

THE WOMEN'S QUESTION



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(Summary of the back-ground paper (Marathi, 48 pp.) prepared for the deliberations of the Women's Conference convened by the Shetkari Sanghatana at Chandvad, District: Nashik, Maharashtra, on 9-10 November 1986.)

FORMULATION OF THE PROBLEM

It has taken the Shetkari Sanghatana full six years since its inception in 1980 to form a palpable women's front and to organise deliberations on the problems specific to women. This, despite the fact that the women's participation in all the agitations led by the Sanghatana was unprecedentedly massive; and that the numerous instances of peasant women's heroism in the agitations have become part of the folklore.

Even in the early days of the Sanghatana, the rural women had, somehow sensed that, unlike in other village meetings, the talk here had a direct bearing on the meagre contents of their pots and pans. They made themselves increasingly bold to participate in the meetings in equal right.

Though the women's question has been on the agenda of all the Sessions of the Sanghatana, starting from the very first at Satana in January 1982, the deliberations concerned ways and means and need to mobilise women to strengthen the agitations rather than problems specific to women. The women who thronged there, themselves, did not seem to look upon the Sanghatana for the redressal of their own specific grievances.

The speeches and the literature often referred to the crushing burden of both domestic and field labour borne by the women. There is no sin like being born a girl in a farmer's house, it was emphasised. The sympathy at the humanistic level was unmistakably present but the women's question had not been faced squarely and integrated into the schema of Sanghatana thought.

programme for economic development : removal of artificial obstacles to development principally in the form of unequal exchanges. It holds progress as the natural state of affairs and stagnation as a perversion. The existence of the women's question - is it then a natural phenomenon or a contrived one ?

-The one-point programme of remunerative prices, will it also take care of the women's question? Unlike in the Marxist camp, there was no illusion that the women's problems will be automatically resolved in the men's utopia. In fact, it was admitted without reserve that the benefit of the remunerative prices may not reach the womenfolk particularly those belonging to the category of domestic labour. This was remarkable because the remunerative prices were supposed to entrain a multiplier chain reaction benefitting all sections of the agrarian community.

- Sanghatana had drawn a new line of significant internal contradiction Bharat vs. India. Bharat was so defined as to include the refugee farmers on urban foot-paths but not the opulent leader-farmer from the country-side. Where, then, do women belong ? Women in "India", are they to be

bracketed with their exploiter menfolk or along with the other exploited in "Bharat"?

- On the basis of its contention, that historically the surplus-value has been generated through unequal exchanges rather than through the exploitation of the industrial workers, the Sanghatana propounds a radically different view history. What has that view to say about the situation of women ? Has the subordination of women been always there or did it spring up at a particular time in history ? what is the genesis of the women's question in the system of The thought of the new peasant movement?

These are, principally the questions which had to be resolved. The Marxist understanding on these subjects held sway for almost a century and then collapsed both on theoretical and practical levels. The leftist feminine movement became a loose appendage of the workers movement. The new feminist wave raised brilliant questions that could not be ignored but remained essentially a metropolitan phenomenon.

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COLLECTIVE EXERCISE

The new peasant movement has a historical and theoretical responsibility of pronouncing itself on the women's question. An exercise was, therefore, initiated in early 1984 which will come to fruition only at Chandvad, in November 1986. The exercise was carried out in three stages:

- Several rounds of 'exchange of experience' meetings consisting of the widest possible spectrum of the rural and semi-urban women, informal in character to start with, followed, by the more formal group meetings at Halli-Handarguli, Selu, Washim, Katol and Kopargaon;
- A conclave for theoretical discussions at Vaijapur in August 1986; and
- An intensive workshop at Ambethan in September 1986.

The present draft is essentially a product of the collective thinking in which participated hundreds of peasant women in vast majority without even the knowledge of the three 'R's.

EXCHANGE OF EXPERIENCES

The 'exchange of experience' meetings confirmed the worst fears about the discriminatory treatment meted out to the female of the species, literally from the womb to the tomb. The discrimination covered

property rights, education, quantum of work—both domestic and in the field, wage rates; clothing, medical attention and even the basic nourishment. Some notable observations were as follows:

- The fact that most rural women work outside, for hire or otherwise, does not appear to confer any significant advantage on them. Whenever EGS work becomes necessary it is, in majority of the cases, womenfolk that are sent. Working outside, unlike in the urban middle-class milieu, is not considered a privilege but more like a disagreeable burden.
- In the communities where the bride-price rather than the dowry is customary, that fact does not improve their familial situation.
- The quasi-impossibility of economic capital formation on the land makes any legal right to parental or other property a farce for most women.
- Almost all marriages take place below the minimum age prescribed by the law for the bride.
- The girls' education is interrupted at the slightest possible provocation or even in the absence of it.
- The incidence of wives being driven out by the husbands/in-laws without any legal formalities is very high. The life of such women is particularly pitiable.
- Considerations of security appear to outweigh all others in arriving at the decisions about women. Joining school,

continuing education, freedom of movement, marriage, arrangements for domicile particularly in the contingency of separation, appear to be particularly governed by the overriding consideration of security, frequently to the detriment of women.

- In the post-independence pattern, economic development is, as a general rule, accompanied by domination of a coterie of new-rich who more often than not wield political power - direct or indirect. The coterie may consist of ordinary docile farmers of yester-year, suddenly turned co-op barons, or project personnel brought from outside. The pattern of behaviour of these groups introduces a new element of insecurity and entrains as a consequence, lowering of the quality of life of the women in many cases.

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MAJOR DETERMINANTS

Understanding of the women's situation, in any given period or society, needs to be based on certain stipulations.

- The biological differences between the male and the female of the species are not such as to make subordination of one of them at all times and in all places inevitable or such as to dictate any particular pattern of gender division of labour. This includes the differences relating to the reproductive and nurturing functions, the height and weight differentials, proportion and distribution of fat, the consequential differences in manoeuvrability and combativeness, the effects of hormones on the control-centres of sex/violence, the differential in the verbal as against visual-spatial faculties et al.

- Any presumption or conclusion to the effect that there exists an innate conflict of interests or disharmony of attitudes between the two sexes would appear to go against the combined knowledge of all natural and social sciences.

- It is doubtful, if the exclusive non-chemical, non-seasonal character of human sexuality is inborn or acquired. The feasibility of forced sex, on the other hand is given by nature. Any modification in these features could significantly alter gender relationships.

- The length of time (absolute and relative to the actual life-span) of the period of gestation, the period of the physical and socio-economic maturity of human offsprings could be equally conducive to modification of the women's position.

- Yet another determinant could be the absolute and relative levels of male-female hormones. These may vary with time, place and even race. Over a period of time, the trend may be towards feminisation of men and masculinisation of women. Alternatively, a basically androgynous model may be subject to cycles of alternate polarisation and harmonisation. The secular long-term trends may, however, be over-shadowed by the hormonal effects of immediate events. In a war-like situation, men may behave more true to the macho type, while in times of prolonged peace androgynous models may be adhered to by both the sexes.

- For reasons rather vaguely understood, male and female proportions in any population tend to be around 1:1. Any significant modification of the situation can drastically alter the whole social fabric including the mores of the society.

- Peace and technology neutral to physical force appear to favour women in determining their situation vis-a-vis the men. War-like situations and technology putting premium on physical strength does the same for the men.

- Socio-economic factors far outweigh the biological factors in determining familial relationships. These latter appear to be modified in such a way that the family can help meet the requirements of the society about the type and quantity of manpower.

MARXIST VIEW

Marxism attributed the gender division of labour to biological considerations. With the springing up of surplus that became private property, house-work lost its public character and became a private service. Men anxious to ensure bequests of their property to genuinely biological heirs imposed restrictions on women which will go away with the abolition of the private property and socialisation of domestic services. This, in a nutshell, is the marxist position on the women's question.

The presumption of some sanction in Biology to the house-work being allocated to women has been debunked adequately by both the Biologists and the Anthropologists. Whether the house-wife's work constitutes productive work or not is a question that has put the tenuous labour theory of value in serious jeopardy. The admitted exploitation of women by their own menfolk has put in question another central pillar - the concept of class. The Gorbachev and Deng Xiaoping have definitely loosened the peg of universal socialisation on which was supposed to hang the destinies of womanhood. Both Biology and Economics have failed the Marxism on the women's front.

NEW FEMINISM

The spokesmen of the new women's movement have displayed remarkable scholarship, innovation, imagination, lack of inhibition with occasional rumbustious streaks - quite

understandable when pent up anger gets a sudden release. A biological materialism was matched with the marxist economic materialism. Patriarchy was posed as a counterpart of capitalism - "...a familial-social, ideological, political system in which men - by force, direct pressure, or through ritual tradition, law and language, customs, etiquette, education, and the division of labour, determine what part women shall or shall not play, and in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male."

Functions connected with mothering or more accurately the cultural connotations of mothering were identified as the causes of women's miseries. A doctrine that rape was a conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a state of fear, was pronounced very boldly. Women should be able to live independently of the men. To this end the Gandhians had advocated the right of celibacy to women; Feminists advocated lesbian patterns instead. The error of the discipline of Psychology in creating pervert stereotypes of male and female personalities was brutally exposed and a concept of androgynous personality postulated. But the qualities acquired by women during the period of their bondage were held by others to be precious in themselves particularly in the era of modern technology to come.

But the presumption of an innate conflict as between the male and the female of the species - without any foundation by itself - created a logical problem. If the subjugation of women is accepted to be due to the reproductive functions and hence in existence from the beginning, of the times, it follows that the

state of affairs will continue to the end of the times. Everything that has an end must have a beginning. If the patriarchy has to have an end, it must have had a beginning.

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GENESIS

Any system comes into existence to meet the specific requirements of the epoch. Alternatively, an odd system may settle down as a result of the application of sheer brute force before which all resistance crumbles. Engels attributed the inception of the patriarchy to the emergence of private property. While the anxiety of the males to ensure proper inheritance is understandable, it is very difficult to imagine why the women, who enjoyed at least a status of equality until then, would surrender without resistance their privileges?

Marx had, very correctly, identified the importance of capital formation in the historic evolution of any society. Preoccupation with the European situation made him conclude that the surplus value arose from the industrial labour. The cycles of expanded reproduction were supposed to trace the path of growth - a rather civilian, almost an accountant's concept of the advancement of capital. The actuality was much more brutal and uncouth. The surplus value in our epoch arose from the agriculture and the savings from the land have been expropriated almost since their emergence.

The modus operandi of the expropriation has been changing over time: plunder by bandits, plunderers-become-monarchs imposing taxes, slavery, bonded labour, inadequate wages, money-lending, land-lords, religious and caste

systems and finally, inadequate prices. The history of human societies is the history of the evolution of the instruments of expropriation of agricultural surplus. No sooner had the man settled down to an organised agriculture in the expectation of an assured bounty, than started a bloody epoch replete with loot, plunder, attacks, invasions, colonialism each with its quota of maimings, murders, rapes, burnings, et al. Men were butchered and women taken away along with the loot to help maintain the rate of reproduction. The proportion of men in all the societies, victors as also the vanquished

remained depleted. Thus sprang communities in which male offsprings were a prized possession and marshal arts the highest accomplishment. Whole villages and individual houses were designed like fortresses. The boys were brought up to be able to face the attackers both physically and psychologically. Girls were taught to be faceless reproducers of progeny and docile boosters of the testosterone levels of their menfolk and future protectors by a hundred arts, words and privileges.

As a consequence, whoever the winner, the women on either side were invariably the losers. The womenfolk of the victors had probably some consolation in the use of plundered finery but in all other respects their plight was exactly like that of the women of the vanquished. The vanquished communities lost not only their wealth but the testosterone levels of their menfolk so assiduously built up. They now had to be built up starting from the bottom with depleted means. This invariably meant progressive sinking of the feminine status.

Since the day man as hunter and fruit gatherer and primitive peasant ceased to be the exclusive factor of production and the capital made its appearance, expropriation invariably accompanied by direct or indirect violence has been the principal economic activity. Family as an institution has been shaped so as to be able to produce the required number of expropriators according to the current mode.

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ACTION PROGRAMME

Thus we have, on the one hand, the slavery and the hardships of the women in "Bharat" and slavery with a fringe of comforts for the women in "India". The prosperity of their menfolk has come out of the war against "Bharat". As a consequence cities are getting filled up with destitutes from the countryside. Law and order are collapsing and with increased insecurity, it is once again women that have to pay the price of liberty.

The patriarchy which emerged from the wars of plunder, has survived for such a long time as to appear not only a natural system but even 'the' system. Armed conflagrations had become relatively rare in the last forty years which fact had fanned some hopes for the liberation of women. But the storms appear to be gathering once again. The economics of plundering "Bharat" is now coming home to roost.

The only hopeful sign is the new peasant movement envisaging formation of capital sans plunder. If the women remain dormant at this crucial juncture, they will find it difficult to regain what they have lost over a millenium. The peasant movement promises an opportunity for a women's restitution.

The women would need to act at three levels:

- 1) to secure rights as farm-workers in respect of conditions of work - employment,

hours of work, rest, maternity, creches- and to have the cost of these amenities included in the calculation of the cost of production.

2) to secure rights as women - education, greater control over their own destinies, rights of property and maintenance that would simultaneously ensure dignity and honour and above all the freedom from insecurity.

3) to strive to secure, along with the women from "India", their rightful place, by virtue of the great qualities they have developed over a millennium of slavery, in the new era of technology neutral to physical force..

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RESOLUTIONS ADOPTED BY THE WOMEN'S CONFERENCE

AT CHANDVAD DIST. NASHIK ON 9 - 10 NOVEMBER 1986

1.1) RESOLUTIONS ON DROUGHT

This women's conference,

noting with concern that,

droughts and famines ravage only the farming community, who, though in no way responsible for the performance of the monsoons are forced to the hard work of breaking stones every time the crops fail;

though droughts constitute a national calamity, other classes, traders, merchants, industrialists, industrial labour and officials live oblivious to its existence;

regrets that,

this penal servitude in the form of relief work is a direct consequence of the anti-farmer policies of the government which leave no surplus with the producers even in a year of bountiful crops;

considering that,

stone-breaking in the guise of relief work has persisted for over a century and a half and the end is nowhere in sight since the droughts are aggravating yearly;

regrets

the conditions, fairly common, in which one Akkabai Rajput of Malpur village in Dhule had to be delivered of her first child while working at a stone-breaking centre,

This women's conference, therefore, resolves that

Resolution 1.1.1

from this year onwards, rural women of Maharashtra shall refuse, come what may, to break stones as relief work. Should the circumstances force them to stone-breaking at relief centres, they shall match

into the cities and avail themselves of the plenty and abundance there.

Resolution 1.1.2

even as Employment Guarantee Scheme work, they would not accept to break-stones or to undertake earth-work. The state government should provide rural working women with the equipment for mechanised spinning, processing for agricultural produce etc. under the EGS and stop forcing them to perform the kind of work normally reserved for those under penal servitude.

1.2) RESOLUTIONS ON WATER

This women's conference,

noting that,

large tracts in the country, including Maharashtra have been ravaged by drought, that in districts like Dhule, Nasik and Ahmednagar scarcity of water has persisted since almost a decade; and that while there is no scarcity of food-grains, the nation is threatened with Ethiopisation;

considering that,

though fetching of water through arduous physical labour over long distances is almost exclusively the women's labour, the problem of water supply has been examined hitherto from the men's point of view;

noting with appreciation

the examples set by the villages Asakheda and Vaghale where on account of the inspiration provided by the Shetkari Sanghatana, the villages made arrangements for pumping and supply of water without any state subsidy;

resolves that;

Resolution 1.2.1

Shetkari Sanghatana should direct all farmers that in every village where water has to be fetch from a distance of over 200 metres, the villagers should alleviate the sufferings of the womenfolk by providing water supply systems without waiting for government grants on the Asakheda-Vaghale pattern.

Resolution 1.2.2.

Wherever water is required to be purveyed in tankers etc. or by means of projects like dams, canals etc.

immediate steps should be taken to bring political pressure on Zilla Parishad or other concerned bodies.

Resolution 1.2.3

The nation water emergency is principally attributable to the erroneous economic and technological policies of the government. National requirements of technology need to be examined from the women's point of view. Augmenting percolation of water, developing ground water accumulation, economising water through sprinkler, drip etc. systems need encouragement on a war footing. This conference condemns that the new technology is being encouraged in consumerist luxuries instead.

1.3) RESOLUTIONS ON WAGES AND WORKING CONDITIONS

This Women's Conference,

expresses

serious concern about the condition of women toiling in agriculture

and in particular that,

1) they are required to give as much and sometimes twice as much time for the housework as for the work in the field. Their work-day consists of 15 to 16 hours;

2) in a family living in agriculture, a clear demarcation of house and field work is impossible. Most of the house-work is auxiliary to the field work;

3) women are given arduous and complicated tasks which are in consequence considered as light-work. While even the simple items of work performed by men are considered as difficult or skilled jobs meriting prestige and higher remuneration;

4) introduction of mechanisation and modernisation affects women adversely since they get pushed to more complex and arduous jobs or to house work;

5) they are denied even the basic welfare benefits universally recognised for working women. e.g. maternity leave, crotch, mid-day meals, sick leave, toilets, retirement benefits etc.;

6) they are generally paid wages 40 to 60 percent less as those paid to the men.

This conference, therefore, resolves that,

Resolution 1.3.1

as an urgent measure, women agricultural labourers should get a special remuneration in consideration of the auxiliary work they perform at home and in compensation of the welfare benefits denied to them;

Resolution 1.3.2

Wherever women give a full day's work they should be paid extra remuneration amounting to 50 percent;

Resolution 1.3.3

Wherever women work for only part of the day they should be paid a full day's wages for 5 hours of work;

Resolution 1.3.4

these extra compensations should be incorporated in the cost calculations of the agricultural prices and costs commission.

2.1) RESOLUTION ON COMMON CIVIL CODE

This women's conference

noting that,

the proposed common civil code has been, for sometime, the subject of a wide spread national debate and that the debate is being dominated largely by the denominational dogmatists and by the self-seeking politicians,

resolves as follows:

Resolution 2.1

- 1) according to the constitution, the Indian Republic is a secular state, which means, 'equally sceptical of all religious dogma' and not a state englobing the dogma of all faiths;
- 2) elaboration of a common civil code includes neither disputing the relative merits of various religious, civil systems, nor imposition of one religious code to all the peoples, nor a hotch-potch melange of diverse religious stipulations;
- 3) the common civil code must represent a well-integrated schema based on equality, justice and reason;
- 4) every citizen of the Republic should be a-priori ~~considered~~ considered as being governed by the common

civil code; however any citizen or his guardian should have the possibility of opting for the civil system of any of the established;

5) the official judicial system should not intervene in civil disputes between citizens opting for a given religious code;

6) the disputes between citizens opting for a single religious code be decided according to the common civil code, should any of the parties take recourse to the official judicial system.

This Women's Conference requests the government to prepare a draft of the common civil code elaborated above.

2.2) RESOLUTION ON PROVISIONS RELATING TO

WOMEN'S PROPERTY IN THE COMMON CIVIL CODE

This women's conference,

in view of,

- 1) the disputes relating to properties of daughters;
- 2) the wide prevalence of the doury system;
- 3) the large incidence of women's murders for reasons related to doury, property etc;
- 4) the need to provide economic support to the divorced, widowed and abandoned women;
- 5) the unsatisfactory system of payment of alimony; and the humiliation of the separated women in accepting alimony from the erstwhile spouse.

resolves as under:

Resolution 2.2

- 1) the irrationality of the existing system pertaining to the women's property is a major cause of atrocities on women;
- 2) the law relating to the property of a family should be drawn on the analogy of a partnership firm. Every female, by virtue of birth in the family, should obtain rights to property on equal terms with the male issues;
- 3) every woman should have the right to exercise her right in parental property at the time of her marriage, i.e. she should be able to claim at

the time of the wedding, her share in the father's ancestral property - movable and immovable on fully equal terms;

4) Similarly, in case of divorce or separation, she should be able to claim equal share for herself as also for the children in her custody;

5) in view of the present social condition of women, all consent letters, signed or otherwise authenticated by women that have the effect conferring benefit on the parental / in-laws' household, should be initio void;

6) our sisters, the tribal women, have been denied the advantages under the Hindu code. This conference supports the writ-petition filed by the Satya Shodhak Keshtakari Mahila Sabha on this subject.

2.3) RESOLUTIONS ON EDUCATION OF GIRLS

This Women's conference,

express serious concern that,

- 1) the number of illiterate women in the country is on the increase;
- 2) the number of girls dropping out is augmenting;
- 3) the difference between the educational levels of the boys and girls is widening.

and resolves as follows :

Resolution 2.3

1) the structure and the system of education should be elaborated keeping in view the requirements primarily of rural women;

2) lack of educational facilities, the economic incapacity of parents and the risk involved in the movement of school going girls constitute the major hurdles for the education of girls.. Hence demands immediate implementation of the following programmes;

a) special arrangements should be made in village-schools for special tuitions to girl-students upto at least three classes higher than those normally offered at the schools;

b) comprehensive use should be made of various system of external education e.g. correspondence courses, television network and video courses etc.

3.1) RESOLUTIONS ON INSECURITY

This women's conference,

expresses serious concern that,

1) the poverty, particularly in the rural area is worsening;

2) the economic policies of the Government are the prime cause of the immiseration of the villages and of the concentration of wealth in the hands of an urban minority;

3) the countryside is dominated by the 'Gunda' leaders enriching themselves by squeezing the co-operative societies etc; while the cities have come under the influence of the criminal 'Dadas' based in slums;

4) consequent upon the economic policies of the state the law and order situation in both villages and cities has deteriorated, insecurity is in the air and alcohol, drugs, crime, Matka and Smuggling dominate the scene, the worst affected are the women for whom even moving about freely has become well nigh impossible, statistics of attacks on women and of rapes is on the increase, the criminals have the protection of the police and the politician, and the principal threat to women is posed by the police and the politician, in brief atrocities on women has become an integral part of national political culture;

5) the incidence of atrocities on women in the communal riots- all engineered by politicians is growing, and the criminals are sheltered under excuses of political expediency.

this women's conference,

therefore condemns this humiliation of the womanhood

and resolves that,

Resolution 3.1.1

All crimes against womanhood- individual or collective - must be fully investigated and the criminals brought to books.

Resolution 3.1.2

Special courts of law and special women protection officers endowed with comprehensive political powers

should be established in each district to pursue cases of crimes against women. so that women can live with a minimal degree of security.

Resolution 3.1.3

the most glaring example of the collective humiliation of womanhood is provided by rapes on large number of women during the communal riots in Delhi, between 1st and 4th November 1984, it has been publicly contended that those responsible for these atrocities occupy important positions of power, not only have the criminals not been brought to books but even the report investigating these crimes has been suppressed by the Government.

This women's Conference

warns the Government that,

unless the criminals of Delhi riots are severely punished before 31st December 1986, thousands of women from Maharashtra will stage an indefinite picketing demonstration of the Prime-Minister's residence in order to give expression to the feelings on the subject of the women in the whole country.

3.2) RESOLUTIONS ON SOCIO-ECONOMIC SITUATION

This women's conference,

condemns

the government policies concerning socio-economic development and their anti-farmer, inefficient and corrupt execution;

and expresses concern that

women are the worst sufferers of the present situation; scarcity of water makes their life miserable, drought/famines force them to inhuman famine-work; inadequate provision of schools, dispensaries, transport and means of production affect their lives, particularly harshly.

This conference, therefore resolves that,

Resolution 3.2.1

Women should prepare themselves to march into the cities as and when directed by the Shetkari Sanghatana in order to seek food, water and shelter instead of going to relief works for stone-breaking and earth-work.

Resolution 3.2.2

In accordance of the directive of the Shetkari Sanghatana all women should cease to use Rajeevastras. Purchase of Rajeevastras even on occasions like weddings should be eschewed. They should not patronise shops stocking Rajeevastras and participate whole heartedly in the bonfires of Rajeevastras.

3.3) RESOLUTIONS ON POLITICAL SITUATION

This women's conference,

notes that,

all the political and parochial forces are driving the nation to rapid ruination and the first Indian Republic is on the point of collapse;

the worst victims of the present system include not only those earning their livelihood on Agriculture, but women from all sectors of the country;

nothing in sight promises a political alternative that will establish a decentralised democratic structure,

the whole countryside has come under the sway of Gunda leaders thriving on political power and economic institutions;

the resultant insecurity has been, in particular, harmful to women.

This women's conference,

therefore resolves that

Resolution No.3.3.1

with a view to breaking impasse all women in Maharashtra should unite to secure power upto the district level, and with this end in view, all women's organisations should come together and present a unified list of women candidates in the forthcoming elections and requests the Shetkari Sanghatana to support this initiative on the part of the women in the forthcoming Zilla Parishad and the Panchayat Samiti elections.

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CHANDWAD DECLARATION (10 November, 1986)

we,

a hundred thousand women, assembled here at the historic township of Chandwad, on this the Tenth November Nineteen Eighty-six;

belonging to different age groups, various castes and diverse religions;

by and large unfamiliar with even the first of the three 'R's, in vast majority of rural origin and in quasi-totality toilers on fields or elsewhere;

in brief, womanhood of the nation in microcosm;

DECLARE

ourselves as fully human beings in equal right with anyone else; and

DEMAND

to be treated as such, in accordance with our individual merits and irrespective of all attributes conferred by the accident of birth-race, colour, caste, creed, faith, language, wealth and, above all, of gender;

SWEAR to free ourselves

of all the bonds that kept us in chains for ages;

of all the sufferings, suppressions, subordination, humiliation and exploitation that has been our lot for a millennium; but above all

of fear- the principal tyranniser of womanhood; and

DECLARE our resolve equally

to liberate the male of the species from the tyranny of the quixotic mask of warped masculinity that they have had to bear for equally fully a millennium.

WE are convinced that,

Whether they realise it or not, women's bondage is fully as much men's misfortune. Women's alienation brings in man's estrangement with self. If womanhood symbolises pathos, manhood can not but represent uncouth bathos. Women's liberation and men's liberation are only two sides of the same coin.

WE have waited

for over a millennium to be able resume normal life. When our foremothers discovered the bounties of agriculture, they thought they were on the threshold of abundance and peace, leaving behind, all the miseries and uncertainties of the food-gathering and hunting days.

Unfortunately the first bountiful harvests witnessed also the swarms of bandits descending to plunder. Thus commenced the new barbaric age, popularly called civilisation, replete with loot, pillage, massacres, abductions and destruction. Faced with the contents of the Pandora's box she had discovered, the women had no alternative but to acquiesce in the reallocation of tasks. Whole communities got restructured to defend themselves against attacks - some from near others from strange and distant lands. Faced with the prospect of extermination, men had the primary interest in doing the actual fighting. Woman, marginally handicapped in physical combats due to her child bearing and rearing functions, had to take the supportive auxiliary role. In times of combat, she had to be hidden well protected with other objects of plunder. The proportion of men in all societies, victors as also vanquished, was threateningly depleted. Thus sprang societies in which male offsprings were a prized possession and martial arts the highest accomplishment. Boys were brought up to be prepared, - physically as well as psychologically, for combats. Girls were conditioned to be faceless reproducers of progeny and docile boosters of the testosterone levels of their protectors by a hundred arts, words and privileges.

As a consequence whoever the winner, the women on either side were invariably the losers. The womenfolk of the victors probably had some consolation in the use of the plundered finery. But in all other respects their plight, as women, was exactly like that of the women of the vanquished

What appeared in the beginning as a temporary response to an emergency has since then settled down as a system so universal as to appear natural and eternal. The plunder has settled down as the most remunerative activity in forms increasingly refined and sophisticated. Bandits became political powers and turned monarchs and later even republicans. Outright pillage was replaced by taxes, slavery, corvée, money-lending, feudalism, castes, religions, imperialism and finally by the native colonialism of the post-Independence era. But the sophistication is only a thin veneer; they all, essentially, are forms of brutal plunder. Communities continue to be in defence formations and women in bondage and suppression. The restructuring of roles in the new barbaric age has brought about a split and polarisation of the basic, balanced and androgynous human personality. Women are now caricatured as epitomes of all the soft and submissive or passive and negative characteristics. Male models, on the other hand, exaggerate the harsh and the uncouth, the positive and the bellicose. Both the female and the male of the species stand simultaneously perverted.

The situation in this country of ours was graver than anywhere else. No other country on the globe carries so many scars of internal conflicts and successive invasions. The condition of the women here in the 19th century marks perhaps the lowest ever and anywhere. Practices like 'sati', tonsuring of the widows, total prohibition on education provide only a few glimpses of the inhuman injustice to women. The political stability brought by the British made possible some quick and sweeping reforms. The legislative advances continued even after the Independence and India has perhaps the most formidable

not to be derogatory to widows,
divorcees and abandoned women, and
in particular to the victims of
atrocities;

not to depict women as comestible
articles overemphasizing the erotic
and the coquettish; and nor to
suffer to see them thus depicted; and
finally

not to let pass unchallenged any
injustice to women.

WE, a hundred thousand women gathered
here at Chandwad, finally

SOLEMNLY RESOLVE

to carry the message of this
declaration to the women in all the
nooks and corners of the globe, with
all the strength and means at our
disposal.

CHANDWAD,
10 NOVEMBER

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WOMEN'S QUESTION

This booklet contains

- i) Summary of the background paper (Marathi pf 48) prepared for the deliberations of,
 - ii) Resolutions adopted by,
 - iii) The declaration made by,
- the Women's Conference convoqued at Chandvad Dist. Nashik (Maharashtra) on 9-10 November 1986 by the Shetkari Sanghatana.



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