

NIPANI is located on the border of Karnataka and Maharashtra. Famous for its special aromatic tobacco since the last century, it has risen to the status of a commercial town through its tobacco trade. It has a population of 40,000.

The strong aroma of tobacco fills one's nostrils as one alights from the bus at Nipani. Women in large numbers rush towards the factories at 8 a.m. every day. Again, between 10 a.m. and 12 noon other women come out from their homes with tins full of *bidis*, on their way to hand over the rolled *bidis* and to take raw material for the day's work.

The tobacco and *bidi* work is regarded as "women's work." Men have no regular work in Nipani. The only other industry is a small utensil factory. Some men work as coolies in the factories. Some are masons or plumbers working on contract basis while others migrate to the cities. Many of the women are single—some are widows, some are deserted and some are *devdasis* who are not allowed to marry.

There are 13 *bidi* rolling factories which offer raw material to be taken home. This is known as the *gharkhep* system. These factories produce labelled *bidis* and pay minimum wages as well as other benefits prescribed by the government. There are a few small factories producing unlabelled *bidis*. These do not have to pay excise on their production. Taking advantage of this, they pay less wages to their workers. Officially, there are 2,190 *bidi* workers, most of them women, in Nipani. In reality, there are many more, as this does not include the children who assist their mothers.

On an average, a woman is supposed to roll 1,000 *bidis* in eight hours. Without the help of their children, this target is impossible to reach.

There are 79 *bidi* tobacco processing factories in Nipani. There are 5,000 women working in them. Faced by the emergence of trade unions in Nipani, factory owners have opened factories in 21 small villages around the town.

## Divisions and Unity

### Dynamics of Organising Bidi And Tobacco Workers At Nipani

About 5,000 more women are employed here. The factories in the town work almost all the year round. Most of those in the countryside are seasonal.

*Bidi* tobacco processing operations have been carried out in Nipani for over a century. The methods of operation have undergone much transformation during the last 10 years. *Bidi* rolling which was a factory job has now become home based work. *Bidi* workers have a history of union activities since 1942.

Until 1976, all stages of *bidi* tobacco processing were manually performed by women. The work was an extension of the agricultural operation done in the field. The women did the transplanting, weeding, plucking and curing in the sun. The pounding, grading, sieving, winnowing of the cured leaves and the powdering of stems was also done by them in the factories. All these were traditional skills of women who form the backbone of the industry.



Women at a union meeting

## Mechanisation An Issue

The arrival of the first machine in 1976 upset the dynamics of the industry, created problems for women and resulted in the emergence of a militant tobacco workers' union. Until then, the processing work was seasonal and came to a standstill during the monsoon. Machines made it possible to process tobacco even during the monsoon.

The cutter machine, grading machine and grinding machine replaced the manual operations of beating, sieving and grading of the leaves, and pounding of the leaves and stalks. This semi mechanised process provided more days of work to a few workers but displaced many others. It also imposed a new rhythm on the work, to which the women were not accustomed. The appalling conditions of work, the destabilising effect of the machines and the threat to their jobs made women feel the need to organise. Today, the union called Chikodi Taluka Kamgar Mahasabha represents both *bidi* and tobacco workers, most of them women.

At present, the threat of further mechanisation confronts them. One completely automatic machine has already been installed in Nipani. This machine has raised the productive capacity of the unit to 30 times what it was when all work was manually done. If two more such machines are installed and if they are operated in three shifts, the number of women required would be reduced to 250. Besides, existing laws do not allow women to be employed in the second and third shifts. So they will be replaced by men.

Mechanisation has resulted in the transfer of the tobacco industry from the informal sector. Unionisation has furthered this process. The early demands of the union related to the formalisation of the status of the women workers, their employment cards, provident fund, leave wages, festival wages and so on. Later, the demand for bonus, which is negotiable each year, gave an edge to union activities. The

union also asked for layoff compensation. It filed suits in the court and won them.

Feeling threatened, the owners are trying to put up a common front. In the event of a strike, the owners close the factories. The automatic machine has



helped the owners who can get their tobacco processed on piece work basis from the new factory.

The union has now taken up the mechanisation issue seriously and has started collaborating with workers in Gujarat who form 80 percent of the total workforce in this industry. Pressure is being built up to stop further mechanisation.

It is possible, however, that if women are pushed on the path of usual trade union demands and methods, they will lose their jobs and be rendered destitute since no alternative employment is available. A well organised base of 7,000 women will disintegrate. Perhaps, therefore, the union needs to work out new strategies to deal with the situation of women workers which is in some respects different from that of men workers.

The union has given birth to other supportive structures. The pressure to initiate these activities came from the women workers. The union leader, Mr Subhash Joshi, a lecturer in a local college, admits that he got various

insights into women's lives because the workers have been so militant and open.

The multipurpose women's co-operative was set up to provide cheap and good grain and kerosene to women. A small savings scheme was set up to advance loans, to relieve women from the clutches of moneylenders. A creche programme has also been started. A transitional women's home to rehabilitate *devdasis* and other women having family problems is also planned. Informal counselling is given to women and nontraditional marriages are encouraged.

These multifarious activities undertaken by the union help women to feel empowered. In a sense, the women workers' trade union has become a women's organisation, taking up the challenge not only to redress economic grievances but also to change the personal lives of women.

However, there are several obstacles in the way of developing unity amongst women workers. If the leadership is sensitive to these contradictions, they can be overcome in the process of empowering the women and uniting them.

## Caste And Community

Both Muslims and Hindus work in the *bidi* and tobacco industry. Very few Muslim men roll *bidis*. It is mainly the women who do this work. Fewer Muslim than Hindu women are union members. Muslim women refrain from joining the union either because the *bidi* owner happens to be Muslim, or because of the pressure of their community. For example, when Chachi, who was a militant *bidi* worker in Samber factory, joined the union, her husband beat her, and the community jury threatened her with excommunication. Later, her husband decided to support her, at which point the jury withdrew the enquiry.

Although the Hindu women know that Muslim women face certain specific problems, Hindu women still feel bitter against those Muslim women who do not join the union.

Hindu workers are divided mainly on the basis of caste. Twelve percent of *bidi* workers are “un-touchable” women. As the work is done at home, high caste women rarely meet the dalit women socially.

Among tobacco workers, 50 per-cent are “untouchable?.” Separate pitchers of drinking water were kept for “untouchable” and high caste women, but the union is slowly making a dent in this custom. They sit separately for lunch. They do not exchange food. This is accepted by the “untouchables” — they do not make an issue of it.

In another incident, one woman, while accusing another, made a generalised statement on caste lines, namely : “These mahars always betray us.” Such incidents reinforce caste bias and hinder unity.

Amongst tobacco workers, 30 percent of the women come from nearby villages. Their interest in union activities is secondary. They have to hurry home right after work and miss union meetings. Some have land or cattle and are not solely dependent on factory work. Women in Nipani town feel that women from the villages cannot be relied upon,

without a patron, with no one to go to. The real meaning of *Rand* is widow. *Undagi* or *Uthaval*— women who are not ready to tolerate ill treatment by the husbands and start staying independently, are regarded as flirts, loose women. The term *Chawchal* is used to refer to a free and daring woman. She is belittled for having no concern for her family.

A *Bajarbasavi* — a woman who deserts the family .to escape oppressive conditions, and who, without a divorce, starts living with another man, sometimes in a love relationship, is regarded as a prostitute. Thus, all the terms of abuse used against a woman are based on her deviation from the ideal *sati* situation.

For example, one woman accused another of having relations with the factory clerk, and reported the matter to the factory owner. She thus belittled her own colleague in the eyes of the owner, as also in the eyes of other colleagues. The union leader, Subhash Joshi, was successful in pointing out this error.

In another instance, a young woman, who had broken with her husband, used to meet a man at lunchtime whom she married later. The owner instigated the women : “If this continues, people will say all of you are bad women. This must stop.” Some women came to the union, asking whether a resolution should be passed for her retrenchment. Through discussions, they understood that they should not interfere in their colleagues’ private lives and should not play into the hands of the owner who took advantage of divisions amongst workers.

Many such incidents keep occurring, creating bitterness and jealousy. The proportion of single women is rather high in Nipani and their “deviant” sexual behaviour is regarded with disapproval.

Surprisingly, *devdasis* are absolved from traditional sexual norms and are not looked down upon by the community. They do not marry, but they may have male sexual partners. They may also change their partners and have children by different men. *Devdasis* are respected



**Sushila Yeobaker and Radhabhai Chavalgikar, bidi workers, who were in the forefront of the 1976 struggle**

But dalit women do feel humiliated when caste identification is used to reprimand or abuse them. For example, in the Kiran Tobacco Processing Ltd., the personnel manager, in order to subdue two militant workers, gave them low status work. Once, he asked them to sweep the floor for eight days. Their own shopfloor leader taunted them : “They have been asked to sweep as if they are mahars.” One of the two was a mahar, the other a high caste Muslim. The matter went to the union. It was pointed out that their anger should have been vented on the personnel manager and not on one another.

while village women nurture their own bias against city women, regarding them as “loose”, simply because many of the women in Nipani are single.

### **Deviancy Frowned On**

Even more than caste or rural urban divisions, the ingrained patriarchal values cause disunity. A loyal obedient wife, however much maltreated, is regarded as the ideal woman or *sati*. Anyone outside of this ideal framework is bad. The grading of her “bad” behaviour depends on the kind of relations she has with a man.

*Rand* in the derogatory sense is a woman not claimed by a man, a woman

and have been leaders at the shop floor in three factories. They are looked upon as a separate category and their relatively freer sexual life is accepted, whereas similar behaviour by other women is not accepted.

### New Visions

The union and other informal networks are making an impact on the lives of the women. Single women, of whom there are many in Nipani, feel worried about their old age. They feel that the union should take the responsibility of setting up old age homes. One woman I met was paying Rs 2 a month so that they would undertake her funeral rites when she died. She felt that the caste jury keeps control over individuals by taking sole charge of such essential rites. She wanted the union to develop as an alternative structure on which individuals can depend.

There is a sense of solidarity amongst the workers, who rally together to help out colleagues in distress. I found that two women were cooking for and physically cleaning two old colleagues who had become completely disabled. In another case, when a woman left her husband, and her parents proved unhelpful, her colleagues contributed money and bought utensils to help her set up a separate establishment.

The mechanisation of the production process and the displacement of women has provided a strong impetus for women to think about new ways of organising the production process. The women are keen that the union should start its own factory in which as many women as possible can get jobs. They want to develop their own brand of *bidis* so that the factory owners will be eliminated. The women, at present, can think only in terms of this particular production process.

Once the women start questioning patriarchy in different areas of their lives, the patriarchal structures even within their own union will become apparent to them. At that point, the women will have been truly empowered to deal with their own lives.

(abridged and edited by Manushi)

## “Where Do I Belong”?

### Profile Of A Union Worker

SUSHILA NAIK is a tobacco processing worker at Nipani, district Belgaum, Karnataka.

I first met her in 1983 during my visit to Nipani. Sushila had come to the union office to deposit her membership fee. The tobacco processing factory where she worked had 79 women workers. Most of them were middle aged. Sushila was much younger. She was illiterate like the others. Yet, she had been elected their leader. She had a distinct personality. She had confidence, determination and strength. Her speech was forceful, her face mobile and her body had grace.

Sushila was a *devdasi*. Because she developed a *jat*, or matted hair, during her childhood, she was dedicated to goddess Yellamma. I was told that she was a celibate who took pride in staying untouched by man. *Devdasis* are not allowed to marry as they are wedded to god Jattidagni. But they can have relationships with men. Keeping a *yulwa*, an officially accepted man, is a common custom amongst *devdasis*. Sushila never kept one.

She was proud of being a leader. The tobacco workers' union in Nipani was formed in April 1980. Sushila's factory was one of the last to be unionised. There was one of the few factories that operated throughout the year. Most of the others closed during the monsoon. To have year round employment, however hard the conditions of work, was considered a boon.

Work went on for 16 hours a day without payment for overtime. Attendance registers were not maintained. Hence, no industrial laws were applied. Minimum wages, provident

fund, casual leave, festival holidays, paid annual leave, were terms nobody had heard of.

Women were just beasts of burden. Their work was mainly manual, carried on inside dark godowns. Their only joy was singing in chorus while doing certain jobs. It gives them a feeling of togetherness. But when the process,



**Sushila, rolling bidis, after losing her factory job**

became semimechanised, the cutter machine and sieving machine made so much noise and threw up so much dust that singing became impossible.

The situation worsened for Sushila and her colleagues when the owner shifted his factory four kilometres away on the Pune Bangalore road. No travel facility or allowance was provided. They could no longer return home during the lunch hour.

When 5,000 women workers in Nipani

got organised, it was impossible for Sushila and her fellow workers to resist the pressure. Sushila took the initiative in forming the union. Gradually, she obtained for the workers all the facilities to which they were entitled. She recounted an incident when she had exposed the duplicity practised by the factory owner. He maintained two separate registers—one for the labour inspector, one for his own use so as to avoid paying provident fund, lay off compensation and so on. Many women were not listed in the former register. Whenever the factory inspector came, these women were asked to disperse. Once, when the inspector was visiting the factory, Sushila signalled to him and pointed at the registers hidden below the desk.

The inspector forced the owner to open the books and all those excluded from the register were made permanent with effect from 1980, the year the union had been formed. Of course, this was not a full compensation as most of them had been working since the inception of the factory in 1966.

Sushila and her colleagues used to call the factory owner “Anna.” The relations between them were those of landlord and tenant. Sushila and the others regarded their “Anna” as “god” for some time.

But not for too long. For two successive years, they had to fight for a minimum bonus of eight percent. The second year, the owner locked the workers inside the factory and started issuing payments without proper notice or negotiations.

Sushila was quick to see the owner’s real intentions and managed to send a message to the union office. Her responsibility was two-fold. First, she had to convince her colleagues not to accept the paltry sum offered to them. Second, she had to get them released from the trap. After this incident the women staged a *dharna* outside the owner’s Office in the marketplace. Each time the negotiations broke down, not as much on the issue of bonus as on the issue of Sushila’s victimisation. To the



**Sushila setting out for a protest rally. The placard reads “Dare you touch this godown, plastered with the workers’ blood?”**

owner, Sushila had become the symbol of rebellion among the workers. He became revengeful towards her. But her fellow workers were determined not to lose her. The bonus was granted after four days.

The union appeared to have won the struggle. But when the factories reopened after Diwali, Sushila’s factory owner seemed reluctant to reopen his. The women waited for one and a half months. In the end, the dispute was referred to the industrial tribunal. The workers remained unemployed.

Sushila matured. She became a true leader. She spoke at public meetings, ignoring the taunts of onlookers of middle class background who could not tolerate an illiterate young *devdasi* assuming a leadership role.

She had to build up the morale of her fellow workers who felt insecure. Twice the owner came with *lathis* to beat them. Once, a, murderous assault was made on their leader, Subhash Joshi.

The owner restarted his factory under a new name, keeping these women out. Sushila organised picketing which turned out to be bitter and bloody. Sushila’s two brothers who had white-collar jobs, did not support her.

Both she and her mother were jobless. But she did not lose courage. Today, she rolls *bidis* and her mother works as an agricultural labourer.

Once, I asked Sushila : “What would you have done if you had not joined the union ? How would you have found an outlet for your talents ?” Her reply was illuminating : “Probably, my talents would not have been discovered. I would not have remained a worker. Since I have a good singing voice, I would have joined a group of singing *devdasis*. They make good money singing goddess Yellamma’s songs at various ceremonies. People invite them to give blessings. My family would have liked my doing that. There is so much pressure on me.”

“Doesn’t your family admire you, now that you have acquired the status of a leading union activist ? Women workers admire you a great deal.”



“My status is accepted within a limited circle. Fighting, squatting on the street, giving speeches, is regarded by most as unseemly behaviour. I would be admired if I went into a trance and told people their future. I am pulled in opposite directions. The union people push me to take part in agitations. They want me to sing union songs. I like that too. I want to belong to them. On the other hand, when I go home I feel like conforming with my people. They never allow me to forget that I am a *devdasi*, especially now that our struggle has petered out and I have lost my job.” □