

Readers' Forum

A Father's Joy

A young friend came running one morning to our house. He said that he had happy news, very happy news! He was actually dancing with joy.

His is not the age to burst into song and dance. He has passed the 30-year mark, and has been married for eight years. Certainly not the age for wild behaviour.

I asked, "How do you look so gay, young man? Won some lottery or some such thing?"

He replied, "One may win just a lakh of rupees or so in a lottery. What I have been blessed with is an invaluable and inexhaustible treasure."

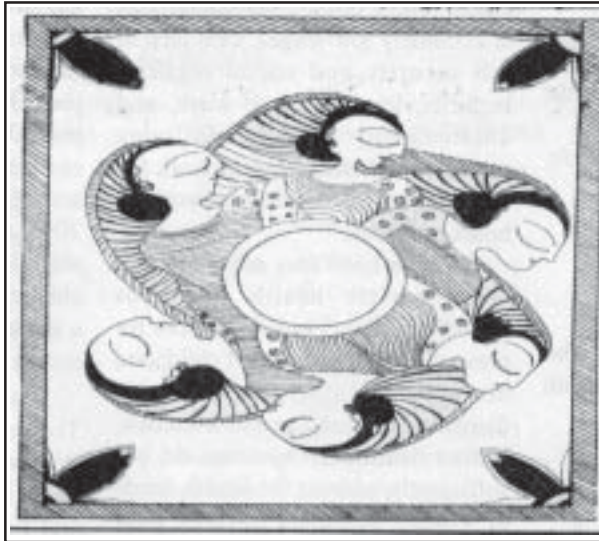
Usually he does not use quizzical language. He talks straight. On that day, too, he could not suppress the secret of his joy for very long. He inserted his hand into his shoulder bag and brought

out a box containing about a kilo of *pedas* (a sweet made of milk and sugar). Handing the box to me, he smiled as sweetly as the *pedas*, saying, "I have become a father of a daughter!"

"Congratulations!" was my instant response. I added, "These are not just formal congratulations. I congratulate you a million times, because you are so happy at the birth of a girl child."

One hardly ever expects a father to be so happy at the birth of a girl child in India, never so happy as to

distribute sweets. When a girl is born, it is said that a stone has been born! Or a bundle of serpents! Daughters are always considered to be unwanted burdens. But I shared his joy. If a father was so happy at the birth of a baby girl, he should not be made to suffer a lecture.



Therefore, after tasting the sweets I ventured to ask if he would want a boy as his next child. "No, sir!" was the instant and unexpected reply. He stated firmly, "I have had my

fulfillment. Only a daughter, no more!" "But you are a religious person," I persisted in my arguments to gauge his conviction. "With no son, how will your last rites be completed?"

He replied, "Yes, I am a believer, but I do not believe in life after death or re-birth or even the so called journey of the soul as defined by Brahmins. In this one matter, I follow

Gautam, the Buddha. You know, he did not believe in concepts like the soul needing to travel to heaven."

I persisted with yet another popular belief. "All right, we forget the other world. But in the present life itself, a daughter is destined to go to her in-laws' place. She would be no help in your old age."

He smiled, "My dear sir, I think that by forwarding all these arguments, you are only testing the measure of my conviction. Actually, it is absurd today to expect your children to look after you when you are old. You must save and invest during your younger days to insure your old age. Most children these days are self-centred. It is foolish to expect them to support you. Under these changed circumstances, the gender of a child becomes irrelevant."

He paused for breath. Then continued, "Sir, today I am very happy, full of joy. Please do not spoil the fun by arguments. Look, I have composed a few lines today itself to welcome my darling daughter."

He took some papers out of his bag. His joy was indescribable when he read two pages of his creation. Whether these lines can be considered poetry is a point to be pondered by literary critics. To me, the lines contain the heartbeats of a fond father who was ardently welcoming the birth of his daughter. I appreciated the lines in this light. And I hope you

will, too:

*/ Have left behind my childhood,
Also my youth.*

All of it was ages ago.

Those philosophical moods,

The Arts and the Muses-

Years have passed since.

What was I till now?

Moving debris of the past,

Life was too still, too dark,

And all horizons lost!

No roads to travel,

No directions to choose.

Suddenly...

Suddenly you lifted your eyelids,

Suddenly you sweetly smiled,

And

There was a miracle!

*Now I see my surroundings
clearly,*

The silences, the darknesses,

The lonlinesses

Which frightened me,

Which made me tremble and run,

Have all disappeared-

*Just because you have opened
your eyes.*

*Ever since you have entered my
life,*

I feel I am something;

I have BECOME!

I have stepped into splendour;

Ever since you have come,

My darling daughter!

Let us congratulate the father who welcomes the birth of a daughter with such enthusiasm.

Yeshwant Mehta, Ahmedabad

Women's Woes

In India, even after 50 years of freedom, the condition of women is worse than in most other developing countries of the world today. The majority of those below the poverty line in India are women. Women's poverty is one of the major causes of backwardness in this country leading to widespread hunger, malnutrition, ill-health, increasing morbidity and mortality from illness, homelessness

and inadequate housing. Most women live in unsafe environments, and face discrimination and exclusion from the mainstream. Nothing substantial has been done on any of these fronts.

Another serious problem for women in India is illiteracy. Out of the 130 million children in India who do not go to school, 70 per cent are girls. According to the Directive Principles of state policy set out in the Indian constitution, universalisation of elementary education was to be attained by 1960.

The situation of women on the economic front is no better. According to an estimate by the National Commission on Self-Employed Women (1988), of the total women workers, about 94 per cent are in the informal sector. This sector is marked by the high incidence of casual labour doing intermittent jobs at extremely low wages, total lack of job security and social security benefits, long hours of work', and unsatisfactory working and living conditions. Indian women work for 69 hours a week, while men work 59 hours per week.

Women have less access to and use of basic health resources including primary health services for prevention and treatment of childhood diseases, malnutrition, anaemia, diarrhoeal diseases, and tuberculosis. Indian healthcare systems do not sufficiently address the health needs of women. Rampant poverty, poor nutrition, poor access to food, unhygienic water and sanitation facilities, dismal housing conditions and bad working environments adversely affect the health of women. Of the entire population, 640 million people lack basic sanitation facilities. Some 53 per cent of Indian children under the age of five are underweight.

In 1992 the average life expectancy for an Indian woman was 63 years compared to 79.4 years in developed industrialised nations. The maternal

mortality rate accounts for around 500 per 100,000 deliveries. Around 50 per cent of women in general and 70 per cent during pregnancy suffer from anaemia. Early marriage, early pregnancy and child bearing, lack of information about human sexuality and negative attitudes towards women and girls pose grave risks to the reproductive as well as general health of Indian females.

Indian women undergo unacceptable levels of violence and harassment within the family, in the community and at the workplace. Preference for the male child has reached alarming proportions in India. The son is still thought to be the one who will carry on the name of the family and take care of the parents in their old age, whereas too many girls are unwanted, unrecognised, ignored and simply discarded. India's sex ratio has shown a decline from 972 females per 1,000 males in 1901 to 929 women per 1,000 men in 1991. Although the sex ratio has increased slightly according to preliminary reports of the 2001 census, there is actually an alarmingly huge deficit of the girl children up to the age of six, indicating a potential enormous increase in the deficit of females in coming decades.

The Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (Regulation and Prevention of Misuse) Act 1992 has failed to put an end to the disabilities and humiliations faced by the girl child. Since India's independence, various laws have been passed and programmes and policies formulated to protect the interests of women in the country. But they have either been ineffective or have not been implemented. In the last 50 years only a small slice of the population, primarily educated, upper class women, have benefitted from the new opportunities available for women.

D.P. Singh Mor, Patiala, Punjab