

REPORTS

ASSAM

Atrocities on Women Unnoticed

Women, in a male-dominated society, are treated as the private property of men. If there is a clash between landlords and labourers, it is the labouring women who finally bear the brunt of the landlords' anger; atrocities on Harijan women have become an everyday occurrence. Everywhere, women are the worst sufferers. This was once more proved in January 1980 when the government let loose its military and CRP forces on the Assamese people.

The cause for which the Assamese people are agitating may be debatable but nothing can justify such an attempt by the state to create fear psychosis through repression. We visited North Kamrup and found evidence of heinous atrocities. Unfortunately, in Assam unlike in Narainpur, there was no ministry to topple so these atrocities went almost unnoticed in the national press.

Things took place too quickly for the people in this region to understand. On January 5, 1980, barely 25 days after the imposition of President's rule, curfew was imposed in extensive areas of North Kamrup. This was a consequence of the agitation in this area in which different sections of people had participated. On January 7, the Governor declared these areas "disturbed" and the next day the army was called in to restore "law and order." The first reports of atrocities reached Gauhati on January 12 through villagers fleeing from curfew bound areas. The Junior Doctors' Association and the Students' Union of Gauhati Medical College sent a medical relief team comprising nine doctors, eight medicos and ancillary staff.

Within four days, this team treated nearly 300 victims of atrocities. More than 25 women who had been raped by military and para-military men came

seeking medical aid. The number of rape cases treated by private doctors and government dispensaries is unknown. Besides, most village women who, according to the reports of their neighbours, have been raped, would not even accept medical aid because of the fearful knowledge that society will finally blame the rape victim, not the rapists. One woman with injuries suggesting rape was in such pain that she could not walk, but she admitted to everything except having been raped. According to members of Asom Mahila Sanstha who also toured the villages, there were more than a 100 victims of rape but not all were willing to file complaints.

Eye-witnesses said that men were brought out of houses, tied to trees or taken away to army camps and women were molested or raped, in many cases before the eyes of the men. Small girls like eight-year-old Rina Hazarika and 80-year-old women like Daibya Deka and Oli Hazarika were so brutally beaten up that their limbs were broken. Moinabal Deka and Aiterubala Burman were raped four to five days after childbirth. Zarina Begum, a 16-year-old married girl, of Kumarikata village, was raped by two army men while her helpless father looked on. Another woman Prova Talukdar was raped by three CRP men, while she was in an advanced stage of pregnancy. These are but a few examples. There were many other young women with injuries on their faces and breasts; there had been numerous attempts to rape and molest. The same story was heard again and again in Galpezar, Dhandhama, Barsimalguri, Bolowa and many other villages of North Kamrup.

As soon as the news of these atrocities reached the towns, there was widespread anger in Assam. In Gauhati, over a lakh of people, mainly women, gathered in a public meeting to protest



-Kathe Kollwitz

against these atrocities. Women from the affected areas also came and spoke. Similar rallies were held all over Assam. Resolutions were passed pledging to offer all possible help to the victims, to ensure that they are not treated as outcasts and that the Government takes the responsibility for this. But such things are easier said than done because the social condemnation of the raped woman will never be eradicated until society begins to accept women as human beings in their own right rather than as the possessions of men.

What happened to the women of North Kamrup can happen to women anywhere in India, any time that the State chooses to let loose its repressive machinery. It is high time we women organize ourselves to fight against rape and all kinds of sexual exploitation.

(Compiled from reports sent by Manorama and Vibhuti Patel.)

PUNJAB

Between Poverty and Police

On the night of March 26, two poor rag picker women Teresa and Kasima along with their male family members were sleeping near the railway station, Bhatinda. Three Railway Police Force men led by a havaladar kicked these poor people awake. "Have you a *chhokri* (young girl) for our saheb? It will only be a ten-minute job," the havaladar allegedly said to the puzzled women.

"We are poor, homeless, rag pickers from Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu. There is no girl among us. Please leave us alone," replied the terrified women. "No. No. We want a *chhokri*. Get us one from anywhere you like; if you don't we will arrest your men on the charge of smuggling," threatened the havaladar. With these words the police party went away.



Teresa and Kasima

The next day the police party came again and made the same demand. The poor people pleaded their inability to meet this atrocious demand. "Should we take that woman?" said the havaladar to the other policemen. Teresa, terror-stricken, pleaded that she was a widow and they should spare her. The other two policemen seemed to think that Teresa would not do. So they took Kasima's husband Krishnamurthi and Teresa's son Albert Lawrence into custody. They were reportedly kept in the railway police

station for two days and mercilessly tortured.

On March 29, Krishnamurthi and Albert Lawrence were produced before a judge. The police had allegedly extorted a confession from them. The judge, as is the common practice, decided within minutes that the two must pay a fine or go to jail. The men were unable to pay the fine and since then have been languishing in jail. The starving women have no money with which to hire a lawyer and bail out the men. None of the local people are willing to stand surety for nomads.

Meanwhile Krishnamurthi and Lawrence were again produced before the judge on April 8. The judge, without even looking up from the papers on his desk, fixed April 19 for the next appearance. When the women tried to appeal to him, the judge rudely ordered :

picnicking in the pleasant surroundings of Narayani, a hill-station 70 kilometres from Berhampur in Ganjam district of Orissa. In an apparent pre-planned move, 30 miscreants reported to be Congress(I) workers from Ganjam, the home district of Ramchandra Rath, the All India Youth Congress(I) President, joined them. These men set about teasing and molesting the girls. When the situation threatened to get out of hand, the headmistress and the girls tried to climb into a truck and leave. The men immediately obstructed them and threw stones, seriously injuring many of the girls. The truck-cleaner was assaulted and kidnapped. Somehow the headmistress managed to reach the nearby Naval Centre where she appealed for help. When the naval officials arrived, there was a clash between the local people and the ruffians. Journalists who had come to report on the incident were also attacked and intimidated. The police as usual appeared on the scene only when the harm was already done.

The effect of this ghastly incident on the girls can be imagined. The offenders of course have the protection of some politicians. Narayani is not an isolated incident. It is another of the Narainpurs, Parasbighas and Pipras of India.

—Lakshmi Iyer

MADRAS

Dying a little everyday

On November 5, 1979, Smt. Vijayalakshmi Chander, a telephone clerk employed by the Post and Telegraphs Department, Madras, committed suicide at her office premises. She left a letter to her parents stating that she was ending her life because she was unable to bear the treatment meted out to her by her husband's family.

In her last letter, Vijaylakshmi said : "Making a marriage alliance with a family above one's status brings suffering to everyone. We have incurred substantial debts, and yet they are not satisfied. Instead of hearing these words and dying a little everyday, it is better to die once and for all." In response to Vijaylakshmi's suicide, Women's

"Turn them out of the room." The wailing women had no alternative but to leave the courtroom. No one knows when the helpless rag pickers will be released from jail.

—Ved Parkash Gupta, *General Secretary, Punjab Human Rights Committee, Bhatinda.*

ORISSA

Schoolgirls Molested

It was Sunday, February 3, 1980. 30 high-school girls from Banpur, chaperoned by their headmistress, were

Democratic Association and Working Women's Co-ordination Committee in Madras, submitted a petition to the Tamil Nadu State Government, demanding that this case be officially investigated. Women's Democratic Association put forth the following demands :

1. Deterrent law should be enacted to the effect that if a woman dies within two years of her marriage, all her properties and her terminal benefits should be returned to her parents.

2. Special aid should be given to women separated from their husbands in the form of subsidized hostels providing women with a secure shelter and some provisions for finding these women jobs.

3. A guidance cell consisting of lawyers, social workers and psychologists should be formed to counsel and assist women who are being beaten or mentally harassed in their homes.

4. A special investigation machinery should be implemented to investigate crimes against women. Suicides by women as well as deaths under suspicious circumstances must be taken up for investigation.

—Women's Democratic Association, Madras

KARNATAKA

Where There is Exploitation, There is Revolt

Anasuyamma is an 18-year-old widow. She has a 2-year-old daughter and stays with her father in village Malur in Karnataka.

Her father Sheshgiriappa is a very poor potter. The government has given him a little land - less than one acre. The landlord of Malur village is a very influential taluk board member called Krishnagowda. He wanted to grab the piece of land from Sheshgiriappa. The day after Diwali, in the afternoon, Anasuya was guarding the guava trees on her father's land. Krishnagowda with a gang of his relatives attacked her. They left not a stitch of clothing on her, they urinated in her mouth and raped her. Her body still bears the wounds of the



Anasuyamma

atrocities. The Dalit Mahila Vimochana Samiti of Kolar district took up the case. They brought Anasuya to Bangalore and conducted a press conference. I saw her at that press conference, crying silently and narrating her story very boldly. She had teeth marks all over her body - she showed them to me. One widely circulated Kannada newspaper sent a reporter to the conference but did not publish a word about Anasuya. These papers raise a hue and cry about Pipra and Belchi which are at a safe distance but remain silent when powerful local men are involved.

On 10 December, 1979, the Samiti organized a protest march. About 300 women along with Anasuya and her baby marched through the streets of Kolar town. The leaflet announcing the march had given a call : "...Where there is exploitation, there is revolt. Women are naturally angered against all forms of exploitation. It is necessary that these million voices join and fight for the liberation of women."

Many other women's organizations of Karnataka - Working Women's Co-ordination Committee members from Bangalore, Shidlaghatta, Chitamani and members of Samata group from Mysore came to Kolar to show their solidarity. Most of the women participants were agricultural labourers from villages around Malur. The demonstrators

shouted slogans like : "Krishnagowda is a rascal, put shackles on him", "When will Mahila Vimochana come? When women arise", "We will spill blood and protect Anasuyamma." Many women carried placards.

We went and submitted a memorandum to the District Commissioner, asking him to arrest Krishnagowda, to conduct an enquiry and also to protect and provide a job to Anasuyamma. After the rally, we held a women's meeting at a dalit hostel. Some women spoke and revolutionary songs were sung. Anasuya was asked to speak. She was too heartbroken and could only cry. It was heart-rending to see that every woman in the gathering felt one with her and began to cry too.

And after all this, what happened ? A week later, some women hired by Krishnagowda beat up Anasuya so badly that she had to be hospitalized. Now she is recovering. Krishnagowda has not been punished. He was arrested and held in custody for only. But women have come closer and have tried to create public awareness.

(Compiled from reports sent by S. Malathi and E. Rati Rao)

DELHI

No faith in Courts

On March 13, 1980, Jenab, a newly-married Muslim girl was burnt to death in Seemapuri, a resettlement colony on the outskirts of Delhi. Two women undertook a special investigative report for Manushi.

"Come, sit down, I will tell you everything that is in my heart." Shabbo made us sit on the cot outside her house. She sat down beside us and we were surrounded by all the women of the *mohalla*.

Shabbo is the mother of seven children. Her husband is unemployed. Her eldest son pulls a rickshaw and supports the family. In June last year, Shabbo got her eldest daughter Jenab married to a boy who also lives in Seemapuri and works in a sari factory. They gave a sizable dowry including silver, gold, jewellery and clothes. But

the in-laws were not satisfied. They wanted a sofa set, radio, electric fan, sewing machine, iron and stove. It was impossible to provide all these. The situation worsened. Jenab was not allowed to visit her parents. Shabbo was insulted whenever she went to meet her daughter. Every day Jenab was ill-treated, beaten and half-starved.

Yet, Shabbo felt that some patching-up of the situation might be possible. "After all, we had arranged the marriage to foster good relations, not enmity." Jenab too preferred to try working out things in this family rather than starting again elsewhere with a new set of problems.

On March 11, Jenab's aunt went to bring her home. She was insulted and told: "This time, we will send the girl only when we have settled matters." Two days later, matters were settled once for all – Jenab was burnt to death.

Shabbo was crying as she told us: "On 13th evening, I was busy cooking. A neighbour came rushing in and embraced me, weeping : 'Shabbo, your Jenab is dead, your Jenab is finished. She is lying in the police station. Those devils have burnt your daughter!'" On hearing this, Shabbo became hysterical and all the women of the locality collected.

At the police station, they were told that Jenab had attempted suicide and was in J.P. hospital. When she rushed there, Shabbo was not allowed to see her daughter. She returned home and her son went to the hospital. After much pleading, he was allowed to see his sister. He says she was being fed glucose which was foaming in her mouth. At 2 a.m. Jenab died.

After post mortem, the body was brought home. The women sitting around told us how terribly burnt the body was : "There was not even a needle's point of unburnt flesh from her head to her ankles. She was unrecognizable." One old woman held up a piece of coal: "Do you see this ? This was the colour of the poor girl's skin." They also told us that Jenab's two

front teeth had been broken, and her hair pulled out. Her hair lay scattered on the floor of the room where she died. One woman said : "Poor girl, she had been starved for three days." They had this information from the five-year-old sister of Jenab's husband. She had been given one rupee and asked a few questions. She said that for ten days or so, there had been constant conflict between her sister-in-law and others in the house. For a few days, Jenab had not been given any food, she had been beaten up badly, then kerosene was poured on her and she was burnt to death.

The women were hesitant at first, they came out with further details. Jenab's in-laws were associated with a man called Salman who ran a regular prostitution racket. Jenab was allegedly pressurized to prostitute herself. She refused and threatened to tell her parents. The women suspect that she was first tortured and then killed in accordance with a well-laid plan.

The people of Seemapuri know the actual facts of the case. They allege that the police have been given a bribe of Rs. 4,000. In fact, one woman had rushed to the police station to give evidence that she knew this was a case of murder. But she was thrown out of the place.

The women suspect that Jenab was first killed and then burnt to create false evidence of suicide. They ask : "How is it that the wooden house did not catch fire ? That the wooden cots in the same room were not burnt? If she had committed suicide, other things would have got burnt? If she had committed suicide, other things would have got burnt too." And, as Shabbo says : "How is it that the door of the room was bolted from outside, not inside?"

No, Shabbo does not want to take the case to court. She knows it would only be a waste of time and money and she has small children to bring up. But one thing she wants. That no other woman's daughter should die as Jenab died. She wanted a demonstration outside the house of Jenab's inlaws. All the women of the neighbourhood were

very vociferous about this demand. They wanted a *Juloos*. They wanted these people to be publicly humiliated, their faces to be painted black so that other exploiters may not dare continue torturing and murdering young women.

MADHYA PRADESH

Towards Self Dependence

The Chattisgarh Mahila Jagriti Sangathan organized a training camp for women activists at Darshansthana from January 25 to February 15.

The women had no experience of community work and had come expecting to be taught something. Those leading the discussion tried to break down these expectations and encourage a free exchange of ideas and thoughts. Arrangements had to be made to look after the children while the women attended the discussions.

The women were most interested in "Legislations Related to Women." We also discussed the role and status of women in history from the Vedic era to the present times. All along, questions were raised about the reasons for the deteriorating status of women. We realized that women have been shown as passive and the role of women leaders minimized or ignored in history writing. But a re-examination of various movements shows that women have been in the forefront of all struggles against oppression.

Many of the participants in the camp were Christians. Our Bible studies course dealt with the importance of women in Christ's vision of the world. The women showed keen interest in this new aspect and began to realise that it is God's will for women to lead a creative and responsible life instead of conforming to the accepted mode of conduct in society.

The issue of community health was discussed and the question arose as to whether or not health is a political problem, and why medical facilities are not available in villages and for poor people.

The women lived with the village people and made an effort to learn from



The Women of Manushi Kendra

FOR LIFE

(To Karuna after the NATO decisions)

Little daughter,
how long will they let you live ?

When will we find
you've got skin cancer
or leukemia ?

When will the bomb fall
which will kill us all
without causing
any material damage ?

From you I can learn
how to love life.
You gurgle with joy
over a glass or water,
You take the sand to bed
because you love it so much.

Our evening walk
in moonlight enchantment
pales the neonlights.
At night you dream
of big cats and small kittens,
And daily
like a hurricane,
you howl
with doubtfully quivering underlip
at something
which should not be possible.

Little daughter, how right you are.
The impossible
we have to make possible
here and now.

We shall not allow them
to protect us to death
with their lethal machines.

We won't buy as peace
their instalment-suicide.
The atom we trust
will extinguish our lights.

Who dares to radiate
the light of life
while the mighty struggle for energy ?

We must learn against death
that we can still love.

- Gabriele Dietrich

village women. They conducted surveys of the village with special emphasis on the condition of women. The evening session were mostly a free expression of ideas, views, problems, through media like art, role-play, poetry and song. One especially interesting play was based on the inequality between the powerful landlords, traders politicians, and the powerless common people. It raised questions as to how workers can preserve their unity when the powerful break it so easily by sending their leaders to prison.

Almost all agreed that the camp helped them develop a critical outlook and they expressed a keen desire to share their ideas with others in their community.

—*Shashi Sail*

Inspiration from Manushi

We have established a women's centre and called it "Manushi Kendra" because we have been inspired by this journal. In this centre we express our thoughts and discuss them without any hesitation. We try interpreting the Bible in new ways from our own point of view. We are anxious to be economically independent. Seven of us are taking training in sewing and hope to begin this work as a co-operative soon. In these

small ways, the "Manushi Kendra" hopes to challenge the domination and fear of men under which women live, so that women can develop a consciousness of our rights and a new self-confidence.

We are not different from other women in India. We are also uneducated, dependent on others, devoid of self-confidence. We live our lives, afraid and oppressed by society. But we believed that we women will together be able to create a society where we will be free, self-dependent and self-confident.

—*Chattisgarh Mahila Jagriti Sangathan*

In Women's Words :

In the village, I had never heard the word "exploitation". I did not know what it meant. Now I want to explain its meaning to others in my village.

I've had a lot of anger inside me for four years. Our parents are ready to display us for sale before any two-legged idiot, as if we are bales of cloth...

When the division of land was going on in our family, I tried talking about my right to a share. I was shut up and told I have no such rights as I am a girl...

Who am I ? I am the woman who was kept sleeping but now I am not asleep. My soul has been awakened...

(translated from Hindi)