

AIPWA Conference

Women Activists Speak Of Their Lives and Struggles

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Within the four walls of the houses, in collieries in Jharkhand, in power looms and match factories of Tamil Nadu, the tea gardens of Assam , the fields of Bihar , Andhra Pradesh, Eastern UP... generations of women have toiled day in and day out without uttering a complaint and without being heard.

But some of these women have broken the rules that confine women to silence. Defying their own hesitation and threats from home and workplaces, these are women who have chosen to protest and organise their fellow suffering sisters for their rightful share in the fruits of their labour. How did these women break the silence? What has been their journey? How did they negotiate the struggles within their own private lives, and link these to the struggles outside? Where do they trace the beginnings of their lives as political activists, and how do they see the women's movement? Probing these questions we met some of these women activists, who had come to Delhi, for the AIPWA Conference and recorded some of their stories. Needless to say these conversations were rather brief, and the unemotional, stolid narratives of these women only hinted the turbulent times they had survived, the sea-changes wrought in their personality by relentless suffering and the decision to be part of a struggling collective. Unravelling and recording these narratives of struggle is a task that would enrich the history of the women's movement and provide invaluable insights into the complex processes of movements and the people who make them up. But it is a task that must wait for a later date. For now, let's begin by meeting some of these activists of the women's movement.

Guni Oraon has come from Hazaribagh, Jharkhand. She is a wholetime of the CPI(ML), a leader of the AIPWA as well the Coal Mine Workers' Union (CMWU) in the Ramgarh region of Hazaribagh, Jharkhand.

She tells us that tired of the cruelty at her in-laws, she walked out of her marital house and started working in a colliery where her husband joined her.

The work in the colliery involved hard labour and her job included carrying head load of coal up steep slopes. In 1972-73, the Party functionaries who were underground at the time, were invited by her husband to take classes in their jhuggi. The men participated in the discussion and she would be a quiet observer. Soon she was asked to join, "I felt I must participate after all they were talking about the suffering that we were going through everyday." One question followed another and other women also joined in.

For several years she worked in the coal washery, where workers earned three rupees a day for 10 hours of back-breaking work. Encouraged by the Party, she began to motivate other women to demand a wage hike. The women took initiatives to lead a strike against their contractor and the men supported it. The 8-day strike led to heavy losses for CCL (Central Coalfields Ltd.), which was then forced to pull up the contractor and eventually their wages increased to Rs. 10 per day.

One struggle led to another, as the unorganised workers and especially the women faced constant threat of losing their jobs not to speak of victimisation at the hands of the employer. The struggle led to 260 of the workers (of whom 170 were women) becoming regularised as CCL employees over a period of time. After her son found employment in CCL, she left her job to take up full time party work in 1995.

Guni, today, finds the gains made by the unorganised workers for regularisation being eroded by the policies of retrenchment. No new workers are getting the jobs from which people have been axed.

She spoke of workers like her struggling to get their children educated. But even those who did a BA or MA are finding jobs far too few. When they do find jobs, they are similar to what their parents have done and get frustrated and leave them- but other jobs are difficult to get. Guni herself is illiterate; her son who has passed his intermediate exams, has worked at loading and carrying coal for five years before passing an exam that has allowed him to be a mining sardar.

She finds workers on the brink of starvation. They are forced to forage for coal in the abandoned mines- a job that the government deems as illegal. It is also dangerous but the options are too few for people who have no jobs. When caught picking coal, they get badly beaten up by the police. The women pick and clean coal from these mines, and the men carry the coal 70-80 kms on a cycle to sell it. They are paid Rs. 80-90 for a sack of coal and women only get to keep Rs. 20 to 30 of it. Often husband-wife teams are made so that they can keep the net income in the family. She feels there must be an urgency in organising the workers.

On a different note, Guni spoke of how she used to believe in god, talismans and totems. Today she smiles it off as something of the forgotten past. Her increasing involvement in struggles and discussions with comrades has led her to the belief that it is the hammer and sickle that matters and she prefers to wear a pendant of her dear tools around her neck.

"I'm a molkarin" said **Padma Sutar**, a leader of the Shramik Mahila Sangathan from Pune. A molkarin does domestic work, cleans clothes and vessels for a small wage in others homes. She speaks to us, "Women have been domestic workers for three generations in my family: my mother did the same work, and now my daughter too does it. I have worked ever since I was 9 years old.

Earlier, there were no laws to protect us, no fixed wages, and our malkins could arbitrarily kick us out. I remember the first time we began to challenge this. We used to work in housing societies - it was back-breaking work. One of us was kicked out of her job as was usual. We didn't know what to do, how to do anything, but we took out a procession. Comrades had guided us and that night, 3000-4000 of us women domestics gathered together. We demanded that those of us who had been sacked be taken back, and also a raise in wages, bonus and holidays. We didn't go to work for 4-5 days. When we did turn up with our demands, some of our employers gave two three rupees extra and claimed to have raised our wages. Others even set the dogs on us.

When we first began to organise, our men said 'What's the point? Nothing'll change'. But we forced the malkins to change their behaviour and have increased our wages. Earlier, we didn't know how to speak, we were shy to make demands. But why be scared? They're not doing us a favour. We demand our rights. Now the malkin has to pay, even if I fall sick and can't make it to work. We've struggled for gratuity, and bonus, which is now guaranteed and we also have an office now. Our husbands too realised women's worth. My husband worked as a waiter in a hotel. When he was thrown out, we women went and helped them organise and fight.

We have struggled against the local dadas for the right to our jhopadpattis. We are with the Lal Nishan Party, and we formed the Shramik Mahila Morcha - including both corporation workers and

domestic workers.

I still work in six houses, and earn about Rs. 3000. I've 3 daughters, two of whom do the same work, although they're educated."

Vandana Sitaram Wange like Padma is also a molkarin from Pune. She says it has not been so easy. "The malkins don't want us to organise. They ask us whether we belong to the Union or not before employing us. But we don't hide the fact. The malkin asks, 'Why increase your wages, your husband will just drink away the money.' We reply, 'Your husbands drink too, the only difference is that they drink in clubs!'

We used to be very vulnerable - we could be falsely accused of theft and beaten up by the police in custody. It used to be shaming to be seen in the police van. Now, if one of us is accused, we all go with her. Where the women are not unionised, there is a lot of police repression."

Suryamma, is from Veyampadu village, Visakhapatnam district in Andhra Pradesh and often sings songs. These are songs about people like her and their struggles.

She says, "I was born in a poor family and my husband's family is also poor. There was a struggle for ration card in my village and the Party was leading it. I joined the Party in 1990. The upper caste landlords have never treated us well. In my area there have been significant land seizure movements and women have participated in it in large numbers. In March 2002, I was arrested along with 23 others during a movement." Suryamma was a CPI (ML) candidate in the 2004 Assembly elections. She has also fought elections earlier.

T. Aruna 's father Tamada Ganapathy is a martyr of the Srikakulam movement and currently teaches in a school in Srikakulam for a living. She says, " I was a student in Class 3, when the comrades returned from jail. I didn't know my father since he had been away in jail. After my father was martyred, I became active in the movement. Comrades have guided and inspired me.

We've worked with agrarian workers. Women agrarian labourers do a variety of work in that region. They pick cashew nuts, 3 months of the year, earning only Rs. 30 a day. They sow rice, construct houses, work in mango gardens and brick kilns.

We've conducted anti-arrack struggles, and also anti-dowry movements amongst middle class women. All of us women activists refused to pay dowry, we have said 'Marry us for ourselves if you want, or else go!'"

E. Musli is from Kakinada in Andhra Pradesh and is an agrarian labourer whose family ekes out a hand-to-mouth existence. She's a district secretary of AIPWA in the Jagampeta mandal. She tells us how workers like her are organised into a sangam. She has been involved in the land struggle, has levelled and cropped the land and have retained control of it.

Sashtami Sona, is the daughter of tea-garden workers from Tinsukia , Assam . She says, "I had earlier been with BJP, influenced by their ideology. I became drawn to CPI(ML) when I saw it was taking up the economic issues of tea-garden workers. My parents were tea-garden workers, too and the work done by tea-garden workers is very hard. The fingers and hands become distorted and bruised, picking tealeaves. Wages are based on the number of bushes picked, and very often people are cheated of wages.

This community is so poor that most often, children have to drop out of school. Many women die of TB and other diseases. Our struggle there is for basic rights and self-respect. Women are paid less than men, and do not get the same respect as men. They are the target of sexual harassment and

assault.

Of late, there has been a cutback in whatever little facilities that workers enjoyed. There was an agitation demanding 20% bonus in the a bagan, and one woman died in the police firing. The owner of the estate forcibly cut off the hair of another woman.

We take up other issues too, one sixteen year-old girl, Pinky Choudhuri, was raped and killed by Durga Makhu when she was returning from school. We protested and took out a procession demanding punishment. In October this year, another girl died in a Professor's house in Tinsukia College, it was reported as a suicide. AIPWA protested against this incident as well."

Thanmozhi, is a power-loom worker from Namakkal District, Tamil Nadu. She is with AICCTU and is also with AIPWA organising power-loom workers. Thanmozhi works for Rs. 50 a day. Her family is dependent on her income and she gets paid only when she is working, at other times there is no income.

She told us about the 12-14 year-old children who work at the power-loom and are badly thrashed. Disturbingly, more and more children are working in the power-looms. Buses come to pick up children for work from their homes yet no cases have been filed against the mill owner. The families of the children are also desperately poor and sometimes even sell their kidneys to buy few more meals.

Her work is not easy nor is it easy to organise workers. The repression is severe. Every time anyone raises the slightest voice of protest, or tries to organise the workers, the management slaps false cases on them.

She says that union leaders' face violent assaults from the management. Since their shacks are also owned by the mill owner, the homes of those who protest are demolished. Thanmozhi herself had to shift homes 6 times. The Union Office too has been raided.

Mutthulakshmi, is a match worker from Sivakasi. She tells us, "These factories are extremely exploitative and dangerous. Wages have been Rs. 1.20 per unit. Workers earn between Rs.10-15 for a day's work. I met some unionists and gradually got involved with the work.

When people began to protest at these rates, the match factories began to adopt mechanisation. As a result in a factory, which employed 300 people, 200 were thrown out. These machines were supposed to reduce risk and increase efficiency, but we have seen it is extremely prone to catching fire. The factories are closed spaces, and any fire turns the place into a deadly tinderbox.

In the Rose Match Factory, 50 people between 15 and 18 years of age, were killed in one such fire started by this machine around one year ago. Two years back, the Standard Match Factory in Sivakasi had a similar fire, also induced by the machine, which consumed the lives of 10 children.

In the Rose Factory fire, those who died were poor from the Thevar caste; the owner from the Nadar community bribed the Thevar caste leaders, and the Union, which was led by CPI-CPI(M) also settled the issue with the management."

Kunti Devi is an agrarian workers leader from Jehanabad of Bihar. She too has laboured in the fields for many years. "I joined the Party at a very young age, I didn't understand politics much but there was terrible feudal repression in our village, in those days. The Bhoomi Sena would destroy our homes and assault the women. I thought, we should pick up arms and resist.

When I joined the Party, people in our society thought "awara ho gai hai" (the girl has gone wild). It

is a very backward society. For six years after I left home, there was a lot of resistance from my family. It is only now that my parental family is somewhat reconciled to what I do.

In Jehanabad, we started the Janwadi Mahila Manch, and later at the State level, the Pragatisheel Mahila Manch.

Women of this region continue to face violence at the hands of feudal armies like the Ranveer Sena, as well as at the hands of the police. So many women like Manju Devi have been martyred in these struggles. Women activists like us have several false cases slapped on us.

Women in the rural areas struggle to survive drought, floods and starvation. Criminals specially target women. When we raise these issues and demand implementation of the food-for-work scheme or the Red card scheme, the police fires on our peaceful demonstrations. Earlier the Congress conducted such repression, now it's the RJD which patronises the feudal armies and conducts state repression."

Bagmati is from Sonebhadra in Uttar Pradesh. "My 13-year old daughter, Sarita had joined the naxalites (MCC) and was killed by the police 3 years back. I was full of grief and tears. A comrade from CPI(ML) came to meet me and told me there was no point in shedding tears, why not wipe the tears of others instead. I joined the CPIML. The MCC does things like blowing up the police ranger; but they're not around to help to face the repression. It's the Maley which suffers and resists repression, so I became active in organising women, mostly agrarian labourers, in my area."

We ask her about her husband: is he in the Party too? She smiles warmly and says, "Oh no, he's very innocent and simple, he has no idea what to say to anybody. He's not active at all, but he's very supportive to me. He assures me, 'You let me wear the bangles and be at home, you be an ML leader, that Party fights for our dignity.'

There were many rapes in our village, and we organised a struggle against this. In Haraiyya village, when police forced their way into a house and pointed a gun at a young woman, and women picked up sticks and beat them up, chased them away. When the police slapped cases on these women, I went to the thana . The police said to me, 'What's all this, Bagmati, now you're getting the women to beat up the police?' I said, 'You wield rifles and lathis every day, why does it bother you so much that women pick up sticks just for one day?' They replied, 'This is not Bagmati speaking, it's the Maley speaking.' And I said, 'It's the same thing!'

The Samajwadi Party offered me a bribe of Rs. 20, 000. They said, take it, either join us or at least sit at home and stop being active in Maley. I told them, I'm not for sale. I can't keep quiet if a woman is being harassed or exploited, and I'm in Maley because I want to fight for justice and dignity. They told me, if you stay in Maley, you'll get killed. I said, 'If I die, I'll die fighting, I won't die like a rat holed up in the house.'

P.S.

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