

SHASHI SAIL

From Fainting to Fighting

A Preliminary Report on the Role of Woman In a Textile Mill Struggle, Chhatisgarh

“I, Jankibai, am 50 years old and I have been working for 25 years in this department. It is very hot in this workshop and the windows are blocked with gunny bags. The workshop is kept hot and humid to prevent the thread from snapping, but the heat makes many strong women workers faint every day. If we faint, we are allowed to go home and we lose our wages for the day.”

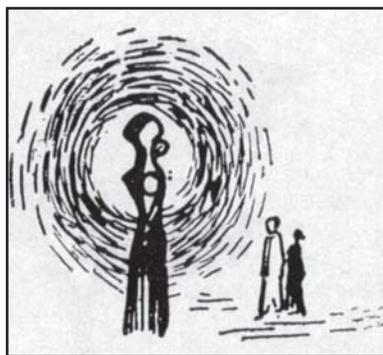
“On July 13, it was too hot and a woman fainted. We approached the officers on duty who said we should continue working even if we fainted or died. The workers were angered. They stopped their machines and *gheraoed* the officers.” This is how 32 year old Tetku Ram narrated the event which led to the struggle. He was hit and wounded in the conflict that ensued between police and workers on the night of July 13. He was arrested on July 14.

On August 14, an item in the local newspapers “Police *lathi* charge women and children” caught the attention of the Chhattisgarh Manila Jagriti Sangathan, a women’s group. We constituted an investigation team with three women and one man, to enquire into the atrocities committed on women by the police and to investigate the role of women in the struggle.

We visited the BNC mill at Rajnandgaon. We found that on August 14 the trade union had arranged a public meeting. The administration clamped section 144 on the area at 8 a.m. The women and children found an effective way of evading this law. They moved in small

clusters towards the collectorate until about 4,000 women and 2,000 children were gathered there. The police intercepted them and abusively ordered them to return home. When they refused, the police beat the women. Some returned home but about 1,000 remained and began to shout slogans. When told that they were violating the law, the women retorted : “Why is the same law not enforced on you police and officials? You too are gathered in large numbers. Why is the law only for us?”

The police then *lathi* charged the women and also burst 30 tear gas grenades. This dispersed many



women and 220 were arrested under section 151 IPC, on the charge of joining an assembly likely to cause a disturbance of the public peace. These women were lifted bodily and forced into police vans. Many women were kicked between the legs, their clothes were torn, and saris came off in the mele.

When we met the police and administration officials, they accused

the trade union of having brought specially trained women from Dalli Rajhara where there is a militant mines union. However, our interviews with the women revealed that not even one was from Dalli Rajhara. Most of the women are wives of workers at the BNC mill, and a few are themselves workers in this mill.

The officials also claimed that most of the women were ignorant and were “used” by trade union leaders. But when we talked to the women, we found most of them determined and militant. Said 25 year old Shantibai, “We have seen the light of the workers’ rights and the darkness of the jail”, and 60 year old Kachrabai added: “I prefer to die here in jail to continue the fight for my rights.”

The officials further claimed that the police were given special orders not to be violent and that they used *lathis* only when provoked. But many women showed us bruises, visible after four days, on their legs, thighs and backs. Agasiyabai had been beaten on her face by the police. Shanti showed a two inch long cut on her thigh. The wounds were still raw.

At a time when men could not come out in the open, due to section 144, women played a crucial role. They managed to outsmart police patrols by moving casually in small clusters to the meeting place. Though most of them are not employed workers, they are consciously a part of the workers’ struggle.

When, on August 16, at about 11.15 p.m., we were returning from our visit to the area, the police stopped our jeep and did not allow us to move on until we got clearance from higher officials. They kept us waiting in the rain and dark for quite some time. We felt insecure and the workers radiated warmth and security to us. These terror tactics of the administration gave us an idea of the atmosphere in which the workers live in the slums, and the difficulties they face while carrying on their struggle. □