

An Invigorating Experience

—Women's Fair At Tilonia

A unique *mahila mela* or women's fair was organised between October 1 and 4, at Tilonia, Ajmer district, Rajasthan, by the Social Work And Research Centre, Tilonia. It had all the ingredients of a traditional village fair, including drummers, dancing, giant wheel and songs. But it had a purpose other than merchandise and it was meant exclusively for women.

Most of the 600 women who came were from rural Rajasthan. There were also contingents from Kerala, Andhra, Haryana and Himachal. The majority of women from Rajasthan had come with the *prachetas* of the Women's Development Programme of the state government (see *Manushi* No. 29).

The details of the *mela* had not been predecided. This enabled the participants to be equally involved in the day to day programme of the *mela*. After consultations in a huge *pandal*, women broke up into groups to discuss issues ranging from how to struggle for equal wages, and how to obtain some control over landed property to drunkenness among men. There were also groups which painted, made posters, improvised plays, composed songs. Language presented a slight problem. But translations were made from Hindi to Marwari and from south Indian languages to Hindi with the help of women who were multilingual.

Every morning, a *prabhat pheri* or dawn procession was taken through a nearby village. Women of these villages thus became aware that hundreds of women were participating in such a *mela*. Many at Tilonia village joined the procession, many looked at the men for permission. Plays prepared during the afternoon were put up at night after dinner. There was dancing before lunch and after lunch almost every day. Women danced

each time the drums beat. There was no self consciousness, and women danced with an instinct for rhythm.

Many of the village women said they had, for the first time, come across others of their kind. As Mangi of Tilonia remarked, she had not been aware that women with varied customs and habits existed or that they faced problems as she did. Tribal women from Kerala said they had heard of distant lands but had never seen women from there. When women of Himachal narrated their experience of forming Mahila Mandals and waging a successful struggle to get loans to buy buffaloes, many women expressed a desire to know more and a separate group was formed to discuss the process of forming such Mandals.

There were about 100 women from urban women's groups, particularly from Delhi and from Rajasthan towns. There was a valuable interaction between these and rural women.

While the stated intention seemed to be that ideas should not be imposed upon rural women, things did not work so simply. I felt that at times when some intervention by women activists would have been desirable they refrained from making it while, at other times, they took decisions without consulting the rural women. For example, during the course of the fair, a Muslim man from a nearby village brought his 12 year old daughter who had been raped by a 22 year old Jat of the same village, and sought our help in dealing with the case. He had already been in touch with the SWRC workers but the police had hushed up the case and the medical report had sought to establish that the girl was not a virgin and was of loose character. The case had been closed by the police on this basis. About 300 women sat together and discussed the issue. The consensus reached here, where rural

women were in a majority, was that we should go to the village and publicly disgrace the rapist by blackening his face. The rural women acclaimed this suggestion, and expressed their complete lack of faith in the police, administration and other authorities.

However, in a later smaller meeting of women activists, it was decided that a silent procession would be taken to the SDO and a memorandum presented to him, demanding reopening of the case and appointment of a medical jury. The women activists felt this was the wiser course of action since the Jat community, if angered, could victimise the girl and her father. This rethinking was not referred back to the larger group of women and the new decision was implemented on October 4. The SDO promised to take action within a month, but it was clear that approaching him was not the indigenous rural form of protest. It was an urban form of protest. Whereas throughout the *mela*, there was an emphasis on rural women expressing themselves through their own idiom, like plays, dances, songs, the form of protest that came to be chosen was not their own.

On the other hand, there were certain situations when I felt women activists could have fruitfully intervened to give constructive direction to prevalent perceptions but they did not do so. For instance, many of the plays put up centered on the relationship between mother, son and daughter-in-law. Each time, the mother-in-law was shown as the enemy. The role of the man in the patriarchal structure was completely overlooked. In one tableau, where the women tried to envision the family as "it should be" the son and daughter-in-law were shown going off to work while the mother-in-law minds their children at home. This can hardly be considered the ideal solution to family conflicts. I felt that in this case, the rural idiom could have been used to introduce new ways of perceiving experiences.

One Tilonia woman commented that the *mela* was a once in a lifetime experience. We hope regular *melas* of this kind can be organised to become a forum for women, and to grow as a part of their culture. □