

REPORTS

SANGAMNER

Protest Against Rape Sabotaged

INCIDENTS of rape are not a rarity in rural India. Any attempt to bring the criminals to justice sets off a chain of reactions which prove how the entire power structure in this country is weighted against women, especially if they happen to be Dalit, poor, working class women.

In January this year, some of us in this taluk town in western Maharashtra read a small newspaper item about the rape of a women worker here. We decided to organize progressive public opinion in the town to condemn the criminals and demand justice in this case.

The police informed us that the attack had taken place at about 9.30 at night, on a road a little outside the town, and that it was a case of multiple rape by four men. The woman was worker in a tobacco factory, which is a major employer of female labour in the town. The woman had been hospitalized, and had lodged the complaint a few days later. The police assured us that the matter "was being attended to"

We then held two small meetings to discuss what action we could take. College students, schoolteachers, and trade union organizers, all agreed to hold a protest demonstration. The girl students we talked to told us that the incident had already affected their freedom of movement; parents warned them against going out in the evening, and one girl was told that she might have to leave college. The girl felt that this was wrong and that the townspeople should take the responsibility of ensuring their security. Some girls complained about eve-teasing in college and some were afraid that those who joined the morcha would be harassed by

boys in college. Most trade unions also responded favourably. The trade unions here are affiliated to one political party or other. The town in general prides itself on its "progressive" tradition communist trade unions are influential, and political meetings are usually well attended.

We held a meeting in the office of a progressive trade union, where we fixed the date of the demonstration, and drew up a leaflet calling on citizens to join us. Some women from the factory where the rape victim had been working, also attended. An activists from their union was present; in fact it was in that office that the meeting was held. The company for which they work is owned by a local capitalist who has several factories and is also a trustee of the local college.

The demonstration became a subject for conversation and gossip. "Who was the woman?" many people asked. "Oh, she was a loose woman", answered others. Some asked us why we were taking up the cause of a woman of "doubtful" character. We talked to as many people as possible, making the point that whatever the woman's character might be, quadruple rape was a case of terrible violence. Also, why were they keen on knowing the identify of the woman, and not that of the criminals?

We learnt from some male students that the criminals were not "goondas" but were the sons of "respectable" traders. These boys, who live near the centre of town, had been awakened at night by noises of a scuffle, when the attackers were forcibly bringing the woman to their rooms. They came out to investigate, but the night-watchman told them to keep away.

We had discussions with male college students, many of whom come



-Kathe Kollwitz

from nearby villages. They felt that the protest was a significant action and agreed to mobilize support. In their experience, it is usually women from poorer classes who get raped, and because the rapists are usually men from influential families, the incidents are rarely reported. We also spoke about the oppressive relations between men and women in this society, and about how boys look at girls.

The next morning a girl student from the college came to see me. She was agitated. "The women from the tobacco factory have withdrawn their names from the leaflet. One of their union activists told us that the woman had a loose character, and the rape happened with her consent." I was at first taken aback, and then angry. I knew that the local union leaders were complacent about the status quo and acted as paid go betweens in labour disputes. But I had not expected them to actively oppose us on a social issue like this.

We women then distributed the leaflets in the town. We visited the *beedi* factories and spoke to women workers about the incident. These women immediately grasped the significance of the demonstration, and felt that such acts of violence against women constituted a threat to every woman's safety. However, it was hard to fight the influence of the established trade unions' politics in such a short time. As an activist said to us, "The workers are like sheep. When we tell them to come, they come." This is how the trade unions in the town function!

The next day I heard that the college principal had received phone calls from the owner of the tobacco factory and from a trade union leaders, asking him to discourage his students from participating in the morcha.

The principal called me later, told me that he had been informed by an "unprejudiced" source that the woman had not been raped, that she was a prostitute who had done it for money. I replied that I knew the factory owner had called him, and also said that we had checked the facts. But the attitude of the principal was enough to dissuade most students from taking part.

We made one more attempt to talk to the women of the tobacco factory. This time they tried to avoid us, saying, "She was a bad woman. She doesn't work here now. She was a temporary workers. We have nothing to do with her." When we continued to press the point, they finally admitted that their "leader" had visited the factory that morning and warned them not to join in the morcha. He used a subtle argument to convince them: "If the woman had been attacked while she was going to work, or coming back from work, then it would have concerned us. As it is, this incident has nothing to do with us."

So, as usual, the woman victim of the rape, far from receiving public sympathy, has been subjected to a slander campaign conducted by the most influential members of the community –

industrialists and philanthroper, working class leader, college principal.

The demonstration was small. About thirty boy students participated, but only three girls dared to face the threats and pressures brought to bear on them. About seventy or eighty women workers also joined the action.

But there is no doubt that those who stayed at home felt a little uneasy that night.

- Vandana Sonalkar

GUJARAT

What Women Want And What They Are Prescribed

A woman writes to the Women's Section in a newspaper that she is treated like a slave by her husband and his family. The Editor advises her to put up with it: "Many are unhappy in Indian society. This person may be told that many like her live in India."

A widow asks if she can participate in festivities. The Editor answers, "If you think it proper and if your children are happy about it, do."

A post-graduate in Economics complains that she is kept ignorant about the economy of her own home. The Editor writes articles blaming educated women for their husbands' unhappiness.

These are samples from **Ila Pathak's** recent study of the Women's Sections in Gujarati dailies. Sections published during September, October, November, 1978 were analysed with the purpose of seeing how far newspapers respond to the life conditions and needs of their women readers. The survey goes a long way towards exploding the myth that the media "give women what they want."

It was found that editors write only about women as wives and daughters-in-law. Even when readers raise the problems of working women, single women, and the status of India women, or try to discuss topics beyond the four walls of the home, like new experiments in education, the editors fail to respond to this.

The readers talk of their experiences as women and express anger at the way

they are treated. They are dissatisfied, they want change, but the editors advise them to be patient, to accept life as it is, and assure them that they can be ideal housewives even if they are educated.

Perhaps to help them achieve this, the Sections contain recipes as a regular features. There are also articles on "woman's love of self-decoration."

While readers insist that women should think for themselves and not blindly followed their elders, editors plead for a "golden means" and support the joint family system. After all, if so many police in India are suffering because of it, it must be worth preserving! Some readers complain that a lot of money and energy is wasted on festivals. The editor responds with an idealistic story of love and sacrifice in a family, and glorifies the ancient traditions of India.

When women express indignation at the way they are molested on the streets and demand equal respect with men, editors warn them to be careful and not to take risks, in other words, to stay safe within the home and family.

Clearly, this is not a matter of individual editors being unresponsive to the thoughts, feelings and needs of their women readers. It is a general trend of mass media in our country to drag women back into their roles of wives and mothers, even as women themselves are moving in new directions. This study shows how far ahead the women who read these papers are, of the material being produced for their consumption. Women's Sections in newspapers are only ways of mentally confined and segregated at home, school, work. They try to fill our heads with recipes and romantic stories, to "keep us in our place." We must resist this trend; we must create our own forms of self expression and of action :

A WOMAN'S PLACE IS EVERYWHERE.

DELHI

"Women's Safety Is Women's Right"

Mid-morning, February 23, 1979.

About eight hundred women marching down the streets of Delhi, carrying placards that read : “Women’s Safety – Women’s right”; “When Women Are Insulted, Why Is The Public Silent ?” “Long live Women’s Unity, Long Live The Women’s Movement”. The university, the busy commercial areas – Daryaganj Bahadur Shah Zafar marg, the bus terminal, echoed to their passionate chants: “We Want Justice” “We will Not Put Up With Hooliganism”; “*Jag Rahi Hai, Jag Rahi Hai, Nari Jati Jag Rahi Hai*” 9Womanhood is Awakening).

Passersby watched with interest, amazement, read the pamphlets handed out. Some men flung obscenities and taunts : ‘Well, isn’t this hooliganism – girls on the streets’, and ‘As long as you keep dressing fashionably, you will be insulted.’

Women kept joining the procession at various points along the route. And I saw one woman labourer turn to look with brightness spreading over her face.

What sparked off this protest by university women – teachers, students and *karamcharis* (administrative staff) – against the harassment they daily face in buses ?

On February 12, 1979, at about 6.30 pm, a student of Indraprastha college was returning from Connaught Place to the hostel, when she and another woman were outrageously molested by a group of men. The conductor ignored their pleas to stop the bus, and the other passengers watched silently. The bus did not stop at the Indraprastha College stand, and the terrified girl was forced to jump from the moving vehicle.

A few days earlier, a teacher of the same college had gone through a similar experience. As indeed, which woman commuter in Delhi has not?

Some students and teachers of Indraprastha college got together and decided to take action. The Students’ Union approached the Unions of other women’s colleges. Some of them responded positively. Meetings were held in a few colleges and posters put



up announcing the forthcoming rally.

Within a week, about 2,000 signatures were collected on two memoranda – one to the Police commissioner, and one to the Delhi Transport Corporation (DTC) authorities. On the 23rd, girls picketed at the gates of some colleges and mobilized support. A busload of girls came from the South Delhi campus to join the demonstration.

The main demands put forward were:

1. Long-term action by the police to ensure the safety of women.
2. Action by DTC staff to help women who are molested, and to hand over eve-teasers to the police.
3. Setting up of a permanent machinery consisting of DTC officials, police and women’s organizations to deal with cases of molestation of women.
4. Severe punishment of offenders.
5. A firm stand by the public against such incidents.

The acute shortage of DTC buses which leads to overcrowding and provides opportunity for physical harassment of women should have been highlighted. The DTC management is even more to blame than conductors and drivers. Also, the fact, mentioned in the memorandum, of police often being chief offenders thinking their uniforms will be sufficient protection against protest, could have been emphasized more. The

memoranda tended to lay the blame for the sexual harassment of women on “rowdy and anti-social elements” or “hooligans”. The analysis in the pamphlet was better, as it linked this problem with the generally unequal status of women in our society – the economic dependence of women, their oppression in institutions like prostitution, child-marriage, dowry, purdah, and their seclusion at home.

The issue was raised and the rally was discussed in Parliament on February 27. The conclusion reached was : “Government is fully conscious of the problem and all possible steps are being taken to curb this menace”!

DTC buses now have a sign up saying “Eve-teasing is an offence; offenders will be taken to the police station and may be arrested. Passengers are requested to co-operate.” The rally received publicity in the press, and on radio and TV.

More important, a women’s committee consisting of two students, a teacher and an administrative staff worker, has been set up in Indraprastha College to follow up cases of molestation, inform the police and see that action is taken. There are attempts to set up such committees in a couple of other women’s colleges. It is hoped that the existence of the committees will help girls feel more

confident to protest when they are harassed. In fact, this was a point emphasized by speakers at the rally, and most enthusiastically hailed by all the women present – the need for women to come to each other's aid. This aid should be not only in the organized form, as the committee hopes to be, but mainly in the form of awareness among women, so that any woman being harassed can count on the help of other women around her. Such solidarity among women would also mean the growth of public awareness on the issue.

Speakers also pointed out that molestation is not directed only against university women – that in fact, this issue can unite women of various classes and sections. The rally, they hoped, would be a step towards such unity.

- Ruth Vanita

BELDIHA, BIHAR

Mass Rape – Police The Culprits

THE mass rape at Beldiha, a village in Santhal Parganas district of eastern Bihar, has attracted some attention because of the ongoing land-grab movement launched in the area by the adivasi leader Sibu Soren, and his efforts to publicise the issue.

We visited Beldiha on February 21 as part of a press team escorted by Sibu Soren. It was late evening when we reached the village and even though eleven weeks had elapsed since the atrocity had taken place, the villagers were still tense, in sharp contrast on the relaxed atmosphere in other tribal villages enroute.

According to Babual Marandi, the trouble started over the forcible cultivation of the land belonging to a local mahajan, which brought an arrest warrant on the heads of three adivasis. As he recalls, "We thought to ourselves, since we've got involved with the law, we might as well continue cutting the crop."

At 3 am on December 31, 2000 men of the Central Reserve Police Force and Bihar Police surrounded the village and without any warning fell upon the

sleeping villagers.

Margaret Kishsko, a 25 year old woman, who was one of those raped, and who has three sons and a daughter, gave a detailed description to the only woman in our group of what had happened. Not that any of the victims was averse to talking about the incident: the adivasis do not suffer from the same inhibitions as do Hindu women.

She said that the policemen were armed with revolvers, rifles and lathis and as soon as they started their indiscriminate attack, the men fled to the fields for their lives. The police then entered the huts, hurling out young children and babies, pawing at the figures in the dark to identify the women by their breasts. One man stayed outside a hut to act as sentry while the others ripped clothes off the women, "crushed" their breasts and assaulted them freely.

"We were too terrified to do anything", stated Margaret Kishsko, "We couldn't leave our children behind and flee. Some women were even gagged



Margaret Kishsko

to prevent them from shouting for help." Seven other women were raped. Three of them were not married; more than half were between the ages of 12 and 15. Many more women were trashed mercilessly.

Mukhi Marandi, still in her early teens, was hit on the legs with a lathi, and raped by three men. Sangli Murmu was caught as she came out of her hut; her breasts were badly bruised and she was beaten and assaulted by two policemen. Talasai Tundu, also in her early teens, was caught in a gully as she tried to escape; after raping her, the assailants inserted a lathi into her vagina.

After some time, the men – according to Babual Marandi – decided, "What's the use of living, since we have lost our dignity?" They beat their *dug-duggias* or drums, calling on nearby villages for help. This enraged the policemen and they opened fire, wounding Patwari Marandi in the forearm, (he showed us the scar). A young boy Parani Marandi was injured twice with a bayonet. The villagers also fired arrows.

Eventually, the CRP and BMP withdrew, after arresting 36 villagers. At about 7 am, the adivasis summoned enough courage to approach the nearest police station to file a complaint, but as they were nearing it, a CRP van made its appearance and they fled in panic. Till late February, no one had complained to the police.

The Bihar government has instituted an official inquiry into the incident, and on the insistence of Sibu Soren and other adivasi leaders, it will be headed by K.B. Saxena, the enormously popular and respected former deputy commissioner of Dhanbad. This does not seem to have prevented the Union Minister of State for Home from denying, on the floor of parliament, that such an incident ever took place.

Darryl D'Monte

PUNE

Women's Conference – Need For Self-organization

The Stree Mukti Sangathan

organized a women's conference at Pune on February 10 and 11. About 300 women from Dhulia, Kolhapur, Solapur, Bombay, Pune, Nanded, Aurangabad, Thana and other districts of Maharashtra attended. A hundred of these were rural and tribal women from Marathwada, Danu and Shahabad districts.

Participations from different professions and areas of work formed separate discussions groups. There were groups of women lawyers, doctors, teachers, trade union and factory workers, agricultural labourers. The group of women students focused on how the education given to us discriminates against women.

The Dalit women's group discussed such burning issues as the increasing incidence of rape of Harijan women, how they are exploited because they belong to "lower" castes, and by what methods this exploitation must be fought. A major demand of these women was prohibition.

The group of women social workers and gramsevikas talked about their experience – they felt that no change in the wretched life conditions of women could come about through social welfare and charitable activity. Therefore the need for women to take matters into their own hands.

There were many women from the mass media who had a lot to say about the false image of womanhood projected by the media.

Experiments in this new use of media were made at the conference. A pictorial exhibition on the history of women's oppression was very interesting. We were all tremendously inspired by the spirited plays, skits, and songs about the liberation of women. With great enthusiasm we bought and sold magazines like *Bayaja*, *Manushi*, *Stree Sangharsh*, *Feminist Network*, *Mahila Andolan Patrika*, *SNDT Newsletter* and the special issue on women of *Mazdoor Kisan Niti*.

The conference was a good experience for all those who attended, because it gave each one of us a greater



Two rallies were held in Bombay on March 8, 1979 to observe International Women's Day



feeling of solidarity with our sisters. This emotion was best expressed by an Adivasi woman with the clenched fist slogan "Stree Muiti Zindabad".

The conference ended with an agreement upon several demands to be raised by women's organizations. These includes :

An effective Employment Guarantee Scheme; crèches for children of all working women; a tribunal to take up cases of atrocities on women, and see that justice is done; fifteen percent reservation of seats for women in technical schools; more hostels for working women and students; government quarters for women teachers and social workers in villages; drinking

water for rural and urban poor; social recognition of the work women do – housework and childcare; celebration of March 8, International Women's Day by all progressive people just as May 1 is celebrated as International Labour Day; Trade Unions should take up the specific problems of women workers; women in political parties, even MPs and MLAs do not represent or speak for women. They should be pressurized to work for legislation that will benefit women.

I felt that thought the conference brought us together to share out varied experiences and to exchange views, the discussions did not crystallize into a plan for action.

- Vibhuti Patel