

## MAIDSERVANT!

The living, talking miracle behind the bright utensils, clean clothes and sparkling floors in thousands, millions of houses. She strains her body from morning to night, accepts whatever salary she is given, and subsists on cold, stale food. Her day begins before sunrise and ends around midnight.

In Pune, only women work as part-time domestic servants. Countless families from famine-hit areas of Maharashtra come to the town seeking employment. These uneducated, rural women can find work only as servants. Usually, their husbands and father are given to drinking. Very few of these men have regular jobs. The level of family income being so low, the women often being sole supporters, they are unable to send their children to school. Girls, especially, are rarely educated because they have to help their mothers at work and at home.

### **Rs. 70 Salary, Rs. 30 House Rent**

Almost all the women work in at least three or four houses. The wages are very low – Rs. 10 a month for washing clothes and utensils in a family of two and Rs. 20 if there are four or five members. There is a 15-member family in Laxmi Park Colony which pays only Rs. 25 to the woman who washes clothes and utensils. The average monthly earning of a maidservant is Rs. 60. One woman in the Kothrud area earns Rs. 70 a month and pays Rs. 30 as rent for her hut.

They work from seven in the morning to five in the evening. The middle class colonies where they work consist of cheap highrise buildings constructed by building societies. Here many flats have a common washing place in the open. The maids have to work without protection from the rain and sun. The drains are badly constructed with small openings. In the rush hour when four women are washing together, the drain gets blocked. In the confusion, utensils

\* Translated from a report prepared for **Bayza in Marathi**

LATABHISE, LEELABHONSLE\*

# A SIGN OF THINGS TO COME

## Maidservants of Pune Organize

belonging to different families often get mixed up. If the neighbour who gets someone else's utensils does not return it, the maid is suspected of having stolen it and its cost is deducted from her wage.

When there is water shortage, the women have to manage with a little stored water and yet they get scolded if the vessels are not properly cleaned. Working in water all the time, the women develop chronic body aches, chills and colds. The employers economise by using the cheapest detergent powders which affects the skin of the women's



-Lydia Victor

hands and make it peel. When they scrub utensils, the salt and spices inflame these bruises.

The work has no clearly defined limits. Often, there are guests all the year round. The employers take it for granted that there will be guests so the women are not paid extra. So also, at festival time there are huge piles of utensils to be washed. Employers think that the left-over food given to the maid at festivals is enough compensation. Or a cup of tea

in the morning is the equivalent of a bonus. But do the maids get tea in every house? Very often, the tea is cold because no one feels like lighting the stove just to warm it up for the maid. And if she does not drink it, she is considered "proud"! Working conditions vary in different houses but this is not taken into consideration by employers. In many houses, the women have to carry the utensils down long flights of stairs to wash them in the common washing place. They are not paid extra for this burden. And they never, never get a holiday except when they go out of town. There is always the danger of losing their jobs on such occasions, unless they arrange for a friend to work as substitute.

### **Women Come Together**

About 12 years ago, maidservants in Pune had organized a strike. In February 1980, a near spontaneous strike erupted. Women had been talking about it for some time. On February 9, some of them stopped work. On the 10<sup>th</sup>, work stopped in Prabhat Road, Karve Road, Erandavana, Ganesh Nagar and Paud Phata areas. The women took out processions in the morning and afternoon. The next day, the newspapers carried reports and the strike spread through Pune. Nearly 2,000 women were on strike. The demands were: wage increase, two holidays a month, either a month's extra pay in cash or a sari once a year and paid medical leave.

Every night, meetings were held from 10 p.m. to 1 a.m. Many labour unions supported the strike. Demonstrations were staged in which the children also participated. Significantly, even when some employers granted the demands,

the women continued the strike for three more days in solidarity with those whose employers had not given in. So far, domestic servants have been easy to exploit precisely because of the fragmented nature of their labour. So this togetherness is a hopeful sign. An organization of domestic servants has been set up.

Many employers reacted with indignation and hostility. There were case of threats and dismissal. The women are planning collective action on this issue. However, a few employers who are themselves working women promptly raised the wages of their maids, welcoming the demand for holidays. The strike did provide occasion for many questions to be raised in the minds of middle class people regarding the similarity of their exploitation as white collar employees and that of the domestic servants. Even if only a few of them came to realize the justice of the maidservants demands, at least a process of widespread discussion and debate was initiated in Pune, particularly among housewives, who are the direct employers of the maids.

It is clear that the issues raised by this strike are not just issues of domestic servants. These women are also a section of the public who are hit hard by rising prices and scarcity. Their agitation is an important step forward in the people's struggle and is a sign of things to come.

## In Our Own Homes

Dear Sisters,

After reading the article on Rape, and after attending a protest meeting of the Forum against Rape, I was moved and felt like talking to my domestic help Rupa, who is more like my daughter. She is 16 years old. I explained to her how she can protect herself from any man by simply hitting him on his testicles. This is the most simple yet most effective way. It can produce an excruciating pain and the fellow may even faint because of it.

I am a single woman and I have had some bad experiences as a child, and I talked about them openly to Rupa. She then said "*Behn*, (sister), you will feel hurt, so I won't name the person, but in your own house, I have had such an experience." I begged her to tell me the name of the culprit, but she refused to reply. "You will feel hurt." So I asked her if it was my father. She was most horrified by it. There were tears in her eyes. She said, "*Behn*, don't talk about your father – he is a gem of a person." Then she said, "I will tell you only because otherwise you will carry wrong impressions about other gentlemen who have been coming to our place. The man in question is your uncle, who is old enough to be my grandfather." I asked her what he had done. One night when she was sleeping, he came into her room and put his hands over her face. She

woke up and was most frightened to see him doing this. He told her not to worry about anything; he would pay her well, etc. She said, "You go away otherwise I will make a noise and call *Behn*." He went away, and the whole night she kept awake. Then in future, she made it a point to see that her friends or someone or the other was in the house when this 70-years old uncle of mine came to visit me. And to think this is the same learned man who has been giving Rupa Rs. 50 a year for the past 2 years to help her sister with books! I told Rupa to give this Rs. 100 to **Manushi**. Her answer was, "*Behn*, I had told my mother not to accept that money\*. But she said, 'No, uncle is like your father, he cannot be having bad intentions. On the contrary, he is trying to help us.'" Our poor women are so gullible and innocent!

I wonder how many "Rupas are being molested by "*Pashwi*" (beastly) men! How many of them are fortunate enough like Rupa to avoid rape? I am going to ask her to learn Judo, and would like her to teach other domestic help too.

Shefali

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\* We received the money from Rupa with a beautiful letter in which she says: "My mind says that all the women of our country should be free... If you all come to this city do let us meet..."

## LUCKIER THAN I ?

Bitch, you are luckier than I,  
Blessed as you are  
With your instinctive schedules of  
passion-heat,  
Which your mate follows terminally;  
Unlike me,  
Who is hounded endlessly  
By the intellectual curiosities and  
perversities  
Of the human male – a game for any  
season.

Bitch, you are luckier than I,  
You can hold your stand against  
Unwanted suitors,  
Protected as you are  
With your primordial strength of fangs  
and claws;  
Unlike me –  
I am chained to the laws and norms of  
human "civilization".  
Bitch, you are luckier than I,

Careless and heedless as you are,  
Of your litter, saved indeed.  
Unlike me –  
I am eaten away  
By sentiment and attachment  
Not withstanding human reason.

- Kusum Gokern