

**AIDWA'S INSPIRING SANGHARSH SABHA FOR A NEW FOOD POLICY:
CHEAP FOOGRAINS AND WORK FOR ALL**

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On April 24th, in a historic and inspiring gathering at the Mavalankar Hall grounds, New Delhi, thousands of women from 19 States, mainly poor rural women, redefined the concept of women's "empowerment" and advance asserting that policies that ignored the needs and concerns of poor women were a farce and a mockery. The Sangharsh Sabha organised by the All India Democratic Women's Association highlighted the crucial linkages between food deprivation and declining status of rural women as experienced by the mass of rural women and expressed in numerous struggles for food and work in the last several months under the banner of the AIDWA. The organizers had expected around three thousand women to attend, but when the call was given in the villages large numbers of women expressed their desire to attend the Sabha and make their voices heard. The participants, around 8000, were agricultural workers, landless women, dalits, adivasis, and a substantial number of poor Muslim women. Thus the Sabha was also a militant assertion of women's unity at a time when that unity is sought to be disrupted in the name of religion. Several groups of women were felicitated for their courageous struggles and when these women came on the stage, some who had fought land struggles, some who had been in jail for defying the police, some who had gheraoed and broken the locks of the FCI godown, they were cheered and applauded by the thousands of women present. The main speakers at the Sabha were women who had directly experienced the brunt of Government's callous and criminal food policy. It was a rare experience to listen to the militancy and articulation of the speakers.

Later the Sangharsh Sabha converted itself into a militant rally at Parliament Street where thousands of women blocked the road in an expression of their anger. A 15 member delegation from several States met the Union Minister for Food, Shri Sharad Yadav and gave him a memorandum.

The Sabha, presided over by AIDWA President Subhashini Ali, was also attended by representatives of several women's organization, other fraternal organizations, intellectuals and economists who expressed their solidarity with the women gathered. Another expression of solidarity came through the collection of foodgrains, vegetables sugar, tea leaves, cannisters of oil from workers in Delhi that enabled the organisers to feed the thousands of women had highly subsidized rates. Com. Harkishan Singh Surjeet, General Secretary of the CPI(M) opened the Sabha with his introductory remarks. Food, he said was a central issue and it was imperative that all citizens have access to it through a strengthened public distribution system. Remarking on the presence of poor women he said that it was their direct experience that was being reflected in the Sabha. He strongly criticized the Central government for its hunger creating policies.

The Sangharsh Sabha, with a focus on the demand for a New Food Policy: Low Priced Foodgrains and Work For All, was a culmination of campaigns and activities conducted over the last 6 months. The activists who spoke in the course of the day's proceedings were drawn from the thousands who had participated in these, to focus on what is emerging as a crucial issue for the survival of the people in view of the current scenario of liberalization and the adoption of the so-called economic reforms in India. Brinda Karat, General Secretary of the AIDWA, succinctly put this across while presenting the main issues of the Declaration cum resolution that was adopted by the sabha. Karat pointed to the irony of the situation drawing attention to the promised paradise by the forces of Hindutva and the reality of the lives of the women as it emerges from the testimonies of the vast mass of rural and urban poor, from amongst whom the participants of the Sangharsh Sabha were drawn. The most glaring aspects of this were:

- Denial of access to food, combined with loss of livelihood.
- Whereas the Vajapayee government has been making promises to give work to the people for a 100 days a year, the reality is that even official statistics show that the number of workdays is declining.
- With regard to agriculture, the policies of this government help a small affluent section whereas the landless face the prospect of losing even their earlier low-paid jobs with the expansion of mechanized farming.

- This has led to an ironically tragic situation where over 6 crore tons of rice and wheat lay rotting in government godowns, even as death and starvation stalk the land.
- One and a half crore tons of foodgrains was exported at the price of Rs. 4 a Kilo. This price was lower than the price at which foodgrains were sold within the PDS to card-holders under the BPL in most states of India.
- The calculation of the below poverty (BPL) line itself is dubious both in its methodology and in its concepts.

Karat drew attention to the large-scale seasonal migration of women labour and the vulnerability of these women to exploitation at different levels. These include a most negative impact on the health of women since they are eating last and least, an increase in violence because of their increased dependence and subordination to the rural rich at distress levels, harder work at less wages. In fact this is the way that labour reform has already been implemented in vast parts of rural India.. Referring to the 73rd and 74th amendment passed exactly 10 years ago, she observed that though the reservation in elected bodies was a landmark step, poor women in rural India were unable to take advantage of this benefit because of their preoccupation with strategies for sheer survival in view of the state abdicating its responsibility.

Garibi Rekha Par Jhoothi Bahas Mahaz Dhokha Hai

Ye Sab Garibon Ko Bantnen Ka Lekha Jokha Hai

Witness an example of how the benevolent arm of the state reaches the woman in her house in the distant villages of India, not to carry food to feed the family but to ask:

Q. How many Rotis do you eat?

A. Three.

Conclusion A woman who eats 3 rotis in India is not poor.

Q. Do you have a TV?

A. Yes

Conclusion : then you are not poor and you do not deserve a green card, take a pink one instead.

Q. How many saris do you have?

A. Three

Conclusion: Ah, Three, then you don't deserve one either.

A widow in Uttar Pradesh opens the door to another official

Q. How many sons do you have?

A. Four.

Conclusion; Oh you shall be rich in the years to come with four sons, you surely don't deserve to be counted as BPL.

Speakers at the Sabha highlighted the problems faced by women in the regions they came from **Sandhya Deb Burman from Tripura** drew attention to the difficulties faced by women in an area affected by terrorism. On the one hand women from the tribal areas have to withstand the ravages of terrorist activity on the other the political regime at the Centre pays no heed to their problem. At times women walk miles to go to the ration shop, with possibility of terrorists snatching away their card on the way apart from making other threats. Meanwhile the state does not receive the requisite supply of foodgrains from the central quota, so that those who have BPL cards do not get the essential items, while many amongst the tribals, do not even have a card. **Mehjabeen from Gujarat** who has spent several months in the Shah Alam Camp, narrated how in the camps they were fed grain which was not fit to be consumed by even animals. The state-sponsored carnage had resulted in loss of livelihood and earning capacity of the minority community was drastically reduced. Many of the families affected by the carnage had lost their ration cards but now the Government was causing difficulties and refusing to give them fresh cards. They were deprived therefore of all Government schemes. **Gomti Shakya and Paramjeet from Ganganagar, Rajasthan** lived in a district adjacent to the border. Here the Indian army laid out landmines in preparation for war, making it impossible to carry on cultivation. Summing up how developments on the

border in recent years affected the ordinary people she remarked, *Na ladai hui, na log mar, e na log jiye .Kissi ki banh kati, kisi ki laot, mahinon bhukhmari jhelni pari.*

Women from 32 villages, including hers, protested outside the Collector's office; only then did they allot some grains for their area; that too went to the sarpanch's house so the women had to again struggle and finally gherao the guy to get it distributed. Coming from an adivasi belt, she pointed out that they had no card, no pension, none for widows either and, it theirs was a life of struggle all the way.

Dr. Abhijeet Sen, Chairperson of the Government Committee set up to look at agricultural prices, extended warm greetings to participants. He drew attention to the fact that while the Committee looked into various aspects of the PDS, some of its recommendations were in accord with the demands being expressed in the Sabha.

- Sen spoke firmly in favour of a universal PDS. *Do Teen Kism ke cards Logon Ko Baant Dete Hain.* The division gets extended to health, education and all other amenities.
- The Committee agreed on extension and expansion of the Antyodaya scheme to a larger group of people.
- Every family below the BPL should be given 60 days work or free rations or be included into the Antyodaya scheme.
- Antyodaya be delinked from the income criterion and be extended to all those falling in the category of the deprived sections.

Laxmibai from Andhra Pradesh pointed out that in her region, there was a huge increase in poverty. Rice was now available for more than Rs. 5 per Kg. as against the 2Rs. a Kg earlier and per person the quantity given was only 4 Kgs. per person. Few women were covered by Antyodaya, even fewer families which were headed by women. In the wake of increasing unemployment and poverty, there were reports from the district of Anantapur of wives being mortgaged and sale of daughters. Others were denied a minimum wage. Also present on the dais were Ratnamala and Padma who broke the lock of the godown to get foodgrain distributed in the course of the campaign. Kamlesh from Haryana had a story similar to that from Rajasthan, where the ration supply was taken to

the house of the sarpanch and was not distributed. The food for work programme meant for the poor in the village was handed over to a contractor who brought a tractor to do the work. The women mobilized and lay down before the contractor and then the officials were forced to give them work. Officials who came to conduct the survey for the BPL cards decided to fill the proforma for the survey sitting in the sarpanch's house itself. Once again the women reached there and forced them to do a house to house survey. This was an example of how the surveys are conducted! From Uttar Pradesh too the women of Moosakhad had tales of the tremendous fight they had to put up to get their basic rights acknowledged. Opposition to the Raja of Benaras appropriating both their land and labour, drove them to stop the tractor from tillage and the reward for this was at least a month in jail, *Tumne boya hai par hum katenge*, they told the Raja and at the convention they beamed as they announced that they had lived up to their word. Rajdulari, also from U.P. was a dalit who hailed from Vajapayee's constituency. She was emphatic about pointing to the corruption that the PDS was steeped in. There is a commission on all supplies going through the quota, this could be 10% but if you had to take a loan to buy the grain you could end up having to pay anything upto one and a half times the quantity you were given as repayment. She mocked at the caste system to point out that in order to avail of the rations for the dalits, *Abhi Sab Harijan Ban Gaye Hain*.

Ameerunnisa from Karnataka had a similar story of how pregnant and nursing mothers were denied the rations due and the result was massive malnutrition amongst both mother and child. Livestock too was perishing in such conditions. The *Bisi Uta* (Garam Ahaar) under the mid-day meal scheme was so bad that children too remained unfed. Either the supply did not reach the village, or when it did get there, it did not reach those who were entitled to it. In any case if you had a cycle or a pucca house or a TV, they said you were not entitled to a green card. **Tanuja from Orissa** too wondered why it was that grain rotted in the godowns while starvation was becoming a frequent tragedy though the government denied this. Denial meant no remedial measures would be taken. The result was that in Rajpur, a woman sold her daughter for a hundred rupees while many are forced to sell their bodies. **Shanta Pal from West Bengal**, she pointed out, that due to the land reforms and distribution of *pattas*, the employment situation had been relatively better in the past two decades. She spoke of how the State Government was trying to

distribute more essential goods through the ration shops, but with the present food policies of the central Government these efforts were being sabotaged. In Bihar there had been many valiant struggles for land. In darbhanga district, an AIDWA leader and agricultural worker, Kusma was killed in police firing. In Runusaidpur, in a struggle for flood relief there was police firing and Manju had a bullet lodged in her leg which later had to be amputated. Several women have been jailed. Yet the women were struggling for their basic rights for food. Noorjehan who spoke from Bihar said that the rationing system had totally collapsed and nothing was available. **Chandra from Tamilnadu** had a similar story of corruption in PDS, denial of basic rights and growing poverty and unemployment. Today the drought situation in parts of the state have added to the problem since there has not been a proper harvest. Thousands are caught up in the debt-distress cycle and have mortgaged all their belongings. The AIDWA activists have been involved in struggles to demand that grain reach the ration shops but the condition is so bad that the shop –owners further wish to exploit so they lay down the condition that you have to buy other things from them before they give you the grain. Jayalalitha's response to the on-going agitations is to impose ESMA. Meanwhiloe she organizes huge rallies in her own support, only to gather the crowd she has to pay Rs. 100 per person along with a promise of Egg Biryani or else the crowds will not come! **Saraswati from Maharashtra**, said that there were 4000 people BPL in her area alone but no BPL cards. The people have no other alternative but to struggle to get them to distribute the grain if they are to survive. That is how 1000 BPL ration cards could be made in Pune but the question remains that does having the card get you the food supply because there was no supply for 3 months in the shops. The situation is worse in the tribal areas and the drought has not helped. **Barfi** from Delhi narrated that in Delhi there was corruption even at the stage of getting the form for making an application for the card. Women in Delhi agitated to identify blackmarketeers but what happens to the foodgrain after the police raid is another story. In Assam the food crisis is very severe, pointed out **Rajeshwari**. The Bodos face more difficulties. Children do not go to school in these areas and instead go to the forests to gather what they can and to catch fish. **Dhanno Devi of Uttaranchal** had spent one month in jail fighting to save the land belonging to the dalits which the District Magistrate gave to the Birlas to set up a factory. From Indore, Madhya Pradesh, **Shanti**

Bai said that the poor were treated as worse than “keera makora” with the state withdrawing facilities that were there earlier. Even pensions have been discontinued. Bhanumati, speaking on behalf of Kerala spoke of how the current food policies are destroying the PDS in Kerala that had once been considered a model for the rest of the country.

The Sangharsh Sabha highlighted the struggles women have to wage to get even the basic right to food recognized by the authorities. The impact of globalisation was visible in their everyday lives as they grappled with hunger to survive in an economy where food was not accessible or available since they did not have an adequate amount of tradeables to muster the cash required to purchase it. Such is the story of the new economic reforms that our very own Desi rulers implement at the behest of their videshi overlords.

The sangharsh sab gave a call to intensify the struggle at all levels. It extended full support to the May 21 all India strike call by trade unions and called on women to organize rasta rokos and gheraos of FCI godowns and Central Government offices, to add the two main demands for a new food policy (see detailed demands in box) and for the passage of the Women’s Reservation Bill.

THE DEMANDS:

- 1. Universalisation of the Public Distribution system. The right to cheap foodgrain through a strengthened rationing system be made a fundamental right.**
- 2. As an interim measure all BPL card holders to be given foodgrain at Rs. 3 per kg rice and Rs. 2 per kg wheat (Antyodaya scheme prices). All widows, single adult women, disabled persons, persons over the age of sixty and female headed families, regardless of whether they have BPL cards or not, to be given immediate access to grain at these prices.**
- 3. Ration quotas to be individual based not family based.**
- 4. The right to work be made a fundamental right. Guaranteed employment scheme with minimum wages and parity between men and women. The earlier provision for minimum 30 per cent of work days generated for women, to be implemented.**

- 5. The foodgrain component of all employment related schemes, including food for work schemes, to be calculated at current Antyodaya prices.**
- 6. A radical change in measurements of poverty, to include other factors such as malnourishment and percentages of family income spent on food requirements as well as collection of gender-segregated data.**