



DEVAKI JAIN

Need For A Larger Vision

“We work with our husbands and children so that we may all eat. Does it make me feel bad working for my husband? I do not understand what that means. If he is able to earn more, then I would like to spend more time with the children and the house”, said Khurshid, a Muslim woman from a weaver household in Jammu and Kashmir.

“Unite as women ? But what about my family ? My husband, my brother ? There are 40 of us in this household. We protect each other. We have enemies in the village. No, I would like to be with my family, not linked up with women from other families just because they also know the art”, says Sita Devi, a folk artist from Mithila, Bihar.

“If I wear my cloth over my shoulder like you upper class women, will you clean my shit? Leave us alone. You do not want us to become strong. Then who would do your dirty work ? Leave us alone. We are doomed to labour for ever”, screams Thimmi, a harijan woman of Chikmagalur district, Karnataka.

“What do they know ?” says Kempamma, a 45 year old worker in a coffee curing shed in Karnataka, pointing to her male supervisors. “We are to do nothing but bow our heads all our lives. I have a sick child. I am late, I

am not given work, the family eats nothing that day. I bow my head. The union goes on strike for better wages. We starve for 15 days and then we join work for 10 paise more. I bow my head.” Like a swan dipping into water, Kempamma demonstrates her words, bending her head down to touch the floor, with her hand on her forehead.

In Petlad in Gujarat, 35 year old Hosain Bibi and 22 year old Mumtaz Bibi are two of the 12 workers in a tobacco processing shed. Hosain Bibi packs tobacco into bags. How come in spite of parda ? “I have 12 children and no husband, and I am the only earning member in my family. My neighbours criticise me for leaving parda and working outside in a shed, but what do I care ? I would rather have my children eat than win the neighbours’ approval. Look at Mumtaz. She is unmarried, she has no father so she earns for the whole family, since she is the eldest child. If she marries, the family will lose their breadwinner.”

Haseena is a 60 year old member of the Self Employed Women’s Association, (SEWA), a registered society in Delhi with about 2,000 members. Haseena does *zardozi* or embroidery in *zari* on velvet. Discussing the increase in incidence of divorce among the young Muslim couples in the old city of Delhi, she says : “If god claims to protect the poor and the vulnerable, why did he create men? When I see these girls come home rejected by their men, when I see the men misusing our income, I cannot help wishing that men had not been born.”

Khurshid and Sita Devi emphasise the strength of family. For Khurshid,

participating in the family’s income earning activity, being an unpaid family worker, does not appear “a value.” For Sita Devi, family as a large kinship group provides security, more than occupation or class does. Thimmi is so hurt by the stigma of her caste, the bhangis who are the nightsoil cleaners of rural India that she abuses women who come with sisterhood emotions. Kempamma sees the inequalities between men and women within the labour union. Men can afford to sit idle, they can manage to come on time to work. For her, there is bondage all around. Hosain and Mumtaz are breadwinners. They have to step out of the classic formation of orthodox religion. And Haseena articulates the universal lament of women in anguish.

Layer Within Layer

All of them are from the working class, in that they are all workers, and all from the assetless section, if that is one definition of the proletariat. Through class runs stratification based on family, caste and religion. The criss cross does not end there. Occupation is another influencing factor. Most occupations, including tailoring, laundering, gardening, pottery and weaving, are still grouped around caste, though some mixing has begun to take place. Certain occupations are based on the family as a unit of labour, certain others on individuals.

Stigmatised occupations like nightsoil removal, animal flaying are strongly caste based, and the distance between this caste and all others is so great that caste dominates all other stratification, as seen in Thimmi’s angry words. At the other extreme, the fact that

the Mithila brahmins are enmeshed in caste notions of superiority also leads to Sita Devi's preference for family unity rather than any other kind of unity.

Family based occupations, such as weaving, potting, sericulture, even construction, cloud not only the lines of economic role demarcation between the sexes but also the clarity of affirmative action by women. There is a simple truth in Khurshid's surprise at the question, even though she may receive less than she gives to the family.

Something More Than Earning Capacity

The old hypothesis that economic independence leads to social liberation of women or to improvement in status, perhaps through areas of power or autonomy, is losing ground today. In Manipur, women dominate the market not only as vendors of small goods but as rice traders and financiers. In 1971, Manipur ranked first in the all India statewise ranking of female work participation rates in urban areas. Yet Manipuri men practise polygamy while women complain of wife beating and a general sense of subordination to men, even today.

Another phenomenon which is baffling is the persistence of dowry and persecution for dowry amongst those middle class households where the woman is an independent salary earner. In between these two extremes are the women who work in the rice fields in Tanjore. Small scale surveys of health and other indicators of social status in this area reveal a higher rate of female morbidity and mortality, regardless of age.

Therefore, whether the woman is working as a family labourer like Khurshid, or as a wage or income earner like the Manipuri trader or the Tanjore rice planter, something more than earning capacity seems to be required. It seems that what women need is recognition, a higher valuation of their contribution. This contribution should not be assessed only in monetised or conventional economic terms. Women's contribution

in reproduction and house-work should also be recognised. It seems that perceptions of women's value need to change, within the class, that is, amongst the woman's own sisterhood and brotherhood, as well as in the larger society.

Unequal Within, Unequal Without

One source of power for women would be control over income. The wage worker may have more control than the family labourer, and the petty trader, the woman who sells on pavement and in the market-place, might have even more control than the wage earner.

There may also be a difference in impact between piece rate payment, that is, payment per unit of output, and time based payment, that is, payment per day.

Piece rate tends to draw in as many hands in a household as are available. For example, on the sites in Maharashtra where a rural employment programme to

mop up the chronically unemployed as well as the seasonally employed is in operation, labour is paid according to cubic foot of earth work or construction. It is customary to find the whole family working to excavate an area of nine cubic feet. The sooner the job is done, the quicker the payment will be. During field-work it was observed that while the whole family can be found at the site in the morning, by afternoon only women, often the older women and children, continue to work. Men often move away to liquor shops and younger women to do additional work, whether at home or as hired labour.

However, payment is made to the person who has registered, and this is often the male head of the household. The cash may or may not be distributed, may or may not be fully spent on sustenance. As the labour is organised by gang leaders who are sometimes small contractors, and sometimes village or



family leaders, the distribution of wages is further filtered. The contractor may deduct his commission, the labourer may be indebted to him. The unequal relationships within the community and the family are reflected in the unequal distribution of reward.

Control over property has not effectively changed gender relations either. In Udipi, in Dakshin Kannada district, the system of Aliyasanthana still prevails. According to this system, the son-in-law comes to stay with his wife in her natal home. Property passes from mother to daughter. In a recent sample survey of households in this area, it was found that 32 percent of the households were female headed, in terms of customary headship. However, decisions and links with power were in the hands of maternal uncles and brothers rather than with the women. So ownership of property does not by itself seem to have made a dramatic difference. Other formations of hierarchy, changes in access and cultural modes have to be added to property ownership if women's autonomy is to be strengthened.

The Benefits Of Organisation

Autonomous women's organisations which demand a change in gender relations have been a source of new dynamism in the last decade. India did have autonomous women's organisations before but the new organisations are providing women from low resource households with power emerging from collective, non family or occupation based formations.

One such formation is SEWA. Haseena and many others like her, live in the Jama Masjid area, but are also distributed across Delhi, Agra Lucknow, and many other towns and villages. They work to fill orders from shopkeepers. These orders are usually transmitted to them through middlemen who also collect the payment. Much as the women would like it to be otherwise, the sons and husbands who act as middlemen do not always bring back to the women the cash received from shopkeepers. Nor do the women get any market feedback on what is going on in

the market, and at what rate work is being done in other areas, Haseena, as a member of SEWA went on tour to see a sister organisation in Ahmedabad, where 12,000 women like Haseena have been organised and own their own cooperative bank, as well as have access to life insurance, maternity benefits, health cover, creches, and other facilities.

Going through the market in Ahmedabad, she saw *mukuts* being sold for prices which were 10 times the price at which she sold the *palla*. The sight so upset her that when she returned to Delhi, she went straight from the station to the Jama Masjid. As she puts it : "I threw myself on the floor of the Masjid, beat my forehead on the floor and moaned: 'Ya Allah ! Is this what you call justice ?' " From that moment she refused to put her hand to the needle till wages for *zardozi* were raised to a more reasonable rate.

Since then Haseena and her sisters in the association have managed to raise their own wage rates by at least 50 percent through collective effort. Soon, with their own shop and also by upgrading their skills, they hope to be able to get 90 percent of the return for themselves.

"Who says Indian rural women suffer from inhibitions and do not want to participate in the cooperatives ?" says Jaswantibehn of Kaira district. "Let me

travel through 780 odd villages of Kaira district and I will show you that this allegation is false. This is just because women are not asked or allowed. I can make women's cooperatives in every village. The men are not more literate than the women. In fact, men are not even interested in the milk business."

Lack Of Vision

The critical issue in a society which has such a concentration of the destitute, who constitute nearly one third of the population, as well as such a sharp inequality between the highest income groups and those living in deprivation, is the difference in the material problems that assail women across this gap. Another issue is the typical phenomenon of intra household inequality, that is, inequality within a household, amongst its individual members, in both material and non material items. The inequality in distribution of food and health services is receiving increased documentation and articulation. The workload variation between men and women is also receiving attention. This inequality persists in terms of access to resources, to social and political power.

To some extent, inequality within the household could be a uniting force for women, whereas class would be a dividing force.

Yet if women's formations are to have



a wider philosophical base, that of providing a force to end all subordination, exploitation and injustice, then the formations have completely to identify themselves with the low resource groups, so as to show their ethical base. The identity could be the universal subordination, but the articulation would have to be on behalf of the materially deprived.

Women's response to the various levels of this situation have naturally been as varied as the scenario itself. It is customary to divide periods in India into pre 1947, that is the preindependence period, and post 1947. Women played a vital role in both the violent and the non violent efforts at national liberation. They also pressed for constitutional equality, and for social reforms including education for women. Gandhi drew upon them, especially for participation in picketing of liquor shops and foreign cloth shops and for development work.

Today, formations of women can be classified as ideology based, which includes the women's wings of political parties, autonomous women's organisations, which have ideological preferences, gender based, including women's groups which emphasise female social subordination, by taking up issues like rape, bride burnings, wife beating, and providing legal aid, family counselling, health care, feminist consciousness raising and research, and occupation based, that is, those which



are an approximation to trade unions but not formally so. The self employed women's associations of casual and self employed workers are illustrations of the last category. The emphasis is on inequality, on demands for gender based justice, for equal wages, freedom to exercise options, and the struggle is for separate identity.

Solidarity around sex or gender is building up, and is gradually overpowering other lines of identity in India. It is building up due to the overbearing pressure on women imposed by the economic crisis and its social consequence in brutality, especially towards women. It is articulating protest, resistance. But it is not yet articulating vision; it is not yet commanding serious attention. In a society which is so stratified, with such wide differences between such large

strata, and which is accumulating serious problems of population, unemployment, balance of payments as well as defence expenditure, gender based formations have to coopt more than gender based issues. They have to generate feminist consciousness on non feminist issues, taking a narrow definition of non feminist.

Unity may be forged on biology bound issues as a step to struggle for the larger vision of total change or revolution. There should be a two step strategy of uniting on gender, to develop societies where gender is not a stigma.

The basis for formation, for example, may be atrocities against women. But the articulation has to be on something more organic, has to be diagnostic and healing. Without such mainstream linkages, gender relations not only harden but create one more ditch in a ditch ridden road to peace and justice. □

Threatened With Eviction

St Brigitte's Convent hostel in Bangalore is a private organisation, run by nuns. It accommodated 140 working women. In August 1983, the management suddenly increased the hostel fees, without any explanation. The women inmates asked the management to discuss the issue. The management refused, and issued eviction notices to the inmates, ordering them to leave in a month's time. The mess was closed down. False charges were filed against

the inmates.

Today, only 50 women have persisted in remaining to confront the management. We held peaceful demonstrations to seek public support. A solidarity committee was formed to support the women hostellers. An application was filed in the city civil court. On October 27, peaceful demonstrators were beaten up by the police, so now the struggle is against the police as well as the management

—Vimochana

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Errata

The sketches from Ajanta, which accompanied the article "The Myth Of the Golden Age Of Equality-Women Slaves In Ancient India," in No. 18, date between the fourth and sixth centuries AD, not BC, as we wrongly stated, We regret the error.