

Confronting Male Power

—All Woman Panel Contests Panchayat Election



—Madhu

INDOLI is a village with a population of three to four thousand, situated in Karad taluk, Satara district, Maharashtra. This village has a tradition of social struggle. In 1932, Indoli was the foremost among the few villages in Satara district wherein the national movement activists set up centres. All the local struggles of the following decade were launched from Indoli. Women participated in all these struggles. In 1938, the first intercommunal dining and entrance of a temple by harijans was organised in this village.

Yet, 36 years after the attainment of independence, when an all women panel was set up to contest elections in Indoli, the local leaders of the ruling party who consider themselves great politicians and who follow a woman leader, opposed these women tooth and nail.

As in most places in Maharashtra, in Indoli too, all the administrative organisations were ruled by Congress (I). So far, Congress (I) candidates were invariably elected to the post of Sarpanch in Indoli. Following their ruling principle, they aimed at fulfilling their vested interests by acquiring a hold over all local social institutions.

The latest Sarpanch was notorious for corrupt practices. Due to internal conflicts he was removed, the village panchayat was dissolved and an administrator was appointed. This administrator worked for two years, after which fresh elections were announced.

Ushatai Nikam and her supporters in the Stri Mukti Sanghatana decided to set up a panel of 13 women to contest this election. When the local

leaders of the ruling party, who had hitherto considered themselves the only ones entitled to contest elections, came to know about this plan, they declared that if a women's panel was put up, a men's panel would not contest. They were afraid of public embarrassment in case the men were defeated by women. Normally, campaigning for an election begins a year or at least six months in advance. Caste, community, familial and friendship ties all come into play, and favours unfairly granted on personal bases are now used to secure votes. So many pressures are created that candidates and voters feel suffocated. This time, the local leaders tried every means at their disposal to put economic, social and familial pressures on members of the "all women panel in order to force them to withdraw.

The Mukti Dal panel, under the leadership of Usha Nikam, had a dual aim—to challenge the corrupt, wealthy casteists who think that politics is their exclusive birthright, and also to challenge the culture of male domination in politics.

The violent and fraudulent methods used to win elections are well known and have become a kind of entertainment for the public. The Mukti Sanghatana employed new methods. A corner meeting was held in each locality. There, a discussion would take place on what kind of candidate is needed, and then the name of the most worthy woman of the area would be announced as candidate. In these meetings, corrupt politicians were criticised. Women's and dalits' issues were raised. Some men also supported the women's

panel, and it began to be much talked of in Indoli.

Before the women could file their applications for candidature, the opposition swung into action. The first weapon employed was inciting of husbands. They were told: "Sit at home and wear bangles!" Efforts were made to make them feel unmanly for allowing their wives to contest elections. How can a man bear such 'a taunt!

The women candidates selected were of backward classes. The opponents went to the husbands of these women and told them that if they stopped their wives from contesting, they would be the men who would be put up for elections. Thus the opponents were also forced to put up men from backward classes in order to oppose the women. This significant change in election policy was a result of the presence of an all women panel.

All kinds of familial pressures were brought to bear on the women through their in-laws. Finally, they became upset and wanted to withdraw. Only two days were left to file applications. Ushatai set out to look for new candidates. She had expected hostility so she was not daunted. She conducted a tireless campaign amongst the dalits, the Muslims and the matangs, telling people how the 13 women had been threatened, attacked and forced to withdraw. She tried to explain to women how powerful organised women can be.

One idealist woman from the neo Buddhist dalit community agreed to stand for election and declared that she would not withdraw under any circumstances. Her husband was

pressured by the opponents and threatened that if he did not stop his wife, he would not be hired as a field labourer. In spite of this threat of unemployment the woman did not withdraw. She said: "We will see what happens. I will not go back on my word."

Another woman from the ma-tang community also decided to stand. Her husband too was pressurised. Perplexed, he said to her: "Why go against the village? It is better that we do our own work and remain silent." But she did not listen to him. On one occasion, she was locked in a room and questioned by some local men of repute but she was not daunted by this experience.

The candidate from the Bud-dhist community was pressurised through her husband's younger brother. He said to her: "You are dishonouring us by standing for elections. How can we dare show our faces in the fields of our masters who employ us? Go and say that you are being forced to file an application." But she remained firm in her decision.

Thus as the winds of opposition began to blow more fiercely a second all women panel was prepared. It was decided that at all costs a panel should be put up even if 13 women could not be collected, and that even if the candidates were defeated, this defeat should be considered a victory.

One woman's husband, Vitthal Kothungde, was threatened by his brother who told him he would not get a paisa of the family property if his wife stood for election. Another candidate of the barber community was taken by her family and kept in another village. Her husband was in Bombay at the time. The opponents made her husband's younger brother file an application and sei him up as a candidate, saying it is not right for a woman to perform antisocial actions by contesting elections. The husband of a woman of the mali community was taunted and derided. He was told: "You good for nothing, put bangles

on your wrists before you put up your wife for election."

The wife of Ganesh Kolugde was fraudulently told that her husband had sent a message calling her to another village in Karad. She went there and did not find him. She abused the opponents and refused to file an application as a candidate supported by them. When one Muslim woman decided to stand for elections, the opponents set to work at once. They went to mock the men but themselves had to face a lot of mockery and came back, defeated.

Ganpatrai Chorekar, husband of another candidate, was threatened that his fields would be deprived of

waver. Her sister's husband had threatened to leave her sister if she went ahead to contest the elections. For her sister's sake, this woman withdrew, and refused to file an application.

So seven women went to file applications. When they reached there, the concerned officer, who was also on the side of the opponents, was not available. He said he was too busy to accept their applications. The women asked him to give them this statement in writing. At this, he agreed to give them the forms but he raised all kinds of difficulties such as water tax, property tax and so on, delaying them for many hours. This was the



irrigation. This man is economically weak, so he pretended that his wife was not at home so he could not say anything to her.

Another woman, Mrs Goswami, had decided to contest, even though her husband had recently been seriously injured in an accident. The opponents derided her, saying: "What kind of a wife are you? Your husband is on his deathbed and you dream of contesting elections." She felt very upset but her husband encouraged her to stand firm. Finally, eight women went to Karad to file applications. Just as they were leaving, the woman of the maratha community began to

last day for filing applications. Everything had to be hastily done because the women lacked experience. Then, the campaigning began. Some activists of the Sanghatana from Kasegaon and Khanapur taluk came to help. Two panels were set up by the Congress (I). They made every effort to defame Ushatai Nikam. They also made fun of the women's panel, calling it "half a panel" and told people not to waste their votes on it. They said a panel of women only was bound to be incomplete. They said women would not be able to get development work done because after all, they were women. The

opposition stand was : “We don’t take this panel into account at all.”

The two Congress (I) panels were known as the Ryot panel and the Chhatrati panel. The latter made personal slander of women candidates its chief propaganda.

The Mahila Sangharsh panel held meetings in every ward, with women’s liberation songs, discussion of the situation of women, middle peasants, landless labourers and how their problems can be solved. The opponents made fun of this method of propaganda, comparing the women to film actresses, thus trying to inflict mental torture on them.

Whenever the women’s panel held a meeting the Ryot panel would organise a meeting nearby and would try to disrupt our meeting. In such situations, women doubted whether a woman would be able to chair the meetings but one woman, Vithabai Dinkar Saluke, who has experience of facing such hostility over the years, agreed to take the chair and did so with grace and courage.

The women’s achievements were two. First, the opponents, who normally only put up men of their own communities, were forced to put up the husbands of the women candidates who had withdrawn earlier. Thus poor men of low castes, poor peasants, landless labourers were given a chance to contest elections. The opponents had to change their policy.

Second, the people of Indoli realised that women can come out of the house and work in the political sphere, and that organised women, even if they are poor and uneducated, can achieve many things.

Though they knew they would be defeated women candidates of Indoli dared to confront two powerful panels. This in itself was a big victory. They will again stand with fresh enthusiasm at the next election because they know what they can do.

(translated from Marathi)

UMA BHATT

Only The Wife Of A Drunkard Knows...



In Manushi No. 24 we published an article by Uma Bhatt on the antiliquor movement in Uttarakhand. Here we present a brief interview with 36 year old Munni Tiwari, who is very active in the movement in Nainital, despite opposition from her family.

What are the problems caused by liquor ?

I have personally experienced many problems. I was brought up by my uncle after my father’s death. My uncle was a good man but he drank a lot. Once drunk, he would trouble my aunt, mother, grandmother and all the children. So, from childhood, I hated liquor. I was married at the age of 16. I opposed the marriage because my husband drinks, and also because he is a farmer whereas I wanted to marry a person in service. But my objections were overruled by my uncle. He was impressed by my husband’s big farm and his status.

Did you . oppose your husband’s drinking after marriage ?

Yes, I did. Though my uncle drank, he encouraged me to oppose my husband’s drinking. He told me not to be afraid of my husband. But my opposition had no effect. One night I locked him out but he broke the door down. I tried every method—weeping, threatening, persuading, pleading, but nothing could stop my husband from drinking.

Do you think drunkenness of men is a special problem for women ?

Yes. Only the wife of a drunkard knows what a big problem it is. The atmosphere at home re-mains

disturbed and tense. The children become timid because the father perpetrates all kinds of violence when he is drunk. The mother and children are constant-ly in a state of fear. There is no peace until the man goes to jleep. My husband’s two elder brothers both died of drink. One died in an accident while he was drunk, the other destroyed his lungs.

How did you join the movement ?

I saw a demonstration and heard the songs being sung but I could not make out what it was about. When the demonstrators sat on hunger strike in the court an acquaintance told me about it. He knew that I too was suffering due to liquor so he said : “You should join up.” I went to the court and sat with the demonstrators. I felt that what they were doing was very good and I determined to help them as much as I could.

Did you feel any hesitation in joining ?

No, I did not. I felt as if somehow, I had been associated with these people for a long time. Earlier, too, I used to oppose drunkenness but I did not have the atmosphere of a movement to support me.

Do you think women play a special role in the movement ?

No man wants a woman to rise above him. I think the movement will show people what women can do.

How did your family members 'when you joined the movement' ?

They were very hostile. My husband, all my family members and relatives opposed me. Some said : "You must be paid to do this activity. We know all the movement people are selfish, and have their own vested interests." Women of the family too said: "Don't you feel ashamed to walk in a demonstration ?" In their hearts they thought I was doing right but they did not openly support me. No woman can open her mouth against the men of the family. Everyone believes that a woman should never say a word of protest so they were bitterly opposed to my activity.

My elder brother-in-law said : "No woman of our family has ever crossed the threshold of the house. You have brought our honour to the dust." My husband threatened to divorce me. I said : "Go ahead. I will take my share

of the property, live independently, and do what is right." Men think a woman is a precious possession

'Which should be the ideal and looked after but I do not agree with this idea. My husband and I have always had different ways of thinking.

Do you think women should have their own separate organisation ?

They should, but it is difficult to get the support of women. When I went from house to house during the signature campaign, I found that women cannot work up the courage to step out of the house. Even if her husband beats her or defames her she cannot oppose him.

How can women be brought into the movement ?

The issues should be discussed with the women in the presence of those men who oppress them. If you talk to a woman alone, afterwards her husband argues against her and she finds herself unable to refute him. So it is better to thrash out the matter in the presence of the men.

The biggest problem is women's economic dependence. This problem confronts her whenever she tries to take an independent decision or undertake any action. If women were economically independent they would not put up with so much oppression.

What are the other issues for struggle apart from drunkenness ?

I have always struggled against different forms of injustice. When my father-in-law was unjust to the poor labourers on his farm, I always helped them. I fought so that they should be treated with equality. I have always hated moneyed people because they suppress others. A poor man knows that if his wife leaves him he will be in trouble because he will have to perform double labour. But a rich man can threaten to divorce his wife and marry again. Even if she leaves him he has servants to run the house. So our fight is not against liquor alone. It is against all those evil forces which are our enemies. □

(translated from Hindi)

In 1828

We are reproducing here a piece that was published in Young India in 1931 under the title, "In 1828." It consists of extracts from a letter written by a woman spinner in 1828, with comments by Mahatma Gandhi. It gives an interesting picture of one avenue of women's employment which was destroyed by British colonial rule.

Sjt. Satis Chandra Das Gupta of the Khadi Pratishthan is editing a Bengali newspaper called *Rastra-vani*. He recently unearthed a letter addressed to the editor of *Samachar Darpan* which was published in Bengali in the 20s of the 19th century. As the letter was of great importance showing how the *charkha* was being slowly destroyed and how it was valued by women in those days, he has published it in his paper and sent me its translation. I am sure it will be read with interest by all who are at all

interested in the *khadi* movement. Here is the letter:

The representation of a spinner To the editor, *Samachar*.

I am a spinner. After having suffered a great deal, I am writing this letter. Please publish this in your paper...When my age was five and a half gandas (22) I became a widow with three daughters. My husband left nothing at the time of his death...I sold my jewellery for his *shradha* ceremony. At last, as we were on the verge of starvation, God showed me

a way by which we could save ourselves. I began to spin on *takli* and *charkha*...

The weavers used to visit our houses and buy the *charkha* yarn at three *tolas* per rupee. Whatever amount I wanted as advance from the weavers, I could get for the asking. This saved us from cares about food and cloth.

In a few years' time I got together seven *ganda* rupees (Rs 28). With this I married one daughter. And in the same way all three daughters...

Now for three years, we two women, mother-in-law and I, are in want of food. The weavers do not call at the house for buying yarn. Not only this, if the yarn is sent to market still it is not sold even at one fourth of the old prices. I do not know how it happened. I asked many about it.

They say that *bilati* yarn is being largely imported. The weavers buy that yarn and weave. I had a sense of pride that *bilati* yarn could not be equal to my yarn, but when I got *bilati* yarn I saw that it was better than my yarn. I heard that its price is Rs 3 or Rs 4 per seer. I beat my brow and said, "Oh God, there are sisters more distressed even than me. I know that all men of *bilat* are rich but now I see that there are women there who are poorer than me. I fully realise the poverty which induced those poor women to spin. They have sent the product of so much toil out here because they could not sell it there. It would have been something if it were sold here at good prices. But it has brought our ruin only. Man cannot use the cloth out of this yarn even for two months ; it rots away. I therefore entreat the spinners over there, that, if they will consider this representation, they will be able to judge whether it is fair to send yarn here or not.

A representation from a suffering spinner, Shantipur (Samachar Darpari)



The readers will not fail to observe the nobility of the writer who in her blissful ignorance felt that yarn was spun by the hands of her *bilati* sisters poorer than herself and therefore felt for them.

Alas, her belief was baseless. She could have stood her own if the foreign yarn had been hand spun. She

could have stood her own even against the foreign yarn, if behind it there had been no policy of determination to capture the Indian trade and kill the national village industry.

Young India, May 21, 1931 (C. W. Vol. 46, pages 188-J89)

Women's Groups In Pakistan Dismayed By The New Law Of Evidence

The Council of Islamic Ideology, made up exclusively of men, recently considered the new law of evidence (Qanoon-i-Shahadat). This new Law has now been promulgated by the Majlis-i-Shoora. This law proposes to equate the evidence of two women with one man, thus reducing the status of women to half that of men and is supposedly based on verse 282, Surah Baqra.

Several women's groups in Pakistan have expressed shock at the promulgation of this law. Women representatives state that not only is the law discriminatory but it also finds no support from any Quranic injunctions. The Women's Action Forum has demanded the right publicly to present their own interpretation of verse 282, Surah Baqra.

One clause in the law states "In matters pertaining to financial or future obligations, if reduced in writing, the instrument shall be attested to by two men or one man and two women so that one may remind the other, if necessary and evidence shall be led accord-ingly." (2a). Women's groups maintain that there is no reference to future obligations other than the witnessing of a contract in Surah Baqra 282. They also seek clarification of the term 'financial' obligations.

There is also a feeling among Pakistani women that since the Pakistan Commission on the Status of Women is still in the process of identifying the status of Pakistani women, it is premature to promulgate laws pertaining to the status of women.