

Women's body seeks ouster of Secretary

by Usha Rai

NEW DELHI, March 7

ON THE EVE of the International Women's Day, the National Commission for Women, the premier organisation for putting women's agenda on the national scene, finds its working stymied by the lone male bureaucrat, T. N. Srivastava, who joined the Commission just two months ago.

The fact that the new Secretary, an IAS officer of Madhya Pradesh cadre, could not vibrate well with the Commission's chairperson Mohini Giri, and some other members was known from day one. But things came to a head yesterday when Srivastava circulated agenda papers for the monthly meeting of the Commission without the approval of

Giri.

So angry was the lady that despite fever she dashed off to the Cabinet Secretary, Surrinder Singh, this morning and sought the replacement of Srivastava. Accompanied by Dr Sarla Gopalan, secretary, Women and Child, she pointed out that a single male — unsympathetic to women's issues — had frustrated the Commission. While Dr Gopalan supported Giri's right to see the agenda papers, the Cabinet Secretary was non-committal but sympathetic.

Giri, who was never consulted about the appointment of Srivastava, has made it clear that she would prefer a woman officer and preferably someone committed to women's issues. Two names that were suggested earlier — Sati Nair of AP cadre and C.P. Sujaya of Himachal cadre — have been moved again for

the important post of secretary.

Srivastava, when contacted, said he had "excellent relations" with the Chairperson. On the drama over the agenda papers, he admitted they had different views. "However I told her she could see them." Asked if he wanted to move out of the Commission, he said "no, certainly not. But there are people who are interested in coming in. I am only a civil servant."

Giri, who has been running the Guild of Service before being appointed to the Commission, is a dynamic person. As an NGO she is not used to bureaucratic delays and red tape. Eager for results in her new avatar she has been organising mahila adalats to bring speedy justice for women whose cases for maintenance etc have been stuck in judicial backlog in various courts.

She has been talking to women prisoners and has a commitment to get 5,000 of them released by the end of the year. She has also opened dialogue with sex workers and is trying to work out a code of ethics for police personnel dealing with them.

At the Commission she found lack of basic infrastructure and facilities. The former secretary of the Commission, Gujarat cadre Annie Prasad had excellent rapport with Giri, but had to leave.

The new secretary, instead of facilitating the work of the Commission, she felt, was constantly putting hurdles.

Three consultants — Menon who was assisting Member Ganga Potai on tribal welfare; S.Patel on socio-economic issues and Jain — have quit the Commission after Srivastava

joined it. The consultants, retired government servants, were asked by the new Secretary to sign the muster at 9 a.m. and report to him once a week.

The working of the Commission and several projects were stalled by one man, says Giri. Rajasthan Chief Minister Bhairon Singh Shekhawat had asked the Commission to study the wages of the Sathins, the grass root workers of the Women's Development Programme, and recommend a decent wage commensurate with their work.

The Commission consulted a Nehru fellow and JNU scholar who has done extensive studies on the sathins. The report was to be submitted early this month so that necessary allocations could be made in the State budget. But in the agenda papers prepared by

Srivastava for today's meeting he has said the consultancy should not be awarded to the JNU scholar because he has doubts about her competence.

Former Law Secretary Ramiah was asked by the Commission to prepare an Ordinance on rape, particularly child rape, which studies show is on the increase. But the Secretary has been delaying release of funds for the project. Prof Mukhopadhyay's report on the rehabilitation of prostitutes, the media consultancy work and appointment of Devaki Jain as adviser to the Commission for a second term have also been stalled.

At today's meeting of the Commission it has been recorded in the minutes that the agenda papers did not have the approval of the Chairperson.

Plans afoot to wind up Mahila Samriddhi Yojana

By Usha Rai

NEW DELHI, March 8

Even as Prime Minister Deve Gowda doled out over Rs 2 crore as cash awards to States, zilla parishads and panchayats for micro-savings by women under the Mahila Samriddhi Yojana, moves are afoot in the Planning Commission to wind up the scheme as it has been found cost-ineffective and difficult to administer.

Yet at Vigyan Bhavan on the International Women's Day today a great hoax was being played on the nation by projecting it as yet another of those marvellous schemes that have swelled up resources of rural and tribal women who never have a paisa of their own.

In fact the Secretary for Posts, Mr R. U. Prasad, announced with great pride that 2.24 crore accounts had been opened and there were Rs 243 crore in these accounts. What Mr Prasad did not disclose that this was the amount that had been collected over three years and three months. In fact it meant there was little more than Rs 100 in each account.

It was in August 1993 that the

then Prime Minister Narasimha Rao announced from the ramparts of the Red Fort the scheme that will have the coffers of rural women swelling. For every Rs 100 a woman deposited in a post office, an annual interest of Rs 25 was assured.

The maximum interest that the Government was willing to give was Rs 75 in a year.

Conceptually the scheme was brilliant. A woman could open an account at the post office with just Rs 4. The interest on it would be Re 1. After a year she could draw from the account or even take a loan against her deposit. It would empower her.

But often women had to walk miles to get a post office to deposit their meagre savings. In some areas there were no post offices. Sometimes, after trudging all the way women would find the post office closed. So they had to plan and come again to deposit, may be just Rs 2 they may have saved that month.

Corruption, as happens with all Government programmes, also crept in. It is learnt that in an effort to get the maximum benefits out of the scheme, some women opened two and three accounts. Patwaris

were given targets on the number of accounts that should be opened.

Based on an evaluation by the Planning Commission it has now been decided to dump the scheme in the Ninth Plan or from this April. Not enough accounts had been opened. In fact, for saving of Rs 240 crore over three years, the Government was paying the Postal Department over Rs 100 crore for services rendered.

While the Department of Women and Child wants the scheme restructured, others have suggested that the Mahila Samriddhi Scheme should be converted into a thrift scheme. Women's thrift groups have been doing extremely well.

But at Vigyan Bhavan the show had to go on. Assam, Tamil Nadu and Madhya Pradesh received Rs 3.5 lakh, Rs 2.5 lakh and Rs 2 lakh respectively for opening the maximum number of accounts. Chandigarh and Pondicherry received Rs 1.5 lakh and Rs 75,000. For maximum deposits in accounts Himachal, Goa and Gujarat received Rs 3.5 lakh, Rs 2.5 lakh and Rs 2 lakh respectively. And the Union Territories Daman and Diu and Lakshadweep bagged Rs 1.5 lakh and Rs 75,000 respectively.

NCW takes up cudgels for sex workers

By Usha Rai

NEW DELHI, May 10

Six workers from Hyderabad's famous red light area, Mehboob ki Mehendi, have appealed to the National Human Rights Commission to help reconstruct their lives. They were thrown out of their homes by the police and locked up in the State Rescue Home and the Women's Central Jail last month.

They have also brought to the notice of the Commission that they were forcibly examined for HIV and sexually transmitted diseases (STD) on the instructions of the Andhra High Court.

The harassed and hounded sex

workers — Mamom Begum, Asha, Rani and 16 others have appended their thumb impressions to the appeal to Justice Venkatachalaiah. "Since we can neither go back to Mehendi nor to our relatives' homes who (the relatives) are well placed in society, where do we go from here" is the question they have raised.

Mrs Roda Mistry of the Indian Council of Social Welfare and Mrs Mohini Giri, chairperson of the National Commission for Women, have taken up cudgels on behalf of the sex workers. The incident has shocked the NCW which has been working on a comprehensive programme of rehabilitation of sex workers. Even as it is trying to

build bridges of understanding, sex workers in Goa and Hyderabad have been abused, Mrs Giri said.

The NHRC was informed that the raid was conducted after a public interest litigation (PIL) was filed in the High Court. It said that minor girls were being employed for prostitution in the area. Mrs Mistry points out that the Labour Liberation Front which filed the PIL does not exist in Mahaboobnagar as claimed. However, Mr P. N. Swamy of Hyderabad is known as a PIL professional, she has told the NHRC.

Mrs Mistry has also stated that there is only one house, that of Gunna, who had underage girls.

These girls, she has told the Commission, were brought by 7 to 10 police persons themselves. "We are against minor girls being forced into the profession. The police are doing it and none from the police department seem to be concerned," the letter states.

The High Court, on the basis of the petition filed, appointed Superintendent of Police, Mrs Tej Deep, to conduct an inquiry and submit a report to the Court. On the pretense of collecting information about ration cards, a police team visited Mehboob ki Mehendi, took pictures of the women and collected a lot of information. Then the women were dragged out and beaten black and blue alleged-

ly for not giving all the information.

The next day five women were produced before the judge but since they were threatened if they spoke up, they remained silent.

The letter to the Commission indicates there was an attempt to grab the land where the prostitutes were housed since it has become prime property.

The tests conducted on the women show that 15 are suffering from venereal diseases and 21 are HIV positive (one of them a minor girl). The report to the court suggests that the women should be tested again after a month for they could be carriers.

NCW seeks housing for sex workers

By Usha Rai

NEW DELHI, April 22

In a bold attempt to help women who want to come out of prostitution but are unable to do so because they have no other means of livelihood, the National Commission for Women (NCW), has approached the Ministry for Rural Development to extend the Indira Awas Yojana or rural housing scheme to them.

In fact the chairperson of the NCW is seeking to extend various existing Government schemes to these women and their children. While approval has been given for starting 150 Integrated Child Development Schemes (ICDs) projects in the red light areas of West Bengal, the proposal to provide free education to their children in Kendriya Vidyalayas, Navodaya and other residential schools is pending in the Human Resource Development Ministry.

In return these women have assured the NCW that they will not

misuse the shelters or turn the Indira Awas houses into brothels. About 150 women between the age group of 15 and 40 from Secunderabad, Nagar, Tennali and Tirupati in Andhra Pradesh, Calcutta and Madras have expressed their desire to lead a normal life.

They want to start life afresh but want an assured income of about Rs 2,000 a month to have at least a semblance of the life style they have been used to. So the NCW has suggested a link-up of the Indira Awas Yojana scheme with skill training and job orientation.

With the help of NGOs identified by the NCW, the women could be trained in handicraft making (baskets, mats, ropes, leaf plates, toys); food processing and agriculture, horticulture, sericulture, running a shop, dairying, electronics, garment manufacture etc. A marketing federation to ensure sale of the goods manufactured by them, are a part of the package deal envisaged.

"Mrs Mohini Giri, chairperson of the NCW, said there were 15,000 girls employed in the sex

trade in the Sonagachi area of Calcutta and they had 20,000 children. The mother of an 18-year-old girl has been pleading with the NCW to save her daughter from being sucked into the seamy business of flesh trade.

The former secretary for Women and Child Development, Ms Sarla Gopalan, had cleared the setting up of ICDs projects in and around brothels to provide nutrition, free education and health care facilities to others and children in the red light areas of the country. The pilot project in West Bengal will be extended to the rest of the country. Four NGOs — Sanlap, Samaritans, Jana Shiksha Prachar Kendra and Women's Interlink — will implement the ICDs project.

At a meeting with the NCW, prostitutes from different parts of the country have complained of police harassment and demanded that they should be provided identification card. Now the NCW is working towards health insurance for sex workers and their children.

The health card provided will also serve as an identity card.

Welfare Boards, on which there will be representatives of NGOs, lawyers, doctors and others, will seek to sort out the various problems confronting sex workers whether it is shortage of condoms or legal and medical aid. Sex workers are expected to pool their resources at the rate of Rs 4 a month to hire professional help as and when needed.

The NCW is particularly concerned about child prostitution. While its long-term objective is legislation to abolish child prostitution, for the time being it has sought the help of those in the trade to check child prostitutions.

UP Chief Minister Mayawati has been asked to set up a bureau to check trafficking of young girls from Nepal to India through UP. The Chief Minister has not yet responded to the Commission's request, but Mrs Giri is hopeful that local administrations will respond to her request to set up vigilance cells at bus stops and railway stations.

Lawyers stand on family courts decried

By Usha Rai

NEW DELHI, April 23
The Delhi State Commission for Women is disturbed by the attitude of lawyers towards the setting up of family courts in residential colonies.

"It is after a great deal of struggle that the Chief Justice of the Delhi High Court has agreed to our request for setting up family courts," the chairperson of the Commission, Mrs Kamla Mankekar stated. "All attempts to block the much needed, progressive family courts is unfair," she stated.

Lawyers at Tis Hazari courts abstained from work today because Section 13 of the Family Courts Act debars them from appearing in these courts. They are also against the move to set them up in residential areas.

The family courts are to be set up in July and the Delhi Government has submitted a list of sites for these courts. Senior members of the State judiciary are said to have applied for appointment as family court judges.

The Delhi Commission has pointed out that women have been demanding family courts after they were recommended by the Committee on the Status of Women in 1975-76. It took Parliament almost a decade to pass the Family Courts Act and another decade has lapsed in trying to set them up. "Now the lawyers are obstructing their functioning," Mrs Mankekar stated. The need for such courts where women may seek social justice in case of marital disputes, violence against them can hardly be over-emphasised, she stated.

At present the civil courts dealing with such cases take years to decide the cases, be it pertaining to divorce, maintenance, custody of children, financial deprivation or other such issues of social injustice, the Commission has pointed out.

The Delhi Commission which has been spearheading the demand for family courts since it came into existence a little over a year ago has pointed out that one of the main objectives of the family courts was to take family and marital disputes away from the intimidating and congested environs of the traditional courts and police stations and solve them in a congenial atmosphere.

Mulayam's 'vulgar' remark

Mayawati approaches NCW for redressal

By Usha Rai

NEW DELHI, July 3

UP Chief Minister Mayawati has complained to the National Commission of Women (NCW) about the vulgar and intemperate language used against her by Defence Minister Mulayam Singh Yadav. She has asked the Commission to initiate action against him.

The Chief Minister has also apprised the Prime Minister and the President of India of Mr Yadav's Bareilly meeting of June 6 where four language was used against her by someone holding as responsible a position as that of a Defence Minister.

In her letter to the President, she has said it would not be proper for her to even repeat the language used by Mr Yadav. However, she has asked the President to refer to *Aaj* newspaper's June 7 edition which carries a box item on how Mr Yadav, without using her name, said she had alleged an attempt to rape her in a State guest house. "In what way is she so

beautiful that anyone should want to rape her," the Defence Minister had reportedly asked at the Bareilly meeting.

Political compulsions and dignity of office may compel the Prime Minister and the President to ignore the letter. But the NCW has already written back to assure that it will look into her complaint. The NCW is collecting evidence and trying to get five persons who could corroborate Ms Mayawati's allegation.

The NCW does seem to be perturbed by the language used by the Defence Minister. If a woman is not beautiful enough to be raped, would it by implication mean that all beautiful women are inviting rape?

The Commission is seething with anger about Ministers and people holding public office making derogatory personal remarks about the looks and appearance of women. Earlier it was Mr Sharad Yadav who referred to city-bred, modern women as "baal kati aurat." "He alleged that women with short hair did not have a finger on the pulse of rural women.

NCW hounded by Maimun's 'well-wishers'

By Usha Rai

NEW DELHI, Sept. 10

Three weeks after rescuing Maimun, who was gangraped and ripped with a knife for defying the Nuh village panchayat and marrying 26-year-old Idris, father of two, the National Commission for Women continues to be hounded by villagers and others who claim to be Maimun's protectors and well wishers.

Chairperson of NCW Mohini Giri, who lives alone in Noida, has received a number of threatening calls. Even this morning, she received an abusive call. "Where is Maimun? Is she well? If Maimun does not live we will see how you live" some callers threatened.

"Others, and this includes a man who looks after tribal girls in Maharashtra, think they can call

me anytime, whether I am asleep or at work, to tell me what my responsibilities are," an angry Ms Giri exclaimed. "You are answerable to the whole country for her welfare," a persistent male caller stated.

Ever since NCW took up Maimun's case it has come under severe attack. The NCW team was attacked at Sudaka village, Nuh, where parents fear that their children may emulate Maimun and defy tradition to marry for love. The tradition, Ms Giri says, is to sell girls for amounts varying between Rs 10,000 and Rs 15,000 and they fear that their 'dhanda' (business) may come to an end. A group of people from Nuh had even barged into Ms Giri's office earlier.

Though Ms Giri had sought security about two months back, her request has not elicited any re-

sponse so far. The Government too has been sitting on the long promised demand for a commissioner for human rights, to do police work and to investigate the cases coming to NCW.

Because of this lack of security, NCW fears for the life of Maimun and as such has not disclosed her whereabouts. However, social workers attached to the Commission have been making periodic visits to Nari Niketan, where she has been admitted as per court orders. Maimun is still traumatised but is recovering steadily. The District Magistrate, in fact, told Ms Giri this morning that Maimun is now learning stitching work at the Nari Niketan.

However, despite gangrape case being registered, none of the rapists has been arrested so far.

Idris is lying low and his brother is trying desperately to reach

Maimun to inform her that the ordeal endured by Idris has not lessened his love for his bride of just three months.

On June 6, Maimun and Idris had married against the wishes of her parents. Maimun told the Commission that her parents were wanting to sell her off to a rich customer. On the basis of her nikahnama, marriage registration certificate and a birth certificate that establishes her age as 19 plus, the Commission has been backing the marriage, though Idris is a married man with two children.

Maimun's parents have filed a case of abduction against Idris because their daughter, they maintain, is a minor. Because of the NCW support to the Maimun-Idris marriage, the in-laws of Maimun's married sisters and cousins are believed to have thrown them out.

JD women up in arms against beauty contest

By Usha Rai

NEW DELHI, Sept. 11

The Amitabh Bachchan Corporation Ltd may be having grand plans of raking in Rs 25 crore through the Miss World beauty pageant in Bangalore this November, but the women in the States ruling party, the Janata Dal, are up in arms.

They have accused Chief Minister J. H. Patel of colluding with Bachchan in commodification of women and asked him to disassociate himself from extravaganzas that reduces women to sex objects.

Pramila Dandavate, secretary of the Janata Dal and the senior-most representative of the Party's Mahila Dakshita Samiti has dashed off protest letters to Prime Minister Deve Gowda and Patel. So angry is the outspoken white haired Dandavate that she is determined to join any demonstration

against the holding of the pageant and all efforts to scuttle it.

Other women's groups, particularly those in Karnataka, are expected to join the battle against the hardsell of the female anatomy. Seven women's organisations from Delhi have protested to the PM about Patel's statement reported in a national daily "if women want to show themselves nude, let them... we will show the world we are a nation of beautiful women." Mr Gowda assured the women, he would write to the CM.

"It's a national shame that the hallowed precincts of the Vidhana Soudha should be used for the vampish parade of beauties," she said.

The beauty contest and Karnataka's role in promoting it was raised at the national executive of the Janata Dal too by Saroj Dubey. The women members present — Mrinal Gore, Leela Pra-

sad, Manju Mohan, Pramila Dandavate and Jayalakshmi from Karnataka opposed it en block. The Janata Dal men stayed silent and one of them was even heard remarking jocularly "they are opposing it only because none of them can participate".

Failing to evoke a response from the men in the party, some JD women have spoken to the Human Resource Development Minister S. R. Bommai who has agreed to take it up with the Government.

Mrs Dandavate was quick to point out that it was more than a political issue and women of all political hues should oppose it en masse. It's a question of the dignity of the woman and fighting the economic imperialism of the west, she pointed out.

In her letter to the PM, she has said "the UF Government is committed not only to uphold the dignity of women but to improve

the status of women by their empowerment. Active help/association with beauty contests send out a wrong signal and cannot, therefore, be appreciated.

"World beauty pageants are looked upon by sensible citizens as a gameplan of multinationals to capture markets of different countries and reduce women to mere sex objects. Spread of consumerism throughout the third world countries has been instrumental in the rise of sexual crimes against women."

She has asked the Prime Minister to advise the Chief Ministers of Maharashtra, Karnataka and Delhi to distance the State Governments from the pageant to be held in their capitals. "Even if we cannot stall the beauty pageant we hope to use the occasion to build up public awareness about the misuse of the female form," Mrs Dandavate told this correspondent.

Gender-sensitive Broadcasting Authority sought

By Usha Rai

NEW DELHI, Sept. 13

The National Commission for Women and the Media Advocacy Group (MAG) have made a strong plea for a gender sensitive Broadcasting Authority of India in their presentation to the Parliamentary Committee on Broadcasting.

While crass commercial interests seem to have dominated the presentation by most television companies, it was refreshing to hear the Discovery Channel's focus on the need for education and the women's groups on the need for a code of ethics in programming. The NCW opposed part-time members on the authority and pleaded for strong gender representation.

The Broadcasting Bill provides for 11 part time members — eminent people from public life — educationists sportspersons, artists, journalists and communicators on the authority. There should be considerable representation of women in this selection, the NCW stated.

The MAG reinforced the need for well thought out regulatory norms by showing excerpts from films and TV serials watched by millions of people including minors. One of the clips showed an 11-year-old girl being enticed in bed. Mr Sharad Pawar could not understand what was wrong with the clip till the MAG group went into graphic details on the impact of such soaps.

Should serials and soaps that make it fashionable to have a second wife and thereby promote bigamy — when the laws of the land are quite clearly against it — be permitted by the Broadcasting Authority?

In fact the MAG expressed disappointment that most of the pages of the Broadcasting Bill had been devoted to licensing and auditing and very little thought has been given to the monitoring and regulatory functions of the Broadcasting Authority.

The Broadcasting Authority, it was pointed out was coming after five years of cable television and well established programming trends. If the monitoring and regulatory powers of the Authority were not given due importance, it was feared that it would be difficult to reverse the Bombay film-based masala programming.

Referring to the film censor board and how its primary objective seemed to be promoting the film industry, MAG warned that the authority could end up legitimising the existing film-based programming trends. It was therefore vital for the Authority to have powers for mid-course correction of programmes.

Dalit woman at helm of affairs in UP notwithstanding

In Saharanpur, women are raped and rapists walk free

From Usha Rai

SAHARANPUR, Sept. 17
Although UP boasts of a Dalit woman Chief Minister, the record of battered and raped women and children in one of its prominent districts Saharanpur is shocking. In the last couple of months there has been a spurt in crimes

against women and children and though in many cases the police has rounded up the criminals, the courts have been releasing them on bail. Encouraged by the court's laxity, *goondas* strut around, flexing their muscles in bravado and terrifying victims who have the courage to speak up.

In several cases the victims are Dalits and children. In fact a Dalit rapist of a seven-year-old has not only been released on bail but is going around boasting "this is a Dalit State. No one can touch me."

Though the National Commission for Women has been visiting Saharanpur and taking up cases of children who have been raped or molested there seems no reprieve for Saharanpur's battered women. Women's groups like Disha, Janvadi Mahila Sangh and Sarvodaya Kalyan Samiti have come together to fight this spiralling crime graph against women and are supported by Ms Zeenat Naaz, the chairperson of

the Municipal Corporation of Deoband, and some concerned men.

Terrified of social ostracism, girls who are allegedly raped are not even willing to register complaints. Their parents whisk

them away from Saharanpur and its villages to safer homes of relatives in distant towns.

In most cases of assault, the women's faces have been battered beyond recognition. In the last one month at least three women have

had their jaws broken so that they cannot speak.

Saharanpur's blackest nights were August 28/29 and 15/16 when a gang of six to eight trouser-clad youth committed a series of dacoities, rapes and two murders. In four hours of August 28/29 there were attacks in four homes of Chutmalpur, 22 kms from Saharanpur, and its adjoining villages.

Brajbir Singh was not at home when seven men jumped over the wall of his home and broke into two groups. One raced to the terrace and battered to death 20-year-old Poonam. Her mother, who was also beaten with rods and choppers is recovering in the hospital in Saharanpur.

The other group attacked Brajbir's father, his elder son Gyanander and 18-year-old Neelam. Gyanander's head was split open but Neelam, who lay on top of her younger brother to

Continued on page 7

Stripped for complaining

Anita (30) of Randevi village, under the Nakud police station, 40 kms from Saharanpur, was stripped on September 7, her face blackened in front of the panchayat and her bottom thrashed with shoes for naming two of her Jat neighbours, Raju and Pappu, in a case of theft at her house.

Anita was publicly humiliated after her attempts to get a case of theft registered at the police chowki failed. The village panchayat to whom she complained was more interested in protecting the name of the village than the dignity of an *Upadhyay* woman. The National Commission for Women is now taking up the case.

Four years ago the stripping of Usha Dhiman outside the Saharanpur court sent shock waves throughout the nation. The NCW took charge of the case and some police officers were suspended or transferred. But the cases registered are still pending in the court and Usha is still the terrified, but now forgotten, village woman, says Rehana of Disha.

IIT-JEE

What is a
Classroom
Contact Program ?

For details see sports page 20

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gang of dacoits who entered the poultry farm where they were living and trussed up their husbands. Rs 400 and a silver pendant and anklets were stolen from their trunk.

Maya and Sunita were so frightened that they did not report the rape. In fact when this correspondent met them, they were making plans to leave for Nepal. The poultry owner who

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In Zeenat, Muslim women see hope

By Usha Rai

DEOBAND, Sept. 19

At the VIP circuit house of Deoband it was a sea of black burkhas. Some of the younger ones — just a handful of them — had the courage to ignore the stern rebukes of the fundamentalists in this seat of Islamic learning and dispense with the stifling sack cloth they are forced to wear.

Most of them had waited for four to five hours for Zeenat Naaz, the chairperson of the Municipal Board and the woman they seek to emulate. Zeenat looks plump and matronly but beneath the soft exterior is a woman strong enough to break the fatwas of the maulvis as she seeks true equality in the male-dominated stronghold of fundamentalism.

Zeenat draws women not because of her status in the civic board but because she symbolises the aspiration of many of these downtrodden women. Currently she is raising her voice for women reading the namaaz in masjids alongside men — and a lively debate ensues.

For daring to challenge the muftis and maulvis on this sensitive issue, crackers and bombs have been thrown in her house and her effigy has been burnt — “though burning an effigy is haram in

Islam.” Because her own security is uncertain she has left her children with her parents in Saharanpur.

Infact a purely women's meeting was disrupted by a mufti who started shouting from the adjoining room that Muslim women cannot read namaaz with men in a masjid. The man was told quietly but firmly that it was a women's meeting and he could air his views from some other platform — and the door was shut.

For Zeenat this was just another hurdle. Seven years ago when she dropped the purdah, her own family would not speak to her for three years. Now all is forgiven and Zeenat's younger brother is seen driving her around. She is fighting for women's rights and spreading political awareness among Muslim women. Several women's organisations have rallied to her support.

Almost two years ago when she decided to enter the fray for the post of chairperson of the Municipal Board, the Deoband religious leaders were on the warpath. Fatwas were issued against her contesting but she just went ahead and won with 5,000 votes.

While some of the more outspoken women supported Zeenat's contention that in the days of the Prophet women were reading namaaz alongside men in

masjids, others cautiously pointed out that it was because of the changing mores and the evil design of some men that women were asked to say their prayers at home.

A young woman scholar from Pakistan, studying at Deoband, openly supported the muftis and cautioned women against stepping out of line. If women stand next of men, distracted by the beautiful women they will pay less attention to the namaaz, she pointed out. Bad elements will begin frequenting the masjid, disturbing the sanctity of the namaaz as well as the masjid.

But if a woman does not wear jewellery that goes “cham cham” or intoxicating perfumes why should a man be distracted, another young woman asked.

Maulana Kashmiri of the Dar-ul-Islam school has even said Shia women have been permitted to go to mosques for namaaz but not the Sunnis.

However, Zeenat Naaz believes all this opposition to women reading namaaz in masjids stems from a basis male fear that independent women will dominate over them if freed from their shackles of centuries.

Only one of every 10 women in Deoband may be happy or content. The rest are in dire straits. Many of them, though young, they pointed out, had been discarded

for a younger wife. When a 60-year-old grandfather sets his heart on marrying a 16-year-old, he claims he is marrying her because Allah wants him to do so.

Though large sums of foreign money come to the Trust in Deoband, not a paisa reaches the poor women of the city, another stated. Referring to a well-known maulana of Deoband who has accumulated orchards and tea gardens and lives like a Sheikh, Zeenat said he turns his face when poor women approach him for alms. Zeenat too was rebuked and brushed off with a “I don't talk of women.”

Referring to the double standards of the religious leaders, she pointed out that while the poor in Deoband are spurned like untouchables, the same Maulana when he goes abroad shares a platform with white skinned women.

Instead of issuing fatwas against poor Indian women, the maulanas should set up a trust and raise funds for their welfare, says Zeenat.

As women approach her for small jobs of tailoring and embroidery — some means of the deserted wife earning a decent wage — Zeenat determines that not only will women read namaaz but she will start her own trust to help the needy.

by RAP

Women's panel to fight molestation case of DU girl

by Usha Rai

NEW DELHI, Sept 27

THE National Commission for Women has decided to fight the case of a 17-year-old girl who was kidnapped in broad daylight from just outside Shyama Prasad Mukherji College, Punjabi Bagh, on September 19, taken to a farm house in Nangloi where two men molested her.

The diminutive girl, an orange belt in judo/karate, managed to escape and with the help of her father lodged a complaint at the thana at Punjabi Bagh. A whole week after the incident there have been no arrests and one of the accused, 16-year-old Deepak

Yadhav, has managed to get anticipatory bail as a minor.

The nightmare that the philosophy honours student has been through has shades of the Billa/Ranga episode because the white Maruti car in which she was kidnapped had a remote control locking device and all her attempts to scream and jump out of the moving car were frustrated.

It also has shades of the bravery of Monisha Verma, the Delhi University student, who fought off a bus conductor and cleaner and jumped off a running bus. Like Monisha, the teenager's prowess in karate enabled her to escape from two drunken and lecherous men.

The father, a school teacher, has approached the Commission to take up the case because the

police have not even arrested the accused. They have, however, impounded the car. A medical examination of the girl by the police showed injury marks on her neck, legs, hand and head.

The chairperson of the NCW, Mrs Mohini Giri, has written to the Police Commissioner to speed up investigation and provide police protection to the girl who is now getting threatening phone calls. The Commission is moving the courts for cancellation of bail. The accused, Deepak and his brother-in-law have been summoned to appear before the Commission.

In his application for anticipatory bail, Deepak said that the girl used to take a lift from him and was known to him. He said that he had dropped her

as usual on September 19.

However, in her testimony to Mrs Giri the girl has denied taking a lift from Deepak. In fact she told the Commission, "if I wanted a boy friend I would have picked someone older".

The girl also told the Commission that she arrived at the college at 12.55 pm when a young man approached her and asked her about a particular address. She said she had no idea and walked on to call her father from a public telephone. She was on her way back to the college when the same boy came in a white Maruti and asked for the direction again. She was walking on when the back door of the car opened and she was dragged in and all the doors and windows were automatically locked.

The girl said her duppatta was tied round her neck and the man at the back, whom Deepak referred to as his 'jija' (brother-in-law) beat her up and almost strangled her. In a crude language he said he wanted to rape her.

At Nangloi, she said the car entered a farm house, the gates of which were opened by a chowkidar. Deepak dragged her into the farm house and beat her up and attempted to rape her. However, she fought back. He left the room and when the older man entered in a drunken state and locked the room she was able to fight him off, open the door and run off.

She said that some labourers saw her traumatised and advised

her to run away. She got into a rickshaw and found that the two men were following her in the car. Then she got off the rickshaw and ran till she got a scooter. The scooter finally took her safely home to Trinagar. A police complaint was lodged the same night by the father.

Mrs Giri, seething with anger, said "I feel so frustrated. This Commission is powerless. I cannot get redressal for women in distress. What is the point in making all that noise in Beijing." She was angry with the police too for not apprehending the 16-year-old who was underage to drive a car. She also questioned the lack of police security outside the college that enabled such an incident in broad daylight.

She slaved away to hit jackpot

By Usha Rai

NEW DELHI, Sept. 28 Radha Ramaswamy, 40, the girl who grew up on the streets of Madras and the Sri Sewa Mandir orphanage is back in India on a nostalgia mission. It's the story of an almost illiterate girl's struggles in an alien land to reach the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.

Radha slaved her way up as domestic help, cook and baby-sitter. She even cared for an AIDS patient till his death. Today she is an American citizen with a car of her own, over \$200,000 in her bank account and investments in real estate.

Since life has been kind to her she has come to rescue her younger sister, niece and nephew from the kind of poverty that haunted her childhood.

She is on a travel circuit of welfare homes in the country with the Chairperson of the National Commission for Women Mohini Giri and hopes to meet her fostermother, Krishna Rao, who was in charge of Sewa Mandir in Madras. Radha also has plans to buy a flat in Mayur Vihar for her sister, Gyana, who is working as a domestic help in Sunder Nagar.

Radha was a year and three months and her sister three months when her mother, barely 17, died. The two girls were rescued by their maternal

grandmother from a drunkard father. But their uncle resented sharing the meagre family earnings with two more hungry mouths. He even left them on the railway tracks to die. But they were rescued by the police and sent back to their grandmother.



Since the uncle would not allow them to enter the house, they slept on the streets and read their school books by the light of the street lamp. In fact the two girls were trapped between a cruel uncle and a drunken father who wanted to sexually abuse his daughters.

At 11 and 12, the two girls were put in the orphanage. The head of the orphanage agreed to send one sister to school if the other came to work in her house. So Radha dropped out of school and worked in Rao's house looking after their grandchildren and washing clothes. It was a tough life, eating leftovers and getting just six to seven hours to sleep. At the end of the month she was richer by Rs 10.

After four years of slogging she was sent to the Ghild of Service Training Institute. Here she learnt to cook, bake and keep a tidy house. But Radha did not hit it off with the warden and was sent to Mrs Mohini Giri and the Guild in Delhi in 1974. She worked at Mrs Giri's home and with the President's family in Rashtrapathi Bhavan.

Mr V. V. Giri even recommended her for job as a telephone operator but not knowing English or Hindi was a handicap. Then she accompanied the family of an IFS officer to the US as domestic help on \$40 a month. When they moved back to India Radha stayed on as domestic help with other Indian families. Slowly her wages increased from \$210 to \$600 a month.

Finally in 1990, after 14 years in the US, she got a green card. All the while her command over English and her culinary skills kept improving. She even learned to drive and today owns

a Japanese car, Subaru.

Last year after clearing an exam on the history of America she was accorded US citizenship. Her job prospects have improved and she works as domestic help-cum-baby-sitter for American couples earning \$350 a week.

But it was not all sunshine, Radha recalls. Medical bungling led to her uterus being removed and her dreams of having a family of her own were shattered. She sued the doctor and three years ago got compensation of over \$200,000.

A young Pakistani doctor who she fell madly in love with duped her of \$60,000 (spent on his exam fees, books etc) and walked out.

But Radha has not lost her zest for life. She wants to improve her status. After working the whole day she attends classes at night so that she can get her school leaving certificate and pursue her ambition to join the medical service — even if it is only as a nurse.

Currently Radha does the cooking for a husband and wife team of doctors and they in turn provide her boarding and lodging. Before leaving for India she has stacked up the fridge with good for two months. Everything from shrimps, chicken to *gajjar ka halwa* and cabbage soup has been neatly labelled and frozen.

The little girls from the Madras orphanage has indeed come a long way.

Nobody heard her cries when she was raped

From Usha Rai

KHARGONE, Sept. 29
For a whole month since she was gang raped on August 25 on the slope behind her house at Jhulwania, Namlubai, 30, mother of four and wife of Kalia, has been on the run with her children. So terrified has she been that she has not even bothered to register a complaint of rape.

In fact most people in the Adivasi Mukti Sangathan do not know if she is alive or dead.

About half a dozen complaints of rape have been registered at the Mahila thana at Indore and are being investigated by the National Commission for Women. But the rape of Namlubai does not figure in the investigation since a complaint was not filed and no one knew her whereabouts.

It was while she was hiding like a hunted doe in the forests and starving hunger with the corn from the fields ready for harvesting that she learnt of the savage murder of

Kalia in police custody. He had been accused of the murder of Jagadiya Patel, the Congress block president, on August 26, a day after his wife's rape by members of Jagadiya Patel's group.

This correspondent was the first non-tribal to meet Namlubai late in the evening last Thursday in the forests between Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra — a pretty woman with fear lurking in her eyes, unaware of what fate awaited her and how she will bring up her four children, the eldest 12 and the youngest just three.

Also present at the meeting was Beenabai, mother-in-law of Namlubai and an important witness since she found her naked and unconscious, except for the small undercloth worn by tribal women.

On August 22, Beenabai recalled there was a meeting of the Shanti Sena at Jagadiya Patel's house and thereafter Kalia was a hunted man. He was physically assaulted and chased into the jungles. At noon on August 25 some

men entered Kalia's house. Namlubai went and hid behind some trees in her backyard.

Then these men started chucking stones to get her out. Asked why she did not retreat into the hills and jungles behind her, Namlubai said she had been surrounded on all sides. Then Bagru, son of Noorji, caught her by the hand and said "Don't leave her. We will keep her." Then a man from Chowkand village stripped her of her sari. Someone even burnt the sari.

"I screamed and cried and begged them to leave me. But everyone had fled and no one came to my rescue", she recalls. Several people participated in her humiliation and witnessed her rape, says Numlubai. After an assault by five persons she became unconscious. But the faces she remembers are that of Rajjo, also a son of Noorji, Bhaila and Gaithia of Kaniapani. Though Jagadiya Patel was not in the group that mauled her, his brother Mangaliya, was.

The small shop in her house was raided, utensils were smashed and pesticides were put in the food-grains. This complaint of poisoning wells and putting pesticides in food was voiced by other women too of Rema ki Phalia, Kabri.

Benabai, who had taken the cattle out for grazing, was informed by some children that Namlubai was being beaten. She rushed home at 3 p.m. to find her lying naked and unconscious.

Namlubai went to her father's house at Kabri the next morning and narrated what had happened. Her mother bathed her with hot water to soothe her aching body and the swelling on her back.

Dhulsia, a nephew of Beenabai, was also picked up by Jagadiya Patel's team and kept overnight.

Kalia, who was in hiding, was informed of the assault on his wife and the abduction of Dhulsia. He was extremely angry and soon after several supporters of Kalia attacked and killed Jagadiya. Kalia too was accused of Jaga-

diya's murder.

Rape of Adivasi women for revenge by Adivasi men is a new phenomena. But with heightened feelings and tension all around, the traditional respect for the tribal women has been eroded.

The National Commission for Women has investigated five cases of rape. Since most of the women are still in hiding they were finding it difficult to trace them. But the five to register complaints are Barkibai (29), wife of Alla Bareela of Kabri; Batlabai (19), wife of Amar Singh Barela of Bhulwania; Munnibai (19), wife of Pyarsingh Barela, also of Bhulwania; Nannibai (45) of Kabri and Punnabai (25), wife of Roop Singh of Bhulwania.

The accused for Barkibai's rape include Tiklu, Kabu, Bachchu and Subram; Manyu, Chedu and Beldu of Kamiapani for the rape of Batlabai; Gathia, Dubru and Dedu of Kamiapani for the rape of Munnibai. Other accused have also been named in the FIR.

(To be continued)

Kapil Sibal

Jammu at about 1 p.m. today.

NCW chairperson attacked

By Usha Rai

NEW DELHI, Oct. 2

For the first time since the National Commission for Women began organising its Lok Adalats to ensure speedy justice for women, angry lawyers and men who saw the power balance slipping out of their hands, attacked the chairperson of the Commission Mohini Giri and disrupted the functioning of the adalat at Jabalpur last Sunday.

With chairs flying and fisticuffs all around, representatives of the All India Women's Conference, who organised the Lok Adalat, and other women threw a protective cordon around Mrs Giri and escorted her out of the district courts.

Just back from what she described as a traumatic experience, Mrs Giri has dashed off a letter to the Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Digvijay Singh to institute an inquiry. The Commission has also

written to the Home Secretary, MP (copy to the Home Secretary at the Centre) that proper security arrangements were not made for a function attended by some 11,000 persons.

Some 980 cases which included dowry, harassment and even accident cases, were to be heard by 18 adalats. Many of these cases had been pending for 10, 12 years, Mrs Giri said.

The large crowd which had gathered for the function was restive. Mrs Giri's speech was stirring. It was against the responsibility of all enlightened citizens to fight against the atrocities on women, she said.

But the men in the audience seem to have been provoked by her admonition to women to come out of their shells and fight their battles without looking around for crutches. If men are brutal don't submit to their cruelties, take courage and walk out, she said.

After the inaugural function, the two High Court judges and the Superintendent of Police left the

venue and the district judge retired to his chambers. Mrs Giri said she then went around the different courts, listening to cases.

In the central area of the district courts she found members of the AIWC doing some last minute counselling. One of the girls they were speaking to was a young, attractive graduate who had complained that her husband, manager in Punjab National Bank had taken another wife. The young girl suddenly developed cold feet and was preparing to stay on as the second wife, when Mrs Giri advised her to go for a divorce and seek a good alimony.

She had hardly finished advising the girl to live a life of dignity instead of being in the shadows of the second wife, when a fat, moustached man pounced on Mrs Giri and said "Go back to Delhi. Don't provoke the women of Jabalpur." He picked up a chair and was about to attack her, when a clerk of the AIWC jumped to her rescue. The man, Mrs Giri said was beaten up by four or five lawyers.

Stiff resistance to Sathins' agenda

By Usha Rai

NEW DELHI, Oct. 17

Even as the 39 sati accused in Deorala rejoice over their release and Rajasthan's most famous sathin, Bhanwri Devi — gangraped for stopping a child marriage — fights for justice, the most powerful agents of women's development and change at the grassroots, the sathins, find that their voices are being stifled and their survival threatened.

Empowered and articulate, the sathins had begun demanding a just wage. The Rs 250 a month that they were getting was not enough to keep body and soul together and to add to their woes the Government entrusted them with over 60 additional responsibilities which varied from getting village women land rights to preparing super compost and distributing condoms and contraceptive pills. Having waged major village level battles for rights of women they began demanding their own right to a realistic salary and joined the Mahila Vikas Abhikaran Sathin Karamchari Sangh.

For three days this week about 400 of the 650 sathins of the State assembled at Jaipur to talk of their struggles and to stake their claims to stay alive as empowered change makers. Having come out of their shell — their ghunghats have been dropped, most of them can now read and write and some have

graduated to leadership positions in panchayats and zilla parishads — they were not willing to crawl back.

In a magnificent show of solidarity, women activists representing almost all political hues except the BJP, supported their struggle and demanded that the 2,000 sanctioned posts of sathin be filled up immediately and a 'wage of dignity' be given them. Pramila Dandavate, Mrinal Gore, Vimla Rande, Brinda Karat, Amarjeet Kaur of AITUC, Srilata Swaminathan, Geeta Ramaswamy of the Construction Workers Union testified to the strength of the sathins.

It was a heart warming to listen to each of their stories of struggle and emancipation. And there were the songs that they burst into to give them strength and unity when one of their sisters, Prem from Ajmer, burst into tears as she narrated her struggles against dowry.

The National Commission for Women, which at the request of the Chief Minister studied the work done by the sathins and recommended consolidation of their work and revision of the grossly inadequate honorarium, organised a seminar to focus on the sathins. Mohini Giri, Padma Seth, Kokila Vyas rallied around the grassroots workers. In fact Mrs Giri held out a threat to do something drastic if the sathin issue was not resolved by December end. She wanted to know why it had

taken the State administration six months to send the Commission's report to the Cabinet.

The new Director for Women and Child Seema Bahuguna expressed her inability to give a categorical assurance that the sathin programme would not be abolished. The programme, she said, was being reviewed by the Rajasthan Cabinet. A review does not necessarily mean that the programme will be wound up. It could be modified or streamlined. But having worked with the Women's Development Programme, in an earlier tenure, she said she could identify with the sathins and the work they have accomplished.

However, the sathins were shattered by what they called the "double speak" of Dr Sarla Gopalan, the Secretary, Women and Child Development from the Centre. Dr Gopalan while lauding the contribution of the sathins in women's empowerment let slip that there were other models of development like the Mahila Samoohs and other such programmes.

With women occupying 33 per cent of the seats in the gram panchayats and zilla parishads some feel that power has devolved and there is no need for other empowerment structures for women.

Arti Sahni of the Karamchari Sangh read out from the minutes of a WDP meeting that states that

if the sathins were allowed to continue over a period of time they would create administrative problems. While the Samooh may have its own strength and should be encouraged as an experiment, it makes little sense to start samoohs in villages by displacing the existing structure of the sathins.

The purpose of the sathins was to initiate a process of transformation which results in women out of their traditional roles into public life to ensure social justice at the village level. And yet the Government persists in evaluating them as unskilled and illiterate because they have not enjoyed formal education, the Sangh stated.

Listing the more tangible achievements, the Sangh says in Khatoli village three cartloads of fertilisers were stolen by powerful men of the village at night. Sathin Prem mobilised others, confronted the men and got back the fertiliser for distribution to the deserving. In several villages, the sathins have ensured that the women got a just wage for earth removal and other such works.

Thanks to the efforts of the sathins women are now sitting and actively participating in local bodies, including caste panchayats and dispensing justice. Should a tried and trusted structure be demolished for experimenting with another model of empowerment, is the question the women are asking.

The rich State's poor record of women's participation in work

By Usha Rai

NEW DELHI, Oct. 25
One of the richest State's in India, Punjab, has the lowest Female Work Participation Rate (FWPR) in the country — just 4.4 as per the 1991 census. What is worse, it seems to be on the decline.

In 60 per cent of the villages of Patiala and Sangrur districts, the 1991 census revealed that less than one per cent of the women were working. At a time when women's groups as well as UNDP and UNIFEM are trying to quantify the unpaid work of women, the Punjab statistics come as a blow for those working for women's emancipation through employment. In fact, most women's groups and development persons refuse to believe that the figures are accurate.

The national FWPR is 22.3. Dadra and Nagar Haveli and Mizoram had the highest FWPR 48.8 and 43.5 in 1991. Surprisingly Kerala, which is held up as the model for its development indicators, has shown a steady decline in the FWPR. From 19.7 in 1961 it dropped to 16.6 in 1981 and in the last census it was 15.8. In several other States of India, including the North-East there has been a decline in FWPR.

Though India's FWPR is higher than that of its neighbours — Pakistan 16 per cent, Bangladesh 8 and Afghanistan — 9 per cent, it compares poorly with Europe's FWPR of 30 to 40 per cent.

As preparation for the mammoth 2001 census gets underway, UNIFEM, UNFPA along with the Department of Women and Child have begun a major exercise to bring in a gender perspective to the census operation. Registrar General Vijayan Unni said, 2 billion enumerators are to be involved in the 2001 census and 400 million pieces of paper will have to be processed. The abysmally low FWPR will be critically evaluated.

Is there a bias in the respondents that they do not consider certain household activities as economic even if it helps supplement the family income? Do men find it below their prestige to accept that their women work?

These questions were partly answered when the Society for Applied Research in Humanities (SARH) and Strategic Consultants on People and Environment (SCOPE) were asked to conduct studies on 'Women, Work and the Census in Punjab.' While SCOPE did a simulation of the 1991 census schedule using the same set of instructions as well as the same enumerators in Firozpur and Gurdaspur districts, SARH concentrated on Patiala and Sangrur districts.

The startling conclusions of the study are that a majority in Punjab consider it below their dignity to tell an outsider that their women

folk work to augment family income. Female work participation has been drastically under reported because most enumerators have not asked the relevant questions. In fact the SCOPE study shows that most enumerators just crossed out the vital questions on FWPR.

Respondents too did not consider activities relating to animal husbandry as work. About 15 per cent of the enumerators did not ask the question on female economic activity and 45 to 50 per cent who reported FWPR of less than 1 per cent had interpreted work as regular work as in white collar jobs, the study showed.

Eighty per cent of the women, it was found were engaged in animal husbandry or agricultural labour. In Patiala if a woman was looking after cattle in the house and the milk produced was not sold, she was recorded as a non-worker. But in another house if a part of the milk was sold she was recorded as a worker.

The SARH study showed that persistent probing by the enumerator made a substantial difference in the FWPRs. In Mithumajra village of Patiala the census had shown a FWPR of 7.8. But the subsequent SARH survey showed the FWPR as 46.3.

Indian women are discriminated lot

By Usha Rai

NEW DELHI, Dec. 7

Women working as farm labour in rural India get just 70 per cent of the wage earned by men. In other words they get Rs 16.40 for a day's work as against Rs 23.40 that their male counterparts earn.

What is worse, however efficient she may be, she gets just 124 days work in the whole year as against the 145 days of work that a man gets in the agricultural sector. In the non-agricultural sector, where the daily wages are higher, a woman gets 133 days of work as against the 157 days that a man gets.

The story of the rural Indian woman, as profiled by the NCAER in its Human Development Report, is one of discrimination and disparities. Whether in access to education, nutrition, wage rates or health care, she continues to be a second class citizen. Culturally we are still a patriarchal society and 50 years after Independence gender disparities persist.

De Abusaleh Shariff, principal economist of the NCAER, says the survey of 33,000 rural households in 16 States shows that 12 per

cent of the girls in the 0 to 12 age group are missing. This is either because of under-reporting or female infanticide.

The discrimination begins early. In a resettlement colony, 15 km from Bhubaneswar, Orissa, the NCAER team visited a family of 7, including four children. The children did not wear clothes, all children were sick—covered with sores and smelled foul. A malnourished girl of 12, probably suffering from TB, had protruding ribs. Despite a five-year difference in the age of the girl and her younger brother and a difference in their heights they weighed the same. Quite clearly the food allocation for the girl and the boy was different.

Malnutrition manifests as bitot spots (white spots on the cornea), the first symptoms of visual impairment. Ten per cent more girls than boys in the 5 to 12 age group have these early symptoms of night blindness, says Dr Shariff. The study shows that in the 0 to 4 age group, 1.1 per cent of the rural population have visual problems. In the 0 to 4 year age group 0.50 per cent of the population have night blindness and in the 5 to 12 age group 1 per cent. With age the risk of bitot increases.

This is a significant finding since men, who generally give information for surveys, do not like to talk of ailments of women and adolescent girls. The NCAER study looked at eight ailments including cancer and tuberculosis.

Though leprosy per se in rural India seems to be on the decline, it is more prevalent in women than in men. As against 100 men who have this cursed disease, 164 women have it. Thirty per cent more women have hyper tension than men. However, the incidence of TB is 40 per cent higher in men than in women.

In a country where 37 per cent of the rural population is landless, wage work is an important source of livelihood. But as against 83 per cent of the male adults who find employment just 30 to 42 per cent women find work. The fact that women work is under-reported in Punjab, UP, Bihar, Rajasthan and West Bengal. It is only after peristent probing that the percentage of women working in these States goes up from 10 per cent to 22 to 25 per cent.

There is great disparity in the male/female wage rate. In Tamil Nadu, women farm labour earn for the same hours of work 67 per cent of what the men earn; in Andhra

65 per cent of the male wage and in the so-called advanced State of Maharashtra just 58 per cent of the male wage. In Gujarat and West Bengal wages are more egalitarian.

It is a similar story in the non-agricultural sector. Even in a State like Kerala women get 53 per cent of the male wage. Men are also preferred to women for longer periods of employment. Short duration jobs go to women. Feminisation of the wage rate and absence of wage stability should concern women's groups.

Tremendous gaps have been shown in the literacy rates and the school enrolment ratio of girls and boys. With a slow but sure trend to privatisation of education in rural India, women may lose that one opportunity to come out of their entombment.

After quota failure, women unite for ticket to power

By Usha Rai

NEW DELHI, Dec. 13
Having lost the battle on the Women's Reservation Bill, women rights activists are going all out to get more women into the 12th Lok Sabha.

Women representing various political parties, NGOs and those in Women's Studies have come together under the banner of the National Commission for Women to lobby with political parties for more tickets for women. They will also raise the resources to support the women candidates and even hit the campaign trail.

Simultaneously, they will make a special effort to ensure that the 40 per cent women who do not vote also participate in the election process. "If the castewalas and the minorities can be seen as vote banks, women too can be seen as a block that can tilt elections one way or another. This is a strength that women should draw on," was the advice of Ms Veena Nayyar, Women's Political Watch.

The second meeting of the Political Core Committee of women, called by Mrs Mohini Giri of the NCW, has decided to create a

National Fund to support good women candidates who do not have muscle power or money powers. With the limit for contesting a Lok Sabha seat being raised to Rs 14 lakhs, it is feared that even women nursing political ambitions will find it difficult to contest.

It was decided to launch a rupee contribution drive across the length and breadth of the country. While helping the women to identify with a cause and a movement, it could generate upto Rs 500 crores, Mrs Giri pointed out.

Mrs Giri said the NCW has networked with 384 districts and can raise funds, mobilise women for the purpose as well as help identify good candidates for different political parties. All 13 State Commissions are also to be involved in the true political empowerment of women.

The idea of a National Fund was endorsed by women politicians as well as NGOs. However, the group could not identify the organisation which will be responsible for the collection and doling out of funds.

Ms Kamla Nath, Centre for Social Research, pointed out that women had greater potential for winning than men. Studies show

that one of the every 10 women who had contested in the last elections had won as against one of every 500 men. However, all of them agreed that independent candidates just did not have a chance of winning.

Dr Sushila Kaushik of Delhi University said that studies had shown that independent candidates were often not serious candidates. They were proxy candidates who wanted the Rs 4 lakhs white money that they could pass on to another candidate.

The fact that every party found it politically correct to mouth promises for women's empowerment should be utilised for preparing a charter of demands that all political parties could incorporate, Dr Kaushik suggested. So the Core Group has set up a committee to draw up the Women's Charter. It was also decided to bring to the women's platform representatives of the BJP and other political groups.

Mrs Geeta Mukherji, who was also present at the meeting, has released her letter to make the Women's Reservation Bill an important election issue.

Shekhawat promises to resolve *sathin* issue

by Usha Rai

JAIPUR, Dec 16: Whether Bhanwari Devi, the raped *sathin* in whose support a massive rally was held here yesterday, gets judicial justice or not, Chief Minister Bhairon Singh Shekhawat is keen to improve the State's image on gender issues.

At a meeting yesterday with the Chairperson of the National Commission for Women (NCW), Mrs Mohini Giri, member, Mrs Ganga Potai, adviser, Mrs Padma Seth, and lawyer, Mrs Shyamala Pappu, the Chief Minister sought the NCW's help in conducting a survey on the work being done by the *sathins* and render advice on whether the monthly honorarium of Rs 250 was adequate for the level of grass roots activism expected of them.

Mrs Giri and others had called on Mr Shekhawat to express concern over the large number of rape cases reported from the State and the failure of the judicial system to provide justice. At yesterday's rally, eight victims, including girls of four, 13 and 15 years, came together on a common platform with Bhanwari to present their cases. There were two victims of gang rape kidnapped from their home and bus and attacked. Most of them just stood before the masses - still traumatised and speechless.

Mr Shekhawat said he would accept whatever changes in rape laws the commission suggested. However, he would not comment on the judgment of the session's judge court acquitting the accused in the Bhanwari case. Each judge has his own "dhristikon" (vision), Mr Shekhawat stated.

Mr Shekhawat expressed interest in setting up a State commission for women at the earliest and sought the NCW's help in formulating a women's policy.

The Chief Minister has asked for the women's policies of Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra on which he can base his State's policy.

Mrs Giri's plea to preserve Rajasthan's unique system of *sathins* was countered with the request that the commission conduct an inquiry into their functioning. "I am willing to pay them whatever the Commission recommends," Mr Shekhawat said.

There are about a 1,000 *sathins* working in 21 districts of the State. Under the Women's Development Programme (WDP) started in 1984, the *sathin* was to be the agent of social change and a friend for the village woman. At a statement released at the rally, the *Sathin Karamchari Sangh* said that while working within the confines of the Government, the *sathins* had closely observed the functioning of the judicial system, Government and administrative machinery. Even after endless visits to police stations, courts and caste panchayats, the *sathins* continue to be deprived of justice. Holding the Government responsible for the *sathins'* insecurity, the sangh maintained they had become victims of the double-faced policy of the Government.

Despite constituting the backbone of the WDP, the *sathin* gets a meagre honorarium and has the status of a volunteer. The Sangh maintains that "unable to contend with the strength of the *sathins*, the Government is attempting to curb them. It was after great effort that the *sathins* emerged from the domestic sphere and moved into the social, economic and political spheres."

Mrs Giri said she would be initiating the study on the work of the *sathins* at the earliest with the help of the Rajasthan University Women's Association and other organisations and individuals.

Salem Revisited - I

Baby girls get a new lease of life, not in the womb

by Usha Rai

SALEM, Dec 26

IN Cholasiramani village, Kabilarmalai block, the rescue of an unwanted waif is talked about with pride, and visitors are taken, almost as in pilgrimage, to a little shack where a two-month-old girl clings to its dotting new mother, Poongadi.

The wonder is not surprising. For this is Salem district, where until three years ago, baby girls were killed within the first week of their arrival.

Poongadi's adopted daughter would have met with the same fate. The baby was born to Vijaya when she was on the verge of

starvation and her husband, a lorry driver, was in jail.

The workers of the Community Services Guild (CSG), who have made their presence felt in three blocks of Salem district, had been in close touch with the mother. In a 1992 survey, CSG had revealed the rising number of female infanticides, causing a national outcry.

But between May and November this year, the guild saved 28 baby girls from being killed in Kabilarmalai block alone. It failed in seven instances — three of infanticide and four of foeticide.

In fact, even as infanticide is being controlled, foeticide is on the increase. The cost of an

ultrasound has dropped from Rs 350 to Rs 250 and as infanticide under the watchful eyes of the social workers has become difficult, more women are going to neighbouring Tiruchengode, Erode and other towns where the facility is available.

The mother of two girls, Subalakshmi, decided to find out the sex of her five-month-old foetus at Namakkal, 60 km from her village, Thaneerpandal. Scanning revealed that the foetus was female. Twice the doctor refused to abort the child because the pregnancy was too advanced. But on her third visit, Subalakshmi succeeded. Within two hours of the abortion, Subalakshmi died.

But her tragic story has not deterred other poor women who feel they cannot provide the 20 sovereigns of gold at a daughter's wedding.

This was the mindset CSG workers had to deal with in the case of Vijaya. They tried counselling her to keep the baby but to no effect. The mother would neither feed the little one nor care for her.

When a CGS worker visited Vijaya under the Save the Female Child (SAFE) programme, she found the week-old baby lying on the floor with ants crawling all over. A few days later, Vijaya was found walking, with her baby, to the river. It took physical persuasion from Thangamma, a CSG worker, and a little money,

for Vijaya to keep the baby till a new home was found for her.

That new home was provided by Poongadi and Gopal. Though Poongadi had a baby from her previous marriage, she had not conceived in her seven years with Gopal. Now the legal adoption of the baby is being worked out.

CSG has been provided with funding from various sources to work out a programme of public sensitisation and stem the tide of baby killings. Every mother who has two female children is monitored closely. In the third month itself, the pregnant woman is registered with the primary health centre and there is regular interaction with her and her

neighbours till the baby is three months old.

Most cases of infanticide apparently occur in the first week of the baby's birth.

While workers are physically stopping infanticide, they are also working with the women through group meetings to improve their confidence. The guild has also been providing for the education of very poor girls. While 150 girls are being provided free education, uniforms and books in the guild's school, the education of another 150 girls is being supported in other schools.

(To be concluded)

Salem Revisited — II

For baby girls it is still grave before cradle

by Usha Rai

SALEM, Dec 27: The Tamil Nadu government's cradle scheme announced with fanfare after the national outcry against female infanticide in Salem district has collapsed. The number of cradles outside government hospitals and primary health centres in which unwanted baby girls could be left has been reduced. In Salem there is just one cradle as against six when the scheme was started.

Mr M Sridharan, joint director for social welfare in Madras, says when the scheme was announced in 1992 three babies a month were being left in the cradles in Salem district. Now there are not that many babies so five of the cradles have been withdrawn. Even so just last month, five unwanted baby girls were

deposited in the one cradle that stands as mute testimony of what was undoubtedly a well conceived scheme.

With no babies for state care and not too many complaints about the "quiet killings," the State is euphoric that female infanticide has been wiped out. But these are tall claims. Female infanticide was never a public event and under greater State vigilance it has become more surreptitious. To elude the watchful social workers, the mother of a three-day old female baby in Kabarimalai block took her to her mother's village and quietly disposed of the unwanted girl. In Sitaram, Palayam, a 26-year-old mother who has a daughter has killed the two subsequent baby girls.

It is also possible that mothers have been deterred by the sche-

me because of the high mortality rate of the cradle babies. According to the welfare department

120 babies were left in cradles in three years. In nine cases the parents were tracked down and persuaded to take back their girls. A staggering 33 cradle babies died and the government claims they had congenital ailments. The remaining 78 babies were given to orphanages run by NGOs in Madras, Salem, Bethel and Thirunelveli. Thirty of them have been adopted.

Ironically, while the State claims it has no more babies to care for it is constructing an orphanage for the cradle babies with Japanese assistance. With the Rs 22 lakhs being provided, a whole floor is being added to the Observation Home in Salem and an ambulance, audio visual facilities and other equipment

are being purchased.

But the Puratchi Thalaivi Jayalitha scheme for the girl child has benefitted some 20,000 girls. Tied in with the small family norm and a desire to promote education of girls, only the second or third girl of a sterilised couple below 40 and earning less than Rs 12,000 per annum is covered by the scheme. No family that has a boy can avail of it.

Initially the government deposits Rs 5,000 in the name of the girl in a government fund. On the girl's first birthday, catering to the South Indian craving for gold, a ring worth Rs 800 is presented to her. On her joining school, Rs 250 is given and on her completing primary education and entering class 6— Rs 500.

From class 9 to 12, Rs 50 per month is given for 10 months of

the year. When she turns 20, the girl is given a lump sum of Rs 20,000 which can be used in her marriage or for her education.

However, there does not seem to be much effort to improve family planning services in Salem district. Couples don't practice spacing either because it is a problem to dispose of condoms in the villages or because the men refuse to use them.

Copper T is not popular. The only method known to these villagers is sterilisation and it is resorted to only when the family is complete. Infanticide is a problem of those above the povertyline. The poor agricultural labour want more hands to work and bring home a wage. So Thanasikoyal, with two boys and four girls, refuses to go in for sterilisation.

(concluded)

Rabri packs women's panel with men

By Usha Rai

NEW DELHI, Dec. 29
Bihar, where ironically incidents of rape have risen sharply since the appointment of Mrs Rabri Devi as the Chief Minister, has made history by having a commission for women which has only men members.

In Uttar Pradesh the State Commission for Women, set up by former Chief Minister Mayawati, has been dissolved by the Kalyan Singh Government which wants to set up its own commission. Though the UP Women's Commission was headed by a relative of Mrs Mayawati and had socialites rather than those interested in women's advancement, the manner in which the commission was dissolved has disturbed women's groups.

Mrs Mohini Giri, Chairperson of the National Commission for Women, has written to Mrs Rabri Devi to rectify the mistake and include at least some women in the State Commission. The 16-member Bihar Commission for Women is headed by Minister for Social Welfare, Tulsī Singh, and the other members are secretaries to the State Government. There is not a single woman on the State Commission. This commission is believed to have met just once and has not yet initiated any programmes for women.

Several women's organisations from Bihar have written to Mrs Giri protesting about the appointment of the all-male commission to look after the interests of women.

Asking the CM to send in a report on the Muzaffarpur case where women were allegedly

paraded naked and one of them gang raped, Mrs Giri had written late in November: "I am told you have accepted our request to form a State Commission for Women. I hope you have chosen women members of calibre, commitment and capacity as women in Bihar are really in need of being taken care of at this juncture. You as a woman CM have double responsibility towards this end."

This was followed up by a letter last week expressing distress at not a single woman being included in the commission. Reports from Patna indicate that Mrs Rabri Devi is thinking of reconstituting the State Commission, but no notification has yet been issued.

Belling the powers that determine the fate of women and women's issues in UP is going to be more difficult.

Rajasthan drops *Sathin* scheme

By Usha Rai

NEW DELHI, Jan. 18

Twelve years after the "sathin model" of women's empowerment and development was launched, the Rajasthan Government has decided to drop the scheme. The model had won international acclaim and approval of women's groups of all political hues within the country.

The decision of the State Government, communicated in a letter from Chief Secretary M. L. Mehta to the chairperson of the National Commission for Women, Mrs Mohini Giri, has shocked the commission and all those who have been working for women's empowerment. The NCW, which had been asked by Chief Minister B.S. Shekhawat to study the role of the *sathin* in women's development, and submit its recommendations, was extremely supportive of the "sathin model".

In its report to the Government,

the NCW pointed out "the *sathin* have brought about a shift in the age-old traditional attitudes related to gender roles, social practices and development issues... The years of effort invested in arriving at the current stage of empowerment of rural women needs to be consolidated and built upon." The commission even warned that the progress made in women's empowerment would be nullified by a shift to the Mahila Samooh (a collective of women) approach.

In fact, women have been feeling terribly let down ever since the Bill for reservation of seats for women in the State Assemblies and the Lok Sabha was scuttled in the last session of Parliament. Now this comes as yet another blow to women's empowerment, says Asha Ramesh of the post-Beijing National Alliance of Women's Organisations. How can the State just brush aside the work done by *sathins* like Bhanwri Devi, who was gang-raped for trying to stop

child marriages, asks Mrs Giri.

In place of the "sathin model" of development, the Government is working on an integrated policy for women, says Mr Mehta. "This will focus on improved targeting of women through better convergence and inter-sectoral coordination," says Mehta's letter to the commission. A 20 per cent reservation for women in Government jobs in Rajasthan is also on the cards.

Trouble erupted when the 600 empowered *sathins* unionised and began demanding a just wage. They are getting what the Government calls an honorarium of Rs 250 a month for umpteen chores that vary from getting village women land right to preparing super compost and distributing condoms and contraceptive pills.

However, the Chief Secretary's letter states that while the *sathins* made a significant contribution in the early phase of the programme, they could not succeed in mobilising rural women into cohesive and

self-sustaining groups. The vast majority of rural women, he maintains, remained "marginalised and passive".

Mr Mehta says the Women's Development Programme had envisaged that after consciousness raising and social mobilisation by the worker in her village in five years, new villages would be taken up for WDP work and new *sathins* identified. "However, the existing *sathins* started thinking of permanent *sathin* status in the village and internalising values of Government employees." Mr Mehta says when a *sathin* was selected there was no age restriction or a prescribed minimum standard of education. There was no work target or prescribed hours of work.

Due to resistance of *sathins*, the Government did not follow the project concept and with *sathins* continuing to live and work in the same villages the programme was getting "stultified," the Government claims.

Continued on back page col. 1

Rajasthan drops *Sathin* scheme

Continued from page 1

Mr Mehta would like to link the *sathin's* honorarium with her educational qualification and ability to perform up to a certain age. Arti Sahni of the Mahila Vikas Adhikaran *Sathin* Karamchari Sangh says the *sathins* were to initiate a process of transformation that would bring women out of traditional roles into public life. But the Government insists on evaluating them as unskilled and illiterate because they have not enjoyed formal education. Women who are demanding a realistic wage or honorarium are being accused of nursing ambitions of Government jobs, she says.

Various groups that have supported the *sathin* struggle will come together and hold a dharna on Monday, the first day of the Assembly session.

Cake for babus, crumbs for 'sathins'

The authorities thrust community service on poor women, without paying them even the measly minimum wage. Usha Rai takes a look at a case in Rajasthan

IT'S ironical that while the Fifth Pay Commission worked hard to provide corporate wages to babus and bureaucrats and raise their age of retirement to 60, moves are afoot that could sound the death knell of the sathins — the most celebrated, village-level agents of change of Rajasthan's women's development programme.

While the bada sahibs are likely to rake in Rs 20,000 to Rs 30,000 a month plus all the perks of a sarkari job, the 600 sathins of Rajasthan are being done out of their Rs 250 a month honorarium because they had the temerity to demand a decent wage/honorarium for their 60 listed and unlisted services to the community.

It is not just the sathins who are exploited but also the anganwadi workers, the sakhis and sahyoginis of the Mahila Samakhya programme, many of those involved in literacy work and education in slum areas and the field workers of NGOs. In Bihar 70,000 dais or traditional birth attendants were promised Rs 100 a month after they completed three months training for cleaner deliveries but have yet to receive it. Many of these exploited women are too scared to protest for fear of losing even the Rs 100 or Rs 400 they get.

These change makers, people who deliver the government's basket of services for the community, do not get even the minimum wages. As we celebrate the golden jubilee of our Independence and politicians who claim to represent the 'janata' steer the destinies of the nation, this awesome inequality must be bridged. It is high time that we stopped exploiting people in the name of voluntarism and welfare. Or there will be a backlash. The census shows that in the service sector or these community-based low paid jobs there has been the maximum employment growth for women.

Most of them have sought to come out of their shell and get empowered even as they supplement the family income. But many of them are also the sole breadwinners of their families.

Whether it is cooking the mid day meals, running the balwadis, giving a hand in the census operation, collecting the monthly contributions under the Mahila Samridhi scheme, ensuring the success of the Pulse Polio drive or getting children into school, the work load has fallen on women. Vulnerable women, desperate for employment, have been used by the government for discharging its social responsibilities.

In parts of Bihar the anganwadi worker even collects the fuel wood for cooking the mid day meal. The peanuts that they get for five to eight hours of work is termed an honorarium. Questioning the role of voluntary work and part time work in the context of economic liberalisation, Asha Ramesh of the National Alliance of Women's

Organisation says it is being used as an excuse to underpay. A woman who sets out to work cannot come home for five to six hours. No one should get less than the minimum wages.

As Brinda Karat of All India Democratic Women's Association points out "women have always borne the burden of parivar seva or family service. Now the community service or samaj seva has been thrust on them without the legal framework for a proper wage structure."

"So while women the world over seek recognition for unpaid house work, in India 'hardly paid' welfare work of the community is being dumped on them." If the government has no money why does it not use its existing gigantic machinery for delivery of services? Why should it try to get itself kudos for employing women when all it does is exploit their vulnerability?

Some 7 lakh anganwadi workers form the backbone of the government's prestigious integrated child development services — ICDS — flaunted at international conferences as the country's most successful model for child care. For years the frail anganwadi workers have been agitating for a better wage. But the helper gets only Rs 250 to Rs 350 and the teacher Rs

450 to Rs 650. Only their supervisor is in the government wage structure.

The crucial health care of the nation's children — their nutrition as well as that of lactating mothers falls on their shoulder. But since they are voluntary workers and not government servants they are supposed to serve without expecting a decent remuneration. Naturally these low paid workers are tempted to dip into food meant for children or the medical stores in their care.

Now there is an attempt to privatise the anganwadis in some States like in UP and parts of Rajasthan. Chandra Babu Naidu has, however, decided to withdraw from the move to privatise.

The other move is to hand over the responsibility of running these programmes to the panchayats. But Karat warns this could work like a double edged weapon. The panchayats have no resources and the entire network of women would be at their mercy in the name of decentralisation.

Now unfortunately some NGOs too, who get generous funding from international donors, pay a pittance to their field staff. The corporate managers of these NGOs live in the cities and even if they get a wage of Rs 5000, they do get a house, telephone, entertain-

ment allowance, transport and health care. The field worker just get Rs 250 to 400.

Some NGOs like CEC (Centre for Education Communication) have taken a conscious decision that there will not be much difference in the wages of the field staff and those managing the programme.

Jaya Srivastava of Ankur, which is involved in education of the underprivileged, says teachers who have studied upto class 6 or class 12 get Rs 2000 to Rs 3000 plus provident fund. A master's degree in social work also starts on Rs 3000. "In our micro situation we are challenging the system — educated or not if a person is capable; he or she should get a just wage," says Jaya.

This is in stark contrast with the attitude of Rajasthan Chief Secretary M. L. Mehta who maintains "the issue of increasing the sathin's honorarium needs to be linked with their educational qualification and ability to perform effectively upto a certain age."

Renuka Mishra of Nirantar says the government should use structures that are already in place instead of creating a parallel bureaucracy. Both Mahila Samakhya and Rajasthan's WDP have created this alternative structure. The sakhis working under the Samakhya programme are not paid. Two sakhis work by rotation every two years and share the honorarium of Rs 250 a month. The collective or group of workers in the village are paid only for travel. Is this not grossly unfair.

The exploitation of these women has to be seen in consonance with the recent study of the National Council of Applied Economic Research which clearly shows that the rural Indian woman is a second class citizen. Not only does the female farm labour get just 70 per cent of the wage earned by her male counterpart — Rs 16.40 a day as against the man's Rs 23.40, but just 30 to 42 per cent of rural women find work as against 83 per cent rural men.

Women have always scraped the bottom of the barrel — whether it is for food — as the last member to eat in a family — or as a worker. In the agriculture sector, the lowest paid jobs — jobs that men don't want — fall like crumbs off a table to women. In Rajasthan when refused to pluck chillies from the field because their hands would burn, women volunteered for the work though it meant a wage of Rs 5 a day. A SEWA study shows that in M-P, Rajasthan and Bihar women carry 12 to 40 kg of fuel and fodder on their heads every day and walk 10 km to the markets. They get less than Rs 3 a day per head load and are harassed by forest guards.

Instead of trying to rectify these inequities in the informal sector it would be a shame if the government seeks to perpetuate them in the formal sector.



Freeing women from moneylenders

From Usha Rai

UDAIPUR:

In a society in which land rights have still not been given to a woman, her jewellery is her wealth. When famine and hunger drive women to the brink they mortgage their jewellery for loans from the *sahukar* (money lender) in the poorest villages of the country where there are no banks.

After the famine of 1987/1988, 300 women of Nayabas panchayat (six villages), Kotdha, Udaipur district, mortgaged three quintals of silver and 1.5 kgs of gold for loans varying from Rs 200 to Rs 600. In 22 other famine-ravaged panchayats with about 140 villages too women pawned their gold and silver.

When the rains came the follow-

ing years and there was a good harvest, the women sought to get back their gold and jewellery but the money lenders played truant. While some demanded more interest than the amount loaned, others showed documents where illiterate women had put thumb marks to a statement showing they had sold (not mortgaged) the jewellery to the money lender.

Astha, an NGO working in Udaipur district for the last 10 years, then launched an andolan to recover the mortgaged silver and gold. Money lenders were tracked to Ahmedabad, Khedbrahma, Abu Road and Kotdha and most women have recovered their jewellery. But 10 per cent are still running from pillar to post for the recovery of ornaments mortgaged seven to eight years ago. In most of these cases, says Kesarbai, there is a dispute because the women have

been duped into parting with the jewellery by the *sahukars*.

Homibai of Rajpur village says she took a loan of Rs 200 leaving her 11 tolas silver bangles as mortgage. When she went back with the Rs 50 saved to pay off the interest, the money lender demanded Rs 600.

Every year of delay means the interest on the principal amount borrowed shoots up. Earlier for a loan of Rs 100, Rs 400 had to be returned with interest in the first year.

After Astha mobilised the women, the rates of interest have been rationalised. So for a four-year mortgage an interest of 24 per cent of the amount borrowed has been fixed; for a four to nine years mortgage, the interest is twice the amount borrowed and for a mortgage of 14 to 20 years it is four times the amount borrowed. So on

a loan of Rs 100 in 14 years the interest would be Rs 400.

In fact Astha, which means faith, has been trying to wean away women from money lenders. Mahila saving groups, each with about 15 members are operational in most villages. Every day a woman who becomes a member of the saving group sets aside Rs 2 and the money collected is invested to get a good interest.

Kesarbai's mahila savings samiti in Borlo village has accumulated a saving of Rs 9000. The samiti gives small loans of Rs 200 to Rs 400 for medical expenses, repair of a leaking roof etc. But on rare occasions large amounts may be loaned for a wedding.

Homibai's samiti in Rajpur has 16 members and Rs 8000 in savings. The women need no longer pawn their jewellery or chase the *sahukars*.

DEVELOPMENT

Rupan carried battle to male camp

Public support for the woman IAS officer is of absolute necessity if Punjab DGP K.P.S. Gill is to be suitably punished for his 'sexual terrorism', says

Usha Rai

IT has taken Rupan Deol Bajaj, the Punjab IAS officer, seven long years and Rs 1.25 lakh (pulled out of her provident fund) to fight the case of molestation against high-profile police officer K.P.S. Gill. Not many women could marshal the courage and tenacity of Rupan to carry on such a long, arduous battle to defend their honour.

It is a much-needed victory for women who find that sexual harassment at work seldom gets relieve. So what's a bit of bottom slapping, a few crude remarks; what's the big deal if the boss wants you to come to his hotel to have a drink before he obliges you with a promotion — is the attitude of most men who feel that women are making much ado about nothing. In these days of liberalisation, surely the upwardly mobile woman should have no compunctions about a few liberties taken by the opposite sex.

While Rupan was marginalised in her service — pushed for five years into the Punjab State Institute of Public Administration — and suffered subtle social boycott, Mr Gill received the Padma Shri. Gill's services in the fight against terrorism were considered too important to take any action against him. Most men would still like to dismiss it as no more than a power tussle between the IAS and IPS. There are others who, in fact, blame Rupan for being so attractive. Could there be anything more demoralising for a woman?

Now that the Supreme Court has ordered the prosecution of Mr Gill — the forces that sought to protect him earlier are at work again. Gill should be suspended pending prosecution. Unless this is done it will not be a fair trial, says Ms Indira Jaisingh, the doughty Supreme Court lawyer.

The Punjab Chief Minister has left it to the Prime Minister to decide whether Gill should be suspended. The Prime Minister, who will garner female support in the coming elections brandishing his proposed policy for women — the Mahila Kosh and Mahila Samridhi — has conveniently gone abroad.

In keeping with his style, he is likely to pout and keep mum till the dust blows over. It is frustrating for Ms Bajaj that after such a long battle the issue is being trivialised and no support for her has developed.

When Ms Bajaj took on Mr Gill after the most embarrassing evening of her life, 95 colleagues, including three police officers, signed a memorandum in her support. Now it is time again for women's groups to rally around.

Under Section 509 of the IPC, any person intending to insult the modesty of a woman by sound, gesture or exhibition of any object can be punished by simple imprisonment of a year or along with fine. But most cases don't even get registered.

In the Philippines, an Anti-Sexual Harassment Act was passed this year. Australia also has a similar law. On the basis of the gang-rape of Bhanwari Devi, a state Women's Development Programme worker fighting child marriages, an NGO from Rajasthan, Vishakha, has filed a public interest litigation in the Supreme Court and asked for guidelines on sexual harassment. The Labour Ministry and National Commission for Women (NCW) have been asked to look into the draft prepared by Vishakha and come out with guidelines which the Court will then approve. So, thanks to the Supreme Court there may be guidelines on sexual harassment.

While Myra Dias of Vayudoot, who for five years was denied promotion to the senior grade because she did not oblige her personnel manager, was ultimately promoted after the NCW intervened, Mrs Ela Chowdhury in the Labour Ministry has not been that lucky though her case is older than that of Rupan.

Mrs Urmil Gupta, who headed the Women's Cell in the Delhi Government, became a victim herself and was transferred after she took up 15 women's complaints of sexual harassment by the administrative head of the department. Again at the intervention of the NCW, a move is on to revoke the transfer. At the insistence of the Commission again, the HUDCO officer who barged into the house of his junior officer and was caught naked, was suspended and departmental proceedings launched.

Mukti Dutta, like Rupan, single-handedly fought a case of molestation against former environment minister Z.R. Ansari till he fell sick and sent in a written apology before his death.

Cases like that of Rupan Bajaj need public support or it would be a long battle gone awry.

DEVELOPMENT

Doughty dozen

A crop of new leaders has emerged to invigorate the women's movement in the country, says Usha Rai

WITHOUT ceremony or song, the Coordination Unit (CU) for Beijing has wound up two years of sustained effort to reach out to women across the length and breadth of the country. It successfully established stronger networks and linkages where there were none. Now the jaton has been passed on to the advisory committee of NGOs that were assisting the unit.

Twelve women, representing different regions and known for their commitment to specific issues, have come together to form the National Alliance of Women (NAWO) which will carry forward the mandate from Beijing and ensure that the Women's Policy that is being worked out by the Ministry of Human Resource Development reflects the perceptions and concerns of women at the grass-roots. It is also trying to have women's concerns reflected in the election manifestoes of various political parties.

Ruth Manorama of Women's Voice, Bangalore, is the chairperson of NAWO. Other members of this key group are Vasantha Kanabiran from Andhra Pradesh, Roshmi Goswami from Shilong, Jarjum Ete from Arunachal Pradesh, Pramilla Savai from Orissa, Neelam Gore from Maharashtra and Pam Rajput of Chandigarh.

Thanks to the composition of the unit, two very significant changes have been made in the women's movement. A whole crop of new leaders with strong grass-roots support has emerged to invigorate the movement and give it new vision.

A few Delhi-based women's organisations were initially resentful of this new young team and questioned their credentials. The fact that they were supported by 14 donor agencies like DANIDA, SIDA, CIDA, Swiss Development Cooperation, Action Aid and Ford Foundation made the established organisations cautious about the donor driven intentions of the unit. But fortunately the women of the CU were strong enough to brush aside the criticism and forge ahead.

CU's other major achievement has been its ability to involve some 10,000 grass-roots women in the Beijing debate and keep their interests alive for consolidation in a purely Indian context in the post-Beijing scenario. Now, the women's movement is no longer limited to strident feminist voices from Delhi, Bombay or Bangalore. It has its echoes in Raipur, where

small industries employing women have mushroomed, and Devgar District of Bihar where women still trek five to six kilometres in search of fuel wood.

There has been special effort to understand women in the North East, Dalit and Muslim women and bring them into the mainstream of the national women's movement.

The Naga Mothers Association and the Mizoram-based MHIP are large organisations that are looking at customary laws and codifying them to ensure that women get a fair deal whether its over property, land or employment.

Post-Beijing there is greater coordination among the women of the North East. It is this networking that checked the exploitation of young Khasi girls being sent off to Singapore as domestic help.

While the government machinery will be doing its bit to promote the women's cause, NAWO will have to play a major role in ensuring that there is no gap between what the government makes a commitment and what in fact happens.

Structural adjustment, globalisation and threats to livelihood are common concerns of all women. Increasing violence against women and growing religious fundamentalism, which is bound to suppress women, have to be tackled.

At the more pragmatic level NAWO will strive for greater political participation of women at all levels and not just the panchayats. While the United Nations is keen on a fifty/fifty partnership in all sectors of development, in India just eight per cent of the jobs in the formal sector are held by women.

NAWO's major responsibility is to ensure greater representation for women in this sector while ensuring minimum wages for the large number of women working in the informal sector.

Is it possible to ensure greater social security for the large number of women in the construction industry? The State, it has been found, is the biggest violator of its own laws. How else can one explain the release of the men who gang-raped Bhanwari Devi, the grass-roots worker from Rajasthan. Women's organisations are still having to prove that she was, in fact, raped.

NAWO is planning its own strategies spread over the next 10 years. But to be effective it needs office space in Delhi and funds.

When a woman says 'no'

It is fine to say that women should have control over their own bodies, but when it comes to the technicalities, she is still quite helpless. For millions, the only barrier between unprotected sex and an unwanted child is abortion. But today the Government is looking at other options. If these 'emergency contraceptives' work, then the morning after may not be too late, says Usha Rai

WITH close to 1.3 million illegal abortions taking place in the country every year in addition to the 100,000 legal abortions, the government is seri-

ously considering introducing emergency contraception or the 'morning after' pill. It's an effort to combat the dangers posed by illegal abortions. Of course the primary objec-

tive of the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare is to achieve what seems like an impossible target—a net reproductive rate of 1 by the year 2000 or a population growth rate of 1.2 per cent.

Women's groups are not likely to respond enthusiastically to the emergency contraception, currently on trial at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences. However, Health Ministry officials are eager to clarify that the concept has only recently been formally introduced in India in a research setting. The randomised multicentric study being conducted by WHO at AIIMS under Dr Sunita Mittal will compare two regimes.

While women have every right to be wary of the constant assault on the women's reproductive capacity, there is no denying that to get empowered, women need to control their ferti-

lity. Avoidance of unwanted pregnancy is also important for the health of women and children as is reducing maternal mortality. The latter stands at 4.3 per cent per 1,000 live births.

At a recent international conference on emergency contraception experts arrived at a consensus that if emergency contraception was wide-

ly available, millions of unwanted pregnancies would be averted. It would in India be a boon for the large population of progressive Catholic women of the North East who would have no qualms in averting an unwanted pregnancy rather than defy religious beliefs and go in for an abortion after conception.

Dr Brinda Frey, WHO consultant to the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, has defined 'emergency contraception' as an emergency measure to prevent pregnancy after unprotected intercourse but before the seed gets implanted. In effect these are measures for intercepting the likelihood of pregnancy.

Emergency contraception can be divided into two categories—in-

regimes—high dose oestrogen, combined oestrogen/progesterone, progesterone only, danazol and mifepristone, or RU 486.

In India, the use of combined oestrogen/progesterone regime or Yuzpe regime (named after Canadian physician Albert Yuzpe) is preferred. Private medical practitioners as well as private organisations like the Parivar Sewa Sansthan have been using these effectively.

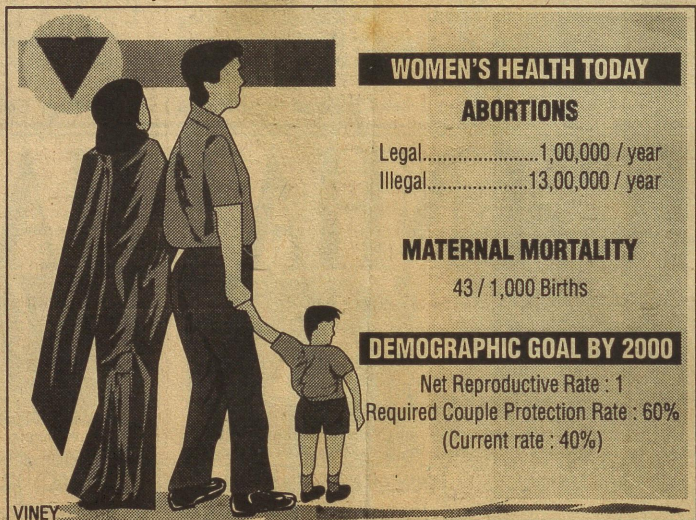
Discussions held so far indicate that the Yuzpe method is a safe, tried and tested method, easy to administer and would require minimum inputs in training and orientation of the service providers. Existing formulations like Mala D are to be procured and repackaged

as emergency contraceptives. There are less side effects like nausea and vomiting and better compliance to the regime.

However, experts agree against introducing emergency contraception into the National Family Welfare Programme straight away. It is to be studied through pilot projects for field trials in service delivery settings.

The 33 Human Reproductive Research Centres with trained personnel and facilities are considered appropriate for the trials. Copper IUD is a more complex option.

It will be a rough passage for emergency contraception in India. But in a country which has one of the highest maternal mortality rates in the world one cannot scoff at it.



volving hormonal and mechanical interventions. The mechanical is the use of Copper IUD within five days of unprotected intercourse. On the other hand, hormonal intervention consists of a variety of different regimes to be administered within a time frame of 48 to 72 hours after unprotected intercourse. The hormonal methods include different

Life term to mothers for infanticide harsh?

From Usha Rai

PUNE: If older women are killing their daughters-in-law for dowry, young women of 19 and 20 are undergoing life sentences for infanticide in Yervada Central Jail. Their numbers are still small — five cases in this one jail. But even these small numbers are a telling commentary on the cult of violence that permeates society today.

As a prison official pointed out "Is it not ironical that a jail that once housed the greatest apostle of non-violence, Mahatma Gandhi, should now be home to perpetrators of the most violent crimes against babies of three days to six years?"

Maharashtra's dynamic I-G of Prisons M. G. Narvane says women are leading in atrocities against women. But should a 19-year-old be incarcerated for life for killing her new born when she herself is little more than a child? "Law does not discriminate on grounds of age or sex," says Mr Narvane. "Whatever semblance of law and order exists in society today is because criminals are behind bars. If criminals are not punished or there is remission of sentences of those convicted, others would be encouraged to kill unwanted infants or young brides."

Adith: and the Community

Service Guild, which conducted the surveys for female infanticide in Salem district of Tamil Nadu and in parts of Bihar three to four years ago, were reluctant to divulge the names of young women who admitted that their new born babies were killed because of the pressure of husband and in-laws who did not want a female child. In their reports to the Central Government Adithi and the Guild said these women should not be punished because they were acting under social pressure. It was the horrifying details of the female infanticide survey that made the Jayalalitha Government announce a cradle scheme for all the unwanted girls. The State would adopt them.

If the number of women convicted for infanticide and dowry deaths seems on the high side in Maharashtra, it is because the conviction rate in the State is 40 to 50 per cent as against 25 per cent in the rest of the country, says Mr Narvane.

Inside the four walls of Yeruvada there is no difference in the treatment of women who have killed their daughters-in-law and the young ones who have slain infants. Sunita Tekade, 19, the youngest woman undergoing a life sentence in Yeruvada, hails from Aurangabad. She told this correspondent that her husband had tied her to a cot when her five-



NO LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL FOR HER: Sunita Tekede (19) sentenced for life after being convicted for infanticide.

days-old daughter was thrown into a well. The husband was angry that she had produced a daughter.

For Sunita there is no light at the end of the long tunnel. Her daughter is dead and her husband has threatened he will remarry. He will not wait 15 to 20 years for a

wife who bears the scars of imprisonment, says Sunita.

Satyabala Sambaji is 20. Her baby boy was delivered at home in Bheed. But since she had been involved in an affair with a young man her husband and his father would not accept the baby boy as

their own. While Satyabala swore the child was her husband's, he suspected it was her paramours. The child died within three days of birth and her husband accused her of killing the child, says Satyabala.

Ganjoo Karandekar has been sentenced for drowning her second daughter, a 11 months baby, in Parmer taluka of Ahmednagar district. Ganjoo has already spent three years in jail.

Manda Tanaji, 25, of Bella village in Pune district has been convicted for drowning her six-year-old son in a well. Manda's husband had taken another wife and so Manda was living with her cousin brother. Her cousin too was accused of murder. Manda's older son is nine and lives in a hostel.

Another woman called Ganjoo, a warder who has already spent 14 years behind bars, was reluctant to relive the tragedy of her life.

"Please don't interview me, don't ask me to talk of my past. I am still trying to forget," she pleaded as she hid behind a prison wall. She claims that her six-month-old baby boy had died of illness.

The fact that young women are undergoing life sentences for infanticide has not been documented. A sociologist needs to compile as well as study the cases languishing in the different jails of Maharashtra if not the country. Though it is difficult to condone infanticide should such young girls be interred for life?

Convictions galore, greed unabated

Many mothers-in-law serving life term in dowry cases

From Usha Rai

PUNE: A hundred mothers-in-law in jails across Maharashtra are undergoing life imprisonment for torture, dowry harassment and what citizens across the country have condemned as "bride burning." In other States too a large number of women have been convicted for this most heinous form of murder.

What should, however, surprise women's groups who have been lamenting about the lack of teeth for our dowry laws and the ineffectiveness of the legal system is the fact that so many women have been convicted for dowry murders. This startling reality was brought out after the National Commission for Women toured different jails in the country to establish the condition of women prisoners and Maharashtra's I-G Prisons M. G. Narvane announced at a Delhi meeting that about a 100 mothers-in-law were incarcerated in his home State. While the NCW has been seeking remission of sentences, Mr Narvane questioned the wisdom of releasing women who have murdered 18 to 20-year-olds out of greed.

Maharashtra, which probably has the largest number of women convicted for dowry deaths, is streets ahead of the other States in delivery of justice thanks to the efforts of Pramila Dandavate of the Mahila Dakshita Samiti and other activists. They not only ensured the incorporation of Section 498 A (torture and harassment) in the IPC some years ago but personally pursued the bride burning cases.

Fifteen of the 103 women convicts in Pune's Yerwada jail are undergoing life sentence for dowry killing. All of them are poor working class women or marginal

farmers and the crimes they committed probably did not hit the headlines. "It is the small fish, those without power and affluence to get a good lawyer, that have been sentenced," says Swati Sathe, DSP attached to Yerwada jail. "The rich, city slickers engage the best legal brains and escape despite startling evidence and death sentence in the lower courts," she maintains.

Women's groups in Maharashtra were shocked when Manjushri Sharda, an M.Sc. was poisoned in the early eighties. She

had been writing to her friends about her husband's affairs and her unhappiness. Up to the High Court Manjushri's husband, a chemical engineer from a family of businessmen, and his parents were convicted and given a death sentence. But in the appeal in the Supreme Court the case was dismissed.

Vidya Soni and her brother were convicted by the lower courts in Nasik for the torture and death of a young woman who failed to conceive. Vidya Soni was in Yerwada prison for two years till

her appeal was heard and dismissed by the High Court.

A visit to Yerwada revealed that women are tortured and killed not only for dowry but for inability to produce a child, very often the male heir. Though Rama Latkar and her son were given death penalty for burning to death the young woman who could not conceive, the mother-in-law was acquitted on appeal and the son's death sentence was converted to life imprisonment.

But none of the current inmates of Yerwada admit to killing their daughters-in-law. In fact many of them behave like ideal prisoners — docile and helpful. Sathe says women who have killed without mercy show no violence in prison because as life termers they want to earn a reprieve after 14 to 20 years or be promoted as warders or supervisors for good behaviour.

In the women's section in Yerwada the dominant colours are yellow and green—the yellow worn by the senior prisoners or warders and the green by those still serving a stiff sentence. Behind the high iron gates life goes on—tailoring, making candles, binding books and cooking. Sonabai Ramchandra Adagadhe is 70. She has been in jail for 17 years and none the worse for it. Wearing yellow, Sonabai has no resemblance to the crochety, old women whose 18-year-old Nanda claimed in her dying declaration had killed her with the assistance of an older son.

Like Sonabai, many of the lifers still cry when they recall the crimes that have marred their lives. But most of them seem cocooned in the security of the prison. Some have no hope of receiving visitors, others still maintain a tenuous relationship with the world

Continued on page 9 col. 2



Cocooned in the security of prison. — HT photo by Usha Rai

Dowry death convictions

Continued from page 1 col. 5

outside. No one knows if they will ever get out.

Kunda Prabhakar Chavan was convicted for life 11 years ago. Kunda says her daughter-in-law Surekha and son Eknath had quarrelled over his insistent demand for money for liquor. Kunda maintains she is innocent and had in fact saved her three-year-old grand daughter, Jyoti, who was in Surekha's lap when she lit up like a human torch. Kunda's son, a rickshaw puller, died of fever seven years ago when Kunda was in prison. Little Jyoti is living with Kunda's mother-in-law and comes to visit her once a year. Looking forlorn Kunda regrets "I was unable to save Surekha. "But life has in fact been cruellest to Jyoti who lost her mother, grandmother and father—all in the span of a few years. It is to help children orphaned by crimes of

their relatives that the NCW has been seeking remission of sentences.

When 21-year-old Sindhu died of burns six months after her marriage to errant, 17-year-old Ashok, there was probably not even a mention in the city briefs columns of the newspapers in Bombay. Housabai A. Kadam (45), who sought to tame her son with the sacred bonds of marriage, was convicted under Section 498A, harassment and torture, and has completed four of the six years sentence. What drove Sindhu beyond the brink of human tolerance? Was it, as Housabai maintains, her mother's bland pronouncement that the married girl should not keep running to her mother's home? or Housabai's aggression? Sindhu's dying declaration put the blame squarely on her mother-in-law. Ashok refuses to come and meet his mother and Housabai, who is

under treatment for cancer, is waiting to get back to her shack in a Bombay slum though she does not know if she will be accepted.

Devika Shankar Sonawane, a vegetable vendor of Dombiville, Thane, and her neighbour Leela Nana More are also serving a life sentence for purging kerosene and burning to death 18-year-old Ratna. The young girl had eloped and married Devika's son in a temple. She had come to live with her in-laws just 15 days prior to the fateful day when she was killed. Jankibal K. Gangurde, 50, has been convicted for life for killing her step son's wife who would not produce a son though she had two daughters.

Horrendous as their crimes were, what is more shocking is the number of such cases. Young lives snuffed out and the older women interred for life. But there seems no end to the greed and the torture.

The gender gap is still a chasm

Women's empowerment is still in the stage of pious intentions, says **Noeleen Heyzer**, Director of UNIFEM, in a talk with **Usha Rai**

IN the developing world the males are always attracted to the bright lights of the cities for employment. In a third of the households women are left with the burden of bringing up children and getting returns out of the small pieces of land in their care.

But a very distinct change in the pattern of migration can be seen in the developing countries of South East Asia, says Dr Noeleen Heyzer, director of the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) and this year's key speaker for the MacArthur Foundation.

With jobs for men becoming increasingly scarce, women are leaving homes in droves as domestic workers. Two years ago when a special study was done on the subject, 500,000 women had left their homes in South East Asia to work as domestic aides. Now their numbers have increased phenomenally. Tribal women from north east India are joining the domestic labour exodus from low growth countries to high growth countries. Within South East Asia region women from the Philippines, Indonesia and Thailand are seeking domestic employment in Hong Kong and Singapore.

Unfortunately, says Heyzer, while some countries recognise domestic work as a commercial transaction, in others, the families importing domestic help claim "ownership rights" on them. So rights and responsibilities have to be spelt out in the framework of the domestic labour market. While women are coming out in larger numbers, their rights are being eroded. The whole scenario of unpaid or poorly paid domestic work and women's enslavement comes out more graphically as women move from public spaces to private ones without knowing their rights.

Recruiting agencies have to be controlled and held accountable, says Heyzer. In many cases there is no trace of the woman who set out as domestic labour. Often their remittances home just do not reach.

With the anniversary of World Conference on Women round the corner, it is time for introspection on the gains, if any, from the mammoth meeting in Beijing. Despite the pessimism in the media, Heyzer sees some definite gains. Five committees, she says, have been set up for (1) closing the gender gap in basic needs like health care and education; (2) for combating violence against women; (3) looking at the feminisation of poverty; (4) making the Convention for elimination of discrimination against women (CEDWA) the legal framework for human rights of women and (5) put in place mechanisms for implementation of these priorities at the international and national levels.

To synthesise the common concerns coming out of all the UN conferences of the last eight years and ensure implementation of action plans, task forces have been formed and responsibilities given to specific UN agencies. UNIFEM heads the inter-agency committee for advancement of women. Pre-Beijing we played a key role in bringing critical issues to focus in country reports. Now we seek to get the promises incorporated into national development plans like India's Ninth Plan, says Heyzer. This ensures allocation of resources for issues that concern women.

But even after all this ground work, stall re-

mains pious intentions on paper. UNIFEM, acting as a broker or a link between government and civil society then turns to the NGOs to stir sleeping consciences.

The current focus is on economic and political empowerment of women. Though there have been greater investments in human resource development and education, the educational levels are still too low for improving the economic status of women, says Heyzer.

Various tools are being used to sharpen the gender sensitivity of nations. The gender sensitivity index in the UNDP report, is one. No one wants to be at the bottom of the gender sensitivity index heap. This year while Sri Lanka tops in the gender sensitivity index in South East Asia, India is fifth.

A comparison of different states in India reveals the relative degree of women's empowerment or conversely their lack of power even over



Noeleen Heyzer

their own lives. Punjab and Haryana, two of the richest states in terms of per capita income have among the lowest female to male ratios. On the other hand, tribal societies, poor by all material standards, show little anti-female bias with roughly equal survival rates among boys and girls. Discriminatory behaviour patterns have much to do with cultural beliefs, social norms, superstition and mind sets, says Heyzer.

Development of the large mass of women living in rural areas has to be seen in terms of ensuring them land and property rights and access to ecological resources.

What are Heyzer's views on reservations for women in the political arena? Fully aware of the efforts for reservation of a third of the seats in Parliament and Assemblies for women in India, she says "reservation is only the first step. It changes the public consciousness on the issue. But women moving into political spheres have to be supported and trained for the job."

Has the UN practised what it preaches — more jobs at the top for women? There are five UN agencies headed by women today — UNCHR by Ms S. Ogatta, UNFPA by Nafis Sadik, WFP (World Food Programme) by Catherine Batini, UNEP by Elizabeth Dodswell, UNICEF by Carol Ballamy and UNIFEM by Noeleen Heyzer — but a lot more needs to be done to narrow the gender gap in the UN, she admits.

Contentious issue

By Usha Rai

Cases of flagrant violation of medical ethics, relating to experiments on human subjects, have been a topic of hot debate in recent times. Of late a number of women's organisations have objected to the use of various drugs on women without their consent.

Injectibles like Norplant, that protect women from unwanted pregnancy for five years, or the chemical quinacrine that induces fibrosis in the tubes to block errant sperms, have fallen by the wayside after women's organisations raised a storm, terming the experiments 'ethically objectionable'.

Things came to a head on Human Rights Day when representatives of about half a dozen women's organisations barged into the offices of the Indian Council of Medical Research protesting against women being denied treatment just because they were part of a 1976 ICMR-supported study on cervical cancer. These women had abnormal tissue growth or showed early signs of cervical cancer. The research was conducted by the Institute for Cytology and Preventive Oncology.

The women's organisations maintained that eight Delhi hospitals, conducting the research, denied treatment to these women just because they wanted to study the growth of cervical cancer.

ICMR denied that these women were used as guinea pigs. On the contrary, it claims that because of the study, cancer could be detected in initial stages in 215 women and they could be saved. There were only five deaths and four were undergoing radiation therapy when they died, ICMR maintained.

The ICPO, it was said, had taken the oral consent or 'informed consent' but the women

insisted that written consent should have been sought as in advanced countries. This threw up the contentious issue of the kind of consent that needs to be obtained before tests are performed on women. There are reasons enough for the women to be apprehensive and their right to know "how informed is informed consent," cannot be questioned. But does a written consent or thumb impression mean that the women have understood the nuances or side-effects of the research?

Justice M. N. Venkatachalaiah, the current chairman of the National Human Rights Commission, heads the Committee that revised the 1980 guidelines, drawn by a team of eminent doctors. The guidelines are being sent to health and research experts, NGOs, women's groups and media for a public debate on the ethics of medical research.

Both in the 1980 and 1997 guidelines, informed consent does not mean 'written consent'. The 1997 guidelines for epidemiology state that while it is important to maximise possible benefits and minimise possible harm, the welfare of the individual has to be balanced against the welfare of the community and society at large.

In the developing countries obtaining 'informed consent' is often considered difficult because the patients may not be knowledgeable or competent enough to understand the meaning of informed consent. The Venkatachalaiah Committee, however, has stated categorically that there is no alternative to 'informed consent'.

Whether or not 'informed consent' is a logic of debate. However, what is more important is for the subject of research to understand what he is to be subjected to, the risks involved and whether he wants to be a guinea pig for the greater glory of science.

There are reasons enough for the women to be apprehensive and their right to know "how informed is informed consent", cannot be questioned

by Usha Rai

NEW DELHI

Adult education institute set to die

WITH literacy being given paramount importance as the key to all development, Ministry of Human Resource Development should have made every effort to nurture and promote National Institute for Adult Education (NIAE). Instead, it seems all set to close its doors.

Set up a little over three years ago NIAE was to provide academic and technical support for the implementation of adult education programmes.

Directorate of Adult Education (DAE), which was bumbling along, was to be merged with the autonomous NIAE for an induction of fresh blood. However, DAE staff went to Central Administrative Tribunal (CAT) and got a stay. Instead of resolving this issue as per the Cabinet decision, things were allowed to slide by the ministry.

According to Education Secretary S.V. Giri, in August/September last year the Expenditure and Finance Committee said there were too many institutions and NIAE would have to be closed down. Says joint secretary Sudeep Bannerji "all schemes have to

get a fresh sanction every year and NIAE did not get it."

Member, Planning Commission Chitra Naik, who assured NIAE would remain and DAE would be phased out is miffed. However, the fate of the institute will finally have to be determined by Union Cabinet since it created NIAE.

The moot question is did Education Department and National Literacy Mission (NLM) make the necessary attempt to keep the institute alive? All indications are that they did not.

NIAE's biggest fault was that it was the brain child of an earlier regime of Anil Bordia, Lakshmi Dhar Mishra and Anita Kaul (secretary, joint secretary and director respectively) and was therefore sidelined.

Some of the best talent of the country was roped in for the research work at NIAE. Senior fellows selected included Anita Dighe of Jawaharlal Nehru University, K.K. Kak, a Gujarat cadre IAS officer, Sadhana Saxena (who had worked with the innovative *Eklavya* project in Madhya Pradesh), Ela Patel who had worked with Indian Space

Research Organisation in Ahmedabad, P.K. Bhargava of International Institute for Population Studies, media expert Avik Ghose and Sumanta Bannerji (who has been working with the NLM).

The multi-disciplinary group was to pioneer adult education research and establish links with field groups and activists. Ghose started weekly broadsheets in Bengali, Tamil and Telugu and tried to make them commercially viable. For post-literacy continuing education, the staff of NIAE networked with a Mahila Samakhyia group in Banda and brought out *Mahila Dakya*, a news letter for neo-literate handpump mechanics.

Junior research fellow Nitya Rao was working with neo-literate women quarry workers of Pudukottai in Tamil Nadu. In Durgapur they were working with women para-vets. Dighe and Patel were working on gender equity in literacy. Some of their case studies were presented and well received at Hamburg's Institute of Education. But in the ministry there was little appreciation.

Instead of supporting the institute, there seems to have been a deliberate attempt to cripple it from day one. It has never had a full time registrar or director; While Giri, chairman of NIAE, visited it just once, the politically powerful Bannerji seemed determined to marginalise what he termed a "Bordia institute".

The NIAE studies on the level of literacy, in districts declared totally literate by the National Literacy Mission, were also found unpalatable. In Durgapur, which was declared totally literate, NIAE did not find even one literate person.

Saxena, who went with an external evaluation committee to Narsinghpur, reported cheating. She got a letter from NLM officials to even withdraw her article on the subject in *Economic and Political Weekly*.

NIAE experts even questioned the 'total literacy campaign' in Ayodhya and were ticked off for doing so.

The ministry obviously wants a research organisation that will be subservient to it, NIAE, which is supposed to be autonomous and was even promised the status

of a deemed university, is not willing to be treated in this manner.

In a memorandum to Arjun Singh, who is the institute's president, the seven senior fellows have pointed out that "NIAE was never really given a chance to realise its potential."

It has sought appointment of a full-time director and registrar. Finance Committee, it has said, should explore alternative sources of funding for the institute as envisaged under Rule 61 of NIAE. It has suggested a corpus grant and tapering off of the institute's reliance on government funding.

But even as NIAE battles for its survival, the services of three daily wagers have been terminated. Yusuf Shah, who was at NIAE on a deputation has been unceremoniously asked to go back and several bright young junior researchers have left to start their own adult education projects.

With 258 total literacy campaigns currently on, NLM is making provisions to do without NIAE.

When crusader becomes a victim

By Usha Rai

NEW DELHI

A MEMBER of the Women's Cell in the Delhi Government has become a victim herself for seeking redressal in 15 cases of sexual harassment and discrimination at work. Interestingly, All cases were from the Department of Food and Civil Supplies.

The women knocked the doors of the Chief Secretary as well as the Commissioner for the department. Instead of justice, the woman who was championing their cause and along with another woman put in charge of the Women's Cell in 1993 has been transferred.

Since January, Ms Urmil Gupta, head clerk in the policy branch and one of the two women in charge of the Cell, was receiving several complaints about Mr K N Sharma, superintendent in the administrative branch of the Department of Food and Supplies.

He used to misbehave with women working under him, use abusive language and threaten them with transfer, she pointed out to her seniors in the

Administration.

After her transfer last month, the women, whose cases she was fighting for, have been demoralised. Feeling both humiliated and angry, Ms Gupta has appealed to the chief secretary, Mr P.P. Chauhan, to intervene and stay the transfer which she has termed as 'malafide, illegal and vindictive.'

The National Commission for Women (NCW) has taken a serious view of the way the case has been handled.

In February Ms Urmil Gupta had brought the case to the notice of the Commission. The secretary of NCW, who is a batch-mate of the Delhi Chief Secretary, sent the complaint to him. Now after the transfer of Ms Gupta, the Commission is seeking all the relevant inquiry documents.

The Food and Supplies Non-Gazetted Employees Association has also appealed to NCW to take up the case. "It's a matter of great embarrassment for the staff that no action has been taken against the officers," the representation points out.

Instead the employees who were raising their voice against injustice have been thrown out. "If this is the fate of the only Women's Cell in the Delhi

Government, it would be useless to open other such cells in the other departments, the Association has pointed out.

Ms Gupta, who was also working under Mr Sharma, has in her complaint to the Chief Secretary pointed out that Mr Sharma used abusive language — "rand and randi" — while addressing the women.

So 15 women plucked up courage and brought this to the notice of Mr S C Sarin, deputy commissioner, administration, and requested for Mr Sharma's transfer.

Mr Sarin said, no action could be taken till there was a "serious case with proof".

The women, along with Ms Gupta, then met the Commissioner, Food and Civil Supplies, on February 1. They explained the facts and even submitted a written complaint, copies of which were sent to the Chief Minister, Secretary and Secretary (Services). The complaint was also sent to Mr N C Rai, deputy commissioner, vigilance, for action.

When there was no action, the women wore black bands to work for a day. Then on February 20 a complaint was lodged with the NCW and its intervention sought.

On March 6, after the Commission wrote to the Chief Secretary, the women were asked to testify before Mr Rai and their statements were recorded. Ms Gupta gave her statement in writing.

Mr Rai submitted his report to the Commissioner, Food and Civil Supplies, four days later.

But: the Commissioner instead of acting on the report wanted Mr Rai to get the women to write out their complaints and submit a report for further action. Most of the women complied with this demand too.

Mr Sharma, Ms Gupta alleges in her complaint to the Chief Secretary, threatened her with transfer as well as implication in a false case.

On April 4, Ms Gupta received transfer orders. Ms Gupta protested to the Commissioner, Food and Civil Supplies, and he assured action.

But Ms Gupta has not been allowed to work in the policy branch while Mr Sharma, against whom the women were up in arms, has not been budged. The women are not only demoralised but fear more harassment. The Chief Secretary was not available for comment.

DEVELOPMENT

Lifeline for trees

Women in Tehri Garhwal have launched a Chipko-like movement to protect high-altitude forests, says Usha Rai

A UNIQUE forest conservation movement has been launched in the Ryalta region of Tehri Garhwal. In a determined bid to check the felling of green trees at a height of 10,000 feet and above, groups of villagers inspired by the Himalaya Seva Sangh, have been tying the 'raksha sutra' (protective thread) around giant trees that have been marked for the axe.

As in the Chipko movement that has won India international acclaim for its people-inspired forest conservation effort, women are at the vanguard of the 'raksha sutra' campaign. "These trees have protected us all these years. Now we will protect them," is the simple logic of the villagers.

The giant trees draped the hills a verdant green, they provided food, fodder and fuel-wood. But above all it was exquisite forest cover that nurtured and sustained the mountain streams and created umpteen 'chaals' or water tanks. There was no shortage of water in these hills.

But, with the vandalisation of the forests, the hills are getting bare and even the chaals are drying up or getting blocked with the felled timber.

Ironically enough, last year as well as this year, the raksha sutra campaign was around the time of Raksha Bandhan, the festival where a girl ties a rakhi around the wrist of her brother seeking his protection. While the raksha sutra was tied around a 1,000 trees on 200 hectares this year, last year the sacred thread was tied around 2,500 trees.

Forests seem to be low priority for the UP government. The handling of the forest fire earlier this year and the lifting of a 10-year moratorium on the felling of trees above a height of 10,000 metres in 1993 spell doom for the UP forests and hills. Land-slides are already on the rise.

People's movements in difficult hill terrain can only have limited success. But, women walking steep slopes to protect endangered forest chunks by tying raksha sutras should inspire the government in Lucknow as well as Delhi to take another look at the forest conservation policy.

The lifting of the moratorium by Uttar Pradesh government, then under Central rule, without consulting the Environment Ministry was condemned by the then Environment Minister, Mr Kamal Nath. The State Government's rationale was that for a more scientific management of forests, the felling of trees above

1,000 metres had been resumed. In his communication with Mr N Jayal of INTACH and Mr Sunderlal Bahuguna, Mr B.K. Goswami, adviser to the Governor, had said only the 'chir' was being cut. The ban on cutting of other trees, he said, had not been revoked.

However, whether the Uttar Pradesh government admits it or not for all practical purposes the ban has been lifted. According to the audio visual presentation prepared by the Himalaya Seva Sangh (HSS), virgin forest areas are now being attacked and trees felled on the pretext that they are 'dry'.

The Ballanga and Bhihang ranges are being systematically denuded to serve commercial interests.

The various checks and balances introduced by the State Government to prevent green trees being felled have been subverted. The forest department is supposed to accompany the forest corporation contractor in the tree marking exercise.

The gram pradhans too are supposed to give their consent. But, the contractors lobby seems to prevail and with the dry trees the green ones are being cut.

People of the exquisite Ryalta forest range live in harmony with nature and depend on the forests for their survival. But even here the contractors have cut trees without attracting the attention of the local people.

Last year HSS workers saw 753 green trees marked for cutting. Further one of the cut trees had a marking. Piles of logs, which are smuggled out at night, were also noticed.

Rai, murenda, kharsu, bhooji, mauro and ringal are some of the exquisite trees found in the Ryalta forest range. There is a wealth of herbs at this height — atish, kadvi, salang, mishri, chor, chiraita and farad. But the cutting of even a single tree causes incalculable damage by crushing the undergrowth.

After the agitation began, the forest corporation has suspended operations. Five plots in the Tehri region, senior forest staff admitted, were given to the corporation by some juniors.

The people of Ryalta are now demanding reimposition of the ban on tree felling above 1000 metres; and that trees marked by the forest department should be cut only after the local people have examined them and that they should have the first right to the dry, uprooted and half broken trees. The demands seem reasonable in an election year.

Ministry backs 30 p.c. quota for women in Govt jobs

by Usha Rai
NEW DELHI

THE DEPARTMENT for Women and Child in the Ministry of Human Resource Development has supported the proposal of the National Commission of Women for 30 per cent reservation for women in all government jobs.

Mrs Mohini Giri, Chairperson of the National Commission for Women (NCW), maintains: "If you want women to get into decision-making positions at least a third of the jobs should be reserved for them." Mrs Giri is, in fact, pushing a proposal mooted by the first Commission under Mrs Jayanti Patnaik.

The recommendation has been cleared by the HRD Ministry and is doing the rounds of the Ministries of Law and Welfare and the Department of Personnel. In her meeting with the HRD Minister, Mr Madhavrao Scindia, Mrs Giri has pointed out that the money spent by the Commission would be wasted if this and other recommendations are not accepted.

Studies indicate that there is a kind of glass ceiling beyond which women cannot penetrate to get top jobs. Even at the lower level, women hold just 4 to 15 per cent of various categories of the government jobs.

The recommendation is significant, coming as it does just before the Beijing Conference on Women and the release of the

1995 Human Development Report of the UNDP in which Mr Mahbub-ul-Haq — author of the report — has mooted the 50/50 job proposal for women and men.

Beginning with 30 per cent jobs in the organised sector for women, Mr Haq says governments should work towards 50 per cent jobs for women.

This year a gender-related development index has been prepared to show the difference between the human development of men and women. The Secretary General of the United Nations is also pushing for 50 per cent of the top UN jobs (assistant secretary-general and above) for women. The deadline to achieve the target is 2000.

With elections round the

corner in India, the Congress could well use the proposal along with the long list of anti-poverty programmes to woo women who form 50 per cent of the electorate.

The NCW has said, the question of reservation of jobs for women should be examined afresh. The scheme of Article 15 and 16 of the Constitution, it has said, is to provide safeguards against various discriminations, coupled with relaxation in favour of certain classes of citizens to promote their development.

However, while Article 15 (3) and (4) enable the State to make special provisions for women and children, educationally backward classes of citizens and SC/STs, clause (4) of Article 16 vests such powers in the States only in respect of backward classes of

citizens and not for women or children.

The Commission has pointed out that the Supreme Court's decision disallowing reservations exceeding 50 per cent of the vacancies for all categories taken together, cannot logically be applied to the case for reservations for women because women do not form an additional category; they constitute a sub-category within every category of citizens.

The Apex Court's decision to limit the percentage of reservations was made in the context of proposals to increase the quantum of reservations due to additions of new categories.

"Reservations for women is in essence only a sub-reservation within a given category whether

SC/ST/OBC or general. Viewed in this perspective sub-reservation for women across the board does not conflict with the direction of the Supreme Court to limit reservations for all categories to 50 per cent of the vacancies."

And if it is legally feasible to provide for sub-reservation for women in the reserved category, it should also be possible to have sub-reservation for women in the remaining 50 per cent posts meant for general category.

If sub-reservation is not allowed in the 50 per cent meant for the general category, it would be seen as though the Government is unwilling to reduce the opportunities for

upper caste men, it has been pointed out.

The Commission felt that the reservation for women in jobs would be in consonance with the one-third reservation for women in panchayats and nagarpalikas.

According to a senior official of the NCW currently women hold less than 5 per cent of the class 4 jobs; at the clerical level it may be higher — up to 15 per cent — but varying from State to State.

Seven to eight per cent of the jobs in the Indian Administrative and All India Services are held by women. In the class two services, women hold less than five per cent of the jobs. In the public sector it is even worse.

DEVELOPMENT

Another species gets endangered

Only by educating and empowering women can female foeticide and infanticide be tackled, says Usha Rai

SPINE CHILLING as the Adithi and Madras School of Social Work surveys on female infanticide in Bihar and Tamil Nadu have been, reports coming in from other states also bear grim tidings of discrimination. If its not infanticide, its foeticide.

In fact in 65 districts of nine states the sex ratio is so skewed that the Women and Child Department of the Ministry of Human Resource Development has given top priority to find out the cause of the imbalance before introducing corrective measures.

As against the average sex ratio of 927 females to 1000 males or in reverse 1078 males to 1000 females, in 55 districts it is 1100 males to 1000 females in the upto 6 years age group; and in 10 districts it is 1150 males to 1000 females.

Though poverty is a major reason for infanticide in Bihar and Tamil Nadu, even in the affluent states of Punjab and Haryana the girl child is fast becoming an endangered species. Patiala, Hissar, Kurukshetra, Faridkot, Amritsar, Jind, Kaithal, Jaisalmer, Bhind and Salem have the worst sex ratio records. Salem tops the list of girl killers with 1205 males to 1000 females.

The countrywide study was initiated by the Department after Adithi and the Community Services Guild of Madras identified large scale female infanticide in Salem early in 1992. While NIEPA is conducting the study in Uttar Pradesh, NCERT has been given responsibility for Punjab and Haryana, Jawaharlal Nehru University for Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, Andhra School of Social Work for Andhra, Madras School of Social Work for Tamil Nadu, Adithi for Bihar and Tata Institute of Social Sciences for Gujarat.

Preliminary studies indicate that fear of land fragmentation is an important reason for large scale foeticide in Punjab and Haryana. Land consolidation is responsible for the agricultural boom of Punjab and it is feared that laws that ensure an equal share for the girl in the property may in fact have led to the current backlash.

But, till the study is complete and findings analysed one should not jump to conclusions.

Lack of education, mounting consumerism coupled with the demand for dowry, poverty, inadequate knowledge and facilities for practise of family planning and the immense greed of the new breed of doctors who seem to have no qualms about misuse of their medical skills have compounded the evils of infanticide and foeticide.

Kudos to the department for the comprehensive studies. Its opened a Pandora's Box. The moot question is how does it propose to tackle the problem? Infanticide and foeticide are crimes of the worst kind. But Adithi and some women's groups do not support prosecution of the parents and even the *dais* who are asked to do the killing in Bihar. It is feared that evil would not vanish but just go underground and in future there would be no cooperation from those who have volunteered information.

However, there is a section in the Women and Child Department that favours prosecution — an exemplary punishment to deter others. However, the government should go all out to prosecute doctors who allow female infanticide in their nursing homes. The Medical Council of India should revoke the registration of such doctors and nursing homes. Has a single sex diagnostic clinic been sealed after the law banning misuse of the facility was passed?

Based on the reasons for infanticide a different strategy is proposed for each state. Child development programmes are to get priority in the worst districts. There will be a focus of ICDS programmes as well as literacy classes. Gender sensitisation of police personnel has begun. Field level workers, the *dais* and ANMs, will be given legal literacy courses and they in turn are to create awareness of the Act regulating foeticide. But this does seem a tall order for the already overburdened ANM.

A more practical suggestion is compulsory registration of all births and deaths. In Haryana the state has started investing in the girl child through an 'Agni beti, agni dhan' scheme. Tamil Nadu too has started a similar scheme where the girls get Rs 20,000 to Rs 25,000 when they turn 18.

But, there is no magic wand that can be waved to wish away the evil. It will have to be a slow painful process of educating and empowering women.

It takes Rs 60 and a sari to kill a girl child in Bihar

by Usha Rai

NEW DELHI

LARGE-SCALE female infanticide has been reported in four blocks of Bihar — Dumra, Gopalpur, Bhawanipur and Kathar — by Adithi, a non-governmental organisation that had earlier done the study on female infanticide in Tamil Nadu.

The killing in Bihar is done primarily by the *dais* or traditional midwives at the behest of the parents — largely the husband — on payment of a fee that varies from Rs 60, plus a sari, to Rs 150.

In fact, more money is given for killing a female child than for delivering a male child. The girl child deaths are termed "saurikhar" deaths (deaths in the room of child birth).

Originally practised by the Rajputs, female infanticide has now spread to other castes.

including the Bhumiars, Brahmins, Kayasths, Yadavs and even *Dais* like the Dushads.

While in Tamil Nadu, newborns were killed by covering their faces with a wet towel or feeding them poisonous milk of a plant, in Bihar, the child's spinal cord is snapped by holding it by the waist and throwing it forward and backward, by feeding salt or sufficing the child into a clay pot.

The exhaustive report, which gives the names of *dais* and the exact number of children they have killed plus video recordings, has been submitted to the Department of Women and Child, Human Resource Development Ministry.

BLAME IT ON POVERTY:

It traces the cause of female infanticide to poverty and lack of sonography and other such sex determination technology in rural areas, which makes families go for female infanticide as against foeticide.

The four blocks surveyed falls

in the districts of Siemamhi, Bhegalpur, Purna and Kathar and have the lowest sex ratio according to the 1991 census: Dumra — 819, per 1000 males; Gopalpur — 739 and Bhawanipur — 757.

Though Palkot block in Gunla district was originally included in the study, evidence of female infanticide could not be established because there was no rapport with the *dais* in the area. So Kathar was selected where a voluntary agency, Bal Mahila Kalyan, was able to identify a high rate of female infanticide and 35 *dais* who were willing to testify to this.

These 35 *dais* in Kathar town and block admitted that each of them killed three to four babies per month. In other words, some 560 babies were being killed in a month. Forty *dais* of Purna town and Bhawanipur block confessed to each of them killing one to two female babies every month.

KILLING RECORD: Ten

dais of Dumra block of Siemamhi district also claimed killing one or two babies a month. Adithi points out that there are 5,30,000 *dais* at least in the State — so the number of female babies killed can be estimated!

Though female infanticide is an important reason for the low female sex ratio in the selected blocks as against 912 for 1,000 males in the whole State in 1991, there is also rampant neglect of the girl child and an obsession for boys. Adithi sees a parallel in the growth of dowry demands and dowry related deaths as well as conspicuously consumptive weddings.

Pleading for a change in the patriarchal system and the abolition of dowry, Adithi has refused to report the cases of female infanticide to the police because reporting and punishment will only drive female infanticide underground. It will not eradicate it — only

make it harder to detect.

Adithi has, in fact, given four reasons to the HRD Ministry for not reporting the cases. These include:

- 1) Female infanticide is not a law and order problem, but a socio-cultural one;
- 2) Adithi needs the support of the people living in the village;
- 3) Often the husbands are forcing and even bribing the midwives to do it. So punishing the midwives appears to be morally wrong;
- 4) Reporting to the police will only lead to corruption and harassment.

In Ranjipur and Punaura villages of Dumra block, Adithi found the sex ratio was 671 and 892 females respectively per 1,000 males. For every 1,000 male child deaths, there were 1,820 and 1,571 girl child deaths in the two villages.

DOCTORS' APPROVAL:

Female infanticide was admitted to by women health attendants and

male compounders. It is done not

only in home deliveries, but in private hospitals with the knowledge of the doctors. There are reports of individual

compounders and birth attendants testifying to hundreds of such deaths in nursing homes.

In Bihar, the newborn is cremated or buried without fuss. Even a death certificate is not needed. However Block Development Officers, Civil Surgeons, ICDS personnel and panchayat leaders deny female infanticide in the State.

To counter female infanticide, Adithi has suggested several measures that will eliminate the unequal power relations within the family and strengthen the initiatives of women to defend themselves against violence.

It has said that the Bihar Government should promote equal inheritance for girls as well as help women's organisations in getting access to the Government owned fish ponds and wastelands

Visionary perception

Evocative films on development need to be screened by Doordarshan to provoke the Government to act, says Usha Rai

DEVELOPMENT and change sweeping through our rural hinterlands, the people's movements that are stirring up a new consciousness against displacement and tribal exploitation have been graphically telescoped at the International Video Festival on science, society and development currently on at Thiruvanthapuram.

In many ways it's a festival of the activists and change makers and what better venue than this city which has seen major science and literacy movements.

A large number of films are like an outpouring from the heart - unveiling pent up frustrations and anger. Others, like those on science and communication, till about the marvels of gene banks, hydrology, the myriad secrets of nature and even about lasers and computers for the blind.

Some 350 entries were received and 110 of them were selected for the competition. A third of the video films have been made by women who show an uncanny ability to get into the very heart of their subjects. Though SEWA of Ahmedabad, which has done pioneering work in training and putting video cameras in the hands of street vendors, has not entered any film made by its students, it has sent Lilaben, a vegetable hawker turned camerawoman to participate in the dialogue on women, social activism and the video.

Tu Zinda Hai is a powerful video about women challenging various structures and authorities. Their spirit is indomitable. But because they dare and fight for the rights of those who are paid Rs 6 when the minimum wage is Rs 16 they are branded Naxalites. One is even raped.

Tribal alienation comes out strongly and represents a major area of confrontation and concern in the years ahead. The video gives insights into the subtle and not so subtle forms of land grabbing - ply them with liquor and grab their lands; extend a loan of Rs 10 in the morning and take back Rs 15 at night.

If predictions can be made on the basis of video films, a tribal backlash is inevitable. They are already questioning development that displaces them whether it is for setting up a firing range in Bihar or for bauxite mining in Orissa. If a court can give an injunction against a tribal burning his dead on the land of his forefathers, why cannot the court give an injunction against their dying, asks an articulate tribal.

One of the widely documented movements is that of the Narmada Bachao Andolan. Sinantini Dhuru and Anand

Patwardhan record four years of the struggle till March 1994. The *Narmada Diary* is powerful and gripping. As determined as those fighting the drowning of their homes and lands are the pro-dam protagonists. On the death of the Gujarat Chief Minister, Chimanbhai Patel, they take a vow to fulfill his dream for the dam. Two other films on the Narmada figure in the festival.

The sections of Society and Development and Environment have attracted the largest number of entries and reflect public concern. So there are films on the four sacred groves of Maharashtra and their slow decimation; the mangroves of Kerala and the campaign to plant them after a person found school children's umbrellas being blown away by winds that had no mangrove barriers to break the winds.

Then there are films on the Asian elephants and the government efforts to rebuild their forest corridors; on the fires in the Jharia coal fields that have been raging for years without any sign of reprieve for those who live above them.

Of a different genre is Shyam Bengal's *Tulsi Tambulam* (The Basil Leaf). Using gentle humour, the film focuses on the dilemma of a priest of small temple whose God gets no monetary offering. As the priest and wife starve - their only source of energy is holy water and basil leaf.

It is doubtful if the official media will ever show the films on those afflicted with lathyrism - the paralysis of the lower limbs in males, said to be caused by eating kesari dal. It would be an indictment of government callousness in dealing with a serious problem that has crippled hundreds of villagers of Satna, Rewa and other adjoining districts of Madhya Pradesh.

Appropriately titled *Waiting for Reprieve*, it shows there is no law banning or regulating cultivation and sale of the toxic pulse. Only its adulteration with other pulses is forbidden under the Consumer Act.

The cultivation of the pulse was banned in 1962 - the ban was withdrawn six months later. Though there seem to be fewer cases of lathyrism being reported in recent times, it is a major health problem that is crying out for urgent attention.

It would be a shame if these evocative films on development are not shown on Doordarshan to provoke the Government to act. Political parties are wooing the rural poor. Let them also understand them.

- DEVELOPMENT -

Disappointing appointment

Women's groups will have to energise the National Commission for Women, says Usha Rai

THE Prime Minister has finally found time to appoint a National Commission for Women (NCW). After seven long months of waiting for the new team, one expected the Prime Minister's Office to appoint a team of women who are in the vanguard of the women's movement in the country. Persons with their fingers on the pulse of the emancipated women of today. But, what a disappointment the new commission is. It has only a chairperson, Ms Mohini Giri, and its former secretary, Ms Annie Prasad, to redeem it.

The other members are unknown entities. Better known for their connections with the Congress than for anything concrete they may have done for women.

In retrospect it seems the old team, headed by Mrs Jayanti Patnaik, was probably better.

The team seems to have been chosen with an eye on the coming elections. Representation of scheduled castes and scheduled tribes as ordained by the NCW Act, and representatives from Jammu and Kashmir, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh.

There is no representative from the South, unless Ms Giri is seen as taking that onerous responsibility. The NCW Act does not extend to Jammu and Kashmir and no one, even remotely connected with the women's movement, has heard of Ms Suraiya Matto. But the youngest daughter of Sheikh Abdullah who teaches in a women's college in Srinagar, was probably seen as a good way of wooing the estranged people of the Valley.

Ms Kailashpati, a member of the Mahila Congress in Uttar Pradesh was once elected to the Lok Sabha and twice nominated to the Rajya Sabha. She represents the scheduled castes and was even on the Consultative Committee of the Information and Broadcasting Ministry but by no stretch of imagination can she be called a spokesperson for a band of articulate women conscious of their rights and responsibilities.

Ms Manorama Singh from Bihar has also graced the Parliament but is not remembered for espousing any women's cause. Ms Ganga Potai from Madhya Pradesh, represents the scheduled tribes and having worked

with the earlier commission should be able to ensure continuity in work. Ms Kokilaben Jyas is probably better known in Gujarat than elsewhere. She was the tourism minister in Mr Solanki's government. She is known to be a good Congress worker, active with a citizen's group that helps the poor and the riot affected.

It's important for the NCW not to be identified with a political party, as it then loses its clout as an independent organisation.

The commission, headed by Ms Patnaik, lost its cutting edge when it was seen as being more active in fighting injustices against women in non-Congress ruled states. Ms Patnaik's battle against the former minister, Mr Rout, for molesting Ms Basanti Behra was seen as an act of political vendetta.

It is therefore important to have in the commission a good mix of women with a sound academic background in women's studies, legal experts and those with grass-roots experience who understand issues as perceived by women. Ms Pramila Dadavate, Ms Lotika Sarkar, Ms Veena Muzaumdar, Ms Sharda Jain - there are so many good women doing such excellent work.

However disappointed, women's groups will have to rally around the NCW and energise it. Unless issue-based women's politics is brought to the centre stage, the very purpose of the commission will be defeated.

Fortunately Ms Giri can take a team along. She has handed over the responsibilities of the Guild of Services, which she heads, and taken charge at the NCW. As a first step she would like to pursue the recommendations of the earlier team of the NCW and see them translated into action. Voices of women are not heard and she is hoping for 50 per cent representation for women at all levels - in Parliament as well as government offices. Her third concern is about violence. The growing violence in society has its seeds in the family, so the family as an institution has to be strengthened, she maintains.

As the founder member of the War Widows Association she played a positive role in rehabilitating war widows.

Milk of death awaits infant girls in Jaya's constituency

by Usha Rai

DHARMAPURI

THREE YEARS after Chief Minister J. Jayalalitha announced a cradle scheme and State care for unwanted little girls, in her own constituency (Bargur — Dharmapuri) female infanticide is still practised and there are no cradles. In fact the local administration refuses to believe that the evil exists. Social Welfare Officer, Mrs Jayalakshmi, says "We are not aware of infanticide in this district. No one has come and complained. So there are no cradles."

The cradle scheme, she maintains, is meant only for Salem and Madurai (Uslampati) districts where surveys by Adithi Community Services Guild and others have established infanticide.

But the surreptitious practice

of stifling out lives, most often within hours of birth, was discovered by the Working Women's Forum when it extended its credit and health programmes to the district. Though the Forum has not conducted the kind of studies done in the other districts, it has ample evidence of the evil... evidence that cannot be bandied about for fear of reprisal on the women.

This correspondent met five mothers who confessed without any sense of remorse that they had killed their little girls. All of them are now members of the Forum and more enlightened. Last Saturday they slipped away from their homes to come to the Forum office in Dharmapuri to talk of their lives and the compulsions that forced them to kill. Gauri (not her real name), of Sorakapatti, is 30 and mother of three girls and two boys. She has killed two baby girls in four years. Both were given the poisonous milk of the oleander

plant 24 hours after birth. Her husband deserted her when she was seven months pregnant with her fifth child.

Gauri is illiterate. At 14 she was married to a landless labourer. Her poor parents gave her three pieces of jewellery and Rs 2,000 later. She had four daughters in succession and the fourth one was put to sleep. The fifth was a boy and received with great joy. The sixth was again a daughter whose life was snuffed out.

There were no tears in her eyes, no guilt or regret in her voice as she stoically recounted her tragic life. She had not even pondered to think about her crime. There was no compulsion. Gauri, who now lives in a separate hut with her five children, says she did what she had to.

She earns Rs 6 to Rs 7 a day cleaning tamarind and supplying it to traders. With a loan of Rs 400 from the credit cooperative society of the Forum she is rebuilding her life. Her mother

helps her financially and occasionally the husband may contribute. The only silver lining is Gauri sends all her children to school because she does not want them to suffer her fate.

Vediamma, 32, of Irular Kottagai, is a tribal who earns her Rs 5 a day weaving mats. In this tribal village, situated on a tiny hillock, poverty is all pervasive. Children roam around naked. Since the nearest school is over 1.5 kms away and not easily accessible most kids stay at home. The men work as daily wage labourers — often cutting wood from the adjacent forests and selling it as fuelwood.

"I am doomed to lead this miserable existence without enough food to eat, place to live, no oil for my head or any assets...let my children die before me. I will not subject them to this suffering. That is why I killed them," says Vediamma.

When this correspondent visited Irular Kottagai, the atmosphere was tense because a

drunken man insisted on sitting in at the women's discussions. But in her earlier interview to the Forum she confessed, "I gave birth to two girls and three boys. Now only the third son lives. The rest died. But it was I who did away with the two girls. My first born was a girl. She lived for 12 months. Then I fed her oleander milk in a coconut shell. She had polio. I cannot provide her medical care. With such a handicap, a girl would find it difficult to survive. I was worried about her future and so I killed her. My second girl lived for a month and a half. Then I killed her in a similar way. The next two were boys but they died due to some illness. My last child, a boy, is alive."

Vediamma says her mother had nine children but could look after them. She has not told her mother or her husband that she killed her girls.

But she says her sister-in-law had nine girls and tried to kill all of them. The first two she killed

by giving some medicine (brought from a local drug store). The other two, she claims were killed by her mother-in-law by rubbing their necks to the ground. Many women get sleeping pills from doctors pleading they are tired and cannot sleep. This is powdered and given to the babies.

"I am sure I will suffer for my sins. But let it all end with me in this life itself. I will not let my children suffer for my sins," says Vediamma.

Many of the women were still too nervous to talk about their crimes. But they tell you about female infanticide in a neighbour's house or that of a close relative.

Ranjitamma, the Forum's organiser at Kandakalpatti, has four daughters, the youngest four months. She admits she was under tremendous pressure to get rid of her baby but with a salary of Rs 300 a month she hopes to bring up her baby. But she fears desertion by her husband if she

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