



Towards A Day When There Will Be No Servants

Domestic Servants Of Nagpur Organize

EVERYONE recognizes that the plight of domestic servants is particularly bad. Each of them is employed by several people at the same time. Most of them are dependent on employers not merely for wages but also for a few favours like loans, old clothes, stale food. The work they do is backbreaking. Their hands and feet become sore and cracked due to continuous work in water, using strong abrasive powders and soaps. Domestic servants, all over the country, are usually women.

Washing clothes, scrubbing utensils, cleaning the house, are the tedious, unskilled but regular chores which fall to the lot of women in India. These are the tasks performed by domestic servants in middle class and upper class homes in the towns and cities. This lessens the work for women in these homes. It gives women of these classes the opportunity for other activities or at least for relaxation in the house.

Various attempts have been made to organize domestic servants in different cities. One such attempt has been undertaken by us in Nagpur over the last few months. At the beginning of December 1981, several domestic servants working in Rahate colony, Dhantoli area in the western end of Nagpur, got together and approached one of us to do something for a wage hike. Several meetings later, an organization called Molkari Sangathana was formed and a letter addressed to

employers was drafted, demanding a flat wage hike of Rs 5 per month. A monthly membership fee of 55 paise a month was collected and the letter was approved for printing. Almost a 100 women and girls, and two men, were present at the meeting to take these decisions.

The letters created a turmoil among the employers. While some immediately raised wages, most refused. Housewives threatened to sack their servants if they insisted on the demand. They threatened to do the work themselves if no one was allowed to work for them. One woman asked her employer, a prosperous lawyer, to write on the letter that he was too poor to afford the increase of Rs 5 in her wage. He sacked her.

Meetings were held in the bastis where these women lived, so that more of them could join. A majority of the women were Chattisgarhi and Gond, some were Kunbi, Govari and other Maharashtrian castes but interestingly, there were hardly any scheduled caste women because they are not acceptable for such work in this city, where Brahminical ideology dominates the middle class. Therefore, most scheduled caste women work on road construction or are vendors of vegetables and fruits. Women contacted their relatives in their bastis and in other bastis and thus helped the organization to spread. Most of them had no organizational experience, were divided on community and caste basis, and therefore kept feeling that there was

no unity in their bastis. They feared that if they insisted on their demands, others would take up their work for less pay.

Yet they unanimously agreed to a two day strike starting on Makkar Sankranti day, January 14.

This is an important festival in Maharashtra, not merely as a kite flying day but also as the day tilgur is distributed among relatives and friends to symbolize the hope of good relations in the year to come. The strike and morcha was a major success in West Nagpur. Almost 500 women with children joined the morcha on January 14, as it wound its way through the lanes and by-lanes of the localities in which they worked. The next day, a morcha of about 125 women covered other localities where they worked, pulling out women who had broken the strike and gone to work, and forcing them to join the morcha.

From early in the morning (in Takiya from 5 am.) some of the more active women and girls stood at the exits of their slum, preventing women from going to work and asking them to join the morcha. The initiative shown by the women, their enthusiasm for the strike, their hatred and contempt for the pettiness of their employers surged out in conversation and in the slogans they spontaneously coined during the morcha, such as "*Gali gali mein shor hai, Banglewale chor hain*" ("The streets are resounding with the cry, these people who live in

bungalows are thieves). Later reports revealed that this slogan annoyed employers more than anything else. The morcha was literally a festival. Every woman wanted the procession to go past the houses of her particularly oppressive, miserly employers, and so on the first day the morcha lasted five hours.

After the two day strike many women got promises of an increase in their salary. A few employers tried to sack their servants but in most cases, active women on their own initiative went and talked to the employers, and persuaded them to keep the women on and to increase wages.

Meeting again after the strike, women were in high spirits. Most of them expressed the feeling that they were experiencing a new life, they had got dignity and a purpose. For once they were acting for themselves, and in spite of their fears, they had stood united. Most of them, though married and having children, did not face serious opposition to their participation from their families. In fact, some men had expressed the need for organization and lamented the lack of knowledge among the women. A few young men in two bastis actually became regular organizers for the Sangathana. Opposition, though not very actively and openly, came from the representatives of the ruling political party in the slums, especially among the Gonds. Employers too, tried to split unity along caste and economic lines, trying to persuade their servants that the organization was set up to cheat them of their money. This opposition in the main did not succeed.

Yet there were signs of weakness. Loyalty of the servants to their employers which is more than the employers' loyalty to them, made many of them hesitate before joining the strike. Some of those whose wages were raised no longer felt the need for unity. Caste, communal and personal prejudices run deep among them. Also, the women were only able to go sporadically from area to area to organize so that, as a regular task, fell on us and on the young men from the bastis. But in spite of all this, the fact that domestic servants could unite, plan and organize for almost two months,

in spite of their lack of knowledge of organization and in spite of the kind of work they do, was certainly a major step forward, the effects of which are visible in their newly acquired confidence and pride.

The compulsions of living, the terrible inflation have made them desperate. Some of the young women working as domestic servants have passed SSC. After working almost eight hours in an average of four houses every day, a woman usually gets less than Rs 75 a month, which is far less than the minimum wage prescribed by government. Most



of them get between Rs 15 and 20 per house per month. They have seen no rise in their wages for at least two years. They now experience a slide in their real earnings, and desperately need to retain their old living standard. They also want a better future for their children. Therefore, even this minimal hike of Rs 5 means a lot to them.

Some well-wishers suggested that it is necessary to systematize work load and wage, calculating the amount of time spent in each employer's house and/or the number of people in each household, and to plan for replacement during leave. They felt the demand for a flat hike in wage was wrong. But in our society, where some employers earn more than Rs 3,000 and others only Rs 500, where

workload is dependent not merely on the number of people in the house but also on the style of living, these suggestions seem difficult to translate into concrete demands.

What is surprising is that many progressive people made suggestions which only sought to institutionalize this sort of personal labour, this system of personal servants. Housework should be something which people do for themselves, something which men, women and children share. Domestic servants are used to avoid changing the existing division of labour based on sex.

We hope there will be a day when there will be no domestic servants, and these workers will be more productively employed.

It is easier for middle class and upper class women in India to lead a comfortable life at home or even to pursue a career because domestic servants are so cheaply available.

We can retain our Brahminical contempt for tedious manual work and yet talk of liberation. Today, it is necessary for women who support their families by working in other people's houses, to organize themselves. Their own liberation lies in an awakening political consciousness. Yet a time must come when there is an end to domestic labour. □