

INNUMERABLE women in India work in the unorganised sector. Since they do not work under one roof, since there is an absence of any labour legislation covering this sector, it is difficult to organise them and improve their conditions of work. Maidservants are part of this unorganised workforce. This report is an indepth study of the Pune Shahar Molkarin Sanghatana, an organisation set up by maidservants in Pune following their 1981 strike.

During the Peshwa period, when Pune was at the height of its prosperity, rich people used to buy kunbi women to wash clothes and utensils. As the city began to get industrialised, many kunbi and maratha women were absorbed in the new factories. Following the influx of rural migrants to the city after frequent famines and after the construction of many dams which displaced rural people, hutment colonies sprang up on open plots in Pune. Most of Pune's maidservants live in these hutment colonies. At home, they face problems of inadequate water supply, poor sanitary facilities, substandard houses, and alcoholism.

Now that fewer caste Hindu women are available for domestic service, inhibitions regarding caste have gradually been abandoned. People of so called backward castes have also learnt to conceal their caste. Today in Pune there is a high percentage of scheduled caste women among maidservants.

The total population of Pune today is approximately 1.5 million, and the number of maidservants is estimated at 15,000. Unlike Bombay, Pune does not have a tradition of employing boys or men as domestic servants. This is partly due to distrust of men and partly due to the traditional concept that house work is woman's work. Earlier, it was mostly destitute women who used to take up domestic service as their sole source of income. Now the situation has changed. These jobs are also taken by working class women to augment the income of the man. When the financial condition of the family

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Organisation Of The Unorganised

Domestic Servants In Pune Struggle For Better Working Conditions

improves, the woman gives up her job. Maid-servants take their jobs as a stopgap arrangement, till they get better jobs in a factory or an institution, or till the financial situation of the family improves. Since the workers in this category are not enumerated in the census, it is very difficult to know the exact number of maidservants.

New Dimensions Of Housework

As the cities underwent change, the nature of housework changed too. The government rationing scheme has made it necessary to queue up for essential commodities like foodgrains, sugar, kerosene and milk. Increasing traffic has made the streets unsafe, which means that small children have to be taken to and fetched from school. Fetching water from public taps is another task created by changed urban conditions. In the central areas of the city, maidservants do this work, but in the suburbs where industrial workers live, this task is done by water carrier women. They charge Rs 16 to 20 per month for fetching six pots of water each day. The water is supplied only once a day.

The tasks of washing clothes and utensils have also become more complicated. Many kinds of synthetic garments have to be soaked in high quality soap and washed with special care. White garments are soaked in whitening solutions. With the advent of detergent powders, there is a tendency to get all clothes washed at home rather than giving some to

professional washermen. Similarly, earlier, utensils used to be scrubbed with some soil or ash. Now that gas stoves and steel or hindalium utensils are widely used, manufacturers have started claiming in their advertisements that utensils should be washed with special washing powders. Many of these powders are harmful to the skin.

Care of various items of furniture and household appliances is another task that falls to the maid servants' lot. There have been cases of employers asking maidservants to wash basins and waterclosets with acid but not giving proper instructions, with the result that the women's hands got severely burnt.

Often, all kinds of extra jobs such as childcare, dusting, looking after pet animals, fetching groceries, running errands, are passed on to the maidservant though these jobs were not mentioned at the time when the terms of employment were settled. Maidservants tend to be overburdened in households where excessive cleanliness and order are insisted upon.

No Increments

Despite spiralling prices, maid servants' wages have remained unchanged for the last 10 years. Usually, when a new woman is employed, her wages are fixed in relation to that paid to the previous woman. Even in prosperous localities like Prabhat Road, maidservants were found working for wages as low as Rs 10 a month.

Findings of a sample survey conducted in localities like Karve Road, Gultekadi, Deccan Gymkhana area, Sahakarnagar, all considered prosperous localities showed that maids were paid on an average Rs 14 a month for washing utensils, Rs 20 for washing utensils and clothes, Rs 25 if they also swept and mopped floors. Women who did the cooking were paid Rs 75 a month. Those who made the *chapitis* every day were paid Rs 22 a month. The rate for babysitting the whole day was Rs 90 a month. Women who lived in the house and did all the house work were paid Rs 40 a month, with board and lodging.

The Daily Routine

A maidservant's day starts at 4 a.m. If she is lucky, her husband will fetch water for her. Otherwise, she has to queue up for it. After packing the husband's lunch, she cleans the house, and then gets the children ready and takes them to school. After this, she begins her first round of household jobs.

Generally, her day of paid labour begins at 7 a.m. The workplace is a minimum of two to three furlongs away from the home. Since she cannot afford the bus fare, she has to walk. A maidservant works for a minimum of three and a maximum of seven households. Her morning round generally ends at 11 a.m.

During the break, she comes home, has her bath and food, and fetches the children from school. Then she gets busy with her own housework. At about 2 p.m. she starts her afternoon round. She comes home at 6 p.m. to start cooking, feeding, washing, and taking battering and abuses from her drunken husband before finally going to bed sometime after midnight. The husband's drunkenness is a daily feature in the life of a majority of these women. Lack of public latrines seems to have affected the health of these women. Considerate employers allow their servants to use their toilets. The less fortunate ones have to relieve

themselves only after sunset. In some places they have to squat on wild grasses which are harmful to the skin.

Social Status

Most of the maidservants who are more than 30 years old are illiterate. A handful of them have studied up to class three, but being out of touch with reading and writing, they are illiterate for all practical purposes. Young girls covered under the survey have studied up to class three. Some girls have passed the high school examination. There is also one stray case of a young maidservant having passed B Com in the first division.

All the maidservants stay in slum

made to work endlessly. It is very easy to overexploit such women.

Since maidservants have to work both in their own houses as well as in those of their women employers, they are well aware of the twofold exploitation of women. They rarely have the time or money to enjoy any form of recreation. Hence the period of four or five hours that they work in prosperous households becomes their entertainment!

Adolescent girls who work as maids prefer to spend time in the employers' houses to escape the squalor of the slums where they reside. They are impressed by the luxuries like



A meeting of the union

areas or *chawls*. Most of them have families living with them. A live-in maid is fast becoming a rarity. There could be two reasons for this. Even widowed or destitute women are not willing to let their young daughters do live-in jobs. This is because employers often tend to take unfair advantage of the girls' helplessness. Hence these women prefer to keep a watchful eye even on daughters of preadolescent age. Second, live-in domestic work means unending work for a nominal salary. Such a maidservant is glorified as "just like one of the family" and is

fans, television, taperecorder, in the employer's home since these are objects they are never likely to own in their lifetime. Employers too prefer to hire adolescent girls since they can be manipulated and made to work endlessly.

How The Agitation Began

Meagre salaries and lack of paid leave were the main problems which spurred the maidservants into a spontaneous strike action on February 8, 1980. The maidservants from Karve Road had fallen sick and had to go on leave. A few maidservants had

appealed to the employers not to cut the pay of those women. When their appeal was refused, they left the workplace and narrated the incident to various maids they met on the way, saying that they had gone on strike. Within an hour, about 150 servants from Karve Road spontaneously struck work.

Although they said they were strike, they did not have a clear idea what a strike meant. They contacted Mr. Kerkar, a union activist of the Life insurance corporation workers. He organised a meeting immediately. From the next day onward, meetings were held in different localities. They were guided by Leela Bhosale, sub-editor of *Bayaza*, a Marathi bimonthly for women, and by Lata Bhise. The agitation was reported in the city press. Maidservants from different areas like Meera Society, Narayan Peth, Sahakarnagar, Shivajinagar, Gultekadi, decided to go on strike too. These women had not been contacted by the activists or asked to go on strike. They took the decision on their own, after hearing about the action. Eventually, the maidservants' union was officially formed and Mr D.J. Khilare of the Janata Party became its president. He was known to many of the women who had initiated the struggle since he had, in the past, helped to settle a colony where most of these activist servants happened to live.

The maidservants decided to launch the agitation though they were fully aware of the risk of losing their jobs. In some localities, they did not report to work for as long as 20 days, till their demands were met. They won their demands on their collective strength.

List Of Demands

In the initial phase of the agitation, pay raise and sick leave were the only demands put forward by the maidservants. After the union was set up, they formulated their demands more clearly, discussed the issues in locality meetings and formulated a list of demands. The issue of pay raise was

discussed at great length. Some of them were getting only Rs 7 while others were getting Rs 20. They finally decided to take into account the number of persons in the employer's household, the financial status of the employer, the present pay, and the workload involved before, asking for a raise.

The demands put forward to employers were:

1. Immediate pay raise
2. Bonus equivalent to a month's salary at Diwali
3. A monthly contribution of a minimum of 15 percent of the salary towards provident fund
4. Paid sick leave



Two of the strikers

5. Two paid holidays a month
6. If the employer goes out of town, pay for that period should not be cut nor should the period be considered as leave.

They had also put forward some demands to the government with respect to their future :

1. Free medical aid
2. Low cost housing on ownership basis
3. Jobs to offspring
4. A minimum wage of Rs 300 a month. If employers cannot pay this wage, government should create jobs with adequate wages.

5. Mathadi Kamgar Act be made applicable to maidservants.

Employers' Responses

The strike proved that, in the absence of labour laws, maid servants will have to depend on their employers' mercy.

Employers, under psychological pressure, raised salaries in response to the printed statement issued by the maidservants' union. However, this was followed by an increase in workload too. The maidservants stood firm on the demand: "Extra pay for extra work."

A union activist then thought of a way of collective bargaining. Housing societies are proliferating in the city.

Usually, only four or five maids work in our society. These maids could come together and create pressure at the cooperative society level rather than at the level of the individual employer. There are 30 families residing in Madhuban society in Deccan Gymkhana area. Six women work as maids for these households. The union issued a charter of demands to all the families. Some maids had been employed in the area for as long as 10 years. Members of the society agreed that their servants were eking out a miserable living.

A union activist suggested to the

secretary of the society that all members should grant pay raise, provident fund and bonus. A resolution to that effect was put forward in the society meeting. But after the secretary changed, the resolution making these terms obligatory on all members was dismissed.

In the meanwhile, the maids had started taking two paid holidays per month. It was made clear to employers that they would have to pay the substitutes separately. All the demands were again put forward to the individual members. Employers made several attempts to employ new women, but the unity among the maids defeated these tactics. The maids decided that the women approached to replace an employee, should insist on the same terms. This strategy forced a majority of the members of this society individually to accept the demands. Now the provident fund is being collected in a local bank.

One employer from Chaitrali apartments on Prabhat Road, was convinced of the justice of the maids' demands, and persuaded other resident employers to accept these demands. After the inception of the union, the incidence of false theft charges, and of wage cuts in case of breakages has gone down. Maidservants have realised that it is harmful to undercut each other for jobs. Now a prospective maid asks for pay that is higher than that received by the previous one. Besides, no new job is accepted without consulting the previous employee.

There had been cases of molestation by employers in Meera society area. The victims are, however, not yet mentally prepared for an open action by the union.

Labour Legislation

Maidservants are not protected by any labour legislation hence they are very insecure. They find it difficult to act against practices like dismissal without notice, nonpayment of sick leave, false charges of theft, wage cuts,

denial of pay raise, physical assault, abuse and so on.

A committee appointed by government to look into these questions recommended that since domestic workers and maidservants receive meagre wages, the Mathadi Kamgar Act should be made applicable to them. But legislators have maintained a convenient silence on this issue. These representatives of the people know that to attempt to secure minimum wages for maid servants will invite the displeasure of the middle and upper classes. Indeed, most legislators themselves belong to these classes.

During the strike, there were incidents of physical assault by some employers. There were also cases of nonpayment of wages. Being scattered over numerous households, the women were not in a position to take effective action,

Developing Consciousness

These maidservants were constantly made to believe that a cup of tea and leftover food were favours bestowed on them by generous employers. During this strike, the hostility of their employers became very apparent to the women, and this revelation destroyed the last vestiges of the emotional attachment and respect they had for their mistresses. The illusion of employers' generosity

was shattered, and clearcut professional relations emerged. They are now acquiring a more professional and objective attitude to their work.

During this agitation the women came to understand somewhat the meaning and power of a strike. They learnt to formulate their demands after repeated discussions with each other. They are also beginning to show some interest in other workers' strikes.

A local leadership also developed and performed tasks like organising local meetings, discussing demands with their co-workers in the locality, informing members of union decisions, asking for members' opinions, attending meetings in other localities, getting to know about trade unions and so on. They guided members in personal matters and settled rivalries between maid servants. They accompanied members to the police station to report causes of physical assaults by employers. They also negotiated employers on behalf of members. Being maidservants, they had hand knowledge of the problems and proved very effective in handling them.

Very few of the outsiders remained active till the end. Of the union secretaries, five were outsiders, and six were maidservants from different localities. They had elected



Maidservants having a discussion

unanimously at the general body meeting. These six women looked after their own households, worked for their employers during the day, and did union work in the evening. They were illiterate women. Only one had studied up to class three. Five of them knew nothing about a strike. One had been encouraged by her husband who is an industrial worker. None of them had ever struck work before. They used to refer to the *morcha* they had taken out as a "strike." Participation in the union provided them with a new set of relationships and a new social life.

After the union was set up, these women started taking interest in other issues. They participated enthusiastically in the *dharna* that was staged on August 8, 1980 by various women's organisations at the collectorate. They started critically observing cases of atrocities on women, and contemplated action. They participated in a conference against rape and atrocities on women. On March 8, they celebrated international women's day. They put forward demands like work for all, child care facilities, maternity leave and so on.

There could be two reasons for their husbands' tolerance of their participation in such programmes. First, they must have felt that actions undertaken under the guidance of middle class women would not cause much trouble. Second, the events being all women affairs, there was no cause for suspicion.

Some Contradictions

A majority of those who employ maidservants were found to be themselves employed in factories, schools, colleges, offices. As teachers, workers, clerks, these people have been involved in agitation for various demands, and pressurised government and other employers through strikes, *dharnas* and *morchas*. The stingy and hostile attitude towards maidservants of people who themselves fight for better working conditions was a visible contradiction.



Also, many maidservants pointed out that the master is often kind hearted, he is not rude. It is the mistress of the house who makes them slog. Why is this so? The men in the family have generally little or no idea of various small and big tasks involved in running a household. Also, between the exploitation of the maidservant and that of his wife, the master perhaps prefers the latter.

Many maidservants claimed that the master is ready to raise the salary but the mistress is not. There could be two reasons for this unjust attitude of the mistress. The most important reason could be that the mistress herself is not paid for the work she does as a house wife. Hence she resents the fact that her husband is willing to pay a "large sum" to the maidservant for the same kind of work. Another reason could be that generally a woman, even if she is employed, has no real freedom to spend her money as she likes, hence her reluctance to take a decision to raise the servant's salary.

It is clear that this contradiction within the working class has come to

the surface. Many household jobs have become part of the employment market, and the relationship between employer and employee, devoid of sentiment, has become well established in them. There is an urgent need to determine the value of the labour power of those who do domestic jobs. This is indirectly connected with women's situation, since it is women who do most of the domestic work in society. Only socialisation of various domestic tasks will free women from the drudgery of housework and will endow domestic work, which has so far been taken for granted as the "sacred duty" of women, with exchange value, that is, will make its value calculable in terms of money.

On January 4, 1984, the women again struck work, demanding a pay raise. In spite of the lapse of three years since the last strike, this action was widespread, and proved successful since the demand was fulfilled within the space of two to four days.

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