

Some Aspects Of Bondage

The Denial Of Fundamental Rights To Women



In this article, I have tried to analyse how the present family structure in India ensures the subordination and exploitation of women in a way that puts them beyond the purview of most of the fundamental rights guaranteed by the Constitution. I realize that the situation is invariably more complex than here described. At present, whatever its limitations, the family also is one of the few arrangements which provide the little support that is available to women. Wide variations exist between families. There are many homes where women receive more than adequate love and care. Moreover, in real life, it is not always easy to draw a sharp line between male and female family members, representing men as solely the exploiters and women as only the exploited. Very often, women play the role of tyrants or agents of tyrants vis-a-vis other women. However, even when women perform this role, they do not strengthen the power of women as a group but rather the power of the male dominated family. Keeping women thus divided against each other is an important way in which women are kept oppressed.

I have concentrated on an analysis of women's general lack of freedom and rights in the male dominated family. Though at times the phrases used may seem harsh, and alien to the experience of many readers. I am convinced that I am accurately describing the various types of bondage in which a majority of women live in this country.

WHILE fundamental rights and civil liberties guaranteed in our Constitution are being denied throughout the country to most sections of the population, the group that is the most oppressed is the women of India, because within each oppressed group women are doubly oppressed. Kiran Singh's case is but an extravagant version of what takes place routinely in a very large number of homes in our country. The exceptional features of this case are limited in that the father concerned is a much more wealthy, powerful and influential man than are most other men who try to prevent women of their families from exercising their basic rights. Also, the daughter has been able courageously to resist the pressure of her father, largely because she possesses educational qualifications which enable her to earn an independent income. She has a strong sense of self respect, and was able to get an unusual kind of support from her friends and from other concerned women. Otherwise, the case is a typical example of the state of bondage in which many families expect women to live in this country.

Kiran Singh's case brings out very

forcefully how almost all the fundamental rights and civil liberties guaranteed in the Constitution, such as the right to life and liberty, the right to freedom of movement, the right to pursue lawful employment, equality of opportunity in matters relating to employment, the right to reside wherever one chooses, and the freedom to associate with persons of one's choice, are very often snatched away from women by the members of their own For too many women in our country, their own fathers, brothers and husbands act like virtual prison guards, holding them captive and keeping them in a state of perpetual fear within the walls of their own homes, and denying them the right to make or even to take part in making the most fundamental decisions about their own lives.

Protection of life and personal liberty (Article 21)

As in Kiran Singh's case, the male members tend to see women not as independent human beings but as pieces of property or as repositories of their *izzat* (honour). Any attempt at independent decision making is seen as a blot on the family honour and status. Kiran's father,

for example, responded to her petition to the supreme court by claiming that he was only trying to prevent her from making a mistake, that she was under the unhealthy influence of people who were confusing her judgment, and that he was only concerned for her welfare. However, despite professing these noble intentions, the fact is that when confronted with a daughter who refused to behave like his property, he did not hesitate to let loose goondas and policemen upon her, and to say that he would prefer to see her dead than alive and defying his will.

It is this ideology of "doing it for your own welfare, in your best interests, to protect you", that is constantly used to deny women the right to make their own decisions, whether in the matter of marriage, of taking up employment, or in their daily movements. The feature which most distinguishes women's oppression from that of almost all other oppressed groups is that the denial of their most basic rights takes place first and foremost within the family. This is done so effectively that the hand of the government or of any similar repressive

agency is seldom visible in keeping women oppressed. That is why it is easy to dismiss such violation as private family affair rather than as social and political issues. But if we examine closely how the family functions in keeping women subjugated we can begin to see how an exploitative family structure receives crucial support from the government and the state through various laws and rules of behaviour which legitimize the authority of the male members over the lives of women members of the family.

Let us examine how the rest of the formal list of rights, supposedly guaranteed to all the citizens of the country, are with impunity denied to women within the family. Unless the concept of fundamental rights and liberties is radically redefined, taking into account the specific nature of women's bondage as rooted in the family, these rights will continue to remain irrelevant for the lives of most women.

Freedom of movement (Article 19 d)

A crucial aspect of living in bondage is to be in the power of someone else who decides where one can go, where and with whom one is forbidden to go, and when one must return. Many women never escape the confines of this form of bondage from early childhood to the end of their lives. To curb women's freedom of movement the authorities do not have to impose a curfew or to make any special laws or to put women in prison. It is ensured by a matter of routine by most families, with women's homes acting as the most effective prisons. Women themselves are trained to consider such a life both normal and desirable, because the consequence of discharging the restrictions is the loss of only type of "respectability" allowed to women.

While one group of women is made to live in actual purdah, the rest of them are subjected to various degrees and forms of seclusion. For each of us, certain public places are out of bound, and if we venture into them, it is with the consciousness of being trespassers. For instance, a recent village study done in Punjab revealed that women live in

extremely closed-in existence. Other similar studies show that this is true for large parts of rural India. The women interviewed in Punjab reported that almost all the time not spent in fieldwork is spent inside the family compound. Moving about unescorted or visiting each other was frowned upon. Some of the women said that they can never go out, except when their husbands ask them to perform some task. They cannot even visit their parental homes without their husband's permission. The women from peasant landholding households interviewed in the Punjab study also said that there are restrictions even within the family compound. They must remain in the inner courtyard near the kitchen. There is usually a room near the entrance where the men entertain their guests. The women can go there to serve tea and food but are not supposed to stand or sit there when men are in the room. This situation is not unique to rural India. The ideology which governs it is still in force in many families in urban areas. Many men employed in towns and cities cannot go anywhere without the explicit permission of their husbands or in-laws.

In most urban areas in North India, except for certain select shopping centres in big cities, the very few women are present in markets, offices and other public places, even during the daytime, points to the diverse ways in which women are kept bound at home, with a very severe check kept on their movements. Most people like to believe that women spend almost all their time at home out of their own choice, because they see the running of the household as their primary responsibility. This myth helps effectively veil the fact that the day to day never ending burdens of household and childcare, placed exclusively on women, are complexly intertwined with family and social restrictions which isolate them as far as possible from the outside world.

The unofficial ban on women's mobility is the most severe in the evenings after dark, when streets are universally viewed as out of bounds for all women. There have been numerous cases where women have been arrested,

detained in a police lock-up, and sent to a Nari Niketan simply because they could not provide "good" reasons why they were out on the streets late at night. The usual assumption is that if a woman is out at night, she must be either a prostitute or a vagrant. I remember numerous occasions when I was aggressively questioned by strangers when I was standing at a bus stop or some other public place in Delhi late in the evening. They actually walked up to me, demanding an explanation as to why I was out alone so late, or even assuming that I must be either a pickup, or a woman in dire trouble and in need of their help.

Many parents attest publicly to their daughters' "homely" virtues by proudly announcing that their daughter has never been out on her own or that she does not even know the way to the city's main market. They boast that even their neighbours would not be able to recognize their girls, so rarely do they step out.

A recent experience brings this out very clearly. A 19 year old woman student in a Delhi university college came into contact with Manushi and wanted to help us with the work. One day she came to Manushi's office straight from college at about 1.30 p.m. and reached home at about 3.30 p.m. Her family was horrified by this act of defiance. What outraged her father particularly was the mere fact that she had learned to reach our office in Lajpat Nagar by herself. Her father told her she would not be allowed to continue her studies unless she promised that she would not read Manushi, and would not go anywhere on her own, but would come straight home from college each day. She was forced to comply with this demand, and her time table was rigorously checked to ensure that she was not staying in college a moment longer than required. She and her friends told us that this was a very common situation prevailing in most of their families.

As an outgrowth of the repressive family and community restrictions, university colleges and hotels for women also function like prisons so that their guardians may feel "secure" in sending

their wards to study there. In many women's hostels, especially in small towns, the women students are forbidden to step out of the hostel gates unless accompanied by their guardians, and even then only on a certain restricted number of days in the year. Even hostels for working women often operate under extremely repressive rules, laying down timings for return of inmates and forbidding them to have more than a small number of approved visitors or guests.

Restricting women's freedom of movement is an important part of the strategy for making women dependent on men. Being denied access to the outside world of employment and public affairs, women are forced to depend on men as their intermediaries whenever they have to step into that world, whether to seek a job, to find accommodation or to find out about a bureaucratic procedure. One effect of this is that women's fear of the external world borders on panic, so that many women learn to put up with any maltreatment at home rather than be forced to leave home for a world of which they know very little.

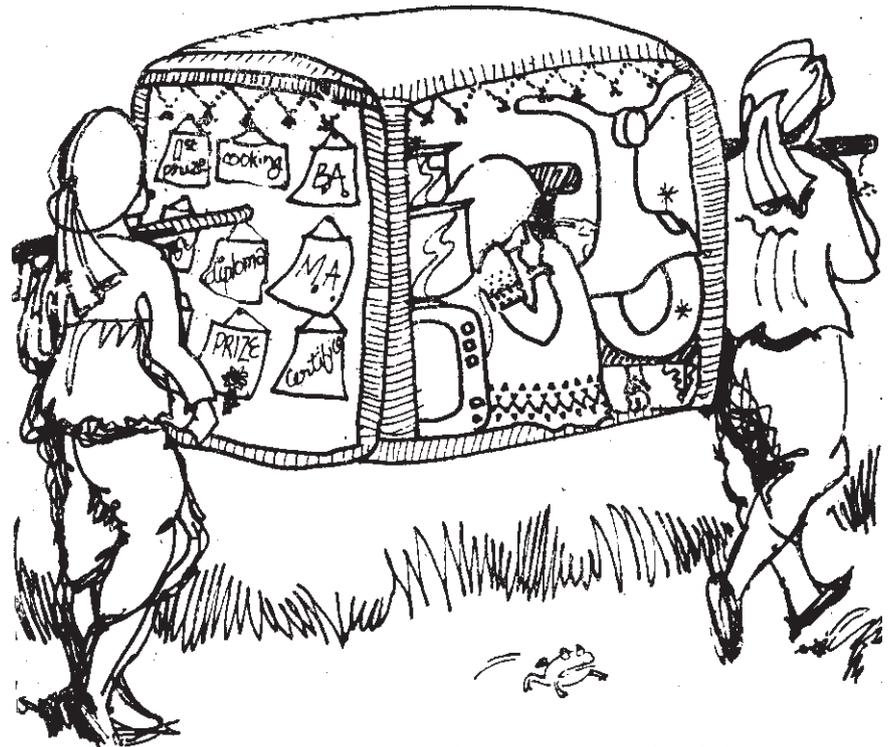
Recently, a father brought his 21 year old daughter to **Manushi**. She had been literally thrown out of her husband's house following years of harassment for more dowry. The father proudly told us that he had brought up his daughter with such fond care that he did not even let her do her a regular BA. She was made to do her BA by correspondence course, even though they lived next door to the university. He did not want her ever to step out of the house alone. He told us the long story of how for years she suffered silently beatings and torture at her in-laws' place, and the first time she stepped out of the house alone was when the in-laws actually beat her out of the house and pushed her on to the street.

The right to choose an occupation and pursue a lawful vocation (Article 19 (g))

One of the most important results of this dependence of women on men is that men are able to exercise crucial control over women's lives and labour, the conditions under which they can labour, the price they can get for that labour.

The primary decision as to whether a woman will be allowed to work outside the house usually rests in the hands of the dominant male members of the family, whether she is an agricultural labourer, a peasant woman, a factory worker, a nurse, a school teacher, a typist or a doctor. This makes women's situation in many ways similar to that of a bonded labourer, because like others in bondage

decide whether or not she would be available for work outside the home. All the women who answered the question said that their husband, father, father-in-law or brother-in-law would decide. Similarly, all these women, including those who were the primary earners in their families, clearly stated that they had no control over decisions regarding major expenditure incurred by the family,



Sketch: Bharti. Text: M.K.

Wanted beautiful, homely fair, virgin bride, convent educated, simple and godfearing, smart and modern but pardanashin. Minimum M.A. B.Ed, pass, well-versed in household duties. Knowing English, French, and other foreign languages but never opening her mouth. Knowing Chinese and continental cooking but having no appetite of her own. Knowing not only household decoration but also self-decoration. Must guarantee to produce sons only. Very decent marriage required with perpetual flow of dowry—one big instalment at time of marriage, other regular instalments on every conceivable occasion, at every birth, death and marriage in family, and on every national and regional festival of India.

women perform crucial services for society but do not have the freedom to decide the conditions of their own labour.

Also, they rarely have independent control over their income. In the Punjab village study mentioned earlier, not a single woman, whether from a Jat peasant family or from an agricultural labourer family, said that she could independently

or even over their own earnings. The same lack of control over their own earnings was reported by primary school teachers, interviewed by Manushi in Delhi. Many of them said that they had to hand over their salaries to husband or in-laws, and were given only bus fare. This is also true of many women doctors, nurses and lecturers.

The government and its legal machinery provide support and legitimacy to families in crushing the resistance of women on the few occasions that women do manage to challenge the authority of the male heads of the family over the women's right to employment. This typical decision of the full bench of the Punjab high court in *Kailashwati vs. Ajodhia Prakash* brings this out very well. The husband filed a petition for restitution of conjugal rights after his wife, a school teacher, was transferred out of his village, and hence changed her place of residence. He argued that he could support her in "dignified comfort" so she should give up her job and return to the "conjugal home", which he, implicitly defined as the home where the husband resides. *Kailashwati's* defence was that she had not refused to perform her marital duties, that she spent vacations with her husband, and that since he knew at the time of marriage that she was employed, he should not have the right to deny her the freedom of continuing her employment. However, the high court decided in favour of *Ajodhia* and stated: "In all civilized societies, the husband has a quasiproprietary right over his wife", and that the husband can order her to leave the job as it is his "legal right."

Men, especially in rural North India, see their ability to withdraw women from paid labour and confine them to the house as an enhancement in their own social status. The moment the men earn enough, the men put tremendous pressure on the women to withdraw from paid employment. Thus, men feel even more powerful, since they can even more unilaterally justify their sole control over the economic resources of the family. The power of this patriarchal ideology has percolated deep down even among the poorer classes, so that even when they cannot afford to survive without women's earnings, men will often compel the women to opt for more poorly paid work which can be done either at home or under severely exploitative conditions allowing minimal social contact. This means the women become dependent on

men for mediating between them and the market, in collecting payments, or for getting them a supply of work. This also puts the women outside the purview of the few minimally effective labour laws, and therefore makes it extremely difficult to organize any collective action to improve their wages and working conditions. A good example of this exploitation is the report on paper bag makers, presented in this issue of *Manushi*. Since their husbands and community disapprove of women going out to work the women have to work under unhygienic and severely exploitative conditions at home.

This is true for large numbers of poor working women in India, some well known examples being those of women who roll *bidis* at home or those who do embroidery work for garment manufacture. It also means that the woman must move constantly from household work to paid work, cleaning, cooking and looking after the children even while she labours at the paid task. A middle class variant of this is giving of tuitions and running nursery schools at home, which are considered respectable even though low paid and tiresome.

The few women who do manage to be allowed to seek work outside their homes find other forces in society similarly restricting their choices and access to skills and work. It is significant, for example, that while there are no legal bans preventing women from taking up most jobs, yet they are ghettoized in the lowest paid, least skilled occupations. If, for example, they work at construction sites, the power of unwritten laws is much greater than all Constitutionally guaranteed rights. There they can only work as headloaders and earth diggers and not as masons or carpenters. In fact, there are powerful invisible forces at work to ensure that they are not allowed to acquire the simple skills, involving even lower order technology, so that they are pushed more and more into backbreaking, unskilled jobs, requiring only hard labour. Even these few jobs are rapidly slipping out of their hands. Threshing, for instance, was traditionally considered a women's job and millions

of women earned their livelihood from it. But as soon as a simple threshing machine comes into wide use, in one stroke women lose access to their traditional jobs and men acquire an exclusive monopoly over machine threshing.

If today women form two thirds or more of India's illiterates, it is primarily because families will often not send girls to school, and when they do send them, will not allow them to study long enough even in order to attain minimal literacy. Boys are more frequently sent to school, or sent to learn a trade, while girls are commonly kept at home from a very tender age to the housework and to look after the younger children. This puts them at a disadvantage in seeking work and employment. It denies them basic information and skills that would help make them more independent in coping with the world outside the family, and in fighting for their rights within the family.

The government also reinforces the same pattern. For instance, most of the industrial training institutes set up by the government to teach new skills useful in obtaining better paid jobs are meant for men. They have no provision for teaching these skills to women. The industrial training institute meant for women are not only much fewer in number but also usually do not teach women any skills that will help women in getting better jobs. The vast majority of the institutions only teach traditional skills such as sewing for the family. Polytechnics for men provide them with important engineering scientific skills but women's polytechnics, even in cities like Delhi, by and large teach things like cookery, beauty care, home decoration and, at best, typing and shorthand.

The right against exploitation : against 'begar', and other forms of forced labour (Article 23(i))

Even when the man is able to stop the woman from doing any form of paid labour, it is not as if the woman labours less hard. She is then in the position of performing never ending unpaid labour in the service of the family from which she can never hope to escape. Against

this form of *begar* she cannot even hope to seek legal redress because it is seen as her “natural” duty. Because this labour is unpaid she is made to feel dependent on her husband and therefore bound to fulfil his desires and obey his commands. Though the labour performed by women at home is crucial to the survival of all the family members, it is depreciated by society and therefore by herself as “doing nothing, sitting at home.” The fact that in the census women performing housework or doing field labour on their own family farms are not even listed as workers is one indication that the government does not even recognize the existence of women’s exploitation through these forms of *begar* or unpaid labour, it is because it is seen as “natural” and inevitable for women to do all the housework and childcare that their social isolation from the outside world also comes to seem natural and inevitable.

No discrimination in respect of employment (Article 16(2)).

The ideology of the male dominated family leads people to suspect as “immoral” any woman who works outside the house. Sexual harassment at work is used as another reason for not allowing women to go and seek work far away from home or for not sending them for training to acquire skills. Sexual violence and harassment is perhaps the only crime which is seen as primarily the fault of the victim rather than the aggressor. Such crimes set into motion a vicious cycle, entrapping women so that they end up by seeming to choose their confinement within the house. The most socially “respectable” situation available to women within the patriarchal ideology is to remain at home and in *purdah*, a situation which also makes them absolutely dependent and powerless.

Those jobs that bring women social exposure are usually the ones where sexual harassment is most frequent and dangerous. The social status of the working women therefore is in many ways much lower than that of a homebound woman. This attitude of contempt towards working women plays a crucial role in making women believe

that the only way they can stay out of trouble and gain social respect is to stay at home performing unpaid labour which becomes a source of keeping them tied down, dependent and at the mercy of the men of the family.

The right to form associations and unions (Article 19(c))

The politics of everyday life under the patriarchal, patrilocal family makes any formal guarantee of the right to form associations in the way defined by the Constitution irrelevant to the lives of the majority of women in the country. Therefore, no laws or emergency regulations are needed to effectively keep women out of most political activity. The primary form of association, for a majority of people, is one that grows out of the alliances formed through family, kin and neighbours, in everyday life, in one’s neighbourhood, and where one labours.

The very structure of the patrilocal family makes it difficult for women to form independent connections. A key source of women’s vulnerable isolation arises because women are made to shift to the husband’s home and village or neighbourhood after marriage. There, they are not only isolated from their primary associations but are also made to live under conditions of very limited contact with their new neighbours and social world.

This further restricts women from forming their own alliances and support groups so that they become more and more powerless and vulnerable. The ideology of the patrilocal family also prohibits them from visiting their parental homes often enough or seeking parental support as and when they require it. Since any other contact and association with the outside world is considered disreputable for women, they are left with no base to operate from in the politics of everyday life, which is far more important than the politics of nations.

This helps explain the near total exclusion of women from all the formal and informal village level political institutions, such as the village groupings and panchayats, where so

many crucial decisions regarding everyday life and work are negotiated. In fact, it is easier for women in small numbers to reach the higher levels such as parliament and state legislatures than to attain effective participation in panchayats, because those few who get to the higher citadels of power almost invariably do so at the behest or with the backing of powerful male dominated families. But at all other levels dealing with everyday life, from *biradari* or other kinship associations to panchayats and trade unions, women are excluded from effective participation at the outset because of the way the patrilocal, patriarchal family restricts them from forming even more basic everyday contacts and associations.

The right to property

This right was taken out of the list of fundamental rights by a Constitutional amendment made in 1979 with the professed aim of enabling the state to acquire private landed property for public good, or to redistribute land in the interest of social equity. However, the Constitution still presumably guarantees that no one will be denied their basic right to property except by due process of law. (Article 300a) But here again the family plays a decisive role.

A crucial part of the strategy of keeping women in bondage within their own families comes from the fact that they are not allowed any independent access to income producing sources of property. In a predominantly rural society like ours, where land is the most important form of property, women’s lack of control over landed property becomes the major source of their economic bondage to men.

Even in families with substantial landed property, the status of women is similar in many ways to that of the landless poor who toil without any rights to land. Some half hearted steps have been taken to confer property rights on women such as the Indian and Hindu Succession Acts. However, these measures have proved inadequate not only because they contain deliberate loopholes to nullify this right for most

women, but also because in many other ways the state tries to create and protect male control over property and family. For example, even when the state decides to confer rights on relatively disadvantaged groups through various paltry land reform measures, the ownership rights invariably get to be bestowed on those whom the government refers to as the male heads of the family.

There is hardly an example of land distributed jointly in the name of husband and wife. Whether as mothers, wives or daughters, women are allowed a limited right in land only if there are no male adult members in the family; even then they usually act as caretakers till the "rightful" male inheritor takes over.

So strong is this bias rooted in the present family structure and so determined is the effort to keep women powerless and dependent on men that middle class families will happily spend lakhs of rupees, give lavish dowries on marriage of daughters, but will not give even a small portion of all that money to their daughter in her own name, under her independent control, in the form of land or other income generating property. In the present family system, women are mainly used as commodities, as vehicles for transfer of consumer forms of property from one family to another. In fact, even control over women, as over slaves, is passed from one owner, the parents family, to the other, the husband's family. By and for themselves, women seldom come to acquire any real control over even what is customarily supposed to be theirs, such as jewellery and household goods. At best, women have a sort of usufructory right in jewellery which is traditionally supposed to be passed on to the son's wife, and thus to stay within the family. In cases where a man throws out his wife, all the products of the marriage are usually assumed to be his, from which he may give her what he chooses, or not give her anything at all. This includes their house, household goods and even the children. The father is considered the legal guardian of the children if they are over the age of five.

This relationship, the dominance of

the men and the dependent status of the women, regulates all property relationships in India. Governmental and legal procedures reinforce it. For instance, a married woman is seldom allowed to apply for a passport without the husband's signature authorizing her to do so. Similarly, if the husband is alive and in town, the ration card is normally given only in his name. The custody and adoption laws are similarly biased in favour of the male "guardian." A married Hindu woman cannot adopt a child in her own name. The child has to be adopted in the name of her husband. There is hardly any area of social life in which a woman can independently enter into a contractual relationship. If a married couple wants to lease or buy a house, a man can do it in his own name, but a woman will rarely be allowed to do it, despite the absence of any formal statute for bidding it.

The right to freedom of speech and expression (Article 19(a))

One of the special features of women's oppression is the way they have been trained to consider "unspeakable" many crucial areas of their oppression and exploitation. The manner in which they are socially victimized for speaking about their oppression ensures their silence much better than any press censorship or other governmental bans on freedom of speech and expression. Once again, the most effective censorship on women's speaking out comes from their own families. For example, if a woman admits to having been raped, the usual consequence is that her own husband or father will throw her out of the house, as happened to thousands of women in Bangladesh. Many of the women who were raped during the 1947 partition met with the same fate, being disowned or even killed by their families. This happens so routinely that women have been forced to choose silence in order to ensure their survival.

This silence is not limited to cases of atrocities on women by outsiders, but includes many instances of violence within the family. Women silently bear with maltreatment because they feel they would be betraying their families if they

went and talked to friends or neighbours about their maltreatment at the hands of a husband or a father. For example, Shakuntala Arora, a college lecturer who was recently burnt to death always pretended that she had hurt herself by an accidental fall when her colleagues expressed concern at the bruises caused by her husband's brutal battering of her.

Similarly, women who protest against harassment on the streets or in buses and trains are routinely hushed by other people, and made to feel that their own dignity would be best protected by pretending to ignore the harassment. To put up with indignity and act as if nothing whatever has happened has been socially defined as the most dignified course for a woman to adopt. Whereas a man who puts up with indignity would be considered a coward, a woman who puts up with it is considered a "true woman."

This silencing of women that begins in the family has been powerfully institutionalized in our society. For instance, in most parts of rural India, women are not only disallowed from becoming members of the panchayat, but are also prevented from opening their mouths in public meetings. A social worker from Rajasthan reported an incident which is a good example of how, without any legal bans, women's opinions are censored out of existence. She said that no woman is ever allowed to attend a panchayat meeting. In Rajasthan recently two men took their dispute before the panchayat, and in the course of deliberations one of them was about to agree to a settlement whereby his family would have had to pay Rs 700. His wife, who was watching from a distance, intervened to say that he should not agree to this, as it would mean the family having to incur a heavy debt. The panchayat members were so outraged at this violation of "decency" that they promptly fined the man Rs 51 and threatened to impose a heavier penalty if his wife dared to open her mouth again in the presence of men at a panchayat meeting. Many other political workers in rural areas report similar exclusion of women from panchayat meetings. Sometimes, when a woman is

involved in a dispute, she alone may be asked to be present, and thus may be too intimidated to speak.

The point when the censorship imposed by the family becomes the woman's internal self censorship is the point of her final silencing. Under such conditions, it is not too far fetched to say that freedom of speech and expression as defined by our constitution or interpreted by political parties becomes irrelevant for a large majority of women. Unless the censorship imposed on women by their family, community and society at large, and internalized by women in all areas of life, is made a political issue, women's voices are not likely to be heard in social and political life.

What Do We Do?

The first prerequisite for all those involved in the struggle for women's rights is to acknowledge and realize that the chains for women's bondage are first forged in the family. The state intervenes only to give women's bondage further reinforcement. This bondage is not just a moral issue. It is one which adversely affects their very survival. The promising feature of the situation is that struggles are beginning to emerge all over the country in which women are demanding independent rights. However, we do not yet have an effective programme and strategy of action which would add strength and build connections between these sporadic struggles. A coherent programme of action is likely to emerge out of more widespread debate and discussion among all those who are struggling for change, especially in rural areas. However, we can tentatively identify a few of the key issues which will help make the crucial breakthrough, where women will be able to work at breaking the weaker links in their chains, where small victories will give further impetus to a widening and deepening effort for more substantial change.

1. We need to ensure and strengthen women's access to independent and adequate sources of income.

a) We need to fight for women's greater access to paid employment and jobs. This is a very urgent task considering the sharp decline in

women's employment in the last few decades, especially in rural areas. Very determined efforts need to be made, especially in the rural areas, to see that women are not displaced from their few remaining traditional jobs without also seeing to it that they gain control over the new jobs and occupations being created with the advent of every little slight improvement in technology.

b) We need to fight for guaranteed employment for the poor, particularly women. We should also demand that the government provide for the subsistence needs of those for whom no work can be provided, for example, the aged and the disabled.

c) We need to make the issue of women's control over income generating property one of the foremost issues of our struggle. Since land still remains the form of property from which an overwhelming majority of the people derive their income and livelihood in all parts of India, women's rights in the land need to be made a priority issue. The experience of the Bodhgaya land struggle, discussed in this issue of **Manushi**, demonstrates that an important beginning can be made in the struggle for women's right to land. Progressive political forces should try to make women's land rights a priority issue and an integral part of their struggles for land redistribution, whether they are active in rural areas and are fighting for land for cultivation, or whether the struggle is taking place in urban areas where the fight is for housing sites that will belong to the poor. In these struggles, it is vital to arouse women to demand co-ownership rights for both husband and wife, rather than allowing the usual practice of automatically placing all major forms of income generating property in the name of the male "head" of the household.

Once women do not have to depend for their survival on the whims of male heads of the family, they will be better able to resist maltreatment.

2. We need not only to build the social opinion that housework and childcare should be equitably shared by men and women, but even more importantly, we need to identify those aspects of housework which contribute most to

producing a life of unending drudgery for women.

For instance, in many rural areas the gathering of fuel and procuring of water consume at least five or six (often more) hours of a woman's workday. Easy access to clean drinking water and sufficient inexpensive fuel are just two examples of how giving priority in our struggles to fighting for these basic needs will allow poor women more time and energy to involve themselves in social concerns and political action.

3. Since an important factor in preventing women from acquiring greater mobility and venturing into outside employment is the fear of sexual violence and consequent loss of social status activists, could attempt to form women's committees in workplaces, in the city, in every village, in *mohallas*, which can take up cases of harassment and build social opinion not only against those who perpetrate such violence but also in support of the woman victim, to fight the dominant prejudice of seeing the woman victim as the person "dishonoured" that pervades both the family and the society.

4. Simultaneously, we need to help women to enhance their political rights and participation in the community, so that they are able to hold on to their economic rights. Without women organizing themselves as women at the village and *mohalla* level, and exercising an effective say in the local decision making level, their rights to land and property will remain mere paper rights, and they are likely themselves to become vehicles for *benami* dealings. Therefore, the demand for women's participation at all decision making levels needs to be pursued vigorously and systematically. This is true especially when people are organizing for their rights. Within these struggles we need to give priority to struggles against the tyranny, maltreatment and physical violence that women are subjected to within the family. The attempt to help make it possible for the vast majority of men and women to relate to each other in a just, mutually respectful and humane way in their most primary relationships needs to be an integral part of our struggle for a just and humane society, economy and polity. □