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FAMILY SYSTEM AND WOMEN'S FREEDOM

Don't cross the boundaries while asking questions, Gargi, else your head will be severed from your body.

- Rishi Yajnavalkya threatening the renowned scholar Gargi during a debate in King Janak's court

When one starts talking about women's liberation in society, the reactions are usually: "You are out to break the family system"; "If a woman is liberated, what will happen to her children?"; "Then who will do the household work?"; "This will spread utter chaos in society"; etc. etc.

Yes, this is indeed how most people react when the question of women's freedom, independence and self-reliance is raised. A society which has believed since times immemorial that women are unworthy of freedom, where a woman who ventures out of her house alone is considered to be of "easy virtue" or "characterless", a society whose scriptures (Manusmriti) declare that women deserve to be abused, how can such a society even tolerate "freedom" and "liberation" for its women? From Gargi's time till today, people who raised such uncomfortable questions have always received threats from society. The question of women's freedom is not a subject of debate — it crosses the

boundaries of debate.

But it is also true that times are changing. Our society is going through a period of painful transition. We no longer live in Gargi's and Yajnavalkya's times. Today, such a fiat will not be accepted. Today, the debate on women's freedom and independence can no longer be concluded by issuing diktats based on *Manusmriti's* verses. Systems based on age-old inequalities and injustices are being questioned. Women are increasingly breaking traditional moulds and seeking their own identities. They are stepping out of their homes and doing all kinds of jobs.

However, there is still a lot of resistance in our society to these changes. Even if a woman attains eminence in society, her family does not recognise this respect and admiration that she has won for herself. On the contrary, all kinds of questions are raised on her going out of her house and taking up a job and becoming economically independent, such as, who will look after the housework and children during her absence from home, what impact her interacting with other men will have on her character, etc. The media too reinforces these backward views present in society through programs that reinforce the belief that a girl's destiny in life is to get married, show the 'liberated' woman to be reckless and irresponsible, depict the husband and children of a working woman as being helpless when she is not at home, etc.

It is high time we started questioning age-old social values and modes of thinking that consider women's freedom and independence to be wrong and immoral. We need to set aside our prejudices and rationally analyse these societal beliefs and doubts. Women too are human beings. They have full rights to decide their role in society and how they should fulfil it. But our society has not given women this right, they have not been given independence and freedom to develop their inherent potential, and that in turn has affected society's development, because society has not been able to utilise their inherent brilliance and enormous capabilities for its growth.

The Family Cage

In our society, a woman's role has been restricted to within the family. When a girl is growing up, if she wants to go out and play, or learn dance or music, she is scolded — first help in the kitchen, it is more important for you to learn cooking rather than go out and play. When she grows up and gets married, all the tasks outside the home are considered to be the responsibility of her husband, while all household tasks — such as cooking, sweeping-mopping, washing clothes, taking care of the children, etc. — are supposed to be her responsibility. While doing all her household chores, if she wants to go out and take a job and be economically independent, she has to struggle within her family. "What do we lack in our house that you want to take up a job?" "You want to earn even though your husband is there!" By insinuating that her wanting to go out and work would adversely affect the prestige of her family, her desire to become independent is gradually killed.

A woman does not have her own independent identity. She is always identified as being someone's mother or wife or daughter. Her mother/father-in-law, sister/brother-in-law, husband and children — these constitute the limits of her existence. Her family is the be-all and end-all of her existence, she does not have the permission to cross this threshold. All her joys and sorrows are confined to within this boundary.

Within this family cage, an enormous amount of injustice is inflicted on women. A woman's place in the home is evident from the names women use for their husbands, such as 'malak' (owner), 'swami' (lord), etc. These names describe reality. Within the house, a woman is nothing more than a man's slave, who wields unrestrained power over her. A man has the right to beat her, have sex with her even when she is ill, rape her, throw her out of the house for no reason, bring home a second wife at whim. All scriptures and religious books give sanction to this power wielded by men over women, and declare that it is a woman's duty to serve her God-incarnate husband. Female foeticide, harassment for dowry, domestic violence, abuse — a

woman is forced to silently bear all this violence, all in the name of saving her family's reputation, honour, etc. Such injustice and violence on women has become so common in our society that people don't even notice it. Even if a man commits grave atrocities and injustices on his wife, no one reproaches him for it, his standing and reputation in society is not affected. This goes to the extent that when a young bride is tortured / burnt / killed for the sake of dowry, the entire society remains silent and attempts are made to hush up the case.

So many young girls have seen their dreams trampled, been deprived of education and been married off to complete strangers at an age when they should have been singing–playing–studying. A girl tolerates all this, as she is brought up to believe that all decisions regarding her life are to be taken by her parents, husband or even her brother; she does not have the right to take any important decisions regarding her life. And when a girl defies these rules and dares to marry a 'man of her choice', she is brutally murdered by her family members, and the entire village/neighbourhood stands behind her family. The silent acquiescence of society to such crimes/murders makes one feel that society can stoop to any level and break any law to protect this form of the family and the rights of men within it.

Should we give acceptance to such an oppressive form of the family? Can we call this an ideal family? Endorsing it means endorsing the inequality and autocracy inherent in it. History tells us that this form of the family has not always been so. In ancient human society, for many thousands of years till modern civilisation evolved, society was egalitarian, women were the head of the family and played an important role in the economic and social life of the community. With the evolution of private property, as wealth and power gradually started getting concentrated in the hands of men, women were gradually deprived of their social rights and imprisoned in the home. Thus arose patriarchy within the family system which relegated the woman to a slave's role. (Discussing how this transition took place is beyond the scope of this essay.)

We need to question this patriarchal family system that became deeply entrenched in society during the medieval feudal period. We are no longer living in a feudal society, that was autocratically ruled by feudal lords and kings, and there was no democracy for the people. Today, we are living in a democratic nation state where the rulers are elected on the basis of periodic elections, and society is governed not by the whims of kings but on the basis of a written constitution that has been drafted by a democratically elected body. However, the old feudal patriarchal family structure continues to exist. It is time that this structure is broken. Women must be freed from the confines of this form of the family, and in its place new family values based on equality and mutual respect and genuine love need to be established.

Family: Fundamental Unit of Society

A family is a girl's first school. It has an enormous influence on her value system and mental make-up. A child's home environment, her cultural upbringing, her parents' financial, social and cultural status, their method of raising their child, together determine what kind of human being a child will grow up to be. An ideal family is one which instils the values of equality, justice, honesty, hard-work, self-respect, rationality, generosity and fraternity in a child, instils confidence in the child, provides the child the social-cultural atmosphere to develop his/her inherent potential, and motivates the child to become independent, form opinions and take the initiative in every thing. But can one expect this of an illiterate and slave-like mother, or an autocratic and arrogant father? Most certainly not. A home where inequality and patriarchal power are considered to be matters of prestige; a home where the mother is a slave, who blindly follows superstitions, customs and traditions, who is dependent on her husband for everything, who is daily abused by her husband, who is not even conscious of the fact that she has lost all her self-confidence and self-respect; a home where the father is arrogance personified; a home where there is no place for equality and logic, and orders are blindly followed — how can such a home/family nurture the values of equality, self-respect, justice

and logical reasoning in a child? Children born into such families suffer from all kinds of complexes, and either lack self-confidence and self-respect, or are bossy and arrogant.

A humane and just society can come into being only when the other half of its population, that is, the women, become free. Only a mother who is well-educated, confident, well-informed, cultured and has an independent personality can provide good upbringing to a child. Only a family based on complete equality between man and woman, where there is mutual respect, love and trust between its members, can provide a child with a good cultural upbringing, instil human values in the child, and develop the child into a good citizen.

Lies Unlimited

In our society, unfortunately, a very large number of people continue to cling to old beliefs and value systems, and want to take advantage of inequality and male-dominated mindsets. They obviously do not want the old family system to be replaced by a new type of family. These people, who are vociferous in their opposition to women's liberation, feel a loss in their prestige when women go out of the house to work. They consider a woman to be family property / a decked-up object adorning the house / a machine for giving birth to the family heir / a body to be used for men's sexual satisfaction.

Such people do not realise that times are changing, and that in today's democratic society, relationships based on unbridled power and inequality cannot survive indefinitely. Sooner or later, women were going to rebel against these patriarchal bonds; and their rebellion has well and truly begun. Women have started fighting for their freedom. With women increasingly asserting themselves and fighting for their rights as equal human beings, these people have launched a vicious smear campaign to malign the women's liberation movement. They claim that it is breaking up the family and taking society to ruin. That is an outright lie. Let us examine their most important allegations.

Firstly, when women start affirming their rights, it is very rare

that the family breaks up because of this. On the contrary, as the woman gradually asserts her identity, after initial strains within the family, it actually strengthens the family bond as now the relationship between husband-wife and father-daughter becomes more democratic.

Secondly, wherever families are breaking up today, if we take a closer look, we will find that in the majority of cases, it is actually the men who are responsible for the break-up. Men humiliate women and abandon them for not giving birth to a male child, and even bring home a second wife; run away from their responsibilities and take to drinking, leaving the wife to somehow take care of the children; or even keep a mistress. But such instances are not considered as breaking-up the family; the wife is advised by society to stoically bear her suffering, somehow keep the family together, and wait for the husband to mend his ways. But as soon as a woman decides to stand on her own feet and become economically independent, this is immediately labelled as affecting the unity of the family system!

The words 'mistress' or 'concubine' do not have masculine-gendered synonyms in our vocabulary, because in general it is only men who have been entering into such relationships, and continue to do so to this day. When women get equal rights in society and become financially independent, this will not lead to anarchy in society or cause the break-up of the family system; on the contrary, it will act as a check on men's promiscuity. A man will have to be faithful to his wife, because now she has the confidence and ability to leave him if he dares to be unfaithful. The relationship between husband and wife will now be based on mutual love, respect and trust. And words such as 'mistress' and 'concubine' will gradually become extinct in society.

The fear that a free and independent woman working outside the home will neglect housework and upbringing of children is also baseless. What do we see happening in practice? Today, whether it be a girl student or a working woman, she does all the household chores. Working women also capably discharge all their responsibilities towards their children. On the other hand,

even if men are unemployed and sitting at home, they do not even help in housework; and the few men who do help out with household tasks are shamed as being tied to the apron strings of their wives.

Therefore, to conclude, all fears about women's freedom and independence are baseless and stem from a patriarchal mindset. These fears have no connection to reality.

Society needs to seriously ponder over this question of women's freedom. If we wish that today's children, who will be responsible citizens of tomorrow, imbibe the values of independence, equality and democracy right from childhood, if we wish that our country should break out of the shackles of centuries-old superstitions and antiquated value systems and genuinely develop, then we need to drastically reform our family system and create the social conditions that encourage women's freedom and independence. Women need to be educated and their participation in all walks of life needs to be increased. They need to be encouraged to become financially self-reliant; special measures will have to be taken to ensure that women have abundant opportunities for employment. The household duties and child-rearing duties assigned to women should be shared, men need to be encouraged to take equal responsibility for these tasks. Along with that, society must make provisions for crèches for babies in workplaces (so that women can take care of or nurse their babies as and when needed), day-care centres for small children, and community kitchens — so that women can be freed from their dual burden of work. In this manner, if the entire society becomes aware of the need for women's freedom and independence, and takes steps to create the conditions for its realisation, only then will women truly become free.



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A WOMAN IS NOT BORN, SHE IS CREATED

A baby girl captivates the whole house with her giggles and laughter. However, as she grows up, this carefree laughter gradually turns into helpless diffidence. Why? Why does this girl, who used to frolic around the house like a gazelle in her childhood, become so meek and walk with hesitant, nervous steps on growing up? Why does this naturally spirited and free girl gradually turn into an unnaturally dispirited and timid person as she grows older?

The renowned French novelist, writer and feminist thinker Simone de Beauvoir has written:

One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.

She is absolutely right. It is our social system that is responsible for thus transforming her.

We know that at birth, a baby, whether it be a girl or a boy, is just a child. Except for the difference in sexual organs, there is no other difference between them. There is no difference in their infantile actions – crying, eating, drinking. The sexual difference in children is a natural difference. It is due to this very difference that men and women complement each other. If both are thus complementary to each other, why does this sexual difference result in discrimination between the two? And, why is it that the

woman is the victim of this discrimination? Why does she have a secondary status in society? As we discuss below, it is not due to natural differences, but because of social and cultural prejudices that there is discrimination between boys and girls, and girls are demeaned.

As soon as a child is born, it starts getting influenced by the family and society. The girl is gradually made aware of her femininity and inferiority, and the boy gradually made aware of his masculinity and superiority. In a majority of households, boys are given preference in matters of food, drinks, clothes, education, etc. This discrimination is so ingrained in our social conditioning that we don't find anything wrong with it and never question it. The girl child is however aware of this discrimination against her, and as a result her personality gradually becomes timid.

A boy and girl are brought up differently right from birth. A boy is given toys like cars, guns, airplanes, bicycles, meccano construction toys, etc. While a girl's toys are related to the home, such as dolls, kitchen-sets, etc. Along with this difference in toys, a girl is constantly encouraged to take an interest in household work, while a boy is encouraged to participate in outdoor activities. Children have a natural tendency to imitate adults. A girl watches her mother work all day from morning to night; she naturally starts imitating her mother. While a boy very quickly starts drifting away from this so-called 'woman's world'; he is constantly made aware that he is a boy and hence is superior to women. It is due to this familial discrimination that a girl's mental world gradually becomes constrained and gets limited to the kitchen and the family, and the girl gradually 'becomes a woman'.

The physical changes that occur in the body of children between the age of 8 to 18 years, called puberty, are entirely natural and initiated by hormones. However, while the pubescent changes occurring in a boy's body are a source of happiness and pride for the family, the changes occurring in a girl's body become a source for concern. All of a sudden she is burdened

with infinite restrictions. She is given so many cautions and advice on each and everything that it totally confuses and unnerves her. At the same time, the strange way in which people now start looking at her body frighten her. As a result, the girl becomes timid, nervous and shy, and loses all her self-confidence.

In contrast, parents and family members nurture big dreams about a boy's future. Every effort is made to provide the boy with the best possible education that the family can afford. The family does everything possible to help him succeed in life. He is given the freedom to pursue the career path of his choice. But the goal of a girl's life is predestined right from her birth. It has become well established in society that a girl's destiny in life is to get married, that on growing up she must get married and leave her home and go to her husband's house, where her main job would be to maintain the household and give birth to and take care of the children. And so, as she grows up and attains puberty, she is taught by her parents that she must learn to become a successful homemaker and an ideal wife, daughter-in-law and mother. Even if a girl is educated by her parents, it is with the sole aim that it will help her get married to a more qualified, higher earning husband.

What does a girl want to do in life? What course of study does she want to pursue? Does she want to take up a job? If yes, what kind of a job does she want to do? When does she want to marry? And to whom? When does she want to have a child? How many children should she have? She does not have the right to take decisions on any of these issues. In fact, she cannot even take decisions on the simplest issues related to her life, like when and where can she go out of the house. In the framework set by society within which women must spend their entire lives, there is no place for the independent development of their personalities, there is no scope for the development of their inherent talents, and there is no encouragement for them to become economically and mentally independent. In such an inhibitive and controlled environment, a girl can only become cowardly, timid, dependent, introvert, insecure, without any self-

confidence, and with a distorted and crippled personality. But that is precisely how our society desires to mould women.

Values and traditions coming down over generations are so ingrained in a mother's psyche that even though she is unhappy with her own situation, she strives to raise her daughter in a manner that will make society accept her as a perfect woman. She cannot think beyond this, as this is what she sees all around her in society; this is how all the women that she knows are bringing up their daughters. In addition to learning to do household chores like cooking, sewing, knitting, etc., a girl is constantly told that since she has to go to her husband's house after marriage, she must learn to be humble and tolerant. She is taught that she must strive to win the hearts of her husband and in-laws, for which she must dutifully serve them. She must be prepared to face any kind of hardships. Even if her husband or in-laws harass or even torture her, she must stoically bear it and continue to love them and look after them. Because of this constant indoctrination, she loses her boldness and confidence. She becomes a domesticated animal.

During this moulding of a girl into a woman, her dreams are shattered and her innumerable aspirations are crushed. A girl who behaves according to ancient norms and traditions is praised by society, and is hailed as a role model. On the other hand, if she refuses to blindly follow traditions, rather questions them, thinks independently and rationally, she is derided and humiliated by society. Her opposition and questions are forcefully suppressed and her revolt is cruelly put down. It is only after this destruction of her willpower and spirit that a girl gets transformed into a 'woman'.

Numerous studies and researches have proved that a woman's status in society of a second-grade citizen has not been always so. During the early stages of development of human society and for more than ninety percent of the time human beings have been on earth, the social system was woman-dominated or matrilineal (but not matriarchal, in the sense of being opposite to patriarchal). A woman used to be the head of the family. There

was no discrimination between men and women. Both equally participated in both household and outside work. It is only at a later point in time, after private property came into existence, that men gradually monopolised outdoor work and women were confined to household work. A woman would toil day and night in the home, but she was not producing anything that would lead to the creation of wealth. Hence, gradually the importance of her work diminished. And because her work was considered unproductive and the man's work productive, the belief was created that the man was providing the woman with food and shelter, and was thus doing her a favour.

Rituals, traditions, social customs and norms were created and supporting literature was written, to ensure that women don't ever question this inequality. With the help of religion, the belief was created that a woman's secondary status is not an injustice on her but is the consequence of her sins from past lives. In order that a woman selflessly dedicates her life to the service of her husband and his family, an ideal woman was defined as being full of motherly love, a symbol of sacrifice, an epitome of tolerance, and eternally faithful to her husband. Such anti-women traditions gradually became so entrenched in society that people today feel there is nothing wrong in them, and therefore there is very little opposition to this value-system and traditions.

It is through such a process of forced moulding that a girl, instead of becoming a human being, 'becomes a woman', who is completely dependent on the man at all levels — physical, mental, social and economic. The associate tragedy is that through this same process, the boy also does not become a human being on growing up and instead becomes a 'man'.

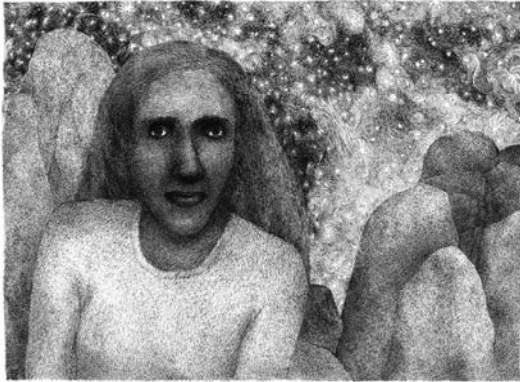
In recent times, many girls/women have been attempting to break the mould created for them by society. They have seized the limited opportunities made available to them by society to prove that they are no less capable than boys/men. Thus, for instance, girls have consistently done as well as boys, if not better, in SSC and HSC Board exams. Innumerable women are stepping outside their homes and taking up jobs. Many have also achieved

considerable success in their careers. Despite this, society and family both still continue to look at women as second-grade citizens. The fight for equality between men and women still has a long way to go.

It is not going to be easy for women to get an equal position in society; it is going to require a long and intense struggle. Women will themselves have to fight for their freedom, no one is going to come and give them freedom on a platter. To participate in this struggle, women need to start thinking deeply and logically about their own situation. The conditions for a girl to become a 'human being' instead of a 'woman' will only arise when she becomes conscious of her own identity and dares to fight and break free from the chains that bind her into mental submissiveness. She will need to stop blind emulation of rituals and customs based on irrational foundations; she will need to break free from the mindset of traditional values.

This struggle for equality between men and women is indispensably linked to the struggle for a just and egalitarian society; only in a society that is based on genuine equality between all human beings will women also get equality. Women will have to actively participate in this struggle for building a just and egalitarian society. Looking at it the other way round, any fight for justice that doesn't have the participation of one half of society cannot go very far, and will remain incomplete.

For women to gain equality with men will need the creation of a society that values household 'unproductive' work, and puts it at par with outside 'productive' work. Such a society will consider women's natural ability to give birth to children as an essential part of production and give it due status and recognition. The creation of such a society will need a long and protracted struggle, which will lead to the inculcation of these values in every person in society. Only then will discrimination end in society. Only then will a woman remain not just a woman, and a man will remain not just a man. Both of them will truly become human beings, and the mutual relations between them will soar to a new, lofty level.



THE MARKET OF BEAUTY CONTESTS

Since the past many years, either due to increased awareness or due to pressure of circumstances, an increasing number of women have been stepping out of their homes in search for jobs. But unfortunately, there are very few jobs available today. Our present economic-social system can neither provide a woman with education, nor employment, nor other facilities like healthcare and housing at affordable rates. Giant profiteering corporations are taking advantage of this situation not only to force women to work at very low wages, but are also exploiting them in various other ways. One of these is using women's bodies and faces to sell products. Women are willing to allow corporations to use their bodies to advertise their products because 'modelling' has become a glamorous profession today. Corporations have become successful in creating an aura of glamour around 'beauty contests' and 'modelling', and many young girls are getting attracted to this profession.

How is it that in an arch-conservative society like ours, modelling has become such an accepted career option for girls?

This change has actually taken place over the last two decades. It all began in the 1990s, when all of a sudden, several girls from India won 'Miss World' and 'Miss Universe' contests. Obviously, it cannot be that all of a sudden Indian girls became very beautiful. Then how come so many Indian girls won international beauty pageants in the decade of the 1990s?

MNCs And Beauty Contests

It did not happen by chance. It is all a part of the marketing strategy of the giant-sized multinational corporations (MNCs) of the developed Western countries. These MNCs are single-mindedly focussed on maximising their profits, which they then reinvest to earn yet more super-profits. But to earn profits, MNCs first need to sell the goods being manufactured by them. MNCs are huge corporations with enormous production capacities. With the markets in the developed countries getting saturated, they have been successful in forcing the third world countries, that is, the countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America, to open their markets to capital flows and goods from the developed countries. (This is the real essence of globalisation.) And so, over the last few decades, MNCs have been entering the markets of the third world countries in a big way to sell their goods and amass profits. However, due to the huge levels of poverty in these third world countries, the market in these countries is limited. Therefore, MNCs are resorting to all kinds of marketing tricks to make people buy more and more goods. One such marketing technique they have evolved with great success is to select a beautiful 'body' from that country, and give it so much publicity that no person between the age of 5 and 95 years remains uninfluenced. And then, that body, wearing an artificial smile on her face, pops up everywhere, from billboards to TV advertisements, pressing us to buy this or that product of these companies.

Beauty Contests in India

In India, the national beauty pageant that selects contestants to be sent to international pageants (such as Miss World, Miss Universe and Miss Asia Pacific) is organised by *Femina* magazine. These contests became very popular in the early 1990s, after a series of Indian contestants won international beauty pageants, starting with Sushmita Sen (Miss Universe, 1994) and Aishwarya Rai (Miss World, 1994). That this flood of winners came after India opened up its market to foreign MNCs in 1991 is no coincidence. These contests are sponsored by beauty product,

clothing and fashion MNCs, and they are well aware of the usefulness of these contests in the marketing of their goods. With six Indian girls winning international beauty contests in seven years, that sent the popularity of these contests skyrocketing.

The Femina Miss India beauty pageant for 2014 was conducted earlier this year. Hundreds of young female bodies from every corner of the country were measured. Apart from the three bodies who were selected as winners, several others were selected for all kinds of awards — Miss Beautiful Skin, Miss Beautiful Hair, Miss Beautiful Smile, Miss Vivacious, Miss Water Baby, and so on. To give the contest a touch of intellectualism, a question was asked of all the finalists — “What are you going to take back from the contest?” To this, the eventual winner replied, “I learnt a lot from all the contestants.” The runner-up replied, “I learnt a lot from all the contestants, most importantly, how to stay calm and composed.” While the second runner-up replied, “I learnt a lot from all the contestants, most importantly, simplicity.” What amazing intellect! Deservingly, they got a prolonged applause from the drooling audience for these brainy answers.

After the winning bodies were selected, they were showered with innumerable prizes and gifts. Soon after, they were off for photo-shoots for advertisements of various corporations.

The popularity, the shower of wealth, the market’s gushing attention ... Who will not wish that all this attention be showered on her body? If it falls on her body, then it falls on the country too! After Sushmita Sen and Aishwarya Rai won international beauty contests in 1994, the media declared, “They have made India proud.” That’s what patriotism has been reduced to in today’s market economy. It involves taking care of one’s body, dieting, keeping a delicate waist, having long and slender legs, maintaining a figure of 32-24-36, smiling and speaking in moderation, and most importantly, wearing clothes that will showcase the body well ... all for the country. Ah! This is what a poverty-stricken, unemployment-ridden country needs ... a beautiful body, whose sweet smile will make the poor and the hungry forget their misery, even if it is only for a short while.

Every woman has her own unique beauty, how can you ever compare different kinds of beauties? How do you compare the beauty of a dark-complexioned girl with that of a fair-complexioned girl? How do you compare the beauty of a mountain girl who runs up and down the mountains a dozen times a day, with the beauty of a tall and sturdy Punjabi girl? How do you compare the beauty of a farmer girl having rough hands and coarse hair with the beauty of a college-going city girl with smooth hair and slender hands? All are beautiful in their own ways.

Beauty Contests: A Perversion

Beauty contests are a perversion of capitalist society. In a capitalist society, all that matters is money, and more money, and still more money. The usefulness of anything is determined by its money value; everything is transformed into a source for earning money. Human values, cooperation, having concern for and looking after one another, saving the environment for our future generations, bringing up children so that they are imbued with human values, use of knowledge for the benefit of society — all such sentiments and concerns become meaningless. And so in a capitalist society, it is perfectly all right to use a woman’s body to boost sales of goods. In the backdrop of a huge, dazzling screen, young women sexily twirl and catwalk down the stage, wearing near-transparent, minimalistic clothing to showcase their bodies — in a competition to select which body will be used this year to sell cars, clothes, cosmetics, underwears, chocolates, etc. As if this was not enough, this is telecast ‘live’ across the world, and the organisers of the beauty contest make huge money out of selling television broadcasting rights to TV companies, who in turn make huge profits out of this telecast by selling advertising spots. Beauty pageants have therefore become prestigious events, and modelling a respectable profession. With billions of dollars involved in these contests, this grotesque display of a woman’s body has now become enshrouded in awe-inspiring glamour.

Er ... aren’t we rushing to judgements too quickly? Apart from their body measurements, aren’t the final winners also judged on

the basis of their intellect? If we look more closely, we will find that this is just a ploy by the organisers, to cover up the real nature of the contest. It is true that in the final round of the contest, after all the measurements of the body are done with and the body has been displayed from all possible angles, the contestants are also asked a round of questions. However, in this, the most stereotyped questions are asked, such as: "What is the meaning of true beauty?" To this, the answer usually is: "True beauty means beauty of the mind." Sometimes, a socially oriented question is added, such as: "What will you do for your country?" And the usual response is: "I will do something for orphan children and the elderly." And when asked about their role model, everyone's favorite answer is: "Mother Teresa." Orphaned children, helpless elderly ... and Mother Teresa — very suitable answers, that can be used to give a social veneer to the pageant winner. Of the 100 odd women whose bodies have been assessed, the chosen 4-5 'beautiful' bodies are given this game of IQ testing to play. The message that is sought to be sent out through this farcical 'intellectual' game is: we don't just ask women to bare their bodies, we also test their intellect, and judge them by their social concerns too.

After they won the Miss Universe and Miss World contests respectively in 1994, Sushmita Sen and Aishwarya Rai got an enormous amount of publicity, with papers highlighting the news in bold headlines and carrying flashy photographs. The perspective that a woman's womanhood lies in becoming a 'beauty' was bombarded on young women throughout the country. Both became idols for lakhs of young women across the country; becoming a 'beauty' became a goal for them. Beauty contests started being organised not just at the city level, but also in lanes and bylanes, and in schools and colleges. Hundreds of girls started participating in these contests. At the same time, the market of the cosmetic and fashion companies also boomed. The sales of powders, creams, perfumes and innumerable other cosmetics skyrocketed; women started going in for threading of eyebrows, hairstyles, expensive designer clothing and such

artificial means in order to look beautiful. Beauty parlours opened up in every nook and cranny of the country.

As it is, because of the way women are brought up in their families and society, they consider themselves weak and inferior to men. This focus on women's bodies, and creation of a perspective that a woman with only a particular kind of body and appearance is beautiful, has led to a further distortion of their personalities. We give below an example of the impact this perverse value has had on women.

A few years ago, there was a news item in a newspaper that a brilliant student of the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (Delhi) committed suicide because she had pimple scars on her face and did not consider herself to be beautiful. In her suicide note, she wrote that she was committing suicide because she was ugly. Due to her intellect, people had a lot of expectations from her. But for her, her external appearance was more important. Because she did not consider herself beautiful, she felt that life was not worth living; for her, her intelligence was of secondary value. Competition about who is more beautiful than others, the reverse side of which is stamping some as more ugly than others, will only result in such tragedies.

The Big Fight Over Women's Bodies

Post globalisation, that is, after India opened up its economy to foreign MNCs in 1991, these corporations started promoting beauty contests in India in a big way.

During the initial years, some organisations opposed these international beauty pageants, arguing that Indian culture was under threat. But their opposition did not get much public support, for two important reasons. One, the ancient Indian culture they glorified had confined women to their homes, prohibited them from taking education, and forced them to commit sati when their husband died. Uncritically glorifying Indian culture meant supporting these backward traditions. Two, while these organisations opposed beauty contests, they were not opposed to the entry of multinational corporations into the

country. Therefore, their opposition to beauty contests had no meaning, as beauty pageants are only a tool of these corporations to sell their goods in the Indian market. Indian girls were anointed winners of international beauty pageants, so that their faces could be used as marketing tools.

Apart from such opponents, beauty contests also have their supporters. There are in fact several 'intellectuals' who have been vociferous in their support for these beauty contests, arguing that these contests help in the liberation of women. Let us examine one of the important debates between these two groups.

The opponents say that beauty contests degrade Indian tradition and culture; the body that was once clothed in a saree is now in a swimsuit, which they claim is obscene. The supporters counter this by arguing — when girls wear swimsuits for swimming, why don't you oppose that too? While the opponents fear that if women wear body-revealing western dresses, Indian culture will die (after all, as soon as a woman's veil slips, culture drowns!), Indian attire will disappear, etc., the supporters are worried that if women continue to remain fully clothed, then our country will be labelled backward and regressive.

O, a woman's body! If religion is to be protected, it is women who are raped; if family honour is to be upheld, it is women who are killed; if culture is under threat and needs to be preserved, it is women who are paraded naked ... It is because we have relegated women to being mere bodies for centuries, and maintained them so well, that they are able to compete at the international level. Even if our other products cannot stand up to international competition, this is one product where definitely we are world beaters.

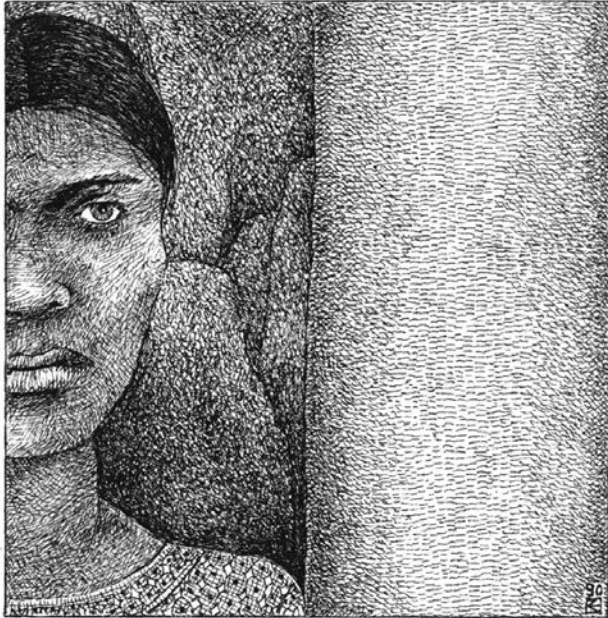
Since this body is so precious, no wonder that the opponents and supporters of beauty contests are debating with each other over how to protect this body. The former argue, the body needs to remain covered to protect 'Indian tradition'. The latter group wants to uncover the body to 'develop the country' — exposing the body will enable foreign capital to flow into the country and sell its goods, thus leading to 'development'.

There is not much difference between the traditionalists who consider a woman to be just a body to be kept fully draped within the four walls of the home as a slave of the family, and the modernists who wax eloquent about woman's freedom, only to strip and parade her in the market. For the latter, woman's freedom has only a limited meaning, and that is, that she should be allowed to step out of the house, but only for catwalking down the ramp. For both these opponents and supporters of beauty contests, a woman is nothing more than a body.

One covers the body, the other exposes it. One protects slavery, the other puts freedom on sale.

In recent times, some supporters of a 'woman's right to exhibit her body' have extended their argument to arguing that a woman must also have the right to 'sell her body', and therefore prostitutes should be called 'sex workers' and the laws must accordingly be modified. Strangely, these people never raise / support the demand for freedom of women to choose their partners, for the right of a woman to choose with whom she should have sexual relations; they are only concerned about the freedom of women to sell their bodies! Once a woman steps out of her home, there is only one road open to her — that goes straight to the market. There, she can either use her body to sell products, or sell her body itself!

In our country, a woman was always at the lowest rung in social hierarchy. She was not considered a 'human being'. And now, beauty contests have reduced her to the status of a mere object. We must seriously question this addiction for beauty contests and the dangers they pose for a woman's place in society, her recognition as a human being, and societal health. We need to challenge the values being spread by the alluring advertisements of multinational companies and their perverse 'ideals', and raise our voices against the marketing of women's bodies and organising of beauty contests. It is our responsibility to create a society where both men and women can live dignified lives, holding their head up high ...



A WOMAN IS A WOMAN'S ENEMY

In the past few years, we have conducted several programs on women's issues in colleges. We have given talks, organised workshops, screened documentary films, even staged the wonderful Marathi play *Mulgi Jhali Ho* (A girl is born). In each program, one common comment that came from the boys was: "In reality, a woman herself is a woman's greatest enemy." To buttress their point, they would raise questions like: "Doesn't a mother-in-law harass her daughter-in-law?"; "Haven't you ever noticed that daughters-in-law don't get along with each other?"; "Haven't you seen women pulling each other's hair at public water taps?" The essence of all these questions is that women themselves are responsible for women's problems and that men are in no way responsible for these problems.

These questions are raised not just by boys, but by girls too. And not just in colleges, we have heard exactly the same comments in offices, homes and in fact everywhere, during

conversations with people from various walks of life. Whenever we have raised the issue of the need for women's unity and solidarity, many people — including both men and women — have remarked that women are their own worst enemies, hence their coming together is impossible. And while expressing this opinion, everyone gives the very same examples, of mother-in-law and daughter-in-law always fighting each other, of sisters-in-law not getting along with each other, and some even mentioned being harassed by their female bosses.

On the surface, this argument seem convincing, that 'a woman is a woman's worst enemy'. But as soon as we examine the issue in greater depth, a totally different reality emerges ...

Patriarchal Society

Our society is a patriarchal society. This means that the man is the head of the family. He exercises power over the family and its members, and controls the property, resources and wealth of the house. The family is recognised by his name and he is the one who makes all decisions pertaining to the family. After the head of the household dies, control and power over the family passes on to another male in the family. That is why the son is considered to be the torchbearer of the familial lineage, because he is the heir.

In a patriarchal society, men are considered to be superior to women, and within the family, the male members exercise control over the women in the family. Their body, mind and behaviour are all under man's control.

Here, it is important to keep in mind that this dominance of man over woman is not because he is a father or a husband or a son, but because he is a man. Ours is a hierarchical society, it is not really a genuinely democratic society, there are power centres everywhere, and within the family, this power is exercised by the man.

This dominance of men over women is rooted in their economic strength, the fact that men control the economic purse, the financial strings, within the family. Hence, the man is the

head of the family, and the woman is dependent on him. Since a woman has stayed in this situation for hundreds of years, she meekly accepts her inferior situation in society, tolerates man's slavery and calls it her fate. This ideology, handed down over many generations, has become internalised by not just men, but women too. Indeed, women have internalised their situation to such an extent that they perceive everything from a patriarchal mindset. A woman behaves the way her mother behaved, and insists that her daughter should behave in a similar manner.

Many people would comment on this: well, if this ideology has been there for so many centuries, it must be having some basis, meaning that men must naturally be superior to women. This viewpoint is further strengthened by the fact that this is the value system that we see all around us, in our homes, among our relatives and friends, and in society, and so we come to believe that it is naturally so. But actually, this has not always been so; in ancient times, society was matrilineal, women were the head of the family, and men and women were equal.

Before we discuss this question of whether women are indeed their own worst enemies and cannot be friends of each other, let us first point out one important fact that needs to be kept in mind. There are some feelings / instincts that are common to all men and women, such as love, selfishness, envy and hatred. It is wrong to think that some of these feelings, such as love, are more in men, and other feelings, such as hatred, are more in women. A woman can be as much the best friend of someone as a man can be, and a man can be as much someone's worst enemy as a woman can be. Actually, if we look around us, it can be observed that men have more enemies than women!

With this brief background, let us now examine why this view is so commonly prevalent in society that 'a woman is a woman's enemy'.

Woman vs Woman, or ...

The oft repeated example of a woman being another woman's enemy is that of a mother-in-law and her daughter-in-law. When

a daughter-in-law enters a household, the mother-in-law ceases to be just a woman. Since the mother-in-law has internalised the patriarchal mentality, within the hierarchical family, where there are no equal and democratic relations between the family members, she is now a step above the daughter-in-law in the family hierarchy. So, she dominates over the daughter-in-law. She in fact exercises power over her daughter-in-law even more forcefully because she has had an inferior, second-grade existence throughout her life, and for the first time, is in a position to exercise power over someone. The daughter-in-law, before marriage, when she was in her father's home, never had a feeling that her father's home was her home because she was always told that "you belong to someone else"; after marriage, when she comes to her in-laws' house, again she is an outsider. And so, initially, she bears her mother-in-law's domination over her. But, gradually as she settles down in her husband's house and starts making the house her own, her mother-in-law starts feeling that she is encroaching on her (mother-in-law's) rights and this leads to tensions within the home. Therefore, the root cause of tensions between a mother-in-law and daughter-in-law is not that a woman is another woman's enemy, but the patriarchal family system that subordinates women within the family.

Let us take a look at one of the most common conflicts between a mother-in-law and her daughter-in-law. Women don't possess any personal wealth of their own. Even if a woman does a job outside the home, in most cases, she does not have any control over her income / salary, this control is with her husband who decides how it is to be spent. Due to her dependent status, she therefore considers the property of her husband as her own. When someone threatens to encroach upon the property of her husband, she then fights to defend her husband's property rights. This is an important reason for fights between not just mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, but also between sisters-in-law. To call such fights as fights between women is not correct. These are fights over property. And in reality, men fight amongst themselves over property more than women do. Here, it is also

important to raise the question: since women do not own any property, how can they fight over property? The answer to this question is simple: since it is men who have control over property and not women, the fight between women over property is actual an extension of the fight between their men over this property. But the fights amongst men are ignored, and only women are stigmatised as being enemies of each other.

When a girl gets married and enters her husband's house for the first time, all the rituals–traditions and rules of the house are taught to her by her mother-in-law. The men of the house don't involve themselves in this. Even if they find something wrong in the behaviour of the girl, they ask the women of the household to communicate it to the girl. On the surface, it appears that a woman is harassing another woman. But in reality, it is the patriarchal family headed by the man which is exercising control over the newly wedded girl. All the rules of the household have been made by men; not only that, all rules are for women only, men have no constraints and are free to do what they want. And it is the duty of the senior women of the household to ensure that the rules are implemented; they implement these rules, because they are slaves of the house.

Yet another commonly given example of women being enemies of each other, is dowry-related harassment / murder of a daughter-in-law by her mother-in-law and sister-in-law. Here too, this is not a conflict between women, this is a conflict born out of greed for money. Everyone wants to somehow earn money and become rich, whatever be the means. Brothers fight over property, and are even willing to kill each other for that. A son is willing to stab his father in the back for property. Money destroys the most hallowed of relations. A doctor–patient relation is considered sacred, but in today's world where money is everything, a doctor is willing to allow the patient to die on the operation table if he does not have money for the operation. In such a world, where money is at the centre of everything, including all relations, why blame the mother-in-law alone for dowry-related harassment of the daughter-in-law? Actually,

along with her, the father-in-law and the husband too are involved in the harassment of the girl. Nay, they are more responsible, as it is the men who dominate the family. Nothing happens in the family without their permission, even the food prepared in the house is as per their tastes. So how can the mother-in-law harass the daughter-in-law without the permission and go-ahead given by the men in the family? To take the analysis further, actually, the harassment of the daughter-in-law over dowry is neither a conflict between two women, nor is it a conflict between man and woman, it is a conflict born out of greed for money.

There are other facets too to the conflict between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. One such facet is the tensions that arise due to gap between generations. The younger generation, whether it be a boy or a girl, embraces new ideas, behaviours, ways of life, much more easily than the older generation, which resists change and is not willing to accept these new ideas and thoughts so easily. In such a situation, it is obvious that there would be a conflict between the younger and older generation, but this conflict is not just between a mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, it also takes place between a father and son. So, to call this too to be a woman vs. woman conflict is not correct.

Let us finally examine another common fight between women, that at public water taps. At the root of this fight is scarcity; whenever there is a shortage, people are going to fight with each other for getting a larger share. Women only pull each other's hair at public water taps because they go to fetch water; if men were to fetch water, there would be a bloodbath!

Let Us Stop Humiliating Ourselves

To conclude, women are not enemies of women. The conflicts between women, because of which people have come to believe that women are their own worst enemies, are actually rooted in our patriarchal and money-centred society. The fact is, anyone can be anyone's friend or enemy. And actually, women are very close friends of each other; there is a very strong emotional

bonding between them, because their sorrows are the same. They empathize with each other's suffering, and provide more support and help to each other than men.

Dear friends, we women too have come to believe that women are enemies of women, because of our slave mentality, because of our internalisation and acceptance of patriarchy. The strong always humiliate the weak and make fun of them. Since women are the most vulnerable section of society, they are insulted in various ways. That is why all expletives are based on mothers and sisters; and most negative sayings and innumerable jokes are based on women's perceived weaknesses. The saying, 'A woman is a woman's enemy', is only another such saying. It is intended to demean us women, and create a rift amongst us.

We women need to become free from patriarchal indoctrinations. All the rights won by women so far have only been won due to our united struggles. If women were indeed each other's enemies, we would never have united for these struggles. The reason why women came together and fought was because their sorrows are the same, their problems are the same, the fetters imposed on them are similar.

Today, our problems such as rising prices, hunger, poverty, unemployment, dowry deaths, violence and rape have increased manifold. In this so-called developed society of today, women are bought and sold; they are stripped and paraded naked through the streets; they are brutally raped and murdered. Despite all the material progress in society, women continue to be insecure everywhere. We cannot fight these problems by remaining divided, we need to unite.

We need to reject such malicious sayings that intend to weaken us and break our solidarity. We need to think over, understand and analyse our fundamental problems. We need to come together and fight to create a just society where we can genuinely live as human beings. Come, let's unite and prove that we are not each other's enemies, but friends. True friends!



WHY MARITAL ADORNMENTS?

I am married, but I do not apply *sindoor* in the partition of my hair to show my marital status, nor do I wear other adornments that married women are supposed to wear, such as necklaces, earrings or even the *mangalsutra*. I am asked a lot of questions about it. Not just me, other women who don't wear these adornments after marriage are also asked, "Why don't you wear *sindoor*, *mangalsutra*, bangles, etc.?"

That a married woman should wear such adornments as a mark of her married status is a viewpoint that has been deeply ingrained in society for ages. When a woman rejects this, people feel that it is a violation of Indian culture.

We need to seriously think on this issue, that can marital adornments make our married life blissful? Can these lifeless adornments make the living relationship between a husband and wife better? On the contrary, we sometimes see that women who very religiously wear marital adornments do not have a happy married life.

Some History

Marital adornments are actually nothing more than the continuation of a centuries-old ritual; there is really no logic behind wearing them. In most countries and communities around the world, women do not wear any adornments to show their married status, it is not considered essential for them to wear any kind of symbols to exhibit their marital status. In our country too, different regions have different customs; in some places, women wear more adornments, in some places less, and in other regions,

none at all. In backward states such as Uttar Pradesh, Bengal, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, there is a lot of insistence on the wearing of marital adornments; while in Kerala, Karnataka and north-eastern states, their use is very less or not seen at all. Among Christians, Sikhs and a few other communities, it is not considered necessary for women to wear adornments symbolising their marriage.

We can understand the reasons for these differences from history. In ancient times, after the emergence of modern humans, for tens of thousands of years, society was matrilineal and woman was the head of the family. She had an identity of her own; her main identity was not of being someone's wife. We still find remnants of these societies in parts of Karnataka, Kerala and in the north-eastern states. In these societies, marital adornments are not given much importance. In other places like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, where during the past two thousand years a rigid feudal and patriarchal society came into existence, women were considered as private property. They did not have a separate identity of their own. Just as slaves and animals had their bodies branded with the seal of their owner to show that they belonged to him, similarly, women wore symbols to show that they were married. Thus, in earlier times, these symbols were used to depict slavery.

Since then, even though society has advanced from being a feudal society to a modern democratic society, patriarchy continues to exist in society, and along with it, several patriarchal rituals too have continued, the wearing of marital adornments being amongst them. Even today, women do not have a distinct identity separate from that of their husbands. A woman not wearing the traditional 'marital' adornments is assumed to be unmarried, divorced or widowed. But if she is neither of these, that is, if she is married and yet does not wear these adornments, then she is considered to be a frivolous and immoral woman.

Supporters of this medieval tradition give a new logic to justify this wearing of marital ornaments, that there is an aesthetic sense behind it and that adornments enhance a woman's

beauty. Let's assume for a minute that this is true, that this is why women wear marital adornments. Then, why is this right of a woman to look beautiful taken away from her after her husband's death? Clearly, it is not a matter of aesthetic sense; it is a continuation of a medieval feudal-patriarchal tradition.

Changes in the Modern Era

Viewpoints regarding beauty change with time and place. They also change in accordance with changing needs due to changes in society. During the days of kings, men too used to wear ornaments. All photographs of kings show them lavishly adorned with ornate jewellery. This means that in those days, men too wore jewellery; it was a part of the fashion of that period. With the beginning of modern times, as men got more and more actively involved in production, they gradually discarded their jewellery, and also started wearing more convenient and practical dresses like pant-shirts and kurta-pyjamas in place of the traditional dhoti. In Europe too, at the beginning of the modern era, women used to wear long gowns or long frocks (dresses), and did all kinds of hairstyles. But in the storm of the industrial revolution, all this changed. Women stepped out of their households in large numbers and went to work in factories. Their long gowns were replaced by pant-shirts or skirts.

A similar change has taken place in our country over the last sixty years. Earlier, when women were primarily in the house, their world was limited to prettifying themselves, wearing ornaments and doing make-up. As society has advanced, more and more women are stepping out of their homes, becoming financially independent, and acquiring an independent identity of their own in society. Simultaneously, their attitude towards wearing traditional dresses and jewellery, including marital adornments, has also changed. Thus for instance, the jewellery worn by women two generations ago, during the times of our grandmothers — such as nose-rings, armbands, heavy necklaces of several traditional designs — is virtually nowhere to be seen today. Forget the cities, even in villages, daughters-in-law are not seen wearing such jewellery. These changes have not taken place

Let's Rise from the Shadows!

due to any social movement, they have gradually occurred with changes in society.

In cities and in industrial areas, where women participate more in production, the changes are even more visible. One obvious change that can be seen is the changes in attire. Women have moved on from wearing *sarees* to comfortable *salwar kameezes* and pant-shirts. Working women such as doctors, engineers, nurses and teachers have stopped wearing heavy jewellery at least while at work, as it interferes with their work. The same is the case with women from the labouring classes — they too do not wear many adornments. In fact, in the daily hustle-bustle of commuting from home to office and back, most working women have very little time for make-up too.

Along with these changes, women have also begun questioning the need to wear adornments to show their marital status. Of course, the number of such women who are rejecting wearing marital adornments is presently small, but it is growing.

External vs. Internal Beauty

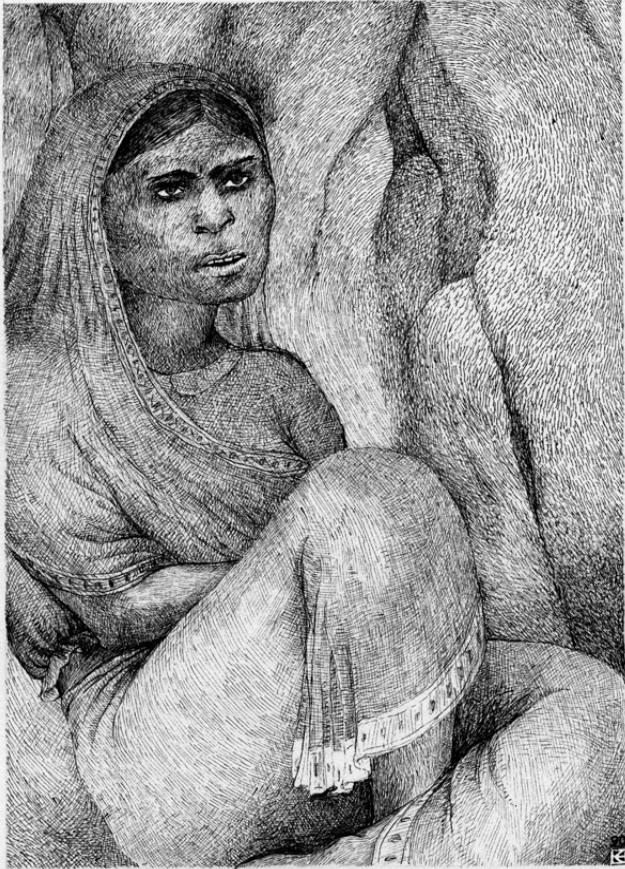
There is another important aspect of this whole issue: society's perspective towards women's beauty. Only a dolled-up, coy, shy, timid woman is considered beautiful. This implies that only a woman's external appearance is given importance. But actually, there is another kind of beauty too, and that is what can be called 'inner beauty'. Inner beauty means the beauty of personality, the beauty of a woman who is independent and confident, who contributes to the advancement of society. Such for example is the beauty of the renowned litterateur, Mahadevi Verma. She was not beautiful in the conventional sense, but can history ever forget her contribution to literature? Another such beautiful woman is Mahashweta Devi, also one of India's foremost literary personalities. And while speaking of such captivating women, how can one forget the legendary freedom fighter, Captain Laxmi Sehgal, who fought along with Subhash Chandra Bose in the Indian National Army. Such women and many others like them are remembered for their work, and not for their external beauty.

In contrast to this definition of beauty, when we consider beauty to mean external appearance, the names of women like Aishwarya Rai and Lara Dutta rise up before us. It is up to us to decide which viewpoint we would like to hold, which viewpoint should gain acceptance in society. At the present time, it is of course true that for an overwhelming majority of people, a woman means only a 'body', and so for them, a beautiful woman means a female body with an attractive external appearance.

Corporations too are interested in the perpetuation of this dominant perspective towards beauty — only then will their business of selling cosmetics and beauty products flourish. So, all their advertisements emphasise only external beauty of women. The media — which is becoming more and more corporate controlled — too contributes to the strengthening of this dominant mindset. Television serials always show women draped in heavy expensive *sarees*, wearing *sindoor*, *bindi*, *mangalsutra* and loads of jewellery.

Also contributing to this dominant perspective, in a different kind of way, are the fundamentalist groups. For them, a woman is just a body, a house slave and a child producing & rearing machine. And so, they keep coming out with fatwas announcing a ban on wearing of jeans or pant-shirts by women, or declaring that women must compulsorily wear *burqas* and *sarees*.

Despite this prevailing scenario, as society gradually changes, more and more independent-minded and bold women are stepping out of their homes and doing all kinds of jobs. Rejecting the dominant view towards beauty, instead of worrying about their external appearance, they are striving to create an independent identity of their own. Of course, their number is presently small, but it is gradually increasing. As women become more educated, as more and more women become economically independent, as more and more women become conscious of their identity as human beings, these old benchmarks of beauty will automatically become outdated. And then, just like the ornaments and attire from ancient times, contemporary jewellery and attire will also be seen only in museums.



SCRUTINISING WOMEN'S MAGAZINES

We are all familiar with the so-called 'women's magazines' available in the market. Many 'educated' people can be seen flipping through these magazines at railway stations. Many of us subscribe to these magazines and devote time to reading them. These magazines — that are weeklies, fortnightlies or monthlies — cost between Rs. 25 to 50 per copy, meaning we spend between Rs. 50 to 200 per month on them. But have we ever given a critical thought to what do these magazines give us? Given that these are women's magazines, what is the special content that they have

that is not present in general interest magazines? What is the perspective behind publishing these magazines?

These magazines claim to be for 'Women of Substance', that they are a 'Complete Magazine' for women, that they are meant for 'Today's Woman'. What is their perspective of an 'ideal' woman? Middle-class women are avid readers of these magazines; what are the values and views that these magazines inculcate in these women? Which are the women's issues that they consider to be important? Do women's magazines contain articles on politics, culture, literature and the financial world, or do they think that these issues are not important for women? What according to these women's magazines is and should be the difference between 'yesterday's woman' and 'today's woman'; and what is their vision of 'tomorrow's woman'?

The answer to these questions becomes clear just by looking at their table of contents. The topics listed on the contents page are generally: *Be careful with herbal cosmetics, Common beauty problems, Nightie with tattling lace, Knit camels on kids' sweaters, What's new this winter, 15 cool drinks for this summer*, and other such articles on similar lines. In addition to this, women's magazines have columns on horoscope, cinema, new products in the market, etc. They even carry jokes that mock at women! All women's magazines have this same general content. In addition, they contain innumerable advertisements of consumer goods, from creams, lipsticks, purses and jewellery to washing machines and dishwashers.

Clearly, these conservative, ritualistic magazines are not interested in changing the present status of women in society. They teach that a husband is the be-all and end-all of a woman's existence, and that there are only two ways of getting a good husband — the kitchen and the body. Spend half your time in the kitchen cooking savouries and delicacies, and the remaining time with jewellery and creams. That is the quintessence of your entire existence. That is not only good for you, it is also good for the market — that is, the cosmetic / fashion / clothing corporations sponsoring these magazines!

The typical woman portrayed in these magazines is a 'modern woman' who washes clothes in a washing machine instead of using a bucket, tub and brush. She uses a Roti-maker instead of *chakla-belan* (rolling pin and board). And she uses a mixer instead of pestle and mortar. But even if a woman uses a washing machine to wash clothes, *roti-maker* to make *rotis*, and vacuum cleaner to sweep the floor, isn't it true that her role and status has not really changed? All that has happened is that she now uses new, technologically advanced gadgets to do her chores more quickly and efficiently. Having thus saved some time from her household chores, she now has the time for decorating the house, preparing delectable sherbets, preparing new dishes for the morning tiffin and experimenting with new recipes for dinner, keeping herself trim and beautiful, and finally, choosing and wearing the appropriate dress and matching jewellery and make-up for the evening party so that she could be the centre of attraction.

Of course, it is true that the innumerable kitchen and household gadgets that these magazines talk about and the wide range of ingredients needed to make the mouth-watering recipes featured in these magazines are way out of reach for most people. For most women readers of these magazines, they only kindle unattainable dreams. Even assuming that society's prosperity increases in the future and more women are able to access these gadgets and make these recipes at home, the question that needs to be raised is: is this all there is to the 'future' of women? Will women in 'future' too continue to be entangled in this conundrum?

Even if these magazines only want to focus on women doing housework, why is it that these magazines never even mention the valiant women who live in mountainous regions, who too cook food, collect firewood, fetch drinking water, sew clothes and take care of the kids, and apart from that, also work in the fields, and do all kinds of other jobs. Why is there never any mention of the women who live in deserts and walk for miles, in conditions of extreme heat, to fetch water for their thirsty families? Why

don't these magazines write about the women who build brick palaces on their strong shoulders? They too look after their households and take care of their children. Why is it that their struggles and their life stories do not merit any space in these magazines? The answer is simple — there is no feminineness in these women. These magazines want to portray only delicate, coy women; they are keen to reinforce the norms and values established by patriarchal society.

Has there taken place at least some development in a woman's personality in the 21st century? If no progress has occurred, then what are these magazines doing about it? And if some development has indeed taken place, then do these magazines devote at least some space to recognising and encouraging it? The fact is, in the perspective of these magazines, the role of women is limited to only looking after her children, home and body. These magazines are not only silent on issues like the back-breaking work done by women and the need to free them from their boring chores, on their slave-like status in society and the need to liberate women from this bondage and bring about gender equality, in a well-planned strategy, they keep showing women new pathways towards the kitchen–house–family.

Have you ever thought about how much space these magazines — that regularly bring out special issues on 'brides', 'beauty', 'motherhood', etc. — allocate to women's careers and self-reliance? Globally, women work the hardest, crores of women around the world support their families financially, and yet women are relegated to secondary status everywhere — have you ever seen these magazines talking about such issues?

On the rare occasion that these magazines provide information about women's careers, they have nothing to do with women's intellectual or other capabilities, they only give information about jobs that need beautiful and smart women, such as air hostesses, receptionists, models, etc. That means even the limited career guidance they provide is aimed at reinforcing the traditional image and role of women in society. If by chance these magazines give some space to women who have achieved

notable success in non-traditional areas, then their struggles, values in life, or views on various issues are not given any importance whatsoever. For example, instead of asking a woman politician questions about politics, a woman musician about music, or a woman writer about literature, they will be asked questions that bring forth their image as a 'housewife': How do you manage both your career and your home? Do you cook for your husband? Who manages the kitchen? What are your favorite delicacies? What kind of clothes do you like to wear? Do your kids miss their mother's presence? etc. etc. One question that all these career women are invariably asked is: if you have to choose between your home and your career, what would you choose? The answer is all too familiar. The point we are trying to make is, these magazines directly and indirectly try to establish the importance or high priority of her home in the life of a woman, even if she is a working woman and has achieved much success in her professional career.

Another disgusting thing about these magazines is that instead of promoting rationalism and a spirit of scientific enquiry in women, instead of provoking them to take an interest in life and the world around us, instead of making them interested in thinking about, analysing and finding answers to socio-economic-cultural problems, instead of filling them with a zest for knowledge, they fill them with passiveness and indifference. They make women fatalistic, submissive to the belief that everything is predetermined by fate, so there is no need to make any effort to change things. According to them, women are married to pots, pans, the ladle and the broom at birth itself; that is their destiny. So, there is no point in going against it; one should make peace with one's fate.

These magazines do not carry even a single article that is related to the issues that are of concern for progressive women who are challenging the dominant societal view towards women. The reason they completely ignore such issues is because that will raise questions about the traditional superior status and rights of men in the family and society and will encourage

women to challenge their present secondary status. Women will start becoming independent and confident, and will start questioning the dominant view towards beauty. What will then happen to the sales of cosmetics and beauty products made by cosmetic and fashion corporations? For these corporations (and hence for the women's magazines sponsored by them), sale of their products — lipsticks, face powders, creams, etc. — is more important than women's esteem and identity. And so, women's magazines are not only interested in maintaining the centuries old inferior status of women in society, they are keen to reinforce it.

Recently, a prominent English language magazine carried a 34-page free supplement, titled *Renaissance Women*. Incredibly, the supplement contained only articles and advertisements about washing machines, refrigerators, wall paints and hair removers. Even more astonishingly, of the 162 pages in the main magazine itself, 44 pages were devoted to advertisements, 14 pages to dress designs, 3 pages were on the welcome party for Miss Universe's visit to India, and 3–4 pages were on men's styles. By constantly bombarding us with such advertisements both through magazines and television, we are gradually coerced into believing that we must have these products in our house. So, just get up and head to the nearest mall.

The only problems related to women that these so-called 'women's magazines' discuss are their beauty problems and health related problems. A lot of magazines list both health and beauty problems in one column itself, as if both health and beauty are one and the same thing. Apart from carrying loads of beauty tips, all the discussion that takes place in these magazines on the issue of women's health is almost always related to the importance of a healthy diet for pregnant women. As if, when a woman is not pregnant, she does not need to have healthy, nutritious food. A woman is after all a slave; she is nurtured and taken care of only so that she is able to give birth to a child (and that too only a son).

What about the most important problems that women face,

especially those that result from a patriarchal mindset, such as dowry deaths, rape, eve-teasing and domestic violence? These are a strict no-no, they are never even mentioned. Even though these are issues which affect women only, yet these 'women's magazines' never take the initiative to encourage and inspire women, who live in constant fear of being molested–stalked–raped, to lead confident lives and fight to change the patriarchal system that is at the root of violence against women? If eve-teasing and rape are ever written about, then the articles only give tips on how can women protect themselves (and not fight back) — which only serves to further increase the fear in minds of women. Similarly, these magazines never discuss and analyse problems of working women who are burdened by their dual role (at home and in the office) and the mindset behind it; they are not at all interested in spreading awareness about this issue too amongst women.

Now let's look at the kinds of crappy stories that are published in the name of literature in every women's magazine. They will never be on themes that show women playing a leadership role in society, on women confidently taking decisions in tricky situations, on a single woman bringing up a child, and so on. The woman in all these stories is always living within the boundaries set for her by today's patriarchal society. The topics are the usual — husband–wife relations; husband, wife and the other woman; mother-in-law and daughter-in-law squabbles; and so on. Thus, for instance, one recurring theme of these stories is a husband's pre-marital or post-marital affairs, while the wife is the embodiment of sacrifice and love, who keeps her unworthy husband's shoes back in their place, cooks his favourite dishes and spends night after night waiting for him; eventually, moved by her penance, the husband returns home. Another common theme is where an educated wife, due to quarrels with her husband or because of his violent behaviour, returns to her father's house, endures verbal abuses from her sister-in-law and insults from her father, yet makes no effort to become economically independent; finally, a sympathetic friend or an

understanding housemaid wakes her up to reality by commenting: "Our man is ours alone. No matter how much he beats us, he loves us. So return home."

Thus, these magazines through their stories and articles propagate and establish the view that a woman's world is confined to her husband's home, and even within that, to the kitchen. Women should not think beyond lipsticks, eyeliners, hair-dos, designer jewellery and dresses; they should not be concerned with socio-political issues. They thus package and embellish 'women's slavery', from slavery of the kitchen to slavery of beauty.*

It needs to be noted that the male readership of these magazines is almost equal to their female readership. Therefore, these magazines further strengthen patriarchal ideology in men's minds that a woman's life should only revolve around her kids and her family.

We truly do not need such magazines. They are trash, they need to be dumped in the garbage bin. What we really need is literature that connects us to the world, makes us aware of social conditions and realities, literature that instils confidence in us and inspires us to lead truly fulfilling lives. Women are living in such adverse conditions and yet their spirit is indomitable, they are fighting for their rights in every corner of the world; the stories of these struggles needs to be told to everyone. Most importantly, what we need is literature that makes us aware that we are first and foremost human beings and only then women, and which inspires us to fight for justice and equal rights in society.

* *To look beautiful is a common wish, but to make it the be-all and end-all of one's existence and identity, is empty-headedness, brainlessness.*

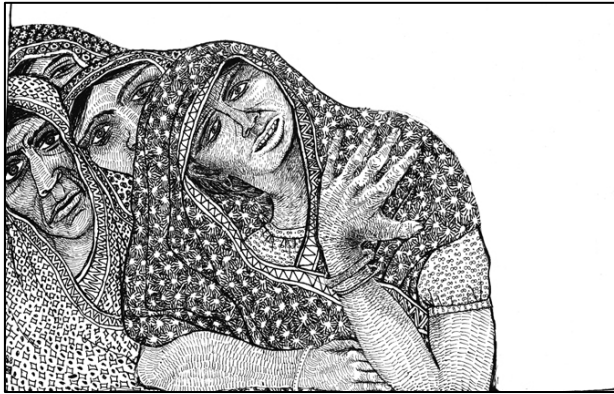


IMAGE OF WOMEN IN MEDIA

Media — meaning cinema, television, newspapers and magazines — is considered to be the mirror of society. That means it is expected of the media that whatever happens in society is portrayed as it is, truthfully, by it. The most powerful media today is obviously television, firstly because it's an audio-visual medium, and secondly, because it has entered into nearly every home in the country. Come, let's take a look at the image of women portrayed on television.

In this essay, we discuss three of the most common images of women shown on television: one, programs featuring models, such as models 'catwalking' down the ramp, interviews with models about their beauty secrets, etc.; two, the faithful wife dressed in a *saree* with her head covered, who crushes her dreams to keep her family happy, who is the ideal housewife but who also looks after the family business when her husband is not well; and three, a working woman who while doing a job is ever-willing to give it up if it comes in the way of her marriage, or if her husband so desires, or if it is adversely affecting her family's happiness, irrespective of however well she may be doing in her career.

So far as the first image is concerned, that of a model, she doesn't appear to belong to our society. A model, even if she is out at work or partying till late night, is very secure as she is

always protected by bodyguards. And so, she does not face any problems faced by common women, like eve-teasing, rape, etc. Her main problem is, how to make herself look more beautiful. There are no similarities between her problems and our problems; it is almost as if she has come from another world. Nevertheless, the repeated portrayal of these slim and beautiful models in glamorous dresses on television has helped establish the image in society that for a woman, her body is the most important, and this is how an ideal woman must look. It has played no small role in making women and especially girls obsessed with their bodies and external appearance.

The second image is an image that has come down over the centuries, the only difference being that it has become much more colourful these days. This image of a loyal, faithful wife or an obedient daughter-in-law or a sacrificing mother, is shown through the medium of religious and family soap operas. For these women, their family is everything, and they completely depend on the men in their family to fulfil their every need. Most women viewers find it easy to identify with this image as it matches with their life. By telecasting such programs, television only serves to reinforce this regressive attitude towards life. However, another reality today is that an increasing number of women are striving to educate themselves and acquire a job; they are not willing to lead traditional lives, and are becoming conscious of their identity and are seeking to break the boundaries in which traditional society has confined them. Such serials discourage them from struggling, and attempt to push them back to within the four walls of their homes. It is criminal!

The third image, that of the 'modern, working woman', is very captivating; when one sees this image, one feels that all the women in the world are educated and self-reliant. These women are shown as being extremely efficient in managing both their office and home, without ever getting tired, irritated or angry. Simultaneously, they are also shown as very sacrificing; for them, their home always comes first, and if the need arises, they are always willing to sacrifice their job without any hesitation. The

basic aim of projecting this image is to establish that no matter how much a woman is educated, no matter how successful she is in her career, looking after her home is always her first priority. Even if both she and her husband come home from office at the same time, it is her responsibility to make and serve tea to the evening guests, cook dinner and serve it to the family with a smile, and put the children to bed. She may be earning enough to use modern gadgets to ease her household work, and so she may clean the house with a vacuum cleaner instead of a broom, wash clothes in a washing machine instead of by hand, and use a mixer instead of a pestle-mortar for grinding; nevertheless, performing all these household chores is her responsibility.

These women are portrayed as being financially independent, but are emotionally dependent on their father, husband and son. They attempt to break free from the chains of patriarchy, but eventually, in the end, compromise; worse, they are shown as happily doing so. This story of their compromise is crafted so cleverly that viewers come to believe that women are naturally thus. This image is very detrimental for women's freedom, because it seeks to drill into us women that this is how we should behave if we are in a similar situation, that is, we should happily be willing to compromise our dreams and careers for our family.

If we deeply analyse these three images, we will realise that all of them are anti-women and foster the patriarchal mindset. The first image shows a woman as being only a body / object, second as a man's slave, and the third shows her to be ever-willing to compromise for her family.

All these images humiliate women, worsen women's exploitation. We need to shatter these deceitful images and create a new image of our own. An image that depicts a woman fighting against the values of our rotten, backward society, her face glowing with the radiance of a thousand suns, the glow emanating from her struggle — the same intense struggle that has won her so many rights in the past, and that is sure to achieve many more successes in the future. That is her true image; that is how it is going to be in the future.



THE NEED FOR INDEPENDENCE

We held discussions with several girl college students to understand what they thought about becoming independent, how aware they were about the various facets of this issue, and the challenges they faced in becoming independent. From these discussions, we came to the understanding that while almost all girls wished to become independent, they were not keen to struggle hard for it. More than seventy percent of the girls expressed the desire to do a job if they got one. But when asked what would they do if their husband opposed it, most answered that they would quit their job. Only five percent of the girls said they would make a serious effort to become independent, would try and convince their husband and family, and would even struggle with them if necessary. But even they stated that if the struggle became so intense that it threatened to break-up their relationship / family, they would compromise and back down. From these survey results, it can be concluded that while a majority of girls wish to become economically self-reliant, they do not really understand the importance of independence.

Another important conclusion that can be drawn from this

survey is that almost all girls felt that their family and society were the biggest obstacle to their becoming independent.

The harsh reality is that even though we claim that India is rapidly transforming into a modern, developed society, no fundamental change has taken place in our society's viewpoint towards women's freedom and independence. While some changes appear to have taken place, they are only at the superficial level, and that too, only in the bigger cities. In the rural areas and mofussil towns, centuries-old backward and regressive views continue to prevail. A woman does not deserve freedom; she must first be dependent on her father, then on her husband, and in her old age on her son — this view expressed in the Vedas continues to be the dominant attitude towards women even today. It is because of this prevalent mindset that women continue to face discrimination in society. They are labelled as weak and defenceless, and thus intimidated and told that they must not move out of the house alone; they are treated delicately, and thus made to feel they need protection and so must remain at home for their safety; they are told that if they assert their independence, their family and kids will be devastated. And so they are confined to within the four walls of the house.

It is due to the prevalence of such beliefs in society that in the upbringing of a girl child, she is not imbued with the spirit of independence. Parents believe that the only objective in a girl's life is marriage. This viewpoint has become so ubiquitous in society that girls find it difficult to disbelieve and reject it. They willingly and happily mould themselves according to the dominant value system; they too come to believe that the sole aim of their growing up, their destiny in life, is to get married, and after that serve their husband and in-laws.

It is because of these reasons that a woman considers herself to be weak and helpless. She loses her confidence. She starts fearing the hustle-bustle and challenges of the outside world and is afraid to step outside her house. Her self-esteem is destroyed. She tolerates all the insults and humiliation heaped on her by her husband and in-laws. Life for her now only means eating the

leftovers after everyone in the family have eaten their full.

Some people claim that they are not against a woman becoming independent, but their entire perspective is very narrow. For them, woman's independence only means that she can go out of the home and work, it does not mean that she truly becomes self-reliant. The control over her income is with her husband, he decides where and how it must be spent. She continues to shoulder the responsibility of doing all the household chores, while the husband continues to be the main bread-winner of the family. Hence, her husband and in-laws have the right to ask her to quit her job if they feel that her earnings are no longer needed to boost the family income as the husband is earning enough, or if they feel that her earnings are too meagre for the amount of hours she is spending outside the home, or maybe just because they feel that she has worked outside enough and now she must stay at home and look after the children.

The first step a woman must take if she wants to become self-reliant and independent is to become economically independent. In taking this first step — stepping outside the home and taking a job, even if it is a small one — she is actually making a giant leap. It has a decisive impact on her personality. Because she now earns some money, it is now possible for her to take her own decisions. She meets many new people in her workplace, enters into discussions with them, and thus broadens her perspective, begins to understand the world better. She makes new acquaintances, and some become her close friends with whom she shares her joys and sorrows. She begins to contribute to socially productive work, and this gives her a sense of being a useful member of society.

Once she decides to step outside her house for work, she automatically starts mentally preparing herself to face the challenges of the outside world. And so, once she starts going outside the house to work, she faces the challenges of the outside world boldly. This boosts her confidence, and even gives her the courage to face and raise her voice against eve-teasing and molestation on the streets. She learns to protect herself from such

assaults, and thus begins to learn to fight for justice.

Gradually, she starts becoming aware of her identity as a human being and as a member of society. This creates in her a thirst for knowledge, and a desire to know more about society and the world. She develops an interest in reading newspapers and magazines and listening to news on television, because now policy changes and political events affect her directly. On the other hand, a housewife generally takes no interest in the goings on in society, because they do not affect her directly, and therefore she rarely reads the newspaper; even if she reads magazines, she prefers to flip through women's magazines.

Once a woman starts taking part in social production, she now develops an independent identity in society, one that is different from her being someone's mother, sister, wife or daughter. People now begin to recognise her for her work. Because she is now earning, because she has an income of her own which she is free to spend as she wishes, it is now possible for her to pursue her hobbies and develop her skills and tastes, be it learning music and dance or reading books or going to theatre. There are so many women who have the potential to excel in music, dance, painting and other such arts, but are not able to develop their skills due to financial constraints in the family. A financially independent woman can help others too. There are so many working women who support the education of their younger brothers and sister out of their earnings.

A lot of people are opposed to women taking up a job, because they believe this will upset the smooth running of the family. "Then who will do household chores?" they ask. Firstly, the question needs to be raised, why is doing the household chores the sole responsibility of the woman? Shouldn't the husband too share this responsibility? Furthermore, in a household where both the husband and the wife are working, if the husband helps with household chores, the children quickly learn to become independent; they learn to do small household chores right from their childhood.

Secondly, if we look around us at families where women are

working outside the house, we will notice that it has not adversely affected the smooth running of the house; working women manage their time very efficiently and do full justice to both their homes and jobs. Not only that, their income strengthens the financial health of the house.

Thirdly, the atmosphere of a household where both the husband and wife are working is much different from that where the woman is a housewife. In a family where both are working, the husband and wife are very good friends of each other; both discuss with each other the problems faced by each of them at their workplace, and advise each other. Both engage in a lively discussion with each other on social-economic-political issues, as the woman is aware of the outside world because she goes to work and therefore engages with the outside world. Such a democratic atmosphere at home has a very healthy impact on the development of children. In contrast, in a household where the mother is a housewife, even if she is well educated, because she is cut off from the outside world, she does not have much to say regarding her husband's office problems, nor can she contribute much to intellectual discussions.

Finally, and most importantly, if for some reason a woman's relations with her husband deteriorate, or her husband dies, an economically independent woman can take care of herself and her children with dignity and confidence, while a housewife becomes a burden on her in-laws and parents and suffers humiliation for the rest of her life.

Some women think that while their life has somehow passed in compromises, they must bring up their daughters well, inspire them to be independent, motivate them to stand on their feet. This hope, that our children will fight the battles we have shied away from, is escapism, running away from facing challenges. Furthermore, this hope is not going to be fulfilled, because, if we don't have the courage to break our chains, we simply cannot instill this courage in our next generation.

Another important aspect of women's independence is that until half of society, meaning its women, does not directly or

indirectly participate in social production, there can be no real progress in society.

To repeat again, for a woman, the first and most crucial step that a woman needs to take for her liberation from patriarchal slavery is to step out of her house and take a job and thereby become financially independent. But today, getting a decent job is becoming extremely difficult. That's because of the policies of globalisation and privatisation being implemented in the country for the last two decades. Our country is now being run by our leaders solely to maximise profits of giant corporations. Corporations are only interested in maximising their profits, for which they seek to employ the minimum number of workers at the minimum possible wages. And so, except for a handful of well-paid jobs, for most people the only jobs available are low-paid jobs in the unorganised sector. And so, today, if the struggle for women's freedom and independence has to advance, the women's movement has to join hands with other people's organisations and raise the demand for creation of more jobs, for ending contractualisation of jobs and making jobs permanent, and for higher salaries. In the long run, all the people's organisations, including women's organisations, will have to fight for building a society which is oriented not towards maximising profits of corporations, but where every member of society would have the birthright to a decent job and a steady income, a home, health care and security in old age.

That is of course a long drawn struggle. But meanwhile, we must be mentally prepared to take any job available, even if it is a low-paid job, as the first step in our struggle to become financially independent. Because only when we step out of the house and become free will it be possible for us to join the struggle to build a new society whose basic orientation is to provide employment to all. That would be the first step towards building a society where men and women are truly equal.



DIRECTION OF WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

Both men and women are equally important parts of society. Both are equally important in the effective functioning of society. Then how come the status of one is high, and that of the other low? Has it always been so, that is, have women always been slaves? And will it continue to be so in the future too?

Human society is founded on the twin pillars of reproduction and production. Anthropologists have shown that in early

human society, and for more than ninety percent of subsequent history, there was no division between these two pillars. Women were the head of the family; apart from their natural role as producers of new life, women were also the principal producers of means of subsistence. Thus, unlike what most people believe from what they see around them today, human society has primarily been a matriarchal society. For ninety percent of the time humans have been on earth, women have played a leading role in the economic, social, cultural and political life of human society.

Matriarchal society was also an egalitarian society. The means of production, that is, the raw materials and tools used for production, were communally owned, and the fruits of labour equally shared by people. Society was a genuine collective in which every individual was provided for and protected by the entire community from the cradle to the grave.

With the evolution of private property, matriarchal society got overthrown. The means of production became privately owned, and society got divided into classes. Simultaneously, the functions of reproduction and production also got divided between the sexes. Men acquired control over the means of production and subsistence, while women were confined to the home, to being mere procreators. The family form changed to patriarchy, with women and slaves becoming the property of the father / husband.

With the division of society into exploiter and exploited classes, or the propertied and propertyless classes, struggle began between these two classes. That struggle has continued to this day. Women have played a key role in this struggle. With the evolution of modern capitalist and subsequently capitalist-imperialist society, not only has the form of exploitation of the propertyless changed, exploitation has also reached new extremes. A small number of corporations control an overwhelming proportion of the world's means of production, and a small number of rich people own a majority of the world's wealth. Women as usual bear the brunt of the enormous poverty

and suffering caused by this profit-centred system. People have waged heroic struggles against this brutally exploitative system, and again women have played a leading role in this struggle too.

While the capitalist system has led to an unprecedented increase in poverty and destitution on a global scale, it has also created the possibilities of building a new society whose basic orientation would be fulfilment of the basic needs of all human beings — well-paid jobs, healthy food, invigorating education, decent shelter, clean pollution-free environment. After decades of struggle, people are actually building such societies that are challenging the global capitalist system in Latin America.

Simultaneously, capitalism has also created the conditions for liberation of women from patriarchy by opening up education for women, and creating possibilities for women to work outside the home, thereby enabling them to become economically independent from husbands / fathers and the family.

This increased awareness and economic independence has laid the foundations for the birth of a women's liberation movement, but that does not mean that it will spontaneously keep growing, that women's liberation is just around the corner and will automatically be achieved. It is going to be a long, arduous struggle; it is going to have many ups and downs; and for it to significantly advance and achieve many new successes will require a conscious, determined, organised and planned effort.

Who is the Enemy?

One question that is often asked of activists of the women's liberation movement is — who is your enemy? The secondary status, or slavery, of women within the family and in society is advantageous for men, and so it is in the interests of men that this situation continues. Therefore, will women's liberation be achieved by destroying the men in society? To answer this, we need to ask: is it possible to think of a society without men? Obviously not. Therefore, the struggle for women's liberation is different from class struggle between the exploiter and exploited

classes in society. In class struggles, the oppressed liberate themselves by destroying the oppressor class. Thus, slaves freed themselves by destroying the ruling slave-owning class. The capitalist class defeated the feudal lords to establish their rule. Colonial countries became free by overthrowing colonial rule. In Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador and other Latin American countries, the people's movements that have come to power are gradually imposing restrictions on the profits of the capitalist and imperialist classes and strengthening cooperative and communal production and management by the working people — leading to fierce opposition by the capitalist classes backed by the government of the United States. However, women's liberation cannot be achieved by destroying men. This goal can only be achieved by establishing gender equality, with both men and women respecting each other's identity and dignity. The real enemies of the women's liberation movement are not men, but the patriarchal mindset, and the rituals, customs and traditions, created to establish and reinforce patriarchy.

The Situation in India

The development model implemented in India after independence, which is popularly known as the mixed economy model of development or the Nehruvian model of development, was essentially a model of capitalist development. Over the last nearly seven decades, as capitalism gradually deepened its roots in Indian society, it has led to considerable social and economic changes in society, and the situation of women in society has also changed. Due to the spread of education and the development of transportation, the woman who was confined to the four walls of the house and who considered it to be her entire world has stepped outside the home. Women's participation at various levels of social production has increased. And thus the foundations were laid for the growth of the women's movement in India.

Fifty years ago, only a handful of women like the feminist intellectual Mahadevi Verma could dream of a women's movement, could unabashedly speak and write about the plight

of women, but during those days it was very difficult to build a democratic women's liberation movement. The reason for that was that in those days, women had not stepped out of their homes in such large numbers as today and were not as aware as they are today. Capitalist development over the last fifty years has changed this situation. Women are not only more aware, they are also more economically independent. The weakening of feudal, medieval values has made it possible for a large number of women to dream of establishing their identities as human beings and acquire a place for themselves in society, and they are making serious efforts to realise their dreams.

It has resulted in a rapid growth in the women's movement across the country. Women are organising everywhere to fight for their rights and independence, and forming small groups in every part of the country. There are also several large organisations with a pan-India presence. These organisations are actively working on issues related to injustice and exploitation faced by women. Sooner or later, these organisations will unite to form a cohesive and robust nationwide women's movement.

New Challenges

While the changes in Indian society over the last sixty years has led to the rapid growth of a very lively women's movement, at the same time, these changes have also resulted in the creation of several new obstacles in the path of women's liberation.

In feudal societies, women were non-entities, they were confined to the house and treated like chattel. They would eat the leftovers, and wear whatever was available. Having no identity of their own, they never faced any crisis of identity. Nevertheless, just like the family took care of its other property like cows and buffaloes, the family also bore the responsibility for the maintenance of its women. In contrast, while capitalist society has created conditions for women to step out of the house, and made them conscious and desirous of having an identity of their own, it has also withdrawn the support structure provided by the feudal family, and made the woman alone. That is, women have

to fight all alone to establish their identity, without any social support from anywhere, including the family.

Capitalist society has created numerous strains within the family, with the result that not only are joint families breaking up, even a majority of marital relationships are strained. In such a situation, if instead of bearing her humiliation silently and somehow keeping the marriage going, the woman decides to struggle, the first question that arises before her is, to whom should she look towards for support — mental, moral and financial. Neither her in-laws, nor her parents, are willing to give her support and willing to provide her shelter. This has made it very difficult for women, even if they so wish, to fight for their independence and identity. Furthermore, capitalist society has led to a massive increase in poverty and a sense of desperation in people, and consequently, crime is also growing; with women being increasingly depicted as sex objects by the mass media in order to use their bodies for selling goods, women are increasingly becoming victims of sexual violence. And therefore, it has become very dangerous for widowed, separated, divorced or unmarried women to live alone in society.

Despite all these difficulties faced by women in fighting for their freedom, due to the possibilities opened up today for women to become free, there are many women who are today rejecting the age-old ways of life at the personal level. But while rejecting feudal traditions and way of life, and individually fighting to assert their identity as human beings, they often do not consider their struggle to be a part of the wider struggle for women's liberation. It is the responsibility of the women's movement to create this awareness in them. These rebellious women are conscious of their inferior status in family and society; they want to break the patriarchal chains binding them and free themselves. It is the task of the women's movement to make them aware that these problems that they are facing are not theirs alone, these are the problems of all women, and they can achieve real liberation only when they join the broader women's liberation movement. The women's movement needs to advance

the dream of these women from achieving small successes for themselves in their quest for independence, to the larger goal of winning equality and an honourable place in society for all women.

One of the biggest challenges faced by the women's movement today is addressing the socio-economic crisis created by globalisation. For the last two decades, in the name of globalisation, liberalisation and privatisation, Indian ruling classes have been allowing multinational corporations to enter the country. The country is now being run solely for the profit maximisation of giant foreign corporations and their Indian collaborators, the big Indian business houses. A new kind of colonialism is being imposed on the country. It has led to a dramatic increase in social inequality and pauperisation of large masses of the people. As more and more people are pushed down into poverty and destitution, the worst impact of this has been on women, their already miserable situation has further deteriorated. Globalisation has also led to sharp cuts in government expenditures on education, health and other essential services; women again have borne the brunt of these cuts.

The first condition for women to establish their independent identity is to become economically independent, for which they must educate themselves and take up a job. However, because of massive impoverishment and decline in job opportunities under globalisation, the only jobs available today are low-paid jobs in the unorganised sector of the economy. With prices going through the roof, women are finding it very difficult to become economically independent, and in fact very often have to struggle just to earn enough to make two ends meet.

Globalisation has also given birth to new forms of women's slavery. Giant corporations today dominate the Indian market; to increase their sales, they are resorting to all kinds of sales gimmicks; and one of the commonest techniques used is the use of women's bodies in advertisements. This growing objectification of women is one of important reasons behind the

spurt in violence on women in recent years.

The Path Ahead

Therefore, today, the struggle for women's liberation cannot be seen as separate from the struggle for the liberation of humankind from capitalist-imperialist exploitation. The women's movement must join hands with the movements of the working people, dalits, adivasis, minorities and other exploited sections of society — all these movements must come together to fight all forms of injustice and exploitation, and work towards building a new egalitarian society.

This of course does not mean that the struggle to attain gender equality be postponed and primacy be given to the struggle against capitalist-imperialist exploitation. The first and immediate task of the women's movement is to create awareness amongst women about their present situation and motivate and organise them to fight to establish their identity and attain equality with men at the economic, social, cultural and political levels; this struggle is virtually a continuous, daily struggle for women and they need to fight it. This is the immediate task of the women's movement. But there is a danger that while fighting this daily struggle, the movement loses sight of its long term goal. That would be suicidal. It must not be forgotten that in the long run, women's liberation can only be achieved as a part of the long-term struggle for building a new society that is based on justice and equality. This is therefore the long-term goal of the women's movement, to create such a society. Therefore, while fighting our day-to-day struggles to assert our identities as human beings, let us also buckle down to the long-term task of fighting to replace the capitalist system with a system that organises economic activity not for the greater glory of capital, but for meeting the needs of people to lead decent, fulfilling, secure and to the extent possible, creative lives.



About Us: ABHIVYAKTI

Dear friends,

There has been a sea change in the situation of women in the country. A hundred and fifty years ago, education for girls was prohibited, they were married off very young by their parents. Women did not have the right to step out of their houses and take a job. Today, girls nearly equal boys in total enrolment in colleges. Numerous women are confidently pursuing various different career paths in society. They are doing engineering and management jobs, running businesses, joining the police and defence forces, becoming administrators, winning medals in sports, taking part in politics, and are holding positions of great responsibility in various different fields.

Society has become much more conscious about the inferior position of women in society, and the various kinds of injustice they suffer. Several new laws to protect women from molestation and discrimination have been enacted. A special law has been enacted prohibiting dowry, and a stringent law has been enacted to prosecute the husband's family in case of dowry deaths; the laws to protect women from molestation and rape have been made more stringent; a path-breaking law has been enacted that recognises domestic violence, including both physical and mental

violence, as a crime; subsequently, the scope of this law has been considerably expanded under a new domestic violence act; a special law has been enacted to protect women from sexual harassment at their workplace; the law has been amended to give Hindu women, who did not have any rights in ancestral property, an equal share; and so on.

Despite this progress, it is also true that women continue to suffer discrimination in society. Even today, in an overwhelming number of families, women continue to occupy an inferior status to men. In most families, girls are educated not because their families wish that they grow up to be independent and develop their abilities, but so that they can get a more qualified, higher earning husband. And if after education, a girl does take a job, however highly qualified the girl may be, however high post she may be occupying in her job, after marriage the continuation of her job depends upon the wishes of her husband and in-laws, and not on her wish. And even if the husband allows her to continue her job because it adds to the family income, she still has to look after all the household chores, from cleaning the house, washing clothes, cooking the food to looking after the children. Very few husbands share this burden.

Even though the principle of gender equality is enshrined in the Indian Constitution, more than six decades after independence, women not only continue to be subservient to men, they also suffer an enormous amount of injustice in our male-dominated society. This includes girl-child trafficking, child marriage, dowry deaths, acid attacks, humiliation and abuse faced by women within the family, eve-teasing and molestation on the streets, sexual violence including rapes, ill-treatment of widows and divorced women, and so on. A new and even more cruel form of violence that has become widespread in recent times is killing the girl child in the womb itself (female foeticide), or if that is somehow not possible, killing the baby girl soon after birth.

Therefore, while on the one hand it is true that the condition of women in the country, especially in the cities, is much better than it was at the time of independence, on the other hand, it is

equally true that women continue to suffer enormous inequality and violence in society.

Fight to Build a New Society

We have come so far, we have advanced so much, because of the struggle waged by our sisters in the past. None of the rights that we have won, including the laws mentioned above, have been given to us on a platter; they have all been won after long struggles. We need to advance the struggle further, take it to new heights. Laws alone will not provide us security, however stringent they are made. Till patriarchy continues to exist in society, injustice and violence against women will continue to exist.

Further, the economic policies being implemented by the country's ruling classes over the last two decades have led to a rapid worsening of the condition of women in the country. In 1991, the major political parties that dominate India's Parliament decided to globalise the Indian economy and open it up to foreign multinational corporations. In violation of the Directive Principles of the Indian Constitution, they are now running the economy solely for the profit maximisation of giant foreign and Indian corporations. It has led to a sharp worsening of the unemployment situation, as well a huge increase in poverty and destitution in the country. Globalisation has also aggravated all the other problems facing Indian society — from atrocities on dalits, to a deepening communal divide and oppression of minorities, to a massive environmental crisis. Women are obviously the worst sufferers of all these crises.

Globalisation has also created new forms of women's exploitation. To increase their sales, corporations are resorting to all kinds of sales gimmicks. One of the commonest techniques used is the use of women's bodies in advertisements to market their goods. Another vulgar marketing gimmick is the promotion of beauty contests by the cosmetic, beauty and fashion industry to increase their sales. Corporations have been so successful in this that today, a very large number of girls and women have become obsessed with their body appearance, and beauty contests are taking place from the national to the city level and

even in colleges, colonies and streets. This objectification of women, reducing them to a mere body, is an important contributing factor in the sharp increase in violence against women in recent years.

The common people have not been silent spectators to this betrayal of the Indian Constitution. People are coming together all over the country, getting organised, forming groups and raising their voices in protest. As more and more people join them, these movements will strengthen, join hands, and become a powerful force which will transform society and build a new society in accordance with the dreams of our freedom struggle that are embedded in the Directive Principles of the Indian Constitution. The women's liberation movement needs to join hands with these people's movements against globalisation, and together fight for building a new, just and humane society. Women's liberation can only be achieved together with human liberation, it cannot be achieved in isolation.

Dear Sisters,

We must strive to break our patriarchal chains. The moment we stand up for our rights as human beings, and look around us, we will realise that we are not alone, and that there are several other women who are also fighting to assert their identities. We will also come into contact with women's groups who are actively involved in doing propaganda campaigns and organising rallies-dharnas for women's liberation and also organising support structures for women in need — we had not heard about them so far because we had not dared to step out of our homes!

Abhivyakti is one such women's group. We are ordinary girls and women, just like you. We organise a wide range of programs to create awareness amongst people on various aspects of women's liberation, using forms such as street campaigns, talks-seminars, film screenings, song programs and street plays, protest rallies and dharnas. We also actively participate in nationwide movements for women's freedom, such as the nationwide protests that followed the Delhi rape case of December 2012, and movements for modification of existing laws or enactment of new laws to enhance women's rights.

Our programs target women as well as men. We believe that men too need to be sensitised about women's liberation, because we believe that women's liberation cannot be achieved by women alone, it will need the active support and participation of sensitive men too. We also believe that women's liberation cannot be achieved in a society where there is exploitation of the working people. Therefore, Abhivyakti attempts to build links with the movements of all the oppressed sections of society, including the working people, dalits, adivasis and minorities.

Dare to dream, dare to act! When Savitribai Phule began her school for girls and dalit children a hundred and fifty years ago, her dream — of building a society where all children, irrespective of gender or caste, have equal opportunities to study — must have seemed to be utopia, an impossible dream, to most people. Yet today, we have come far ahead in the realisation of that dream, there are lakhs of girls and dalit children in schools. So, let us also pick up the courage to dream. Today, the need of the hour is for some of us to dream of building a new, beautiful society, where men and women will truly be free and equal. At least some of us must take the initiative to begin the struggle to build such a society; only if there is a beginning will there be an end. People, both women and men, are taking such initiatives all over the country. Let us also begin our own small initiatives. Let us reach out to each other, understand each other, join hands, and march ahead. Gradually, more and more people are bound to join us...

If you agree with our views expressed in this booklet, and would like know more about us and join us in our various initiatives, you may contact us at any of the addresses given on the next page.

