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**GUARANTEED EMPLOYMENT  
FOR THE RURAL POOR**

**VOLUME - I**

Edited by  
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## 15. WOMEN, POLITICS AND GUARANTEED EMPLOYMENT

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### Introduction

This paper analyses women's mobilisation by four activist groups in the period between the Seventies and the Nineties around the notion of 'guaranteed employment'<sup>1</sup>. I ask the following questions; a) what are the issues raised in and through women's mobilisation? b) what kind of mobilisation of women takes place? c) what is the socio-political and economic context of this mobilisation? d) what are the strategies of political mobilisation used by the groups? and e) what kind of gender issues have emerged as a result of the mobilisation?

I focus on the *Maharashtra Rajya Shetmajoor Parishad* (henceforth Parishad), a rural trade union organisation aligned to the Lal Nishan party that mobilised small and middle peasants and the landless, in the Ahmednagar, Aurangabad, Parbhani, Osmanabad, Jalgaon, Satara and Kolhapur districts of Western Maharashtra, the *Shramik Sanghatana* a leftist-oriented political organisation that mobilised the tribals in Shahada, Taloda, and Nandurbar talukas of Dhule district in the early Seventies, the *Mukti Sanghrash and Stree Mukti Sanghrash* another leftist-oriented political organisation who have organised the landless and displaced textile workers in Islampur in the late Seventies and Eighties in the Mann and Khanapur talukas of Sangli district and the *Janwadi Mahila Sanghatana* (also known as All India Democratic Women's Association) who have mobilised rural landless and peasant women in various parts of Maharashtra in the late Nineties.

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Two interrelated theories are used to understand the nature of women's political participation. The first as argued by Omvedt (1977, 1993) and Sen (1990) states that the period of the Seventies was critical in raising women-specific issues in mass movements as against mass movements in earlier period. Omvedt suggests that this movement facilitated the growth of women's movement in India, that is movements of, by and for women. Expanding the earlier argument Sen, (1990) argues that the mobilisation of the Seventies, which raised many women's issues, created a 'space within struggle'. This movement then got transformed into a 'feminist movement'. The second theoretical position raised the question of 'subsistence needs', which Agarwal (1994) argues leads poor women to challenge the existing political-economic structures. It is for this reason they intervene politically.

In the following paper the political mobilisations in the Seventies by the Parishad and Shramik Sanghatana are discussed and how 'women's specific issues' emerged in the struggles around 'guaranteed employment' are assured. Later the struggles of the late Seventies by Mukti Sanghrash and Stree Mukti Sanghrash after the 'guaranteed employment' Act is passed are investigated and feminist issues emerged are evaluated. In the case of Janwadi Mahila Sanghatana, how in the contemporary times, new perceptions of 'feminist concerns are being articulated is analysed.

Contemporary theorists discussing EGS suggested that 'guaranteed employment' is 'women friendly' (Datar 1987, 1990, Acharya 1990, Krishnaraj 2004). They base their argument on the premise that a) it is a Law and b) includes provisions sensitive to the needs of women. This paper argues that 'guaranteed employment' is possible only where there is political mobilisation. Also this political mobilisation helps to raise further issues of gender exploitation. Appendix one elaborates on this argument.

### **Section One : Women in Drought Struggles of the Early Seventies**

In this section women's participation in two movements, one organised by Parishad in Ahmednagar, Aurangabad, Parbhani, Osmanabad, Jalgaon, Satara and Kolhapur districts of Western Maharashtra and the other Shramik

Sanghatana in Shahada, Taloda, and Nandurbar talukas of Dhule district<sup>2</sup> are examined. Whereas Parishad organised small and middle peasants and the landless, Shramik Sanghatana mobilised the tribals. Both raised issues of land relations and working conditions of women and men. Parishad and SS mobilisations have to be located in the distinct socio-economic conditions of the areas of the region. Through a discussion of these movements the issues regarding women raised in the struggle are assessed.

Parishad and SS raised issues of access to work and equal wages for landless, peasant and tribal women, demanded services such as access to drinking water, crèches to be provided at the work-sites. While Parishad raised the problem of sexual division of labour by protesting against differential wage payment for women and men, Shramik Sanghatana in their struggle raised the issue of domestic violence as a result of alcoholism (Gramin Shramik 1972, 1973, Sathe 1990).

In order to reconstruct the history of these movements I refer 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'.

#### A. STRUGGLES OF SHETKARI SHETMAZOR PARISHAD

Scholars argued that land reforms in Western Maharashtra have had a partial success, as against other regions, and have led to an increase in the number of small and middle peasants (Brahme and Upadhaya 2004). From the time the Tenancy (Amendment) Act 1956 was implemented to the year 1970, tenants of the coastal districts of the region became owners of nearly 70 per cent of the leased land. In the non-coastal region 24 per cent of tenants became owners and landlords got back nearly 56 per cent of the leased land. In both these areas the number of landless remained high (Brahme and Upadhaya 1979, 2004). The Maratha-kunbi caste cluster dominant in Western Maharashtra were benefited from land reforms. Whereas the Marathas were the landed and the small and middle peasants, the Kunbis were wage labourers and sometimes the tenants.

Women from the Maratha caste sometimes work on family land but seldom as wage labourers. Patriarchal upper caste Marathas follow stringent rules and regulations regarding their women's mobility and practise the 'Sanskritic' tradition of secluding them. Kunbi women often work as agricultural labourers in the field of others. In the context of the land reforms, women's ability to access land depended upon their relationship with the males, either husbands, sons or other kin (Saradamoni 1983). Thus women rarely benefited from land reforms because they did not have independent rights to land. If they are members of the landed they contribute to labour on their land, in other classes they are wage labourers. In Maharashtra women always worked as wage labour (Dreze 1995). This section is often concentrated among households of poor and from "so called" low caste and the Kunbis.

The drought in the early Seventies severely affected the small and middle level peasants and landless in Western Maharashtra. Scholars argue that the drought shattered the State's rural economy, affecting about 15 to 30 million people out of a population of 50 million, particularly large sections of the rural population including agricultural labourers, small farmers and the landed, (Ladejinsky 1973, Omvedt 1975, Dreze 1995). The persistence of drought for three years in succession forced these sections, including agriculturists holding more than 10 hectares of land to demand employment in the relief sites (Subramaniam 1975)

The drought conditions led to shrinking supply of foodgrains along with rising costs of living thereby putting immense pressure on the women to sustain their families. Also due to drought women had to travel longer distance for drinking water and fodder for their cattle. Male migration to cities, towns and villages for employment also increased their responsibility<sup>3</sup>. Scholars analysing the drought years commented extensively on the large number of women workers at the relief sites. (Omvedt, 1975, Brahme and Upadhaya 1979, 2004, Dreze 1995). Omvedt (1977) argues that the disadvantaged position of rural poor women was heightened during the drought years where women faced double oppression; as not only they had to find wage employment but also take care of the family under harsh conditions.

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In western Maharashtra the severity of the drought forced 'upper caste Marathas' to allow women to go to the relief sites. The presence of Maratha women at the drought relief sites surprised both the government officials and the activists. In a government report on drought conditions, Mr. V Subramaniam secretary to 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'. (Subramaniam 1973)*

Parishad became active in politically organising the workers, in particular women, at the drought relief sites of Western Maharashtra from 1970-1973. The organisation raised issues of work and services related to drought relief and EGS work-sites. For the first time, Maratha women were politically mobilised as they were drawn into the struggles and raised issues concerning both women and men<sup>4</sup>.

In these work-sites the Parishad demanded equal wages for equal work for women and men and protested against differential payment, where men were paid Rs 2.50 and women Rs 2 at the drought works<sup>5</sup>. The division of work was such that men would dig the earth whereas women would carry the earth. Though the carrying also involved hard work especially when women used to carry loads on their head they were paid less than men. Parishad also raised issues relating to working conditions especially access to drinking water, shelter, sanitation facilities, first-aid and crèche services. Additionally, Parishad demanded the implementation of '*magel tyala kam and kamacha yogya dam*' (work for whoever demands it and wages in accordance with work) and the payment in kind - 17 and half kilo of grains weekly for a family of four. It was around these issues that LNP mobilised the workers.

Accounts in Lal Nishan Party journals like *Gramin Shramik*, newspaper articles and government reports document the surprise of party activists at the active participation of the women workers. 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)*

Women workers devised new strategies where they had a sit-in and blocked traffic on the roads<sup>6</sup>. They would not budge until higher authorities like the Block Development Officer and the Collector talked to them and accepted their demands (Omvedt 1977, interviews with Lal Nishan Party and Parishad's activists, Malini Bai Tupule, leading CPI (M) activist). Records show that women started organising among themselves. In a public meeting attended by around one thousand 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, because of their inadequate drought relief policy (*Gramin Shramik* 1973).

Women also actively participated in meetings and conferences organised by the party. Through discussions in these meetings and participation in the drought struggles women became conscious of the significance of collective strength. In an 'all women' meet organised at Walve, Sangli district on 13 April 1973 addressed by women trade union leaders from Bombay, women discussed the importance of organisational building among women (*Gramin Shramik* 1 May 1973). Through participation in the struggles women created a platform for themselves to express their interests. Omvedt (1977) argues that the active participation of women in the drought struggles sensitised Parishad activists towards women's issues. This was asserted 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 1979)*

The struggles of Parishad are significant because it is for the first time that women from the landed sections are part of the movement. The issues



raised in the above discussion reveal Parishad's sensitivity to the problems faced by women. Parishad activists were perceptive to the issues of equal wages and employment opportunities for women and raised the problem of sexual division of labour. In addition they were aware of special needs of women and child's nutrition, women's sexuality and health concerns. This concern was reflected in the demands that they put forth during the struggles. Parishad's mobilisations show that the 'practical gender issues' are as much crucial as the 'strategic'.

#### B. STRUGGLES OF SHRAMIK SANGHATANA

Shramik Sanghatana were active in Dhule district where, the Bhil tribals constituted 37 per cent of the population (Census of India 1971). The poor economic conditions coupled with exploitation by the rich landlords especially the non-tribal led to increased indebtedness and land alienation<sup>7</sup> among the tribals of the State. (Brahme and Upadhaya 1979, 2004) Among the Bhills this process was mainly due to the two inter-related processes of land reforms and land alienation. Scholars argue that between 1951 and 1971, as wealthier farmers recovered land for their own cultivation, the percentage of landless agricultural labourers in Shahada taluka in Dhule district increased (Thakker and Kulkarni 1995, Prabhu 2002). Land alienation was caused by high indebtedness of the tribals and lopsided State policies favouring the landlords. The Patils, and Gujjars--non--tribal groups--mainly traders, alcohol vendors, and migrant merchants--consolidated their land holdings by taking over the tribal land by fraud and by trapping the tribals into a cycle of indebtedness. In this process the tribals became wage labourers in their own lands. The State aided this process when it appropriated community held tribal land and converted it into 'reserved and protected' forest land thereby denying tribals access to it, which was a customary practice (Brahme and Upadhaya 1979, 2004, Prabhu 2002).

Unlike 'upper caste' Hindu women, tribal women always enjoyed greater mobility and freedom (Brahme and Upadyay 1979, 2004). Omvedt (1977) argues that tribal women,

*'are more often more matriarchal, the 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 field work) and patriarchal dominance in form of wife beating'.*

This sexual independence of tribal women was often 'perceived negatively' by the 'outsiders', including the landlords, traders, and government officials. Parulekar (1972) argued that this class usually used the economic vulnerability of tribal women as a way to subject them to various forms of sexual harassment. Humiliation and sexual abuse of tribal women were common. Additionally tribal women faced domestic violence as a result of alcoholism of 'their' men. Scholars argue that commercialisation in the area led to an increasing intake of alcohol where the traders encouraged this practice in order to further the cycle of indebtedness and alienation (Brahme and Upadhyaya 1979, 2004, Sathe 1990).

Tribal women were active in many struggles that were waged against the structures of exploitation (Parulekar 1972). Similar to the Kunbi women, tribal women worked as wage labourers where they faced problems such as low wages, irregular work, long-working hours (Sathe 1990). During the drought years the tribals worked on the relief sites for survival where Shramik Sanghatana mobilised them (Sah 1975).

Shramik Sanghatana mobilised tribals on issues such as demand for access to forestland, wastelands and repossession of lost lands. The strategy of Shramik Sanghatana was on the one hand to push for progressive legislation relating to land relations and on the other to pressurise the government to enforce the existing legislation on land reforms (Brahme and Upadhyaya 1975, Thakker and Kulkarni 1995).

Shramik Sanghatana organised the tribals working at the drought relief and EGS work-sites. During the drought years SS protested against the inferior conditions of work and differential wages for women and men. Additionally, SS demanded for timely wages for women and men, opening of scarcity relief

works, corruption in drought relief work, and continuous employment. In these mobilisations tribal women were in the forefront of the agitations and in the negotiations with the landlords and officials they were 'more adamant than the men' (Mies 1976).

Interaction of women activists with women labourers at the relief work-sites led to many discussions regarding women's participation in the different campaigns. Tribal women could put across their concerns regarding working conditions confidently but were unable to express the domestic violence that they faced within the house. Shramik Sanghatana organised women's conferences, meetings and informal committees so as to encourage women to speak out and help them develop understanding of their experience of personal violence with the structures of exploitation (Savara and Gothoskar 1982, Sathe 1990).

After a series of such women's conferences, SS initiated an anti-liquor campaign in 1972 at Dhule district. With the help of SS activists, tribal women planned an anti-liquor campaign where they would break the brewing pots in the villages. Additionally they decided to publicly humiliate the men by thrashing the husbands in public if they tried to beat their wives (Savara and Gothoskar 1982, Sathe 1990) Tribal women strove to link up the issue of alcoholism and violence to issues of indebtedness and economic insecurity. Bhuribai, a leading tribal women 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' (Sathe 1990).*

Shramik Sanghatana also promoted interactions with urban-based activists where they discussed issues of the relationship of women's movement to the workers' movement and the role played by women in various liberation movements in history. These discussions enabled tribal women to link up class and gender oppression and led to the emergence of leadership among them (Savara and Gothoskar 1982, Sathe 1990, Kumar 1993). Kumar (1993) argues that the struggle moved from protesting against alcoholism to attacks on wife-beaters, thus questioning violence in the 'private sphere'.

In effect this struggle highlighted the potential of women as activists and leaders, there was realisation of the strength in women's collective action, issues of domestic violence were discussed openly where women were gradually questioning the structures that legitimised their exploitation. Mobilisations provided a 'space' for women for expressing their concerns.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, drought relief works played a crucial role in meeting the material needs of the rural women. The struggles highlighted that for rural poor women issues of access to employment, wages and food are as much strategic as the issue of domestic violence.

### Section Two: The Interventions by Mukti Sanghrash and Stree Mukti Sanghrash-EGS and Women's Issues in the Eighties

In this section the activities of Mukti Sanghrash who organised workers around EGS Act in Sangli district<sup>9</sup> in the early Eighties are explored. Data for this section collected through interviews with leaders of the organisation, Indutai Patankar, Gail Omvedt and Nagmani Rao, who were closely involved with the movement during the Eighties. Secondary data, including files, minutes and resolutions of Stree Mukti Sanghrash meetings, pamphlets of the organisation, were referred to. Secondary sources, especially published material pertaining to the struggles of the organisation in general and women's political mobilisation in particular were used.

Mukti Sanghrash was an outgrowth of Shramik Mukti Dal that had been organising workers in Sangli district from 1980. Its leaders were earlier in Parishad and SS<sup>10</sup>. In 1982 the leaders of Sharmik Mukti Dal formed another organisation Mukti Sanghrash (acronym for Shoshit Shetkari Kamgar Kashtakari Mukti Sanghrash) who represented the concerns of peasants, agricultural labourers and workers. The earlier organisation fought for the interests of the urban workers and now a separate organisation was necessary to organise the rural workers, in particular peasants and agricultural labourers (Omvedt 1993).

By 1977 the women's movement emerged in India and the struggles conducted by MS were influenced by its feminist consciousness as well as the

post-emergency euphoria. The economic conditions of Sangli district also influenced the struggles of the organisation. Due to an uneven distribution of rainfall and differential quality of agricultural land, Sangli district stood out among the other districts of Western Maharashtra. Due to scanty rainfall in the Eighties the district was affected by severe drought conditions<sup>11</sup>. In this situation the workers started demanding EGS works. Sangli district was also flooded with many displaced urban workers from Bombay<sup>12</sup>. With the onset of drought conditions and lack of employment opportunities compelled these workers to demand work as wage labourers at EGS work-sites. Mukti Sanghrash started mobilising both rural and urban workers to initiate new EGS work-sites.

For almost two years (1982- 1984) Mukti Sanghrash organised *morchas* (protest walks) and *dharnas* (protest sit-ins) all over Sangli district, especially in Islampur, Mann and Khanapur talukas raising issues such as corruption and implementation of EGS provisions (Bakshi 1986, Omvedt 1993). A special effort was made by Mukti Sanghrash to conduct 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. Unfortunately, though EGS had now become an Act, there continued to be differential wages. Thus, struggles of Mukti Sanghrash (like LNP earlier) centered on demands for equal wages and equal work. Additionally, they challenged the practice of employing women workers only if accompanied by a male and demanded a recognition of a 'team' consisting of at least two women workers, as many women, mainly widows, abandoned, unmarried, and divorced were denied work at EGS work-sites (Stree Mukti Sanghrash, 1992).

Mukti Sanghrash interpreted EGS as an environmentally sustainable development programme. The activists demanded that under EGS those productive works be sanctioned that would help in developing wasteland into agriculturally productive land<sup>13</sup>. Mukti Sanghrash also protested against EGS works such as stone breaking and road building as these do not lead to the growth of productive assets. The group demanded projects like percolation tanks and agricultural land leveling schemes, which would help in increasing quality of agricultural land and restoring water availability. Activists mobilised workers around the slogan '*khadi ami phodnar nahi, rasta ami khadnar nahi*.

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*dushkal ghalobnae shibae rahanar nahi* (We won't break stones, we won't build roads, we won't sit still till we eradicate drought). Through this struggle Mukti Sanghrash promoted the principle of 'people controlled development leading to drought eradication' arguing that the villagers would select EGS sites as they alone know their environment<sup>14</sup>. As a result the villagers put forth a number of village reconstruction projects-such as small dams, percolation tanks which were accepted by the government officers after they conducted a feasibility study of these work-sites (Omvedt 1993). Though the knowledge and perspectives of poor peasants and women are significant as they are in close and constant interaction with forests and land, the development process failed to recognise its importance (Agarwal 1994). In this struggle through an effort to tap the knowledge resource of the rural people, the intellectual seeds of linkages between development, sustainability and environment were sown<sup>15</sup>. SMS activists stated that

*'participation in the drought struggles has helped us to bring forward an agriculturally linked environmental issue. This has generated a debate on 'women and environment' where we have to develop strategies to initiate an 'alternative sustainable development programme' from a women's perspective'. (SMS File 1992)*

Influenced by feminist consciousness, a separate women's organisation Stree Mukti Sanghrash, was formed in 1985<sup>16</sup>. Women activists of Mukti Sanghrash emphasised the need for its establishment to provide a platform for women who were finding it difficult to express their perspective in a wider mass movement<sup>17</sup>. Stree Mukti Sanghrash enlarged its field of influence: it was active in Tasgaon, Walwa taluka of Sangli district, Karad taluka of Satara district and some parts of Kolhapur and Solapur districts. In the beginning Stree Mukti Sanghrash basing themselves on feminist ideology conducted meetings and discussions with only women's groups. Later on they held mixed groups meetings where they discussed feminism.

As a result of its earlier mobilisations, SMS became aware of a new category of women, *'parityakta stree'* (deserted women) working on EGS work-sites (Datar 1992). in order to understand the plight of these women, SMS conducted a survey and found that *'parityakta women'* needed not only work,

wages but also housing and child-care facilities and suffered from social stigma (Datar 1992). They faced a major problem, that of their recognition as women with "independent identity".

SMS was able to organise a demonstration of three hundred *parityakta strees* from 36 villages in Sangli district in front of the collector's office. They demanded ration cards for the divorced women and widows, their recognition as household heads as well as grant of two guntas (1/20 acres) plots of '*gaothan land*' to build their own houses. The group was successful in pressurising the government and twenty-three women from Bahe village, Sangli district were even granted land titles. However, the local bureaucracy refused to release these lands. As a result, these women registered a case in 1989. After thirteen years of struggle, the judiciary passed the verdict in their favour. For the organisers this struggle was a success as the issue was not only of having their own separate house, but also that this was a step forward for building their own 'separate independent identity'.

SMS activists argue that through participation in these struggles they initiated a fight for women's political power, land and inheritance rights. In particular the campaign for the housing rights of *parityakta stree* has helped them to formulate strategies by which these women can claim the right to live independently (SMS, January 1992). For the SMS organisers rural women's livelihood issues were critical. In the course of the struggles as '*parityakta stree*' defined their material needs in terms of access to work, housing and homestead land rights the issues of practical interests were as critical as strategic interests. For the organisation, housing rights were a crucial form of gender need as it gave the '*parityakta stree*' a sense of security and significantly access to productive resources.

### **Section 3: 'Guaranteed Employment' As Food and Health Security: JMS Mobilisation in the late Nineties and early 2000**

Janwadi Mahila Sanghatana interpreted 'guaranteed employment' as food and health' security. JMS argues that EGS food coupons paid as part payments help the poor to maintain minimum levels of food and health security. Dreze

and Sen (1989) argue that the role of government to provide food security through food subsidies and food for work programmes is significant. In the post-economic liberalisation period government introduced 'targeting' in the Public Distribution System (PDS)<sup>18</sup>, which limited the number of poor eligible to access food subsidies in the scheme. In this context the foodgrains available under EGS become critical. Almost twenty years since the growth of women's movement in India, women's groups developed beyond conscientisation and issues of women's health and nutrition became crucial. Thus, in this struggle the issues of women's food and health security is crucial.

Data for this section were collected from a set of interviews with JMS leaders of Maharashtra and activists at the village and taluka level. Secondary data, which included pamphlets and books of the organisation, were referred to. The mobilisations by JMS has to be located within the changes in the EGS scheme, India's economic policies from the late Eighties and the drought conditions affecting the State in early 2000.

Guaranteed employment under EGS not only includes access to employment whenever demanded but also provisions such as equal work and equal wages, timely payment of wages, availability of edible quality of grains under food coupons. The struggles discussed in this paper show that every time an organisation seeks to mobilise EGS workers these issues have to be raised. JMS, like earlier organisations had to initiate their struggle around these issues, additionally had to deal with the anti-poor changes that were incorporated within EGS in the late Eighties. In 1988 government initiated certain changes in EGS. Programmes such as horticulture, social forestry, sericulture and Tuti tree plantation and provision of wells were integrated into the scheme<sup>19</sup>. These changed provisions did not benefit rural women given their lack of access over land (Human Development Report 2002). Additionally, these changes introduced a new stakeholder-the contractors-in the implementation of EGS. These contractors were given the power to decide wages and the nature and number of workers to be employed. Observations at the field reveal that at most places these contractors were landowners<sup>20</sup>. They

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were able to become contractors because of their networks with the officials, political parties and/or the local politicians. Also these contractors preferred to employ men as women are considered to be 'unskilled'. In some cases women were paid less. My own fieldwork in Mayona village, Nashik district shows that these contractors were employing women as maidservants under EGS programme. Thus, despite the history of militant struggles women remain prone to exploitation.'

JMS's redefinition of women's issues needs to be evaluated in the context of the economic changes occurring in India after the late Eighties specifically in context of export-led growth and structural adjustment programme<sup>21</sup>. These benefited the upper class and marginalised the poor. This marginalisation takes place due to two processes: One in order to control fiscal deficit, the State has been decreasing expenditure on welfare such as health, employment and education process. Secondly, in the post-liberalisation period, the Government of Maharashtra is increasingly acquiring agricultural lands for non-agricultural purposes. Development of industrial estates and starting of mega projects caused dispossession of land leading to displacement of people<sup>22</sup>. Due to displacement, the community loses its control over natural resources like land and water and there is a simultaneous breakdown in their social relationship and cultural ethos (Vora, 2002). These processes affect women more than men.

Additionally, in order to control fiscal expenditure the State restructured the Public Distribution System (PDS), which earlier used to provide cheap foodgrains to poor. Specifically, structural adjustment policy demanded a reduction in food subsidies and a shift from universal to targeted schemes in many countries. PDS was restructured into Revamped PDS (RPDS) in 1992. Under this programme PDS started providing cheap food to people in drought-prone, desert, and hilly areas and in tribal and urban slum areas'. The scheme was again changed in 1997, when the government introduced the Targeted PDS (TPDS) as a part of the earlier scheme. After this change the government started using the income criteria to demarcate between the poor and non-poor households, so that food subsidy could be provided to those households that are declared Below Poverty Line (BPL)<sup>23</sup>. Many rural poor are thus unable to buy cheap grains leading to greater undernourishment. In a study to assess the

reach of RPDS in Akhar village, Jawahar taluka of Thane district of Maharashtra, in 1996, Swaminathan concluded that the coverage and utilisation of RPDS was extremely low (Swaminathan 2000). The State does not seem to be serious about implementing even the limited reach of TPDS. In 1994 the State government availed of only 8.13 lakh tonnes of grains out of an allotment of 18.18 lakh tonnes and nearly 30 per cent of it were used in the city of Mumbai alone, while the rest of the State had to do with the rest 70 per cent (Swaminathan 2003). In this context EGS is important as all workers, irrespective of whether they are under BPL category or not can demand work under the scheme and access the foodgrains.

After ten long years, Maharashtra<sup>24</sup> experienced drought in early 2000<sup>25</sup>. As a result, the government started EGS work-sites across 33 districts of the State with a total expenditure of Rs 9,417 million. Two kinds of interventions were made by JMS. One is mobilising women in Thane and Aurangabad district to demand increase of EGS work-sites. Secondly, the use of advocacy strategy to put pressure on the government. The demands of JMS are based on their interpretation of 'where and how EGS' can address the livelihood concerns of the poor.

In Paithan taluka of Aurangabad district, JMS raised the issue of severe unemployment as a result of displacement. People in this taluka were 'twice displaced'. Farmers lost their land to two projects, one the Jaikwada Dam and the second, as a result of establishment of industries by the Maharashtra Industrial Development Corporation (MIDC). After being displaced at the first time many rural labourers were absorbed into the industries. With the closure of these industries there was large-scale retrenchment. The latter led to severe unemployment problems in the district, which increased women's responsibilities. Activists state that as this taluka is a town, women took up activities such as vegetable vending and papad making to sustain their families because their husbands/fathers/brothers became unemployed.

Over the last few years (from 1999 onwards) JMS organised women to demand the start of new EGS work-sites. This authority rests with the tehsildars. Though the tehsildars sanctioned new EGS works, they rarely started them.

Even when these were started, wages were not paid on time. Additionally, JMS conducts workshops to make women aware of the provisions and services for women workers. JMS activists argued that even for a routine mandatory implementation relating to the scheme they have to pressurise the officials.

JMS is also involved in an advocacy campaign- 'Right to Food Campaign'<sup>26</sup>. This campaign emerged as a result of a public interest litigation submitted to the Supreme Court by People's Union For Civil Liberties in April 2001. Associated with it is the *Anna Adhikar Abhiyan* (Campaign for Right to Food and Health)<sup>27</sup>, a cross-section of people's organisations, groups and women's organisations working on 'Food Security'<sup>28</sup>. The *Abhiyan* demands the implementation of an all-India "employment guarantee" programme, supplemented with social security arrangements for those who are unable to work. Together with 'guaranteed employment' the campaign demands the effective implementation of nutrition-related schemes, introduction of cooked mid-day meals in all primary schools and reform and expansion of the public distribution system. As part of the campaign, JMS mobilised people around the slogan "We want cheap grains and work". To this end a 'Sanghrash Sabha' was organised in Delhi on 24 April 2003. The sabha demanded that the right to work be made a fundamental right and guaranteed employment be effectively implemented. They also demanded that minimum wages be implemented and that there should be parity between men and women.

The success of the campaign could be inferred from the fact that some of their crucial demands were incorporated into the Common Minimum Programme of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government at the Centre<sup>29</sup>. It includes enactment of a National Employment Guarantee Act, mid day-meals in primary and secondary schools, universalisation of ICDS and significantly strengthening of PDS to involve women's cooperatives in its management (*Frontline*, July 14 2004). The inclusion of women's cooperatives shows the close connection of women with food security.

Employment and food security are now organically connected to health-care. JMS has also joined the *Jan Arogya Abhiyan* (People's Health Campaign) of Maharashtra which demands proper access to healthcare for women and in

addition to access to cheap and nutritious food. Food security is linked to food access, a function of purchasing power and livelihood opportunities; and food absorption, in turn is related to access to safe drinking water, environmental hygiene, education and healthcare (Food Security Summit, 2004).

JMS's emphasis on health security relates to the increasing consciousness of nutritional status and health of rural women. Due to unequal access to food, heavy work, and occupational health problems, women require special nutritional needs. Women are particularly susceptible to illness, in particular anaemia. Poor women are often trapped in a cycle of ill-health exacerbated by child-bearing and hard physical labour. Poverty underlies the poor health status of most of the Indian population, and women represent a disproportionate share of the poor (World Bank 1996). In the context when the cereal consumption in rural Maharashtra declined since 1961-62 (average calorie intake decreased from 2280 in 1960-62 to 1939 in 1993-94) for all groups of rural population access to food subsidies is critical. On the basis of a study in Karajgaon village of Talasari tehsil of Thane district, Swaminathan argues that there is low utilisation of TPDS in the village, which could be one of the reasons for malnutrition among women<sup>30</sup> (Swaminathan 2003).

In this context the importance of EGS to maintain the food and health security of women increases. EGS not only 'guarantees access to work' but also through 'food coupons' that are paid as part payment, workers are assured of a minimum of foodgrains. Under EGS all workers irrespective of whether they have a BPL card or not, obtain food coupons. In the case where many of the poor households do not get the BPL card as they do not fall into the 'restricted income category' these food coupons are significant. Under EGS the rural poor not only get employment but also access to foodgrains, which leads to better health (Saradamoni 1992).

In the course of the struggle, JMS redefined 'guaranteed employment' as food and health security. Through the campaign that demanded for effective implementation of wage employment programmes, which includes 'food coupons' and a nation-wide employment guarantee scheme' shows how the practical and strategic needs are crucial for survival.

### **CONCLUSION : Political Mobilisation Vs State Initiatives**

Scholars suggested that EGS is 'women-friendly' because it incorporates provisions such as access to drinking water, sanitation facilities, provision of shelter and crèches and presence of maternity benefits. Scholars further argue that EGS raises the status of the women by employing them in large numbers (Dandekar and Sathe 1980), and the wages form a 'core-income' for many women, which reduces the intra-household inequalities in nutrition (Datar 1990). It also curbs seasonal malnutrition of the poor households by providing employment during the drought seasons (Subbarao 1992).

These 'women-friendly' provisions were not introduced in the EGS for the first time but were present as the famine codes as early as in 1893<sup>31</sup>. These codes were later a part of the rules and regulations in the drought relief works which later became a part of the EGS programme. Dr`eze (1988) argues that

*'the backbone of the famine relief strategy embodied in the Famine Codes was the organization of massive public works, wages paid in cash, public employment directed towards creation of public assets like roads, canals, provision of water, shelter and crèches and gratuitous relief for those unable to work either in form of doles or kitchens.'*

However, there was one radical element in the EGS Act, which was not there in any programmes earlier. This was its guaranteed nature. Despite this, women could not access the provisions of the scheme.

The discussions in this paper have shown that it is not possible to implement the EGS provisions even in the minimum in some cases, such as starting of EGS work-sites without political mobilisation. This is particularly true in case of women's issues, given the patriarchal nature of institutions. The issues raised highlighted how political participation redefined women's material and strategic needs. The mobilisations in the Seventies demanded equal wages for equal work, raised the issue of sexual division of labour, and questioned the use of family wages for alcohol consumption by the tribal men and in turn increased domestic violence. In the Eighties gender issue was defined as demand for employment and housing rights for '*parityakta stree*'. Additionally,

by demanding the sanction of 'productive works' under EGS, the scheme was interpreted as an environmentally sustainable development programme. In the Nineties 'guaranteed employment' was redefined as food and health security for women. All these issues show that for the rural poor women both 'practical and strategic' interests are important. In the Seventies the organisations confronted the government through demonstrations, protests gheraos and sit-ins. Recently, MS and JMS used the court as a means to redress grievances.

I have shown that political mobilisations by left and feminist organisations are necessary to create awareness among women workers. What happens when organisations that are not of left and feminist orientation mobilise? Vachan, an NGO in Nashik district have been mobilising workers on EGS work-sites. Though they demanded 'identity cards' for EGS workers, they were not aware of the 'women-friendly' provisions of the scheme<sup>32</sup>. Further, what happens when no organisation mobilises workers? I argue that in such cases women-friendly provisions are not implemented and neither are women workers aware of these 'provisions'.

In order to assess, a) whether women-friendly provisions were implemented? and b) whether women workers were aware of these EGS provisions?, I conducted a survey<sup>33</sup> in Nashik district of Maharashtra between April 2002 and June 2003. I chose those EGS sites where there was no political mobilisation. Two hundred and sixty women were surveyed and one hundred and thirty interviewed. These included both tribal and non-tribal women workers, as well as migrants. Analysis of data shows that in these work-sites women did not have access to safe drinking water, there was delay in payment of wages, there were differential wage rates for women. In addition, they lacked access to sanitation, infrastructure, shelter facility, first-aid, crèches and maternity benefits. The migrant women workers were most vulnerable as lack of the above services posed a greater problem. Additionally, most workers got inedible grains under food coupons. Moreover, women and especially migrant women, were prone to sexual harassment. Analysis of data shows that on EGS work sites where there are no left and feminist organisations to politically mobilise workers, women do not have access to the women-friendly provisions and are not aware of them. I argue that awareness and consciousness are critical elements in ensuring the implementation of gender-sensitive provisions.

In this context, how does one evaluate the State approach to women and development? From the late Seventies onwards State's approaches to integrate women into the development process evolved through different stages; from welfare to equity to economic efficiency to empowerment<sup>34</sup> and presently gender mainstreaming. Kabeer (2003) states, gender mainstreaming involves a 'synergy' between various sectors of development. This approach entails shifts in organisational cultures, in addition to the goals and resource allocations of the government towards gender concerns (Goetz 1995, BRIDGE 1997). Krishnaraj et al (2004) argue that EGS could become one element of a larger policy of gender mainstreaming in India. In order to do so this scheme needs to be 'restructured' so as 'to create a synergy of services' where EGS sites could provide an ideal site for health, literacy and awareness programmes". The state would use the EGS work-sites to create awareness with regard to other development programmes of the State.

Can the State become an agency that can encourage the growth of awareness among women? The Shramshakti (report of the national commission on self-employed women and women in informal sector) published in 1988 suggested that the development policies be integrated with each other while taking into account the existing constraints, biases and discriminations under which women work and survive and suggested mobilisation of women to implement such programmes. Can the State which represents upper classes and castes and patriarchal interests become an agency for the mobilisation of the rural women? Can a 'top-down approach' work? Rather, from the above discussions I would argue that one needs a 'bottom up approach', wherein gender sensitive women's organisations would organise women and pressurise the State to be responsive to their demands.

In conclusion I argue that left and feminist organisations used EGS to intervene and mobilise the mass. This paper shows that EGS provided a space for women, to access 'women-friendly' provisions and redefine women's questions but also become politically conscious. I conclude that there is a potential for women in EGS to access both practical and strategic interests.

Notes

1. 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, primary sources such as newspapers, government records, pamphlets and letters from the organisations were used. Data were also collected through interviews with EGS workers, government officials and activists.
2. For a detailed analysis of the formation of Shetkari Shemazoor Parishad and SS please refer to Shaji Joseph.
3. Studies have shown that male migration increases the work burden of rural women and these women lead a life of prolonged hard work, loneliness and powerlessness (Jetly 1987).
4. Omvedt (1977) argues that by drawing a massive number of rural poor into a collective work experience the relief work intensified their class-consciousness.
5. The reason given is that to carry involves less labour and digging is more a strenuous activity necessitating more wages.
6. Along with 'rasta roko', a new strategy of 'rail roko' was used by women in the anti-price rise struggle in Bombay (Sen 1990)
7. Brahme and Upadhyaya (1971) argue that in the year 1970-71 around 4540 tribal families in Maharashtra lost 20,060 acres of land to government projects.
8. A Compendium of Government Orders (2 Vol.) up to 30 June 1973, Revenue and Forests Dept. GOM 1973. The government of Maharashtra in 1973 sanctioned a) supply of drinking water, b) cash doles to pregnant women engaged in works to be paid for 3 months and payment of Rs 10 for medical comfort, c) increase in wages and remove disparity in the rates of daily wages between men and women (maximum wages to be Rs 2.50 for both men and women) and d) provision of crèches at work-sites.
9. EGS was introduced in the year 1965 as a pilot scheme in Tasgaon taluka, Sangli district of Maharashtra by Shri V.S. Page.
10. Bharat Patankar and Gail Omvedt were associated with Shramik Sanghatana and LNP, respectively.
11. Average rainfall in the period 1980-85 was 71.5 mm as compared to the normal rainfall of 663 mm. (Source: Vishal would give)
12. The Bombay textile strike of 1982-84 displaced as many as 2.5 lakh workers and forced them to return to their villages in search of employment and livelihood (Bakshi 1986).
13. EGS works are divided into 'productive and unproductive works. Productive works refer to work that are used for development of agriculture.
14. MS and SMS also initiated the 'Bali Raja Struggle' which involved peasants building a small dam on their own.



15. Refer Gail Omvedt's 'Reinventing Revolution', 1993 for an elaboration on this position.
16. Omvedt in her book "Reinventing Revolution" states that Stree Mukti Sanghrash was formed in 1985 whereas Datar refers to it as 1983. I use Omvedt's date as she was a part of the organisation and played an important role in its formation. The core members of SMS were Indutai Patankar, Gail Omvedt and Nagmani Rao.
17. Sen (1990) states 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'. Omvedt in an interview expressed the need for SMS as 'for a gender-equalitarian fight' it was crucial that women's separate unit was formed' (Interview, 21st June 2003).
18. PDS was started in 1939 as a war time rationing measure and in the Seventies it was made into an universal scheme. PDS is a rationing mechanism that entitles households to specified quantities of selected commodities at subsidised prices. The six essential commodities supplied through PDS are: rice, wheat, sugar, edible oils, kerosene and coal. The objectives of PDS include rationing during scarcity, maintaining price stability, keeping check on private trade and raising the welfare of the poor. State guided system of delivery of cheap food (Swaminathan 2003).
19. For details on the various changes please refer to *Vishal Jhadav* in this volume.
20. In the survey of the EGS work-sites in Nashik district.
21. Structural adjustment entails a wider set of policies to restructure different sectors of the economy. It includes changes in the role of public and private sector in the economy. The components of SAP are: liberalised trade, fiscal restructuring, increasing public sector efficiency, financial sector reform and specific programmes for agriculture, industry, transport and energy sectors (Taylor 1991).
22. Under the New Industry, Trade and Commerce Policy for Maharashtra 1995, the government would undertake the establishment of industrial estates and mega projects for infrastructure development requiring almost 2000 to 7000 hectares of land (Vora, 2002).
23. Below Poverty Line (BPL) is the income-poverty line calculated on the basis of absolute expenditure for minimum levels of living. On the basis of the income criteria 35 per cent of India's population were below poverty line in 1993-94. If one makes an estimate on the basis of nutritional indicators then during the same time 48 per cent of population were undernourished. In case where the PDS is changed to include people who are below poverty line then it increases the chances of excluding people who, though not under the 'estimated poverty line', are undernourished (Swaminathan 2003).
24. In 2000-01, of the 12.7 million women working in rural areas of Maharashtra, 89 per cent were in agriculture, of which 41 per cent work as cultivators and 48 per cent as agricultural labour. The statistics show that the proportion of marginal and subsidiary workers amongst women is much higher and they are mostly employed as casual labour. In 1999-2000, women contributed 58 per cent of the total employment generated under EGS.

25. During the period 2001-2002, the State experienced acute scarcity conditions where large parts of the State suffered from crop failures forcing the State to declare 'drought' (Drought 2002, State's Report Maharashtra).
26. In April 2001, the People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL), Rajasthan, a human rights organisation, submitted a writ petition to the Supreme Court seeking enforcement of the right to food. The case was filed against the Government of India, the Food Corporation of India (FCI), and all States and union territories on the issue of inadequate drought relief and issue of chronic hunger. The petition points out two aspects of the State's negligence in providing food security. The first is the breakdown of the public distribution system (PDS) and the inadequacy of government relief works.
27. There are other demands in this campaign. In the paper I am highlighting only those issues that are relevant to the understanding of the argument presented.
28. Some of the prominent organisations are Center for Enquiry Into Health and Allied Themes, TATHAPI Trust, National Center for Advocacy Studies, and Janwadi Mahila Sanghatana.
29. UPA is a government formed by the support of 16 political parties including the CPI(M) led by the congress Party.
30. 53 per cent of women surveyed were undernourished on the basis of the Body Mass Index, Swaminathan (2003).
31. Following the recommendations of the first Indian Famine Commission (1880)<sup>31</sup> appointed by the British Government, the government of India in the year 1893 passed a resolution on Famine Codes, which contained detailed instructions and rules for guidance of administration in dealing with famine relating to type and nature of works, classification of relief labour and scale of wages, organisation of gratuitous relief, establishment of a system of village inspection (Srivastava 1968). The Bombay Scarcity manual of 1962, which is still in use (GOM 1962) follows a very similar pattern and clearly emphasised upon 'employment for all' (Subramaniam 1975).
32. Vachan when it started organising focused demanding for 'identity cards'.
33. The detailed analysis of the fieldwork is specified in the *Appendix*.
34. Welfare approach focuses on recognising value of women as a resource, equity approach emphasises that development process should benefit women as well as men, economic efficiency approach seeks to integrate women into the economic growth so that there could be equitable distribution of benefits of development and empowerment approach aims at eradicating the historically based inequalities by building, strengthening and extending the power base of women through development programmes.

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