

# **The Revolutionary Women's Movement in India**



**New Vistas Publications**

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## **Publishers Note**

In the light of the oncoming WSF event, with its heavy NGO presence, there will be a renewed thrust of bourgeois feminism pushed into the progressive sections within the country. In the light of this, New Vistas is coming forward with three new booklets on the Women's Question in India that will put forward the socialist perspective on the issue. These are mostly based on articles taken from the magazine *People's March*.

The first booklet gives a revolutionary perspective to the women's question in India and includes an example of a revolutionary women's organisation, seen in the backward areas of Bihar and Jarkhand.

The second booklet deals with the question of prostitution and the attempts of the NGOs to legitimise it, to serve the needs of globalisation and the vast tourist industry, by adopting the term sex-workers.

The third booklet gives a living example of the liberation of women through a revolution and socialist construction in once revolutionary China. China was an acutely feudal and patriarchal society, and yet through the communist movement and the later period of socialist construction we find gigantic changes in the role of women and their emancipation. Of course once capitalism was restored after the death of Mao, one of the first spheres to get affected was in the role of women.

We do hope these booklets will be useful in strengthening the women's movement in the country and building it along correct lines, away from the bourgeois feminist approach of the foreign-funded NGOs. Please do send us your suggestions after reading them.

January 1, 2004

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## The Revolutionary Women's Movement in India

*Avanti*

As we approach March 8, early in the dawn of this new century remarkable developments are taking place on the women's front in India. Deep in the forests and plains of Central India, in the backward villages of Andhra Pradesh and up in the hills among the tribals in the State, in the forests and plains of Bihar and Jharkhand women are getting organised actively to break the shackles of feudal patriarchy and make the new democratic revolution. It is a women's liberation movement of peasant women in rural India, a part of the people's war being waged by the oppressed peasantry under revolutionary leadership. For the past few years thousands of women are gathering in hundreds of villages to celebrate March 8. Women are gathering together to march through the streets of a town like Narayanpur to oppose the Miss World beauty contest, they are marching with their children through the tehsil towns and market villages in backward Bastar to demand proper schooling for their children. They are blocking roads to protest against rape cases, and confronting the police to demand that the sale of liquor be banned. And hundreds of young women are becoming guerrilla fighters in the army of the oppressed, throwing off the shackles of their traditional life of drudgery. Dressed in fatigues, a red star on their olive green caps, a rifle on their shoulders, these young women brimming with the confidence that the fight against patriarchy is integrally linked to the fight against the ruling classes of this semi-feudal, semi-colonial India and are equipping themselves with the military knowledge to take on the third largest army of the exploiters. This is a social and political awakening among the poorest of the poor women in rural India. It is a scenario that has emerged far from the

unseeing eyes of the bourgeois media, far from the flash and glitter of TV cameras. They are the signs of a transformation coming into the lives of the rural poor as they participate in the great struggle for revolution.

But this revolutionary women's movement has not emerged overnight, and nor has it emerged spontaneously from merely propaganda. The women's movement has grown with the growth of armed struggle. Contrary to general opinion the launching of armed struggle in the early 80s by the communist revolutionary forces in various parts of the country, the militant struggle against feudal oppression gave the confidence to peasant women to participate in struggles in large numbers and then to stand up and fight for their rights. Women who constitute the most oppressed among the oppressed, poor peasant and landless peasant women who have lacked not only an identity and voice but also a name, have become activists for the women's organisations in their villages and guerrilla fighters. Thus with the spread and growth of the armed struggle the women's mobilisation and women's organisation have also grown leading to the emergence of this revolutionary women's movement, one of the strongest and most powerful women's movement in the country today. But it is unrecognised and ignored, a ploy of the ruling classes that will try to suppress any news and acknowledgement as long as it can.

## The Background

The vast majority of women live in villages weighed down by feudal oppression that takes many forms. Intense economic exploitation, crude and brutal social oppression, a culture that not only denies her independence but also denigrates her in all possible manners. Hence, women from the oppressed classes have had a stake in the destruction of the feudal rural order and have come forward to do so.

In the anti-feudal peasant struggles in the past century women have played a very militant and active role. In the Tebhaga struggle in the 1940s the participation of women was very high and Nari Bahinis were formed for self-defence when state repression began. In the Telengana peasant uprising from 1947 to 1951 too women participated in large numbers and peasant and tribal women became guerrilla squad members and there are many accounts of the bravery and tenacity displayed by

these women in the face of encirclement by the Indian Army, in the face of torture and sure death. Thus when the Naxalbari uprising took place in 1967 in North Bengal under the leadership of Charu Majumdar it is not surprising that poor peasant women and girls participated with full enthusiasm. In the Srikakulam struggle the participation of women was remarkable. Women became commanders of the armed squads and struck terror in the hearts of the moneylenders and landlords of the area. The armed struggle in fact began after an attack on women by the goondas of a landlord when they were on their way to participate in a peasant conference. The names of the women martyred in this struggle, women who preferred to be felled by the bullets of the armed police rather than surrender still shine high – Nirmala, Ankamma, Saraswati. Thus these women defied their families and society to take on roles, which directly challenged their traditionally acceptable roles in society. They displayed tremendous heroism and determination to make the anti-feudal struggle a success. But the revolutionary movement at this time did not take up the conscious task of organising women's organisations and taking up the struggle against manifestations of patriarchy. In the face of severe repression these movements were suppressed.

When communist revolutionaries regrouped themselves and began building up the anti-feudal peasant struggles in the late 1970s once again there was an upsurge of participation of women in the struggles. In the plains of Central Bihar, in the fields and villages of Telengana (AP) the peasant movement grew like a storm. Among the first issues the movement confronted was the feudal privileges of the landlords over the wives and daughters of the labourers working in their fields, especially of the Dalit castes. Subject to worst form of abuses and vulgarities of the landlords' men, bent down due to starvation and poverty, these poor women were easy prey for the landlords and their henchmen. Many of the violent struggles in Bihar and Telengana in the first part of the peasant movement in the 70s and 80s was to end this abuse and molestation, going in the name of "tradition". These struggles provided the background for the growth of the women's movement.

In this article we are restricting our report to the movement in Andhra Pradesh and Dandakaranya.



## The Development of the Rural Movement in Andhra Pradesh

The Telengana region of Andhra Pradesh remained a bastion of feudal exploitation and many forms of patriarchal oppression related to it have continued there till the early 80s till the anti-feudal struggles hit them hard and decisively. The landlord's 'sexual rights' over the wives of his labourers is only one of them. Then under *vetti*, both the male and female labourers were expected to provide free services to the landlord and his family. The service castes too were forced to provide free labour. Child marriage was widely prevalent. So were religious practices like the *jogini* or *basavi*. A local variant of the devadasi cult, young girls from the lower castes were married to the gods and a girl so married could not marry any man. In effect she was forced into prostitution.

When the anti-feudal struggles broke out in Karimnagar and Adilabad districts of Telengana in 1977 one important form of struggle was the social boycott of landlords. The labourers refused to go and work for the landlords in the houses and in the fields. The success of the social boycott was made possible because of the active participation of women too. Vetti came to an end in many districts of Telengana only because of these struggles. The active struggle of women also helped the formation of the Ryotu Coolie Sangam(RCS), the peasant organisation. They also became members of the peasant organisation. As the struggle developed many incidents challenging the right of the landlords in social and cultural aspects of their lives came up. After this struggle broke out the first RCS organiser to be murdered by the goons of the landlord was Laxmirajam. He was murdered because the women in his village decided to celebrate the *batkamma* festival in their own locality rather than as tradition in the *gadi* (courtyard) of the landlord's house.

Among the other major issues taken up by the revolutionary peasant movement has been the issue of wages. Though initially the question of equal pay for equal work was not taken up, the struggle for an increase in the pitifully low wages was fought bitterly. The movement led to an increase in wages for all kinds of agricultural labour, though the rates for men and women remained different, women getting less than men. The peasant struggle developed in the midst of intensive propaganda about the new democratic revolution to end feudal and

imperialist exploitation.

Among the first women's organisations were formed by the CPI(ML) CP Reddy group in Telengana under the banner of the Progressive Organisation of Women (POW). Towards the end of the 1970s units of the POW were formed in villages in Karimnagar district and conferences were also organised. Later as work of organising women rolling beedis (leaf cigarettes) began they too got organised into the POW apart from being organised in the unions which were also formed. Thus the demands of women, especially peasant women began to be articulated.

Women in the Telengana region and in the Eastern region of AP were also active in the land struggles undertaken by the CPI(ML)(PW). By the early 1980s itself women of the poor peasant and landless classes were clashing with the landlords and police over the lands occupied by them. Tribal women had started displaying their militancy. In April 1980, when the police suddenly banned the tribal peasant conference at Indervalli in Adilabad district and started driving away the people who had gathered in the market it was a tribal woman who pulled a bow against a policeman and hit him with her arrow. Gradually village level organisations of women began to emerge and they became widespread from the late 1980s. These women's groups also became targets of police repression and found it difficult to function.

### Viplava Mahila Sangham

In areas where the revolutionary movement was strong women took up the anti-liquor struggle in their localities. This became a major agitation in the beginning of the 1990s encompassing a variety of women's organisations. (See report in box). Thus the village level women's organisations formed in the various districts as the peasant struggle developed coalesced into the Viplava Mahila sangam (VMS) around 1995. (In North Telengana they were initially called MVS.) This underground women's organisation is the culmination of many efforts and experiments to build the women's movement in rural Andhra Pradesh in the face of state repression. As the peasant struggle expanded from North to South Telengana, from Guntur to Rayalseema districts so has the mobilisation of women. Born and steered within the revolutionary struggle for a new democratic society of which the principal slogan is land to the tiller, the land struggles have and still

## PERSPECTIVE OF THE MOVEMENT

This revolutionary women's movement takes as its guiding theory the theory of Marxism-Leninism-Maoism. Hence the Marxist analysis on the origins of women's oppression govern its perspective that:

The masses of women face twin oppression. Just as their male members they undergo class oppression. But at the same time they experience patriarchal oppression. Patriarchy is the system of male domination over women. The ruling classes of all exploitative societies institutionalize patriarchal oppression. But in addition to that, men who are at the same time oppressed by the ruling classes resort to patriarchal domination. All men generally practise thus patriarchy, which is institutionalized by the ruling classes. This is an important characteristic feature of women's oppression. This feature contributes to the pervasiveness of patriarchal prejudices. Thus class oppression and patriarchy are interconnected, and at all points of time this interconnection must be grasped and is the cornerstone of the Marxist perspective on the women's question.

In the Indian context, the oppression faced by women has to be seen in the framework of the nature of Indian society.

After the withdrawal of the British in 1947, India became a semi-feudal, semi-colonial society under the rule of the big landlords and comprador bureaucratic bourgeoisie. With the aid of imperialism they oppress the working class, peasantry, petty bourgeoisie and national bourgeoisie.

Even while feudalism remains the predominant social relation, capitalist relations have also spread and the two coexist. Hence in India both the feudal as well as the capitalist varieties of patriarchy are visible.

However they do not exist as separate entities. Just like other aspects of the semi-feudal semi-colonial structure, patriarchy exists in a combined form. It is with the help of this form of patriarchy that the landlords, compradors and imperialists oppress India's women masses. But due to the uneven development of Indian society patriarchal oppression has its specificities among the different classes, castes and tribes; its manifestations also vary in the big cities, in the towns and in the vast rural areas. While in the big cities and to an extent town's influence of capitalist-imperialist patriarchy is greater, in the villages feudal patriarchal norms dominate more. Therefore in India the concrete struggle against patriarchy requires that semi-feudal, semi-colonial structure be overthrown and a new democratic society be set up in its place. Thus without a New Democratic Revolution, all struggles and reforms can at best bring some partial changes in the lives of a section of women but cannot bring about a qualitative changes in the lives of women, cannot be a major step to eliminate patriarchy and emancipate women.

The targets of the Indian New Democratic Revolution (NDR), the big landlords, the comprador bureaucratic bourgeoisie and imperialism are also the perpetrators of patriarchal oppression on Indian women. Hence struggle against these classes and their state also encompasses the women's liberation struggle against patriarchy. There is a continuous and lively dialectical relationship between the two. One cannot be conceived without the other. The struggle for NDR opens new vistas for women's emancipation from patriarchy and the struggle against patriarchy energises the NDR. The NDR, harbinger of liberation for the Indian masses, is the sure road to women's emancipation.

occupy an important part in the mobilisation of women. For example in December 1997 the peasant association RCS in Ainool village (Mehboobnagar district) decided to occupy 200 acres of land controlled by Ramachandra Reddy and two other landlords. Of the 300 people who took part in this campaign 100 were women. In Shalkarpeta village in the same district the VMS supported the call of the RCS to take over 100 acres out of 200 acres belonging to a landlord. The VMS campaigned among women to prepare them participate in the struggle. Finally in June 1999 when a public meeting was held, over 100 women participated. They took part in the rally and planted the red flags they held on the land they occupied. Similarly in 1998 in Kovunoor village in Cuddapah district a land struggle committee was formed to regain control of 120 acres of land illegally occupied by a landlord. The lands belonged to the SC society and village community. It is decision of the RCS and the VMS that when lands are taken over and distributed women should also be given titles to the lands independently and this is being implemented wherever the revolutionary movement is able to give titles to the land.

Wage struggles occupy another important activity for the women's movement. A campaign for equal wages for agricultural work has been taken up. In Tandra village (Mehboobnagar district) the VMS campaigned among women labourers for days to make them realise the need for and the importance of struggle. Finally when the RCS and the VMS together gave a strike call for higher wages it was a success. They beat the drum and began the strike. Two days later the landlord and rich peasants came before the labourers and negotiated in public to decide on the increase in rates. Inspired by the example of Tandra women in surrounding villages also took up similar struggles even though in all of them no VMS units existed. The initiative of women workers too has increased with the growth of women's organisation. In June 1998 in Pallikonda village of Nizamabad district, women beedi workers faced unemployment because the owners decided to remove their local agents and thus stop local production. 300 women went to Bhimgal mandal centre and sat on a dharna before the beedi company office. The local agents were re-appointed and production resumed.

An account of the issues taken up by the VMS in areas will give an idea of the variety of issues being addressed by the women's

## Anti-Liquor Agitation

In the early 1990s the anti-liquor agitation led by women swept the whole of Andhra Pradesh and thousands of rural women were activated to demand the banning of arrack. This agitation has its roots in the anti-arrack struggles begun by local organisations of women spontaneously. The struggle began in the Singareni coal mines area when the women spontaneously took up a campaign to close down arrack shops. The issue got taken up in other villages where the revolutionary movement was strong. Hence when the struggle against arrack broke out in Oct 1994 in Nellore district it swept the state. The government was forced to ban arrack, but two years later the Chandrababu Naidu govt lifted the ban. This once again led to a widespread agitation. A state level body of 42 organisations was formed to oppose the lifting of the ban and the reduction in subsidies for social welfare. Since then VMS units have been active in trying to close down arrack shops in their villages. There have been militant struggles too. The women of Anantapur agitating before the Collector's office on April 15, 1997 did a rasta roko because he refused to come out and take their memorandum. They were lathicharged and arrested but that did not deter the women. Women have picketed arrack shops, broken pots, destroyed hundreds of litres of arrack and other liquor.

Similarly tribal women in the Eastern region took the lead in their area to demand the enforcement of a ban on brewing and sale of liquor. From 1990 itself they were propagating about the destructive impact of liquor and making men take pledges that they would give up drinking. Thousands of them participated in the struggle. They destroyed lakhs of litres of arrack the liquor extracted from palm trees. They destroyed arrack brewed from jaggery. In fact earlier, in 1990 while campaigning against liquor they had managed to stop the supply of jaggery to the brewers for almost six months. Therefore from 1995 this became a mass issue. Women broke the village distilleries of the brewers. In more than 50 villages hundreds of women continued this struggle for almost three years. In 1997 when the Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu lifted the ban on liquor more than 4000 women took out a morcha. They also organised a big rally the same year to cut down *jeelugu* trees (palm tree from which liquor is extracted).



organisation in AP.

In Achampet area, Vakeshram village one woman Autamma's husband died but his brothers refused to give her any share in the land. The VMS organised a panchayat and made the brother give her a 5 acres plot of land.

In Warangal village of Medak district 70 women organised a morcha to protest against the rape of a Dalit woman by a landlord's son. They thus exposed the incident. In Dubbakka village one man Venkatagowd promised to marry Balamma. But finally he ditched her. She committed suicide. The women took out a rally demanding that he be held responsible for her death. The rally was lathicharged by the police.

In another interesting case in Erpedu mandal village Cinnanuru, a village head attacked and chased away a family. In the process the 8 year old daughter of that attacked family got lost. She was found by one Ramaswamy, who took her and made her a bonded labourer in his house. When the VMS got wind of this they mobilised the local villagers and rescued the girl. They insisted he pay for the months she had worked for him. He was made to pay Rs 12,000 to the girl for her labour. VMS units in several areas have been instrumental in organising small symposiums on issues like dowry to educate people against dowry. They have organised processions to spread awareness about dowry killings.

Besides VMS units have been active in mobilising women for agitations against drought, for facilities like roads and electricity. Especially in the summer of 1998, faced with a severe drought, women were in the forefront of the agitations for water and relief. They were in the forefront of exposing Chandrababu Naidu's Janmabhoomi reform program. Hundreds of women demonstrating in Regonda mandal town shouted, "We want water not liquor". They have staged rasta rokos and dharnas, held meetings and processions. They have stood up in many instances against police atrocities. They have stopped police from arresting mass attacking the police with whatever they had in hand. They even tried to snatch their rifles. Shocked the police ran away leaving Mahendra Reddy behind. 20 special batch police came back another day but were again confronted and chased away. Similarly, in Gurajala mandal 50 women stopped a police bus taking away the Sangham leader and forced the police to release him. In Durgi Mandal,

Naramalapadu village twice the police arrested RCS leaders and both times under the leadership of the VMS women staged rasta rokos and got them released.

Such examples can be multiplied by the hundreds all over the state. Women themselves have faced repression for leading the struggles. They have been beaten up by the landlord's men, they have faced harassment, threats and beatings and arrests by the police. But through all this women under the influence of revolutionary politics are getting organised and building their own organisations and fighting for the right to equality and freedom from oppression. For them the struggle for new democratic revolution and the struggle against are integrally linked. Hence their feelings and dedication for the revolutionary movement. This came out most sharply in a major confrontation that developed with the police in Manala village of Nizamabad district over the martyr's column. In Sept 1997, 1800 men and women of Manala and neighbouring villages laboured for 18 days to build a 45 feet high column in memory of revolutionary women martyrs. Thousands attended the inauguration of the memorial column. Hence in June 1998 when the police came and tried to force the women and men of Manala to break the memorial they faced stiff resistance. When the police realised that the villagers were willing to face death but not allow the column to be broken they were forced to retreat. Though they tried to harass the Manala women in other ways they did not succeed.

### **Impact of revolutionary politics on Gond women**

The impact of the revolutionary movement on tribal society both in Dandakaranya and also in the Eastern Ghats (Vishakapatnam, Srikakulam, Vijayanagaram districts) has been even deeper. The majority of tribals in the districts of Gadchiroli, Gondia of Maharashtra, in Bastar division of Chattisgarh, Balaghat in MP and Malakangiri of Orissa belong to a sub-tribe of the Gonds – *Madia*, *Muria*, *pardhan*, *Dorla* or *RajGond* though other tribes like *Raut*, *Halbi* also inhabit these forests.

Though there are particularities in the customs but their society is patriarchal. The women play an important part in production, they labour hard and long in the fields and home yet traditionally they have no rights to the land. They do not have any social rights either. Their

participation in the actual rituals is prohibited by custom, their role in community decision-making and arbitrations is also marginal. In many ways, through customs and beliefs, small and big, their subordination is reinforced. Thus, for example, though women may plough the land and even cut the harvest, they may not thresh the grain, nay, they should not even step on the threshing floor when it is going on. Girls are not allowed to enter the main grain store of the family. During menstruation they must stay outside the village and not be seen, esp. by a priest.

The family has the right to decide the marriage of a girl and boy. If a girl disagrees with their decision, then she is forced to go to the house of her in laws. In case of resistance, it was common to beat her inhumanly, tie her to a pole and carry her off, like an animal's carcass being carried after a hunt. In some areas, boys would kidnap a girl one of them liked and force her to marry him. Polygamy is common, a woman's labour being prized. Though their society does not prohibit pre-marital sex, and in some parts it is acceptable within certain institutional arrangements like the Ghotul, yet promiscuity is neither a practice nor is it acceptable. A girl pregnant before marriage is looked down upon. In some areas, like Gadchiroli the custom of giving up wearing the blouse once a girl is married was strictly enforced among the Madias. But it is not uncommon in other parts too for women to give up wearing the blouse once they have a child or two. Better publicised is the oppression that these women have been facing at the hands of 'outsiders' – the contractors, traders, settlers, policemen and other government employees who come into the forest, into the tribal villages and take advantage of the simplicity and innocence of these girls to sexually exploit them and then abandon them. For them the tribal ways amount to promiscuity, which gives them the license to treat them as prostitutes. As the squads of the people's war entered the Dandakaranya forest from 1980 onwards they confronted these patriarchal customs and practices. As they won the trust of the people and started struggles for rights over the forest and for raising the rates for tendu leaf picking the hot summer months they gained the trust and confidence of women too. Women are in the forefront of picking tendu leaves so they came into the struggle too in large numbers. Women actively participated in the strikes when the contractors and the Govt

were intransigent about their demands.

Women participate in many kinds of labour in the forest. They go for bamboo-cutting for the paper mills, they work in the forest dept nurseries, in road building and other such work. In all these areas of work, struggles broke out to improve the wage rates and the conditions of work and women were very active in the struggles. Young girls came forward to campaign in villages, to put up posters propagating the issues and demands. Women with babes in arms walked for days to attend meetings and conferences. There were many instances when outsiders exploiting tribal girls or molesting them were brought by the squads before the people forced to apologise and either leave the area or reform their behaviour. As a result the incidence of sexual exploitation in the areas of struggle went down a great deal. And when the police repression began to crush the revolutionary forces and their struggles women learnt to face the police and help to keep the movement and organisation alive. From all these experiences the Krantikari Adivasi Mahila Sangathan (KAMS) was born. While the initial units were formed in Gadchiroli district they gradually spread to all parts of the district and to the neighbouring districts. Since 1995 the KAMS has spread by leaps and bounds in Bastar – Dantewada district, some parts of Bastar district and Kanker district, Gondia, Rajnandgaon and Balaghat. It later spread to Malkangiri district too and here too the organisation has grown rapidly.

The first district Conference of the KAMS was held in Gadchiroli in 1991, but the Maharashtra Government launched its repression campaign a few months later and all the KAMS district committee members were forced to leave their homes and operate from the forests, or become full time organisers functioning underground. The KAMS took as its task to propagate against tribal customs which are oppressive for women. They struck a chord among young women and gained their active support. KAMS units began to be set up in village after village. But due to the repression the units found it difficult to function openly. For the police merely being a member of KAMS is a crime. In the chargesheet of a middle aged woman arrested from Gondia district was written that she is the president of the village KAMS unit! Thus from 1993 onwards KAMS has grown in the midst of severe repression. KAMS units have been set up in the Abujmadh hills, in the

areas around Keskal, in the hills of Byramgad and the plains of the Avapalli, Indravati and Pamed national parks, up to the banks of the Shabari river. Today there are more than 500 villages with units of the KAMS, the membership varying from 5 to 20 in each village. In areas where there are more units range committees have been formed which oversee 25 to 40 villages. Since 1997 range level conferences of the KAMS have been held in several areas and the range Committees elected.

### **Issues and Struggles:**

The KAMS has actively propagated against the more oppressive customs that are resented by the women and helped women and girls who have put up resistance.

For example due to the active campaign against forced marriages now one rarely finds a case of physical force being used to force a girl to marry against her wishes. If a girl brings such a case before the village unit of the KAMS or the peasant organisation the KAMS members and/or the squad talk to the family to convince them to desist from forcing their will on the girl. In fact there are many cases in which girls have left their families and become guerrillas in the PGA to avoid a marriage they are not interested in. Women perceive the revolutionary party as their own because they see it as a force which is helping them to become aware of their oppression and fight it. They come to the squads with their problems and expect help. Girls from the *Kondagaon* area approached the party to end the *Ghotul* system because they felt oppressed that they were forced to go and dance in the *Ghotul* every night even if they were not interested. The KAMS in the area took up this campaign to stop compulsory dancing. Meetings and rallies on this issue were organised. In many villages the *Ghotuls* were shut down or atleast were no longer a compulsory activity for unmarried women. But taking advantage of the increased repression of the police when it is not easy to function both for the party and mass organisation, the elders of the clan and community again forced the *Ghotul* activity to be restarted.

In *Gadhchiroli* there was strong resistance from the clan elders to the campaign for wearing the blouse after marriage and it has taken some years to wear down their resistance so that now the practice is no longer widespread as before. Initially it could be enforced only in

### **Portrait of a martyred KAMS activist**

Pauribai Salami at the age of 25 years was already a mother of 3 children when revolutionary politics entered her village in 1992-93. Born in Bonde village of Deori tehsil she was married at a young age in Sukdi village. She became active in the activities of the peasant organisation in her village and later became the President of the KAMS of her village. She was active in the tendu leaf rate struggle and did not hesitate to negotiate with contractors. She took on the task of helping the burad workers (bamboo workers) to organise themselves and put up their demands against the forest officers and contractors. She solved the problems that faced women in her village. She led a morcha in Deori against police atrocities. It did not take long for Pauribai to be noticed by the police. Once when the police came to arrest Pauribai, they came in 12 vehicles, but all the women in her village gathered and confronted the police and made them retreat. But in 1993, in the midst of an atmosphere of fear and terror the police succeeded in arresting Pauribai. She was subject to torture and rape while in police custody. But she remained unbending. She was charged under TADA and sent off to Nagpur jail, more than 100 kms from her home. Three years she was forced to stay in jail, in conditions totally alien and hostile to her. Her health was affected. When she finally managed to get released on bail, it was conditional. Every week she had to report to the police station at Deori. She had to go to Nagpur to attend court every month, a cost that was difficult for her poor peasant family to bear. In spite of the ebb in the movement due to the police terror, she remained firm. The police kept on harassing her. She was picked up every year during Martyr's day, July 28. inspite of the continuous harrasment she rejected the enticement offered by the police in village meetings held by them to win over the people. Pauri bai kept the spirits of women around her up in spite of all these difficulties. But in August 1998, after prolonged ill health for which she could not afford treatment Pauri bai died. She had barely crossed the age of 30.

the families of those active in the peasant organisation.

For the past 4 to 5 years the KAMS has been regularly organising March 8 programs around specific themes. While sometimes, big programs gathering women from many villages have been held, in some areas smaller meetings of women of 5 to 10 villages have been organised in every range. Women squad members have presented skits in these meetings, sung songs.

A March 8 meeting organised in the Indravati National Park area in 1999 was busted up by the special armed police when a report of the meeting somehow leaked to them. Almost 1000 people, half of which were women had gathered for the meeting in the forest. A pamphlet had been brought out for the occasion. The people had to return very disappointed that the meeting could not be held.

The KAMS has also organised on issues of all India significance like the 400 to 500 strong morcha taken out by women in Narayanpur to protest against the Miss World contest in Bangalore in 1997. KAMS has actively participated in the anti-famine morchas, in election boycott campaigns, in development activity in the villages undertaken by the village itself.

Representatives of KAMS also sit in the revolutionary people's committee wherever they are formed. KAMS has conducted people's courts in cases like wife beating, re-marriage by men while abandoning the first wife. In one case of a people's court the local KAMS brought forward the case of a girl made pregnant by one boy. The KAMS unit ferreted out the identity of the boy. He was forced to part with some land and cattle for the girl and her forthcoming child. As a result of the women's organisation and campaigns women's political and social consciousness has developed. Women are actively supporting the armed struggle and the people's guerrillas. Every year they gather in large numbers before the martyr's column in their village to pay homage to the revolutionaries who have died fighting to make the new democratic revolution a success. They take tremendous risk to help the guerrillas during police encirclement. When the police arrested some men from Bellum Nendra village the women followed the police and the men all the way to the police station over 5 kms away and did not budge because they refused to release the men. The police arrested these women too and sent them off to jail, more than 150 kms away. They are participating

in large numbers in political rallies and meetings.

Young girls, often defying their parents, are joining the people's guerrilla army in large numbers and their numbers have gone up remarkably in the past 5 years. Now almost 40 % of the fighters in the People's Guerilla Army in Dandakaranya are women fighters. Women, who have been housewives, too have left their children with relatives, and joined their guerrilla husbands to serve the poor.

### **Adivasi Viplava Mahila Sangham**

Up in the mountains of East Godavari and Vishakapatnam districts of Andhra Pradesh an overwhelming majority of the people are tribals. They belong to the *Kondlu, Gadaballu, Kondareddy, Bhagata* and other related tribes. The hard life in the hills makes the woman's labour even more arduous and tedious. Even fetching water entails climbing and descending with pots over long distances. Patriarchal traditions make her socially dependent and politically powerless. Further is the exploitation of people from the plains who have come into the hills and started plantations.

Closer to the plains like in Malakangiri district women are facing newer forms of exploitation. Settlers are marrying tribal women to gain access to tribal lands. The woman loses her place in the tribal community only to be used and abandoned by the avaricious husband. Women were in the forefront of the tendu leaves struggle which began in this area from 1983 onwards. They negotiated with contractors before the entire village. When a contractor refused to negotiate with Sanyasamma she told him, "Give me the keys to your jeep, I will drive it, while you carry this one sack of tendu leaves and show me." Women have participated in struggles to occupy the excess lands of landlords. Through protracted struggles they have emerged as mass leaders.

While from 1985 itself women's organisations began to be formed in villages but it got a district level area level character in 1989 when the Krantikari Adivasi Viplava Mahila sangham came to be formed. In 1995 the name was changed to Adivasi Viplava Mahila Sangham.

In the beginning of the 1990s the major struggle undertaken by the AVMS has been on the anti-liquor issue. (See box in page no.9) Apart from this the organisation has undertaken campaigns, organised meetings, rallies, people's courts on many issues. For example in 1996 a dowry death case in Ramavaram became an issue in which 100s of

women were mobilised and they demonstrated to teach the killer husband a lesson.

Since 1997, March 8 is being celebrated all over, even in the remote villages.

Since 1988 in bamboo cutting and other related work the struggle for equal pay for equal work has been taken up and won. Thus a tremendous change is coming about in the region because of the awakening among women and the growing organisation among them.

In March 2000, hundreds of meetings were held in all parts of these districts and women have come to look forward to this 'their' day, the day to talk and plan to struggle for their rights. Women are going to cities far from their region, like Vishakapatnam and Guntur to participate in state level programs. By 1998 there were 200 units of the AVMS with 6700 members. But the organisation is functioning in the face of severe repression and many units are destroyed in the raids and arrest campaigns launched at regular intervals by the armed police. In March 2000 a campaign against polygamy was taken up in the Koyyur mandal. People's courts have been conducted on many cases of polygamy, on forced marriages. Justice has also been meted out to those men who have sexually exploited women and then abandoned them. In big meetings in which neighbouring villagers are mobilised the men have been forced to marry the woman and give them a share in their property.

Thus the revolutionary women's movement is growing in the midst of struggle. It is growing in Bihar, Jharkhand and West Bengal as well. As women are getting mobilised and organised in larger and larger numbers a section of them are also moving forward to join the armed struggle as fighters. They are willing to brave the hardships of guerrilla life with its constant movement and constant alertness, take on tasks and duties equal to men, with the aim of changing this exploitative society, for there is no other way to get out of the existing system, however long and arduous the path may be.

The movement is creating a new woman, bold and brave, who is willing to sacrifice her life for the social cause – the names of the women who have sacrificed thus loom high in the sky. There was Rathakka (Nirmala) the housewife from AP who died at the sentry post while defending her comrades, Emeshwari (Kamala) the Oraon educated girl from Jagdalpur who died at her post during a raid on a

police station, young Raje who died of a snake bite, Swaroopa who died giving a heroic fight in an encounter.

This list can go on. But they are fighting so that woman can be unshackled and attain equality, so that the poor can get justice and India can become an independent country free from imperialist exploitation.

## Cultural Expression of the Adivasi women's revolutionary movement

Sushila

Sadhana, a male comrade wrote the popular novel "Rago" which deals with the social oppression of an Adivasi Gond girl, her resistance to that oppression and her integration into the life of an armed revolutionary. He wrote it on the basis of his experiences while working in Dandakaranya, at a time when the tribal women's movement was still in an embryonic stage.

Almost a decade later, the adivasi girls of DK are themselves composing songs in Gondi to express their oppression and anguish and their path to liberation. From the hills in Balaghat and Abhujmadh to the banks of the Godavari and Pranhita rivers the forests are resounding with songs not only about revolution in general but also about women's condition and their aspirations. This cultural outpouring of young women squad members joining together to compose songs is spreading. Young girls can always be found in villages jostling each other while standing to give chorus when these songs are being sung.

An old but popular song that has been adapted in the various dialects of Gondi as it has spread from area to area is the Kamalakka song. This song has played an important role in spreading awareness among village women. Written as a dialogue between a village woman – Kamala – and a peasant organisation leader – Sangham Pandu – It begins –

*Madvimir, Madkamir kamalakka  
What have to say, speak Kamalakka  
How much can I tell, sangham Pandu.  
What can I tell, sangham Pandu*

Then Kamala laments about the marriage forced upon her by her

elders and parents and then goes on to vividly describe the slave like labour she performs in the house of her in-laws and husband and her utter neglect. She describes her work –

*I labour all day, but then my in-laws  
Call me a lazy daughter-in-law!  
To collect the leaves, to bring the firewood it is the daughter-in-law,  
To fetch the water, to cook the food, it is the daughter-in-law  
To make the togggu, to cook the gruel, it is the daughter-in-law,  
To clear the stumps, to gather and sweep it is the daughter-in-law.  
I get in the darkness, Sang'iam pandu  
And pound and pound the grain  
Till the sweat flows Sangham pandu  
I slave in the house, I slave in the forest,  
Cutting the paddy, cutting the Kohla I do well.  
Yet, girl you may not thresh they say,  
I looked after the house, bring the needs from the hills,  
But I cant go near the grain store  
I breed the hens, I breed the pigs,  
But he eats without asking his wife and children  
Near the panch, near the ritual if we go,  
What do women understand they say  
What sin have we committed sangham pandu  
I cannot go anywhere, Sangham pandu.  
He takes the cows and bulls and sells them off  
He drinks and spends the money, my man  
He never brings anything, not even clothes  
As if he doesn't know he has a wife and children*

This song very popular among women, young and old, poignantly brings out the unending, unrecognised toil that is the fate of tribal peasant women

The patriarchal family, the subordinate position of women in the family and her lack of rights is a theme repeated in many of the songs on women. Like in this song written by the squad women in North



Baster two years ago :

*The red flower, sister, is flowering  
Let us follow the path of the red flower and struggle.....  
In the village, the elders, sister  
The elders threaten and suppress us sister  
In the house mother and father  
Without listening to mother and father we cannot go anywhere  
They marry us off sister.....  
You bring up the sons and daughters  
You do all the work in the house  
But the man has the right to the house  
The children too are the father's right  
Sister, the sons and daughters get the father's name,  
Sister the house too is in the man's name  
Wherever sister, we are seen as outsiders  
Wherever we look everything is in the man's name.....*

In the flag song too, the lack of rights over crop, land, house is emphasised:

*You give birth to girls and boys, but your name is nowhere sister,*

*The store is full of paddy, but girls cannot get it, sister  
At a tender age, they are performing marriages sister,  
If she says she wont go, they are beating her sister....*

*We look after the crop, we look after the harvest, but we have no right sister*

*Even though woman looks after the cattle and goats, her name is not there, sister*

*Sister on the land*

*Even if she looks after the hens and pigs, the girl has no share  
The land and sky are equal, women and men are equal*

The social oppression faced by girls due to some of the traditional customs and superstitious beliefs are also repeated in many songs. Like forcible marriage practiced quite commonly, the practice of forcing women to remove the blouse once they get married in parts like Gadchiroli:

*At a tender age they marry off sister,*

*If she says she wont go, they are beating her, sister  
They are bringing grown-up wives for small boys sister  
Without asking me they married me, my parents,  
They took the liquor and fixed it up the elders  
The MADIA CUSTOM IS DIFFERENT,  
The men don't have the custom  
The custom of removing the blouse  
At marriage they remove the blouse  
They put the haldi and take off the blouse  
They make me the daughter-in-law of the madkamirs*

The feelings of a young girl forced into marriage have been poetically expressed in this song which goes like this:

*In the darkness of no moon  
In the light of full moon  
In the deep forest I am alone,  
I put my foot forward, I take a step backward  
Wherever I step it is dark, brother  
Their only daughter, this bright beauty,  
This beautiful face they have ruined, brother  
They have forcibly married me off, brother*

The imagery in the song expresses the depths of despair that young girls feel due to the outmoded customs and practices. In the end when she realises that women must organise themselves and struggle to end these conditions, she says:

*Yes, brother yes, I have heard your view  
I will no longer stay in this darkness  
I will go forward towards a red dawn*

The songs emerging from the revolutionary women's movement are clear about the way forward, towards equality. They reflect what progressive young tribal women view as the only concrete way to achieve their goal of emancipation from social exploitation and oppressive tribal traditions – the path of building women's organisation and joining the armed struggle or supporting it to establish a new democratic order. Thus the flag song ends by saying:

*The land and sky are equal, women and men are equal*

*If our troubles have to go  
Join the struggle sister  
Let us build a Red army and win power  
Let us build our liberated areas in the world*

The red flower songs ends in this way:

*Sister in the forests of Dandakaranya  
Let us take the struggle for new democratic revolution forward  
All the people must unite sister  
We have to build our raj (power)  
Hold the red flag in your hand sister  
Let us also join the war sister*

At the same time songs on other issues concerning women have also been written, sung and become popular. This one song deals with the atrocities of the police on women and the people's resistance to them. Taking the background of the rape of the nuns in Jhabua district of MP it strings together a series of incidents. It goes like this:

*In the rule of this police, in the rule of this Government  
There is no security for sisters  
There is fear in the village, there is fear in the forest.....  
The tehsildar with the eyes of a cheetah, the ruler of  
Narayanpur*

*Reached Vedmakot, and summoned a meeting  
Like a cat he slipped and tried to molest Kamaladidi  
The people enraged went to Narayanpur,  
They took out a procession, did a chakka jam  
Women of the Christian faith, who nursed children  
The goons of Jhabua district, with the lotus symbol  
This Congress Govt is false, they entered within  
And raped them, the whole country was enraged  
There was a strike in Antagadh ...*

All these songs are structured in the forms of their traditional songs — the re re la, or re la setting the tune. Hence these songs are easily remembered and easily sung. The growing women's movement has also spawned a cultural movement.

## Movement of Jharkhand Adivasi Women

*Rajashree & Amrita*

The women of Jharkhand have a long history of heroic struggles against the British colonial rulers and the comprador-feudal rulers of post-British India. The Santhal rebellion of 1857-58 has made an indelible imprint on the history of India.

Women played an active role in that rebellion and formed a good chunk of the 30,000 that set out to march to Calcutta. They participated in the raids on the houses of the enemies. Many women were killed or arrested during the *Santhal hul (rebellion)*

Women were also active during the Munda uprising at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century led by Birsa Munda. The Puritanism and revivalism of Birsa's religion with its opposition to the worship of spirits (*bongas*), the drinking of rice-beer (*haria*), the *giti ora* (the dormitory for youth), the *akhara* (the dancing ground) and stress on equality between sexes had a positive impact on the women who participated as armed fighters in the uprising.

Women also participated in large number in the campaigns taken up by the **Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM)** in the late 1960s and 1970s. Those campaigns were for the seizure of land, harvesting of paddy and land appropriated by the moneylenders, for recovery of pawned articles and so on. Women also led the anti-liquor and anti-wife-beating campaigns and campaign against witch hunting. In spite of these campaigns, patriarchy remains quite strong though not as strong as in the feudal-dominated plains. The **JMM's** programme was more and more oriented to train the women as housewives by teaching them domestic chores such as cooking, stitching, embroidery. Though the women have a role in the village councils they have no role in the higher institutions that take real decisions. Thus political participation

of women had not really improved over the past century also. Wife beating, witch-hunting, sexual abuse by outside exploiters (*dikus*) etc. are still quite conspicuous. The adivasi woman has a double burden. She takes part in production outside the home and the whole domestic burden is borne by her. She does the cleaning, cooking, washing and also looks after children. Both share bringing of water and firewood. She works in the fields (women don't plough) and also forages in the forest. She collects mahua seeds, wood for fuel, leaves for making plates etc. Kendu Patta is also collected by women in the season. They also make rope. They even go to the nearby towns to work as daily labourers. They have no right on land traditionally.

**It is against such a backdrop that the Nari Mukti Sangh (NMS) commenced its activities in the early 1980s. The NMS emerged after the tribal peasants in Jharkhand started getting organised under revolutionary leadership against the feudal oppression of Rajput landlords and the harassment of officials and contractors of the forest department. It first started in the district of Giridih, a district in which the majority of the peasantry belongs to the Santhal tribe. It is a women's organisation in which almost all the activists and leaders are drawn from the adivasis – from the Santhals, Mundas, etc. Adivasi women have lesser restrictions and have become active members of NMS. But the non-adivasi (the 'mahato' caste who spoke khortha) women face many restrictions at home and so have not been very active members of NMS. Though some have joined, comparatively their number is much less. Some women have had to face a lot of 'repression' from home after they joined.**

### **Anti-Feudal Struggles**

Women were first organised in the anti feudal struggles. Women faced intense exploitation both economically and sexually. They had to slog 12 hours with only a meagre allowance of food. If they didn't go to work for some reason the goons of the landlord used to come to their homes and drag them to work. The Rajput landlords did not treat the adivasis as human beings. The newly wed bride had to spend the first night with the landlord. They kept some of these women as concubines also. The whole family, including children, had to do forced

labour (*bandhua majduri*). Verbal abuse was also routine and common. They could not wear chappals, and they could not sit on a chair in front of the landlords. Rural Bihar served as a model of feudal exploitation. It is from the darkness of this condition that the people, including women started getting awakened in the late seventies.

Women organisers spoke against this exploitation and organised women. But they did not fail to mention the social customs among the peasants which oppressed women and also about the male supremacy at home. At first, men opposed NMS and women's participation in organizations. Later when the peasant movement against the landlords gained momentum and as men and women began participating in them in large numbers, their attitude gradually changed. They could see how women were exploited. Women's resistance opened their eyes and NMS got a strong foothold.

Verbal abuse stopped completely and now they are addressed as 'Bhai' & 'Behen'. They wear chappals and are invited to sit in chairs!

The struggles against forest department followed asserting the rights of adivasis on the forest (produce). The *thekedars* (contractors) cruelly exploited the innocent adivasis. In addition the girls were exploited sexually. All this came to an end with struggles. Wages increased. Right to forest produce was won.

The change in society did not stop there. It entered the homes of the poor. Old customs changed. Especially the role of women in changing the society got full recognition. Now the political arena is open to women. They easily attend meetings. Now the situation in struggle areas is such that if the husband is in the Krantikari Kisan Committee, the wife is in the NMS. When one goes to the meeting the other stays at home to look after children!

After the women firmly established their role in society. NMS began taking up 'women's issues' extensively. A whole generation (or two?) has grown up witnessing this '*Vaicharik Sangharsh*' (cultural revolution) in the countryside, which changed the fate of the women in these regions forever. And changed the feudal thinking of men too.

Repression has become severe from 1997. But it has only boomeranged and NMS emerged stronger than ever. It brought forth the ingenuity and creativity of women and their leadership qualities have shone brighter.

This brief introduction of the history of NMS will not be complete without mentioning Comrade Bhakthida. He was the mentor and father figure for NMS. An elderly man worked in Dhanbad district and was a strong defender of women's cause. He took along the first young women organisers with him and trained them in their work. Extremely popular among the village women and children, he drew them into revolutionary struggles as he went along. That is why, whenever the history of NMS is to be written, the first leaders of the women's movement remember him fondly and say that his name has to be engraved in golden letters!

### Structure of NMS

According to the NMS manifesto, the structure is thus: A State Council (called *Rajya Parishad*) is elected in the State Conference. A State Executive Committee comprising President, Secretary, Joint Secretary and a Treasurer (called *Rajya Karyakarini Committee*) is to be elected from the *Rajya Parishad*. Then there is the district council (*Zilla Parishad*) that is elected in a district Conference and a district executive body is elected from the district council. The same procedure is followed for the next layer i.e., the '*Anchalik Committee*.' (This comprises the street or ward committees in the cities / towns or gram panchayats. At least 3 of these committees can form a *Anchalik Committee*. The basic or fundamental unit is elected in a basic level conference if there are at least 15 members.

For now, they could form up to district committees only. The efforts to hold a State Conference and elect a State Body & EC are on. They also want to form a Central Executive Committee combining the units of NMS in Bihar, Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarkhand, Orissa, West Bengal etc.

In the basic (village) committees and *Anchalik* committees there are village women (part-timers) but the leading district committee members are whole timers and the *anchalik* committee is also led by a fulltime worker of the organisation. The organizers and PRs form the core leadership of NMS and are the backbone of the organization. They are women dedicated to building up a revolutionary women's organisation and spreading the revolutionary women's movement not only in Jharkhand but in other parts of the country as well.

According to the manifesto, the *Zilla Parishad* should meet at least thrice in a year and the *Zilla Karyakarini Committee* should meet at least once in a month; the *Anchalik Karyakarini Committee* should meet at least once in a month and the basic level units (committee) should meet at least twice in a month.

### Issues taken up by NMS:

As mentioned earlier, women took active part in all the anti-feudal struggles and in the struggles against the jungle *thekedars*(contractors). Now, let us see how they have been tackling women's issues and problems.

#### Child Marriages:

Among adivasis, girls do not get married at a very young age but in some areas they are married off by 13 to 15 years. Among the non-adivasis and other castes in plain areas this is widely prevalent. And in Bihar in some districts there is a custom called 'Rasgaddi'. A girl is married off between 9 to 12 years of age but the boy just puts sindoor on her head and leaves her at the parent's home. This is popularly called first marriage. After she grows up, say, at the age of 18 or so, again a ceremony is conducted and the girl is sent with the boy. At the time of first marriage itself they decide when to conduct 'Rasgaddi'. The girl's family has to spend lot of money both times.

NMS has done a lot of propaganda against child marriages and has created an atmosphere against it. So they get prior reports of child marriages which are going to be conducted. The NMS didis go there and after a long discussion convince the family that physically and emotionally also it is not good for the children to get married at such a young age. The people get convinced and stop the marriage. Then a bond is written that they will not get their children married for another 9 to 10 years. And when they want to marry them off they ask the permission of NMS. If all the conditions are fulfilled then NMS promptly gives the permission.

Over the years the NMS has stopped many child marriages and carried on political propaganda as well. As a result, in Jharkhand in areas where NMS is strong, child marriages have stopped and girls are married off only after 18 years of age. Even among the non-adivasis it increased to 18 years age. But in the plains of Bihar they could not

achieve much success in this regard and propaganda work is going on.

#### **Dowry & dowry related deaths/harassment:**

The practice of taking dowry is not prevalent among the adivasis, but it has reached an unprecedented high among the non-adivasis. Harassing women for dowry and later murdering her is also prevalent. Most of the times the in-laws and the husband just try to get rid off her and have a second marriage.

NMS has done a lot of propaganda against giving and taking dowry. (propaganda of NMS on any issue includes posterings, wall writing, rallies, demonstrations, songs, plays and village level meetings). When NMS comes to know that a marriage is being conducted with dowry they go and tell them that 'this is not allowed in the (NMS) area.' They educate all the village people. A bond will be written by the groom and his parents that they will not take dowry nor will they demand in future and that they will look after the girl and will not harass her in any way. NMS also educates them not to spend lavishly at marriages and if they agree conducts a 'shibir vivah'.

After continuous efforts from NMS now the situation is that no one openly takes or gives dowry. But yet the give and take goes on clandestinely. Definitely the practice has come down in the areas where the NMS is strong but to completely eradicate the evil requires more effort at changing people's attitudes and a complete economic change in the society. And the NMS is actively trying for both these changes.

When the NMS comes to know that a woman is being harassed for dowry or is being thrown out of her in-laws house they conduct a jan adalat (people's court). The husband is summoned and asked to come forth with the reason for abandoning her. Usually what they get is a lame answer. So they argue with him against it. If he still insists on leaving her, they just calculate how many years she has toiled in their house and how much she should get for it and also make a list of all items she had brought into their house from her parents and the dowry amount is also calculated. They tell the man that she has spent half her life serving him and now at her age she can't remarry so easily, with the children and so that he should just cough up the whole amount which is her due. Obviously, the man fails to do so. If he has land, they demand a share in the land also. Then he is reprimanded for all his wrongs. Normally he takes his wife back. A bond is written by him

promising to look after her well. If the man is ready to give back the money or a share in land, some times a divorce is given to them. Usually the woman wants to live with him and only wants him to 'change'. So NMS tries to fulfil the woman's desire.

Now, in Jharkhand NMS strong areas dowry harassment has come down a lot. If a girl is killed for dowry, NMS conducts a *Jan Adalat*. Once the husband had to return the dowry and also give a compensation of Rs 50,000 to the girl's parents. He is usually beaten up as a punishment and made to write a bond that he will not remarry without NMS' permission.

#### **Shibir Vivah:**

NMS conducts propaganda against feudal marriage customs and lavish marriage expenses. People influenced by the propaganda ask NMS to conduct Shibir Vivah. In this there is no dowry. It is a simple get together of all the people and relatives. They all have meals and the marriage is solemnised in a public meeting. The bride and the groom, mass organisation leaders and of course the NMS *didis* speak on marriage and the relations between men and women, how they are in feudal society and how they should be democratic. The bride and groom wear new clothes garland each other, shake hands, eat sweets and the marriage is over. Such marriages give the people a glimpse of the new culture coming up in the struggle areas and have definitely saved the girl and her parents a lot of expense and trouble. When the boy and girl love each other or when they are from different castes, they approach NMS and a Shibir Vivah is conducted.

The people look after the NMS *didis* as one of their own families and NMS gets a lot of invitations to attend marriages. It is interesting to note that in Chattisgarh NMS tells them straight away that they won't attend a marriage where dowry is taken, whereas in Jharkhand they attend the marriages wherever possible or at least send them their best wishes (*sandesh*).

#### **Sexual harassment, rape:**

Sexual harassment cases and rape incidents have come down in NMS areas. When a rape incident occurs NMS conducts a *Jan Adalat*. They enquire and if they find the boy is from a poor family and has come under the influence of imperialist culture of TV, cinemas and if

he accepts his crime, he is warned severely and let off. Obviously, having to face the *Jan Adalat* is in itself a big punishment for such boys. If the rapist is a goon or has done it before then the punishment is severe. He is beaten up, his head is shaved, *chuna-tikka* (spots of lime) is applied on his head, a garland of *chappals* placed around his neck, he is paraded in the villages. Some times a hand or leg is cut off in serious cases.

Once a boy had relations with a girl. When he came to know that she was 5 months pregnant he fled. The girl had no father. A complaint was lodged with NMS and the people searched for the boy and within 2 days arrested him and brought him to the Jan Adalat. The boy's parents complained to the police. And they landed up just when the Jan Adalat was going on. Women questioned the police - "*we did not invite you, why have you come? You have no work here!*". When the police said they came to arrest the rapist, women just said, 'what evidence do you have that he raped, just get away from here' and they had to flee. The boy was given a piece of their mind and a shibir vivah was conducted without any dowry or poojas and a bond was written in which the boy stated that he will look after her well throughout his life.

In Bihar in 1994 when a girl named Meena was raped there was a big agitation and NMS ensured that the culprit got punished though the police and government tried to protect the boy who was from a landlord family.

As mentioned earlier due to anti-feudal struggles, the sexual exploitation of women by landlords has completely stopped. In both Bihar and Jharkhand there have been struggles against the sexual exploitation by forest range officers and contractors and several of them were beaten up. Now this has also stopped completely.

#### **Anti-liquor struggles & wife beating:**

Lot of propaganda work was done against arrack. The adivasis brew as well as sell arrack. In some villages NMS conducted raids on arrack shops and brewing centres and have broken the pots. In a few places they even raided some shops nearby and destroyed whisky and brandy bottles also. But this struggle has not taken place in a big way, so only in a few areas it was controlled and propaganda is under way - against drinking, brewing liquor and the increasing violence on women due to this. It is interesting to note that in the Jan Adalats conducted on

wife beating, the wife is asked to give the unheeding husband a beating, which immediately brings him to his feet, and he promises the '*behenjis*' to look after her well. But the NMS tries to solve the problem amicably as far as possible between wife and husband. In the feudal / adivasi society a wife who speaks up or beats her husband is considered to be a very bad woman, but people accept it when it is done in a *Jan Adalat* conducted by NMS. The participation of village women in the political arena has increased their self-esteem in the family and reduces violence on them.

#### **On Health problems:**

The public health centres in the villages and forests are in a very poor state and the people never get any medicines or proper treatment in them. The NMS has taken up the issue in a big way and every year conducts campaigns and organises rallies against the Health Dept. Especially during monsoons all kinds of diseases spread and NMS makes it a point to mobilise people at this time every year. The people go in a rally to the Health department offices in the nearby towns and hold demonstrations/ dharnas till the officials agree that they'll come to their villages and distribute medicines on such and such a date. The nutritious food, which was to be given to the pregnant women, was also ensured due to these struggles. Epidemics were controlled and vaccines like polio are being administered properly. NMS does propaganda also on the double standards of the government in giving medical facilities to the rich and the poor. Through songs, doctors are requested in songs to give treatment to the poor. Apparently some doctors were beaten up in Jan Adalats for not treating the poor people. But NMS realizes that only when there is struggle the officials are coming and a continuous process of treating the poor is yet to begin.

#### **Polygamy:**

NMS strongly opposes polygamy. Formerly when a man used to get a second wife for himself either by abandoning the first wife or without, there would be no opposition from any quarter of the society. But NMS has taken it up as an issue for propaganda and agitations. In the *Jan Adalats* both the man and his second wife are brought to justice and punished. The people in the *Jan Adalat* oppose polygamy, but say "it's wrong, but once it's done. What can we do?". If possible



they ask them to separate and he is advised to look after his first wife well. Both of them are paraded in the villages in the belief that it will deter people from doing such things. But on this issue they are relying more on propaganda than agitation.

#### **Equal wages for equal work:**

One of the demands on which the NMS vows to fight is equal wages for equal work. In feudal Bihar – Jharkhand, it goes without saying that women are paid much less than men. So there were agitations for increase in wages and the demand for equal wages to women is also put forward. Now, in NMS areas women get equal wages and the wage rates for all have also increased considerably.

10 years back they used to give Rs. 4 or 5 for a sekda (100 leaves) of Kendu Patta (Beedi leaves) over the years it increased to Rs. 50-55.

#### **Superstitions & witchcraft:**

One of the major problems of a backward society is the prevalence of numerous superstitious beliefs of which women are the worst victims. The backward villagers especially the adivasis believe in witches and ghosts. Not knowing the scientific reasons for illnesses, if somebody dies or falls ill they feel some witch has done something. They go to the *Ojha* (witch-doctor) who for his own ends points out to some women indirectly. The 'victims' then go and beat her up and ostracise her family or even kill her. Many poor women have met such a fate for no wrong of theirs. It's only natural for the women's organization to take up this issue seriously. A lot of propaganda work is being conducted and *Jan adalat* held whenever they come to know that a woman had been named a witch. The witch doctor and the persons who blame her are brought to book. In cases where she had been beaten, she is asked to beat the ones who tortured her. They are made pay all her medical expenses. On this occasion NMS educates the people on the landlords' interests behind propagating such superstitions among poor people and also explains the medical reasons for illnesses. (Usually widows become victims. In order to confiscate their lands this witch business was started by the exploiting classes and the men of the poorer classes also followed suit and many poor widows were killed in this name and their land confiscated.) Earlier, the victims used to go to the police for justice.

But they used to demand money. Now they have stopped going and look to NMS for support. The practice of killing and beating women in the name of witches has come down.

#### **Saving the forest (Jungle Suraksha):**

Women have not only resisted the forest contractors who stopped them from collecting forest produce, but they have also apprehended forest officials who were smuggling teak or were assisting those who smuggle. The women lay waiting and caught them red-handed. They were beaten up and a bond was written not to do such things again. The carts carrying illegally felled wood were caught by NMS women. NMS takes upon itself the responsibility of stopping this smuggling and does jungle-suraksha.

#### **August 15 & Elections:**

Every year on August 15<sup>th</sup> NMS goes to the schools in the areas and propagates among the children about fake independence and the children boycott the function organised in the schools. They even hoist black flags where possible. There is this interesting incident of a 3<sup>rd</sup> standard boy, who got inspired by NMS 'didis' & led all his school students (including his seniors) to boycott the function. They took out a rally shouting slogans on top of their voices. The police came, arrested them and each boy was made to stand on a bench and given one blow and warned not to do such things again. And the missionary school authorities dismissed this boy for leading the students! (he started to move around with the NMS didis and has now become a good organiser).

NMS boycotts elections because they are of the firm opinion that the lives of people are not going to be changed through this corrupt electoral system and a revolutionary change is necessary. Hence it conducts propaganda along these lines. In one village in West Bengal the women were so fed up with CPM goondaism that they did not want CPM candidates to get elected and wanted to burn down the polling booths. The police guessed something was wrong and stopped the women. The women said, 'we want to cast votes, why are you not allowing us' and barged into the booths in 3 places and brought the boxes out. The candidates who come to campaign are also questioned by the women on women issues. The NMS just conducts propaganda

on this question.

### **Celebrating March 8<sup>th</sup> as a struggle day of toiling women:**

99 percent of the work of NMS is based in the rural areas. But NMS leadership is very conscious of the fact that without the support of the intellectuals and the middle class sections in the cities it will be difficult to carry on. Though they have not deployed any organizers to work in the towns and cities, it determinedly celebrates March 8<sup>th</sup> in big cities every year and propagates its ideology among the city dwellers. So since 1990, March 8<sup>th</sup> was being celebrated in the cities of Bihar and Jharkhand by mobilizing thousands of women from the countryside. A month long campaign is conducted by volunteer teams of NMS and Jharkhand Abhhiyan (the cultural front) in the villages and in the city. On March 8<sup>th</sup> a rally and public meeting are conducted.

Since 1997, in various ways the authorities have been trying to stop the NMS from celebrating March 8<sup>th</sup> in cities. But the NMS women with a single minded purpose of celebrating March 8<sup>th</sup> have been overcoming all obstacles by fighting militantly and have been literally celebrating March 8<sup>th</sup> as 'the struggling Day of toiling women'. The only reason the police could cite was that 'NMS propagates MCC ideology'. NMS strongly condemns this and pins them down on the question of whether women have a right to celebrate the International Women's Day or not. They have had experiences when permission was not given or if it was given it was cancelled at the last minute or they were permitted to hold the meeting but not the rally, if nothing else they are asked to stop for at least half an hour before taking out the rally. And police stop NMS women from the villages from coming to the meeting.

The village women try to find various ways to enter the city but the police do succeed in limiting the numbers. Once they have reached, they argue their way out and conduct the programme as planned. Now-a-days to avoid police interruptions the women are woken up at 3 am and all the proceedings are preponed by a few hours. By the time the police get wind of it it's too late to stop. NMS also has alternative arrangements made to conduct the programme in some other place but till now they have not had to use them for March 8<sup>th</sup>.

Campaign teams and their leaders are also being arrested, but

press statements are released and the demand to release them is also made a part of the propaganda campaign.

In 1997, when six district conferences of NMS were arranged, police tried to stop each one of them. NMS had made alternative arrangements to conduct them in a different place. So when the police blocked all the roads and tried to disrupt the Conferences, NMS just went and conducted the Conferences in the alternative places exactly as they had planned. Big processions were taken. And to the ire of the police immediately posters were put all over that they had successfully conducted their district conferences!

There is always the alternative of celebrating the March 8<sup>th</sup> in villages in a decentralised manner. But the impact a massive rally of toiling women in a city can have is altogether different. So NMS is determined to carry on the struggle to celebrate March 8<sup>th</sup> as far as possible in the cities only.

The following is the brief summary of the resolutions passed in the meeting arranged on the occasion of March 8<sup>th</sup> this year:

1. Against POTA: along with many others NMS activists were also arrested under POTA. It resolves to fight against this draconian law along with the vast toiling masses including women, peasants, workers, people living on hard-earning, lovers of justice, progressive intellectuals and the democratic forces.

2. Against the barbaric police repression: the police and the paramilitary personnel's repression on the people of Jharkhand is increasing day by day. In the months of November & December of 2001 the atrocities perpetrated by the State Police, BSF & CRPF on the women like gang rapes, beating, mass atrocities and murdering people through beating etc. in the name of Operation Eagle, Operation Shikhar and Operation X crossed the limits of barbarism even of the middle ages.

In Dhanbad, Giridih, Hazaribag & Bokaro districts of North Chota Nagpur the police killed one woman and two men by beating them up, gangraped 7 women, arrested Sanjothi Kumari and illegally detained her for 10 days and sexually abused her; tried to molest dozens of women, severely thrashing up 60 women and 200 men, in the name of searching for looted jewellery, and seized about Rs. 50,000 etc. These are burning examples of this.

On 18/2/02, the leading comrade of the propaganda team of the March 8<sup>th</sup> programme, Com Lalitha Marandi was arrested while returning from a programme by the police of Devri PS, Giridih Dist. And she was sent to jail under POTA.

NMS appeals to all the toiling masses and progressive and democratic forces to build a democratic movement.

3. Against social restrictions and evils: NMS resolves to fight against the evils of dowry, bride killings, Sati, child marriage etc and to wage an unending struggle for widow remarriage, equal wages for men and women, women's right over property and to establish equal respect and position for the women in the society.

Here is a vivid description of how March 8<sup>th</sup> was conducted this year by the NMS.

### **March 8<sup>th</sup> celebrations in 2003:**

The first phase of the propaganda programme was started from 2<sup>nd</sup> February and went on till 20<sup>th</sup> Feb. In every team the number used to be from 70-80. Wall writing, postering, street meetings, street plays, cultural programme of songs and dances were performed. The importance of the March 8<sup>th</sup> was explained in the general meetings. Propaganda was done in villages, towns and cities. Funds were collected for the programme.

The second phase started from 24<sup>th</sup> February and the main aim of this was to propagate in Patna where the March 8<sup>th</sup> programme was arranged. About 100 members of the NMS reached Patna on 20<sup>th</sup> February. This Central Team did propaganda work till 6<sup>th</sup> March. Thousands of people used to attend the meetings. There was a lot of political propaganda as well. On hearing about the atrocities of the police people used to respond and condemn.

During this campaign Com. Jatin Marandi, Secretary of Jharkhand Avon was arrested.

The final programme was celebrated in Miller School Grounds, Patna in which about 14-15 thousand people attended including from Kolkata, Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Ranchi, Patna, North Bihar, Central Bihar and Jharkhand. And women were more in number.

The programme started in the morning at 10 with the hoisting of the NMS flag. After singing songs martyrs' column was garlanded.

Songs were sung and slogans were shouted in the memory of martyrs

Procession was started in the afternoon at 2 PM and went through the main streets of Patna city finally reaching to the School grounds. A steering committee was selected to conduct the meeting. Various speakers spoke about the importance of the day. The programme concluded in the night at 9pm.

Celebration of March 8<sup>th</sup> in such a manner in the midst of police repression and foiling the police attempts to obstruct the meeting is a great achievement.

### **Meeting against the arrest of Com. Lalitha Marandi**

On 18<sup>th</sup> February, 2002 Com. Lalitha was arrested by the police of Devri PS, near Bhelvadali while returning from the propaganda programme of March 8<sup>th</sup>. She was beaten up during interrogation and later sent to Giridhi Jail. This news spread like wildfire throughout the district. Immediately wall-writing & postering was done and pamphlets were distributed in the villages and towns of Giridhi, Dhanbad and Hazaribag districts. Protest rallies and public meetings were conducted in various places from 25<sup>th</sup> to 30<sup>th</sup> March. She was released after three-four months.

### **Repression & Resistance**

From 1990 itself, arrests of the activists had started. Restrictions began to be imposed on public meetings.

Revolutionaries can withstand the repression when they are among the people. Similarly NMS activists live among the people and conduct their programmes secretly and openly according to the necessity.

Though there was some repression on NMS from its very inception, 1997 was the turning point. Till now there are no killings or firings but women have been arrested, tortured, booked under false cases, beaten up during the combing operations and interrogated. In many districts village women have also been raped as part of operations conducted against the Party and the squads/platoons. In Jharkhand, women have also been booked under POTA (though except for one woman all have been consequently released). In some villages arrested women have been paraded to deter other women from joining organizations.

The women did not take all this lying down and NMS was instrumental in organising the resistance of women. Many are the

instances where women have rounded up the police and beaten them up. In many villages the women (some times the whole village) gheraoed the police stations to get the arrested persons released. In one village in Jharkhand such was the anger of the women that they made the police lick their own saliva! Some times there were firings on people gheraoing the stations.

In Jharkhand the adivasis beat the drum (called nagaara) whenever the police attack. Hearing it, all the people from neighbouring villages will gather and resist the police. They also take their bows and arrows along and sometimes use them. Women take any household implements they can lay their hands on or else pelt stones. Many such battles with these militant people have left the police helpless. And in almost all incidents, the police are made to write a bond in which they apologize for their ill deeds and promise not to come again. Indeed, they did not enter such villages after that!

But when the police conduct big operations and the people are terrorised, there has not been organised resistance. NMS tries to boost up the morale of the people on such occasions. Torchlight processions and demonstrations and other propaganda were taken up against repression. Fact-finding teams of intellectuals also expose the repression on people.

There have been some heroic instances of resistance by women under the leadership of NMS. In one instance, 3,000 women did a 24-hour rasta roko against rape by police. The men stood in guard. The rapist policeman was fully beaten up. The DSP apologised and wrote a bond that they will not do so again.

One Santhi of Jharkhand was arrested when campaigning for March 8<sup>th</sup> in 2002, severely tortured, booked under POTA, sent to jail and was released in 2003. Some women who were tortured and raped have retreated. But the majority stayed, continued to work or at least support the organization.

Some girl children who work in Jharkhand Abhiyan have also been arrested while campaigning for March 8<sup>th</sup>. They were threatened not to give programmes. Due to people's pressure they were released the next day.

Meetings against police repression:

**On 31<sup>st</sup> January 2003 a procession was taken out against**

**women's exploitation, atrocities, and police repression in Bazar comes under Baravadi PS of Lathehar District. About 3000 people were attended. At 4 in the evening a public meeting was held and cultural programme was given.**

**In the same district and PS, a rally and public meeting was organised against police atrocities on women and the common people, bride burning for dowry etc. on 8<sup>th</sup> February 2003. about 2000 people were attended. The speakers warned the police against the police entering into their villages and shouted slogans against the atrocities of police and the government administration.**

## **Publications of NMS**

1. NMS ka Aahvan, 2. Krantikari Nari Andolan ki disha, 3. NMS manifesto, 4. Mahilaon ka lal sena dal, 5. Chamaktha lal Sitara 6. Stree swatanthratha aur communist naithikatha par Lenin ki vichar.

The first three books form the theoretical base of NMS. All the members are educated on the first 3 books. Classes are held and combined study undertaken in committee meetings. NMS doesn't have a magazine of its own and all its reports are published in the magazine Jan-Jwaar (which in fact carries the reports of many other mass organizations).

All the three basic books stress on the relationship between class struggle and women's liberation. The NMS flag has 5 stars in it which respectively indicate – independence, democracy, equal rights, women's liberation and socialism. NMS stands firmly in the camp of the socialist women's movement. It stresses that women's movement needs the ideology of Marxism-Leninism-Maoism to develop in the correct direction. It also says that we should strive for socialism after the victory of the New Democratic Revolution and realizes that even under socialism the class struggle for women's liberation must go on.

## **Political Education**

The NMS has given importance to educating the women who come into the organisation to work full time for the movement. Since many of the women and girls who are coming are from poor peasant families, many of them are not even literate. They are encouraged to become literate as soon as possible. Then apart from the three basic books

classes are also being conducted for the organisers on the following subjects like grammar, geography, history, Marxism, and history of revolutions in the world in the 20th century and new economic policies.

Three editions of an audiocassette of songs have also been released by NMS over the years.

Thus through hard work and revolutionary zeal, through a conviction that women's situation can be changed only by organising the mass of poor and peasant women, through patient and determined effort and learning through doing has the Nari Mukti Sangh grown over the years. It has grown and spread along with the spread of the revolutionary movement in North and East India. But being a rural based organisation it is little known in other parts of the country. Yet the organisers and leadership of the NMS have set their sights far beyond the tribal women of Jharkhand.

**As the President of the NMS Sheila said in an interview :**

*" So long as feudal and imperialist exploitation of women persists, so long as the discrimination against women continues, so long as women live like animals and slaves, so long as women are deprived of economic and political rights, burnt to death for the dowry, become victims of the atrocities of the police, mafia and goondas, so long as export of girls for prostitution and the male domination exists – struggle has to be waged for the women's liberation (nari mukti ke liye) which is possible only with the establishment of socialism in the country. Even after establishing a socialist society there will be necessity of women's organizations as we understand from the discussion of Com. Lenin with Klara Zetkin.*

*"In the earlier days, the organizers of the NMS had to struggle a lot to mobilize women. In the villages men did not allow their women folk to attend meetings in the night which is the only free time they have after the daylong toil.. So, NMS organizers had to adopt methods like also calling men for the meeting and speak about general problems of the village. Finally the meeting would end up as a general meeting of the village. But still NMS organisers were able to propagate their ideas.*

*"Only after the general revolutionary atmosphere created through the revolutionary struggle grew could women come to*

*the meetings on their own.*

*"In the beginning NMS work started in three districts – Dhanbad, Giridih and Hazaribagh. Later it expanded to Dumka, Devghar, Jaamthad Goda, Sahebganj, Bokaro, Ranchi, Simdega, East & West Singhbhum, Chatra, Palamu, Lathehar, Lohardagga, Garhwa, Gumla, Kodarma.*

*"Till now NMS units have been formed from village level to district level and we are in the process of forming a State level Committee. Apart from this we are planning to form the committees of NMS in the States of Bihar, UP, Uttarakhand, Chattisgarh, West Bengal, Assam, Punjab, Orissa, Delhi etc."*



**The revolutionary women's movement is growing in the midst of struggle. It is growing in Bihar, Jharkhand and West Bengal as well. As women are getting mobilised and organised in larger and larger numbers a section of them are also moving forward to join the armed struggle as fighters. They are willing to brave the hardships of guerrilla life with its constant movement and constant alertness, take on tasks and duties equal to men, with the aim of changing this exploitative society, for there is no other way to get out of the existing system, however long and arduous the path may be.**

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