
UNIT 1 PEASANT AND WORKING CLASS FEMINISM

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1.1 INTRODUCTION

The dominant stereotype that persists in society is that men are producers and women are reproducers. According to August Babel (1975, p.4), women are the first human beings to taste bondage and women were the first slaves. Scholars like Maria Mies (1998) and Gail Omvedt (1977) have explored the life worlds of peasant women. The subjective and objective dimensions of the peasant women's conditions are important and it will help you to understand their affinities or detachments related to peasant movements.

1.2 OBJECTIVES

After completing this unit you will be able to:

- Explain the formation and historical background of peasant and working class women in India;
- State the trajectory of the various movements based on peasant and working class; and
- Analyze the social stratifications that determine the assertion of peasant and working class women.

1.3 DEFINING PEASANT AND WORKING CLASS

It is important to understand the concepts related to the categories such as peasantry and working class. This exercise that engages with the definitions of these categories will help us to locate the linkages that exist between gender, and the peasantry and working class.

The category of peasant is contested. It refers to diverse sections such as share croppers, rich small holders, landless labourers and sections such as feudal tenants. These are dealt within the Marxist theoretical tradition. The revolutionary agency of the peasantry is very much part of the Marxian analysis. Marxist scholars link feudal tenants to the world of peasant economies. This approach explores the conditions that determine the location of rural day labourers, feudal tenants and independent farmers. Peasants and their life worlds are explored in the context of consumption/production, capitalist/non-capitalistic agriculture and the exploitation of impoverished producers in agriculture. The mode of production plays a vital role in the class location of peasant. Anthropological readings on peasantry focus on the role of norms and values, predicaments on tradition, nature of vision and so on. In other words, norms, values, tradition and vision of peasantry are studied in the field of anthropology.

The working class is the class which has to sell its labour power for survival. Marx called this category as the “proletariat.” The sale of labour power within a particular time determines the wage of the labourer. But, there are differences in the category of working class based on market conditions and work. The labour contract too decides the nature of the subordinate location of the working class. Blue collar occupations and manual jobs determine the social space of working class. The working class is not a homogenous category. Rather, there are differences in the location and social mobility of the working class. Skill determines the social mobility of the working class. Those who are skilled are more privileged than the unskilled. The section that exists between skilled and unskilled are the semiskilled. Those who are part of the primary market and secondary market also have a different trajectory. Changing needs and demands in labour market result in poverty. Primary market and secondary markets are the two entities of labour market. Primary market is determined by the requirements of the workers. It has good jobs with career prospects. It also has proper pension schemes, full time employment and good pay. Those who are part of the primary labour market are socially mobile and better paid than those who work in the secondary labour market. The Primary labour market is composed of skilled labourers. On the other hand, secondary

market provides low social mobility, part time jobs. It does not provide pension. Those workers in the secondary market are vulnerable to multiple forms of exploitation and exclusion. The marginalized sections are very much part of the secondary labour market. For instance, workers who belong to the subordinate classes, castes, races and gender are part of the secondary labour market. They do not have the access to paid vacations, standardized labour contracts, pensions and entitlements, and other forms of social security. Unemployment and under-employment are the salient features of those workers who are situated within the secondary labour market. The working class in the first world faces the threat of automation. Rapid technological changes call into question the day to day work of the labourers. The primary markets and manufacturing sectors also undergo rapid changes in the developing society. The shrinking of those sectors affects the working class in such countries.

Scholars who belong to the school of subaltern studies positioned the category of peasant in a different theoretical fashion. **Ranajit Guha** (1983), one of the path breaking founders of the school, emphasized the historiography of the peasant and peasant insurgency in colonial India as seen 'from below'. Thus, a subaltern study re-reads the peasant (subaltern) resistance and its representation in the colonial historiography. Subaltern studies focused on the impact of caste system in agrarian milieu and resistance. It explored the dimensions of peasants and their movements in the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial period. "Subaltern" is a category that signifies subordination. **Partha Chatterjee** is one of the important scholars who contributed to the field of subaltern studies. He provided the subaltern interpretation of the peasant world and caste system. He criticized the Marxian analysis of the peasantry as a particular way of reading that reduces the caste system to a superstructural epiphenomenon. He contended that this reading was a particular kind of Marxist distortion. According to Partha Chatterjee (1983) both base and superstructure contribute to the shaping of caste system. He argues that religion acts as a form of consciousness which helps the subalterns to oppose the dominant forces. For instance, Mayan peasants in the Chiapas of Mexico argue that they are people of corn. In other words, corn stands for their struggle. Tom Brass (1991) criticized subaltern studies for its construction of rural producers as uniform and he equates it with the approach of populism.

Three agencies such as *Sarkari* (government), *Sahukari* (money lending) and *Zamindari*(landlordism) controlled the lives of the peasants in India. These agencies are active in the exploitation of the peasantry. However, the peasantry in contemporary-neoliberal India is experiencing the retreat of

state from agriculture, lack of proper policies, the penetration of capitalist forces in the field of agriculture, “NGO-ization” and the consequential depoliticization of peasant agency, recurring suicides in agrarian communities, rapid technological change and so on.

Now that we have obtained some understanding of the categories of peasant and working class, let us look at these within a historical perspective in the next section.

1.4 HISTORY OF PEASANT AND WORKING CLASS FEMINISM

In the section above, we learnt about how the categories of peasant and working class have been defined by various scholars in the field. In this section, we will examine these categories in a historical framework as well as in relationship to women and feminism. Some of the issues to be covered here include the condition of Indian women, their relationship to labour, and to agriculture.

The independence related struggle about the peasantry in our country took place in 1857. It was an unorganised feudal peasant struggle against the colonizers that was led by feudal lords. The emergence of leadership among peasants happened only after the formation of *Kisan Sabhas*.

Uday Mehta (1979) has classified peasant movements in terms of the following three phases:

- 1) **Initial phase**- The sporadic growth of peasant movements in the absence of organized and proper leadership emerged in the period, 1857-1921.
- 2) **Second phase**- During the period 1923-46, an organized form of *Kisan Sabhas* created consciousness among the peasants. The salient feature is that peasant movements were led by people and they gave importance to the problems of peasant in the national question.
- 3) **Post-Independence phase**- Agrarian movements became assertive due to the ruling parties’ incompetence to foreground the problems of Indian peasantry. It was broadly mobilized by leftist parties and in the late seventies and eighties, it became the discourse of some other autonomous farmers’ organization (Cited in Solomon, 1982, p.3).

The tremendous peasant assertions, according to **Maria Mies** is a part of “the deepening economic crisis which affects the peasants and more brutally than urban middle class” (Mies, 1976, p.472). The agendas of the peasant

movements were land to the tiller, higher prices for farm produces, write off farmers' loans, and so on. Militant peasant assertions were neutralized by clashes, firings and deaths.

1.4.1 Tracing Indian Women's Location in the Social System

The social stratification of women in India is contested. They are fragmented on the basis of class, caste, region, sexual orientation and so on. The condition of women in India is determined by the ambiguous overlapping of class and caste. The specificity of their location that is determined by caste and class accelerate the divisiveness and the lack of solidarity among them. They are situated at two levels of existence. One is that both of them are oppressed by the patriarchal ideology that is prevalent in India. The second one is that they also belong to different classes and castes. There are divisions within the caste and it intersects with class in a complicated fashion. Women who belong to different classes and castes internalize the dominant ideology of caste and class and become the victims of a persisting patriarchal ideology that is conditioned through caste and class. Thus, they reproduce a sense of false consciousness related to the supposed superiority and inferiority of their social worlds. The sense of superiority and inferiority of their specific caste-class locations also decides their sexual/social labour. It is important to understand the contestations of labour and women in India.

1.4.2 Women and Labour

As we mentioned earlier, the social stratification of class and caste determines the nature of the women proletariat in India. It also determines the social recognition of labour. In other words, the labour of women is recognized through their social location. Nature of work determines the dignity and social mobility of the individual and communities. The situation is different in developing societies such as India. The social mobility of women in India is linked to caste and class stratification. The patriarchal ideology in India becomes an obstacle to the empowerment of women. There are links that exist between caste, class and gender. For instance, a woman who belongs to the higher class-caste strata of India is more socially mobile than the women who belong to the Adivasi and Dalit communities. Constitutional privileges in India have made an impact on the rights and privilege of the marginalized communities such as dalits and tribals. Still, they are marginalized from the mainstream milieu of power due to the persistence of caste. It will be interesting to understand the relationship of caste-class and gender through the social trajectory of the gendered-class-caste proletariat of India. For instance, midwives and washer women in India

belong to the lower caste-class. Their labour is conditioned through the caste-class ridden labour environment. Women from higher castes will never involve themselves in the stigmatized caste-class bound labour or occupations. Their labour thus is determined themselves through their social location in the caste-class hierarchy.

1.4.3 Politics, Agency and Women in India

Post-independent and pre-colonial India has witnessed a diverse political agency of plural and unequal women. In other words, the emergence of political agency in these two broader periods, that is pre-colonial and post-independent, is different in India. It is different because the existential predicaments of women belonging to different classes and castes are different in nature. It is unequal in nature due to their diverse social backgrounds. For instance, women who belonged to the higher strata in India participated in the freedom struggle against the British colonialism. It is interesting to note the distinctive nature of the political agency and the social milieu of those women. Women leaders like Sarojini Naidu represent a different trajectory from the women activists from the Dalit and tribal communities. They have a different perspective of the oppressor. Marginalized women had to face double oppression based on internal caste colonialism and external British colonialism. Thus, the stake of these marginalized women activists was distinct from leaders such as Sarojini Naidu. On the other hand, leaders such as Sarojini Naidu exemplify the path breaking women's political agency which was only aimed at the abolition of the British colonial-imperial rule. The difference in the political agency of women and its complexity can be found in the section on the history of the political agency of women.

1.4.4 Agrarian Conditions and Impact on Women

Joan.P. Mencher and K. Sardamoni argued that "No one has ever measured the amount of paddy harvested by a woman and that harvested by a man. In those parts of Kerala where harvesting is paid by a share of what is harvested, usually 1 to 6, one tends to find a larger proportion of harvesting done by females. Still, we have never heard a complaint from a landowner that women were not good at harvesting, or any claim that males could harvest more in a given period of time."(Mencher & Saradamani,1982, p.155) The stereotype that men are better at agricultural work is conditioned by the patriarchal ideology that is prevalent in the field of peasantry.

The absence of women friendly implements as well as tools that can redeem women from their mundane and tiresome labour is important and vital to

end their exclusion from the labour that is determined by the patriarchal division of labour. Thus, it is practical to have new tools as well as implementations to (en)gender their social milieus.

The current status of women in the realm of agriculture impedes their agency as well as social mobility. In other words, they are not skilled in the area of agriculture except in using the plough. For instance, women who work in the farm are devoid of skills. They do not get a proper wage. Thus, they are exploited on a large scale. There is a dearth of proper training for women and thus they are marginalized from key aspects related to agriculture. They are forced to remain in a lesser position in their families, community and farms. Landless women are different from the aforementioned class-caste of women. Their status is totally different because they do not have technical skills and training. Simultaneously, their identities that are constructed through their caste cum class determine their growth. In the section below, we will look more closely at the role of women in peasant and working class feminist discourse through women's movements.

1.5 CONTRIBUTION OF WOMEN IN PEASANT AND WORKING CLASS FEMINIST DISCOURSE THROUGH MOVEMENTS

Women participated in the **Bodhgaya struggle** for the land. They were mobilized by the *Chaatra Yuva Sangarsh Vahini* which is influenced by the ideology of Jayaprakash Narayan. The land was appropriated by Bodhgaya *Math*. The *Sangarsh Vahini* organised a demonstration of local labourers and peasants against the Bodhgaya *Math* authorities. Twenty four women from the different cities of Bihar participated in it. The slogan was “those who sow and plough the land are the owners of the land” (Manimala, 1984). The land was under the control of *Mahant*. It is important to understand the history of the *Mahant* system. The ‘*Shankar Math*’ is another name for the Bodhgaya *Math*. It is named as ‘*Shankar Math*’ because it was reconstructed by a person called Shankar. *Mahanti* tradition started after Ghamandiyi became the *Mahant* in 1590 AD. The *Math* became a renowned *Tantric* centre in the seventeenth century. Krishnadayal Giri, the *Mahant* transferred all the *Math* property, which was in his name, to a trust in 1932. He was the president of it. Dhansukh Giri became the *Mahant* in 1977. Internal conflicts were high during that period. All administrative rights were given to Darbari Jairam Giri due to the deteriorating health of previous *Mahant* Shatanand Giri. However, Jairam Giri divided the *Math* in to 20 Trusts and he became the president of the working committee of those

Trusts. It resulted in the conflict between the *Mahant* and the *Darbaris*. But, they were all together in the case of the appropriation of the land from the poor. They used all sorts of coercive measures to grab the land of the poor. These lands were controlled through Bodh Gaya *Math* and its *Kacheri*.⁵³ *Kacheris* existed in Gaya that time. It was managed by *Sanyasi* known as *Mudiya*. He was the representative of the *Math*. He is appointed by a *Mahant*. *Math* employed permanent labourers called *Kamiya*. They work in the fields of the *Math* and were given 15 kathas of land for cultivation. They were also paid for that work. The *Math* never gave them any receipts and they were not able to claim their rights under sharecropping laws. The *Mahants* occupied 9,575 acres of land in 138 villages, in 11 areas of Gaya district. Women were exploited by those who were part of the *Math*. At this juncture, labourer activists decided to reap lentil for themselves rather than giving it to the *Math* in November, 1978. The decision was made public by the activists. The lumpen brigade of the *Math* surrounded the entire field. But, courageous women entered the field and reaped the crop. Thus, women initiated the first political activity in Bodhgaya. It attracted women to that movement. They were conscious of the patriarchy that was very much part of their day to day life. They socially boycotted men who beat their wives. They were not allowed to sit in the village meetings. Women were successful in an anti-liquor agitation because they realized that alcoholism affects the financial condition of women. They were active in stopping liquor brewing. Thus, they created consciousness among women, men and children about the impacts of alcoholism. Women helped the labourers who were brutally attacked by ruffians of the *Math* on 8th August, 1979. Women protested against the atrocities of landlords. Women argued that their struggle have two dimensions, the right to land and the right to equality. Women challenged the police during the protest related to land. They were brutally beaten up by the police during the protest in 5th November 1980. Government identified the land that was illegally possessed by the *Math* in October 1981 and decided to distribute the land to landless labourers in places like Kusha, Munesarpur, Chakla, Jayrampur, Parsawa, Gosa Pesra and Kurmawa. Women argued that the land should be legally in their names. This is one of the significant moments in the history of the land struggle in Bodh Gaya. They did Gherao in front of the officers and raised this question.

The *Tebhaga* movement of sharecroppers started in undivided Bengal in 1946-47. It started after the great famine of 1943. The sharecroppers of that particular region did not have occupancy rights. They faced threats of eviction. The landlord exploited them by taking their produce. They also

levied illegal cess from the share croppers. At the same time, women were exploited by the landlords. The main slogan of this movement was 'land to the tiller'. It demanded a reduction in land rents from one-half to one-third of the crop share. It was organized by *Bengal Provincial Kisan Sabha (BKPS)*. It was led by Communist Party of India. Women's self-defence league or **MARS** (*Mahila Atma Raksha Samithi*) was also part of the struggle. It is important to understand the formation of MARS. It was founded in the year 1942. It was linked to the mobilization of Bengali women on the eve of Bengal famine. It gained its strength in 1943. Five thousand women from Calcutta and its suburban regions conducted a hunger-march to the Bengal Legislative Assembly to protest against the hike in prices. They also conducted marches in small towns of Bengal. It had branches in every district by May 1944. There was membership of 43,500 women belonging to working class, peasant, middle class, urban poor sections. Oppression on the basis of gender is related to caste, economy based oppression and agrarian conditions. Caste Hindu landlords regulated the lives of the women from share cropping households. Those women experienced sexual exploitation from the landlords. It is argued that rural-poor women faced the worst conditions. Both Hindu and Muslim women were very much part of this struggle. Women acted as the informers for the activists of the movement. They informed the activists about the arrival of the police. They made sounds or blew conch shells. They gave shelter and food to activists. Women also became messengers of the activists who worked in the market and other areas. There were *Nari Bahinis* or *Mohilla Bahinis* (women's corps) to protect the village. Women who belong to poor sections were active in meetings and demonstration. They were also the members of the *Tebhaga* committee. These women were courageous and resisted arrests. They rescued people bravely. They used household devices used for husking, chopping woods, brooms, and knives to resist the attack of the police. They resisted the landlords who were harvesting paddy with the help of the police. Women used mixture of dust and chilli powder to attack the police. Many women were killed and got injured during the attacks of the police. They protested against wife beating in the *Tebhaga* peasant courts and branches of MARS. They argued that wife beating questions the integrity of the movement against the landlords. Their campaign against domestic violence provided new dimensions to the *Tebhaga* movement. Some of the peasants in the Muslim areas objected to the presence of women in the *Kisan Samitis*. Women argued that they also were part of the labour in the agrarian field and protested against such move by the males. However, it is argued that women were not part of the key bodies of BKPS or Communist party. Women's right to land was not discussed in an appropriate manner.

The *Telegana struggle* started in the year 1945. It was an armed struggle organized by the Communist Party of India in the rural part of Andhra Pradesh against the feudal regime. It stood for the cause of providing land to the peasant cultivators. It demanded hike in wages. It also addressed the abolition of forced labour and sexual exploitation of women. Three million men and women belonging to 3000 villages of the several districts of *Telegana* participated in this struggle. Landlords during the Nizam period exploited women. They sexually exploited women from the poor and vulnerable sections. They were kidnapped by the land lords. They were forced to submit themselves to the sexual advance of the landlords. Those women who were part of this movement belong to landless and middle class peasant backgrounds. They joined the movement to solve their land related issues. It was also an attempt to come out of the structure of oppressive family. Women in Andhra Pradesh participated in the *Telegana* struggle and challenged the barbaric rule of *razakars* during 1948-1950. They were active in rallies and strikes. Men found refuge in the forests for their activism during the bitter days of repression. Women remained in the family. Women used chilli powder, slings and pestles to defend themselves. Women carried messages by disguising themselves as boys. Ten thousand women participated in this struggle. They were repressed by the police. They were also brutally raped by the police and the landlords. But, leaders of *Telegana* showed a paternalistic attitude to women's question. Women were not allowed to work as guerrillas and asked to work as messengers, providing shelter and so on. Male leaders considered women as not capable of fighting with arms. They admitted that they were not interested to take women to the battle field. Thus, women who were part of the *Telegana* were alienated from the dominant patriarchal leadership. During *Telegana*, women guerrilla committees were formed and women fought against the *razakars* of Nizam. *Razakars* were the private Muslim Militia of Nizam. Some of them who were part of the guerrilla wing were asked to go back to family after the struggle. For instance, women were considered as a supportive part of the Communist party. A few among them only become party members. Women argue that they did everything for the struggle like their male counter parts. But, they were not given membership in the party Women were watched by the male activists. They were criticized by the male activists for their mistakes. The question of separate land titles to women, domestic violence, dowry were never discussed in the party.

It will be interesting to understand the role of women activists of *Telegana* struggle through the life histories of some of those of women activists. **Mallu Swarajyam** is one of the pioneering woman activists who left an

indelible mark in the history of *Telegana* struggle. She was a vibrant guerrilla strategist, commander and communist party organizer of *Telegana* movement. She argued that she worked in the post-independent communist party as an extension of her guerrilla spirit. She was born in 1930 in a feudal family of Andhra Pradesh. She was part of the freedom movement at an early age. She was vocal about the inequality that determine the lives of the poor. Her mother influenced her humanist attitude. Swarajyam was influenced by Gandhiji and the salt satyagraha. Russian writers such as Maxim Gorky made an impact on her revolutionary perceptions. She used to read the banned newspaper of the communist party called *Prajashakthi*. Swarajyam attended the political class in the house of Arutla Kamala Devi, an activist of member of *Andhra Mahila Sabha*. That political class focused on playing and stick-fighting. She listened to the debates on the movement against forced labour from that class. Her family was against her affiliation with the Sabha. Her political activism was also linked to the *Andhra Mahasabha's* struggle against the dictatorial rule of the Nizam of Hyderabad. The *Mahasabha* declared political solidarity with oppressed classes, indigenous communities and their struggle against the feudal system. Her political activism had a cultural dimension too. She politicized the genre of cradle song called *Vuyyalo* as part of consciousness-raising. This particular genre was popular among the different castes and classes of rural Telegana region. These radical forms of "*Vayyalus*" created a new sense of revolutionary rigour among the comrades. One of her "*Viyyalu*" was about the cruelty of land lord Visnur Deshmukh Ramachandra Reddy in which she narrated the plight of a peasant woman after her child birth. It also dealt with the obstacles to care of her child. This song thus deals with the feudalism, oppression and its impact on a peasant woman. The peasant lady requests the landlord to allow her to take care of her child. But, the landlord sends his militia to physically harass her. This song explored the politics of feudalism and land relations. It dealt with the nuances of labour and suppression. This song advocated the oppressed to join the political collective that addresses the plight of toiling masses. Swarajyam became the member of *Andhra Mahila Sabha*, the women's wing of the *Mahasabha* in the year 1942 when she was twelve years old. This particular moment of her life signifies her passion for the revolutionary praxis. The peasant assertions of this particular moment was influenced by the struggle of a dalit woman named Ailamma against encroachment of her land by landlord Visnur Deshmuch in the year 1944. Swarajyam became the member of the communist party in 1946. Peasants were organized as village squads. Later, they were converted to guerrilla squads. Communists in Telegana under the leadership of P.Sunderayya mobilized the peasants and formed *gramraj*. It annihilated the practices

such as forced labour, usury and evictions. It also increased the wages for the workers. Swarajyam became the organizer for the struggle committee of Suryapet taluka in 1946. The committee was responsible to provide training to men and women. Their objective was to convert them into fighting units called *dalams*. Women were part of the land distribution committee. There were two women in that community. Swarajyam became a member of women's committee which focused on women's rights in 1945. It resisted wife beating, alcoholism and provided support to the women who suffered from patriarchal families. There were women's fighting units under the communist party. Swarajyam taught the activists how to escape themselves from the enemy. She was part of the successful struggle against the cruel landlords. She became the committee organizer for the tribal areas. She was an active guerilla in the Godavri forest region during 1948-51. This movement restored the land rights of the Koya tribals of that region. Swarajyam provides a new insight that addresses the questions of gender, working class and the oppressed peasantry.

Women played a role in environmental movements. They were assertive in the **Chipko movement**. It emerged in the Garhwal hills of northwest India. The Chipko movement was innovative way to prevent the cutting of trees. It was against the exploitation of forest that was owned by the government and the forest department and emerged in the year 1973. One village woman protested against the logging of a tract of oak forest related to the potato seed farm. Women protested because it would result in the loss of their source of fuel and fodder and would add five kilometers to their journey for fire wood. Women took the initiative to start vigilance against illegal felling. They also protested against the tree auctions. They also opposed alcoholism and domestic violence. They were conscious that their daily life was dependent on trees. Thus, women become more active in village meetings.

Women achieved allotment of a part of the village wasteland in a Sewamandir project in Rajasthan in the 1980s. They planted herbs and plants. But, they faced opposition from the local government officials. There was no provision of a land registration related to women. Women in the Bankura region of West Bengal organized *samitis* or societies for the reclaiming of the waste land for sericulture which was started in 1988. There were 1500 women from thirty six villages. They formed a society of their own. Landless women in Bangladesh too cultivated crops in the waste land.

Women were part of the landless labourer's movement in Karimnagar district during the sixties. They started agitating against the kidnapping of Devamma and the murder of her husband by a local landlord.

In Kerala, women were organised under *Kisan Sabhas* and the *All Kerala Mahila Sangam*. They were an active part of conscience building, supporting the underground activities of fellow revolutionaries and so on. Women became martyrs during their struggle against the diabolic activities of the dewan, Sir C.P.Ramaswamy Aiyer. **Susheela Gopalan** is one of the pioneering woman communist leaders. She is renowned for her mobilization of workers who were part of coir manufacturing units. She played an important role in the foundation of the coir worker's co-operative society. She started the Coir workers Centre in 1971. She was the president of that centre. There were women leaders from the adivasi and dalit communities of Kerala. **Mayilamma** is one of the brilliant adivasi woman leaders from Kerala. She fought against the Coco-Cola plant at Plachimada. The struggle in Plachimada symbolizes the agency of adivasi women and their struggle to reclaim their right to water. Natives of Plachimada faced an acute shortage of water after the installation of the Coco-Cola plant. Mayilamma mobilized the indigenous communities and faced brutal repression from the police-cum-political party nexus of Kerala. She died on 6, January 2007. **C.K.Janu** is another prominent woman leader from the adivasi community of Kerala. She founded the social movement called *Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha (AGMS)*. She is one of the contemporary icons of the adivasi assertion in Kerala who succeeded in creating a dalit-adivasi alliance. She faced oppression from the police during her struggle for land rights at Muthanga. The emergence of Janu as a political leader symbolizes the political consciousness of Adivasi women which is based on the ideology of right to land and natural resources. Her movement became a pressure group within the political sphere of Kerala.

In Punjab, poor peasant woman **Raghubir Kaur** was elected to the Punjab assembly in 1937. She mobilized peasant women in the rural areas. In March 1943, an *All Indian Kisan Sabaha* held a separate conference for women. Sikh as well as Muslim women participated in it. The Warli peasant uprising happened in Thane, Maharashtra in the 1940s. Godawari Parulekar was a prominent woman activist in this uprising.

Tribal Bhil labourers in Shahada, Dhulia district in Maharashtra were also part of the tribal resistance against the exploitative landlords. **Bhil women** were also part of the anti-alcohol agitation at Shahada in 1972. They entered liquor dens and destroyed all bottles of liquor. They were vocal about the drinking attitudes and oppressive character of their husbands. They also challenged the lumpens who were employed on the liquor barons.

Women who were part of different trades in the informal economy were mobilized by the Self-Employed Women's Association (**SEWA**). This was founded by **Ela Bhatt** in the year 1972. She worked with the Gandhian women trade union called Textile Labour Association.

There are different views on the conditions of sex workers. On the one hand, their social location is determined by their labour and specific gender identity. At the same time, they are marginalized labourers who are involved in stigmatized sex related labour linked to the commoditization of the bodies of the women. The stereotypes about them could not help them to transcend their stigmatized past even after their rehabilitation. Thus, rehabilitation is questioned through the complicated nature of sex work, stigma, gender, class, labour and so on. It is important to understand that there are differences in the opinion of the sex worker activists. For instance, *Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee's* 'Sex Workers Manifesto' deals with the various dimensions of the sex workers' assertions. They argue that sex workers movement have raised questions about social systems and determinations, interconnected milieus of class, gender and sexuality and ethics of politics/morality. They began with a biographical sketch of their movement. It emerged as a collective of health workers of STD/HIV intervention programme at Sonagachi, Calcutta in the year 1992. Sonagachi is one of the largest and oldest red light areas of Calcutta. Initially, that programme created a sense of belonging and support among them. It helped them to look at themselves as a collective force whose lives are determined by specific social, ideological and political conditions. They contend that the distribution of condoms and the idea of safe sex is related to nuances of their lives that are determined by their customers, pimps and related other anti-social elements. This manifesto also deals with how the nature of motherhood, ideologies of love, and coupledness affect the sexual behaviour. They asserted that they founded *Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee* as an exclusive forum for sex workers. It was a forum to engage with their experiences and to articulate material marginality and societal ostracization. They declared their identity as sex workers in public spaces. They made their deliberations on the potentials and pitfalls of sex work. They opine that sex work is an occupation, not a moral condition. They are vocal about the developmental agencies that patronize their subjectivity. They are critical about the politics of rehabilitation that do not understand the complexities of their lives. They also argued that they are exposed to the moral policing of the society. According to them, society views sex workers as a homogenized category that provides sex related services. They consider these sort of perceptions as reductionist and detrimental to their

lives. They are considered a threat to public health, societal order, sex related morality and the civic system. They are conscious of being objects of pity, excluded from the dominant paradigms of citizenship. A sex worker is more oppressed than any other worker due to the above mentioned labour and gender bound specificities. They also expose the cultural industry as one which reproduces the ideology of women as a sexual object. The same ideology influences the human search for desires that are not confined to the categories of monogamy. They believe in a democratized family rather than the oppressive family which reproduces categories such as “chaste wife” and “fallen women.” They argue that their labour is equal to that of any other labour. They are different in the case of physical labour, occupational hazards such unwanted pregnancy, sex related diseases and so on. It is part of their livelihood. Their movement redefines perceptions about gender, poverty, sexuality and so on. It also provides them material and symbolic aspects related to their life worlds. Questions related to nuances of labour power affect the life chances of those who engage in sex work. This question has not been explored by this group in a detailed manner. However, it is also contended as a political collective against the repressive patriarchal ideology that stereotypes them as fallen women. Male sex workers are also part of this movement.

Women in Nepal were oppressed due to the excessive involvement of men in their public life. They were oppressed in every respect. Most of their activities were under the surveillance of the Nepali men. Women demanded a separate space for their meeting. They got allotted it from the Panchayat in the year 1988. For instance, **Nipani beedi workers’ struggle** was against the *Devadasi* system. Thus, it stood for the self dignity related to women and work.

In the above section, you have obtained a comprehensive view on the important role played by women activists in peasant and working class movements. Let us now attempt a brief overview of some current debates that are significant to peasant and working class feminism in the contemporary scenario.

1.6 CURRENT DEBATES IN PEASANT AND WORKING CLASS FEMINISM

Peasant and working class women are fragmented in contemporary India. Social strata based on caste, class, region proliferate the fragmentations. At the same time they are facing the challenges of the retreat of the nation-state from social security. They are also becoming the victims of development induced displacement that is driven by neo-liberal ideology.

Their political agency is repressed by the repressive state apparatus. The oppression of the dalit-advansi-women working class in Nandigram, Plachimada, Muthanga and so on demonstrate the brutal dimensions of the repression of their assertions. Identity politics and the NGO-ization of the social movements accelerate the gap that exist between the different sections of women. They think that leadership from their community can only address their issues in a positive manner. Thus, they are caught in a complicated gendered political milieu. The differences as well as solidarities symbolize the diverse ways of engendering democracy.

1.7 LET US SUM UP

This unit tried to explore the intersections of peasant /working class identities among women. It dealt with their struggle in the various movements in India and contribution towards the peasant and working class. We have critically analysed questions such as: What conflicts exist between peasants and ideological/repressive state apparatus? Has male leadership in the peasant assertions-movements addressed the question of women? These questions have been discussed by locating women's issues and concerns in the historical context of peasant movements.

1.8 GLOSSARY

- Agency** : Human action and its impact on actors; ability to take action.
- Capitalism** : This refers to an economic system that subjects wage labour and commodity production for sale. It is also associated with exchange and profit. It does not immediately address the needs of the producers. It is a principle as well as the means of industrialization. It abounds with private property, free-competitive market and involvement of workforce in employment in the private sector. It promotes the idea of free market of small scale entrepreneurs who are competent to hire individual labourers for minimum cost. It also expects profit maximization through this sort of an arrangement. It focuses on the production for profit and private property that is partially controlled by the state. Sociologists such as Max Weber explored the category of wage labour and market exchange as one of the key aspects of capitalism. Capitalist systems are based on

calculated rationality, achieving wealth through deferred gratification and separation of the economic and social conditions.

Colonialism : Colonialism refers to the political order imposed by the developed countries on Asia, Africa, Australasia and Latin America. It began with the penetration of white populations of Spain, Portugal, Britain, France and Netherlands during the fifteenth century and their entry to Asia and Africa in the nineteenth century. They exploited native resources. It was racist and ethnocentric in nature. It also contained the idea of civilizing mission to hide its exploitative nature.

Endogamy : It is the selected or prescribed practice of marriage within the boundaries of kin-group, clan, lineage, village and social class. The opposite of endogamy is called as exogamy in which the prescribed marriage will be outside the in-group.

Feudalism : This term is contested. It refers to the political system of western European institutions during the middle ages. It is also applied to refer to the landholding in the seventeenth century England. Marc Bloch explored the relationship between feudalism-vassalage. According to him, the features of feudalism are succession based on hereditary, the mode of providing land by lords to their vassals, split in the authority and limited/taxable self-disciplining peasantry. Max Weber linked it with patrimonial power and struggle related to rent.

Labour : According to Karl Marx, labour not only produces commodities; it produces itself and the worker as a commodity. It is identical with wage-labour. It is conceptualized as the conflicting realm of the labour and class in Marxian scholarship. Labour refers to the working class and exploitation of the labour power by the capitalist class. Marx argues that if labour is value, wage is private property. Thus, laborer belongs to one whom he labors. Working class is not homogenous and the decomposition of labour happens due to their stratification of their skills.

Skill : Skill refers to the manual and mental techniques that have to be acquired through training and schooling. It is also associated with aptitude.

1.9 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) What are some definitions of peasant and working class that help us to understand these terms? Explain in your own words based on your reading of the relevant sections.
- 2) How is the women's question addressed in the peasant movement of India? Try to use specific examples from the unit to formulate your response.
- 3) How has the history of peasant and working class movements been influenced by peasant and working class feminism? Analyze the relationship between the two based on what you have read.
- 4) What are the various aspects of peasant and working class feminist discourse? Explain their contribution with examples.
- 5) Given the current debates in peasant and working class feminism, what are your thoughts about the future course of related movements in India? Try to think about this issue in the context of the historical background that has been presented to you in the above unit.

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