



Tribal Women As Contract Labourers In Meghatuburu Iron Ore Project

IT is common knowledge that more and more tribal women are migrating from their homeland, Jharkhand, either with their families or individually, in search of employment. They are found working on farms in Punjab, tea estates in Bengal and Assam, in brick kilns, and as seasonal migrant labourers during harvesting seasons in West Bengal. The tribal women labour force is increasing in the industrial, mining and civil construction projects, both in the private and in the public sector. Tribal women also migrate to metropolitan centres like Calcutta, Delhi and Bombay, where they sell their bodies just to stay alive.

What are the factors that force these women to leave their home land? Let us look at the economic situation in Jharkhand today. Jharkhand area contains the richest minerals and heavily concentrated deposits of ores like iron and coal, which are fundamental to industry. The process of mining and industrialisation in this area has been accompanied by decimation of forests, destruction of local ecology, ruthless plunder of agricultural land belonging to the tribals, and take over of the water sources previously utilised by the tribals for their traditional agriculture.

During the last century, the tribals have gradually been deprived of arable land, and the land still under their control has been drained of fertility. This ruination of tribal agriculture and forest based economy has been accelerated in recent times.

As a result, the entire Jharkhand belt has for decades been in a state of famine. Tribals are forced out to join the pool of surplus labour in industry and mining. The tribals are simple, hardworking people. It is much easier for the capitalists, particularly the contractors, to cheat them and maximise their own profit.

Meghatuburu iron ore project is a captive mine of the Bokaro steel plant. It is going to be a heavily mechanised mine in the second phase of modernisation of the steel plant.

Loss Of Community Life

Tribal women contract labourers are subjected to two fold exploitation — at the worksite and at home.

Women form 40 percent of the total workforce at Meghatuburu iron ore plant. They are mainly Hos and Mundas from Singhbhum and Ranchi district of Bihar, and from Keonjhar district, Orissa.

Neither the contractors nor the management have provided them with any kind of housing facility. So they have been forced to live in a scattered way in what are known as huttings. These are hovels clustered in different far flung areas.

Families coming from the same village or the same ethnic group are thus scattered while various ethnic groups coming from different districts live huddled together, partitioned by community and cultural barriers. This housing system isolates the tribals from their own community and renders them

an amorphous, identityless crowd. The social life they had in villages is altogether lost.

The loss is obvious to anyone who sees women in a village, helping each other, sharing fun and festivity. In an industrial area, the community is so scattered and displaced that the women are forced to remain anchored to their own individual families. So fragmented is life that a family may not even know who the next door neighbours are. Such atomisation of the community also makes the workers fall easy prey to exploitation by contractors.

No Legal Rights

All the women contract labourers are illiterate. They lack any technical skills. But they are hardworking and simple. Taking advantage of their simplicity, the contractors deny them their legal rights such as maternity benefit, creche and so on but extract the maximum amount of work from them.

The contractors employ tribal women in those categories of work which they have been doing in their villages. The tribal women do not realise that the same work which they do in the village or the family acquires a different value when done in a different situation. Women contract labourers carry heavy loads of mud, water, stone chips and cement on their heads, and climb heights of 40 or 50 metres on rickety ladders to deposit these headloads. Since they do such heavy manual work in their villages and carry on doing it even in the last

stages of pregnancy, they do not realise that, as hired labourers, they are entitled to different conditions of work.

If a contractor thinks that a pregnant woman cannot work to his satisfaction, she is summarily retrenched without any retrenchment benefit, sometimes without even her full wage. If a pregnant woman has to take some leave, she is not paid.

This violation of the Maternity Benefit Act goes unchallenged because there is no strong organisation of women labourers.

The law itself is not geared to the actuality of women's lives. The law requires that the pregnant woman produce a certificate from a registered medical practitioner or from a hospital. But in Meghatuburu, contract labourers have no right to health checks or medical facilities nor is there a single doctor who has the requisite qualifications to issue a certificate.

The denial of maternity benefit lowers the family income. Women are in any case accustomed to living on the leftovers of family food. During pregnancy, this practice renders her more malnourished. This undernourishment is shared between mother and unborn child. Once she is retrenched from her job, she is forced to do odd jobs like selling of firewood or rice beer. She works up to the day of delivery and goes back to work soon after, having no rest or care.

Subhuman Conditions

When I first visited one of the huttings where the contract labourers live, I was shocked by the contrast between these crowded hovels made of twigs, leaves and pieces of old tin, and the decent, colourfully painted houses of the tribals in their villages.

In each small hut which is not larger than seven by six feet, a family of half a dozen or more members has to cook, eat, and sleep. Even babies have to be delivered in these hovels. For six months in a year, it rains heavily in Meghatuburu. Winters are very cold. The huts the workers build provide them no protection against rain and cold. It is hardly surprising that a child born in such an unhygienic environment finds it difficult to survive. A casual survey revealed that 60 to 70 percent of children

die before they reach the age of three years.

Malaria is endemic in the area. Malnutrition coupled with chronic dysentery due to lack of clean water supply and proper sanitation take a heavy toll amongst the children.

Abandoned By Husbands

Family ties seem to be gradually loosening amongst contract labourers. There seem to be a large number of single mothers. Raimuni Purthy is a contract labourer. She was six months pregnant when I met her. Her husband left her soon after their marriage. She had no knowledge of his whereabouts. When



she was eight months pregnant, she was retrenched from her job. Living alone, in a dingy hut, she had taken to selling rice beer in order to maintain herself.

Puni, another contract labourer, had migrated from the village with her husband and children, driven by economic necessity. For four years, husband and wife worked in Meghatuburu under various contractors. Three of their four children died. Eventually, Puni too fell ill. Her husband brought another woman. Puni was given a little bit of food every day. She was given no medical treatment whatsoever. Her condition worsened and she lost her appetite. The neighbours seemed unconcerned at her plight. When I met Puni, she was a skeleton. She was severely anaemic with congestive

cardiac failure. Her husband refused to talk to me. Needless to say, neither the contractor she had been working under nor the management showed the minimum human concern.

Dongoi Mai, a militant contract labourer, is very angry at her husband for having brought another woman because Dongoi failed to produce a child for him. Dongoi is seriously thinking of leaving him. "He does not even buy me a cake of soap", she remarks in frustrated fury.

Doubly Exposed

In a village set up, tribal community life exercises considerable control,

partially diluting the man-woman contradiction that exists within the community. Also, women play a major role in the economic life of the family. Women do most of the agricultural and gathering activities. Without her, it becomes impossible for a man to sustain the family.

When the family moves into the capitalistic economy, and individuals become wage earners, the situation changes. There is no community control exercised through ritual, norms or values. The life style changes drastically but without erecting any new value system.

The displaced people are subjected to contradictory tendencies. Women seem to be given some amount of individual rights but on the other hand, men get relatively free from community

control and can act more arbitrarily. This sharpens the man-woman contradiction.

Lacking protection either from the tribal community or from any organisation of their own, the tribal women, though simple and dignified, become victims of sexual exploitation. Supervisors, contractors and *munshis* coerce them with threats of firing them from their jobs. When such exploitation results in pregnancy, women are forced to abort by traditional abortion techniques. In some cases, these abortions are botched and result in the woman's death. The woman does not

dare expose the guilty man because she fears losing her job and also fears being outcasted by her own community.

Some women are forced to sell their bodies in order to keep themselves and their children alive. When a man has left his wife or has married again or when his income is not sufficient to support the family or when he squanders his income on drinking and womanising, the woman is left with no choice but to sell her body.

Women In Unions

Usually, it is difficult to organise tribals in a stable and disciplined structure like a trade union because

spontaneity plays a major role in their lives. It is even more difficult to organise women because of their double workload—at the worksite and at home. While the men come in contact with nontribals and may gradually begin to see themselves as members of the working class, the women are in a different situation due to the nature of the work they do. They do essentially the same work as they did in villages so they do not clearly see any difference in their situation, though they are directly experiencing the onslaught of capitalism in their personal, social, cultural and community lives. □

How Rajni Escaped

IN **Manushi** No. 18, we printed a report by R.N. Sharma about the murder of his daughter, Suman Bala by her husband, Naresh Sharma. Recently, R. N. Sharma visited **Manushi** office with his niece, Rajni. Rajni, 24 years old, an MA in political science from Meerut university, seems to have narrowly escaped Suman's fate. On September 18, 1983, Rajni was married to Veer Inder Singh Kocher, development officer in the General Insurance Company, New Delhi. The families came in contact through the matrimonial advertisement columns of a newspaper. Since Rajni's three elder sisters had also been married in the same way, her parents had no qualms about contracting the alliance.

Rajni's father, Balraj Singh, a retired railway employee living in Delhi, spent most of his retirement benefits and also money sent by his son who is in the USA on the wedding. About one lakh rupees was spent. Yet immediately after the marriage Veer Inder and his mother, Bhagwant Kaur, started demanding more money. Rajni was harassed and beaten

by her husband who, she says, was a drunkard and gambler.

She was allowed to go to her parent's house only when Veer Inder wanted her to ask for money or when he wanted to go out of town and could not make an alternative arrangement for her



Rajni

Veer Inder
Singh Kocher

accommodation. In the months following the marriage, Rajni's parents paid several sums, adding up to a total of Rs 14,000 to Veer Inder, who promised that she would not be harassed further.

Rajni alleges that on one occasion, she was forced to sign a blank paper and on another, to sign a statement that in

the event of her husband's death, she would have no claim to his property. He then asked her to bring Rs 18,000 more from her parents, which she refused to do. On March 4, 1984, Veer Inder and his mother threatened Rajni and forced her to write a suicide note saying that she was unhappy with her husband since the marriage had been contracted without her consent therefore she was taking her own life.

At this point, Rajni realised that her life was in danger. On March 5, she secretly wrote a letter to her father, asking him to save her. On March 5, her husband had gone out and when her mother-in-law went to the bathroom., Rajni took advantage of the few minutes she was left unguarded to run out of the house. She jumped into the first bus she saw and made her way to her parent's house. She was not able to take with her any of her clothes, jewels, or other dowry items.

Veer Inder Singh made some attempts to call Rajni back, while making further dowry demands from her father. However, Rajni is now determined not to go back. She intends to study and find a job. She has filed a criminal case against Veer Inder Singh for his alleged attempt to murder her and has also filed cases demanding that he pay her maintenance and return the dowry. □