



Struggling At Every Step

—Pheriwalis in Bombay

This is an account of the lives and working conditions of pheriwais in Bombay, by two women activists of the Chhatra Yuva Sangharsh Vahirji who have worked in Bombay slums for some years.

“WHEN my husband died, I felt I was better off. Even if I eat dry bread, at least I eat it in peace. What did I get from marriage but scoldings and beatings? My life was spent that way. Now that my husband is dead, I sleep in peace, not in pain.” So says Janabai. What are the pressures under which she lives and works?

Janabai earns her living by working as a hawker. She lives in Bholewadi stum in Mulund, a suburb of Bombay. Janabai spent her childhood wandering from village to village with her parents. As an infant, she was carried around, strapped on her mother’s back. Later, she spent years helping her parents eke out a living. She was married at the age of 18. And after marriage, Janabai had to bear child after child, put up with her husband’s beatings, and also work as a street hawker. Her children were brought up as she had been. Is this the predicament of Janabai alone? Let us look at her community.

The history of every child of this community begins at the police station. As soon as a child is born, it must be registered at the police station. This is because the British rulers had declared the whole tribe a criminal tribe. The British rulers have gone but the tribe remains so registered in police records.

This tribe is landless and has no place in the caste system. In the village economy, they earned a livelihood by roaming from one village to another, doing odd jobs such as mending torn clothes, vending herbal medicines and

entertaining people with their songs and dances. They would eat the leftovers that people gave them. When the self sufficient village economy was destroyed by the impact of British colonial rule, the livelihood of such tribes diminished. Some of them were forced to take to petty theft. The government then declared them criminals. Their nomadic culture facilitated their entry into the profession of street hawking.

Today, these tribals are eligible for reservations since they are classified as a backward community, but they have not been able to benefit from the reservation policy. They make a living in big cities by hawking balloons, spices, medicines. Some of them exchange utensils for old clothes. They eke out a meagre livelihood by selling the old clothes that they collect in this way. Clothes which are in a wearable condition are mended and sold in nearby villages. Clothes which are not fit to be worn are sold to merchants and are later used as rags to clean machinery in factories. Women do the job of exchanging utensils for clothes and of selling clothes to the traders. Men and women share the task of mending clothes.

In this community, women bear the financial responsibility of supporting the family. These women look assertive, even aggressive. They smoke in public and use abusive language. They look as if no one would be able to suppress them. But their real life conditions belie their appearance.

The vending business begins with a

loan, When a woman gets into business, she has to buy a set of utensils on credit because she does not have ready cash to pay for it. This set contains an assortment of utensils so that the customer has a choice. The woman has to pay interest to the creditor at the rate of 25 percent a week. Thus, in a month, the interest adds up to 100 percent. Shakuntala says: “I have spent 10 years in the trade but I have not been able to pay off the interest accumulated on the original loan. Until one can pay back the interest, one is forced to buy utensils from the creditor and he charges higher prices.”

Why do these women not take a bank loan? They are not eligible for bank loans because they do not *have pukka* huts or steady employment. “My mother worked under the same conditions and I am still paying off the loan taken by her”, says Lata. All the money that the women manage to save is thus spent on paying off the interest on the initial loan. It is impossible for the women to get out of debt unless they get outside assistance.

“When we go on our rounds, the watchmen stop us outside apartment buildings. To get into the buildings, we have to pay off the watchmen on a regular basis. These payments add up to as much as Rs 200 a year. And we also have to put up with molestation from them”, says Draupadi, who has been working in this trade since the age of seven.

To escape harassment by the police, Draupadi now sells off the clothes to a trader even though he pays very little.

He buys clothes from the women at the rate of Rs 2 a kilo and resells them at the rate of Rs 4 a kilo. She explains : "Even though we get less money this way, we prefer it because we escape police harassment and molestation. Earlier, we used to go to small towns near Bombay to sell clothes but now we have given up that practice. We had to stay there overnight and it became difficult to save our bodies from these fiends."

When the women went to near-by towns during festivals or fairs, they used to put up tents on the roadside and May there. Male passers by used to harass them. Now they usually sell the clothes to traders or at weekly markets in Bombay suburbs. They have to pay a fee before they are allowed to sell at the weekly markets. They pay Rs 2 but are given a receipt for 75 paise only. Thus the women are trapped between economic exploitation by traders on the one hand and physical molestation by stray men and police on the other.

Such is their professional life. Now let us look at their social existence. A woman's day begins with the cooking fire and ends with her husband's beatings. Most of the women earn and also run the house. The men have nothing to do but drink and beat their wives. Alka of Bholewadi says : "We teach the girls the trade when they are very young so that they will be able to earn enough to feed themselves. If my mother had not taught me the trade, how would I have" survived ?" Girls are not sent to school. If a girl does not earn, how will she feed her husband and children ?

Most children do not go to school. When women go on their rounds, they strap to their backs the infants who are under two years of age, and take them along. The older children play around all day in the slums. They are fed in the evening when their mothers return. "If we look after the children, how shall we fill our stomachs ?" asks Shaku, "My mother too used to leave me on my own, and go to work. When I was seven years old, I was raped. But what could my mother do ? If she had stayed with me

day and night, how would we have been fed ?" One might think it strange that Shakuntala speaks so casually of having been raped. But the cruel reality of helplessness lies behind this casualness.

The woman earns and runs the house. But the hut is in the husband's name. Kamlabai spent her life's savings to buy a rickshaw. When she was asked in whose name the rickshaw was, she

accepted oppression and torture. They have the strength to fight back. One expression of this strength is their attempt to form a cooperative. The women of Bholewadi want to form a cooperative so that they can buy utensils at wholesale rates and escape harassment by traders and policemen. When a meeting was held in the slum, it became apparent that the women wanted



A woman selling old clothes on a pavement

replied : "In my son's name. If my husband had been alive, it would have been in his name." The people of this, community never had any property or possessions. Even today, they have very few possessions, but whatever they do manage to collect is in the control of the men, even though it is the women who toil to collect it.

Now that the community is taking to a settled way of life, it is acquiring certain customs which had no place in its culture. The community never had any wealth so there was no question of dowry. In recent years, the custom has been growing and it appears that it will grow still further. Hirabai says: "Amongst us, nothing was ever demanded of a bride's father. But now utensils and clothes and sometimes even a hut is demanded."

The women have never easily

the cooperative primarily to ensure their physical safety while the men's chief concern was earning more money.

The men thought that a co-operative would help them sell clothes straight to the factories at double the price they get from the middlemen. But the women were more interested in ensuring their physical safety. They wanted to get identity cards as cooperative members so that they would be, authorised to sit in marketplaces and enter buildings without harassment by police and watchmen. So they said they did not mind postponing the question of augmenting their earnings but they wanted identity cards right away. Thus the meeting ended in a dispute between men and women since they had different priorities. Thus these women have to fight at every step and at every level to get their basic rights.

(translated from Hindi)