

*Tell me something about yourself and your work.*

I have been working for about four years with the Chhatra Yuva Sangharsh Vahini. For the last two years, I have been working amongst women in Bombay slums, on the issues of land and water.

I am also studying law as an external student. I have done M Com privately while working full time for the Vahini.

*Why did you decide not to take a job ?*

I felt that it would not be possible simultaneously to do a job and also to work for social change. Almost all my time goes into my work in the field. If it is ever possible for me to earn something by doing a part time job that does not take much of my time, I might consider it.

*Do you not feel insecure about your future ?*

I do have feelings of uncertainty. That is why I am studying further. We believe that degrees are not of much use and that the education system is defective yet in spite of that critique we have, I am studying and getting the degrees as a kind of security. If ever I have financial difficulties, I will be in a position to get a job and will not have to be dependent on anyone. I do not want a situation to arise wherein I have to stop my Vahini work altogether because of financial problems.

*How many other full timers are there in the Vahini in Bombay ?*

There are two others. Both are men. One is a slum dweller who has passed the eighth class. The other is a B Sc. Both of them get a stipend of Rs 300 a month from the Vahini. I do not need to take a stipend because I am staying at home with my parents,

*Does your family support you in your work ?*

In the beginning, they did not support me. I had to face quite a lot of opposition. But now they have accepted it.

*What kind of problems did you face ?*

The usual problem that girls face—being pressurised into marriage

MADHU KISHWAR

## She Works For Change

—An Interview With Chetna, A Sangharsh Vahini Activist

*Most organisations working for social change amongst the poor face an acute shortage of women activists because few women are able to resist social and familial restrictions on their movements and activities. These are extracts, translated from Hindi, from a taperecorded interview with a 25 year old fulltime worker of the Vahini. Chetna is no longer working in Bombay. She has shifted to Bihar.*

immediately after graduation. When I resisted the pressure I had to encounter problems.

*If you had a job would you have encountered this pressure ?*

Yes, because in our community it is not considered good for girls to do jobs. I belong to a traditional Gujarati bania family. My father has a grain and dry fruits business. My mother does not earn. We are four sisters and two brothers.

*Have your brothers and sisters studied ?*

My brothers are helping my father in his business. They did not study much. One of my elder sisters is a registered medical practitioner and is married to a doctor. She runs her own dispensary. The other elder sister got married after graduation. But she had problems with her husband although not of a very serious kind. Yet she felt the need to be economically independent so she did her B Ed and is now a school teacher. My younger sister is in her final year at school.

*So the girls have outdistanced the boys in education ?*

I have noticed that in our community the boys know they will join their fathers'

businesses so they do not take their studies very seriously. But it is natural for the girls to want to study further because this is the only opportunity they get to go out of the house. Otherwise, they are more or less restricted to the house. They may visit relatives who live nearby but they are not much exposed to the world outside.

*Are you and your sisters the first to have made a breakthrough in this matter ?*

Yes.

*Will your younger sister take a job ?*

Yes, now I have forced the idea on our family that girls should take jobs. Yet it is not easy for us to get permission to take a job.

*How did you resist the pressure to get married ?*

My parents had not realised that I was deeply involved with Vahini work. They thought I was just doing it to pass time. We have a large joint family so there is not much of a tradition of sharing our ideas. All the members do not know what the others are busy with.

In the beginning, when my parents began to search for prospective husbands for me I did not say an outright no, but I used to evade each proposal

and thus delay the whole thing. After a while, they began to insist that I meet the boys. Then I clearly told them that I would not see the boys and that I had decided not to marry just now. Further, I said that if I ever married I would take the decision on my own and would not consult them. They were upset and tension developed. They were afraid that perhaps I wanted to have an intercaste marriage and was already involved with someone. I told them that I was not planning to marry in the near future and whatever decision I took in this matter would be based on my work, to which I intended to devote all my time. A lot of tension was generated so I went to stay for some time with my sister, who is a school teacher. She supported me.

*Had she not supported you, would you have had the courage to resist the pressure?*

Yes. But actually, there was not so much pressure at home that it was necessary for me to leave. Even if I had stayed at home they would not have locked me up or forced me outright. I went away for a while just to let the tension subside. It was not as if I fought with them and walked out.

Now, I live at home. My father gives me regular financial help and everything is fine.

*How did this change come about ?*

After they came to know about my involvement, there was more talk and discussion at home. My parents realised that I am mature in my thinking and will not take a rash decision.

Also, I and a friend, Alaka, have begun jointly to write a regular weekly column in a popular Gujarati paper about our work and the problems of slum dwellers. Middle class people tend to think that anyone who writes is doing a big thing. Our relatives and family friends comment on my writing in an approving way, and my family cannot help feeling pleased. Even if they are not really happy in their hearts, when out-siders begin to tell them that their

daughter is doing something notable they begin to feel somewhat gratified. It is not as if they really like my work or encourage it but, well, they have accepted it.

*And how did you undergo such a mental transformation ?*

It happened after I joined the Vahini. When I first joined the Vahini I did not know much about it as an organisation. Nor had I thought seriously about the matter. All I knew was that in 1974, J.P. had raised his voice against the emergency. After doing the B Com final exam, while I was waiting for the result, I did not feel like doing the usual courses that girls join, such as beautician's course. I had no interest in such things. I came to know of a social action health group called Medico Friends Circle. Through that group I came in contact with the Vahini. I thought that till my results came I might as well pass the time by helping with Vahini work. So I began to help, and I grew more and more involved.

*How did you get so involved ?*

In 1980, when I joined the organisation, work was going on in the slums. I immediately became involved in working with slum children. I used to run an informal daycare centre for the children and take them on picnics. Once it happened that I took children from half a dozen slums on a picnic together, I had planned to teach them many things that day, to tell them about the conditions under which they were living. I did not realise that they were in a holiday mood.

When we reached the picnic spot I tried to make them sit down together but most of the children from one slum, Tulsiwadi, were Muslims, most of the children from another were dalits and most of the children from a third were marathas. The Muslim children refused to play with the Hindu children. They said the only game they would play together was cricket in which the Muslims would represent Pakistan and the Hindus India. I tried my best to

persuade them but they absolutely refused to play with the Hindu children. The Hindu children too refused to play with the Muslims. The same thing happened with the marathas and dalits. The maratha children said they would not play with the dalits. They called them *bhangis*. Then I realised that I was not prepared for such questions to arise. I had gone all ready to teach them.

*What had you planned to teach them?*

At that time, I just wanted to tell them that if not immediately, at some later stage, they should fight against the conditions under which they were living, that they should become independent, should study and stand on their own feet. To do this, they would have to save themselves from the influence of the local forces such as liquor dens, ruffians and pick-pockets.

But then I realised that I myself did not understand the conditions under which they were living since I had not anticipated that such questions could arise. I felt that somehow or other, I had not been able to understand the whole reality. First, I would have to go there and learn. Only after that could I work.

We talk about establishing freedom and equality on a wider level but when we work in the slums we have first to reduce the influence of the dominant forces there before we can establish the values we talk about.

*How do you think that can be done ?*

We can learn to do it only on the basis of our experience of working in a particular area. For instance, we found that even within the community equality did not exist. Consider the distribution of water. Certain powerful people in the locality took more water from the public tap and the weaker ones got less. So we discussed the matter in a women's meeting and decided that a particular woman would undertake to sit at the tap every day and see that everyone got an equal share of water. This resulted in a lot of conflict. The powerful people used to

intimidate the woman and insist on taking more water. This was discussed in our meetings. We said: "We say that we do not have houses while others have bigger houses than they need. We talk of equality but we are not even able to share water equally."

The quarrels continue and the discussions continue, too. I would not say that we have solved the problem but, at least, it has become an issue for discussion and dialogue. This process continues even today.

*Do the powerful people come to the meetings ?*

Yes, they do, but we have to go and call them, saying: "You are being mentioned in the meeting so please do come and tell us what happened."

*Who are these powerful people ?*

Those who are economically powerful, who run liquor dens, who trade in women. They keep women doubly exploited and that it was necessary to organise them separately. Most of the slum dwellers are migrants from rural areas. They could not get work in their villages so they came to the city. They could not get a place to stay in the city so they ended up in the slums. All of them are exploited. But within the slum community women are doubly exploited. For example, wife beating and drunkenness of husbands are special problems faced by women.

*To begin with, around which issues do you think it is easier to organise women ?*

On the water question, women came spontaneously to meetings, without any persuasion. There is no water provision in the slums. Daisal has a tank in the centre. There are no taps. In the legalised slums there are supposed to be four taps per 1,000 huts but Tulsiwadi has only three taps though there are over 2,000 huts. In April, the tank in Daisal dries up. People have to buy water at 25 paise per small pitcher. There are women who fetch the water from a *chawl* that is ten minutes' walk away. People cannot afford

to bathe daily. At least four pitchers are needed daily for a family's drinking and cooking needs. That means a family spends Re 1 a day just on water.

Water distribution in Bombay is extremely unequal. Some areas have water laid on 24 hours, others have water only in the morning or only in the evening. Our demand is that everyone should have a certain minimum ensured to them, and if there is a genuine shortage, certain people should not have water 24 hours. Distribution should be egalitarian.

We also demand that the law of four taps per 1,000 huts be implemented.



**Queuing up for water in a slum**

People in Daisal dug their own tank. But the police declared it illegal. We said we had the right to dig since we had no water facility provided to us. But after a year the new tank too dried up.

Although the water question is a priority issue for women we have not been able to concentrate on it. The land issue took precedence because we had to fight evictions. We are now planning to concentrate on the water issue. So far, our delegations have gone to negotiate

only to the local ward offices. We have not taken the struggle on to a wider level. We now plan to approach the corporation.

*How did the Vahini decide to work in slums ?*

Sangharsh Vahini's policy is to begin work amongst those sections of people who are most oppressed, economically and socially.

*Can the slum dwellers be called the poorest in Bombay—considering that they have to pay thousands of rupees to get a plot of land in a slum ?*

Bombay has a population of about 8.5 lakhs of which 4.5 lakhs live in slums.

There are many categories of slum dwellers. Some are very poor and have no secure job. Others earn about Rs 1,000 or more a month and live in *pukka chawls*. In the slums where we work, many people take whatever job they can find, such as construction labour. Others collect junk from the streets and sell it. The slums we have chosen are those in which the people have no security and their homes can be demolished at any time. There are certain other slums in

Bombay where the people have been issued photopasses by the administration. This means that if their houses are demolished government will give them alternative accommodation.

We are very few activists and there are many slums so we cannot work in all of them. We initiated our work in slums where we had a contact or which happened to be near the house of a Vahini member.

*What shape did the land struggle take ?*

In the beginning, we used to organise resistance against demolition. After the meeting, we would go to the ward office and talk to the ward officer. We would tell him that we had no security and he should either arrange alternative accommodation or else settle us where we were. When the demolition squad came, we would resist and organise a *morcha*. It was not easy. We were not always able to prevent demolition.

For instance, once, a demolition squad suddenly turned up at Tulsiwadi which is a very big slum near Racecourse. We had planned women's camp that day so we happened to be there at 7 a.m. Suddenly, we saw the demolition van. We organised a *morcha*.

*What kind of preparation had you done ?*

We had discussed the reasons our not having a place to stay and the need to fight for our right stay there. We had emphasised that we could fight only if we were united. So the preparation was that we should be united and should come together.

We had also decided that women would be in the forefront of resistance against demolition. We came to this conclusion because had worked more amongst women and we felt that women could handle the issue better.

*How many people were there in the morcha ?*

There were about 300 women. Many men joined us later. We held up the demolition for about two hours. But the

van sneaked round from the back and began to demolish the slum from the other end. When people realised what was happening they began to run helter skelter to collect their possessions from their homes. They were afraid that their possessions would be destroyed or confiscated and they would lose everything. A great many things were in fact taken away from houses by the squad.

We collected the people again and pointed out to them that because each one of them had run to save their personal belongings, the collective resistance had broken down and demolition had taken place. We then organised them to demand that their goods be returned to them. All the things were returned. We took a *morcha* to the ward office. The local MLA also came. While the agitation was underway many people tried to tell the slum dwellers that we were bad and were trying to mislead them. But the slum dwellers had now reached such a stage that nothing could hold them back. In fact, we felt that even if we had not been fully prepared for the struggle the slum dwellers could not have been silenced.

We sat on *dharna* at the ward office. Finally, the authorities agreed that the people should re-settle in the slum but they did not give them any legal status or alternative accommodation. Since the slum had been demolished the people suffered a big financial loss. They had to construct their huts all over again. It costs at least Rs 2,000 to build a hut. It needs a plastic covering because of the heavy rains in Bombay; also wooden or mud walls and a door.

*Do not the slum lords resent your work ?*

Yes, they do. In the beginning, they ignored us because they thought we were small fry and would not be able to touch their interests. When we organised the demonstration against demolition in Tulsiwadi they felt threatened. They felt their control of the slum would be

weakened.

When the people were resettled and we activists went home the slumlords took charge. They measured out small plots and distributed them to the people. They had given people very small plots so land was left over and extra huts were constructed. They grabbed those huts and sold them. A hut is sold for Rs 5,000 or 6,000. Since this slum is near Racecourse in south Bombay the huts are very expensive even if they are not *pukka*.

They also *told* the people not to let Vahini activists enter the slum. People do not dare to answer them back. That is why we cannot organise any action programme against them. But they have never tried to attack us directly.

*Why not ?*

They have an idea that perhaps we are politically strong. Also, they know that we are not interested in contesting elections so they think we cannot harm their interests.

*Are most of them connected with political parties ?*

Yes, they are local party workers of the Congress (I).

*Many people think that the land given by government to slum dwellers is grabbed by slum lords and the needy do not get it. Is this true ?*

This is not an adequate reason to refuse to give land to slum dwellers. There are slum lords and they do try to take advantage of the situation. But then antisocial elements try to take advantage of every situation. So, when land distribution takes place, care has to be taken that land goes only to the right people. It also has to be ensured that those to whom it is given actually have control over it. The administrative machinery has to ensure this. It can only be done when the local people are involved in the process of land distribution.

When a hut breaks down the slum lords sell a bit of the land for their own profit but it is not true that the whole

slum is virtually in their possession, The present situation is partly a result of the myth in people's minds that slums are full of antisocial elements.

*Do you think there is no basis for this myth ?*

All the antisocial elements do not live in slums alone. Often, outsiders build the dens and get them run by slum dwellers. The slum lords are more active, they create a row and racket so it is natural that they should be more visible. All their activities are carried on in the streets. I am not justifying their activities but it is not true that most slum dwellers are antisocial elements. Many of them are people who earn and spend their whole lives on that basis. In the areas where we work, there are very few antisocial elements.

It is difficult to take action against the slum lords because of their political connections. They are involved in many rackets such as selling women, but the police does not take action against them.

*Have you tried exposing these rackets ?*

We took up one case against them but were unable to do anything substantial. There was a girl named Salma who had been deserted by her husband and lived alone with her six month old daughter. She was looking for a job as a domestic servant but she wanted to take her baby along with her to work. There was a woman who used to visit this slum often because she had a daughter living here. She promised to find Salma a suitable job.

One day, she took Salma with her to a redlight area. Salma was taken inside a house. The woman who had brought her there conversed with some other women, and then went away. Salma began to feel that she had been brought to a suspicious place. She told one of the women that she wanted to go home. The woman answered : "We have bought you for Rs 700. You cannot go anywhere." When she tried to argue she was told : "Look, you have to stay here so you might as



**View of part of a Bombay slum**

well submit quietly." She stayed quiet all night and thought of a plan. At 6.30 a.m., she went out on the pretext of getting milk for the baby. She left the baby behind, to allay their suspicions. As soon as she got on to the street she took a taxi and went straight to the police station. The police brought her in a van, rescued the baby and took some of the people in the brothel into custody.

The next day, Salma came to the Vahini office and told us the story. We decided to investigate further. When we went to the police station we found that a first information report had not been lodged. There was no record of the case in the police register. We talked to the police. They said they had received an anonymous letter earlier, informing them of this particular racket. They said they had beaten up the people concerned but had been unable to extract any information about the racket.

Salma was afraid to name the woman who had sold her. We did not press her to do so, because we knew that her life would be endangered and we would not be able to ensure her safety. Even when she went to the police station with us,

people in the slum questioned her. We tried to find her a place in an institution but were unsuccessful. Finally, she said she would prefer to return to her mother in Bangalore. So we got her a ticket and sent her off. Thus all that was achieved was that she was saved. We could not touch the racketeers. People say they have often complained against them to the police but no action has been taken.

*Do you face opposition from men when you organise women ?*

When we organise women to demand land for slumdwellers from the government, men encourage us and tell us how we should conscientise the women. But when we raise other questions like that of wife beating, we do encounter opposition.

We decided that when a man beats his wife, all the slum women should collect and stop him. One night, a man began to beat his wife. He is a railway employee. His wife cuts *supari* at home. He is in the habit of stripping her and beating her mercilessly. Women immediately collected and tried to stop him. When he resisted they dragged him out of the house. But later that night, at

about 2 a.m., when everyone had gone to sleep, this man got up and began to beat his wife again, saying: "Now I will see how other women come to rescue you." He was in a very vindictive mood and beat her badly. It was a good half hour before the other women arrived to stop him.

After this experience we sat and discussed the matter. We felt that we had not adequately foreseen the possible consequences of our action programme. We had stopped the man once but as a result he had beaten his wife even more. The problem could be solved only if the man felt that he would have to face some social pressure. So far, we had discussed the issue only amongst women. The men did not think that wife beating was wrong. So we felt that we would have to create social pressure.

*When you say social pressure in this instance, don't you mean male pressure ?*

I don't mean to underestimate the women's action. It is important that the women were able to come together and take action. But what next ? A culture has to be created wherein such a man will feel pressurised. Until that happens I do not think this problem can be solved.

*How did you set about doing that ?*

We tried but we did not succeed. We tried to start a dialogue with everyone but we could not continue it. One reason was that we were not able to work as intensively as was needed. We do not have enough full timers. We had taken up a lot of work in different areas and could not pay equal attention to all. The dialogue we did have did not seem to take much effect. Men would say in the meeting that beating was wrong but in practice no change was visible. We were not able to create a cultural environment.

*You are a Hindu and most people in Tulsiwadi are Muslims. Do you face hostility because of this ?*

No, never. In any case, Hindu-Muslim clashes do not take place amongst them. During riots, the area

becomes somewhat tense but there are no clashes between local people.

*But you said that even the, "children have communal feelings ?*

Yes, the feelings are there in their minds but clashes do not take place. Perhaps because the Muslims are dominant in this slum, the Hindus remain quiet. And neither side has any organised force on communal lines. The feelings are there nevertheless.

We do discuss the question. When riots took place in Moradabad we had a long discussion. I said: "I am a Hindu. Does this trouble you in any way ?" They said: "With you it is different." Yet I do feel that if a Muslim girl activist comes to work with us, it will make a difference. They will prefer to talk to her.

*Do you find many differences between the different slums ?*

Broadly, there is no major difference. But I think it is easier to create social pressure on questions like wife beating in a smaller slum where there is a more homogeneous community.

Tulsiwadi is a very big, heterogenous slum. The population is predominantly Muslim and most of the women work at home. They take in piece work from factories, such as filling ink in ball point refills, cutting *supari*, packing pins or making *rakhis*. This work is very low paid. They earn about Rs 50 a month. Their husbands work as fruit vendors, taxi drivers or pickpockets or coolies. Most of the people are from Azamgarh in UP. A few women work as domestic servants or vegetable vendors.

But the slum in Mulund is smaller. There are about 40 huts. Here, the women go out to earn while the men stay at home. The women are *pheri walis*—they exchange steel vessels for old clothes. They earn about Rs 350 a month. The men mend the clothes which are then sold to big traders. These people were originally a nomadic tribe of Maharashtra. The women are more aggressive than the Muslim women in Tulsiwadi. But this does not mean that

they beat their husbands or even that they resist their husbands' beating. They think that it is wrong for a woman to catch hold of her husband's hand to stop him from beating her. In this slum, we have built up pressure against wife beating. If a man beats his wife, the women catch him and take him to the police who lock him up for a night. In other places, we have found that the wife feels very bad if her husband is locked up but here this does not happen. The women scold the man and boycott him. Wife beating does stop for a few days at a time but it is not eradicated.

*Are there liquor dens here too ?*

Not inside the slum. We had been holding regular meetings against wife beating. One day, some outsiders set up a liquor den inside the slum. We discussed the matter and decided that it would have an adverse effect on women so we would not let it remain in the slum. We spoke to the owners who said they had bribed the police Rs 300. They said they were willing to close the den if we raised this sum for them. The women said : "If you bribed the police, that is none of our business. We can't get you the money but we will break up the den." Before taking direct action we thought we should complain to the police. So we took a demonstration to the police station. The police brought all the women in a van and smashed the den.

But later that night, the owners brought hired ruffians to beat up the women. We, the activists, had gone home. But the women were prepared to fight back. They had pinches of chilli powder to throw in the attackers' eyes. Fortunately, the clash did not take place because some men went and asked for police security. The police came and took away the ruffians.

But we felt that we were at fault because we ought to have given more thought to the possible consequences of our action. We had not prepared the women to face an attack. We went home and the women were left to face the

music. Had they not been prepared for the attack, the courage they had built up with such difficulty would have subsided and it would have been far harder to build up courage a second time, after such a setback.

*Did the women in Daisal discuss the land question ?*

Yes, we did and we made lists of the slum dwellers. When we discuss the question we say that the land should be registered in women's names.

*How did you develop this understanding ?*

From the Bodhgaya struggle. (This struggle of agricultural labourers for land was organised by the Vahini and ended up by demanding redistribution of land in the names of women labourers. See Manushi No. 14). We said that if women are involved in the struggle and get the land in their names they will not be so pressurised.

However, though we discussed this in our meetings, we did not reach the stage of raising the demand with the administration.

*How many female headed house-holds are there in the slums where you work ?*

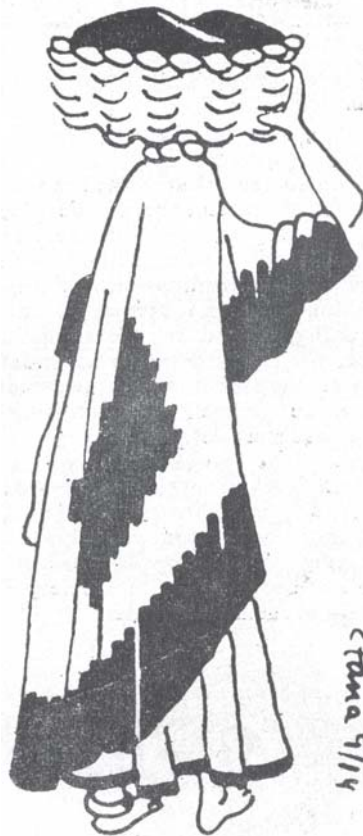
There must be at least 15 percent. In the smaller slums, where the community is a compact one, women do not live alone because it is difficult for them to resist social pressures. But in big and unorganised slums like Daisal there are several women who live on their own or with their children, after their husbands abandon them. But they are much more insecure.

One woman whose husband used to beat her was told by him to get out of the house. I encouraged her, saying it was better to leave him. But she said: "So you say, but now at least only one man beats me. If I leave him, every man will try to become my master, and will come knocking on my door at night." I could not find an answer to this.

In Daisal, there was a woman, Parvati, who stayed alone. Her husband had left her because she had no child. She was gang raped one night. She went to the police station and reported it. Then she

rang us up and we went there. The case is now in court. She had a child as a result of the rape. There are many instances in Tulsiwadi too of women being molested. Women say they prefer not to live alone because ruffians will not let them survive.

*So, apart from fear of community*



*pressure it is also fear of molestation by ruffians which compels women to get married. But why are married women not molested ?*

Molestation of married women is not socially sanctioned. But when a woman is living without a man, every man thinks that he is sanctioned to treat her as he likes.

On the one hand, when a middle class or lower middle class woman is raped we insist that she should be socially accepted. Here, we do not face the problem of social ostracism. On the other hand, we face a problem in that molestation is not treated as a serious issue. When Parvati's case was

discussed in the meeting, the women did not seem to feel that anything very serious had happened. They seemed to accept that this does happen, it is part of life. We had to emphasise the seriousness of the issue. The insecurity in the slum is so great that molestation is not seen as a significant matter.

On the one hand, women are exploited in a rigid culture. On the other, they are also exploited in an atmosphere where there is no culture. In unorganised slums where no culture has developed, women are not rigidly segregated or secluded but they have no status at all. It is socially accepted that a woman can be used as a commodity by any man. The only way to get security is to live with a man.

*I am wondering if you have ever suggested that if two or three women live together instead of each woman living alone they would have more security than has a woman who lives with a husband who routinely beats her up ?*

I never really thought of suggesting it.

I definitely think of such a way of life for myself but not for those women, perhaps because of the many problems, and also because this is not a socially accepted way of life.

*But if it is suggested, do you think there will be more security possible for single women ?*

Yes, certainly. I have noticed that even two women living together makes an appreciable difference. Parvati was raped when she was alone. Her mother used to come occasionally and stay with her. I felt that if her mother had been there that night she would not have been raped. So the presence of another woman makes for more security. And this will, also lead to building the idea that a woman can live on her own without a man. A man is not indispensable.

*Well, at least they won't be beaten. A husband may be sought for security but he may make the woman miserable. One woman is not socially sanctioned to beat another. Do you think you could suggest this ?*

Yes, now that you have suggested it I think it should be tried. I had not thought of it before. I had thought of institutions such as cooperatives but not of two women living together. This is possible but of course economic stability will be necessary otherwise they will face a lot of problems.

*How do you see your own life ?*

I have not taken a definite decision nor have I decided to get married. I do not think I will marry soon. I would like to live with a comrade with whom I can share my life.

It could be a woman or a man. This work is such that one needs to share, to discuss, to evaluate together. The organisation is there, of course, but it is also good to live in a group. We have come out of the family structure but this does not mean we think a human being should live alone. A group is very necessary for an individual's development.

*As a woman, do you face problems within the organisation ?*

The organisation has an understanding of women's problems so one does not face difficulty in raising these problems but as an individual, an independent woman, one does have trouble. It is not easy to be accepted as a woman with her own independent thinking. Because I am a woman, my thinking is not treated as fully mature or significant. People usually think I must be under the intellectual influence of some man or other.

*Do you think women activists in fact develop independent thinking ?*

Yes, there are two or three who are not dependent on any boy. Their thinking may not be very clear because they have not had much exposure. The women's question is being raised on a wider level and this has affected the organisation too.

I feel that within political groups people are thinking about how we can get rid of our rigidity and be freer in physical relations. The marriage institution is being criticised. To consider these issues is a good thing but it also happens that in the flow of this thought,

boys do try to make use of girls. Boys cloak their motives in ideology. The argument is that if girls are really liberated they should not object to being physically approached by boys. I do not say this is a fault of our organisation. This question comes up in every organisation today. I think girls have to develop strength to resist, to give an ideological answer to the boys' misinterpretation of freedom and liberation.

*Do you feel any pressure to get married ?*

No, not within the organisation.

I also feel that often, an unbalanced atmosphere develops inside the organisation between boys and girls. Since the girls face discrimination and oppression in every sphere of their daily lives, and in the organisation too they have a secondary place, they feel that they must raise the women's question forcefully at least within the organisation. The boys are not able to understand this. They think that the girls are obsessed with this one issue and can think of nothing else. They accuse the girls of



not looking at society in a comprehensive manner.

I feel it is for the girls to take the initiative in this matter and to right the balance. We have to be more effective, in order to establish the importance of the women's question within the organisation. If the boys refuse to see its importance we should forcefully reject their point of view.

*What kind of future do you see for your work ?*

My initial romanticism has dissolved. This is a good thing. At first, I used to

think change was imminent. Then came a phase of frustration when I felt that nothing could be achieved. Now I have brought myself to a stage when I feel that the change I want will not come about in the foreseeable future but certain actions do have some effect. The problem will not be solved in five or 10 or even 20 years. Nevertheless, each small action is a step forward. So the phase of frustration is over.

*How do you feel your work has affected you as a person ?*

Ever since I have begun to think about women's situation, I have become more independent. I feel like a full individual. I have developed creatively, or so it seems to me. When I work amongst women I get a lot of strength. The organisation in which I work is supportive, and when I work with women I can identify with those women and they can identify with me. That is a very good feeling.

*What are the areas that you think need to be concentrated on, in future ?*

There is an acute shortage of women activists. It is much easier to organise adivasi and dalit women in villages than to organise middle class women. We tried to involve college students in Bombay in our work but we found it very difficult.

*But there are groups of activist middle class women in Bombay, are there not ?*

Yes there are, but those women are no longer living in middle class society. They have broken away from it, just as I have. What that society says about us or thinks of us no longer affects us. Therefore, what we do does not deeply affect the middle class society from which we have come. Middle class women do approach women's organisations when they have marital problems. They come as individual victims and we may take up their cases but they are not able to work with us in a sustained manner.

We have to evaluate our work and find out how we can involve middle class women in a more comprehensive way in our organisations and our political work.