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# *Rural Origins of Women's Liberation in India*

THE YEARS after 1970, climaxing in International Women's Year of 1975, have seen a significant growth in militant and mass-based women's organizations in India. Not only is there a rising consciousness of women's special oppression, and "women's liberation" suddenly a respectable topic, but there is a significant turmoil at the very base of society, expressing itself in agitation and organization. New organizations have emerged in the last few years, from *Dalit* (untouchable) students to upper class cosmopolitans, from agricultural labourers to professional careerists. The older party fronts have been revitalized, with growing membership and widening network. And all have been pushed to greater radicalism, in rhetoric if not in action.

Among these developments, the growth of left and especially communist-led organizations are of most significance for the mass of toiling women and thus for a women's movement in the real sense of the term. The change is evident if we review briefly the growth of Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Communist Party India (Marxist). The CPI (M) probably has the largest mass-based women's organization in India. Operating at the state level, it has picked up a sizeable base among the rural poor in the last few years. In Tamil Nadu, the first conference of the Democratic Women's Union was held on 28 and 29

Decer ' :r 1974 in Tanjavur district, with a membership of 27, half o. iese from among the Harijan agricultural labourers of Tanjavur district itself. In West Bengal the Ganatantrik Mahila Samiti (Democratic Women's Organization) held its 14th state conference in April 1973 and proclaimed a notable growth especially among the peasantry and middle classes since the last conference in 1970. 121,632 members from all the districts except one were represented. In Kerala the Women's Federation has grown since 1969-70 to a membership of over 100,000. Its powerful base is Alleppey district where the agricultural labour movement is strong. The Shramik Mahila Sabha (Toiling Women's Organization) of Maharashtra has come to the forefront since 1974. It has its largest base outside Bombay, in the districts of Dhulia and Thana where there has been work among tribal agricultural labourers.[1]

The CPI (M) has no national women's organization, and *People's Democracy* has published little in terms of reporting or ideological guidance in 1975. In contrast the CPI has long had a national organization, the National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW) and published plenty of material during the International Women's Year. These efforts at present seem mainly designed to draw women into support for the Congress Party as a major auxiliary in the fight against the "twin forces of imperialism and fascism"[2], and at its best the ideological approach remains infected with large elements of bourgeois ideology about "women's natural place". A republic day number article notes, "Nature has given women the responsibility of bearing and rearing children but it has given her other qualities and talents also."[3] In spite of these differences at the top the pattern of growth of the CPI organizations seems to be similar to that of the CPI (M). The NFIW grew significantly between its 7th national conference in 1970 and its 8th conference in December of 1973 and new units were established in Maharashtra, Bangalore, Mysore, Himachal Pradesh and Jammu.[4]

## *Rising Tempo of Militancy*

There is thus significant growth in the women's organizations of the major left parties. There have been new organizations as well from the Women's Anti-price-rise Front to the Progressive Organization of Women (POW) of Hyderabad. There are still significant limitations to all this: there is no sign as yet that the Left at an all-India level has seriously committed itself to building up a general mass-based women's liberation movement; there are no significant set of activists with a commitment to the women's movement as such on a broad scale; the ideological guidelines for organization as well as theory have only begun to be put forward. But the growth that has come up from the base is indicative of a very broad process of social change.

What is the reason behind this growth? These dramatic developments have coincided with the proclamation of IWY, but it would be an idealistic view of social processes to say that IWY or the influence of

external "women's liberation" themes has been the cause. IWY has resulted in many middle and upper-class-based meetings and programmes. Its existence has been useful for mass organizing—it lends legitimacy to be able to say that women all over the world are rising up, that the leaders of every country have recognized the special oppression of women and their rights to equality. But IWY by itself has done nothing and its detente-ish slogan of "equality, development and peace" tends to run counter to the growing tendency of women all over the world to fight for their rights.

IWY was proclaimed as a response to the rising women's movements in the west and to their growing trend to a socialist ideology; as a response to the militant participation by south-east Asian and African women in armed liberation struggles and their linking of national liberation with women's liberation. It is a reflection of the militancy at the base and, in part, an effort to co-opt it. Similarly, the growth of women's organizations in India—even among the middle classes—reflects a massive stirring at the very basis of society, a rising tempo of women's militancy and participation in mass struggles and, in the course of this participation, their rising consciousness of their own particular oppression and desire to fight it.

But the exact class structure, the shifting relations of production behind this must be analyzed carefully. Here the situation is different in India from the western countries, China in the 1920s and 1930s, and many Third World countries today.[5]

*Participation in Social Production*

The key factor is women's role in the work force. The woman who is only a housewife may be specially oppressed as a woman and deprived of her full human potential. She may share the class situation and oppression of her husband, but she does not generate a woman's movement. It is the women who participate in social production and experience not only a double oppression but also double work, who become the force behind general movements and women's movements. In India there is a significant variation in women's participation in the work force. There is regional-national variation: the participation is much higher in the south and west (and Maharashtra and Andhra have the highest rates of the non-hill states) and almost nil in the Punjab and Uttar Pradesh. There is also a historical variation: women's participation has been declining over time as a result of the continuing neocolonial dependence and resulting economic stagnation and inability to use available labour power. Still, the basic pattern of this participation remains and can be described fairly simply: women are a significant factor as productive workers among the rural poor, but they are hardly to be found in the cities. They are not especially significant as yet among most sections of middle-class employees, and they are almost non-existent among the organized industrial working class.

Only six per cent of all working women are in the organized sector including th middle-class and working-class jobs. The remaining 14 per cent of non-agricultural working women are in low-paid, unorganized positions in small factories, contract work, bidi and similar household industries and domestic work. (Note that even though the 1971 census figures may be an underestimation of the actual number of working women those who are underestimated are even more overwhelmingly in the unorganized urban and rural sectors). In many industries where women have had a significant position in the past—such as textiles, jute, mines—this has been vanishing over the years. This lack of women workers in the organized and especially industrial work force is in contrast to the present situation in much of south-east Asia (where women fill up positions in many industries, especially textiles). and to the situation in China in the 1920s (where women formed a significant proportion of factory workers but did not have mach role in field work). It also contrasts with Latin America where women participate more in urban work but not in agricultural labour. Thus while Indian women workers have always had a tradition of militancy (from the millworkers' struggles of the 1930s and 1940s down to the present) it has been difficult for them to play a leading role.

The situation is different in the rural areas. Of all working women 50 per cent are agricultural labourers, 30 are poor peasant cultivators. As noted above it is in the rural areas especially that census figures may be an underestimation of actual work participation. In fact, though middle and rich peasant families may prefer to keep their women in the home and in "semi-feudal" bondage, among the rural poor throughout most of India women labour in the fields as they have done for generations. The fate of women—a women's movement—in India is thus particularly bound up with the fate of the rural poor.

### *Rural Poor Assert Themselves*

Prior to independence the main contradiction in Indian rural society was between peasants as a whole(including the rich, poor, even landless)and the semi-feudal landlords, merchants and bureaucrats who were the allies of British rule. After independence as a result of limited land reforms, a partial movement against the worst semi-feudal excesses and the development of green revolution technology, this situation began to change. A section of rich peasants emerged, developing as capitalist farmers and consolidating with the remaining landlords to form the ruling class in the villages. Poor peasants became pauperized; while various forms of "semi-feudal" dependence(debt bondage, sharecropping) remained, landlessness increased and the agricultural labour class began to emerge as an increasingly self-conscious section. More and more the basic contradiction became that between the poor and landless peasants on the one hand, and rich peasants and landlords (including both semi-feudal and capitalist) on the other. The rural poor began to assert themselves as the motive force in all rural

...the Kisan Sabhas. When these began ...revive after 1965, they were made up primarily of poor peasants. New agricultural labour unions also began to eme... In many ways the Bihar famine of 1966 and the Naxalbari revolt of 1967 signalled the beginning of this shift. But it was not until the renewed famine days and struggles after 1970 that the rural poor began to be the significant focus of agitations and struggles

This assertion of the rural poor meant also the emergence of women and of Dalits (Harijans and Adivasis) who make up the majority of poor peasants and wage labourers. But women in movements of agricultural labour and poor peasantry did not simply come forward as disembodied representatives of a class. They came forward as doubly oppressed members of that class which had to endure special burdens: housework as well as agricultural work that was always more poorly paid than that of men; and the inferior position in society (the scandalously low sex ratio in most parts of India is mainly a reflection of the fact that girl babies are given less food and care than boys). They had to endure the weight of various kinds of traditional bondage, dowry, the subordination to the authority of men, bondages which remained even though they were less heavy among the rural poor than among the rich and higher castes. If low caste and Dalit they were considered sexual prey for high-caste landlords. All these burdens were bound together in their lives. To fight the class battles they had to fight also their oppression as women; to have the right to work at a decent wage meant the freedom to go out of the house; to take part in organizing required some release from home burdens; to realize their potential as half the working class meant a struggle against male domination within that class. All this of course was equally true for working-class women, rich peasants and middle-class employees and housewives but because women were less represented in the urban work force, the question of their participation in movements was not so pressing. So women were militant in occasional battles of urban workers but were never involved in union leadership. Women were so few in the unions any way. However, the issue could hardly be ignored so easily in the case of the rural poor.

## *Communist Women's Organizations in Maharashtra*

In this way the increasing assertion of poor peasants and agricultural labourers has brought the "women question" to the forefront. The emergence of women as a significant factor in the agitation of the rural poor especially since 1970 has been the base of the developing women's movement. Maharashtra provides the most outstanding example.

Since this article focuses on mass-based, left-led and particularly communist-led women's organizations, a historical background is necessary. There was in fact almost nothing that could be called a communist-led women's movement prior to 1970. In contrast to Vietnam (where the Indochina Communist Party established a women's union in the year of

its own inding, 1930) and to China (where leaders like Mao recognized the importance of women in the anti-feudal struggle from the beginning)[6] this task has been neglected in India.

The general tendency of the communist movement has been to take a "liquiationist" stand—to recognize women's issues only as class issues and to use women as a ladies' auxiliary to the general movement.[7]

This can be clearly seen in the case of Maharashtra and Bombay. There was no separate women's organization of the CPI before independence. When communists joined the Congress Socialist Party and worked within the Congress, their women also began to work within the All-India Women's Congress (AIWC). Here they played a major role, taking up the demands of lower middle class and toiling women, and giving a militant mass character to the organization. During the war they allied themselves with the Congress women inside the AIWC against its upper class and pro-British members: they organized women and brought them on to the streets for the first time in agitations for food, kerosene and other facilities: and as a result many women were attracted to the party.

After 1948 there was a split inside the AIWC as in other mass organizations, and communists were expelled from the AIWC. There was some immediate effort to continue organizing. In Bombay, for instance, a Shramik Mahila Parishad (Toiling Women's Conference) was held in 1949, the first effort to rally working-class women, and it drew over two hundred delegates and some four to five thousand women in a rally.

## *Delegates for Belgrade*

But there was no effort to form an all-India communist-led women's organization, and for the party as a whole the women's issue was dropped. In Maharashtra, some women who were close to the CPI kept up the theme; Shantabai Mukherji, the wife of a communist trade union activist ran a magazine for a time called *Shramik Mahila*, and this was the focus for a certain amount of effort. But women members of the party were sent elsewhere, primarily into direct trade union work. "Sometimes when I used to find time I would go to women's meetings," was how one long-time activist put it.[8] This was clearly not a party-directed effort, or a programme that had any priority. In 1955-56 the NFIW was formed as an all-India organization, but there was no Maharashtra or even Bombay unit established.

In 1963, finally, the Shramik Mahila Parishad was organized as a Maharashtra unit of the NFIW and on 8 March 1964 it held a conference in Bombay, which was described as the first session of the Shramik Mahila Parishad or Sabha, the first official party effort. But the main purpose of this, say old activists, was to send some delegates to the International Democratic Women's Conference in Belgrade. The CPI here was responding to an international demand and not taking an initiative of its own. Dange is said to have made his intentions clear: "I'm a short-sighted man—you may have long-term goals in mind, but you

have to organize to send delegates to the conference."

The implication was that after that the party could forget it, and it did. In spite of the fact that the conference was a success, and about 15,000 women, mostly working class, gathered for the march, the women's organization was not maintained or developed. From 1964 until 1973-74 there was no communist-led women's organization functioning in Maharashtra.

Why was this ? The central problem seems to have been the policy of the party leadership as revealed in this remark: "Our main grievance is that the party has never taken an interest in organizing women on their own basis." A CPI activist has defended Dange by saying that he was interested in women, but "he always stressed working women; he referred to the 'women's departments' of unions in Europe and what useful role they played during strikes"—and this was in fact the "liquidationist" tendency: women's problems were seen only as workers' problems; their main role was as auxiliary to general class struggle. And these themes pervaded all sections of the communist movement. There was no consideration of the special barriers to participation of women and it was felt that it was not appropriate to organize around "social" issues.Housework? — "oh; that's hardly an issue we can take up" either as a demand for public facilities or in terms of asking male comrades to share some of the burden. Equal wages? not so relevant because "after all it's the family income that's important." And so on. There was a tendency to say, "How can we organize the women when we have barely begun to reach the men?" without the recognition that there were ways in which men themselves could be organized through organizing women.

*Years of Famine*

What changed this, perhaps decisively, was the Maharashtra "drought," the famine years of 1970-73, the most severe in history even in this food-deficit state. Fifteen to thirty million people out of a total population of fifty million were affected. In some districts there was continuous drought over the three years. The most affected districts were those of western Maharashtra, the region which had also produced the most solid rich peasant strata on which the Congress Party had laid its political base, the region of kulak-controlled cooperatives and a certain amount of entrepreneurial capitalist agriculture with a degree of development of an agricultural labourer class. The effect of all this was to generate a massive rural unrest, which provoked the Maharashtra state government to institute the largest scale famine relief work programme ever seen in India. Relief work employment beginning in 1971 reached a peak in 1973 when nearly 5 million of the rural poor were given jobs, primarily at "metal-breaking" (stone-crushing).[9]

It is important to emphasize that this relief work programme as well as other measures of the government during the famine period was in response to the fear of rural unrest. After all it had been a Maharashtrian,

Y B Chav with deep roots in the western Maharashtra peasant districts who had been the first to voice the fear that the "green revolution" might "turn into a red one." And important administrators admitted, "it is on the cards that a violent upheaval would inevitably have occurred had it not been for the foresight of the administration in providing work for the needy."[10] Therefore the famine work projects were started and the government made a promise of work to those who demanded it (*magel tyala kam* became the theme of the period) but the result of the relief works in turn was to draw out massive numbers of the rural poor into a collective work experience which in turn intensified their class consciousness.

It may be noted that the Bihar famine of 1966 (perhaps more severe in its effects) was not accompanied by any significant mass movements. In the case of most famines since, the tendency even of the left party papers, *New Age* and *People's Democracy*, has been to give reporting stress on the misery of the people and the inadequacy of government efforts, rather than on revolts and agitations. In contrast, the pages of both papers in reporting on the Maharashtra famine by late 1972 and 1973 were filled with accounts of struggles, *bandhs*, *gheraos*, riots and agitations. However, the most complete statistical information has been given in *Gramin Shramik* (Rural Toiler), the Lal Nishan rural paper covering all varieties of rural struggles. It might be useful here to summarize the available data.

## *United Struggle*

The period of struggle was inaugurated by a united left conference of 8000 agricultural labourers and poor peasants held in Srirampur (Ahmednagar district) in February 1970 and then by a march in Bombay of 30,000 tribals, poor peasants and workers on 4 March. Following this, between March and December 1970 there were a total of some 34 demonstrations, marches, strikes and meetings involving 53,000 people. Then from January to October 1971 a total of 157,618 of the rural poor were listed as participating in 66 actions of all kinds, including marches, gheraos, road closings (the first appearance of these) and one simultaneous demonstration of 50,000 poor peasants before 119 taluka government offices on May 1. Approximately another 120,000 took part in agitations,[11] in the six months before February 1973 but the detailed reporting stopped as the struggle was heating up. However according to a government source, in the first 8 months of 1973 there were 1529 marches, 171 processions, 97 bandhs and 52 gheraos, a significant leap in the numbers of actions and correspondingly of people involved. 27,000 persons had to be "arrested or restrained" for breaches of the law.[12] Finally came 15 and 16 May 1973, with one of the most widespread and united actions in the history of Maharashtra, perhaps of India. On 15 May with five left parties (Lal Nishan, CPI, CPI (M), Socialist, Peasants and Workers) taking part, a million and a half rural workers on the relief projects struck work, and on 16 May the communist parties organized a supporting strike of some 500,000 Bombay workers.[13]

These actions were organized by the left parties and around demands ranging from the takeover of forest land organizing specially affected groups (as the tribals) to the basic underlying issues of food (price rise and a demand for ration food) and work. However, the crucial fact was that in all of this the women, poor peasant and agricultural labourer women, were taking an increasingly prominent role. And their militancy was noted by everyone, from government officials to left organizers. Subramaniam, author of the pro-government famine study, notes that women were more aggressive and persistent in demanding facilities on the relief works.[14] It was the women of Ahmednagar district, a CPI activist recalls, who took the initiative in starting "road closings" as a new form of direct agitation. It was the tribal women, according to the young male organizers of the Shramik Sanghathana in Dhulia district who were the most tenacious, the last to compromise in a gherao and the first to take direct action on such issues as *daru* (alcohol). "The women were the first" in militancy and activity, asserted an independent organizer of a tax-refusal movement in turbulent Valva taluka of Sangli district, where village self-defence squads formed when the villagers rebelled against the lack of roads and developmental aid. "It was the women who were in the forefront—they were the first to break through the police lines, the first to fight", remarked Lal Nishan organizers. As Ahilya Rangnekar said, "When women take part in the movement, its quality is different. Women are more militant, more lasting and have a tenacity to fight..."

*Fighting Spirit*

The reason for the militancy was simple. The double oppression always faced by toiling women was heightened during the famine period. Here they were forced, for a meagre pay, and much less than the men, to work on backbreaking jobs under the hot sun while in addition they had to care for their homes and their children as they had always done, but under conditions where it became increasingly difficult to procure even the minimum of food for cooking. Women faced their oppressors both at the point of production and at the point of consumption: landlords and rich peasants in the fields or often corrupt supervisors on the job; and they were also the ones to directly face the exploiting merchants, rising prices and often absolute unavailability of food. With the famine and its relief projects it was not only the low-caste field labourers who were involved but also women of "respectable" middle peasant families who came out of their homes, sometimes for the first time, to labour with others. More heavily exploited, and exploited at every point, it is no wonder that the women were more aroused and more militant than the men.

This militancy was recognized by the administration. It lay behind the fact that relief works were promised to women(*magel tyala kam* included *magel tila kam*!) as well as to men; and it lay behind the declarations that men and women would receive equal wages on the relief works from 15

April 1973 onwards. Then the right to equal wages and the right to work itself were extended generally when the government initiated the Employment Guarantee Scheme (EGS) which promised work to those who demanded it, including women. Later the Minimum Wages Act was finally extended to agriculture in November 1974 with a fixed Rs 3 minimum for 7 hours' work for men and women equally. Whether Rs 3 is living wage, whether the EGS is any long-term solution and whether even these reformist measures can be implemented by the present regime are different questions. The important fact is that it was first in the rural areas that the most important rights of women—the right to have productive work, and the right to receive equal wages even when specific tasks are different, as in agriculture—were recognized in principle. And this recognition was itself a result of the women's participation in rural agitations and a victory for the democratic movement of the people.

### *Against Price-rise*

The left parties were also taking note of the women's role. Though there were no separate campaigns for equal rates, the demands of the parties and unions and of the Landless-Agricultural Labourer-Poor Peasant Conference included one for equal wages for men and women both in agriculture and on the relief works. "During the latter part of the third year of the drought," a government spokesman notes, "the demand for equal wages for men and women which had been voiced for long, began to grow in intensity".[15] The issue of women's special oppression began to be noted and stressed in speeches and occasional articles for rural activists, and organizers began to call on women activists and wives of activists to take part in tours and meetings and speak to the rural women. Still it was in the cities rather than the rural areas that the first specifically women's fighting organization was formed. This was the United Women's Anti-price-rise Committee organized on 3 October 1972 in Dadar, Bombay.

The Anti-price-rise Committee was an outgrowth of the famine agitation in two ways. First of all, as the theme of rural struggles it was anti-price rise rather than demand for work and wages that could be most easily extended to the rural areas. The CPI and CPI (M) had for much of the period a tendency to focus their demands on the consumption issues of food and price-rise, while Lal Nishan tended to focus more on the demand for work.[16] Secondly, many of the communist and socialist organizers were women who had experienced at first hand the militancy of the rural women in tours and campaigns in the rural areas. Mrinal Gore, the socialist leader, was touring in Ahmednagar and Bhir and elsewhere in late 1972 and 1973. They returned to their city homes with the confidence that rural women could act with the same tenacity and fighting spirit. As a Poona organizer noted, the famine agitations were their "first experience of women's organized strength as women." There were few left activists in the

countryside but there were some in the cities where they started organizing.

The Anti-price-rise Committee was part of the trend towards left unity that was developing by the end of 1972. Indeed it was the first solid organizational expression of the trend, the Trade Union Joint Action Committee and the Sangarsha Samiti having been formed on a stable basis in late 1973 and early 1974. Its leading members were from the Socialist Party, CPI (M) and CPI in Bombay, and from other parties (Lal Nishan, Peasants and Workers) in the district towns. By the end of 1974, however, the CPI had began its withdrawal from this as from other united fronts. After its first meeting the women had two actions in the same month, a *dharna* of 1000, and a *satyagraha* of 3000, and then went ahead through 1973 with alternating programmes of *gheraos* and marches. The gheraos brought out 30 to 40 women to surround top capitalists (the president of the Oil and Steel Merchants Association, the managers of Lever Brothers and of the Tatas were threatened) and Ministers (Chief Minister Vasantrao Naik of Bombay state and his Civil Supplies Minister, and Y B Chavan and Mrs Gandhi). The marches brought out over 25,000 women into the streets, brandishing their rolling-pins and beating their *thalis*.

## *Chain Reaction*

The Anti-price-rise Committee had severe limitations as a "women's movement." It was limited to urban women, mainly in Bombay and some of the district towns; and it was not really focused on the root problems of women as such but rather on the single issue of price-rise and related consumption issues (like availability of foodgrains). But its achievements were significant. It was a militant left united front, thus breaking the pattern by which women's organizations were splintered as "fronts" of every left party. It channelled the developing anger of the people which up to that point in Bombay had been turned against the small shop-keepers by the Shiv Sena, and turned it against the big capitalists and the state. It brought women on to the streets in militant demonstrations, proving again to the left leaders that urban middle-class and working class women could be aggressive in gheraos as workers, and militant in action as the rural women had already shown themselves. And this, along with the fighting participation of women textile workers and workers' wives in the big, bitter strike of January 1974, was crucial. Inevitably, the special problems and needs of women came into focus

It was after the rural workers' massive general strike on 16 May and the Anti-price-rise Committee's rolling-pin march of Diwali that the CPI and CPI (M) reactivated their women's fronts. On 17 and 18 November 1973, the second session of the Shramik Mahila Parishad, controlled by the CPI but involving women from Lal Nishan and the Peasants and Workers' Party, was held in Karad, Satara district. It brought to its session agricultural labourers and industrial workers who had taken part in both rural demands for work and urban anti-price-rise

agit on. For the first time since 1964 it could be said that a women's orga...zation of the CPI was in existence in Maharashtra. Similarly, the CPI (M) moved to establish its organization, the Shramik Mahila Sabha, with a conference in January 1974 in Bombay. Outside of Bombay and the areas where Ahilya Rangnekar was working, the main units of SMS were found among the tribals in Dhulia and Thana districts organized by Sharad Patil and Godavari Parulekar, and among workers in Ichalkaranji.

## *Liberation on the Agenda*

And more developments began to happen. *Magowa,* an independent Marxist journal brought out perhaps the first women's liberation issue of a left magazine in September 1973. The articles reflected not only the problems of middle-class women who constituted its main readership, but also the role of tribal women in Shahada (Dhulia district) who had become famous for their role in the general movement and their special work of smashing alcoholism. In Shahada the affiliated activists had begun to hold study camps for the women. Among the neo-Buddhists, the Dalit Panthers were emerging as the main organization of youth, but their educated girls were stirring also, and perhaps the first student organization in Maharashtra to express a militant feminist position was the Mahila Samta Sainik Dal (League of Women Soldiers for Equality) formed among Buddhist students in Milind College in Aurangabad. The Lal Nishan Party, which had never had a women's unit before, brought out a Women's Liberation special issue (the first such issue of a communist political paper) on 8 March 1975, and joined with students and the CPI women in organizing a Women's Day March, the first time when hundreds of working-class women in Poona took part in a demonstration that focused on their needs as women. The Indochina Victory Day marchers of 17 April and 1 May in Poona brought with them special slogans hailing the victory of the fighting women of Vietnam, Cambodia and Africa. Socialist leader Baba Adhav turned his attention to the problems of *devdasis*—girls from poor and mainly untouchable village families sold into prostitution under the cover of religion, and a Devadasi Conference was held at Gadhinglaj, near Kolhapur, in September.

But the climax of all these efforts was the United Women's Liberation Struggle Conference (Samyukta Stri Mukti Sangarsha Parishad) held in Poona on 18 and 19 October which admitted all observers. It was indeed strikingly new in bringing together women of all social classes, and especially toiling women, in an atmosphere of relative equality. More than this it was an effort to begin at a state level what had not yet been done at an all-India level—to build a women's liberation movement that would deal with not only the basic issues of all oppressed women but also the needs and power of toiling women, especially agricultural labourers, and to build it as a united effort with participation from all working-class-based parties.

Seven hundred women attended the conference, 350 from outside

agricultural labourers and urban workers, the largest group being 65 agricultural labourers from the Shramik Sanghathana in Dhulia district who had collected 70 rupees each from others in their village to come as representatives to the conference. Other agricultural labourers came from Ahmednagar, Kolhapur, other parts of Dhulia and Poona district itself, some braving the threats of officials who had warned them against participating. They surprised the middle-class participants by their frequent eloquence in speaking of needs and struggles. Textile workers from Bombay, ginning and pressing workers, bank employees and clerks, housewives and students also came, and from Poona itself Dalit municipal sweepers and factory workers mingled with professors, clerks and students.

In the organizing of the conference the main role had been played by the Lal Nishan Party, a number of independent radicals and women and activists associated with the *Magowa*—Shramik Sanghathana group. A number of factors, including disruptions of the last couple of months, had prevented broader participation. Towards the end of the conference, women from CPI (M), the Socialist Party and even the Republican Party had become involved and joined in supporting the main resolution, and the glimmer of a broader left mass-based unity was visible.

*Freedom Road*

The main demand dominating the discussions at the conference was the right of women to work, to participation in socially productive labour. Every aspect of women's oppression and women's needs was dealt with: opposition to dowry, fight against the ravages of alcoholism, anger at the atrocities committed against poor women, especially Dalits and tribals, and nurses and village volunteers isolated in the villages. But the most unifying theme was the right of women to have a full share in all fields of production and public and political life, the right to have some basis of economic independence that would give them the strength to fight the customary bondage and special oppression. Even the devadasi movingly described the hardships and religious superstitions that forced untold thousands of girls into slvery, and how it was difficult for her to oppose the custom thoroughly because she was still dependent on it for a livelihood. "If you give me alternative work I can stand up against anything", she said.

The main focus was on agricultural labourers and toiling women. As all women face oppression and need liberation, the movemen is for all. But the main strength lay in the vast majority of working women, factory workers who had experienced struggle and could help organize others, most of all the 2,500,000 or more Maharashtrian women agricultural labourers who were beginning to organize themselves. It was in this conference that the militancy, determination and basic strength of the rural poor women (which had emerged during the famine period, and underlay the growth of all left organizations

with a mass base among women) began to express itself in the context of a broad women's movement. And along with the focus on toiling women was the explicit recognition of the connection of the women's movement with the working class and all oppressed sections, a recognition that while perhaps women needed a separate organization, their needs could be achieved only through revolutionary social change and the establishment of a socialist society.

The conference did not create a solidified organization. A kind of "communications committee" was formed to exchange information about work going on in a variety of places. The aim from the very beginning had been not to build an organization but to give thrust and direction to a movement. Most of those attending seemed to feel that in some significant way this had been achieved. There was a new voice of women that was beginning to be heard in the speeches of both labourers and students. In contrast with the peace dove (women's symbol of IWY) and rolling-pin (of the Anti-price rise-Front,) the badge of the conference was the clenched fist with the slogan "Unity *zindabad*" that had become the mark of the largest organized section of women, the Shahada tribal labourers. And a new burst of creative energy among young women and men found expression in poems and poster exhibitions and the new songs of the conference. These songs were sung not only by the tribal labourers but also by young housewives and workers from Bombay who were beginning to realize that their struggle was a fundamental one and that it was bound up with the total movement for the liberation of society. While the building of a women's organization and movement lay ahead, the real objectives were not lost even in the rhymes and rhythms of poetry:

> Hear us, O hear us,
> The age of oppression will be over now.
> Mother Ganga, mother Jamuna will not have to meet the sea;
> No girl, no mother will have any fear of men.
> The age of oppression will be over now:
> On the earth the toilers will not be bound in chains,
> And each woman will have the right to work alongside of men.
> Hear us, O hear us,
> The age of oppression will be over now.

See *People's Democracy*, 30 January 1972; 29 April 1972; 19 January 1975; and interviews.

See for instance the coverage of women and the photograph of volunteers at the Vijayawada session in *New Age* dated 9 February 1975. From the beginning of IWY the CPI-led Indian Committee for International Women's Year has been working closely with the government-led National Committee for International Women's Year; see almost any issue of *New Age*, especially that dated 23 February 1975.

*New Age*, 26 January 1975.

*New Age*, 16 December 1973.

5 The basic facts about the patterns of work participation of women in India and other aspects of their position have been summarized in numerous places by now and are well known: see among other sources the Status of Women Commission Report. For a broad international comparison Esther Boserup's *Women's Role in Economic Development* is still the most comprehensive and useful. For the case of China see, among others, the Women's Special Issue of the *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, January-March 1975.

6 On Vietnam see especially Arlene Bergman, *Women in Vietnam*, San Francisco 1975, and Mai Thi Tu, *Vietnamese Women: Yesterday and Today*, Association of Vietnamese Students in Canada, 1973. On China, see the *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars, op. cit.*, and Marilyn Young, (Ed), *Women in China*, University of Michigan 1972.

7 To take secondary contradictions (women's oppression, and caste oppression) as primary would be a "right" deviation; to ignore secondary contradictions altogether and treat class as the only contradiction has been called a "liquidationist" or "left deviationist" tendency.

8 Quotes are from interviews except where otherwise indicated.

9 For a comprehensive statistical overview see V Subramaniam, *Parched Earth, The Maharashtra Drought 1970-73*, Government of Maharashtra, 1975.

10 *Ibid.*, p 40 ff.

11 *Gramin Shramik*, 1 December 1971 (Belwandi session special issue) and 15 February 1973.

12 Subramaniam, *op. cit.*, p 411.

13 *New Age*, 3 June 1973; *Peoples' Democracy*, 27 May 1973. Lal Nishan and CPI (M) sources agree on the 1½ million figure: CPI cites 3 million but this is undoubtedly an overestimation.

14 Subramaniam, *op. cit.* pp 433, 469.

15 *Ibid.*, p 404.

16 See *New Age*, *People's Democracy* and *Gramin Shramik* for this period. More interestingly, after June, while CPI (M) tended to project an extension of the demand for "food and work" on an all-India scale (*People's Democracy*, 27 May 1973) the CPI shifted to a "dehoarding" campaign, which was not felt by government to be so much of a threat since its immediate targets were the merchants rather than the administration; See Subramaniam, *op.cit.*, p. 318.

17 For the first time the basic issue of women's liberation was coming into prominence—abolition of the sexual division of labour by which women were limited to "home and children" while men held a monopoly on productive labour.