

Indian women: of droughts and dowries

We are pleased to reproduce here some excerpts from 'Manushi' an Indian journal about women and society. Many BF women have been reading and getting excited about Manushi since it was first available in this country. It is a feminist journal of enviable quality in its own right and of especial interest to Western anti-imperialist feminists because it forms a constant challenge to our Western notions of how we perceive women and feminism in society.

Gender testing and the subsequent abortion of female foetuses received a lot of shock-horror treatment in the press (it couldn't possibly happen here!) and I was asked to comb Manushi for its version to provide a counter to the racist bias of the press. In the event, going back through old copies, I decided it would better inform people to read something to which Manushi itself gave prominence. Thus reproduced here are excerpts from a very long

article on drought and a short story about dowry. Each issue has an extended report on some aspect of women's lives in India that combines sound materialist analysis with feminism; women in textile factories, women in the cashew industry, women as agricultural labourers, women as teachers. These detailed studies show how women organise as well as how they are victims of an oppression that claims many of their lives.

Drought—'God sent' or 'Man made' Disaster?

WHY ARE YOU writing about drought? What has that got to do with women? This question springs as much from ignorance as from arrogance which leads men to assume that not just running the affairs of country but also messing around with the problems they have created, are their prerogatives—that women, if at all they are to speak, should confine themselves to 'women's issues' such as dowry and birth control. The attitude behind the question is one that pushes women into invisibility. Are not women 50 per cent of the poor, the Harijans, the Adivasis and of every other oppressed group in this country? Are not women in rural India affected even more disastrously by drought—the first to be hit by malnutrition and disease, the first to die, the first to be driven into destitution and prostitution? And is it not the women in the city who is suffering the worst consequences of scarcity and price rise—struggling harder and harder to make both ends meet on an ever-shrinking budget, standing in long queues to buy essential commodities, having to work harder and substitute with her labour and time for services she can no longer afford?

... 'It was her habit to feed me first then the children, and not eat enough herself.' This husband's epithaph underlies the traditions built into a male-dominated society, which forces women to see their own lives as less valuable and to think that virtue lies in self sacrifice. It means the slow starvation of the woman when the family is living at bare subsistence level. It is because of this devaluation that women accept as inevitable their double burden of work—paid and unpaid. Their daily toil begins hours before the men's 'working day'. The burden of fetching water for the family has, for instance, always been a woman's burden. So when all nearby water sources dry up, it is the woman who walks anything from 1 to 3 kilometres in search of water, scrapes it out of a river bed or spends hours scooping it out of a nearly dry well. Added to this strain is that of gathering some kind of edible matter or procuring it by longer hours of back-breaking labour.

Is it any longer true that famines and droughts are unavoidable 'natu-

ral' calamities? Or is this just another myth, like that of the 'natural' inequality between men and women? That the drought is not a mere 'natural' calamity is evident from the fact that even though Punjab and Haryana had no rainfall last year, they have, on the whole, maintained their level of production. This is because the rich farmers in these states are relatively better off and have irrigation facilities. Even in the worst hit and traditionally backward areas such as Madhya Pradesh, the rich farmers are able to afford private irrigation facilities and managed to harvest 60 to 70 per cent of the crop.

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

The drought has further accentuated the pauperisation in the countryside. The rural poor have been driven further into debt and newer forms of servitude, forced to mortgage or sell what little land they had left. Thus the stranglehold of the landlord-moneylender combine has been further strengthened and the process of concentration of assets and land—which has been going on steadily even while there has been so much talk of land ceilings and agrarian reforms—has been accelerated. Since all these problems—poverty, bondedness, lack of living wage, unemployment, landlessness—affect women much more since women bear the major brunt of poverty and exploitation, must not these issues also become women's issues? Can women not organise around these issues? What form should the struggles take? We have seen over the years, the inadequacy of protest demonstrations, submitting demand charters which are aimed at reforming the government and pressuring it into becoming more 'considerate'. But in places the poor and landless did try other means, as for instance the Harijans sub-division, who raided the local merchant's shop and distributed the grain equally amongst themselves. Perhaps this

and other instances point the direction in which the solution lies—in people realising and asserting the need to exercise collective control over 'privately' owned resources. (From an editorial in Manushi No 6)

Jewel

ONCE UPON A TIME there was a small brown toad who cried a good deal. And she cried a good deal because she thought that she was ugly. It is true that she had a few spots, but she was all right on the whole and more or less the colour of ordinary mud. She looked like a stone or a bit of the earth, but she persisted in crying. Her parents consoled her. 'You have a jewel in your forehead', her parents said, 'And that makes you precious and your very own'. 'But what if I lose it?' the little toad asked. 'That would be disastrous. The jewel is your dowry, and it makes you precious.' 'Oh', said

the little toad and burst into tears. 'Now what?' said the parents, 'Why are you crying?' 'Because I don't want to lose it,' said the little toad, 'That jewel is precious and my very own.' 'You won't lose it,' said the parents. 'But I will', said the toad, 'When I get married, I will lose the jewel.' 'That's different', said the parents. 'Why?' said the toad. 'Because then, my darling, it won't really matter whether or not you are precious.' That cured her, she had no tears. (Suniti Namjoshi in Manushi No 12) Manushi is available from: 147 Grove Lane, Camberwell, London SE5.

Iran: what to make of the Mojahedin

'In the name of God, we, the supporters of the People's Mojahedin Organisation of Iran, express our solidarity with the heroic struggles of the Irish people against the aggressive imperialist British regime...'

Many of you will have heard words along these lines from Mojahedin members active in campaigning work as the Iranian Solidarity Front or the Moslem Students Society. Their combination of religious zeal and militant anti-capitalist rhetoric has led to considerable confusion among socialists. Are they Marxists with an Islamic face or are they Islamic zealots who dabble in the language of Marxism when it suits them?

Since the People's Mojahedin (PMOI) are by far the largest organisation fighting the Khomeini regime inside Iran, and only they, along with their Kurdish allies, are in the position to overthrow this blood-thirsty tyranny, the question boils down to how and whether we solidarily with the main liberation movement in Iran.

Koran

The difficulty is apparent as soon as you turn to one of the PMOI's principal theoretical texts. It's called: 'How to study the Koran (hardly encouraging), but then it starts off:

'The age in which we live can truly be said to be an age of revolution and ideological struggles. Man-kind, throughout its history, has never really been free from social struggle. And until the time when society has reached a truly consistent unity, given the existing domination of society by the class structure, there can be no escaping the need for struggle and revolution.'

Readers who know Marx's Communist Manifesto will recognise the line of argument, if not the language, immediately. And so it continues—classic Marx and Lenin put into a language suited to Iranian conditions and merged with the spirit of the earlier revolutionary tradition of Shi-ite Islam. The final goal for the Mojahedin is a mix of Marx and Islam called 'towhidi' implying a

society where all contradictions of class, race, religion, nation, etc. (not sex, note) have resolved themselves in a final unity.

If you believe that Marxism must be adapted to the better traditions and mass culture of a particular society in order to thrive there, you will be impressed. But you may also be deceived. The problems are that most of the Mojahedin's members never become acquainted with the theory behind the organisation. They are recruited on the basis of how they feel about Islam (good) and the regime (bad); from there they get mainly military training. The PMOI's supporters in the West reserve their quasi-Marxist language for discussions with socialists. They are *different* according to whether they are addressing socialists, liberal organisations or religious groups.

This match between theory and practice extends to their strategy within Iran. Until June 1981, the Mojahedin tried to operate legitimately but after a period of ominous threats, the regime started to physically attack the Mojahedin. When a rally of nearly half a million PMOI supporters in Tehran was attacked by Khomeini's 'revolutionary guards', leaving fifty Mojaheds dead, the organisation decided to go underground and engage in military struggle. The date was 20 June 1981.

Rajavi, the leader, and ex-President Bani Sadr, left for Paris and joined forces, along with the Kurdish Democratic Party and a few smaller groups, to form the National Council of Resistance. Politically, the NCR sees itself as close to the Nicaraguan Government, with its blend of liberal bourgeois and radical forces.

Inside the country, the PMOI's tens of thousands of supporters began a series of military actions against the regime, beginning with a strategy of assassination against members of the Islamic Government and developing into a strategy of massacring Khomeini's revolutionary guards. As these had instituted a

Robespierre-style reign of terror against the Iranian people, this tactic proved extremely popular. Successful, too, as the Guards stopped wearing the uniforms that identified them, kept off the streets, and generally adopted a 'low profile' strategy.

In the process, the Mojahedin lost tens of thousands of members through torture, public execution or street ambush. The horrific tales led to a massive international campaign to expose the regime's excesses. Overseas support for the PMOI flooded in while inside the country they were able, they claim, to recruit several new cadres for each one murdered. The regime has since cut down on the massacres.

Bennite

What sort of regime would the PMOI and the NCR introduce in Iran? The programme is essentially Bennite: people's councils throughout industry and society, improvements in workers' wages and conditions, a national programme of 'socially aware' industrialisation, nationalised health service, investment in agriculture, etc. The programme would be financed largely from oil revenues.

Such a regime would be a marked improvement on Khomeini. There is nothing to suggest, however, that the new regime would be any more progressive or enlightened than, say, today's India or Wilson's Britain. After all, Bani Sadr, co-leader of the NCR, was President of Iran for nearly two years and consciously helped to *set back* the gains made by workers and the national minorities during the revolution.

Women

But it is the Mojahedin's attitude to women that puts them, for me, on the wrong side of the fence. While the PMOI's formal position is for the 'political and social equality of women and men', and while they campaign vigorously against the treatment of women under the present regime, they remain trapped very much within the reactionary Islamic anti-feminist dogma.

It emerged from a recent issue of their paper that women's place in the PMOI's 'classless society' would be one of the 'devoted mother' and the 'toiling wife' within a traditional family. There is no place for independence, control over her sexuality, lesbianism, the right to bare her head in public, to dress as she pleases, etc. Not much difference, in fact, from the situation for most women under Khomeini...

In conclusion, we could not but welcome a victory by the Mojahedin over the Khomeini regime, but this is largely a humanitarian concern. When it comes to politics, on the other hand, we cannot seriously consider engaging in solidarity work for an organisation which openly advocates the oppression of women. History teaches us, after all, that the position of women in society has implications for the position of all.

Ben Lowe

* For more on the PMOI's views on women, see 'Outwrite' No. 12.



Farzaneh