



From *Against All Odds* p.iv

Religion, secularism, and organizing women workers

By *Mirai Chatterjee*

Mirai Chatterjee is a full-time member of the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), Ahmedabad, India.

We have excerpted from her article, *Religion, secularism, and organizing women workers* from the book *Against All Odds: Essays on Women, Religion and Development from India and Pakistan*, Eds. *Kamla Bhasin, Ritu Menon and Nighat Said Khan*, published by Kali for Women, SAWF and Isis International, 1993.

Organizing self-employed women around economic issues has been our main focus for several years now. In the course of our work, we have recognized and accepted the important role religion plays in women's lives, but have been more concerned with their struggles for social and economic justice. However, with the rise of communalism, and its distorted interpretation of religion, we are facing serious challenges to our work. Not only are self-employed women's economic gains being threatened, but also our very survival as a union of poor women, regardless of caste, creed or religion, is at stake. This has prompted us to further analyse and understand the role of religion in women's lives, particularly in the context of rising communalism.

Belief, questioning and protest

Our day-to-day experience of working with poor women has led us to appreciate and respect the part religion plays in their lives. Whatever it be, our members draw tremendous strength and inspiration from their faith, the strength they need to continue to struggle both at home and at work. For even those who have begun to

believe in themselves and the importance of collective action, religion remains integral.

At the same time, increasing consciousness of the injustices they face has led SEWA members to question some aspects of religion, religious practice and the role of male clergy in all faiths. Anti-women practices in the guise of religious beliefs have been openly challenged. Several Muslim women members of SEWA have formed an independent support group, **Mahila Talak Pedit Sangh**. Apart from assisting divorced women to work and earn, the Sangh has taken up the issue of maintenance, child custody and adoption for divorced Muslim women and supported efforts to obtain rights for Muslim women. Working within the framework of Islam and the Koran, members have been attempting to offer a new interpretation of the scriptures which hitherto have been used to justify the denial of rights to women. SEWA members strongly condemned the tragic death of Roop Kanwar through sati in Deorala village of Rajasthan in 1987. At the community level

we have challenged unjust attitudes and behaviour towards women, passed off as 'religious traditions'.



Action challenging religious practices can only be taken where we have a strong base of constructive activities like the union, co-operatives, health and child care, and a large membership. Further, in terms of our goal of organising self-employed women, attacking or debunking religion in toto would have had disastrous consequences, given its importance in women's lives.

Intead, at SEWA we accept and respect the role of religion and faith in our society and try to inculcate the idea of 'Sarvadharm', the peaceful co-existence of all religious currents among us.

Communalism, organizing and poor women

We are faced with an increasingly difficult situation, with the current rise of

communalism, all kinds of reactionary beliefs are being peddled in the name of religion. How does communalism affect poor women?

One thing that is immediately obvious is the blatant misuse of religion by communalists. Playing on people's faith and through a narrow, selective interpretation of religious texts, communalists have already created enough havoc. There are so many examples of the misery that their dangerous rhetoric and activities have caused. In 1986, during Janmashtami celebrations *Shambhu Maharaj* of the Hindu Suraksha Samiti urged Hindus to take to the streets in protest as the government prevented his proposed procession.

"Babas sent by Shambhu Maharaj came to our area", said Lilaben Arjanbhai, who sews old cement bags for a living. "They said Lord Krishna has been insulted and as Hindus, we should remember our dhrama and take out a procession." These irresponsible exhortations came only two months after the terrible communal violence which rocked Ahmedabad following the Rathyatra procession in 1986. Today the situation has, if anything, worsened. Religious leaders are making fiery speeches against one or the other community, these self-styled leaders are spreading fear and hatred among people who once lived together in mohallas and chaals across the country.

Rhetoric and misuse of religious sentiments aside, communalism is yet another negative force in poor women's already difficult lives. For example, for those lucky enough to survive communal violence, there is the loss of their homes, tools of trade, small business and valuable daily wages. Long periods of violence take a tremendous toll on the economic well-being of the city, and poor, self-employed



women workers are the worst hit. For one thing, there is no question of selling vegetables and fruits from baskets in markets, or of pulling handcarts or rolling bidis. With curfew everywhere, women neither reach their workplaces nor deliver to merchants the finished products made at home - bidis, readymade garments, incense sticks and there is no way of receiving fresh supplies of raw materials.

Sometimes, workers manage to deliver finished goods to their employers but later, when curfew is lifted, they are told by the merchants that all records of goods received and even the goods themselves were destroyed in the violence, so how can they possibly be paid?

In some areas which suffer regularly during communal violence, merchants, contractors and others refuse to give women any work. In 1985, 1986 and 1991 our area was constantly under curfew. *"Our homes and few belongings were reduced to ashes. I am a readymade garment worker and have been sewing for Kanubhai of Revdi Bazaar for ten years. Now he says he simply will not give me any work as the cloth he gave me for sewing got burned with my house and sewing machine. None of the readymade garment merchants are giving us work here. How should we eat?"* asks Mehmooda, an

active member of SEWA.

In addition to the loss of daily wages, both during and after the communal violence, many self-employed women lose their tools of trade, sewing machines, pushcarts, charkhas and small stocks of raw material and finished goods are either looted or burnt to a cinder. This year too, as before, even though the government announced compensation for destroyed goods, many self-employed women could not avail of this because of lack of 'proof', a prerequisite for compensation from the government. Thus home-based workers and other self-employed women are forced deeper into the vicious cycle of indebtedness, further pauperisation and marginalisation.

Communalism and women's unity

Communalism also has a divisive effect on women's unity. At SEWA we emphasise the commonalities of our experiences and struggles, bringing women of all religious affiliations under one roof. But communal violence which brings bitterness and mistrust in its wake works towards unravelling our efforts. Women who were marching through the streets together, demanding justice for all, are suddenly segregated in refugee camps. It would be impossible, under such circumstances, to expect women to be impervious to the atmosphere of fear, mistrust and divisiveness.



From *Against All Odds* p.183

Although our unity is seriously challenged by the communal divide, years of struggling and sharing our everyday joys and sorrows are not so easy to erase. "In the midst of the violence, we met our Muslim sisters and brothers in Sarkhej" explained Chandaben Pappubhai, an old clothes vendor, SEWA stalwart and expert orator. "As I told all the people at the joint meeting of the city's trade unions, it is always the poor and self-employed of all communities who suffer the most. And self-employed women are the worst affected, being the poorest of workers. There are people in this city who want to divide us, to keep us down. But we will fight back together."

What women like Chandaben have also begun to understand is that the same forces who spread the communal poison also disseminate vicious anti-women propaganda. Not long after the communal violence of 1986, Hindu communalists distributed a booklet expounding 'Satyavad' or 'Theory of Truth'. In this they advocated that women return to the home and give up their jobs in favour of 'unemployed men'! To do otherwise would be to be 'a witch, a fallen woman and an insult to womanhood.'

"You have always told us to be strong and united", shouted Zarina, [a Muslim SEWA member] a normally shy and soft-spoken readymade garments worker. "Where is your unity now? We struggle the whole year, come for meetings which stress unity and peace, and yet we end up as 'guests' of these refugee camps every year." Similar sentiments were expressed by Narmadaben, a bidi worker in a refugee camp for Hindu residents not far from Zarina's camp. For SEWA and its 30,000 members who have grown to believe that there will be a better tomorrow, such periods of communal violence are times of reckoning.

"We worry about each other, our families and how to remain strong and united. It is not easy. Many of us who try to preserve



From Against All Odds p.112

our linkages as women workers are chided, taunted and isolated. 'Whose side are you on?' they ask, goading and provoking us. When trouble broke out at Raikhad, some of us tried to form a women's committee of both communities to work for peace. My husband thought it was a good idea but my relatives didn't. Still, I kept meeting with the other women, and our peace committee did manage to ease some tension. We women understand. It is we who have to bear the brunt of this madness", said Niruben, a SEWA organiser. Similarly, Muslim women who are a part of the Talak Pidit Sangh recognise that the same community 'leaders' who urge them to defend Islam and shun other communities, strenuously worked to prevent women from attaining their basic rights. "It is these same people who oppose our coming out of our homes and our right to maintenance and child custody. Where are they now? Are they helping Khairunissa, Husnabanu, Zarina and all the others who have been left by their husbands to fend for themselves?" asks Rahima, a SEWA organiser and secretary of the Sangh.

SEWA's role

The rising communal wave, its exploitation of religious feelings and allegiances and its destructive impact underscore the need to examine our views on religion and secularism and to develop a new understanding of these from a feminist perspective. We will have to take

the leadership in initiating actions for peace and justice for all.

We have found that unity is built when a group of women begin to collectively perceive a common need or interest. For example, organising bidi workers, regardless of caste or religion, but around the issue of bonus or identity cards slowly creates unity among them. Common bonds forged thus are then not so easily broken even in the face of great provocation.

We need to start organising against communalism from our very neighbourhoods, be they middle class or working class. The commonalities in our religious traditions and origins need to be explored from a feminist perspective and we should identify the contributions to religion by women and those of religious women to society.

We should support secular movements for a common civil code but as feminists scrutinise them for their approaches to our problems, and, we should protect the movement for a common code from cooption by communalists.

If the number of articles, papers and discussions are any indication, feminists are increasingly concerned about the role of religion, communalism and secularism in women's struggles. It is up to us to take the lead, respecting the faith dimension in women's lives and the strength it gives, and yet collectively challenging religious and communal forces that continue to obstruct our movement for justice and equality.

Notes: 1. Vibhuti Patel and Sujata Gothoskar, 'The Story of the Bombay Riots in the Words of Muslim Women', Manushi, No.29 July-August 1985; Ammu Joseph, Jyoti Punwani, Charu Shahane, Kalpana Sharma, 'Impact of Ahmedabad Disturbances on Women', Economic and Political Weekly, October 12, 1985; 'Why This Slow Murder' a SEWA report on the effects of communal violence in Ahmedabad, Manushi, No.33, March-April 1986. 2. Ibid. 3. Chinmay Patel, 'Streedharm' in Satyavad, p.16. Ahmedabad Bhavani printers, 1986. ☉