

The Sathins' Struggle Continues

Newsletter March 1997

The very existence of the Sathin in the Women's Development Programme (WDP) in Rajasthan is now under threat with the Government of Rajasthan showing indications, of closing down the sathin model of women's development.

The Chief Secretary of Rajasthan, ML Mehta indicated in a letter to the National Commission for Women, that the Rajasthan Government intended to shift from the Sathin model to an integrated model of women's development. Several false allegations against the Sathins were made: that they were no more effective as workers, that they were now preoccupied with getting a status of government servants etc. The government claims to be so concerned about women's development as to do away with the Sathins, who, according to them, have become an obstacle in the way of 'genuine' empowerment. These developments reveal the attempt of the Government to disband the collective strength of the sathins who have unionised themselves into the Sathin Karmchari Sangh since 1993 and have been struggling for recognition of their work, increase in wages and better service conditions. Although the Rajasthan Chief Minister himself requested the National Commission for Women to study the impact of the sathins's work, the CM, has refused to take cognisance of the NCW report (1996) which recommends continuation and expansion of the sathin model and raise in their meagre honorarium of Rs.250/-pm.

Consolidating its strength, the Sathin Karmchari Sangh staged a dharna in Jaipur, jointly with other mass organisations. On Feb. 3, at a public meeting in Delhi, women's groups, trade unions, and democratic rights groups expressed their solidarity with the Sathin Union and reiterated the need to collectively resist attempts by the 'State to devalue and exploit women's labour. A memorandum was submitted to the Chief Minister of Rajasthan with the following demands:

- Continue and expand the institution of the Sathins, and increase the number of Sathins.
- The Sathins be given a just wage, of at least minimum wage.
- Departmental exploitation of the Sathins be immediately stopped, and retrenched Sathins be reinstated.

The invisible empowerment component of the Sathins be recognised as work and the corresponding skills and knowledge be given due recognition.

- Village issues be given priority, and the Sathins be given full support from the department
- The process of deciding the future of the WDP be transparent and involve the Sathin.
- The recommendations of the National Commission for Women be immediately implemented.

Subsequently, the Rajasthan Government has backtracked somewhat. ML Mehta has come out with a statement that the post of Sathin will not be abolished, and Seema Bahuguna, Director, Women and Child Development (Rajasthan) has clearly stated that Sathins will not be removed from their posts. However, there is a need to keep up the pressure, and demand that the Rajasthan Government be accountable to these women workers who are carrying out the multifarious tasks allocated to them by the Government. Exploitation of women's labour in the name of 'voluntarism' and 'women's welfare' must end, and workers in all community service programmes must get at least minimum wages, security of service and other benefits.

You can support the Sathin Union by:

- Sending them letters of solidarity: c/o 408/2 Anasagar Ghati, Ganj, Ajmer 305001.
- Writing to the Chief Minister of Rajasthan urging that the demands of the sathins be met.
- Publicising the issue.

Taken from the Saheli (a women's resource group) website:

<https://sites.google.com/site/saheliorgsite/solidarity/the-sathins-struggle-continues>