

Readers' Forum

=== Sthri Shakti in MP ===

Nearly 6,000 elected women of the three tiers of *panchayati raj* — the village, *janpad* and *zilla* (district) levels — came from districts as far away as Bastar, Sarjuga, Mandla, and Sidhi to gather in Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh (MP) on November 19, 1996, at a *sammelan* (conference) organised by MP's Department of Women and Child Development. The newly elected women expressed their jubilation at being elected to the *panchayats* as well as showed their anger and frustration at the predicaments they will inevitably face within the *panchayati raj*.

Political empowerment has just begun. It has brought out the stark realities of grassroots electoral and developmental politics and what role these women will play against the background of gender and caste structures. Caste and gender rigidities will effect these newly elected women considerably, since they will have to face the insensitivities of administrative *babus* from the state level right down to the village *patwaris* and *panchayat* secretaries, any of whom might create hurdles for these women.

Although the Department of Women and Child Development is the nodal agency for overseeing the implementation of the states' policy on women, the *panchayat* members who attended the *sammelan* were more interested in resolving their own problems with the present *panchayat* structure and governance.



The *panchayat* members at the village level were interested in stopping the misuse of Jawahar Rojgar Yojana funds by male *panchayat* presidents. They reported that male presidents rarely announce the meetings properly so women members are kept from attending the meetings. At present, there is no organic link between the three tiers of the *panchayat raj*. For example, *janpad panchayat* members can do as they please without considering the opinions of the village *panchayat* members. As seen in the case of Indira Awas Yojana, the recommendations made by *panchayat* presidents are not considered, even when the beneficiaries are below the poverty line. Several such cases were brought out by the women *panchayat* members in the *sammelan*, but representatives from the Panchayati Raj

Department were conspicuously absent. Furthermore, the guest speakers who came from Delhi and the speakers from remote villages and towns were on very different tracks. The Delhiites talked more about what transpired at the women's conference in Beijing, a subject that was miles away from the village women's concerns.

In such a large gathering, mobile speakers need to be made available in many locations so that women can stand up and make their points quickly. A guest speaker from an MP police department was angry that the government was not heeding the plea of his department to recruit more women police constables and set up more women-run police stations. While his point was well-made, there is no evidence yet that more women-

run police stations will necessarily be able to solve the problems of women in distress. Before he finished speaking, angry women of Raisen District started to heckle him. Complaints such as “Our FIRs (First Information Reports) are never registered by the police. Although the law recognises oral complaints they are not considered by the SHOs” and “In the broad daylight women are dragged to the police station on suspicion only” - were voiced by the women who gathered in the *sammelan*.

Other pressing issues which were voiced by many women had to do with the governance of *panchayats*, health, education, water, sanitation, and economic empowerment. The need to solve the problem of female *sarpanches* getting harassed by male *panches* and village *goondas* was also expressed. Others mentioned the problem of no-confidence motions being raised unfairly against female *sarpanches*, particularly those from a Scheduled Caste. It was heartening to hear the resolutions passed by the unanimous voice of the women gathered that a female *sarpanch* removed by a no-confidence vote shall be replaced only by another woman and not by a male *panchayat* member.

Women in *panchayats* cannot use muscle power like men do but they can fight using the provisions of the law. Unfortunately, however, legal literacy is extremely low among these *panchayat* women. Even the *panchayat* secretary often aligns himself with the male *panches* and harasses these women. In one *panchayat* in Sarguja, a woman *sarpanch* from a

Scheduled Caste was asked by a male member to clean the tea cups after a *panchayat* meeting, with no regard to the fact that *panchayat* meetings are constitutional meetings and not family gatherings.

Toilets were a demand of all the *panchayat* women. One female *janpad panchayat* member narrated how a male *panch* destroyed a toilet built for women near a bus stop in a village in Dhar district just so he could build a shop in its place to run his *beedi* business!

Health issues are one of the most pressing concerns for women *panchayat* members. A female *panch* from Jabalpur District was almost in tears as she described how in six months time, ten women had died during delivery due to severe complications. They could not be taken to the nearest Public Health Centre due to bad roads and the refusal of the auxiliary nurse midwife to come at night. According to this *panch*, the safe motherhood program launched with fanfare in MP is not really working. Not surprisingly, in the whole

sammelan there was not one official from the Health and Family Welfare Department to listen to what these women had to say.

Programs for maternity benefits, old age pensions, and social security benefits have many operational hurdles the village *panchayats* must know how to overcome. In particular, the problems with the Ayushmati Yojana programme and the Prime Minister's Rozgar Yojana programme were brought up. The women know these programmes well but what they really want to know is how the administrative hurdles can be removed so that people can get the benefits of them.

Manu N. Kulkarni, Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh

==== A Woman's Edge ====

From a middle class woman's perspective, I feel that up until about two generations ago, a middle class man's needs for marriage were children, sex, and someone to run the household.

The household was usually run by his mother, a widowed sister, and sometimes even by servants. A mistress or a prostitute usually satisfied his need for sex and the wife provided him with children. A woman, on the other hand, needed marriage for security, children, and lastly for sex. Security in her husband's house was closely related to her capacity to produce male heirs. A 'barren woman' or one who gave birth only to daughters lived in constant dread of her husband re-marrying or abandoning her. A girl was brought up to consider



making herself desirable to her husband as her ultimate goal in life.

A man's need for companionship was generally fulfilled by his brothers, cousins, or friends. It was very seldom that a man sought companionship in a woman, but when he did, it was usually the courtesan rather than his wife who filled the role. A woman sought companionship in her sisters or other relatives. A man who was content with his wife alone and who treated her as a friend was often mocked by his relatives and friends and called a *joru ka gulam* (wife's slave). In fact, in the 19th and early 20th centuries, it was thought to be highly fashionable for upper and upper-middle class men to keep a mistress or to visit courtesans. Early 20th century Hindi literature is full of stories of *jagirdars*' or *zamindars*' affairs with courtesans.

Religion was the only other alternative besides marriage that was open to Indian women up until the 19th century. Women could become *bhaktis*, *sadhavis* or nuns if they did not want to marry, although even this option was not easily available to them. Mirabai was an example of one *bhakt* who chose her love for Krishna over marriage.

The proverb: "Behind every successful man stands a woman" usually means that the woman behind the scenes has sacrificed her own desires, ambitions, and comforts to devote herself completely to her man so that he could become successful. In contrast, most men have interfered with and often even stopped their wives or female relatives from trying to achieve anything outside the confines of their homes. Perhaps men are scared that if women are given a chance to become their equals, they will soon become their superiors. It is not a coincidence that both Rani



Courtesy: National Museum, New Delhi

Lakshmbai of Jhansi and Maharani Ahilya bai Holkar were able to prove their merit after their respective husbands' deaths. Sometimes I wonder whether Indore would have prospered as much as it did had Ahilya Bai's husband lived longer.

The scenario is much different from what it was in the 19th and the first half of the 20th century for women. The spread of general awareness and the education of women have led to better job opportunities. A woman has a much better status in her natal home now. The ability to earn has given her a feeling of security, independence,

and self-confidence. She is no longer totally dependent on her husband. In fact, these days a well-educated young woman with a good job may feel apprehensive that marriage will conflict with her peace of mind, financial independence, and security. The woman of today is much more choosy before marriage and much more demanding after marriage than her grand mother could have ever imagined to be, even in her wildest dreams.

A woman is now well-equipped to set up and run a house on her own. Here she has an edge over most men

who do not have the skills to run a house. This, along with the 'stay-single' trend in vogue today gives her a very viable option of staying by herself. Her position in comparison to her American counterparts is much better because family links are much stronger here than they are in the first world. So the chances of becoming lonely are much lower here.

Today's financially independent woman can afford to be as intolerant, arrogant and selfish as most men of past generations were, but I hope she will adopt a rational attitude and not go to the other extreme to settle old scores and become an exploiter herself.

**Lakshmi Bhargava, Bhopal,
Madhya Pradesh**

==== Nothing New =====

Today my heart is filled with sorrow. There is nothing new about it. My misery is not just mine but of all womankind. Some express it, some suppress it — all of them experience it. However great or small men are they'll never consider us women their equal. The prejudices in their minds are deep rooted. They can never and never will respect us. In any part of the world they'll always treat women as something inferior, something weak that they never forget to exploit physically or mentally. But the most unpardonable are those women who let themselves be manipulated in whichever way the men please. What do they get after all? Nothing, really nothing worth mentioning. Will that day never dawn when men learn to respect and treat women as an equal? Ignorant men wake up, you are a part of woman's body for nine long months — yet are unable to understand her.

Anjali Jha, New Delhi

Robe Se Kaho, Disrobe Karo

(Say it with Pride, Let's Disrobe)

*When Anjali Kapoor disrobed for Fantasy
There was consternation within the legal fraternity
Some said she should be prosecuted
Others said she should be debarred.
None paused to reflect,
To what purpose all this robing, shobing.
In the South, I am told
There are some intelligent munsifs
Who wear robe, tie, coat and lungi.
The lungi keeps them cooler
And better disposed to hear
Heated arguments.*

*If someone were to ask me
To design the most uncomfortable uniform
That was possible
I would say
In the month of June
Let the neck be suffocated
By the use of a collar.
To add insult to injury
Let a coat be worn,
A black coat:
All the better to burn, my dear.
Not satisfied with my sadism
In a penultimate gesture
I would direct
That on top of the black coat
Should be worn
A black robe.*

*But there are some amongst us
Who would argue
That it is in keeping with tradition
To retain this attire.
In their Oxford accents
They would plead before the judge:
On the one hand, Milord
[O, hateful epithet!]
There is comfort and convenience
But on the other hand
There is tradition!
Whose tradition?
The British tradition
Or the Indian tradition?
I would say to them
There is no need to be
More British than the British!
Following Anjali's example
Let us all disrobe—
Robe se kaho
Disrobe karo.*

Rajesh Talwar