

EMERGING WOMEN'S MOVEMENT IN DANDAKARANYA

(Conference Report)

The Gadchiroli district conference of *Krantikari Adivasi Mahila Sanghatan* (KAMS)¹ is a momentous event in the history of India. The tribal women, one of the worst oppressed sections of our country, are resisting the oppression and exploitation unitedly and are meeting to take their struggle forward!

When we were told 15 days earlier that we would be attending this conference, we were as much overjoyed as were full of doubts - how do the adivasi sisters look like, how do we talk to them, how do they form women's *sangams*², how do they function, etc., We just couldn't wait for those 15 days to pass in our eagerness to meet them. For those of us who have been working in women's organisations in the plains, it is but natural to have interest in learning how the women are being organised in the forest. At last, the day has arrived.

By the time we reached the venue, it was bustling with delegates from various ranges. Every one came grinning shaking hands with us and greeting *Lal salam*. Except for a few *Dadas*³ who came to help with the conference, it was women everywhere. Some were cooking, some were cutting bamboo. Some others were removing stones from the venue and levelling the ground. We were left gaping while *adivasi* women were cutting the trees using axes with consummate ease and conducting every activity with tremendous self-confidence. Yes, there is nothing that cannot be done by the tribal women. Starting from ploughing the land, they participate in every activity. Every tree, no matter how strong and bulky, had to surrender to their axe. They prepared the bamboo within no time. The sharp contrast between the 'weakling' who is tied behind the four walls with no role in production, and the 'strong' *adivasi* who participates in productive work was quite apparent. Strong limbs and body, it was a majestic sight to watch them work and walk in a rhythm.

1. The conference was held on 7th and 8th of Oct.'91 in the deep jungles of Gadchiroli district (Maharashtra). 40 delegates from 9 ranges - Kamalapur, Ghatta, Kasanpur, Etapalli, Satgaon, Dhanora, Murugaon, Rajoli and Chichgarh- attended the conference. Adivasis comprise more than 50% of the population in this district. KAMS is rallying various tribes - Rajgond, Madia, Albi, Pardhan, Govari, Vatankani- and also non tribes belonging to Kapus, Netakani and also very backward migrants belonging to 'Uran' tribe under its flag. Presently there are 1000 KAMS village units are being formed and functioning.

2. Telugu equivalent for 'organisation'.

3. Tribals affectionately address the male squad members as *dadas* (brothers).

But our troubles started soon enough. Every time they say something, we ask the sisters who knew Madia language, 'what are they saying'. These sisters¹, who were quite well-versed in the language by now, used to reply in Madia and it was laughs all around. They used to make us say Madia words and laugh at our pronunciation. Seeing them we felt as if they owned the laugh of honesty. In fact, language did not come in the way of becoming close friends. For instance, all those from Ahiri knew Telugu but all of us used to converse with the help of eyes and eyebrows and gestures.

Though the conference was being held in the forest, the arrangements were as good as a city conference. Banners with attractive slogans adored the periphery of the venue. Bamboo benches were placed on all sides for sitting, stand to keep plates and glasses, kitchen and other racks, everything was made of bamboo. The entire venue was decorated with colour paper and flowers. Volunteers informed delegates where to wash hands, take bath, etc.

The much awaited evening has finally come. For singing and dancing, *adivasi* sisters may jump in their villages and streets without being asked but here were a bit shy to start. But squad members were already at it. Only beginning was difficult and once started, how long they could dance! That's what happened - the moment it began everybody swarmed there and joined hands. The *adivasi* sisters who are squad members were at the forefront - they apparently used to dance the whole night while still in their villages. It has to be seen to be believed how art springs up naturally and becomes a part of their life. Brothers, sisters, sangams, customs, traditions, struggles, martyrs - their songs, formed spontaneously, touched everything. They composed a song impromptu about the conference which ran like this: "Sisters! why did you come all the way from your villages and ranges? To attend the conference. Why did we form *sangams*? To fight against repression..." It continued on and on. Even those who were lying down with stomach ache, head ache etc. could not resist it and joined the dance, and were promptly teased for it. They just gave a wry smile as an explanation and continued with their dance. It is needless to say that we also were not spared from learning the song and dance and joining the group.

But even while watching all this, we were thinking that how many years of effort must have been behind this conference for which women came walking several miles from so many ranges, how many difficulties they must

1. Reference to women squad members who have come from plains of A.P.

have faced to draw out these women who, despite their role in production, were victimised by the patriarchal society, and how many types of traditions and superstitions they must have fought in the households and villages.

The Guerilla Squads as catalysts

True, all this has not come in a day, a month or a year. There has been a decade long effort behind this¹. There have been days when squad members cooked for themselves or just remained without food until they gained the confidence of the tribal women; there has been a long struggle to learn the languages; there have been innumerable *panchayats* (people's courts) conducted against feudal traditions; there have been progressive marriages after abolishing forced marriages; and, most importantly, there have been struggles by *adivasi* women to break the shackles of patriarchy in their homes and villages. Some were tragedies, some were victories. It is no exaggeration to say that the squad members, who stood by them through all this were more than their own brothers and sisters for these women. Their every word reflected the deep love and affection they have for the squad members.

The arrival of squad is a turning point in the lives of most *adivasis*. When the delegates in the conference were asked to talk about 'how they came into sangams and why', the narration of almost everybody invariably began with, "the squad came into our village. Then" Their speeches at the conference clearly reflected how the combination of squad's understanding and effort regarding women's organisation, and on the other hand, the struggles of those women which provided inspiration even to the squads, led to the formation of women's organisations.

Hurdles there were many

"*Dadas* came to our villages and stressed the need to form *sangam* and understand everything. We used to meet them without the knowledge of villagers. People at home used to say 'do you go with them? do you sully our honour? You are running in a young age, but you have to come back home, only people without any work roam around like that, why do you need all this', and all such things. But we did not listen. Sisters in the squad used to explain everything with patience. Now everybody understands and tolerates our attending meetings. We said 'we would join *sangam* and would not accept

1. The guerilla squads began their activity in Chandrapur dist. in 1980. (Before bifurcation Gadchiroli dist. was part of Chandrapur.)

forced marriages. In the beginning even some women opposed but now everybody is coming forward."

"Squad came to the village when we were quite young. We followed what the *dadas* said. Sisters taught us many things. Now we are forming *sanghams*. Villagers used to say 'do you go away if *sanghams* are formed? When three sisters offered to join the squad, they were beaten up by the villagers. But now all villages have *sanghams*. We came here to learn how to work more. Some people spread the rumour that sisters were going to join the squad. We beat up such people; That is the only way to shut them up. **Recently we also received military training.** Police came searching for us some times."

"We joined the *sangam* in spite of opposition from villages and warning that we would die. Earlier we were confined to domestic work and farm labour. After *dadas* came, we learnt many things and are progressing. In the beginning, when *dadas* asked us to join the *sangam*, we refused due to our ignorance. Gradually we understood the things and formed the *sangam*. We went to campaign for *sangam*. *Dadas* shared our joys and sorrows. Forest guards never allowed us to cut trees. After joining *sangam*, we could do everything. In the past we were told to remove blouses after marriage. *Dadas* explained and convinced us to resist the hated practice".

"We were not given food at home for joining the *sangam*. Our sarees were hidden to prevent us from attending meetings and campaigns. My mother jumped into the river threatening to die if I continued in *sangam*. Anybody will do that when they do not understand things properly. So it is necessary to make them understand. After that nobody will say anything except that we should be good and honest. When *sanghams* were formed in the villages, other women used to comment that it was nice for us to roam like this without attending household chores. Then we helped them in their work and explained things to them. After this, those who called us *loafers* came into *sangams* themselves."

Thus, several of them spoke. The essence of all their speeches was that formation of women's organisation was not an easy task but full of obstacles. It is not out of context to mention one thing here. When asked to speak, these sisters did not do it without hesitation. They were very shy, stuttered; some spoke with turned heads; some spoke without getting up; and some began and stopped in the middle. They said they were shy because they never spoke like this before. But even in the few words they spoke, there was lot

of clarity. They hesitated because of inexperience and not due to lack of clarity about the subject. This is a common problem faced by women from plains or forests as they were never allowed to participate in political matters in the past. However, the sisters who actively participated in *sangam* campaigns and activities, and who were members of range and district committees spoke boldly. Not only that, their political perspective and clarity of aim were crystal clear. Some of them are given below:

The Tasks

"We can face the police only when *sangam* is strong. What should we struggle for? We should fight for our *adivasi* state (reference to people's state but not a 'state' under this constitution). In the village men do not respect the women and treat them as mere cooks. We should fight against this."

"Our *sangam* is *adivasi mahila sangam*. Why did we form this? Because we had several problems. We are able to achieve demands only because the *sangam* is strong. Now we do not suffer the exploitation by forest department. We have right to cut the forest and cultivate land. Women in the villages have also become active. That is why police are attacking our villagers. But because of *sangam*, we could get our range district committee president (DAKMS) released when he was arrested. ... but will you go out and report our *sangam* has become very strong? Don't do that! We should still strengthen ourselves a lot. We must put in more effort. Earlier women were not allowed to come forward and speak out. They were discouraged to speak for being women. Sisters said if males could speak ten words, now they could say at least two. Now we are in *sangam* and learn several things and are capable of speaking."

"In our village, we beat up those who opposed the squads. Here the movement has advanced. Where we showed lenience our movement has yet to recover. If one village works hard, the neighboring villages also become active. Some drunkards jeer us saying 'are you the leaders?' We should not spare them. If we eat food and sing a few songs, it is not *sangam*. Politics should be taught. We should not feel we know everything, we should always learn new things.

"The squads told us to fight by strengthening the *sangam*. Our *sangam* became strong in the process of squads working for it. We should struggle without fear for land, for wage rate, for the sake of all. We should speak staying at the front. *Adivasis* have several problems like bad crops. All

these should be explained to the masses. We acquired some understanding about problems only in the process of struggle. We will know things only if we agitate. "

The Activities

Well, what are the activities of the women's organisations? What are the issues they take up campaigns, struggles and *panchayats* on?

They cover not only the customs and traditions that have been suppressing women, and the need for women's organisations but also the common problems faced by the tribals such as drought, rising prices, low wage rates of paper mills, leaf collection and road works, and Gulf war, too!

Customs and traditions are of several kinds - after marriage, wearing blouses is denied, only white sarees are allowed and women are made ugly; though women participate in all agricultural activities till the harvest time, once the crop is cut and gathered on the field, they are not allowed to come near, **that is, women have no right on the grains**; if daughter comes to mother's place after marriage, she cannot enter the kitchen, they are not allowed to eat eggs; in some festivals chickens and lambs are cooked and eaten exclusively by men; forced marriages are common. Thus, in the name of age-old traditions, women are placed under severe restrictions. So the activists and members of women sangams mainly campaign against these evil practices. But tribals cannot give up such customs all of a sudden. It takes fair amount of time and patience to change.

But it is the tribal women only who take up these campaigns and struggles. They move around the villages in small groups and hold meetings on various problems and influence the people through speeches and songs. Forced marriages, child marriages, insults - all such problems are brought to the activists by the women. And they are resolved immediately in a *panchayat*.

Facing the Repression - Paramount Task of the Sanghatan:

However, tribal women now have another problem - facing the police repression. Today, tribals have become conscious of their rights, now they are not afraid of forest officials, contractors and government officials. They are fighting and getting their wage rates enhanced. They are waging continuous struggle against exploitation. The exploitative government naturally can not tolerate this. So it resorts to barbaric repression which intensifies by the day. In such a situation, the task of safeguarding their

husbands and brothers from the dragnet of police came before the women. And they have been performing this task with heroic stoicism and **proving in practice that masses are the real fortress of the party.** In several villages they resisted and beat up the police and saved the *sangam* leaders from imminent arrest. In several instances, police had to beat a hasty retreat unable to face the women power - Rajaram, Guruja, Emalikasa, Regulavai, Gundera, Kothakonda, Jepi, Kobra menda, Edgikvi, Allapalli, Sursondi and several other villages have witnessed the incidents of women facing the police from the forefront which will remain etched in the history of the women's movement.

In the conference, facing the police has naturally become the central topic of the speeches by delegates. All of them said 'we must safeguard the *sangam* activists by staying at the front. If we are united, police cannot catch our people! Women's organisation is at the forefront in fighting the patriarchy manifested in customs and traditions, the exploitative forest officers, Bengalis¹ and contractors, and the state repression such struggles bring. Moreover, they have also succeeded in gradually eradicating the patriarchal attitudes prevailing in their own men. In the past, *dadas* never allowed women to come near the squad. 'You ask other people to join the *sangam*, but if you don't allow your wife and sisters to join, how will others come forward', with such arguments, they were convinced and allowed women to come into the squads. Earlier, if female squad members spoke to village women separately, *dadas* used to say 'are you turning them against us?', they used to insult women by saying 'your task is cooking only' thus they discouraged the women in several ways. But today the same *dadas* say 'how can we have a procession without sisters?'. **They are recognising the role of women in the revolution.** Such a transformation was possible only because these women stood firm even in unfavourable conditions. Thus they are once again showing that patriarchy can be eradicated mainly through the conscious participation of women in social, economic and political activities. But this does not mean patriarchy has completely disappeared but the process has already begun. That is why, there is so much history behind the district conference of the women's *sangam* today. And there is so much effort behind it which brought consciousness to the tribals, one of the most backward sections of the country.

However, it is also true that where DAKMS (*Dandakaranya Adivasi Kisan Mazdoor sanghatan*) has been strong, those areas have seen formation of strong women's organisation. It has to be said that the squads and their encouragement and effort are behind this.

1. Reference to those settlers (from Bangladesh) who are hand in glove with the exploiters.

Conference ends- Determination doubles:

The conference went on for two days at **com.Swarnalatha Nagar in com.Kursam Rajakka Hall**. Silence was observed to commemorate the martyrs and delegates formed lines to hoist the red flag. Flag hoisting, singing songs, observation of silence, speech by the chief guest, messages from Forest committee and DAKMS, discussion on manifesto, speeches of delegates, elections and resolutions - this was the programme for two days. Delegates listened attentively while sisters and brothers explained various things. Some literate women even made notes. Of course, all the four nights, there were dancing, singing and various other cultural items. Only on the last day, a heavy downpour which dashed our hopes of dancing into the full night. In the last, Forest committee members spoke about the impending repression and the need to strengthen the *sangam* to face it. With this the highly inspiring two-day conference came to an end. All the delegates left with the determination to spread the details and resolutions of the conference, and the aim to form *sangams* in new villages.

As they were leaving in small groups, we felt, 'is the conference already over? We should have spent more time with those sisters sharing all their experiences'. But **this conference is just the beginning of the women's movement that is spreading all over Dandakarnaya**. In the process of their work in the villages, they will forever face new experiences, victories and defeats. But seeing those sisters, we cannot but feel that they would defeat any obstacles and rest only after liberation is achieved. To this end, they are 'arming' in every sense of the work. We have no doubt in saying the final victory will be of the people.

Storing their smiling faces, words, struggles and experiences carefully in our hearts, and resolving to strengthen the working class women's movement in the plains in aid to their struggles in the forest, amidst exciting slogans and emotional atmosphere, we took leave from each other with *lal salaam*.

Leaving the conference, our hearts were filled with affection for those *adivasi* sisters who are building steps to the history of women's movement in India, without being conscious of it.

- Latha
-Sujatha