

Guaranteed Employment and Gender Construction

Women's Mobilisation in Maharashtra

Gender analysis of Maharashtra's Employment Guarantee Scheme has focused on the "women-friendly" nature of the scheme as it attracted a large number of women workers. This paper argues that it is not the presence of a large number of women as EGS workers that makes the scheme women-friendly, but that this presence makes possible their mobilisation by organisations that have leftist and feminist ideologies. Through this mobilisation, not only "women-friendly" provisions – such as equal wages, provision of crèches, shelter, maternity benefits and close proximity of EGS works – get implemented, but women raise new concerns, which critique gender discrimination.

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Contemporary theorists discussing the Employment Guarantee Scheme (EGS) in Maharashtra, which was instituted as an act in 1977, have argued that "guaranteed employment" is "women-friendly" [Dandekar and Sathe 1980; Datar 1987; Archarya and Panwalkar 1990; Krishnaraj et al 2004; Dev 1995] and identify the EGS as a "programme for women" as it absorbs 51 per cent [Dandekar 1983], (45-64 per cent as per Datar and 40 per cent as per Archarya and Panwalkar) of rural female wage labourers and therefore it is sensitive to their needs. The EGS is a law, which "guarantees work"; where the state has to provide work on demand and includes provisions such as equal wages for women and men, crèches, drinking water and sanitation facilities at work sites.

Krishnaraj et al (2004) on the issue of gender sensitivity of EGS, have stated that one aim of this scheme is to use the mostly unskilled labour of the rural areas as under the EGS Act it is necessary that unskilled labour form 60 per cent of the project labour cost. This paper analyses women's mobilisation by three activist organisations in the period between 1970s and 1990s around the conception of "guaranteed employment". It also asks the following questions: (1) what is the socio-political and economic context of this mobilisation? (2) what are the strategies for women's political mobilisation used by the organisations? (3) what kind of gender concerns have emerged as a result of this mobilisation? and (4) what is the relationship between women's mobilisation and "guaranteed employment"?

Observations in the field show that though EGS has attracted unskilled labour force, it has failed to provide any form of training to these unskilled labour forces, especially women. They continue to depend heavily on the scheme for employment and income even after three decades of its existence. I argue that the high visible presence of women as labourers on EGS work has contributed to render women as unskilled workers in the labour market. Additionally I argue that only high visibility of women as EGS workers does not make the scheme a "programme for women"; on the other hand, it is the scheme's potential for

mobilisation of the rural poor that makes EGS a gender-sensitive programme.

I draw from Herring and Edwards (1983) where they assert, that the design of EGS, with its various levels of decision-making and the practices of implementation makes it a conservative scheme. In their opinion, what is most crucial is its "potential" for mobilisation of the rural poor, as it becomes an incentive "for collective action". In this paper I will examine the potential of EGS for mobilisation and its impact on collective action. Additionally, I will also analyse how gender concerns emerge through this mobilisation and collective action and thereby evaluate the relationship between guaranteed employment, political participation and gender construction.

In order to understand the above questions I draw upon the work of scholars and activists who have already analysed and discussed the relationship between political participation of women and the growth of feminist movement in India as well as the relationship between development programmes enunciated by the state and the women's empowerment [Omvedt 1977a, 1977b, 1993; Sen 1990, Gandhi and Shah 1992; Kumar 1993].

Omvedt (1977a, 1977b, 1993), Gandhi and Shah (1992), Kumar (1993) analyse the growth of women's movement in India in the late 1970s and argue that its distinctive characteristics were the movement was led by, for and of women, and that its organisation – was autonomous of established party and mass movements. It was the urban educated middle classes who established these organisations. Though they were different from each other in terms of their ideological stance, they were bound together by a common cause for growth of feminist consciousness. Lastly, these autonomous organisations cleared feminist consciousness through an analysis of gender discrimination and thus articulated a feminist critique of Indian society. Further they also argued that the contemporary movement was the third wave in the growth of Indian women's movement, the first being the nationalist struggle and the second being the mass movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s in Maharashtra, in which women had played a prominent role.

Sen (1990) argues that we need not distinguish between the second and third waves of women's movement. She states that feminist consciousness and a critique of patriarchy can emerge without a movement led by women only. Rather gender concerns can evolve in mass movements where both men and women participate, which was the case of the movements in Maharashtra in the 1960s and 1970s. In these struggles, women could create a "space" for themselves, even though men were present as participants and as leaders in the movement. Additionally, she contends that from the late 1970s onwards, separate women's cells to address distinctive gender concerns have emerged in these mass movements. She argues that these mass movements have played a critical role in the evolution of feminist consciousness.

What was the nature of this feminist consciousness? Agarwal (1989, 1994) understands feminist consciousness to be linked with material concerns. The critical issue defining women's movement in India is the articulation of economic concerns, which defined patriarchy. Thus the issues of gender discrimination and violence in the private sphere cannot be understood without assessing the economic conditions that structure women's status.

In this paper I argue the following. First the mass movements in rural areas of Maharashtra in the late 1960s and early 1970s involved the political participation of both women and men. Second, in these movements women from all classes and castes found a "space" to express themselves and participate in politics and through it gave an expression to gender concerns. Third, urban women activists together with rural women tried to forge an all-India alliance of women. Fourth, recognition of gender concerns was related to an assessment of material needs of women and its impact on and relationship with discrimination within the family.

All the above issues are critical attributes in the discussions and the debate on how development programmes can aid women's quest for empowerment. Policy planners and women activists assert that once women are provided with minimum basic needs, then women will be empowered. Therefore, they say that the state has to provide these needs to women through development programmes. However, Moser (1989: 1800-1804) distinguishes between two kinds of interests "practical and strategic". Moser argues that most of the development programmes for women are designed to cater to practical needs of women rather than strategic as she defines it. Thus, these development programmes succeed only partially.

It is in this context that I analyse the state-sponsored scheme of guaranteed employment. This scheme incorporates all the elements that Moser describes as practical needs such as equal and timely wages and access to sanitation and drinking water facilities. No wonder some scholars have considered it as a "women-friendly scheme". However, I argue with Herring and Edwards (1983) that this scheme is intrinsically conservative and that its potential for mobilisation and collective action is its major strength. It is only when there is mobilisation and collective action of women by organisations that have leftist and feminist ideologies that "women-friendly" provisions in this scheme get implemented and women raise new gender concerns, which critique discrimination of women. Further in these mobilisations, which began in the late 1960s, the strategic and the practical needs combine together as gender concerns.

In this paper I investigate the above issues in the context of two-time periods – 1969-1975 and late 1970s to late 1980s. In

the first phase, I focus on Maharashtra Rajya Shetmajoor Parishad (henceforth Parishad), and Shramik Sanghatana. In the second phase, the article investigates mobilisations by Mukti Sangharash and Stree Mukti Sangharash.

This study uses a combination of methods. Initially, secondary published sources such as books and articles on EGS and the women's questions were used. Later, I used primary sources such as newspapers, government records, pamphlets and letters from the organisations. Data was also collected through interviews with EGS workers, government officials and activists.

This paper is divided into four sections. Section I discusses the struggles initiated by the Parishad, Section II Shramik Sanghatana, Section III Mukti Sangharash and Stree Mukti Sangharash. And Section IV establishes the argument of the paper.

I Women in Drought Struggles¹

In this section the protests and struggles of women in Ahmednagar district (western Maharashtra region), Aurangabad, Parbhani, Osmanabad districts (Marathwada region) and Jalgaon district (north Maharashtra region), which emerged under the leadership of the Parishad are examined. The Parishad, a rural trade union organisation was established in 1971 in Ahmednagar district. It was affiliated to the Lal Nishan Party, an independent left party not having links with any established contemporary communist parties. Its constituency was among industrial workers in the urban areas. Through the formation of the Parishad, the Lal Nishan Party wished to build up a class alliance between the urban workers and the rural workforce.

Initially, the organisation focused on forming trade unions of village and district based government officials such as 'kotwals' (village police), zilla parishad employees and others such as construction workers in the rural areas [*Gramin Shramik* 1967, June 15, No1:13]. When the drought affected the landless and the small and middle peasants the Parishad started mobilising them to demand relief. Once the government provided work in relief sites, the Parishad organised these groups to demand better working conditions for women and men.

In the course of this mobilisation, the Parishad raised three kinds of demands all given to the organised working class in urban areas. The first was equal wages for women and men. Secondly, they demanded services such as drinking water, sanitation and crèches at the relief sites. Through these demands they articulated the problem of sexual division of labour, which was later discussed in the feminist movement. Thirdly, they demanded that drought-relief programme become a permanent employment guaranteed programme. The Parishad organised the workers around the slogan of *magel tyala kam* (work for who ever demands it). This slogan made "access to work" a legitimate right for all those who were working at relief sites [*Gramin Shramik* 1973, March 10, No 4:27].

In order to understand this mobilisation, the nature of agrarian conditions in Maharashtra in the late 1960s is first discussed. Brahme and Upadhaya (1979, 2004) have argued that the land reforms in western Maharashtra have had a partial success (as against other regions of Maharashtra) and have benefited a large number of small and middle peasants, who are marathas and kunbis. The 1911 Census gives this group a numerical strength of 41 per cent of the total population (excluding the tribal

population). Most of the small and middle peasants were marathas while kunbis were wage labourers and sometimes the tenants.

The drought in the early 1970s shattered the state's rural economy, affecting about 15 to 30 million people out of a population of 50 million [Ladejinsky 1973, Omvedt 1975, Dreze et al 1999]. Scholars argue that rural areas experienced shortage of foodgrains, drinking water, fodder and employment opportunities which led to large scale migration to towns and cities [Subramaniam 1975]. The persistence of drought for three years in succession forced all sections of the society, including landlords holding more than 10 hectares of land to demand employment in the relief sites (ibid 1975).

Agarwal (1994) argues that in India, production has historically been privatised on the basis of patriarchal family units using family labour complemented by non-family labour. In such an agrarian structure, women of the landholding classes are secluded and their sexuality guarded not only as a mechanism to control and limit their labour to productive and reproductive tasks of the family, but especially to ensure the paternity of children. Thus women labourers tend to work close to their homes or in work situations where coworkers are other women or men from their own family or community.

In western Maharashtra, the situation was slightly different. Omvedt² (1977b) has argued that women from the maratha caste worked on family land as the marathas follow the 'Sanskritic' tradition of seclusion of women and have stringent rules and regulations regarding their women's mobility due to their patriarchal nature. On the other, kunbi women often worked as agricultural labourers in the field of others.

The drought conditions, which included shrinking supply of foodgrains and rising costs of living, affected the sexual division of labour in Maharashtra. Not only did they have to travel longer to find drinking water and fodder for themselves and their cattle, but also with increasing male migration to cities and towns and to other villages where there were relief sites, they had to find employment support and sustain their families. This increased women's responsibility. No wonder, scholars analysing the drought years have commented on the extensive number of women workers at the relief sites [Omvedt 1975, Brahme and Upadhaya 1979, 2004, Dreze et al 1999].

In these circumstances, the seclusion of women of the maratha landed classes was challenged. Women of maratha caste were forced to find wage employment with a large number of maratha male migrating out of the villages and region. The presence of maratha women at the drought-relief sites "surprised" both the government officials and activists. In a government report on drought conditions, V Subramaniam, the secretary to the revenue and forests department noted,

wives, daughters and daughters-in-law of agriculturists holding more than 25 hectares of land belonging to the Maratha caste were demanding for work [1975: p 432].

The Parishad became active in politically organising the workers at the drought-relief sites of these districts from 1970 onwards. It raised issues of work and services related to the drought-relief work sites where a high number of maratha women were present. While raising issues regarding rights of workers employed in drought-relief work sites the Parishad raised demands that had implications for rights of women workers and which became important in the growth of feminist consciousness later.

The initial efforts of the Parishad were to demand equal wages for equal work for women and men. They protested against

differential payment of men who were paid Rs 2.50 against women who were paid only Rs 2 per day. Local officials would ask men to dig earth and women to carry earth, and thereby justify differences in wages. The Parishad on the other hand, countered this by stating that "carrying" also involved hard work. They thus demanded equal wages for women. The Parishad also raised the issues relating to working conditions, especially access to drinking water, shelter, sanitation facilities, first aid and crèche services at the drought-relief work sites. Through this process they raised a problem of gendered sexual division of labour, which became a major tool of analysis of the work process in the feminist movement. Since the issue of equal wages raises the broader question of job classification, obviously these officials were legitimising a sexual division of labour by allocating differential gender based tasks and thereby giving an inferior status to women and thus low wages.

The ideology of trade unionism of the Parishad may have influenced the nature of demands put forth by the Parishad. They wanted to give the labourers in rural areas rights already availed by working classes in urban areas. Thus in addition to equal wages and access to services they demanded that all workers be paid on time, that the government opened more drought-relief sites and acted to ensure that corruption, which had started in these work sites be stopped.

It is no wonder that the Parishad now mobilised the workers using the slogan 'magel tyala kam' and 'kamacha yogya dam' (work on demand with requisite wages). Given their background in leftist ideology and their work with organised working classes, they believed that all unemployed must be given work. This was a radical demand because this idea for the first time was extended to the rural workers in Maharashtra. This demand, that of right to work, is the basis for the origin of "guaranteed work", which later got embodied in the Employment Guarantee Act of 1977. Earlier in 1965, this programme was introduced as a pilot scheme restricted to one taluk; Tasgaon taluka, of Sangli district. Now the Parishad was demanding that this concept be extended to all rural workers. This campaign of the Parishad found popularity within no time. No wonder thus by 1975, a government report on drought observed that the "employment for all" notion in the scarcity manual was

perceived by workers as a "right", whereby millions of poor men and (especially) women all over Maharashtra were determined to claim if necessary by stopping an official's jeep, by 'gheraoing' (that is encircling in protest) the block headquarters or forcing their sarpanch, the village headman, to take their demands to higher authorities [Subramaniam 1975: 189].

In the course of their struggle the Parishad, raised gender concerns of economic exploitation. Through a struggle for equal wages, services at relief works and access to employment, the issue of gendered sexual division of labour was raised. Further it was in these mobilisations that the Parishad activists recognised the participation of women in the struggles.

Contemporary commentators such as Dreze et al (1999) and Omvedt (1977a, 1977b) have argued that relief-work sites became the focus of a great deal of radical political activity of rural women who attended conferences, meetings, protests and demonstrations organised by the Parishad. Additionally, Omvedt has shown that the relief works drew a large number of rural poor into a collective work experience, which in turn intensified their class-consciousness. Further, she argues that, though women always participated in the struggles of peasants and agricultural

labourers, it was these interventions that brought the “women’s question” to the front.

Records that I investigated confirm this. They show that women had started organising separate meeting for themselves where they discussed their own problems. Two meetings organised by women were reported extensively in the journal *Gramin Shramik*. The first meeting drew a thousand women labourers for a state level conference on November 19, 1972, whereas the second was held at Walve, Sangli district, on April 13, 1973. In this meeting the women trade unionists from Mumbai, together with 2,500 women participated. The delegates discussed issues such as access to drinking water, sanitation, provision of crèches in drought-relief work sites and the importance of organisational solidarity among women. Reports attest to the growing collective consciousness among rural women, including maratha and kunbi women.

Women workers now took the lead and devised new strategies to organise their struggle and to take it beyond its present status. In one case, they gheraoed the block development officer and the collector until they accepted their demands for opening more sites and paying timely and equal wages [Omvedt 1977a, 1977b, interviews with Lal Nishan Party and Parishad’s activists, Malini Bai Tupule, leading AICP, activist]. They also stopped traffic on road and railways calling these agitations ‘rasta roko’ and ‘rail roko’. These strategies were later used by women in the anti-price rise struggle in Mumbai [Sen 1990].

It is interesting to note that not only were the high caste-class maratha women participating actively in these struggles, but they were equal with lower castes and minority communities in aggressively demanding their rights as well. In a public meeting

attended by around 1,000 people in Osmanabad district, two women (one a Muslim and another a dalit) went up the stage and snatched the mike from the speaker, who was a minister, and questioned the government’s inadequate drought-relief policy [*Gramin Shramik* 1973: May 10, No 8; 15]. These instances of dalit, Muslim women and maratha women coming together and actively participating in protests reflect the changes in the rural social structure as a result of increased political activity.

Omvedt (1977b) has argued that the active participation of women of all castes in the drought-relief struggles led the Parishad activists to become sensitive about women’s issues. She quotes the surprise felt by Leela tai Bhosale one of the leaders of the Lal Nishan Party who stated that,

we never paid attention to women’s problems as women. But during the famine days, when women waged a struggle for equal wages and equal work that it began to come to our heads that women can take part in a big way [Omvedt 1975:47].

The mobilisations started by the Parishad had a significant effect on other struggles in rural areas and on the institutionalisation of guaranteed employment as an act. They not only drew women of all classes into the political struggles against drought, but their demands for timely and equal wages for women and men, access to various services at work sites, and especially rights of all rural workers to demand and obtain work from the government became the rallying call for agitations all across Maharashtra.

Additionally the Parishad was able to activate women politically for the first time including the landed maratha group. Women found a space for themselves and recognised their significance in this movement. Through these mobilisations, women realised

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the discriminatory practices affecting them and were mobilised to question them, which led to the comprehension of gender issues in the work process. The Parishad's mobilisations show that the "practical gender issues" are as much crucial as the "strategic". Also over time women assumed leadership roles and devised new strategies for organising these protests, which later became a part of the repertoire of the women's movement in India.

I

EGS and Opposition to Alcoholism

Struggles Led by Shramik Sanghatana

During the early 1970s a group of tribals demanded that the landlords in Dhule district open their granaries. High prices along with the drought of 1970-71 had forced them to starvation. Instead, the landlords used their private army to open fire on them killing one and injuring many. This incident pushed the local activist Ambar Singh³ to organise a campaign of *bhoomi mukti* (liberation of land), which started with a conference on January 30, 1972.

The conference drew many left-oriented activists from the cities of Mumbai and Pune, including those associated with an independent left organisation called Magowa. The leftist intellectuals such as Sudhir Bedekar, Kumar Shiralkar, Bharat Patankar and Chhaya Datar who made a critique of mainstream left communist parties and its strategies had earlier established Magowa in 1967 in Pune.⁴

These activists joined the movement led by Ambar Singh, and in July 1972 formed the Shramik Sanghatana. The Shramik Sanghatana argued that contemporary drought was related to unequal land relations. They, therefore, demanded a comprehensive legislation on land reforms to counter drought. They also mobilised the tribals for access to forestland, wastelands and repossession of lost lands and believed that only a mass movement can liberate the tribals from the clutches of non-tribal landlords and moneylenders [Brahme and Upadhaya op cit].

Shramik Sanghatana spread its activities in the Shahada, Taloda and Nandurbar talukas of Dhule district whose population was mainly bhil, who constituted 37 per cent of the population of Maharashtra (Census of India 1971). Poor economic conditions and severe exploitation by the rich non-tribal landlords had led these tribals to become indebted and face land alienation⁵ [Brahme and Upadhaya op cit]. In the case of the bhils this process was due to two interrelated factors, lack of implementation of land reforms and consequent land alienation. This trend is unlike that of the districts described in the earlier section where small and middle peasants got access to land because of land reforms. Instead in Dhule district, between 1951 and 1971 wealthier landlords not only maintained their rights over their own lands, but usurped tribal land by manipulating rules and regulations under the land reforms legislation.

Most of the landlords were non-tribals and belonged to the castes of patils and gujjars. In addition to being landlords, they were also traders, alcohol vendors, and merchants who consolidated their landholdings by taking over the tribal land by fraud and by trapping the tribals into a cycle of indebtedness. As a result, the tribals became wage labourers in their own lands. Additionally, the state showed complete insensitivity to the traditional tribal rights over forest land when it converted this land into "reserved and protected" forest land thereby denying tribals to access it [Brahme and Upadhaya op cit].

In the discussion that follows, the specific local conditions and the history of political participation in this region as well as the strategies used by the organisations for mobilising the tribals in Dhule district are highlighted. As will be noted, there are significant differences between the ways that the Parishad and the Shramik Sanghatana organised the small and middle peasants on one hand, and the tribals on the other. These relate to the differences between the organisations, their ideologies, the groups that they mobilised and the nature of land relations in these regions.

In the drought struggles discussed earlier one saw maratha women being mobilised for the first time; on the other hand, in tribal areas women who had become wage labourers had faced these problems such as low wages, irregular work, long-working hours, and had organised themselves earlier against the exploitation of the landlords [Parulekar 1972, Sathe 1990]. Parulekar (1972) documents various struggles of the tribals, including women, in the early 20th century against the landlords in Dhule and Thane districts. This history was critical in mobilising tribal women during the drought years of the 1970s.

Additionally unlike "upper caste" Hindu women, the tribal women always enjoyed greater autonomy and freedom [Brahme and Upadyay op cit]. Omvedt (1977a: 15) argues that in the tribal society women structure their own space of action because they are

matriarchal, (and this) independence includes greater sexual freedom before marriage and choice of marriage partners. However, they suffer from both class and patriarchal dominance; class dominance manifest in forms of double work (domestic, child care and fieldwork) and patriarchal dominance in form of wife beating.

Sometimes this sexual independence of tribal women has been "perceived negatively" by the "outsiders", which included the landlords, traders and government officials. Parulekar (1972) argues that this visibility of their economic vulnerability made them subject to various forms of sexual harassment. Humiliation and sexual abuse of tribal women were rampant. Additionally, the tribal women faced domestic violence as a result of alcoholism of "their" men [Brahme and Upadhaya op cit, Sathe 1990]. Drinking alcohol was a way of life for the tribal, men and women. However, commercialisation led to further exploitation and increasing domestic violence of women [Prabhu 2002].

The Shramik Sanghatana initiated its work by organising the tribals at the drought-relief sites. Like the Parishad, the Shramik Sanghatana organised protests against the inferior conditions of work and differential wages for women and men. A contemporary source stated that they demanded timely wages for women and men, an increase in employment and scarcity relief works and questioned the corruption at relief sites [Sathe 1990]. In these mobilisations tribal women took lead and while conducting negotiations, with the landlords and officials another source argues that they were more "adamant than the men". According to Gandhi and Shah (1992) these tribal women even struck work and protested when strike breakers were brought from neighbouring villages.

The urban women activists like Chhaya Datar and Nirmala Sathe⁶ introduced a feminist perspective to tribal women. Tribal women could put across their concerns regarding working conditions confidently but were unable to express domestic violence that they faced within the house. The Shramik Sanghatana women activists organised women's conferences, meetings and informal group sessions to encourage women to speak about their problems and help them to understand the underlying issues. Over time the discussions, which were earlier restricted to the issues

regarding sexual division of labour, now expanded to domestic violence at home. As these discussions continued the Sanghatana activists and the tribal women started seeing the links between domestic violence and the structures of exploitation [Savara and Gothoskar 1985; Sathe 1990].

In Shahada, tribal women had traditionally composed ballads on country liquor referring to it as “the temptress” of men. However, the discussions mentioned above made them understand that alcohol was not a witch or a temptress but rather a deliberate enticement for men so that they get further indebted to the landlord (Gandhi and Shah 1992). No wonder tribal women started organising an anti-alcohol stir in 1972, by breaking liquor pots owned by landlords, humiliating drunkards in local bars and identifying wife beaters [Savara and Gothoskar op cit, Sathe op cit]. Kumar (1993) argues that the struggle moved from protesting against alcoholism to attacks on wife beaters, thus questioning violence in the “private sphere”. In the course of this struggle, new demands put forth the prevention of sexual exploitation. Bhuribai, a leading tribal woman activist stated that,

our opposition is not to alcohol as such but to the beating up of wives which was the inevitable result of liquor drinking [Savara and Gothoskar 1985:145].

Additionally these meetings became the site of the growth of study groups that discussed women’s liberation movement, feminism, the organised workers movement in Bombay and liberation movements in the rest of the world. These discussions enabled tribal women to grasp the language of class and gender oppression and led to the emergence of leadership among them [Savara and Gothoskar 1985; Sathe 1990; Kumar 1993].

Whereas the Parishad through its mobilisation was able to address gender discrimination in the forms of sexual division of labour at work sites, the Shramik Sanghatana not only did this, but also went many steps forward. For the first time, there was a comprehensive critique of the relationship between land relations, commercialisation and sexual exploitation. It protested against the non-implementation of land reforms and also questioned the nature of capitalist commercialisation of agriculture and linked it with sexual exploitation by exposing how landlords pushed the tribals to further indebtedness by encouraging alcoholism, which in turn, led to domestic violence.

Agarwal (1989,1994) has contended that forms of gender discrimination and violence in the private sphere cannot be understood without assessing economic conditions. The work of Shramik Sanghatana shows the integral relationship between these two perspectives. It is interesting to note that various women’s groups in the country used this example to mobilise women against domestic violence occurring through alcoholism in the decades of the 1990s.

III

‘Dushkal Ghalobnae Shivae Rahanar Nahi’

Mobilisations by Mukti Sangharash and Stree Mukti Sangharash

The Employment Guarantee Scheme was implemented in the years following the drought years and the government enacted EGS Act in 1978, making employment a “statutory judicially protected guarantee” for those who demanded work in the rural areas [Dev 1995]. Guaranteed employment was subsequently used by many people’s organisations to mobilise workers. In this

section, I discuss the mobilisations conducted by Mukti Sangharash that organised small and medium peasants and displaced industrial workers in Islampur, Mann and Khanapur talukas of Sangli district in the early 1980s.⁷

Bharat Patankar was one the main leaders of Mukti Sangharash who was earlier associated with Magowa and then with Shramik Sanghatana. The Shramik Sanghatana broke up into number of splinter groups in the late 1970s, including Shramik Mukti Dal (SMD), founded by Bharat Patankar in 1980. In 1982, activists of SMD including Bharat Patankar, his mother Indutai Patankar, wife Gail Omvedt and Jayant Nikam, Nagmani Rao, formed Mukti Sangharash (acronym for Shoshit Shetkari Kamgar Kashtakari Mukti Sangharash – Exploited Peasants, Workers, Toilers Liberation Struggle) and concentrated their work in the districts of southern Maharashtra, Satara, Sangli and Kolhapur known for regional unevenness of water facilities [Omvedt 1993].

When the Mukti Sangharash started its mobilisation of peasants under EGS, Sangli district was facing a severe drought. It had a long history of scarcity conditions due to uneven distribution of rainfall and quality of agricultural land. The district has two distinct zones; the central zone, a rich agricultural tract and the eastern zone, which was drought-prone, having low and uncertain rainfall and poor soil condition. Further the district has traditionally small size of holdings⁸ and a large proportion of the landholders were small and middle level peasants belonging to maratha caste [Brahme and Upadhaya op cit].

The Mukti Sangharash activities found an immediate resonance because of severe drought in 1982. Additionally, the urban textile mill workers who had returned home as a result of the textile strike of 1982-84 flooded the district. This strike displaced as many as 2.5 lakh workers, forcing them to return to their villages in search of employment and livelihood. Drought and unemployment forced these displaced workers, including women to demand work as wage labourers at EGS work sites.

For almost two years (1982-84), the Mukti Sangharash organised demonstrations, ‘morchas’ (march) and “dharnas” (sit-ins) in various areas of Sangli district [Omvedt 1993]. Like the above-mentioned organisations, the Mukti Sangharash initially raised issues of corruption and demanded the implementation of EGS provisions such as equal and timely wages and thereby questioned the sexual division of labour. Additionally, as Mukti Sangharash believed that the exploitation in Indian society is linked to class, patriarchy, culture and ecology, they held meetings and discussions with women at EGS work sites and in the households to raise women’s awareness of the privileges due to them under the scheme.

Three demands were made by the Mukti Sangharash, which reflect how they were able to use the EGS programme to devise a comprehensive plan for reorganising the contemporary drought-prone region and simultaneously highlight the gender concerns of single women. The first demand integrated their strategy to eradicate drought and develop an agriculturally sustainable programme. Second, they wanted to introduce a democratic functioning into the implementation machinery of EGS, where people were to decide the kind of productive works to be taken under EGS. Third, they raised the problems faced by single women abandoned by natal and marital families, known as ‘parityakta’. Therefore they wanted to change the provisions of EGS, which employed husband and wife teams and thus discriminated against single women. Additionally, for comprehensive support structure for parityaktas, they demanded housing entitlements for them.

The Mukti Sangharash started their struggles by mobilising workers around the slogan 'khadi amhi phodnar nahi', 'rasta amhi khadnar nahi', 'dushkal ghalawalya shivay rahanar nahi' (we won't break stones, we won't build roads, we won't sit still till we eradicate drought). The Mukti Sangharash argued that stone breaking and road building did not lead to the growth of productive assets. Rather there was a need for a comprehensive programme for drought eradication that would seek to restore the fertility of the soil and cater to water problems [Omvedt 1993].

As the movement progressed, the Mukti Sangharash activists started making a regional level plan to organise ways to solve the water problem. The Mukti Sangharash now demanded that the government initiate a programme of constructing small dams, percolation tanks under EGS, which would help in increasing the quality of agricultural land and restoring water availability. They initiated a struggle, what was called as 'Bali Raja' struggle and involved peasants in building a small dam on their own. Through this process, they linked up the idea of drought eradication to environmental sustainability – through public participation.

In the course of mobilisation for alternate sustainable development programme, the activists came across a major problem in the implementation of EGS works. Under this scheme workers were employed as a husband and wife team. However, as mentioned earlier, this practice discriminated against parityakta women workers, in particular the widows, abandoned, unmarried, and divorced women, who were unable to find a male worker to constitute a team. The organisation demanded that the officials recognise a 'team' consisting of two women, as women can work as hard as men and are anyway physically equal to men (Stree Mukti Sangharash Files, 1992).

The women activists of Mukti Sangharash recognised that issues like above, relating to parityaktas, need separate and special attention. Already the feminist movement started in the late 1970s in urban areas, was discussing the need for separate autonomous women's organisations. The Mukti Sangharash women activists, influenced by feminist consciousness felt the need for separate cells within mass organisations and thus formed a separate women's cell called Stree Mukti Sangharash (SMS) in 1985 [Omvedt 1993].

Women activists argued that a separate cell would provide a platform to women hesitant to express themselves and allow the "women's question" not to be subordinated to the issues of the larger movement. Additionally, it would encourage the development of leadership among women and give them space to articulate their own perspectives be it on issues of caste, class, patriarchy or ecology. This "space" was crucial as some lower class and lower caste women, especially from maratha groups, were hesitant to express themselves freely in front of men. It is no wonder that Sen (1990) argues that "in mass organisations having a large women's component a separate women's cell is often established to initiate a process of analysis of the structures of women's oppression".

The Stree Mukti Sangharash initially spread its activities to Tasgaon and Walwe taluka of Sangli district, Karad taluka of Satara district and some parts of Kolhapur and Solapur districts where they conducted meetings and discussions with women. They saw their main task as developing "feminist consciousness" among women and challenging the existing sexual division of labour. In these meetings not only did they involve male activists in large numbers in their camps, wherein they discussed various dimensions of feminism, they also subverted the existing sexual division of labour by asking men to organise the kitchen and cook for all.

The critical moment in the development of SMS occurred when they started mobilising parityakta women. They realised that these women faced specific problems through a survey that they conducted in the villages. They found a large number of parityakta women (at least 50 in every village), between 16 and 50 years. The parityakta women had little or no contact with their natal and marital homes and as a result did not have the support structures and entitlements available under kinship rules like married women. Thus these women were more often than not without homes, childcare, community bonds and faced social scorn (SMS files). Since then this issue has become part of the activities taken up by various women's organisations. Even the government of India sponsored report on self-employed women in informal sector called Shram Shakti argues that 33 per cent of households in rural India are female-headed.

In order to highlight this problem, the SMS activists organised a conference at Vita village in Khanapur taluka, Sangli district in which many women's organisations participated. In this conference they discussed specific needs of parityakta women which included the issues such as access to livelihood, need for separate ration cards and homestead land, so that they could have their own place to stay. Additionally, they raised a legal question. In practice, women in rural areas did not have property rights nor did they have land and housing registered in their names. This change of law, practice and its implementation were necessary for any of the above demands to be accepted.

Following this conference the activists organised a demonstration of 300 parityakta women from 36 villages in Sangli district on February 9, 1989 in front of the district collector's office, where they demanded that the government allocate two guntas (1/20 acres) plot for housing for women from 'gaothan' land (common property resource) under government schemes. According to the organisers this would be a step for building an independent identity for parityakta women. The government agreed to this proposal and 23 women from Bahe village, Sangli district, were granted homestead titles. However, the local bureaucracy refused to release this land. As a result a case was filed in 1989 and won after 13 long years of struggle in May 2003 when the Bombay High Court gave a verdict in their favour (Stree Mukti Sangharash Files). Thus SMS activists concerns encompassed issues of not just rural women's livelihood but their rights to protection in case of abandonment.

When Mukti Sangharash and SMS focused on practical interests such as equal wages and right to work for women under EGS schemes, they wished to build a struggle to give women political power, access to land and inheritance rights, together with sustainable agriculture. No wonder Nagmani Rao states in an interview that⁹

when Stree Mukti Sangharash was taking up the livelihood issues through EGS our urban feminist sisters were accusing us of being very economic in our whole approach and that we were reducing women to mere economic beings and thus not being feminist enough.

IV Conclusion

The EGS has acquired an image of women-friendly programme, thanks to the large-scale participation of women. I interpret the number game differently and place my argument in the context of the "feminisation of poverty". UNIFEM (1995) states that "women constitute at least 60 per cent of the world's poor" and one of the causes of the "feminisation of poverty" is the fact that

women have lesser means, assets, skills, employment options, education and financial resources than men. Given their constraints from household to the market, their range of income earning options and returns to their labour is lower.

In Maharashtra, of the 12.7 million women working in the rural areas, 89 per cent are in agriculture – 41 per cent as cultivators and 48 per cent as agricultural labour [Krishnaraj et al 2004]. Thus women mostly work as subsidiary and marginal workers and in these situations women more often than not take recourse to short-term unskilled employment on schemes such as EGS. Thus the high visibility of women on EGS work sites could be because they have no recourse to other high paying jobs in the labour market thus reflecting gender-insensitive development process rather than the gender sensitivity of the scheme. The EGS is gender-sensitive to the extent that new gender concerns have evolved when leftist and feminist organisations have mobilised women workers around guaranteed employment raising gender concerns. **EPW**

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Notes

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- In order to reconstruct the history of these movements I have referred to secondary sources, that had earlier analysed these movements. I have also interviewed activists (now retired) of these two organisations. In addition, I use information available in the official journal of Lal Nishan Party *Gramin Shramik*.
- Gail Omvedt was associated with the struggles of the Parishad during the drought years. Omvedt conducted her fieldwork for her doctoral work in 1970-71, 1973 during the drought and was a witness to the struggles of rural women and men. Omvedt later was one of the founding members of Mukti Sangharash of Sangli district, Maharashtra, which in the 1980s mobilised workers in and through EGS.
- Ambar Singh, an educated tribal leader was associated with the Sarvodaya Mandals. In 1969, he formed the Adivasi Sewa Mandal after being disillusioned with the narrow vision of the Sarvodaya Mandal. The Sarvodaya ideology did not address the issues of landlessness, land alienation and indebtedness among tribals [Brahme and Upadhaya 1979, 2004].
- Today Sudhir Bedekar is a critical thinker while Kumar Shiralkar has joined the CPI (M). Bharat Patankar has founded Mukti Sangharash/Chalval in Sangli district, Maharashtra (Section III in this paper). Presently, he is associated with Pani Sangharash Chalval. Chhaya Datar, another activist with Magowa was associated with the women's movement. Today she heads the Women Studies Unit, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai.
- Brahme and Upadhaya (1979) argue that in the years 1970-71 around 4,540 tribal families in Maharashtra lost 20,060 acres of land to government projects.
- Chhaya Datar and Nirmala Sathe organised tribal women to start a women's cell in the Shramik Sanghatana. Today Nirmala Sathe is the trustee of Aalochana, a women's documentation centre in Pune.
- Data for this section is collected through interviews with leaders of the organisation Indutai Patankar, Gail Omvedt and Nagmani Rao who were closely involved with the movement during the 1980s. Secondary data, including files, minutes and resolutions of Stree Mukti Sangharash meetings, pamphlets of the organisation, was referred to.
- In 1981 the proportion under two to 10 hectares (small and middle level peasants) was 35 per cent and they held about 57.1 per cent of the agricultural holdings
- Interview on February 21, 2003.

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