



Laro Janko

MADHU KISHWAR

## She Works For Poor Women's Rule

### —An Interview With Laro Janko

*Laro Janko is a Ho tribal woman from Ichakutti village, Singhbhum, Bihar. She is a very unusual woman, the only full time tribal woman activist I know of in this belt. For many years she has been working with a trade union leader, comrade P. Majumdar, organizing tribal mine workers. Comrade Majumdar is a man of rare dedication. He came to this area from Bengal when he was a young man, to help organize the tribals into trade unions. That was over 20 years ago. Since then he has made Singhbhum his home, has lived and worked there.*

*Laro Janko was initiated into trade union politics about 10 years ago by P. Majumdar. She is not married. It is very difficult to guess at her age. It could be anything between 30 and 40 years, but she looks young and strong though small built. Over the years she has picked up a lot of communist jargon and therefore at first gives the impression that you will not get beyond platitudes and learnt up answers on class struggle when talking to her. But when I talked to her for hours, I found that she is an incredibly versatile thinker.*

*She is uneducated in the formal sense and speaks only broken Hindi apart from her own Ho language. She is one of the few Ho women I met to whom I could speak directly without the help of an interpreter. In spite of her broken Hindi, she was amazingly articulate and keenly perceptive. The way her thought process flowed constantly reminded me of a mountain rivulet. No matter how big a rock comes in its way, it somehow veers around it, and finds a way to bound forward. Apart from being a trade union activist, Laro is also secretary of the Mahila Samaj, a women's organization recently started by her and P. Majumdar.*

*I tape-recorded several long conversations with Laro in 1981 and 1982. These are some extracts translated from the original Hindi. Here she speaks about her own life and about the problems of tribal women. Even while tribal women are brutally exploited by non tribal men, and are also oppressed by men of their own community, tribal culture allows women relatively much greater independence and autonomy in decision making. Laro Janko's strength and independent spirit are in part a product of that culture. A large part of her vivacity and courage also comes from the fact that she got the time and opportunity to involve herself in the work of organizing tribals to fight against injustice.*

MY village is Ichakutti. The first time I went to work outside of my village was on the railway line. They were recruiting people for rail work. It was being shouted all over : "They are recruiting, they are recruiting." I heard it and I too went to look for work. The work was at Rajarampur which is three stations ahead of Rourkela.

*How old were you ?*

I don't know. Maybe 10 years old. I was a child then. In cities children go to school and play at that age. That is the age when I went to work on the railway line. The work I did was carrying headloads of chipped stone that are spread on the railway line—the little

stones that you see around railway lines. I used to be paid Rs 40 a month.

*Any holidays ?*

At that time I did not know anything about holidays. I did not even know how to count money. There was a girl named Lebuka from my village. She used to keep the money and handle the expenditure. *How many of you went from your village?*

Ten men went together from our village.

*And how many women ?*

We were all women.

*Then why do you say ten men ?*  
(she had said "das admi").

Ten women went.

*Did you have any problems with men harassing you there ?*

No, I had such problems only later, when I went to Calcutta. But there was another girl from my village. She had a *latpata\** with a *munshi*. The village people heard about it. When they asked her, she answered very boldly : "Why do you say such things about me? I do not do such things. Have you ever seen me doing it? Why then talk like this?" But afterwards they found a proof. The *munshi* asked for some fire. When she

\* Laro throughout uses this word for any kind of sexual act—rape, seduction, voluntary affair, forced affair. It shows how they do not seem too different from one another to her.

was giving it to him, he caught hold of her hand and started dragging her into his tent. People asked her : "Why didn't you scold him ? Why did you keep quiet ?" She was silent. This became a proof. After that they forbade her to talk to him. Anyway we worked there for only three months. After that I worked in the mines when I was about 11 years

In the mine, the Dalmias do what they like. When they please they give us work, and when they please they throw us out. So we would work for a month and a half or maybe two months and a half in the mines. The rest of the time we would have to work on our land.

My family does not have much land for cultivation. So we gather wood from the forest and sell it. In summer we go and collect *mahua* from the forest.

When I was slightly older, I went for the first time to work in a brick kiln. I had gone to visit my aunt in Boda village near Chakradharpur. Someone asked me if I wanted to go to the weekly market in a nearby village. I went along. In the market I met a *munshi*, and he said : "Come and work in the brick kilns." I was thrilled because I had never sat in a train before. The *munshi* paid the train fare. In the brick kiln I was given the job of truck loading. The brick kiln was in Kamargachhi. We would go to whichever place ordered some bricks from our kiln. There we would do the loading and unloading. I left that place and came back after six months.

*How much money did they give you per day ?*

Oh, money ! That time I didn't know how much per day or anything. I was happy with whatever gave me. We used to work for six trucks. They gave us enough to buy rice for a week, maybe they gave us eight or 10 rupees per week. We managed with that much. It was not really enough for our food requirements. We bought as much rice as we could with that money. Then we would measure it out in *katoras* (big bowls) and would divide it up : "So much for the morning, so much for the evening." That is how we ate. Sometimes if it didn't last the week we would buy some cheaper flour.

We never got enough money to buy clothes.

We didn't live in a *basti*. Near the kiln that we worked in, there was a vacant plot of land. We made our huts there. Four of us used to live in a hut. All of us women. One of them was a *sardari* (gang leader). What work did she do? Late at night, she would go over to the *munshi*, cook for him and feed him. After some time she got pregnant by the *munshi*. He gave her some medicine. When the labour pains started, she cried a lot because the child would not come out. Well, we went away to work in the morning. After we left, she cleaned the hut, smeared cowdung all over. Then the *munshi* brought her some medicine to try and get rid of the child. There was another woman already living with the *munshi*. She also had a similar *latpata* with him.

That woman had a five year old daughter by the *munshi*. He had tried to get rid of that one as well, but had not succeeded. Anyway, the *sardari* gave birth at night before we came home. When we came the hut was empty. We asked: "Gangi, do you have a child in your belly ?" She said : "No." But the child had already come out. We could hear it crying: "*huan, huan*." So we started to look for it. There was a pile of bricks lying nearby. She had wrapped up the child and hidden it under the bricks. We brought out the child. It lived for two months and then died.

There was a driver there. He was either Bengali or Bihari. My aunt's daughter got *latpata* with him. The *sardari* informed the *munshi* about it. And what did the *munshi* do? He took a burning piece of fuel wood and beat her up severely with it. She cried a lot. But we took her side, and that driver went away.

*Did nothing of this kind happen to you?*

Well, we were three women together. For a while nothing happened to me. They only used to touch my body. I didn't know the contractor. One day he said to me : "Come and give me some water." I went to give him water. That is

when *latpata* happened with him.  
*Did he force it on you or was it with your consent ?*

No, he forced it. But then it had happened. After that it happened thrice. He was either the contractor or a *munshi*. I abused him a lot. He had a shirt on. I tore it up in anger. After that I came back to my country. He gave the train fare to the *sardari*. I don't know how much money he gave. The *sardari* took money from him and gave us a ticket. So my aunt's daughter and I both returned home.

After that I worked again in the Dalmia stone mines. In the beginning I didn't work in the mine itself. I used to carry water up for the manager, the *munshi* and such others. I used to work in their houses. They paid Rs 1.50 and later Rs 2 a day, to carry water for all of them to their houses.

*Did the munshi and manager there also trouble you ?*

They also do this. Whoever enters their house, they will surely touch her body. I used to tell them off many a time. But they would only laugh. We used to think that at least we would get food for sure.

*So one has to do all this for food.  
Did you have latpata with them also ?*

If not in the beginning, they will certainly do it sooner or later. First they touch you and then it goes on like that. Afterwards they will certainly do the *latpata* work with you.

*When you came home did you tell them what had happened to you ?*

No, no, I didn't tell at home. Why not ? Just like that—out of shame. If I had told, people would have said: "Oh she is such and such a kind of girl."

*Why didn't you get married ?*

Marriage I didn't do. I wanted it but I didn't do it. My brother got married. After his marriage he started quarrelling with my parents. My parents are always sitting near me and crying : "See daughter, this is how your brother quarrels with us." Seeing that, my heart really broke with marriage. So I didn't get married. I thought : "My parents gave birth to the two of us. My brother is

abusing my parents so much. If he doesn't give them food when they are old, and does not look after them, how will they live?" This is what I thought. So I didn't get married.

*Do you look after your parents even now?*

When I work in the mine, I give them money. When I don't work, I don't give. They work on the land right now, and get food.

*Weren't you pressured to get married?*

Yes, they asked me to get married. A family from Uttutua sent a message to my parents that they were going to come and see me. My parents said : "Na, na. We won't give our daughter in marriage. We are going to keep our daughter like this only." That boy was working in Mathsaur. Now he is in a city.

Once, earlier too, when I was a child, some people said: "We want that girl in marriage." Then they came over to our house with some rice beer and went on talking *kimin kimin* (meaning they said this and that). I heard them so I asked : "Why are you talking *kimin kimin*? I am not going to get married. Don't you say anything about marriage." Then I heard them referring to me as their *bahu* (daughter-in-law) and I got really angry. I told them : "I will take a piece of wood and sharpen it well at both ends. Then I will shove it in from your behind and take it out from your mouth and I'll shove it into your mouth and bring it down in your behind."

*Don't you want to marry even now?*  
*Don't you like anyone?*

No ! No !

*Among Ho tribals, which is considered better—the birth of a boy or of a girl?*

A boy.

*Why?*

They are happy even about the girl. They will try very hard to get a boy. But after all there is only one crop in a year, and they never have enough rice for more than two or three months. That is why it is good if a girl is born. Because when a girl grows up, she will somehow, from somewhere or other, get something for her parents to eat.

Boys don't do it. And even if they go

for work, for *bidi* making, that is all they can do. Who will want to take their *izzat*? If nothing else a girl can sell her *izzat* and feed her parents. Even parents keep quiet, thinking : "We are getting food after all."

Women do most of the work. Men only plough the field. That is all. A woman does many things — brings water, pounds rice, cooks food, cleans utensils, feeds the men. After that she will go to the forest, bring wood, leaves, *datun*, and in the evening come back and cook food. And if she is married, she will have a child. She will carry the child also to the forest. When she is cooking the child will cry. She will have to feed the child and then cook the food.

Men only do the ploughing. Even the days they plough, they come home by noon. All the other agricultural work is done by women.

*Don't men help in the housework?*

No. Sometimes if the woman is really sick, the man may cook. But he will not sweep the house or pound the rice. Even when the woman is sick, she will often cook the food and yet the man may beat her. He will demand : "Give me food at once." She will say: "You take the child, then I will make the food. The food can't be prepared so soon." Then he will get annoyed and hit her, beat her up. If someone tries to stop him, he will say : "Who are you to stop me ? She is my woman. I can even kill her." He will threaten like that.

*Tell me, during drought and times of scarcity, why is it that more women than men migrate?*

Men can manage even with one underpants but women need a sari, a blouse and what not. Who will get them all these things in the village? Where will they get money? There is no money in the village. That is why they have to go to the brick kilns. Lakhs of them go every year. Some come back. Many others do not. When they go there they have to give their *izzat* for a sari or for some food. In the city, men lure them with the promise of a sari, a blouse, some oil. These are the little things that tempt them.

We can't stop all this alone. But now we have made a Mahila Samaj. So we will raise this there, have village meetings and discuss it. That is how it can stop.  
*At what age are girls usually married off?*

When they become big, when they start menstruating.

*Tell me something about the marriage customs. If a girl likes a boy, can she tell him so ? Can a girl refuse a proposal ?*

If there is a beautiful boy and I like him, I won't tell him : "I like you, let us get married." The boy will say it. The girl can refuse a proposal. She can tell someone: "Look, I don't want to marry him. I don't like him."

If there is *latpata* between a boy and a girl, she won't tell anyone. If she gets pregnant or has a child there will be a furore in the village. Then the girl will name the man. If he refuses to marry her, the *panchas* will be called. They will sit down and discuss. The man will say : "I didn't do it. Let her give a proof. Does she have anything from my body ? Ask her to show it." That is why the girl always tries to keep something or other from the man's body—a handkerchief, a piece of his shirt, anything. If she does not have a proof, the man gets away with it. If she has such a proof he has to keep her, whether he likes it or not. After that, when the child is born, he can leave her or he can continue to keep her.

There was a girl called Shanti from Gua. She used to work in Chiriburu. She had a child by Pradhan Jamada—a baby girl who is now grown up. But he left her. She even filed a case against him. But she did not have money to fight the case, not even money to travel to the court. He agreed to give her some clothes and some rice so she dropped the case.

The *panch* tries to persuade the man to keep the girl or to give her some land. If he does not, the girl will have no land, and no way of getting food. She has to keep working to feed herself and the child. She goes to the forest and sells wood. But she can't get enough food. So her body will dry up and she will become a skeleton. There are women like that—so thin you can see their bones.

*Tell me, why is there a taboo on women touching the plough?*

How do I know? They tell us from childhood. If we touch the plough, we are fined. The village men have a *puja*, and if a woman is old, they call her a witch and kill her. If someone gets sick, they will hold a *puja*, grind some rice and do a *ching bing* ritual. Then they will do a sacrifice with a hen or a goat and if the sick person does not get well, they will ask: 'What is the name of the witch? She is behind all this.' Then the witch will be named. They will get angry with her and will kill her with an iron *taangi* which is used for cutting wood. It happened last year in Sigipi village. They killed the aunt of a woman called Kujuri Kui, because they called her a witch.

Men do the killing. Women don't join in the killing, but they don't stop it either. The men will get very annoyed with whoever tries to stop them. If we say too much against the killing, they will be ready to kill us too. How can we stop them? They won't be stopped. They are in a mob.

*Can't women get together and save her?*

They can. But where do we have such an organization? There is not so much wisdom. That is why it is not stopped. But slowly we are going to raise the issue in our meetings. We will discuss it and say that it is not good.

In Dhangaon too a mother and daughter were called witches and were killed. When I was young, it happened in my village. Four women were killed off like that. There was a big furore in the village. They threw their bodies in the Sanjay river. The police came and took away some men. Those were old women but sometimes they kill young women too. The girl who was killed in Dhangaon with her mother was very young.

The man who does *ching bing* names the woman. Whoever he names is killed. Women are never part of the *ching bing*. Women cannot be *dyunvas*.

There are no hospitals in the villages. That is why people do *pujas*. If there are hospitals people will stop *pujas*. Right

now if a person is sick, people can't afford the money for travel to the hospital and for medicines. That is the problem.  
*That is true. But how is it that only women are called witches and not men?*

You are right. Only women are killed. It doesn't happen to men. That is why we will have to do some thinking on it.  
*What are some of the other problems faced by women?*

Everywhere the tribal land is being taken away, if not by Tata then by Rourkela or by Bokaro or by government to build stations or factories. They promise to give us land elsewhere but they don't give it. That is why some tribals are cutting the forest to get land for us.

When women go to the forest to cut



-Yvonne Indart

wood, the forest guards are all around—rangers, officers, god knows how many of them. Wherever they hear the sound of a *taangi*, they go there. If they come across a lone woman in the forest, they do their *latpata*. If two or three women are together, it won't happen so easily. If she is alone, it will definitely happen. That is why women go in groups. But they can't find enough dry wood for all of them at one place, so they have to scatter in different directions and search for dry wood. After some time they all collect together and cut the wood they have gathered into small pieces with a *taangi*. When the women separate and the guards find one woman alone, they catch hold of her.

She won't come and tell anyone at home. If she tells, the villagers will say: 'Oh, this girl does these things' and they

will throw her out of the tribe. So she keeps quiet. If somehow they come to know about it she won't be allowed to cook with others or take water from or eat in the same kitchen.

If she gets a child like this, she won't be allowed to work in her parents' house. She will be allowed to do only work which is outside the house, such as sweeping the courtyard, cleaning utensils or pounding rice.

Women also get raped by policemen. For example, recently, after the Gua police firing on protesting tribals, policemen raided many villages. When they went to Sigipi village, people ran away into the forests as soon as they heard the sound of trucks and jeeps. But some girls got left behind, and they got into a *latpata* with the Bihar Military Police. I heard that two or three policemen did it. They didn't beat the girls, but they showed them a rifle and said: 'If you don't give us your *izzat*, we will shoot you' so they did what they liked to their bodies.

These girls were not thrown out of the tribe. But they have to cook separately. In any village gathering, when women sit together, these girls won't be allowed to sit near the others. They will have to sit separately. When there is a *puja paath* in the house, these girls will not be allowed to cook or even bring water. They won't be allowed to touch the *handi* in which water is brought for drinking or cooking.

Some widower may marry them but a man who has not been married before will not marry them.

*But you also had a latpata. Are you also not allowed to touch?*

At home, even I am not allowed to touch. My mother and my brother's wife do everything. They got to know about me because people talked about it. But if someone asks me directly I will say: 'Did you see me doing it? Do you know when and where I did it? Then how can you say I did it?' And they will keep quiet.

Since we started the Mahila Samaj we talked about this question a little bit but nothing has come of it. We go from

village to village, and say these rapes should not happen. But we have not yet had a general meeting on this.

*How did you get involved in political work ?*

It was around 1973-74 when I was working in the mines, that we tried to make a union. We tried hard but couldn't really make a union. So we brought Majumdar from Lal Jhanda union. He held some meetings and explained to us what the capitalists are like, and what the landlords are like. In this way our minds changed. We worked for years to get a wage increase.

*How did you get to be so active and articulate while the other women do not speak much ?*

In the beginning I saw a woman named Bijli from Sigipi village. She was older than I was. She used to speak very well in meetings. Many people supported her and clapped for her. I started thinking: "We have collected so much funds from our mine for the union. So they are certainly going to ask us to speak in the meeting and tell our problems." I kept thinking like this and began to get worried. I thought: "Why can't I speak ? I will certainly speak." I got a *khatpata* in my heart, I became restless. One day I was asked to speak in a meeting. I didn't speak very forcefully. *Baap re baap*, I felt so ashamed of the way I had spoken. I felt like covering myself with a lid. My body was trembling. But they kept giving me opportunities to speak in meetings. After speaking a number of times I began to get a heat in my head.

Then when the mines were closed down, throwing us all out of employment, we struggled for reopening of the mines. The management attacked us with hired ruffians, police, military police, policewomen. That time, I was really filled with heat and abused the management. Since that day the heat has gone up into my head.

*How did you come to stand for the Bihar assembly election ?*

When someone had to go for lingosesan (negotiations) with management, to discuss the rates and



**Laro Janko**

grades of payment, our committee would elect a representative to go. Both men and women would vote. I was chosen to go. There they asked me to narrate what had happened. So I had to speak. That is how I started speaking. At election time, we had a big discussion to decide who would be a good candidate. Some people said Rando, some said Laro. Between these two, who should we choose? So people said : "Let us choose Laro."

Why Laro? She is a woman. People said : "Since the time we started our union, she has never run away from struggle. Even now she goes from village to village, neglecting her own personal work."

*Did some people say that since you are a woman you will not be able to work ?*

In our committee they did not quite say that. But in other places where we went to campaign, men did say : "She is a woman. She can't do much work." They would answer: "So what ? When you go to the city, don't you see how women are doing all kinds of work ? She is a tribal woman. Why can't she do the work? We have put up men for years now. As soon as these fellows get a small crumb, they go the other way. They can be turned like cycle handles by whoever puts pressure this way or that. That is

why we will now try a woman."

*How did the campaign go ?*

There used to be many of us for the meetings but there was only one jeep. And then we used to get stuck in Mahila Samaj meetings, so we could not reach all the villages. People would come to our office and say : "Why haven't you come to our village ? You must come there. Otherwise how will you make it ? But we could not reach the whole area. Even then, we got the third position. Though it was an absolutely new area for us. It was the first time the communist party had entered that region.

*Tell me about the Mahila Samaj work.*

We realized that women are victims of many atrocities. They have to give their *izzat*. Why does this happen ? So we called a meeting and tried explaining this. We have made many members. Our secretary has the list. We must be having about 1,500 members. In our meetings we discuss the exploitation of women, how to end it, and how to bring *garib raaj*—the rule of the poor. In the general meetings there are both men and women. Women now talk a bit. Some of them are now working in villages. They are not able to talk much in the big meetings which have people from the whole area.

*Did your parents try to stop you from*

*doing political work ?*

Yes, in the beginning they did try to stop me. They abused me, and said : "We won't let you enter our house." Then my brother intervened. He has read some Marx Lenin books. I can't read but my brother can read. When we tried to call meetings my parents tried to stop me. But my brother said I should go to the meeting to see that the mines were reopened.

Once the police went to my house and attacked my mother and my brother's daughter who is only 11 years old. They beat up my mother with a huge stick. Her whole arm got swollen. After that they tied them up and released them only after two days. The blood circulation was stopped due to their arms and legs being tied up for so long. They were in pain for many days. My mother told me : "See, because of you, I am getting beaten up in this old age." She started crying. I told her : "See, mother, this is the rule of the capitalist. Till we bring the rule of the poor, this world will remain like this. The police and military will keep on committing atrocities."

*So how will you bring the rule of the poor ?*

It can come only if all of us fight together. Right now we are demanding a separate tribal state. But that will not end

the misery of the poor. Bengal is a separate state but the poor have not gone. They are still there. So the tribal issue will take us only one step forward. *But they do not allow women to fight equally for the rule of the poor. Women have to keep quiet. So it will not be a rule of poor women. How will you bring that about ?*

Poor women's rule means that all these atrocities on women, the exploitation of women, the greater oppression of women, will have to end. *But will the poor man stop beating up and oppressing his wife if the rule of the poor comes ?*

No that won't happen. But our Mahila Samaj will try to stop it. That is how this exploitation can end.

*But how will you see to it that women speak for themselves? Look at the number of atrocities in the past few months. Men openly speak about the police beatings and arrests. But women are not allowed to talk about police rape. How do we ensure that we women speak about the injustice done to us ?*

It won't happen at once, but it will certainly happen slowly. If we climb one step of the ladder at a time, we can hope to climb all the steps. Right now there are no schools. Women are not educated. We will make schools and we

will force children to be educated.

*But in cities educated women are also beaten up. I am educated but if I get married I will be expected to cook, and to look after the children. What do we do about this?*

What do we do? We will organize. If a man touches a woman, we will put him down. "Why do you do that to her?" we will say. If a man beats his wife, and the whole village gets together to attack him, he can be stopped.

*But will men attack other men ?*

If we are organized, if the Mahila Samaj is organized, then at least 10 or 15 women will certainly go to him and that is how we can stop him.

...Now I have changed. If someone touches my body—whack, I give him a slap on the face, or hit him with a stone or with my hand. When I go here and there and someone tries to joke around with me, I give him a good scolding. Now they can't force me into anything. I have changed. If someone tries to force me, well, there are many stones around. I pick up a few and hit him with them. In the beginning I used to keep quiet but now we are changed—all of us who work in the mine and run the union. Some girls have changed like me. Some have not changed so much but none of them are as they were before. □

## Parvati's Struggle

Kodtalli is a cluster of houses in the midst of thick jungles in the western ghats of Karnataka. The main occupation of the people is the cultivation of paddy. Parvati and her husband Gajanan own three acres of land in this village. To cultivate this land they have to work hard, and also have to protect the crop from wild animals. The nearest bus connection to their village is five miles away. The way lies through dense forest, and in the rainy season the leeches torment them as they walk. Though they work from dawn to dusk, they find it difficult to procure two meals a day.

Adjacent to their land lies a field owned by a man who has been plotting

to get Parvati's family off the land so that he can usurp it. This year, in collusion with the local police constable, he plotted to get rid of Gajanan. One fine morning, the police arrived at their house to arrest Gajanan on a false charge of theft. Frightened, Gajanan ran away and took shelter in the forest.

Parvati now had to manage the agricultural work by herself. With the help of other village women she managed to transplant the paddy saplings. The police constable frequently visited her house and threatened her, demanding that she reveal the whereabouts of Gajanan. Though she repeatedly told him that she did not know where he was hiding, the constable refused to believe her statement. Parvati decided to resist this

harassment. With the help of a literate man in the village, she wrote a letter to the superintendent of police, who gave instructions for the local sub inspector to investigate the matter.

On investigation it was found that no theft case had been lodged against Gajanan. The police constables in conspiracy with the land hungry neighbour had harassed them without filing any complaint. Alarmed by the investigation, the local police had to search for Gajanan.

Parvati had to struggle for months. After three months, the police took her to the police station where she found Gajanan. Parvati's struggle shows the hidden capacities of illiterate but strong women of rural India.

—Pratibha Hegde, Bangalore