

IN 1974, six young graduates who belonged to rural harijan families got together to try and organise the rural poor in Tamil Nadu. Some were from Christian families and had studied in Christian schools. All had training in community organising. Since harijans are the most oppressed and constitute 68 percent of the total population in Chingleput district where we began our work, we initially organised the poor and landless along caste lines. In 1977, after the movement was well established in one district, the organisers, or animators, as we call ourselves, went to the poorest villages in Tamil Nadu. Some of us returned to our own native villages. At this point we changed to organising on a class basis, forming landless labourers' associations (Vivasaya Cooligal lyakkam) which include the landless of other castes as well as harijans. These associations were registered under the Societies' Registration Act. By 1981 we had 15 well trained animators, each in charge of a landless labourers' association of over 3,000 members, working full time in five districts—North and South Arcot, Chingleput, Madurai and Sathiyavadu.

Landlords in these areas preserve many social customs aimed at humiliating the harijans. For example, when landlords give food or water to harijans, they insist that it must be received in bare hands, not in a plate or cup. They do not allow harijans to enter their homes or to draw water from community wells. They feel insulted if a harijan appears in any state but the most abject poverty. Any harijan fortunate enough to own a bicycle must not ride it through the landlords' streets. If a harijan man wears sandals or a shirt, he must remove them in the presence of a landlord, and stand barefoot and barechested. Harijans who dare defy these customs or ask for their legal rights are often beaten or have their homes burnt down. Harijan women are paid particularly low wages, only Rs 1.50 or 2 a day, though they work very hard. In some areas, they are experiencing increasing difficulty in finding paid agricultural work, as mechanisation spreads. Harijan agricultural labourer

Despite Heavy Odds

Organising Harijan Women In Tamil Nadu Villages

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Women on a patha yatra

women are often sexually exploited by landlords.

In this area, women did not attend village meetings, since men considered it “disrespectful” for women to want to attend meetings. If they tried to attend, men shouted at them and sent them home. When we began to organise, we found a very low level of women’s involvement. Therefore, we started organising women separately. We now hold combined meetings as well as separate meetings for men and women. In the women’s meetings, we began by discussing the special oppression faced by rural harijan women.

Both women and men animators organise women on women’s issues as well as both men and women on class issues. Men animators cooperate with us, but often seem not fully convinced of the importance of women’s participation. Once, we organised a meeting of the wives of all the male animators. We were very surprised to find that their husbands kept them in the dark about their organisational work.

At first men interfered with women’s meetings, and scoffed, citing such proverbs as “The day breaks only when a cock crows, not when a hen squawks.” Many members were forbidden by their husbands to attend the women’s meetings and were beaten when they went anyway. These women kept coming. They got out of the house by saying they were going to the market. When we touch on issues concerning the role of women in the family we face a lot of problems. Recently, the husband of a leader of a village women’s movement threatened to divorce her if she continued to involve herself in the struggle.

Raising Women’s Issues

We began organising women by taking up cases of atrocities on women. On December 24, 1980, an eleven year old girl named Suganya was attacked while she was playing with friends. She was raped and stabbed 21 times. She had to be hospitalised and put in intensive care. Although everyone knew who the rapist was, the police did

not arrest him because he was an important person in the local branch of the ruling political party.

The issue was discussed in a women’s meeting and a protest rally was organised. We were refused police permission to hold a demonstration but we went ahead. About 2,000 women from neighbouring villages participated, taking the risk of arrest. We were surprised by the spontaneous participation of so many women at such short notice.

Another case was that of Nagomi, a mother of three, who was beaten by a landlord while she was collecting firewood. For several days, she was too afraid to talk about it. When it became known, the women went up to the harijan welfare minister while he was addressing a public meeting, and made him step down from the stage to listen to their protest. The landlord was arrested. Nagomi refused to compromise with him at the police station, and demanded that he apologise publicly in the village. He was brought to the village where he tendered a written apology.

Once mobilised, the village women proved very bold and creative in taking action to change their world. In one village, they decided to draw from a village pond, access to which was denied to harijans. The government had spent money on deepening and cleaning the pond for the use of all villagers but the high caste Hindus refused to allow harijans to draw water from it. A harijan had to stand and wait until a caste Hindu poured some water into the harijan’s pot. The harijan women had protested many times but were very upset that repeated discussions had not changed the situation. They decided to take direct action by going to the pond in a large group. To protest the prejudices against low caste people and against women, they planned that menstruating women would first draw water from the pond, then the other women would follow. Thus, the women dared to challenge the insulting taboos whereby harijans and menstruating women are considered unclean.

In 1981, women of one village

organised to ask the tehsildar to build a road from their village to the well. In the past, only men ever went to meet government officials. I was surprised at the way women questioned the tehsildar, and I believe the men too were surprised. On another occasion, when a revenue inspector visited the village to mark the route for a new link road, and the men agreed to his proposed sketch, the women did not agree. They insisted that it be redrawn to suit the people’s needs. The inspector was shocked to see women making demands. When he enquired, he was told : “These women are from the Sangam. That is why they are talking and demanding.”

One woman, Chandra, a harijan agricultural labourer and also a mother of three, regularly attends the women’s meetings. She realised that she was overworked and felt that her husband should help with the housework. At one meeting, she came to the front and told everyone that she had talked to her husband into fetching water from the well. This was the first time a man had done this in her family and may be even in the history of the village. Another woman, Govindammal, then said she was willing to pay Rs 100 to any woman who would make her husband clean the area in front of the house with cowdung, a job women must do every morning.

When we raised the idea of men helping with the housework in the mixed meetings, the men did not like the idea. They said we were trying to create problems. One village leader was so disturbed that he could not sleep. In the early morning hours, he sat up in bed, asking himself: “What is all this about? What is women’s liberation? Are women not free?” He was really puzzled by these new ideas. Women realise that if they want men to share housework, there will be some disturbance at home. They are ready to face this fact.

Health Care Work

Training village health workers is another aspect of our organising. Landless villagers cannot afford to buy nutritious food. We encourage them to eat locally grown nutritious food such as greens, pulses, grains. We criticise

local superstitions against foods such as papayas, greens, groundnuts and *ragi*.

We cannot advise women to bathe every day and dress in fresh clothes since they do not have the resources for this. We advise them to keep food covered, to boil water, to keep the cowshed clean, to keep animals at a distance from eating and sleeping places, and to prevent water stagnation. Through health education, we make people aware that ill health is due to poverty, and we point out the necessity of fighting economic exploitation which keeps them poor.

For common ailments such as diarrhoea, colds and coughs, we urge villagers to use traditional home remedies rather than commercial drugs or syrups.

The villagers have also organised politically to fight for better health care. In village Paliyankuppam, many families were affected by virus fever which was spreading rapidly. With the help of the village health worker, the villagers reported this to the nearby primary health centre, but the doctor in charge refused to attend to the problem immediately. The villagers then sent telegrams to the district health office and to authorities in the health department. The next day, a district medical team arrived and the negligent doctor was reprimanded in front of the villagers.

Challenging Taboos

To give widows a new social role, we have trained some of them as village health workers. This policy was the result of a tragic incident. A widow came for help to two young women health workers of our organisation. She did not state her problem clearly. She said that she "had not bathed for two months", a euphemism in our language for having missed menstrual periods. The inexperienced health workers failed to understand, and sent her a way with some aspirin. A few days later, we heard the drum beatings which announced a death. We learnt that the widow had hanged herself for fear of a hostile reaction in the village when her

pregnancy became visible.

After this, we began to pay special attention to widows. We trained several as health workers, barefoot doctors and birth attendants. Each has a kit which contains everything required during the delivery of a child. Traditionally, widows are considered to bring bad luck and infertility, and are therefore not allowed to conduct deliveries. We have tried to create a new image for widows. The villagers call the health workers "sisters" or "teachers" instead of widows. We avoid training young unmarried women as health workers since, in the past, several such girls, after receiving



harvest. All the women like Bakkiam because she is kind and hardworking. But the elderly village male leader did not agree because she belongs to the dhobi caste which is considered lower than the harijans, and dhobis are not allowed into harijan houses. One woman protested to the leader, saying: "When you all meet at the centre of the village to decide on village issues, have you ever consulted women? Why should you be consulted when selecting a village health worker? This is a women's issue. Please go away." After a long struggle, Bakkiam was trained to be a village health worker.

training, suddenly left the movement and the area because they got married. Apart from widows, we prefer to train married middle aged women. Without the burden of small children, they are free to attend meetings and carry out their work well.

Village health workers are selected by the community, especially by women along with the animators. At a women's meeting in one village, a woman named Bakkiam was selected to be trained as the village health worker. Bakkiam belongs to the dhobi caste. She and her family wash clothes for the whole village. In return, they are given food every night and are paid in kind after the

The Struggle In One Village

Kaverirajapuram is a village in Thirutani taluk near Arakkonam. The village is divided into three separate caste sections. Naidus are the dominant caste. They are rich peasants. Most naidu families own more than 50 acres of land. They cultivate cash crops such as cucumber, roses, lilies, sugarcane, and sell them in Madras. The harijans and tribals are either landless labourers or marginal peasants possessing two to three acres of land. The labourers are paid very low wages, women less than men. Most of them are in debt to the landlords and have to work till the loans are repaid. Women work in the cowsheds and men

in the fields. The tribals do not own agricultural implements or animals. They have to borrow these from the landlords and pay interest for the loan.

The harijans and tribals are not allowed to wear footwear in the street of the landlords, and if they refuse to obey these orders, they are severely beaten. Boycan, a tribal, pushed down from the platform near his house because he did not stand up when a landlord passed by. Chengalrayan was beaten because he took his cattle near the landlord's fields. Suburayalu was beaten because he took a cucumber from a landlord's field. The tribals are even more terrorised and enslaved than are the harijans.

When we started working in this village, the labourers were frightened and told us to leave. They thought they would lose their employment if they joined the Sangam. Sensamma was the only person who started attending meetings in spite of her landlord's threats.

Chengaiyah was beaten by two landlords on July 11, 1983, while he was returning from market. The reason was that Chengaiyah's son Venkatesan was suspected of having an affair with the landlord's wife and due to this Venkatesan was sent away from his village for more than six months. Chengaiyah had arranged Venkatesan's marriage and wanted his son to settle in the village. The landlords insisted that Venkatesan should be sent away from the village, knowing this, two landlords beat up Chengaiyah with deadly weapons in order to force him to send his son away from the village. Chengaiyah was taken to the police station and then to a hospital. Though he was vomiting blood, the doctor certified that he had suffered simple injury. The Sangam members protested and pressurised the doctors to admit him into the hospital.

To protest this atrocity, the Sangam organised a rally on August 10, 1983. The Sangam planned to hold a mass meeting in the landlords' street but the police refused permission for this. We suspect that the police had been bribed. As the rally began, 50 policemen arrived in a jeep and told us that the landlords had obtained an injunction



Demonstrating against atrocities

order from the court so we could not conduct a meeting or rally in the village premises. If we conducted the meeting, all the leaders would be arrested. More than 500 people had gathered but the rally had to be cancelled. However, a meeting was conducted in which we spoke about how people are not allowed to exercise their basic rights in a supposedly democratic country.

After this meeting, on September 27, in the middle of the night, they set fire to the house of Sensamma, the woman leader who has been leading the struggle from the beginning. The next day, she reported to the police. The landlords then called a meeting of all the tribal families and told them to sign an undertaking, and to vow before the village gods that they would not join the Sangam. Many were frightened into signing but about 20 families refused to sign. The landlords refused to give work to these labourers who joined the Sangam. They also refused to loan animals to them. The landlords harvested the crop which had been cultivated by the tribals on a sharecropper basis. They managed to divide the villagers and turn them against each other. The Sangam members reported all this to the authorities. The police continue indirectly to support the landlords.

Today, the labourers who have joined the Sangam are unemployed and

find it difficult to get one meal a day. The Sangam leaders have helped Sensamma to open a shop so that the labourers can get food grains on credit. The landlords have even informed landlords in other villages not to employ these labourers. The woman organiser who is staying in the village has been repeatedly threatened with rape. The landlords are making every effort to get her evicted from the house where she is staying. Now we are trying to find work for the affected families. When we tried to build a centre to provide them work, the landlords prevented the owner of the land from selling us a plot to build the centre. The word "Sangam" is a real threat to the landlords. Our struggle in Kaverirajapuram continues.

On November 21 and 22, 1983, women leaders met at village Thiruvallangadu and started a *path yatra*. This was a walk rights through 12 villages, in the course of which they talked to the villagers and found out their problems. They were given food and accommodation in each village. They conducted women's meetings in the villages where women were not already organised into Sangams. They also conducted cultural programmes focusing on women's issues.

The *path yatra* was a success in the sense that many women who do not normally attend meetings joined in. In spite of exhaustion, the women were excited after the experience. □