

## BREAKING FEAR'S SILENCE

**“We have formed to Sangham to make our lives worth living, to protect ourselves from rape and insult.”**



SO spoke Kankamma, a young peasant woman, president of the Ryotu Mahila Sangham, Kodurpaka village.

Kodurpaka falls in Sirsilla taluk which, with Jagityala taluk, has been severe repression of the year-long peasant movement, culminating in the notification of these taluks as “disturbed areas” on October 4, 1978. These two taluks are part of Karimnagar district of the Telengana region of Andhra Pradesh.

In November, the People’s Union for Civil Liberties, Delhi, sent a Fact Finding Committee to investigate the situation in these areas. In the course of its investigation, the committee met and talked with a large number of peasant activities, including Kankamma and others from her village.

Kankamma had fled Kodurpaka and sought sanctuary with friends and relatives in another village. But she boldly accompanied us to her home village to take us to the house of Rajavva, a fifty-year-old activist of the Ryotu Mahila Sangham, who had been raped by the goondas of the landlord.

The landlord, Shri Venkatrao, who owns two hundred acres, was not present in Kodurpaka when the committee went there, but his “men” were everywhere, right from the road, where Venkatrao (who is also a member of the Lions’ Club) has constructed a bus stand, to every place inside the village visited by the committee. His father, though present, refused to meet us.

Rajavva, the victim of the rape, had left the village with other key activists of the Ryotu Mahila Sangham. Her old husband had been beaten very badly and could hardly talk. It was Kankamma who narrated events, though she quietened down for a while when the landlord’s men came and joined the group surrounding the committee. About ten to fifteen women had also gathered but they moved away as soon as a committee member attempted to question them.

The attack on the women activists came a few week after the notification. “On October 29,” said Kankamma, “Nampally, Potinarsiah, Kondiah, Bariah, Hanumiah, Padolla Narsiah, Sudha Narsiah, and Ventiah slaughtered a buffalo, ate the meat and got drunk. In the evening, they came to Harijanwada from the fields, with the bottles in their pockets. They wanted to rape me. But I had not been living in my house for some time. Then they wanted to rape Bannava. She was not to be found.”

Not finding either of these two women, the goondas beat up another activist and her husband, who fled towards Harijanwada. The goondas then came to Rajavva’s house and took her to the fields. When her men-folk tried to help her, they beat them up and tied them to poles.

“There in the fields, seven men raped her. She lost consciousness. They brought her back and threw her into the house. When we tried to take her to the

hospital, no cart, rickshaw or any other vehicle was allowed to take her.” They managed to get her to Karimnagar Hospital only the next evening. Rajavva’s eldest son went to lodge a complaint with the police. The Sub-Inspector said, “Do you know what rape means? Your father owes the landlord Rs. 3,000. You are making up a false case to evade the debt.” However, the rape case was registered – No. 101/78, P.S. Sirsilla. The committee was told that the police had come and made enquiries but no action had been taken.

“Day in and day out we are exposed to such treatment”, Kankamma continued. “The *dora’s* (landlord’s) goondas of our own caste have vowed to rape us, to beat us and to ransack our houses. They are not letting us live in our homes. Nor are they allowing us to enter the village. After the Ryotu Mahila Sangham was formed, Kondiah, my own cousin, took an oath that he would rape me whenever he got the chance.”

As we walked with Kankamma to another house which had been ransacked by the goondas, a menacing crowd of men and women, many armed with spears, gathered around us. They were people of her own caste; they hurled abuses and threats at Kankamma who withstood it all defiantly. The *mukhia*, an old man who is the community leader of the 150 Harijan families in Kodurpaka, said, “We must stay united. We must be with the *dora*

and keep to the old customs. No need of any Sanghams.”

“Kankamma has brought trouble to the village. We were fine until she and the other women started their meetings.” Shouted someone else in the crowd. As the situation grew increasingly tense, we put Kankamma in our car and left Kodurpaka. A group of the landlord’s men were on watch at the crossroads outside the village as, in the deepening twilight, we transferred Kankamma to the jeep that would take her back to her refuge.

### **The Sanghams**

What are these Sanghams that the *mukhia* did not want in his village? He was referring, not just to the Ryotu Mahila Sangham but also to the Ryotu Coolie Sanghams (peasant organizations) which have been formed in both Jagityala and Sirsilla taluks. In both taluks, the Ryotu Coolie Sanghams have led a powerful and popular agitation against illegal landholdings, against bribes and fines extracted by the landlords, against *vetti* system of compulsory labour for the landlords, and for higher wages.

Almost every report of the demonstrations and meetings mentions the presence of peasant women in large numbers. Women participated most in the Pudipalli Ryotu Coolie Sangham meeting. In Gummalapuru (Mettapalli taluk) it is reported that on October 21, 1978, the police came in a jeep to arrest the organizers of the newly formed Ryotu Coolie Sangham. Hundreds of women surrounded the jeep. One young woman took the ignition key of the jeep and hid it.

After a few hours, more policemen came to the rescue of their besieged colleagues. They fired in the air and made a lathi charge in which many women were injured. In some village women have been implicated in false cases. In many villages, the Ryotu Coolie Sanghams have organized a social boycott, that is, a total strike against the landlords. No villager, man or woman, would go to work for the landlords. No villager, man or woman, would go to work for the

landlord during this time.

The peasant movement, which has been organized after the revocation of the Emergency and has developed momentum through last year, has attracted the wrath of the landlords, the local police, and finally of the Andhra Pradesh Government. Seventy landlords reportedly called upon the Chief Minister, Chenna Reddy, urging him to take stern measures against the peasants. Ten days later, the tow taluks were notified “disturbed areas” under the Andhra Pradesh Suppression of Disturbance Act.

Women’s organizations were formed only in Sirsilla taluk. In nearby Chakapalli village, a Ryotu Coolie Sangham had already gained strength and some incidents had taken place. Many members of the Sangham had been arrested, and implicated in various cases, and a police camp had been set up near the landlord’s *ghadhi* (fortified house).

A Ryotu Mahila Sangham had been organized in Chakapalli too. In our talks with the women of this village we did not get much information about its formation or the nature of its activities. What did emerge, however, was the hostility they felt towards the *dora’s* wife because she is the *sarpanch* of the village *panchayat*. They also felt angry about the suicide in their village of D. Mallama, wife of a peasant activist Raja Reddy who had fled the village. Mallama had committed suicide, they said, because the police harassment following the implication of her husband in several cases.

They also reported that one woman who had taken an active part in the Mahila Sangham was later found to be an agent of the landlord. The Mahila Sangham had been fully participating in the programmes, meetings and processions of the Ryotu Coolie Sangham.

In Kodurpaka, the Ryotu Coolie Sangham has been recently formed and its base is still narrow. Only sixteen of the poor and Harijan families were members. This is in contrast to villages

like Lethumuru, Maddenuru, and Chakapalli, where all strata of the peasants – the landless as well as relatively affluent peasants owning upto forty acres, are united against the landlord, and this unity cuts across caste and economic divisions.

The landlord in Kodurpaka, brother-in-law of the Chakapalli landlord, had clearly no intentions of allowing the Ryotu Coolie Sangham to develop in his village. He took steps to keep the *mukhia* on his side and to let loose his men on the sixteen families involved in the peasant organization. Kankamma and two other women had been playing an active role in the peasant organization, had attended meetings of the Sanghams in other villages, and agitated for the demands of the Sangham in their own village. And they had also formed the Mahila Sangham.

In both Chakapalli and Kodurpaka, the women’s organizations appear to be ancillary to the peasant organizations. Their women’s organizations are being formed in the context of the peasant movement against the big landlords and are organically linked with it.

### **Meeting A Need**

The Mahila Sanghams, however, meet a specific need of the women of the poorer classes who are sexually abused by men of the upper classes. There are districts in this region where it is customary to send a girl to the landlord when she attains puberty. Village women are also made available to the landlord when his wife is pregnant. Over the years, this sexual exploitation by the upper class men has become part of the daily life of the poorer women. But now women are beginning to resist and revolt.

The attack on Rajavva and other women activists are, on the one hand, part of the repression of the movement of the poor peasants. They are also specifically directed against these women as women who are defying “old customs” and practices which are degrading to the female sex. The repression had taken the form of sexual

violence, either threatened or actual – from molestation to rape. This form of repression is by no means isolated or accidental. It is an important part of the spectrum of repression let loose on the struggles of the oppressed for their rights. Witness the recent Bijatpur violence on women and the landless poor by the landlord's goondas, the rape of women and killing of workers by the police in Bailadilla.

Through the Ryotu Mahila Sanghams are only at a nascent and embryonic stage, these and other such organizations are of vital significance. The women's movement in India can evolve its own coherent and distinct shape only by examining and participating in movements for change at the grassroots level, movements that aim at ending exploitative relations between employer and workers, landlord and peasant, man and woman.

The inspiration and the strength of the Indian women's movement will come from women in the factories, fields and plantations, fighting against exploitation, both economic and sexual – women like Kankamma, who are breaking fear's silence. Kankamma says : "Earlier, we never spoke publicly of how we were treated. Now we have formed the Mahila Sanghams and we will struggle." □

1. For a study of socio-economic conditions and the peasant movement, see "Peasant Resurgence in Telengana", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Nov. 18, 1978, and Report of the PUCL (Delhi) Fact Finding Committee which also investigates forms of repression, and the Government stand. Published in *Mainstream*, Jan. 6, 1979.

2. For the Andhra Pradesh Suppression of Disturbances Act and Acts operative in Mizoram and Nagaland, see "Mini-Emergencies to Suppress the Poor", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Nov. 18, 1978.

3. For more information on Chakapalli and conditions in Sirsilla taluk, see Report of the OPDR, "Sirsilla Repression Probe Committee," published in *Economic And Political Weekly*, Oct. 7, 1978.

## *The Dead Rebel Girl*

*Deep now, in the new born silence of death  
she lies, the rebel girl, her heart silver-stilled;  
she's far, now, from the thunder of war and the colour of its  
suffering,  
the fire-tongued rifles of her mind, at last, for ever silenced.*

*She is dead, but her cause struggles on  
with the squabbling of the guns in the hopeful hills.*

*She is dead, but the music will never die,  
the music in the hills and the trees, and twigs  
breaking fear's silence,  
and those green hidden wanderers at night  
that need no fowling pieces.  
Life for her is sucked dry.*

*The blood turned to early hardness,  
the flesh drawn into the bones,  
and the eyes that kissed life's left cheek  
staring now into invisibility.*

*The thin sketched lips pale and firm.  
The flesh without desire.*

*They'll come when the shouting has died down  
and the tongues of anger unwagged in their steel mouths  
they'll come, bare headed in memory and dead-eyed with tiredness  
they'll come and plant wood and stones to dress her again.*

*In cities where marble monuments make believe majesty,  
tired skinned politicians will play God,  
lay down rules for the ludo of war  
and, like the hypocrites they are,  
condemn the hill-housed freedom fighters.*

*They'll send planes to blast them to bits for their "crimes",  
not waiting for an RSVP.*

*They'll send planes to do God's good work  
to protect the Divinity of poverty and want.*

**Bob Turpin**



-Ira Roy

## *For Nelia*

Why are you so hard ? they ask  
Why do you not bend a little ?

They call it grace  
Swaying like a bamboo  
With the wind.

Listen to it weave  
The music of compromise  
While it kisses the ground  
At your feet.

Even bamboos however  
Could only bend so much.

When the storm comes  
Listen to their cracking!  
They break one by one.

You could only bend so much.  
I would prefer to be a rock,  
Smoothened by years  
But unswaying.

Why are you so hard ? they ask  
Why do you not bend a little?

**Clarita Roja**

\* *Nelia Sancho*, a Filipino "Beauty Queen" was arrested early in 1976 and charged for being a member of the New People's Army and the Communist Party of Philippines.

## *Written in Hazaribagh Jail*

Night, and the light rain falls  
Across my memories  
Erasing scars and smears of blood  
From the mind's battlefield.

In the Rajasthan desert  
They explode a device,  
A nuclear miracle,  
And in Bihar a peasant trudges  
Behind his ox and plough  
Across the crusty earth,

The sun hard on his bent back,  
A rag around his loins,  
And they that boast of nuclear achievement  
Feel no shame.

Sweet the rain  
And fruitful is the earth,  
But science is just a show of power  
A shaking of twentieth century spears  
Whilst the people die.

**Mary Tyler**