

ON November 28, some of us heard that the Rani Sati Sewa Sangh was planning to take out a women's procession in honour of a princess who had once committed Sati. That an illegal practice of murdering women should be openly glorified in the capital city seemed to us part of an alarming trend of degrading, confining and violently abusing women. This procession had been taken out in the last two years as well.

We tried contacting several women on the phone but most of them were disinterested and seemed to feel that we should ignore the Sangh's activities and not draw public attention to them by staging a protest. However, a few of us felt very strongly that we should protest, because this was not an isolated case. From 1973 to 1980 there have been seven reported cases of women committing Sati. Each of these women was glorified and the site of her immolation made into the centre of a religious cult, a place of pilgrimage. In Rajasthan, a huge fair is held annually at Jhunjhunu. Industrialists, politicians and government officials all come to pay their respects.

On the morning of December 1, about 15 of us assembled at the parade grounds at Red Fort. There were four women from Action India, two from NFIW, two individuals (of whom I was one), a handful of women from the Indian Housewives' Federation, and Roda Mistry, former minister of social welfare, Andhra Pradesh. We had not met before to plan our strategy – some of us had never seen each other before. Each of us had only communicated with one or two of the others and all the contacting had been done on the phone. Hence we all had different ideas about how we should protest. For instance, Roda Mistry had telephoned H.K.L. Bhagat and other officials who were planning to attend the ceremony, and had dissuaded them from doing so. She and Savitri Nigam also tried to stop the procession by using influence with politicians and police. They were also advising the policemen to declare section 144 and disperse the assembly.

NANDITA HAKSAR

“Ek Sata Ho, Hum Mandir Banayenge”

Countering Attempt to Revive Sati

On the other hand, some of us felt that allying with the police was not the way to voice protest.

When we reached the grounds, a large *shamiana* with a stage had been erected. 108 women decked up in full finery as Satis were waiting to participate in the procession. They sat passively throughout the proceedings. They were all local women belonging to the

community.

On the stage was the silver idol of Sati mata along with 108 Kalashes, each with a coconut in it. A priest was singing bhajans. There were about 20 men who were the organizers and about 500 passers-by at the peak point, who gathered to look on. These were all men. There were also dozens of small boys in uniform, brought along by the Sangh.



Marwari women in a procession commemorating sati—a stage managed affair!

Rajasthani marwari community. It is significant that women of this community are not usually allowed to take part in protest marches. They were even kept away from a morcha in Calcutta which was organized by the community to protest the dowry death of Neelam Jain, a girl of the

We stood outside and began shouting slogans through our hand mike. We hadn't discussed what slogans would be appropriate so had to improvise. We also sang songs such as “We shall overcome...” in Hindi. After a while the police declared section 144 (under which

an assembly of more than five persons is forbidden). They then demanded that we disperse but did not attempt to disperse the Sati meeting ! The disagreements amongst us now flared up. Roda Mistry wanted us to go away for 15 minutes. But some of us refused to go and stayed solidly together. A few others went away as demanded by the police. We now broke the police cordon and surged forward. We raised a slogan : “*Dharm ke Dhongi Hai Hai*” (Shame on this religious farce). This really angered the men of the Sangh. We could see their faces distorted with rage and hate, as they sang even louder and turned up the volume of their mike to drown our voices. One of us also shouted : “*Ek Sata Ho, Hum Mandir Banayenge*” (Let one man immolate himself on his wife’s pyre and we will build a temple)! Another slogan coined on the instant was : “Rajasthani sisters, come forward, join hands with us.”

They delayed the procession by several hours, hoping we would leave. Finally in mid-afternoon, they suddenly sent the schoolboys to cordon us off, and began to line up for the procession. It was headed by a motorcyclist followed by five elephants, five horses, the idol on a high pedestal, the 108 women with the *kalash* on their heads, and men all around the women, both in front and behind. By this

time, there were only 11 of us left. Among us were a very militant little girl and her grandmother. We held hands and blocked the path of the procession, shouting slogans with great energy. Whenever we saw the possibility of a violent reaction developing, we immediately sang: “We’ll live in peace.”

The processionists promptly did a right-about-turn and began to march the other way. We rushed along and blocked the path again whereupon they again turned around. This we did two or three times. Enraged, the Sangh men began to raise one of our own slogans against us : “Whoever clashes with us will be crushed.” The police were getting flustered and constantly rebuking us : “Do you know what you are doing ? Do you want to provoke a communal riot?” This, because at an earlier stage there were two Muslim women with us! We retorted by asking them what they were up to in riot-torn areas and why they were not taking action against the worshippers of Sati which is illegal.

We were accompanied by some women police. One of them said to me : “You have supporters among us too. Just because we are wearing this uniform, doesn’t mean we don’t know that happens to women.” We talked about Veena, the police officer who had been murdered by her husband. We also talked to some of the women

processionists. They said : “The men brought us so we came. Sati is a very old custom so it must be good.”

We then took a short cut and reached the temple ahead of the processionists. The temple is located in the midst of winding by-lanes in the Jogiwara area. Many people, mostly women, were looking out of their houses. We again raised slogans, spoke on the issue, sang songs. The processionists must have been waiting at a distance. After a while, we left because we did not have the numbers required to physically obstruct them and did not want to participate in unnecessary violence.

When we discussed it later, we found that in spite of the lapses in organizing, all six of us had experienced a much greater feeling of solidarity and oneness during the action of standing together and opposing the processionists than we had even felt during any other demonstration in the past. This was because here we had a visible opposing force.

The press reporters who had come completely failed to understand why we were opposing the procession. They later talked a lot about us being “neurotic women.” They wrote up the reports in a most non-serious fashion, their language and the headlines given belittling both the significance of the procession and of our protest. □

Tamilnadu Rally Against Rape

ON December 24, 1980, at 12.30 in the afternoon, a group of children went to pluck fruit from the EWS forest in Arkonam town. Suganya, an 11 year old girl studying in the sixth standard was one of the group. Her mother Ms Koushalya works as a teacher and her father as a driver in a transport company. While the children were playing, a rapist started chasing them. He got hold of Suganya, raped her, stabbed her in 16 places and ran away.

Another young girl took Suganya to a neighbouring pond. People who were

washing clothes there, took her to the hospital and informed her parents. She was in hospital for two days and was sent to the general hospital at Madras on December 26. There, she was operated upon by four surgeons and put into intensive care. She was unconscious for more than a week.

Though more than a month had passed, no action had been taken to arrest the culprit. The Society for Rural Education and Development contacted many local leaders and organized a mass rally and public meeting on January 17, 1981. Many women from the villages joined the rally and made it successful.

- Burnad Fatima

BEASTS IN DARKNESS

*When walking alone
in the darkness,
identifying myself with
the silent, serene mood of night,*

*I feel
an electric current
passing through my limbs
when the car swerves past
and the lorry rushes by
roaring...*

*Oh, the dark night
frightens me not
but the sight of man
makes me shrink.*

- Manjula C.G.