

ON July 27, at 3.30 a.m. several policemen arrived at the office of Chhatra Yuva Sangharsh Vahini, Agra. They broke the lock and banged on the door, almost breaking the hinges. 24 year old Madhu, a Vahini activist, was asleep inside the office. It had rained very heavily on July 26, and Bapunagar slum had got flooded so about 40 women with small children were also sleeping in the office with Madhu. Madhu opened the door and asked: "Who are you?" Reply: "We are the police. We have come to arrest some people." Madhu asked: "Who are you going to arrest? Please show me the arrest warrant." At this, police inspector Mohar Singh caught hold of Madhu's breasts, pulled off her dupatta, kicked her, and when she fell down, stamped on her foot with his boot, as a result of which she sustained a fracture. Seeing him attack Madhu, one of the women picked up the broken leg of a bench and hit Mohar Singh with it. This infuriated the police who stamped into the office, turned off the light and proceeded to beat up the women and children with lathis. They also sexually molested and insulted the women, injuring some of them. The policemen then searched the office and left. 15 minutes later, they reappeared and arrested Madhu and six of her co-workers, even though it was unlawful for them to arrest Madhu at night, with no policewoman present.

In the police station, Madhu was subjected to further harassment and torture. In her words: "The policemen kept making obscene and insulting remarks. They burnt my skin with lighted cigarettes. The superintendent of police Daniel and the additional district magistrate Rastogi watched them, and had a good laugh. When I asked permission to visit the toilet, they refused pointblank. I sat for hours, moaning in pain and controlling myself. Then the ADM Rastogi asked me about Anal and Ashok. I said I did not know where they were, to which Rastogi responded: "OK, if you don't tell us, you'll be fed many tasty dishes, and you won't be allowed to go to the toilet." After hours, I was finally told to go to the toilet, but then they ordered me to urinate in front of a row of policemen, which I refused to

Sangharsh Vahini's Struggle in Agra

When People Demand The Implementation Of Government Promises

do. My legs were aching badly. When one of my wounded co-workers asked for some ointment to put on his wound, he was told to apply my urine."

Rastogi insulted Madhu during the interrogation, saying: "Haven't you been raped yet? And where did you get that fancy short haircut—at Pavnar ashram? Well, now Geeta's place is vacant, you will have to replace her." (Geeta was a prostitute who had been rescued by Madhu). Rastogi then ordered the



Madhu

policemen to give Madhu *prasad*. One of them twisted her arm and another burnt her with a cigarette. The others arrested were also tortured.

On the morning of July 27 when the residents of Babu Nagar and JP Nagar

came to know that the police had insulted the women the previous night and had also arrested Madhu and six others, about 2,000 of them—men, women and children—set out to meet the district collector. The silent procession was led by Anal and 20 other men. Immediately behind them were women with small children, and men with bigger children brought up the rear. When the procession came within 100 yards of Hariparvat police station, armed policemen suddenly swooped down on the defenceless people, without issuing any prior warning. An order was given: "Mount", and mounted police charged the women. Many women fell down and were trampled by the horses. The policemen mercilessly beat up people with lathis and rifle butts. Two pregnant women were seriously injured. A baby who fell from its mother's arms died three days later of the injuries received. Ten year old Satish's knee was pierced by a bayonet and 60 year old Jamunadas' wrists were fractured. Many other people were injured. Anal and 20 others were arrested. In the course of that day, these men were thrice taken out of the lockup and severely beaten. Anal's leg was fractured and he received many injuries which have not yet healed.

Why did all this happen? It happened because of Chhatra Yuva Sangharsh Vahini's courageous and militant activity in Agra. The administration, the police and businessmen who carry on illegal

activities are all equally exasperated by the Vahini's presence. The Vahini has several times shed light on the illegal doings of the police, and has also successfully struggled to get different laws implemented.

One example is the struggle to free a girl called Geeta from a brothel. When Geeta was 11 years old, her brother-in-law sold her into a brothel in Sikandra, Agra. During the 12 years that she lived there, she made several attempts to run away but was caught each time and cruelly punished. Once she managed to reach the Hariparvat police station but Mohar Singh, who was in charge there, called a pimp and handed her over to him. Finally, on the pretext of getting medical treatment for her son, she managed to appeal to a local doctor, who put her in touch with Madhu and other Vahini activists. On April 9, these activists took Geeta to Hariparvat police station to lodge a report against the brothel owners, but the police officer refused to register the report. The district commissioner also said it was not his job to record Geeta's statement. Finally, a woman magistrate took her statement. When the police ignored all pleas for action against the brothel owners, the Vahini organized a public meeting against the police, in front of Sikandra police station. Some activists were immediately arrested on the charge of violating section 144. However, the struggle was partially successful in so far as the police were publicly exposed and some police officers were transferred.

Madhu was very active in this campaign to save Geeta, so the police were determined to take revenge on her. Geeta had been given shelter in an orphanage but Madhu was planning to take her to Vinoba's ashram at Pavnar. Before she could do this, the police arrested Madhu, and simultaneously they arranged forcibly to marry Geeta to a blind man who is 22 years older than she is. The Vahini was so involved with the struggle in the slums that it was unable to prevent this marriage from taking place.

The second struggle waged by the Vahini is for the right of slumdweller to own plots of land for houses. According

to the urban land ceiling act, one person cannot own more than 1,500 square metres of open land in Agra. All extra land will be considered government land. In spite of this law, a rich colonizer called Lajjaram Gupta has staked a claim to hundreds of acres in Agra. He tried to evade the law by "selling" off small plots, to the poor slumdweller who had built huts on this land. The slumdweller began to pay him money either in lump sums or in instalments. Most of the slumdweller are Dalits.

Vahini activists began to explain to the people that according to law, this land belonged to the government and not to Lajjaram, so there was no need to pay him



Even three year old Babli was not spared by the police

any money. The two colonies were named Babu Nagar and J. P. Nagar. They obtained water connections, and the people got ration cards as well. Lajjaram threatened to get the residents evicted but since they were now organized they refused to be intimidated. The Vahini maintained that it was implementing Indira Gandhi's 20 point programme. The programme promises to provide land sites to the houseless, but so far the government has not given land to a single person in Agra, under this programme.

In retaliation, Lajjaram sent some toughs to the colony on the night of July 10. These men removed and broke the statues of Mahatma Gandhi and Babasaheb Ambedkar, which had been installed by the residents. The people were angered by this insult to the statues, but Vahini activists believe in non-violence, so they managed to keep the situation peaceful. The police did not get a chance to arrest anyone or to terrorize the people on, the pretext of maintaining law and order.

On July 25, Anal was going on his cycle to meet the district magistrate, when a well known ruffian named Arvind fired at him. The bullet missed him but he was then attacked with lathis. He filed a report at Hariparvat police station, and was assured that the culprits would be arrested, but no such action was taken. Instead, Arvind filed a police complaint, saying that Anal and his friends had attacked him and stolen his Watch, Rs 3.50 and a gold chain. It was in consequence of this complaint that the police came to arrest Anal on the night of July 27.

The urban land ceiling act has been violated with impunity in Agra. Land traders act hand in glove with the administration to usurp government land. District authorities have also made a practice of illegally buying and selling land in the names of their relatives. The hutment dwellers settled on this land are forcibly evicted with the help of the police and of toughs acting under police protection.

There have been several cases of illegal takeover of public land. In 1980, the principal of the local Baptist school sold the school grounds to a capitalist who began to construct shops there. The

teacher's association waged a long struggle and finally proved that the land belonged to the government and the sale was illegal. Similarly, a Christian cemetery was sold off, and huge bungalows constructed on the site. Even small municipal parks have been captured as sites for temples. The Hanuman temple built in Muzaffar Khan park is a lucrative enterprise for its owners.

By taking up Geeta's case, the Vahini has exposed the active connivance of the police in the exploitation of prostitutes. They have also shown that land ceiling laws are not being implemented in Agra. They are working to strengthen the hands of the poor, and the state is determined to repress this emerging force.

Various tactics are being employed to further this repression. There is a majority of Jatavs in the Babu Nagar population, but there are also many Dhobis, Mallahs, Kachis, Kallahs, Thakurs and Muslims. People of all these communities participated in the struggle. The police are now trying to create communal tension by spreading the rumour that the Jatavs want to capture land belonging to other communities, by setting up statues of Babasaheb Ambedkar.

The police are also making efforts to slander the Vahini activists, particularly Madhu. They have dubbed the Vahini workers "naxalites" and Madhu an "immoral woman." However, the residents of Babu Nagar, J. P. Nagar and Khandari slum are carrying forward the struggle undeterred. On August 7, about 1,000



An old woman shows her wounds

people participated in a silent march. On August 15, 50 people held a poster demonstration. They set out at 10 a.m., covered 38 kilometres on foot, sticking posters as they went, and returned at 4.30 p. m. On August 18, 500 people held a sit-in demonstration at the district collector's office. The police arrested 36 men and 12

women. On August 23, 500 women demonstrated against police atrocities. The police arrested 51 women. Two of them were minors and eight had small babies in their arms. All these demonstrations were held in spite of the proclamation of section 144 in the city. As a result of this social pressure, Madhu and Anal have been released, though cases are still pending against them.

On August 31, several organizations came together in Delhi, and formed the Agra Jan Sangharsh Sahyog Samiti. On October 2, the Samiti staged a march from Rajghat to Boatclub, against state and police repression of social activists, and particularly the attempts to slander women activists.

The Vahini now demands that a judicial enquiry be conducted into the Babu Nagar incident, all those arrested be released and the false cases against them be withdrawn, all those injured by the police be compensated, slum dwellers be given the right to the land on which they are settled, and an enquiry be conducted into the unlawful seizure of land duct by big traders.

- Agra Jan Sangharsh Sahyog Samiti

The organizations which have come together to form the Samiti are: Ambedkar Youth Organization, Indian People's Front, Chhatra Yuva Sangharsh Vahini, Dalit Panther, Delhi Mukti Morcha, Manushi, People's Union for Civil Liberties, Yuva Janata, Samta Yuvjan Sabha, Socialist Party. □

Threatened Unemployment For Thousands

Over 20,000 workers, a majority of whom are women, in small-scale handloom coir factories in Kerala, are faced with the threat of unemployment because of the

granting of a licence to an industrialist to produce coir mats on mechanized looms in his factory in Tamilnadu. An enquiry conducted by the government coir board has proved that the licence was procured through fraudulent methods and backdoor dealings. The coir board has unanimously requested the government to withdraw the licence.

Ten unions of coir workers have also

submitted a memorandum to the industries minister, asking him to prohibit the production of coir mats on mechanized looms wherever they can be produced on handlooms.

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