the eighth standard but they do not look up to him even though they voted him to the position. The lack of "community" amongst the musahars is one of the causes of their continuing backwardness. I will return to this point when I discuss education.

The other notable feature of musahar life in the nineteenth century was the existence of a nuclear family structure. The "modernity" of this aspect of traditional life impressed Nesfield :

"There is not a trace among their marriage customs of any of those forms of conjugal communism which Mr Mclennan would have us believe are the invariable necessary stages through which all tribes and nations have passed or must pass before they can reach the final goal of monogamy." The musahars in Nesfield's time were monogamous, they disliked divorce, married couples were expected to establish independent households, and a widow was expected to remarry rather than cohabit with her younger brother-in-law as was the custom among the lower caste Hindus. The conjugal bond, it seems, was given greater importance than the mother-son bond which is accorded priority in the extended Hindu family. All of this suggests that the status of musahar women amongst their own kind was high. The marriage ceremony, even amongst the plains musahars who had absorbed some Hindu ideas, symbolised this. There was no brideprice or dowry on marriage. Material considerations were irrelevant. The bride walked happily and confidently to the home of her husband. In a Hindu marriage, she is taken screaming and crying by the bridegroom's party. The groom's mother performed the most important functions in the marriage ceremony rather than a priest as in typical Hindu marriages. Nesfield links this to the importance of mother goddesses in musahar culture. To Nesfield marriage among the musahars was reminiscent of Vedic times. This is an acute observation but for one fact—in the Vedic period girls married at the age of 16 to 18 whilst in Nesfield's time they married much younger.

Unstable Marriages

Today, the musahar women of Rukun village continue to behave in a manner which would not be tolerated by the husbands of the charnar women living nearby. They are more confident and outspoken.

They lack the modesty of chamar women. Breastfeeding occurs without covering up. They order the men about ; they involve themselves in the fights which from time to time break out on the main road ; some of them even beat their husbands. Nesfield observed the great fondness which musahars had for alcohol. This continues today — some of the women drink with their men but some even get drunk while their husbands are away at work. Complaints about wife beating are less common. According to one woman, she was never beaten because she was her husband's drinking companion.

Despite all this the situation of musahar women today is an unhappy one. Married life has become destabilised even though marriage takes place between close friends and relatives. The musahars are still, in Nesfield's words, "intensely endogamous." Marriage arrangements begin when the bride's father visits local villages looking for a groom. Musahars do not search very far, and they do not employ a go-between. What then causes marriages to be unstable ?

The chief factors seem to be associated with population growth and economic stagnation. Mortality has fallen rapidly but disproportionately amongst the scheduled castes. The chief beneficiaries have been adults but infant mortality remains very high. In Rukun there are quite a number of grand-mothers amongst the musahars, and four of them receive a widow's pension. While parents are living longer, the economic opportunities for young adults have not been growing. The days when a young musahar couple could set up an independent household appear to have come to an end. Everything is costly, even the construction of a modest hut. Then there is the problem of finding a bit of land to build on. The following case study may be an indication of the kind of situations which are becoming increasingly more common.

Rani is in her early twenties. She has given birth to three children of whom a girl aged two and a half survives. She was betrothed at the age of five and went

to live with her husband when she was 15. Her mother-in-law was "not pleased" with her. In five years of married life she was never a permanent resident in her husband's village. She came and went until towards the end she was spending only between 10 and 15 days on each visit. For most of her married life she has lived with her own parents. Since the birth of her surviving daughter, she has not seen her husband. Rani's mother assured us that very soon they would be looking for another husband.

At first I was told that the husband had absconded because she had given birth to a girl child. While this turned out to be untrue, the explanation is an interesting one. At present, the musahars value female children as much as male. Some insisted that it was better to have girls because they work harder. Boys cannot be controlled. Nevertheless, the low value placed on female children in the society around them is now affecting the musahars sufficiently to cause anxiety about the birth of girls. Some of the women insisted that boys were essential because they "gave status."

Later, I was told that Rani was thrown out of her husband's home because her mother-in-law's daughter and children had come to live there. There was no room for an additional family. Rani's husband had no say in who could stay and who had to leave, presumably because he was frequently unemployed and earned too little when he did have a job. This is clearly not the whole story. Rani's husband had made no effort to visit her since the last child was born. There were deeper, personal reasons for the failed marriage. Yet the circumstances in which the marriage failed are new. In Nesfield's time, parents did not live as long as they do now and economic circumstances were less constrained. Households containing more than three generations for any length of time must have been rare. Today, they are increasingly common. The mother-son and mother-daughter bonds have been intensified and the conjugal bond appears to be weakening.

Decline In Child Marriage

Musahar women are not only aware of the unstable world in which they live but also spend a good part of each day discussing what to do about it. The search for employment forces many men to leave their homes for short but unpredictable periods of time. Physical mobility contributes to destabilising marriage. According to the women of Rukun, the age of female marriage has been increasing in recent decades as parents attempt to stabilise the institution of marriage. About 30 years ago, girls were married at between the ages of two and ten years to grooms who were slightly older. The age gap was sufficient to cause problems once economic circumstances required young men to search for employment over a wider and wider area. It became easier for young men to become involved with other girls. Child brides were being deserted in sufficient numbers to cause concern. Even if the marriage was consummated there was the danger that a girl, when married very young, would be attracted to another man once she became older. The absence of her husband for even short periods of time would create opportunities to develop other relationships. The strict monogamy of earlier days was threatened and dying.

Census evidence confirms these claims about the decline of prepuberty marriages although they were not as typical as my informants believe. In 1911, 403 girls Per 1,000 aged 0-12 years were married; by 1921 this had fallen to 301 per 1,000. Today, only 12 percent of girls under 14 years have been married at some time. The marriage of male children was always less common, and since the turn of the present century the custom has further eroded. In 1911, 260 boys per 1,000 under 12 years of age were married; by 1921 only 216. Today, about six percent of boys under 14 years have ever been married. While child marriages are less common now, it is worth noting that of the girls who do marry before puberty, the proportion who marry older boys has in-creased from about 35 percent at the turn of the century to 50 percent today.

The decline in child marriages began fully five decades before thescheduled castes of Bihar began to experience rapid population growth. I have no explanation for this early fall in

The musahar section of the village

the popularity of prepuberty marriages. My guess is that economic change during the first half of the twentieth century began to destabilise the institution of marriage by requiring men to become more mobile. Rapid population growth since 1950 has further weakened the conjugal bond. As the older generation lives longer, their hold over their children increases, and conflict between parents and incoming brides arises. Arguments flare up because musahar women are not submissive like the chamars. Patriarchal authority of the kind that has developed amongst the chamars is not evident here, possibly because employment for men is so uncertain. The lack of a solid economic base places education out of reach for most musahars. The few thousand men with elementary education end up with the same employment problems as illiterate men. Female education is virtually non existent.

Bold But Oppressed

The tragedy of the musahar women is that they belong to a depressed community which is still too disadvantaged for them to become caught in the "low level literacy trap." Their bold behaviour, relative to the behaviour of other harijan women above them, must not be misunderstood as something which indicates their high status. Their very boldness is an index of their relative socio economic disability.

Nor does their boldness prevent the unhappiness which comes from the instability of marital relations. Marriage is the only thing which the musahar women of Rukun have. We have no l and, but we have our men", said one woman with hostility, in response to our questioning the importance of marriage. The musahars have no assets, virtually no household possessions except pots, and their children do not attend school. Few decisions have to be made because there is nothing to decide. If a temporary job comes their way it is snatched up. No thinking process is involved, if the villae sarpanch is handing out old clothes, they take whatever is offered. On more outine matters, poverty imposes its own discipline. Each day firewood must be collected, the pots scrubbed, water fetched and grain pounded. For the rest of the time the women visit each other and talk about marriage and poverty.

Marriage performs two other important functions. It not only gives musahar women status in the eyes of other castes bu it protects them from exploitation by other men. No matter how inadequate a husband may be, he is still a "guardian" of a kid. Marriage also affords a rare opportunity for celebration, often on a lavish scale. Wedding feasts can cost up to Rs 1,000 and although the bride's and groom's parents contribute equally, loans at the rate of six percent per month will be taken from landlords, if the landlord is willing to give. While such indebtedness gives rise to "bonded labour", marriage festivities throw a thin beam of optimism on an otherwise gloomy existence. For all these reasons, the collapse of marriage causes anxiety.

Obstacles To Education

A rapid increase in literacy beyond the elementary level is one of the ways out of backwardness. When this occurs, it is a fair prediction that the "independence" and insecurity of musahar women will disappear. But the obstacles to higher literacy are formidable. The musahars fear that the school will impose unpredictable cash demands. While education is "free", from time to time school teachers collect small sums of money from students to purchase fire crackers and decorations for special occasions. The musahars have very little cash, and what cash there is cannot be wasted on school entertainments. The alternative of sending children to school when they cannot fully participate in school functions is degrading. Parents prefer to have nothing to do with schools.

Although the government school is located on the other side of the road which divides Rukun, they refuse to send children, partly because they cannot give them decent clothes, hair oil or equipment of any kind. Schools in Bihar, as in all parts of the world, establish and express middle class standards. The inability of the musahars to meet these standards discourages them from making any effort. They believe, probably correctly, that if their children attend schools under the existing circumstances, they will feel even more inadequate than they already do, and will suffer a further loss of confidence. The only way of overcoming this problem is to locate government schools in the harijan section of Bihar's villages. That, of course, would be opposed by the other low castes but there is no better alternative. Unfortunately, the musahars have no idea how to organise themselves to bring about such changes. They are without leadership and direction.

The musahars have experienced major social and economic dislocation in a relatively short period of time. Their way of life today is so basic that it isdifficult icult to find the right words to describe their situation. In considering the position of musahar women, concepts liks "status", "decision making" and "independence" are not very helpful. What scope for self determination do women or, for that matter, men, have iri situations of extreme poverty ? Despite their independence, the state of marriage for musahar women is no better than that for chamar women. Moreover, as marriage has become destabilised, young musahar women increasingly fall back on their mothers. Thus their perceptions of mortality, as those of the chamar brides, are dominated by an older generation. From this we may predict the persistence of relatively high fertility for some time to come.

With literacy the confidence and articulateness of a community rises. This is important even if employment opportunities do not expand at the same rate as literacy. But as the experience of a minority of chamars suggests, the process by which literacy rises is one which also causes the independence of women to fall in the short term. Before

feminists condemn this trend, they should consider what has happened to women in a totally illiterate community. Musahar women are relatively independent, but this is virtually meaningless, given the appalling conditions in which the community must live. When the musahars become more assertive and literate, the independence of the women is certain to erode. Should we cry out against this ? When you are a member of a community as severely disadvantaged as this one, whatever benefits accrue to the community as a whole, as a result of rising literacy levels, will more than outweigh any loss of female independence. ❐

-Bula

A Teacher's Battle

Teachers in unaided schools, particularly unaided minority schools, are exposed to constant harassment by the management. The case of Ms Vijaykumari Mcgee, a teacher in Queen Mary's School, Delhi, testifies to this fact.

In February 1977, the management forced Ms Mcgee to sign *a*n agreement, and demoted her to the post of an assistant teacher from that of a TGT. Two TGT vacancies occurred in 1979 and 1981 but the management did not give Ms Mcgee either of the posts. She appealed to the Directorate Of Education, which ordered the management to restore her original status of a TGT. The management, however, failed to comply with this order. In 1980 Ms Mcgee fell ill but was denied medical leave. In spite of a directive received from the Directorate Of Education, she has not been paid for the period of leave.

A few years ago, the principal of the school suddenly pulled down the shutters of the hostel to the teachers. Ms Mcgee had been staying at the nearby Victoria Girls' School hostel for seven years. One night in September 1982, she saw a peon from an adjoining school scaling the hostel wall and jumping into the compound. Caught redhanded, the peon tendered a letter of apology. But the next day, on being questioned by the authorities, he suddenly turned violent. He chased Ms Mcgee in and out of the hostel. Brandishing a knife, he threatened to kill her if she did not return the letter of apology to him. Ms Mcgee refused to be browbeaten by him. The authorities, however, instead of helping or protecting her, suddenly locked her out of her room. She has been running from pillar to post since then, has approached the police and the bishop concerned, but has been unable to get back her hostel accommodation. The room remains locked while this young teacher has to live in a rented accommodation.

It is clear that the so called special status of minority institutions often acts as a permit for the authorities and management to exploit teachers and students who belong to the same minority community and whose interests they are supposed to safeguard through these minority institutions.

— Indrani Ghosh

Silent Rally By Women's Groups In Madras

Women's organisations in Madras got together a silent rally on December 2, to focus attention on injustices suffered by women. About 35 associations participated, coordinated by Savitri Vaithy, president of the Monday Charity Club, which runs a home for aged destitute women.

Curious heads turned and amused passersby stopped and stared as the long column of about 500 women wended its way along a six kilometre route from Teynampet to the Gandhi statue on the Marina. Many women carried placards with slogans in English and Tamil, saying "Equality", "Down With Dowry", "Better Treatment For the Better Half" and so on. Interestingly, there were several elderly women who set off on the long walk, but very few young girls.

At the Gandhi statue, the women pledged not to take or give dowry, and to form action committees in each locality to fight exploitation, harassment within the family, and obscenity in the media. The organisations also held a seminar "Challenge and Response" on December 3 and 4, where speakers spoke on subjects like commercialisation of women, self employment, economic independence, and dowry.

Vociferous rallies earlier, even tearing down and tarring of obscene posters have not helped the city which is still beleaguered by life sized hoardings of astonishing crudity. So how will a mere silent rally help? Answering this question, Savitri Vaithy said : "We are not trying to achieve anything more than creating awareness. All the women here are from comfortable, middle class backgrounds and know little of the deprivation of the poorer illiterate women. They can only sympathise with, and provoke thought among the people on their conditions."

—Bharati Sadasivam