

WOMEN'S QUEST FOR POWER

By Devaki Jain, Malini Chand and Nalini Singh
 Vikas Publishing House, 1980 Price Rs 75/-

THIS book discusses five models of endeavour in which large numbers of women have organized, participated or led themselves in pursuit of better food, clothing and shelter. The studies indicate the impact of such participation on women's lives and on the community. Findings are substantiated with data and statistics. Questions are raised in the introduction and conclusions left to the reader. Perhaps the most inspiring case study is the last, entitled: "Night Patrollers of Manipur." This self-organization of women against alcoholism which gathered strength between 1975 and 1979, is of particular relevance today as the movement is reported to be reviving in Manipur.

The book traces the history of Manipuri women's militancy. Between 1905 and 1939, they agitated against the British government's imposition of enforced labour and the increase in water tax, and launched a Nupi Lan (women's war) against reckless rice export by rich traders, which not only threatened the market-women's livelihood but also pushed the population to the verge of starvation.

One night in 1975, a drunken man attacked a young woman. A group of women who happened to be passing by, spontaneously struck back at the man. This incident stimulated the formation of women's patrols. "Enrolment to the committees is voluntary and open to any woman genuinely interested in prohibition and who can pledge herself to nightly vigil with the patrollers whenever required...The patrols assemble at a central rendezvous in the area by 7 p.m. evening...with long bamboo sticks and lanterns in their hands, women patrol the streets...They wear huge turbans which conceal upturned baskets lined with shock-proof material to prevent being hurt by stone-throwing, violent men from house-windows." Men found drunk in the streets are surrounded and fined Rs 50 and then handed over to the police.

Habitual offenders are sometimes given a beating by the women. Drunkards are often detained for the night in some community hall and guarded until they are sober and have paid their fine. Also, "manufacturers and vendors of liquor are under constant pressure from the night patrollers to curtail production. The women often raid breweries, and break wine pots or empty their contents into street gutters, facing the wrath of the owners with equanimity..." The women also agitate to pressurise authorities into passing laws governing liquor consumption.



A Madhubani Painting

Significantly, the women are all unpaid voluntary workers and themselves raise whatever funds are necessary for their public propaganda work. In some cases, women have sold their jewellery so that the organization might not die due to lack of funds.

The Manipuri women's power stems from two factors—their crucial economic role as producers and marketers of rice, and their association with each other in the market-place, that is, their collective identity as women in a non-family institution.

The other four studies in the book deal with women who have organized to achieve these goals, with an emphasis on employment rather than on togetherness as women.

For instance, the women painters of Madhubani, whose work has received national and international acclaim, were involved in a government-launched handicrafts programme. Their living conditions, their entrapment in oppressive families and their persistence in creating active, colourful images even while living on the edge of poverty, are movingly documented. One artist said: "My mind is full of wild colours and picture-ideas race through my mind. I have no time for grief." Jamunadevi, a Harijan artist, sells her paintings at Rs 5 each to a local middleman, even though the price of each in Delhi exhibitions is Rs 100. Cataract has dimmed her vision but she has not gone to a doctor: "Who will take me?" Another woman, Baua Devi, who has travelled all over India to exhibitions, still has no share in family decision-making. Her ten-year-old daughter was married off against her wishes.

This study conveys a sense of wonder at women's creativity which continues to renew itself under such adverse circumstances, and also a sharp sense of tragic waste—what could these women, and so many millions more deprived of even this minimal opportunity, not create if they could live in a free, self-determined environment ?

The other three chapters on SEWA (Self Employed Women's Association, Ahmedabad), AMUL (Anand Milk Producers' Union, Kaira) and the Lijjat Pappad organization, examine women's cooperatives. Just as the Madhubani project did not challenge women's oppression even though it brought wealth to a few painters and commercialized the art on a world scale, so also in the other projects, women provide themselves with an income but do not change their status in any significant way.

Under the Lijjat Pappad scheme, women in their spare time at home, prepare high quality snacks for supply to Bombay and other cities. Wages and bonuses are decided by the all-women membership on basis of equal ownership. However, the marketing is done by agents of the business world. The whole process leaves untouched the fabric of social injustice.

Likewise, the Amul milk cooperative. One village boasts of a women's cooperative which came to be through the initiative of the woman *sarpanch*. The villages are organized to supply milk and dairy produce to towns. Success is due to the overall male expert hierarchy which excludes women from decision-making and discourages their participation at any but the lowest level. This particular model is blatantly exploitative of women's labour. Women have to do the heaviest, unskilled and lowest paid labour—tending cattle and collecting fodder. But women's labour is rendered invisible. In the Amul plant, men handle the sophisticated technology and the only woman employee is a receptionist. This so called "development" and "modernization" in fact creates more work for women and lowers their status because while the men get exposed to a newer world, women remain at the lowest rung of the social ladder.

Ranjanaben Desai, deputy general secretary of SEWA, suggested how women can change this situation : "Those at the top will only be forced to listen to the organized voice of the masses." This book can be useful to those interested in possible beginnings of such organization because it provides information about what is happening to women as a result of industrialization, anti-women state policy and private profiteering, and how women are reacting to these phenomena.

—Benni and Manini

WE WILL SMASH THIS PRISON —INDIAN WOMEN IN STRUGGLE

By Gail Omvedt

Orient Longman, 1980

This book is a personal account of the author's involvement with and impressions of, the budding women's movement in Western India, through the 70s. The life conditions and problems of different groups of women—agricultural labourers, Adivasis,

college students, street sweepers, urban housewives— are documented in different chapters, often in the women's own words. Through case-studies of different women—married, divorced or single, political activists or wives of male activists—the predicament of women begins to emerge. Even the most active women are tied to the kitchen and kids, and have to submit to the decisions of male family members. The apathy of trade unions to the specific problems of women distances them still further from political activity.

The author describes various meetings, conferences and agitations around women's issues and records the debates between women activists. She raises several questions about the direction of the women's movement in India and which section of women is likely to organize first.

She emphasises the special militancy which women bring into any movement. I was particularly struck by the radical statements made by ordinary working women in the course of conversations recorded by the author, especially by their clear-sighted awareness that it is the family structure which holds them back from self-expression and self-generated activity. For instance. Tarabai, a sweeper who has resisted family pressures to conform and has built up an independent life of her own, tells the author at the end of one chapter: "Gailbai. don't marry. Dont marry." Similarly, the last few lines of the books are the words of a woman whose daughter was in hospital after harassment by in-laws for dowry: "She was such a fine girl. And now she can hardly even walk, hardly move, she is so sick. Now we are not going to give her back to them, we'll educate her, let her have employment, forget about marriage."