

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

WOMEN'S PROGRAMMES

In most tribal societies woman holds a high and honourable place. She goes proudly free about the country-side. In field and forest she works in happy companionship with her husband. She is not subjected to early child-bearing : she is generally married when she is mature, and if her marriage is a failure (which it seldom is) she has the right of divorce. The lamentable restrictions of widowhood do not await her : should her husband die, she is allowed, even enjoined, to remarry; and in many tribes she may inherit property. Her free and open life fills her mind with poetry and sharpens her tongue with wit. As a companion, she is humorous and interesting; as a wife, devoted; as a mother, heroic in the service of her children. Her brave, laborious, faithful life is an inspiration.

Yet the women's programmes of Community Development have not been received by the tribal people with any great enthusiasm. There are several reasons for this. In the first place, the conventional and stereotyped schemes of the Mahila Samaj, with its emphasis on sewing, knitting, embroidery and the singing of bhajans, have not excited the interest or met the requirements of the tribal women.

The life of these people is very hard. The majority of them live in mountainous or forest regions or in the deep interior of the great plateaux. With little education, without any kind of maternity service, deprived by poverty of any special diet, the tribal mother has to struggle hard to bear and preserve her child. It has been noticed that while tribal girls are usually strong and vigorous, they age far more quickly than other women, for they have to work too hard on insufficient food. Under these circumstances, economic and health programmes must be given the highest priority. It is much more important to have a healthy baby than to knit a jumper. A clean home, nourishing and well-cooked food, a knowledge of simple rules of health to be followed before and during childbirth and of what to do during the critical months that follows it—these are the essential things at which the Gram Sevika should aim. She has the great task of holding age at bay and keeping the tribal women young.

Instead we have seen all too many girl workers who seem to have little interest in these things, who are confused and puzzled about what they should do, and are content to introduce sewing (which is useful but not essential at the present time), embroidery and knitting (of doubtful economic value) and rather formal social gatherings which have little appeal.

And again, is it really desirable that the women's programme should form a separate unit in the general scheme of Community Development? Surely it should be an integrated scheme of economic development, the improvement of health, and social and cultural life for the family and tribe as a whole.

For in tribal society men, women and children do everything together. There is, it is true, some differentiation in function : there are taboos on certain activities for women; there are also taboos for men. In the north-eastern areas, for example, weaving is confined to women, in parts of cen-

tral India only men may touch a plough. But generally, whether it be in collecting forest produce, in the hard long labour of the fields or in the happy dances after the day's work is done, men, women and children share the common burden and relax, not in separate groups but all together.

Men and women dance together without any inhibitions; when children dance, the elders, men and women alike, delight to join in the general merriment.

And then women workers drawn from the towns, where still men and women work in different spheres and often enjoy their recreations separately—even in Delhi parties you will notice the ladies and gentlemen tending to gather in separate groups—devise completely separate recreational programmes for the men and women. The women are collected in Mahila Samitis and are taught to sing unfamiliar songs in an unfamiliar language, when they would much prefer to be dancing and singing with their menfolk. There is a danger that the women will gradually come to feel that mixed dancing is wrong, and the healthy practice of social inter-relationships, which should not only be continued but encouraged, may disappear. The tribals are ahead of us in many ways and we have to be very careful that we do not push them back.

If the truth of this is acknowledged, it means that there should be drastic changes in the approach and methods of the women's programme. The Gram Sevikas and Mukhya Sevikas should develop it in the home and family, basing it on the free and happy life of the tribes and the actual needs of their homes.

Another reason for the comparative failure of the present programme is the lack of well-qualified and well-trained Gram Sevikas; most of them have not the slightest idea of any kind of policy. They go into the tribal villages as reformers and quick-changers; they introduce new garments such as petticoats and brassieres, teach the girls to do their hair differently, bring in cosmetics, change their ornaments and even sometimes persuade the girls not to wear any ornaments at all. They destroy the old beauty and give cheap plastics in its place. They seem to be quite unaware of the essential priorities needed for the tribal home.

Proper selection and training is thus essential. This can be done in two ways, either by selecting tribal women and training them to become Gram Sevikas; or, by selecting intelligent and sensitive non-tribal women and orienting them to tribal life and culture besides training them to assume their responsibilities for a given job. We endorse the recommendation of the Pachmarhi Seminar that in order to enable the Gram Sevikas to function effectively, it is necessary that their work-load should be reduced and that they should be given charge of one Centre each with a radius of three to four miles. In addition, proper residential accommodation should be arranged for them. While the Gram Sevikas can help the women in their domestic crafts, the P.E.Os should, wherever possible, work out schemes in consultation with the Industries Department to introduce and promote really useful crafts which can provide a supplementary income.

The tribal system of looking after children is in itself a subject of study and admiration. The whole system of educating the child in tribal customs and traditions through the conditioning effect of the family and household gods, the village gods, the dormitory and other systems of joint living are in themselves the very essence of education. This requires to be understood

and appreciated before new forms of education for the promotion of child welfare and family welfare are introduced.

The Balwadi programme has proved effective in bringing children together to learn lessons of cleanliness and corporate living. This activity, however, needs to be geared to the corporate way of life already in existence. For example, the conditioning effect of the Balwadis should be in harmony with the conditioning effect of the tribal family and the tribal community for corporate living. This requires further study in the dynamics involved in learning through the process of conditioning through situations. After such research is made, the Gram Sevikas may become sensitive to this situation and promote, as far as possible, the educational process through participation and through situations.

The question of the formal education of tribal girls is of importance. Wherever Ashram Schools have proved useful, efforts should be made to get girls to attend their primary^a classes. For the children attending Middle Schools, there will be need of separate dormitories for boys and girls. From some of these students who show promise of leadership, recruitment should be made for further training in preparing for the job of Gram Sevika. The responsibility for finding the right kind of girl or woman should rest with the Mukhya Sevikas, the senior Block officials and the Collector. When they are found, they should be given systematic training at every stage so that eventually they can become good workers who will be happy and at home in tribal society. This is a long-term programme and needs to be worked out accordingly.

In conclusion, we suggest that the whole approach to the women's programme requires reorientation. It may be advantageous to ask well-qualified and sensitive Mukhya Sevikas and Gram Sevikas, after their orientation to tribal life and culture, to experiment with different types of programme and thus determine the kind of activity that will be most suitable. The most important thing is to cut out the frills and concentrate on the less spectacular but far more vital problems of maternity, child-care and clean and happy homes.