



“Zameen Kenkar? Jote Onkar!”

The Story Of Women’s Participation In The Bodhgaya Struggle

*This is a translation from Hindi of an account by Manimala of the struggle of the landless Bodhgaya. This account, as it appears here, has been synthesized from a report that Manimala prepared for **Manushi**, and from excerpts from a series of extensive recorded interviews with her conducted by Madhu Kishwar. Manimala was an active member of Chhatra Yuva Sangharsh Vahini from its inception. She resigned from the organization in 1981, though she continues to be associated with many of its activities. Even though she was not one of the few Vahini women who went and lived in Bodhgaya and were involved in the daily struggle, Manimala kept constant contact with the struggle and spent a great deal of time there working as an activist. In addition, as someone who did a great deal of reporting and writing on behalf of the organization, she very close contact with every phase of the struggle. She also played an important role in the ideological debates within Sangharsh Vahini.*

Manimala does not attempt to be a neutral observer. This is the story as it would be told to concerned listeners by one of the participants in the events as she experienced, perceived and analysed them. She does not claim to be a spokesperson for the movement, since some others were even more intimately involved with the everyday aspects of the struggle than she was. This is one of the versions of what happened as it seems an important version.

THE year 1974 saw the emergence of people’s movements in different parts of the country against rising prices, miseducation, unemployment and corruption. Young people who stood outside any party affiliation participated in these movements in a massive way. In the course of this struggle, Jayaprakash Narayan felt the need for a youth organization which would keep away from the politics of power and devote itself to the struggle for a “total revolution”, an organization that would struggle for a complete change in the system. Chhatra Yuva Sangharsh Vahini was born in January 1975. Membership in the organization was restricted to people under 30 years of age. From 1975 to 1977 it devoted itself to working for the movement’s programme and helping build public opinion against the autocratic tendencies of the ruling Congress party. These principles were accepted by Vahini activists as the basis of their political understanding: 1. Sangharsh Vahini activists will not contest elections. 2. Vahini will work for total revolution by peaceful methods. 3. Vahini activists will live among the landless people of Bodhgaya, will adopt their ways of life, eat the same food as they do, and live as members of their

families.

Searching For A Direction

After the 1977 elections, in which the Congress party was defeated, the Sangharsh Vahini had to decide its long term strategy for total revolution. In the beginning, most of the young people who came into the organization were not dogmatically committed to any particular political doctrine or ideology. Having liberated themselves from the old quarrels and contradictions between different isms, they sought a better way of analysing the present social system to help them decide on a more effective strategy for the political struggle. On January 17 and 18, 1978, a meeting of the Bihar state committee of the Vahini was organized in Patna city. The meeting was attended by 48 men and two women. Even though two out of 50 is a very small number, it was a significant development. Prior to this, even though women in large numbers had been participating in people’s struggles, they never played any part in policy making. It would not be an exaggeration to say that this was the beginning of the search to find ways to make it possible for women to play an active decision making role in the people’s struggles of this decade in

Bihar. A special feature of the Vahini has been the effective participation of women at every level, even though there were never as many women as men in the Vahini’s decision making bodies.

The main focus of discussion at the Patna meeting was to decide the basic issues of struggle, to identify crucial areas in which the movement must concentrate its activity and to chalk out a strategy for action. We agreed between us that only those issues would be considered basic which had the potential to shake the social system roots. Hence the struggle for land was identified as the main issue for the current action programme. The perspective adopted was that those whose labour productively on the land should have rights over it.

There was also much debate over the last issue we discussed. Even though we all agreed that the focus of our thinking and would be on the most oppressed (*antim jan*, the last person), our definition of the most oppressed remained unclear. It was agreed that in our attempt to create a new nucleus for the new organization, we would identify the most oppressed as those who labour but at the same time do not exploit the labour of any other individual or class.

According to this thinking, we came to see the landless labourers as the focus of our organization.

This initial discussion gave our actions a certain direction. However, even at this stage some important issues got left out. For example, in the definition of the most oppressed, it was easy to see clearly that we must include those who labour themselves, but it was not as clear how it would be possible to exclude all those who exploit the labour of others. Labour has many forms and so has its exploitation. One kind of productive labour, that performed by both women and men in the fields, is subject to exploitation by the owners of the land. Then there is the labour performed by half of the population—household labour, which is considered unproductive. Women perform this labour and men, even men who labour on the fields of the landlord, exploit this labour of the women. The organization was not sensitive enough to be able to acknowledge the significance of both types of exploitation. During our discussion, we stuck to a very worn out and conventional definition of labour, within which household labour has been given neither any economic nor any social value. We concluded that it was enough to begin with a broad consensus that the focus of our organization would be the landless poor and their struggle for their rights over the land. The issue of women's exploitation was passed over. Since, in creating the organization and deciding on the main issues, we

overlooked the specific nature of the exploitation of women, it was inevitable that both the organization and the struggle came to be dominated by men.

However, it was recognized that in present day society women are doubly exploited, that they are treated as second class citizens, and that they will have to struggle to win their basic human rights. In this struggle, the people's movement will need to lend them support. We thought that we could begin the fight with the struggle for land, and then the fight against the many other inequalities in the social, cultural, political and educational realms would ultimately get linked up with the struggle for land rights, leading to a movement for total change. However there was no clarity about how the different forms of inequality involving exploitation were related to one another. Therefore, without any analysis that unified and organized the issues more systematically, the struggle for land became not just the focal point of our efforts, but our total struggle. The other issues usually got taken up or left behind according to the conditions laid down by the struggle for land.

Thus, with limited clarity, but prepared to take the risk of learning from our own experience, the Vahini activists began their struggle in the second week of March 1978. Bodhgaya was chosen as the area to try out our strategy, since 12,000 acres in this area were believed to be under the control of one Math. We felt that it would be easier to organize

the landless labourers in this district because there was only one landowner with whom we could enter into a direct confrontation. In other districts, we would have had to deal with landowners of varying categories, and labour conditions might also have differed from one landholding to another.

The Choice Of Bodhgaya

The Bodhgaya Math is also known as Shankar Math because a person named Shankar had reconstructed it. In 1590 AD, Ghamandyi became the Mahant and that marked the beginning of the Mahanti tradition. By the seventeenth century, this Math had become a well known Tantric centre. Temples of various goddesses were established around it. In 1932, the then Mahant, Krishnadayal Giri, transferred all the Math property, which used to be in his name, to a Trust, and the Mahant was made president of the Trust. In 1977, after as Dhansukh Giri became Mahant, internal power conflicts escalated in the Math for several reasons. The previous Mahant Shatanand Giri's health had been failing in his last days, so all the administrative rights had been handed over to Darbari Jairam Giri. Exercising these rights, Jairam Giri divided the one Math Trust into 20 Trusts, and himself became president of the working committee of each Trust.

This resulted in a power struggle between the new Mahant and these Darbaris, who had recently acquired and enhanced their administrative control. Whatever their internal conflicts over the Math property, they are all united in their



attempts to keep the land out of the hands of the village poor by any means, including violence and fraud. All the land under the Math is administered through Bodhgaya Math and its *kachheri*. There are at present 53 *kachheris* in Gaya district. Each *kachheri* is managed by a Sanyasi known as a Mudiya, who acts as the representative of the Math, and is appointed by the Mahant. The permanent labourers, known as *kamiyas*, employed by the Math, work in these fields, and are given three to 15 *kathas* of land to cultivate, for which they are paid wages. The Math does not give them any receipt, so they are not able to demand their rights under the sharecropping laws. An administrative enquiry found that 9,575 acres of land were in the names of the Mahant and of related individuals in 138 villages in 11 areas of Gaya district; 7,480 acres of land were discovered to be the personal property of the Mahant.

The Mudiyas or Sanyasis manage the religious functions of the Math, which serve merely as a facade. Before accepting his post, the Mudiya vows to surrender his ego, and to remain free of greed, lust and material desires. However, several labourers—*dais*, *paraitas* and *tahlus*, are kept at the Math for the purpose of providing comforts and luxuries to the Sanyasis. The Mudiyas are notorious for deceiving and entrapping young women from the villages. Each one of them has several living mistresses. The Math uses its ability to exploit the labour and the bodies of these women as a means to demonstrate its power. Government officials have also taken advantage of the situation to openly exploit these women. Even among the landless poor, the relationship between woman and man is one of maidservant and master. Women have to shoulder all the domestic responsibilities of cooking, washing, childcare, and serving their husbands, along with the responsibility of earning a living. The landless men had never thought of the continuous attacks on women by government officers and Math functionaries as attacks on women, but rather primarily as attacks on their own

honour. Women were held responsible for bringing this dishonour on their men. Therefore the men thought they were in the right to insult and humiliate the women who were thus attacked. Before the movement started, women had lost their sense of self worth as a result of the combined attacks by Math functionaries, government servants, and men of their own community.

Struggle Against The Math

On April 8, 1978, the Sangharsh Vahini organized a joint demonstration of local labourers and peasants against the Bodhgaya Math authorities. Many more men than women labourers came to join the demonstration. However, 24 women from different Bihar cities came to join the demonstration. In this demonstration, the slogan to which people were most attracted was: “*Jo zameen ko boyejote, voh zameen ka malik hai*” (Those who sow and plough the land are the owners of the land).

In November 1978, the labourer activists of Pesra village decided to reap the *rahar* (a kind of lentil) crop but keep it for themselves instead of taking it to the Math. In the Bodhgaya struggle, all programmes are usually publicly announced in advance. Therefore, the Math had time to prepare itself. Early in the morning, hired ruffians and musclemen of the Math surrounded the fields. However, the women boldly entered the fields and reaped the crop. The collective strength of the people rendered the lathis and the ruffians ineffective. Thus, the first strong action programme of the Bodhgaya land struggle was carried out by women. This programme had some positive effect. Women in other villages were more attracted to the movement.

Masters And Maidservants

However, this participation by women did not have any effect on the man-woman relationship at this stage. In this context, I would like to discuss one particular meeting held in the early phase of the struggle, sometime in 1979. I had gone to Bodhgaya in an interval between two of my examinations. Anil Prakash, who was working there, said he would like to organize a village meeting in Pesra

where I would speak on the women’s struggle and he would speak on the land struggle. I suggested we do it the other way round. I would speak on the land struggle and he could speak on women’s issues. I thought that might have a better impact. For one thing, I said, won interest in the land struggle increase if they heard a woman speak about it. Secondly, men would feel that a woman could take interest in other things beside women’s issues. Also, if a man spoke on women’s issues, people might take it more seriously.

All the women were sitting on the floor and all the men on *charpais*. I went and sat on the floor with the women. At this, everyone protested and asked me to sit the *charpai*. I said I would sit on the *charpai* only on condition that the other women would also with me. None of them moved so I admitted defeat but stuck to resolve of sitting on the floor them. I said that if we did not sit together, we should adjourn day’s meeting. All that came of it was that the men finally got off the *charpais* and sat on the floor the women. We felt that it better to get everyone on level—if the men were not willing for the women to rise up, at they too had to come down and sit on the floor.

After that, we started discussing wife beating. Some village men argued that they beat up women because they made mistakes, didn’t cook at the right time, they didn’t listen to their husbands.

We had a big argument and asked them whether men never made mistakes, and if they did, whether they were beaten up for this by the women. The men remained convinced that God had made women to serve them. In that context, Anil Prakash happens to suggest the sharing of some small portion of housework. He said that since both men and women work in the fields, the burden of housework should not be left to women alone. The women agree and told the men that since the men ploughed but the women did harvesting and other jobs, there was no reason why women alone should do the housework and to look after the children. Anil suggested that, to begin with, men should start

washing their own plates after meals.

It seems that this discussion had an impact on the women. Prior this, they had never discussed such issues. These were very new ideas for them. At night, when serving dinner to her husband, one woman remarked that from that day onward, he should wash his own plate. No sooner had she said this than he flung the plate in her face *and* beat her so brutally that she was badly injured. In the morning, children from several other homes reported that their mothers had also been beaten up. One 16 year old girl reported that her father had come home drunk, and when her mother had refused to sleep with him, he beat her mercilessly, overcoming the children's attempts to intervene.

Against Wife Beating

That night, we held a meeting to discuss what we should do about these beatings. We decided that only women would be allowed to speak in the discussion on wife beating. Some men tried to insist upon speaking, but they were stopped. Someone at the meeting made a suggestion that men who beat up their wives should not be allowed to join the organization or the struggle. However, this suggestion could not be implemented. All the women did not put it so clearly, but, on the whole, they all felt that if their men got the land, they would beat them even more. Nothing much came of the meeting except that some people declared they would not even drink water in the homes of men who beat up their wives. I at once decided that I would neither sit with, eat with nor drink water from the hands of a man who beat his wife, and I declared this openly. After this, the children started bringing me news about men who beat their wives. For example, if someone called me over to his house, the children would say: "No no, don't go to his house, he also beats his wife." In this way, the truth started coming out. Before this, it was not even acknowledged that wife beating took place. However, in actuality beatings were so frequent that children grew up believing their mothers were made to be beaten. Now, these same children began to express their

resentment against it.

However, the effort to stop wife beating did not have much impact because very few people openly and consistently spoke out against it. Some of the *saathis* (*companions in the struggle*) who had been beating their wives without really considering whether it was right or wrong gave up wife beating altogether. Jarikidas and Karu were among those who came to believe that it was a crime to beat women, and so stopped doing it. Women also began to consciously feel that beatings were wrong. Some stopped accepting it as a given fact of life. There were also some



Landless labourer women on their way to the fields for harvesting

attempts at social boycott. Sometimes, such a man would not be allowed to sit in the village meetings. This happened in Katorwa village. However, in general the struggle against wife beating was not taken up in as systematic a way as was the land struggle. As a result, the wife beating issue is now almost completely buried.

Yet village women did often come to each other's rescue. For instance, in Shekhwara village there was a woman called Shanti who was very active as an organizer. She had gotten herself operated after she had given birth to two sons. Her husband beat her up brutally for this. Kunti, who lived in the Vahini office, went and intervened. Many other women also came to Shanti's rescue, and managed to send the husband away. There was no Vahini activist present at

that moment. The village women decided to hold a meeting and discuss the incident. The meeting could not be held for some reason, perhaps because it rained, but the man was publicly humiliated by the women for having beaten his wife, and for living off her.

Thus, the raising of the issue had some small impact on about a dozen villages. Yet the issue does not manage to surface in most political meetings. I feel the reason for this is that the proper atmosphere has not been created in the meetings for women to speak openly about it. Even though they speak to individual women activists about their husbands having beaten them, they do not speak about it in the village meetings. This means that, somehow or other, the movement has remained insincere in its attitude toward such issues, and therefore women are not encouraged to speak out as much as is needed.

In the early days we had launched a struggle for the implementation of the government minimum wage laws. The struggle started before the *rahar* harvest, but it was unsuccessful because it was also directed against the small peasants who did not have the means to pay the minimum wage. This meant that if the labourers refused to work, the small peasants just tried to do all the work themselves. When the organization realized this, the struggle was withdrawn and Vahini decided to focus on the struggle against the Math.

Staking Their Lives

In August 1979, it was decided that the land struggle would take the form of a strike in all the movement areas. Gaya has been a famine stricken district, and even in normal times, starvation is always at the door. Yet the people's commitment to struggle was such that they were ready to stake their lives. They decided that they would not plough the land till they had rights over it, nor would they allow the Math to plough it. The land would lie fallow. This was a risky decision since no alternative employment was available to them at that time. Most of the people in this area are landless labourers, most of whom are from scheduled castes. The

marginal farmers, who are primarily agricultural labourers with a little land, are from what are called the backward castes. The majority of those active in the struggle are harijan landless labourers. It was not possible in every area to get the poor peasants to accept the leadership of the landless. By this time, we had successfully reduced the conflicts between these two sections, yet enough tension still remained to prevent the peasants from directly joining the movement.

All the scheduled caste people are landless, but among the backward castes some people are landless and others have small pieces of land. These latter are marginal farmers who themselves labour on the land, but once in a while do also employ wage labour. The backward caste people are about as poor as those from scheduled castes, but social differences remain prominent. The bhuiyan caste is a scheduled caste and others, such as yadavs, are backward castes. In the beginning, the backward castes would not join the struggle, even though they possessed very little or no land. They had a feeling of caste superiority. Bhuiyans felt that since backward caste people also exploited them, they should not join with them in the struggle. After some time, they did begin to come together, but only a little, at a personal level. Some individual yadavas like Banshi yadav joined the movement but the larger number of yadavs did not join.

Somehow the labourers managed to survive the long struggle. Some of them also got work on government food for work projects. Since every individual in the village was not able to obtain employment, those who went out to work shared their grain with the families who were jobless. Different villages organized the sharing process differently. In some villages, all the grain earned was collected in a common place, and then distributed equally to all the villagers, after allocating a certain fixed share to the "struggle fund." In other villages, each employed individual, was given the responsibility of supporting one or two families who had no earning member, and each individual also contributed a certain

fixed portion of grain to the struggle fund. The struggle fund of grain was kept for a crisis when no employment was available to the striking workers. At this time, we also got quite a lot of publicity in the press, and help poured in from urban areas. A Bodhgaya Sangharsh Sahyog Samiti was set up at the national level.

However, the Math made extensive preparations to get the land cultivated by hired labour brought from outside. Local police and ruffians were used to protect them. The villagers were determined to prevent the lands from being ploughed. When the outside labourers, accompanied by lathi wielding ruffians, approached the fields, the villagers— women, men and children would stream into the fields, singing revolutionary songs and shouting slogans : "*Hal Kholo, jaldi bhago*" (Unyoke the bullocks and run away fast). They would then unyoke the bullocks and drive them off.

Drums were used to summon the villagers. A drum beaten in a particular way was a signal for people from neighbouring villages to collect. The moment this drum beat was heard, everyone would rush off—the women flinging aside their household work, and the children arriving in a swarm. In some cases, when outside labourers, guarded by ruffians, started to plough, the villagers would tell them to unyoke the bullocks. If they did not obey, the children would immediately lie down in the field. In an instant, dozens of them would be spread out like a sheet on the ground. Meanwhile, the adults would try to unyoke the bullocks. In this way, it would become impossible to plough the fields, and the Math's men would retire defeated. Usually, more women than men were present in these actions, because the men used to go to find employment outside their villages.

The Math spread police and goonda terror throughout the area. There were many incidents of ruffians waylaying and beating the villagers, abusing the women and threatening to rape them. Dozens of false cases were registered in local courts against the villagers.

Individuals would be arrested from the marketplaces, so that no collective resistance was possible. Every effort was made to frighten the women and girls. It became dangerous for women to go out alone or even to go out at all at night.

In one incident, one of the Vahini activists, a tribal girl named Alice Kanchan, was going from one village to another, when she was caught hold of by some ruffianly youths, beaten, abused, and insulted. Her clothes were torn. Jankidas, who was with her, was also beaten up. The news spread quickly and the villagers collected. The culprits took refuge in a local *gurudwara*. The villagers were in an angry mood, and many of them brought lathis. Violence did not erupt because the villagers remembered the commitment of the movement to non-violent principles and therefore reiterated their resolve that even in self defence they would not take up arms. In spite of the attempts at intimidation, the villagers did not lose heart, because they were well organized.

Simultaneously with the struggle for the land, a struggle was also conducted to demand food for work programmes for the unemployed. The organization used to decide who of the *saathis* would go to *gherao** the block development office and who would stay in the village to prevent the Math's men from ploughing the land.

Help From Outside

This part of the struggle took place during the Janata Party regime, between 1979-80. Even though the Janata government did not directly help in the struggle, they saw to it that the police did not directly attack us. That is how the struggle could stay non-violent. Only in 1980, after the Congress came to power, were the police sent to Bodhgaya. Though the local administration and police were always inclined to favour the Math, yet direct intimidation such as raids, firings and beatings by police began only after 1980. In the initial phase the government did not send in the police to smash the movement. The Mahant's men were responsible for the 1979 firing. The police did not fire. The general attitude of the Janata government was

not to interfere in the struggle, though some help came from the several food for work programmes that were started in the area by the government at difficult moments when the people had nothing to eat in consequence of the strike.

In addition, sympathetic individuals within the Janata government gave help through the backdoor, and many important Janata people in the government came out openly in support of the struggle. Some of them even joined demonstrations. Nobody from the government openly opposed the movement. With the coming of the Congress government, all this changed. The police were directly used to attack the movement. Several activists were arrested on false charges. After 1980, Bihar Military Police, Border Security Force and Central Reserve Police camps began to be set up in the villages, to terrorize the people and to defend the Math's interests. In November 1982, a full time Vahini activist was arrested on the charge of inciting the villagers to indulge in looting, and of living on their loot.

This phase of the strike was directed not so much against the economic power of the Math as against several myths which contributed to the exploitative situation, such as the belief that the Math is a divine power, and that women are weak, inferior beings, unlit for public life, meant to serve men, and that men have the right to beat women. This time, children also directly participated with women in the action programme. It became clear that children were able to be involved mainly because of women's participation. It had now been proved in practice that it was impossible to fight for change in the system without women's participation. They began to come forward, not just in equal, but in even larger numbers than men.

Anti Liquor Campaign

Simultaneously, a campaign against drunkenness and wife beating was carried on in many of the areas. This aspect of the movement was a collective battle waged jointly by women and children. Two women activists, Kumud and Kanchan, took an especially active



part in it.

Heavy drinking of liquor is very common and widespread in this area. The movement found it difficult to grow under such circumstances. In the evening, when meetings were held, men would come drunk, shout abuses, and talk nonsense. It would become impossible to conduct political meetings in such an atmosphere. Everyone agreed that this should stop but there was no agreement within the organization on whether to start a campaign against it. Excuses were offered for the drunkards, saying that these poor men drink due to poverty. The organization was not willing to state that drinking must be opposed because it resulted in atrocities on women. When discussions were held about the drinking problem, women said that one of the worst consequences of it was wife beating. It came out that most of the beatings followed heavy drinking. Some young girls said that when their fathers came home drunk, they would order their wives to sleep with them. If the women refused, the men would beat them. Women had other reasons for considering the men's drinking oppressive. When the men spent their earnings on liquor, the whole financial responsibility for running the household fell on the women. The men would often beat up the women to demand more money for drink. Therefore it did not take long for the women to understand that drinking was an important issue for the

struggle. Very few women drink, most do not drink at all.

The anti liquor campaign emerged primarily as a women's campaign. For example, Kumud told the organization: "Fine, if you don't want to make an overall policy on this issue, I won't insist upon your doing so. But wherever I am working, I am going to start a campaign against it." Every now and then, whenever I went to Bodhgaya, I would also try to get the women to campaign against drinking. The campaign was conducted quite vigorously in a dozen villages, especially in Katorwa because of the presence of a Vahini woman activist in this village. Very few men joined in this campaign, but a couple of male activists who were residents of the area, and who were deeply committed to women's issues, also took up the campaign very seriously.

Meetings were held in several villages to discuss why men should stop drinking and why liquor brewing is wrong. Sometimes a village would reach an open consensus that liquor brewing should be ended, and that those who violated this decision should be punished. As a general policy, Vahini did not undertake any action before a consensus was reached. In those villages which reached a consensus on putting an end to liquor brewing, the houses where liquor was being brewed would be identified. The villagers would then try to persuade those people to stop

brewing liquor. Some would be convinced and would give a commitment that they would stop making and selling liquor, but some others would continue brewing on the sly, because liquor brewing is a lucrative business.

This is how the action would start. We would hold a meeting. Very few men joined in. Women and children would get together and go to the house where liquor was being brewed. The children knew everything since it is very difficult to hide anything from them. They would know every hiding place, and would shout and point out: "That is where *mahua* is hidden, this is where *hadia* is buried and hidden." All the pots would then be taken out and broken or confiscated.

About 50 women would be present for every such action. In every village there were about four or five homes brewing liquor. There was not much opposition to the breaking of liquor pots. The brewers would say: "Leave us alone today, and we won't do it again." How could they oppose the campaign when they had participated in the earlier meetings where the consensus against liquor making had been reached? It went on like this for months. In some villages, liquor brewing nearly stopped. In others, it started up again after a while, and had to be stopped again. The temptation to make money through liquor brewing is very strong.

We would collect the bottles and canisters used for brewing and take them away with us. When the families came to ask for them, we would say that the matter would be decided in a meeting. These meetings were attended mainly by women. They would take the decisions. Men would be told to sit at a little distance and remain quiet. Even if they tried to speak, they would be asked to keep quiet. Even Vahini men *saathis* were told to be silent. Only the women activists were allowed to speak at such meetings. Everyone, including those who had brewed the liquor, would be asked: "What do you think we should do now?" Then the punishment would be decided. "For four days, no one will speak to them. No one will share their

sorrows or joys for four days." They had to concur in this decision. Sometimes we would auction the confiscated canisters and pots. Anyone could take the ones they needed after putting 10 or 25 paise in the struggle fund. This was also a form of punishment. The liquor brewers would be publicly criticized.

Women's Issues Made Secondary

However, the Vahini did not give as much importance to this aspect of struggle as we did to the land struggle. Men started feeling uneasy with the campaign against liquor and wife beating. The Vahini *saathis* also came to a deadlock. Some felt that we were wasting our energy on this kind of struggle. It would be better to intensify the fight of landless labour against the Math. Some argued that when a poor labourer works 12 hours a day, he gets so exhausted that he needs liquor. They felt that when the labourers get the land and their economic condition improves they will not need liquor.

The question, though raised, was suppressed: "Should women continue to be abused and beaten by drunken men until the land struggle is won?" Despite the arguments, no clear policy could be evolved and the emerging voice of women's protest was smothered by the success and influence of the strike. The whole movement began to be influenced by the dogmatic belief that after the economic situation changes, the man-woman relationship and other aspects of social and cultural conditioning will also automatically change for the better. But we women raised the question: "If these men who are today landless beat up their wives so badly, merely using the power derived from being men, then tomorrow when they get the land will they not become relatively even more powerful? Will they not then be even more cruel to women? Will it not then be even more difficult to change the male-female power relationship? What is the guarantee that they will then beat women less? Moreover, are women not beaten and is liquor not drunk in well-off homes?" We also asked: "If they free themselves from this cruelty and

addiction to liquor, and establish in their homes relationships based on justice and equality, will this not strengthen them in their struggle against the Math?"

Even though the discussions did not yield a consensus, some of the *saathis* began seriously to think about these issues, and to change their personal lives accordingly. Some of the men activists from the villages, for example, Bandhuji, Karu, Bansiji, Kishoriji, and Ganauri, vowed that they would not touch liquor or beat up their wives. At a personal level, they also began to intervene whenever they heard that someone was beating his wife or sister. They developed a greater respect for women. Moreover, the women began to feel a sense of self respect, which they had not had before. They began to feel that beatings were wrong, and that if the movement talked only of land but not of beatings, then the movement was in some way insincere towards them. This kind of sentiment was on the increase amongst them: "These people will put us in the forefront of the struggle for land, but they will not give the women any land." The conflict over the beating of women therefore had a definite positive effect. This is how women finally came to understand: "We are part of the struggle so we should also get land."

Math Attacks In Mastipur

On August 8, 1979, the Math's ruffians brutally attacked demonstrating labourers in Mastipur village. Two activists of the Mazdoor Kisan Samiti, Ramdev Manjhi and Panchu Manjhi were killed, and Janki Manjhi was injured. There were men, women and children in the demonstration. They stood firm in the face of this violence. They did not retaliate with violence. The ability to face death in the struggle without taking to arms was the heroic strength they displayed. The only answer they gave to lathis and bullets was their unwavering commitment to continue the struggle. Everyone stood firm. Apart from many men activists, Kumud and Kanchan were also present. These two played an important part and showed great courage and presence of mind. They carried wounded activist Jankidas

to the hospital. The martyrdom of activists proved the militancy of the peaceful struggle. As a result, the "*hal kholo, jaldi bhago*" movement was intensified.

This violent attack raised an important question for the movement. Were we going to retaliate with violence? We had to prove in practice that non-violence can also be very militant. There was an atmosphere of terror. Two *saathis* had been killed. One *saathi* had lost his leg. The village *saathis* had to be assured that they were not alone, that the whole national organization was behind them. We thought if we came out on the streets, the fear might disappear. The Math authorities were feeling more powerful. They thought they could use violence and kill. In return we wanted to show that we could continue our struggle by non-violent means. On the basis of this thinking, we decided to have another demonstration within a week of the attack.

Non-Violent Resistance

August 15, 1979 was observed as martyrs' day to prove the militancy of our non-violent movement. A massive demonstration was taken out from Mastipur. Women were in the forefront, including Baliyadevi, wife of Ramdev Manjhi, martyred five days previously. Baliyadevi had her baby girl under her left arm, while with right hand uplifted for revolution, she raised the slogan: "*Zameen kenkar? Jote onkar!*" (To whom does the land belong? To those who labour on it). The same day, addressing a public meeting in Pesra, another woman, called Barki, declared: "We will take revenge for every drop of blood that has been shed, not by spilling blood but by reaping the crop from that land, by making that land ours, which till yesterday was watered with our sweat and has now been watered with our blood."

The direct and indirect part that women played in the struggle up to this point made certain things inevitable. Women's demands to have a decision making role in the movement and to be provided with opportunities for the development of their thinking could not

be refused.

Women's Shivar Demands Land Rights

So far, we had tried to get women to attend all the political meetings, but the presence of men had always inhibited women from speaking. In November, a women's *shivar* was organized to help them develop their thinking and strategy, to lay down policies for the women's struggle for freedom, and to recognize their importance in the land struggle. Kumud and Anjali were mainly responsible for directing and organizing the *shivar*. For three days the women discussed various issues. Since this was the first camp, Kumud and Anjali had to initiate the discussions and introduce the ideas, but the women's participation in discussions was encouraging. Apart from discussions, the *shivar* was important because for the first time, the women got an opportunity to get out of the endless grind of domestic work. To be completely free from domestic drudgery for four days is like being in heaven for these women. In a sense, the land struggle had increased the stresses placed on them, because they still had to cope with the housework while participating in the movement.

It was agreed that Vahini male activists would make the arrangements for the *shivar* while the women activists would do the organizing and conduct the discussions. The Vahini men and the village men collectively cooked the food. Mothers brought their nursing infants along, while the grown up children were looked after at home by their fathers. Otherwise, the women could not have participated in the discussions. Besides the discussions, the women played games together. They had never played like this before. They played *kabaddi*. When we asked the women what they had liked best, they said the *kabaddi*. They were able to realize the possibility of forming friendships between women not of the same family. In addition, there was also singing and *jhumar* dancing.

The discussions centred around everyday things, such as what in the social set-up prevents the development of friendships between women, how

women are downgraded through abusive language, how women are exploited by having to bear the total responsibility for housework, the way girls are discriminated against in the family, and why women are so caught up in ritualism. The women spoke freely about their personal oppression. They were also interested in knowing more about the land struggle because so far their complaint was that men discussed it only among themselves and did not tell the women anything. Women were informed only at the time of a demonstration or a *dharna*. Often, the women did not even know exactly what kind of a demonstration they were being asked to join. They suggested that we organize separate *samitis* for women. Some efforts were made in this direction, but since there were so few women activists, the efforts could not be kept alive. It was resolved that women should also get land. A resolution was passed, saying that when the land was distributed, women should be given land in their names. At that time, the movement had not decided its position on this question, but in that *shivar*, the women came to this decision. On the last day, about 500 women attended. Many of these women had not stayed throughout the four days but came and went as they could find time. The main resolutions passed were :

1. We suffer injustice both inside and outside the home, so we will have to fight for justice in both spheres.

2. Men get drunk and then come and beat us. We will no longer tolerate this.

3. Religious superstitions and rituals weaken us ; we will give them up.

4. Abuses are directed against "mothers" and "sisters"; we will neither use such abusive language nor tolerate its use.

5. Rich people have invented castes and concepts of superiority and inferiority so as to divide us. We will not accept these concepts.

6. Big families are detrimental to the country, to society, and to all of us. We will keep our families small.

7. Women and men should have equal rights in property. We will also

demand our right to land.

It is noteworthy that about one year before this meeting, a *sammelan* was held, which was attended by both men and women. Not a single resolution on women's issues, had come to be passed in that *sammelan*. Women activists had later protested against this.

Attempts To Integrate Women's Issues

The women who participated in this *shivir* took the initiative in defining their independent activity and programme. The whole movement therefore had to try to integrate these women's issues as part of its own programme. Special actions began to be organized around women's issues.

For instance, there is a hotel called Saluja hotel situated midway between Gaya and Bodhgaya. This hotel is notorious for channelizing abducted girls into prostitution rackets, and for similar activities. At that time, there had been several brutal rapes in Gaya city. For example, some Rajput men had raped a woman, cut off her breasts and played football with them. Now that it was being acknowledged that the struggle for women's liberation had to start, it was felt that if in nearby Gaya such atrocities were occurring, the Bodhgaya movement should protest. Right from the start, Vahini's understanding had been that Bodhgaya is not a complete movement in itself but is a small part of the struggle for total change in the system. A big procession in which more than half the participants were women was taken out from Bodhgaya. There was such an uproar demanding the closing down of the "rapist hotel" that the hotel had to be closed for some time and the owner was jailed.

Another issue on which there was some discussion was that of the ritual form of marriage. Since these people are from the "lower castes," they do not call a pandit to officiate at weddings. However, many people have to be feasted, and rituals like *kanyadan* (giving away the bride as a gift) and *sindoor* are performed. After discussions, some people came to the conclusion that these rituals are harmful

and unnecessary. As a result, about half a dozen marriages were performed afterwards in a simple manner. The wedding ceremony consisted of the bride and groom garlanding each other. However, this could not become widely accepted in the area because not enough effort was put into it. The economic programmes always received priority. It was not easy to change these rituals so easily because women had no standing of their own. In fact, at the 1980 *sammelan*, a woman called Girija devi spoke very strongly against changes in the wedding rituals. She said that even when men get married the regular way they desert their wives. She felt that if the marriage was devoid of rituals, the man would be even less likely to stick by the woman.

Also, the activists began to discuss the duties of a husband more seriously. There was an activist called Feroz who got married at his parents' insistence, but when he came to Bodhgaya after the marriage, he complained that his wife objected to his going off to Bodhgaya, leaving her with his parents. A discussion took place in which most *saathis* said it was riot right to leave the struggle for the sake of a woman, so he should leave the woman and immerse himself in the struggle. However, some of us felt this would be very wrong. We told him that since he, an adult, had, with his eyes open, chosen to get married, he had now no right to treat the woman as a child producing machine and domestic servant for his parents, and to become a revolutionary at her cost. We said that the women's struggle was as important to us as the land struggle, so it was his duty to fulfil his responsibility to the woman whose life he had involved with his own. Finally, he went back to her. On the other hand, a 38 year old *saaihi* called Pramod Kumar had listened with great interest to these discussions. He had never heard such ideas before and was very attracted to them. His wife stayed with his parents in a but since she had no children, was given a bad time there, he heard the discussion, he felt it would be better for his wife to come and stay with him Bodhgaya. He proposed that

he would call her there, but she would have to be fed from the struggle fund, as he and the other full activists were, even though she no experience of movement work. Some *saathis* objected to this, it was decided that it would be right to call her. She came and with the villagers, showing courage in adjusting to village conditions though she was a woman. Recently, she had a girl and all the villagers helped just as if a child had been born to one of them.

Theory Versus Practice

Though, on an ideological level, women's independent identity and the independent identity of the movement for women's freedom had both been accepted as essential, yet it was not possible wholly to incorporate this acceptance in our practice. In the *shivir*, women activists had said that they would have to struggle at two levels—one for the right to land, and two, for the right to equality with the men of their own community. They were not experiencing as much difficulty in organizing for struggle at the first level, but a deep understanding of the second level of struggle was still lacking. One incident will serve to illustrate how the first faltering steps taken in the direction of building an independent base for women's issues were often crushed.

In Piparghati village, in 1980, a *saathi* called Prakash Pran, with the help of some others, opened a school for adult women, especially for those who were active in the struggle. The villagers felt the necessity for literacy because they were wholly dependent on city activists for negotiations with the authorities, drafting of leaflets, and giving of press releases. At that time there was no school for adult men throughout Bodhgaya, so the men were indignant at the idea that the first school opened should be for women. They thought the women were getting too smart and were trying to get ahead of the men, so they began to make life difficult for the women. Though these men were conducting the land struggle on principles of non-violence, they readily used every weapon from teasing and ruffianly behaviour to downright physical violence against the women.

They would waylay the women on the way to school, and would abuse and harass them. Several women were also beaten up at home by brothers and husbands who forbade them to step out of the house. The attendance dropped off and the school had to close. When the women were individually asked what had happened, they told the truth. After some time, a meeting was called, the matter discussed, and the culprits punished by some days of social boycott. Some of them had to hold their ears and do several sit-ups in public. They also had to apologize. The unfortunate thing, however, was that the school remained closed. One reason was that the meeting had been held quite a while after the closure, and, in the interval, the *saathis* who were running it got discouraged. They felt that their work was not treated as real “revolutionary” work by the other *saathis*, even though it was no easy task to persuade the villagers to come daily to a literacy class. Most of the Vahini activists seemed to feel that it was enough that the culprits had been punished. The reopening of the school was not treated as a priority matter.

A few days after the closing down of this school, a government school teacher from the same village raped a girl, and secretly forced her to get an abortion. The matter came to be known. The movement activists held a meeting to decide what should be done to the man. This teacher was not involved in the movement. Several movement activists tried to clear him of blame by saying that the girl had a bad character, as did her sister, but the women did not accept this view. They felt that the teacher had done wrong, so he should admit his fault, ask forgiveness, pay for the abortion expenses, and also give the girl at least Rs 30 from his salary each month, so that she could have the chance to marry into a good family, or set herself up independently in some employment. Since there was a difference of opinion, it was agreed that we would take a decision by “democratic means” that is, by calling a meeting of all the villagers. According to this majority opinion, the

teacher was not at fault. On the women’s insistence, he did apologize, but he was absolved of all other responsibilities. Women were present in fairly large numbers at this meeting, but, as usual, were not able to argue in front of the men. Only one Vahini woman activist, Anjali, was there to push the matter. She could not carry the day, because whatever came to be said most loudly and emphatically came to be the “democratic” opinion. It was clear that according to this definition of “democratic decision making” the opinion of the more articulate majority would prevail, and men would continue to dominate all decisions.

Women’s Dual Battle

We constantly felt that the Vahini men activists were more interested in women participating in large numbers in action programmes, but were less interested in their developing an independent identity. As a result, while women came and participated in a big way in demonstrations, and were often in the forefront, they could not come to have a decision making role because equal effort was not put into calling them for decision making meetings. The Vahini activists put a great deal of effort into ensuring that local leadership emerged from among the men landless labourers, because the accepted policy was that the leadership of the movement should be in the hands of those whose movement it is. However, when it came to women’s issues, leadership and decision making were not in the hands of women. True, it was recognized in principle that sympathetic men would play a supportive role. However, in practice men played not a supportive, but a decisive role. Why did this happen? The reasons were many. First, women had to fight at two levels—against the system and also against the men *saathis* within the movement. While this movement had created a supportive atmosphere for the first kind of struggle, it had not done so for the second kind.

Second, there used to be about 10 or 15 men activists in each village but rarely more than *one* woman activist. In some villages, there was no woman activist at

all. Therefore, for meetings, men would go from house to house, calling the men, while the woman would go similarly to call the women. It is more difficult for women to leave the housework and come to the meeting, yet the task of calling them had to be done singlehanded by the lone woman activist. Moreover, the women found it more difficult to speak in public than did the men. There is no tradition of women speaking in public in these villages. At best, sometimes the older women speak but the young women usually remain silent. The village boys get opportunities to go out of their villages and take part in Vahini meetings at the district and the state level. There they learn to discuss and argue out issues. In each village there are at least 10 or 15 such men or boys who have had some exposure to the outside world.

The women are riot free to move out of the village in the same way. Therefore, the Vahini woman activist is almost the only articulate woman left to defend the women’s cause. She has to argue alone against all the men. She too has, after all, been brought up and conditioned in similar ways by society. She is still in the process of learning to struggle, and though she *may* feel very strongly, she is not always able to express herself strongly in words. The women activists will repeat their arguments several times, but when they find that no one is willing to be convinced, they give up arguing. It is very difficult to keep arguing. Even I couldn’t do it consistently. It is especially hard because there are so few women activists. The atmosphere becomes so uncongenial when they are fighting for women’s issues.

Some women activists also feel afraid that if they argue too aggressively, there will be a split in the movement. In the interest of *unity* they stop arguing after a while. This gives a varying impetus to action on women’s issues. For instance, though the land struggle was most advanced in Pesra, the consciousness on women’s issues was far higher in Katorwa, where Kumud lived and worked. Here, social boycotts of drunkards and wife beaters were successfully organized. Men had to

publicly apologize in the face of women's censure. Men who drank were not spoken to. Their own children would say to them : "Babuji, you have got drunk today, you have beaten our mother today, we won't talk to you."

"Bhoo Shoshan Ka Ant Hoga"

In June 1980, the Mazdoor Kisan Samitis decided to capture the land and plough it independently of the Math. By this time, there was relatively greater cooperation between sharecroppers and landless labourers. Many sharecroppers helped the labourers by lending them ploughs and bullocks, and by themselves not accepting sharecropping arrangements with the Math. However, they did not come to join the labourers in the ploughing operation. The bhuiyan landless labourers were in the leadership and the peasants, who are mostly yadavs, found it difficult to accept theft leadership. They tried to help, but they could not bring themselves to plough together with the landless. Though the movement covered 120 villages, ploughing was done in only 38. About 3,000 acres of land were captured and ploughed. Seed grain from the struggle fund was used for sowing. The labourers also willingly took loans from the peasants on an Individual basis. They were intoxicated with the hope that the land would really be theirs, and in this mood, they were ready for any sacrifice. All of them, young and old, women, men and children, participated in the ploughing. Many villagers from adjoining villages joined each ploughing operation. The women would walk ahead, sprinkling the *gobar* manure, the men came behind them with the ploughs. Children would make earth and sky resound to their slogans :

"Ab na koi math hoga, ab na koi mahant, Bhoo shoshan ka ant hoga, bhoo shoshan ka ant" (Now there will be neither Math nor Mahant, there will be an end to exploitation based on land). Each one had his or her task and for a brief while it seemed as if no work was more important or less important, no one was more powerful or less powerful, big or small, man or woman. There was only one impatient aspiration to create a new

culture, a new oppression-free society. There was an unparalleled, beautiful cooperation between women, men, children, small peasants, Vahini activists, and members of local social work organizations. In Beeja village, 200 ploughs were in motion at one time. This rocklike unity defeated for the time being all the weapons of the police and the hired ruffians.

Police Repression

The police did not interfere with the collective ploughing. At the same time, court cases were also in progress against the Math for its violation of land ceiling laws. This gave us the hope that the land would be distributed among the landless. However, suddenly, on June 30, the police attacked the Vahini activists in Shekhwara village. Two of them, Prabhat and Naresh, were arrested and put in a jeep. The village women demanded to see the arrest warrants and surrounded the jeep. The policemen set their guns at the ready and also picked up lathis. About 200 women had gathered and they refused to obey the police order to move away. They said : "We are standing on our own land. Why should we move away?" The police started beating them with lathis and showering filthy abuses. Many were wounded, some so seriously that they were confined to bed for months. This was the first such violent attack on women by the police, and it marked the beginning of a whole chain of such attacks. However, despite this repression, sowing was successfully completed on 3,000 acres in Bodhgaya, Barachatti, Mohanpur, and Sherghati areas.

The crop grew and prospered. It had not yet fully ripened when on November 3, 1980, the Bihar military police set up camps in the villages. On November 5, protest demonstrations against the police presence were held at the district offices. It was declared that "*Jisne phasal ko ropa hai, vohi phasal ko katega*" (Those who have sowed the crop will also reap it.) As harvest time approached, police repression intensified. The police raided houses of several village activists and confiscated their belongings. Many were beaten up

and arrested. On November 19 about 1,500 land labourers held a peaceful demonstration in Pesra. They were brutally lathi charged and several women were injured. The constable and other policemen showered filthy abuses on two Vahini women activists, Geeta and Anjali, and said "They are not even worth spitting at." Geeta said: "Who is worth spitting at? You?" and spat in his face. After this, both women were mercilessly beaten up. Their bodies and faces were badly swollen, and in that condition they were kept overnight in custody and then sent to jail. The Math authorities threatened to convert every village in Bodhgaya into a Pipra (a village in another area of Bihar where several hadjans had been burnt to death).

In the midst of this repression, the *saathis* decided to prepare to reap the crop. They were successful in some areas but in others hund reds of arrests took place. In one village, 46 men and 49 women were arrested. They were later released. Police entered houses, beat up people and looted *their* belongings. Shantidevi of Beeja village was several times beaten up so badly that even today she suffers from pain in her back and her jaw. Even children were arrested.

Since, in this area, it is we who reap and harvest the crop, they faced the brunt of the attacks. In many cases, after the women managed to reap the crop and take it to their houses, it was looted and forcibly carried away by the Math's men or the police. This had a disastrous effect on the economic situation of these families. Many of them were unable to repay the loans they had earlier taken, and had no seed grain or manure for the sowing of the next crop. The few belongings they had were lost in police raids. Many fell sick after police beatings and arrests. Also, while a great deal of monetary help had come from several national level voluntary organizations in the first phase of the movement, now much less was forthcoming. The enthusiasm of outside supporters began to wane, partly because many internal struggles had broken out within the Vahini. Since the credentials of some of the *saathis* were being questioned,

people from outside did not extend the same kind of enthusiastic support.

Despite the police atrocities, the people persevered. The harvesting was also done collectively, just as the ploughing had been done. The harvested crop was then brought to the village from the fields. A fixed portion of it was given to the struggle fund from which the *saathis* who had come from outside the area were fed. In some cases, the rest of the grain was distributed on the basis of the number of members in each family. In most cases, however, this kind of egalitarian distribution could not take place. Instead, some families kept as much as they could for themselves. This did happen. It was not as if we had managed to create an ideal situation.

Women Used As A Means

One thing is noteworthy. More women participated in the harvesting action than any other action because most families felt that the larger the number of women who went from their family to participate in the harvesting, the larger would be the share they could carry home, and thus the larger the share their family would get. Once again, in many villages, women were used as a means by the men. They would send all the women of their family to harvest the paddy. If one woman went, the family got one share; if five went, the family got five shares.

In some villages, they attempted a better arrangement. They agreed that the grain was to be collected in one place for equitable distribution to every family. This was more difficult to do, because the police atrocities and attacks had increased. The police would come on a raid and would take away the grain from the collective storing place, so it would not reach the point of distribution. Therefore the practice was more prevalent of people harvesting as much as they could and carrying it straight to their houses.

Since the villagers were not in a position to sow a crop in the next season because of violence against them, they decided they would not allow the Math to cultivate the land either.

A Setback

After the setback caused by the police repression, the movement could not pick up full strength again, even though the resistance and struggle continued. The Math authorities spread a false rumour that the court cases regarding violation of land ceiling laws had been decided in their favour. They began to feel emboldened by the fact that the landless were not in an economic condition to sow another crop. They interpreted this to mean that the unity and friendship between the landless and the peasants had broken down, so they



Policeman brought in to intimidate women harvesters

began to entice the sharecropping peasants to enter into agreements with them. The usual practice is that the sharecropper gets one third share and the Math gets two thirds. The Math told the peasants who had formerly sharecropped the land that they would be given their share after some years, and drew up false pattas to this effect, promising them free land at some future date if they agreed to cultivate it as sharecroppers for the present. They issued a handwritten sharecropping *farman*.

When the sharecropping peasants tried to cultivate the land, the landless labourers offered *satyagraha* and obstructed the ploughing. This

happened in almost every one of the 58 villages there the struggle was ongoing. During the *satyagraha*, 10 children, 22 women and 91 men were arrested. In many areas, despite the resistance, the sharecroppers successfully completed the ploughing. In some areas, the labourers destroyed the crop that had been sown. In others, they decided that since the land was theirs, the crop would also be theirs, and they made announcements to this effect. When harvest time came, the labourers would get together, march to the fields, singing revolutionary songs, and reap the crop. However,

though the police and Math ruffians did not intervene while the crop was being collectively harvested by the labourers, they later conducted raids in the village and carried away the grain. They also confiscated the labourers' belongings, looted some huts, knocked down others and committed other acts of violence.

The Math had also sent its own team of men to harvest the crop even before it was ripe. These men succeeded in carrying away the major portion of the crop to the *kachheris* or local offices of the Math. The labourers' organization gave a call for *nakebandi*. The landless surrounded the *kachheris* so as to prevent the Math men from transporting the grain from the *kachheris* to the

-Jan Friese

Math itself. The labourers said that they would not allow the grain grown on village land to be taken out of the village. When the villagers surrounded *kachheris*, the police attacked them with lathis, and also fired in the air, but the villagers stood firm. On November 8, there was a brutal lathi charge in which about 60 people were injured. Kalia Devi was among those badly hurt. She has not yet recovered. The police and ruffians together fired about 14 rounds. Eight adults and several children were injured in the firing.

It is significant that as repression intensified women's participation increased. In the beginning, while the women came to harvest the crop, they thought that it was men's job to engage in *gherao* and other forms of confrontation. However, after the *satyagraha*, women also began to go to jail. Since the children always accompanied the women, they too went to jail. Women began to participate in equal numbers with men in every programme, including *gherao*. Even the men began to feel that an action programme without women was incomplete.

Where We Failed

Despite the fact that women were in the forefront of all *morchas** and demonstrations, they never managed to reach the decision making levels of movement organization. Their participation at this level remained completely nominal. Why did this happen? Are women less capable of thinking and planning than are men? Were they there only to be used as weapons in the struggle?

Though the matter was discussed in many meetings, no concrete steps were taken to find a solution. Women's participation was necessary to make the struggle a success, since the success of a non-violent struggle depends on the largest possible militant participation of all the people. It was also easy and convenient to encourage women's participation in action programmes, because they used to come only after feeding the family and doing the housework, and used to bring their small

children in their arms. As soon as the action was over, they would be back in the house, yoked to the same round of household tasks, which, in the eyes of the movement, did not seem to have any value.

However, to get women to participate in decision making was not so easy because that would require them to stay out of the house for several days at a time, to attend meetings from morning to night, to move from one area to another. Those who are actively involved in decision making invariably have to do a certain amount of travelling to assess and compare the situation in different villages. If women start becoming active in this way, the household arrangements get disturbed, and tension escalates within the family. At this point, instead of making it an essential condition of participation in the movement that every man should take on responsibilities in housework, Vahini did not consider women's participation in decision making to be so important. It is clear that even while believing in equality between the sexes, we either did not raise these questions, the resolution of which is essential to the building of a new egalitarian culture within the movement, or if we did raise them, we did so only hesitantly, because we were afraid that more determined efforts in this direction might split the movement. This tendency affected the policy of land distribution as well.

Defending Women's Dignity

However, there were instances when women asserted the importance of the women's struggle. For instance, in August 1980, when the ploughing programme was on, the students of the women's college in Gaya decided to hold a demonstration in protest against the police atrocities committed against Maya Tyagi in Baghpat. At that time, some *saathis* were not ready to interrupt the ploughing programme and participate in the women's programme. They felt it would be an unnecessary distraction. However, we protested and with us the village women also argued that for them both the struggles were equally important. They said that getting the land

would be of no use to them if their dignity was not secure. If they felt insecure, they would be unable to go to the fields and would have to stay home, as a result of which the land would belong to the men alone, who would then completely dominate the women.

Ultimately, everyone agreed, and the ploughing programme was stopped for a while. About 300 women, accompanied by men, went to Gaya city, and there joined with about 300 women students in demonstration at the Gaya court. The court was chosen as the site so as to expose the failure of the legal system to give justice to women. Since Maya Tyagi had been stripped naked, we burnt obscene literature, magazines and photographs in front of the court, as a symbolic gesture against a culture which exploits and degrades women's naked bodies. For several minutes, the court proceedings came to a standstill as our slogans rent the air: "*Jis samaj mein aurat nangi nachvayijati hai, hum usko mita ke dam lenge; jis samaj mein aurat bus bhog hi samjhi jati hai, ham usko mita ke dim lenge* (We will not rest till we have eradicated this society which make women dance naked, and treats women as sex objects). This demonstration was a victory for the women since it was an acknowledgement by the organization of the independent validity of the women's struggle, and of the fact that an attack on women, whether in Bihar or anywhere else, was an attack all women and was to be struggled against as such. This was perhaps the first time that urban and rural women had jointly demonstrated on a women's issue in the streets of Gaya city.

What Is Just Distribution?

By October 1981 the government had identified 1,000 acres of land as illegally possessed by the Math, and some of this land was redistributed among the landless labourers in Kusha, Munesarpur, Chakla, Jaya-rampur, Parsawa, Gosai Pesraj Kurmawa, Lebra and other villages. At this time, the Vahini brought out a pamphlet criticizing the government distribution policy. The pamphlet stated that we would prepare a list of allottees and present it to the

government. This list would be legal and just. It was declared that if the government continued distributing land in an unjust manner we would resist by organizing *gherao* of the concerned officials. It also stated that in land distribution “we will give priority to landless labourers, those without means of subsistence, the disabled, widows, and small peasants.” The Vahini activists accordingly prepared lists in which women, except for widows, were not included. These lists created two categories of those who were eligible to receive land. To be eligible, a man had to be landless or without means of subsistence. But a woman was eligible only if, first, she was married and widowed, and, second, she belonged to a family in which the men were landless. The reality is that most women are landless, even if their husbands own land. This was not recognized; a woman’s eligibility was made to rest on her relationship to a man, living or dead. Also, the implication of this categorization was that for a man to be without land and for a woman to be without a man, that is, a widow, was an identical situation. Some of us women activists were infuriated when land distribution began on this pattern and women were not given land. Since even when the movement made such a small gain it was completely usurped by men, we wondered what would be the shape of the society which would emerge from this kind of class struggle.

When the issue was raised and discussion started, most of the Vahini activists acknowledged that this kind of distribution was wrong in principle, and that it proved how strong was the hold of male ideology on the movement. However, many *saathis* asked: “What difference does it make in whose name the land is registered? After all, it is for both husband and wife.” We replied: “If it doesn’t make a difference, then put it down in the woman’s name. Why argue over it? And secondly, if it makes no difference who owns the land, then why not let it continue to be owned by the Mahant? Why don’t we fight for better wages, about which he had offered to



Mass arrests—tied with ropes and taken to the police station

negotiate? Why do we insist on the transference of land ownership from the Mahant to the landless, if it makes no difference in whose name land is registered?” Some *saathis* also argued that raising this question would weaken class organization and unity. To this we replied that equality can only strengthen, not weaken, an organization, but if it does weaken our unity, that will mean that our real commitment is not to equality or justice but to transfer of power, both economic and social, from the hands of one set of men to the hands of another set of men. Some activists, including some women, also argued that since women marry and go to their in-laws’ homes, it is not possible for the land to be in their names. To this we answered that the right of the women to land was perhaps the one crucial issue which could simultaneously shake up all the social and economic institutions including the oppressive institution of marriage and the family. If we do not acknowledge the legitimacy of a man-woman relationship founded on inequality, why should we assume that a woman must leave her home and go to her husband’s home to provide heirs for his family and continue his line? Perhaps the only way to resolve the dilemma is that the land should not belong to individuals at all, but should be the collective property of all the villagers who toil on it. We felt that to shirk the question of women’s right to land would be to shirk

the “total revolution” to which we were committed, and replace it by the desire to merely improve the labourers’ life conditions, instead of bringing about vital change in the system as a whole. However, in practice no systematic attempt was made to collectivize the land.

The village women were discontented by their exclusion. The women of Pesrasaid: “We were in the forefront of the fight, carrying our children in our wombs and in our arms. We went to jail and faced the lathis, we also did all the housework. But when the land was distributed, we were pushed back, we didn’t even come to know by what rules the land was distributed.”

It was also observed that after the land distribution there was a greater imbalance in the relationship between men and women. There were more incidents of drunkenness and beating. In the course of quarrels, men were heard saying: “Get out of the house, the land is mine now.” All this led women to feel that after such a long struggle to get land, they were left without ground to stand on. Women in almost every village expressed their anger at this injustice, and categorically demanded that land be given in women’s names.

Women Assert Their Land Rights

In February 1982, the Vahini held its Bihar state conference in Mehsi in East Champaran. There too, the women

-Jan Friese

activists who had come from Bodhgaya criticized this inegalitarian policy and demanded that women be given land in their names. Since, it had now been proved that carrying ahead the class struggle without the participation of half the class, the women, was not possible, the human rights of this half had to be conceded. A decision was taken that land would be accepted in women's names wherever redistribution was yet to take place.

There was a great deal of angry debate between the villagers. The women in Pesra said: "Fine, let the block development officer come here. We will snatch the measuring tape from his hand and measure out the land ourselves." The men asked: "How can you cultivate the land on your own? Who will plough it for you?" The women replied: "Well, who will harvest your crop in that case? We are ready to cultivate the land with hoes instead of ploughs, but we want it in our names." In Piparghati, the women declared that they would not let the land be distributed at all, if it was to be given to men only.

We then discussed whether land should be given jointly in the names of both husband and wife. Some of us felt that this would tie down the woman completely. She would be unable to leave the man if she wanted to, because leaving him would mean leaving the land altogether. We felt that land should be given in the names of women alone. We said that if we are truly committed to equality, the men should atone for years of domination. So far, whatever little property they had was owned by the men whether it was a hut or livestock. Now therefore, the first round of land distribution arranged should be in the names of women, just as the reservation policy, for instance, works in favour of harijans and other groups which have been oppressed for centuries. In the next round, land could be given to men so that there would be equality. Though some Vahini activists were not in agreement with this idea, most of the villagers, including the men, felt it was fair, and agreed to it.

In Beeja and Piparghati villages lists were drawn up giving the names of



women and widowers. It was rewarding to observe that the men villagers had also realized the importance of this principle and were committed to it. They too felt that what was happening was significant and beautiful. However, in Piparghati, the district officer refused to distribute land in the names of women, and insisted that a list of men's names be drawn up. His only argument was that the land must be given to the head of the family, and in India the head of the family is the man, not the woman. He also said that women would go away to their in-laws, hence they could not own land. The villagers unanimously refused to take the land in the men's names. The women organized *agherao* of the officer, and the men too agreed that since we are fighting for equality, nothing should be accepted on the Vahini inequality. Some of the basis of activists were perturbed and said that the land should be taken in anyone's name so that at least a crop could be raised. However, in spite of the unemployment and near starvation conditions prevailing in this village, none of the people agreed to accept land in the names of men. In villages where women got land, I asked them who would inherit the land. They said they would give it to their daughters-in-law, not to their daughters.

Stalemate Continues

Thus, the stalemate with the government continues. In the meantime,

internal conflicts broke out in the organization and the local village activists decided that they would, from now on, conduct the struggle on their own. Vahini activists who belong to the area will from now on conduct the struggle but outsider activists should not come to intervene at the local organization level. One or two Vahini activists were opposed, saying that the village activists are not yet in a position to conduct their own struggle.

But then who was to decide who was capable or not? Since they feel capable, we must agree. One of the main activists was expelled from the Vahini for some bungling he did. Some others have of their own accord gone to work in other areas. The struggle continues with small ups and downs but it is not as intense now. There has been no new phase of struggle. Only 1,000 acres of land were distributed, even though 3,000 had been captured originally. The villagers have not been able to plough the rest of the captured land even though they are not allowing the Math to plough it either. The rest of the property remains with the Math. A total of 26 *kachheris* have been closed down as a result of the economic losses and the pressure caused by the land movement. These *kachheris* are deserted and some of them are falling to pieces. From 1978 to 1981, the Bodhgaya Math has suffered a loss of about two crores of rupees. □