

Some Reports Sent To Us

MAHARASHTRA Women Threatened with Unemployment

1,600 working women are threatened with unemployment in the Musa factory today. These women are part of the 4,000 strong work force of bidi worker women in Sangli and Miraj districts. The Lal Jhanda Bidi Mazdoor Union has been working for the last 10 years to organize these women to fight for their rights. After a long struggle, women in the Musa factory had finally won some rights.

But in April 1982, the Musa factory owner has given notice of an impending lockout. This is a way of evading the recently implemented minimum wage, bonus, gratuity and provident fund regulations. The workers are paid Rs 8 for making 1,000 bidis and are now demanding Rs 12. The factory owner says that he will not declare a lockout if the workers agree to accept any wage he offers them.

Bidi factory owners make very large profits. Last year, Babalal Rajubhai closed a factory, throwing 300 women out of employment. He then opened another factory in which workers are not paid minimum wage or given any security of service. In this way, factory owners take advantage of the workers' helplessness in face of growing unemployment and rising prices.

The Musa factory owner spends Rs 16.13 on 1,000 bidis. This includes the price of tobacco and *pan*, wage of Rs 8 to the worker, and excise duty. 1,000 bidis are sold for Rs 27, thus the owner makes a profit of Rs 2,240 every day from the

labour of 1,600 workers. So the profit for 26 days is Rs 38,240. This amounts to an annual profit of Rs 4,580,880. Yet he insists that he has to close this factory because it is unprofitable.

However, the 1,600 women workers are determined to struggle against this conspiracy to throw them out of employment, and make fatter profits by perpetuating inhuman conditions of work. Today, the women workers are ready to go to prison if necessary, but determined not to let the factory owner get away with his game.

—K.L. Malabade (translated from Marathi)

MADRAS Women's Rally

On February 5, 1982, Pennurimai lyakkam organized a procession in support of a charter of demands. The procession started at 10 am. from the Anna flyover and marched towards the fort and the secretariat, along Anna Salai. Girija, the president of Pennurimai lyakkam, headed the procession. More than 500 women participated in this procession. There were women from several city slums, homemakers, women construction workers, students, teachers, office worker. Before the procession began, several magazines which portray women in an obscene and degrading manner, were burnt. As magazines such as Maya, Mokkuthi, Chavi, Kumkumam, Kumutham, Rani, Kamam, Kalki, Anandavikatan were being burnt, the gathering shouted slogans calling for the destruction of all



—Kotko Kollwitz

ideas and notions which are responsible for the abuse and enslavement of women.

While the procession was underway, many women defaced obscene hoardings by throwing cowdung, water, rotten eggs and tar on them. In order to depict the suffering of women subjected to the drastic rise in prices and the inequities in the rationing system, several women carried kerosene cans and ladles, and some wore garlands made of dried vegetables. Many of the women carried placards with demands for the following measures to be implemented: immediate provision of ration cards to all, particularly the poor in the city slums; an end to destruction and eviction of slums; bringing down of prices of essential commodities; provision of basic amenities in all slums; provision of electric lamps in all slum tenements; cancellation of rise in rent for all slum tenements; provision of all essential facilities in maternity hospitals; an end to all forms of police harassment and police atrocities against women.

The procession was stopped near Napier bridge, in view of the prohibitory order in force in the city. The chief

minister was away, so some representatives met the deputy secretary Pichani, and presented the memorandum. He promised to take immediate action and fulfil the genuine demands of the organization.

—Girija, *Pennurimai lyakkam*

GUJARAT

Tribal Women Workers Revolt

On December 16, 1981, the women labourers of Ukai thermal power station, Surat, decided to go on strike to protest against the exploitation to which they were subjected. The women were hired to work at the Gujarat electricity board, a semi-government organization, by contractors whose policy it is to extract the maximum work for minimum wages. The labourers are also forced to put in extra hours of work for inadequate payment.

Though some of the women had worked for as long as eight years, no register was maintained and no one was

About 800 women, under the leadership of Sumitra, joined the Surat women workers' union, went on strike and gathered in large numbers at the work site. Both the contractors and the general electricity board turned a deaf ear to them. They refused to talk to union workers. The labourers sought help from various unions like SEWA and the Hind Mazdoor Sabha. Petitions were sent to the assistant labour commissioner at Surat. An enquiry was instituted and an inspection ordered.

Prosecution under the contract labour act and minimum wages act was launched against the contractors. A labour worker, P. Chidambaram, filed a writ petition in the high court. A one-man commission was appointed on December 12. A settlement has now been reached. Around January 1, about 800 women workers and some male labourers were reemployed. They now receive as wages Rs 8.40 instead of the earlier Rs 4 a day. The agitation succeeded because

against the criminals they are still moving about freely in the village. The police inspector, SP and DSP have been bribed into silence.

Kalavati was an agricultural labourer in Mandai village, district Vaishali. She had studied upto class eight. The son of a former village *mukhia*, a yadav by caste, used to harass her. One day, he had her husband badly beaten up, and a few days later, when she went to the forest to collect wood, she was gang raped and killed and her body was dumped in the river. A fisherman who witnessed the murder, was also bribed into silence.

One keeps hearing of such incidents of women being done to death. In Karharya village, district Vaishali, a woman was branded with a hot iron till she died. Many women are tortured and killed by husbands and in-laws for bringing inadequate dowry and tilak. All this has created an atmosphere of terror amongst women. When I went to Mandai to get information about Kalavati, the women were afraid to speak, and it was only after much reassurance that they would even tell me the sequence of events.

—Nadira
(translated from Hindi)



Some of the Striking Women With Sumitra (centre)

made permanent. They were paid less than the government ordained minimum wage, so the question of asking for bonus and provident fund did not arise. They did not have the basic facilities such as weekly leave. They were given no guarantee of continuity of work. To add insult to injury, they were beaten and tortured.

of their unity and strength in organizing themselves.

—Amina Amin

BIHAR

How Kalavati Was Killed

Kalavati, a harijan girl, was gang raped and killed on October 7, 1981. Though a warrant has been issued

SANGLI

International Women's Day Celebrations

Sangli, a district town in the centre of Maharashtra's sugarcane belt, experienced its biggest and most enthusiastic women's day celebrations this year on Sunday, March 7. 400 women—bidi workers, agricultural labourers, office employees, students—gathered for a five-hour sharing of songs and experiences.

Miraculously, "leaders" spoke for only 10 minutes each, while working women and students came forward to tell of their trials and achievements. Bidi workers told of their ongoing struggles to survive, while an agricultural labourer team leader aroused an enthusiastic round of applause as she described how she had grabbed a stalk of sugarcane and beaten a rich farmer when his insults and sexual harassment of young girls in

her team became unbearable.

The following day, on March 8, 600 women mobilized for a rally and presentation of demands including water and toilet facilities, nurseries and creches, equal wages with men for equal work done, and "world peace."

—*Gail Omvedt*

BOMBAY

Quite a number of activities took place in Bombay in connection with International Women's Day. Nari Sangharsh Samiti and Jagruti Kala Pathak jointly organized a cultural programme focusing on the oppression of women in our society and holding out the hope that collective struggle will change the status quo.

As March 8 was a Monday, we decided to hold the programme on March 6. We had made posters announcing it, which we stuck all over Bombay. I found a surprising number of people, especially illiterate women, looking at the posters. Quite a number were unable to read the poster, and it was highly irritating to see some men reading it out with a patronizing air, to the women who were with them. We had decided to call the programme "We will smash this prison" and that was what the posters said in Hindi. When we were sticking posters along the roadside, only men crowded around and asked questions. Nobody could understand that "prison" referred to the home, though the picture showed the traditional representation of home with a sloping roof. "Which prison are you planning to smash?" was the most frequently asked question.

The programme consisted of a one-act play by Shanta Gokhale, a symbolic representation of labour, and a dance-drama with a lot of songs. The play was about a typical upper middle class family—a woman, her husband, son and mother-in-law. The husband is seemingly liberal, "allowing" his wife to work, but vociferously regretting his decision when she refuses to resign her job and accompany him at the time of his transfer. Even the woman's mother-in-law, whose desire to sing had been thwarted by her husband who held that respectable women do not sing or dance, is unable to approve of or support her decision.

In the labour representation, the invisible work of women in the home was shown as the bottom-most layer of a pyramid which has the factory worker as the more privileged layer and the capitalist as the most privileged top layer. Though all women put in a lot of work at home, this work is not given due importance because they are not "gainfully employed", and they are considered consumers only, not producers. Vibhuti Patel composed the verses which clearly brought out this anomaly.

The dance-drama was woven around folk songs in various regional languages. It depicted the life of a woman from birth through puberty to unhappy marriage and her final awakening to the need for collective struggle.

A week later, some of the participants met to analyse the programme and discuss ways of improving it. Quite a number of women remarked that the audience thought it was too propagandist, or, to put it more subtly, there was too much of the same message. Also, that instead of showing only the oppression, some positive things done by women could have been shown too—in other words, an attempt to portray herstory. Lastly, the clumsiness of having a woman act out the part of a male character could have been avoided. There was no agreement on this last point.

—*K. Jayanthi*

DELHI

On Sunday, March 7, some women got together and organized a women's fete in Sarojini Nagar community hall. There was a poster exhibition, a display of literature and artwork on women's issues, and an exhibition on the female reproductive system. Activities included: songs, self-defence demonstration, quiz, raffle and dance. About 80 women attended.

BANGALORE

Vimochana organized a festival of films on women and a seminar on the theme "Women in Struggle." We enacted a street play at 12 different unorganized labour settlements. The women who live

here are mainly migrant labourers working as construction workers and domestic servants. The play focused on the double oppression of women as workers and as women.

Women artists came together for a common display of their work, in a conscious effort to break out of the tradition which has marginalized women artists and forced them to work in isolation.

A handbill, a postcard and a brochure were issued on the occasion of March 8. We hope the programme, which brought many women together, will provide an impetus for reflection and action on the many dimensions of women's experience.

—*Vimochana*

UDAIPUR

On March 9, 1981 some women came together to support a woman who had been tortured for dowry (See **Manushi** No. 8). These women formed an organization called Mahila Samiti.

This year on March 8, the Samiti organized a meeting in which 200 women and 15 men participated. There was a small exhibition which tried to acquaint women with the various facilities and programmes available to them in the city. The meeting was addressed by Parvati Wadhavan, Usha Bhatnagar and Anita Mathur. The aims of the organization are to stabilize family life, to free women from exploitation within the family, to spread awareness of women's condition, and to fight against price-rise and poverty. The main emphasis was on the point that men are also helpers in the women's movement so men desirous of working for women's development can join the organization. It was decided to keep the organization non-aligned with any political party, to organize a meeting once a month, and to keep contact with as many women's organizations as possible.

—*Anita Mathur*
(translated from Hindi)

BIHAR

The Bihar Pradesh Chhatra Yuva Sangharsh Vahini, a non-party youth organization founded by Jayaprakash Narayan and committed to the ideal of

peaceful total revolution, organized its three-day state-level conference from February 7 to 10 at Mehsi in Champaran district. The conference formulated several programmes for the year. It was decided to organize the following programmes on International Women's Day : burning of obscene literature and blackening of advertisements which portray women in a vulgar manner. In accordance with this decision, a handbill was released and programmes were organized.

In Patna, the programme was spread over a period of five days. On March 4, a small portable exhibition portraying the present condition of women in society, was shown at J.D. women's college, and Gangadevi women's college. Street

corner meetings were also arranged near both colleges.

On March 5, an advertisement hoarding for Regent cigarettes, in front of Maurya hotel, another for Afghan Snow, in front of Ashoka hotel, and two for Bajaj radio, near two cinemas, were tarred with black paint, because they featured semi-nude women. On March 8, a conference was organized at Shaheed Bhagat Singh Colony, Kankerbagh. About 75 women from the slum participated in the conference, which was presided over by Ms Jugni Devi, a resident of the area.

According to reports received in Patna, programmes such as corner meetings, processions, seminars and demonstrations against rape and cabaret

shows, and in support of intercaste marriages, were organized in Gaya, Madhubani, Sitamarhi, Bhagalpur and Barauni.

—*Kanwaljeet, Patna*

DELHI

A Brutal Murder

On March 18, newspapers reported that the body of a young woman had been found in a holdall at New Delhi railway station. The body was highly decomposed and had a rope round its neck, suggesting death by strangulation. Ten days later, the woman was identified as Rama Maheshwari of Saharanpur. Investigations revealed that when persistent demands for more dowry were not met, Rama's husband, father-in-law, brother-in-law and sister-in-law conspired to murder her and dispose off the body. The in-laws had allegedly planned a second marriage for Rama's husband, Ashok Kumar. They concocted a story that Rama had run away with costly ornaments, but the police have discovered these ornaments in the in-laws house.

On April 3, a large group of people from the teaching profession, members of women's organizations and relatives of Rama demonstrated at the Tis Hazari courts where the accused were produced. The Nari Sangharsh Samiti, a new organization which seems to have sprung up with this case, in cooperation with Rama's family, has been continuing the agitation both in Delhi and in Saharanpur.

Setting A Precedent

Women working in the hotel industry are often expected to act as hostesses to the customers. This includes taking the men out sight-seeing or shopping, after work hours. Such a work situation makes these women even more vulnerable to charges of immorality which are in any case frequently thrown at women who are in paid employment.

Chandra Kanjilal is a woman who refused to be silenced by such charges. For two years now, she has been fighting the management of Maurya Sheraton, Delhi, who terminated her services on



Patna Students Defacing Obscene Hoardings

the charge of “gross misconduct.” In October 1979, Chandra began working as lobby manager at Maurya, which is a five star hotel belonging to the Welcom group. She had prior experience of working in another five star hotel, apart from other responsible jobs that she has handled at different times in her working life. However, during her six month probationary period at the Maurya, she had differences of opinion with her immediate boss who asked her out to dinner, and when she refused, began to subtly harass her. When the probation period ended, she was informed that her performance was unsatisfactory so she was being transferred to another department in the same hotel. Since Chandra had never been given any prior indication that her work was unsatisfactory, she questioned the decision to extend her probation, especially as she was being given a more responsible position, but on the same salary. She was told that a final decision would be taken within a week.

The next morning, Chandra was approached by an American guest who is one of the prestigious and regular customers of Maurya hotel. He asked her to go out with him to a cocktail party the next evening. She refused, saying she was on duty. The next day, he calmly informed her that he had “arranged” it so that someone would take over her duty and she could go out. Chandra was not happy at this manipulation, but after persuasion from her boss, she finally agreed to go. They and some other guests went out together and returned to the hotel for coffee. The following night, the same group went out again for dinner.

Two days later, Chandra was told by two management executives, Mr Rehman and Mr Vickers, that her services were being terminated as she had been guilty of “unusual comings and goings.” They accused her of spending two consecutive nights with the American guest in his suite, and leaving the hotel at 5.30 am. both times. They said they had 101 witnesses to prove this, and called her a “cheap and undesirable woman.”

They also insinuated that it would

be better for her if she resigned as they would then give her three months’ salary. Chandra explains: “Just because my personal circumstances at the time were that I was a woman with the stigma of being separated from my husband, these men tried to use that against me.” She refused to resign, and wrote to the management saying: “I would consider it proper and just to myself and to all the other women at Maurya who have been demoralized by my case, that an open enquiry is held and I am returned to my post as lobby executive.” They



Chandra Kanjilal

responded by banning her entry into the hotel, on the ground that she was an “undesirable character.” They said that as she was a woman of “easy virtue” she should be grateful for the three months’ salary being offered to her.

When these tactics failed to work, and Chandra continued to insist on an open enquiry, the management ordered her transfer to another hotel of the Welcom group in Patna. They gave her just six days’ notice to join duty there. Again, she refused to be intimidated and declined to go since this would have been tantamount to admitting guilt. By now, she felt it was more than a personal issue: “Today I am determined to see this through to the bitter end. I am not afraid of any scandal, as the whole episode has already been made into one. It is time it came out into the open how men at the top abuse and misuse their position, especially towards divorced, separated and widowed women who are working for their livelihood.”

On January 9, 1981, she filed a

criminal suit for defamation of character against Habib Rehman, Walter Vickers and Harish Jha, three top executives who had been systematically trying to manoeuvre her out of her job on the basis of the charges they had concocted against her. As soon as she filed this case, she was fired from her job in Siddhartha Hotel, another Welcom group concern where she had finally agreed to transfer, on advice from her lawyer. Vickers, a Britisher, has since left India and so cannot be prosecuted. Rehman and Jha were finally summoned in December 1981 but they failed to turn up in court. It was not till March 22, 1981, that a warrant was issued for the arrest of Rehman for avoiding the summons.

Today, Chandra is determined to fight this case even up to the supreme court if necessary — not just to clear her name, get back her job and be economically independent, but, more importantly, to make this a test case, a precedent for other women who are similarly harassed and pushed out of their jobs on cooked-up charges. She has gone ahead with this case despite discouragement from most people, who told her that she would have to face further humiliation in court by the defence trying to prove her a woman of “easy virtue.” In refusing to be cowed down by this possibility, in daring to challenge a notoriously sexist industry, and publicly expose their manipulations, Chandra has taken a very brave step. Whether she wins or loses in court, her action will inspire other women also to fight such harassment at work.

—Shakti

ERRATA

In our article on Amrita Pritam in Manushi No. 10, on page 6, we wrongly mentioned the name of her husband as “Sardar Gurbaksh Singh, businessman and editor of the Punjabi magazine *Preetlari*.” We deeply regret the error.

In the review of Leela Gulati’s book “Profiles In Female Poverty”, we forgot to mention the name of the publisher. The book was published in 1981 by Hindustan Publishing Corporation, Delhi —110007. The book costs Rs 35. We regret the omission.