

Poor Peasant Women Organize for Land Rights

By Govind Kelkar

On ne saurait combattre la subordination des femmes et les systèmes patriarcaux concernant les relations femmes-hommes sans régler la question fondamentale du manque de propriété et de ressources des femmes. L'article examine une série de questions socio-politiques concernant l'accès des femmes à la propriété foncière et aux ressources économiques dans le cadre d'un mouvement populaire à Bihar en Inde.

We had tongues but we could not speak, we had feet but we could not walk. Now that we have land, we have the strength to speak and walk.
(The poor peasant women of Bodhgaya, 7 March 1987)

Women's subordination and patriarchal gender systems can be combatted only if a fundamental change is made in the existing propertylessness and resourcelessness of women. Women's independent rights to land and to control of resources are integrally linked to measures to change the ideology and structures of patriarchy within the family and in social relations. Like the gender based division of labour, the division of private property based on gender is regarded as natural and therefore not to be questioned. A women's relation to productive property/land is always mediated through her relation to her husband, father or brother.

Giving effective land rights to women in a society where they never had them before creates a profound social impact. In a study of the women's question in the peasant movement in the district of Gaya, Bihar I noted that women activists made an organized attempt to bring about change in the pattern of land distribution. (Kelkar and Gala) Although only about ten per cent of the land was given in the name of women, it gave them confidence to speak out and to question practices that have subjugated them over a period of time. The movement has two



A. Ramachandran, from *Yayati, The Complete Man*, 1986

important slogans: "Auratke Sahbhag bina, har badlav adhura hai" (without women's participation, any social transformation is incomplete), and "Aurat Harijan aur mazdoor, nahin rahenge ab mazdoor" (women, low castes and labourers, will no longer be at the mercy of others).

Hindu laws of property and ownership of the means of production give women negligible rights as human beings to family income, assets and property. The Hindu Succession Act of 1958, for example, gives daughters and the surviving widow equal shares in the inheritance of their parents' or husband's property, in case of intestate succession. But the testator is given the right to will all his or her property away. In the patriarchal culture of India, the property is usually willed to the sons, so as to keep the property within the family. The Act further recognizes the joint family system amongst Hindus and gives precedence to the personal laws that tend to govern joint families in India.

Hence, with the exception of Audhra Pradesh and Kerala, where such personal laws have changed, the Act does nothing to check inequality of inheritance and succession afforded to women. Moreover, the Act does not affect the devolution of tenancies of agricultural land.

Likewise, there are checks on women's acquisition of property through dowry. In 1961, the Dowry Prohibition Act was passed, prohibiting the giving or taking of any dowry 'in connection with the marriage.' The definition of dowry in the Act does not allow any direct or indirect gift to the bridegroom or exempt any property transferred by the parents in the name of daughter. It has been argued that this legislation does not protect women's rights and places a new barrier between women and their acquisition of property.

Women's effective exclusion from the possession and control of land is largely the basis of their subordination and dependence

Women's exclusion from the possession and control of land is the

on men in rural India. While the Hindu Succession Act and the Dowry Prohibition Act can be appealed to in certain circumstances of disputes among families, in most cases, daughters waive their land rights in favour of their brothers. Otherwise, they would be denounced as 'selfish' sisters and would risk alienation or a severance of ties with their natal families.

Social relations within a community are not gender-neutral; neither are the effects of redistribution of land. Land reforms in India have been shown to have a differential impact on different rural classes as well as on men and women within each class. By and large, women have been losers in relation to men of their class. Recent studies in India indicate that land reforms have not succeeded in halting the process of decline in the position of peasant women. (Bardhan; Agarwal)

In the early seventies, the Committee on the Status of Women in India received many representations from women of different states regarding the discriminatory features of some of the new land laws. In May 1980, in a camp of women agricultural labourers in Bankura district in West Bengal, similar home truths were pointed out by a number of poor peasant women. (Sardamoni x) During our field work in 1984-85 in the villages of Etawah district in Uttar Pradesh, Devi, a *bhangi* (scavenger caste) woman sharply remarked: "No. Women never control any assets, not even the children they bear, they are known as their father's children. This has been going on for generations". Raj Kumari, a Chamar woman, added:

Land is passed on from father to son. Even the jewellery that is gifted to a woman on her marriage is not given to her, it is kept by her parents-in-law. If a man dies or remarries, the woman is completely dependent on others for her survival. A man can gamble or drink away his land but a

woman is always concerned about her children. She can never see them starve, she would do all in her power to raise them to the best of her ability. So land should be owned jointly by both the husband and wife. (Kelkar 1989)

Similar reports come from the rural areas of Bihar where women have been struggling against the prejudices of state officials as well as those of the men of their own community towards women having independent land rights.

Interestingly enough, Bihar was the first state to pass legislation to abolish the *Zamindari* system. Its primary purpose was to abolish the prevalent intermediary system between the state and the tiller of the soil. There were other progressive legislations such as Bihar Land Reforms (Fixation of Ceiling Area and Acquisition of Surplus Land) Act 1961; Bihar Tenancy Holding (Maintenance of Record) Act of 1973; and The Minimum Wages Notifications. Some of the major provisions of these laws were: 1) setting a ceiling on the holding of agricultural land, ranging from 20 acres for canal irrigated land, to 60 acres for poor quality hilly land; 2) giving tenants who have held tenancies for 12 years the right of occupancy on the land 3) periodically fixing minimum wages for agricultural labor.

There are loopholes in the law, and the attitude of the state machinery has encouraged violation of the ceiling laws. The land records are not up-to-date and the close connection between the landlords and the local officials responsible for maintaining the land records ensures that they are faulty. Lands are rarely declared surplus. Of the lands declared surplus, not many are taken over and even fewer are distributed among the landless.

Although the records show that more than 50 per cent of the land acquired under the ceiling act has been distributed, even casual observation shows that this is not

true. A large part of such distribution is on paper only. (Dogra) In a recent analysis of the struggle of the poor peasants and landless labourers for minimum wages, land reforms and civil rights, an administrator-cum-researcher establishes that administrators at all levels have been very relaxed and negligent in implementing the land laws. (Subramanian)

The region of Bihar: class, caste and gender issues

For the past several decades, Bihar has been in a state of agrarian turmoil, and Bihari women and men have come to be regarded as backward on one hand, and politically aggressive and militant on the other. The state machinery has been repeatedly censured for both its repressive acts and its neglect of the people's welfare. Land reforms and other rural development programmes in Bihar remain largely unimplemented due to the concentration of power and land in the hands of a tiny group of very powerful upper caste men. Any kind of development effort is thwarted by vested interest groups and the local bureaucracy, which is entrenched in feudal values. The limited development that has taken place among the rich peasantry is skewed, which is sharply reflected in the increasing withdrawal of women from socially-recognized work and in their growing domestication and subordination, even among the non-caste and lower caste groups. Agricultural labourer and Dalit women have suffered large-scale state neglect under the feudo-patriarchal rule of landlords. Nevertheless, they have showed an unparalleled militancy and strength in fighting landlord oppression and in struggling for improved wages and their right to land and other resources.

The districts of Bhojpur and Rohtas which I investigated have two peasant organizations: Bihar Kisan Sabha and Bihar Kisan Samiti. These organizations

basis of their subordination and dependence on men in rural India.

came into existence in the late 70s. Unlike earlier peasant associations which tended to be led by rich peasants, these two peasant organizations are made up of agricultural labourers and marginal peasants. Both Bihar Kisan Sabha and Bihar Kisan Samiti have reportedly helped small-scale agricultural labourers (including women), and small-scale tenants to secure higher agricultural wages, and security of tenure. Women and men of the lower castes have gained self-esteem, dignity, and courage, and are better able to defend themselves against molestation, rape, and torture.

The landlords of Bhojpur, Rohtas and the rest of Bihar are mainly from the upper castes. In Rohtas, there are some landlords from the backward caste of Kurmis. The peasants of this area are chiefly from the backward castes. Both before and after the 1954 abolition of the *Zamindari* system of revenue collection, a class of rich peasants (those not only themselves tilling the land but also employing labourers) has emerged. Conversely, many of the poorer peasants have lost their rights to land and have been turned into sharecropping tenants-at-will (who have no security of tenure and can be evicted at the will of landlord), operating on the basis of oral leases. A substantial number of them have also become agricultural labourers.

On the basis of the intensity of the agrarian struggle, I selected eight villages, four each from the two districts. The four villages in Bhojpur include: Ekwari, Chauri, Babubandh and Sonatola, where I had some 30 in-depth individual discussions and several collective discussions with women. The Rohtas villages are: Tori Mohanpur, Karbandia, Basuhari and Kir, where I had 24 in-depth individual discussions and several collective discussions. Women with a reputation for active participation in the peasant movements were selected for the interviews. Most of my discussions were with Dalit and backward caste women from agricultural labourer and marginal peasant families. My

discussions with women centered around three major issues: socio-economic structure of the village, including its class, caste and gender relations; history of peasant struggle in the region; and women's participation in the struggle.

The role of women in Bihar is influenced by class and caste factors. The upper castes, for instance, follow a very strict system of seclusion (*pardah*). In fact, the extent of seclusion of women is a very good indicator of caste status: the greater the seclusion, the higher the caste. Even among the poorer sections of the upper castes, agricultural field work is never done by women. In addition to the traditionally defined household work, women also process agricultural goods, but this is done within the courtyard (*angan*) itself.

Among peasants of the backward castes, women participate in all kinds of agricultural field labour in their family fields (the only exception being ploughing, which is taboo). With poor peasants, where the income from the family fields has to be supplemented by wage labour in other people's fields, the women do not do the wage labour. The full (equal or more) participation of women in all non-household work has been a feature of Dalit, agricultural labour families, however. In these families, women perform as many days of wage labour as men, as well as being solely responsible for the household work.

One of the features of the caste system is a strict endogamy. But the subordination of the lower castes to the upper castes has also resulted in the general 'sexual availability' of lower caste women to large landowning, upper caste men. Rape and sexual assault on lower caste women, particularly Chamars and Musahars, were once considered the privilege of Rajput and Bhumihar landlords. The *Dola* custom (forcing every bride of the lower caste to spend the first night following her marriage with the local landlord) pre-

vailed in the villages of Bhojpur and Rohtas districts. These practices caused much anguish among the lower castes, but the latter could not oppose them because of their socio-economic dependence on the upper caste landlords. By 1930s, however, resentment among the lower castes gained ground and the words *izzat* (dignity) and *larai* (struggle) were used frequently. The 1940s witnessed two radical peasant movements, Tebhaga in West Bengal and Telangana in Andhra Pradesh. The two movements were followed by the Naxalite movement in the late sixties in the areas of West Bengal, Bihar and Andhra Pradesh. In all these movements, women were reported to be in the forefront of the struggle. (Custers; Lalita *et al*; Roy)

The lower castes (Backward Castes and Dalits) include among them various classes of peasants and also agricultural labourers. A large number of them are agricultural labourers or poor peasants, (those who possess some land, either owned or rented, but also have to perform some wage labour). For these women, two economic problems that are very pressing are wages and land.

Despite the equal remuneration acts, women generally get 40 to 60 per cent of male wages and are given the more labour-intensive tasks such as weeding, transplanting, and harvesting. Landless and agricultural labourers provide a cheap source of labour to large landowners at an extremely low wage. In addition to wages, they receive some *Khesari* (lentil), which is dangerous to the health and was declared illegal in the Bihar Minimum Wage Rules several decades ago. As a result of wage strikes launched by peasant organizations in the late 1970s and 1980s, the official minimum wage declared in the area is Rs. 14.50 in cash or 5 kg. rice in kind, plus a light mid-day meal. It is not paid in any of the villages I visited. Women workers also have the problem of gender based inequality of wages. Women's work

is absolutely essential to the existence of the family and tends to be very tedious and time consuming, yet it does not provide them with much autonomy concerning decisions in the home or even with regard to the disposition of their earnings.

The other question is that of access to land, in particular the land rights of women agricultural labourers. There are two aspects to this question. First, the class of agricultural labourers itself needs access to land through a redistribution of land—at least of the land that is above the legal ceilings, or of government lands—and second, within mass movements, there is an attempt to get joint and separate allocations for women, and not only an allocation to men in the name of the households.

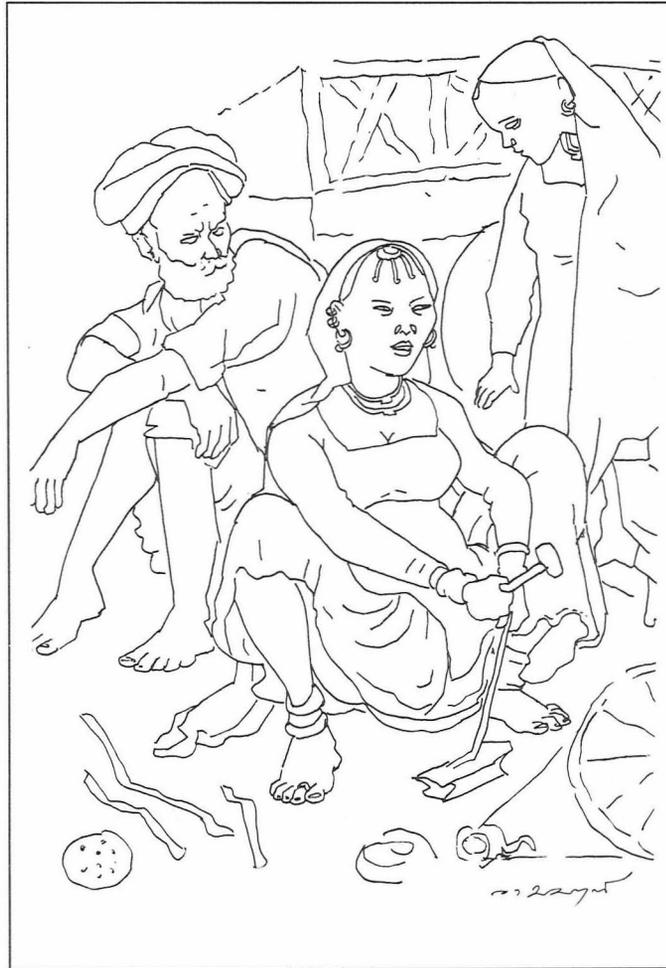
It is matter of common knowledge that no fundamental change has been brought about by the *Zamindari Abolition Act* in the agrarian structure and land relations. Social and economic power remains with the class of former *zamindars*. The state in India did not set out to change gender relations fundamentally in society, or to enable women to have access to land/property and other resources. Its construction of family-centered programmes, its assignments of productive, reproductive functions and, above all, land/property and technology control functions to the (male) heads of households seems likely to erode even further the rights which women earlier enjoyed.

Women's experiences in the land rights movements

Discussions with women were often punctuated with frustration at their domesticated existence—*pinjra ka jivan* (caged life)—which is systematically rendering them worthless. There is substantial participation of women in the peasant struggles, ranging from 25 to 60 per cent of the male activists engaged in the struggle. Women participate both directly and indirectly in battling the landlords and police, in snatching arms from them as well as receiving

bullet wounds, in protecting and sheltering peasant movement activists for months in their homes, in hiding their weapons from public visibility as well as in providing food and sustenance to the people in the struggle. Some of the women were killed by the landlords or the police. Many women are still in jail. Most of these women are from Dalit and Backward Castes or agricultural labourers.

Four of the Sonar (a Backward Caste) women from the village of Ekwari told me that they organized meetings of peasant movement activists in their homes. Dur-



A. Ramachandran, from *Yayati, The Complete Man*, 1986

ing periods of crisis, they maintain a close watch on the activities of landlords, protect the activists by letting them sleep in their homes during the night and gather glass pieces, bricks and stones to protect themselves against the attacks of the landlords. They regularly feed the struggling men and clean their weapons to prevent them from rusting or otherwise becoming unusable.

This kind of active assistance of women in a guerrilla struggle of the popular movement is not unique to the village of Ekwari. There are many such instances of the indirect participation of women in other villages of the area. The role of women in the peasant movement does, however, strongly suggest the necessity for a reconceptualization of the "indirect" participation of women in a popular movement, which is usually considered a passive activity and even regarded as non-participation.

Discussions with male and female activists of the peasant movement, however, reveals that the agrarian struggle and the peasant movement has not been able to shake off patriarchal bias in the treatment of women members. The entire experience is riddled with glaring contradictions between the women's demonstrated abilities, as well as their determination for political or organizational work, and their inequality and subordinate status both in the family and in the decision making process in the movement.

The question of *izzat* (dignity)

In a meeting in the village of Sonatola, women described their protracted struggle against the upper-caste landlords of the neighbouring village of Berath, who "raped Chamar, Dusadh women in order to keep them and their men submissive and obedient." It is common practice to force a Dalit, agricultural labourer woman to have sexual relations with a Rajput landlord. If the woman declines, her husband, brother or father is implicated in false criminal cases. The woman and other members of her family are not allowed to draw water from the well, or walk on the lanes by the side of fields or ease themselves in the area, as the fields are considered to be owned by the Rajput landlords. These practices have been substantially reduced as a result of the peasant movement in the area. However, Dalit and agricultural labourers of Berath still

have to face a lot of injustice from Rajput landlords.

In many places, rape of Dalit or agricultural labourer woman by the landlord triggered the peasant struggle. And, some of the "incorrigible rapists" were defeated during the course of the struggle. It was reported that "the word *Naxalite* thereafter came to connote to many, a person who would resist the sexual oppression with the last drop of the blood." (Mukherjee and Yadav) Kabutari Devi, (the widow of the well known peasant leader Rameshwar Ahir), and three other women of Yadav community in the village of Ekwari told me, "The rape of agricultural labourer women which many of us bore unquestioningly is no longer an acceptable social norm. There is some change in the village society. The lower-caste women feel safe and have some *izzat* now. Now, the upper caste land-owners behave themselves and dare not insult us." Women of the villages of Chauri and Babubandh, with anger and anguish in their words, described that in the pre-movement days up to the sixties, upper-caste landowners would pinch Dalit women's breasts while ordering them to work in their fields, mostly to do *begar* (unpaid menial labour).

In several villages, women confirmed that they have gained this *izzat* partly as a result of the conscious policies of the peasant organizations to end social oppression of women, and partly as result of women's participation in the agrarian movement, where women-specific issues were raised by peasant women themselves. Notwithstanding these efforts, the question of rape and sexual abuse is seen as a caste/community specific issue, and not as a women-specific issue.

Whenever women activists initiate discussions on the prevailing forms of male dominance in the movement or question patriarchal prejudices, these are pushed aside for "more important and immediate issues," or the matter is postponed for implementation in a future, non-feudal society. This should not be misinterpreted as an attempt to treat women-specific problems independently of the class-caste based peasant movements. Rather, it drives home the fact that the leadership of the peasant movement does not fully understand the complexity of the woman question. The issue of rape of agricultural labourer women by upper caste landlords,

while a very important issue for the women, nevertheless, becomes a limiting factor, too. The peasant organizations have not moved beyond this issue to, for example, deal with the increasing social oppression and subordination of women both in the family and in the community.

Agricultural wages: the question of parity

With regard to the issue of agricultural wages, both men and women are receiving increased wages as a result of the peasant movement in the two districts of Bhojpur and Rohtas. The only exception is the village of Chauri where the wages have not improved since the early 1970s.

The upper caste landlords of the village of Chauri still refuse to pay a higher wage to women and men labourers of the village, though they pay an additional wage to outside labourers. This is the landlord's continuing vendetta against the poor after the wage strike of 1972-73. The landlords, however, are no longer in a position to insult the women labourers in the way they used to in the days prior to the peasant movement in the area.

Nevertheless, there are two important problems related to the question of wages. First, in none of the villages of the study does the agricultural wage of the labourers meet the required standard of the officially declared minimum wage in the area. In most cases, the wages are less than one-half of the minimum wage in the area, and even less in the case of labourers of the village of Chauri. Second, the question of unequal wages for men and women agricultural labourers has never been raised at any point throughout the two decades of the peasant movement. Women receive only 60 to 70 per cent of male wages for the same or similar work. The only exception is harvesting, when women are paid on a par with men.

The inequality of wages for woman labourers is closely associated with their inequality in the family and in the movement. All the women I had discussions with during the fieldwork unequivocally expressed their resentment at the existing disparity of agricultural wages. In several cases, like in the village Karbandia, women feel that the demand for parity of wages between men and women workers "will not be supported by our men." Surpris-

ingly enough, neither of the peasant organizations raised the question of equal wages in any of the strikes organized for higher agricultural wages in the region.

Similarly, the peasant organizations do not question the existing gender-based division of labour in agricultural work, and thereby support the continuation of a higher position for male labourers. Ploughing and picking of rice seedlings are considered male jobs, and men are paid an additional 15 to 25 per cent of the wage for these jobs. It is important to note here that if women had taken to ploughing or picking rice seedlings during the crisis periods of the movement, then this work would not be considered taboo. In early 1983, landless and agricultural labourers of the Chamar caste of the village of Kaitharkala in Nawanagar Thana of the district Bhojpur claimed their lawful right to government land and wanted it to be distributed to them. The upper caste landlords, who virtually controlled and operated the land, sought police help in beating Chamar women, and in arresting their men and driving them away from the village. In the absence of these men, the Chamar women of Kaitharkala successfully resisted the landlord's efforts to plough the land, and decided to plough it themselves. They learned the technique of ploughing from an old man in the village, subsequently ploughed the land and acquired full control over the produce.

Such incidents are treated as aberrations, as the activities of the women during the crisis situations of the movement. But they also reveal the false assumptions of the superiority of male tasks in agricultural work. These assumptions, in turn, lead to unequal wages between men and women labourers. Of course, the real beneficiaries of the payment of lower wages to woman labourers are the landlords and rich peasants. The sex/gender system of unequal wages essentially helps to maintain a system of class exploitation.

Access to land

In discussions with the Bihar Kisan Samiti leadership, which includes several women, they suggest that ownership of the land entails a complex set of functions which includes the right to decide on the use of land and to alienate it. It provides the right to receive the income from the

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land and to decide on its disposition, particularly in the case of a marital dispute, including desertion or divorce. The local leadership of the Bihar Kisan Samiti in Basuhari argue that women should be the direct beneficiaries of the land distribution programme and should be given separate allocations in the distribution programme. The local leadership categorically states: “If a household is entitled to two acres of land, one of the two acres should be marked in the independent name of the woman of the household.” The joint *pattas* (titles) “will be nullified and invalidated in effect because of the overall male dominance and the general support for patriarchal norms in Bihar’s rural society. We should, therefore, strive for separate, independent *pattas* for women.” (Kelkar 1987)

This was not, however, carried out when the Bihar Kisan Samiti supervised a land distribution programme towards the end of 1989. Although titles to the land were given by the administration, the manner of land distribution was decided by the Bihar Kisan Samiti Committee and those active in the struggle.

In the village of Basuhari, all those who supported the land struggle were given one acre of agricultural land and some tiny pieces for homestead land per household. The four households which had a history of siding with the landlord were given half an acre each. Those of the nearby villages who had been active in the peasant movement were also given half an acre each. Only five women (compared to 110 men) were given land in their independent names. The five women include three widows, one peasant movement activist who was deserted by her husband for being “ugly and dark,” and a ten year old girl who had lost her right hand in the struggle. In the neighbouring villages, 26 women of the total of 396 beneficiaries received titles to relatively tiny portions of land in their independent names. Out of the total of 120 acres of

distributed land, women received a marginal portion of 7.85 acres, less than 7 per cent of the distributed land. And, the considerations in the cases of women were that “they were without male support—widowed, divorced or deserted by the husband, disabled and therefore lacking the possibility of marriage.”

There are, however, some members of the Bihar Kisan Samiti in Basuhari as well as in the villages who are apprehensive about the effect of separate *pattas* for women. They feel that “women might not be able to manage the land on their own,” and also “if a woman has land in her name, she would find some minor, trivial excuse to desert her husband.” It is seen as a potential threat to the men in the village and a potential divisive factor in the leadership.

Undoubtedly, there is the need to have women’s organizations in the class-based land movements. However, the questions raised here are: Why should peasant organizations, like Bihar Kisan Samiti, not demand women’s right to land and parity of agricultural wages? Why have the peasant organizations remained limited to organizing only men? Why are these poor peasant women’s demands be interpreted as silence and passivity? In September 1990, soon after the land distribution in the Basuhari, the poor peasant, Dalit women members of the Bihar Kisan Samiti protested:

We were there in harvesting the fields. We were there in carrying ploughs and in snatching arms from the zamindar’s goondas. We fought for our rights and actively participated in the land struggle. Why, when the land is distributed, do we not get our independent right to land?

Further, despite the substantial participation of women in the peasant movement, there is only a marginal representation of women in both the local leadership

and in the leading (state level) organizations. Hard evidence of the leadership of the peasant movements indicates that women’s substantial or equal participation in decision making was neither achieved nor intended. In the village of Sonatola, women complained “we struggle against the *Sarkar* (Government), the police and the landlords, but the men take over the leadership.” A Chamar woman in her forties, who had received bullet wounds in the struggle against the landlord, added “*Court-Kachehri hum karte hain. netagiri admi karte hain*” (we take care of their release from the jail, but when the men come out they become the leaders).

Some of the women who took a leading role in the peasant movements are appreciated as well as affectionately remembered for their “dedication” and “commitment” to the cause of social transformation. They too, however, failed to take up woman specific issues in the movement. Two women in Babubandh, three in Chauri and another three in Ekwari told us about the life and works of “Comrade Sheela Chatterjee.” She organized Dalits and agricultural labourers (both men and women) against the oppression and exploitation of the landlords and reportedly had “frequent meetings with the village women” to discuss the critical significance of a peasant movement but she, too, glossed over the women’s problems. “She had meetings with the women and would organize them for the purpose of land struggle, but never raised any women-specific questions.”

The gender division of mass/political work

In Sonatola, we were approached by a “wholetimer” (a person who is supposed to give all the time available to him for mass work or political work). He wanted us to explain to his wife that being a whole-timer means that women should

take full responsibility for children and supporting the family, so that men can be free for political work.

Many activists of both the Bihar Kisan Sabha and the Bihar Kisan Samiti expect their wives to take full responsibility (both financial and emotional) for looking after children, the aged, or any other dependents in the family. Women, on the other hand, resent these attitudes and begrudge the men's whole-timer roles at the cost of women. They feel extremely overburdened with familial and extra-familial responsibilities, having no time for themselves to do any kind of mass/organizational/political work.

Shanti Devi, a bangle seller from village Ekwari, appreciates her husband's work in the peasant movement, but feels doubly burdened in running the household and taking care of their two daughters. "If he shared some responsibilities, I would get some time to do organizational work myself and not end up merely participating in the demonstrations," she said strongly, and added "the village needs many activists to continue the peasant struggle, but I don't want any activist in my home. My husband's whole-timer work has crippled me."

Babuni Devi, a Bhumihar caste woman from a small peasant family in Ekwari, has three children. She, too, appreciates her husband's movement work but angrily accuses him of a) keeping her out of political discussions and b) putting all the responsibility for the household and the children on her. Babuni Devi is a militant woman, who dares to defy the upper caste norm of *purdah* and also male control in the family. She very strongly questions the sexual division of mass/political work. "Both men and women should do the 'movement work', and at the same time share domestic responsibilities and child rearing. Why should the women be burdened with the domesticity? I very much want to do the 'movement work' but how can I leave my children at the mercy of others?"

Significantly, women do not negate the agrarian struggle or the men's "movement work." While discussing the achievements or gains of the peasant movement, they repeatedly stress the two gains: dignity or *izzat* and higher agricultural wages. There is, however, a general feeling of despair, a kind of fatigue, particularly in

Babubandh and Chauri. Asarfa Devi, a Chamar woman of Babubandh who played a heroic role in resisting the landlord/police attack on the community and saving her husband, Sakaldeep (a well known activist of the peasant movement in the mid-seventies), and some other activists of the peasant movement, has "*bahut ghata hua*" (lost so much) in the course of the struggle. The homecoming of Sakaldeep after 12 years with another wife and children has had a demoralizing effect. He is considered "unfit" for "movement work" and has been driven out to seek a livelihood for himself and for the additional family. Meanwhile, Asarfa Devi has herself taken on the responsibility of caring for Sakaldeep's additional family.

In the village of Chauri, several women said, almost in a chorus "We have not gained anything from that strike, neither increased agricultural wages, nor self-respect. The landlords still insult us." In the same breath, however, women of Chauri, like those in the other villages, have a determined reply to their situation, "We will again organize and fight, that is the only way left for us. We are hungry, we have to fight."

Throughout our discussion with men and women activists in village Basuhari, the following two points were reiterated and emphasized. First, the Government makes policies and programmes on paper only. It is the peasant movement activists who really translate these plans into action. Second, women, like men, have fully and fearlessly participated in both the struggles for higher agricultural wages and in the land struggle. A full recognition of their role, however, is denied. The women activists present in the discussion meeting added "*Phir bhi ghar main aurataon ki izzat nahin hain*" (yet women have no dignity in their own homes). While, in the strictest sense of the term one may not call these efforts a 'rural women's movement' in Bihar (Kishwar), it is an important step.

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