An Assertion of Womanpower

Organizing Landless Women in Maharashtra

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In 1971, 50.46% of the working women in India, a number over 15 million, were agricultural wage workers, that is, they had no land and worked for a wage on the land of others. Surveys show that the average earning of women agricultural workers is extremely low, and that on an average, they obtain work for 149 days a year only.

Besides working for extremely low wages and having a long working day of 12 to 14 hours, women workers in the rural sector face the most severe oppression. Sexual abuse by landlords and police is common; so is

drunkenness of husbands and beating of wives. The burden of the dual role of housekeeper and worker affects the women badly as they toil for long hours in the field and then return to do the housework under primitive conditions. They have to fetch water and fuel from long distances and cook on wood fires, while children cry with hunger, neglect and fatigue.

One necessary step to change these conditions is self-organization by women. Organizing women rural workers has been more difficult. Most of the development efforts directed to women in this sector consist of health services or employment generation in the periods when they have no work. This has no long-lasting effect on the lives of rural women. The only process which can change the conditions is the development of an organization wherein women become conscious of their own problems and struggle to change these conditions.

Experience of successful organizing is so rare that we decided to study and analyse one such case where women successfully organized themselves to collectively assert their power, to collectively struggle against the oppression they felt as women and as workers. Our purpose was to understand the handicaps and discrimination suffered by being poor and being women.

In 1972, in an area of 150 villages in Shahada *taluk*, Dhulia district, in Maharashtra, groups of agricultural rural women from the tribal communities went around all the liquor dens and broke the liquor pots. This action against drinking by husbands was a revolt against wife-beating and the subordination of women.

Prior to this, the *Shramik Sanghatana*, a toilers' organization, had been organizing the rural workers around economic demands. However, women's participation in the movement was marginal. The act of breaking the liquor pots symbolized the awakening of women, a break from being silent sufferers to taking their lives into their own hands. Since then, the women have been struggling against individual cases of working women's oppression, such as rape, beating by police and landlords and wife-beating. They have also been participating more actively in the *Shramik Sanghatana*'s economic and political struggles around wages, employment and elections. The women's committees are informal, unstructured and developed by the women themselves, not from a plan by outsiders. Our enquiry attempted to gain an insight into the dynamics of this undocumented, fragmented process. Reconstructed from the words and memory of village working women, it captures some of the mechanisms of the process, even while it leaves many questions unanswered.

Social and Economic Background

Shahada *taluk* in Dhulia district of Maharashtra is an extremely rich and fertile area. In the 19th Century it was inhabited by a tribal population

who cultivated their own small independent farms. In the latter part of the century constant feuding between dynasties and conditions of war and instability forced the tribals to give up their farming and flee into the nearby mountains.

In the 18th Century and in an effort to resume cultivation, the British government offered tracts of land for sale at low prices. Since the tribals had been living in the forest, only a few of them were able to buy back small pieces of land. Most of the fertile land was bought by cultivating farmers from outside the area.

The large farms of the non-tribals were farmed on a capitalist basis. Severe forms of labour bondage existed. Through small loans, the tribal labourers and their families were bonded for life. In an effort to increase the area of land they cultivated, the landlords would regularly engage in various forms of deceit, and a large number of tribals were gradually cheated of their small plots.

The existing landholding pattern of the area reflects the result of this process. About 75% of the land is in the hands of 15% of people who are mainly non-tribal outsiders and 25% is in the hands of 25% to 30% of the local population, mostly tribals. The small plots of three acres are insufficient for survival. Hence, even owners of these small plots have to work as agricultural labour. Some plots are five to ten acres and the output of these is sufficient for survival. Tribals who have no land of their own work as agricultural labourers.

The productivity of the large farms able to develop private irrigation is the highest in India. The rich grow sugarcane to sell in the market while the poorer farmers grow food for self-consumption. Despite the high productivity, wages of the landless are extremely low. In 1972 for men who worked 11 hours a day it was Rs 2 to Rs 2.25 a day and for women who worked seven hours, 75 paise per day.

Women's Role in Production

The participation of women in the economic sector differs according to whether they are from land-owning or from working families. Women from the families of rich landlords work neither on the farm, nor in the home. Labourers farm the land under the supervision of the landlord. In the landlord's home, female labourers do the housework – cooking, washing and child care – under the supervision of the landlord's wife; she may have some education, but she lives a secluded life. Women from the families who own small plots fall into two groups. If the land is sufficient to provide for their own needs, the woman will not work outside her own farm for a wage – she may work on her own farm if the farm operates at subsistence level. Her major task is housework and child care.

If the plots of land are too small, part of the family has to work for wages. Here, too, several patterns exist. Either the men work outside the

farm for a wage, and the domestic chores are left solely to the women, or both men and women work outside for a wage, doing required work on the family farm in the few hours or days they have spare. In both cases the burden of housework falls solely on the woman with the help of her children.

Landless labourer women work for a wage and do housework. They can be seen carrying their children to work in the hot sun, getting out early in search of work. They leve their children in the sun at the side of the fields, and very rarely is time given to feed them. Their life is insecure; unlike the woman who owns even a small plot of land, whose life is, to some extent, more secure, the landless woman has no choice except to work for a living.

Women of land-owning families do not work in the fields, but supervise domestic servants at home. A small percentage of women from middle peasant families may work in the fields, but all of them do their own domestic work.

Among peasants who own small subsistence farms, most women work in the fields, either on their own land or for a wage; they also do their own housework, as do landless women who all work on the farms of others.

Women who work for a wage perform those tasks that do not use animal or machine power, for example, sowing, weeding, cutting of corn during harvest. Men do jobs which need the help of animal or machine power – ploughing, spraying. Whether mechanization increases or decreases employment is a much debated question in India. It is related to the nature of production – which crops are grown, and which operations are mechanized. Observations by activists in this area indicate that mechanization has reduced the number of hours required for what traditionally has been regarded as men's work, and that there is a trend for men to take on traditionally women's work.

The oppression faced by women is dependent on their social and economic status and their role in the production process. Women from the land-owning families are excluded from all work and remain confined within their homes. Their life of comfort, ease and wealth is dependent on exploiting others, both in the fields and at home. Women from the middle peasant group are secluded in their own homes where they labour in unrecognized household tasks. A few women do get out to the fields. The landless women are directly exploited by the landowners.

Nature of Tribal Society

When Banibai of Katharda village and Vimalbai of Shahada were asked: 'Do you consider your husband as god?' they burst out laughing. Unlike Hindus, the tribals do not have the idea that husbands are godlike. A possible reason for this is that women are economically independent, and can easily separate, divorce and remarry, whereas in upper caste cultures,

a woman divorcee does not have the same status as a married woman.

The system of dowry takes a different form among the tribals. Since all tribal women work, the girl's father demands a certain amount – from Rs 200 to Rs 1,000 – from the boy in return for his daughter's hand. This, it is claimed, is a security against the girl being sent back to her father's house.

On the whole, there seems to be greater sexual freedom for girls among tribals than is common elsewhere. If an unmarried girl is found to be having sexual relations or a married girl an extra-marital affair, the *panch* holds a meeting, and the man is often fined. However, both are free to marry elsewhere. It is not very difficult for a girl to remarry. Widow remarriage too, is not difficult. During marriage or divorce or any religious ceremony the *panch* plays an important part but women have no voice in the proceedings of the *panch*. Despite the relatively greater sexual freedom for women, men are allowed to marry more than once but women are not. Women have to obtain a divorce before another marriage.

Problems of Women Tribal Labourers

Women labourers share certain problems with men of their own class, for example, low wages, irregular work, and long working hours, and suffer from them to a greater extent. Maternity leave, creches and medical care are totally non-existent.

Landlords and rich peasants beat the landless labourer women on the slightest pretexts. Requests for grain or for more money are grave enough offences for thrashings in villages where organization is still weak; police atrocities are common occurrences. In Javda village in 1973–74, the police rushed into a marriage party and beat up the women.

Atrocities by forest employees and forest guards such as beating, corruption, and rape of women are also common. At Kudawad, for example, especially during the Emergency, special arrangements used to be made by the rich peasants to harass the landless labourers, particularly women. Live wires were spread around the sugarcane fields. Many women passing by on their way to work or returning home received near-fatal shocks.

Another form of harassment of women is perpetrated by the watchmen of crop protection societies which are registered co-operative societies of the peasants. They are dominated by the rich peasants. They had licences for guns to protect the crops, from the British period up to 1974. In fact in 1974 a sugar tycoon in Shahada devised a scheme for a private para-military force, the professed aim of which was to protect crops. This was the beginning of armed attacks on the labourers, extracting fines from them, confining, beating and torturing them. The watchmen search the clothes of the labourers to see if they have stolen grain. This searching of women by watchmen is very insulting and is disapproved of by the women.

Regular deceit is practised in the payment of wages. For exampl Taloda, the building and construction department paid the labourers Rs 2.50 to Rs 3.00 each. The payment recorded was Rs 5.40 each. Insulting, inhuman treatment and abusive language are commonly used by the oppressors to establish their dominance over the oppressed, especially women.

Women were also suppressed by men of their own class. Men drink away a significant portion of the small amount the family earns, and regularly beat up their wives. The women do all the housework alone.

Tribal Response

In the beginning, the tribals and the oppressed in general bore their oppression meekly with occasional outbursts, Around 1970, Ambarsingh, a tribal, began thinking of doing something when a girl approached him for assistance after some women, including a pregnant woman, had been raped at Padalda village. These girls reproached Ambarsingh for not concerning himself with problems faced by the women from his village, though he was educated. Ambarsingh decided to take up these issues. He began organizing religious *bhajan mandals*, *bhajans* were composed and the atrocities perpetrated on the tribals discussed. They felt that as a first step to stop these atrocities, it would be necessary to send applications and delegations to collectors and ministers. At the same time Ambarsingh was in close contact with the agricultural tribal workers and spoke to them about their oppression.

However, no systematic organizational form took shape until the *Adivasi Seva Mandal* was formed in 1971, with contacting and sending applications to authorities as its main activity. There was no separate organization of women. In fact, as late as 1972 women's participation in the organization remained insignificant.

One incident, however, accelerated the process already begun, of a change in the consciousness of the tribals. At a place called Patilwadi, about 10 miles from Shahada town, a group of Bhil labourers was returning from the godown of a rich farmer, Vishram Patil. They had been demanding a loan of 12 kilos of grain. They were accosted by an armed mob of landlords and rich peasants, accompanied by the police. The police found the Bhil crowd peaceful and so refused to open fire, whereupon the landlords themselves opened fire, killing one Bhil and injuring many.

This incident focussed attention on the area, and the Marathi weekly *Manoos* gave it wide publicity. This attracted the attention of some Sarvodaya workers. G. S. Shinde together with other Sarvodaya workers and with Ambarsingh, began work by establishing the Gram Swarajya Samiti, in late 1971. Around the same time some young men from Bombay and Pune, who wanted to work among the tribals and help them organize, came and joined the GSS.

How the Women Got Together

On 30 January 1972, an all-party *Bhoo Melawa* was held. An appeal was sent out for volunteers to come to the area and work amongst the Adivasi population. Responding to this call, some left-oriented, educated young men began work among the tribals. They all worked together under the Gram Swarajya Samiti, whose main issue was the struggle for the return of tribal land that had been illegally taken over by the landlords through deceit. Soon the group realized that this issue excluded the majority of the exploited landless labourers, since most did not have any land to claim. Thus it was necessary that other issues like wages and employment which affected a majority of the poor be taken up. A survey was conducted which helped the Gram Swarajya Samiti to gauge the attitude of labourers to the idea of organizing to struggle for increased wages. The labourers responded enthusiastically to the survey. Thus demands were put up for an increase in daily wages. On 1 May 1972, an *Ekta Parishad* was held. It was attended by 10,000 people. Night meetings were conducted to propagate the *Ekta Parishad*. It was not the land question or the atrocities of the crop protection societies that brought the labourers to the Parishad, but the perception that their own dignity and power could only be realized through organization.

There were very few women at the *Ekta Parishad*; one got up to speak. She had hardly begun when, overcome by nervousness, she sat down. The crowd laughed. Ambarsingh retorted: 'Women have been oppressed and confined to their homes. Now they are getting out of their confinement and beginning to assert themselves. We men have no right to laugh at them.' It was felt that the problems of the landless labourers needed to be taken up more systematically. Thus Shramik Sanghatana was formed as a wing of the Gram Swarajya Samiti.

The Gram Swarajya Samiti had not consciously tried to involve women in their own issues; however, the men from the cities were conscious of the necessity to involve women in the struggle. They wished them to participate because they were concerned with human rights, that is, the right of an individual to determine his or her own life.

As one of the activists put it:

> During negotiations the rich peasants would say to us: 'Why call the labourers? We'll decide among ourselves,' implying of course that the labourers did not understand, were ignorant. We resisted this strongly and said that the negotiations concerned the labourers, so we had to involve them as well. Later the man would say: 'Why call women? We'll decide.' The implication was similar to the earlier one. We had to resist this too.

Women's Participation

Women participated in non-violent struggles and strikes, but their involvement was extremely low; however, the women who did partici-

pate were very militant. And as the issues which the organization took up encompassed more aspects of their lives, their involvement and enthusiasm increased.

To begin with, the men activists found it extremely difficult to approach women workers. Their usual approach was to go to the homes of the landless and talk about the necessity of organizing. They would talk to the men, while the women stayed in the kitchen. When leaving, they would go to the woman, thank her for the tea, apologize for causing so much trouble, and mention in passing that she too must join the struggle. The women's responses were mixed. As Bhuribai, a prominent woman activist says:

> At first I did not think it correct that these strange men were coming to our homes. Were their intentions good, I wondered. But I would also feel angry that they were only talking to my husband about unity, struggle, wages. Did not these things concern me?

When a struggle did break out, however, a small number of women who had been activized during wage struggles and drought relief work did participate. At these times it was easy for men activists to have discussions with the women.

In February 1972, at Manrad village, electric shocks were given to tribal labourers by crop protection societies and the police. Around the same time, a woman from Shrikhed village was raped by the son of a rich peasant. On the basis of these and other general issues, the GSS issued a call to boycott the 1972 assembly election. The general response to this could be gauged from the drop in election participation from 50% to approximately 27%. Men and women realized it was in their power to decide their vote. The activists had just begun their work there. They would, however, go to the fields where women would be working and talk to them about the elections. Women would say: 'Is it true. What is the use of voting? Until now we were blind.' This indicates that women workers respond better to men activists at the worksite where they work in groups than at home where they are isolated.

In 1972, the GSS organized a *satyagraha* for the liberation of the lost lands of the peasants. The women affected by this demand were from the poor and middle peasant class, but few participated.

However, just three months later, in the 1972 strike at Pariwardha, the militancy of a few women who took part played a crucial role. The strikers were demanding an increase in wages. Some strike-breakers under the protection of the police went to work in the fields. A group of women participating in the strike, discussed, among themselves and with the others, the implications of the strike for their struggle and their unity. The women went further and argued thus with the strike-breakers: 'All of us are starving. It is not only for a wage increase that we are struggling. This struggle indicates our unity and resolution against the employers. How

then do you feel like working for the rich peasants?' In spite of the presence of the police, the women took the strike-breakers back home. But women were still regarded as an appendage to the movement which remained dominated by men. The men wanted to negotiate for the women's wages as well, but the women insisted that they would negotiate for their own wages.

There were two struggles in 1972 – one revolving round the land issue and the other round the wage issue. In the three months between the two struggles, the Gram Samiti intensified its night meetings in the villages. With the help of the women who were involved in struggles earlier, they began to involve other women in the night meetings. As a class, landless labourers and women get organized faster, and on a more sustained basis, than do the holders of small strips of land. This is related to the parcellized nature of small peasant existence as against that of landless women who find a natural community of interest in the problems that they experience collectively.

The struggle against crop protection societies also intensified. The landless and small peasant women suffered most at their hands. 'As we participated in struggles and discussed more and more issues we began to trust the male activists,' says a woman from Kurangi village.

Women like Bhuribai from Kurangi, Bajabai from Moad and many others who participated in wage struggles, in the land grab movement and in struggles against atrocities perpetrated on labourers by the crop protection societies emerged as leaders of women. The mass of women, however, remained outside the activities of the Shramik Sanghatana. They hardly participated in the night meetings of the villages. The group of men and women activists discussed how the mass of women could be involved in the struggle. They decided to plan for a camp where women from different villages could come together, discuss their problems and take up struggles jointly.

The activists had realized and the women activists had experienced that women found it easier to discuss in groups, outside the home; in the company of other women, so they tried to contact women while they were going to work. They discussed the issues with them and the preparation for a women's conference.

There was a severe drought in Maharashtra in 1973. This led to severe food and work shortage. To alleviate the rural crisis, the government started drought relief works such as stone-breaking, road-building and well-digging. The work started was extremely inadequate for the drought-affected population. In the beginning, hardly 30% of the population was employed. After the organized struggle of the agricultural workers, this increased to more than 85%. Though the government had fixed minimum wages on a quantum basis, corruption was rampant, and wages were invariably given late. The tribals organized themselves around the demands of employment, timely wages, and against corruption. All the people participated wholeheartedly because they were severely affected

by the adverse conditions, and their life depended on their organization and their struggle.

Women constituted 50% of the *morchas* and *gheraos*. They came in large numbers and sang songs; they brought their children along. This was one of the first occasions that they began to talk in large meetings before crowds. Thus it was their class demands around a most pressing issue that brought them out of their isolation and apathy.

This experience was not unique to Shahada, but was common to all struggles conducted during the drought period, all over Maharashtra. The situation demanded it of them; their life and survival depended on them getting employment, their wages in time, and thus on their organization. Having once participated in struggle, the women discoverd their strength and asserted it in other aspects of their lives. Yet there remained a contradiction within their own lives. For while outside the home they were beginning to assert their power in confrontation with the rich peasants and landlords, their oppression at home continued.

Wife-beating and drunkenness remained. This oppression also restricted their participation in issues of general concern. As one woman in the first conference had put it: 'We sing songs we like. First, we were scared of the police inspector, now we no longer fear him. The times have changed. However, we are still beaten by our husbands.' It was in such an atmosphere that the first women's camp took place.

A discussion was held by Shramik Sanghatana with the women of Kharwad on how to organize the camp. Women's committees were set up to look after various organizational aspects of the meeting – to collect grain, to persuade women to come, to arrange drinking water. The meeting was centred around questions of alcoholism, wife-beating, and women's self-defence. While persuading other women to come, the women related their own experiences of oppression and the need to collectively fight against it.

The First Women's Conference

In order to consolidate and further increase the participation of women in the struggles, a women's camp was organized in March 1973, at Kharwad village. It was expected that two or three women from each of 10 to 15 villages would come for two to three days. However, the response was tremendous, over 150 women – 10 to 12 from each village – participated.

At first there was some resistance from the men against sending women to the camp. A discussion took place at Tarhawad. Men, especially old men, objected, pointing to the work at home. This was discussed in the presence of activists. Other women volunteered to look after the children and houswork of the delegates. The number of women attending the camp kept changing through the two days as women would attend for some time and go back. This was their first experience of sitting down and

discussing issues at a stretch. Women from different villages related their own experiences. They talked openly about how their husbands drank and beat them up, about sexual harassment by rich peasants and police, about their long days of work, the burden of housework and what they had to do to get the chance to come to the camp. It was a frank discussion about their real problems and every woman participated.

During the camp, the women from Karankheda village had described how their husbands drank and beat them up, and they asked the women at the camp to help them eradicate liquor from their village. Spontaneously, all the women walked to the village. On the way, more and more women from villages along the route joined in. They marched to the liquor den and broke all the pots. 'We will not allow you to produce and sell liquor again', they threatened. They also gheraoed the police inspector and asked him for an explanation. This was a clear manifestation of the power of women. Soon a wave of liquor pot-breaking shook the area. As in Moad village, women moved around in bands to break liquor pots and terrorize the ruffians of the village.

The Women's Committees

In the process of the liquor pot-breaking activity, informally organized women's committees developed. Women who had been participating in general class issues in the 1972 strikes, for example, those women who had insisted that women be part of the negotiation committee, were the central figures in these committees.

There were no regular meetings of the women's committees. In nearly every village, there were a few leading women, and whenever an issue came up in a village, the women would immediately establish contact with them. A meeting would be held, the issue discussed, and action organized around it. For example, near Kurangi village, the son of a rich peasant, carelessly riding his motorcycle, knocked a woman down. Bhuribai, a very active woman from Kurangi, was present, and with the help of some others, she caught the rich peasant boy. Word was sent through women and men to the nearby villages. What was to be done with this man? Women wanted him to be tied in the open in the cold at night; they beat him and tied him up.

Specific issues affecting women were taken up in the women's committees. Women greatly disapproved of the male watchmen of crop protection societies searching them, and they organized *morchas* to oppose this practice. Arrests by crop protection societies were resisted through united and determined resistance. The labourers refused to accept the authority of the crop protection societies, and in the face of this the rich peasants had to curtail their unlawful powers.

In the Modai Hati in Moad, a labourer was forcibly taken to the crop protection society on a charge of theft. When the women came back from

work, they met and decided that they would not fall into the trap of trying to prove him not guilty but instead would press for his immediate release. The women went in a procession to the crop protection society. The women and young boys threatened: 'Release him or we will join him.' He was released.

In Nandiya village, as in many others, women and young boys had divided themselves into groups, each taking responsibility to eradicate liquor and *matka* dens in a particular area. There was no formal structure for the women's committees; they were invariably created during negotiations, struggles, and processions. After the struggles individual women stayed to discuss day-to-day issues, such as wife-beating. Through regular camps, processions and public meetings, it was generally known which women were to be contacted if an issue arose.

One point has to be clarified about the opposition of the women to alcoholism. 'Our opposition was not in any sense to alcohol as such but to the beating up of wives which was the inevitable result of liquor drinking. Our struggle was against women's oppression,' says Bhuribai, a leading activist.

As a result of the liquor pot-breaking campaign, and because women started beating up men who beat their wives, and compelling them to apologize, wife-beating and alcoholism were considerably reduced, but did not completely disappear. Often, there would be renewed attempts to produce liquor. If that proved difficult, liquor would be smuggled in from villages where women's organized opposition was not so strong. When this happened, women activists would try to contact women from the other villages and tell them of their efforts at organized action.

Before 1972, it was a regular custom for the wives of Saldaars to be sexually abused by the rich peasants. In Piplod village, for example, the rich peasants had the right of the 'first night'. After the women began participating in the struggle, they refused to be so used. Rape and sexual harassment of women by rich peasants and landlords had been regular occurrences. Now, the rapists were given an organized beating up, as in Kurangi village in 1973. The incidence of rape consequently declined. The struggle of these women's committees is a continuing one.

The Second Shibir

In late 1973, another women's conference was held, involving women from outside the local area, mainly from Bombay. While the aim of the first camp was to get women to express themselves and to talk about their own problems, the aim of the second was to link up the problems of women to other social problems. The topics of discussion were the relationship of the women's movement to the workers' movement and the historical role of women in the Russian, Chinese and Vietnamese revolutions. The conferences primarily consisted of a series of lectures by the Bombay

women; the local women were silent listeners. However, on topics which touched their lives, they participated actively. For example, on alcoholism, a Gandhian woman insisted: 'Drinking increases poverty. The only way to stop it is through persuasion.' An activist opposed this attitude, saying: 'Alcoholism has to be opposed because it causes corruption in our midst and disunity in the movement and because it increases the oppression of women. Poverty exists because of the social and economic system. Persuasion will never stop liquor drinking. Only the organized action of women can stop it.'

Discussion of their immediate problems was linked to broader issues and thus the relationship to other social movements was analyzed. As an example, women discussed the social causes of drinking and gambling, government's apathy to these problems and how the local landlords and the bureaucracy got money from the liquor sellers and hence had a vested interest in liquor drinking.

Through discussions and through their own experience, the women activists realized, as Bhuribai of Kurangi put it: 'Liquor drinking, especially in the cities, is difficult to attack as an isolated issue. It is connected with a great many problems – low wages, unemployment, the routine yet hectic life of the working population.' Thus gradually the enthusiasm of the women against liquor drinking also began to be generalized and connected with other issues which affected them as labouring women.

The participation and concerns of the women activists were not confined to the local issues of Shahada only. As another local woman activist put it: 'It is necessary not only that we deal with the women's question in the context of general class issues, but also that we relate to oppressed women and their struggles wherever they are taking place.' In 1974, over 500 women participated in a rally at Dhulia. In October 1975, a two-day women's seminar for working women in Maharashtra was organized at Poona. About 65 women from Shahada-Taloda had come to this conference where they spoke regarding their work. During the conference, they visited Telco, a large factory of the Tata group, the manager and foreman showed them around the factory. They described the various amenities they provide for the workers such as free transport and lunch at the workplace. One woman stated: 'Surely, unlike other factories, you must be having no reason to complain about the workers coming late for work.' Another woman asked: 'The time and energy the other workers spend in travelling and cooking can be used for increased production and hence increased profits here, is it not?' Their awareness was growing by seeing and observing beyond their immediate environment.

The increasing participation of women which accompanied the development of the movement is indicated in the following figures. In the first case in 1971, out of the 101 accused for rioting, only one was a woman. In 1972, women were conspicuously absent from the meeting during harvesting. In 1974, at Amlad, out of 45 accused for rioting, 15 were women. In 1974, at Prakasha, out of the 138 accused for countering the physical

attacks of rich peasants, 30 were women. More strikingly, in the grain-looting case in Shanosa village in 1974, seven women and two men were accused.

Women were beginning to break out of their isolated existence. Their participation in the general class movement and the struggle for wages has increased. Their involvement in liquor pot-breaking, struggles against wife-beating and rape had increased their participation in the general movement.

Nature of Women's Leadership

Though the percentage of women landless labourers participating in the struggles is higher, the leadership comes mainly from women holding small parcels of land. This, we think, is mainly because of their relative stability and independence from the local rich peasants. This general pattern is true also of men activists. However, men activists from poor peasant families have a better chance of being literate, whereas the women activists are usually illiterate, hence there are limitations on their development. The only way they can inform themselves about happenings elsewhere is through discussion with other people, especially with men activists who are orators, or good at public speaking.

Illiteracy, however, has not affected their militant participation in struggles. At first, when the few women became active, they were considered to be the leaders of women. But it was found that when general struggles came up in the village, the active women were the general leaders of the labourers in that village. During the wage struggle, at Maod, Bajabai, a woman activist, played a central part.

Another characteristic peculiar to nearly all women activists is that in their own homes they are the dominating figures. They either have very few children or none. On the whole, they do not have large households and their domestic work is limited.

Age Distribution: Percentage of Women Leaders

Age	*1974*	*1978*
Below 25	30	10
25–35	50	70
36–45	20	20

Caste Distribution: Percentage of Women Leaders (1978)

Tribal	91–92 per cent
Backward classes	7–8 per cent
Upper classes	1 per cent

Class Distribution: Percentage of Women Leaders (1978)

Poor peasants	90 per cent
Landless labourers	10 per cent

The leadership was primarily in the middle age group (25–35) and consisted primarily of tribal peasants, who held small pieces of land.

Limitations of the Movement

This study indicates the process of development of a women's movement in particular conditions. It also points to certain shortcomings of the movement. We attempt below to trace the possible reasons for these shortcomings.

The general movement of the labourers had taken up the question of the reacquisition of lost and transferred lands. Women had participated in the movement, but the right to property remained the exclusive domain of men. The question of equal rights to property for women was never raised.

Again, women had no say in the *panch* proceedings. In matters of marriage, matrimonial disputes and sexual affairs, men – and only older men – are the sole judges. In some places, young men have asserted their right to participate in the *panch* proceedings. But this right was never demanded by the women, until June 1978.

Manushi November–December 1982.

'Zameen Kenkar? Jote Onkar!'*

Women's Participation in the Bodhgaya Land Struggles

This is a translation from Hindi of an account by Manimala of the struggle of the landless poor in Bodhgaya. As it appears here, this account has been synthesized from a report Manimala prepared for Manushi, *and from excerpts from a series of extensive recorded interviews with her conducted by Madhu Kishwar. From its inception Manimala was an active member of* Chhatra Yuva Sangharsh Vahini. *She resigned from the organization in 1981, though she continues to be associated with many of its activities. Even though she was not one of the few Vahini women who went and lived in Bodhgaya and were involved in the daily struggle, Manimala kept constant contact with the struggle and spent a great deal of time there working as an activist. In addition, as someone who did a great deal of reporting and writing on behalf of the organization, she kept very close contact with every phase of the struggle. She also played an important role in the ideological debates within Sangharsh Vahini.*

Manimala does not attempt to be a neutral observer. This is the story as it would be told to concerned listeners by one of the participants in the events as she experienced, perceived and analysed them. She does not claim to be a spokesperson for the movement, since some others were even more intimately involved with the everyday aspects of the struggle than she was. This is one of the versions of what happened – to us it seems an important version.

The year 1974 saw the emergence, in different parts of the country, of people's movements against rising prices, miseducation, unemployment and corruption. Young people who stood outside any party affiliation massively participated in these movements. In the course of this struggle, Jayaprakash Narayan felt the need for a youth organization which would keep away from the politics of power and devote itself to the struggle for a 'total revolution', an organization that would struggle for a complete change in the system. Chhatra Yuva Sangharsh Vahini was born in January 1975, with membership restricted to people under 30 years of age. From 1975 to 1977 it devoted itself to working for the movement's programme and helping build public opinion against the autocratic tendencies of the ruling Congress party.

The principles accepted by Vahini activists as the basis of their political understanding were: 1) Sangharsh Vahini activists will not contest elections; 2) Vahini will work for total revolution by peaceful methods; 3) Vahini activists will live among the landless people of Bodhgaya, will adopt their ways of life, eat the same food as they do, and live as members of their families.

*'Who Owns the Land? The Person Who Works It!'