

“ADIVASI women are very free.” This refrain was repeated to me over and over again by friends in Delhi and Calcutta. “They are also very promiscuous”, others, notably men, would tell me. These two reactions summarize the double standard of morality which afflicts women who participate in the world outside the home.

After living for nearly two years in Chotanagpur, my conclusions on the nature of this “freedom” are as follows. Adivasi women are “free” to perform almost all kinds of manual and agricultural labour. They play the major role in the marketing of household produce and have control over income from this source. Compared to many high-caste women in Chotanagpur, they have great freedom of movement. On the other hand, the major economic contribution of women is both economically and ideologically undervalued.

Most Mundas settled in Chotanagpur villages would describe themselves as cultivators. But land loss, population growth, inheritance patterns, have combined to impoverish many of them, so that most households have to supplement their income from other sources for at least six months in the year. My survey showed that some families were in a worse position, having mortgaged land to pay debts. Women’s labour and income is thus of vital importance to the family’s survival, where agricultural income is insufficient.

Women Provide The Food

A woman’s work may be divided into four areas. Her domestic work consists of child-rearing, cooking, drawing water, washing clothes and cleaning. She has to take long trips to the nearest forest to fetch firewood. Women also gather produce from the forest for eating and selling. At home; they prepare foodstuffs — spread, dry and husk grain, dry and preserve vegetables for storage. Outside the house, women collect cowdung and manure from the fields. The main means of subsistence is the one winter rice crop. Working in groups, women transplant and weed this crop, a task which consumes most of their time during July, August and September. Harvesting is done jointly by men and women.

HILLARY STANDING

Free-To Feed The Family

Adivasi women in Chotanagpur

Women take up all kinds of casual wage labour. They work on road building and construction sites. Some young girls go to the city to do this work. The charge that they are promiscuous is partly due to the fact that contractors who employ them exploit them sexually. In the village, women join agricultural work parties. Some women work as combined domestic and agricultural labourers for wealthier households. In return, they get only their meals, no wage. Widows with small daughters are driven to destitution because though they are entitled to a life share in their husbands’ land, they rarely manage to get this. Often, they send their daughters to work as unpaid domestic servants until they are old enough to be married. Most of the marketing of cash

crops and forest produce is done by women.

But Managers Are Men

In theory, the division of labour is not too rigid. Everyone works during harvesting. Small girls and boys mind the cattle. Men may do “women’s work” if they wish. They sometimes do marketing, unmarried or widowed men do their own cooking if they have no close female relatives. But women are strictly prohibited from ploughing or mending a house roof. Supernatural punishment is supposed to be inflicted on women who dare break these rules. It has been observed that in all male-dominated cultures, the hold of men is preserved over work considered “superior”. The work done by women, however socially necessary, is never



A manifold burden—Adivasi women weeding the rice crop

considered “superior”, but if men traditionally do the same form of work in another community, it will be the “superior” work there.

Some Munda men work as house servants, agricultural labourers or coolies. They generally do more of the heavy work such as digging and repairing of fences, embankments and houses. The rest of what is especially men’s work consists of taking part in politics and performing pujas. Women are excluded from taking an active part in the village *panchayats* and *sabhas* which decide local matters. They may watch from the sides, but are discouraged from speaking unless the case concerns one of them. Similarly, household and village rituals, except birth

sufficient unit, as it is commonly thought to be. Clothes, pots, cooking oil, kerosene, have to be bought from the *bazar*. Since all transactions are in money, cash has to be generated from somewhere. This income which they call *sunum-bulung* paise (oil and salt money), is earned mostly by women through their market-ing activities. At least one woman in each household has some source of income from selling in the *bazar* or in her home.

There are many small local markets and an occasional large one. The women sellers go to market whenever they have time to spare or when the cash need is particularly urgent. They sell mostly foodstuffs, or forest produce. Those who cannot afford to invest any money in preparing the

by “service” people who have no time to do their own husking or by women from nearby towns, who buy it because it is cheaper, and who in turn make flat or puffed rice from it and bring it back to sell in the *bazar*.

Buying and re-selling is another way of making money. Often, vegetables are bought in a cheaper market and resold in a more remote one, where prices are always slightly higher. But this activity requires women to move around, and is impossible if they have small children or no one to mind the house.

For those women who can obtain or accumulate a little capital, the manufacture of cooked foods and liquor provides a more regular source of income. There is also a steady demand for it throughout the week. Liquor is sold at home throughout the week. It is legal to manufacture liquor but illegal to sell it! If the law were enforced, many widows would lose their main source of livelihood.

Women get a very small income from marketing (never more than five rupees, often much less), but it is essential. It is not handed over to men, but is used to buy household necessities and perhaps a sweet or toy for the children. If she can, the woman sets some money aside to recycle it into business. Thus though she has control over money, she has no “freedom” to dispose of it as she pleases. She has to use it for basic family needs. However, her husband’s side-income made from selling goods he makes, such as leaf umbrellas or wooden stools, is called “drink or tobacco money.” Hers is “oil and salt money”!

But Female Labour Is Not Valued

Male labour has a price, but most of female labour does not. When a man makes a stool or umbrella for the market, he calculates how much time he has spent making it, and then fixes the price according to how much he could have earned in that time by the daily wage labour rate the area. But though his wife spends more time collecting raw material—wood, fire or - leaves he does not calculate her labour cost at all.



Starvation, malnutrition—a way of life

and marriage ceremonies, are the monopoly of men, although women do all the work behind the scenes—they cook, prepare rice beer, clean the sacred places.

The working day is longer and heavier for women than for men. Men’s work—ploughing and preparing fields—is of a seasonal nature. At other times of the year, men can find time to relax. Women, on the other hand, perform a full day’s domestic work every day, and carry a heavy burden of extra work at peak times in the agricultural calendar.

Women Earn The Money

The Adivasi household is not a self-

goods, collect leaves, sort them out, and tie them in bundles for sale in local teashops or at weddings. Snacks are served in these leaves. A large bundle sells for two annas. Jungle fruits, roots and leaves are also collected and sold in small piles, usually in two anna piles. These are useful sources for small amounts of cash, but the market is restricted, as many women collect their own forest produce rather than buy it. Another source of income without having to invest capital is husking paddy for resale in the market. The fixed profit is two annas per *paila* (traditional grain measure). This is bought

Similarly, whatever a woman sells, however much labour she has put into it, the profit is always two annas. She calculates profit, not in terms of her labour or time spent, but in terms of how much oil and salt her family needs.

Women — Invisible To The Government

Women's labour thus has a kind of invisibility about it. Collecting forest produce is a gathering activity. So it is seen as part of women's normal domestic duties. Cash crop marketing is also largely in the hands of women. Even in this, their labour cost is not evaluated. A good example is the marketing of lac, of which Chotanagpur is one of India's largest suppliers. Most of this lac is bought in country markets by middlemen for private merchants. It is bought in very small individual amounts (usually less than a kilo at a time) from women who bring it to market when they need "two annas" for oil and salt. For some years, government officials have been trying to persuade tribal men to process their own lac and sell it direct to government for a higher price. This policy has completely failed, because the men set the lac during the slack season, but the scraping, preparing and selling is done by women. It is also a gathering activity — "women's work". If the government seriously wishes to encourage small-scale business and commercial activity in Chotanagpur, it will have to go to the women. At present, women are completely ignored in the "development" process.

To summarize : women's contribution to the household budget is crucial, but ideologically not acknowledged. Since a woman has to somehow find time for her cash-earning activity, while doing fulltime domestic and agricultural work, she cannot accumulate much money, or expand her trading activity.

Munda men see themselves as cultivators par excellence. They scorn trading activities and despise the castes who engage in trading. The marketing done by women is thus treated as unimportant, even though it is essential for the family to make both ends meet. As with many groups of cultivators in India,

inheritance is through men. Male children are more highly valued than female children. A wife may be sent away if she does not produce a male child or a man may take a second wife. It is sometimes argued that the payment of brideprice indicates the value attached to women's productive contribution. But while the women's labour may be acknowledged as useful, it is not rewarded with a share in decision making. Why is it that in "public" affairs, women are excluded from taking an active, let alone an equal role ?

The Shame Of Poverty

To add further insult to injury, Adivasi women (and indeed all poor working women in India) have to endure sexual insult and exploitation. It is assumed that women who need to trade or to travel in search of work, are "immoral" or fair game for male employers. The "ideal" set up by men for women is seclusion within a father's or husband's house. "Honourable" men do not allow their women to wander around doing odd jobs. Such "honourable" men can, therefore, conveniently demonstrate their wealth through controlling women. Poor women thus bear a double burden—of poverty, and of the shame of poverty.

The young Adivasi girls who work on

construction sites in and around the city of Ranchi have the added disadvantage of being lone migrants without relatives to protect them. There is no suitable accommodation for them, and they have to sleep rough, often on the site itself. In 1973, a number of voluntary agencies discussed the possibility of providing a hostel for such girls, but little came of this, and existing hostel facilities for working women in the city are most inadequate in terms of the magnitude of the problem.

The employment of Adivasi girls and women as maidservants in the city is also common. It was clear from a number of conversations with members of families employing women that having sex with the male employer was sometimes one of the "services" expected of maidservants.

At village level, the situation of younger widows is particularly hard. Many told me that they dared not stay alone in their houses because of unwanted male attention. Having labelled socially productive women as immoral, men can then exploit or harass them to prove the point!

In conclusion, Adivasi women would seem to have the "freedom" to work and earn, but not the freedom to take decisions affecting their work or their lives, or the freedom to control their own sexuality. □

GHETTO OF THE DESTITUTE

*Suffocating in the cesspool dwellings
I never understood the meaning of all life.
Beneath the great blue roof of the sky
Are tall sky-scrappers and
Alongside, the blue drainage canal —
The ghetto of the destitute.
The shrivelling intestine
Like the last burst of dying flame —
The mighty voice of the destitute:
"If the meaning of life is struggle,
Then we set out
To look for it,
Carrying our own shrouds."*

—Jayshree Gaikwiad
(translated from Marathi by Meena Srinivasan)