

# The Anti-Price-Rise Movement in Bombay

By Usha Mehta and Usha Thakkar

*Le soulèvement de 1972 contre la hausse des prix en Inde était un mouvement de protestation unique et sans précédent lancé pour réparer les torts causés au peuple en général et aux femmes en particulier. Cette révolte spontanée des femmes de Bombay a pris des mesures concrètes et mobilisé des participantes pour réaliser son objectif. Même si ce mouvement n'était pas motivé par une idéologie particulière, il visait à promouvoir le bien-être de la population en s'opposant à une politique gouvernementale inéquitable.*

When an economic crisis arises, women become the first victims. In 1972 in Bombay, women's tolerance had reached the breaking point. On August 6, 1972, in response to the situation, Bharatiya Mahila Federation—a leading all-India women's organization—called a meeting of all parties and independents. Meenakshi Sane—President of the organization, fervently appealed to the people, and especially to women, to co-operate with the Federation in fighting the monster of rising prices. The meeting called upon the government to adopt rationing for essential commodities. It was pointed out that what was happening was contrary to the much publicized *Garibi Hatao* (Remove Poverty) programme of the ruling party.

After about a month's time, on September 13, 1972, representatives of about 70 women's organizations came together and formed the *Mahagai Pratikar Samyutka Samiti*—The Anti-Price Rise Women's United Front—to fight rising prices, and also to bring prices down. Women were invited to join the front not as members of any political party, but as women and as members of women's organizations. Women from all walks of life: housewives and working women, domestic servants and mill-workers, teachers and students, social workers and political leaders rallied around the common cause.

Though the immediate aim of the movement, as stated by

its President Mrinal Gore, was to make essential commodities available and bring down the prices by bringing pressure on the government, the ultimate aim was to organize a powerful women's movement as had been done in Japan. As she observed, "Anti-price rise movement is not an end in itself. It is my dream to build up a strong women's movement through it."

Many and varied were the techniques adopted for the movement. From peaceful meetings and conferences to *dharnas* (sit-ins), deputations to Ministers and heads of big companies, *ghearaos* (surrounding a person by forming a human chain) and *bandhs* (stoppages), many ingenious and innovative tactics which excited the participants and evoked public sympathy were tried successfully.

Several public meetings and conferences were held at different places in the city during the movement. Women from all classes and localities, of different age groups and interest groups attended the meetings in the thousands. In most of them, the leaders of the front exhorted women not to slacken their efforts and to be prepared for a long and arduous struggle.

Resolutions suggesting various measures such as passing a law on price ceilings, on the distribution of land among the landless, collection of tax from tax evaders, reduction in indirect taxes, banishment of corrupt officers and ministers, strict implementa-

tion of the laws already passed, and others, were adopted. The Government was warned of dire consequences if these were not carried out and if the fraud committed against the people was not stopped forthwith.

On October 5, 1972, a large demonstration was organized in the heart of the city. The majority of the demonstrators were from the working class and they not only travelled long distances to participate in the *dharna*, but also lost their day's wages. This was the first part of the protest.

Demonstrations continued for the next three years. They were organized on a large scale



Sharon Fernandez, Untitled, 1991, Ink on Paper

and involved persons from different sectors of society. Again, demonstrators from the working class often travelled long distances to participate in them and were not concerned about losing their day's wages.

With the increase in the price of milk in 1973, the agitation gathered new momentum. Undeterred by threats and warnings, women entered the Aarey Milk Colony (a government undertaking) and stopped three trucks from leaving. They accused the government of progressively reducing the fat content in the milk with a view to selling low fat milk at a higher price. The Agricultural Minister was *gheraoed* in his Chamber on the 17th of January 1973 for more than four hours by 30 women who demanded a reduction in the price of milk. They also demanded the resignation of the Minister, who according to them, was in league with the affluent sectors of society.

On the 12th of February, 1973, women were heard shouting slogans on the roads like "Reduce the prices or resign", "Cheaper liquor dearer milk—Naik (Chief Minister) Government shame, shame." Later, the leaders of the procession submitted a memorandum to the Speaker of the Legislative Assembly protesting the "unbecoming, ungraceful and anti-Socialist policy of the government" of letting prices rise.

The agitation outside was matched by stormy scenes inside the Maharashtra Assembly in March 1973 when the house discussed an opposition-sponsored motion regarding the detection of *dhatu* (seeds with narcotic properties) in imported *milo* (sorghum). Mrinal Gore, the President of the Front, questioned the government on the issue. Again, in May 1973, she showed the government a sample of rice containing iron filings bought from a ration-shop in the city. As a result of this move, nearly 400 tons of rice were withdrawn from the city's ration shops.

Throughout, women showed not only their courage and self-confidence but also their ingenuity and innovativeness. Apart from the use of traditional methods of protest like *morchas* (protest marches), demonstrations and *gheraos*, they invented novel methods and symbols to express their feelings of anger, thus proving that women can become effective revolutionaries.

In February 1974, a *thali* (plate)-beating programme was organized simultaneously at more than 1,000 places in the city. At 10:00 p.m. sharp, women beat *thalis* with rolling pins. The sound of the music continued for half an hour. This was a warning bell—*Ishara Ghanta*—for the government and a call to the people not to suffer the injustice of the government, but to awaken, arise and join the protest movement. With a view to focussing the attention of the people and the government on acute shortages of kerosene, on August 1, 1974, women saw to it that the *Sachivalya* (Government Secretariat) corridors vibrated with the sound of clanging empty kerosene tins, which they beat with rolling-pins and small sticks.

In April, 1974, the effigies of Chief Minister Naik and Food and Civil Supplies Minister Vartak were the focus of a *Kachara-tula* (weighing in dirt) ceremony which attracted the attention of the media.

On 11th September 1974, more than 8,000 women of all sectors of society including, Hindu, Muslim and Christian women, joined the historic protest *morcha* wearing badges depicting a woman's hand holding a rolling pin and enthusiastically shouting slogans like "Tell Naik, rolling pins are here", "*Nahi Chalegi, Nahi Chalegi, Yeh Sarkar Nahi Chalegi*" (This Government cannot last), "*Pav Do Gehu Do, Nahi To Gadi Chhod Do*" (Give bread, give wheat or else quit). This massive demonstration was a feather in the cap of the women's front and proved to be a severe headache for the traffic police and the government.

In April 1975, several thousand farm-labourers and tribals from different parts of Maharashtra marched with Bombay's housewives and industrial workers to the Legislature Building to demand the restoration of forest land to tribals and a ration of seven kg. of grain per person per month.

The demonstrations attracted the attention of the general public and evoked sympathy from all quarters. The agitation had resonance in other parts of the state of Maharashtra, including Poona, Nagpur, Dhulia, Pusad, Aurangabad, Jalna, Amravati, and Yeotmal. Also, the leaders were successful in obtaining assurances from the ministers concerned regarding better food distribution. Again, officers were sent to different places to find out whether the complaints made by front

members regarding the supply of inferior quality grains were true.

Though it is true that the anti-price rise movement could not accomplish all that it had intended, and that it ended with the Declaration of Emergency in 1975 at a national level, resulting in the consequent imprisonment of many leaders, there are many distinct achievements to its credit. The movement was spontaneous, open, and democratic. It was organized by women's organizations and women belonging to different political parties. It created a sense of solidarity between women, which was unique. There was cohesion among the various groups that started the movement, and the motivation of the participants was more emotional and focussed than is the case with undirected movements.

All the accepted leaders from the different groups and political parties were committed, vocal, prepared with facts and figures, and resourceful. Also, the movement caused several new and young leaders to come forward.

The programmes adopted by the Front were always peaceful but colourful. The tactics they adopted were innovative and imaginative, the slogans were catchy and original, and the symbols apt and attractive.

Another major achievement was that it contributed to the shaping of public opinion. The efforts of the women's front were given good media coverage, not only by women's magazines, but also by other papers and journals in English, Marathi and Gujarati.

There were, however, certain major drawbacks. It is an irony that one of the strong points of the movement—the bringing together of women from different parties—became its major weakness. Though initially all differences were forgotten, eventually they came to the fore and dealt a severe blow to the movement. Coupled with personal rivalries and clashes of personalities, the death-knell was sounded. Those who were comrades-in-arms in the beginning began to accuse each other of using the front to serve the ends of their respective parties. The fact that the movement was essentially issue-based and not ideology oriented also prevented it from taking deeper root. Initially, seeds were sown for a dynamic yet non-violent movement, but it could not

sustain the momentum.

The success of movements like the anti-price rise movement cannot be measured in statistical terms. The fact that women from different groups and political parties have come together to form many women's organizations after 1975 attests to the fact that the work done by the United Women's Front in 1972 was not completely wasted. Moreover, the movement did succeed in exploding the myth that women, because of their social conditioning, do not participate in or reflect on politics as men do. In fact, the women actually widened the narrow meaning of politics.

In a country like India, which is both traditional and modern, a movement like the anti-price rise movement is important. In this case, the women derived strength from their traditional roles in the private world, and used it effectively in the public world.

*Authors' Note: The material for this article is drawn from newspapers—Times of India, Indian Express (English), Maharashtra Times and Lok Satta (Marathi)—as well as interviews with some leaders of the movement.*

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