

FACE TO FACE WITH RURAL WOMEN CWDS' SEARCH FOR NEW KNOWLEDGE AND AN INTERVENTIONIST ROLE

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Author's Note

Established in 1980, the Centre for Women's Development Studies (CWDS) carried a legacy of the traumatic experience shared by most members of the Committee on the Status of Women in India (1971-74); five years (1975-80) of attempts at sponsoring compensatory research on the majority of Indian women whose life experiences had remained 'invisible' to policy makers and social analysts alike; and three years (1977-80) of a frantic search for new development strategies and policies in collaboration with the Planning Commission and a few allies within the bureaucracy.

The Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) had responded to the Committee on the Status of Women in India's (CSWI) appeal to bridge the invisibility gap by initiating the first Programme of Women's Studies in India, soon after the submission of the Committee's report, inducting myself and Kumud Sharma to implement this programme under the guidance of a high powered Advisory Committee. The Committee included, in addition to four members of the erstwhile CSWI, a galaxy of the most reputed social scientists and jurists in the country. Beginning in the dark period of the National Emergency (1975-77), this research programme deliberately maintained a low profile, but viewed from its onset, research as a 'tool for action'. This interventionist role manifested itself between 1977 and 1980 through participation in a number of policy reviews initiated by the Planning Commission of the post-Emergency government. While the research inputs offered by us received some consideration by the bureaucracy, the strategies that we recommended ran into considerable opposition, quite often on the argument of their 'non-feasibility', especially in the rural context. While the need for employment generation for poor women was admitted, and no objections were posed to the idea of organisations of poor women, a strategy linking the two was thought to be impracticable in the rural context. The emergence of Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in Ahmedabad, the Working Women's Forum (WWF) in Madras, and the Annapoorna Mahila Mandal (AMM) in Bombay demonstrated the dynamism that such organisations of poor working women could display in their search for empowerment and security. Planners, however, explained their success as essentially rooted in their urban base and refused to abandon the sanctity of the 'household approach' for poverty eradication in the rural areas.

Within the ICSSR also, we felt constrained by our inability to draw an adequate number of competent and committed social scientists to pick up some of the crucial priority areas that we had identified. The departure of Prof. J.P. Naik from the ICSSR had removed the most powerful backer of the women's studies programme and constraints of human and financial resources made us feel acutely frustrated. It was in this context that the Advisory Committee for Women's Studies unanimously recommended the establishment of an autonomous research institute, to develop 'the seminal role played by the programme in its initial period' with greater freedom and resources. The CWDS was formed out of this decision and, from the beginning, accepted the interventionist role that it had to play.

Having identified poor rural women as the largest single group who had been victims of marginalisation through neglect by development policy and social science research, we decided to focus all our efforts, at least in the initial phase, on this group. This was to begin a two way learning experience, which has continued till now. What began as a search for new knowledge and an attempt at constructive intervention has evolved gradually into a partnership with organisations of peasant women, and a mutually reinforcing search for participatory empowerment. We had to experiment with research as well as action methodology, feeding in lessons from one to the other. Not all our efforts or experiments could be documented and published because of the self-imposed constraints of a small group of professional social scientists trying to play a catalyst role in influencing a wide range of establishments - involved in economic and social development - in a country as diverse and complex as India. The select bibliography at the end of this paper indicates the kind of block building approach in selecting our research themes on rural women, the policy analysis and debates in which we participated, and our persistent efforts to promote direct dialogues between them and the development establishments - national and international, opinion builders, political mobilisers and knowledge systems. It has been an exciting and rewarding voyage as social scientists, combining conventional with participatory research, giving us the courage to discard some dominant perspectives and theories of social sciences, as well as feminist scholarship from the west. While trying to look at the world, history, the natural and social environment and above all development and change from the view point of the neglected majority so far "missing" in social science discourses, we felt rewarded by M.N. Srinivas' observation that women's studies in India was "a challenge from below", and the most significant development in Indian social science during the '70s and '80s.

This paper represents a slice of CWDS' own history in its early years, documenting results of our initial forays into action research. Written in the mid-80s, I felt it still has lessons to offer to the large number of organisations and institutions trying to play an interventionist role in the empowerment of rural women today. For the CWDS, it represents an effort to preserve our own memory of earlier struggles, to prevent 'the politics of memory' from defeating us. I have deliberately avoided burdening the paper with footnotes to maintain its narrative character but I hope readers will take note of the bibliography and believe that the generalisations in the paper are all based on substantive research and analysis.

The Experiment and Its Outcome

Approach and Some General Lessons

Research and analysis of the rural women's situation at the macro level encouraged CWDS to develop a general approach to the issue of rural women's development. We believed that removing the 'invisibility' of rural women in development policy and planning needed direct and effective interaction between the two.

For the women, it was not only a case of overcoming their shyness or the 'culture of silence'. We found that this is not a characteristic behaviour of poor rural women - especially women who come from the traditionally labouring sections of the population. Their individual behaviour is certainly controlled fairly oppressively in the local context by the complex network of social formations that regulate their lives, behaviour and options. With some local variations, these formations are fairly common in India. We have been tempted to call them the *Panchabhutas* - (the five elements) - of class, caste, community/religion, family and kinship - and the dominant social norms prescribed by them. They dictate the do's and don'ts for women, the work that they might, or must not do, the obligations that they must shoulder, the freedoms that they may or may not enjoy. This network, then, operates, or manifests itself through other institutions, practices and customs, such as the sexual division of labour, the discrimination or disparity in wages between men and women, the gender disparities in access to education and information, and participation in economic, socio-legal or political matters.

We assumed that women would speak of their problems and aspirations - their dreams - away from these structures of subordination. The sharing of experiences common to many could help to lighten the load to some extent. Finally, the discovery of the commonality - of experiences, problems and powerlessness - might generate a search for their causes, and a desire to challenge and change the situation for the better by acting collectively.

This shift from a state of despair to a state of hope, determination, and concrete ideas of what they could do themselves, what support they needed from the government, what they had a right to demand, and what scope the local situation offered, immediately - to do something to change their

situation - had to be achieved through two or three days of intensive discussions, and of living together so that they could begin to know the other women and decide whether they could trust each other and act together.

To play the catalyst's role effectively, we had to know something about the local situation, the contours of the economic, social and political crosscurrents, and the socio-economic and demographic characteristics of the micro-region (block, and the cluster of villages from which the women were coming). We had also to identify, beforehand, certain feasible alternatives for employment generation or expansion. We ascertained the state of traditional occupations, new jobs or activities (if any) started in the area (even if they had not reached these particular villages), kinds of infrastructure available in the region in the way of raw materials, credit, training, markets or other basic resources; who in the government was responsible for different types of development assistance/support to the poor, and so on. Above all, we tried to find out how many of these programmes of support designed for the poor in general had reached women at all and in what shape.

This involved firstly doing a simple analysis of the district and the block with available data from the last three censuses - using the device of the sex-ratio to assess the trends of gender asymmetry - in the population, labour force, literacy and education, migration, life expectancy and the death rate. Most often, this macro-analysis helped to identify certain issues that had to be investigated at the micro level. For instance, if census data indicated a high rate of male migration, then we would seek out such households at the village level to investigate their conditions. If reports indicated a general trend of seasonal migration, then we would look for the incidence of female seasonal migration at the village level. Such village level investigations also helped to establish contacts, and to identify the women who could be called to the camp. We wanted the group to be representative of different age-groups, castes, communities, etc. but with a bias for the poor in these groups.

This preliminary investigation also helped to strengthen our eventual role as catalysts. It gave us a distinct edge over the local bureaucracy, which was generally unaware of either the macro or the micro trends in the women's situation in that region. Such ignorance was not uncommon even among voluntary organisations working at the grassroots. In one district, the rising

incidence of female seasonal migration to a neighbouring state was unknown to the male field workers of a highly reputed and well-established local voluntary organisation.

An outcome that we expected from the rural camps was a realisation by the bureaucracy and the women that the planning of economic activity had to be realistic and had to take note of many environmental and infrastructural factors before it could be viable. We also wanted the bureaucracy to perceive the women's acute need for employment for their own and their family's survival. Thirdly, we wanted the women to know in clear terms what types of assistance in the way of resources, training and other support they could *demand* from the government, as such provisions already existed in various rural development programmes. The preliminary research was thus crucial.

We were aware of the established norms of conduct for outsiders in rural society and how important it was to seek entry through the 'gate-keepers', i.e. the power elite of the villages. Where we had no other entry point, this had to be followed. Where we had a link with a local voluntary organisation, as in Rajasthan, the latter provided the entry point. In Punjab, we were collaborating with the Women's Wing of the State Department of Rural Development, which justified our interest in women. In West Bengal, we had been involved by a Minister of the State Government to help them design adequate local employment in one little area - to reduce the hardships of seasonal migration by women. Because of his backing we had, initially, the support of both the bureaucracy and the Chairman of the local Panchayat Samiti. In the case of Uttar Pradesh, however, our entry was only through research.

We discovered that our profession of research helped greatly to legitimise our presence in the villages. Rural society is now familiar with the phenomenon of educated young persons coming and asking questions. It is accepted as a part of the mysterious process called 'education', which they are prepared to tolerate. A few may occasionally ask, "what will we get out of all this investigation?" Even such sceptics are willing to accept answers like "we will write a book about your village", or a fervent promise to bring the village's, or the respondent's, problems to the notice of appropriate authorities.

We learnt that it was far easier to enter villages and obtain a great deal of information in a fairly short time if one could speak the language of the region, and could explain the reasons for one's presence. In some areas, where 'politics', or 'government' are regarded as dirty words, connection with a political party or the government might reduce one's acceptability. Mostly, however, a connection with the government, a known voluntary organisation, or an educational institution helped to establish legitimacy with the 'gate-keepers'.

Dealing with officials at the initial stage, before our bonafides were known, was more tricky. Being armed with programme and policy information from the national government or UN agencies helped. A combination of tact and knowledgeable ability was useful. Introduction from someone they knew in the government was extremely valuable. With particularly obstreperous officials, it was sometimes necessary to indulge in some polite plain speaking, indicating that we knew what we were talking about, that we could always obtain the information from people higher up in the hierarchy if he/she did not oblige, and in which case, we would not hesitate to inform the higher official of the non-cooperation of his subordinate. In one case, this converted a hectoring and obstructive Block Development Officer to stuttering offers to assist all our efforts.

It is a mistake to regard all government officials as adversaries of the people. They are as diverse as ourselves, by levels of knowledge, competence, interest and sincerity. Many at the lower levels remain utterly ignorant of, or do not understand the policy objectives, or shifts that take place at higher levels, and are grateful if someone helps with access to such information and understanding. Programmes like DW CRA demanded more flexibility, imagination, creativity and sensitivity from the local level bureaucracy, than the streamlined, vertical programmes of the past. An agency, which for generations had seen itself as responsible for all the initiative and the delivery of inputs which some one at the top had decided was necessary for development at the grassroot level, cannot adapt to participatory development overnight. Transition to a faith in people's capacity to work out solutions of their own problems is a process that conventional but sincere bureaucrats have to experience gradually. On the other hand, many are concerned with the failure of implementation of existing programmes, and do welcome offers of help from intermediaries to 'motivate the people', or get a 'feedback' from the village level as to what would be welcome.

Being able to provide what is wanted could earn him kudos at both ends - with the people, and with his bosses.

This does not mean that there is no negativism, corruption, lethargy or resistance within the bureaucracy. But the assumption on which our entire exercise was based was that bureaucratic blindness, or resistance, could be reduced or overcome by exposure to the articulation by poor rural women of their needs and demands at the camp. To make that interaction really effective, it was necessary to feed some information to the women. If the bureaucracy was to lose the “purdah” that prevented them from ‘seeing’ the reality of women’s lives, the assault on that blindness had to be equipped with adequate information, particularly about the bureaucracy’s expected role in development, especially for women in that region. Such women coming alive to the bureaucracy as intelligent, rational, and articulate beings, aware of their rights as citizens, would be a serious challenge to at least one structure of subordination.

We observed several cases of such ‘conversions’ during the four camps. In one case, the District Magistrate became a staunch ally and friend of the women’s groups, even after his transfer from that area. Even more significant was the paper that he wrote for a seminar on public administration, in which he examined the process of development through the eyes of an old tribal woman. For her, it had meant only lost hope, increasing despair, and unending labour and loneliness. Another senior official, though an ardent believer in organisations of the rural poor, understood the effectiveness of the ‘Purdah’ on himself during a camp with a group of seasonally migrant women labourers. The lesson turned him into one of the strongest supporters of the need for rural women workers’ organisations and the generation of independent employment for them in their own areas. He also wrote a paper documenting the lessons that he had learnt from that camp.

Not all bureaucrats are, however, equally sensitive. Some officers were visibly annoyed when women, whom they had regarded as faceless, voiceless and unintelligent people spoke forcefully in demanding what they felt they had a right to expect from the government. The officers were even more upset when they found that they could no longer pass off such demands as unreasonable. In one camp, the women reported the hardships experienced by their children when they accompanied the mothers on seasonal migration. The toddlers had to lie exposed to the sun, the rain, mosquitoes, snake bites

and other such dangers. When we informed the mothers that under the labour laws, women workers in factories, mines and plantations had to be provided with creches by their employers, they flared up. Why was there no similar provision for agricultural workers? An attempt by an officer to shut them up by saying there was no such law for workers in agriculture only resulted in greater anger from the women. Were they not labourers? Why should the government make laws for the protection of only one set of workers and not for the rest? Fortunately, the camp was being attended by the State Minister for Land Reforms - a very humane person. He intervened at this point to say that the women's anger was fully justified.

Officials were further disturbed when they found that there was a role reversal in these camps. Normally, when senior officials visit villages and meetings are arranged with the people, it is the officials who speak and the people listen. They are also not used to seeing many women in such meetings. In the women's camps, the officials were invited only on the last day. By that time, the women had discussed their problems for several days, had been informed of the kind of assistance that they could ask for from the government, had also found out the cases where they had been deprived of their rightful dues. Such discussions helped the women to speak up, ask questions and demand answers. For once, the bureaucracy finds itself at the receiving end, and face to face with the principle of accountability. For many, it is not a pleasant or welcome experience.

We conducted these camps in four states of India. The experiences were diverse because of general differences in the political and social culture of the regions and in the degree of our involvement with the women. We were already involved for over a year with some women's groups in West Bengal and Punjab. When the camps took place, we knew some of the women fairly closely. We were also trusted and our preparations could be more elaborate. In Rajasthan, we collaborated with a local voluntary organisation, which had been working with the women for some time and therefore the discussions could take a positive, concrete direction fairly easily. In Uttar Pradesh, however, the women did not know us well. They had met us in our research role only and were not very clear about the camp's objectives. They had a vague idea that it might be of some benefit and help, and had come pouring in, many of them in the teeth of opposition from some male heads of families. It therefore took longer to get over the initial feeling of bewilderment. Other reasons for the differences are discussed in the respective reports of the four camps.

Rural Women's Camp at Tajpur

(District Jalandhar, Punjab) 14-16 September, 1982

Seventy women from five villages took part at this camp. All of them were members of the Mahila Mandals in their villages and the delegates included the office bearers of each body, along with some ordinary members. Our colleagues, along with an official of the women's wing of the Rural Development Department and an office bearer of the Tajpur Mahila Mandal, which was hosting the camp, visited each village to explain the purpose of the camp, and to request that delegates should be drawn from different age, class and caste groups.

Unlike the other three camps where the women were drawn primarily from the poorer sections of the villages, the participants in the Tajpur Camp came from a mixed class background as Mahila Mandals were composed that way. The office bearers came mostly from land-owning families which were fairly well-to-do. However, since these organisations were already interested in generating economic activity and were informed beforehand of our and the government's preoccupation with income generation for the 'weaker sections' i.e. the poor (already identified in Punjab by a government survey), they brought with them some of their members from a landless agricultural labour background. Most of the latter belonged to the Scheduled Castes.

It is easier for women from upper and scheduled caste households to come together to a meeting in Punjab, where untouchability as a physical barrier does not operate in the same manner as in most other parts of rural India. The class barriers are there, but could apparently be overcome when it was considered necessary by some of the highly intelligent office bearers of Mahila Mandals.

Out of the fifteen office bearers of Mahila Mandals who participated in the camp, five were women of commanding personality. Some of them had received basic education and were open to new ideas and new perspectives for looking at their own lives and those of other women in their villages.

In the early '80s, Punjab had over 10,000 Mahila Mandals, promoted actively by the Women's Wing of the State Department of Rural Development since the 1950s, as part of the Community Development Programme. Unlike

most other states which virtually abandoned the women's programme, in Punjab the Mahila Mandals had expanded. They were mostly active in running preschool play centres (Balwadis), craft training classes for young women and other community oriented activities. The emphasis on community service had, by and large, confined membership and leadership to the relatively better off sections of rural women who attached some status value to 'social work', emulating the voluntary work of middle and upper class women in urban areas. However, some rethinking had started since the 1970s and the Women's Wing had initiated economic activities in a few cases. These were mostly income generation activities, such as traditional handicrafts (embroidery, garments, durrees), small scale manufacture of soap or disinfectants for sale in the villages, or running small retail shops or tea services. Essentially small activities, they did not promote much contact with wider markets, nor generate substantial employment to satisfy the needs of poorer women. Poor women from landless families in rural Punjab had to depend mainly on seasonal wage labour in agriculture, cattle rearing, rope making, and various forms of casual labour.

The institution of Mahila Mandals in rural areas became the subject of great debate in policy and activist circles from the '70s. Analysis of policy literature from the 50s indicated that there was great ambiguity among the designers regarding the purpose, objectives and role of these bodies. Believers in the philosophy of community development argued that Mahila Mandals had been designed to train rural women for participation in community development and improve their capacities for participation in the political process, as an aspect of the theory of 'democratic decentralisation'. The First Five Year Plan (1951-56) had stated that comprehensive rural development would require both expansion of the productive base and changes in social institutions. The Community Development Programme was accompanied by the establishment of new formal institutions like the village Panchayats and their groupings at the block and the district levels. While no reservation for women was provided by the Constitution in State Assemblies and Parliament, the Panchayati Raj Acts of most States earmarked at least one seat on the Panchayats for women and provided that if no woman was returned through the process of election, then one had to be nominated or co-opted. It was generally argued that the Mahila Mandals would provide a better forum for rural women to learn the techniques of participation, as rural society did not encourage women to be articulate and forceful in the presence of males.

In practice, however, with the exception of a few states like Punjab and Assam, Mahila Mandals declined in numbers and vigour. According to many 'insiders', the programme was deliberately 'scuttled' by the government.

When the debate on the need for a grassroots organisation of village women was revived during the Women's Decade, a section of the bureaucracy pleaded for the use of the existing Mahila Mandals to channelise better development services to rural women. However, critics pointed out the upper class character of these bodies and pleaded for single class organisations of poor women if the services were to reach those who needed it most.

The controversy had been revived through the observations of the Committee on the Status of Women in India, which had criticised the failure of Panchayati Raj Institutions to show any concern for women's rights. The inclusion of one woman in the Panchayats had become 'tokenism' and needed to be replaced by a supplementary institution of Women's Panchayats, which could take up all types of development activities for and by rural women. The Committee recommended an integral connection between the established Panchayats and the proposed Women's Panchayats, suggesting that the prevalent practice of co-opting or nominating a woman member to the latter should be replaced by inducting the office bearers of the Women's Panchayats to the Village Panchayats to represent women's needs and perspectives, as the office bearers of the Women's Panchayats would be accountable to their own members.

Since in Punjab, the State Government had encouraged the promotion of Mahila Mandals, and had even organised them during the first half of the Women's Decade, district level conferences of these groups and the formation of a State Level Federation followed shortly. The Women's Wing of the State Department of Rural Development insisted that these bodies had a high potential for introducing some dynamism into rural women's development in the State. The Director of the Women's Wing was opposed to the idea of a single class organisation, as she believed that such a body would enhance social tensions, instead of encouraging women to play a reconciling role. In her opinion, Mahila Mandals had acquired considerable status in rural society by doing very useful things which served the community. They also knew how to obtain the support of the community for their activities in the way of land, donations and other encouragements.

The Tajpur project, initiated jointly by the CWDS and the Women's Wing in 1981, was in the nature of an experiment. Could a traditional body like a Mahila Mandal be persuaded to welcome poor women workers as its members and develop a sense of solidarity and sisterhood? Could such a body eventually become a forum to improve the overall position of women in the villages? Tajpur had a history of caste/ class tension. An earlier effort to organise a Mahila Mandal had to be abandoned because Jat and Harijan women would not sit together.

We gambled on the attraction of a modern sector activity - the manufacture of leather goods, to link up with the rapidly growing industry in the district - to break through these barriers. In matters of economic activity, rural Punjab is ready to welcome modernisation. This attitude and the respect with which they regarded Tara Behl, the elderly Director of the Women's Wing, assured for the Mahila Mandal (being formed round the leather project) the official support of the Panchayat, the State and the block bureaucracy. When the Tajpur Mahila Mandal hosted the Rural Women's Camp in September 1982, it was still basking in the euphoria of having initiated and worked a rather novel activity. Being close to Jalandhar City, they were aware of the thriving nature of the leather industry, and felt that they had made a good choice in training the younger women from poor households in a skill which would link them to a modern market. Even women who had earlier opposed the experiment had come round to favour it. The idea of a get-together with other Mahila Mandals which were still preoccupied with more traditional activities appeared to be welcome.

An exhibition of simple posters had been hung around the camp tent. The posters focused on issues relating to women's work, discrimination at home and in the labour market, excessive work burden, the problems of dowry and women's legal rights. This provoked a distinct reaction from some of the women. Non-recognition of women's work within the household, restricted employment opportunities, wage discrimination, educational disparities between boys and girls, and the growing alcoholism among men came up fairly early as acute problems.

Some of the women from relatively affluent households observed initially that they had much less problems than poor women, who had to work for a living. But by the second day, even the well-to-do were admitting that they had little authority and control over their lives. Pritam Kaur, an elderly

President of a Mahila Mandal, known to her village as a formidable matriarch, suddenly said:

“I am the treasurer of the family and manage all its finances, but I cannot spend Rs. 5/- or half an hour of my time on Mahila Mandal activities without having to account for it to the men in my family”.

The younger unmarried women talked about ill-treatment by their fathers and brothers, and lack of recognition for their contributions to the family in the way of earnings and household chores. There was general agreement that rural society gave very low status to women.

A group of agricultural labourers who had been receiving Rs. 6/- as daily wages from local landlords had raised a demand that their wages should be raised to Rs. 8/-, which was the going rate for male labourers in that village. The landlords and the local Panchayat had punished them for their behaviour by refusing them employment. When the women were informed that the minimum wage in Punjab was Rs. 13/- and that under the law, men and women should receive equal wages, they turned to their local Mahila Mandal, demanding that the Mahila Mandal resolve this issue with the Panchayat. It was not easy for the women from land owning families to see themselves in the role of champions of poor workers. Some began to murmur in protest. A few said “these are not issues for women to discuss”. “We did not come here to discuss ways of supporting demands against our families”. But the group of agricultural labourers was firm - if the Mahila Mandals could not help them in such situations, then why should they be members of Mahila Mandals?

When younger women spoke of being beaten by fathers or brothers, one of us asked about the role of mothers in such situations. Why did mothers keep quiet? Why did they not try to defend their daughters? How, then, could we believe that mothers in rural Punjab did not discriminate between sons and daughters? Most mothers were unprepared for such questions, but Pritam Kaur sat up and took notice. Sure, Mahila Mandals had not intervened in such matters earlier, but obviously they must do so in future. Educating mothers in their responsibilities was a task of the Mahila Mandals, not just craft training. Mothers must learn to defend their daughters and to control their sons against such wildness. The appeal of the

agricultural labourers also made sense to her, and she felt that the Mahila Mandal must take the matter up with the Panchayat.

We knew we were skirting on very thin ground. Class differences in rural society had not been overcome even by leaders of great national stature like Vinobha Bhave or Jayaprakash Narain, but if bodies like Mahila Mandals were to become more effective instruments for improving rural women's participation, then we had to take note of phenomena like Pritam Kaur and understand the mental dynamics of such women. They had their feet deeply rooted in the traditions of rural society and shared quite a few of its established biases and prejudices. The managerial roles that some of them played within their own households were extended to the Mahila Mandals, which they accepted as an additional responsibility.

These women did not come to the camp out of economic need. They were apparently looking for ways to make their leadership of Mahila Mandals more effective. Obviously, they valued these positions. Charanjit Kaur, President of Kala Bakhara Mahila Mandal articulated this more clearly:

The tasks that I perform within the family bring no recognition. Nor do I exercise much choice. I do what has to be done. What I do as President of the Mahila Mandal reflects my capacities, my leadership, and my convictions. This camp has made me feel that it is not necessary for women to be always in the grip of some fear. We have spoken here without the feeling of any fear. That is going to make a definite difference in what we do in future.

Many of these issues had not been clear to us before the camps. Nor did we have a general strategy. Should we try to eliminate or avoid issues which cause tension between the participants and stick only to issues on which there was general agreement? It was fairly clear that we could not hope for complete agreement even on the issues of women's rights. While everyone agreed that their work and labour did not receive due acknowledgement, there was a distinctly cool response to the notion of giving daughters the right to inherit agricultural land. Daughters would be married into other villages. How could land be given to them? This would also cause conflict between brothers and sisters. At the same time, everyone agreed that an independent source of income was essential if women were to challenge their present oppressed state. Even for women in the landowning families,

an independent source of income would assure for them better acknowledgement of their roles within the household. As for the poor, such alternative income sources were critical, if they were to struggle for better wages in agriculture.

The women saw the Tajpur leather centre as a concrete effort to upgrade women's economic skills and wanted to organise similar activities in their own villages. When some of us pointed out that it might not be a good idea for all Mahila Mandals to take up identical activities, they readily accepted the need for diversification. They felt, however, that learning from each other and the sharing of experiences was critically important. How were they to achieve this?

We asked what they wanted to learn from Tajpur? The answers, gradually articulated, were quite clear. They wanted to develop viable economic projects, and they wanted linkage with other agencies instead of their present sole dependence on the Women's Wing of the Rural Development Department. They wanted access to more information so that they could make a better choice of activities, markets, or source of funding or training. They also wanted an association with the CWDS. Why?

Because you do not regard us as dumb idiots. You do not discourage us from asking questions and do not make us conscious of our inferiority and ignorance. You are not trying to impose any readymade solutions, but asking questions like us. We understand that to be effective, to be efficient, we must learn many new things, and plan our activities. We may also have to extend our responsibilities to other tricky problems that oppress women in our villages. But to start with, we shall take up employment generation, which will help everyone, and on which everyone is in agreement.

A hint that co-operation between the Mahila Mandals could begin through a process of regular joint consultations received immediate response. They decided to form a joint committee and to hold regular monthly meetings on a rotation basis in different villages. They would discuss common issues and plan steps to achieve greater economic independence for women in their five villages. They requested the CWDS' participation in these meetings and its help in establishing liaisons with government agencies, banks, the Punjab

Women and Children's Welfare and Development Corporation, and other elements in the wider society. As Charanjit Kaur put it,

We have to get out of the village to improve our conditions in the village.

They also agreed that such liaising would be more effective if several Mahila Mandals undertook it jointly, instead of trying to pursue things only on their own. Perhaps they could share other things, such as training or marketing arrangements.

Discussions had been carried on in small groups. On the last day, each group presented its report and proposals to the Commissioner and Deputy Commissioner of Jalandhar and other officials of rural development, health, education, industries etc. Pritam Kaur, the oldest participant, was asked to chair the meeting. By demanding to know, they obtained information from the officers about loans, subsidies, training and marketing facilities that existed under various programmes of rural development and made notes. They discovered that the State Government had established a corporation for Women and Children's Welfare and Development, and asked to know what kind of help they could get in marketing the crafts that they were producing already. The Managing Director of Punjab Tanneries, who had already established contact with the Tajpur leather centre observed that if other villages could take a lesson from Tajpur in developing organised production at the village level using modern production technology, then in his opinion, leather could become a powerful tool for rural development. The Commissioner and the Deputy Commissioner visited the leather centre and agreed to provide additional machines and some equipment to improve the women's working conditions.

As an experiment in stimulating rethinking and raising consciousness, the camp was effective. Women speaking on the last day repeatedly observed that they had experienced a sense of fearlessness in the camp and would go back with a new sense of energy. The preoccupation with economic matters notwithstanding, it was clear that the most powerful structure of subordination of these women was their powerlessness within the family. During the three days, they began to question some of the more common forms of family oppression, but it was clear that generation of economic activity was being welcomed as a much easier plan of action. They knew very well that challenging the authority of the family, caste and class could

not be done when the women's lives were still severely controlled by these institutions. There had been active opposition from men in one village to their women coming to the camp, and some women had received beatings. However, the President of the Mahila Mandal took a firm stand, backed by the officers of the Women's Wing, and brought her delegation to Tajpur.

Postscript :

The Joint Committee held three meetings and decided to form themselves into a corporate group under the name Mahila Vikas (Development) Mandal. They had framed a constitution and decided to seek registration before political turmoil in the state arrested their efforts.

Pritam Kaur discovered that she had overestimated her position of strength in village politics when she raised the issue of women's wages with the Panchayat. A certain amount of propaganda was also spread in these villages after the camp that the Centre for Women's Development Studies was interested in stirring up quarrels within the families. This was discovered by our colleagues when they went to continue their research into family dynamics in Patara village.

One lasting effect of the Tajpur Camp was however visible a year later. In August 1983, when the Press reported a move on the part of some leaders of the Punjab agitation to demand a separate personal law for Sikhs, which would reduce women's rights in marriage and to a share of their father's property and revive a declining institution called 'Chadar Andaži', we sent the report to the Presidents of the five Mahila Mandals who had participated in the camp. Within a week, we received unanimous resolutions from the five Mandals, with a request that we convey their feelings to the Prime Minister. Though differently worded, the five resolutions contained the same idea. The women were protesting that this move for a new personal law was being discussed without consulting women's organisations. The reports in the Press indicated a major attack on the rights guaranteed to women under the Constitution of India, and the attempt to revive Chadar Andaži could only be viewed as a reactionary measure aimed to revive polygamy, since the institution had already died out in most areas. The women were informing the government that they would resist any attempt to reduce their existing rights.

There was little doubt that repeated ventures into collective discussions had given these women a sense of strength, which they had lacked before.

Rural Women's Camp at Jhilimili

(District Bankura, West Bengal)
16-18 October, 1982.

The Camp at Jhilimili involved members of the three Mahila Samitis organised in 1981, drawing in women from twenty one villages in the Ranibandh Block of Bankura District. The three organisations, whose members belonged to tribal and lower caste groups, were agricultural labourers by occupation, and residents of hamlets/villages contiguous to Jhilimili, Bhurkura, and Chhendapathar villages in three corners of Ranibandh Block. All the Samitis shared the name *Gramin Mahila Sramik Unnayan Samiti* (Rural Women Workers' Development Organisation) and were formed with the primary objective of generating employment for their members in their own areas so that their dependence on seasonal migration could be eliminated. The women had identified the growing dependence on seasonal migration as the real cause of high infant and maternal mortality, overall decline in their health, and loss of schooling for their children.

Ranibandh Block in Bankura district was one of the most underdeveloped regions in the State of West Bengal - drought prone, badly deforested, and inhabited predominantly by tribal communities. Agriculture could provide employment locally to women from landless or marginal farm households for a maximum period of six weeks. Disappearance of the forest - once a source of food, fuel, fodder and some livelihood - had compounded their misery, and thrown more and more families into seasonal migration to the green revolution districts of Hooghly and Burdwan three or four times a year for mere survival.

Some of these facts surfaced during a "Reorientation Camp for Migrant Women Agricultural Labourers", organised by the Government of West Bengal at Jhilimili in May, 1980, as a part of its rural labour camps programme, to acquaint the peasants with their new rights under the land reforms policy. This was the first women's camp. The Government also wanted to explore the causes and consequences of increasing participation of women and children in seasonal migration over a few decades.

Identifying the results of such intermittent nomadism, the women linked to it the rising incidence of male alcoholism, domestic violence and frequent destruction of family life and stability. Sexual assaults by employers or

labour contractors and the growing number of young unmarried women with little prospect of marriage once they joined the stream of seasonal migrants, were also directly linked to this problem. Then there was the perpetual state of indebtedness aggravated by destruction of homesteads by bad weather during the absence of women.

They recognised the need to organise themselves and fight these evils. The State Minister for Land Reforms who attended the camp requested the CWDS to assist the government in designing appropriate follow-up action. By October 1981, the three Samitis were in existence.

The Jhilimili Samiti (which had a hard core of members who had attended the 1980 reorientation camp) offered to host the joint camp of all three Samitis. Each Samiti held village level meetings conducted by its EC Members, with the assistance of the CWDS field staff. The meetings discussed the purpose of the camp, tried to identify the basic problems facing women from that particular village, and to select its delegates. In a few meetings where women identified bad road communication and difficult access to a health service as a major problem, particularly for expectant mothers and small children, they were asked to bring with them specific examples of some cases which had ended in fatality, because of bad road communications. Several village groups thus came to the camp armed with written memoranda, listing their basic problems in order of priority and their suggestions or demands from the government.

An exhibition was arranged, depicting the links between the women's situation and changes in the forest economy, the reasons for the formation of the three groups and some of the basic problems identified at village level meetings. These included inadequacy of healthcare and educational facilities, impact of migration and the current drought, social issues like dowry and desertion by husbands and the growing problems of old women who could no longer work for a living and were being reduced to destitution. Some posters focused on hopes and aspirations aroused by the formation of the three organisations.

During the camp, women insisted on talking not only about their problems but also about their efforts to solve some of these. They were justifiably proud of their achievements in having generated some employment during one year, and having helped some women to reduce their dependence on seasonal migration. Women from Bhurkura, whose plantation of Tussar

host trees on a plot of wasteland had progressed rapidly, boasted of the care that had allowed 98 per cent of the plants to survive, while the Forest Department's record was only 40 per cent. They were concerned with the need to begin training for sericulture. Women from Chhendapathar Samiti, whose employment generation activities had not made much headway, had identified lack of educational and health facilities and the need to improve road communication between their villages and the Block headquarters as their primary problems. During the discussions, however, they began to realise the possibility of finding wasteland plots in their areas to emulate the success of the Bhurkura women in creating work for their members. The women from the Jhilimili Samiti had already searched unsuccessfully for wastelands in their own areas and felt that greater possibilities lay in the organised trading of minor forest produce. They had worked out a calendar of seasons during which different types of seeds, edible and non-edible, leaves, and fruits could be collected from the forest.

The responses that the three Samitis received from their own villages or communities definitely influenced their perception of priorities. The influence of the local gentry could be seen in the priorities identified by the Chhendapathar women. When we had met them at Mahila Samiti meetings they were complaining of failure to generate employment but for presentation in the camp, their written memoranda emphasised health, education and irrigation facilities.

The Bhurkura women, who from the beginning, had received the support of the men from their village manifested through the gift of a plot of wasteland, could link their particular situation to mistakes in the Government's forest policy, but were unable to suggest other activities or plans for the future. They had not experienced the struggle to identify a viable activity, as the Samiti had virtually formed round the wasteland plot. Plantation work came very easy to them as they were high skilled agricultural workers, but in the absence of a struggle, their outlook or their consciousness had not changed substantially. The women from different villages still tended to sit in different groups. Except for three, who were newcomers to the Samiti, the other members were still hesitant to speak up before the camp.

Some of the office bearers from Chhendapathar proved to be more articulate and critical in their questions. They had gone through a period of village level discussions before the Samiti had been formed, with the

immediate objective of beginning collections of sal leaves for the eventual manufacture of plates. However, this activity had not produced the anticipated results, because markets were distant. The machines for the production of sal plates and cups, though very welcome to the women, were too few. The samiti had trained over 200 of its members to operate the machines but was not in a position to provide work to all of them for regular periods. The office bearers maintained that they had to answer the repeated questions of their members - "Why did we form the Samiti? What has it brought for us?" Some of them also had to face the jeering of men in their villages. It was clear that a section of the Chhendapathar members, its Executive, and the CWDS had failed in their leadership to find solutions to these problems.

As compared to this, the attitude of the Jhilimili Samiti members was very different. They had experienced resistance from some people in their own villages since the inception of their organisation. Efforts had been made to break it up by spreading rumours. When the President of the Samiti was ill with chicken pox, a story was spread that the spirits were angry with the Mahila Samiti and anybody connected with it would suffer the consequences. However, a threatened panic among the tribal women was timely arrested by some of the non-tribals, who pointed out that chicken pox had affected even those villagers who were not connected with the Samiti at all. They had also identified the source of these rumours.

The Samiti's success in organising the collection and sale of forest produce in 1981 had been resented by the management of LAMPS, the local cooperative society to whom the government had given the monopoly for trading in sal seeds and kendu leaves. In 1981, the management of LAMPS had been practically forced by the district administration into recognising the Mahila Samiti as its agent for the collection of kendu leaves and sal seeds. Armed with full information about the prices of these goods guaranteed by the State Government, the Samiti women had insisted on informing all their collectors (who became Samiti members, strengthening membership from 64 to 250 within four months) and ensuring fair payment. This had definitely affected some people in the LAMPS management, who earned marginal profits for themselves banking on the people's ignorance of government orders. There were various attempts by the local power elites to prevent the Samiti from getting government support for their projects.

These struggles against the local power elite and the methods that the Mahila Samiti had to adopt to reach the State Government, including a visit by three office bearers to the Chief Minister of the State, had made the members of the Jhilimili Samiti far more conscious of the fact that the local power structures were against women's solidarity. They, therefore, raised the question of women's representation to bodies like the management of LAMPS.

They also asked questions about the structure of the Panchayats, which were taking major decisions about road construction, planting of trees, well digging, and other minor irrigation projects. Women had very definite views regarding the location of these. Why were they not represented in the Panchayats? When it was pointed out that under the law every Panchayat contained two women who had been nominated, as no one had stood for election, the women were angry. What was the point in nominating women who did not care for other women? Very few women in the villages were aware that they had two representatives on the Panchayat. If the representatives did not care to inform themselves of the problems suffered by poor women in these areas, could they act as women's representatives?

While initiative in raising these questions was taken by some leaders of the Jhilimili Samiti, it seemed that the Camp was exercising a subtle influence on other women also. A few young women who had seldom spoken up in previous Mahila Samiti meetings, suddenly exploded into highly emotional questions.

Because we have to join seasonal migration to support our families, men in our villages make jeering and humiliating remarks about us, saying that we have all become prostitutes. We know we shall never get married because of this reputation. But did we have any alternative to seasonal migration? Who was going to support our old and sick parents, our widowed sisters' children or the sister who has been abandoned by her husband and come back to us for shelter? I support this whole family by my labour. When I go to the Panchayat to settle a problem of land belonging to my family, my appeals are not heeded. Is it because I am poor or because I am a woman and a migrant worker? But if I had not shouldered the responsibility to

feed my family, would the people in my village have done it in my place? What gives Panchayat members the right to treat us like dirt?

Another young woman from a relatively higher caste forcefully articulated the problems of poor women in these castes.

We have not been reared to agricultural work and are not allowed to take part in the only occupation available for women in the village by our caste rules. Our families are helpless against the caste leaders. But will someone here please tell me - how do I feed my children and my sick mother? I have now reached a point where I am ready to challenge these taboos. But there is no Mahila Samiti in my village. Will the Samiti admit people like me even though we are not as good as others in the type of work that they are trying to generate?

Such statements forced us to face the issue that even single class organisations cannot solve the problems of these women. They are poor but they are divided from the traditional agricultural workers by their caste norms which still hold rural families, particularly women, in their grip. From one village, where the Mahila Samiti had a large membership, we learnt that some of the younger high caste women had defied caste and family restrictions by joining the Samiti members in going to the forest to collect minor produce for sale.

While emphasising the great need for minor irrigation, planting of trees along the roads and under social forestry, which would be useful to the local people rather than Eucalyptus, which helped no one in the village, the women also raised critical questions about the government's forest policy. On the one hand, the government permitted contractors to fell sal and other trees to earn revenue. On the other, the forest department kept replanting eucalyptus.

The women admitted that sometimes they and their family members were forced to fell trees to earn an immediate cash income. As Sarala Sardar from Bhurkura Samiti put it in very vividly.

We know that felling a tree is like cutting off one of our limbs. But there are moments when our desperate need to earn some cash coincides with the contractors' profit motive. If we had alternative sources of income, not only would we not fell trees, but we would not allow anyone else to do so, because we know that most of our problems are linked to deforestation.

Amongst the social issues, in addition to those identified at village meetings, some new ones that came up were - (a) non-serious attitude of officials to women who sought official intervention to settle village conflicts; (b) the indifference of caste and community councils to ill-treatment and desertion by husbands; and (c) deprivation of any rights to the husband's home and land in the case of deserted/abandoned/widowed women. The most concern of the entire group, however, was for economic security.

While officials came mainly on the last day, the Minister for Land Reforms, who had helped to initiate this entire activity, came on the second day (accompanied by the Minister for Tribal Welfare) to listen to the women's discussions. He promised to convey their demands and suggestions to the relevant departments of the State Governments. He also told them that they were strong enough to deal with the family issues themselves, since they were not economically dependent on their families. Turning to the local officials and members of the Panchayats and Panchayat Samitis, however, he observed that the women had disproved the pet theory of both the bureaucracy and political parties that women lack 'motivation' for participation in development activities. The fact that women from twenty seven villages had been mobilised needed recognition from both the bureaucracy and the Panchayati Raj institutions. These women provided tremendous potential for 'planning from below'. The activities which the women had identified, if taken up by the relevant departments, would generate more employment and thus help fight the drought situation. The Panchayat Samiti should seek the help of the women's organisations in implementing these plans. The Minister of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Welfare observed that he had not expected so much enthusiasm and articulation among the women and had been pleasantly surprised.

Eighty seven delegates from the three Samitis attended the Camp. In addition, twelve women from six villages who were not yet enrolled as members of any Samiti came to demand inclusion of their villages into the

network. One group offered to donate more wasteland for developing plantations on the Bhurkura model. With volunteers, dance teams, and children in arms, a total of 150 persons attended the camp, apart from twenty five other invitees and CWDS staff. Age-wise, the group included some old and some young women in their late teens and early twenties, but the majority were in their thirties and forties. On the last day, over 700 women from twenty seven villages participated in an open rally. Three representatives of the three Samitis reported the gist of their discussions. The two Ministers congratulated the camp, and commended the work of the women's organisations. A representative of the District Press Club spoke with some feeling of the possible long-term impact of such organisations in changing the widespread derogatory attitudes towards women.

Postscript

In terms of immediate impact, the camp helped to increase the feeling of solidarity between women from the three organisations, which have since developed a system of common planning and come to each other's rescue in times of crisis. They have been sharing in joint training of leaders and spearheading the formation of new groups in other parts of Bankura district and in the neighbouring districts of Purulia and Medinipur. Networking has been institutionalised through the Nari Bikash Sangha (NBS), an apex body federating fifteen Samitis, which organises joint workshops for training and planning, and has initiated a small credit scheme to promote the diversification of economic activity by smaller groups of members, and new Samitis which have no wasteland for plantations.

Child care centres, a special emphasis on school enrolment of all children, participation in literacy campaigns and intervening in cases of domestic/marital voluntarism, with occasional training and networking inputs. Since 1988, the NBS successfully spearheaded a demand for equal participation of women in the programme of Joint Forest Management and promoted a number of women's groups as offshoots of the Forest Protection Committee. They have played a major role in the formation of the Ranibandh Banabasi Sangha - a federation of Forest Protection Committees within Ranibandh Block.

The camp made a distinct impact on the local leadership. Several leaders of the Samitis successively served as members of the local Panchayats even before the 1/3rd reservation policy came in 1993. The earlier hostility has decreased greatly, and some local bosses

take credit for the achievements of the Mahila Samitis. The demonstration effect of the 'Bankura model' inspired other groups within Bengal, South Bihar and Orissa.

Rural Women's Camp at Bakewar

(Etawah District, Uttar Pradesh) 27-30 July 1983

The Bakewar camp was different from the other two camps in the sense that we had only been conducting research in this area and were not involved in any organisational work. Local people who wanted to prevent the camp from being held spread rumours that the camp was intending to (a) tubectomise the delegates, and (b) export the women to Delhi for forced labour and worse - Delhi was said to suffer from a severe shortage of women. However, the women whom we invited knew us as researchers and decided to come in spite of these rumours. In some cases, they had to defy opposition from male heads of households.

We had expected between fifty to sixty participants, but ninety one came with forty children, from nine villages in the Ajitmal and Mahewa blocks of Etawah district. The majority (68) were in the working age group, seven were above fifty, and sixteen below twenty years. Of the latter, thirteen were unmarried. Sixty participants belonged to the Scheduled Castes, twenty to service and backward castes, one was a Muslim, and ten were from general castes. Seventy two came from landless families and nineteen from families of marginal farmers with less than one acre of land.

Bakewar and Mahewa blocks form a part of UP's Pilot Development Project Area. PDP was a much publicised precursor of the Community Development Programme, conceived and initiated in 1948. Its aim was multi-faceted growth, i.e. improvement in housing, roads, marketing, sewage disposal, drainage, water supply, malaria control, irrigation, provision of dispensary/health services, schools, recreation centres, warehousing, and cottage industry through a programme of popular education and information. The architects of PDP had not foreseen any caste, class or gender based differences or conflicts. In the process of implementation, however, the complexity of social forces inverted the entire project in favour of the minority - the rural rich. During our visits to the area in 1981, we found that collective projects, like the cooperative societies, were totally dominated by the rural elite and higher caste families. The vital role of women in all agricultural activities was ignored completely. Their occupational needs were seen as home decoration, better cooking methods, kitchen gardening, sewing, embroidery, etc., which failed to promote

increased participation and excluded poor women who needed to expand their earning power.

The Bakewar Extension Training Centre's schedule for women included training in agricultural skills. During a period of two decades, however, women had only received training in fruit and vegetable preservation, kitchen gardening, food and nutrition, pest control and cattle rearing.

In the national Community Development Programme of the early 50s, the women's component, an afterthought, included a threefold strategy of organisation building, literacy and crafts. U.P.'s programme for rural women was commended to other States as a model. But in the late 60s, the entire programme for rural women's advancement was abandoned by the decision of the Chief Minister of the time. The official reason was economy, but the basic reason, fairly well known at that time, was the Chief Minister's objection to village women "becoming too vocal". He had even objected to women being recruited into the Administrative Services. While he could not stop the latter because of constitutional guarantees, his intervention in the rural development programme put an end to this live development activity. As a result, we found it virtually impossible to find even a single Mahila Mandal in the villages that we visited.

Under the pressure of the Central Social Welfare Board, a few scattered efforts at leadership training took place from time to time. The syllabus included a section on women's legal rights but this was excluded from the actual training because instructors received no teaching materials.

Provisions in the Panchayati Raj Act, which called for the nomination of one woman on every Panchayat if a woman was not elected, were violated all over the place, and the office in charge of Panchayats at the district level appeared to be ignorant of this clause in the law. Now, as then, U.P. remains one of the four states with the lowest indicators of women's status viz. (i) sex ratio in the population (ii) female literacy; (iii) infant mortality; (iv) maternal mortality; and (v) the mobilisation of women as voters in elections.

As in the other camps, an exhibition of posters was put up, depicting the situation of rural women in the region. This did not, however, provoke much interest among the women, except some of the very young ones. The women were hesitant in articulating their problems. When some of them were coaxed into speaking, they could only recite the problems that they

experienced as individuals in poor families struggling to make both ends meet. Even when the identical story kept coming from many, it appeared that they were not able to see the commonality of their problems.

We broke into smaller groups, mixing women from different villages in each, and attaching one or two CWDS staff members to stimulate discussions. By the end of the first day, the groups had identified the problems: landlessness, inadequate income from marginal farms, seasonal, insecure and low wage employment, (even after 8-10 hours of hard work) and rise in the cost of living. Women from agricultural labour households claimed that they could get employment in agriculture for only 20-25 days in a year, in weeding and harvesting. While men earned Rs. 7-8 for a working day, women earned only Rs. 5. The prescribed minimum wage in the area was Rs. 8.50. In one village in a low-lying area, even this limited employment was affected by recurring floods.

Some women had been trained in tailoring by rural development functionaries but could not compete with professional male tailors for the limited demand for tailoring services in the villages. Attempts to promote sericulture had been initiated by the Government twenty years ago, and many women had the experience of rearing (mulberry) silk worms. Recently, this work had been extended to many poor households under the Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP). For the poor, however, the work suffered due to lack of space in their homes (where they were expected to rear the worms), extreme variations in temperature (since the women had to do their cooking in the one room huts), and destruction of the silk worms by ants, lizards and curious children. The worms also kept falling into the food. The women were really desperate to give up sericulture, as it had only added to their burdens, and brought in very little income. During the rearing season, they had to be up all night feeding leaves to the worms and then tackle all their other work during the day. Women from two villages also complained that they had to go long distances to obtain the Mulberry leaves, or get young boys and men from their families to climb the trees, which were too high for the women.

Some women were making paper packets, earning upto Rs. 2 a day if they worked alone, and about double when they could get other family members to help. Several landless families had taken bank loans for goat rearing about two years ago, but their goats had died and they had problems in repaying the loans. They also claimed that they were made to put their

thumb impression on loan receipts for Rs. 2,000/-, while they received only Rs. 1,500/- in hand. Nor were they aware that loans for goats under the IRDP carried a share of government subsidy which did not need repayment.

Other problems included the destitution of old women - quite a few were blind, desertion and abandonment of many young women by their husbands without any maintenance; and physical intimidation by husbands and other males in the family. There were also stories of high caste men enticing low caste men into gambling. While the men gambled away their earnings, women with little or no independent earnings were saddled with the responsibility of running the households. Harijan women from one village reported that they were forced to walk long distances for water, as the well constructed for their use in the village had been forcibly taken over by the higher castes.

In one group, the issue of dowry was raised towards the end of the first day. Surprisingly, a number of women observed that equal education and legal property rights for women would be far better than dowry. The education of young girls, however, was a major problem. Many of the village schools were only upto the primary stage. They charged fees, in spite of government regulations to the contrary, making it impossible for poor families to send their children to school. For girls, education virtually stopped after the primary stage because their parents did not consider it safe to send them to adjoining villages and towns where the school was located. Many women demanded free middle schools in all villages.

The second day's discussions began with a concise presentation of problems that had been identified on the first day. From this followed the question, "Why is it this way and what can we do?" The women were, however, so overpowered by their feeling of powerlessness that they found it difficult to make the transition from anecdotes to issues. Repeatedly, we had to inject information or questions to stimulate their thinking. When they repeated that they could not get any attention from Panchayats, which treated them with contempt, we had to inform them that under the law the Panchayats should include one woman. The women had no knowledge of this or any other law that sought to protect their rights. When we informed them that a member of the District Judiciary connected with legal aid services in the state would be coming to the camp that afternoon, there was a clamour. They surrounded the Judge, asking for information, advice and help in obtaining legal redress - maintenance for deserted or divorced wives, land

titles/homes, of which widows had been deprived by rapacious in-laws and so on.

In discussing their own plan of action, however, the necessity for collective action remained a very distant goal. We were forced to conclude that the process of atomisation was far more advanced in this part of UP than in the other states where we had organised camps. With the exception of a few women from Ajitmal, who had been members of a women's cooperative (which became defunct after a few years), none of the others had any experience in collective action or organisation. They could not visualise the possibility of a women's organisation becoming responsible for organising employment for its members. There were repeated appeals - "You do it or ask the Sarkar (government) to do it". It was clear that while the women were desperate for some immediate opportunity for wage earning, if someone else would be willing to assume the responsibility and risk, they were not ready, for the time being, to gamble on a collective enterprise.

We also realised that they were unable to place any trust in other women from their villages.

How can we be sure that they will not cheat, steal or grab our work from us?

The isolation of these women from others, even in similar situations in their own villages, is forced by their grim struggle for survival and absolute preoccupation with keeping their families going. Programmes like sericulture further confined them to the household, with an enormous burden of work for very little returns. Secondly, the widespread prevalence of suspicion, hostility and tension between different groups in the villages made the poor place little faith in keeping any collective organisation free from the influence of these powerful interests. Thirdly, the women displayed the typical psychology of insecure, assetless, vulnerable labourers. Their language indicated that they saw work always as something that someone else gave, and could not even imagine themselves as entrepreneurs.

After considerable discussion, the women decided to recommend to the government three specific projects for employment generation - (a) sericulture in a workshed where women could earn daily wages; (b) a collective goatery; and (c) a spices processing plant. Only women from one

village who had been accompanied by their caste leader - a male - agreed to try a collective approach.

The fifteen destitute and abandoned women who attended the camp had not been aware of the government's scheme for old age and widow pensions. After hearing of the scheme, they sought our help in presenting a joint application to the District Magistrate, who was expected on the third day.

On the last day, the women overcame their nervousness of officials and agreed to present their demands for new projects, construction activity, redress of grievances, pensions, free schooling and other specific problems. The District Magistrate instructed the District Development Officer to formulate projects for sericulture worksheds, spices grinding units, and measures to remove the water logging from the village of Naudhana (where water logging during the rains had made it impossible for women even to go out for ablutions).

For all the women, the camp was their first experience of coming together outside their village and discussing their problems collectively. Their diffidence on the first day reflected the established norms of local rural society. The fact that they could overcome this in two days and speak forcefully to the officials on the third day itself reflected a definite transformation. While it did not succeed in throwing up collective action as the remedy, it did initiate a process of thinking about possible change and encouraged some women to hope. It also conveyed a lot of information to the women about available assistance and legal support. Overwhelming response without much preparation indicated desperate need and disproved the theory of women's passivity or resistance to change. The large numbers made it difficult to organise the intensive discussions, which is necessary for the kind of transformation that we had hoped to bring about. However, the large size of the group itself became an event for both the women and the officials.

Postscript

Soon after the camp, we had requests from the State Planning Department, UNICEF, and women from two villages to help them in taking follow up action. The Planning Department first thought of obtaining project proposals from us, then decided to seek our help in preparing block level plans for the programme - Development of Women and

Children in Rural Areas (DWCRA). The UNICEF wanted us to help organise more camps and also our presence as an intermediary to ensure the implementation of the programmes for women's development in those few villages. The women from two villages informed us that they had decided to form themselves into Mahila Mandals - so what should they do now? Two of our colleagues went back to help them in identifying a plot of land to support their plans for a goatery. The plan ran into difficulties vis-a-vis the Panchayat.

Our correspondence with the State Government, UNICEF and some officials at the block and district levels brought home to us the basic lesson that we did not have the two instruments that were critical to follow-up the process initiated by the camp. We did not have a field organisation to continue to nurse the spark generated by the camp, and we could not locate a local organisation to play this role. Nor did we have an organisation at the State headquarters to pursue matters with the bureaucracy and extract fulfilment of promises made to the women.

*The Community Health Volunteer in one village, a graduate, had been persuaded to help the women plan a follow up. One of the items was pensions for the old women whose applications were submitted to the District Magistrate. We sent another set to the Chief Minister with a letter from our Chairperson, Dr. Phulrenu Guha (a veteran member of the Chief Minister's party), saying that she expected the Chief Minister to ensure that the women received the assistance to which they were entitled "under the rules". The Chief Minister did intervene. We informed the women and the Community Health Volunteer. Finally we heard that the District Magistrate's office wanted the Medical Officer to certify the women's age. The Community Health Volunteer, a functionary of the Health Department, asked **us** what should be done next.*

*The Bakenwar camp most effectively proved that broad objectives - to use the camps as a vehicle to increase women's visibility, articulation, leadership qualities and confidence required a longer period of exposure. A 3-4 day camp could certainly generate a spark, **but for women ground down by the sheer weight of their problems, mere conscientisation was not enough. Some material support in the form of employment or assets was essential to break through the walls of despair and loneliness of which these women were victims.***

None of the other groups with whom we had to deal suffered to the same extent from the total absence of a sense of community as the group we met at Bakenwar. The reasons for this need much greater investigation than we had done so far. The strategies that were necessary to combat this process of alienation and atomisation were also to be discovered.

That fear plays an important role in keeping these women subdued and divided was clear because they kept expressing their fear throughout the discussions. We certainly needed to develop better strategies to combat this fear among groups where collective solidarity as the first instrument of strength fails to work.

Another issue that came out in sharp contrast between West Bengal and UP was the role being played by politicisation in one region and depoliticisation in the other. In the case of West Bengal, the high level of political mobilisation in the State certainly affected the consciousness of the women we were dealing with. Though in terms of class, poverty, and powerlessness there was marked similarity between the two groups of women, it was easier for the women in Bankura to recognise the value of collective action for two reasons - (a) the legacy of collective values that still remained in the consciousness of tribal groups; and (b) the new consciousness that the women derived from watching the interplay of political action by different groups in their regions. A high level of political mobilisation raises consciousness of concepts like rights, demands and accountability of authorities and make the people familiar with the basic tools for political action. In the case of this particular region in Uttar Pradesh, the only form of politics that had been prevalent was factional politics. Mobilisation of people had been absent for a long period. Even when such mobilisations did take place, women were excluded. There was something in the development ecology of this region that had enhanced alienation and atomisation at the cost of the spirit that holds the community together.

Rural Women's Camp at Brahamano Ka Vada

(Udaipur District, Rajasthan) - 19-21 October 1983

Faced with our lesson from UP, we decided to work in collaboration with Seva Mandir, Udaipur, in Rajasthan. Seva Mandir was an established voluntary organisation that earned a lot of prestige in Udaipur District for its educational and developmental work in rural areas. In 1981, it established a Women and Development Unit, which involved itself in adult education, health, appropriate technology and income generation activities amongst rural women. Beginning their work under the influence of Gandhian theories of social action and construction soon after independence, over the years, field workers of Seva Mandir had increasingly absorbed theories of participatory development. They regarded the village community (Samuha) as the primary decision making unit for initiating any developmental process. Within the Seva Mandir itself, a great deal of autonomy and initiative was conceded to its field staff. These were all explained to us in our official discussions with the Executive Director and President of the organisation.

The Women and Development Unit had welcomed our suggestion for collaboration, as they admitted facing some difficulties in designing appropriate income generation activities in some of the interior villages. They had tried handloom weaving and other handicrafts, but found themselves running into bottlenecks in raw material supplies and marketing. Discussion about our experiences in Ranibandh with wasteland development, livestock rearing and forest produce began a process of enthusiastic rethinking by the Women and Development Unit, since Udaipur was also facing massive problems of deforestation, poor land quality, drought, landslides, and seasonal migration, particularly among its tribal population. They welcomed our help in formulating viable economic activities in such locations, provided they were welcomed by the women. Initial discussions with the Tribal Development Commissioner in Udaipur and other district officials also offered hopes of obtaining state support.

In consultation with the Women and Development Unit, we initially selected Kherwara block in the south of the District on the borders of Gujarat. We visited five villages along with the members and staff of the Women and Development Unit, and had enthusiastic meetings with the women. We found that a majority of women in these hamlets were seasonal migrants to the cotton fields in Gujarat during harvests. Their men went, during other seasons, to work as well diggers. As in Ranibandh, the women identified seasonal migration as their worst enemy. It virtually reduced their family life to occasional meetings, exposed them to a great deal of exploitation - sexual and otherwise - and left their children and elderly people as victims of neglect.

When we talked of possible alternative employment in their own areas and offered the example of their counterparts in Ranibandh, the women jumped at the idea of wasteland cultivation, preferably with fodder trees to support livestock. This area was full of skeletal cattle roaming the countryside, looking for grass among brown mounds of earth, with not even a speck of green left anywhere. We also discussed the possibility of planting oil-bearing trees, which were being advocated by the Tribal Development Commissioner as a commercial proposition. The women were fully prepared for collective activity and offered to search for plots of wasteland in their own villages.

After this preliminary investigation, we went to the block headquarters to meet the field staff of Seva Mandir in a jubilant mood, looking forward to a quick finalisation of arrangements for holding the camp a month later. To our utter surprise, we ran into extremely serious resistance to the idea of organising any activity separately for women. According to the field staff, all activity had to come out of the village and external intervention was uncalled for. Secondly, all such initiation of new ideas had to come from the Samuha. We asked whether women attended the meetings of the Samuha, and were told that they did not because the norms of rural Rajasthan did not permit this. That was why it had been necessary for the Women and Development Unit to form the women into their own groups for adult education and other activities. If women never attended the meetings of the Samuha, how could their needs receive priority or even consideration? According to the Kherwara team, the basic problem was poverty, which the women shared with their men. We also asked, did not women form a part of the Samuha and could they not voice a demand of their own? At this point, we were told that the team would consult the Samuha and let us know.

Two weeks later, letters from the women's groups in the five villages that we had visited, informing us that they had identified plots of wasteland and were waiting for us to help them in the next steps, were forwarded to us by the Kherwara team. The team's position, however, remained unchanged and in the context of the internal organising principle of Seva Mandir, the CWDS and the Women and Development Unit had to recognise that we could not force the issue further.

It was in this context that the Women and Development Unit selected Brahmano Ka Vada - a village within 15 kms. from Udaipur city. The primary criterion was the positive attitude of the local field staff. All the organising responsibility for the camp was taken by the Women and Development Unit of Seva Mandir, while our role was only advisory.

In the earlier camps, we spent a great deal of time building awareness, identifying and analysing core problem areas, and assisting the women to work out the necessity for collective action. In this case, all this was not necessary, as the work of the Women and Development Unit with the thirty five women who came from three villages had already covered this ground. It was therefore, possible to concentrate, in more concrete terms, on specific types of potential employment activities, which preliminary research had

identified as possible in the ecological, social and economic conditions prevalent in this area, and to bring in experts in each of these activities to discuss their requirements, risks and potential gains with the women directly. The ensuing dialogue revealed the gaps in the understanding of the pragmatic realities of village life which existed in many cases between technical experts and rural women.

In the first day's discussions, the women described the work that they do on the maize and wheat crops in the area which kept them busy for six months. Some women had started growing vegetables, mainly tomatoes, between the main crops over the last four years, but profits were marginal. They could sell a head load of tomatoes for Rs. 5/- in the city, but bus transport cost them Rs. 2-3. Most of the women came from marginal farm households and had to supplement their income by wage labour on others' land or in construction, quarrying, road building and earth work. There were significant wage differences between men and women in all these activities. Some women owned small quantities of livestock, mainly goats, but declining fodder sources presented a major problem. Nearly all reported supplementing family income by the sale of fuel wood and fodder collected during lean seasons, but deforestation was making this increasingly difficult. Here again, the returns were marginal. A head load of fuel wood fetched Re. 1 from the contractor in the forest areas, but upto Rs. 5 in the cities. Castor plants grew wild in this area and some women earned from Rs. 0.50-1.00 per kg. by collecting, drying and selling these to contractors, but lack of alternative markets left them totally vulnerable to exploitation by contractors. Deforestation had affected their livelihood as well as their daily lives. Twenty years ago, there were abundant forests. Now trees had become scarce and women spent three hours a day hunting for fuel and fodder and wondered what the situation would be in another three years. One woman who had attended a recently introduced demonstration of an improved stove, however, said that with the new stoves the fuel could be made to last a little longer.

The majority of the population was tribal and was governed largely by customary law rather than the personal law of the major religions. The Tribal Panchayats, and Councils of twelve caste Panchayats played a powerful role in the social and political life of the community and the personal lives of each household. Tribal women were less affected by purdah. We did notice, however, that every time a man from Brahmano Ka

Vada entered the camp, the women of that village immediately covered their faces.

The women's discussion of their work round the year revealed that even during the six months that they considered themselves unemployed, they were actually engaged in a variety of activities. While livestock required some work throughout the year, activities like castor seed collection were seasonal. They had heard that dairying was a profitable occupation, but when confronted with the comparative economics of supporting goats and cattle, they immediately recognised that cattle would be a wrong choice in their declining fodder situation, what with the possibility of having to pay high fines to the forest department for the grazing of cattle on forest land. This led to a broader discussion on declining forest resources in general and ended with the women emphatically supporting the idea of recultivation of wastelands for fuel, fodder and other income earning plants.

When they heard a Professor of Botany from the Udaipur Ayurvedic College describing the various medicinal plants that could be grown on wasteland in this area with a little initial care, there was an extraordinary response. The Professor had begun by saying that such plants had commercial value, and his college would be prepared to buy them. The women were, however, even more keen to get him to tell them of the uses of such plants. They started to tell him of the cramps, headaches, backaches, and fevers which were common in their families, particularly among women and children. When he said that some of the herbs that he recommended would be useful in dealing with such ailments, the women practically mobbed him. They were going to grow these plants if he would promise to come and teach them their uses.

A few women put forward the suggestion that they should start rolling bidis and making matches, as they had heard that these industries provide large scale employment for women. They knew that the Tendu⁹ leaf needed for rolling bidis was available in the forest. However, they dropped the idea after learning that (1) tobacco would not be very easily available in the area; (2) the forest department was unlikely to favour lopping of trees on the scale required to support a match industry; (3) there were serious health hazards endemic to both the industries, especially for women and children; and (4) the nature of the contract industry in bidi manufacture was highly monopolistic, exploitative and yielded only a pittance to the worker producers. Would it not be better to go for something with growing

demand and shrinking supply like fuel wood and fodder, especially in the face of their own difficulty in access to the dwindling forests? Discussions brought up the linkages between denudation of the forests, soil erosion, drought and reduced productivity of the soil. The women confirmed this through their own life experiences.

“Earlier we tribals had the right to forest produce. Now these rights are given by government to contractors, who use us only as labourers”.

The women heard the experience of the Ranibandh Mahila Samitis in some detail and were encouraged to take up issues relating to forest policy, marketing of minor forest produce, access to forests and grazing lands, and collective access to wasteland. They decided to raise these matters with government officials when the latter came to the camp, instead of seeking employment as wage labourers on road construction.

On the second day, they had a dialogue with the Tribal Development Commissioner on a whole range of issues connected with the forest. Afterwards, there was a detailed discussion with the poultry expert on the advantages of large-scale rearing of better breeds (who lay more eggs), design of poultry sheds, use of bird droppings as fertilisers, and link-ups with an Udaipur based cooperative which would deliver the special feed required by van and pick up and market their eggs in Udaipur. The Tribal Development Commissioner emphasised the economy of large-scale production and said women could do this work much better than going to the fields.

The women asked a lot of questions, and concluded by rejecting the idea of large-scale poultry units and the use of foreign breeds suggested by the expert. They felt that they would not be able to protect the birds from insects, lice, and poisonous lizards common in the area, and laughed at the idea of being dependent on a van to deliver special feeds, since access to roads were so bad, specially during the rainy season. They also rejected the idea of sending their eggs by van as they would all break on the way. They preferred to stick to the indigenous varieties of birds which fetched a considerably higher price at the Udaipur market than the foreign breed. The marketing co-operative was a monopolistic structure geared more towards the needs of the urban market than those of the producers. The women felt that they could increase the production of the indigenous

variety, continue to transport both birds and eggs to market by bicycle as they do now and demanded government's subsidy for this purpose.

The discussion on sericulture, which the State government was trying to introduce in this region, was equally lively. Some probing questions put by the women revealed that cultivation of mulberry trees required irrigation and relatively good soil, and would mean conversion of present croplands to mulberry. For this reason the women rejected the whole idea.

By the end of the second day, the women's priorities were clear.

- (i) they liked the idea of planting medicinal herbs as a source of both employment and better health as well as knowledge for their families;
- (ii) they wanted to increase poultry production of the indigenous variety and increase goat rearing, provided they could increase fuel and fodder cultivation on wastelands.

They were also interested in improving their access to other minor forest produce and trading in them without the intermediacy of contractors. It was found that one LAMPS (of the same type as in Ranibandh) did exist in one of the three villages, but functioned only through contractors. In their discussions with the Tribal Development Commissioner they referred to the West Bengal experience and demanded that women's groups should be allowed to become members of LAMPS as the West Bengal Tribal Development Cooperative Corporation had permitted already. The Commissioner promised to investigate the possibility and to assist the women to become members. He also admitted that there was a considerable amount of non-agricultural land available for redistribution.

On the last day, the Additional District Magistrate (a young IAS officer who had not yet lost his enthusiasm), after listening to a summary of these discussions, excitedly informed the women that he had just received orders to allocate available wastelands to the Panchayats for redistribution. The women promptly showed him a large tract next to the area where the camp was being held, and demanded that this should be allocated to the Brahmano Ka Vada women's group. The ADM saw no difficulty in this and suggested to the Pradhan of the local Panchayat that he should initiate steps for this transfer.

A few other officials who attended the camp on the last day were distinctly surprised to find the women so articulate and argumentative. The women voiced their consensus that the camp had been a practical learning experience, much more useful than some of the training programmes in tailoring that a few of them had attended as individuals. They had enjoyed arguing with the officials and learning of new possibilities for employment generation. They had also gained from the experience of other women's groups which had given them new ideas.

Postscript:

The women of Brahmano Ka Vada began a struggle to obtain title to that plot of wasteland from that day, which ended in their favour only two years later. Tremendous resistance was put up by the Panchayat. The ADM who had supported the idea was transferred before the transaction could be concluded. The Tribal Development Department gave the women the green signal to start planting, in the hope that the land transfer would come through eventually. The women took this advice at its face value and planted. They were then told that the plot was not waste but pasture land. But their labour had already enriched it and the women were determined not to give up. Support for their demand came from very high sources in the national government and pressures had to be mobilised at many levels, before the final transfer of the land to the women's group took place in October 1985.

The struggle that the women had to undergo to achieve their initial objective had also helped in reducing the resistance to separate activities for women among some of the Seva Mandir workers. One of our colleagues learnt of this during a later visit to the Kherwara block. This experience helped us to understand the difficulties of breaking through the resistance of traditionalist thinking, even among persons committed to participatory development. The conversion that we failed to achieve in Kherwara became possible only when the same men were face to face with the struggles of women in Brahmano-Ka-Vada.

Conclusion

With all the commonality of the problems and the solutions that began to emerge during the discussions and the common organisational pattern that we adopted for these camps, each of them had a distinct flavour and personality. The smaller size of the groups in Brahmano-Ka-Vada and Tajpur made it easier for us to follow the internal dynamics that developed

during those three days, but there was a tremendous difference in the attitudes, perspectives or the priorities that dominated the discussions. The women of Tajpur were very conscious of their subordinate position in the family and the community, but pragmatically opted for concentrated work on employment generation before they could challenge the power of the institutions that subordinated them. The women of Brahmano-Ka-Vada did not appear to attach much importance to family oppression and did not identify class or caste oppression during the camp. Yet their choice of land as the basic asset to begin their collective action for development which, as they saw, would benefit not only them but the community as a whole, provoked immediate resistance and hostility from the local Panchayat and others.

The acquisition of wasteland by the Mahila Samities in Ranibandh had not provoked similar resistance from the local power elites, certainly far less than the mere possibility of these women forming an organisation or obtaining government support had done. Why this difference? Was it because the lands had all come from tribal households, who saw them as going to women from their clans and therefore, not a threat to the community? Or was it because the local elite had not understood the potential of wastelands as a development resource?

Bakewar represented the other extreme, where women did not feel they had any space to operate politically as a group. In purely emotional terms, Bakewar also taxed us the most. At none of the other camps did we feel the terrible burden of problems to which it was also so difficult to find solutions. At all the other camps, we had a feeling of excitement and we learnt a lot, but we also felt we were able to contribute something to the emergence of a new force. Bakewar churned us up much more; it did not permit the positive feeling of achievement. It was more a groping and a feeling of our own inadequacy and powerlessness.

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