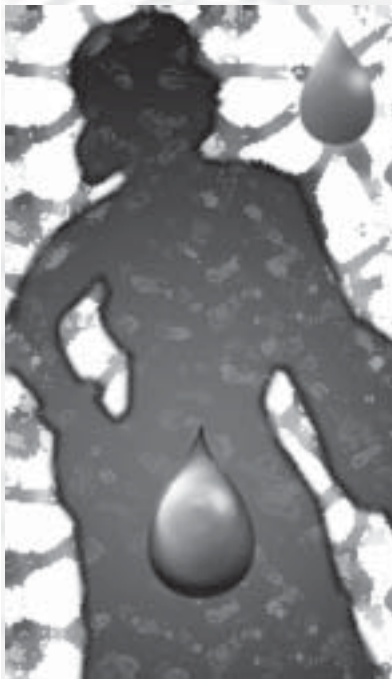


Women as Untouchables

Many a time we come across news items describing the refusal of temple entry to untouchables. However, what we are less aware of is another form of untouchability, based on gender.

During menstruation or pregnancy (pre or post delivery) women in several communities in many parts of our country are not allowed to enter the kitchen, even touch a pickle jar or utensils, make delicacies, especially when those are meant for religious purposes. One of my friends told me that even if her father touches her by accident during her period, he immediately takes a purifying bath.



Many assert that there has been a major elevation in the status of women and these practices are therefore slowly dying out. I partly agree. Such practices are becoming obsolete—but for different reasons, which have nothing to do with elevation of women's status in our society.

We have fewer joint families with many females in one household. In a joint family, even if one woman is not allowed to enter the kitchen, it makes no difference, since the prohibition would not disturb household cooking. But in a nuclear family there is only one woman in the household and such a restriction would be very troublesome. I personally know many cases where married women do adhere to these practices in their parents' house but not in their own nuclear household. Isn't it ridiculous that the pickles get mildewed only in her parents' house when touched by a menstruating woman, but not in her own nuclear household? Similarly, Dalit women are often pulled into the beds of upper caste men, but are not allowed near an upper caste well.

What could be the reasons behind these bizarre forms of partial female untouchability? Few menstruating women enter the temple on their own although there is no blood detector near the temple. During *shravan mela*, the female *kawanria* has to give her *kanwar* to someone else when she starts menstruating on the way. Frequently, menstruating women are not allowed to pluck fruits, vegetables or plant new saplings or water the plants in the belief that this would spoil the things they touch.

Variants of these forms of untouchability are more or less prevalent in every part of the world. In the case of untouchability based on caste there is much resentment

among untouchables. On the other hand even most highly educated and elite women are not aware of the existence of various forms of untouchability based on gender.

I blame the male dominated media for this ignorance. The media gives undue coverage to issues such as dress codes. When a college principal prohibits girls from wearing jeans or when Lashkar-e-Jabbar clamps on a

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restrictive dress code it makes headlines across the country. But when a lady magistrate is not allowed to enter the Sabarimala temple, it gets a very small column on an inside page of the newspaper. Even women activists can not be absolved of blame for not fighting these forms of untouchability.

Co-ordination between media and women activists to spread awareness regarding untouchability on the ground of gender is needed. Most women have resigned themselves to their fate, calling it the way of the world. They do not perceive it as a hideous act of men. The death knell of these practices will sound the day women discern the truth.

Bina Ray, Bokaro, Jharkhand

Reader's Forum

Who Represents Kashmiris?

I am a Kashmiri Pandit (KP) living in Pune. All my relatives had to flee from their ancestral homes in Kashmir and are either living in some metropolis in India or with their children abroad. They had to sell their property in Kashmir at throwaway prices and start life all over again. My relatives are well-educated professionals but I know many other Kashmiri Pandits who are living as refugees all over India.

Why could a minority of non-Muslims not be tolerated in the only Muslim state of India? More than the Muslims, Kashmir is very much the KP's homeland, along with the Sikhs, Dogras, Ladhakis and Gujjars who have lived there for ages.

Kashmir is not only a beautiful place, it also has a unique history of cultural tolerance. '*Kashmiriyat*' or Kashmiri ethos is an amalgam of different strands that have been welded together by the sages of this splendid land. Shaivism and Sufism have flourished here for centuries. The interaction of Lal Ded, a Shaivite, and Mir Said Ali Handai, a prominent Sufi of early 14 century, laid the foundation for the amity that has characterised Kashmiri ethos. This led to a spiritual movement referred to as the '*Rishi Order*' in the annals of Kashmir.

The founder of this movement was Sheikh Nuruddin Rishi (b.1378 AD). He was influenced by Lal Ded and he denounced the mullahs of his time as hypocrites who misinterpreted the verses of the Quran in order to attain power, ignoring its message of peace, love and brotherhood.

I wonder how much of this spirit exists today amongst those who call themselves the representatives of Kashmiris and hail *jehad*? They are not and can never be called the true representatives of the people of



Kashmir. The valley can never be at peace with its own conscience, nor the great civility of *Kashmiriyat* be restored to it, until the KP's can be returned their properties, have their freedom and security restored to them and the violence against them accounted for.

As regards the constant plea of the various self-defined representatives of the Kashmiri people— All Parties Hurriyat Conference, the Lashkar-e-Toiba, Mujahedins, etc., regarding their self determination, plebiscite and upholding UN resolutions, some of the following factors need to be taken into account:

The UN resolution says that the right of self-determination concerns the free determination of their political status, without dismembering or impairing, totally or in part, the territorial integrity of the sovereign states. As such internal self-determination or secession cannot be considered by international organisations as the international order is also based on the very concept of the state as a territorial and political unity.

The right to internal self-determination is merely the right of indigenous people to have a

representative democratic government chosen through a legitimate political process. Indigenous groups must prove that there exists a pattern of systematic discrimination or exploitation against them by either a non-representative government or a foreign power.

Clearly, this does not apply to Kashmir as India is not a foreign power in Kashmir. The State's accession has never been doubted internationally. In fact, by accepting India's complaint against Pakistan in 1948 and by implementing the first part of the Security Council resolutions, the UN has indirectly recognised the accession. Besides, far from being exploited, the rights of the Kashmiri people have been secured through Article 370 of the Indian Constitution which accords a special status to the state.

Also the J&K does not consist of one people, there are four major linguistic groups. Lastly, the Indian government has made many attempts to compromise with secessionist leaders. The Delhi Agreement, the cease-fire initiative and the recent appointment of an interlocutor— K C Pant— to talk with leaders in Kashmir, bear testimony to the fact that the Central Government has not rejected all compromise solutions.

There cannot be any question of a plebiscite even according to the UN resolution on Kashmir.

Ms. Asha Kachru, Pune

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