



Readers' Forum



Censoring a Modern Ramayana

There is a Telugu weekly called *Andhra Jyothi*, which was established around 1966. Its editor was V.R Narla, an eminent man of letters. The present editor is Namini Subrahmanyam Naidu, a young writer from Rayalseema.

D.R Indra is an established writer (b.1951) who has been showered with several literary accolades. Recently he wrote a story called *Raavana Joshyam*, the first part of which was published in the January 14, 2000 issue of the *Andhra Jyothi* weekly. The second excerpt appeared on January 20, 2000 while the third was to be published a week later. But after the second excerpt came out in print, some RSS goondas entered the *Andhra Jyothi* weekly office located in Jubilee Hills, Hyderabad. They vandalised the office and broke tables, threw files through the windows, and roughed up one office boy. Abusing the editor and finally demanding D.R. Indra's address, they created a nightmarish situation.

The management did not call the police, but they filed a case instead and asked the author not to publish such "trash" hereafter. The editor, having no other option, did not print the story's final excerpt and issued a note of apology. The Journalists' Association also kept a studied silence on the matter and did nothing to either condemn the management's attitude or file a complaint.

Raavana Joshyam tries to explore afresh the social relations between Raavana and Sita, in which the latter is described as enjoying the freedom of love, as she savours the beauty of Sri Lankan flora and fauna. Raavana benevolently asks for her hand while Sita reflects on the sexist treatment she received at the hands of Rama and her in-laws. When Raavana tries to make advances, Sita vehemently cautions him not to touch her.

Then follows a long discourse between Raavana and Sita about male-female relations. This is the gist of the first two parts of the story. The conclusion was yet to be published when the story was suddenly withdrawn.

Now after all, what is there in *Raavana Joshyam* to bring forth a reaction of this nature? In twentieth century Telugu literature, there are many precedents of such narratives: *Ashokam* by S. Muddukrishna; *Sita Agnipravesam* by novelist Chalan, *Ramanika Sita Emouthindi*, a series of essays published in *Andhra Jyothi* Sunday supplements in the 1970's, authored by Arudra, *Ramayana Vishavriksham* by veteran feminist writer Ranganayakamma, and *Sita Jyosan* by the very first editor of *Andhra Jyothi*, V.R Narla. Many traditional writers like Suravaran Pithapa Reddy (*Ramayana Viseshalu*), Katuri Venkateswa Rao (*Poulasthya Hridayah*), Subba Rao (*Ramayanam Ranku*) and Sujare (*Vastavikatha*) gave a new perspective on the *Ramayana*. All of these books were hailed by the Telugu reading public, and D.R. Indra is not the first to challenge the classical interpretation of the *Ramayana*. But why on earth is his work alone withheld from publication?

Pajasahiti, a monthly journal, published a detailed note of all these facts in its February issue. On March 15, 2000, D.R. Indra's love story was published in book form, and released at Hyderabad's Press Club. A detailed pamphlet condemning RSS goonda politics was also put into circulation.

I, as a writer with nearly 45 years of creative activity and as member of Andhra Pradesh Civil Liberties Committee, request all the intellectuals and democratic thinkers to join me in condemning the RSS acts of terror and vandalism.

Dr. Manepalli, Srikakulam, Andhra Pradesh

At the Dawn of the New Millennium

The new millennium has failed to bring hope to the Indian woman. She is worshipped as a goddess in temples, but at the same time she is denied the right to live, to education; she is sold, raped and finally denied justice. She remains in chains, a prisoner who has never been allowed a trial.

Her plight is exemplified in a recent article about a girl named Tulasa, who remained crippled for 16 years as a result of being kidnapped, raped, and sold into prostitution at 13 when still a little child. Her case only came up for a hearing 16 years after the FIR was filed. Even after her death she was still denied justice.

Advertisements for aborting female foetuses in private hospitals at Delhi read, "Pay Rs. 300 now and save Rs. 3 lakh," which means save the money that would be later spent on the girl as dowry. According to the National Family Health Survey of India, the risk of dying between ages one and five is 43 percent higher for girls than boys.

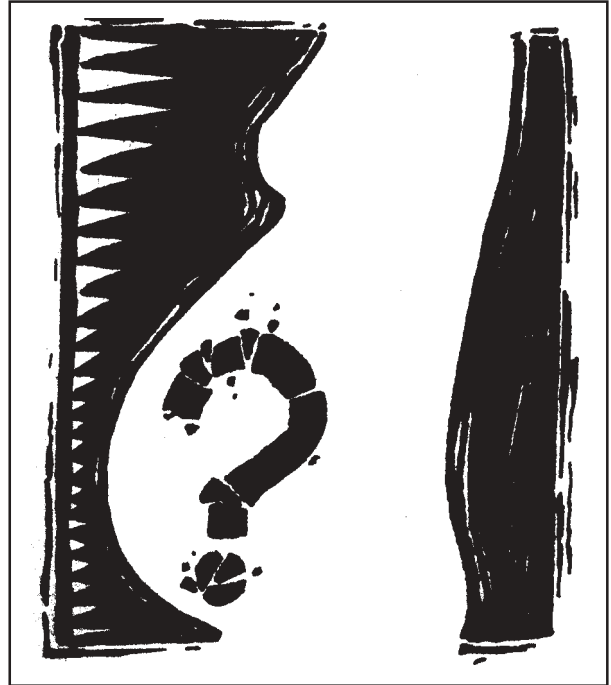
A 1993 national government survey of more than 5,000 women in Rajasthan showed that 56 per cent had married before they were 15 years old. Of those, three per cent married before they were five, and another 14 per cent before they were 10. Barely 18 per cent were literate. Social workers report that many husbands tire of their marriages after the third, fourth or fifth child, when their wives are still young.

There are lakhs of exploited street children, many of them little girls. India adopted a National Policy on Children in 1974 that was supposed to end such exploitation; India is also a participant in the international community's campaign to ensure the survival, protection and development of children, whose goals include the battle against homelessness, hunger and illiteracy, with special focus on the girl child. Implementation of these programmes was supposed to reduce gender discrimination, and protect girls from prostitution or abuse. But in reality little or nothing effective is being done.

Kadeeja Mansoor, Ajman, UAE

Aborting Disabled Foetuses

This letter concerns a conversation I had with a friend of mine on sex selective abortions. I pointed out that apart from female foetuses, those which showed any 'deformations' are aborted, too. Children with any form of 'disabilities' are far less desired than female children. My friend held the opinion that people with 'disabilities' ('mental disabilities' in particular) are less capable than



women, and hence, abortions of female foetuses is that much more evil.

I would be very happy to be proven wrong. But my argument is this: What right does anyone have to expect a woman to carry a child with disabilities, and to bring the child up, essentially single-handedly? Similarly, what right does anyone have to expect a woman to carry a female child, if she doesn't so desire?

Uma Iyer, Allahabad, U.P.

Fundamentally Opposed

The recent attack on the film unit shooting the film *Water* and the reaction by different groups makes for an interesting observation. Hindu fundamentalists, well assisted by the BJP-led government of Uttar Pradesh, went on their rampage without even bothering to see the script, forcing the unit to pack-up. Muslim fundamentalists, not to be left behind, went on to protest against the 'heretical act' of Shabana Azmi, the lead actress of the film, who shaved her head for the role. Meanwhile, Taslima Nasreen, whose novel *Lajja* was widely promoted by the BJP as the work of a courageous and honest writer, this time around has been called for arrest. The BJP promoted her novel because it attacked the Bangladeshi Muslim fundamentalists' mad response to the Babri demolition. This time the BJP could not stomach the courage and honesty with which she criticised Hindu fundamentalists for their intolerance and for suppressing the freedom of

the filmmaker. The political strategy of fundamentalist forces is the same: opposition to democratic liberties, and intolerance towards freedom of expression when it hurts their vested interests.

Ram Puniyani, EKTA, Mumbai, Maharashtra

Gender Discrimination and Entrepreneurship

Self-employment in general requires more initiative and enterprise, more self-reliance and a greater urge for independence on the part of the work seekers than salaried employment, and female work seekers in predominantly traditional communities are seldom encouraged to develop these traits in ample measure. Even enterprising communities in which entrepreneurship is practically in the blood, for example as with the Marwaris, daughters are not moulded as entrepreneurs though their success rates in business need to be fully investigated

Those women who decide to start their own self-employed unit often tend to base their choices on gender concerns. It is commonly found that tailoring is the most important form of self-employment for females followed by the retail trade - the reason being that they are mostly located within the homestead or neighbourhood so that women can work there without having to disrupt their household chores. On the other hand certain forms of self-employment are being consistently avoided by women, which includes any type of industrial venture, transport, workshop, contract business and repairs of domestic appliances and electronic equipment.



The stereotypical mindset that suggests women are unfit for heavy manual work ensures that women face discrimination in industries like engineering. At the same time some notion of prestige attached to working with machines exists since machine-related employment generates a much greater amount of capital. Here capitalist and patriarchal values coalesce to undermine and underrate women's labour and skill.

In our culture, a woman are often referred to as Lakshmi, goddess of money and prosperity. Ironically, the same goddess that showers gold coins on her devotees has eluded her female worshipper's grasp. As a result, though women have made some admirable progress in entering the job market and gaining relative economic independence, most of them have yet to achieve adequate monetary freedom and attain decision-making powers that come with controlling inheritance or running an enterprise. So while there may be an increasing number of employed and self-employed women, only very few can control their own or family money, or use their fiscal power to enhance their social status, like their male counterparts. This is even true of some fairly rich women who may have family business and property held in their names.

In almost all cases the family enterprise has some percentage of shares and company holdings in the names

of females of the family. Some women are directors of the company too, but most of these “directors” do not participate actively in the family business. At best, if an educated wife, sister, daughter or daughter-in-law is expected to participate, it is by becoming an unofficial secretary. The males may start with such smaller jobs but quickly graduate to more important tasks of meeting the clients, taking decisions during deals, and securing collections. Be it a small enterprise or large, the financial interactions are almost never done by women.

There are several social reasons for the discrimination against women emerging as entrepreneurs.

➤ The idea that the family’s main earning should be enough to feed the wife and children, while women should stay at home and do the household work, including childcare. Even if she does have her own enterprise it should be as a complement to the male’s. As a result women largely remain dependent on men.

➤ Whenever women start their own ventures, it is either to tide over a family emergency or initiated for pastime. Most women are apologetic about their work and provide an excuse to explain why they have started their venture,

making sure that the value of their husband’s earnings is not undermined.

➤ Due to household responsibilities women are expected to start home-based ventures. Since mobility is also a problem, if the venture is at home or nearby, the operation of the unit too becomes easy. But it also limits the potential of growth.

At the same time, a large number of educated, unemployed women have been added to the labour pool but they are not rapidly absorbed in the overcrowded job market. For ordinary women a satisfactory life still mean a package that can be incorporate the husband, children, housework and, if possible, some extra income by working part time, preferably within home or in the neighbourhood.

The situation however can change if parents give an equal share to their daughters as they give to their sons instead of some cash and kind in the form of dowry. If it becomes socially accepted that girls too will have a share in the family enterprise, they can be expected to have better control over decision making powers, and also over the financial aspect of their lives, which relates directly to the level of their security, independence and status in society.

Uma Arora, New Delhi □

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