

Reader's Forum

==== Bharat vs India ====

We are a very small group of people involved in organic farming and rural development work. The questions below have arisen out of this work and priority.

Siddu wants Rs 20 to go to his village to bring back his little sister who came to visit him. Ramilu wants his gunny bags of Sorghum (*jauwari*) to be put in my stone-floored room, since he has a mud floor hut only and the rats eat away his bags and the produce as well. Peerappa wants money to take his ill wife to the doctor. Siddu, Ramilu and Peerappa are agricultural workers. They are small farmers too. Their women and children work all day long in the fields. They are being interviewed by researchers working on a project run by an international organic agriculture federation working in Asia and claiming to improve their life and work situation. Some of their experts get Rs 5,000 per day for this work. The farmers whose knowledge is being surveyed get a mere Rs 2,000 in a year, on completion of the project! That too only because some of us intervened. Why this gross difference?

I recently attended a conference of the Asia branch of the above federation. My anger has grown. Why is the Indian mind so full of inferiority and authority complexes? Why do we have to have big people on stage to prove that we are doing good work? Why do we uncritically bow before people who are upper caste, have money, power and/or

degrees and titles? Don't we know that in our country degrees and titles can be bought and that our educational system is corrupt and useless for our needs? Why do we claim to be the biggest democracy in the world when we give most of the space, time, energy, resources to the expert, the scientist, the academecian, the bureaucrat, the industrialist and none to the farmer, the worker, the woman who actually does the work for our survival? Why do we speak a language alien to most of our country's men and women? Why do we create institutions in the name of the poor, the under-developed and then let these be used by/for the already privileged, educated, upper-caste, upper class? Why do the Krishi Vigyan Kendras have to spend lakhs on their buildings plus infrastructure and staff of agricultural scientists and yet be of no use to the neighbouring farmers?

When shall we start thinking in terms of creating space for the farmer, the worker, the woman so that they get a chance to speak out and get exposed to more information and education, to expand their visions, to make them equal partners in communication and living? When shall the experts stop sermonising and inflicting boring speeches on audiences who know more practical solutions?

Why does the Indian government give loans to village women (DWACRA, IRDP) with unpractical conditions like forcing them to buy a Jersey cow? Why do Indians call themselves social workers and NGOs

when actually they make a living out of this work? Why are more and more NGOs becoming mega projects begging multinational agencies for huge sums for the poor, but creating lucrative jobs primarily for the already privileged? Why do we think that the poor, backward, the under-developed do not have the same human wishes, hopes, aspirations, dreams, as those of us who call themselves civilised educated and developed? Why should a village woman not also want to have a *tola* of gold on her body when others have kilos, even if they don't show them openly? Why do we think that an acre or two of land is enough for a poor villager to survive?

Asha Kachru, Ranjole, A.P.

==== Can't Feel Free ====

I am not sure if in this society, any woman can actually feel free. Yes, we wear what we like, do as we wish, but are we free of those unnerving stares aimed at us, allegedly because of our "seductive" clothing. Are we free of the general fear of being harassed? I have yet to see even an unostentatiously dressed woman having an undisturbed walk along the quietest or the busiest street in Mumbai, a city hailed as the woman's paradise.

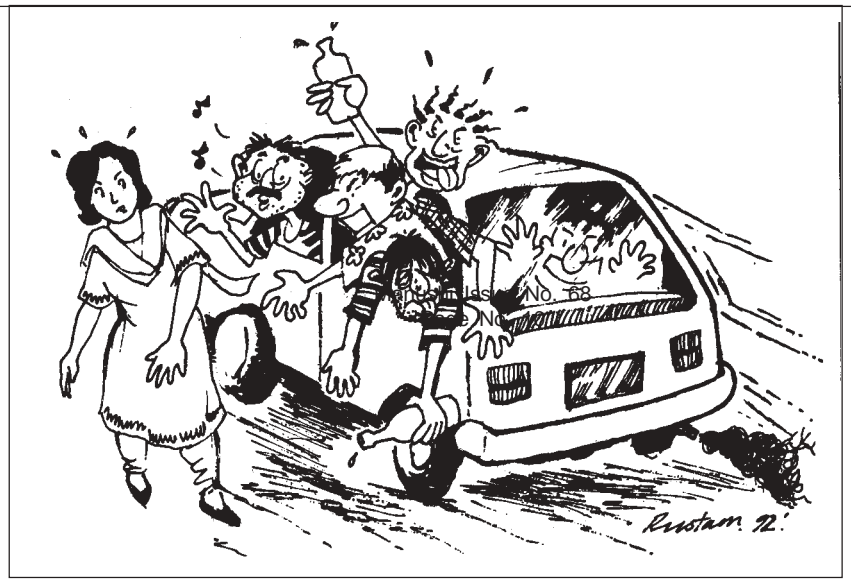
Many women will frown and rush to correct me that they have a peaceful walk almost every day. I ask them to think again and probe their minds, check if there is an image or two of some ugly monster lurking in the dark recesses of their subconscious memory.

Recently, I was standing at a railway station when a decent looking chap walking afar in the opposite direction saw me, suddenly cut the horizontal distance between us in a few quick paces and without touching me passed by a hair's breadth. The idea obviously was to unnerve me so that I am on edge till he walks past.

By no stretch of imagination can this be termed as sexual assault. Sadism? I would think so. This was not my first or last such experience. Men with such indulgences are uncannily similar in their *modus operandi*. The universal male obsession with females may be essentially sexual in nature but the wild gestures and catcalls, executed so helplessly, have mainly to do with a certain sadistic streak that women probably do not possess, and if they do, is not easily manifest.

There is a hidden agenda to a catcall, to a deliberate brush or bottom-pinch: show her who is superior. Let's watch her suffer humiliation and helplessness, the feeling of violation that burns through her every time someone darts that look and mutters in that alien language. The offence almost never meets a defence. The glory of watching one's insults being absorbed through her skin without fear of reciprocation is something men savour. And since most women prefer to pretend they have not felt humiliated even as their whole mind is seething with the humiliation, the man's confidence is vindicated. The victory is savoured till the next prey.

On another occasion, when I was dressed miserably and looking it, a chap came close and breathed some offensive-sounding syllable in my sweaty ear, upon which I snapped, with some help from the humidity and the heat, and decided to confront him. Digging up some Hindi



invectives reserved for his category, I hollered at him loud and clear for the benefit of several others who were drawn to the scene.

The bewildered man did not know what had hit him, just as I hadn't two seconds ago. With an incredulous look on his face, he tried to hide his mortification by walking away, face sunk somewhere in his chest. The rest of my audience was aghast. The expressions around me clearly suggested disgust. I was being disowned for mouthing such unpronounceables, which are reserved for the unfair sex. A fitting defence is always perceived as an offence.

All the women I know are afraid of physical assault, molestation and the darkest nightmare of all, rape. This form of offence again is necessarily the prerogative of the male. If there were only good men in this world, women would probably see no need to marry for safety or to keep an unhappy marriage going. Often, it is to protect herself from unwanted attention that she stays married to an unworthy man and takes his name.

Seema Kamdar, Mumbai,

==== Changing Rituals ====

We are back in India after 17 years stay in Kenya for Diwali and Bhaiya Dooj festivities. My initial reaction was of pleasant surprise, coupled with shock. The positive response was at the continuation of Diwali celebrations and rituals inspite of changes in generation.

In our family, when I got married in 1958, my father performed the rituals as the head of the family. The roles have changed now. My husband being the eldest son performs the rituals as the head of the family. Except that nothing else has changed, so I am happy.

But I was shocked at the wanton waste of resources in the burning of crackers and fire works. A new range of fire works, each string costing couple of hundreds, has been added. An average middle class family spends a few thousand on these fire crackers and it goes on for a minimum of three days. In the morning all streets and parks were littered with the remnants of the previous nights' festivities. Add to it the awful noise level, resultant air pollution and environmental degradation. I was

distressed at the wanton loss of precious resources, which my motherland needs for basic “development” and improving the quality of life of its citizens.

On Bhaiyya Dooj day, I accompanied my husband to his sister’s house and missed more than ever not having a brother of my own. When I used to live in India, I used to tie *rakhi* to a couple of cousins of mine. But now I am more matured and having been away from India for so long have lost touch with those cousins. My parents had always instilled this in me : “Remember, you have no blood brother. So you should reconcile to the fact, and do not get emotional about *rakhi* brothers”. That day, when I was watching my husband and his sister performing the *rakhi* rituals, I went through a lot of trauma. Having worked on gender issues for over a decade, I came up with a concept of starting Didi Dooj. Luckily my sister was in Delhi right then so I wished her Didi Dooj. She responded favourably. So I rang up a few more friends and cousins and all of them thought that it was a brilliant idea.

Those of us who ask for equality in all other aspects of life should also be demanding a change in the Hindu rituals. I invite you and your readers to comment on this idea.

Prabha Bharadwaj, New Delhi

==== Power Obsession =====

Empowerment of women implies a mediating of the relationship of the two genders by power and thus has in-built in it latent conflict, one-upmanship, hierarchisation and a constant glancing on either side of oneself to ensure that the other sex is not trying to overpower one. This state of affairs will certainly not lead to a cessation of gender power struggle of sexual politics but perhaps

escalate them, adding to them more surreptitiousness, mistrust, and working against each other.

The desire for power may be a given trait in human beings but its ascendancy to such great heights and its assuming such an overwhelming importance is a humanly constructed social reality like all other social realities. Power has been allowed to gain such an awesome ascendancy and importance by human machinations more so from the coming into existence of the desire for private property reaching its zenith in the capitalist system which supports and strengthens patriarchy, both reinforcing each other in the process.

However, if power has been allowed to gain such great and harmful significance by human machinations, human effort can also lead to its diminution and construction of more enriching social realities like cooperation, kindness, tolerance, understanding, peace and love. As long as power and its concomitant competition are allowed to be the brick layers of human relationships, these relationships can never be conflict-free, imbued with a gracious give and take and a richer way to love and be loved. This is true of gender relations as well, where power struggle cannot be made to disintegrate by ‘empowerment of women’ which is still playing games with power. Such a concept has its genesis in a capitlist-patriarchal mind-set and lexicon.

Patriarchy it seems has struck such deep roots in our psyche that it orientates, at least, unconsciously, if not consciously, the thinking and actions of even those who genuinely wish to change the subordinating and superordinating-by-males patriarchal order.

The patriarchal mode of thinking has obviously percolated to our very unconscious so that the acquisition of power is given over due importance by women themselves, as the goal of the Third World Women’s movement for liberating ‘The Second Sex’. Women indeed have to be extra alert, cautious and wary of the latent residues of patriarchal modes of thinking lodged in the unseen nooks and crevices of their psyche and their language. Both these need to be innovatively transformed and a new kind of woman envisaged who can act as a beacon for both women’s liberation, as well as that of men in the future.

Saraswati Haider, New Delhi

==== Femino-Centric Vision =====

There seems to be no other “femino-centric” magazine other than **Manushi** which deals with the whole gamut of discussion on the evolution of an alternative vision. The big picture has always been left to the male. So history always has been HIS. Unless women enter all spaces of Big, Macro, Micro dreams, there can be no balancing of male-female visions. This imbalance is what causes violence to the daily lives of men and women.

Sunny M, New Delhi □

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