

Trying to give Women their Due:

The Story of Vitner Village

by

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VITNER is a small village on the bank of the river Sopi, in Chopda *taluk* of Jalgaon district, Maharashtra. Only two buses a day come from the district headquarters, Jalgaon, to Vitner. For four months during the monsoon, the village is cut off from the outside world, as it gets surrounded by water and no bus can approach it. The villagers store up food to see them through these months.

Last year, two important things happened in Vitner. First, this village elected a women's panel to the *gram panchayat*. Second, the women of this village got a share in their husbands' property. The women officially got the land in their names, and the documents relating to the land were changed accordingly.

The idea that women should get equal rights in property has been on the agenda for quite a while. The issue has been seriously debated in Manushi. Resolutions to this effect have been passed at many women's conferences. The law has loopholes, but women rarely get even the little to which they are entitled by law. There are a few instances of women fighting the government to acquire land, as in the Bodhgaya movement (see Manushi No. 14), but there are next to no instances of women getting a share in their fathers' or

husbands' property..

Even women activists in women's organisations find it difficult to get their share in their fathers' or husbands' property. Women's greatest fear in demanding property from their fathers is that they may be alienated from their natal families. To get property from a husband is not easy either. Where there is already a marital dispute, a demand may be made in court, but the woman rarely ends up getting anything. It is in this context that the fact of 125 women of Vitner getting a share in their husbands' property assumes significance. This did not happen spontaneously. Nor is the effort limited to Vitner. It arose from two years of effort by the Shetkari Mahila Aghadi which decided that this programme should be implemented in as many villages as possible. The issue was debated for two years within the organisation before the decision was taken.

The debate began at the Chandwad meet in November 1986, where a resolution was passed to the effect that women should have equal rights in property. Another resolution was passed that women would acquire a hold over *panchayat* bodies. After this, no steps were taken on the property rights resolution, although the debate

continued in several later meetings. Certain questions arose during the debate on which a definite stand was taken.

In response to the common objection that women get dowry and *stridhan* which men do not get and, therefore, should not be entitled to another share of property, it was pointed out that there is a difference in the value and form of the wealth daughters get in dowry (cash, jewellery) and the property sons get (land, business). The son gets property from which the family's livelihood is generated. Utensils and household goods, even gold, do not have the kind of capacity to multiply and the productive value that land or a shop has. A woman cannot earn an income from the wealth she gets in dowry. Also, this wealth does not usually remain for long in the woman's control. Its value is stagnant and even declines.

To counter the objection that, if women get shares in land, the land will get fragmented into unproductive holdings, some participants pointed out that this can happen equally when land is divided among sons. The main reason for fragmentation of land is not division among heirs, but the overall too great load on agriculture in our country. The only solution to this problem is that the

numbers dependent on agriculture be reduced. Denying shares to daughters will not solve the problem.

Other irrational arguments were also advanced, such as, agriculture is already running at a loss and the loss will be greater if women get shares. To this some women replied that when so much agricultural labour is imposed upon women, when the responsibility is shared, why should not the land be shared too, and even the loss divided?

The question had arisen as to when a daughter should be given her share. If it is given at the time of her marriage, this would mean dividing it in the lifetime of her father. Also, the share of property will not be distinguishable from dowry. The groom's family will demand the bride's share in property just as today they demand dowry: The discussion made it clear that the share should not be given at the time of marriage. An objection was raised that if a woman is to get her share 20 years after her marriage, when her father dies, of what use will it be to her? But the question is not one of use alone; it is a question of women's helplessness. If the in-laws know the daughter-in-law has a right in her natal family property, they will harass her less. When the woman knows she has a right in her natal family, she will gain in confidence. Her brothers too will not consider her a burden if she returns to her natal home, as she will be living off her own share. Thus, the Aghadi activists answered all the questions raised in the course of the debate. In November 1989, two important resolutions were passed at the Amravati conference. Every male activist of the Shetkari Sanghatna should put a part of his land in his wife's name, over the produce of which she will have control. The expenditure on farming this land will come from the general family funds spent on farming all the family land. The income from the produce of this piece of land will be given to the wife, without deducting the costs of farming it. Every peasant activist who thus honours his



wife will be acknowledged by name in the *Shetkari Sanghatak* and other media. It was decided that the land should be handed over to the wife by means of an agreement on stamped paper. This was to ensure that the matter was not taken lightly, and at the same time, that government bureaucracy did not get involved.

It was also resolved that every village which takes steps to establish women's rights would be declared an ideal village. Examples of such steps are: arrangements for drinking water so that women do not have to walk long distances to collect water; election of women's panels to the *panchayat* with a woman of oppressed sections as the *sarpanch*; giving shares in property to women. Such villages would be honoured as model villages and given the title of Jyotiba village. The first example of such a model village is Vitner, which, in January 1990, fulfilled all three conditions.

On January 2, 1990, Mahatma Phule's death anniversary, a *vichar yatra* which began at his native village, Katgun, culminated in a meeting at Nagpur, where prime minister V.P. Singh honoured Vitner with the title of Jyotiba village. The citation was handed over by him to the

village deputy *sarpanch* and the Mahila Aghadi head, Indira Patil.

Vitner is a village of about 200 families. About 10 to 15 families have 15 or more acres of land. About 75 percent of the people have about five acres of land, and 10 to 15 percent are landless. A male agricultural labourer gets a daily wage of Rs 15 and a female Rs 8. A labourer works six hours a day. Permanent labourers, all of whom are men, get Rs 5,000 a year, three quintals of maize and one set of clothing. The main crops here are maize, millet, cotton and bananas. Some families also raise groundnuts.

The castes in the village are Maratha, Gujar, Koli, and backward castes who are Buddhists. Gujars and Kolis are larger in number and also politically more active. Dowry is prevalent amongst Marathas and Gujars but hardly in evidence amongst Kolis and backward castes.

The *gram panchayat* elections in Vitner were held in July 1989. In March 1989, a Shetkari Sanghatna conference had passed a resolution that all *panchayats* should be elected without opposition. It was decided that in Vitner a women's panel should be elected without opposition, but this attempt was

unsuccessful. An opposing panel stood for election and was later backed by the Shiv Sena. The women's panel was elected and all members of the opposing panel lost their deposits. During the election campaign, the opposing panel had hurled filthy abuse at women candidates over the loudspeaker and this had to be stopped with the help of the police.

The women's *panchayat* has now been functioning for a year. The income of a *panchayat* comes from house tax, water tax and grazing land. The grazing land in Vitner is quite good. Every year it is auctioned by the *panchayat* and is usually taken by shepherds who acquire grazing rights for eight months. The *panchayat* gets between Rs 2,500 and Rs 3,000 from this auction. The *panchayat* meets once a fortnight.

The women's *panchayat* in Vitner has constructed lavatories for women and men, and a playground for the school. The post of a teacher in the village school was vacant for two years. Two teachers have been appointed. The most important task completed was that of providing drinking water.

The village gets its drinking water from taps whose pipeline is connected to wells. The water is drawn up from the wells by a 15 horsepower motor. The *panchayat* had only one motor and whenever this went out of order or had to be sent to Jalgaon for repair, the village would have to do without running water, sometimes for up to 15 days. This problem was a frequently recurring one. The women would have to fetch water from distant wells. The *panchayat* this year bought another motor, so that if one goes out of order the other immediately goes into operation. The new motor cost Rs 15,000. The money was acquired by selling some trees on the grazing land.

The *panchayat* organised functions on Ambedkar anniversary and also on January 26 and August 15 when the flag hoisting was done by the *sarpanch*, a woman of the Koli caste.

I talked to both men and women of

Profile of the Panchayat

Members of the Vitner panchayat:

Shubhabai Dashrath Raisingh (*sarpanch*)
Indirabai Bhanudas Patil (deputy *sarpanch*)
Rukmabai Sitaram Patil
Sushila Atmaram Patil
Radhabai Devidas Patil
Saraswatabai Rajaram Raisingh
Kamlabai Moolchand Raisingh
Shantibai Moolchand Raisingh
Dwarkabai Mukunda

All those whose surname is Raisingh belong to the Koli caste and those whose surname is Patil to the Gujar community. Dwarkabai is a Buddhist Mahar. Apart from Indirabai and Radhabai, all the others work as agricultural labourers to supplement their income. Dwarkabai is from a landless family. Apart from Indirabai, all the women are illiterate.

Indirabai Patil played a leading role in the Vitner programme. She is about 30 years old and has studied up to class eight. She is active since 1986. Her husband was in the Shetkari Sanghatna before that, but she was opposed to his work because it meant he had less time to work in the family fields. She used to prevent him from going to meetings and programmes. With great difficulty he persuaded her to attend the Chandwad convention. After that she became active. She stood for the legislative assembly elections too, but lost. She feels that the work women have done in Vitner is far more important than winning a legislative assembly election. Women of two neighbouring villages are now repeatedly requesting her to get shares in property for them too.

the village to find out what changes they thought had come about in the village after the election of women to the *panchayat*. The women said their problem of fetching water from a distance had been solved, and no earlier *panchayat* had paid any attention to this problem. The men, hearing this, laughed and agreed, saying: "We did not have to face the hardship of fetching water, so no earlier *panchayat* thought of investing so much money to solve the problem. Women have to face this problem so they solved it."

Members of the former *panchayats* were also present at this discussion. They agreed, saying that they never undertook any investment until they were sure it would be profitable in terms of a monetary return.

I asked the women members of the *panchayat* whether their election has

made any difference in their lives. One said: "What difference can it make to our daily lives? We still do the same work. Even the *sarpanch* goes to fetch firewood. Labour is written in our fate. Do you think a male *sarpanch* would work in the fields? We have to work both in the fields and at home." But, she continued, "It has made a difference in the sense that we are more respected, even in our parents' homes. We are respectfully received in the *taluk* office, because we have accomplished something." The *sarpanch*, Shubhabai Raisingh, used to keep ill health. Every 15 days she had to go to Jalgaon to see the doctor. After becoming the *sarpanch* her health improved and now she is not taking any medicines. Her husband used to drink a lot and beat her too. He has now stopped drinking and beating her. When I asked him the reason he said: "When she is so respected, how can I

beat her?"

Indirabai told me: "Our self confidence has grown after being elected. We came to know that if we get a chance, we women can do good work. We can do administrative work. We handle all the *panchayat* correspondence, even at the taluk level and with the *tehsildar*."

After the election of the women's panel and the solving of the water problem, Indirabai Patil, had appealed to the deputy *sarpanch*, telling her that if women of Vitner were given property rights, the village could qualify as a Jyotiba village, and be the first such model village. A meeting was organised and a debate begun on the issue.

Peasant families here already had a tradition that one goat would be owned by the woman of the family and when it was sold, the money would be hers. If she had to sell the goat for a wedding in the family, she would be heard reminding family members later that she had sold her goat for a family requirement. It was argued that since women work the

and finally people accepted that wives should be given a share. In January 1990, 125 women got a share in their husbands' property.

When I talked to women as to what difference this had made in their lives, they said that their value had increased, both in the in-laws' and in the parents' homes. Their self-confidence had been enhanced.

They agreed that daughters should get a share, but they were not willing to act on this because the daughter would go to her husband's place. So they said they would give a share to their daughters-in-law.

One woman commented: "We know it is not easy for our husbands to throw us out of the house nor will we leave easily. Yet we do always fear whether we have any right in our parents' house or not. This used to make us feel helpless. Having got land, we do not feel helpless now before husband or son." Indirabai said : "We feel more secure, we can play a greater part in family decision making. If we get an equal place in the family where does the question arise of leaving the house or husband?"

In May 1990 there was a Mahila Aghadi meeting in Vitner. There was a festive mood amongst the women. At the end, a woman brought lemon juice for everyone, saying: "This is from the lemon tree on my share of the land."

(Translated from Hindi)

