

CHHOBI...

A SMALL village in Sonarpur, West Bengal. Twenty five years ago, the area was haunted by a dacoit. A band of policemen descended on the village, to hunt him down. A police officer, armed with a search warrant, began visiting a particular house everyday — the house of Chhobi Mandal, a young widow who worked in the fields for a living.

Chhobi knew what this man wanted. After all, she had been married at the age of seven and widowed at eleven. Her situation had made her very vulnerable to sexual harassment. But she pretended not to understand the officer's intentions.

Chhobi's feigned ignorance could not help her for long. One day the police officer trapped her alone in the hut, pushed her against the door and tried to rape her. Chhobi was furious. She resisted violently, fought him off and forced him to leave.

That was when centuries of fear and anger found a voice. Chhobi, on the suggestion of a friend, discussed the incident with some local workers of the then undivided Communist Party. Three MLAs helped her. She was taken to Calcutta to register the case and an enquiry committee came to conduct an investigation.

She Kicked the Mountain

The officer sent by the enquiry committee made fun of Chhobi. He told her, "You are a little nobody. Do not try to kick a mountain." The police were determined to have the case dismissed. They offered Chhobi Rs. 5,000 to drop the case. They also called together the young men of the village, gave them food, liquor and Rs. 5 each, and ordered



... One Of Many

them to testify in court that she was a prostitute. Chhobi faced pressures from all sides. Her relatives tried to persuade her to accept the police bribe. Even the other village women teased her about being promiscuous.

But all this only strengthened her resolve to win. The case dragged on for three years. Chhobi's firmness won the respect of the villagers. None of them was ready to testify against her. And finally the case was decided in favour of Chhobi. The guilty police officer was dismissed.

Speaking Together

Chhobi says that after this incident, she feared nothing. Many of the village women had been afraid to speak publicly of the way they were sexually harassed

by men from outside the village. Chhobi talked to them and convinced them they had nothing to be ashamed of or to hide. That their problem was a collective one and should be dealt with collectively. Once her victory became widely known, such incidents of violence became rare in the area.

Chhobi also tried explaining to the women the importance of economic independence. Many of them decided to follow her example and work with her in the fields. Chhobi talked with these women about the need to organize and fight for their rights.

Into Our Own Hands

A group of women appealed to Chhobi to try and abolish the *bhatir khanas* where illicit liquor was distilled.

The women were the first sufferers because the men used to come home drunk and beat up their wives. Chhobi appealed to the panchayat to take action. But nothing happened.

And Chhobi daily saw her sisters' agony. A woman who was five months pregnant and had been severely beaten by her husband was brought to Chhobi's hut in a coma. Another woman who could no longer bear the cruelty of her drunken husband committed suicide. Chhobi's own younger brother-in-law whom she had brought up from his childhood like her own son, started coming home drunk and abusing her.

Chhobi decided she could no longer wait for something to be done. She left the village, telling the women she would return only when she had found a solution to their problem. She went to the local party office and told them, "If you do not get the *bhatir khanas* abolished, we will take the matter into our own hands." The local party leader told her to take action and promised her all support.

Chhobi returned to the village in three days' time. She had found the solution — in the strength of the women themselves. Thirty women held a secret meeting in the school compound and decided to send an ultimatum to the owners of the *bhatir khanas*, demanding an end to liquor days. The production within five ultimatums appeared to have worked — the women were told that liquor was no longer being produced in the village. Chhobi found this difficult to believe. She searched until she found where the liquor was hidden. The women, armed with lathis, marched in a procession to the *bhatir khanas* and smashed the bottles. The owners, hearing the clamour, rushed in and demanded compensation for their loss. Chhobi had a ready reply. They would be allowed to produce liquor provided they signed a contract guaranteeing employment to at least 16 men who had squandered their earnings on drink.

The agitation continued. On three separate occasions, the women smashed liquor bottles, held demonstrations and

fought with the owners of *bhatir khanas*. Within a month the production of liquor was completely stopped.

Today Chhobi is forty years old. What explains her strength, militancy and political consciousness?

—As a childless widow, Chhobi was freed from the burdens of family and childcare.

—As a scheduled caste woman, she was freed from the restrictions placed on the freedom of movement and expression of upper caste women.

—As an agricultural labourer, she had some degree of economic independence.

—The Communist Party supported her when she was alone in her fight.

But Chhobi's real strength lay in the fact that she did not see her personal battle as a purely individual one. She involved other women in it so that they were able to take up issues which concerned them all. Today she is not alone. Hers is a collective strength — the strength which comes from struggling together. □

FREE AMINA

"An 18 year old girl who pretended to be a male in order to earn her livelihood as a 'helper' in trucks in the past six years is now in police custody in the northern town of Gaibandha.

The girl, Amina Khatun, is facing charges of hiding her identity, using fictitious names and carrying a male driving licence. The girl hid her long hair with a piece of cloth fastened on her head.

Her physical movements and actions caught the attention of customers at a roadside tea stall, who challenged her identity and later informed the police.

The girl reportedly confessed to the police that she had left her home district of Mymensingh six years ago after the death of her father. She said she passed herself off as a young boy to get a job as a helper in trucks so as to support herself and her family." (Newsreport from Times of India 17.9.79).

Apparently, it is a crime for a woman to dress as a man and get a higher-paid job than sweeping, cooking, rolling bidis or whatever. Amina's case shows the response of the state if sexual divisions of work are crossed. Perhaps it is just the law in Bangladesh — is 'concealing one's identity' or a woman dressing up as a man a crime in India?

There are feminists of words — and feminists of action. Amina's act, which is condemned by the state and society is an act which refuses to accept the boundaries that society has decided for women. It is a protest against the fact that there are certain jobs that women can't do if they are women, but can do if they are dressed as men. And do so well that no one notices for six years.

We protest against this action of the Bangladesh Government and urge them to drop the charges against Amina, and to allow her to continue as a helper on the trucks. We should support Amina through letters of protest to the Bangladesh embassy, writing to Amina, contacting friends in Bangladesh to do something in her support.....

— Mira Savara

