

VidrohiMahilaManch and Nazariya

Study groups and Work – Lata P. M.

Q1. What are the changes that have happened over the past two years (last year)?

Ans.: Earlier we worked at the PHC. We gave information to people sitting at the PHC. We used to give information to people about government schemes, about health, if any complaints came up, we used to help solve them. Not all women were willing to approach the Gram Panchayat. They felt that domestic problems should be solved at the home level itself. However, the intensity of the problem often warranted going to the Gram Panchayat. Because they hoped that they might get justice through the Tanta MuktiSamiti (Conflict Resolution Committee) formulated at the Gram Panchayat level. But two years ago, the situation was such that women's rights were being compromised, nobody would listen to women, and this was the situation everywhere. Therefore, a discussion on establishing Gram Ekta Samiti (village unity) was conducted. In the meanwhile the women workers (activists) continued to participate in programs like conducting sex education classes for adolescent girls and boys, imparting information to women's groups about HIV AIDS and domestic violence, conducting discussions on gender discrimination among adolescent groups, etc. Discussions were also being held about the injustice done to the patients at the Primary Health Centres. Thus, it was necessary to work on issues affecting the overall village, and not only on women's health issues. Moreover, women had no space in the administration of the local Gram Panchayat and in their way of working.

With this background, Local Village Unity Committee (Sthanik Gram Eekta samiti) was established with the participation of the village people. It was decided that this committee would comprise of representatives from the departments of Health, Education, Gram Panchayats, as well as Lawyers, Police, Journalists, social workers and those women who have faced injustice themselves. Such committees were formulated all over the district. The village level women workers of Sangram are a part of each of this committee.

A lot of women's issues were being resolved through the work of the Village Unity Committees (Sthanik Gram Eekta samiti) and the unity of the villagers and their pressure lead to reduction in violence against women. Moreover, violence faced by adolescent girls at the school-level was also reduced. Due to the pressure from the workers at the health centre, health facilities are being made available. Our work faced major opposition in four places. At such times, everybody came together and through the Village Unity Committee (Sthanik Gram Eekta samiti) questioned the government machinery in terms of rights and entitlements, which also helped in creating awareness among the people. This led to increased participation from women and also in boosting their self-confidence. Women began questioning the system right from their homes, PHCs, schools levels to the police stations and Gram Panchayat levels.

As women's participation in our programs grew, we felt a need to change our way of working. We were only focussing on individual problems. Therefore it appeared as if our work was limited to specific individuals and their problems. All of us at VidrohiMahilaManch and Nazariya had a joint discussion about this and decided to change the way we worked. Instead of working only with the affected women, we decided to conduct programs so that no woman at the village level would have to face violence. Earlier we would impart information only related to HIV, sexuality, gender discrimination, health; we broadened our scope and now we conduct discussions on "what is violence?", "what are the forms of violence?", "how to identify violence?" Moreover, we also discuss about what should be done if one faces violence, where to go, whom to approach, how to access the legal provisions to address violence, etc. Sangram conducted a program with the National Legal Aid Services Authority (NLASA) in Sangli which helped later on to work with the state and district level

legal cells. This was beneficial to create a new identity for all the V.M.M and Nazariya workers at the taluka level as P.H.Vs, which helps the workers in resolving village level problems.

While conducting programs at the village level, each one was working in her/his own areas of work, but organization building could not happen. While we were working as field workers we would not feel confident or assertive while reporting out work, we did not have an idea about how successful our work really was. The concepts of participatory work, opportunity of expression of thoughts to every individual, participatory decision making instead of unilateral decision making, were not clear to us and hence we could not build a movement. Therefore, we have initiated a study group for two days each month with Lata P.M, a worker in the feminist movement, for all the workers of V.M.M and Nazariya. The objective of this study group is – while we present ourselves in the society, there should be a transformation in our thoughts at the individual level, social level and a strong movement should be built. While we build awareness in society, we ourselves also need to have thorough information.

*the local MahilaDakshataSamiti (Women Protection Committees) members have also started taking help from workers of VMM and Nazariya for solving unresolved or unreachable cases coming to them.

Study group no.1

Lata P.M. started conducting the study group from 10/01/2017 and 11/01/2017.

In this group, women's liberation movement's songs were taught to us. We were made to sing those songs together, which showed us that a united voice is important for building a movement. The importance of a leader's role was explained. The art of speaking with confidence, and discussion on the meaning of rights, entitlements was conducted. The necessity of creating conflict to establish our existence in the area of work was demonstrated through examples. The importance of communication skills, discipline, clear speech while imparting information or meeting people was explained. Later the birth of V.M.M and Nazariya was discussed. The Meeraj riots, injustice inflicted upon Muslim women were also discussed to demonstrate this. The injustices on Dalits were also discussed.

Secularism and revolution were also discussed subsequently. Information about various movements and uprisings at various levels was given. This discussion gave information about the forms of revolution. For e.g. Cultural Revolution, educational revolution, caste-related revolution, spiritual revolution etc. were discussed.

It was discussed how participation of youth is important for every revolution and how more knowledge is gained through movements than from school education. She narrated various incidences and stories to explain conflict. She explained how movements on the caste issue were built by Phule-Shahu-Ambedkar.

Slogans are very important in building movements and uprisings. We can express our rights, demands, freedom through slogans. We can attain freedom of speech, freedom of health through this. Several slogans were learnt. We learnt that even if the concept is not clear, the foundation of the thought process has to be strong.

It is important to conduct campaigns in order to bring about transformation. Concept is important in implementation of a campaign. When we carry out awareness generation, transformation is guaranteed. Integrated values need to be adhered to in order to reach the original concept. We need to overcome our inferiority complexes. People who disagree also co-exist in a democracy. We need to be united as a society. Individual revolution needs to take place. In a patriarchal society, violence inflicted upon women is not recognized as violence.

Dr.BabasahebAmbedkar drafted a Constitution based on equality. Mahatma Phule asked us to seek truth. We discussed about fatalistic attitude versus revolution. We also discussed the characteristics of feminist women.

We learnt how games can be used to elicit participation from a large number of people. Similarly, while discussing about gender equality, information was given about the gap in the birth rate of girls and boys. The same evening, movie "Dangal" was screened for all to see. A session was conducted on this movie the following day. It was discussed that girls and boys should not be discriminated against, girls should have the freedom to do things that they liked, which will lead to their creating their own identity.

Revolution and perception were discussed through group discussions, followed by a game. We learnt that we need to have the strength to say "no" while presenting the truth, and also that we need to be firm in our own minds. Aarti madam gave information about the Domestic Violence Act while Meena madam gave scientific information about gender discrimination.

The workers received a lot of information from the training and study group. We could get the necessary information about how to reach the root of a concept.

Study group no.2

Lata P.M. conducted the second study group from 18/02/2017 and 19/02/2017.

On the first day we were divided into pairs and each one introduced the other by sharing their likes and dislikes. Information at individual level was discussed. History of the composition, lyrics, tunes of the songs used in movements, the reason for singing them was explained. In an earlier time, there was a ban on singing songs related to social movements. In fact, songs is an effective medium to present out issues, our views openly before the society. While building a movement, it is important to use struggle-related words than using words from the regular language. For e.g. Zindabad, Jai Bhim, Jai Savitri, Jai Amrapali, Lal Salaam, Jai Fatima, Jai Jyoti, Jai Birsa.

Then we discussed the importance of building a movement. In a movement we can openly express our opinions, each one has scope to express themselves and any single person's opinions are not forced on the others, and can be agreed upon.

After this, the discrimination in the work done by men and women was presented through drama. Although women put in more labor and hard work, their work is still not recognized. They are told that "it's their duty" and is not taken into consideration. For clarity, the work that men and women do and the remuneration that they get for the same, was listed on a chart paper. A comparative discussion was conducted. Women are not given access to information about the external world for fear that it will reduce the supremacy of men. Impediments are created in her way if she wished to go out for work. Therefore women have to think about their own labor, in order to assert their position in society.

Information about women in history was given. We learnt that women enjoyed a primary position historically. While demonstrating the important role of women, we learnt that it was the woman who invented agriculture, wheel, fire, etc. In Stone Age, women were given complete rest from any kind of work during their menstruation period. However, once men realized that children were born out of sexual intercourse with women, matriarchy gradually gave way to patriarchy. Women's downfall thus began which still continues. Women were deprived of education. When Mahatma Phule realized this, he came forward and began educating women in his own house. He educated Savitribai and laid foundation of women's education. The hardships that Savitribai had to face were also described during this information. Savitribai's contribution led to Fatima Sheikh being the first woman Muslim teacher and Rakhmabai being the first woman doctor.

Later information was given as to why 8th of March is celebrated as International Women's Day. Babasaheb Ambedkar's work related to women's inheritance rights was explained. Women should have a share in their father's property. Similarly women were given the right to vote. Issues of earning women were discussed. Once a woman starts earning, the man tries to get close to her for

her money. Workers of V.M.M. shared personal experiences about this. It was discussed that women should decide their way of life and should not stay within the constraints laid down by men.

Study group no. 3

A recap of the last 2 study groups was done and the third study group on 22/4/2017 and 23/4/2017 began with discussion on “revolution”.

What is revolution? Revolution is creating total transformation in society. In 1889, Muslim women took to the streets and declared that they don't agree with staying in purdah and threw away their veils. They declared that they were against the Shariat Law. However, even today, talaq is practised in India, and hence the issue of women's rights is still at a status quo.

Information about French revolution was shared. Freedom, equality, fraternity was discussed and information of establishment of the United Nations was shared. Discussion on our role as activists was conducted. When we are faced with an issue we need to be firm in our role. This was discussed with examples.

After this, information about the Hindu code bill was shared. Dr.BabasahebAmbedkar resigned from the Hindu Code bill due to his demand that women should get an equal right in their father's property by right of inheritance. Even today women have to struggle for their inheritance right. Dr.Ambedkar also resigned from the position of Cabinet Minister for his demand for women's rights. He conferred on women the right to vote even before India was independent. He also strived for reservations for SC, ST, OBCs.

In the next session, information about the “Sant movement” of the 12th century was shared. In this, God Vitthal was brought to the banks of Chandrabhaga river so that even the most “shoodra”, “atishoodra” (untouchables) could touch him. Yet the Brahmins took him away again. How the saints were tortured by society was described. Also that Mohammad Sheikh was the first Muslim devotee of Vitthal and the historical stories of Changdev and Muktabai were shared which led to discussion about the attitude towards women.

The problems faced by activists when they tried to break the established framework of society were discussed in this session. The following issues arose during this discussion: For eg.

Breaking away from established norms leads to women being considered as “forward”.

- If she is working, she is taunted as “who knows what work she does, sweeping or swabbing.....she only walks around with a purse on her shoulder”
- If she is seen outside home at late hours she is taunted as “was there too much work today”?
- If she comes home early, she is asked whether she had “no work today”.
- If she is wearing flowers in her hair, she is asked if “there's anything special today”
- If she tries to resolve conflicts among other people, she is asked if she thought of herself as a “lawyer” or “has she become the local mafia”?
- She has to face questions like “whose car/bike did you come home by”

We have to face all these questions and still try to move ahead with confidence. We have to constantly keep in mind the thought that women have to move forward.

Study group no.4

The fourth study group by Lata P.M. was conducted on 25/5/2017 and 26/5/2017. It began with physical exercises. Before undertaking any work, it is important to focus our mind and body which can be done through physical exercises. The different kinds of exercises which help in focusing the mind and body were discussed. Exercises are also important to keep away physical problems. After this, fearlessness, intelligence, assimilation, emulation were discussed.

This was followed by discussion on language, speech, communication. Learning a language enables communication with a larger number of people and helps in gathering information about people. Information about Gautam Buddha was shared. The story of Gautam Buddha was shared which helped to understand that to achieve our objective we need to move patiently and without haste which can have a positive effect on our work.

It was discussed how caste and religion affect the diet of a person. For eg. A Muslim person who is used to eating meat cannot go into an area where the Vani (vegetarians) community lives and eat meat openly. His diet practices get restricted. This means that often a person's right to food is compromised due to caste and religion, which should not happen. Giving the example of the Nath sect (nathpanth) it was told that they never followed any particular religion. They were closely connected to nature and hence studied medicinal herbs. The Vedopachar system was followed to treat most health problems which is still in use. Those dealing with this herbal medicines included people from all religions and castes.

Latatai explained through poetry and songs how people cohabited in those times. Their caste or religion did not inhibit their cohabitation.

This was followed by information and history of Indira Gandhi. Despite being the Prime Minister of a nation she could not inherit her family property due to patriarchal influences in the society. Even today women have to struggle for it. She told us that to know more about women who have struggled historically and to understand about the history of social movements and struggles, it is important to read books. Names of such books were also given. In the meanwhile history of Shivaji Maharaj was also shared. Shivaji never believed in discriminating on the basis of any religion or caste. People of all castes and religions lived in his kingdom. During this discussion the Miraj riots were also discussed which had its roots in religious discrimination.

After this we discussed about the fair (Urus) in Miraj. Actually, people of all religions gather during the Urus. People from Gaded community come together to plan the Urus. Information about Dalai Lama was shared, that he is a chief priest of Buddhist religion. Information of Nalanda and Takshashila Universities was shared followed by information about establishment of the SatyashodhakSamaj. Shahu Maharaj and his work was introduced in the same discussion. He was an important ruler who lay the foundation of education. He promoted the concept of "Gav tithe Shala" (A school per village).

Study group no. 5

This study group took place on 30/7/2017 and 31/7/2017.

In this study group we discussed the meaning of rights. While protesting or raising a struggle it is important to be able to speak in terms of rights. This enables us to stage a rebellion of any scale. Rebellion is to break the outdated traditions and norms and to fight for your rights. The struggle for rights is rebellion. The deprived sections can be empowered through rights-based work.

This was followed by information about the stereo-typical image of the role of a mother. The prevailing image created by society which shows her to be forever loving, sacrificing, kind is not necessarily correct. Unless we break this established norm, women will not achieve their rights and their development will lag behind.

While giving information about Panchasheel, it was mentioned that Panchsheel gives superior status to women. Panchsheel includes, Pradnya (intelligence), Sheel (character), Karuna (kindness), Ahimsa (non-violence), Samata (equality) and Shanti (peace).

Currently the rate of female foeticide has increased considerably and the Government has passed an Act to control and prevent this. However, women's problems remain the same.

The afternoon session discussed why women had to face so many restraints. The group discussion brought out the following issues :

- Why can't men wear Mangalsutra?

- Why do women have to wear it as a symbol of marriage?
- Why shouldn't widows attend religious functions?
- Why are only women burdened with the responsibility of following religious rituals?
- Why should women be segregated during menstruation?
- Is it right to deprive even those who do not menstruate?

After discussion it was concluded that these are not appropriate practices.

In this study group, there was discussion aboutchildren. In this discussion, the problems faced by sex workers' children while living in our society were discussed. Their views were expressed. Discrimination at school level, lack of opportunities to realize their potential, and taboo were discussed. In the Mahila Hakka Parishad (Women's rights conference) in Nagpur, money from VAMP was refused, which was a wrong thing to do. VAMP stated their position along with other feminist groups. In fact, while building movements, support from feminist groups is expected. However, this did not happen, which was not appropriate.

Study group no. 6

The study group started with a song from the movement and history of the poem "Dharan" (Dam) by Dalit author DayaPawar was told. During the struggle for water, several organizations came together. It is from the experience of this struggle that DayaPawar was inspired to write the poem "Bai mi dharanbandhate" (I am building a dam). Women have forever struggled for water and to end their drudgery of fetching water from faraway places. The poem describes these hardships that women face. Women's participation was taken during construction of the dam. Women had to undergo physical hardships, leave their children behind and go to help in the construction of the dam. And yet, women's drudgery of fetching water still continues.

When we present ourselves in society as an activist, more than our work, it is important to be aware of the way we communicate with people, the way we speak and behave with people in the society. Our image should impress the people.

While working with people it is important to encourage their individual freedom. It is important to work for their security and their rights. It was discussed that we need to help them to raise their voices and to guide them.

The afternoon session saw a discussion on fatalistic attitude. Stories about "tulsivivah" and "God Datta" were shared which demonstrated that even when the man was at fault, women were blamed. Therefore it is important to study the traditions, religions, sects, patriarchy, etc.

Study group no.7

This study group was conducted on 26/10/2017 and 27/10/2017. This study group discussed the Mahila Raj SattaAndolan (Women in governance movement). This movement trains women who are elected representatives and sarpanchs in the local self-government bodies. Women all over Maharashtra have been shaped through this movement in the last 20 years. The movement trains women about governance practices after they enter politics. It was told to the women of VMM that if they were part of politics they should enter this movement. Currently women workers of VMM work at the village level to resolve women's issues and other problems through the Village Ekta committee. Nazariya also does the same kind of work. While working so, whenever there is a new G.R. (government resolution) they can immediately spread its information among the public.

A recap of all the earlier study groups was taken in this study group. VMM and Nazariya have brought about changes in conducting their work and implanting their programs at the village level.

Awareness generation is being done through the messages of Phule, Shahu, Ambedkar. Birth anniversaries of Savitribai, ShahuMaharaj, Mahatma Phule was never celebrated in the villages, but after these study groups, their thoughts were learnt and assimilated and spread among the villager people and now their birth anniversaries are being celebrated in all villages. While both organizations will continue their work in the same way, a 3-day excursion to Kolhapur has been planned to learn more about the work of ShahuMaharaj, where there will be a lecture on 28th November and visits to the museum and New Palace. Overall, all the workers feel that they benefit from these study groups. It has helped in cultivating the habit of reading books and increase in knowledge levels. All workers have realized the importance of visiting libraries. In future, efforts are being planned to acquire more books so that the workers will be able to access them and read as much as possible.