

The Burning Falls To Our Share”

—Women In The Chilli Trade

A SEWA Survey

THERE are nearly 2,000 women employed in grinding spices in three localities of Ahmedabad —Behram-pur, Amraiwadi and Madhupura. Most of these women are migrants from Rajasthan. There are Hindus, Muslims and Christians among them.

The work of grinding spices is seasonal—from February to April. The rest of the year, the women have to look for other work. Some work on construction sites, others as domestic servants.

During the season, women go from door to door in middle class residential colonies with the cry of “Get your red chillies ground.” They sit in the courtyard of the house to do the grinding, at a considerable distance from the living area, so as to avoid the possibility of spices being blown into the house. They are given a mortar, and pestle, a container, and sackcloth to use as a floor covering.

The spices commonly ground are coriander, red chillies, cummin, dry ginger, cardamom, black pepper and herbs. Coriander has to be roasted before grinding. Each spice is weighed separately although the grinders can estimate the weight by looking at the amount. After one grinding, the women sift the powdered spices and regrind it until it is finely powdered.

The women are paid Rs 4 per kilo of ground spices. It takes them one and a half hours to grind a kilo of red chillies, and 45 minutes to grind any other spice. However, they are paid according to the

quantity of ground spice, not by the hour. Some employers pay even less than Rs 4 a kilo. Normally, a woman can grind five to seven kilos a day, which works out to a maximum daily income of Rs 28. However, there is no guarantee that work will be available to her all the time.



Plastic chillies decorate the doorway of a chilli grinder's house

A Survey

The health wing of SEWA and the activists of Sangini conducted a survey of nearly 400 women who make their living by grinding spices. The research group comprising Darshna Parmar, Madhu Solanki, Ramala Shah, Rekha

Trivedi, Abigail Khristi, Narmada, Rangpara, Lakshmi, Shanta Parmar, was headed by Mirai Chatterjee and Jyoti Makwan.

Here is a statistical profile :

Married: 84 percent, of whom 41 percent have three to four children

Age: Between 25 and 34 : 41 percent
Between 35 and 44 : 23 percent

Education : Illiterate : 66 percent
Studied up to secondary level : 19 percent

Studied in primary school : 15 percent
Number of years spent grinding spices :

Under five years : 32 percent
6 to 10 years : 26 percent
Over 15 years : 24 percent

Religion : Hindu 83 percent; Muslim 14 percent; Christian 3 percent. The husbands of 210 women are mill workers or rickshaw pullers or vendors. Nearly 24 percent of the women had unemployed husbands. Fifty one percent of the women did not know how much their husbands earned, and complained that the men brought home money on an irregular basis. Thirty six percent of the women were solely dependent on their income from spice grinding.

Health Hazards

Work related problems are legion. Nearly 38 percent of the women complain of pains and aches in their arms ; 15 percent suffer from constant sneezing and running noses. Wiping the nose with the *sari* end only increases the inflammation. About 15 percent said their bodies, especially feet, burn while they are at

work. The burning continues even after they return home.

Twenty eight percent said they are unable to sleep well at night because of body ache and burning sensation. Sitting near the stove to cook for their families aggravates the burning sensation. If by mistake their hands come in contact with any delicate and unexposed part of the body, acute burning sensations result. Seventy seven percent reported constant exhaustion and spells of dizziness, but this could be due to general ill health and anaemia.

Fifty six percent had a burning sensation while urinating and 54 percent an itching sensation. None of the women had ever gone to a doctor for relief. The women said that an increase in the workload results in a corresponding increase in pain, but they endure it because the work season is a short one. Nearly 79 percent of the women seek relief in home remedies like cold water baths, applying clarified butter and oil on the skin, or using mud packs.

All the women spoken to live in hutments in slum areas. The shortage of water is acute. Long queues form at the few taps. People have to wake up very early in order to secure a place in the queue. Since the taps often run dry before all the residents have collected enough water, quarrels among those who have queued up are frequent.

There is no electricity and during the work season, when the women return home late, they have to cook in the dark. There is no sanitation in these areas. Filthy gutters often overflow into the courtyards. Even if a family constructs a sewer to divert this water, it nevertheless remains stagnant within the slum. There are no separate toilets for women. And the common latrines are badly neglected and unhygienic.

A Profile

Harkhibehn leaves home at 7 a.m. during the work season, after completing the household chores. She has contacts with certain families who employ her to grind spices every season. These homes are situated in farflung colonies. Often,



Harkhibehn at home with her children

she walks all the way home to save the busfare. She takes the bus only if the employer is generous enough to give her the busfare. She tries to reach home by 5 p.m. but the timings depend on the workload. On days when she fails to get enough work, she returns home by 2 p.m.

For her lunch, Harkhibehn takes with her a few *chapatis*, some salt and chillies. If the employer is kind, she may give her some lentils or pickles to eat. Perhaps even a cup or two of tea. An exceptionally kind employer may give her a worn out *sari* or children's dress : "There is a

woman who lives on Ellisbridge who not only employs me every year but also introduces me to other families. She also gives me Rs 5 extra as a token of appreciation for my work.

"When my child was quite small, I used to take him with me to work. I would put him to sleep in a piece of cloth hung from a tree. I would also take my daughter along to look after him. Most employers do not like us to take our children along. And my children are particularly naughty.

"One has to walk considerable distances in search of work. This tires our feet, and grinding makes our arms ache. Sometimes, I feel dizzy from sheer exhaustion and just sit down on the roadside, sometimes outside someone's house and ask them for water. It's amazing how some people can actually refuse you a drink of water.

"Naturally, when you are grinding chillies in the open, some of it does blow into your and the children's eyes. Rubbing the eyes increases the burning sensation. I have to wash my hands before washing the children's eyes, and then buy them some sweets to divert their attention.

"Our rate is Rs 4 a kilo but not everyone pays at this rate. If you could help us in this, it would be nice. Before

Destalking chillies



grinding the stemmed red chillies, we have to remove each stem. Our rate is Rs 4 for this variety, and Rs 3 for the stemless variety. We even have to make good any shortfall in the quantity of spices. In order to grind red chillies properly, one has to dry them in the sun and this makes them shrink.

“I do not like to work for shopkeepers. They do not trust us to carry the spices home, and because we have small children, it is not possible for us to adhere to the strict timings of the shop. Neither are we keen to bring work home as it means having to carry the spices to and fro.

“The advent of machines has adversely affected our work. Many people prefer to have their spices machine ground, because it costs less. Now people can also buy ground spices in packets. If they get spices ground by us, they have the bother of supervising us, giving us tea, and then some powder inevitably blows into the house.

“I started doing this work only after my marriage. In my natal family none of the women did this work, but all of the women in my in-laws’ family do it. My marriage was arranged when I was in the cradle although the wedding took place 20 years later. We find it hard to run the house on our meagre income. My daughter, who is 12 years old, has been accompanying me to work for the last two years. Both she and her younger sister, aged six, are engaged. When they are about 20 years old, I shall get them married.”

From Six To Sixty

Jhangubehn Keshaji has four daughters and three sons. As a six year old child, Jhangubehn began accompanying a neighbour to grind spices : “I used to grind spices, as a sort of game.” Now she is 60 and is still at the same work.

She has no qualms about working in a shop, except that the shopkeepers pay at the rate of Rs 2 .a kilo for finely powdered spices and Rs 1.50 for coarsely powdered ones. Some shopkeepers are generous enough not to weigh the



Jhangubehn Keshaji stitching gunny bags during the monsoon—the off season for chilli grinding

whole chillies before they are ground. This means the women are paid per kilo of ground spices. She says that some customers are reluctant to pay at Rs 4 a kilo. But if the customer uses a fine sieve to measure the powdered spice, she insists on being paid at this rate.

Most of her old customers live not far from her house, so she does not have to travel long distances. But the advent of machines has affected her livelihood. “Many shopkeepers have acquired machines. Now, crying out in the streets is ineffectual. I just have to cling to my old customers with tenacity. During the off season I used to work as a construction labourer. But now that I am old, people hesitate to employ me, so I have to manage by taking loans. My sons live separately from me but do give me some money.

“Middlemen ? No, there are no middlemen. Our blood goes into this work. It is our eyes from which the tears flow—where is the need for a middleman in such a trade ?”

Women Chilli Farmers

The women of Kausani district in Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh, are engaged in growing chillies. These women’s husbands are either employed in the army or have jobs in the plains. The women stay in the villages and manage the fields. The price of chillies is steep in the market but the profit does not reach the women farmers. These women have no voice in the district market. They have been struggling for the last two years to secure a place in the market.

“The burning falls to our share (*hamne jalan mol li hai*). We grew up amidst chillies. Outside were the chilli



Chilli grinder at home

fields and inside the house were heaps of dried chillies. We trade in chillies. Chillies all around, chillies in our bodies, it is enough to burn the womb to ashes.” It is a fact that these families have few children, but no one has yet under-taken to study the reasons for this so there is no medical evidence.

Another chilli growing area is Maneklav village, Jodhpur district, Rajasthan. Here, only women are hired as field labour to do the agricultural work. They sow the chilli seeds, pluck the ripening pods from the plants, dry them in the sun, and tie them in bundles. Then they take the bundles to market, get them weighed and sell them. The work of buying too is done by women alone. How is it that the entire operation from sowing to marketing is in the hands of hired women? Why are no men involved ?

“Their skin will burn”, the women say.

As if chillies cool the women’s skin !

But this work is available to women only for six months in the year. To provide the women with remunerative work for the rest of the year, the government women’s development programme ran a training course in carpet weaving.

But the programme was a complete flop. The women could neither stitch nor embroider because holding anything fine with the fingertips caused acute burning sensations.

These women also find sitting near a flame to cook unbearable. If any member of the family— husband or children— come in close physical contact with the women’s bodies, they too experience burning sensations. Since the unexposed parts of the body are more sensitive than the exposed parts, they tend to avoid physical intimacy.

(translated from Hindi from “Anasuya”)

When Marriage is a High Risk Enterprise

Madhu and Ruth report on the Rajrani-Abdul Aziz case



THIRTY eight years after we adopted a Constitution that promised to all citizens the right to nondiscrimination on the basis of religion, and committed our State to secular norms of functioning, a marriage between a Hindu and a Muslim can still provoke murder and mayhem. More often than not, the State machinery is either an indifferent spectator or an active collaborator.

For every one case like -the recent one of Rajrani and Abdul Aziz that manages to come to public attention, there are dozens that are suppressed in silence, with the lives of both parties needlessly blighted. Rajrani, aged about 26, and Abdul Aziz, aged 31, have known each other for over 12 years. Aziz was a close friend of Rajrani’s family and was accepted almost as a family member. Aziz is a

property dealer and Rajrani’s father a shopkeeper. Rajrani’s family are

Sanatanis. But, in 1980, some leaders of the local Arya Samaj, who were not otherwise known to Rajrani’s family, began pressurising them to break off relations between her and Aziz, and to turn him out of their house where he was staying as a tenant.

Upset by the hostility they had to face

from all and sundry, her family tried to prevent her from associating with Aziz. She had just

Rajrani and Abdul Aziz after their marriage passed out of school and was pre-vented from going to college although she wanted to study further. For the next seven years, she had to communicate with Aziz through letters hand delivered by a woman friend of hers. She occasionally managed to visit his parental home where she was welcome as his family had accepted her. When her family saw that she steadfastly refused to consider any alliance they proposed, and declared that she would marry none but Aziz, they grew less hostile to the relationship. On June 28, 1988, Rajrani married Aziz in a Delhi court. When we asked why they opted for a civil rather than a religious ceremony, she said; "Neither of us wanted to convert or to have the other converted."

After the wedding, Rajrani returned to her parents' home since Aziz was busy campaigning for the Lok Dal candidate in the Faridabad byelection. They had kept their marriage a secret but Aziz revealed it to a few close friends whom he had known for about 15 years, and who were also aware of his relationship with Rajrani. One of these friends was his business partner, Bir Singh. Aziz gave them a small party in a Faridabad hotel.

Bat, after he left for the election campaign, these friends went to Palwal and launched a campaign of intimidation of Rajrani's family. The campaign was spearheaded by the Arya Samaj. The same leaders who had visited the house in 1980 came again, with threats to kill her, her father and brothers, burn their shop, and turn them out of the town. False rumours were spread that Aziz used to pay off her family in order to associate with her. According to Rajrani, the main motive of Aziz's friends in turning against him was their desire to grab his property. She alleges that they already have about Rs 300,000 of his in their control which now he does not dare return to claim. Rajrani's description of subsequent events :

"There was a lot of tension in the house. The Arya Samaj leaders came and

questioned me. I said : 'I had a court marriage. What's wrong with that ?' They had brought hoodlums with them who surrounded the house at strategic points. Two days later, the leaders came again and said that I must agree to remarry. I refused, saying 'How can you break the law ?' They replied : 'The law is nothing to the Samaj. We will show how we can break it'. They collected a huge mob —over 2,000 men, at our house, shouting slogans. They were extremely abusive. They caught hold of my father, brothers, and uncle, hit them and threatened to kill them. Aziz's friends, Kalu, Bir Singh and Suresh were in the lead. They had kept Aziz in the dark about all this, advised him to keep away from

dangerous type so he chose him. When I tried to refuse, they threatened to kill my brothers on the spot. So the Samaj wedding ceremony was performed and recorded on video. Everything was done under compulsion. [broke the garland they put on me. The boy had no house, his mother is a maidservant and they are practically pavement dwellers. So he came to our house.

"The next day, the hoodlums turned up again, saying they would kill me because I had acted so resistant. My mother and aunt went to lodge a police complaint but the police refused to record it. Finally, they agreed to come to our house. As they entered, the hoodlums too came



Rajrani and Abdul Aziz after their marriage

Palwal and promised that they would conduct me safely to him. They told us that he had run away, deserting me. But I knew it was a lie.

"On the pretext of taking me to a safe place, the Samaj leaders took us elsewhere and produced five extremely unsuitable men as prospective husbands—a couple of them were pimps who traffic in women. The police—an SHO, a DSP—were present throughout and were helping them. There was one unemployed fellow. My father thought he, might be the , least

in with weapons. The SHO told them to leave, but they remained in the vicinity of the house. We were in great fear. Aziz's office was badly wrecked by the mob. One old mosque was attacked and a Muslim washerman's house was burnt. Muslims are in a very small minority in Palwal. There has never/ been any communal trouble before.

"The boy to whom I had been illegally married stayed in our house for five days or so. He kept making demands. My father gave him clothes a watch Rs 400. He did

not approach me, however. He told me not to worry, I was like his sister. The Samajis were angry with him for this, and kept inciting him to assert his rights as a husband.”

Rajrani, who was pregnant, was forcibly taken to a doctor to get an abortion performed but the doctor refused to do it when she protested. She was also forced to give a statement to a local magistrate, saying that her marriage to Aziz had been performed under duress.

It is alleged that the Arya Samaj was in league with the RSS and with certain factions of the Congress (I) and of the Lok Dal, all of whom seem to have acted in unison on this issue despite their political differences. It is noteworthy that the Arya Samaj too is factionalised. Some members were sympathetic to Aziz and Rajrani; one Mr Shastri, a Samaji, actively helped them and was a witness at their wedding.

During this period, Rajrani managed to smuggle out three letters to Aziz. With the help of his friends in the Lok Dal and the Janata party, Aziz filed a habeas corpus petition in the supreme court along with Pramila Dandavate of the Manila Dakshata Samiti. Rajrani was brought to the supreme court under police escort. The same day, her younger brother, aged about 19, was abducted by the hoodlums. The Samaj leaders who were present in court threatened that he would be killed if she repudiated her earlier forced statement against Aziz. However, she gave a true statement and, shortly after, under threat of arrest following prompt action by counsel Rani Jethmalani, his abductors released him. The court ordered that Rajrani be allowed to go wherever she desired, and that her family and Aziz's family be provided police protection.

A few days later, Rajrani's cousin was attacked and seriously injured and her brother was beaten up by the gang of hoodlums at 10.30 a.m. while he was in the shop. The police guards claim they had gone for "lunch" when this happened. The shop was badly wrecked. No one in the market came to her brother's help. He was stabbed in the stomach and had to have

20 stitches- Her uncle was attacked and got a serious head wound. Yet, the police have not lodged a report or taken any action.

The communalists, in collusion with the police, are thus wreaking violence of a deterrent kind with the aim of striking fear into the heart of anyone who might contemplate such a marriage. Rajrani and Aziz are compelled to live in hiding in Delhi and dare not visit Palwal, while their attackers who have committed a series of illegal acts, roam free and continue their terror tactics unchecked.

Rajrani and Aziz have managed to stay together not because of any protection conferred by the civil marriage, but because Aziz happened to be working for the candidate of the Lok Dal which is in power in Haryana, and consequently got the support of some sections of the Lok Dal, their allies in the Janata Party, and through them access to the supreme court and to the national media. The support of both families was also of crucial importance.

Lacking such external support, they would not have found any mechanism of protection in the state apparatus. Many couples find a civil marriage of little more value than the piece of paper certifying it.

The supposedly secular apparatus of the state generally crumbles before the onslaught of communal organisations and is often in collusion with them. In Delhi, for instance, a Vishwa Hindu Parishad office bearer confirmed that the Hindu Mahasabha has appointed one of its members to daily inspect

the notice of forthcoming marriages under the Special Marriage Act, which are put up in the court at Tis Hazari, a month in advance of the intended marriage, as required by law. The Mahasabha member notes down the names and addresses of parties proposing to have an intercommunity marriage, particularly Hindu-Muslim marriages. The organisation then attempts to pressure the parties into abandoning the idea of marriage, and if the couple is already married, may go as far as forcing the Hindu

to illegally enter a second marriage with another Hindu. It is well known that this form of organised blackmailing takes place in many parts of the country today, and that the court notices of marriage provide a major source of information to the blackmailers.

The Special Marriage Act, 1956, was framed as a secular marriage law, and one of its purposes was to enable persons of different religions to marry without changing their respective religions. This purpose is being defeated by political communal organisations who drive people to resort to religious marriages since these can be performed in relative secrecy. But a religious marriage entails the conversion of one partner. Yet, the government has not considered amending the law to protect the privacy of couples by scrapping the provision for posting of notices in court. In fact, this practice derives from the English practice of calling the banns, or announcing a forthcoming marriage on three successive Sundays, in church. In the days when the church served as a sort of community centre for local people, a deserted spouse had a good chance of being informed of his or her partner's impending bigamous remarriage. The transfer of this practice to the framework of civil marriage does not serve this purpose, as the court is not a place routinely visited by most people.

The supposed purpose of putting up a notice of a marriage a month in advance is to enable any living spouse of either party to object to his or her remarriage. But this purpose is rarely served. Men enter into bigamous marriages far more frequently than do women, but first wives are almost never able to keep a watch on notices in different courts or to prevent their husbands' bigamous remarriage even when they know it is impending.

Thus, the really illegal marriages which cause hardship to others (the first wife and her children) continue to be performed with ease while marriages which should affect no one but the two persons and their families, are being used as pretexts for communal violence and political vindictiveness. □