

# The Process Of Organising

## —One Woman's Experience

*This is an account by a woman activist in Maharashtra of her experience of working with men and women on various issues in a range of political groups, her own development, the problems she encountered, how she dealt with them, and what she envisages for the future.*

AT present, I am working in Krantikari Mahila Sanghatana and Nari Samata Manch, a group of about 200 women and 30 men workers. The group was founded on March 8, 1981, and I was one of the founder members.

I became politically active during the wave of youth revolt and agitation that swept Maharashtra and also other regions like Bihar and Gujarat in the seventies. At that time, I was studying in medical college and used to participate in college activities.

When our group started a discussion about which candidates should be put up in the student elections we received a, bitterly aggressive resistance from boys to the active participation of girls. Some male friends were very willing to protect us from such reactions but we did not want caretakers.

We were harassed in many ways. Boys passed rude comments about us. Our names were insultingly written on the walls. Our opponents in the elections were eager to see me and my friend in tears but we decided not to give them that satisfaction.

In the meantime we became fed up with college politics and started participating in other activities, like group discussions and debates, at the intercollegiate level. We came in contact with an organisation called Yuvak Kranti Dal which was struggling for social justice in all spheres and for revolutionary change.

My sister, I and other friends started participating in protest marches around issues such as price rise, minimum wage for labourers, rights of industrial workers. We used frequently to visit tribal and other rural areas. We perceived vast differences between the lives of women labourers and those of urban, educated women. We began to think about and analyse our high caste and class upbringing.

I will not go into the details of the agitations but I would like to make some observations about the role of women workers in political organisations at that time. In our meetings, we used to raise certain questions like: Why do women not actively participate in discussions? Are women activists psychologically pressurised by their husbands? Do the



relationships between married activists continue to be traditional husband-wife relationships?

### **Special Attention**

At this time, I realised that because we women activists were very few in number we got a very special attention from men. I noticed that women activists were very engrossed in the attention paid them by male comrades. They used to spend a lot of time on Sundays and holidays preparing nice eatables for the male comrades. I also observed that girls who were good looking and well educated by conventional standards were quickly coupled with male comrades in marriage or in relationships. Girls who had average looks or education by traditional standards got married very late.

We used to have many discussions about the need for equality between men and women in the organisation and about our shortcomings in this regard. But I noticed that, on the whole, and especially in political controversies, if husband and wife were both activists, they would be treated as a unit. Everybody assumed that the wife would have the same opinion as her husband.

In practice too, a wife or a girlfriend would support the opinion of her husband or boyfriend. A man comrade would take for granted that if a woman was friendly with him she would have the same opinions as he had. If she expressed a different opinion he would feel hurt, like a husband, and would later ask her: "Why did you not tell me before the meeting that you were going to propose such a programme?" On the other hand, a woman with an independent thinking process was appreciated by male comrades.

In public meetings, very few women had the confidence to speak. If women did speak, they would usually be placed first in the list of speakers. This was because last speakers were supposed to be more responsible and experienced, and they were men.

I found that women activists were so conditioned that as soon as a man finished speaking they would appreciate his speech without being asked. But very few men activists would openly express appreciation of a woman's speech. In the course of six years, at about 350 public meetings, I noticed that when a woman spoke the people who had come to the meeting would encircle her and express their appreciation but very few men activists could accept a woman's political success.

### **"Housewives' Social Work"**

Women are usually given the work of treasurers or of office secretaries in the organisation, on the pretext that they have a good handwriting and are very tidy. Women are said to have the patience to do these jobs. I saw in my organisation

and in other organisations too that wives of male leaders automatically become important figures and are treated as mass leaders.

Not all wives of male leaders attain that status, however. On one occasion when, there was a rift in the organisation a woman tried to express her opinion to her husband. He snarled at her that she had no right to interfere. She replied: "Even cooks and maid-servants are paid for their work. For 10 years, I have prepared food for so many members of the organisation at all hours of the day and night—even at hours when hotels refuse to serve food. Yet I do not have any say in decision making. Is this not injustice?"

I also found that no consideration was given to women activists during pregnancy and childbirth. They are simply omitted from the political process. If other arrangements cannot be made for childcare, the woman has to retire from political life.

If a man works as a full timer the organisation tries to give him an honorarium, however meagre, because it is realised that he has to support his family. But a woman who wants to work full time is expected to leave her home and go wherever the organisation sends her because it is not considered necessary for her to contribute to the family income. A number of women become less active because they have to take a job to help support the family, and also have to do the housework and childcare. The part time political work done by such a woman is then branded as "housewives' social work."

I began to be convinced that most organisations do not see themselves as a medium for women's political force and energy. Most of them wish to fit women's work into their own structure. They do not take into account the social and familial situation of women when they plan programmes, and if they do they subconsciously think they have done women a super favour.

In trade unions where I worked female leadership was very inadequate compared to male leadership even when women industrial workers were being organised. Most women's unions were affiliated to political worker did not give to a deserted wife the union would rarely pressurise him. Not enough effort went into convincing men workers that they should not gossip about the character of women workers. If party members beat their wives the party committee did not necessarily raise the issue. Thus workers may be active in strikes but are not very active for social change.

From my experience and my reading I felt that if pressure to change society is to be built up likeminded people should come together even though political parties still have reservation about autonomous women's organisations with a broad social perspective.

In 1980, I was peripherally active in Yuvak Kranti Dal. My husband resigned because of a difference of opinion. I remained in the group though everyone expected that I too would become inactive because I had just had a child.

### **Identifying Issue**

On August 15, I shifted my clinic from Marathwada to Hadapsar near Pune. Hadapsar is on the outskirts of Pune, on the Pune-Solapur road. The original township is a typical market village while the outskirts have grown to accommodate the spreading slums from Pune city. The population consists of three main groups—industrial workers, farmers and agricultural labourers, and people engaged in trade, transport or service jobs.

Hadapsar is well known in Maharashtra for its green vegetable market. Vegetables grown in the interior are sold to wholesale merchants from Pune.

Through my dispensary I came in contact with a large cross section of the population, particularly of women. Hadapsar, because of its geographical location, has women of both cultures—

urban and rural. I used to hear about the day to day problems of my patients and their acquaintances. I became a member of the local library and started calling women over or visiting their houses. Mangla, my compounder, introduced her friends to me. I used also to narrate the problems. I, as a working woman faced. One woman used to tell me her experience of being sexually harassed. Mangla told me how a boy promised her marriage but began to avoid her. We discussed the role of Mahila Mandal. In that area Mahila Mandals were thought of as means for passing the time by eating together and singing *bhajans*. When we discussed problems such as wife beating or sanitation or problems of single women everyone felt that it would be beyond the capacity of a Mahila Mandal to take up these issues.

I started meeting women in small groups in and around Hadapsar. For the last 10 years not a single meeting had been organised specially for women by any political party. Though Hadapsar is just 14 kilometres away from Pune the progressive women's organisation did not have any branch in this area.

Hadapsar has a population of about 43,000. Yet in 75 percent of the area there are no toilets. Large colonies of semislums have sprung up. Industrial workers live in this colony. Though canal water is not supposed to be used for washing and cleaning it is so used. In Hadapsar village, people from different castes stay in different areas. People from scheduled castes and nomadic tribes stay on the periphery of the village.

Women industrial workers were earning between Rs 5 and 6 a day. Most of them had to walk a distance of three quarter kilometer from Hadapsar to the industrial area every day. There are no public toilets, canteens or creches in the industrial area. The workers felt that a women's organisation should start a canteen and a creche.

The condition of agricultural labourers is even worse. Government and sugarcane estate owners feel that if an employment

guarantee scheme is started in this area they will not get enough labourers. As it is, men are not at all interested in agricultural labour. they prefer jobs in the nearby city. Most of the agricultural labourers are women. They get Rs 6 to 8 a day during the peak harvest season.

When we began to discuss the possibility of starting a Mahila Sangathana many women wanted us to organise part time employment schemes. They had in mind the Pune Mahila Mandal which runs a pickle and papad business. I explained the difficulty of starting such a scheme without a marketing network and capital. We decided to hold study circles and to consider what could be done in the area of women's employment.

### For Total Change

We held initial meetings in four different areas. The proportion of women coming to the meetings was meagre

meeting continuously for three months, we would hold a women's rally on March 8, international women's day.

During these three months, we used to read articles and discuss them. We also participated in programmes in Pune. We used to meet in a local school. Of the 12 women, three were from schedule caste, six from so called upper castes and three from middle castes like maratha, mali, kumbhar

We discussed the name Krantikari Mahila Sangathan. Everybody felt that kranti meant a total and drastic change in the socio-political structure. On March 8, 1981, the committee organised a rally. We collected contributions from committee members and decided to appeal for funds during the rally. The Spontaneous reaction of women was that they wanted the people of their slums and their families to hear such ideas about women's rights.



compared to the total population. About 45 women used to be present at each meeting. We used handmade posters and local notice boards to announce each meeting.

We formed a convenor committee of 12 women from different slums. We decided to meet once a week. We also decided that if we were successful in

At a prior meeting, we had decided that some members of the committees would also speak but everyone was very nervous at the thought of giving a public speech.

A local member of the legislative assembly had been invited. Since he came late he was not asked to speak but was just garlanded.

At the follow up meetings we decided

that if we were able to run the organisation for two years we would then elect office bearers. Women who had shown commitment by giving time to the organisation would be chosen. Such an understanding would help us avoid the pressure of choosing someone who had political or economic influence over our members. Women who were more interested in social prestige than in work stopped coming when they came to know about the criteria we had laid down.

Cases of deaths by drowning of newly married women began to be reported to us. There were no office bearers at that time, so each decision was discussed collectively. Responsibilities were shared.

We then started facing social pressures and aggressive attitudes. Though the school trustees' board had given us permission to hold meetings in the school we sensed reluctance to give us the keys. One political party was interested in our using their office but women did not like the idea. Someone suggested that we use temple premises. However, the temple authorities were unwilling because they felt that women from all castes would come into the temple and would also come on days that are supposed to be inauspicious for women. Two meetings were held in a worker's house. We were looking for a way out.

One case of a woman from Mahadeonagar came to us. A land-lord in this area used to make sexual advances to women tenants. Once, he got drunk and molested and beat a woman. She reported to a police station which is three kilometres away. Representatives of our organisation met the police commissioner. The police registered a case of rioting against him but as the woman was not able to produce a medical certificate they said they could not register a case of molestation. The witnesses recorded by the police were friends of the landlord. The tenants were terrified because of his economic and political status. On Ambedkar's anniversary we organised a *janata* court by women in the area. One of our members



acted as judge. A mock trial was held. The victim came and gave an application. The landowner had run away. Our judge declared him a social outcast. The women were in a jubilant mood. We gained confidence in our power. Workers of our organisation happily told their families that the landowner had not been able to do anything because we were united. After the mock trial the man stopped harassing women in the area.

One of our members, Lata, who lived in that slum, suggested that we gather in Buddha Vihar every week. This suggestion was happily accepted and that is where we still meet. Women of other castes confessed that this was the first time they had ever entered this slum. We also discussed questions arising from this experience such as: How is it that people of all castes are allowed to enter Buddha

Vihar ? Why are women not thought inauspicious there ?

### **Political Hostility**

Some of our members in Ram-tekadi slum were very energetic. They started taking the initiative in various social functions in the name of Mahila Sanghatana. Local organisations and youth Mandals which did not have any women members used previously to make use of the services of these women but did not give them any say in decision making or any recognition. These and other established social workers began to resent the Mahila Sanghatana. They challenged the Mahila Sanghatana to get various things done, for example, to get toilets and land for a co-operative society, to pressurise factories that had declared lock out to start functioning again, to give full time employment to all women, to visit the water tank and check the quality of

water. These tasks were too large for us to perform.

We organised a rally where we asked male workers to bring women of their families and women workers to bring men of their families. Over 200 women workers came with their husbands, brothers or fathers. But local men leaders came alone, and shamelessly said that they wanted to help their wives but the wives were not willing so they respected their wives freedom not to participate. The fact was that they had not even bothered to inform their wives.

Local progressive parties would invite our members to serve food at party rallies. We called a meeting to discuss this. One of our members said: "We are in search of our own identity. We are not interested in doing the same domestic jobs on a larger scale. This is not because we despise this work—at various camps we have served food and cleaned the floors when necessary but this is not our only function in life." Another member said: "Why do the party members not do this work themselves? Why do not they involve the women from their families?" Someone else suggested that we wear black saris and register our protest during the rally.

Many such incidents occur. To our surprise, when one of our members contested the *gram panchayat* election, all the party groups wanted to have a joint panel with us. They wanted to cash in on our image of militancy.

We also faced hostility from other quarters. For example, pro-minority members use Ms to their names. They do not observe ceremonies or fasts such as Hartalika or Vatsavritri which is similar to Karva Chauth. We have never organised a *haldi-kumkum* ceremony because we felt it excludes women of other religions and also single women. Members of Hindu revivalist organisations say: "Now you have started opposing *haldi-kumkum* ceremony. Soon women will start declaring that they will have only one child or no child at all. What will become of the Hindu race?"

### **Men And Women**

Six months after the founding Mahila

Sanghatana, we felt the need for a forum of men and women who were interested in starting supportive structures for grassroots organisations. So 10 of us

started Nari Samata Manch in Pune. Its members were mostly people connected with the media, law, and journalism. The Manch worked as a forum for interaction of different trends of thinking, held study circles, and also functioned as a centre for women in Pune to meet and talk.

We prepared exhibitions on women's health, *devdasis*, water and hygiene, and showed them in different areas. One exhibition based on the murder of a young bride, Manjushree, by her husband, was called "I, Manjushree." This exhibition was seen by about 50,000 men and women in Maharashtra.

While organising street corner shows of these exhibitions we faced a hostile reaction from a communal organisation which calls itself Sanskriti Sanraksha. One of our posters mentioned that Draupadi too had been used as a commodity. Sanskriti Sanraksha "warned" us that this would not be tolerated. Some boys tried to tear the posters. Some tried to make sexual advances to our members. We realised the advantage of having men with us.

In the last three years we have organised about 40 camps on different themes such as women and law, women and work, women's movement, family control, women and dalits, women and literature, character assassination of women workers and so on. Usually, these camps continue the whole day. About 50 women participate. The women bring their own food. Once a year, a three day camp is organised in which about 30 women participate. Here we select the working committee members and discuss organisation strategies and priorities.

From May 24 to 29, 1984, we toured villages in Maval taluk, Pune district, where we put up our exhibition and discussed the issues of water and employment. We found that in Ahirvade, Gevanda, Shilivao, Thakursai, Kambre and Uksan villages, women have to walk one and a half

kilometres, carrying water on their heads. The water was muddy and in many places wells had dried up. Children, aged around 10 years, come down to the springs and fill their pitchers. Adika Kudle of Chikhaise village said that fetching of water goes on from 2 a.m. to 11 p.m. In all the 20 villages we visited, water tankers are insufficient in number and come infrequently.

There is no kindergarten in any of these 20 villages. Schools are six to seven kilometres away from the villages. Usually, a girl drops out of school when she is 12 to 14 years of age. Though the employment guarantee scheme provides for the creche facility at the workplace, this has not been implemented.

We found a disturbing trend of increase in cases of desertion without maintenance. Sopan Lokhande of Kondivade village said that the police are not properly investigating the death of his sister, Tai Vanjari, of Nene village, who was physically and mentally tortured before being pushed under a running train.

So far, I am the only full time worker. My husband, my four year old daughter and I stay with my parents in Pune. Household jobs are shared by servants, my mother and my husband.



So far we have taken aid from funding agencies for particular projects such as an exhibition or a canteen. We are now thinking of applying for funds for projects such as women and health, and atrocities on women. We also plan to take financial help from government to conduct surveys, publish books and organise legal aid. □