

An Assertion Of Womanpower

A Case Study On The Organizing Of Landless Women In Maharashtra

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

Besides working for extremely low wages and having a long working day of 12 to 14 hours, women workers in the rural sector face the most severe oppression. Sexual abuse by landlords and police is common and so is drunkenness of husbands and beating of wives. The burden of the dual role of housekeeper and worker affects the women badly as they toil for long hours in the field and then return to do the housework under primitive conditions. They have to fetch water and fuel from long distances and cook on wood fires, while children cry in hunger, neglect and fatigue.

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

conscious of their own problems and struggle to change these conditions.

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

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

Prior to this act, the Shramik Sanghatana, a toilers' organization, had been organizing the rural workers around economic demands. However, the participation of women in the movement was marginal. The act of breaking the liquor pots symbolized the awakening of women, a break from being silent sufferers to taking their life into their own hands. Since then, the women have been struggling against individual cases of working women's oppression, such as rape, beating by police and landlords and wife beating. They have also been participating more actively in the Shramik Sanghatana's economic and political struggles around



wages, employment and elections. The women's organizations are informal, unstructured and developed by the women themselves, not from a plan by outsiders. Our enquiry attempted to gain an insight into the dynamics of this undocumented, fragmented process. Reconstructed from the words and memory of village working women, it captures some of the mechanisms of the process, even while it leaves many questions unanswered.

Social And Economic Background

Shahada taluk in Dhulia district of Maharashtra is an extremely rich and fertile area. In the 1800s it was inhabited by a tribal population who cultivated their own small independent farms. In the late 1800s constant feuding between dynasties and conditions of war and instability forced the tribals to give up their farming and flee into the nearby mountains.

British rule in the eighteenth century ended the period of instability, and in an

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

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

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

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

Women's Role In Production

The participation of women in the economic sector differs according to whether they are from land owning families or from working families. Women from the families of rich landlords neither work in the farm, nor in the home. Labourers farm the land under the supervision of the landlord. In the home of the landlord, female labourers do the housework—cooking, washing and

childcare, under the supervision of the landlord's wife. Though the landlord's wife may have some education, she lives a secluded life. Women from the families who own small plots fall into two groups. If the land is sufficient to provide for their own needs, the woman will not work outside her own farm for a wage—she may work on her own farm if the farm operates at subsistence level. Her major task is housework and child care.

If the plots of land are too small, part of the family has to work for wages. Here too, several patterns exist. Either the men work outside the farm for a wage, and the domestic chores are left solely to the women, or the men and women work outside for a wage, doing the work required for the family farm in the few spare hours or days they have. In both cases the burden of housework falls solely on the woman who performs it alone, with the help of her children.

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

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

Among peasants who own small, subsistence farms, most women work in the fields, either on their own land or for a wage. All of them also do their own housework. Landless women all work on the farms of others, and also do their own housework.

Women who work for a wage perform those tasks that do not use animal or machine power, for example, sowing, weeding, cutting of corn during harvest.

Men do jobs which need the help of animal power—ploughing, spraying. Whether mechanization increases or decreases employment is a much debated question in India. It is related to the nature of production—which crops are grown, and which operations are mechanized. Observations by activists in this area indicate that mechanization has had the effect of reducing the number of hours required for what has traditionally been regarded as men's work, and there is a trend for men to take on traditional women's work.

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

Nature Of Tribal Society

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

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

On the whole, there seems to be greater sexual freedom for girls among tribals than is common elsewhere. If an unmarried girl is found to be having sexual relations or a married girl to be having an extra-marital affair, the panch holds a meeting, and the

man is often fined. However, both are free to marry elsewhere. It is not very difficult for a girl to remarry. Widow remarriage too, is not a great difficulty. During marriage or divorce or any religious ceremony the panch plays an important part but women have no voice in the proceedings of the panch. Despite the relative greater sexual freedom for women, men are allowed to marry more than once but women are not. Women have to obtain a divorce before another marriage.

Problems Of Women Tribal Labourers

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

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

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

Another form of harassment of women is perpetrated by the watchmen of crop protection societies which are registered cooperative societies of the peasants. They are dominated by the rich peasants. They had licences for guns to protect the crops, from the British period upto 1974. They misused their authority by terrorizing the labourers, extracting fines from them, confining them, beating and torturing them. The watchmen search the clothes of

the labourers to see if they have stolen grain. This searching of women by watchmen is very insulting and is disapproved of by the women.

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

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

Tribal Response

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

However, no systematic organizational form took shape until the Adivasi Seva Mandal was formed in 1971. The main activity of the Adivasi Seva Mandal was to contact and send applications to authorities. There was no separate organization of women. In fact, as late as 1972 the participation of women in the organization remained insignificant.

One incident however accelerated the

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

This incident focused attention on the area. The Marathi weekly *Manoos* gave wide publicity to this incident. This attracted the attention of some Sarvodaya workers. G.S. Shinde together with other Sarvodaya workers and with Ambarsingh, began work by establishing the Gram Swarajya Samiti, in late 1971.

How The Women Got Together

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

that brought the labourers to the Parishad, but the burning question of unity.

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

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

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

Women's Participation

Women participated in non-violent struggles and strikes, but their involvement was extremely low. However, the women who did participate were very militant. And as the issues which the organization took up encompassed more aspects of their lives, their involvement and their enthusiasm increased.

To begin with, the men activists found it extremely difficult to approach women workers. Their usual approach was to go to the homes of the landless and talk about the necessity of organizing. They would talk to the men, while the women stayed in the kitchen. When leaving, they would go

to the woman, thank her for the tea, apologize for causing so much trouble, and mention in passing that she too must join the struggle. The women's responses were mixed. As Bhuribai, a prominent woman activist says: "At first I did not think it correct that these strange men were coming to our homes. Were their intentions good, I *wondered*. But I would also feel angry that they were only talking to my husband about unity, struggle,

wages. Did not these things concern me?"

However, when a struggle did break out, a small section of active women would participate. At these times it was easy for men activists to have discussions with the women.

In February 1972, at Manrad village, electric shocks were given to tribal labourers by crop protection societies and the police. Around the same time, a woman from Shrikhed village was raped by the son



of a rich peasant. On the basis of these and other general issues, the GSS issued a call to boycott the 1972 assembly election. The general response to this could be gauged from the drop in election participation from 50 to approximately 27 percent. Men and women realized that it was in their power to decide their vote. The activists had just begun their work there. They would however go to the fields where women would be working and talk to them about the elections. Women would say: "It is true. What is the use of voting? Until now we were blind." This indicates that women workers respond better to men activists at the worksite where they work in groups than at home where they are isolated.

In 1972, the GSS organized a satyagraha for the liberation of the lost lands of the peasants. The women affected by this demand were from the poor and middle peasant class, but not many of them participated.

However, just three months later, in the 1972 strike at Pariwardha, the militancy of the few women who took part played a crucial role. The strikers were demanding an increase in wages. Some strike breakers under the protection of the police went to work in the fields. A group of women participating in the strike, discussed among themselves and with the others, the implications of the strike for their struggle and their unity. The women went further and argued thus with the strike breakers: "All of us are starving. It is not only for a wage increase that we are struggling. This struggle indicates our unity and resolution against the employers. How then do you feel like working for the rich peasants?" In spite of the presence of the police, the women took the strike breakers back home. However, women were still regarded as an appendage to the movement which remained dominated by men. The men wanted to negotiate for the women's wages as well, but the women insisted that they would negotiate for their own wages.

There were two struggles in 1972 — one revolving round the land issue and the other round the wage issue. In the three

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

The struggle against crop protection societies also intensified. The landless and small peasant women suffered most at their hands. "As we participated in struggles and discussed more and more issues, we began to trust the male activists" says a woman from Kurangi village. Women like Bhuribai from Kurangi, Bajabai from Moad and many others who participated in wage struggles, in the land grab movement and in struggles against atrocities perpetrated by the crop protection society on labourers, emerged as leaders of women. The mass of women, however, remained outside the activities of the Shramik Sanghatana. They hardly participated in the night meetings of the villages. The group of men and women activists discussed how the mass of women could be involved in the struggle. They decided to plan for a camp where women from different villages could come together, discuss their problems and take up struggles jointly.

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

There was a severe drought in Maharashtra in 1973. The failure of rains led to severe food and work shortage. To alleviate the rural crisis, the government started drought relief works like stone breaking, road building and well digging. The work started was extremely inadequate for the drought-affected

population. In the beginning, hardly 30 per cent of the population was employed. After the organized struggle of the agricultural workers, this increased to more than 85 per cent. Though the government had fixed minimum wages on a quantum basis, corruption was rampant and wages were invariably given late. The tribals organized themselves around the demands of employment, timely wages, and against corruption. All the people participated wholeheartedly because they were severely affected by the adverse conditions, and their life depended on their organization and on their struggle.

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

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

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

A discussion was held by Shramik

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

The First Women's Conference

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

To begin with, there was some resistance from the men against sending women to the camp for two to three days. A discussion took place at Tarhawad. Men, especially old men, objected, pointing to the work at home. This was discussed in the presence of activists. Other women volunteered to look after the children and housework of the delegates. The number of women attending the camp kept changing through the two days. Women would attend for some time and go back. This was their first experience of sitting down and discussing issues at a stretch. Women from different villages related experiences of their own lives. They talked openly about how their husbands drank and beat them up, about sexual harassment by rich peasants and police, about their long days of work, about the burden of housework and what they had to do to get the chance to come to the camp. It was a frank discussion about their real problems, and every woman participated.

During the camp, the women from Karankheda village described how their husbands drank and beat them up. They asked the women at the camp to help them eradicate liquor from their village. Spontaneously, all the women at the camp walked to the village. On the way, more and more women from villages along the

route joined in. They marched to the liquor den and broke all the pots. "We will not allow you to produce and sell liquor again", they threatened. They also gheraoed the police inspector and asked him for an explanation. This was a clear manifestation of the power of women. Soon a wave of liquor pot breaking shook the area. As in Moad village, women moved around in bands to break liquor pots and terrorize the ruffians of the village.

The Women's Committees

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

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

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

In the Modai Hati in Moad, a labourer

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

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

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

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

Before 1972, it was a regular custom for the wives of Saldaars to be sexually abused by the rich peasants. In Piplod village, for example, the rich peasant had the right of the "first night." After the women began participating in the struggle, they refused to be so used. Rape and

sexual harassment of women by rich peasants and landlords had been regular occurrences. Now, the rapists were given an organized beating up as in Kurangi village in 1973. The incidence of rape consequently declined. The struggle of these women's committees is a continuing one.

The Second Shibir

In late 1972, another women's conference was held, involving women from outside the local area, mainly from Bombay. While the aim of the first camp was to get women to express themselves and to talk about their own problems, the aim of the second was to link up the problems of women to other problems in society. The topics of discussion were the relationship of the women's movement to the workers' movement and the historical role of women in the Russian, Chinese and Vietnamese revolutions. The conferences primarily consisted of a series of lectures by the Bombay women. The local women were silent listeners. However, on topics which touched their lives, they participated actively. For example, on alcoholism, a Gandhian woman insisted: "Drinking increases poverty. The only way to stop it is through persuasion." An activist opposed this attitude, saying: "Alcoholism has to be opposed because it causes corruption in our midst and disunity in the movement and because it increases the oppression of women. Poverty exists because of the social and economic system. Persuasion will never stop liquor drinking. Only the organized action of women can stop it."

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

Through discussions and through their own experience, the women activists realized, as Bhuribai of Kurangi put it: "Liquor drinking, especially in the cities,

is difficult to attack as an isolated issue. It is connected with a great many problems—low wages, unemployment, the routine yet hectic life of the working population." Thus gradually the enthusiasm of the women against liquor drinking also began to be generalized and connected with other issues which affected them as labouring women.

The participation and concerns of the women activists were not confined to the local issues of Shahada only. As another local woman activist put it: "It is necessary not only that we deal with the women's question in the context of general class issues, but also that we relate to oppressed women and their struggles wherever they are taking place." In 1974, over 500 women participated in a rally at Dhulia. In October



1975, a two day women's seminar for working women in Maharashtra was organized at Poona. About 65 women from Shahada-Taloda had come to this conference where they spoke regarding their work. During the conference, they visited Telco, a large factory of the Tata group. The manager and foreman showed the women around the factory. They described the various amenities they provide for the workers such as free transport and lunch at the workplace. One woman stated: "Surely, unlike other

factories, you must be having no reason to complain about the workers coming late for work." Another woman asked: "The time and energy the other workers spend in travelling and cooking can be used for increased production and hence increased profits here, is it not?" Their awareness was growing by seeing and observing beyond their immediate environment.

The increasing participation of women which accompanied the development of the movement is indicated in the following figures. In the first case in 1971, out of the 101 accused for rioting, only one was a woman. In 1972, women were conspicuously absent from the meeting during harvesting. In 1974, at Amaed, out of 45 accused for rioting, 15 were women. In 1974, at Prakasha, out of the 138 accused for countering the physical attacks of rich peasants, 30 were women. More strikingly, in the grain looting case in Shanosa village in 1974, seven women and two men were accused.

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

Nature Of Women's Leadership

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

However, illiteracy has not affected their militant participation in struggles. At

first, when the few women became active, they were considered to be the leaders of women. But it was found that when general struggles came up in the village, the active women were the general leaders of the labourers in that village. During the wage struggle, at Maod, Bajabai, a woman activist, played a central part.

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

Age Distribution: Percentage of Women Leaders

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

Caste Distribution: Percentage of Women Leaders (1978)

Tribal	91-92 percent
Backward classes	7-8 percent
Upper classes	1 percent

Class Distribution Percentage of Women Leaders (1978)

Poor Peasants	90 percent
Landless Labourers	10 percent

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

Limitations Of The Movement

This study indicates the process of

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

The general movement of the labourers had taken up the question of the reacquisition of lost and transferred lands. Women had participated in the movement. But the right to property remained the



exclusive domain of men. The question of equal right to property for women was never raised.

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

As mentioned earlier, the sexual

division of labour at home and at work is still unchallenged. It has never been raised or discussed by the activists. That a woman labourer has to cook at home, that there are no women tractor drivers, that women's work is mainly weeding, is taken for granted. Considering the number of women activists and women participating in processions and non-violent struggles, it seems surprising that the question of creches and cheap eating facilities to simplify women's work, has not been raised. There are no pre and post maternity benefits whatsoever, nor are they discussed or struggled for.

Questions relating specifically to the woman, her control over her body, reproduction and abortion have also not been raised. Abortion still depends on the wishes of the man, except when it is a premarital affair. The raising of the demand for creches can be facilitated by familiarizing the women with similar demands or struggles elsewhere in other women's movements. A pre-condition for this would be a conscious perspective on the nature of the women's movement, which was lacking in the case of the Shahada movement.

Similarly, questions of women's sexuality could not be discussed systematically for want of a conscious leadership with such a perspective. Most of these limitations are due to the isolation of the women's movement in Shahada and the lack of a clear perspective on the women's question. □

(This study was done two years ago for APCWD).