

# REPORTS

## GOA

### Fighting for a Home

THE Institute de Nossa Senhora da Piedade is an institution for the welfare of women which for the last 70 years has always maintained a women's hostel in Panjim. Since 1952 this hostel has been under the management of the Congregation of the Daughters of the Sacred Heart of Mary who take their orders from the Archbishop of Goa and Daman.

In July 1978 the parents of hostellers were suddenly informed that the management had decided to close down the hostel and the Institute itself on October 31, 1978. The girls were shocked and upset. They were all attending schools, colleges and offices in Panjim. Where were they to go if the hostel closed? And why were they being arbitrarily thrown out of a hostel which had housed women like them for decades?

Some members of the Congregation of the Daughters of the Sacred Heart of Mary protested: where could the girls go in the middle of the academic year? Again, many social service activities were being conducted by the Institute. There was the handicrafts centre which provided a number of poor people with work. What would become of them?

These members tried to explain the position to the authorities but all letters written to them remained unacknowledged. Then the girls went into the history of the Institute to see whether they could make out a legal case. They unearthed a document dated April 25, 1952, relating to the handing over of the Institute to the Archbishop, which explicitly stated that "the handing over does not affect the state ownership

rights of the moveable and immovable property handed over. ..." This clearly proved that the Archbishop is at best only a trustee entrusted the premises for a specific purpose — the benefit and welfare of women. The entrusting authority is the government while inmates of the hostel being the beneficiaries under an arrangement in the nature of a public trust are the true possessors of the premises.

They also discovered that the Archbishop, who considered himself the actual owner because his predecessor had resided in the premises from 1875 to 1894, was planning to demolish the building. The Municipal Council of Panjim had issued a licence for its reconstruction as a commercial establishment. The Mayor has refused to provide a copy of the plan but a citizen who saw it several times says there is no provision in it for a women's hostel. Instead there will be banks, shops, offices and private homes.

Such plans seemed illegal to the girls who therefore formed a Trust of all the hostelites to carry on the management, if the existing management proved unwilling to shoulder its responsibilities.

The management then decided to 'discipline' the girls and those members who were opposed to the Archbishop's line of action. These members were transferred and one who refused to comply with the transfer orders was dismissed by the Sacred Congregation in Rome, without a proper enquiry. The Archbishop and the Congregation also filed a civil suit against her.

The girls were harassed in several ways. The study hall was closed, urgent repairs were not done, furniture was removed and food stopped. The



—Kathe Kollwhz

management also filed a suit against a hosteler who had been living there for six years. They charged her with misbehaviour, interference, indiscipline and called for an injunction against her.

The girls in turn filed a suit for an injunction against the management, restraining them from closing the hostel, demolishing the building and interfering with the property in any way. The injunction was granted but the management's appeal to the District Court was upheld on June 30, 1979. As a result, the Institute was invaded by priests and married men who rushed in to try to take physical possession of the premises. The incident made headlines in the local papers.

The girls then approached the Lieutenant Governor, the Education Department, the Goa Archives, the Law Department, the police, the Town Planning Office, the Municipality. At the Municipality they were treated very rudely while all the other departments showed utter helplessness and paralysis.

The Director of the Goa Archives, however, recognised the building as a

National Monument and wrote to the Municipality forbidding its demolition. Thus the issue has been temporarily resolved.

Several freedom loving citizens have been participating in the tussle between the girls and the Archbishop. They look upon it as a struggle for women's rights against vested authority — in this case entrenched church authority that can be as domineering and ruthless in its own sphere as any other authority, be it political, social or economic.

The question that arises is: why is the government not alive to its responsibility of protecting citizens' rights? Since the Trust formed by the women of the Institute has been working unitedly and efficiently even through periods like November 1978 when the Archbishop's management ceased functioning altogether, why cannot the women continue to run the Institute themselves? The ultimate ownership could rest with the Government and perhaps final responsibility with the Archbishop, while the women themselves manage the Institute — just as women have run so many other institutions in the country.

— *Citizens for Civil Liberties and Human Rights*

## HYDERABAD

### Another Police Victim?

Within a year and a half of the Rameeza Bee incident which provoked public wrath to an unprecedented degree in Hyderabad, Bhongir (a town 50 Kms. away from Hyderabad City) was the scene of a similar incident. A five thousand strong crowd stormed the police station on the night of October 15, demanding a judicial enquiry into the death of Shakila, who, they believed, had been raped and killed by the police.

A women's group from Hyderabad, which visited Bhongir to investigate the incident of October 29, interviewed a wide spectrum of the Bhongir public and gathered the following details.

Shakila, a young woman about 24 years old, lived with her husband Henry,

in Yadagirigutta, a place of pilgrimage 9 Kms from Bhongir.

On September 19, Henry was picked up from Yadagirigutta by the police as a pickpocket and brought to Bhongir town. He was charged, convicted and sentenced to pay a fine of Rs.100 or undergo one month's simple imprisonment. The police, it is reported, paid the fine and nabbed Henry for further interrogation, as soon as he was released.

On September 22, it is alleged, the police brought Shakila to Bhongir and kept her in the verandah at the back of the police station for about a week. During this period, a number of people who visited the police station claim to have seen her. It appears the police then decided to shift her away from the police station. Reportedly, she was taken to the local Dharmashala by some constables. On finding that there was no accommodation, it is claimed, they foisted certain charges on one Suresh occupying Room No. 10 and took him into custody. His room being vacant, they paid up his dues and got the room allotted to Shakila. At this stage the manager of the Dharmashala insisted that it was against their rules to allot rooms to non-Hindus. According to the Manager, the police solved this problem by producing one S Krishna Reddy and claiming that Shakila was his wife and her younger brother Basha just an errand boy. The room was taken by Shakila on September 29. According to the manager and other inmates of the Dharmashala she was a quiet, good-looking woman who was seen to leave the room around 5 p.m. everyday, returning only the next morning. She is reported to have told the manager on October 9 that she was visiting her parents in the village and would be away for a few days.

This was the last the Dharmashala inmates saw of her until October 14 when she returned to her room in a deplorable condition. When she was in this condition, the police reportedly asked the manager to throw her out. The next morning her condition became worse. Her brother Basha rushed to one Dr. Ravi

Vijay Kumar Reddy. According to Dr. Reddy she had consulted him on the 13th for mild hyperacidity. Examining her on the 15th, he found her comatose and shifted her to the local Government Hospital from where, due to lack of facilities, she was taken to Gandhi Hospital, Secunderabad, in a taxi. It is reported that two constables, Basha and a doctor went with her. At Gandhi Hospital, Secunderabad, she collapsed by 9 p.m. The postmortem report stated that it was death due to barbiturate poisoning.

Strangely enough, Henry had been admitted into the Osmania General Hospital, Hyderabad, on the afternoon of October 14 in an unconscious state as an unknown person. The police version of this incident was that it was a suicide pact.

It is significant that the movements of the police aroused suspicion among the local people. According to the people of Bhongir, the police are notorious for their orgies and atrocities on women. This prompted a watchfulness on the part of some of the local youth, who, in a tempo van followed the taxi carrying Shakila. These boys, one of whom had spent the night of September 28 in the same lockup as Henry, reached the Gandhi Hospital and on hearing about the death of Shakila, rushed back to Bhongir. Enroute at Bibinagar the van was blocked by a police vehicle and all except four of them were rounded up and kept in police custody till 11 a.m. on October 16. The four who escaped reached Bhongir and alerted the public about the mysterious death of Shakila and the disappearance of her brother.

It seems that when the 5,000 strong crowd rushed to the town and rural police stations, neither the Circle Inspector nor the Sub-Inspector could be traced, and the Sub-Collector's attitude was extremely offensive. He is said to have asked the crowd whether she was a sister, mother or daughter to any one of them that they should react so violently.

The whole incident reeks of foul play



**Henry and Shakila**

and the glaring inconsistencies in the official version raise a number of questions:

1. Why did the police pay Henry's fine and then keep him in unlawful detention? 2. Why was Shakila kept in the police station between September 22 and 29? 3. Why did the police manipulate accommodation for Shakila at the Dharmashala on September 29 and why subsequently did they try to get her evicted on October 14? 4. What is the explanation for Shakila's absence from the Dharmashala between October 9 and 14? 5. How is it that Henry was found unconscious in the verandah at the back of the police station? 6. Basha, on being asked by Dr. R.V.K. Reddy as to the whereabouts of Shakila's husband answered hesitantly that the latter was in the police lock-up. Why did the Sub-Inspector deny this when Dr. R.V.K. Reddy asked him? 7. Dr. Kishan, who claims that he is the Sub-Inspector's family doctor was asked to take a look at Henry. He merely examined his pulse and pronounced him unconscious without any further examination and without seeking any explanation from the police for his condition. Why? As a responsible member of the medical profession, why did he not perform any other routine tests on Henry? 8. Why was Henry admitted as an unknown person in the Osmania General Hospital by the police

when they claimed that there were so many convictions against him? 9. How does one explain the presence of two hypodermic needles and an empty syringe box in Shakila's room in the Dharmashala? According to the Panchanama these were not included in the samples sent for chemical examination — Why not? 10. Why were the boys who were returning from Secunderabad detained at Bibinagar Police Station on the night of October 15? 11. Who is the Doctor who is reported to have accompanied Shakila in the taxi? 12. How does one explain the absence of any wrapping foil or containers in Shakila's room if she had taken barbiturate? 13. Which shop supplied the barbiturate without prescription? 14. How reliable and honest are the reports of the Forensic Dept?

There are apparently many strange and unresolved factors about this. For instance, why did Shakila return to the police station every evening for almost three weeks? If she was being molested, what was the threat which made her return every day to the police station? One could speculate that it was the danger to Henry, a fact made all the more poignant if we remember that this was her third husband. The first had deserted her, the second was killed in the cyclone and Henry who had become a Muslim and married her for love was in the hands

of the police. What could any woman do in a situation like this? She knew no one in Bhongir. A Muslim woman unwanted in a Hindu Dharmashala, she was being asked to vacate the room every day. She had no money. All she had was the hope that Henry would be released.

The fact that Shakila did not confide in anyone speaks of her situation as a woman. We are trained not to speak out when we are in trouble, more so if the trouble is sexual. The submissiveness, the strength and the ability to put up with any thing is so romanticised in our social mythology that the exploitation inherent in it is never realised.

For those of us who met Rameeza Bee, the similarity in character traits was very striking. The people of Bhongir described Shakila as meek, quiet, pathetic and innocent looking. This is what impressed one about Rameeza Bee as well. The very qualities which make the so-called "ideal" woman are the qualities which lay her open to brutal attack.

Are we to believe that it was out of kindheartedness and humanitarian concern that the police were so actively interested in her accommodation, eviction, treatment and funeral arrangements? Is this routine service which all people in distress can expect from the police?

The amazing vigilance on the part of the local people is an indication of how much they have suffered at the hands of the police. The massive and spontaneous reaction of the people of Bhongir reflects their growing distrust of the police. Recently, the Andhra Pradesh Government sanctioned an ex gratia payment for victims of police rape. This is the familiar attitude of patronage and payment for "damages done."

When commissions of enquiry are appointed they serve to divert and dissipate public reaction in the hope that justice will be done. When the findings of the Mukhtadar Commission went against the police, the report was not made public and Rameeza Bee was projected as a prostitute and harassed continuously.

The momentum of increasing public fury is our only hope in the face of a structure that ensures only continuing atrocities and protection for the guilty. While this public fury is a hopeful sign it is not enough as it is based on the traditional male attitude of equating the woman with private property. It is when women become conscious and fight that incidents like this will be viewed in the right perspective as primarily the violation of a human being's dignity and liberty.

— Women's group, Hyderabad

## **FARIDABAD**

### **Police vs the People**

In one of the worst orgies of violence in recent times, Haryana police ran berserk and killed innocent people in Faridabad on October 17. They also concealed and destroyed all evidence of their misdeeds, and misled the Press as to what happened on that day. This is the finding of a three member Fact Finding Team sponsored by the People's Union of Civil Liberties and Democratic Rights, Delhi branch, which toured Faridabad on October 24, met victims of the police firing and relatives of those killed. They discovered that even after a week, the police were still persecuting innocent people.

On October 17, when a strike call had been given by different trade unions, the police, without making any public announcement, imposed Section 144 at 2 am. Sub-Inspector Brahm Dutt ordered a lathi charge on a crowd that was unaware of this imposition. While some workers were arguing with the police, Brahm Dutt opened fire, killing one of the demonstrators on the spot. When the dead man's friends tried to lift the body, he fired again, killing two more people. This enraged the crowd. They are reported to have pounced on Brahm Dutt, who later succumbed to injuries inflicted by the crowd.

The total indifference of the police and local administration to basic human rights, was described by the employees of a hotel at Neelam Chowk, the place

where the firing occurred: "When the trouble started, some policemen took up vantage positions on top of a building and started firing on the crowd in the streets. The policemen on the road started beating up people, including school children. ... The panic stricken people rushed to the railway bridge between Neelam Chowk and Mathura Road. The police trapped the crowd on the bridge and started shooting from both sides. Many people jumped down to a depth of 25 to 40 feet. The policemen forced those who were dangling from the bridge to jump down, by beating them on their knuckles. Some were physically lifted and thrown down from the bridge by the policemen."

From the eyewitness reports heard by the team, it was evident that there is no properly organized labour force in Faridabad. Not a single leader of any union or political party was to be seen at Neelam Chowk before or after the incidents. The CITU people, contacted at their office, were ill-informed about the incidents.

On the other hand, it was clear that "the policemen themselves were preparing for a show-down," as one shop employee put it. Evidence suggests that after the death of Brahm Dutt, the gun-carrying police force ran amuck, to

take revenge. One engineer working in West Germany, who is home on leave, told the team that he saw a policeman stopping two young schoolchildren as they were returning from school on their bicycles, unaware of the happenings. They were beaten mercilessly, though it was five hours after the morning incidents. Everyone in Neelam Chowk corroborated that the worst type of police *raj* prevailed in the whole area after the incidents. Policemen entered shops and residences to beat up uninvolved and innocent people. One hotel employee showed the team his injured shoulder. He had been pounced upon by policemen while he was cooking in the kitchen.

The police extended the range of their atrocities to areas far away from the scene of the demonstration, and to people who had nothing to do with the striking workers. At Punjabi Colony, 4 to 5 kms. away from Neelam Chowk, Kashmiri Lal Bali, aged 42, was killed at point-blank range by policemen who had taken positions on the building opposite his house. Bali, a government employee, came home from work at 4.30 p.m. and went up on the roof to call his son Anil. As he reached the roof, a bullet hit him. Seeing him fall, Jagdish Prasad, aged 28, who was staying in a room on the



**One of the injured workers in hospital**

terrace, came out to help him. He was also hit by a bullet and later died in hospital. Bali's 12-year-old son Anil was hit next and died later. 16-year-old Surendra Kumar, a neighbour's son, was also badly injured. These were cases of cold-blooded murder.

A police party headed by the DSP snatched away Bali's body, rushed it to Gurgaon and cremated it there. The body of Jagdish Prasad was not handed over to his relatives and no one knows what happened to it. At Gurgaon cremation ground, Bali's relatives found at least six more dead bodies of unidentified people waiting to be cremated. The relatives of dead and missing persons were utterly helpless. The doctor at the hospital refused to tell them where the bodies were.

On October 22, a police party came to Bali's house and dislodged a bullet which had got stuck in the wall. The team saw the hole made by the bullet, enlarged into a wide gap by the police party. Local people said that the police were still prowling around to recover the cartridges of bullets fired by them. A photographer who had taken photographs of Bali's dead body, was being constantly harassed by the police.

Reporters were not allowed to enter the hospital where those injured in the firing lay. Members of the team managed to smuggle themselves into the male ward and saw six persons with bullet injuries. They were shocked to see four of them—all in plaster, and in no condition to move—chained to their beds and guarded by armed policemen who were occupying beds meant for patients.

Children seem to have been a special target of the police violence. Wherever the team went, people complained of this. Of the 150 to 200 people still missing, a large number were children.

The team was told that at every stage, local industrialists influenced the police. At the Circuit House meeting, where the industrialists, police officials and minister Khurshid Ahmed discussed the post-firing situation, it was the industrialists who offered to pool money and give an award to the dead policeman.



**The dead body of K. L. Bali**

It was they who pressurised the Minister against giving Bali's dead body to his relatives. There was a widespread feeling that the magisterial inquiry ordered by the Haryana government would not lead anywhere, except to excuse the police. The people were demanding a judicial inquiry and suspension of the guilty policemen. Local people also complained that none of the major political parties or trade union leaders bothered to visit or help the victims and their relatives.

In its report, the Fact Finding Team has noted that the industrial climate in Faridabad had deteriorated over the years primarily because of the aggressive attitude of local industrialists. They habitually employ *goondas* in the name of security guards to beat up those workers who are active in the trade unions. For instance, it was alleged that on October 17, *goondas* employed by the management of a cotton mill near Press Colony, Faridabad, had chased workers belonging to the union. Eye witnesses told the team that the police were protecting the *goondas* who hurled stones at the workers.

Summing up its findings, the team stated that the imposition of Section 144 unannounced was a deliberate provocative step. The disappearance of 150-200 people and the atmosphere of fear felt by all the people—workers,

shop-keepers, housewives, children, clearly show that a reign of terror has been let loose by the authorities. The disposal of dead bodies in secret, threats, destruction of evidence, and bribes show the complicity of the authorities in the incidents of the 17th. A judicial inquiry must be held into the violence of October 17.

## **MADRAS SIET College Rebels**

25 years ago, a retired High Court judge, Basheer Ahmed Sayeed and other powerful members of the Muslim community, founded the Southern India Education Trust Women's College. Ever since, the students and staff have lived in fear and insecurity behind its spiked steel gates and formidable compound walls, isolated from the campaigns of teachers and students throughout the state.

Over the years, Basheer has manoeuvred six of his relatives into the 11-member college executive. Basheer and his family have been ruling the college as a highly profitable business, blatantly defying all government regulations. In the 1960s, they stubbornly refused to implement the state government's order abolishing the payment of fees by students of the Pre-University course. Since 1974, the management has refused government grants, thus avoiding opening accounts to Education Department auditors. Feeble attempts made by the government and university to enquire into alleged abuses are blocked by Basheer's refrain that the college is a minority institution and therefore above investigation.

But on August 6, the people of Madras were provided with evidence of a remarkable change within SIET College. On that Monday morning, the staff and students gathered in the auditorium as usual, but instead of listening to the customary platitudes of morning assembly, they cheered as a representative of the non-teaching staff walked onto the platform and read out a

15- point charter of demands presented jointly by teachers, students and non-teaching staff.

The demands included job security for all employees after one year of service, UGC pay scales for teachers, revision of pay scales for non-teaching staff on the basis of successive Pay Commission recommendations, reduction of tuition fees to the level of those charged by government colleges affiliated to the Madras University, abolition of donations for admission, freedom of association and the right to a democratically elected college council and students' union. Before the astonished eyes of the management, the staff and students raised slogans in support of these demands and dispersed.

The management declared the college closed and ordered hostellers to leave their rooms by the evening. But with the support of their teachers who pointed out the illegality of the vacation orders, and the mess employees who enthusiastically continued cooking meals, the girls refused to budge.

The next morning, about 3,000 students and staff staged a lively demonstration outside the college gates, demanding immediate re-opening of the college. Girls clad in salwar kameez, trousers, shirts — dresses explicitly banned by the college rules—perched on the compound walls shouting slogans and waving placards that declared “SIET is a concentration camp!” and “We are students, not jail birds”.

Teachers are grossly underpaid and kept “temporary” for as long as ten years. They are spied on by a ‘Personnel Officer’ and fined for coming late; their increments are stopped if the examination results are not good; they have to perform duties like sitting at the gate during lunch hour to prevent students from leaving the campus and to act as shop assistants in the college co-operative store.

As for the non-teaching staff, the president of their association S.M. Pasha pointed out that their position was little better than that of “bonded labourers”. Their pay scales are much lower than in

other colleges and they have no job security: one man with 22 years of service is still designated “temporary”! They often have to perform domestic work in the homes of members of the management.

Students have to make donations to the college at the time of admission. The sum is anything from Rs. 500 to 5,000, depending on the family's ability to pay. The tuition fees are much higher than those charged by other colleges, but facilities are almost non-existent. In addition, students are fined at every step — for coming late in the morning, for absenting themselves on government holidays which are not college holidays, for wearing a sari blouse considered too low-cut. Students are demanding lifting of the numerous restrictions on their freedom, such as the rule that hostel residents may go out only once a month, and the practice of subjecting visitors of resident staff and students to lengthy and humiliating interrogations. They are also demanding an elected union and the right to associate with other student groups and forums. So far, “the very word ‘union’ has been taboo”, said one student.

The teachers were the first section to get organized. An association was formed last February, and after months of secret recruitment and preparation, a list of demands was presented to the Vice Chancellor of Madras University and to the college principal, in late July. Since the management responded by trying to bully the teachers' representatives, the students and non-teaching staff seized the opportunity. A Joint Action Council was formed and drew up the 15-point charter of demands.

After the college closure, staff and students maintained vigil outside the gates where they were joined by teachers and students from other city colleges. Many organizations, including the Association of University Teachers, the Tamil Nadu Association of Non-Teaching Staff, the Graduate Teachers' Association and the Students' Federation of India extended their support. On the fourth day of the

agitation, two people appointed by the university conducted an enquiry. The Vice Chancellor conceded that minority-run institutions could not flout university rules concerning salaries and job security. The same day, the management announced that the college would re-open on August 13, and promised vaguely that teachers' problems would be discussed with the government. The Joint Action Council announced that the struggle would continue until the demands of all three sections were met, and deplored the efforts of the management to divide the college community by offering bait to the teaching staff alone. August 13, it promised, would be marked not by a tame return to work, but by a massive demonstration outside the college gates.

Thereupon, the state government declared August 13 and 14 holidays for all colleges in the city! In spite of this, hundreds of students and teachers assembled outside SIET College on the morning of August 13, marched to the university and sent a delegation to hand over a memorandum to the Education Minister.

Though Tamil Nadu has a history of militant agitations by college teachers and students in defence of their democratic rights, the SIET struggle is unprecedented for the unity manifested between the three sections of the college community. It is all the more significant that this united action has been achieved in a women's college (because women's colleges have remained largely isolated from the teachers' and students' movements) and one that is also under a minority private administration. The management tried to give a communal colour to the struggle by mischievously asserting that “agitators” are out to destroy the Muslim-managed colleges through the agency of Muslims themselves. But as the slogans reverberated at the college gates on August 13, it was clear that the near-spontaneous democratic struggle had seen through and defeated the tactic of setting Muslim against non-Muslim and student against teacher or non-teaching

employee.

—Susan Ram  
(from E.P.W.)

## AMRITSAR

### Another Dowry Death

Manorma, 25, was burnt to death last August in the house of her in-laws, 72-B Rani-ka-Bagh, Amritsar. She died apparently because her brothers who had since her marriage given money to her in-laws, refused to comply with further demands for dowry.

Manorma was married to Kailash Chand three years ago and had a son and a daughter. According to the neighbours, Manorma was constantly harassed by her mother-in-law Savitri Devi. Manorma's in-laws had always taunted her for bringing insufficient dowry and their demands became more persistent when their neighbour's son got a car in dowry. Two days before Manorma met her gruesome death, there was a violent quarrel between her in-laws and her brothers. Manorma and her brothers were brutally beaten up.

The girl's *bhabhi* (sister-in-law) implored her to return with them to her brothers' home. Her *bhabhi* expected the worst from Manorma's in-laws because they had burnt their youngest daughter-in-law barely ten months before in their ancestral village of Fatehgarhchurian. The youngest daughter-in-law's parents were poor, moreover her stepmother was unconcerned, so the case was not pursued. Another reason why her in-laws got away with the heinous crime was that they had managed to force the poor girl into signing a statement saying she had committed suicide.

The neighbours say that Manorma had agreed with her *bhabhi* and was about to leave with them when her husband appealed to the mother of Manorma by drawing her attention to the plight of her children. Manorma was taken in and agreed to stay on for the children's sake.

The burning of two daughters-in-law in a year enraged the people of Rani-ka-Bagh. On hearing the news they gathered in front of Gopal Krishan's (Manorma's

father-in-law) residence to shout slogans and decry the inhuman act.

On 24th August, 1979, a procession of about 450 people marched through the city protesting against Manorma's murder and staged a *Dharna* in front of Gopal Krishan's residence. The procession, led by Manorma's tearful relatives, was a moving sight.

On 25th August a *Shok-sabha* (condolence meeting) was held in Rani-ka-Bagh and was well attended. The people seem anxious to ensure that Manorma's death is not just one more among the long list of suicide murders in which the guilty go unpunished. They are determined to get the police to take proper action against the criminals.

— Vandana Chatrath

## DELHI

### The Same Old Story?

This is Abha, a graduate in zoology from Daulat Ram College, a school teacher and mother of a five-month-old daughter. It is reported by her parents that after her marriage to Dr. Hari Shankar Goar, Scientific Research Officer, (Class I) at IARI, Pusa, New Delhi, she was being tortured for more dowry. A refrigerator was demanded which was given by her parents four months before her murder. On July 7, 1979, her husband beat her and injured her on the forehead so that the wound required four stitches. Her husband wanted to go to West Germany and it is suspected that he wished to re-marry for more dowry. On October 1, Abha went to her parents to celebrate Dussehra. When she returned home at night, her brother and younger sister too noticed that her husband seemed angry. The next day, an unknown person came and informed her parents that Abha was seriously ill and was in hospital. When they rushed there, a nurse informed them that Abha had died of poisoning. The parents have registered a case of murder against her husband and father-in-law. No arrests have been made so far.

It is really painful that after a short spell of detailed reporting and protest demonstrations against dowry deaths,

the same three-line news-items have started appearing in newspapers once again: 'Woman commits suicide' or 'Woman burnt to death in stove explosion'.

For the last one month, such cases are reported almost every day on the third page of newspapers, and all of us are reduced to silent spectators once



more. We appeal to women reporters in these newspapers to undertake investigations and print full reports on these so-called 'suicides' and 'accidents' so that people may be made aware of the reality. It is clear that the administration and police have entered into a conspiracy of silence and wish to bury all such cases so that the wave of awareness around this issue which had begun, can be conveniently consigned to the past.

### Following Up Anti-Dowry

Stri Sangharsh, which has been engaged in a campaign against dowry deaths since June 1, when it held a demonstration against the murder of Tarvinder Kaur, has now produced a play on the issue. The play was performed at Indraprastha (I.P.) College on November 15, at the women's day organized by the I.P. College Women's Committee. An exhibition explaining the function of dowry today was also put up by Stri Sangharsh, forming part of an exhibition

produced by I.P. College students. Our posters traced the way in which marriage is used to transfer both capital and commodities, this exchange being emphasised to a point where the individuals marrying each other become unimportant.

Our play 'Om Swaha' explores what Hindu marriage means for a woman: total denial of self-expression, a thwarted personality, and a life of unending drudgery. Hardeep, a young bride, is taken to her in-laws' house. Her day begins at the crack of dawn. She is a slave to the demands of the family. She is battered with complaints of the inadequate dowry she brought, beaten and finally killed. The police, for "lack of evidence" change the case from murder to suicide.

Kanchan, a friend of Hardeep's, attempts to give witness but is sharply silenced. Her own fate follows that of Hardeep—she too is an overworked daughter-in-law. Her labour power is extracted without any of the benefits due to a worker—neither maternity leave nor any respite from domestic drudgery. The same dowry demands haunt her and she too is killed. The actors then redo Kanchan's story, to show a woman with some spirit.

This time, Kanchan breaks out of the silent suffering imposed on her by her upbringing and tries to run away but before she can cross the Lakshman Rekha of her in-laws' house, she is caught... Kanchan's fight raises questions for all of us—how long are we going to watch women live and die like this? The play ends with a song calling upon all of us to support the struggles of the Hardeeps and Kanchans of our society.

Since the June demonstration, Stri Sangharsh activity has tended to concentrate on meeting parents of dowry victims, and following up cases with police and lawyers. Yet we felt that we should resume consciousness raising in a more concerted way. This kind of activity could not be sustained without the growth of a supportive group or movement against dowry and dowry murders.

The I.P. College Women's Committee which was formed last academic year and which had organized the rally against physical harassment of women, was also feeling the need to co-ordinate with other groups and women's colleges. They had arranged a meeting with the mother of a dowry victim and found that cultural activities were an effective medium of communication. The play, exhibition, and seminar on the women's day organized by them were a positive instance of a college and a non-college based group working together for a common cause. All women's colleges in Delhi had been invited to participate in the seminar.

Our play was intended to raise questions on the issue of dowry and also on broader questions related to feminism. In the discussion with college students after the performance, this did in fact happen. The major questions raised were: Who were the members of the cast? How and why did they become feminists? How was Stri Sangharsh formed? What alternatives exist for women? How could they refuse to give dowry and change their position in the family? Could we show the play to parents and to men to change their consciousness? We intend to perform this play both in colleges and in residential areas, hoping to encourage agitation on this issue.

—Stri Sangharsh

## **BANGALORE Intervening in Elections**

*Vimochana Forum for Women's Rights* is a group of women and men who have come together with the idea of building a broad-based women's movement. As their immediate task, they tried to make use of the election campaign period to raise the question of women's rights. They organized poster campaigns, public meetings and demonstrations to awaken in women a consciousness of their oppression, They felt that this would help women discover how society turns a deaf ear to their pleas.

Their appeal to women voters: "Let us ask ourselves a basic question before

we cast our vote this time: **What have all previous Governments done for the women of India?**

Though there are legislations and protections, none of the parties have been really concerned with the emancipation of women. Only a party which can put forward a genuine programme on behalf of women to liberate the working masses (both men and women) should be voted for.

**Women of India, remember that you are the toilers who have been exploited, oppressed and discriminated against!** In the agricultural sector you do arduous work in the fields. You gather firewood, draw water, collect cow-dung, bring food supplies and work for low daily wages wherever work is available. It is you who get up before dawn, prepare the food, look after the children and earn money doing menial jobs in other people's fields and houses.

In urban industry, you are a key sector of the work force, making garments, labelling, sorting, and packing: doing many semi-skilled and unskilled jobs for low wages.

You are also nurses, teachers, clerks and typists working long hours for low pay under oppressive working conditions.

**Therefore vote for the candidates who support women's emancipation, and whose programme includes:**

Equal pay for equal work; Abolition of the dowry system; Equal opportunities for education and employment; End to atrocities on harijan and adivasi women; Creches and maternity benefits for all women; Permanent work for casual and temporary workers; Censorship of films, books, newspapers and advertisements that propagate false views about women; Recognition of women as an important national resource, capable of participating in the social, economic and political development of India."

They would like responses to this pamphlet and invite suggestions for their work. □