



Readers' Forum

Meeting My Eastern Sisters

A personal account of a participant in the Sixth National Women's Movement's Meeting in Ranchi, Bihar.

The journey from Ranjole to Ranchi was a long and a difficult one. We had to change trains twice and then continue on in several buses, followed by a final journey in an autorickshaw. Fatima Bi and Sangamma, both agricultural workers, members of our DWACRA Women's group in Ranjole, joined me in attending this meet. They were very excited as they have hardly ever had an opportunity to visit a place away from their village. It was fun for them - and I was also excited because I was taking them with me, exposing them to a different culture of women interacting with women.

As we approached Orissa and Bihar we could already observe the increasing poverty in the surroundings. There were no concrete huts and no lush green fields as on the Andhra side. Along the way we were once delayed as the train was stopped by Rashtriya Janata Dal workers to advertise a non-existent railway station shop at Govindpur Road. Some tribal women were being misused for this purpose — they were made to dance on the railway line dressed in ethnic costume. As some of us protested we were made to keep from interfering because goondas rule the roost there. They have a reputation for shooting at you if you do not follow their commands.

When we reached the meeting site in the afternoon at the conference premises of Ranchi University we were all the more frustrated to find that we had to be content with sleeping on the floor on rice husks or in dingy campus rooms with no water or sanitation facilities.

We had to sleep in the unwashed clothes we were still wearing without a change after a 3 day journey. Next morning we were told by some Christian sisters that they had only been able to get the area cleaned four days before the meeting, that the toilets were still being constructed and an easily accessible source of drinking and washing water was not quite ready. They told us the meeting's organisers had turned down their offer to house the participants at their Church campus nearby that has better facilities. We also learned that the Ranchi University employees would not do their job of cleaning the campus unless heavily and constantly bribed. A local coordinating committee member informed us that the four academic members of the team that prepared for the meeting were all over-worked and ill.

The National Coordinating committee members arrived late and then overruled the decisions of the locals by, for example, using buildings far away from the main premises to board some of the participants and not keeping us all together at one place. Buses had to be used to ply between the two locations. One of the National Coor-

dinating organisations commented that they had never wanted to coordinate or organise the meeting, the task was thrust upon them.

I had to ask myself what was the use of all these National and local coordinating bodies if they were not even able to arrange modest living arrangements for the brief duration of the stay of the participants? We had paid registration fees. If they could not manage the job themselves why weren't the participants informed so that they could arrange for their own boarding and lodging, at least those who had written to the organisers? Why were some of the participants put up at hotels outside the campus? Why did some urban feminists opt out at the last moment? Is it because they were expecting and did not want to go through the inconveniences caused by bad management and poor conditions in Ranchi?

I let Fatima and Sangamma relax and talk to other village women around, of whom there were plenty present, and went out to the main building to find out what was going on. I found myself attending the State Repression on Women group discussions. Though it was a chaotic scene - subgroups talking loudly at the same time under one roof in a big hall - I was able to hear the Manipur women who spoke at length about the way the Indian military and the police are harassing their women and men. These women have taken charge of protests in Manipur, since many of their men have been tortured

brutally. Some have been killed by the Central forces. They told us that now they themselves are being shot at, some of them had been murdered, some raped, others were the target of brutal attacks. They asked us to show solidarity for their cause.

A Telangana journalist told us about police cruelties to Telangana women. A woman agricultural labourer said that while she was going back to her hut to feed her child, she was stopped by the Andhra Police and her breasts were pressed by them to see if she was telling the truth that she was breast-feeding an infant. We were told that a young girl of 16 years was being kept in custody to find out if she had contacts to Naxalites and she and her parents were being tortured.

An adivasi woman from Madhya Pradesh also narrated her experience of torture by forest officials.

This was the end of the first day for me. Fatima and Sangamma told me that the other village women next to them were asking them for clothes and food. They had no money to buy the food coupons. I gave them mine as I could not eat the food offered.

Next morning I had to waste half a day at the railway station to get my tickets preponed, as all three of us decided to leave as soon as the conference finished, though earlier we had thought of visiting places nearby.

The rest of the second day I attended sessions on Dalit Women, Tibetan Women and on the Mental and Emotional Health of Women.

The Tibetan women talked at length of the brutalities of the Chinese government towards them. They reported they are not only being molested physically, but the Chinese are carrying out a regular genocide of Tibetans. They told us, the Tibetan women, are being made to abort their pregnancies if they are not carrying a child from relationship with a Chinese man. The Tibetan women are very well

organised in groups all over India and they were also asking for support on various levels.

The Mental and Emotional Health Group women came out expressing their anger, fear, and frustrations. We participated by performing a role play. Shirali, from this group, made me dance and sing when I said that we women should also consciously preserve our positive energies to sustain ourselves. Later some of those that attended, who said earlier that they could not dance, were seen dancing away at the cultural programme in the evenings. Lots of cultural performances were held during the evenings at a big stage reserved for that purpose. Sisters from the North East were very colourful and prominent in these events.

The displays in the book stalls were very well presented. I was so happy to have been able to buy books written in Hindi by women on women's issues.

Next morning we were all looking forward to listening to the plenary sessions organised in different major languages, but before this could happen we received the bad news that one of the photo journalists, a woman, was molested by the local police while she was trying to talk to some women in a big mental hospital near the confer-

ence premises. She was told that she had not asked for permission to visit the hospital. But does that mean that the police can physically molest a woman, snatch her camera and tear her blouse? We all came out on the streets shouting slogans against the Ranchi Police and the oppressive character of the state of Bihar.

We were adamant on having the Superintendent of Police come to our gathering and declare openly that he would punish and suspend the culprit policemen. Unfortunately we had to leave before this issue was resolved as our train was departing very soon. Though we left the conference in an uneasy mood, we were sure that our Ranchi sisters would do their best to make our point clear to the Police.

I asked Fatima and Sangamma on my way back what was their impression about the conference. They said they did not understand much of what was happening. They said it was all in English (though that was not actually the case) and that there was lots of singing and dancing. However, I noticed that they were so involved in the protest march on the last day that I had to pull them out to be able to take the train back home...

Asha Kachru, Ranjole, A.P. □

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