

IN June 1980, the United Nations women's conference in Copenhagen concluded, from the evidence gathered in recent years on women's work participation and workload, that two thirds of all work in this world is done by women and that they receive only one tenth of the world's income. Yet the bulk of these women are not considered as part of the workforce. This is particularly true for rural women. As they are not considered part of the workforce, it is not surprising that they are not mentioned in rural class analysis or in studies of peasant movements.

This case study of an organization of agricultural labourer women in the Bhongir area of Andhra Pradesh is meant to contribute to the body of critical-descriptive-historical analysis of women's movements and organizations. The study of this organization took place in the context of a research project on rural women in the subsistence sector. This paper is based on that study, sponsored by the ILO.

The women we are talking about were harijans, illiterate, poor, and earned their living mainly by daily wage labour in the fields of landlords and rich peasants. Some had a small fraction of land. The men were also mostly agricultural labourers and poor peasants but many had lost their traditional employment due to "modernization" of agriculture. The women, however, had not lost much of their earlier employment. In fact, women performed approximately 80 percent of all agricultural labour in the fields. This fact, and the fact that they performed this work like transplanting, weeding and harvesting collectively had influenced their consciousness and behaviour. They showed an astonishing degree of assertiveness and militancy and a great capacity for clearheaded analysis of their problems and the working out of solutions.

This assertiveness was not an inborn quality of the harijan women, but was the outcome of their awareness of their importance for the survival of the family, and of the fact that they had to live by the work of their own hands. In contrast to

LANDLESS WOMEN ORGANIZE

—Case Study Of An Organization In Rural Andhra

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the urban middle class women, these women did not see themselves as housewives but as workers. Most of their life was spent not within the confines of their poor huts but outside. They were too poor to have their private life separated from public life. Although the men are socially defined as breadwinners, as is the case with upper caste and class men, the women knew they would never "rise" to the status of a housewife who is "kept and fed" by her husband. In fact, they talked with a certain contempt of such women who could not do the hard work to which they were accustomed.

A major factor which contributed to the boldness and self confidence of these women was the collective nature of their work in the fields. They always worked in groups of 10 to 30 women made up of smaller teams of neighbours, relatives and friends. These teams had developed a spirit of solidarity and mutual help which transcended the egoism of the individual family. Even the mother in-law daughter-in-law enmity, typical of caste Hindu families, did not divide these women to the same degree as is the case in the upper castes. The collective spirit among the women was strengthened also by the fact that the landlords had to bargain with them collectively about the wage. They could not recruit the women individually but had to negotiate with their spokeswoman who in turn was controlled by the other women labourers. The necessity to recruit large numbers of women for agricultural operations during certain periods of the year provided the objective basis for the development of women's collective spirit and organizational skill. Communal feelings, the discrimination of caste Hindus against harijans, also helped to strengthen

the solidarity among harijan coolie women.

The agricultural work process itself, for example in rice transplanting and weeding, its regular rhythm of body movements by many women also strengthened their feelings of togetherness. It was the physical basis for cultural activities which accompanied this process. The songs sung during rice transplanting and weeding not only standardized the work rhythm but also relieved the women of fatigue and emotional stress. The themes of the songs were often the key aspects of a woman's life—marriage, man-woman relations, relations between mother and daughter, mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. The songs maintained the unity between the private and the work sphere. They also contained the hopes, aspirations and dreams of a better life, even though these ballads of landlords, princes, gods and goddesses fixed the consciousness on the patriarchal values of their oppressors. But the work process itself, the fact that they worked for a wage, prevented them from taking these dreams too literally and losing their sense of reality.

The songs were a mechanism to generate a feeling of collectivity, to prevent the atomization of individuals, the compartmentalization of life and the sense of alienation common in modern work processes. Thus the women preserved a sense of human identity and dignity and of cultural creativity. This sense of pride in their songs and dances found its clearest expression after work and in their festivals. In spite of their fatigue and the burden of their work, the women came out almost every evening after the evening meal and sang and danced in the light of the moon or the petromax. They said they then felt more refreshed than when they went to

sleep. This proves that the women's cultural production was necessary for them to stand the otherwise crushing routine of worklife.

This area was selected for the fieldwork because since 1977, the agricultural labourer women had been organized in women's associations or sangams by a voluntary organization—the Comprehensive Rural Operations Service Society (CROSS). In 1976-77, CROSS had begun to organize poor peasants and agricultural labourers, mostly harijans, in the villages of Bhongir taluk, Nalgonda district, Andhra Pradesh. The creation of women's associations had not been in the minds of the CROSS organizers when they started their work among the poor peasants and agricultural labourers in Bhongir taluk. They had formed poor peasants' sangams which theoretically included men and women. However women were not among the office bearers, nor did they come to the meetings or attend the night schools, which were among the principal activities of the village associations.

In summer 1977, the organizers discussed this lack of participation by the women, and concluded that no persuasion would bring the women to the meetings, not because they were not accustomed to speak up in the presence of the men, but because they had to do the cooking and housework in the evening while the men held their meetings. The organizers decided to form separate women's associations with their own office bearers and special programmes, and a woman activist took over the responsibility of organizing the women. The office bearers of the new women's associations were elected by the harijan and other low caste women in the village from among their own group. Other caste women were not officially excluded from these women's sangams, but they did not want to join because of their feelings of caste superiority. Thus for the first time the harijan and other poor peasant women had an organization of their own which was not dominated by the men of their community or by the women of the dominant high caste Hindu landlords.

The women responded enthusiastically to the prospect of forming

their own association. Between July 1977, when the first association was set up in Sikandernagar, and December 1978, 20 women's associations were formed with a total membership of 705 women. By December 1980 the number of village based women's associations had increased to 84.

The formal structure was introduced because it was felt necessary for the achievement of one objective of the organization, namely to get access to funds and credits for the economic programmes for small and marginal farmers. The organizers used the existing system of the community fund, the chit fund system, to introduce the idea of the women's associations.

The objectives of the women's associations were based on the same strategic principles as the men's associations: the organization should give the small and marginal peasants and agricultural labourers the necessary collective bargaining power to gain access to the funds made available by the government for the economic development of the weaker sections.

These economic programmes were seen as a necessary pre-condition for organizing the poor peasants, because it was felt that they could not resist the despotism of the landlords unless their own economic base was strengthened. Even a struggle for higher wages or for land would be doomed to failure if they did not have something of their own to fall back upon. These economic programmes were accompanied by a programme of conscientization and education through night schools, which combined alphabetization with political and social education.

Following this double strategy of combining programmes for economic betterment with conscientization and education, the women's associations started to use the local chit fund system to raise initial common funds. The interest collected through the chit fund was common property, and was saved for common projects such as the building of a night school. At the same time, regular weekly meetings were held in the villages, where women discussed a variety of

subjects related to their lives. The women responded with enthusiasm to these meetings which combined singing and discussions of their problems, of possible solutions, and of strategies at the village and block level. The meetings helped to broaden the solidarity among the women and gave them an action orientation. In contrast to other such discussions, which often remain on a purely rhetorical level, the women in the women's sangams often started to act immediately after having identified their common problem and discussed a strategy.

The women were not motivated only by the prospect of more education and cultural action. CROSS was known as an intermediary institution which helped to get funds for buffaloes, wells, general stores, vegetable vending and other such small income generating projects; the women therefore expected individual economic benefits, and saw their sangam activities also as a means to an end.

Meetings of the women's sangams were used to identify the beneficiaries for these economic schemes. The criteria for their selection and the procedure were the same as in the men's sangams, that is, only individual women could benefit, not the whole sangam. Whereas the men's sangams in some villages had been able to get funds for community projects such as a community well, the women's associations had not been able to do so. For example, they wanted money for the construction of a night school, since they held their meetings on the road under a tree. They also demanded that electricity should be brought to the harijan colony too. However since all funds were based on the credit system, the banks and the government authorities who provided subsidies and margin money were not interested in projects which were not "productive", that is, which were not of a surplus generating nature but only helped the poor to improve their collective condition of life.

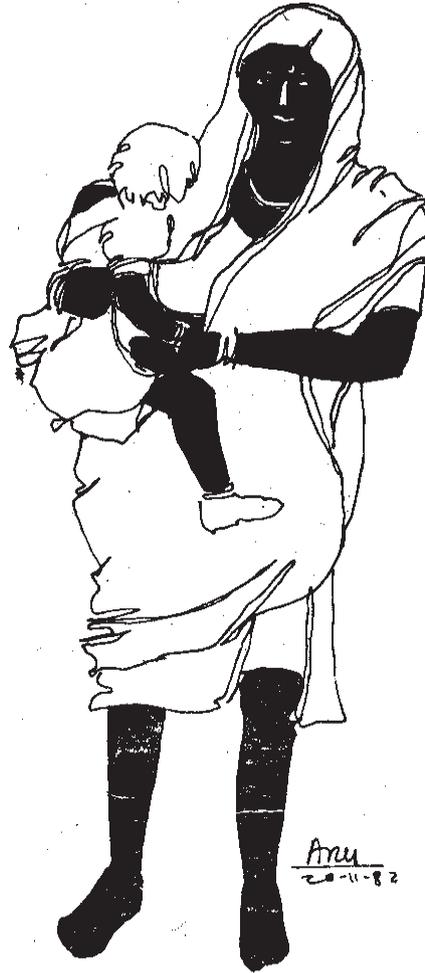
The economic programmes for women were accompanied by educational activities, mainly in the form of night schools which provided a forum where women could discuss their

problems, but also where they could acquire the necessary knowledge and training for their socioeconomic uplift such as literacy and knowledge about food, health, childcare. These programmes were on the double strategy, namely that of combining the effort to raise women's economic status with that to raise their social, political and cultural status in society and to enable them to fight against their oppression through their own organization. Although this double strategy seemed to be the only possible one in the given situation, it was not free of contradictions in its implementation. These contradictions are part and parcel of all economic programmes aiming at income generation based on the individual family or the individual woman. By granting loans to individual women for one of their schemes, for example for a buffalo, the general aim of the education programme, namely, to strengthen women's solidarity and unity and to increase their bargaining power, was partly jeopardized. Some women were selected as beneficiaries of these schemes and others not, therefore divisions among the women were bound to arise.

The woman who had started the sangams realized the problem, and tried to avoid such divisions by appealing to the solidarity of the women, assuming that it would, take time for all to benefit from these schemes, and by asking the women to select the poorest and most deserving who needed help most urgently. This appeal to their spirit of self sacrifice rather than to their common interest appears to overlook the political side effects of these schemes, namely, to further competition among individuals and so introduce capitalist values to the poor. They do not aim at benefiting the rural poor as a class. The economic gains from these programmes to the individual family were quite negligible, and in the long run they even contributed to pauperization. The prospect of individual betterment and the lack of alternatives still had the effect that women opted for the schemes, although they did not expect much from them.

In spite of these contradictions and difficulties, the women were keen to join

the sangams. Women from many villages wanted to have a women's sangam. It seems that the divisive tendencies inherent in the economic programmes were neutralized by the sense of collective power that the women derived from their organization. The actual success of the associations was due to the fact that they gave the women a feeling of organized



collective strength and could be used as an instrument for struggle. The issues taken up by the women's associations in Kunur and Sikandernagar in 1978 show that they were able to use them for issues that were more relevant and crucial to all of them than individual economic schemes. As soon as the first sangam meetings took place in these villages, the women began to discuss the issue of wages and the organization of a strike. They also discussed other issues such as the differences between male and female

wages, and land.

Their collective experience and their common interest as workers helped them to use their organization for more general objectives. In our group discussions with the women in Kunur it became evident that their aspirations went beyond the limited aims set by the economic programmes. They first told us how the sangam had started, about the problems they had in attending night-school during the transplanting and weeding season, and about their efforts to get the solidarity of other caste women for their strike. When we asked what problems they discussed during their meeting they first enumerated their various demands: "We want a general store, buffaloes, electricity, a flour mill." When we asked whether they also wanted better houses, one woman said: "Houses are not going to feed us. We want land, our plots are all on bad land and are too small. We want land, all the rest is humbug."

They then went on to say that all their difficulties, the fact that despite all their work they could not fill their stomachs, the fact that the landlords abused and harassed them, that they were not allowed to cut grass, were related to the fact that the others had land and they had not, or only very poor plots. "Now we want land. Then we will feel that they have done something for us. We are scared of them for every small thing. We do not want to be like that."

These discussions revealed that the women did not need conscientization to make them aware of the fact of their exploitation. They were also able to analyse correctly the root cause of all their problems, that is, their lack of control over the main means of production—land. They were not against asking for buffaloes, goats, a general store, better houses, but they did not take these things too seriously, since they would not change the basic production relations in their area and hence would not solve the problem of "how to fill their stomachs."

In contrast to the philosophy that the programmes of the Small Farmers Development Agency would solve the problem of poverty of the rural poor, the

Kunur women have realistically assessed these programmes as palliatives. Neither did they distinguish between economic exploitation and social and cultural oppression—a distinction usually made by outside activists. They saw clearly the connection between the landlords' contemptuous and highhanded behaviour and their own lack of bargaining power. Their enthusiasm for the sangam was therefore caused not so much by individual self interest as by the prospect of having an instrument which would give them more power.

We had observed the great role that songs played in the organization of work in the fields and as a means of collective expression after work. We showed an interest in their songs, recorded them, played them "back to them, asked for translations ; as a result, the women felt inspired by .our interest and came together to sing and dance more often than they would have done without our presence., Singing was already an established feature of the nightschool programmes, but the women did not respond with equal enthusiasm to all songs. There were two kinds of songs—their own traditional ballads which they sang during their work and on festive occasions, and songs introduced by the organizers, which were expressions of social criticism and of the aspirations of the poor. They asked us to join their dancing and singing when they met informally after their long day's work and they began to teach us their songs. Then they also wanted to learn some songs from us. As one of my research assistants was a very good singer and knew a number of new and inspiring songs, she became very popular among the. women. The young girls began to learn her songs. As they could not read and write, a young man from the caste village wrote down the texts of these songs and taught them to the teenaged girls. At the weekend camp which was held two months after he had left the village, we discovered that all the women of the village had learned these songs and now they presented them to the assembly of all the other women :as one of their cultural contributions. The women assembled there were so impressed by the

songs that they also wanted to learn them. It was suggested that a group of good singers should be formed which would go and teach such songs to the women of other villages.

The response to the new songs introduced by the research assistant shows not only the importance of songs as a powerful means of communication, mobilization and organization of illiterate peasant women generally, but also that the people were clearly able to differentiate between songs with an abstract or superficial analysis of their situation and those which expressed it in concrete terms. About one such song, which became very popular afterwards, one man said : "This is *our* song." They recognized their own lives, worries and hopes in the words of the poet and made this song their own. This shows that the women did not blindly accept or reject everything that was offered to them from outside, but that they made their own choice among the new cultural items introduced to them.

The women's response, the initiative they showed in acquiring new insights, inspiration and knowledge, made it clear that their objective and subjective condition was such that they needed very little stimulation and encouragement to start going ahead on their own. The methodology used during the field work also contributed to realizing the women's own dynamics, their intrinsic learning motivation and creative spontaneity. Had there not been an organizational framework, however, and some activities which guaranteed the continuity of the process, the stimulation generated during the few weeks of the research team's stay in the villages would not have lasted and would have been of little consequence for the future development of the women's associations.

The women's militancy, their ability to make a clear analysis of their situation, and their ability to use their organization for their own emancipatory goals, became evident during the periodical weekend camps which were organized for their education. Whereas the nightschool programmes in the individual villages met with a number of practical difficulties, these

weekend camps were a success and have, since become a regular feature of the women's sangams. The following account of the development of these camps gives some insight into the development of women's collective consciousness in the course of years.

The first camp for the women of several village sangams was organized after a year's organizational work. This camp in the taluk town Bhongir was attended by 50 women from 10 villages. The woman activist had invited representatives of various government departments, for example the person in charge of the women's welfare department, and a professor from the home science college in Hyderabad, to speak to the women. The lectures were on "Sanitation and health and the role of women" and "Malnutrition and food values." These lectures by academics were followed by discussions on the Minimum Wages Act, the wage differences between men and women, and the cost of living. The women reported on the situation in their respective villages and discussed strategies with which to fight the landlords for an increase of their daily wages. This weekend camp was a great success and encouraged the organizers and the women to continue their efforts.

The second women's camp, organized on October 28 and 29, 1978, had a different focus. It was planned jointly by the sangam organizers and our project team. We felt that it would be good to bring together the women from the villages where we had worked in order to share and discuss past experiences with the sangams and their struggles, to feed back some of our findings to them, and to widen their horizon which is usually limited by boundaries of their villages.

The weekend camp was held in a college in Bhongir. About 70 women came from 15 villages, village groups had prepared songs, role plays and skits which they presented to the audience. One of them also talked about the previous months' experience and their problems and successes. The women participated actively and enthusiastically in the programme. In the role plays which they

had prepared themselves, they gave very sharp and witty descriptions of some of their main problems. The themes of these role plays were drinking and wife beating, dowry, negotiating about wages with a landlady. In particular, the role play about wages met with keen participation from the audience. The audience started to suggest to the actors what they should do to get a better wage from the landlady. After this cultural programme the women continued to sing and dance until late in the night. It was obvious that they thoroughly enjoyed being away for two days from their daily drudgery and from their responsibility for husbands and children.

On the second day we talked about labourer women and their problems and organizations in other parts of the country. The aim was to show how other poor peasant women in India are also struggling successfully against their exploitation as women arid workers. This also helped to give the illiterate women an idea of their country, their geographical knowledge being usually restricted to that of their own village, some neighbouring villages, and the next taluk town.

On evaluating the experience of this camp, it can be said that its main significance was in the fact that it provided a forum for women from different villages to come together, to exchange their experiences, and to enjoy their own cultural productions. The women seized this opportunity for recreation and inspiration with gusto. It was this enthusiasm which encouraged them to demand more such camps. The experience also taught us that poor peasant women are by no means satisfied with an improvement of their economic situation, but that they also struggle for their human emancipation, for the restoration of their human dignity and creativity. They do not want to be mere objects of development and teaching.

Some of the organizers felt that the second camp had focused too much on cultural activities, on "fun", and not enough on giving the women some practical knowledge. The third camp on November 19, 1978, therefore tried to

combine functional education, for example on rice zones in the country and on education, with the usual cultural programme of role plays, skits, songs and dances. The camp was attended by 90 women from 19 villages. They had prepared more dramas and songs and had learned the new songs. So great was the enthusiasm generated by these weekend camps that the women decided to have a camp at least once a month. They also decided that at these camps all the women should discuss particular problems of a single village. The most urgent problems should be dealt with first.

These two decisions show that the women understood the necessity to expand their organization beyond the boundaries of their villages, and to learn from each other's experiences. They also felt that their actions could be successful only if they had a strategy which



comprised more villages. The decision to have such camps every month was also an expression of the need for time for reflection and recreation. The women usually have no time in their villages to attend meetings or longer study sessions. Either their husbands demand their services or simply oppose their going out, or their children bother them.

An analysis of their working day shows that the main problem for these women is lack of time. The demand for more weekend camps was thus the women's tactic to find time for themselves, for recreation, as well as for reflection and education. The CROSS organizers felt that one camp a

month would antagonize the men who might protest against the frequent absence of the women, but the women insisted that it was necessary.

The fourth and last weekend camp in which we participated was organized on February 17 in village Veeravalli. This camp brought into clear focus the major contradictions with which the agricultural labourer women in the women's sangams have to struggle: sex, caste and class. It marked the end and culmination: of a certain process of organization and mobilization, based more on the initiative of the organizers, and the beginning of a new phase in which the sangam members came to the forefront as leaders.

The women's sangam in Veeravalli had prepared and organized the meeting to which the women from seven other villages had been invited. The reason for selecting a village as the Venue of the camp

was that the women would like to be hosts to other women, and also to root these meetings more in village life.

The president was a very dynamic woman. She, the secretary, and the other women had organized the meeting in the open shed of the night school. As a special attraction they had also managed to get a loudspeaker and a microphone. A provisional kitchen had been installed at the side of the school shed where some men and women were already preparing the rice and vegetables for about 100 people. The common meal has become a regular feature of these meetings, and the women thoroughly enjoy being served

food without having to bother about the cooking.

Around 11 a.m. the shed was filled with women, some of whom had also brought their children. When all had been properly settled down, the programme started. It had been planned that the president should welcome all the guests and introduce the programme. 'Before she could start, however, a small group of elderly high caste women arrived, came into the shed and sat in the centre next to the microphone. We were told that this was the president of the old Mahila Mandal dominated by high caste women, with her friends. Nobody had invited her. As the sangams are mainly all-harijan organizations, the caste women kept away from them.

It was an awkward situation. It was obvious that the old president wanted to speak and to inaugurate the meeting. She wanted to show that she was in charge of the women of this village. The sangam president asked the Mahila Mandal president to say a few words. She addressed the meeting and spoke about the Mahila Mandal and its activities. It was surprising that she, a high caste woman, had dared to come to a harijan women's meeting. But she and her friends made a special effort not to touch any of the harijan women and not to be touched by them. She spoke for about five minutes and then sat down. Then the sangam president addressed the meeting, and explained the programme. Then a high caste woman talked about hygiene, about the necessity to look after the children, to send them to school, about food preparation and so on. It was obvious that this kind of lecture about things which are beyond the economic reach of the harijan women made no sense to the sangam women, but they listened patiently. Finally someone suggested the microphone should be given to women in the audience who wanted to reply. After an initial shyness due to the fact that they had never used a mike, the harijan women discovered its use and power. They told the women that they would very much like to send their children to school but where would they get the money for clothes and

uniforms? "When I send my eldest boy to school, the other one has to stay at home, because he has no clothes. Will you give us clothes?" one woman asked. They countered her suggestions by reminding her of their basic economic problems, their low wages, lack of work and of land. The woman who had spoken earlier sat down and kept quiet because she had no answer to these questions.

The sangam women, however, had captured the microphone and began to talk about their main problems: wages, lack of land, man's insufficient contribution to the family income. The main theme was the low agricultural wage. Many women participated in the discussion and felt inspired to speak out about their grievances. The caste-women all sat in one corner. It was obvious that they did not like that the harijan women spoke about their exploitation by the rich people of the village. However they did not dare to say anything because they were only a few amongst almost 200 women.

Then an old goud woman, who was standing outside the shed, began to criticize the sangam woman. She spoke in favour of the rich people and said that the harijan women had no right to speak like that about the richer women, and that they should be satisfied with their wage. The sangam women got angry with her. "Who are you to talk on behalf of these women?" she was asked. The exchange of words between the sangam women and this woman became more and more aggressive. The goud woman, was asked how she had made her money, namely by selling liquor to the men of the village. She retorted: "Even to your men. Tomorrow they will come and take liquor from me; even if they cannot pay, they will take it on credit. Today you speak about exploitation. Tomorrow you beg for money." Although the gouds do not belong to the upper castes, it seemed that this woman identified with the upper caste and class people in the village rather than with the harijans. Finally, the harijan women asked her why she had come at all: "Who invited you to our meeting? Why did you come to start quarrelling here? We did not invite you" The meeting then adjourned

for lunch and all the caste women and the goud woman left the shed. They did not come back in the afternoon.

Many children and men had gathered around the open shed. They constantly disturbed the women. In the afternoon the programme continued with role plays and discussions. One of plays which the women had made themselves was about wife beating by a drunken man. A woman from Chandupatla played the drunken husband. She had a turban on her head and shouted at the wife. As a special item, this drunken husband wanted to kiss his wife — to the great merriment of the audience. When she scolded him for his drinking and squandering of money, he beat her with a stick.

The discussion which followed was not very animated but a few good suggestions were made. One woman suggested: "The men should pay for the rice out of their wages and we can pay for the rest, the vegetables, the sugar and so on, from our wages. If they would do that then they would at least be regularly contributing to the household if they then drink, at least we would not have to starve with our children." The men who had gathered in front of the shed were asked whether they would agree to such an arrangement but none replied. The men created a lot of disturbance, several of them going about with a stick, beating children and pushing around the women who were not in the shed. Some of them obviously felt they had to give orders and directions. A meeting of women in which they had no function was something they could not accept.

Until this time the women's associations had not met with serious opposition. The men organized in their village sangams had taken a benevolent or indifferent attitude to the women's sangams. The issues that the women had taken up, such as the wage issue, were to their benefit also, as were the economic programmes. The cultural activities such as the role plays on drinking and wife beating were not taken too seriously by the men, particularly as these performances had taken place far away from the villages, in the sheltered atmosphere of all women

camps. The Veeravalli camp, however, was held in the midst of a village, on an open space amongst crowds of men and children, under the eyes and ears of the upper castes. The new quality of this camp was that it acquired the character of an open public meeting, using a loud speaker and a microphone. May be it was this emphasis on publicity and the more elaborate preparation by the Veeravalli women which attracted both men and upper caste women to it.

Men did the cooking of the common meal for the women, and were supposed to look after the children. This active participation of the men was in itself a great achievement and can be seen as a sign that the women's sangams had grown in importance. Similarly, the fact that upper caste women dared to come put of the caste village to a meeting of harijan women and even sat with them under the same roof, close enough to be touched by these "untouchables", shows the impact of this organization of the poor twomen.

The fact, however, of increased visibility and organizational strength and self confidence of the harijan women, their fearlessness in speaking openly about exploitation and oppression by their men in the presence of upper caste women and of harijan men, accentuated the existing contradictions. Since the women *publicly* exposed the men and the exploiting landlords, the attacked reacted for the first time, and the women's struggle assumed a much more serious and more explosive character. The Veeravalli camp was followed by a series of repercussions which showed that for these poor women emancipation is not a picnic but can lead to violent confrontations with their oppressors and exploiters.

As our fieldwork was completed in February 1979, the following account of the events after the Veeravalli camp is based on secondary information. It seems that the fact that so many women spoke openly about their exploitation by the landlords, that they used a microphone to do so, and that they exposed drinking and wife beating in front of their men, enraged both the landlords and some of the men. The consequence was an increase in wife

beating. One woman in particular, who had spoken at the meeting, was very badly beaten by her drunken husband afterwards. Moreover, the landlords spread rumours that the daughter of the president of the women's association had illicit relations with a man. This led to a grave crisis in the village sangam. The village elders, all belonging to the upper caste landlord class, were asked to settle the matter of this rumour. They imposed a fine on the guilty young man and then went to drink away that money.

The women were not discouraged, however, by these negative reactions. On the contrary, they maintained their organization; they understood more clearly the male complicity in the oppressive system of the village ; and they worked out a strategy which did not aim at glossing over the contradictions between men and women, but at giving themselves more autonomy and organizational strength. Their militancy was not broken but enhanced due to the events of Veeravalli. These events were discussed by many sangams in the

surrounding villages. The next weekend camps in Motakundur and Aler on April 24, 1979, focused on the issue of wife beating, on the practice of dispute settlement by village elders, and on the payment of fines by the guilty to the community leaders. The Veeravalli events were concrete points of reference for these discussions. The report about this camp says : "As a result of the day long deliberations, the women decided to set up an area committee, consisting of women leaders to look into various problem cases, to visit the villages, to conduct meetings about women's problems, and to put an end to the practice of referring cases of women to the village elders, who make money from both parties to the dispute without doing justice to either of them. This will also help the women to break the barriers which have confined them for ages."

Since the camp in April 1979, the women's associations have continued to increase in number. More important is that the women, in spite of opposition and difficulties, are making the associations



more and more their own autonomous organizations which they can use as instruments for education as well as for the generalization of their struggle against exploitation and oppression.

Shortly after the Veeravalli camp a reorganization of the men's and women's sangams took place. Cluster committees were set up which met every fortnight. They consist of the representatives of the men's and women's sangams of six to seven villages, hence of a man and a woman from each of these villages, in these meetings all important issues are discussed, also women's issues like wife beating. When the women want to discuss such a problem, they first discuss it in their village sangam and with the women representatives and form an opinion on the problem. Then the women representatives confront the meeting with that problem and it is then discussed by all, also by the men. In these meetings, women confront men not as individuals but as an organization. For the implementation of the solutions often a women's committee is founded. These cluster meetings now take up the question of settling marital disputes. If they can't find a solution the matter is taken up by the steering committee which consists of representatives of women's and men's sangams and some of the organizers.

This account of how the issue of wife beating was dealt which shows the effectiveness of this organization, particularly with regard to so-called women's issues. One woman Rukamma, who had been very active in the women's sangams right from the beginning became the cluster representative of her village. She was also a very good actress and had participated in a role play where she had played the role of a drunken husband. Her husband, who was a drunkard himself, began to resent his wife's going to the cluster meetings every fortnight. He also felt insulted that his wife made this play about a drunken husband. So he began quarrelling with his wife and beat her up every time she went to her meetings.

Rukamma first told her village sangam about this, which meant she talked publicly

about this so-called private affair. The women of the village sangam discussed the matter and came to the conclusion that Rukamma should separate from her husband and that he should vacate the house. They decided to punish him by not giving food or water to him and they were supported in this decision by the other women's sangams. The man had to go to his mother's house for food.

At the next cluster meeting the decision of the women was discussed but it was decided to discuss the matter also at the steering committee level where some of the organizers were present. Some of the men present felt that the punishment for the man was too harsh. Others felt that something should be done to help him overcome his inferiority complex which was due to his wife's political activities. Others, men and women, felt that the matter should not be discussed since it was a private affair between husband and wife. However, most of the women insisted that it was a public political affair since it affected their organization. The man's resentment was mainly due to the fact that his wife attended the fortnightly meetings. He felt she neglected the household. He accused her of having illicit relations with another man at these meetings, and also said that she did not want to look after the buffalo. He complained that his wife now had more importance than he had himself. The women therefore almost unanimously said that the man should leave the house. "A woman should never leave her house. The house belongs to her. The man should get out." The decision of the women at the village level was thus endorsed by the other women representatives. The organizers decided to send a team of two to talk to the man.

The women, however, insisted that the man should apologize to his wife as well as to their women's sangam and promise to mend his ways. They also demanded that such a man, if he refuses to change, should be expelled from the men's sangams. Hence they used the mechanisms of social boycott as sanctions against such men. None of the organizers had proposed this strategy to the women.

In fact the organizers were not very happy about the radical way the women dealt with the issue of wife beating, and tended to play it down as a common and negligible problem in the area. The women, however, refused to accept this "normal" state of affairs any longer.

The camps and meetings have become important instruments for women's mobilization, education and organization. Particularly all-women camps and conferences have become a regular feature where all women meet. By December 1980 they had already had 13 such camps. The women attribute so much importance to these meetings that they are ready to forgo one day's work, and that means day's wages and also food, for these meetings. They use the money from their chit fund to finance their or organizational and educational activities.

All this shows how the women have advanced in their consciousness and in their organizational strength in the course of two years. Their gain in human autonomy and dignity is mainly due to the fact that there was an organizational effort which brought them together. Due to this and to their double exploitation as women and as workers they moved ahead faster than did the men.

The militancy and the organizational strength of the women also had an effect on the men in the general village associations. The men who formerly had protested when the women wanted to attend meetings and weekend camps, realized that in their own dealings with the landlords and other dominant groups, they could get more support from the organized women than formerly from their oppressed, individualized wives. They began to understand that the ruling classes could easily break the unity of their movement by stressing the patriarchal authority of a man over his wife. They realized that, contrary to common opinion, a separate women's organization strengthened rather than weakened their movement.

Perhaps the most encouraging women's sangams have been able to produce their own village based success

of this movement is that the leadership and nightschool teachers. At present, 75 village girls who have had some primary education, are working in the nightschools of the sangams. Although they still lack administrative and coordinative skills they are very active and enthusiastic organizers and teachers. The emergence of local organizers and leaders is an important step in overcoming the problem of paternalism and elitism so often encountered when middle class leaders try to organize poor peasants. This development is a step towards a truly autonomous poor peasant women's organization. Another factor which seems to have contributed to the success of the women's associations is that the woman activist who had initiated the formal organization of the poor village women acted as a coordinator rather than as a leader who provided a particular orientation or ideology. She did not interfere with the decision making processes at the village level or during the periodical weekend camps or cluster meetings, but stayed in the background. This lack of "strong leadership" and of imposition of a "line" from outside, seems to have provided the harijan women with the necessary milieu within which they could discover and develop their own ideas and strategies, based on a rational assessment of their collective experiences.

The agricultural labourer women have shown that the separation of their struggle into "women's struggle and "workers' struggle is wrong. The argument that women first need economic independence and that they should restrict their movement to economic aims does not take into account the social reality of these women. It is often argued that poor women need "bread" first, only then can they think of "emancipation." This view ignores the fact that these poor women will not even get bread if they do not fight for their emancipation. The Bhongir women have shown that their struggle for better economic conditions is linked inseparably to their struggle for human dignity and self respect. The women have also shown that it is wrong to suppress their struggle against male oppression and exploitation



Some of the members of the sangams

in the name of class unity of all the poor. It was through the struggle waged by the women with the men that the men began to take the women seriously and began to count on them.

It is a myth that the poor women need teachers from outside to make them aware of their situation and to help them analyse it. What they need are initial initiatives, the provision of platforms and of an organizational framework which guarantees continuity. What they also need, at least in the initial phase, are coordinators who help them to transcend the limited horizons of their village existence and put them in contact with each other and with the wider network of social relations.

The leadership of the organization has been largely collective. No single leader has emerged who assumed authority over the other women. Yet there are many strong women, who were selected as cluster representatives and who collectively decide on important issues. The camps are the main general forum for discussions and decision making. They ensure the democratic participation of all women and prevent the usual appearance of bureaucratic centralism.

The women have also shown that it is

correct to encourage separate and autonomous women's organizations based on class. These organizations provide women with a power base from which they can fight class exploitation as well as sexual oppression and exploitation. They double the strength of the class and do not weaken it. This was recognized even by the men. The material base for this organization is the fact that these women work and bargain collectively and that they are not housewives. They form the bulk of the rural working class therefore their women's organization is a class organization.

It is often argued that only a national party can protect the people effectively against repression and that organizations based on self organizing cannot withstand the pressure. Though we cannot generalize from the limited experience presented here, we can say that an organization of the people based on a politicization "from within" may have a better chance to resist repression than a centralized bureaucratic party who fights *for* the people. This became evident when the landlords began their repression against the peasant organizations. The women proved to be more militant and loyal to their organization than did the men. □