

Women and Poverty at the India Social Forum - 12th November, 2006.

## **Women and Poverty**

### **Freedom from the culture of subjugation and oppression**

**By Vidya Bhushan Rawat**

In the country of one billion people over 24% of the population belong to Dalits and tribals. Nearly 80% of the Dalit population in India lives in villages and very interestingly the gender ratio is about 936 women per thousand men, which is slightly higher than the national average.

Dalit women suffer from double disability in our society. The first disability of being woman is doubled with the caste tag over head. Women remain the most 'sought after' 'object' in our society and 'honour' of our families. Her honour is a subject of contention between warring brothers, avenging communities and destroying civilization. From Gujarat to Kashmir, the honour of women became the major issue in our uncivilized world.

Even where there is no war, the powerful peasantry with inexplicable caste identities kept women subjugated for years despite her contribution both at home and at the field. It is therefore not surprising that great green revolution of India ultimately strengthened the hand of feudal patriarchy resulting in greater gender chaos in the region. Since agrarian reform had never been feminised and farmer's movement in India caged in the confines of upper caste feudal patriarchy and any voices of dissent are muzzled with atrocious caste consciousness. Today, women are short in supply in Haryana, Punjab, western Uttar-Pradesh and still the caste Panchayats are playing their dubious role by organizing Kangaroo courts for those who try to challenge the status quo. Ultimately, it is the woman who becomes victim of such notoriety of the system. Therefore, cases like Imrana, should not be seen as a problem of the Muslim society. It would be absolutely farcical to confine Imrana's story to an issue of Muslim society. Imrana is the symptom of greater gender discrimination prevalent in the feudal social system of Western Uttar-Pradesh irrespective of religious identities. These actually reflect the feudal pattern of our social system.

The war for land and water is still not over and promises yet to fulfilled by respective governments but the new forms of discriminations and colonisations have begun. It is acknowledged by the UN Secretary General Kofee Annan in his report that nearly 25 million people have become displaced due to various internal factors while 20 million people have been killed due to various diseases like HIV AIDs. In the trouble torn state of Kashmir, one can see the miserable condition of women whose husbands, and children are killed in the violence.

Whether it is to sustain culture or values, women are the foremost to be used in the wider patriarchal design of subjugation. Therefore modesty, chastity, culture and values are specific to women's world. Every time, she tries to cross them or come in conflict with them, the cries are loud enough to rock our political system.

If one has to find a malnourished child in our families, one could easily finger towards the girl who has to do all work at home and yet remain hungry for the full day. It is not surprising that it is women who become victim of 'spirit' and other such practices in our villages. In Tsunami, a majority of women died because men could throw away their lungis when the water forced them to swim while women's modesty took their lives. For them throwing away their Sarees and Petticoats would have become too immodest to face the world hence they could not swim.

The cultural oppression and social subjugation result in limiting the economic development and opportunities to work out. Who would allow his wife or daughter to work out if she report the other day that a colleague passed some remark on her appearance. In most of the cases, women are asked to sit back. So the policy of the existing social system is to hit the victim and kill her self-esteem.

But despite all this, the changes are visible in Dalit women whose case history is something different than the upper caste women. The middle class upper caste women, who never worked on the field or came in open due to their own purdah system, were always told 'women from respected families do not work out'. Dalit women have always worked on the field hence going in open with purdah was their culture. Even Dr Baba Saheb Ambedkar when first burnt Manu Smriti in 1927 as a mark of protest against racial and gender prejudices in the book, at Mahad, had to rely heavily on women.

One of the progressive side of the Dalit movements is that women became an inherent part of it though patriarchy was also visible there in the movement yet not to the comparison of the brahmanical system. Dalit women retaliate and are not told to sit and depressed. Therefore, the revolt of Phoolan Devi is an example. She fought for her dignity and rights. Could we imagined if any middle class upper caste Hindu family would allow their daughter to fight back and not die in humiliation? Recently, Mayawati lit the pyre of her mentor Kanshiram in Delhi, sought to break away from the age-old hold of the patriarchy during such time. By performing the last rites she has send the signal that Dalit political leadership does believe in changing and not glorifying everything which is traditional in the name of culture, such as upper caste Hindu women leaders have always done. Despite a powerful woman, Indira Gandhi always wanted to visit the 'Jagannath temple' and could not fulfill her wish.

This social bias again women results in our day to day life. Hence whether it is the Panchayats or any other government schemes, women have not got their due. We Indians are expert in finding our ways out without breaking our system. Hence when we thought that 33% reservation for women would bring a remarkable change in our life, our men used their social status ( pati devo bhav) to dupe their wives. So once they lost their seats to women, they fielded their wives (preferring wives is a clear option over other females like daughter, mother) as she would obedient more than any other. Since, it is said that husband is your God whatever big you might be in social-political life. So the revolution failed because women are just rubber stamp and husband an unaccountable Laloo for whose sins Rabri would have to pay.

Many of us thought that with the advent of market many things would change, life of women become free and independent yet this disillusionment is growing. The results are threatening. Market is hitting at our social structure but at the same point of time

strengthening the puritan cultural values, which destroyed dignity of women. Market glamorizes oppression and rituals related to women. Therefore, we see a sudden growth of festivals, which people considered as degrading to women. Question is market have always objectified women and therefore trapped them in another stereotype that women are good for certain thing and not for everything and these include look better in providing 'hospitality' as they smile better and on the ramp. We make them feel that it is their freedom.

It is therefore important to understand that the new economic paradigms are killing more and producing little. The issues of displacement and deforestation again put the clock back as 'family' comes first and women despite all our courage comes back to the family, to save it and to take care of it.

In 1990 Nobel Laureate Octavo Paz, in his acceptance of the award said

' The market economy.. cannot be simply a cause for joy. As a mechanism, the market is efficient, but like all machines, it lacks both conscience and compassion. We must find a way of integrating it into society so that it expresses the social contracts and become an instrument for justice and fairness.

The advanced democratic societies have reached an enviable level of prosperity at the same point of time they are islands of abundance in an ocean of universal misery. A society possessed by frantic need to produce more in order to consume more tends to reduce ideas, feelings, art, love, friendship and people themselves to consumer good. Everything becomes an item to be bought, used and then thrown on the rubbish dump..

India is a signatory to Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. Apart from this, we have ratified many other international treaties yet a lot remain to be done. We have one of the finest constitution of the world which gave women right to vote even at the time when many others in the 'developed' world were struggling to get the same. Our constitution says equal pay for equal work. We had a woman prime ministers and many ministers. We have women chief ministers and a lot. Yet, violence against women continues, unabated. Our laws become redundant when issue of woman comes to the fore. We have dowry laws and now the Domestic Violence Act. We have given 'property rights' to women and yet she suffers a lot. In this cruel world of subcontinent, under pressure from a civilised world, we have done everything to look secular as well as civilized and yet when the issue of implementation comes, it is a matter of great disappointment.

Let us remember what Koffee Annan, UN Secretary General said in his report ' In larger Freedom', on laws and their implementation:

' But without implementation, our declarations ring hollow. Without action, our promises are meaningless. Villagers huddling in fear at the sound of government bombing raids or the appearance of murderous militias on the horizon find no solace in the unimplemented words of the Geneva Conventions, to say nothing of the International community's solemn promises of 'never again' when reflecting on the horrors of Rwanda a decade ago.'

( Kofi Annan in his report in larger Freedom, chapter ' Freedom to live in dignity')

A woman is a woman but we tried to define her in terms of her relationship and use this emotion to serve patriarchy. Her identity as a woman is overshadowed by her identity as a mother, sister, wife or a daughter. Constitutionally, we might be a democracy but that democratic spirit has really not crept in our social life, which remains socially oppressive and culturally brutal. Our forefathers did what they could have by providing us a secular progressive constitution yet very few of them thought the keys to success of model constitution lies somewhere else. In our social fabric which remain compartmentalized and thoroughly regimented, and, where our morality differ from each other, writ of the constitution need to be strengthened. It is quintessential, therefore, that the moral values erupt from secular and progressive outlook and not to subjugate those voices of freedom and liberty.

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