
The Goddess in Karnataka

In India each village (*gram*) and city has its own deity. During natural calamities like famine and floods, special prayers are offered to the mother goddess, as well as and also during the outbreak of epidemics like plague, cholera and measles. Special offerings like curd, rice and tender coconut are offered. Jaggery and rice are the favourite foods of the goddess. Special lamps made out of lemon skin are lit for the mother. One notable future of goddess worship in Karnataka is that women priests are found in most of the temples and they carry out all the tasks and duties associated with worship. Common folk can easily follow the rituals, as they are very simple.

One temple which is famous both at the national and international level is the Dharmaraya Temple which is situated on OTC Road in Ulsoorpet where Karaga Shakti (Draupadi) is worshipped. The entrance has two small *gopurams* and a big one where idols of Lord Ganesha, Krishna and Draupadi, along with the Pandavas, are installed. The temple is four hundred years old and was renovated by the Muslim ruler Tipu Sultan.

It is believed that goddess Shakti (Draupadi) under the commander Uddanda Pota Raja, helped Veera Kumara by killing a demon. That victory is celebrated to this day. During Bheemana Amavasa and Dashera the idol of the goddess is taken in procession along with that of Arjun. An old Kannada inscription states that the idol belongs to the Chalukya period and that a priest from the Varshakula Kshatriya community is authorised to look after the affairs of the temple. The man who carries Karga Shakti is dressed like a woman and has to lead a saintly life that whole month. Jasmine is offered for Adhishakti and the celebrations continue for ten days.

Goddess Annamma Temple is situated on Subedar Chetram Road. In the *garbha griha*, idols of various

goddesses, each associated with the outbreak of particular epidemics, are installed. Names such as Plague Amma, underscore this association. All the idols have weapons in their hands. They are supposed to ward off evil and to protect the people from disease.

These temples are reminders that women represent the divine creative power and are, therefore, worthy of worship. However, despite such pro-women traditions, in contemporary India, many ordinary women fail to get something as simple as equality and justice.

Sangeetha G. N., Bangalore

Empowerment of Women

The empowerment of women is considered the most effective tool to put an end to the atrocities committed against women. But there is a misconception regarding empowerment of women. It is usually interpreted as economic independence attained through either job or property ownership. But very often even economically independent women suffer silently due to fear of physical and mental violence and remain voiceless, and powerless. Women who live with oppressive husbands in such situations bear the torture either for the sake of children or because they are not prepared for the social stigma of divorce. Many are unaware of the ways and means of getting out. Economic empowerment alone does not guarantee equality for women.

It is time to give serious consideration to the legal and political empowerment of women. But how many even educated and employed

women have legal literacy? We need to enact more laws to protect women from all sorts of exploitation and to plug the loopholes in the existing laws concerning women. The loopholes in the laws enable offenders against women to escape easily. Therefore, even women who have the guts and the means to seek justice in the court of law become weary when justice is delayed or denied to them. Such women also have to face society's wrath. Therefore spreading legal literacy among women through school and college courses and through adult education centres will be measures in the right direction.

The women's empowerment process also should include political empowerment. There has to be active representation of women in influencing forums like *panchayats*, the assembly and the parliament to highlight the problems of women. At present, out of 545 Lok Sabha members only 44 are women. Very few of them are articulate; the rest remain decorative pieces. This type of representation serves no purpose. The representation of more women in the parliament might pave the way for more representation of women in the cabinet. It is very urgent for women to participate at this level because all the important decisions concerning women's health, education, employment, family planning, property inheritance, marriage, divorce and violence against them are now taken by men. This amounts to gross injustice meted out to the women of this country.

Therefore, along with education, training, employment and health promotion measures, legal and political empowerment of women

Reader's Forum

should also be aimed at. If they really want to live with dignity in this world, women have to take care of their physical and mental fitness, because a sound body and sound mind will enable them to lead their lives productively. As a result of globalization, young women are now spending their energy wastefully in physical grooming only, thanks to the mushrooming beauty contests. These glories for the few are short-lived. We have seen how these beauty queens have been exploited in the modeling and the cinema world. Therefore, young women should spend their time and energy in seeking knowledge about how to improve their situation.

Dr. Rameeza. A. Rasheed, Chennai

On Domestic Violence

For years, this subject has been neglected due to the strong moral and emotive overtones which surround the concept of family. There is a need to view the domain of the family as an analytical category in order to establish a link between the violence prevailing within it and the wider structures and processes in which it is embedded. The distortions in the family can never be understood unless seen in the contextual framework of the wider society.

Feminists have raised the issue of viewing the 'private as public' in order to come to terms with existing anomalies and exploitation in the domestic arena. There is a tendency to view everything that happens in a domestic setting as "normal" trivializing serious life threatening situations faced by women in their own homes. Law enforcing agencies fail to give enough recognition to or take prompt action in cases related to violence against women in the domestic sphere. Moreover, the legal system itself lacks the necessary provisions which would safeguard the rights of women within the family.

➤ A report by the World Organisation Against Torture, based

at Geneva, stated that "battering at home constitutes by far the most common form of violence against women and is a significant cause of injury to women." It also pointed out that battering was not considered a crime in some countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin-America.

➤ A survey conducted in Pakistan by a US based human rights group reported that 80-90 per cent of women there are victims of domestic violence.

➤ In a household survey of women living in rural Gujarat, organised by the International Center for Research on Women, two-thirds of the women interviewed said they had faced some form of psychological, physical or sexual abuse.

➤ A study by Mumbai's J J Hospital's Department of Preventive and Social Medicine found that one in every five women treated at the emergency ward was a victim of domestic violence.

Though 'domestic violence' encompasses a wide variety of acts, I would like to examine two specific forms prevalent to a large extent in our society—marital rape and wife beating.

Certain social contextual issues need to be understood before we can comprehend why the former, such an extreme act, displaying such a high level of aggression and use of force and violence to achieve dominance, should occur so frequently in relationships between husbands and wives. It is important to understand that not all sexual overtures are the expression of an active libido. Numerous studies have indicated that sexuality is often used as an instrument to assert authority and power. Sexual abuse very often represents the sexual expression of non-sexual motives, such as a need to dominate or feel superior. Wives very often are the only available vulnerable scapegoat for men. For many husbands it is a risk free way to give vent to their various frustrations and insecurities.

A common assumption in many societies is that the wife is the 'property' of the husband. Religious texts and certain patriarchal traditions and practices actively propagate this view. This can cause the woman to lose her individual agency as a human being. She becomes depersonalised. She is often defined in terms of her dependent role and subordinate position in the household. In many households she exists at the sufferance of the husband and his agnates. Her anatomical and physical attributes are seen as mere instruments to service the husband's wishes. This perpetuates and encourages exercising control over women's bodies through the use of force and threat of violence, be it through marital rape or other related forms of sexual and physical abuse and humiliation.

Certain countries have laws against rape within marriage; however it is by and large not considered an offence under the Indian legal system. Only if the married woman is below 12 years of age is the husband tried for rape charges, except in the case of parties separated by agreement or by custom. Thus, in order to search for a solution to marital rape, one must look beyond legislation, because marital rape reflects personal and societal devaluation of women. What is required is that a woman be viewed as a partner, not a subordinate in marriage; her individuality and her agency must be recognized. The legal, social, and customary norms must assure every married woman this status, and we must actively combat ideologies which refuse to give a married woman her rightful status.

Most of us fail to acknowledge that this form of violence is extremely widespread. It is also a wrongly held notion that middle class women, upper class women and working women are rarely battered. It is assumed that only alcoholics, paranoid or economically frustrated men beat up

their wives. However, studies have shown that battering also occurs in a significant proportion of households where the husband does not fit into these stereotypes of a batterer. It has also been pointed out that even when the man is considered a 'loving husband' by friends and acquaintances he may also indulge in wife beating!

There is also a belief that, as the years go by, especially after the birth of children, or because of increased integration of the woman into the larger family, and an increasing partnership with the husband, wife battering declines. There is, however, no conclusive evidence to show that wife battering definitively ends at any particular point.

Flavia Agnes' paper, "Violence in the Family: Wife Beating." in *Women in Indian Society—A Reader*, edited by Rehana Ghadially, is based on a survey of 50 women. She has been sensitive enough to keep in mind that for years the women's point of view was ignored or submerged beneath the view of the dominant sex.

The immediate causes of violence, as reported by the women in Flavia's study, were:

- Arguments over money.
- Jealousy and suspicion of the woman's character.
- Instigation by the in-laws.
- Conflicts over housework
- Husband's abuse of alcohol
- Woman's desire to work outside the home, or her self esteem ('she thinks too much of her herself')
- Disputes over children.
- Extra-marital affairs of the husband.

The general explanation given by men for battering women in Flavia's study is that they are 'provoked' to act violently — implying that women actually 'ask for it,' either because they fail to conform to the ideal of a proper 'woman' as defined by men, or because they are masochistic by nature and derive pleasure from being beaten.

Why Don't Women Leave?

Why do women continue to put up with the inhuman treatment meted out to them and not walk out?

The notion of masculinity and femininity that exists in our society applies pressure on a wife to conform to the dominant societal stereotypes. Guilt for not conforming to these stereotypes is too much to handle for most women. Masculinity in our society, as in many other societies, implies aggression, and dominance. Hence, a man is essentially seen as 'manly' if he acts out in conforming to such stereotypes. The woman on the other hand has to be the epitome of femininity, which supposedly implies passivity, sacrifice, timidity, and inferiority. This strict dichotomisation and sweeping generalisation on the basis of gender gets reflected negatively in the man-woman relationship at all levels and in all spheres.

By and large everything symbolising a woman—the work, actions, and notions associated with women and womanhood—is accorded an inferior position in society. Differences do exist, but there is no reason for the differences to be hierarchized, or for one gender's characteristics to be accorded less recognition or given lower status.

Internalizing Inferiority

Women are reared in such a way that they grow up with a feeling of low self esteem, perceive themselves as being dependent on the will of others, and as a result, begin defining themselves in a subordinate relation to them.

Very often, women have no place to go if they decide to walk out. The natal home does not accept them for long and they are forced to go back to 'adjust'. Economic dependence leaves them with little option but to go back to their marital home. Lack of education makes many women incapable of fending for themselves or aware of

possible alternatives. A woman's options and her mobility are restricted in such a way that finding a job and establishing herself is an uphill task. There is, thus, a lack of support structures, both emotionally and in terms of economic resources and security.

The case of Gomti Shah illustrates the drawbacks of the system. Gomti, a Gujrati Jain girl, got married at the age of sixteen into a lower middle class family residing in an industrial area in Bombay. After six months of marriage she went back to her parents' house because of the cruelty of her husband and in-laws. The parents and the village *panchayat* sent her back although she was reluctant and pleaded, "if I go back they will kill me..." She was taken back on the conditions set down by her husband and in-laws, one of which was that her uncles (who were residing in the same town) should not interfere. Every night she was tortured and beaten, even burnt at times with a hot iron.

The neighbours, due to the disturbances each night, complained to the police. The police did not take any action as they felt it was a domestic matter. The neighbours then informed the uncles. Gomti Shah and her husband were called to the police station where she was interrogated in the presence of her husband. In spite of multiple wounds and physical evidence of atrocities and torture on her body, when asked if she was facing any problems at home, she replied in the negative. Everyone returned to their respective homes. The uncles sent for Gomti's mother, but before she could arrive Gomti Shah was dead.

The story of Gomti Shah echoes the lot of numerous women in India. If we cannot insure that a woman is safe within her home, with her husband, and is given due respect by her own family, can we expect her to be safe and be respected in the outside world?

Radhika Sharma, New Delhi