

International Women's Day Rally

ON Sunday, March 10, 1985, Saheli, Ankur and some other groups organised a rally in celebration of international women's day. About 300 women and a few men walked in procession from Shivaji Park through Paharganj, Chawri Bazar, Chandni Chowk, to Red Fort parade ground, where a public meeting was held, attended by about 800 people, including a large number of men.

The rally focused on "Communalism, violence and women." The demonstrators, carrying colourful placards, stopped at street corners to sing songs, raise slogans and distribute leaflets. Unfortunately, the markets were closed but there were many onlookers, passers by as well as people peering through windows and from rooftops.

At the public meeting, short speeches were made on women and law, women and religion, and the need for women's unity. These were interspersed with lively group songs which were the most attractive feature of the day. Two plays were put up—*Patan* by students and teachers of Miranda House women's college, and *Dharm Aur Aurat* by Saheli, Ankur and Action India workers. The first, although well acted, was disappointing in that it consisted of a series of scenes of violence, and conveyed the depressing message that our own moral decline (*patan*) is the origin and the consequence of such violence. Human beings emerged as rather mindless, unlovable and unloving creatures.

The second play, vibrantly acted, fast moving and witty, showed how religious practices are used by men to repress and confine women, but how some women do resist such pressures. It ended with the message that if women manage to unite, this resistance can be strengthened. Many of the participants joined the actors in dancing to the song which closed the play and the day's proceedings : "*Dhirey dhirey ai liai chetna*" (Awareness has come to us

gradually, Now we will not stop, whatever happens... Since women are half of India, when we arise, the country will move forward.-")

The singing and dancing managed to infuse new meaning into popular forms of celebration without being stridently propagandist. This, I felt, was something of an achievement. The focus on communalism was also a significant choice, coming in the wake of the Delhi riots. The rally had been preceded by several days of small meetings, singing, speaking and putting up plays in localities that had been badly hit by the riots.

However, I felt that the tendency throughout the proceedings was to blame

were: a uniform personal law; severe punishment of rioters; complete rehabilitation of riot victims, especially women. There was no mention of the fact that the ruling party and government had actively organised the recent riots.

General criticism of the police was voiced, but without linking it to any criticism of those who wield political power. Thus the conclusion that emerged was that people are to blame, and what is needed is a change of heart. While not denying the truth of this, I felt that it did not correspond to most people's experience in the recent riots. It was clear to most Delhi residents that the violence was politically manipulated and organised, not a spontaneous outburst of the com-munal hatred in our hearts, even though this hatred did fuel the fire.

Also, if we are not very alert, a demand like the one for abolition of



religion and the religious establishment for most of the ills that woman is heir to. The four page leaflet, for instance, stated that religion builds barriers between people and creates violence of which women are the primary victims, and that religious forces such as those reviving *sad* in Rajasthan or those ruling Muslim countries, are the most dangerous forces we have to combat. The anti Sikh riots were not referred to but the demands

personal laws can end up imposing a Hindu majority version of secularism on minority groups, which is what the ruling party is, in any case, doing. A slogan like "*Char ghar diya jalayenge, Jati bhed mitayenge*" reveals this insidious danger. The *diya* is a tra-ditional Hindu symbol. While trying to wipe out communal ill will, we must be careful that we do not wipe out minority identities.

—Ruth Vanita