



Drought — “God-Sent” Or “Man-Made” Disaster ? Women the Worst Victims

WHY are you writing about drought? What has that got to do with **Manushi**, with women? We were repeatedly confronted with this kind of questions while some of us were working in different libraries, trying to collect information on drought.

This question springs as much from ignorance as from arrogance which leads men to assume that not just running the affairs of the country but also messing around with the problems they have created, are their prerogatives— that women, if at all they are to speak, should confine themselves to “women’s issues” such as dowry and birth control.

The attitude behind this question is one that pushes women into invisibility. Are not women 50 per cent of the poor, the Harijans, the Adivasis and of every other oppressed group in this country? Are not women in rural India affected even more disastrously by drought—the first to be hit by malnutrition and disease, the first to die, the first driven into destitution and prostitution? And is it not the women in the cities who are suffering the worst consequences of scarcity and price rise—struggling harder and harder to make both ends meet on an ever-shrinking budget, standing in long queues to buy essential commodities, having to work harder and substitute with her labour and time for services she can no longer afford? For the middle class woman, this means every kind of drudgery from unravelling old wool len sweaters to re-knit them, to cutting down on her own consumption and needs so that the children’s fees can be paid or shoes bought for them or not being able to afford the occasional short scooter and having to crush herself into

over-crowded buses, regardless of her age, her health and of what she may be carrying. Or else she has to put off visiting the doctor, consider her own health unimportant so that she can save a few rupees and prevent the family’s standard of living from sinking too rapidly. For the poor woman, the privations are even more pronounced and the labour input more back breaking. It means standing in endless queues to buy kerosene, fetching water from distant and erratic taps, being forced to turn from kerosene to cowdung *chulha*, getting up earlier to grind the wheat herself in order to save a few paisas, walking miles just to buy at a slightly cheaper market, cutting down on her own food so that there is enough to go around, being forced to supplement the family income by doing poorly paid, menial jobs.

The “Unprecedented” Drought

While in the cities, soaring prices and artificial scarcities are taking a heavy toll of women’s lives and labour, in the rural areas, want takes a much more brutal form. 200 million people, that is, one third of the total population have been in the grip of famine for the last ten months or more. In the seriously affected areas, villagers have no food stocks left, no employment and no money with which to buy anything. They are just starving, stilling the pangs of hunger by chewing leaves and digging up roots. (Hindustan Times, 6.12.78) Even these have got exhausted over the months. It is during such times that poor peasants and landless labourers are pushed even more deeply into debt, and forced to mortgage their land to landlords and money-lenders.

Women Are Always The Worst Hit

As food and water resources have grown scarce, thousands have been driven to migrate to cities in search of work, the consequence being that women are often left behind in the villages to fend for the children and the old.

As people are forced to live in subhuman conditions as human lives are systematically devalued, degraded, it is women who suffer most, are the first to be sold or exchanged for food, the first to die. It is not surprising then that an

While this issue is being printed, the havoc of drought is already giving way to the fury of floods

overwhelming number of the starvation deaths so far reported have been those of women. (Hindustan Times, 31.3.80) Even in normal times, women in this country as elsewhere in the world, have always borne the brunt of poverty and malnutrition. In every family, women eat the last and the least. This, and many other forms of neglect and devaluation of women within the family seem to be on the increase. No wonder then that the mortality rate among women even in “normal” times is much higher than that among men. (Between 1951 and 1971, the number of females per 1,000 males decreased from 946 to 930.)

Here is a living example of how this comes to be. This is how Ratna Chamar described the death of his wife at Hanna relief work project in Uttar Pradesh to Inder Malhotra of Times of India (September 1979): “Ratna claimed and others confirmed that on the day of her

death the poor woman had worked on the canal relief project all day and then had collapsed on reaching home. "If you have survived all this time, why do you say that she starved to death?" he was asked. His reply was : "We get very little grain and we get it very late. It was her habit to feed me first, then the children, and not eat enough herself."

Thus the traditions built into male - dominated society, which force women to see their own lives as less valuable and to think that virtue lies in self-sacrifice, mean the slow starvation of the woman when the family is living at bare subsistence level.

The Double Burden

It is because of this deviation that women accept as inevitable their double burden of work--paid and unpaid. Their daily toil begins hours before the men's "working day." The burden of fetching water for the family has, for instance, always been a woman's burden. So when all nearby water sources dry up, it is the woman who walks anything from 1 to 3 kilometers in search of water, scrapes it out of a river bed or spends hours scooping it out of a nearly dry well. (Statesman, 22.5.80) Added to this strain is that of gathering some kind of edible grain procuring it by longer hours of back breaking labour. A woman political worker from Chattisgarh district reported how one landless labourer with three children and a father-in-law to support, took to gathering fire wood to eke out a living. She had to walk miles daily to a distant jungle, collect firewood and carry the heavy load to the city. This strained her so much that one day she started bleeding profusely and just collapsed

When the erratic Food for Work projects appear, women from surrounding villages have been flooding them. At certain sites the percentage of women far exceeds that of men. They have to walk miles carrying the children, work on the project, again walk miles to the BDO's office and wait hours for the grain to be distributed and then somehow convert the virtually non edible grain into food for the family.

Women put all their energy into food gathering activity — Adivasi women and

girls rise before daybreak and rush to sweep up rnahua flowers to feed the family. Even these resources have been slowly snatched by the local rich to feed their animals since even fodder has been scarce. (Patriot, 17.4.80) In parts of Orissa, tribal girls who go out to collect basic Adivasi foods such as bamboo shoots, have been arrested and clapped into jail for the crime of trespassing into bamboo groves which have always belonged to the tribals but have now been taken over and "protected" by the government without as much as informing the tribals. Since all edible roots, leaves and fruits have been slowly exhausted, people have been driven to



eat poisonous churuhla grass, wild kesari dal which causes terrible skin diseases, body swelling, blindness and paralysis (Indian Express, 10.3.80) Here too, women have been usually the worst hit, the first to die of starvation- which the government conveniently chooses to label as deaths due to "malnutrition" or "poison" since in some cases deaths occur after rather than before consuming poison.

As all sources of food became more and more out of reach of the rural poor, families have had to sell their last

possessions from domestic animals to utensils to even doors and windows. (Patriot, 16.5.80) In parts of East Uttar Pradesh, one ragged sari has to be shared by all the women in a family so that if one goes out wearing it, all the rest must hide in the hut And finally, when there is nothing left to sell, the least valued human beings, that is, the girls and women, are sold. Year after year, newspapers report how the sale of women into prostitution shoots up during times of drought.

In Nawapara, Orissa, girls in the age group 10 to 14 are reported to have been sold for anything from Rs 15 to Rs 55. (Patriot, 7.5.80) Businessmen from

Madhya Pradesh purchase these girls and sell them to vice dens in the cities at very high prices. One Raia Nayak of Komma village, sold his eight -year-old daughter Premlata to a businessman for Rs 40 : "I could not give her food for days together and my entire family starved so I preferred to sell her. She can now survive on the food given by her master and my family can survive for a few days on the money I got by selling her."

Another report sums up very succinctly how women are being used,

and then accused and punished by administrators who are supposed to be administrating “relief”: “Recently, police apprehended a woman in the vicinity of Food for Work food grain stores at Kadar village...She was in possession of a bag of rice...Working on the suspicion that she might have stolen it from the stores, the police took her to the Block Development Officer’s residence... It took the BDO quite some time to open the door...a young girl in a dishevelled state was also in the room... BDO introduced her as a close relation...But when the woman with the bag of rice entered the room, the girl rushed towards her, crying “Ma!” Finding himself thoroughly exposed, the BDO immediately raised an alarm and asked the police to arrest both mother and daughter on a charge of pilfering grain from the stores. He said that he had called the woman to his room for interrogation. The matter is still under investigation and no action has been taken against the BDO so far.” (Blitz, 26.4.80)

In UP it has been reported that tribal women who collect fire wood and go to sell it in towns, are sexually exploited by ticket checkers because they have no money to pay for the short train ride from the village to the town. The Tripura government recently uncovered a major interstate racket wherein about 2,000 tribal men and women, mostly unmarried girls, are exported from Bihar every week, and many more from Orissa and Madhya Pradesh, to work in privately owned brick fields in Tripura. The women were sexually exploited as well. (Organiser, 22.6.80) In another typical case “... migration of landless labourers and small farmers in Singhbhum is not unusual. What is unusual is that while male members are finding it difficult to get employment outside the state, the women are being trapped by unscrupulous contractors ... who lure them by promising them a daily wage of Rs 10...this year’s drought has made the task of the contractors even easier .. the girls are sent to brothels or dumped in private homes to do domestic work. In

most cases they are not paid anything except two meals a day. Failure to obey orders of the master invites torture and beating ... there are also instances where girls have been sent back to their homes after their “utility” in brothels is over...” (Statesman, 27.11.79) These cases go to show how poverty acquires doubly brutal dimensions for women. While for a man, poverty means starvation, for a woman, it invariably also involves rape and a myriad forms of sexual exploitation. Women are made go much more vulnerable in poverty that the distinction between voluntary and forced action seems to completely lose its meaning : 50 destitute girls aged between 20 and 30 years, went to a magistrate’s court in the famine stricken district of Rangpur and registered themselves as prostitutes., the girls filed affidavits before the magistrate, declaring they were voluntarily accepting prostitution as their profession because of “extreme economic hardship.” Prostitution, they felt, was better than begging, (Times of India, 28. 9 79) These cases are the mere tip of the iceberg because big newspapers either systematically under-report or never report what is really happening to the poor, especially women, in this country. Such facts are given occasional coverage simply to provide titillation by sensationalizing atrocities on women. A cursory glance at the newspapers makes it clear that most of the space is occupied with tracing the political games and manoeuvres of those in power

Relief — The Myth And The Reality

The government has been piously promising relief on a “war-footing”. But how have the much-vaunted Food for Work programmes been functioning? On the one hand, the government officially admits that there is no absolute scarcity of food in the country, that tons of food are lying in state godowns It is also known that tons of foodgrains lie hoarded by private traders. On the other hand, the government bureaucrats, in their airconditioned offices, pretend to

be as helpless before the calamity as are the starving landless themselves

All the political parties, including those in power at the centre and in the states, are only making political capital out of the people’s misery. Those in power blame the previous regimes while those in opposition blame those in power

Between the exploitative landlords and the hypocritical relief schemes, the landless poor are trapped. Often, these two connive to rob the workers of their rightful earnings. The landlords, because of their political connections, can ensure that the Food for Work project be shortlived so that the poor become more dependent and are forced to accept any wage they may decide to fix, or even work in some form of bonded labour. In Madhya Pradesh, the landlords are reported to have sent their bonded labourers (known as *Kamia Mazdoars*, since the term “bonded” though not the fact has been banned) to work sites; they then pocketed the wages of the labourers and gave them the usual meagre ration of food. Furthermore, there have also been reports of poor labourers preferring work in the relief project to work in the landlord’s fields, only to find that the whole project is in control of the landlord who then takes his revenge on them

Reports from all over the country show that those who work on the relief projects are being cruelly cheated of their rights. Almost everywhere, large scale bungling has been reported, involving every power holder from village heads to relief officers and some social workers who are supposed to be running voluntary organizations. The wages which actually reach the labourer’s hands are far lower than what is allocated on paper. In Palamau, for example, only 3 kilos of wheat were given to the workers instead of the promised 4 kilos. Worse still, in Bundelkhand region, all the food was reported to have been diverted to the open market where it was sold at high prices, the profits being pocketed by contractors and government staff. Workers were given 50 paise for a whole day’s toil. (Patriot, 28.4.80). Another form

of government relief is to flood “fair price” shops with food — where it lies unbought because the people in these areas, have no money at all.

In many places, the workers are not paid. Who are they to complain to, when the authorities are themselves the exploiters? In Kundra, for instance, the only relief work undertaken was the construction of a 5 km. long dirt road. This was completed within three weeks last September and the wages had not yet been paid as of March. This delay in distributing the meagre wages is a common feature at most “relief” works. The villagers have no means of knowing when food distribution will begin. In Banda district after 26 days of work, the people were given certificates and had to walk many miles to the block headquarters to collect their food. In other places, they had to wait hours in the sun before distribution started. Women at most of these sites were being paid much less than men—by the same government which boasts of having passed the Equal Remuneration Act!

A study conducted by the Planning Commission shows how well-organized this robbery is. In one state, foodgrains meant for the labourers were sold, and crockery and furniture was bought for government inspection bungalows. In another, the money was used to beautify the collectorate building. Some contractors selling food in the market said that labourers were not used to eating wheat anyway! In other cases, good quality foodgrains were sold off by contractors and ration shop owners, and inferior grain distributed. (Patriot, 14.2.80)

Often, the wheat distributed is not fit for human consumption. Also, as Shyama, a woman in Durgapur, pointed out, is plain wheat food? For a whole day’s hard labour, “Would it be too much if they give us a pinch of salt or a handful of chillies to go with it?” she said. (Times of India, 22-5-80) The women trying to make do with the meagre quantities of sub-standard grain, are often forced to adulterate it still further so that they can

feed the whole family. They mix sawdust with the flour to make *chapatis* of it. (National Herald, 20.3.80)

And then of course, there is the usual phenomenon of the sexual abuse of women by contractors and petty officials at the worksites. For example, in a rich contractor’s camp near a road building site in Palamau district, the Sunday magazine reporters saw eight young tribal girls taking care of him—one pressed his limbs while another held his head and so on. (Sunday, Special Drought Issue)



Who Suffers Most? And Who Benefits?

When we are told by the government and the mass media that Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Rajasthan, UP, Bihar and parts of West Bengal, Jammu and Kashmir, Assam, Punjab, are affected by drought—what does this actually mean? Who are the people made to bear the burden of this calamity?

A new dimension of barbarity to famines and starvation in the present day world is added by the fact that millions are being condemned to starvation in the midst of plenty and opulence, and worse, that such occurrences have become good occasions to speculate, hoard and

make super profits. What is scarcity for the poor becomes a blessing for the rich. Government policy is doubtless giving an impetus to this trend.

Even during this “unprecedented” drought, the victims are largely landless agricultural labourers and poor peasants. The rich farmers and landlords have remained immune from its destructive effects. For instance, the Kharif crop was supposed to have been badly hit, but the arrivals in the market have far exceeded the government targets and stand close to the level of the bumper harvest of 1978. (Indian Express, 7.12.79) Clearly those who have a marketable surplus to sell are invariably rich farmers and landlords.

“Natural” Or “Created” Disaster?

Is it any longer true that famines and droughts are unavoidable “natural” calamities? Or is this just another myth, like that of the “natural inequality” between men and women?

That the drought is not a mere “natural” calamity is evident from the fact that even though Punjab and Haryana had no rainfall last year, they have, on the whole, maintained their level of production. This is because rich farmers in these states are relatively better off and have irrigation facilities. Even in the worst hit and traditionally “backward” areas such as Madhya Pradesh, the rich farmers, able to afford private irrigation facilities, managed to harvest 60 to 70 per cent of the crop. (Indian Express, 17.12.79)

Drought, like price rise and inflation, has its own politics and there are powerful vested interests which seek to perpetuate such misery because they gain by it. The government has computed the loss in farm incomes due to the current drought at Rs 1,000 crores. But it is the poor peasant and landless labourer who seem to have almost exclusively borne this loss because it is they alone who produce for consumption and not for market. The rich farmers who can hoard the surplus and later sell it at higher

prices have actually benefited from scarcity.

The drought has further accentuated the pauperization in the countryside. The rural poor have been driven further into debt and newer forms of servitude, forced to mortgage or sell what little land they had left. Thus, the stranglehold of the landlord-moneylender combine has been further strengthened and the process of concentration of assets and land—which has been going on steadily even while there has been so much talk of land ceilings and agrarian reforms—has been accelerated.

The government, by increasing the procurement support price of foodgrain, makes matters worse. This helps only the rich who have surplus foodgrain to sell and prevents even a little relief to the urban poor, by keeping prices artificially inflated even during times of plenty.

The so-called “national” calamity is therefore not a calamity for the whole nation. To the frequenters of five star hotels, it makes no difference whether sugar sells at Rs7 or Rs5 a kilo. Thus even while there is so much talk of “shortages”, the consumption of the rich has in fact become even more luxurious. Witness the sudden spurt in big cities, over the recent year, of exotic eating places such as fancy ice cream parlours, pizza joints, French, Arabic and Mughlai restaurants.

Meanwhile the rural poor are flocking to the cities in the hope of a few crumbs. They are seen eating garbage, begging, and are reduced to committing petty “thefts and robberies.” For the government, they represent only a “law and order” problem—the police and anil begging squads are left to deal with them

Droughts, floods and other such calamities have become good occasions for the Indian government to pour out hypocritical concern for the poor and to seek in them excuses for the politics of perpetuating poverty that it has pursued since independence. “...It was at Kithana in UP that a tribal woman told me something that nearly made me cry. The drought, she said had done her family

some good. Because of a relief work project close to the village, she and her children were eating *rotis* made of wheat. What the Kols eat normally —thick *chapatis* made of extremely coarse grain mixed with jowar stalks—I tried to eat at Manha Kolan but could not. And I do not think I will ever live down my shame and sorrow for the pain I inflicted on a boy of 14 at Simawar by asking when he had eaten *dal* and cooked vegetables with his *rotis*. He tried to answer my question, stammered for a while and then began to sob.

His mother told me in a matter-of-fact way that she had never been able to feed her son *dal* or cooked vegetables.” (Inder Malhotra in Times of India,

The Central Government has defined the problem village as one where villagers have to walk over 1,6 km for water. In a normal year, there were about 4,000 problem villages in Madhya Pradesh alone. Following draught, the number has increased three times.

Statesman, May 22, 1980

September, 1979)

This is the context in which the so-called “unprecedented” drought occurred. The achievements of this “great democracy” in the 33 years since independence are indeed spectacular. More than 150,000 villages, according to the government’s own figures, are without potable drinking water throughout the year. And when the government says “potable drinking water” it does not mean “clean drinking water” because this is not available even in cities like Delhi with their elaborate water works!

And it is in “normal” times that more than 70 per cent of people in this country live below the poverty line—the government’s idea of the poverty line being an income of Rs 30 per month for urban areas and Rs 20 for rural areas— an income even at this level unequally distributed. It is in this context of increasing

pauperization of the mass of the people that the phenomenal price rise and inflation acquire the aspect of life and death issues.

When rice sells at Rs 2.80 to Rs 7 a kilo, sugar at Rs 7 a kilo, milk at Rs 3 a kilo, any attempt at “holding the price line” or selling in “fair price” shops acquires a farcical character, aimed only at fooling the urban middle class. It has absolutely no relevance to the lives of millions living below the subsistence level. And it is in “normal times” that sale of human beings goes on despite the government’s pious platitudes about having abolished bonded labour. Take for instance the case of Prasen Korwa from Bandna village near Garwa. It was during “normal times” that he borrowed 12 kilos of rice from the *sarpanch* (a government official) Shivdutt Mahato in 1971. At that time, the value of the rice was Rs 20, But the interest on his debt started multiplying. He has already given the landlord two goats worth Rs 150, a bullock worth Rs 170, and around 12 kilos of pulses costing Rs 16. In addition, he worked without pay for 15 days and returned Rs 150 in cash. But the *sarpanch* is still not satisfied. Since that fateful day, Prasen Korwa works on Mahato’s fields with only a meal a day,,¹¹ (Sunday magazine, Special Drought Issue)

Is it true then, as the government would have us believe, that the state is trying to help people, that it is only inefficiency and corruption which prevent schemes from working? Or is there some method in this madness? Is this corruption not part of a larger pattern wherein the owners of resources are able to devise newer and newer ways to keep the poor in such a state of subhuman subsistence that it becomes easier to crush whatever little possibility of revolt can exist under such circumstances?

The government is very efficient when it comes to unleashing violence and crushing struggles of the oppressed and the poor. It is very efficient in ordering police firings on unarmed workers demanding their rights, as in Kanpur, Faridabad, Pantnagar. Why is it

then, that the government cannot ensure a supply of clean drinking water in villages where Campa Cola can manage to be regularly supplied? Why is it that the government cannot ensure that the food under the Food for Work project reaches those who work for it, instead of ending up in the pockets of the corrupt bureaucracy

For years now, we have been fed with lies about the problem of poverty that our government is trying to cope with. But if one looks at the policies and programmes of the whole governmental set-up, it becomes clear that all its efforts are directed towards perpetuating inequality and strengthening the position of the economically powerful. How else would one explain the government's attempt to go in for colour television - a project that might cost anything up to Rs 300 crores—at a time when more than 150,000 villages are without drinking water, when water is at places selling for Rs 3 a bucket (Patriot, 19.4.80) when millions are dying of starvation? The politicians in power boast of allocating Rs 14 crores to relief work (of which only a fraction manages to reach the affected) but how is it that the budget for 1980 to 1981, presented to Parliament in March has sanctioned over Rs 37 million to defence? Why is it that the government can afford to go on buying more and more sophisticated arms from abroad but cannot show the same keenness in procuring deep digging bores to provide much-needed water? Similarly, 32 per cent of the total budget is being spent on maintaining a corrupt, inefficient bureaucracy whereas the budget spent on providing irrigation facilities is substantially less than this, even though droughts in India are acquiring the regularity of the seasons.

In spite of the utter destitution and powerlessness to which the mass of people in this country have been reduced, there have been attempts—some spontaneous, some organized—to express their anger and demand their rights.

One silent but no less significant

way in which people expressed their anger, was by keeping away from the recent state assembly elections. Many villages boycotted the elections en masse. Here is one of the many examples: "Residents of drought-hit Khandekama village of Barmer district refused to vote unless drinking water was provided to them immediately. Not a single voter turned up at the Sundara polling station until 1 p.m." (Statesman, 29.5.80)

In Chattisgarh region (Madhya Pradesh) too, attempts were made by the people to march to the local Food Corporation godowns where food was lying rotting in the open because of less storage space—with the demand that food be distributed to the hungry, But

The World Bank acknowledged yesterday that the era of chronic food shortages is over for India. Production exceeding 118 million tons of foodgrain in a year of acute drought is a measure of the contribution that expanded irrigation and extension have made to Indian agriculture

(Statesman, June 27 1980)

the protesters could not reach the food godowns because of the heavy police guard. These godowns are as heavily guarded by police and security men as are the government's defence establishments! (Reported by a local activist)

Dahanu district in Maharashtra is one of the worst affected in the state. But no relief work was provided because the government, for its own reasons, did not "declare" it as a famine-stricken area. To put pressure on the government, the Kasthakari Sangathana organized the tribals to demand Employment Guarantee Schemes in the village. On April 23 they went in a demonstration to the Tehsildar's office and got an assurance that work would be started, but while they were returning to the village, they were brutally attacked by local goondas, shopkeepers and land-

lords. Many women, children and men received serious injuries. As usual, the police refused to take notice. No arrests were made till May 31. In fact, the activists of the Kasthakari Sangathana are being threatened with arrests and are being intimidated by both police and goondas. (Report sent to us by an activist)

An even more revealing case: "In Karwi sub-division where a population of 3.92 lakhs has been affected, only 35,000 were employed in relief project. A mob of starving Harijans allegedly raided the shop of a grain dealer Baijnath Shivhari, looted 4 quintal of grain at Bira village, Banda district, and distributed it equally among themselves. They said: 'We were starving and this greedy profiteer was selling his foodgrains across the district border in Madhya Pradesh.'" And what was the state's response? "A case of dacoity was registered against the Harijans at Shivrampur police station"! (Times of India. 12.11.79)

Who Are The Thieves?

Does this not clearly show that the laws of our country are weighted in favour of the propertied? What could be called the highest form of social justice is labelled "dacoity" by the guardians of law. After all, it is these landless Dalits who work on the fields and produce the foodgrain. Through this act, they had tried appropriating the fruits of their own labour and distributing it justly. Do we not need to ask who decides what is to be called "theft" in law? For whose benefit do these laws operate?

How is it that 12 per cent of the richest rural farmers owning more than half of total rural assets including land, is not called "theft"? Is it not "theft" that 80% of the country's resources are controlled by 20 per cent of people? And if one dares call this theft, one is accused of creating a "law and order" problem! Surely no supernatural powers conferred such property rights on a few chosen ones! Why is it that starvation deaths, when there is plenty of food rotting in

godowns, both private and state-owned, are not treated as “murder” ? Why is it that all the laws of the country protect this unfair ownership of resources by a few?

Solutions From Above ?

Since this is the record of the government, how have opposition parties reacted to the situation ? There have been sporadic attempts by some parties to highlight these issues but most of the agitations ended in slogan shouting before the blank walls of a government office and the handing over of a memorandum to some official or the other. The following are instances of action under the aegis of some political party or the other

“Recently, thousands of men and women with empty pitchers and buckets paraded through the streets of Giridih and demonstrated before the Deputy Commissioner’s office handed over a charter of demands.” (Patriot, 14.4.80)

“In Etawah 2,000 kisans demonstrated on March 18 at the district centre. A charter of demands was submitted to the District Magistrate.”

“40 women belonging to the Anti Price Rise Committee, for 15 minutes gheraoed V.P. Sathe and demanded proper distribution of kerosene and other essential items and steps to bring down sugar prices.” (Times of India, 29.2.80). “In Faizabad district, Kisan Sabhas and the Khet Mazdoor Sabha jointly led a demonstration of 2,000 peasants and agricultural workers in Akhbarpur tehsil, demanding a proper running of the state tubewells in view of the drought conditions, ending blackmarketing and strong steps to check price rise.”

This tendency of sporadic political agitations to end in deputations and memorandum-giving has, over a period of time, bred in people a sense of despair and futility, the feeling that nothing ever changes. And political parties through such agitations, help foster the myth that solutions will come from above, that government can be pressurised into becoming more “considerate.”

We have come across a few other such instances of different kinds of

collective action being reported in the press but by and large, such instances seem to be systematically censored or under-reported. It seems as though the press is only too happy to be part of this conspiracy of silence. Here is one instance that we ourselves witnessed. On June 30, 1980, all the traffic at India Gate was stopped for an hour by thousands and thousands of poor Adivasis who had come to the capital and braved the pouring rain to protest against their deteriorating economic, social, cultural conditions, and demand a separate Jharkhand state. This got only a few lines on the third page of national newspapers. And the Adivasis were treated with equal callousness by the government. They were heavily fined and clapped into prison for travelling back home without tickets !

Since the press under-reports events in the capital, what chance do small local protests have of getting to the people through the mass media ?

The mass media helps isolate peoples’ struggles so that they do not get forged into a widespread movement. It is this isolation of small, local struggles which demoralizes them on the one hand, and on the other, breeds the feeling of helplessness and despair among all of us—the feeling that nothing is being done to bring about change and that nothing can change.

To give an example from our experience. Many women from small towns and cities which have no active women’s organizations, have told us that for the first time, as they read in **Manushi**, reports, of women’s collective struggles in some parts of the country, they begin to develop a new feeling of power, of strength : “If women in Patna or Bombay or Bangalore can organize, we can do it too.” And it is this feeling which is helping many of us overcome our diffidence and initiate new women’s groups.

Even more revealing was what the mother of one of the dowry victims had to say the other day, at one of the anti-dowry demonstrations in Delhi. Satyarani Chadha’s daughter was burnt

to death by her in-laws a year ago. And the culprits have gone scot-free. Today, Satyarani is a leading participant in all anti-dowry demonstrations. She wanted us to help her organize a demonstration outside the house of her daughter’s in-laws. We asked her why she didn’t do this immediately after her daughter died. Her answer : “I didn’t know then about these morchas. Otherwise, I would never have let the hundreds of women of my community who came to mourn the death of my daughter, sit around crying with me. We would have gone together and demonstrated outside their house, put pressure on the neighbourhood to socially ostracize the family, and got justice for ourselves.”

It is this sense of power to effectively intervene in our own lives and to fight for justice that the mass media in conspiracy with the powers-that-be, wants to deny us. The only time it chooses to highlight such atrocities and militant action by people is when some political lobby takes an interest in it. For instance, in the Baghpat rape murder case, the fact that Charan Singh and Company have jumped into the fray to settle scores with Indira Gandhi is in no small measure responsible for the publicity the case is receiving. Similarly, when the Belchhi atrocities took place, Indira Gandhi’s elephant ride, what she said, seemed more important to the press than the fact of atrocities on Harijans. Why does the mass media give more coverage to the Prime Minister’s various appointments or the many vague, empty pronouncements by the horde of Ministers than to the starvation of 200 million people ? Surely, not a case of mistaken priorities— but a systematic attempt to make some people into larger than life figures, to build cults around them, and make the power games of a handful of such people seem the only events of importance in the national life. All this contributes in no small way to making the mass of people feel small and helpless. It is made to seem as if a single stroke from Indira Gandhi’s pen, a wave of her hand or a frown on her face is more potent than the anger of thousands

against inhuman living conditions. This feeling of smallness, helplessness, of struggling in isolation against the ever-increasing might of those we are made to put in power, are important factors in making people “accept” their predicament.

Our Battle Begins Here

We feel that a lot more is happening by way of people’s resistance, protest, and efforts to create change, than ever gets known through the established mass media. So we have to collect and disseminate this information on our own. We must do this vigorously, systematically. This is an important way in which we can win back for ourselves the belief in our own power to change things. Only thus can small local struggles get linked and grow into a widespread movement.

Women in large numbers have participated in consumer movements against inflation like that which swept Maharashtra and Gujarat in the early 70s. But these movements have been led by the urban middle class. The worst sufferers—working class women—remained largely uninvolved. That is why these movements had a short term minimal impact. The issue of price rise in this country must be linked to the issue of a living wage. As long as landlessness, indebtedness, bondedness, unemployment, continue to be life conditions for the mass of people, their total destitution will keep prices out of reach for them in any case.

During the recent drought too, there were local agitations against food scarcity in villages, and against price rise in cities. Why is it that these struggles remained fragmented? What is it that prevented the anger and discontent from exploding into a wide-spread movement? What are the factors that act as a hurdle or as safety valves? It is in this context that we hope that Manushi readers will help us gather information on this drought (and now floods that are already beginning their havoc). Particularly, the details of how such calamities affect people’s lives, accelerate the process of

indebtedness, bondedness, pauperization, traffic in women, prostitution. Even more important, what role did woman play in agitations and struggles during this period?

Since all these problems — poverty, bondedness, lack of living wage, unemployment, landlessness — affect women much more since women bear the major brunt of poverty and exploitation, must not these issues also become

inadequacy of protest demonstrations, submitting demand charters which are aimed at reforming the government and pressurising it into becoming more “considerate”, and since political parties have so far organized in this direction only, there has been a growing cynicism about the effectiveness of mass action itself. But in places the poor and landless did try other means, as for instance the Harijans in Karwi sub-



Death on the Highway by Kathe Kollwitz

women’s issues? Can women not organize around these issues? What role can women’s organizations play in taking up these issues? We invite our women readers to send their views, especially those based on experience of struggle and women’s participation in struggle. Also, women’s reactions, responses, to the problems of drought or inflation as they feel them in daily life.

What form should the struggles take? We have seen over the years the

division, who raided the local merchant’s shop and distributed the grain equally among themselves. Or the poor villagers in Jharkhand and Jaurhari, who physically restrained rich farmers from taking their wheat stocks to sell in neighbouring markets. (Patriot, 18.10.70) Perhaps these instances point the direction in which the solution lies — in people realising and asserting the need to exercise collective control over “privately” owned resources. □