

Report of All India Convention of Women Leaders

On

“Justice for Women from Margins”

Organised by

Rashtriya Dalit Adivasi Mahila Andolan (RDAMA)



Report
on
“Justice for Women from Margins”

13th-14th September 2019

Venue: Gandhi peace Foundation, Near ITO, New Delhi

Centre for Alternative Dalit Media (CADAM), Sathi All For Partnerships (SAFP) and National Alliance For Labour Rights (NALR)) had initiated the idea of organising this convention.

The National Commission for Women (NCW) graced the occasion with Madam Rekha Sharma Chairperson of NCW inaugurating the convention before the scheduled time. The hall was full and all participants had gathered, travelling from ten different states on their own expenses to reconvene and unite to pledge their support to the platform to empower women from the margins. The convention had participation of women from the states of Delhi, Haryana, Telangana, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Sikkim and Rajasthan. A few participants from Maharashtra and other South Indian states were expected who could not participate due to last minute issues. The support organisations who could participate were from, NCDHR, SEWA Bharat, Mahila Dakshta Samiti, Abhiuday, Jan Parshad - Sach, Leads-Jaipur, Maitri, Parmarth, Professors from Delhi University, Ambedkar University and JNU.

This report provides an overview of the discussion held and plan ahead. A background note attached as annex to this report detail the objectives, schedule and the expected outcome along with the attendance sheet.

The All India Convention of Dalit Adivasi Women Leaders

RDAMA and its associates have organised the All India Convention of Dalit Adivasi Women 2019 on the theme of “Justice for Women from the Margins”.

The convention was organised with the following objectives:

1. To improve linkages and networking among the grass root level Dalit Adivasi Women leaders
2. To identify common challenges faced (violence, land/ resource rights, access to essential services etc) by Dalit Adivasi women and other marginalised women and develop common strategies to address them
3. To develop mechanisms for sustainable common platform of marginalised women, especially coming from Dalit Adivasi communities
4. To develop a common action agenda for Dalit Adivasi and other marginalised women (RDAMA)

Women leaders from socially excluded communities, minority communities, other backward classes and general communities are invited to participate. While emphasising on the Dalit

Adivasi women, the approach of the convention is inclusive to dialogue also with other women and social organisations.

The convention had participation of women from the states of Delhi, Haryana, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. A few participants from Maharashtra and other South Indian states will also participate.



Proceedings

The RDAMA General Secretary Ms Sumedha Bodh opened the convention by recalling RDAMA's initiation by Rajni Tilak in 2007 and its history of growth over the years in north India to provide leadership to women who took up a two and half foot bamboo staves to keep patriarchy in its place and to make space for gender equality and dignity of all. She talked about

discrimination faced by Dalit women in hospitals, schools as well as work to have larger resource gap than other poor. Water and land resource gap for the Dalit is greater than the al than the lack along with food and equal wage. The nutrition levels of Dalits is lower than the other marginalised. These women face greater violence from people in power as well as at home. In Bundelkhand the Dalits still walk with their foot wear on their head, the objects for devotion as well resource base of Adivasi and the marginalised are decimated using community pressure of those who yield social power with impunity. Women and their bodies suffer violations in the name of honour and caste boundaries set a Brahminical order. Basic need of water and land is controlled by local institutions like the Khap Panchayat while national resources like countries budget and infrastructure caters to the rich more than the poor. Rajni Tilak led a social change movement on Ambedkarite feminist principles that had Buddhist peace building as a strategy to usher equality and equity. RDAMA will continue the work initiated by Rajni Tilak by seeking support from women, men and those from other genders and sexual orientations. Thus the first two sessions were on leadership and violence faced by women.

The Chairperson gave the key note address of leadership. Ms Sarita Thatal member RDAMA and an elected representative of the Panchayat from Sikkim felicitated the Chairperson NCW Ms Rekha Sharma. Madam Sharma urged the women leaders to leave behind their identities that pull back people from development process offered by the national freedom. She urged participants to rise above the feeling of being wronged. In her experience she has been a woman who could be her own person to be equal with men. She opposed the system of reservations as this system perpetuated inequality between those who gain privilege. In her experience only the wives and daughters of political leaders get opportunities to take on reserved political seats. The powerless remain excluded unless they are ready to break their cycle of vulnerability.

She shared that NCW received no domestic abuse and violence complaints from women in North East of India as women treat themselves as equal but this is not the case for the Hindi speaking belt. Women in these states are willingly not breaking their assigned subordinate role. This must change through education and entrepreneurship. NCW is open to support any one who requires its assistance. She urged the leaders to go back to their states to nurture at least ten women to take their own decision towards their own dignity. She called for women to support other women to educate and train themselves to lead the change they want to be and not focus on divisions in society

Ms Sarita Thatal from Sikkim shared her experiences of implementing all government schemes like scholarships, nutrition etc in her constituency. She was able to reach most benefits to people along with training women to earn money through enterprises and inculcate habit of saving through Self Help Groups. The panchayat under her leadership mobilised children to conduct Bal Panchayats and elders to participate in area development plans. She shared her feeling abandoned by her father who left the family on her birth as the third girl. She called for women to look after themselves and their dignity as well as their own homes before attempting to change the society. It takes no time to organise home front and then women can expand their role outside to experience the abundance of the universe.

The representative from Maitri network recalled that Rajni was a founder member of this national network that works on women and violence. Leadership characteristics were explained by the RDAMA as having the courage to take on issues of atrocities as well as empowerment for the vulnerable like the orphans. The leader cited examples of their work where they have taken up fact findings on atrocities and violence faced by their sisters as well as their people.

Grave issues were narrated to sink in facts that issues of marginal identities cannot be wished away but have to be consciously worked upon.

Ms Soso Shaiza, Member NCW from Manipur shared that she is proud of her being an Adivasi as due to this identity she has been able to get a coveted national leadership position. Her grandmother was the first tribal of her area to win local elections so she feels fortunate to belong to a political tradition. Even so the article 14 and 15 of the Indian Constitution provides for affirmative action that must be availed. She urged women in the room to apply for research and seminars that NCW can assist with.

Process of the convention

The two-day convention was designed to provide input to the women leaders on leadership, Violence Against Women, Resource gaps and entrepreneur opportunities to understand implications at field level for a plan of action. Four technical sessions provided an input to the participants to plan their work for the next six months. The learning from the sessions are summarised below:

1. “Increasing access of marginalised women to resources especially land rights”.

Resources and network build capabilities. These capabilities are nurtured through relations between people and experiences. The speakers shared research and experiences on the resource gap identification by the RDAMA leadership and constant follow-up to secure housing and land rights for the marginalised women. Speaker from Gaya, Bihar Ms Sarawsati spoke of building their homes under the Indira Awas Yojna. Similar issues were shared to remind the audience that securing resources is only a first step in the work of empowerment. The next step is sustaining resources for community good. Thus, half of earnings need to be invested in social enterprise and vision for the future. Ms Roma from National Union of Forest peoples and forest workers provided a theoretical input to understand private property and marriage as the citadel that maintains patriarchal control of resources. Thus, women were urged to invest in group resource development beyond married joint family property norms. Participants were urged to develop their skills to earn from the market a decent wage to look after the needs of self and the family and spend to realise dreams for women to control resources so that peaceful ways of governance can be supported sans violence that forces servitude instead of life that fosters dignity. Living movements and enterprise across the country that have created and accessed resources were shared that have increased resource base for women in form of :

- 1) Space: Housing, land/water/sanitation/electricity and access to infrastructure
- 2) Business: Access to finance, skills, training, Job placement/production support and marketing

3) Social Network: Participation in decisions making and developing an agency



Father Vincent Ekka from ISI along with Ms Grace and Dr Archana spoke on the culture and lifestyle of those who live on forest and land. Ms Arti Kohl From Bundelkhand shared her experiences of working on land right of tribal women and Ms Hemlata Kansotia from Jaipur discussed how challenges can be overcome in the face of discrimination. The need for enterprise development was discussed and finally Ms Rati from Abhiuday shared how she was nurtured by elders in development field that has helped her to support tribal women in Tughlakabad to make and sell designer apparel through Dastakar exhibitions.

The speakers input shed light on the struggles and gain in developing resource base for women leaders. Today women from Sonbhadra can give a testimonial to save natural habitat that they protect for the sustainable development and for local people's livelihood. Thus, it has been possible for women in India to lead movements that utilise resources for immediate needs and plan use for community. The session ended with a call to plan the financial leadership to promote local women agency by planning for the next century where women develop and sustain resources differently than done until now. Towards this it is necessary to understand the use of violence and honour that subjugates masses. Violence as a means to maintain

relationships has to be given up as a behaviour in self such that power within guides consensual living.

2. “Voices from the grassroots: Struggles of Dalit, Adivasi and other women groups”

The session focussed on the life experiences and the struggles of the women located at the margins of the society. They face social, economic and political exclusion by the dominant groups of society. It is extremely essential to highlight the life-stories and personal experiences. In this session the main agenda was to develop a connect between the struggles of the grassroots with policy making, political and social movements, human rights intervention and the right to livelihood for women. To build the momentum of the ‘Rashtriya Dalit Adivasi Mahila Andolan’ and highlighting the severity of the marginalised situation of women it becomes necessary to touch the grassroots. The voices from the grassroots enabled us to understand the complexity of issues and challenges faced by women of margins at different platforms. Speakers shared various issues such as social subjugation faced by Dalit women in metropolitan city like Delhi to Adivasi women from forests struggling for survival. The different kinds of exploitation at different levels reflect the deep rootedness of the issue.

3.Strategizing the future action:

In this session the participants were divided into 4 groups. They were given four topics to work on and present their views, strategy and means to achieve their goals. The topics were as follows:- 1) Leadership development 2) Organisation and Movement building 3) Entrepreneurship 4) Coordination responsibilities

Entrepreneurship

In the contemporary times financial independence and security of women has become one of the major goal's institutions working for women. It becomes imperative for women to financially secure themselves and develop assets for a quality life. The group discussion on the said topic touched on issues such as: a.) Why do women need to be financially independent? b.) Imperative resources and institutions c.) Technology and Market Assistance d.) Balancing household and small-scale business d.) Identifying the strengths for women from different regions e.) Capacity and network building of women entrepreneurs.

A declaration was drafted and read out on the basis of the discussions. In brief it included the following points:

a.) The need to increase the base of grassroot level women leaders from the margins. To create a pool of leaders each woman leader will connect and orient 5 Dalit and 5 Adivasi women. This initiative will help in bringing out women from their household and voice their views.

b.) Financial Independence is a must for women to create their rightful space in the family as well as in the society. This will enable them to pursue their ambitions and create assets for their future.

c.) Developing legal awareness among women from the margins. The women from margins are most vulnerable to incidents of violence and exploitation by the hands of dominant groups in society. Due to lack of legal information and support system these women are unable to get justice. It is necessary that not only these women are provided with step by step information to file a complaint. But they are connected with the local women leaders and NGOs working on the issue. RDAMA intend to develop a network base which will connect the local women with local leaders and they will further be in contact with state and national level leaders. It will create a directory of leaders ranging from local-state-national.

d.) Access to information on various government schemes on nutrition, water and sanitation, reproductive services, scholarships and micro and small-scale enterprises. The women participants from the convention highlighted that they lack information on schemes of the government. Providing access to the information and supporting them to gain benefits of government schemes will enable these women to make changes in their quality of life.

1. The Structure of RDAMA was discussed and it was decided that a National Coordination Committee (NCC) will plan and carry on the work that was nurtured by Rajni Tilak to cocreate a strong movement that will work across different forums to get justice for women from the margins. The members of the NCC who were appointed for a one-year period (September 15 2019 to September 14 2020) are:
2. The work plan for the next six months was decided to be as follows:

Outcome of the Convention:

- Grass root level women leaders from marginalised communities improved information base to effectively address issues related to violence, leadership and resource rights such that the access to essential services for the marginalised increases.
- The Dalit Adivasi and Muslim Women leaders improved a networking among themselves and met mentors who could support RDAMA to become a platform of women leaders that are linked with a common strategy for a future agenda.
- A common strategy and action agenda for the women from the margins in the identified states emerged to strengthen RDAMA leadership linking them to NCW and other platforms/

Follow up Action after the Convention

Following follow up action is envisaged after the convention for a one-year period:

1. Leadership and personality development workshops in the states as identified by the members
2. Organising training on leadership with input on water and sanitation programmes, legal and financial literacy for strengthening women groups on land and resource rights

3. Constitute state level coordination committees of women from marginalised communities in 8 states.
4. Creating a directory of grass root level women leaders from marginalised communities
5. Initiating a newsletter for continued linkage building among the women leaders from margins
6. Strengthening the membership structure for RDAMA
7. Organise a study on inclusion and equity issues in WASH initiatives in India, take up dialogue with the government departments to ensure the participation of excluded women groups in the implementation and designing of WASH programmes, activate the village water and sanitation committees and strengthen local women leadership on access the services on water, sanitation, nutrition and health.
8. Develop entrepreneurship among women from margins through promoting enterprises led by them which are sensitive to WASH concerns and also provide income to the women.
9. As the chairperson of the National Commission on Women and other NCW members attended the convention and offered for collaboration, they will be approached with suitable proposals for collaboration and support.

Annex

Background Note for the Convention

Context

Dalits and Adivasis are among the largest and most excluded social groups in India. Together, they constitute more than one fourth (26%) of India's population. Women and girls from these communities have been facing multiple layers of exclusion and oppression. Besides the age-old caste based and social exclusion, Dalit and Adivasi women face patriarchal suppression and economic deprivation. Poverty ratio among these communities is higher than other communities. Other development indicators such as nutrition, education and health among the women from these communities are a matter of great concern.

Apart from lagging behind in development indicators and facing social discrimination, women from Dalit and Adivasi communities face frequent violence. While patriarchal violence and domestic violence are commonly found, DAWs face severe caste based and social violence. Dominant caste groups in the rural areas use violence as a means of continuing their power positions and keep the Dalit Adivasi communities under subjugation. They target Dalit women for violence also to attack the dignity of the whole community. The social political structure is such that these women hardly succeed in getting justice from the police and judicial system. Coming from economically weaker sections, Dalit women are often dependent on other caste families for their daily livelihood and wage work. This often leads to undignified compromises.

To alter the situation, India has seen various anti-caste and anti-patriarchy movements in past decades. However, most Dalit women feel that the existing women movements have not been raising or representing the issues faced by them adequately. Similarly, the existing Dalit organisations and movements also have been lacking in adequately promoting Dalit women's representation and leadership. In the context of challenges faced by Dalit Adivasi women and their emerging local leaders, Rashtriya Dalit Adivasi Mahila Andolan was initiated as a national platform of Dalit and Adivasi women leaders by Late Rajni Tilak. She was among the prominent Dalit woman leader in north India until last year when she passed away after a short hospitalisation. She came from the Dalit community and had faced the caste and patriarchal challenges in her life. Over 3 decades, she continued with her efforts to strengthen Dalit and women movements with a progressive and Buddhist approach. The RDAMA platform was set up in her leadership to promote a togetherness and spirit of collectivism among the women leaders from excluded communities where by they can share their experience on learning and resource mobilisation with each other to break their isolation and help each other in strengthening the struggle to lead a dignified life.

The process of linking socially excluded women leaders through RDAMA had gained momentum during Rajani's life as reflected in the RDAMA declaration which called to strongly deal with violence faced by women on a daily basis. The RDAMA responded to atrocities and advocated for policy and practical change to safeguard women. Rajni urged women to be active in sustainable development of their own geographies by setting up *pani panchayats* or water committees, get their name on housing and land they live and work in and set up enterprises based on SHG savings. RDAMA thus trained a cadre for leadership at different levels. Leadership for RDAMA has the significance to achieve life force with dignity for self and the collectives that can choose equality offered by the intention to respect environmental sustainability. However, the set back with her demise in early 2018 required support to increase the potential of a platform like RDAMA to strengthen Dalit Adivasi women leadership through increased communication to develop linkages across different forums. This platform has already been in touch with the multitude of grass root level women leaders from the socially excluded communities.

These women and their communities regularly face the challenges posed by violence, lack of land and resource rights, and difficulties in accessing essential services related to water, sanitation, nutrition, education, skilling and health. There is a need to bring all these Dalit Adivasi women leaders together on a common platform. This movement will promote discussion among them on strategies to strengthen leadership among Dalit Adivasi women. An annual convention, will get together national leaders to interact with grass root level women leaders from Dalit, Adivasi and other marginalised communities.