

ORGANISING WOMEN : THE BASIC CONCERNS

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Over the last decade and a half, there have been any number of seminars, workshops and meetings about organising women. What is heartening about this one is that the concern is clearly defined women of the unorganised sector. Women in this area carry the triple burden of gender, caste and class. They bear the total responsibility for housework and for nurturing and rearing the young. In their work places, they are the lowest paid and do the hardest work. They are the most prone to sexual harassment. They also belong to the lower castes, most likely the scheduled castes and bear the burden of untouchability and caste anathema too.

Women of this sector are largely illiterate and lack basic health services. The most poorly fed in their already malnourished families, they are prone to anathema and the attendant illnesses of malnutrition like TB, etc. They provide the hinterland for prostitution and beggary. They are also the mothers of the largest population of child labour in the world.

Over the years, churches, voluntary organisations and political parties have been mobilising these women, but the basic concerns have been repeatedly skirted. They have been used to show conversions, to procure funds from abroad, and for their votes, but never have their issues been raised and support generated for the same.

What Then Are These Concerns?

1. Coalescing the triple burdens of gender, caste and class.

Subordination to patriarchal values is exemplified by wife-beating and total responsibility in the house apart from work outside. While men do leave earlier than women for work, they have a little spare time and smoking a beedi and a cup of tea at the village tea shop. Women, on the other hand, fetch water, light the fires and tend to the children. On a lean day when there is no work, men can afford to laze around, to go to the cinema, etc. While women, on lean days, fetch firewood for home and for sale, weave mats and stitch quilts. In the evenings men can spend time in the arrack shop, while women, even if they visit the toddy/liquor compound, have a quick one, and then rush back home for evening chores. As women grow older, they are free from household burdens. But that is because there is a little

* Cheyutha, HYDERABAD, Paper prepared for the National Workshop on ORGANISING WOMEN IN THE UNORGANISED SECTOR, February 22-24, 1994.

daughter or daughter-in-law to take over duties. Again, even though many older women are wise, they are never allowed to sit in the clan panchayat. That is, any possible political role to the women is totally denied. There was only one woman I remember who could do this with ease, and she was a child widow who had reared her children singlehanded, and completed her household responsibilities. The same women who could sit in the panchayat along with men committed suicide, because her daughter-in-law would not submit to her domination at home. That is, strong women live a life of great contradictory pulls and pressures.

Sexual exploitation is a very real issue for the poor women in the village and town. In the olden days, the right of the landlord was taken for granted, and women were at their beck and call. Lately however, exploitation is however more subtle. Enticements have replaced summons. Whenever caste and class tensions break out, rape of the women is part of the punishment for the lower classes/castes. While the notion that women who are agricultural labourers are relatively more free than their richer sisters is true, it is doubtful if they would reject exchange of position if possible. In fact among construction labourers, sexual harassment is so universal that newly arrived migrants from the villages hesitate to send their wives for construction work.

In the unorganised sectors there are clear divisions of sex-role. The woman is the nurturer, the daily provider, while the man is the hunter, the protector. Thus the man will work to pay the big bills of marriage, death, illnesses, while the woman works to provide the daily food. Most households will not run if the woman did not work. If a man has no wife, he remains perpetually at the lowest state of subsistence. Women-headed households suffer similarly. The man is however allowed to vent his ire by beating his wife, though regular beating is not tolerated by the wife's clan. Similarly, the woman is expected to keep a sharp tongue in the head. Desertion by the husband is common. These then are the cultural stereotypes. Among strong clans like the scheduled castes, life is not much more of a drudgery for the woman than it is for the man.

It is not also surprising that the sectors where women work are largely the unorganised ones. Agricultural labour, construction labour, beedi making, domestic labour, vegetable vendors, though providing employment to large percentage of labour remain largely unorganised, except for stray attempts by dedicated activists. Here the rates are far below the stipulated Govt. minimum wages, hours are longer and no benefits of other labour-beneficiary legislations are provided (such as ESI, PF, Workmen's compensation Act etc.). Where men and women do the same work, women are paid **lesser wages**.

Women of the unorganised sector largely belong to the backward castes and scheduled castes. Caste stereotypes apply totally. The SC women labourer cannot dream of taking tea in the village tea-shop or worshipping at the local temple. She waits patiently at the village well for the upper caste to pour out water for her. She is the lowest of the low.

The left attempts to organise women on the class question, ignoring both gender and caste. The left has been critiqued frequently and is slowly mending its ways. What is rarely being critiqued is the attempt by activists, NGOs and Govt. to organise women solely on the gender question, bypassing caste and class altogether. The entry of women activists in direct Govt. programmes and as Indian consultants to foreign donor organisations is also a recent phenomenon.

Why is the Govt. viewing women's development in terms of developing consciousness and organisation and not pure development as in the case of the poor? Why do its programmes with respect to other oppressed sections lack such an orientation? Why are international funding agencies insisting on women's programmes? Why are so many NGO's taking up women's consciousness-raising programmes, employing retired feminists, but steadfastly turning a blind eye to class and caste atrocities?

Clearly the women's movement based on gender does not face the threat of suppression as other movements do it faces the greater threat of co-option. Due to the loss of its own credibility among people, Govt. and the ruling class is offering the enticement of co-option and stability to groups, particularly women's groups. To that extent, it is willing to talk in the language of feminism. We see clearly the various Mahila Samakhya programmes in the 5 states. They have been touted as successful in raising women's consciousness, but wherever the spill over into caste and class has threatened the official programme, it is quietly contained. The arbitrary dismissal of six women workers from the Women's Development Programme in Rajasthan led to a fact finding mission by feminist groups, resulting in an interesting critique published in Oct, 1991 which raises some of these questions for the first time.

An NGO in our state leads in raising women's consciousness. Yet when Dalit men and women burnt alive on the pretext of banamati (Sorcery) it is a non-issue with the NGO. In the area covered by the NGO, women agricultural labourers are paid one-third the stipulated minimum wages. The Dalit women are not allowed to drink tea in the tea-shops, nor are they allowed to worship in the temples. In the more remote villages, they are not allowed access to the village well and bore. They are routinely denied access to the Govt. lands that rightfully belong to them. Yet these are non-issues for the NGO.

Organising on the gender question is fraught with contradictions. If one organises on the gender question, the questioning and revolt is bound to spill over into the class and caste questions. Ample funds are given both by Government and foreign donors to organise women by raising their consciousness. Issues projected are those of women's property rights, child marriage, wife-beating, etc. Women are never looked at as part of caste and class. This must be viewed naturally as an attempt to divert from the more explosive class and caste questions, i.e. the gender question is viewed by the ruling class as one which can be subsumed by the system.

Those of us who work among women, must be able to take account of the intersection of gender with caste and class. Women should be supported to identify themselves as women and as an oppressed group, yet at the same time, relating this to their class and caste experience. Those who wish to organise around wife-beating and drunkenness, yet do not wish to touch untouchability, or the land and wage structure, are falling into the ruling-class trap. Those who wish to take-up only 'political questions, but do not touch the politics of patriarchy, will never be able to tap the real potential of women. It is indeed difficult to see a vast mobilisation today on the gender question, as difficult as it is see a similar one on caste and class. Yet work at all level can give rise to tapping these hidden potentials. Supporting women leaders by helping them, with recognition in their village, encouraging them to be assertive in the village gatherings, training them with insights into the world beyond will enrich any organisation of the oppressed castes and classes.

2. Continuity of leadership : In any organisation, this is important so that the political role is defined clearly and substantial gains are made. In the unorganised sector in India, women's role as mother, grand mother or daughter is so tightly defined as to deny her a political role and interrupt active leadership.

The most active women in any organisation of the poor have been the older ones-those who have completed their duties of child rearing and whose daughters-in-law look after the hearth. Yet I have found that even older activist women, with the sudden death or illness of a daughter-in-law are forced to forgo their activist roles and return to the home. Apart from the family in India, there are no social services that support the women in their various roles. Inside the family if there are no other women, support structure is again absent. These have to be patiently built up if continuity of leadership is to be assured. Sex-roles and stereotypes cannot be destroyed in a generation; support structures that can help women caught in these binds can be built up though in a generation.

3. Support Structures for Organisations : Apart from support structures for activist women among the poor, support structures for the movement and organisation also need to be built up. The unorganised sector has very few resources of its own, particularly women. It is rich in energy, in creative experience, in variety of struggle. Yet access to the bureaucracy, to advocacy, to the media and to legal aid is minimal. These should not only be provided, the activists can be trained to use these facilities with ease.

One problem which has to be faced is that of finances. Any movement/organisation needs funds and the poor women can hardly raise these from their constituency. While the Naxalites can raise funds from contractors in the area and leading activists like Medha Patkar can raise funds on the strength of the name, it remains a continuing problem for many as to how to raise money. While international funding agencies are yet ready enough to fund such work, activists find it problematic to accept such funds. Tapping Govt. resources could be a likely alternative. In this context, I feel that a variety of experiences and choices need to be studied to help choose alternatives.

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