

RAMEGAON is a village about two hours run from Latur. I spent the month of September 1982 in Ramegaon to study the work of the dalits there. In this village, 33 dalit landless families have organized themselves to collectively cultivate government owned grazing land.

The previous year, these families planted hybrid millet on this land. They had to face tremendous difficulties, since on the days they went to clear the land of undergrowth or to plant the crop, they had to lose their daily wage earned by working on the land belonging to upper caste landowners. This meant that they either ate only one meal, if one member of the family went to do wage labour, or they did not eat at all. They borrowed a pair of bullocks from Sarvangin Vikas Sanstha (SVS), an organization doing similar work in Latur, and managed to complete the sowing. However, after this, many of them were boycotted by the landowning upper castes, who used to fling insults and taunts, saying : "Now you have become farmers, you must be very busy, so you do not need to work on our fields."

At harvest time, two SVS workers, Vilas and Manik, went with the dalits to reap the crop. Soon after the work began, two maratha men came and let their goats loose. When the goats started chewing the crop, the angry dalits shouted to the marathas to take away the goats. A verbal battle started. In no time at all, 30 upper caste men armed with sickles, wooden sticks and iron rods, collected and proceeded to attack the two SVS workers. Seeing this, many of the dalit men fled. To quote some of the women : "The moment our men saw the upper caste men approaching, they lifted up their dhothis and ran." The women ran towards Vilas and Manik, and tried to protect them by covering them with their saris and by getting beaten up in their stead. About six women were badly injured. The police then appeared, arrested 15 people, and filed cases against them. Over a year has passed since this incident took place, but the court has not yet taken a decision. This means that the women have to scrape together the money to go to the court at Ausa for each hearing. Sometimes, they walk the 30 kilometres.

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Women In The Land Struggle

The Experience Of Ramegaon Village In Maharashtra

After this, not a single person in Ramegaon or in the surrounding villages was willing to give work to the dalits. They had to walk miles and miles to distant villages to find work. The village shops refused to sell anything to them. Slowly, the dalits of Ramegaon began to starve. Some went to stay with relatives for a couple of days or weeks. Some went to Latur to do head-loading labour. They had managed to reap about 20 bags of millet from the crop they had planted. This was taken by the government and divided up amongst both upper castes and dalits.

It is noteworthy that the sarpanch and one or two other rich farmers are cultivating parts of the government owned grazing land, but no one has raised a finger against them, because, after all, they as marathas have a right to farm, whereas dalits have only the right to carry away cowdung and to work on other people's land.

As time passed, the natural interdependence of village life got the better of the cold war between the castes, and the dalits were given work again. They said : "Though we refuse to clean the village, we get just about enough to fill our stomachs."

It was during the next planting season that I went to live with them. I found that the women were very free, vocal and militant. They realized that much depended on them, so they were ready to stand together and fight. It was only because of years of male oppression that they never voiced an opinion during general meeting. Often, I would find that they were seething inside. The SVS had started adult education classes where the only educated woman, Mangal, taught them alphabets

and numbers. These classes became a forum for free expression and discussion of views by women.

We started discussion about the land and about what our role as women should be. Many of them said: "Our men make a lot of noise, but during the fights they run away." We often spoke about the importance of education, birth control, and most of all, about the problem of the land. In spite of what had happened the year before, the women were ready to try again. They had heard stories of dalits in other villages who had cultivated the land and had now got it registered in their names. It was felt that it would be better for only women to do the planting, because the upper caste men might hesitate to attack women. The women also said that, unlike the men, they would not get excited or angry, but would complete as much of the planting as possible. After discussion, all the women agreed to this idea. A few, who had not participated in the planting the previous year, were questioned and gave their replies. Some of them had been prevented by their husbands and others had been out of the village at that time. We asked them to discuss the plan with their husbands.

Soon after, there was a general meeting, in which many men, after hearing the plan, remarked: "We can do better without the women" or "What if they get beaten up like last time?" The women explained that they had gotten beaten up the last time, only because they had intervened to protect Vilas and Manik. They also added a few words to soothe the male ego : "We are not doing it because you can't do it, but only because they won't cause as much trouble with us." It is also a known

fact that dalit women have relations with maratha men. This gave them more confidence that they would not be beaten up. Soon after this meeting, other commitments took me out of the village.

At the end of October, they decided to start planting *zavas* and *khardi*, which are used for oil, and are not eaten by cattle. With the help of our organization's foreign funds, we were able to provide them with money for a pair of bullocks, a cart, a plough, other essential implements, and seeds. Late one night, the men went and prepared the land. The next day, the women went too. For three days, these families planted continuously. None of the upper caste people came to interfere with them. On the third day, the police, who had been informed by the sarpanch, came and arrested 60 people. The people voluntarily courted arrest, in accordance with their earlier statements to the upper caste people : "We are cultivating government land. It is neither yours nor



ours so you do not have the right to do anything. Let the government take action." Of course, no action was taken against the rich farmers who also cultivate this land.

The women were released immediately and the men after three days. During this time, the people were without work, and

so without food. On November 4, when I went to the village, I found the women quite cheerful. They have stopped cleaning the village, but many of them are now paid at a piece rate for their work on others land, and this is better than getting a wage of two or three rupees for a whole day's labour, as was the practice earlier.

More cases have been filed against the dalits. More money, time and energy will be wasted on the hearings. The question is : if the government wants to give land to the tiller, how are the tillers going to get land unless they start cultivating government land? The fight goes on, as next year the dalits will once again take the risk of planting a crop.

The dalit women of Ramegaon have organized themselves, and have become militantly united to improve their status in society first as women and second as dalits. The story of these women is the story of women struggling to be in control of their lives. □

Women In The Handloom Industry

A survey of 1,010 weaving households conducted in 125 villages of Mahesana district, Gujarat, between November 1981 and September 1982, by the Foundation for Public Interest, has come up with some interesting findings regarding women weavers. It was found that whenever one loom is active and a male member of the family is working on it, 1.5 additional persons are required to keep it going. These persons are usually women and children of the family. Thus every active handloom is always backed up by a woman worker. Also, approximately 950 women out of a total of 1,953 women surveyed reported knowledge of more than one skill related to the pre weaving process. However, though the activity of women supports the loom, they are not separately

or independently paid for their work. Even when weaving cost is calculated, the women's contribution in terms of labour hours spent is not taken into consideration. Their work is considered to be free labour since it is not paid.

At present, two steps are being taken in Gujarat for the development of the handloom industry. Improved looms, equipment and techniques are being introduced, and the weavers are being provided with readymade beams. This ensures a standard quality of cloth, and also increases production and the earnings of the weavers. However, provision of readymade beams will adversely affect thousands of women who are engaged in the pre weaving process. It will destroy the skills they now possess. They will be

delinked from the handloom industry and are likely to be pushed out of the industry. Their potential for earning supplementary income or for getting full time work will be annihilated. To avoid this possibility, the following steps should be taken :

1. All the women in weaver households should be provided facilities for upgrading their skills.

2. On completion of training, each woman worker should be given a loom on which she can earn an independent income. Even if a man in the family has a loom, she should be given another. This means that every weaver family should have two looms. This will increase the household earnings and will also save the women from having to migrate in search of employment. It will also give women an independent income.

3. Whenever government housing schemes for weavers are implemented, the design of the house should provide for two looms for each family. □