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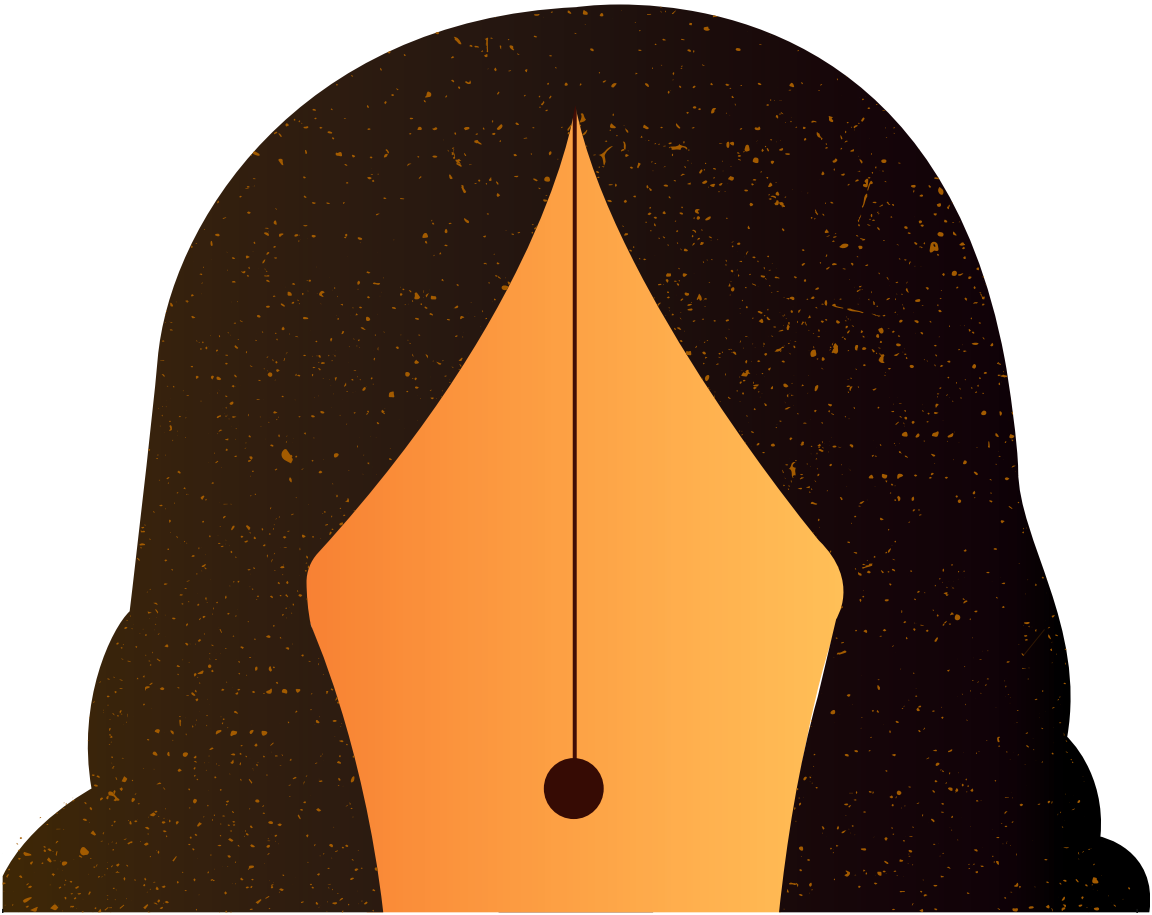


Her Stories

Media Reporting on Gender Issues

Edited by

Dr. A. L. Sharada



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From the Editors Desk

I am happy to present to you Her Stories – Media Reporting on Gender Issues. The fifth in the series of annual compilations of our award-winning entries, this volume is curated from the 10th edition of the Laadli Media and Advertising Awards for Gender Sensitivity, 2020.

This year is a watershed year, with our lives seeing upheaval like never before on account of the pandemic. However, it taught us to cope, it enabled us to use new digital technologies to run homes and to work. We received the entries online, conducted the jury meetings on Zoom, invited our guests on social media and via e-invites, and even live-streamed the event on Youtube. Despite the havoc caused by the pandemic, we received a heartening response from the media as well as the jury members and we have presented 81 awards and 12 jury appreciation certificates at the 10th edition of the awards.

We observed that the online publications remain at the forefront of change, as they continue to offer the much-needed space for committed journalists to write in detail on issues that rarely find their way into mainstream print publications. It is very encouraging to notice the growing popularity of feminist online publications which are pushing the envelope and dealing with subjects that have traditionally been considered taboo and have rarely found space in the media.

'Her Stories' is a compilation of 48 award-winning entries reporting on four themes – Gender and Patriarchy, Right to Development, Right to Protection and Right to participation. Each section has an introductory note briefly introducing the articles included in the section to give the readers a bird's eye view of the issues covered and help them pick and choose the articles they wish to read. Even though the book does not include all the award-winning articles, we have endeavoured to bring to our readers a collection of works written from refreshingly new perspectives. I hope this book provides you with new insights and a riveting experience of exploring the unexplored.

It is interesting to note that the concepts of Gender and Patriarchy are getting



their due place in public discourse through inclusion in the media. The innumerable and insidious ways in which patriarchy influences our lives is captured with sensitivity, be it the male gaze, notions of virginity, toxic masculinity or the sanctity of the institution of the marriage. Intersectionality of patriarchy and gender with caste also influences the way we respond to female drug addicts, marital rape, women from marginalized communities like the criminal tribes amongst others.

Child labour, trafficking, child marriages and dropping out of school are some of the major roadblocks in girls realizing their right to development, while discrimination, gender biases and glass ceilings limit the participation of women in the political, economic, and other fields. The selected essays dive deep into these issues and provide an insight into the position of women and girls in our society.

Often media reports focus on the gruesome rapes and murders, but there are many forms of violence in public spaces that deserve more attention, be it flashing or groping in public places. It is interesting to note that the media is addressing these issues as well and moving beyond just reporting on cases to writing about the social causes and responses to the violence and the justice system that fails to protect the rights of women and girls in the country.

We hope the book is used extensively by media teachers and students to gain new insights and perspectives. We look forward to a day when gender sensitivity becomes a core value of good journalism and communication.

I am happy to share with you that an award for the gender-sensitive script is instituted by Script Writers Association, we hope to see more sensitive portrayals of women, and gender issues in the films and OTT content in the coming years.

I express my gratitude to UNFPA and The Royal Norwegian Embassy of India, without their support the book would not have been possible.

The book is designed by Aarya Nagre and Deepali Nagre and it is always such a pleasure to work with them.



I cannot conclude without expressing my special thanks to all the winners who permitted us to include their work in this publication.

I thank Malathi and Mrinmayee for putting the content together and Pooja for her consistent support to ensure that the book is edited, compiled, designed and published as per the timelines. Thank you, girls!!

A. L. Sharada

Dr A. L. Sharada

Director, Population First



SCOPE OF LAADLI MEDIA AWARDS

- Cover 28 States, 6 union territories
- 13 languages

MEDIA

CATEGORIES

Advertising

Service, Product and Public Service/CSR

Print

News Features, Features, Investigative Reports, Editorials, Op-Eds and Columns

Electronic

News Features, Features, Documentaries, Serials, Radio Plays, Topical Programmes and Issue Based Programmes

Web

News Features, Features, Articles, Blogs and Columns, Special Editions

Others

Theatre, Feature Films, Short films, Multimedia, Books

Special Awards

Laadli Lifetime Achievement Award, Laadli 'Woman behind the scene' Award, Web series



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I

Gender & Patriarchy



Gender & Patriarchy

Asia Pacific Institute on Gender Based Violence defines patriarchy in a succinct way as follows:

“Patriarchy is about the social relations of power between men and women, women and women, and men and men. It is a system for maintaining class, gender, racial, and heterosexual privilege and the status quo of power – relying both on crude forms of oppression, like violence; and subtle ones, like laws; to perpetuate inequality. Patriarchal beliefs of male, heterosexual dominance and the devaluation of girls and women lie at the root of gender-based violence. Patriarchy is a structural force that influences power relations, whether they are abusive or not.”

Patriarchal power equations, thus, manifest in myriad ways in our daily life. It, therefore, becomes important to create conversations on some of these manifestations of patriarchy through editorials, op-eds, articles and features in media. It is heartening to note that our winners dealt with issues related to patriarchy with great sensitivity.

As we all know, patriarchy places a premium on the virginity of the women and restricts their access to productive labour, controls their reproduction and sexuality, restricts their mobility and access to spaces and institutions.

What is desirable in terms of physical attributes for men and women is also socially determined and beauty of a woman is often seen through a male gaze in a patriarchal society. In his article **When Her Skin Colour Is Dark**, Rudra Prasanna focuses on the quintessential Indian obsession with fair skin. While



desire for fair skin is common among both men and women, a man is not viewed with the same derision for being dark, he observes. Presenting the undeserving importance given to fair complexion and its influence on the prospects of marriage, especially for women, Rudra Prasanna's writing is a reminder to introspect.

Moving on to a more sensitive issue of virginity, Lachmi Deb Roy in her article **Faking Virginity: Do Women Need To Bleed To Show They Are 'Pure'?** highlights how products that allow women to fake an intact hymen and their virginity are complicit in encouraging regressive attitudes around female sexuality and women's agency. She explores the issue providing perspectives from feminists and doctors on virginity, notions of purity and honour associated with it, and women's right to bodily autonomy in India.

Ankita Anand's **Travel & The Female Body: Why Thailand Is A Safe Space For My Skin** deals with the street harassment that women face when they choose to access public spaces. She provides a personal account of her travels to Thailand. She shares her sense of freedom when she is not stuck with a constant fear of being harassed, stared at, hear lewd comments, or face inappropriate touching during her travels in Thailand. In India, and in many cultures, such behaviour on the part of men is seen as a male-entitlement and is rarely questioned or challenged.

Vikas Trivedi's article **औरत किस एक चीज से आजादी चाहती है?**

#DIGITALTRASHBIN takes an in-depth look at what women want freedom from. He asks the pertinent question of what should be chucked into the trash bin and the answers are as varied as the women and girls he interviews; from discrimination, catcalling, alcoholism, defecating in the field, rioting, terrorism to insistence on long hair and cooking, domestic violence and narrow mindedness.

It is important to be aware that in patriarchy the notions of Masculinity are equally dysfunctional. Sagar Galani in his blog **I Am A Man And This Is How 'Kabir Singh' Is Damaging To Me** brings forth the disturbing portrayal of the protagonist in the movie Kabir Singh, which normalizes toxic masculinity in the



guise of dealing with love. Although the theme of the film is love and addiction due to loss of love which resonates with the youth, it depicts a violent, controlling behaviour by the male protagonist which promotes toxic masculinity. The blog highlights how films promote toxic masculinity and misogyny.

Tanvi Sinha's Unhappily Ever After: The Cost Indian Women Pay For Our 'Lowest Divorce Rate explores the patriarchal underpinnings of the institution of marriage and argues that lowest divorce rates in India are not an indicator of successful marriages. Tanvi Sinha breaks the myth of the glorified Indian family and provides an in-depth understanding of the social and cultural barriers in seeking divorce. The blog exposes the concept of family's honour being built by the suppression of women in the family. It highlights the social stigma and the lack of support from the society which compromise the dignity of the woman when she chooses to live alone after divorce.

Going deeper into the institution of marriage, Nileena Atholi in her feature, **Marriage Is Not A Cover For Abuse** exposes the issue of marital rape and the associated patriarchal mindsets of the society in Kerala. She shares the narratives of marital rape, encapsulating the experiences of women, irrespective of their socio-economic status. The narratives are corroborated with statistical inputs while also discussing the issue of under reporting or non-reporting due to the blatant expressions of patriarchy. It calls to recognize marital rape as a legal offence and adopt a gender lens while addressing it.

Patriarchy does not suppress only women. Certain sections of boys and men and in certain contexts and situations face severe violence, discrimination and have limited agency and choice. Young boys facing sexual abuse is a case in point. Geetika Mantri - Shiba Kurian in their feature **How Patriarchy Forces Boys Who Survive Sexual Abuse Into Years Of Trauma, Silence** underline the impact of sexual abuse on boys and the damage caused by patriarchy. The social conditioning forces male survivors of sexual abuse to remain silent, affecting them deeply throughout their life.

A similar kind of silence and non-acknowledgement is seen in the case of the



female drug addicts of Punjab, who are seen as crossing the patriarchal boundaries and are ignored in the rehabilitation efforts. Divya Goyal in her investigative report **Punjab: The Invisible Drug Addicts** brings to the readers the tales of Punjab's women first-hand users of drugs. From male partner influence, domestic violence, alcohol addiction, exposure to drugs while selling and sex-work, the reasons are varied, she says, but they are stigmatized and ignored in the rescue and rehabilitation process.

The caste and administrative systems in India also play a role in defining the power equations among different sections of the society. The nomadic tribes constitute one such segment of the society. Some of them are stigmatized as criminal tribes and are denied access to basic development opportunities like education, livelihoods, basic health facilities etc. While both men and women are impacted by the stigma, the plight of women is much worse, says Jyoti Shinoli in her feature on Pardhi community - **No Crime, Unending Punishment**

Anwasha Banerjee's feature **Wives Forced In to Prostitution, Husbands Act As Pimps**, brings to the readers the heart wrenching story of yet another marginalized section - women engaged in culturally perpetrated prostitution in Dharampura, located on the outskirts of Delhi. The feature provides an in-depth look at this practice and the commitment of the community to this tradition as well as the exceptions who have distanced themselves.

Bijaya Dwibedi exposes yet another harmful cultural practice, among the Dongaria tribes of Odissa. His Story, **The Dongaria Maidens Of Niyamgiri-In The Web Of Belief And Tradition** highlights the plight of girls from Dongria Kondh tribe of Niyamgiri Hills from southern Odisha who are betrothed to boys as soon as they are born as per centuries old customs. Often, they are left in a lurch in their adulthood when the boys decide to choose another partner.

In his article, **सुबह होने में अभी देर है** Shirish Khare highlights the discriminatory behaviour towards marginalized women owing to their caste, class and economic status. The sensitive narration of the stories of Rajau, Mira and Geeta brings to

light the various dimensions of their vulnerabilities like, being subjected to violence and rape due to their socioeconomic status as well as the fear and embarrassment associated with such violence.

Yet another feature, **Between Masaan And Moksha: Being A Dom Woman In Varanasi** by Adrija Bose, brings out the suppression, restrictions and discrimination faced by the women of the Dom community, which is responsible for burning the funeral pyres at the Varanasi ghats. The women are relegated to the insides of their home and cloistered in the community due to a tradition supported by women themselves. Adrija Bose's feature looks at the lives of the women from across generations and presents the contention between strongly held traditions and dreams of the new generation.

Controlling the fertility and reproduction of women is one major means of maintaining the gender power equations. Be it menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth; a number of taboos and accepted practices are woven around them. It may come as a shock to many readers to know about the stigma faced by menstruating women even today and that too in a State like Kerala, which is considered as one of the most progressive States in the country.

Nizar Puthvana's feature, **Menstrual Huts**, exposes the practice of quarantining women in menstrual huts. This practice is forcing many women to consume contraceptive pills indiscriminately to delay periods, compromising their health and safety. Puthvana builds a strong case to work towards addressing the age-old beliefs and traditions.

That son preference is still strong in our society is borne by the fact that the sex ratios are continuing to fall in the country. One of the disastrous consequences of falling sex ratios is the trafficking of women for marriage. Jyoti Yadav writes about the women purchased by men in Haryana for marriage in her feature **मौल की बहुएँ : हरयानवी मर्दों के एहसान तले दबी औरतें जिन की अपनी पहचान खो गय**. She depicts the drudgery of these women in their matrimonial homes – a place where language, cuisine, culture, customs are different. She also questions the hypocrisy of Khap Panchayats' long held belief and diktat of racial and caste purity.



Similarly, the reproductive choices of women are often manipulated by the patriarchal and commercial interests. Roli Srivastava in her investigative story, **Missing Wombs: The Health Scandal Enslaving Families In Rural India** exposes one such malpractice – the increasing number of hysterectomies in rural India which are being promoted by medical professionals. She sheds light on the various strategies used by them to compel uneducated women to undergo the procedure. The nexus exploits schemes created to safeguard emergency health expenditures and lures patients into it even when medically unwarranted.

Writing on the same issue, Jahid Khan in his editorial **महिलाओं पर भारी गन्ने की खेती** focuses on the exploitation of the women farm labourers of Beed district in Maharashtra who work in the sugarcane fields and sugar factories. These women are forced to undergo hysterectomy to avoid economic loss for the families as well as the employers. Facilitating this inhumane practice are hospitals which have now come under immense public and government scrutiny.

While natural calamities impact both women and men, how they impact them depends on their gender roles, perceptions and prerogatives. Nidhi Jamwal in her feature, **Who Moved My Village?** explores how the gender roles impact lives of men and women in times of calamities caused by climate change. While loss of livelihoods due to submergence of land forces men to migrate seasonally for employment, women are left behind to take care of children, elders and farming and bear witness to the inching tides every year. Nidhi Jamwal gives the history of disappearing land in the Sundarbans, while focusing on the future of its women.

01

INVESTIGATION-Missing wombs: The health scandal enslaving families in rural India

by **Roli Srivastava**

Thomson Reuters Foundation - 08 May 2019

Karauli: Farm labourer Dharmendra Meena's first year of marriage with his wife Vaijanti in northwest India was "beautiful and carefree".

But their first pregnancy changed everything.

First came the infection during childbirth, then the stark choice presented by a visiting doctor: undergo a "life-saving" hysterectomy - the removal of her uterus and ovaries - or die.

The couple took a loan of 100,000 rupees (\$1,400) to cover the procedure, trapping Dharmendra in slave labour and joining thousands of people in rural India estimated to have been duped by unscrupulous doctors into having unnecessary hysterectomies.

A Thomson Reuters Foundation investigation found many women - often young - targeted by doctors whom medical experts say seek to profit by prescribing the surgery for minor ailments, with the operation and later costs driving families into debt.

Having a hysterectomy brought on the menopause for Vaijanti, also a farm labourer, then aged 19, while Dharmendra was forced to work on the money lender's farm for long hours and low pay as he tried to clear his debt - becoming a victim of debt bondage.

He ended up having to do other jobs and take more loans to support his wife and child, and now - seven years after the surgery - earns less than the monthly interest of 6,000 rupees.

"The interest on the loan is rising every month," Dharmendra told the Thomson Reuters Foundation, sitting in a sparse hut next to his wife in Taroli, a village in the state of Rajasthan.

"We don't sleep any more. We fear the money lender," he said before Vaijanti listed their losses – the wedding jewellery they sold, her fertility, his freedom and their hopes for the future.

Seeking a solution

About 3 percent of Indian women have had the surgery, found a landmark survey in 2018 by the government, which is trying to improve medical standards and reduce malpractice after media reports and a lawsuit drew attention to hysterectomy scams.

The cost of hysterectomies driving families into slavery has largely gone under the radar, human rights activists said.

The Indian Council of Medical Research is writing guidelines for hysterectomies, and the health ministry plans to publish a standard operating procedure for gynaecologists to follow.

But Dinesh Baswal, deputy commissioner of maternal health in the health ministry, said it was a complex problem as women sought hysterectomies thinking that it would help resolve abnormal bleeding or painful periods that stopped them working.

"A majority of cases can be handled with the assurance that it will go on its own," Baswal said. "But how do you counsel them? They keep going back to the doctor for a solution."

Medical experts and health campaigners said they were concerned that action was too slow with India overlooking the financial distress and bonded labour involved post-surgery.

The popularity of hysterectomies was once attributed to its coverage by state health insurance schemes for the poor. But the surgery has continued after many states removed the cover due to reports of hospitals carrying out the procedure to claim funds.

In visits to about a dozen villages in Maharashtra, Rajasthan and Telangana states



over five months, the Thomson Reuters Foundation found hysterectomies were routinely leaving families destitute and trapping people in modern-day slavery.

Interviews with 38 women who said they were struggling financially post-surgery uncovered 10 cases of debt bondage, with families selling jewellery, livestock and land to survive.

In most cases, their husbands or sons had no choice but to toil for the money lender, who used the debt as leverage to compel them to work without any contract, rights or recourse.

The families reported the surgery costing between 30,000 and 100,000 rupees, but many ended up paying more for post-procedure problems. With many women unable to return to work, families' incomes were halved, increasing their dependence on loans.

"War on women"

India is home to an estimated 8 million modern-day slaves, working at farms, factories and fisheries, trapped in the sex trade or forced into marriages, according to the Global Slavery Index by the Australia-based charity Walk Free Foundation.

While factors ranging from India's caste system to rural-urban migration or drought and deforestation are often cited as causing debt bondage, the financial impact of hysterectomies has received little attention, human rights campaigners say.

In a first step to map the problem after years of activism on medical malpractice, the government last year released data on the number of women who had undergone the procedure.

Various states from Telangana to Chhattisgarh have in the past decade cracked down on small private clinics that performed the surgery frequently to claim state health insurance funds.

But India has not grasped the scale of how many unnecessary hysterectomies are being performed nationwide, according to activists who said the 2018 survey was only a small first step.



More than 22,000 Indian women aged 15 to 49 out of 700,000 surveyed - 3 percent - had undergone a hysterectomy, it found.

Half of the women had never gone to school and two-thirds of surgeries were performed in private hospitals, the data showed.

Campaigners fear without a crackdown on unscrupulous clinics across rural India, the practice will continue to endanger women's health and trap families in debt bondage.

Some medical studies have linked hysterectomies to early onset of osteoporosis and other serious health side effects.

"This has to be recognised as a cause of indebtedness and bonded labour," said Bharath Bhushan, founder of Centre for Action Research and People's Development (CARPED) - one of the first organisations to study medical malpractice in 2005.

"This (a hysterectomy) is a big expense for poor families, and it leads to loss of wages as the women are unable to work post-surgery," Bhushan said. "They have lost their health, and livelihood. This is crazy ... this is war on a woman's body."

Bonded

Over the last decade, activists have recorded thousands of hysterectomies in villages in Telangana, Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Bihar, Chattisgarh, Karnataka and Odisha, among other states.

Deepali Laute was 21 when she had a hysterectomy after being told she could die of her abdominal pain. Laute was a mother of two and the doctor said she no longer needed her uterus anyway.

As farm workers in Budhiyad village in Maharashtra, Laute and her husband earned 200 rupees daily. They took a loan of 20,000 rupees from their boss that trapped them in debt bondage.

Three years later, she is still recovering from the surgery and cannot work, while

her husband Dashrath repays the loan by spending longer hours on his employer's farm for far less money.

"We were always poor, but I never had a loan on my head," said Dashrath. While he earns about 250 rupees for a day's work, the loan repayment leaves him with only 50 rupees to take home.

"My loan is constantly increasing as I keep borrowing more for recurring medical expenses. Deepali is still not well."

Despite their strife, the couple do not regret the surgery.

"The doctor said I will die if I don't get my womb removed. I feel a lot of pain after the surgery in my limbs, but at least I am alive," said Laute, feeding goats tied outside her tin shed home in the middle of a pomegranate farm as dusk drew nearer.

Baswal, from the health ministry, said various states have started requiring doctors to gain government approval to perform a hysterectomy - to curb unnecessary surgery and fraudulent claims for money.

But now people pay for the procedure themselves and move to nearby villages or far-off towns to repay the debt, said Archana Kharche of Astitva, a Maharashtra-based women's rights charity that has mapped the malpractice in 20 villages in the area.

About 400 km (245 miles) east of Budhiyad is Mohammed Nagar village in Telangana state, where generations have undergone the procedure as doctors in the area defy sporadic state crackdowns.

Telangana has the highest number of hysterectomies in India - government data shows - with Maloth Bhuti among those who believed the surgery was her best shot at curing period pains.

The surgery halved her family income as Bhuti, whose mother and daughter-in-law are among 50 women in the village to have undergone the procedure, was unable to return to her farm work.

"I can no longer work. My children take care of me. My husband had to leave the village to work on the money lender's farm. He had no choice," said Bhuti, 45, a mother-of-four.

Telangana health director G. Srinivas Rao said the state was informing women in villages of the health risks of the surgery.

"We have also asked hospitals to fill out details of each hysterectomy case, which is then audited by health officials. There is some change," said Rao, a doctor.

"Unnecessary and unethical"

In Dausa, Rajasthan, advocate Durga Prasad Saini recalled how he started tracking hysterectomies in five private hospitals in the neighbouring town of Bandikui almost a decade ago.

"We were discussing the problem of female foeticide, when someone said: 'But where are the wombs?'" he said.

"Nearly 80 percent of all procedures carried out were hysterectomies. We counted 1,000 hysterectomies in a year in the five (private) hospitals," he said.

His findings formed part of a petition filed in 2013 against the practice in the Supreme Court by physician-campaigner Narendra Gupta, founder of non-profit Prayas based in Rajasthan, who sought compensation for the women who had the surgery.

The petition - which is still pending in India's top court - and subsequent requests to officials prompted the government to carry out the first-ever national hysterectomy survey, he said.

Rural women often do not get a proper consultation at state hospitals so they go to private doctors, where they are advised to undergo "unnecessary and unethical" hysterectomies, he added.

"There are enough studies and reports that show clearly that there is a rising number of hysterectomies," Gupta said.



"A lot... are being conducted without other non-invasive methods being explored."

While hysterectomies in the West are common post-menopause, activists say many rural Indians are having the surgery young -after being told it offers a quick fix to their period problems.

Some doctors say they offer the surgery based on demand.

"Women think if the uterus is removed, they will be free of (period pains)," said C.K. Sharma, a doctor who runs a hospital in Karauli, which is popular with women in nearby villages.

"If I say no (for a hysterectomy), they will go to another doctor to get it removed," said Sharma, who declined to give his full name and did not respond to further requests for comment.

Desperate for the doctor

Hysterectomies, medical experts say, are never the solution to the problems that women present to doctors, and its demand highlights the issue of private doctors cashing in on ignorance.

"Doctors link all of it - their pelvic pain or lower back pain - to the uterus," said Subha Sri, the head of Commonhealth - a Chennai-based coalition of health charities.

Subha Sri reviewed hysterectomy cases in southern Karnataka state and said the procedure - which should be carried out only in rare cases - was being arbitrarily done by doctors.

"They are introducing health problems and often not treating women for what they had come for," she said.

Couples such as Dharmendra Meena and Vaijanti said they felt they had no option but to opt for surgery that was presented as a life-or-death choice at a desperate time.

But Vaijanti often wonders about what could have been.

"I could have continued working on the farm if I hadn't had the surgery. I would have had another child," the 26-year-old said. "The surgery changed everything."



Roli Srivastava

Roli Srivastava is Correspondent, India, with the Thomson Reuters Foundation, based out of Mumbai. She reports on gender, climate change, health, migration, etc.

02

Travel and the female body: Why Thailand is a safe space for my skin

by **Ankita Anand**

thequint.com - 23 January 2018

I bought a glass of cold coffee at a small coffee shop in Bangkok and walked to the bus stop on the road. There was nobody about and I sat on the bench. I am not a huge coffee drinker but for the next 40 minutes I sat there and sipped my cold beverage like it was an elixir and watched the Thai world pass me by.

Many would find nothing remarkable in this. But for me, it was extended exhilaration. I felt like I was in a hot air balloon that was gaily floating about for much longer than expected.

Not many things matched up to my feeling during the next few days of my stay and travel within the country.

Because, if the intention of travelling was to see a new world, mine was unfolding within my body – right then, right there. To wear a dress, have a leisurely coffee on the road and not be stared at, was the most remarkable novelty.

"The streets belonged to them"

My body's flashcard stored no such memory from back "home" in the city of Delhi, where I lived.

As a college student, I had once been heckled by a stranger in a twisted combination of outrage and mock politeness: "Button your shirt, ma'am." The sense of entitlement with which the man had expressed anger at the clothes I'd worn, had in turn induced an anger in me white-hot enough to blur the memory of what happened after.

What I do remember is reporting the incident to my friends, during which I had probably added, that in the confrontation that followed I had ended up hitting him. I don't think that had actually happened, and in later years when I looked back on the incident I felt surprise and guilt at my own lie. It was not something I

usually did. Perhaps my sense of violation had been so steep – and the desire to retaliate so strong – that I had started believing it myself. Without that bit of fiction, possibly, there would have reigned in me a helplessness that would have been too humiliating to live with.

With a history like this, to be in Thailand with a girlfriend spending – with pride and caution – our nest eggs, and not to be constantly reminded of my gender while being outside, was the best kind of 'tripping' I could ask for. Encouraged by my friend and finding the place a haven for first-time try-outs, I wore a two-piece swimsuit on the island of Koh Samet and for the first time as a grown up, that much of my skin rendezvoused with sun, wind and water.

My heart warmed up when at night in Ayutthaya, the old capital, we saw a bunch of women going around on motorbikes, long after the markets had closed.

They weren't handicapped at dusk; the streets belonged to them and they were the lights.

As we returned from Ayutthaya to Bangkok on a train, my friend had a can of beer in her hand. She initiated a conversation about the country with the guy sitting next to her – and at no point did she have to face judgmental remarks or fend off unsolicited invites from him.

Beyond my gender

A lot of this can appear laughable or naive to people depending on their gender or context. But living in a world where I get reminded of my gender before, and sometimes without, it being acknowledged that I am a person, I do not have the luxury of taking these things for granted.

Women in Thailand have their own struggles and it is not as if gender hierarchies, or crimes, for that matter, do not exist. World Nomads, a popular website for travellers, has this piece of advice, or rather, admonition, to dispense about being in the streets or back lanes late at night in Thailand:

“That's as silly here as it is in your hometown...”

But, just like Maya Angelou had surmised about people (“At the end of the day people won't remember what you said or did, they will remember how you made them feel”), with places too, what I end up remembering is how they made me feel. This was a place that had its priorities right, that helped me feel like a person again, without constantly tagging my gender.



Ankita Anand

Ankita Anand is a New Delhi based journalist, editor with Unbias the News, a global, virtual newsroom focusing on diversity in the media. She covers gender, labour, indigenous communities, etc.

03

I am a man and this is how 'Kabir Singh' is damaging to me.

by **Sagar Galani**

feminisminindia.com - 09 July 2019

Like many, I look to Hindi films as a source of entertainment and to understand different perspectives in complicated situations. Considering films like Kabir Singh, I should look for alternative sources. The Shahid Kapoor-Kiara Advani starrer is a beautiful film on the surface: stellar performances by the leads, beautiful cinematography by Santhana Ravichandran, and melodious musical scores written by Harsh Rameshwar. The team captures the essence of falling in love, losing love, and intoxication via alcohol and drugs. Despite strong technical elements, it was impossible not to cringe at the repetitive misogyny, glorification of masculine stereotypes, and lack of consent depicted in the lead relationship. I can't speak for others, but I walked out of the film questioning what it means to be a responsible man.

Is it problematic to depict misogyny in movies?

Films are rarely neutral in their depiction of anything. In Kabir Singh, they have depicted misogyny that is real (that is not the problem), but with a positive undertone (this is the problem). About 25 minutes into the film, Kabir (Shahid Kapoor) sees his love interest Preeti (Kiara Advani) for the first time. A romantic background creates an environment that allows the audience to admire this blatant objectification. It guides the audience towards perceiving his subsequent actions as romantic and caring while being “strong” and masculine. He does the following:

- 1) He announces to a classroom full of boys that they're not allowed to interact with this girl.
- 2) He barges into the girl's classroom, asks her to sit in the front row and decides who she should be friends with so she can “perform better academically”.

3) He starts entering her classroom and taking her away to “private tuitions” on a field.

While Preeti softly admires these actions in the film, I can only imagine the trauma any woman would go through if faced by such blatant harassment in real life. Is it okay to depict this as a start to a “loving” relationship? In a world where raising men and women differently has become normalized in every echelon of society, it's disappointing to see experienced professionals celebrate misogyny and harassment. Glorifying such actions only encourages others to imitate this behavior; it's deeply irresponsible.

ARE WE REALLY, IN 2019, WATCHING A FILM GLORIFYING THE MISOGYNY, AGGRESSION, AND NON-CONSENSUAL RELATIONSHIPS THAT CHARACTERIZE TOXIC MASCULINITY?

Can rational men be influenced to normalize aggressive behavior?

The first 20 minutes of the film are devoted to establishing Kabir's character. We're introduced to the following qualities:

He's sexy: Girls are down to sleep with him, but he won't shy away from threatening a girl with a knife in case she changes her mind during the act.

He's smart: He performs surgeries with ease, but he may be drunk on rum when he performs them.

He's athletic: He's a skilled goalkeeper, but if provoked, will thrash members of the opposing team while facing minimal to no consequences.

GLORIFYING SUCH ACTIONS ONLY ENCOURAGES OTHERS TO IMITATE THIS BEHAVIOR; IT'S DEEPLY IRRESPONSIBLE.

I only wish filmmakers would take responsibility to realize that as a young male viewer, I look up to the male protagonist's actions. Despite recognizing how problematic his actions were, I couldn't help but yearn for the command he had over his life: he takes what he wants, and no one wants to mess with him. The

messaging I've received throughout my life is that I'm a man, that I'm the provider, and that I am entitled to get what I want.

In times when I'm insecure and feel like I don't have that command over my life, it's so easy for me to watch movies like this one and blame my issues on the fact that I don't engage in such behavior. Even as a young man who believes deeply in the innate equality and agency of women, I subconsciously get one step closer to normalizing threatening a woman who won't sleep with me, just because a commercial movie with an attractive lead told me I could.

Am I solely responsible for major decisions involving my partner?

As a man, should I be dictating the actions and decisions of my partners? If I am to buy in to the narrative of the film, my answer would be a “yes.” I should be operating under the assumption that I know better than my partner and should protect her from her inherent incompetence.

After Preeti gets a “deep” cut on her foot 45 minutes into the film, we see Kabir deciding that Preeti can't take care of herself. Without any discussion with her, he decides she must move into his dorm so he can help her study. Of course, this move results in less studying and more intimacy for the two of them. Kabir makes countless decisions on her behalf that are shown to have a positive impact on both their academic and personal lives.

In Kabir Singh and in many other Hindi films, a perfect relationship has a very specific definition. We're constantly shown that a responsible, “masculine” man will make the important decisions for his female partner and protect her from any harm, even if that means stripping her of her agency to consent. I can't help but reflect on my own relationship. Have Hindi films shaped my belief of what my responsibilities are? Perhaps I do interrogate my girlfriend about “how she's going to reach home” too often. Maybe I am operating under the assumption that as a boyfriend, I know more about how to “protect” my partner (a bias that I should work toward eliminating).

WE'RE CONSTANTLY SHOWN THAT A RESPONSIBLE, “MASCULINE” MAN WILL MAKE THE IMPORTANT DECISIONS FOR

HIS FEMALE PARTNER AND PROTECT HER FROM ANY HARM, EVEN IF THAT MEANS STRIPPING HER OF HER AGENCY TO CONSENT.

I've never believed films are required to be an ethics lesson for their audiences. I've always believed that imperfection in characters is what makes films truly beautiful. While I still believe this, Kabir Singh made me realize that films are equally responsible to not openly laud and glamorize incorrect behavior. Are we really, in 2019, watching a film glorifying the misogyny, aggression, and non-consensual relationships that characterize toxic masculinity? Are people genuinely entertained by such films? The answer is a resounding yes: the film earned 100 crores in 5 days.

As members of society committed to dismantling rigid gender norms, we need to interrogate what message is sent by films like these to young men in audiences across India.



Sagar Galani

Sagar Galani is a writer with feminisminindia.com, and his writing focuses on gender inequality and toxic masculinity in Indian society.

04

Unhappily ever after: The cost Indian women pay for our 'lowest divorce rate'

by **Tanvi Sinha**

womensweb.in - 07 February 2019

India has the lowest divorce rate in the world, and its 'culture' is proudly cited to be the reason. But is that really a good thing? What does this do to the couples in these marriages?

When I was studying in the United States in the eighth grade, there was one other Indian girl in my class. I had just moved from India. I was no less patriotic than Shri Manoj Kumar. Always ready to sing, 'Mere desh ki dharti sona ugale ugale heere moti'. The other girl on the other hand was born there. She hated to be associated with India. Or me.

During one of the discussions, the teacher was talking about marriages across the world.

"Some people are forced to get married. In countries like India. It is called arranged marriage", she said.

She looked at me and the other girl to offer valuable insights on the topic. The other girl agreed with her. She said it's a sad state of affairs there. I told her that arranged marriages are not necessarily 'forced' marriages and many people live happily ever after.

After the class, the other girl told me that I do not belong in the current generation. I am ancient. I thought for a moment for an equally insulting response.

'At least we do not have such a high divorce rate!' I said with a sense of triumph.

Ahh!! So naïve I was at that age. Forgive me. I was 13.

Guess the percentage of divorce rate in India!

According to a recent study, India has the lowest divorce rate in the world.

The countries with the highest divorce rates are Luxembourg, Spain, France, Russia and the United States. Countries with the lowest divorce rates are Chile, Colombia, Mexico, Kenya, with India topping the chart at 1 percent!

Let us explore why.

Big Fat Wedding

“Indian weddings, no matter the religion, take months of pre-marital rituals and a lot more days before the actual wedding.”– Unified Lawyers.

An old housemaid of mine had sold her jewelry and her house for her daughter's wedding! I had found it ridiculous. I kept telling her that she should put the money to better use, secure her daughter's future (and hers). But she was adamant.

Irrespective of the socio-economic class the family belongs to, the wedding has to be a level ahead of their actual living standard. The jewelry. The functions. The photographer. The makeup. The caterers. The decoration. The grand venue. The guest list usually involves everybody the girl and boy's parents, grandparents and siblings have ever looked at! With so much of tamasha, a spectacle of people a couple may not even know, and a humongous financial payout, it is a no brainer that a woman's family (who mostly pays for the wedding) feels petrified at the thought of this investment going to trash or worse – doing it all over again.

Family and society pressure

Indian marriages are of course never about the boy and the girl. It is about their families. Therefore, the divorce also becomes about everybody. It is about family, honour, father's pride, mother's dream, grandparents' last wish, sister's chances in the marriage market, and neighbourhood aunty's uncomfortable questions. I do not even know where to find the poor, unhappy couple in this. Somewhere under the dump. Lost.

Women have nowhere to go

In the movie 'Dil Dhadakne Do', Ranveer Singh's character tells his mother that she did not get out despite knowing about her husband's philandering ways

because she had nowhere to go. Yes, it is the harsh reality.

For Indian women, divorce may not be the best option because they would be considered as opposing the rules and tradition of the Indian society. In addition, women have to shoulder the high cost of divorce. – Unified Lawyers.

It is expensive to live in an independent establishment, as opposed to living with family where the cost gets divided. Even if women are financially independent, they may not have someone to live with (especially for mothers) due to lack of support. Staying with parents, or siblings may also end up with taunts. Women may end up feeling that if they have to be miserable either way, might as well be it with the husband!

Shaadi mein problem? Bachcha kar lo!

This ill advice has caused many couples to get stuck to each other, with no way out. India is a special country that loves to glorify parenthood as an institution of sacrifice.

When a woman with a child decides to end her marriage, she is often told that she is being selfish. She should work it out for the sake of the child, and not give in to her 'ego'!

Abandonment – The substitute for divorce

When I was in school, a friend's mother always came to pick her up in simple sari, but bright sindoor. The girl never talked about her father. Once I asked her about him. (Sorry again! Was too young). She told me her father was posted in Bokaro. Festivals passed. Birthdays passed. Years passed. The girl's marriage happened. The father never showed up.

He is posted in Ranchi.

The names of the city changed. The father was never seen.

Very recently, she mustered the strength to tell me that her father had left her mother and her, when she was six. She told me they had problems from the

beginning. One day, he just left! They never heard from him again. The mother was soon asked to leave the house by the in-laws. They moved to her maternal grandparents house and lived there. The mother pretended to be together because of the stigma.

This may have happened 20 years back. But sadly, this is still happening. I know men of good families who have just left their wives and disappeared to another country. They dread a divorce as it could involve alimony, child support_ or even a mental cruelty or dowry case depending on how they have treated their wives. When they are in another country, they are safe from police and Indian legal system. They make a fresh start in life. The wives here are stuck. Sometimes with kids. These cowards literally play with a woman's life.

My take: Nothing to be happy about

India may have the lowest divorce rate, compared to other countries. But divorce rate in India is higher than what it used to be. We have come a long way.

Any women going through a divorce, or in the process of one, or through with one, please do not feel discouraged by reading the above. A marriage is a relationship, and not all relationships work out. It is okay to end it. If you are in an unhappy relationship, it is okay to save yourself at the cost of the relationship.

A low divorce does not necessarily reflect a happy couple. It reflects lack of choice.

Divorce isn't such a tragedy. A tragedy is staying in an unhappy marriage. – Jennifer Weiner



Tanvi Sinha

Tanvi Sinha is an award-winning writer who writes regularly about the subtle inequalities faced by women in India. She is an avid blogger on her website tanvisinhasblog.com.

05

How patriarchy forces boys who survive sexual abuse into years of trauma, silence

by **Geetika Mantri & Shiba Kurian**

thenewsminute.com - 31 December 2018

“Come, Riyaz! Let's meet someone,” a boy in his neighbourhood told him one afternoon. Riyaz* was 11 years old then, while the boy was four to five years older than him. The boy took Riyaz to a lonely area behind the building. What happened next took a while for Riyaz to comprehend. The boy rubbed himself against Riyaz for five to 10 minutes. “I tried to resist him, but I was no match for his strength. After that, I ran home,” recounts Riyaz, who is 29 years old now.

A few years later, Riyaz would have a second encounter with sexual abuse, when he was in class 9. One day, his bench-mate touched him and then tried to unzip his trousers. They were on the last bench in the classroom, so no one could see; but Riyaz was frozen. “He tried to unzip me... he put his hand inside. And then he, he took...” Riyaz struggles to finish the sentence. “He put his hands inside my underpants. He tried to take my hand and make me touch him too, which I resisted very strongly,” he continues with difficulty.

This continued for three to four days. “I was scared when he was touching me, as this was happening during the class. I feared what my classmates would say, how they would treat me if they found out. Finally, I requested my teacher to change my seat, which she did. It stopped then,” Riyaz says.

These incidents affected Riyaz in many ways – he became timid, developed a stammer and was very anxious around boys. “I did not open up about these incidents to anyone until last year, because male child sexual abuse is less heard about and also difficult to talk about. I was scared people would make fun of me, or not believe me. The guilt of not being able to protect myself, being a boy, kept gnawing at me. I feared questions like 'how could you be scared when you are a boy'. Nobody would have trusted me, because boys are perceived to be mentally and physically stronger,” Riyaz says.

Riyaz's childhood is just one in hundreds of other cases where boys are scarred by

sexual abuse. They are forced to become slaves of patriarchal definitions of what it means to be a man, ultimately compelling them to deal with sexual abuse as a child on their own.

Incidentally, the limited study in this field bears testimony to the lack of acknowledgement and awareness on the oft-suppressed reality that boys too fall prey to sexual abuse. Even the handful of studies on male survivors of child sexual abuse (CSA) point out the dangerous effects patriarchy can have on their mental well-being. It is also important to understand how psychological and emotional trauma experienced by a boy are different from that of a girl, and how the burden of hegemonic masculinity or manhood overwhelms a male victim of sexual abuse into years of silent suffering in shame, guilt and confusion.

TNM spoke to a few survivors and experts to understand what happens to boys when they are sexually abused, how the spectre of abuse, when left unaddressed, impacts their adulthood, sexuality and mental well-being, and how they cope.

How patriarchy, social conditioning force male survivors into silence

Sexual violence remains an unacknowledged and an open secret in many Indian families. This is compounded by the way patriarchy sees boys and men as aggressive and protective, which leaves little room for vulnerability, especially for male child sexual abuse survivors.

Dr Preeti Jacob, Assistant Professor, Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry at the National Institute of Mental Health and Neuroscience (NIMHANS), Bengaluru, says that when it comes to boys, parents are reluctant to acknowledge sexual abuse. “They brush off an incident of CSA as a stronger form of bullying,” she tells TNM.

She also points out that sexual abuse generally comes with a high degree of secrecy because “men can't be victims as they can't and won't be abused” by the society.

Ram*, a Hyderabad resident and CSA survivor, agrees. “Society shows more sympathy towards female survivors, because according to the mindset of people, especially in orthodox families, boys and men are strong and bold so

they don't get abused or assaulted,” he says.

The 24-year-old was first sexually abused by a cousin at the age of four, but did not realise what was happening. In a similar situation a few years later, he realised that it was wrong, but could not confide in his parents.

Ram's ordeal did not end there. He shifted to a residential school when he was in class 6. “My mathematics teacher was my next abuser,” he tells TNM. “I am close to my mother and so I was homesick when I shifted to the residential school. I might have come across as a vulnerable person who would not speak to anyone about a traumatic experience. As he continued to abuse me, I started developing a phobia towards mathematics.”

He shifted to a day school for secondary education. When he was in class 8, Ram developed an interest in biology. His biology tutor, however, decided to exploit him instead. “He would show me informative posters by the Education Ministry on male and female body parts and point towards the private parts in a sexually suggestive manner,” he recounts.

Ram wrote a letter to President Ram Nath Kovind in July asking for mercy killing. In his letter, he pointed out that the cases of boys being sexually abused tend to fall through the cracks due to society's delusion that a male child can “never be vulnerable in a patriarchal society”.

There is also a general silence when it comes to anything related to sex, which further discourages survivors from speaking up, says Dr Shekhar Seshadri, a psychiatrist and senior professor, Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry at NIMHANS.

“Whether it's a boy or girl, their socialisation and relationships with adults are constructed on a culture of instruction, expectation and obedience; not on the basis of conversations. Look at the silence around sexuality as a whole, even in a civil society and between two intelligent and liberal adults. So how can we expect a child to be able to talk about such topics?”

This proves to be a challenge even for those working to raise awareness, observes Sandhiyan Thilagavathy, founder of the NGO AWARE (Awareness for

Women to Advocate their Rights and Equality), whose team visits residential buildings and gated communities to talk of child sexual abuse with children as well as parents in Tamil Nadu.

Sandhiyan says that when they started the awareness campaigns two years ago, many parents claimed they did not need such sessions when they had a son. While this mindset has changed to an extent, Sandhiyan notes that when parents are asked to have open conversations with their child about their body and appropriate behaviours, they find themselves in a spot when their children ask them questions like 'how are babies made?'

For instance, Delhi-based Rahul*, who was sexually abused as a child multiple times, says that he has had a conversation with his parents about sex. "But it only touched upon lines that since I am of a certain age, I have to be safe," he says.

Sandhiyan adds, "And most of the parents have a common belief – 'I don't want to instil unwanted exploratory ideas in their young minds by talking about it'."

Due to this culture, children often lack the vocabulary or reference to express sexual misbehaviour or abuse, even if they feel it was wrong. "Children don't disclose [abuse] because at that point, they are too young; they don't know whom to disclose to or fear that they will not be believed. Or perhaps they have tentatively tried to do so, but have been shushed," Dr Shekhar says.

Grooming: How it reinforces confusion, silence

Realisation of being sexually abused in the first place, Dr Preeti says, depends on the grooming during the course of the abuse. Grooming is a preparatory process where the abuser gains a child's trust, with the intent to abuse him or her, while also manipulating the child to ensure he or she does not disclose the abuse.

Dr Shekhar explains how grooming works. "An adult perpetrator knowingly establishes a relationship with a child and imbues it with certain 'specialness'. This includes sweet talks like, 'I like you so much, we are so good together', inducements and gifts. The child is isolated from adults and family in such a situation. And then, the abuser sexualises the relationship," he says.



“The child is then compelled into silence – either with the threat of injury or repercussion to the child or their family, or using emotional blackmail by saying things like, 'I will be in trouble, don't you care for me',” he adds.

In such a situation, the child will not be able to recognise an abuse and will also be manipulated by the abuser because of the nature of their relationship. Just how deeply grooming can affect a child's perception is reflected in Rahul's story.

The 29-year-old had suppressed memories of the sexual abuse he was subjected to by multiple people in his childhood. They didn't surface till he was 25 and working in Bengaluru. After experiencing nightmares, during which he would break into a sweat, he sought psychological help. It was then that he recollected that his personality quirks were not social anxiety and the scars on his body were not from rough play.

“I was first abused at the age of four or six, by a close female relative at my home. She would force oral sex on me. Around that time, we had a live-in domestic help, a man. He would sexually assault me almost every day. I sensed what he was doing was wrong. But when I resisted, he would hit me and gag my mouth, saying this is love. So I grew up with a skewed definition of love – that love was all about sex. Eventually, the man was sent away because he did not do his work properly,” Rahul says, adding, “Luckily, I would forget it the next day or my memory suppressed it.”

While Rahul was manipulated into believing a dangerous definition of affection, Pune-based Avinash* silently endured a decade of sexual abuse at the hands of his uncle, Sumit*, due to the threat of physical violence.

The 29-year-old grew up in a remote village in West Bengal. “Sumit and my family lived in the same house as a joint family. We were poor and he was the only person in the family who had passed class 10 then. So, he used to tutor us,” Avinash narrates.

After the tutoring session, Sumit would sexually abuse Avinash, his younger brother and other children as well. “Over the years, I think he has sexually abused 17-18 children,” Avinash alleges. “Several children in the neighbourhood used to come to my house to study as well. Sometimes, he would lure some of them by

promising them a few rupees or some chocolates.”

Avinash says that his uncle has sexually assaulted him multiple times from when he was in class 2 until class 12. “It was painful,” he recalls. “But if I resisted, he would threaten to beat me, physically torture me, or create other problems for me. So it became a routine. When the tuition ended, one of us would become his prey,” he says.

The children were so terrified of him and the consequences of resisting him that they did not speak to each other about it. “I was so scared that when my brother would get abused, my sense of protectiveness towards him was overpowered by a sense of relief for myself, that 'thank god, it's not me today',” Avinash recounts.

Homophobia and toxic masculinity

Vidya Reddy of Tular, a Chennai-based non-profit organisation for the prevention and healing of child sexual abuse, points out that in a society that is homophobic, one of the biggest fears for a boy who has been abused is being labelled gay. Parents bring up their boys to think that if they are weak, they won't be considered a “man”.

In fact, Vidya notes, cultural references play an important role here. “Certain phrases in a region – like ombodhu maadhri irukathay (don't be like a transgender person) in Tamil – is an indication of how a culture perceives whom they think is not a 'manly boy',” she says.

This distorts survivors' idea of what it is to be a man, she adds. “The boy may perceive himself as weak and different because of the abuse, or because he allowed the abuse to happen or even because he was chosen to be abused. One of the common problems men who have been abused as children share with us is the feeling of powerlessness,” says Vidya.

Boys who may develop anxiety, a timid nature or show other manifestations of trauma after being sexually abused may appear vulnerable or effeminate and, hence, are prone to further abuse. Like Ram, whose mathematics teacher started abusing him because he came across as vulnerable, Riyaz also became a victim of bullying from other boys as he

came across as being timid and hence “unmanly”.

“The second incident, where my classmate touched me inappropriately, happened because he knew I was scared around boys and would not tell anyone,” Riyaz says.

For men, what can also reinforce silence around child sexual abuse is if their perpetrators are women. Grooming plays a particularly important role here, because in the rare case that women are abusers, they almost always have a pre-existing relationship with the victim, Dr Preeti says.

“It's likely that a woman abuser is known, has an established relationship with the child, who may not even realise when the relationship is sexualised. Such cases get entangled in a sense of betrayal, the abuse and assault, as well as the confusion if this should be considered abuse at all, given the nature of the relationship,” she explains.

This is further compounded because patriarchy mandates that boys and men will always enjoy heterosexual sex. “While a girl's sexual abuse is scorned and looked at as a serious crime, most men are pressured by society to pass off their sexual abuse as a rite of passage,” Insia Dariwala, filmmaker and president of The Hands of Hope Foundation, which does outreach programs to create awareness about child sexual abuse in schools, communities and neighbourhoods, points out.

This is what happened with Rahul as well. He initially spoke about the abuse to a few friends, whom he no longer classifies as friends. “Some said that since I am a boy, I must have enjoyed it,” he says, referring to the abuse by his female relative. “Others said that since I am gay, I must have enjoyed other men touching me,” adds Rahul, who was also subjected to sexual abuse by a male relative and later by two gym instructors at the hotel where his parents worked.

“However, what they did not realise is that such exposure at that age is not what any child, irrespective of sexual orientation, would enjoy. Male survivors receive that kind of apathy a lot. Girls, on the other hand, have been more empathetic. I got the validation that a male survivor of CSA would look for,” he adds.

How abuse impacts psychological, emotional well-being

For Rahul, remnants of sexual abuse continue to agonise him, such as the gash that the men who gangraped him once inflicted on his pubic area. “As a child, I managed to conceal the bruise with cotton and tissue, and it healed eventually. I am 29 years old now and it still burns when I urinate. Sometimes, the pain would be so bad that I would cry,” he shares.

Rahul also started experiencing social anxiety as he grew up. “I turned into a person who does not go out, who just sits at home. I had to start taking medication for my anxiety attacks. Each day is unpredictable for me, marked by erratic behaviour and self-doubt. Anything can set off anxiety, even a disturbed sleep cycle.”

The trauma also started impacting his ability to process emotions. “There is so much suppressed rage inside me that I tend to fly into a fury, where my tongue becomes a sword and I start hurling things,” he adds.

For Riyaz, his second instance of abuse impacted his speech. “I started stammering and my anxiety increased. After undergoing speech therapy in the last few years, my speech has become better.”

Insia opines that the burden of patriarchy weighs down so heavily on boys that it directly affects their ability to emote and express. The consequence of which is either increased aggression or increased isolation from the outside world, both damaging.

Explaining such behavioural problems in male survivors, Dr Preeti says that boys are more likely to externalise their abuse. This means, the person perpetuates what they have experienced or witnessed or display aggression or rule-breaking behaviours. “However, this does not mean that all boys who experience sexual abuse will end up becoming aggressors themselves,” Dr Preeti stresses.

Meanwhile, if a person internalises abuse, he or she may develop mental health issues, such as depression, anxiety, low self-esteem or submissiveness.

However, externalisation and internalisation of trauma are not mutually

exclusive, adds Dr Preeti. “The same child who hits out at somebody or picks up fights or gets angry is also likely to cry more, blame himself, feel guilty or have low self-esteem. So, it is not true that boys will only externalise trauma. Regardless of gender, survivors exhibit externalising and internalising behaviours to cope with trauma,” she elucidates.

Vidya Reddy (of Tulir) notes that the mental health aspect of child sexual abuse is misunderstood in India, especially for boys. “Unless there is a physical manifestation of the impact of the abuse, parents and society don't understand how it affects the child mentally. As long as the boy eats and sleeps “normally”, they feel their child is fine,” she explains.

The emphasis on physical markers of sexual violence also manifests when parents uphold unhealthy notions such as “at least he won't get pregnant.”

“This attitude breeds many possibilities that normalise abuse when it comes to boys. There is a school of thought that a boy getting 'roughed' up sexually will make him stronger and teach him how to 'handle' women,” Insia says.

How CSA affects sexual behaviour, sexuality in boys

Sudheer*, an advocate based in Bengaluru, remembers how his cousin, who was 19-20 years old, did something inappropriate to him when he was six. “We used to live in a joint family. Once, my cousin took me to a room on the top floor of the house, started removing his clothes and made me remove mine too. He held me... and I don't remember exactly how, but he masturbated on me,” he recounts.

“I think it happened a few times. I did not feel violated at the time; it was much later in life that I realised what he had done was wrong,” Sudheer adds.

While the abuse itself did not seem to traumatise Sudheer, it did pique his interest in his own sexuality. “It made me want to experiment, which I did with a few of my cousins who were of the same age as me. We sort of explored our bodies,” Sudheer tells TNM.

However, because Sudheer got the feeling that he 'enjoyed' the abuse, it made

him feel dirty and self-loathe himself. “I felt sick and guilty when I felt I enjoyed it. Maybe my cousin groomed me. But I felt dirty wanting to do sexual things after that,” he says.

What happened with Sudheer is not uncommon. Experts refer to this as traumatic sexualisation, where a child, regardless of gender, is exposed to sexuality at a developmental stage when they cannot fully comprehend the phenomenon.

Dr Shekhar explains that this can happen in two ways. “On one hand, it happens through the dynamics of seduction, grooming, inducement, mystery and excitement. The other way is through force, hurt, coercion or injury. And a lot of the impact of sexual abuse depends on the nature of this traumatic sexualisation. If a child is sexualised using grooming, sexuality has primacy and the adult outcome may be inappropriate, excessive or unhealthy sexual behaviour. If it is through force, injury and coercion that the boy develops, then you have phobic avoidance.”

It is important to recognise, especially in cases like Sudheer, where outright feelings of pain and violation are absent, that it is still abuse. “Ultimately, for both boys and girls, genitalia will respond to stimulation because it is a bunch of nerves put together. So the child feeling “good” because someone has sexually stimulated him doesn't mean anything. It's still a violation of their boundary,” Dr Preeti asserts.

This happened with Rahul as well. Apart from the tsunami of confusion and trauma in his mind, his body also started reacting to the abuse. “Because of the constant stimulation, my body started sexually maturing before the defined age of puberty. I started having hair growth at the age of 10. Besides, because I was getting an erection, I thought I was enjoying it. This was confusing to me,” he says.

Dr Preeti says that feeling “pleasure” during abuse is also a reason why children carry guilt. “Since they feel good to an extent, they think they have invited it in some way,” she adds.

Boys who have been sexually abused often get confused about their sexuality, especially if it happens in their pre-teen or adolescent years. There are two kinds of issues, explains Dr Preeti.

“There are children who have always experienced same-sex attraction; but, after being abused by a man, they don't know what to make of that attraction. A question that keeps haunting them is whether they were abused because of same-sex attraction. We have also had boys who are heterosexual and have been abused by men. They fear other people would perceive them as a homosexual; or they fear they would become gay,” she says.

Further, for boys who are heterosexual, abuse by men can affect their sense of being male, masculinity and self-identity, Dr Shekhar observes.

In young children, abuse may affect their expression of sexuality, Dr Preeti says. “Post the abuse and the grooming, a certain awakening of sexuality does occur. This may be something that they haven't thought about until that point. Sexual behaviour can also become a way of normalising the abuse, especially for younger children, to the point that they can do the same to someone else without understanding what it means.”

CSA survivors are also likely to develop trust, intimacy and relationship issues. However, Dr Sonia, a Pune-based psychiatrist who has treated adult survivors of child sexual abuse, says that this depends on several factors, including the cultural values the boy was brought up with.

For instance, Avinash, who buried the trauma for the most part, believes that the abuse did not give him intimacy issues. However, he finds it difficult to trust people and worries how his future wife will react to his past. “I am worried how she would take it; whether she will be able to accept it, although I know it is not my fault...,” he trails off.

For Rahul, as far as romantic relationships are concerned, he finds it difficult being with a person who is a survivor. “It becomes difficult and unhealthy because both of them can trigger each other. On the other hand, if the partner is not a survivor, there will be a danger of apathy from him or her. The male survivor has his own set of issues and anxiety; one touch that reminds them of the abuse can throw them off-balance. I get dependent on my partner because I still feel vulnerable and look for ways to keep myself safe. So, the burden of my responsibility falls on the partner,” he says.

Coming to terms with the abuse

There is no set template for coming to terms with sexual abuse, especially when it happens at a young age, experts say. For some, it may be about acknowledging the abuse and sharing their story, while for others it may mean confronting their abuser or seeking therapy. And for some, like Ram and Avinash, coming to terms may be all about channelling their trauma to make social impact.

Due to the traumatic memories and the subsequent panic attacks, Ram was not able to share his experiences with anybody or give vent to his emotions.

“In 2017, when reports about a seven-year-old boy at Ryan International School being allegedly sexually abused and murdered surfaced, I decided to speak about the matter. And at the age of 23, I spoke to my mother about how I was sexually abused as a child. She understood and gave me the courage to fight it out and help others,” he says.

Ram started exploring the subject and speaking to male survivors across India.

Avinash, meanwhile, is thinking of reporting his uncle, Sumit. He realised what happened with him was a criminal offense just two years ago, during a sexual harassment training at his workplace. He learnt about the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act and realised that he was a survivor of child sexual abuse. “I developed blood pressure problems and anxiety after learning about this,” he says.

He was also associated with Insia's Hands of Hope Foundation, where he interacted with other male survivors of CSA. It helped him feel that he is not alone.

He also confronted his abuser in 2016. “I told him what he did to me was wrong and that I would take action against him. He has not been able to look me in the eye since. He keeps avoiding me and has also moved out of the house,” Avinash shares, adding that he wants to report Sumit to prevent further abuse and raise awareness.

Is he concerned how his parents would react if he files a complaint against

Sumit? “I realise that he is part of the family, but family ties and love don't not justify abuse. Sumit has done something wrong, I accepted it because I did not know it was wrong. If [I file the complaint now] something happens in the village, let it happen.”

Therapy is helping both Riyaz and Rahul deal with their trauma. While some can never tell their families about the abuse they have faced, Rahul was able to do so. “It was tough for my parents to process it as they realised that everything happened right under their nose. But they listened to me and are helping me through my struggles,” he says.

The role of therapy

After experiencing anxiety attacks, Riyaz finally confided in his female friends about his abuses last year. The two convinced him to consult a psychiatrist in January 2018. The therapy helped assuage his anxiety. “I was angry that I could not prevent my abusers from doing what they did to me. I was guilty that I could not protect myself. With therapy, I have become calmer and the guilt is lesser,” says Riyaz.

Rahul initially struggled to find a good therapist. When he finally consulted one in Pune, he was able to clarify that his social anxiety was actually a trust issue.

According to Dr Sonia, male survivors seek counselling and psychological help when they are in their mid-20s or early 30s. When she is presented with a child sexual abuse case involving a male, she counsels them in a phased manner. The first step, Dr Sonia says, is making the survivor accept that they have been abused. “Lack of acceptance is the first problem. The survivor's trauma continues when he keeps telling himself that he could have fought it or he could have opened up to somebody,” she explains.

Once the survivor accepts the abuse, the second step is to empower him emotionally. “This is the phase where the survivor is counselled to put this past behind him. However, this is a tricky phase, where the survivor recognises his triggers,” says Dr Sonia, who practises child and adolescent psychiatry. “After I identify the survivor's triggers, I help them disconnect emotions from them piecemeal.”



Once the emotional part is sorted, finding a psychological solace and resolution to what has happened is the next step. “This is when the survivor laments the incident and calls it a closed chapter. This will help him look at the situation objectively rather than emotionally,” she says.

Lack of government support system

Girija Kumarbabu, secretary of Indian Council for Child Welfare (ICCW), Tamil Nadu, stresses the importance of helping a child who has been abused, at its onset. And this, according to her, can be through a proper support system set up by the government.

“However, as of today, there is no professional centre under an NGO or government where the child can be referred to, especially boys. There is a lack of trained professionals as well. Some parents take their children to a psychiatrist or psychologist, while in many cases the child is left alone to cope with the crisis or come out of it,” she says.

“Every child can overcome such a crisis if supported from the time the abuse is disclosed or discovered. Hence, instead of thinking of punishing the offender, there should be an equal focus on protecting and helping the child. This can be addressed by, as POCSO describes, identifying support persons and training them to be a support system to the boy child,” she adds.

While echoing a similar concern, Dr Sonia notes that these gaps are often filled by the survivors themselves, which, she believes, could backfire.

“A lot of times, a survivor learns a few tricks of the trade and starts counselling. This is not a good idea because his emotions will always be coloured by his own experience. He will look at the case like how he fought it and how he dealt with it, and then let the patient try the same. Counselling and helping others have to be completely non-judgemental; a one-size-fits-all solution will not help. While their intentions are appreciated, which is adding to the strength of the whole movement, I am not sure how helpful it will be,” she reasons.

An urgent need for more studies



The last known government research on this issue was carried out in 2007. In the study, 53.2% of children reported to have experienced some form of sexual abuse; and of these, 52.9% were boys.

The most recent effort to understand the trauma of sexual abuse among males and how it impacted them was in November 2017 by Insia Dariwala. She conducted an online survey of 160 men in the country, which revealed that 71% of respondents were sexually abused as children.

According to the survey, most instances of CSA occurred when the boy was between 10–16 years of age or between 5 to 9 years of age. Only 14.5% of respondents said that they disclosed their abuse to someone as a child. Also, 56.1% of respondents said that shame stopped them from disclosing their abuse.

Finding the studies on this issue insufficient, two years ago, Insia had started a petition on Change.org addressed to the Minister of Women and Child Development, Maneka Gandhi, demanding an in-depth study on male child sexual abuse in the country.

This petition made the Indian government sit up and consider expanding the scope of the POCSO Act to make it more inclusive of male survivors. While POCSO has always been gender-neutral, an amendment proposed later, to introduce death penalty for those who rape children below 12 years, took into account only girl survivors. The Indian government then commissioned Insia Dariwala, with support from Adrian Philips of Justice and Care, to conduct a larger study on male survivors of child sexual abuse.

In her response in April 2018, Maneka Gandhi said, “Child sexual abuse is gender neutral. Boys who are sexually abused as children spend a lifetime of silence because of the stigma and shame attached to male survivors speaking out. It is a serious problem and needs to be addressed.”



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06

No crime, unending punishment

by **Jyoti Shinoli**

ruralindiaonline.org - 10 August 2018

Pune: "Don't cry. We will do something. I will make sure that you get help right away," Sunita Bhosale says. The phone call is from Kansewadi village in Shrigonda taluka of Ahmednagar district.

Shantaram Chavan, around 80 years old, has been badly beaten by some villagers for building an embankment through his farm. His daughter Pinti has taken him to the civil hospital in Ahmednagar. It's 40-year-old Pinti who Sunita is trying to reassure on the phone.

She then makes another call to a volunteer in Ahmednagar. "That Chavan has got beaten again. Go to the police thana now. Tell them to file a case under Section 307 [attempt to murder under the Indian Penal Code]. And keep informing me," Sunita says and disconnects.

After a few moments of silence, she says, angrily, "How could they do this? It's his land. This is the second attack on him. They had already broken one of his hands. Do they want to kill him now?"

Sunita Bhosale often receives calls from Pardhis asking for help.

Like Chavan, 33-year-old Sunita Bhosle belongs to the Phanse Pardhi community, listed as a Scheduled Tribe (ST) by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs. The community has endured many decades of discrimination and violence.

The Pardhis, along with various other tribes, were branded as 'criminal' by the colonial British government with the Criminal Tribes Act (CTA). "The 1871 CTA and its later amendments notified more than 120 communities as "criminal tribes", implying that these communities were criminal by birth and practiced crime as a profession. The Act gave the colonial government the power to brand, penalise, segregate and forcibly sedentarise hitherto nomadic communities," says

a study titled A Report on the Status of Pardhis in Mumbai City by the Centre for Criminology and Justice at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai.

In 1952, the Indian government repealed the Act, and the tribes were 'denotified'. Some of them are now included in the list of Scheduled Castes, some as Scheduled Tribes, and some are in the Other Backward Classes category.

Around 223,527 Pardhis live in Maharashtra, according to Census 2011, and some also live in Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Karnataka and Madhya Pradesh. Within the Pardhis, there are various sub-groups, originally named according to their occupations or other descriptors, including Pal Pardhis (who lived in tents), Bhil Pardhis (who used firearms), and the Phanse Pardhis (who hunted using a noose).

Of the nearly 1,500 nomadic and semi-nomadic communities, and 198 denotified tribes in India listed by National Commission for Denotified, Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic Tribes., the Pardhis remain among the most deprived in terms of education, employment and other facilities; they are still often viewed as prone to crime and are stigmatised.

“We are still labelled as criminals,” Sunita says. “For any crime in a village, the police usually blame the Pardhis because they are an easy target. Whereas the atrocities [against the Pardhis] are serious, as you saw even now. This stigma against us has to end.”

Sunita has become known as someone who fights for the rights of Pardhis. But it's been a long journey for her.

She too faced harassment in her zilla parishad school in Ambale village of Shirur taluka in Pune district, where she studied till Class 6. “I used to get teased a lot due to my community. I would wonder why they are doing this to me?”

Sunita's father Eknath occasionally hunted monitor lizards, pheasants, rabbits and other small animals for food. Her mother Shantabai, along with her elder sister Anita, begged for food; their little brother Avinash stayed at home. “We often stayed hungry,” she says. “I remember in school we used to get milk. I would drink it bellyful, because there would be nothing at home to eat. Our teacher was a good person, he would give me as much milk as I wanted. He knew the Pardhis'

condition. Food collected from begging would not be enough for the family of four. We hardly got to see bhakri.”

The family lived in a hut on the outskirts of the village. When Sunita was just three, her father broke her mother's left hand during one of his bouts of violence. 'Medical help was out of our reach', she says. 'So her hand has remained paralysed...'

The family lived in a hut made of plastic and tin sheets, at that time on the outskirts of the village. When Sunita was just three, her father broke her mother's left hand during one of his bouts of violence. “Medical help was out of our reach,” she says. “So her hand has remained paralysed...”

Three months after this incident, her father's body was found on the Ranjangaon Road railway tracks in Ahmednagar. “The police said it was an accident, but my mother thought he may have been murdered and wanted an investigation,” says Sunita. “But nobody bothered because he was a Pardhi, and the police used to often arrest him on suspicion whenever there was a murder or robbery. She even tried to meet the superintendent of police. Nothing happened.”

Sunita also knew well the discriminatory practices within her community: “Child marriage is one of the major reasons for Pardhis dropping out of school,” she says. “Women are still considered as lower in status. A married woman can't keep her belongings inside the house. She can't bathe inside the house.” Arbitrary decisions of the Pardhi jaat panchayat (caste council), often based on notions of women's 'impurity', also create fear among the Pardhis.

Over time, working with activists who promoted education and addressed cases of atrocities against the Pardhis in the district, Sunita became familiar with provisions of the Indian Penal Code and the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe (Prevention of Atrocities) Act . “I want every Pardhi to know these laws so the policewalas won't fool them,” she says.

She also began attending morchas and meetings in Shirur taluka and in Pune where she would meet or listen to speeches by well-known activists like Eknath Awad and Rajendra Kale. “They have been an inspiration. They would visit Pardhi settlements and I saw how they were trying to eliminate the misconceptions in the community. I understood that to overcome this situation

we must be aware and educate ourselves,” she says.

Sunita too started visiting the Pardhi households in Ambale and nearby, speaking of the importance of education, of the negative effects of their customs. Alongside, she continued to work with her sister and brother on their farm.

The Pardhis, she observed, faced numerous other problems too – they moved from place to place, seeking alms, hunting, or doing odd jobs, which meant most didn't have a ration card, a voter ID, a stable education, or access to healthcare. Sunita decided to dedicate herself completely to work with her community and therefore never got married.

In 2010, she started a non-profit organisation named Kranti to consolidate her work. Kranti, she says, now works in 229 villages of Daund and Shirur talukas of Pune district, and Shrigonda taluka of Ahmednagar district (listed as Ahmadnagar in the Census).

Sunita estimates these 229 villages have a total Pardhi population of around 25,000. With the help of 50 volunteers and activists she handles at least three cases a week, varying from beating to rape and false charges of robbery and murder. She meets the aggrieved person, talks to him or her, helps file a police complaint when necessary, arranges for a lawyer, pays the legal fees, and follows up on the cases. “In not a single case of atrocity has justice been done. In the cases of false charges, 99 percent are innocent,” she says.

Over time, Sunita has got many fellowships and awards from various organisations in Maharashtra, and has used most of that money to help schoolchildren or those needing medical care in her community. Funding for her organisation also comes from individual donations. “I get small amounts to keep the cause alive. The volunteers who are with me are themselves Pardhis. I grow jowar, bajra and harbhara on my nine acres of land and get around 15–20 quintals annually, so I give some to the volunteers. I can't pay them but if they need money, I help because most of them are unemployed or farm labourers or young students.”

One of Sunita's targets is to ensure everyone in her community gets a caste certificate, which will enable better access to government schemes. “I also want to

create a big database of Pardhis, which actually should be done by the government to implement policies effectively,” she says. “No government scheme has ever really reached us.”

“In spite of a budget allocation of thousands of crores [for STs], no money has ever been spent on the development of this community,” says advocate Pallavi Renke, national coordinator and Maharashtra state president of Lokdhara, a national alliance of notified and denotified tribes. An IndiaSpend series published in 2016 shows that over the last 35 years, Rs. 2.8 lakh crores allotted to the welfare of SCs and STs through measures like midday meals, scholarships and crop insurance remained unspent.

'In spite of a budget allocation of thousands of crores [for STs], no money has ever been spent on the development of this community', says advocate Pallavi Renke, national coordinator and Maharashtra state president of Lokdhara, a national alliance of notified-denotified tribes.

Sunita estimates that 50 per cent of the Pardhis in the 229 villages now have voter IDs and ration cards. And parents are more willing to send their children to school – a necessary move when the literacy rate in the community in Maharashtra is just 64 per cent (Census 2011). “The younger generation is willing to move ahead,” she says.

“Education really changes our lives. Now my aim is to get a good job and earn well for my family,” says Jitendra Kale, 24, from Karade village (home to 10 Pardhi families) whose parents are farm labourers. He has a diploma in agriculture; his younger brother is preparing for the police recruitment exams. Similarly, Aarti Kale, 15, in Class 10 in the zilla parishad school in Karade, also wants to join the police force. “I just don't want to get married. I want to study and I will do that,” she says.

Sunita now lives with her mother in a two-room concrete house the family built in 2003 in Ambale. Her sister is married, her brother works as a gardener at the National Defence Academy in Pune, where he lives with his family. Sunita's mother is proud of her daughter. “I had to bear a lot as a woman. In our samaj the condition of women is worse than other women. I feel proud today seeing my daughter doing something for our samaj,” says Shantabai.

Their new house has a cupboard filled with her organisation's files and documents. “I follow in the footsteps of Babasaheb Ambedkar and Savitribai Phule – they fought for equality, education and for the rights of backward communities,” Sunita says. “But a lot more has to be done. And I need support for it. We don't have any political representatives. Who is going to speak for us?”



Jyoti Shinoli

Jyoti Shinoli is Senior Reporter at the People's Archive of Rural India; she has previously worked with news channels like 'Mi Marathi' and 'Maharashtra1'.

07

Faking virginity: Do women need to bleed to show they are 'pure'?

by **Lachmi Deb Roy**

Outlookindia.com - 19 November 2019

A miniscule section of India, which is women like us - liberal and emancipated - may scoff at the idea of virginity, but we cannot disregard its pertinence in certain sub-cultures. India, after all, is not a monolithic society.

Mumbai-based author, speaker and feminist, Meghna Pant says, “If a man is chauvinist enough to think that a woman's character is tied to her hymen and a woman is foolish enough to marry him, then they both deserve products like the I-Virgin.”

But are products like I-Virgin regressive? Yes. Is it abhorrent? Yes. Does it diminish a woman's sexuality? Yes. But does it give women the agency and right to rig a system that is so unfairly stacked against them? Yes. Does it find a way around patriarchy for the millions of women for whom misogyny is a reality and not a choice? A resounding, Yes.

Pant narrates an incident when in college she heard of a classmate who was 'saving' herself for marriage. Yet, every week she would have a new boyfriend, with whom she would do everything, except vaginal penetration. She was the most sexually active person that Pant had ever known.

A couple of years later her parents selected a man from her community whom she had to marry, and she told him that she was a virgin. Technically, she was. Thanks to her one truthful lie, they all lived happily ever after. Was she morally wrong or right? Who are we to say?

Virginity is a societal construct and like everything else in India it can be managed. All a woman has to do is to be smart about it. So, go on, sleep with a hundred men and if you find yourself on the wrong side of patriarchy, know that help is at hand.

A product called “I-Virgin -- Blood for the First Night” (that's exactly what it is

called) was available on Amazon. It was available in the form of a capsule or a suppository, which mimics a hymen and a blood-like substance. It has now been taken off by Amazon.

Kiran Manral, author and editor of *She the People* says, “When we seem to be going back into the distant past in every other way, it might seem appropriate that even this aspect of female bodily agency seems to be going back into the past, where patriarchy-determined female virginity is desirable because of the need to ensure knowledge of paternity of offspring.”

Doctors say that there is no documented evidence which suggests the safety profile of the product. But it is non-invasive, which means no surgery is involved.

Dr Madhushree Vijaykumar, consultant obstetrics and gynaecologist at Motherhood Hospitals, Bangalore says, “These capsules are made up of natural substances. There are no chemicals involved and there are no side effects. They just mimic or fake virginity. We don't have any scientific evidence on its usage and long-term effect.” Apparently, these capsules have to be taken as one to three doses, maximum.

“In India, we still have people, where they have a notion around rupture of hymen. They think the first intercourse should always have a blood clot or bleeding. But honestly, all women who have their first intercourse, aren't necessarily supposed to bleed,” adds Vijaykumar.

The I-Virgin capsule, once inserted into the vagina, dissolves under the influence of body heat and vaginal moisture to create a membrane or a fake hymen. This membrane has been designed to simulate the release of blood during intercourse.

Vijaykumar states, “This is a non-doctoral prescription. We don't advocate its use because this is not medicinal.” She explains that 13 to 15 percent of girls don't have hymen from birth. Often, the absence of hymen runs in the family. “We still don't know the reason for its existence.”

Additionally, there are other ways to rupture a hymen, apart from sexual intercourse. These include: extreme sports like gymnastics, horse riding and cycling or adventure sports like running, sprinting and stretch exercises. Even

masturbating may rupture it, including use of vibrators. Any sort of jerk or injury in the vaginal area might do the same. Moreover, it isn't essential that a ruptured hymen will bleed during the first intercourse. It's high time we put ancient concepts of female virginity to rest. Isn't it important that women need to start focusing on their desires and fulfilment.

Manral says, “It is really sad that most women don't even experience an orgasm regularly and most think of it as a bonus. Women need to start thinking of an orgasm as non-negotiable, to learn what gives them pleasure rather than what gives their partner pleasure.” If they are satisfied and eager for sex, she adds, that is a bonus for their partners, male or female.

Women's 'virginity' or 'purity', as termed by patriarchy, is still very much prevalent. Hymenoplasty is a thriving business in cities as well as villages. Feminist writer, Paromita Bardoloi says, “It's a wrong to say that it's only men who decide about women's bodies. It's the feudal mindset where a woman is supposed to 'belong' to a man – a father, a husband or a son.”

This system is equally perpetuated by women. They are so conditioned in patriarchy that many of them find their self-worth only in the patriarchal notion of purity. Unless we treat a woman as an individual from her birth, the notion of 'purity' will keep raising its ugly head.

Bardoloi says many young women don't put up photos on social media with a male friend because that might ruin their prospect of finding a “good guy”. A woman is supposed to know nothing about life or sex, so that her husband can groom her to be the way he and his family wants.

“This is the undercurrent that still runs,” adds Bardoloi. “We just put beautiful covers of love, respect, dignity and honour over it. No one wants to address the elephant in the room, which is women's ownership of their bodies. And that includes her vagina.”



Lachmi Deb Roy

Lachmi Deb Roy is Assistant Editor with Outlook Magazine. When not churning out lifestyle and entertainment stories, she likes to concentrate on stories that have a soul.

08

Punjab: The invisible drug addicts

by **Divya Goyal**

The Indian Express - 04 July 2019

Chandigarh: Harjot Kaur has no idea whether her husband is dead or alive. “Ki pata poorā ho gaya hova (he might have died),” says the 30-year-old, disdain dripping from her words.

The couple had a bitter fight one day and he broke her arm. “I was writhing in pain. He gave me chitta (heroin) saying it was a pain reliever. An illiterate, I believed him,” she says.

He was a drug addict. She too was soon hooked. “Initially we used to take pure heroin. Then there was no money to buy it. Then we started injecting cheap white powder mixed with water, at least five times a day. We mortgaged our home to buy drugs. It cost us everything,” Harjot adds.

The husband then took to petty thefts and snatchings to fund his addiction. “He spent three years in jail,” she says. So intense was her addiction that she doesn't even remember when exactly her husband went missing and never returned home.

Harjot is one of the patients admitted to Punjab's only government run de-addiction centre for women – Navkiran Kendra – in the premises of Kapurthala Civil Hospital.

The biggest victim of Harjot and her husband's drug addiction is their daughter. The parents never admitted her to school and she grew up seeing them injecting drugs in their veins. Now 7, she lives with Harjot at the centre and has been admitted to a school by the administration.

Call it the government's lack of vision or failure to accept that women too take to drugs, In Punjab's narcotics problem scenario, women addicts have largely remained ignored. This, mostly because women refuse to go for treatment

fearing social stigma. While Punjab's drug problem has remained in focus for more than a decade now, it was only in 2018 that the government realized the need for a de-addiction centre exclusively for women and set up the 15-bed Navkiran Kendra. However, there are some private and government centres where both men and women are treated.

So, what exactly is pushing women into this trap?

According to experts, there are several reasons but at the top is the influence of the male partner, who more often than not happens to be an addict in most such cases.

“Mostly it is the male partner under whose influence a woman starts taking drugs. There are relationship issues, broken marriages, domestic violence, alcohol addiction, peer pressure (among students) and some get into addiction while selling drugs for easy money or for running their household if the male partner is unemployed. Women in the flesh trade often take to drugs when they start feeling guilty. Among students, it starts with party drugs,” says Dr Sandeep Bhola, consultant psychiatrist, de-addiction specialist and incharge, Navkiran Kendra. He adds that among opioid drugs, women patients are mostly addicted to heroin.

Take the case of 19-year old Shivani from Ludhiana. The girl who cleared class 12 board exams this year, is undergoing treatment for heroin addiction. “My boyfriend of two years ended the relationship to be with some other girl. It was before the board exams. I was emotionally drained and angry. A friend suggested that I take a hit to relieve the pain. That was the first time I snorted heroin using a wrap (panni),” Shivani recalls.

“I used to get Rs 2,000 a week for pocket money and I would get half a gram of heroin, which I used to manage with for seven days. One day my mother caught me doing drugs in the washroom. My boyfriend wasn't an addict, but I ruined my life in a momentary act of foolishness,” she says. Shivani now wants to pursue graduation but her parents fear she will again take to drugs in college.

Twenty-eight year old Gurjot Kaur started doing drugs after her husband offered her heroin as a painkiller for headache. “He said I will feel better. I was hooked and kept injecting heroin for almost 10 years,” says Gurjot. Her husband died of a

drug overdose a year ago and some family members brought her to Navkiran for treatment.

Manjeet (25) snorted heroin a few times with friends just for fun. She soon turned into an addict. Following a broken marriage, Manjeet enrolled into a beautician's course. "Girls there used to take drugs. I took heroin for some days with them and then became an addict. For three years, I injected myself 7-8 times a day. My friend used to get a 12 ml bottle, which was enough for two people. We used to buy it for Rs 100 and then further sell it also for Rs 600 to get money for our own drugs. From heroin to several other medical drugs, I injected all," says Manjeet, now a Hepatitis-C patient.

Women in drug trade

Chief of the Anti-drug Special Task Force (STF), Additional Director General of Police (ADGP) Gurpreet Kaur Deo says that a woman becoming an addict affects the entire family. "If a man goes astray, a woman can guide the family. But if a woman becomes an addict, she is vulnerable to sexual and physical exploitation and unable to guide her children. Fearing social stigma, they are afraid to declare their addiction. Women addicts are hardly visiting Outpatient Opioid Assisted Treatment (OOAT) centres for treatment due to stigma".

Based on the arrests made, the ADGP adds that women peddlers get into drug trade for easy money, running the household if the male partner was unemployed or if they themselves were hooked to drugs.

Door to door survey to treat women addicts: Minister

Punjab Health Minister Balbir Singh Sidhu says that soon ASHA workers will be conducting door to door surveys in villages to treat women addicts. "ASHA workers will be going door to door and treatment given to women addicts will be confidential. They will be provided medicines at doorsteps to avoid social embarrassment. We planned this project because a woman can open up with a woman. Currently there is no need to open more women exclusive de-addiction centres. Identifying women addicts is more important," he says.

"Initially, the priority was to provide enough treatment facilities for men as they

constitute the majority of addicts,” he adds.

Drug addiction among women in Punjab in numbers

Though there is no data available with the government stating the exact number of female addicts in the state, the statistics compiled and accessed by The Indian Express, show that a significant number of women in Punjab are hooked to drugs and the problem cannot be ignored.

Since Navkiran Kendra was opened last year, 53 women addicts have been admitted and in total over a hundred treated (including OPD patients). A new project — comprehensive health and rights based approach for women who use drugs, funded by The Global Fund through Harm Reduction Asia-India HIV AIDS Alliance — was started in February this year under which 106 people have been registered of which maximum are 20–35 years of age. Six were tested HIV positive and 17 HCV positive.

The study 'Punjab Opioid Dependence Survey: Estimation of the Size of Opioid Dependent Population in Punjab' conducted by AIIMS, Delhi in 2015–16, pegged opioid dependents at 1.2 percent of adult population in state (approx 2.32 lakh individuals in 18–35 age group). It said that '99 percent of opioid users were males', indicating the rest one percent were females.

Magnitude of Substance Use in India–2019 report

Though conducted at national level by AIIMS and National Drug Dependence Treatment Centre, the findings give an idea of the addiction problem among women in Punjab. Study was conducted for age groups 10–75 years across all states and UTs. Findings:

* For every one woman who consumes alcohol in India, there are 17 alcohol consuming men. Punjab is among five states with highest alcohol consumers.

Cannabis users (ganja, charas, bhang): 2.8 percent of total population use cannabis of which 0.6% are females, 0.9% children (10–17 years) and 5% males. Punjab among the five states with the higher-than-national prevalence of cannabis users.

Opioid users (heroin, poppy husk, opium, pharmaceuticals): 2.1% of total population use opioid drugs of which 0.2% are females, 1.8 % children and 4% males. Of top ten states where people need help for opioid related problems, Punjab has the second highest 7.2 lakh persons after Uttar Pradesh (10.7 lakh)

Cocaine users: Study says that 0.18% males and 0.01% females in the country are using cocaine but Punjab having second highest (27,000 approx) cocaine users.

People Who Inject Drugs (PWIDs): Of estimated 8.5 lakh PWIDs, the second highest 88,000 in Punjab.

(Note: Names of all the patients interviewed have been changed to protect their identities)



Divya Goyal

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Between masaan and moksha Being a dom woman in Varanasi

by **Adrija Bose**

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Varanasi: There's not a single woman at the Manikarnika Ghat in Varanasi, one of the holiest and the largest open-cremation site on the banks of the Ganga.

Ironically, the Manikarnika Ghat, named after Jhansi ki Rani Laxmibhai, the queen who is known for her heroism in the Indian nationalist uprising, is no place for women. Or at least, that's what the Dom community will tell you.

The Doms, a low-caste community of corpse-burners in Varanasi, are used to the pungent smoke that fills the air and the ashes that keep floating around with the pyres burning all day and night, throughout the year. In Varanasi, about 250-300 of them live around the ghats, secluded from the rest of the city. Often, they fall back on copious amounts of alcohol and marijuana to deal with living with the dead. But for the women in the Dom community, it's a just life of silence.

“Women are not allowed to do this job,” said Gurudev Chaudhury. Forty-year-old Gurudev is tired of burning dead bodies and dreams of a better life for his son. “I haven't studied. This is what my father and his father did. No one will give me a job. But I am sending my son to school. I want him to be a doctor,” he said, with a smile plastered on his face.

Sitting in his 10x10 square feet home that includes two narrow beds, one of which is occupied by his son who is still asleep, Gurudev talks about his dreams for his children. His two daughters, who are standing next to him, don't find a space in those dreams.

Gurudev has just returned after cremating a bunch of dead bodies following an accident where a bridge collapsed that led to the death of 18 people. “Some of their skulls were broken, and some didn't have limbs,” he said. As Gurudev talks about his work, that often includes decapitated bodies, he doesn't blink an eye. His face is still smeared with the grey ash from the previous night's work. A bright orange

scarf is wrapped around his head, a black thread tied to his neck and an orange tika on his forehead. When I asked him about his plans for his daughters, he said, “Wo toh sasural waley jo bolengey (That will be decided by her in-laws).”

The unseen, unheard dom women

The winding alleys behind Manikarnika ghat, where many of these Doms live, are filled with one-roomed houses lined up against each other. Next to some of these houses, there's a neatly stacked pile of wood that will be used for cremation. There are also half burnt wood logs that the Doms bring back after the funeral is over— these are to be used for cooking.

The young boys run around with a flat tyre, an elderly man wobbles around in his inebriated state even though it's just 11 am and the women are hunched over their chullah; they are accompanied by their daughters.

“I love going to school. But if the other girls don't go, then I am not allowed to go either,” said 15-year-old Muskan. Muskan is in standard VI, but she knows that in about 2-3 years, she will get married. “They have already started looking for a groom for me,” she said.

Every day, at the break of the dawn, Muskan and her sister wake up. They help their mother start the fire and make breakfast for the family. They, then, get ready to go to school. Together.

The days Muskan's sister is unwell, she can't go to school either.

“We don't allow our girls to step out alone,” Vimala Devi said.

Vimala Devi, though not related to Muskan, has taken the role of guardianship for the women of the entire neighbourhood of the Dom community. Explaining the reason behind the strict rule of female members staying indoors, and not stepping out without their family members, Vimala Devi said, “Who knows what goes on inside the head of these upper caste men? We can't let our daughters roam around alone.” The 56-year-old widow said that it is because of their low caste status that the girls are more vulnerable.

Devi has four daughters and four sons. Her sons who work at Manikarnika Ghat help in the cremation process. One of them sells flowers and sandalwood at a shop next to the ghat. “I had 20 children, they died one after the other,” she said. While three of her daughters are married, she is worried for her youngest 16-year-old daughter. She said that no one wants to marry her daughter because she has 'dimag ki bimari'. “Look at her, who will marry her?” she asked, pointing at her daughter, as she stood in a corner scared to even raise her head.

Despite her worries, Vimala Devi knows that she will not find a groom for her daughter outside of her caste. “Whatever we earn, we want to stay within our community. This is our family,” she said.

With a strict mindset of not intermingling with other caste, it's quite common for the Doms to marry among family members as well.

The other women who have gathered around Vimala Devi don't talk much; they just keep nodding their heads and agreeing with her. “Our women need to stay quiet, we cannot put our lives in danger,” she said.

Talking about this fear, P.S. Krishnan, former Secretary to Union ministry of welfare, and currently a member of the National Monitoring Committee for Education of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, said that the Doms are not aware of their rights and they have been neglected by successive central governments. “They need education to climb up the ladder, and they are entitled to education. They belong to the SC category so they are entitled to reservation. But the government has done very little to provide them with any access to their rights,” he said. “They usually drop out of school in the 5th or 6th grade, so they don't reach the level of getting reservation in jobs,” Krishnan added.

Gurudev has to be pestered repeatedly before he decides to finally allow me to meet his wife. Maya enters the room, her head covered with a chaddar that reaches up to her eye. She walks up to her husband, and stands next to him. All my questions to Maya are answered by Gurudev.

This chaddar has a historical significance. Utpal Pathak, a senior journalist based out of Varanasi, explained that this tradition of covering the head with a black cloth existed in Varanasi during the Mughal period. However, with time, women

started dropping the chaddar. But the women from the Dom community still use it. “Now it has become a symbol for them. That's how you recognise a Dom woman,” Pathak said.

Maya and Gurudev have been married for 14 years. “I must be 25-26 years old now,” she said.

Gurudev intervenes at this point and said that this is how it works in their community. “Women have to get married early, this is the only way to remain safe,” he said.

The passage to heaven

Death is a big attraction in the city situated at the banks of the Ganga. It is believed that people in Varanasi attain 'Moksha', freedom from the cycle of life and death and will never return to Earth. In Hinduism, that's the idea of heaven. To attain that, many travel to Varanasi and live next to the ghats, waiting for their death. Amidst all of this, the people who are responsible to carve out the path live in poverty, and isolation. And the women from this 'untouchable' community have the added burden of living in fear.

“You think women can do this job? Can they smell human flesh and not fall sick?” Ajay Chaudhary, a 38-year-old man asked. He breaks into a laugh immediately after that. “They can't,” he said.

Ironically, Ajay's master happens to be a maalkin. Yamuna Devi, 68, is the only woman who inherited the rights over a sacred, earthen oven lighted for centuries after her husband died. It contains what she claims is God's eternal flame, without which the funeral pyres cannot be lighted.

In the Dom tradition, it's always a male family member who inherits the business. But Devi had taken it upon herself almost four decades ago to support her two young sons.

“A Dom woman's job is to make her husband's job easier. They are forced to leave schools, they are married off early and while most marginalised communities are provided with some form of training like pottery making and weaving, no one



wants to teach the 'untouchable' Doms,” Pathak said. So, Devi had no choice but to take up her husband's job to ensure her sons get education.

But Devi, the maalkin, has stopped visiting the ghats after her sons grew up and took over the business. She stays at home now and refuses to talk to outsiders.

When I asked about Yamuna Devi, Vikram Chaudhary, her nephew said, “She doesn't even come to the ghats.” He does not respond when asked if she is no longer allowed to.

Vikram Chaudhary was about 12 years old when his father gave him a log of wood and asked him to place it over a dead man's boy. “That's how it started for me,” said the 35 year old, reeking of alcohol. For years before that, Vikram and his brothers would go to the ghat with their father and watch him conduct the rituals. But Vikram doesn't want to take up any other job. “Why should I? This is our family business,” he said.

The Hindu mythology may suggest that the Doms were cursed by Lord Shiva when a member from their community named Kallu Dom tried to steal an earring of the goddess Parvati, and in turn, making them the keepers of the flame, but Vikram sees it as a 'blessing'. “We are Doms. We have been chosen to do this job. No one else can,” he said with a sense of pride.

Vikram belongs to the family of the Dom raja, Jagdish Chaudhary. It's the Dom raja and his family members who own the burning ghats. The others work for them. While the Raja and his relatives make about Rs 500- Rs 12,000 for each body, the other doms only get a fraction of it, ranging from Rs 150 to Rs 300.

The importance of Yamuna Devi now lies in that one meal that she cooks every day using the half burned woods used in a funeral. “We go to her house to eat that meal,” said Vikram.

While everyone at the ghat knows about Yamuna Devi, not many have met her.

When I reach Yamuna Devi's house, her grandchildren open the door. They go inside to call their father. “Why do you want to meet her? I am her son, you can talk to me,” said Anil Chaudhury.

Despite Yamuna Devi's courageous act decades ago, the life of Dom women haven't changed. And, neither has her own. The only female gatekeeper of heaven is now shut indoors and has been reduced to the job that all Dom women must do-- stay silent.

Pathak pointed out that many international organisations have failed to help the community because the locals do not want to intermingle with them. "Even sharing food with the Doms or talking to them are seen as a sin here," Pathak said.

Meanwhile, Vimala Devi tells me that there are rules set for the girls in the Dom community. They are not supposed to talk to strangers, they can't step out alone, they need to cover up, and the only thing they should dream of is marriage. But Vimala Devi hasn't made these rules. The rules have been passed over the generations to the Dom women, just like the job of lighting the funeral pyre has been passed to the men.

"Daughters are to be kept at home, they need to be kept safe till they are married off. We can't let them roam around like the boys," Vimala Devi said. Immediately after, looking for some assurance, she asked the other women who had gathered around if they agree with her. "Do you let your daughter go outside? Should we allow them?" Unanimously, they respond, "No".

When I ask Vimala Devi if she wants the young girls to pursue higher education, Muskan taps on my shoulder and says, "Didi, I want to study. I want to become someone."



Adrija Bose

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10 Who moved my village?

by **Nidhi Jamwal**

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Sagar island, Sundarbans: Parvati Das has spent sixty summers in Sumati Nagar, her native village in Sagar Island of the Indian Sundarbans Delta. Three years ago, the embankment meant to protect her village and its residents from the rising sea level breached. "Since then, the government has tried fixing the embankment. But, the sea keeps breaking the embankment again and again. Since my childhood, the sea has come right at our doorstep," said Parvati, a widow and mother of three sons. Two of her sons, both fishers, used to sell dry fish. The third son, 30-year-old Shakti Das, both physically and mentally challenged, is completely dependent on her for all his daily activities. "After the embankment breached, my fisher sons lost the land meant to dry the fish, which went into the sea. They both migrated out of the island in search of livelihood," she narrated. One of her sons now works 2,000 kilometres (kms) away as a construction labourer in Tamil Nadu, whereas the other has migrated further to Kerala. But, Parvati has nowhere to go. "Soon the sea will engulf my hut, too. But, where can I go with my bed-ridden son, Shakti?" she worriedly asked wiping saliva off Shakti's face who excitedly laughed watching his old mother speak.

The coastline of Sagar Island, the largest island in the Indian Sundarbans Delta, is thickly populated with villages whose menfolk have migrated out of the island in search of work leaving behind women to look after the old and sick, and raise the children. These women bear a witness to the impacts of a changing climate on their fast-eroding lands and livelihoods. "Agriculture, mainly paddy, and fishing-related activities are the main source of livelihood of people in the Sundarbans. Some people are also involved in the honey collection," Tuhin Ghosh, a professor with School of Oceanographic Studies, Jadavpur University, Kolkata told Gaon Connection. "Research studies conducted by us show that due to various reasons, including climate change, agriculture productivity is on a decline in the islands, forcing people to look for other sources of livelihood and migrate. The number of cultivators in the islands has dropped, too," he added.

The Sundarbans is a tide-dominated region of the enormous Ganga-Brahmaputra Delta, spread over about 40,000 square kilometre (sq km) in India and Bangladesh. It is formed from sediments delivered to the Bengal Basin by three rivers — the Ganga, Brahmaputra and Meghna. The Sundarbans hosts the world's largest contiguous mangrove forest (about 10,000 sq km, of which 40 per cent lies in India and the rest in Bangladesh).

The Indian part of Sundarbans delta has a total of 102 islands, of which only 54 are inhabited and the rest are forested. These inhabited islands accommodate a human population of 4.6 million. And, these are some of the poorest of the poor people in the country. "Around 34% of the 4.6 million people residing on different islands ... are under extreme poverty and 75% of families there has at least one member working in other states of India," reads a 2018 research paper, 'Agricultural productivity, household poverty and migration in the Indian Sundarban Delta'.

Land erosion and agriculture decline

Of the 54 inhabited islands in the Indian Sundarbans Delta, Sagar Island is one. It accommodates 42 villages or mouzas. Ghoramara Island, located to the north of Sagar Island, covers an area of 4.8 sq km, whereas Mousani Island covers 24 sq km area. Just like any other delta region, formed by the deposition of sediment where a river meets the sea, the islands of Sundarbans are continuously undergoing changes due to land erosion and accretion. They are also highly vulnerable to frequent embankment breaches, submergence and flooding, beach erosion, cyclone and storm surges.

A chapter on the Sundarbans in May 2014 book, *Landscapes and Landforms in India* notes: "... the Sundarbans continues to aggrade each year from the deposition of river-sourced sediment. From May to September, when river discharge is highest, sediment is transported along the coast westward from the river mouth and into tidal channels by twice daily tidal flooding... The nexus of river discharge and strong tidal currents along the Bengal coast allows river-borne sediment to reach the remote interior areas of tidal islands." Apart from aggradation, islands of the Sundarbans also face erosion, which, claim experts, is both a natural process and also impacted by climate change and sea-level rise. For instance, a study has recorded that between 1969 and 2009, the Indian

Sundarbans Delta has lost 210.247 sq km land (see map: Zones of erosion and accretion in the Indian Sundarbans, 1969–2009).

Researchers present different scenarios of sea-level rise in the Sundarbans. For instance, as per the tidal gauge data at the nearest Haldia and Diamond Harbour stations, as quoted in a 2016 research article, the annual mean sea level rise from 1950 to 2014 is 6.8 metre (m) to 7.23 m at Diamond Harbour, and about 6.92 m to 7.17 m from 1970 to 2014 at Haldia. "There are a large number of sea-level rise studies in the Sundarbans varying from 2 mm per year to 14 mm per year rate of sea-level rise. A lot of land is submerging in the Sunderbans and at the same time new lands are emerging," said Ghosh. According to him, climate change is an important factor affecting the livelihoods of the local people. "Apart from the sea level rise, the pattern of rainfall in the region has changed. Although the total volume of rainfall has increased, the number of rainy days has decreased. So, in a shorter time period, the islands receive heavy rainfall, which impacts the agriculture practices," he added. Ghosh also blamed salinisation of soil for hampering agriculture. Salinisation of the river is affecting availability of fish and crab, and also changing the mangrove species, he said.

The 2018 study, which focused on the western boundary of the Indian Sundarbans Delta, including Sagar Island, Ghormara Island and Mousani Island, has recorded a time series map of the islands showing a considerable change in shoreline due to erosion and accretion, which has affected agriculture activities. Between 1990 and 2015, the rate of erosion in Sagar, Ghoramara and Mousani islands has been 0.2 sq km, 0.02 sq km, and 0.08 sq km, respectively. As agriculture becomes unproductive and land continues to erode, the poorest of the poor in the Indian Sundarbans migrate in order to stay afloat.

'Sab nadi te pore geche'

'All my land fell into the river' Till some 17–18 years back, Sunita Doloï and her family used to live in Ghoramara island where her husband's family-owned 40–50 bigha (6.4–8 hectares) agricultural land. Farming was their main source of livelihood. "Slowly and the sea kept eating into our land. Finally, it reached a point where our entire land went underwater and we had to leave Ghoramara," narrated Sunita. She now lives in Kamlapur village of Sagar Island where the government has provided her family 1.5 bigha (0.24 hectare) land. "What can one

do on 1.5 bigha land? We have built our house on it and do little vegetable cultivation. My husband sells pukur [pond] fish and seasonally migrates in search of work. I look after my in-laws and children," she told Gaon Connection. Sixty-three-year-old Lal Mohan Das sensed 'the hungry tide' two decades back when his 12 bigha land in Ghoramara eroded into the sea. "About 23 years back, I bought three bigha land in Bankim Nagar village of Sagar Island and left Ghoramara. I now grow paddy here, while my son works as a mason in Kerala. His wife lives with us in the village," said Lal Mohan.

But, the land in Bankim Nagar village on eastern side of the Sagar Island is no safer. Original residents of this village have been losing their lands, too. They claimed the village had lost at least 100 bigha (16 hectare) in the last three decades. And, the embankment had breached thrice and still not repaired. Fifty-one-year-old Ashok Mandal of Bankim Nagar claimed to have lost seven bigha (1.1 hectare) land in 2014 when the sea engulfed a large chunk of the village land. "I am now left with 10 kattha [0.06 hectare] land on which I do beetle nut cultivation," he said. Meanwhile, Sandhya Mandal of Bankim Nagar lost 10 bigha (1.6 hectare) to the sea and has no agriculture land left. "My husband seasonally migrates out of the island, while I do daily wage work to make both the ends meet," she said. "Men can migrate, but we women have to stay back to look after the house," she added. Similar stories emerge 15 kms away from Beguakhalli village on the western side of the Sagar Island. Thirty years ago, Parvati Das married Ashim Das and moved to Beguakhalli.

Since then she has been noticing the sea come closer to her hut. In 2009, when Aila cyclone hit the eastern coast of India, Parvati and her husband lost everything. "Our house and 15-16 bigha [2.4-2.5 hectare] land went into the sea. Now, we have only two bigha land left, which is shared between my husband and his four brothers. My husband migrates for work, while I look after the children here," said Parvati. She has built a new house at a new location in the village, but the sea has already come very close. "During high tide, sea water enters my home and we take shelter on the embankment," she added.

Environmental refugees

According to Sanjay Vashist, director of Climate Action Network in South Asia (CANSA), an international network of non-profit organisations working on

climate change, climate change induced migration is a big concern in the Sundarbans. "As villages in the Sundarbans go underwater, people are moving out to Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Gujarat and other states. There is a lot of internal migration from one island to another, too," Vashist told Gaon Connection. "Right now there is no tension among people in the islands, but in future, as migration continues, some friction may arise as land is a scarce resource in the Sundarbans," he added.

Vashist isn't wrong. "In Sagar block alone, which includes Sagar Island, Ghoramara and Lohachara islands, about 227 hectare agricultural land has been lost in 14 villages," informed Bankim Chandra Hazra, the local MLA (a member of the legislative assembly) from Sagar Island. Since the 1960s, over 1,120 families from Sagar, Ghoramara and Lohachara islands have been resettled in various parts of the Sagar Island. "Initially refugee families were given 2.08 acre [0.8 hectares] land each for farming plus homestead. But, thereafter, we have been providing only an acre [0.4 hectares] each to a family," he added.

Take the case of Jibantala village in Sagar Island, which has about 500 families. "Of these, about 150–200 families have come from Ghoramara island, parts of which have gone into the sea. The government has given these families 1.5 bigha char land each along the local river to build their houses," informed 40-year-old Aasima Bibi, a resident of Jibantala. She has three sons and all three work as construction labourers in Hyderabad, 1,500 kms away from their home and families. "I run a small tea shop in the village and look after my daughters-in-law and grandchildren," she added. On being asked about the possibility of tension between original settlers and refugee families, Aasima Bibi acknowledged migration had put an additional pressure on the existing resources. For instance, there are only four handpumps to meet water needs of all the families in Jibantala. In adjoining Kamlapur village, there is one hand pump for 80 families. "But, people who have come from Ghoramara are also human beings and have children who need to be raised. They have lost their land to the sea, so we share resources with them," said Aasima Bibi. But, without alternate agricultural land, the sustenance of environmental refugees in the Sundarbans remains a big question mark. Eighty-five-year-old Kushal Das Doloi, a relatively new resident of Kamlapur village in Sagar Island, lost 125 bigha (20 hectares) land (common to him and his six brothers) in his native village in Ghoramara. In return, he got only

1.5 bigha land. "We lost 15-16 bigha agriculture land, but have not received any alternate land for farming or monetary compensation for that land, though the government compensated us for the loss of house during Aila cyclone," said Parvati Das of Beguakhalli village. Ratikant Mallik of Dhabla Radhikapur village claimed he had lost about 1.6-hectare agriculture land to the rising sea level. "The government hasn't compensated against the loss of agriculture land. Rather, post Aila cyclone, it acquired land to build embankment in our village. But, the same has also not been done," he complained.

Banking on embankments

Whereas embankments provide a sense of security to the local people, they are also one of the possible reasons for the sinking of the islands as sediment cannot reach these patches of land masses in the delta. "The entire Indian Sundarbans region has 3,500 kilometres long embankments. Of this, 176 kilometres was washed away during the Aila cyclone and 777 kilometres was partially damaged. Another 1,043 kilometres is lost due to various reasons," informed Hazra. Thus, more than half the embankments meant to 'protect' the Indian Sundarbans either do not exist or are partially damaged. Both the state government and the Centre are working towards building and strengthening the embankments.

"During Aila, the 176 kilometres embankment was damaged. The Centre had to give Rs 1,339 crore to fix it, but so far it has provided Rs 673 crore only. Meanwhile, we [the state government] have already spent Rs 950 crore in constructing parts of the embankment," said Hazra. According to him, 84 kilometres of embankment in the Sagar Island had already been strengthened, whereas work was going on for 25 kilometres more. The state government also has another Rs 77 crore project to use submerged geo-tube technology to arrest beach erosion in parts of the Sagar Island. But, questions are being raised over the viability of such projects to keep the sea at bay. Deltas are live landforms that are continuously growing or receding. Climate change and sea-level rise are exacerbating changes in the Sundarbans delta.

While the menfolk migrate out of the islands in search of livelihood and a less uncertain life, women are daily watching the hungry tide inch closer to their homes.



Nidhi Jamwal

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औरतें किस एक चीज़ से आज़ादी चाहती हैं?

#DIGITALTRASHBIN

by **Vikas Trivedi**

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किस एक चीज़ से औरतों को आज़ादी चाहिए?

इस सवाल का सबसे सही जवाब ये होगा कि हवा में इस कदर आज़ादी घुले कि औरतों से ये सवाल ही न पूछना पड़े.

लेकिन हवाओं ने भी अपने-अपने आंगन और बरामदे चुने हुए हैं. आंगन में बैठी औरतों के पसीने से भीगे बदन और बड़े कपड़ों से छिपाकर सूखते छोटे कपड़ों तक वो हवा नहीं पहुंच पाती, जिसकी अहमियत बरामदे में लुंगी-बनियान पहनकर बैठे कुछ मर्दों को पता नहीं होती.

जब आज की हवाएं हक्कीकत से यू महरूम हैं तो ये सवाल पूछना लाज़िमी है कि किस एक चीज़ से औरतें आज़ादी चाहती हैं.

बीबीसी हिंदी की सिरीज़ डिजिटल ट्रैशबिन (डस्टबिन) लेकर हम यही जानने निकले. बिहार में राघोपुर और बेगूसराय का बीहट. राजस्थान में टोंक और अलवर.

लेकिन क्या कुछ ऐसा पता चला जो शायद आपके या हमारे लिए नया हो? जवाब है- हां. हमें पता चला कि बंदिशों इस कदर बैठ गई हैं कि अब भी कुछ औरतों को नहीं पता कि आज़ादी असल में है क्या... वो जो 1947 में मिली थी?

लालू प्रसाद यादव का गढ़ राघोपुर

माथे की मांग में संतरी सिंदूर, आसमानी रंग की साड़ी और बेहद पतला शरीर.

इंदु देवी जब कागज़ में फेंकने के लिए एक चीज़ लिखने खड़ी हुई तो माइक में उनकी वो आवाज़ भी आ रही थी, जिसमें वो एक-एक अक्षर को जोड़कर एक शब्द और फिर पूरा वाक्य लिख रही थीं.

'ल.ड़.की, लड़की... हमको गुस्सा आता था इतना बच्चा पैदा करने में. लड़का के चलते लड़की की संख्या ज़्यादा बढ़ गया.'

'औरत मां का रूप होती है' वाले समाज में जब एक औरत को बार-बार मां बनने में तकलीफ होने लगे तो इंदु देवी की ये बात जनसंख्या पर लगाम पाने के विज्ञापनों और दावों का मखौल उड़ती नज़र आती है.

लेकिन क्या इंदु अकेली हैं? नहीं राघोपुर की ऐसी कई आवाज़ें हैं जिसका हम सब तक पहुंचना बेहद ज़रूरी है.

पटना से राघोपुर के पीपा पुल पहुंचने से ठीक पहले का रास्ता काफी संकरा था।

रास्ते में खड़े टैम्पू में अभिनेत्रियों के क्लीवेज वाले पोस्टर लगे हुए थे। लगा कि हम में से ज्यादातर को कम कपड़ों में लड़कियां सिर्फ पोस्टर्स तक ही अच्छी लगती हैं। लिबास पोस्टर से बाहर न आ पाए, वैसे भी पोस्टर फटता है तो निकलता हीरो है, हिरोइन नहीं। हैं न?

'मेरा बेटी जींस पहनता है तो आप लोगों को क्यों बुरा लगता है.'

'मर्द जींस क्यों' लिखकर ट्रैशबिन में फेंकने से पहले जब एक औरत अपनी ये बात कह रही होती हैं तो वो साड़ी के पल्लू से अपना 'दिख रहा' पेट ढकती हैं।

उस औरत के सामने तीन लोग थे। एक-स्थानीय लोग, दूसरा- कैमरा, तीसरा- वो समाज जिसे आपने-हमने बनाया है, घूरने वाला समाज।

साल के छह महीने दुनिया को पीपा पुल से जोड़ने वाले राघोपुर की औरतें सिर्फ इसी से आज़ादी नहीं चाहती हैं। और भी कई चीज़ें हैं, जिन्हें अपनी ज़िंदगी से भस्म कर देना चाहती हैं लड़कियां।

खाना बनाना: स्कूल के लिए लेट हो जाते हैं। मास्टर साहब गुस्सा करते हैं। इसलिए हम पढ़ने में अथि हैं।

लंबे बाल: चोटी करो, जूड़ा बनाओ, तेल लगाओ। नहीं पसंद बड़े बाल।

खेत में शौच: खेत में जाते हैं तो आसपास का आदमी देख लेता है।

छेड़खानी: लड़का सब गंदा-गंदा गाना गाने लगता है तो मम्मी-पापा मना करता है।

शराब: शराबबंदी तो हो गया लेकिन अब भी शराब मिलता है।

इन लड़कियों की बातों पर प्रोफेसर नवल किशोर चौधरी कहते हैं, 'ये औरतें सिर्फ बाल और कपड़े की बात नहीं करती हैं। ये उस दास्तां को उखाड़ फेंकने की बात करती हैं जिस दास्तां में वो सदियों से हैं। हमको उस दास्तां से आज़ादी चाहिए जो पितृसत्ता ने थोपी है। दिशा और उद्देश्य साफ़ है। ये जनतांत्रिक विकास है। हमें ऐसी आवाज़ों का जश्न मनाना चाहिए.'

परिवर्तन के जिन संकेतों की बात प्रोफेसर चौधरी ने की, उसके कई साइन बोर्ड हम ट्रैशबिन के अगले पड़ावों में भी नज़र आए।

कवि दिनकर की धरती बेगूसराय

'औरतहूँ के आज़ादी चाही, ऊ तऽ पहिलहीं आदमी के गुलाम बनवले हऽ'

ट्रैशबिन पर लिखी पंचलाइन पर बेगूसराय के एक होटल का सिक्वोरिटी गार्ड ये 'पंच' देकर हँसने लगता है।

इसके जवाब में मुझे वहीं से कुछ दूरी पर पैदा हुए रामधारी सिंह दिनकर की कविता याद आती है।

'औरतें कहतीं भविष्यत की अगर कुछ बात, नर उन्हें डायन बताकर दंड देता है. पर, भविष्यत का कथन जब नर कहीं करता, हम उसे भगवान का अवतार कहते हैं.'

यथार्थ में ज़्यादा कविता नहीं घुसेड़नी चाहिए. चीज़ें शायद जटिल हो जाती हैं.

आसानी से इस बात को समझाने के लिए बीहट के मैदान में कबड्डी-कबड्डी करती हुई एक लड़की कैमरे पर आती है और इसी कविता को आसान भाषा में समझा जाती है.

'भेदभाव को ट्रैशबिन में डालना है. लड़की है तो घर में बैठेगी और लड़का है तो बाहर घूमेगा.'

ये उस भूमिहार बहुल इलाके की लड़कियां हैं, जो कभी लेफ्ट का गढ़ रहा था. यहां की लड़कियां कबड्डी खेलकर देश और दुनिया में नाम कमाकर ये साबित कर रही हैं कि आज़ादी सिर्फ 1947 में मिली हुई चीज़ का नाम नहीं है.

लेकिन शायद ये आज़ादी छिनी हुई थी और सभी लड़कियां ये हिम्मत नहीं कर पाई थीं.

ट्रैशबिन कई और बेड़ियों से भरता जा रहा था, जिन्हें ये लड़कियां तोड़ देना चाहती थीं.

एक बच्ची असुरक्षा को ट्रैशबिन में डालना चाहती थी. लेकिन पहली कोशिश में असुरक्षा सही से लिख नहीं पा रही थी. लगा कि हर महसूस की हुई चीज़ लिखी नहीं जा सकती.

रोज़ी खातून को दंगों से आज़ादी चाहिए थी और मंटुस कुमारी को आतंक से, क्योंकि इसकी वजह से देश के सैनिक मारे जाते हैं.

एक बच्ची की पर्ची ट्रैशबिन में डाली नहीं जा सकी. ये बच्ची ट्रैशबिन में बाल विवाह को फेंकना चाहती थी, लेकिन कुछ दिनों में खुद के बाल विवाह की तारीख़ करीब आने से वो उस रोज़ घर से नहीं निकल सकी.

उस बच्ची की आज़ादी की आवाज़ उसी घर में रह गई, जहां से अब वो खुद ट्रैशबिन से कुछ गुना बड़ी डोली से विदा होगी. अपनी आवाज़ को पर्दों में दबाए हुए.

सुंदरता: काला रहे या गोरा. हमको सुंदरता से कोई फ़र्क़ नहीं पड़ना चाहिए.

गंदी सोच: समाज के लोग बोलते हैं- लड़की है छोटा-छोटा निक्कर पहनी है, बेशर्म है.

मारपीट: औरतों को मारा जाता है, इससे आज़ादी चाहिए.

पटना यूनिवर्सिटी में प्रोफ़ेसर सुनीता रॉय इन बच्चियों की ट्रैश की हुई चीज़ों को पढ़कर धीरे से मुस्कुराती हैं.

वो कहती हैं, 'साहित्य और पौराणिक समय में भी औरतों को एक वस्तु से ज़्यादा कभी नहीं समझा गया.

महाभारत में द्रौपदी के साथ भी यही हुआ।"

प्रोफ़ेसर रॉय कहती हैं, "एक घटना आपको बताती हूँ. एक औरत को उसका पति जुए में हार गया. दूसरा आदमी जब लेने आया तो औरत डंडा लेकर दौड़ गई कि तुमने क्या मुझे द्रौपदी समझ रखा है. आज की औरत, द्रौपदी जितनी कमज़ोर नहीं कि उसके बाल पकड़कर कोई भी कहीं ले जाए."

बेगूसराय से लौटते हुए कार में एक फ़िल्मी गाना बजता है, 'ये मौसम गया, वो मौसम भी गया. अब तो कहो फिर कब मिलोगे? मिलेंगे जब हां...हां...हां बारिश होगी.'

ट्रैशबिन में फेंकी चीज़ों को देखकर औरतों के संदर्भ में आज ये गाना कुछ बदला नज़र आता है. 'ये मौसम भी गया, वो मौसम भी गया. आज़ादी भरी बारिश कब होगी?'

राजस्थान: आज़ादी अभी बाकी है मेरे दोस्त...

जयपुर से दो घंटे की दूरी पर टोंक का सोड़ा गांव.

स्टीरियोटाइप दिमाग को लगा था कि राजस्थान की औरतों से आज़ादी की बात निकलवाना काफी मुश्किल होगा.

लेकिन स्टीरियोटाइप का जन्म ही शायद इसलिए हुआ है कि कोई कभी तोड़ सके. लिहाजा हमारा भी टूटा. राजस्थान की बच्चियां और औरतें इतना मुखर होकर बोलीं कि हमारे वीडियो जर्नलिस्ट प्रीतम रॉय को कहना पड़ा- यार माइक का लेवल धीमा करना पड़ेगा, इन लोगों की आवाज़ काफी तेज़ है.

उस पल ये सुनकर हँसी आई थी. लेकिन अब सोचकर अच्छा लगा कि शायद पहली बार कैमरे के सामने घूँघट से निकली इन औरतों ने ऐसे अपनी बातें कहीं कि 'आवाज़ तेज़' कहलाई.

असामाजिक तत्व, औरतों का गलत इस्तेमाल. बीड़ी और.... भी कई ज़रूरी मुद्दे.

इन आवाज़ों पर समाजशास्त्री राजीव गुप्ता कहते हैं, "ये पितृसत्तात्मक समाज की देन है, इसके खिलाफ़ आवाज़ अब उठनी शुरू हुई है."

प्रोफ़ेसर गुप्ता जब पितृसत्ता वाली बात कह रहे थे, तब सर्वेक्स क्वार्टर के अंदर से 19 साल की बिट्टू भी सिर में दुपट्टा लिए झांक रही होती है.

मैं बिट्टू के पास जाकर पूछता हूँ- पितृसत्ता का मतलब जानती हो? वो ना करते हुए सिर हिलाती है.

मैं मन में कहता हूँ- ये सिर और चेहरे में जो दुपट्टा तुमने लपेट रखा है न... यही पितृसत्ता है!

डर सिर्फ़ यही नहीं थमे...

बिहार की तुलना में राजस्थान की औरतें पीरियड्स पर बात करने को लेकर सहज नज़र नहीं आईं.

यहां इस बात का ज़िक्र इसलिए किया क्योंकि जिस तारीख़ में औरतें गांव में पीरियड्स पर बात करने में असहज नज़र आ रही थीं, उसी दिन भारत में बनी शॉर्ट फ़िल्म 'पीरियड- द एंड ऑफ़ सेंटेंस' को ऑस्कर अवॉर्ड मिला था.

हमारी इस सिरीज़ का अंतिम पड़ाव रहा अलवर. गाय की वजह से सुर्खियों में रहने वाले इस मेव बहुल ज़िले की लड़कियों की अलग चिंताएं हैं, जिन्हें वो फेंक देना चाहती हैं.

जैसे- मोबाइल, मशीन और डर... लेकिन किस वजह से? शब्द कई बार इतने ताकतवर नहीं होते कि किसी के डर को सही से बयां कर सकें.

बिहार के राघोपुर, बेगूसराय और राजस्थान के सोड़ा गांव और अलवर की औरतों की आवाज़ें #DigitalTrashbin सिरीज़ के ज़रिए आप तक पहुंचीं.

इन आवाज़ों को ध्यान से सुनिएगा और अगर मन से हल्की आवाज़ भी आए तो आस-पास जो भी आपकी अपनी-परायी हों, उनसे पूछिएगा....



Vikas Trivedi

Vikas Trivedi is Multimedia Producer working with BBC News Hindi. He has an eye for issues that often get overlooked by society, especially by men. He writes on issues like social justice, politics and cinema with a gender perspective.

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मोल की बहुएं : 'हरियाणवी मर्दों' के एहसान तले दबी औरतें जिनकी अपनी पहचान खो गई

by Jyoti Yadav

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मेवात/रोहतक/जींद: 'हो सकता है कि मेरे माता-पिता अब मर गए हों. मुझे ठीक-ठीक याद नहीं है.' ये शब्द हैं देश की इंटरनेशनल सिटी गुरुग्राम से महज 50 किलोमीटर दूर नूह ज़िले के गुहाना गांव में रह रही महबूबा के. महबूबा को 60 साल पहले बंबई के पास के एक इलाके से लगभग 1400 किलोमीटर देश के सबसे पिछड़े ज़िले कहे जाने वाले मेवात में लाया गया था. 80 वर्षीय महबूबा के पास मायके के नाम पर इक्की दुक्की यादें ही हैं. बुढ़ापे में उनके दांत बाहर निकल आए हैं. कांपते हाथों को इधर उधर घुमाती वो कहती हैं, 'बंबई से मेरे गांव तक पहुंचने के लिए कई बसें, ट्रेन और पैदल जाना पड़ता है. अब मुझे रास्ता याद नहीं है. मेवात का कोई ट्रक ड्राइवर वहां गया था. उम्र बीस बरस से भी कम थी मेरी. वो ड्राइवर ही मेरे शौहर के लिए मुझे पसंद कर आया था. मैं कभी मायके नहीं जा पाई.'

महबूबा दिमाग पर जोर डालकर आगे कुछ याद करती हैं, ' उस वक़्त ना रेडियो था, ना टेलिफोन और ना ही इंटरनेट. मुझे लगता है कि मेरे परिवार के कई लोग अब तक मर चुके होंगे. शादी के बाद शुरू के दो साल गिन गिन कर काटे थे मैंने. मुझे साड़ी पहनना खूब अच्छा लगता था. लेकिन मेवात के कल्चर में साड़ी नहीं है. मैं कभी साड़ी नहीं पहन पाई. मेरे शौहर की भी तीस साल पहले ही मौत हो गई.'

महबूबा, उन हजार मोल की बहुओं/पारो में से एक हैं जिनका जिक्र हाल ही में हरियाणा के मुख्यमंत्री मनोहर लाल खट्टर ने 'बेटी बचाओ बेटी पढ़ाओ' के एक कार्यक्रम में किया था. उन्होंने अपने मंत्री ओपी धनखड़ के बिहार से बहू लाने वाले एक बयान का जिक्र करते हुए कहा था, 'अब जम्मू कश्मीर से धारा 370 हट गई है तो लोग कह रहे हैं कि कश्मीर से बहू लाएंगे. ये मज़ाक की बात है. हमें लिंगानुपात पर ध्यान देना है.'

एक भैंस से भी सस्ती कीमत में मिल जाती है मोल की बहु

दिप्रिंट मोल की या पारो कही जाने वाली इन बहुओं के हालात जानने हरियाणा के मेवात, जींद, रोहतक, सोनीपत, महेंद्रगढ़ जिलों में पहुंचा. 15 से ज़्यादा खरीद कर लाई गई बहुओं, 5 बिचौलियों, खाप पंचायतों और नेताओं से बात करके हमने इस इंटर स्टेट मैरिज नेटवर्क और इन महिलाओं की स्थिति को समझने की कोशिश की.

महिला मुद्दों पर सालों से काम कर रही सामाजिक कार्यकर्ता जगमति सांगवान का कहना है, 'ये कोई नई बात नहीं है. ये पिछले 50 दशकों से चला आ रहा है. लेकिन तीस साल पहले जब सेक्स रेश्यो बिगड़ा तो बहुओं को खरीदकर लाने का चलन बढ़ गया. अगर हम अभी भी सेक्स रेश्यो सुधार लें तो उसके परिणाम भी आगे आने वाले बीस सालों में ही दिखेंगे. मतलब साफ है कि अगले बीस साल तक राज्य के कुंवारे लड़कों के लिए बाहर से बहुएं लाई जाएंगी. ऐसे में हरियाणा सरकार और महिला आयोग चुटकुले सुनाने की बजाय आंगनवाड़ी स्तर

पर जागरूकता फैलाए. ताकि घरेलू हिंसा या खेतों में जबरन मजदूरी के कामों में लगी इन बहुओं तक मदद पहुंच सके.'

वो आगे जोड़ती हैं, 'हर गांव में कम से कम 100-150 ऐसे लड़के हैं जो 'मैरिज मार्केट' के हिसाब से फ़िट नहीं बैठते हैं. जैसे किसी के पास ज़मीन नहीं है तो किसी के पास सरकारी नौकरी, कोई शारीरिक रूप से दिव्यांग है या समाज के हिसाब से उतना 'सुथरा' नहीं. यहीं कुंवारे लड़के देश के दूसरे हिस्सों में अपने लिए बहू खोजने जाते हैं. इन बहुओं को कभी 'पारो' बोल देते हैं तो कभी 'मोल' की या कभी 'बिहारन'. एक तरह से 'लेसर मेन' के लिए 'लेसर ब्राइड'. इन जोड़ों के बच्चे जब बड़े होकर स्कूल जाते हैं तो उन्हें वहां डिस्क्रिमिनेशन झेलना पड़ता है.'

ऐसी 'शादियां' ज़रूरत की देन हैं. एक तरफ़ हरियाणा के गांवों में कुंवारे बैठे युवकों को अपना वंश चलाने के बहू चाहिए, घर में काम करने के औरत और खेतों में मदद कराने के लिए मज़दूर. दूसरी तरफ़ अन्य राज्यों के गरीब परिवारों दहेज ना दे पाने के सामर्थ्य की वजह इस तरह की 'शादियों' के लिए तैयार हो जाते हैं.

2011 की जनगणना के मुताबिक हरियाणा का लिंगानुपात 879 था. ये राष्ट्रीय अनुपात (940) से भी कम था. इसके बाद से ही हरियाणा राष्ट्रीय मीडिया में बेटियों को मारने वाले राज्य के तौर पर कुख्यात हो गया. ज्ञात हो कि मोदी सरकार ने 'बेटी बचाओ बेटी पढ़ाओ' की शुरुआत पानीपत से ही की. पिछले 50 साल से देश के गरीब राज्यों जैसे बंगाल, बिहार, असम और झारखंड के अलावा केरल और तमिलनाडु से हरियाणा में बहुएं लाई जाती रही हैं. बहुत बार ये बहुएं मानव तस्करों के नेटवर्क के ज़रिए भी हरियाणा में पहुंचती हैं.

अब धीरे-धीरे पॉपुलर कल्चर जैसे गानों, रागनियों और चुटकुलों में मोल की बहुओं का जिक्र जुड़ गया है. लोग चुटकुले के तौर पर बोलने लगे हैं कि एक मुर्दा भैंस की कीमत डेढ़ लाख है लेकिन एक बहू सिर्फ़ 40 हजार में मिल जाती है. ये अब हरियाणा की संस्कृति का हिस्सा बन गया है.

'अजनबी देश, अजनबी भाषा और अजनबी लोग'

बिहार के भागलपुर जिले की 18 वर्षीय सोमी दास की शादी जींद के अहीरकां गांव के 33 वर्षीय दिव्यांग संदीप सिंह से 1 साल पहले हुई थी. शादी का सारा इंतजाम संदीप ने ही करवाया था. सोमी यहां की भाषा समझने के लिए अपने पति पर ही निर्भर हैं. संदीप के इशारे के बाद ही वो एक आध जवाब दे पाती हैं.

लेकिन संदीप सोमी की तारीफ करते हुए कहते हैं, 'ये बड़ी चतुर है. आते ही सब सीख गई.' जहां एक तरफ़ सोमी अभी हरियाणवी भाषा समझने का ही संघर्ष कर रही हैं तो दूसरी तरफ़ मेवात के गुहाना गांव में चार बेटियों की मां सुशीला एक बेटा पैदा नहीं करने पर गालियां खा रही हैं. सात साल पहले झारखंड से मेवात में लाई गई सुशीला के घर की मारपीट की आवाज पड़ोसियों तक पहुंचती है. घर के बरामदे में सो रहे ससुर के डर से धीमी आवाज में वो आपबीती सुनाती हैं, 'मुझे नहीं पता था कि मेरे पति की ये दूसरी शादी है. मुझे बताया गया था कि कोई काम ना करना पड़ेगा. लेकिन अब मुझे ईंट के भट्टे से लेकर खच्चर तक पालने पड़ रहे हैं. कई बार नींद आती है और ईंट गिरने से पैर टूट जाता है तो कई बार हाथ कट जाता है.'

सुशीला अपने घर बमुश्किल से तीन बार ही वापस झारखंड गई होंगी। सुशीला का कहना है कि जिस बिचौलिए जुबैर ने उसकी शादी करवाई थी, उसने उसके पति से दस हजार रुपए खाए थे।

जब मैं जुबैर के घर गई तो पता चला जुबैर के घर खुद एक पारो है। उनकी पत्नी रिजवाना भी झारखंड से ही हैं। वो सुशीला की शादी के लिए पैसे खाने के आरोप से इनकार करते हुए कहती हैं, 'मैंने तो उसे कई बार कहा है कि भाग जा, वो जाती ही नहीं है, पिटती रहती है।'

सेल्फी विद डॉटर अभियान चलाने के लिए राष्ट्रपति द्वारा सम्मानित सुनील जागलान बताते हैं, 'हरियाणा के लगभग हर गांव में 10 से 12 ऐसी बहूएं हैं। बड़े गांवों में ये आंकड़ा 200 के पार है। ऐसी शादियां जाट, ब्राह्मण, यादव, मुस्लिम और रोड जातियों में ज्यादा हो रही हैं। ये रुकेगा नहीं।'

वो आगे जोड़ते हैं, 'ऐसी स्थिति में सरकार को कोशिश करनी चाहिए कि मैरिज रजिस्ट्रेशन को अनिवार्य करे ताकि इन औरतों को एक इज्जत की जिंदगी मिले। हमने लोकसभा चुनावों के वक्त भी इस मुद्दे को उछाला था। कांग्रेस ने इसे अपने मेनिफेस्टो में जोड़ा भी था। ज्यादातर अनपढ़ या कम पढ़ी लिखी लड़कियां कम उम्र में हरियाणा में लाई जाती हैं। किसी के पास भी मैरिज सर्टिफिकेट नहीं है, ना ही लोकल थानों और अधिकारों की जानकारी है।'

इस संदर्भ में हिसार ज़िले के एसपी अश्विन शानवी दिप्रिंट को बताते हैं, 'राज्य सरकार ने 2015 में 'स्वाधार गृह' योजना चलाई थी। इस योजना से तहत मदद मांगने वाली महिलाओं की संख्या बेहद कम है। हां अगर ऐसा कोई केस आता है तो हम ज्यादा संवेदनशीलता बरतते हैं क्योंकि इन्हें अपने केस की खुद ही पैरवी करनी होती है। पारिवारिक साथ देने वाला कोई नहीं होता।'

अब ये सामाजिक मुद्दा हो गया है सियासी

जींद जिले के कुंवारे लड़कों ने 2014 लोकसभा चुनावों के मद्देनजर 'रांडा' यूनियन (कुंवारे लड़कों का यूनियन) भी बनाया था। क्योंकि अब ये एक चुनावी मुद्दा भी बन गया है। स्थानीय नेता भी गाहे बगाहे मोल की बहू दिलाने का वादा कर बैठते हैं। साल 2015 में आया गाना 'बहू ले आओ मोल' पूरी व्यवस्था की परत दर परत खोल देता है-

30-35 का जुगाड़ करो और बहू ले आओ मोल की, बैठ रेल में चाल पड़ो, कोई आसाम और कोई बिहार,

एक बार की बात सै या, वहां ना जाणा पड़े बार बार, कम खर्चे में काम चलै और लोड़ ना डीजे ना ढोल की!

जो खाप पंचायतें जातीय दंभ भरती थीं, आज घुटने टेक कर बैठी हैं

ऑनर किलिंग के लिए कुख्यात रही खापों ने भी वंश बढ़ाने की जरूरत के सामने अपने दंभ को कम किया है। जींद की सर्वजातीय बरसौला खाप के प्रधान सतबीर पहलवान का कहना है, 'खाप दूसरे राज्यों से लाई जा रही लड़कियों के खिलाफ नहीं है। जो हमारे घर आ गई वो हमारी हुई। अगर कोई जाट के घर में आई तो वो जाटनी हुई और किसी हरिजन के घर आई तो हरिजनों की हुई। हमें सिर्फ एक गोत्र की शादियों से दिक्कत है।'

जिस दिन हम कंडेला खाप से मिले उसी दिन हिसार से भाजपा सांसद बृजेन्द्र सिंह गांवों को अमित शाह की रैली (16 अगस्त) का निमंत्रण देने आए थे. दिप्रिंट से बात करते हुए वो कहते हैं, 'आप हरियाणा के बिगड़े सेक्स रेश्यो की तुलना क्षेत्र पार से हो रही शादियों से नहीं कर सकते. खट्टर सरकार ने इसे ठीक करने के लिए कई कदम उठाए हैं और उसके सकारात्मक नतीजे हमारे सामने हैं.'

विडंबना ये है कि जब सांसद ये बातें कह रहे थे तो पंचायत में सैंकड़ों पुरुषों के बीच सिर्फ 5 महिलाएं मौजूद थीं और वो भी घूंट में. सांसद से सारे सवाल पुरुषों ने ही पूछे.

कौन दिलाता है पारो/ मोल की बहुएं?

बरसौला गांव के एक ब्रोकर ने दिप्रिंट को बताया, 'मेरी खुद की शादी नेपाली मूल की लड़की से हुई थी. अब उसके बाद मैंने गांव के ही 4-5 लड़कों की शादियां भी करा दी हैं. मेरी पत्नी के घरवाले हिमाचल के किसी गांव में आकर बस गए थे. बीवी के साथ जाकर वहां के गरीब परिवारों की लड़कियां देख आता हूं. यहां आकर कुंवारे लड़कों के परिवारों को बताता हूं. थोड़ा बहुत कमीशन भी मिल जाता है.'

अहीरकां गांव के एक अन्य बिचौलिए ने बताया, 'आजकल ज्यादातर लोग बिहार, यूपी और हिमाचल से आए मजदूरों के मार्फत शादी का जुगाड़ कर लेते हैं. जितना रोजगार के लिए माइग्रेसन और इंटरनेट बढ़ा है, चीजें आसान हुई हैं.'

इन शादियों का एक नया पहलू है कि इनमें से ज्यादातर शादियां अंतर्जातीय हैं. दूसरे राज्यों की दलित लड़कियों की शादियां हरियाणा की अगड़ी जातियों में हो रही हैं. अनजाने में ये जातीय सिस्टम पर प्रहार भी है.

बेटे के लिए कोख की चाह में लाई जाती हैं पारो

मुस्लिम बाहुल्य मेवात इलाके में एक बार पत्नी के भाग जाने या मर जाने पर दूसरी शादी खरीद फरोख्त या बिचौलियों के मार्फत ही संभव है. बिहार के सासाराम से लाई गई खुशबुन अपने दो साल के सबसे छोटे बेटे को दूध पिलाते हुए वो कहती हैं, 'मेरे पति को पहली शादी से छोरा ना हुआ. तो फेर मेरे को मेवात लाया गया. ईब मैं खेतों में काम करूं हूं.'

पारो नाम कैसे पड़ा? इस सवाल के जवाब में मेवात के गुहाना गांव के प्रधान कहते हैं, 'जो यूपी पार से लाई गई उनका नाम पारो पड़ गया. बिगड़े सेक्स रेश्यो ने इस ट्रेंड को फैलाया. राज्य सरकार का दावा है कि 2018-19 में हरियाणा का लिंगानुपात 887 से बढ़कर 914 हो गया है.'

रंग, कद और बोली को लेकर बनता है उपहास

इंद्रप्रस्थ इंस्टिट्यूट ऑफ इन्फॉर्मेशन टेक्नोलॉजी में सामाजिक विज्ञान की अस्सिस्टेंट प्रोफेसर पारो मिश्रा बताती हैं, 'पारो और उसके पति ही एजेंट की तरह काम करने लगते हैं. ज्यादातर ये ही बहुएं अपने इलाकों की गरीब लड़कियां ढूंढ कर यहां लाकर शादियां करा देती हैं. इन्हें क्षेत्र पार शादियां कहा जाना चाहिए. सही शब्दावली इस्तेमाल करके ही हम सही हल ढूंढ पाएंगे.'

वो आगे जोड़ती हैं, 'घरेलू हिंसा के मामलों में ये महिलाएं बिलकुल अकेली पड़ जाती हैं. ना ही पुलिस के पास जाने का कोई तरीका होता है और ना ही अपने घर लौटने का.'

इतना ही नहीं, इनके बच्चों को भी घर और स्कूलों में दुर्व्यवहार का सामना करना पड़ता है. डिप्रिंट से हुई बातचीत में कई महिलाओं ने इस बात को स्वीकार किया कि गांव की औरतें अक्सर उनके रंग, कद-काठी और बोली को लेकर उपहास ही उड़ाती हैं. कई बार दादियां अपने पोते को मोल की बहू के साथ पलने नहीं देती.

पारो/मोल की बहुओं के बाद अब 'लुटेरी दुल्हन' का गैंग हुआ सक्रिय

दिल्ली के कुछ गिरोह कुंवारे लड़कों को 'मोल की बहू' के नाम पर चूना भी लगा रहे हैं. पिछले दिनों हरियाणा सीएम विंडो पर एक युवक ने शिकायत की कि 80 हजार रुपए लेकर एक महिला से उसकी शादी करवाई गई, जो तीन दिन बाद पैसे और गहने लेकर फरार हो गई.

प्रशासन के मुताबिक साल 2017 में सोनीपत के खरखौदा में शादी के नाम पर 35 युवाओं को ठगा गया. इनमें से 14 लड़के जींद जिले के थे. सबको शादी कराने के नाम पर एक ही दिन बुलाया गया था. कंडेला खाप के लोगों का कहना है, 'लूटने वाले गिरोह में पंजाब की लड़कियां ही शामिल हैं. इनका नाम पत्रकारों ने 'लुटेरी दुल्हन' रख दिया है.'

एक नया बदलाव भी हो रहा है, जो भारतीय संस्कृति का परिचायक है

पंचायतों का मानना है कि बाहर से बहुएं लाने के बाद हरियाणवी जीन बदल रहे हैं. अब इनके बच्चे सिर्फ हरियाणवी नहीं हैं, बल्कि क्षेत्रीय स्तर से उठकर भारतीय बन गये हैं. पर शायद ही इनमें से कोई बच्चा असम, तमिलनाडु या बिहार के अपने ननिहाल जाता हो. जींद के संजय को 'हरियाणवी जीन' के बदलने से डर है कि उनकी पहचान खत्म ना हो जाए लेकिन साथ ही वो जोड़ते हैं, 'इंसान की पहचान उसके कर्म से होती है'.

व्या कहते हैं मानव तस्करी को लेकर सरकारी आंकड़े

नेशनल क्राइम ब्यूरो रिकॉर्ड्स के मुताबिक साल 2016 में देश में मानव तस्करी के 8,132 केस दर्ज हुए थे. 2015 में इन केसों की संख्या 6,877 थी. कुल 15,379 पीड़ितों में से 9,034 पीड़ित 18 वर्ष की उम्र से कम के थे. आधे के करीब बच्चों को शादी के नाम पर ही खरीदा-बेचा गया. पश्चिम बंगाल और असम में सबसे ज्यादा मानव तस्करी के केस रिपोर्ट हुए. 2016 के बाद के केंद्र सरकार ने आंकड़े जारी नहीं हुए हैं. लेकिन हरियाणा सरकार के मुताबिक राज्य में 2016 में मानव तस्करी के 30 ऐसे केस दर्ज हुए थे. साल 2017 में महज 48 केस सामने आए.

(इस फीचर स्टोरी के लिए रिपोर्टर ने जाट जोश और ज़मीन कहे जाने वाले हरियाणा की यात्रा की जहां महिलाओं का सेक्स रेश्यो इतना खराब है कि राज्य में बाहर से बहुएं खरीद कर लानी पड़ रही हैं. इन बहुओं को मोल की या पारो कहा जाता है, जिनका मूल्य कई बार एक मुर्दा भैंस से भी कम होता है. रिपोर्टर ने खाप पंचायतों, नेताओं, एनजीओ, मिडिलमैन से बातचीत के ज़रिए मोल की बहुओं की कहानी की परतों को खोलने

की कोशिश की है. अब ये ये सिर्फ सामाजिक मुद्दा ना रहकर एक राजनीतिक मुद्दा बन गया है. अब चुनाव के वक्त बहू दिलाओ वोट पाओ का नारा अक्सर सुनाई देता है.)



Jyoti Yadav

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सुबह होने में अभी देर है सुदूर थार में राजौ से मीरा और गीता की दूरी और दर्द

by Shirish Khare

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राजौ और मीरा, एक ही दुनिया के दो किस्से हैं, दो किरदार हैं। इधर हैं, अपनी अस्मत गंवा चुकी राजौ, जो गांव के लाख विरोध के बावजूद अपनी खातिर अदालत में जा खड़ी हुई, लेकिन घर लौटी तो गांव छूट गया। उधर है, आदिवासी होने का दर्द झेलनी वाली मीरा, जिसने गांव वालों से डरकर अदालत से मुंह फेर लिया, और पहले की तरह गांव में रहने में अपनी भलाई समझी। दोनों यह मानते हैं कि गांव के रास्ते थाने और अदालत आना-जाना और न्याय की लड़ाई लड़ना तो फिर भी आसान है, पर समाज के बगैर रह पाना बहुत मुश्किल है।

एक ने अदालत में लड़ना मंजूर किया, दूसरे ने गांव में रहना। अब मैं खुद आपके सामने अपनी यात्रा का अनुभव साझा कर रहा हूँ, जिसे जानते-समझते आप ही तय करें कि कौन अधिक अंधेरे में है, किसके नजदीक कुछ उजाला पहुंचा, गांव... थाने... अदालत... समाज के बीच मौजूद उनकी दूरी और अपार दर्द से गुजरते हुए।

लेकिन इसके पहले बता दूँ कि यह वर्ष दो हजार बारह अगस्त के आखिरी दिनों की बात है, जब मैं राजस्थान के पुष्कर पहुंचने के बाद थार मरुस्थल को पहली बार अपनी आंखों से देखने के लिए के छोटे-छोटे गांव घूम रहा था। इसी दौरान एक दिन जोधपुर में एक दुकानदार ने पुराने अखबार के जिस पर पत्रे पर मुझे समोसा परोसा उस पर भरतपुर जिले के गढ़ीपट्टी में 'बंदूक की नोक पर पांच लोगों द्वारा एक दलित औरत से बलात्कार' की खबर छपी देखी। मुझे पता था कि भरतपुर जोधपुर से दूसरे छोर पर है, लेकिन इन्हीं दिनों इस इलाके में मानवीय हवस और अत्याचार की कई खबरें किन्हीं चीजों की तरह मेरे साथ-साथ बंधी चल रही थीं। और इनकी गांठों को खोलने के लिए मैंने किसी जगह थोड़े दिन रुक जाना तय किया था। मैं जिस जगह रुका उसका जगह का नाम था- बायतु। बायतु जयपुर से करीब पांच सौ किलोमीटर दूर, और पाकिस्तान की सीमा से करीब सौ किलोमीटर पहले आने वाला एक कस्बा है। यहीं सामाजिक कार्यकर्ता भंवरलाल चौधरी के लोक-कल्याण संस्थान कार्यालय के एक कमरे में मुझे कुछ दिन ठहरने को जगह मिल गई थी।

यदि आप देश के उत्तर-पश्चिम तरफ पाकिस्तान से कंधा मिलाने वाले राजस्थान के थार में बाड़मेर का मानचित्र देखें तो एक ब्लॉक के रूप में बायतु अच्छी-खासी जगह घेरता दिखेगा। बायतु से लगा अधिकतर भाग हरे रंग से रंगा है, जो थार का खाली स्थान दर्शाता है। खाली स्थान मतलब मीलों दूर तक कोई बसाहट नहीं। यात्रा के दौरान ऐसी वीरान जगहों पर मेरी नजरें ज्यादा ही लंबी-लंबी होती जाती हैं और वहां जाकर ठहरना चाहती हैं जहां जीवन के चिन्ह हों। फिर वे चाहे भेड़-बकरियों के झुंड हों, या किसी चरवाहे की मुस्कुराहटें, जिसके एक बार मुस्कुरा देने भर से वह रेगिस्तान में अजनबी नहीं रह जाता।

सोचता हूँ कि यदि मैंने बहुत सारी यात्राएं अकेले न की होतीं तो अकेलेपन से पैदा होने वाली अनिश्चिता का डर इतना कम न रह जाता। लेकिन, भले ही अकेले घूमना मुझे आत्मविश्वास से भर देता हो और अक्सर यात्रा पर

अपने साथ किसी और का न होना मुझे भला लगता हो, फिर भी मैं ऐसी कोई जगह नहीं पहुंचना चाहूंगा जहां मेरे अलावा मुझे किसी दूसरे आदमी की आवाज सुनाई न दें, फिर चाहे वह समंदर हो या रेगिस्तान का किनारा, जिसके नजदीक बैठ मैं अकेले उसे घंटों यूँ ही नहीं निहारना चाहूंगा, और मैं ऐसे किसी दृश्य की भी कल्पना नहीं करना चाहूंगा जिसका समय पलक झपकते ही गुजर जाए। इस मनोदृष्टि से सोचता हूँ तो भारत में करीब सात लाख गांव हैं, मेरे हिस्से अधिक नहीं तो देशभर के ऐसे सात सौ गांव तो आए ही हैं, जहां से मैं गुजरा हूँ, रुका हूँ और जिनके बारे में मैंने कुछ-न-कुछ लिखा भी है। इन्हीं में धार मरुस्थल के इन गांवों का एक छोटा वृत्तांत भी है, जिसमें आखिरी पायदान पर खड़ीं राजौ, मीरा और गीता नाम की तीन महिलाओं ने जाति-व्यवस्था के कटु अनुभवों से गुजरने में मेरी और अधिक मदद की

राजौ का गांव सावऊ, बाड़मेर जिले के गोड़ा थाने से बारह किलोमीटर दूर बताया गया। भंवरलाल की जीप से मुझे मुरली चौधरी और हनुमान के साथ एक पक्की सड़क से सावऊ तक पहुंचने में एक घंटे भी नहीं लगे, लेकिन राजौ के भीतर की झिझक ने उसे डेढ़ घंटे तक बाहर आने से रोके रखा। आखिर राजौ की मां ने हमें झोपड़ी के अंदर बुलाया तो हम जूते-चप्पल उतारकर अंदर एक दरी पर बैठ गए। मैंने राजौ की मां और फिर उन्होंने मुझे, मुरली और हनुमान को बारी-बारी से देखा। इनमें मैं अकेला अजनबी हूँ। राजौ की मां ने मुरली को एक कागज पकड़ाया।

राजौ के साथ जो हुआ वह नौ जून, दो हजार आठ की इसी कागज मतलब एफआईआर की कॉपी में दर्ज है, 'श्रीमान थाणेदार जी, एक अर्ज है कि मैं कुमारी राजौ पिता देदाराम, आयु 15 साल, जब गोड़ा से आने वाली बस से शहरफाटा पर उतरकर घर जा रही थी, तब रास्ते में टीकूराम पिता हीराराम जाट ने पटककर नीचे गिराया, दांतों से काटा, फिर... और उसने जबरन मेरे साथ खोटा काम किया। इसके बाद वह वहां से गांव भाग गया। मैंने यह बात सबसे पहले अपनी मां को बतलाई। मेरे पिता सौ कोस दूर मजुरी पर गए थे, पता चलते ही अगली सुबह लौटे। जब गांव वालों से इंसाफ नहीं मिला तो आज अपने भाई जोगेन्द्र सिंह के साथ रिपोर्ट लिखाने आई हूँ। साबजी से अर्ज है कि जल्द से जल्द कड़ी कार्यवाही करें।'

'ये उन्नीस की हो गई है।' - राजौ की मां ने हमें राजौ की उम्र बताई। मां से ही मालूम हुआ कि बचपन में उसकी सगाई अपने ही गांव में पाबूराम के लड़के हुकुमराम से हो चुकी थी। लेकिन, वह परिवार अब न तो राजौ को ले जाने का नाम लेता है, न ही राजौ की कहीं दूसरी जगह शादी करने की ही बात करता है। और गांव वालों से तो मदद की जरा भी आस पहले भी नहीं थी। कहने को दो कोस दूर पुनियों के तला गांव में ताऊ है, साठ कोस दूर बनियाना गांव में चाचा है, अस्सी कोस दूर सोनवा गांव में ननिहाल है, लेकिन खैर-खबर लेने कोई नहीं आता। यह झोपड़ा भी दो साल पहले गांव में था, वहां से उठाकर दो कोस दूर यहां लाया गया है, गृहस्थी का हाल तो खस्ता था ही, अब और खस्ता हो गया है। पंचों में चाहे खेताराम जाट हो या रुपाराम, खियाराम हो या अमराराम, सारे यही कहते हैं कि चिडिया के पूरा खेत चुग जाने के बाद पछताने से क्या फायदा!

लेकिन खेत चुग जाने में राजौ का कसूर क्या था? झोपड़ी से घूमकर मेरी नजर गांव की तरफ गई। पर, दूर-दूर तक मुझे बसाहट का कोई चिन्ह दिखाई नहीं दिया। राजौ के मां के कहने पर राजौ ने अपनी लंबी चुप्पी तोड़ी। इसके बाद राजौ ने बताना शुरू किया कि कैसे उसके पिता देदाराम उस खोटी खबर को लेकर सबसे पहले गांव के पंच खियाराम जाट के पास पहुंचे थे। उन्होंने इसे अंधेर और जमाने को घोर कलयुगी बताया, फिर उन्हें

देदाराम से बगैर पूछे आरोपी टीकूराम के यहां यह संदेश भी भिजवा दिया कि पंद्रह-बीस हजार देकर मामला निपटाने में ही भलाई है। लेकिन, टीकूराम के पिता हीराराम जाट ने साफ कह दिया कि भई वह न तो किसी को एक फूटी कोड़ी देने वाला है, न निपटारे के लिए कहीं आने-जाने वाला है! फिर अदालत की दूसरी पेशी पर बाइमेर कोर्ट के सामने आरोपी सहित पूरा परिवार और गांव के सारे पंच प्रधान जमा हो गए। अदालत के बाहर हर आदमी जज बना हुआ था और फैसले सुना रहा था कि अस्मत गंवा चुकी महिला को आखिर किस तरह पेश आना चाहिए। सबकी जुबान पर सिर्फ यही बात थी कि केस वापिस ले लो, कोर्ट-कचहरी का खर्चापानी भी दे देंगे। पर, टीकूराम को सामने देखकर राजौ बिफर पड़ी, उसने राजीनामा के तौर पर लाये गए पचास हजार पर थूककर जमीन पर दे मारे और वहीं सबको ऐसी खरी-खोटी सुनानी शुरू कर दीं कि एक न ठहरा।

इसके बाद, जिस चाचा ने राजौ का नाता जोड़ा था, उसी के जरिए पंचों ने तरह-तरह की बातें पहुंचानी शुरू कर दीं। जैसे, 'राजीनामा कर लो तो हम साथ रहकर गौना भी करवा दें'... 'छोटे भाई की शादी भी करा दें'... 'नहीं तो छोटे का भी सब धरा रह जाएगा'... 'कोर्ट-कचहरी के चक्कर में पडने से अच्छा है आपस में हिल-मिलकर रहना'... 'फिर वो तो लड़का है'... 'उसका क्या है'... 'जितना तुझे पैसा देगा, उतना कचहरी में लुटाकर छूट जाएगा'... 'तूलड़की हो'... 'फिर उम्र ही क्या है तेरी'... 'बाद में कोई साथ न देता बेटा'... 'फिर बदनामी बढ़ाने में अपना ही तो नुकसान है'... 'तुझे अच्छे-बुरे का भेद पता न है'... और फिर पूरे गांव की बदनामी। जब राजौ और उसके परिवार पर इन बातों का भी असर न हुआ तो कभी राजौ की जान की चिंता की गई, कभी उसके छोटे भाई की जान की चिंता की गई। लेकिन, इस अब तक तो किसी की नहीं गई। शायद वे भी चाहते होंगे कि ये सब भी जाएं, लेकिन उस तरह जिस तरह वे चाहें कि इन्हें जीना कैसे चाहिए!

फिलहाल आरोपी टीकूराम जमानत पर रिहा है, और उसकी शादी भी हो चुकी है। जाहिर है आरोपी के रिश्तेदार आरोपी के साथ जिस मजबूती से खड़े रहें, पीड़िता को उसके रिश्तेदारों से वैसा समर्थन नहीं मिला।

दूसरी तरफ तमाम डर, शर्मिंदगी, पाबंदियों से जूझने के बावजूद राजौ कोर्ट में केस लड़ रही है। उसे उसके इस फैसले पर आज तक मलाल नहीं है, उसे एक ही चीज की आस है और वह है न्याय। इस आस में मां-बेटी के गहने कुर्बान हो गए हैं। 'गांव आओ-जाओ तो अब सीधे कोई न टोकता, पर पीठ पीछे बातें होती ही हैं, तरह-तरह की।' मेरे पूछने पर राजौ बोली और उसने बताया कि आरोपी के परिजन और पंचों को छोड़कर गांव के बाकी लोगों के साथ उसके संबंध समय के साथ धीरे-धीरे सुधर रहे हैं।

राजौ के यहां से उठते ही बातचीत का सिलसिला खत्म ही हुआ था कि मैंने राजौ से कहा कि चिंता मत करना, जब मैं आपकी खबर लिखूंगा तो उसमें आपका नाम बदलकर लिखूंगा और आपकी फोटो भी नहीं छपेगी। पर, वह जिद पर अड़ गई कि मेरा फोटो खींचो और उसे खबर के साथ बढ़ा करके छापना। और वह मुझसे यह भी पूछने लगी कि उसकी खबर में उसका नाम क्यों नहीं छपेगा?

झोपड़ी के बाहर उसने खड़े होकर अपनी एक फोटो खिंचवाई। फिर उससे पूछा कि वह अपना नाम छिपाना क्यों नहीं चाहती? उसने बेझिझक कहा, 'मेरा असली नाम और फोटो ही देना भाई! नहीं तो कुछ मत छापना। गांव के जिन ताऊ लोगों के सामने लाज शरम से रहना था, उनके सामने ही घाघरा उतर गया तो दुनिया में जिन्हें हम जानते तक नहीं, उनसे बदनामी का कैसा डर!'

मैं हैरान था कि शुरुआत में जो लड़की इस मुद्दे पर बात करने के लिए घर से बाहर निकलने में झिझक रही थी, ये उसी के शब्द हैं। मुझसे थोड़ी देर बात करने भर से राजौ के जो मनोभाव बाहर निकले वहीं तो एक सामंती और पुरूष-प्रधान समाज के खांचे में नहीं बैठते। देश के बाकी भागों में भी देखा गया है कि समाज की सोच के उलट जब महिलाएं प्रतिकार और संघर्ष करती हैं तो उन्हें मुख्यधारा से अलग-थलग कर दिया जाता है। कई बार उन पर यौन हमले भी होते हैं। दरअसल, महिलाओं के यौनांग को उसकी सबसे बड़ी कमजोरी के रूप में देखा जाता है। इसलिए, उसी पर सबसे अधिक चोट पहुंचाने के बारे में सोचा जाता है।

इसके बाद, मुरली और हनुमान मुझे यहां से मीरा के गांव बांडी धारा की ओर ले गए। सावऊ से बांडी धारा तक पहुंचने और कच्चे, टेढ़े-मेढ़े लेकिन चौड़े रास्ते से होकर जीप में हिचकोले खाते हुए हमने मिनटों का समय घंटों में बिताया।

रास्ते में थार की तासीर पर बातें हुईं। यह तो मैंने पढ़ रखा है कि अरावली पहाड़ी के पश्चिम तरफ थार भारत का सबसे बड़ा मरुस्थल है जो उत्तर-प्रदेश और मध्य-प्रदेश की ओर पैर पसार रहा है। गर्मियों में बालू रेत के टीले आसानी से देखे जा सकते हैं और तेज हवाओं के चलते ये टीले एक जगह से दूसरी जगह चले जाते हैं। हालांकि, इन दिनों इलाके का तापमान तीस से पैंतीस डिग्री सेल्सियस रहता है। ऐसे में इस समय इस तथ्य से राहत है कि अभी वैसी प्रचंड गर्मी नहीं है कि बालू रेत के कारण थार में पारा पचास के पार हो जाए और न ही उतनी कड़कड़ाती ठंड ही है कि पारा शून्य के नीचे तक चला जाए। बरसात यहां अनिश्चित रहती है। इसलिए, सौ साल में अस्सी सूखे-अकाल के नाम रहे। लेकिन, ये सारी स्थितियां यहां के लोगों के लिए प्रत्याशित हैं। सामान्य-ज्ञान की बहुत सारी बातों से अलग इन दिनों में मैंने कुछ बारीक बातों पर भी ध्यान दिया तो पाया कि यहां मीठे पानी की फसल उगाने से लेकर उसे बचाने के कई तौर-तरीके भी आम हैं। जैसे, गिलास को ओठों से लगाए बगैर पानी पीना। जैसे, लोहे के बड़े कुंड में बैठकर नहाना और खारे पानी से नहाकर बचे हुए कुंड के पानी से कुंड में ही कपड़े धोना। जैसे, नहाने में डिचरजेंट की बजाय चिकनी माटी का उपयोग करना, ताकि माटी की परत जब कुंड के नीचे बैठ जाए तो ऊपर का पानी ऊंट आदि जानवरों के पीने के काम आए।

जब हम मीरा के घर पहुंचे तो वहां मीरा नहीं मिली। पति पूसाराम ने पूछने पर बताया कि घर के बाकी सब अंदर गांव में हैं और थोड़ी देर में आ जाएंगे। पूसाराम ने अपनी झोपड़ी के आंगन में हमारे बैठने के लिए खटिया बिछा दी। बदन पर काली बंडी पहने और आंखों पर चश्मा चढ़ाए बुजुर्ग पूसाराम ने हाथ जोड़कर हमारा अभिवादन किया। उन्होंने बैठने को कहा तो मैं भी उन्हीं के साथ खटिया पर बैठ गया। फिर मुरली के साथ बातों ही बातों में दो साल पहले मीरा और उन पर बीती बातों पर चर्चा शुरू हुई। उन्होंने बताया कि तब कैसे इसी आंगन में रामसिंह राजपूत नाम का आदमी आपने सात दोस्तों के साथ नशे में धुत उन्हें बुरी-बुरी गालियां बक रहा था! उस दिन भी पूसाराम घर में अकेला ही था। पहले तो उन्हें यही समझ नहीं आया कि रामसिंह उसे गालियां बक रहा है। फिर जब वह आंगन में बंधा पूसाराम का बकरा उधार खरीदने की बात पर अड़ गया तब पूसाराम को समझ आया कि रामसिंह किसी तरह उसे डरा-धमकाकर उससे उसका बकरा हथियाना चाहता है। पूसाराम के मना करने पर उसने बुजुर्ग पूसाराम के साथ जमकर मारपीट की। नजदीक खेत में काम कर रहीं उनकी पत्नी मीरा को जब अपने पति की चीखें सुनाई दीं तो वे दौड़ी-दौड़ी आईं। देखा कि रामसिंह उनके बकरे को जबरन ले जा रहा है तो मीरा ने भी बकरे को छुड़ाने की कोशिश की। तब रामसिंह ने मीरा को भी खूब मारापीटा।

वह छब्बीस जनवरी यानी गणतंत्र-दिवस की सुबह थी, इसलिए सारे गांव वाले स्कूल में झंडा फहराने के लिए जमा थे। इसलिए, मीरा पूसाराम को लेकर तुरंत स्कूल की तरफ भागीं और अपना बकरा बचाने के लिए गुहार करने लगीं।... 'फिर गांव वालों ने रामसिंह को बुलवाया, पर वह नहीं आया। और उसी रोज वह इनका बकरा काटकर खा गया। अगली सुबह इनके (मीरा) साथ हमने थाने में शिकायत कराई' -मुरली ने बताया।

उसके बाद कोर्ट केस चला, लेकिन इधर गांव वालों के समझौते के लिए बढ़ते जोर के आगे भील समुदाय का यह बुजुर्ग दंपति दो महीने में ही समाज से हार गया। एक रोज ये दोनों ऐसे टूटे कि इन्हें राजीनामा के लिए हां बोलना पड़ा। मीरा को अपनी और अपने पति की मारपीट का भयकर दर्द हमेशा के लिए भूल जाना पड़ा। उनके बकरे की मौत और उसकी कीमत भी हमेशा के लिए भूल जानी पड़ी। गांव वालों ने सिर्फ अस्पताल में लगा खर्चा दिलाने की गारंटी दी थी। हालांकि, उन्होंने यह भरोसा भी दिलाया गया था कि अब आगे से वह ऐसा न करेगा। फिर रामसिंह राजपूत ने माफी भी मांगी थी, यह अलग बात है कि केवल ऊंची जाति वालों से। पूसाराम से माफी मांगने का सवाल ही नहीं था, यह बात आती तो गांव में बहुतों के भीतर जाति का अहम आड़े न आ जाता!

'...तो राजीनामा से खुश हैं?' मैंने पूछा तो पूसाराम ने सिर हिलाकर मना कर दिया। कहा, 'राजीनामा कौन मेरी खुशी से हुआ था' और कुछ देर में उनका दर्द आंसू बनकर बहने लगा। इस बीच, गांव से लौटी मीरा ने घड़े से लोटा भरकर पानी पिया और पूरा समय पूसाराम को ध्यान से सुनती रहीं। पूसाराम ने कहा, 'राजीनामा गांव वालों की खुशी से हुआ था, जिसकी बड़ी लड़की की ही तीन लड़कियां हों, उसे तो हर चौखट पर नाक रगड़ने की लत पड़ चुकी होती है न!...' जब पूसाराम चुप हुए तो मीरा बोलीं, 'इस बूढ़े आदमी को पटक-पटककर क्यों मारा?' इसलिए कि उसे पता था कि हमारे बाप-दादा की तरह हम भी कमजोर हैं, उसने गांव के किसी बड़े आदमी से कुछ क्यों नहीं मांगा, हमसे ही हमारा बकरा क्यों मांगा, इसलिए कि वह जानता था कि हम जैसा से ही वह बकरा छिन सकता है!

मीरा की पसलियों से उठने वाले कराह ने महीनों तक उन्हें तकलीफ दी थी। 'फिर आपने समझौता किया ही क्यों?'... 'समझौता किससे किया?' मेरी और मीरा की बात का जवाब पूसाराम ने दिया। बोले, 'कुछ लोग बोले थे देख पूसा, कितने बड़े आदमी तेरे सामने हाथ जोड़ने को राजी हैं, तू उनकी बात न रखेगा, हम सब को रहना तो गांव में ही है न!' फिर मीरा और पूसाराम ने सोचा कि बात तो सही ही है। खेत के पानी से लेकर आंगन के लिए गोबर, चूल्हे के लिए लकड़ियां, ब्याज पर लिए पैसे, आटा पिसाने के लिए चक्की और मजूरी ये सब तो बड़े आदमियों के भरोसे ही है।

'यदि ये सब नहीं होता तो?'... 'तो मैं तो आगे भी लड़ती, पर कुछ रोज में यह जगह छोड़नी पड़ती। यहां हमारी झोपड़ी है, ये आंगन है, खेत जमीन है, दानापानी है। फिर बच्चे, बकरियों को लेकर कहां भटकते घूमते?' - मीरा ने जवाब दिया।

शाम ढलती देख मैंने सोचना शुरू किया कि और देर की तो लौटते समय सड़क और अधिक सुनसान हो जाएगी! इसलिए, हम बायतु लौटने के लिए आंगन से उठ गए। इन दोनों को सारी बातें खुलकर कहने का मौका मिला और यही कारण है कि दो-ढाई घंटे की बातचीत में उनका दर्द भी राजौ की तरह कसमसाते हुए मुखर होने लगा। फिर चलती जीप से मैंने पीछे छूट रही उनकी झोपड़ी को एक बार फिर देखा। लेकिन, मेरे मन में

एक की बजाय दो झोपड़ियों का दर्द रेगिस्तान में चींटियों की तरह रेंगने लगा। और मुझे राजौ की कही वह बात याद आने लगी, 'मेरा असल नाम और फोटो ही देना भाई! नहीं तो कुछ मत छापना।' उसके ये शब्द पीढ़ियों की पीड़ा से उपजे प्रतिरोध का स्वाभाविक मनोभाव ही तो है जो परंपरागत प्रवृत्ति के विरुद्ध परिवर्तन के वाहक भी हो सकते हैं लेकिन अशिक्षा, आर्थिक तंगी और सभी तरह की कानूनी अड़चनों से जूझने के बावजूद समाज की सोच और समाज पर निर्भरता ही उसके न्याय के रास्ते की सबसे बड़ी बाधा बन गए हैं।

कहते हैं 'पांच पंच मिल कीजै काज, हारे जीते होय न लाज' किंतु, जहां के पंच अपनी ताकत से जीत को अपने खाते में रखते हों, वहां के कमजोरों के पास हार और लाज ही बची रह जाती है। ऐसे में कोई कमजोर जीतने की उम्मीद से थाने और कचहरी के रास्ते जाए भी तो उसे जाती हुई राजौ और पूसाराम के साथ लौटती हुई मीरा मिलती है। तब यह सवाल इतना सीधा नहीं रह जाता है कि वह किसके साथ चले और किसके साथ लौटे?

और इधर, अजमेर स्टेशन उतरते ही मैंने भंवरीबाई को मोबाइल लगाया। वे लड़खड़ाती बोलीं, 'तुम तो औरतों की आवाज लिखने के लिए आ रहे हो न, सीधे अजमेरी-गेट थाने चले आना!' नए शहर में थाने की बात सुन मैं अपने भीतर की लड़खड़ाहट को साधते बोला, 'पर हुआ क्या है?..' 'ये तुम थाने में ही समझ लेना। हम तो पचास साल की बूढ़ी औरते हैं, तुम लड़के ही हो, दो-चार थप्पड़ खा सको तो ही आना!'

वापस लौटने से अच्छा है अजमेर के अजमेरी-गेट थाने चलना। ऑटो से थाने पहुंचा। देखा, थानाधिकारीजी टेबल पर रखे 'सत्यमेव जयते' की प्लेट और पीछे की दीवार पर टंगी गांधीजी की फोटो के बीचोंबीच अपने बदन से सीधी रेखा बनाते हुए तने हैं।

इन दिनों कड़्यों के लिए यह बात समझ से परे है कि सिर्फ रसूलपुरा गांव से दलित महिलाएं कोई-न-कोई प्रकरण लेकर थाने क्यों पहुंच रही हैं? एक हफ्ते में दलित-महिला अत्याचार की तीन-तीन शिकायतों के बाद तो पुलिस वाले भी इन शिकायतों से तंग आ गए हैं। दूसरी तरफ, महिलाओं का आरोप है कि पुलिस दलित के संरक्षण और सम्मान के लिए बने कानून के विशेष प्रावधानों पर अमल करना तो दूर शिकायत दर्ज कराने वाले को ही हवालात की हवा खिला रही है। रसूलपुरा के सुआलाल भाम्बी, उनकी पत्नी गीतादेवी और बेटी रेणु ने जब बीरम गूजर के खिलाफ जबरन गाय हथियाने और मारपीट का मामला थाने में दर्ज कराना चाहा तो सुआलाल भाम्बी को ही यह कहते हुए थाने में बैठा लिया गया कि अब तो जांच के बाद ही पता करेंगे कि कसूरवार कौन?

रसूलपुरा गांव अजमेर से जयपुर जाने वाली सड़क पर करीब दस किलोमीटर दूर है। यहां पहले दलित दूल्हा घोड़े पर चढ़ नहीं सकता था। किंतु, दस साल पहले हरकिशन मास्टर ने घोड़े पर चढ़कर पुराना रिवाज तोड़ा था। और पंद्रह साल पहले भील समुदाय की छग्गीबाई सामान्य-सीट से जीतकर सरपंच बन गई थीं। तब गांव की ईज्जत का वास्ता देकर सारे पंचों को एक होना पड़ा था और अविश्वास-प्रस्ताव लाकर छग्गीबाई को छह महीने में ही हटा दिया गया था। छग्गीबाई का सामान्य-सीट से जीतना करिश्मा जैसा ही था। मैंने छग्गीबाई से उनके नंबर पर संपर्क साधा। उनसे चर्चा हुई शुरु हुई तो वे बोलीं, 'तब मैं दलितों के वोटों से जीती थीं। नतीजा सुनकर ऊंची जात वालों ने रसूलपुरा स्कूल घेर लिया था। मैं स्कूल के भीतर फंस गई थी। फिर पीछे कमजोर

दीवार पर लगी खिड़की तोड़कर मुझे निकाला गया था। फिर पुलिस की गाड़ी से भगाया गया।'

एक गांव के ये दो उदाहरणों से मुझे आपसी तनाव और टकराहटों की पूरी तस्वीर समझ आ गई। असल तो परिवर्तन की इस प्रक्रिया को सबल वर्ग सहजता से स्वीकार नहीं कर पा रहा है और उसे अपने विशेषाधिकारों के छिनने के रूप में देख रहा है। गणतंत्र की स्थापना के दशकों बाद भी इस वर्ग में यह चेतना नहीं आ रही है कि सभी नागरिक एक समान हैं। इसलिए यह हिंसा, अन्याय और घृणा के बूते अपना राज कायम रखना चाहता है।

इन सबका सबसे अधिक दबाव दलित महिलाओं पर पड़ता जा रहा था, इसीलिए कुछ साल पहले इलाके की कुछ महिलाओं ने अपने अधिकारों के लिए समिति बनाई, नाम रखा- 'महिला जन अधिकार समिति'। इस बारे में भंवरीबाई बताती हैं कि पिछले पांच साल में जब हम बाल-विवाह, मृत्यु-भोज और जाति-प्रथा जैसी बुराईयों के विरोध में बोलने लगे तो हमारा विरोध बढ़ने लगा। दलित महिलाएं जब जाति-सूचक शब्द और गालियों पर आपत्ति जताने लगीं तो उनसे पूछा जाने लगा कि तुमसे तो हमेशा से ही इसी तरह बात करते आ रहे हैं, पहले भी तुम्हारे बच्चों को बिगड़े नामों से ही बुलाया जाता रहा है, तब तो तुम्हें बुरा नहीं लगता था, अब क्यों लग रहा है?' जाहिर है कि इस तरह की टीका-टिप्पणियों और बहसों से आपसी संघर्ष बढ़ा।

दूसरी तरफ, दलितों को गांव की सार्वजनिक जमीन से होकर अपने खेत आना-जाना पड़ता है। शिकायत में तेजा गूजर पर आरोप है कि कुछ दिन पहले उसी रास्ते पर गड्ढा खोद दिया और कांटे की बागड़ लगाकर रास्ता बंद कर दिया। इसलिए, उसकी दलित महिलाओं से लड़ाई हो गई। ये महिलाएं जब यह शिकायत लेकर थाने पहुंचीं तो थानेदारों को इन महिलाओं पर 'आए दिन आ रही आफतें' समझ नहीं आ रही हैं। इन हिंसक प्रतिक्रियाओं के पीछे वे परिवर्तन की प्रक्रिया नहीं देख पा रहे हैं जिससे ऊंची जाति वालों को समस्या है। इन्हें समस्या है समाज के उस एकाधिकार को चुनौती देने से, जिसमें यह निर्धारित है कि दलित और महिलाओं को किस प्रकार का व्यवहार शोभा देता है।

इस तनावपूर्ण स्थिति में सुआलाल भाम्बी की गाय देर शाम तक जब घर नहीं लौटी तो उनकी पत्नी गीता और बेटी रेणु गाय का पता लगाने गांव में घूमने लगीं। गीता बताती है कि बीरम सिंह ने उनकी गाय बांध रखी थी। गाय मांगने पर पहुंचे तो मां और बेटी के साथ गाली-गलौज और विरोध करने पर मारपीट। उस वक्त तक गांव का एक आदमी भी बीच-बचाव में न आया। ऐसे में जब गीता अपने पति सुआलाल और बेटी रेणु के साथ थाने में रिपोर्ट लिखाने आए तो तंग आकर थानेदार ने सुआलाल को ही बंद कर दिया। लेकिन, जब अजमेर के कुछ दलित-कार्यकर्ता थाने पहुंचे तो पुलिस कहने लगी कि सुआलाल को लेकर गांव चलते हैं, यदि गांव का एक भी आदमी यह कह दे कि वह गाय सुआलाल की है तो वह गाय सुआलाल की हुई।

लेकिन सुआलाल का कहना है कि गांव में तो कई गवाह मिल जाएंगे, पर मामला केवल गाय का ही नहीं है, गाय तो मेरी है ही, असल बात तो मेरी पत्नी और बेटी के साथ बेवजह मारपीट और गाली-गलौज का है, उसका न्याय चाहिए। पुलिस वालों के हिसाब से ऐसे तो मामला सुलझने से रहा। इसलिए, अगली सुबह गीता और रेणु को जिला व सत्र न्यायधीश, अजमेर का रास्ता पकड़ना पड़ेगा। रात उन्हें अजमेर में ही कहीं बीतानी होगी, सुबह होने तक हो सकता है उनके पास गांव के पंच प्रधान पहुंच जाएं, हो सकता है तब वे अदालत के बाहर मारपीट और ईज्जत का हर्जाना देने की भी बात करें और उनमें से ही कोई गीता और रेणु के मार्गदर्शक बन जाएं! लेकिन, गीता और रेणु के शरीर पर चोट के निशान ताजे हैं, दोनों इस बार किसी तरह का कोई समझौता न

करने के बारे में बात कर रही हैं। उन्होंने गांव से थाने, थाने से अदालत तक का रास्ता तो तय कर लिया है। लेकिन, आगे क्या वे अदालत के रास्ते से चलकर गांव के रास्ते चल सकेंगी? रात हो चुकी है, और यह सुबह की तय होगा कि ये किस रास्ते पर चलेगी, लेकिन सुबह होने में अभी देर है...



Shirish Khare

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14

When her skin color is dark

by **Rudraprasanna Rath**

Dharitri - 31 January 2019

Your daughter is well read, well behaved, looking not that bad, the groom's side are interested in this proposal, however, they are looking out for a fairer bride for their son. Your daughter is not that fair.” You must have heard these lines from the middleman who fixes marriages. Many times these statements see a marriage getting broken even before the cupid has struck. At times, the groom's parents who appear to be gentle find it difficult to convey the message directly to the bride's family. But many times the half spoken words of the middleman who is also known as Madhyasti, is capable enough to convey the meaning to the brides' family. Intime, the groom's family finds that their heartthrob appears to be a girl whose skin colour is dark.

Giving birth to a girl child in India is itself considered as a challenge to many couples. The idea of a daughter's marriage hangs heavily on the minds of the parents since birth itself. And with passing time, the parents remain anxious to see how the skin colour of their daughter changes. If the girl does not change as she grows up, she becomes a burden on the family as it is believed that dark skin colored girls are hard to get married off.

Our society has a different approach to the fair skinned girl. Our culture and tradition have always accorded highest priority to fair girls. Our deities are fair, so are our film heroines. The models who sell products on TV are also fair. It is widely assumed that fair girls are capable of being good wives. Even if the male is dark, he seeks to marry a fair girl. On the other hand, a good looking educated girl is often rejected only because of her skin colour.

Discrimination to the darker skin is visible not only during marriage but it is also largely reflected in other aspects of our society. The girl gets rejected in love, pushed to the back bench during academics. In many private jobs, the promotions

of girls are often dependent on her skin colour. Many private companies look for fair women when they want to employ PA, steno and secretary, etc. Even if it is not explicitly mentioned in the advertisements, yet in practice, the fair girls get preference.

Only because of these dark girls, the advertisement and showbiz business keeps on raking moolah. Powder, snow, and moisturising creams sell. The advertising agencies further consolidate the impression that dark skin is bad, inauspicious. If you do not change your skin colour, you are likely to be rejected sooner or later. Hence, hating this skin colour is the only option available. This drags dark girls into the trap. They fall prey to this colour coded publicity stunts and keep on spending a large part of their money to make themselves look beautiful. Even after spending so much they cannot come out of the trap. They stay unacceptable as before. They fail to break the shackles of black and evil responses related to it.

Even though ancient manuscripts have mentioned fair and dark skin colours, it's replications are never visible in society. Only after the Britishers invaded this country, skin tones began to be talked about openly. People were segregated based on their skin colours and the fairer ones were soon counted as superior human beings. The fault lines which were created almost 300 years ago are so well entrenched in our psyche that we are still under the clutches of colorism and colour based discrimination. The irony is that while a dark male is acceptable, the dark female remains behind the veils, the veils have been created by society and controlled by complex socio-economic processes and factors. Due to her skin colour, she remains far from enjoying her social status. Equality remains a far cry. She is kept away from opportunities and the pressure of being a dark girl is so much that the girl either lives a life with low confidence or even commits suicide at times.

While we boast of materialistic achievements in life we cannot just shut the debates of colourism away from our lives. Educational qualification, behavior and response to humanitarian crises should be the yardstick to measure any human

being, let alone women. Changing colours of skin should not create a curtain in front of our eyes. Humans should love fellow human beings irrespective of their caste, creed or colour and the very word 'dark skinned' should be removed from our vocabulary.

(Translated from Odia)



Rudra Prasanna Rath

Rudra Prasanna Rath is a freelance consultant and a Development Communication professional working with international agencies of repute. He has been writing articles on gender issues for a decade.

15

Marriage is not a cover for abuse

by **Nileena Atholi**

Mathrubhumi Daily - July 2019

Kozhikode: In 1999, the 26 year old journalism student Zaynu (name is not real) married a professor who taught in a renowned college. On the very day of their wedding, her husband's uncontrollable (mis)behavior took place while they were driving home. He didn't care despite her showing the uneasiness. Sexual aggression of the husband became explicit after the birth of their first child. Zaynu shared with a heavy heart that their second child was the product of a rape. It was a pregnancy with a lot of complications. Zaynu, who was prescribed full bed rest, was raped by her husband in the eighth month of her pregnancy. Because of this, she was hospitalized in the following days due to pain and bleeding. "Your relatives will know if you are physically hurt. So I will torment you sexually and mentally to vent all my frustration", he said to Zaynu one day displaying his wrath for lesser dowry in their marriage contract. He was well aware of the public consciousness that women often fail to resist sexual assault or they'll be reluctant to reveal the torture to others because rape victims are often accused of "asking for", "deserving," or "enjoying" their victimization by the patriarchal society. Not able to withstand the unbearable torture, Zaynu decided to get divorce. Her husband, who boasted a monthly salary of lakhs of rupees, sent a mere 3500 to their children's education. After their divorce he married for a third time and had children in those relationships.

British philosopher Bertrand Russell said decades ago that marriage is for women the commonest mode of livelihood, and the total amount of undesired sex endured by women is probably greater in marriage than in prostitution. But even today marital rape is not a criminal offense in India. The state of affairs is not different in Kerala society as well where they boast high literacy rate, quality primary education, and better human development index. Neither the Kerala society nor our law have ever confronted or discussed this issue as a serious

violation of human rights.

The prevailing situation in India allows men to have sex with their wives without their consent. The main reason for this is that our law book while defining rape, does categorically mention that husband raping wife is not a criminal offense. Indian penal system does not consider married women in the case of rape as it considers the sexual workers. The family, the society and the law take the marriage contract or *taali* for granted as a woman's license to lifetime suffering of her partner's sexual perversion and fantasies.

What is Marital Rape?

Marital rape is the term used to describe forcible or non-consensual sexual acts between spouses, ex-spouses, or intimate long-term partners. These sexual acts can include: intercourse, anal or oral sex, forced sexual behavior with other individuals, and other unwanted, painful, and humiliating sexual activities. As per the international definitions including by the United Nations, it is rape if partners use force, threats, or intimidation to get each other to submit to sexual acts.

There are three types of marital rape. Forced sex, violent sexual intercourse (including domestic violence), and sadistic/obsessive rape (inciting unnatural sex). According to the United Nations Population Fund-2000's statistics, about one-third of Indian spouses had been forced into sex by their husbands. Yet when the government amended its criminal law in 2013, marital rape was not included under rape.

NFHS Survey Result

According to the National Family Health Survey-4 of 2015-16, 33% of women in India (one-third) have experienced physical, mental, or sexual abuse from their spouses. 7% of women had non-consensual sex with their partners when they were not interested. 6% of women have been raped by physical assault by men. 4% women were forced by husbands to have sex through threats or intimidation. About 3% were subjected to undesired sexual acts. Only 1.8% of unmarried

women in India have been victims of sexual assault whereas 6.7% of married women have been sexually assaulted.

Marital Control

The 49-year-old Radha who hails from Thiruvananthapuram married while she was 24 year old. At 29 she joined the government service as an employee. Radha's husband used to get offended if she talked to her friends in the first few days of their marriage. One day, a male colleague came to visit Radha at home which made her husband angry. He raped his own wife in the bedroom while the colleague waited in the guest room. After this incident, it became the habit of her husband to rape her in the bedroom upstairs whenever any friend or colleague came to visit her at home.

She once told this painful experience to her daughter who gave her the courage to move ahead. Currently Radha is not divorced. She lives on the second floor of the house which was built with her sweat as well. The house is in the name of husband while the loan for the house construction was taken in Radha's name. So they are legally separated inside the same house. She is still experiencing mental harassment from her husband in her own house as he fixes the camera in her bathroom and walks on the floor naked while their daughter is away from home.

According to the NFHS, marital control which restricts women talking to other men should be considered as the first sign of aggression in marital life. If a partner shows any of the traits like getting angry or jealous if his wife talks to other men, accusing her for being unfaithful, restricting her from meeting even her female friends, limiting her relationship with her family, always trying to find out where she is or showing lack of trust to hand over money, it can be considered as Marital Control. 19% of women in India have experienced at least three of the above mentioned behaviors from their husbands. Marital control is more prevalent in rural areas. Rural and urban areas account for 21% and 15 % respectively. 73% of husbands who indulge in marital controlling behavior have shown some form of violence (physical, mental, or sexual) to their wives.

Indian Women's Response (According NFHS survey)

- 27%: Husbands get angry if they talk to other men
- 24%: Husbands won't hand over money to them with trust
- 22%: Husbands bar them from meeting even their female friends
- 20%: Husbands always keep a watch and enquire where they were
- 17%: Husbands try to restrict their relationship and contact with their own family

A husband and wife from Malappuram are married for 17 years. The husband forces the woman to have sex regardless of her physical condition. He forces upon her during menstruation as well. Nonetheless she says that her husband loves her. She says there is no domestic violence. But she is not aware that her husband's longing and enforcement of sex without considering her health is domestic violence. Unbearable of forced sex during menstruation and sickness, she has thought of committing suicide on several occasions. Yet she says her husband is affectionate to her. "Women are often slaves of the false notion of love. They think that love is what they get when their partners beg to them, cry, and forgive. They misunderstand it as love. That is what makes her say her husband is loving her despite indulging in martial control and marital rape" says writer Sharadhakutty.

Marital Rape and Kerala

According to the NFHS, 6.6 % of women in India face sexual harassment from their husbands while 3.8 % of married women in Kerala are victims of rape. According to Survey-4 the rate of marital rapes in Kerala is higher than the states like Himachal Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir, Rajasthan, Meghalaya, Sikkim, Maharashtra, Assam, Mizoram, Goa and Andaman. It is worth noting that these states are far behind Kerala in women's health and human development indicators.

According to the Kerala Social Welfare Board report, among the recorded 18378 domestic violence cases in 2015-18, 2482 were marital rapes. In 2015—16 alone, 716 of 6051 reported domestic violence cases were marital rapes. Of the 6022 divorce cases filed in Kerala in 2016-17, 4626 women have suffered physical violence. Of these, 854 were raped and sexually abused. In 2017-18 out of 6305 reported domestic violence cases 912 were marital rapes. As per the 2016-17 statistics, the highest number of rape cases were reported in Thiruvananthapuram. Among the 1325 reported cases as many as 309 women were sexually assaulted by their spouses. The lowest number of cases was reported from Alappuzha, Malappuram and Kasaragod; 5, 7 and 9 each respectively.

District wise figures of Marital Rapes in Kerala in 2016-17 (Kerala Government service providing center data consolidated)

- Thiruvananthapuram: 309
- Kollam: 15
- Pathanamthitta: 48
- Alappuzha: 5
- Kottayam: 21
- Idukki: 36
- Ernakulam: 103
- Thrissur: 22
- Palakkad: 87
- Malappuram: 7
- Kozhikode: 95
- Wayanad: 53

- Kannur: 44
- Kasaragod: 9

There is a significant slump in the reported cases in 2018-19 compared to the previous two years. Out of 5025 reported domestic violence cases, 783 wives were sexually assaulted in this period. However, according to the Social welfare department's acting project manager Mohammed Nisar, the stark difference in the statistics may be because some of the shelters have become inactive and the service centers do not provide proper reports.

The figures in Kerala may increase again

There are many cases of marital rape in Kerala where women are unwilling to reveal. "Generally women only talk about physical and financial exploitation, in that sense at least 3,000 women might have become victims of sexual assault between 2015 and 2018." Says Smita Chand, a legal counselor at Pathanamthitta Mahila Mandiram.

"Only brutal sexual assaults find place in record books. The one time incidents are hardly recorded. Another reason why the sexual abuse case is not documented is the difficulty of producing evidence. Often women are reluctant to share their ordeals to a male lawyer. With all these, the cases reported in the service centers go unrecorded or undocumented," Chand adds.

The cases of marital rapes are reported in government run shelters for the victims of domestic violence as well. There are plenty of cases reported through lawyers in family courts, police stations, Kudumbashree forums and family counseling centers in Kerala.

About 16% of women in Kerala undergo some form of physical, mental or sexual abuse from their spouses. It is startling that these many rape cases are reported in a state where 92.1 % of housewives play a significant role in family decisions, 34.9% of women own property or land and 70.6 % of women have a bank account. Most of these cases are extreme forms of sexual assaults.

Women undergo multiple forms of sexual violence from their spouses like exposure to pornography, forcible sex during menstruation, forced sex during pregnancy, forced oral sex, and excessive sexual intimidation. Here the women don't have enough awareness or education to recognize whether they are victims of sexual violence. In such a society the complaints will be less reported. **(Her series of five articles was selected for the award. This is one of them. This is translated from Malayalam)**



Nileena Atholi

Nileena Atholi is sub editor with Mathrubhumi online. She has written several articles on gender issues and has won 15 awards.

16

Spending painful days in menstrual huts

by **Nizar Puthuvana**

Madhyamam Daily - 21 July 2019

Alappuzha: The story of women who are still forced to spend the painful days of menstruation, alone and afraid in derelict spaces.

Decades have gone by since untouchability was abolished by law. This practice sounds like folk tales to the new generation. But the sad fact remains that untouchability has not been wiped out completely. It continues to exist in many forms. One of which is theendarippura, huts to quarantine women having periods.

Menstruation is still taboo in many communities. Women having periods are banned from entering the kitchen, from touching food and household items, and preventing them from sleeping in the bedroom are just a few of the practices that are still followed. Mensuration and untouchability gained centre stage among the public discourse in Kerala after the Supreme Court verdict on allowing young women to enter Sabarimala.

The Adivasi community of Kanis who reside at Agasthyrakoodam hills in Thiruvananthapuram still follow the abhorrent tradition of quarantining menstruating women in menstrual huts (theendarippura) that are made in the jungle away from the settlement. These women are forced to stay in these huts for five to six days alone and afraid for their lives, notwithstanding the complications that arise during periods. This too is an ironic reality of a country that spends crores of rupees on women's safety.

This is the story about menstrual huts at Anakal Ooru (village) in Agasthyarkoodam and the lives of girls and women who are forced to spend a week of their lives every month in loneliness and terror.

Vijayalakshmi, a 14-year-old girl from Tanjavor, was killed when tornado Gaja

wreaked havoc in Tamil Nadu in November 2018. She had her first period and her family forced her to stay in the menstrual hut near their home as per custom. She pleaded to her family to let her stay indoors when Gaja's impact was being felt strongly. But her family members did not allow her to do so. Finally, on the fatal 16th of November, a hapless Vijayalakshmi was crushed by a tree that fell on the hut during strong winds. By the time she was brought to the hospital, she had been dead for hours. Even though international media reported this incident, it wasn't discussed much in the country. That's the power of rituals and customs in India.

One of the most tragic outcomes of menstrual huts can be seen at the Muthuvan Adivasi settlements at Idamalakkudy in Idukki district. Over 2,000 women had to bear the consequences after resorting to measures to avoid being quarantined at menstrual huts. These women used to take over the counter contraceptive pills like Mala-D to stop or delay their periods. These women used to walk 18 km through the forest to Munnar to get these pills. But they were grossly unaware of the side-effects of unmonitored use of these medicines. There are 28 Muthuvan settlements and all menstruating women took to this method. There were women who ate these pills for eight years continuously. 177 of these women became sterile and others suffered from serious physical ailments. That's how the outside world came to know about this predicament. The government intervened and they built safer concrete rooms to solve the issue. The investigation following this revelation led us to the menstrual huts of Anakal Ooru.

This settlement is located farther away from all the other Kani settlements at Agasthyarkoodam hills. The people are not just far away from their fellow tribesmen but they follow a different lifestyle. The current population is 70, including women, children and the elderly. There are 18 single room houses here. The members of this settlement are so steadfast in their traditional faith and customs that they declined the government offer to build houses for them using concrete. Their homes are made of clay, and cane leaves. They even dissuaded government officials from electrifying their village.



The tribesmen reluctantly allowed their children to get education after continuous efforts from the government. But many are still deprived of this basic right because of the belief that learning to read and write will anger the Hill God. Eechooty, a nine-year-old boy, is one of those unlucky children. The lives of girls are even more pathetic. Majority of them are illiterate. So it does come as a no surprise that such a conservative community would hold on to the menstrual hut custom.

Menstrual huts are a part of the customs that are integral to their faith. The small frail huts made of palm fronds cannot even withstand a drizzle. It's in these shabby huts that girls and women with periods are forced to stay. More than the trauma of these young girls who are banned from touching anything in their own homes is the abject horror of having to spend a week alone.

They become really alone after sunset. Snakes and other venomous beings can creep in anytime, not to mention attacks from wild animals and robbers. Wild elephants roam around the vicinity of the settlements most nights to plunder the farms. They come near these huts and go back. The women believe that the Hill Gods protect them from these animals. Not just elephants, antelopes, bison and wild boars also roam around the settlement at night. Though they are familiar with these creatures generally, during the lonely days in the menstrual huts, they go breathless in horror at the sight of these animals.

The woman of substance

Lakshmi is one of the oldest women at Anakal Ooru with her three sons. Villagers call her Lechmi. It's only recently that pregnant women from the settlement are being taken to hospitals for delivery. Before that midwives like Lechmi used to handle deliveries. She cuts the umbilical cords with the cane leaf that is sharper than surgical knives and applies herbs to protect from infections. All the adolescent children at Anakal Ooru were brought to life by Lechmi. And she is proud of it. The woman who is as strong as the forest and very brave too.

When she knew that we came from the city, she spoke freely about farming, and



taming three sons. But the mention of menstrual huts silenced her. She's more terrified of loneliness than wild animals. She spoke about women who were bitten by venomous creatures in those huts.

The ferocity of the forest becomes fiercer during nights. And you can enjoy it only with someone for company. Otherwise it instils pure dread. Lechmi described the horrors of those nights in her own way. As children have started to go to school, she, and women like her, believe that menstrual huts and nights of terror will soon be things of the past.

It's surprising that in a state despite crores in funding and several dedicated departments for tribal welfare, menstrual quarantine is still being practiced. Hope the authorities take notice now. Parvathy, Manju and Mala of the forest are waiting for those good days when they won't have to go through the horrors of menstrual huts.

Amba And Sons: The Latest Victims of Chaupadi

Nepalis consider menstruation as the most unclean bodily function. The practice of quarantining women during periods is called chaupadi in Nepali language. When people build homes, they also make huts nearby for menstruating women to stay. During periods women are prohibited from seeing or talking to anyone, and have to stay alone. Recently at Western Bajura district near capital Kathmandu, a woman Amba Bohara and her two sons suffocated from smoke and died.

Amba's period began during the coldest time in winter. She ventured out of the menstrual hut at night and started a fire for heat. The smoke from the fire filled the hut, killing the woman and her sons aged 10 and 12.

When her mother-in-law didn't find the children in the home in the morning, went out to look and saw the tragic sight. These huts known as chaugoth are built without any ventilation. International media has condemned the tragedy.

Local Police chief Uddab Singh said that they were investigating the case. During

periods, women are forced to stay alone in these huts and are not allowed to attend religious functions. Last year a young girl died of snake bite in a menstrual hut. After this, the government declared chaupadi as a criminal offence with three months imprisonment and 3,000 rupees fine. The Nepal Supreme Court had decreed this practice as a criminal offence in 2005.

But Amba's death proves that this savage tradition still continues, says the media. The International Court of Justice has also intervened in this matter.

(Translated from Malayalam)



Nizar Puthuvana

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17

Wives forced into prostitution, husbands act as pimps

by **Anwasha Banerjee**

Ei Samay - 10 June 2018

Dharampura: *The city of Love in Najafgarh. The PERNA community lives here. The female members of Perna society live to appease and feed their male members. That is the only purpose they live for and the only way of earning they know of, is selling their dignity. So everything is termed as 'Normal' and 'Customary'. The income goes to the husband's kitty and wife gets raped every night.*

The sun is not up yet... he is just stretching limbs and rubbing sleepy eyes. The roads, the dirty boundary walls, the gullies are still smelling of blankets, tooth powder and boiling tea. Life is coming to move after a nightlong peaceful slumber. However, the young girls of Dharampura, illiterate, unaware of who they are, are still fast asleep. Why not? They have to be up all night which is far from being peaceful for them! They need to be fresh as tulips again when they get on to their feet. This is the time to rest for a while, to steal a breather, to dream for the ever unfulfilled.

It's 5:30 in the morning. A chilly breeze was fastening the last lap of sleep in the eyes of the city-dweller. Suddenly a coarse voice of a creature called 'husband' shakes the timid wife up from her sleep. She sits up on her modest bed as the God of the household screams, "NGO Didi ayee baat karne ke waste" (Lady from NGO has come for a chat). The 22 something girl stares listlessly and the God returns to his regular club of drinking and gambling. That is what he is destined to do! Everyday.

Let us assume the girl is called Bijli. A huge silver nose-ring was dangling through her nostrils. Enormous earrings pulled both her ears downward beneath the sari-covered head. The look is now less of distress and more of curiosity. The first sentence that blurted out of that innocent mouth is that her identity should not be compromised. I agreed. Conversation gathered pace and she was as dead-pan as I

could have never imagined.

A kohl-laden baby lying beside, was crying at the top of its voice. She casually took it up in her lap and started breast-feeding... It suddenly struck me that in our country we count breast-milk as Amrit (divine food). Incredible India indeed! Amrit churned out of a body pushed to hellish torture every night. She muttered, "*Kal ki raat acchi beeti. Dhai hazar aye ek raat me! Marad khush hua!*" (Last night was great. I earned Rs 2500 in one night. Husband is happy). What do they do that has to be continued exclusively at night? Well, no prizes for guessing.

What is 'legal' in Sonagachhi or GB Road, the same old trade keeps going in Dharampura – rightly called 'The city of Love' or Premnagar in Najafgarh. People say, this age-old tradition has given the city its title – Premnagar!

How many customers every night darling? Three to six, I gathered from them. If there is an ongoing festival, demands are higher, so are the rates. The regular rate per person varies from Rs 500 to Rs 700. If the Client takes the woman at home in his own car, income staggers! Sometimes a client takes her to a gathering where all his friends and acquaintances are waiting to pounce on the prey! Sometimes gang raped, sometimes solitary 'fun' continues. Clients get tired, nights get darker. Money is finally offered to the prey and she heads for home. Respite from 'work'.

What happens when a client comes here, in your den? She spoke in a strange undertone, "If clients come here then they have to pay first. Husbands count the pennies and lead the men inside. Sometimes they watch over the doors themselves, sometimes other women of the locality, so that nobody can disturb them. "Highway is nearby, you see! Patrol is a must. Anyone can barge in anytime!" whispers Bijli. After every 40 minutes of work, a break of 10 minutes to gasp a breath. Then stoops down the next man in line! The Premnagar saga lasts from 1-30 to 4 am in the morning. A few hours of deep slumber and there begins the daily chores – cooking, child rearing and all kinds of menial household jobs.

And all this, just a few miles away from the historical capital of the world's largest

democracy! Delhi is nearby. Here in Najafgarh, the husband himself serves as the pimp, gets clients, fixes rates, bargains and then sets the ball rolling! Yes, the pun is totally intended my dear readers!

But what about emotions? Other men raping his own wife every night? What about the age-old Indian masculinity and concepts of chastity? No. Unfortunately enough, they are not in vogue here in Premnagar. The husband proudly says, "*Biwi kamaa rahi hai toh bahuti garv ki baat hai*" (When the wife is earning, it is a matter of great pride). So a flight of males every night – from truck drivers to police – flock around the city of love. Men in Khakis often want free services. Hence they are not to be trusted often.

And the tradition continues for generations... probably will continue for generations to come as well. Because this is the only way of earning these people know of. Men do not slog. Why should they? Customs and Convention have asked them not to. Wife should do the 'Kamaai' and the husband should live a life of merriment and inebriation! What else could a man have asked for? The women know their destiny from the day they are born. They never go to school but prepare themselves for the Kamaai. Why should they read books? They serve no purpose.

Now let us come back to Bijli. I asked her, 'Do you like this profession?' Perhaps it was for the first time in her life somebody asked about her 'likes'. She looks on listlessly and mumbles, "*Aadmi khush ho jata hai toh aur kya chahiye!*" (Your husband is happy. What else do you need) Yes. That's all they care about. The 'Khushi' of their 'Aadmis'.

"Are you aware that it is a criminal offence? You are being raped every night!" I keep on questioning. But she remains poker-faced and answers, "*Aur Keya, bachpan se yehi toh sikha hai.*" (What else? I have learnt only this from childhood). Her eyes give out a clear message of 'no more questions'. She now softly says, "*Fir ghar kaise chalega didi, khayenge kya?*" (How do we earn then? What shall we eat?) Her silence and glance makes me mute.

Bijli takes me to her friend who is in the same profession, and resides nearby. Let us suppose her name is Kamla. She is just 16 and married. We call out from outside her Jhopri and she opens the door. We enter and I start breaking the ice. Suddenly a loud knock on the door sucks all the blood from Kamla's face. The self-proclaimed husband has paid a visit and is annoyed by the visitor. "Who the hell are you?" he shouts. I politely say a made-up name and profession. He spouted, "*Lo fir se aa gayi aur ek NGO wali. Agar dhanda chhodne ki baat ki, toh mujhse bura koi na hoga.*" (See here comes another one from the NGO-s. If you advise her to leave the profession, you'll see my worst side.) He storms out of the house with unconstitutional slangs bellowing from his mouth.

Kamla does not react. Starts making Atta dough. She is in the middle of her daily chores. The dal is already cooked, now the roti has to be made. The basket nearby contains Potatoes, tomatoes and chilies. Her words resonate the same emotion or the lack of it, as Bijli. She continues with a faint smile, "*Kabhi Kabhi chhutti bhi mil jata hai. Jis raat aadmi pyar kare, us raat jane nahi deta hai. Bahut achchha lagta hai. Ye kaam toh ghar ke liye hai. Mere apno ki liye. Paisa kamane ke liye. Isme gila nahi.*" (Sometimes I do get an off. The day when my husband decides to make love, he does not let me go. This job is for my own household and people. I earn money. I have no regrets).

A stunned me leaves her there and knocks on another door. A joint family unfolds before the eye! Parents stay with two sons, fully devoted to Perna customs. Two daughters-in-law and three kids make the family complete. All the kids belong to the elder brother. The younger one is married for eight months and it is already her second trimester of pregnancy. But none is ready to talk about it. It is much more important to discuss and fight on why the Badi Bahu got up late that morning. We got inside the Chhoti Bahu's room. She is illiterate like all other Perna women, but quite agile. She started off by pointing a finger to her bulging belly covered under a vibrant Ghagra Choli – "*Pata hai aapko, isko girana chahti thi. Ek bar bachha honese sab araam khatm. Bahari aadmio ka aana jana shuru.*" (You know I wanted to abort this one. Once the baby comes, all comforts come to an end. Other males start coming). Her bangles tinkled as she spoke – "*Abhi mera*

bahot kadr hai. Lekin bas aur kuch din..." (I am respected a lot now. But only for a few more days), her eyes moist and a bizarre look of dishonour-fear-shame plays over her face.

Her sister-in-law goes to 'work'. Her children are looked after by their grandmother. This is another Perna custom! The first year of marriage is 'pure'! Sometimes a year more. Two-three kids and then women are pushed to hit the road for the Dhandha. Why such a custom? Because the males must ensure that the kids belong to them and are not someone else's! There is no pre-birth gender selection issue in the village. One can very well understand why!

I met another 40 year old who once used to stand on the highways for clients. She has two daughters who the husband never took responsibility for. But she is a fighter. Recollects her own story with teary eyes ``*Mai apni ladkiyo ko is line me aane hi nahi di. Bahut maar padi. Phir bhi nahi mani. NGO ka school me padhai unko. Yahan rehne nehi di. Abhi shadi kar di un logon ki. Wo samman ke saath apni zindagi kaaT rahi hai.*" (I did not let my daughters come into this trade. I was severely beaten up. But they could not defeat me. I never let my daughters live here. I sent them to schools run by NGO. Now they are married. They live a life of respect and honour).

Her tears keep sparkling as she whispers, "*Koi apni marzi se ye kam karna chahti hai kya? Aisa ho sakta hai kabhi? Pehle sabhi ko zabardasti hi dhande me layee jati hai. Uske baad wapsi ka koi upay nahi. Gyara saal ke umr se padi hu is nark me. Koi kya kar sakta hai tab? Isse to Jauhar bhi achchha hai. Hum toh jaan bujh ke zehar pee jaate hai.*" (Does anyone want to do this willingly? Is that possible? Everyone initially is forced into the trade. I have been in this hell since I was eleven years old. Did I have a voice to protest then? I did not. Jauhar is better than this. But we drink the poison knowingly.)

The shackles of patriarchy have fastened these women from the day they see the light of this world. They are unable to discover the path of salvation. Pati Parmeshwar is permanently etched on their minds so that they keep alive the horrific imposts year after year. It appears easy, commonplace, and regular to

them. Isn't there anyone who protests? Sometimes, yes. Solitary voices do raise themselves. But they are either beaten to death or scared to shut up. And with bruises all over their body, with aching limbs they have to rub the cheap lipstick on and stand in the highway waving to unknown masculine figures. They have no roads to escape.

The Bijlis and Kamlas we talked about here belong to the Perna Community of Rajasthan. They are found sporadically in Haryana as well. Similar communities are Nat from Bihar and Kinjar from Rajasthan who even push their own daughters to the flesh trade. British rulers labelled them as 'criminals' and 'dangerous'. They were mercilessly arrested by the police and beaten. But even after our so-called “Independence”, we have not been much aware of these nomadic communities. So they are generally ostracized. No education, no employment had been planned for them by the state administration in all these years. And they continue with this oldest profession. Mr Prime Minister, are you listening? Who is going to take the responsibility of Bachao and Padhao of these Betis? Are they not your country's? Are they not your own?

(Translated from Bengali)



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18 महिलाओं पर भारी गत्रे की खेती

by Jahid Khan

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महाराष्ट्र के बीड जिले में चार हजार से ज्यादा महिलाओं के गर्भाशय निकाले जाने का हैरतअंगेज और शर्मनाक मामला सामने निकलकर आया है। इन महिलाओं के गर्भाशय महज इसलिए निकाल दिए गए कि वे लगातार गत्रे की कटाई का काम कर सकें और उनके इस काम में कोई रुकावट पैदा न हो। विधान परिषद में खुद राज्य के स्वास्थ्य मंत्री एकनाथ शिंदे ने हाल ही में इस बात को स्वीकारा है कि निजी क्षेत्र के 99 अस्पतालों में साल 2016-17 से 2018-19 के बीच यानी बीते तीन साल में 25 से 30 साल उम्र की इन महिलाओं की अज्ञानता और मजबूरी का फायदा उठाकर गर्भाशय निकाले गए। बहरहाल मामले की जांच के लिए महाराष्ट्र सरकार ने स्वास्थ्य मंत्रालय के मुख्य सचिव की अध्यक्षता में एक समिति का गठन किया है। जांच समिति में तीन स्त्री रोग विशेषज्ञ और कुछ महिला विधायक होंगी। यह समिति गर्भाशय निकाले जाने के सभी मामलों की जांच दो महीने में पूरी कर सरकार को सौंपेगी। जिसके बाद सरकार इस मामले के सभी दोषियों पर जरूरी कार्यवाही करेगी। इंसानियत को शर्मसार करने वाला यह मामला, उस वक्त सामने आया जब कुछ स्थानीय अखबारों में इससे जुड़ी रिपोर्टें प्रकाशित हुईं। जाहिर है अखबार में रिपोर्ट प्रकाशित होते ही राज्य में हंगामा मच गया। रिपोर्ट के आधार पर ही राष्ट्रीय महिला आयोग ने राज्य के मुख्य सचिव को नोटिस जारी किया। उसके बाद बीड के सिविल सर्जन की अध्यक्षता में एक जांच समिति गठित कर मामले की जांच की गई। जांच में यह मामला सही पाया गया।

सूखे की वजह से हर साल चर्चा में रहने वाले महाराष्ट्र के बीड जिले को मराठवाड़ा में मजदूरों के सप्लायर के तौर पर जाना जाता है। यहां 80 फीसदी परिवार मजदूरी का काम करते हैं। इन परिवारों की महिलाएं सबसे ज्यादा गत्रे के खेत और शुगर फैक्ट्री में काम करती हैं। महिला श्रमिकों का कुछ हिस्सा ईंट बनाने का काम भी करता है। गरीबी और भूखमरी से पीड़ित कई परिवार जिले के बाहर भी मजदूरी करने को मजबूर हैं। गरीब परिवारों की मजबूरी का फायदा वे ठेकेदार उठाते हैं, जो खेतों और शुगर फैक्ट्री में मजदूरों की सप्लाय करते हैं। यहां के ठेकेदार अमूमन पति-पत्नी को साथ होने पर ही काम दिलवाते हैं। काम की शर्तें बड़ी अजीब हैं। यदि दंपति एक दिन की भी छुट्टी लेते हैं, तो उन्हें पांच सौ रूपए तक जुर्माना देना पड़ता है। इन शर्तों का सबसे ज्यादा असर महिलाओं पर पड़ता है। चूंकि मासिक चक्र के दौरान या फिर गर्भवती होने की स्थिति में महिलाओं को काम से छुट्टी देना पड़ती है, इसलिए ठेकेदार उन पर दवाब डालते हैं कि वे अपना गर्भाशय निकलवा दें। ताकि उन्हें माहवारी न हो या वे गर्भधारण न कर सकें। गर्भाशय निकाले जाने के बाद मासिक धर्म तो रुक ही जाता है, महिला उसके बाद मां भी नहीं बन सकती। ज्यादातर महिलाएं, जो मां बन चुकी हैं, वे गर्भाशय निकलवाने के लिए मजबूर हो जाती हैं। आलम यह है कि गत्रे के खेत में काम करने वाली पचास फीसदी महिलाओं ने अपना गर्भाशय निकलवा दिया है। यह जानते हुए भी कि इसके निकलवा देने से उनके स्वास्थ्य पर कितना दुष्प्रभाव पड़ेगा।

नौजवान महिलाओं के गर्भाशय निकाल देने के इस अमानवीय और असंवेदनशील मामले में वे ठेकेदार तो शामिल हैं ही, जो खेतों और शुगर फैक्ट्री में महिलाओं की सप्लाय करते हैं, बल्कि उन निजी अस्पतालों और

डॉक्टरों का भी कम गुनाह नहीं, जो पैसों की हवस में महिलाओं की कोख निकालने का काला कारोबार कर रहे हैं। महिलाओं की सेहत से खिलवाड़ करने के अपराध में शामिल हैं। यह पहली मर्तबा नहीं है, जब पैसों की लालच में महिलाओं के शरीर के इस अहम हिस्से गर्भाशय के साथ खिलवाड़ किया गया हो, आदिवासी बहुल छत्तीसगढ़ में भी आज से कुछ साल पहले, इस तरह का सनसनीखेज मामला सामने आया था। मामला इतना चर्चित हुआ कि उस समय इसकी आवाज संसद में भी गूंजी। राज्य में साल 2010 से साल 2013 के दरमियान गर्भाशय निकालने के 1800 मामले सामने आए थे। ज्यादातर मामलों में विभिन्न बीमा योजना का लाभ लेने के लिए यह आपरेशन किए गए थे। ऑपरेशन में बड़ी तादाद में निजी अस्पताल और उसके डॉक्टर शामिल थे। यहां भी ऑपरेशन की वजह पैसों का लालच था। देश में उस वक्त 'राष्ट्रीय स्वास्थ्य बीमा योजना' चलती थी। जिसके तहत गरीबी रेखा से नीचे रहने वाले परिवार 30 हजार रुपए तक का इलाज, सरकारी खर्च पर कुछ निजी अस्पतालों से करवा सकते थे। यह योजना निजी अस्पतालों के लिए वरदान बन गई। इन अस्पतालों के डॉक्टरों ने सूबे की गरीब महिलाओं को गर्भाशय के कैसर का डर दिखाकर, गर्भाशय निकालने के सैकड़ों ऑपरेशन किए। कैसर का डर बताने वाले डॉक्टरों ने न महिलाओं के कम उम्र की परवाह की, न ही उन्हें हकीकत सामने आने और यकीन टूटने का ख्याल आया। ऑपरेशन के बाद महिलाओं के स्वास्थ्य पर इसका क्या असर पड़ेगा, इसकी परवाह भी नहीं की गई। कायदे से बच्चेदानी निकालने के पहले बायोप्सी होनी चाहिए, जिससे यह मालूम चलता है कि कैसर है या नहीं। लेकिन जब पैसों का लालच इंसान के जमीर पर हावी हो, तो इन सब बातों की कौन परवाह करता है? उसमें भी जब महिलाएं गरीब हों और उनकी कोई सुनवाई करने वाला ना हो, तो व्यवस्था और भी ज्यादा निरंकुश हो जाती है।

सब जानते हैं कि गर्भाशय, महिलाओं के शरीर का एक जरूरी हिस्सा है। गर्भाशय निकालना तभी जायज है, जब मरीज में कैसर या दीगर कोई जानलेवा बीमारी के लक्षण मिलें। यदि किसी महिला के गर्भाशय में कैसर या और कोई जानलेवा बीमारी है, तभी डॉक्टर गर्भाशय निकालने की अनुशंसा करता है। कम उम्र की महिलाओं का बिना किसी वाजिब वजह के गर्भाशय निकाल देना सरासर नाजायज है। उसके साथ लैंगिक अत्याचार है। जिसका असर वह महिला लंबे समय तक भोगती है। गर्भाशय निकाले जाने के बाद, महिलाओं का मासिक धर्म तो रुक ही जाता है, वह संतान भी पैदा नहीं कर सकती। शरीर पर गलत प्रभाव पड़ते हैं, वह अलग। खास तौर पर कम उम्र की महिलाओं पर इसका सबसे ज्यादा असर पड़ता है। उनमें कई हार्मोनल बदलाव आते हैं। हार्मोन के असंतुलन से संबंधित उनमें कई परेशानियां शुरू हो जाती हैं। इतना ही नहीं, कई महिलाएं डिप्रेशन की भी शिकार हो जाती हैं। एक तरफ केन्द्र की राजग सरकार कामकाजी महिलाओं के लिए 26 हफ्ते का मातृत्व अवकाश देने जैसा प्रगतिशील कानून लेकर आती है, तो दूसरी ओर महाराष्ट्र जैसा राज्य है, जहां महिलाओं के गर्भाशय महज इसलिए निकाल दिए जाते हैं, ताकि मजदूरी में कोई रुकावट पैदा ना हो। सरकार और स्थानीय प्रशासन के ठीक नाक के नीचे महिलाओं के साथ यह अमानवीय कार्यवाहियां होती हैं और वे तमाशाई बने रहते हैं। अब जबकि यह मामला सामने आ गया है, तो सरकार की जिम्मेदारी है कि वह सबसे पहले उन अस्पतालों और ठेकेदारों की शिनाख्त करें, जो इस गोरखधंधे में शामिल हैं। गुनहगारों की शिनाख्त हो जाने के बाद, उनके खिलाफ पुलिस में मामला दर्ज हो और उन्हें कड़ी सजा दिलवाई जाए। यही नहीं दोषी

डॉक्टरों और नर्सिंग होम के लाइसेंस रद्द कर, उनके खिलाफ कड़ी कार्रवाई की जाए। इंडियन मेडिकल एसोसिएशन ऐसे डॉक्टरों के लाइसेंस तुरंत रद्द करे, जिन्होंने डॉक्टरी जैसे पवित्र पेशे को अपने काले कारनामों से शर्मसार किया है।



Jahid Khan

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The Dongria maidens of Niyamgiri in the web of belief and tradition

by **Bijaya Dwibedi**

The Samaja - 22 September 2019

Bhawanipatna : Everything runs with law in the land of the old, primitive scheduled tribe of Kalahandi and Rayagada known as Dongrias in Niyamgiri. These Dongrias are tied with the culture and tradition of the land and the clan from ancestors to ancestors in all aspects like birth, marriage, festivals and other cultural activities. The rules of the land made them tied with the laws of their culture and tradition particularly to the women. As a result, some of the women remain unmarried till death because of the faults caused by their ancestors. They pass their sad life waiting for the return of their would-be husbands.

A life cursed

Child marriage is a system regulated in the social structure of the life and society of the primitive Dongrias. The elderly family members of the male counterpart propose the new born baby girl to take home as their daughter in law or grand daughter in law announcing the name of their young boy for marriage. This leads to the finalization of the proposal between the two families with all willingness where the elderly family members of the groom side give coins as a rule to fix the proposal to the girl's side. Even at this young age, the marriage to happen in the future is finalized and they celebrate a grand feast by spending 40 to 50 thousand rupees from both sides. But, sometimes when the small Dongaria boy grows up, he changes his mind. They have their freedom to choose their own life partner. They mostly make choices in Dhangadabasa (A house for cultural recreation in Niyamgiri area) by performing songs and dances. They make a choice and drag the girls to their home as wife very openly. As a result, the girl fixed for the boy earlier by the elderly family members or by the ancestors remains as a maiden throughout the life. They pass life waiting for the husbands to come back. They can't even marry. They are forced to live an unmarried life till the end, being tied with the rules and regulations of their society and land. It becomes impossible on

their part to come out of that. They lead a very common life wearing a plain saree just like a widow. Their parents also never think of getting them married to other boys. They are forced to be like that because if they have to get them married to someone else, they have to give a double fine to both the clan people of the boys and the girl's side. A very difficult and sometimes impossible task.

It is known that almost 400 girls are leading the life of maidens in almost the 90 villages found in the range of Niyamgiri Mountains of Kalahandi on the border of Kalahandi and Rayagada districts. It is a hindrance for the growth of the Dongarias in those localities. In this context, the eminent researcher on the Dongarias Mr. Suryanarayan Padhi says, "All the Dongaria rules, regulations, customs, traditions and religion are considered to be on par with the laws." This has been continuing since time immemorial and none of them have ever tried to break these laws or the law of the land.

Bidyutlata Naik, a researcher on Dongaria Language and culture, expresses that, "A Dongaria boy can marry 4 to 5 wives but a Dongaria girl can't marry anyone except the boy fixed earlier during the childhood days." As a result, many Dongaria girls remain unmarried throughout their life, as if their lives are cursed.

(Translated from Odia)



Bijaya Dwibedi

Bijaya Dwibedi is a seasoned journalist, working with Odia newspaper The Samaja

III

Right to Development



Right to Development

Children should have the right to grow and develop in enabling environment conditions, pre-condition for which is provision of balanced diet, quality education, healthy, sanitary and hygienic environment and access to appropriate healthcare services. However, a large number of girls, remain beyond the pale of development due to the patriarchal norms and mindsets which consistently undermine their value. The dreams and aspirations of many girls are nipped in the bud when they are denied education, loaded with household responsibilities or become child brides.

The five stories presented in this section highlight the stark realities of a girl child's life and also share some heart-warming stories of resilience, grit and determination.

According to NFHS 5 report around 27% of girls in India get married before the legal age of 18 years. Apart from denying them an opportunity to pursue education and employment, child marriages are also a threat to their wellbeing and health. They are more vulnerable to domestic violence, sexual and reproductive health issues and death during child birth.

Krithika Srinivasan in her story **Child Marriage: Wake Up To Cervical Cancer Risk, Say Tamil Nadu Doctors** underscores the issue of child marriages and its correlation with cervical cancer and other sexually transmitted infections in Villupuram, Tamil Nadu. The informative report captures stories of women who were child brides and the detrimental impact it has had on their health. The limited awareness on the need for regular screening for reproductive health issues adds to the increasing rate of cervical cancer prevalence. This report also illustrates the efforts taken by the government to address the same.

According to a report by UNICEF “School attendance in India decreases when children are required to spend hours collecting water. A 22 per cent increase in school drop-out rates has been reported in drought-affected states. Close to 54 per cent of rural women – as well as some adolescent girls – spend an estimated 35 minutes getting water every day, equivalent to the loss of 27 days' wages over a year” (Source: Analysis of the situation of children, adolescents and Women in India 2016)

It is common to find girls and women treading long distances with the brass pots delicately balanced on their heads to fetch water to meet the needs of their family, both in rural and urban areas. This is the reality of many women's lives. In the feature **The Price Of A Water Lies In Between Abortion And Loss Of Education**, Nandhini Vellaisamy shines the spotlight on gender in the context of water fetching responsibilities and its impact on women in Tamil Nadu. Through first hand experiences of women from different age groups and regions, the story tells us the hardships faced by women which include losing out on education, opportunities to work, impact on their health as well as lack of economic independence, because of social conditioning that fetching water for the house 'is a woman's job'. It also makes a powerful case to change gendered mindsets, gendered roles and domestic prejudices.

According to data from Census 2011, the number of child labourers in India is 10.1 million of which 5.6 million are boys and 4.5 million are girls. Premvijay Patil in his op-ed **दिव्या नहीं करेगी अब मजदूरी, पढाई करने की चाह होगी पूरी** touches upon the evils of child labour, and gender discrimination in the context of education and nutrition. First and foremost, the responsibility of any nation is to provide its children with a purposeful and quality life and prepare them for a better future, exhorts Premvijay Patil and presents a holistic perspective on child labour and discrimination.

Varun Bhat in his report, **पहाड़ों के बीच पहाड सी जिंदगी, माही की लहरों से बहती हमारी मलाला** presents an inspiring story of girls in remote villages in Banswara district accessing education and fulfilling their aspirations to continue schooling despite

the difficult geographical terrain. He provides a detailed account of the complexities related to girls' education and their aspirations to soar higher despite the challenges. The story also provides statistics on the increasing enrolment of girls in schools in this mountainous region.

Rudra Ranjan Sejpada and Saurabh Duggal present two heart-warming success stories of girls breaking the social constraints and taboos that limit their aspirations. Rudra Ranjan Sejpada in his feature, **In Love With Ghungroo And Tabla** presents the story of proud parents, Rama Chandra and Swarnalata Puhan of Balasore and their Pancha Ratna (Five Jewels) – also an arts organization run by their five daughters. It is an inspiring example of a family that valued its five daughters, supported and brought them up as any child should be.

Yet another inspiring story is Saurabh Duggal's **Rugby Gives Wings To Tribal Girls From Impoverished Bengal Village** which captures the troubles and turmoil of girls trying to break free of the gender barriers and pursue a sport not often associated with girls. The charming and compelling story of these young Adivasi girls from Saraswatipur reminds us that Rugby – a game of brute force played by men, can be nothing but a game if the right opportunity and desire is cultivated among girls

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Rugby gives wings to tribal girls from impoverished Bengal village

by **Saurabh Duggal**

Hindustan Times - 20 July 2018

Chandigarh: Plucking tea leaves is all about dexterity. The target is the bud and the top three leaves. It takes a lot of practice and a fair bit of speed to bag enough leaves to get the day's measly wages. Rugby, on the other hand, is as robust as it gets, with a huge emphasis on raw power.

The tea gardens of Saraswatipur in interior north Bengal is where the two meet. For doughty teenage girls here, tea plucking provides sustenance and rugby the right to dream. Adivasi families, with hardly any modern trappings, are cheering their young girls who have taken the tough route to the India rugby team.

The long vacation after class 10 board exams is an opportunity for 18-year-old tribal girl Lachmi Oraon to financially support her parents in providing for a family of 10, including six daughters and two sons. She spends most of the day picking tea leaves. A week's toil fetches just ₹600, but it is a big contribution to her parents' weekly income of ₹1200.

Surviving on rice and dal — the family can't even afford milk — doesn't stop Lachmi from chasing her dream to become India's top rugby player. Like her, many other adivasi girls are the central figures in the revolution rugby is bringing to the isolated Saraswatipur. Around 40km from Jalpaiguri, it is a cluster of four villages — Gudan Lane, Nirpaniya, Maharpur and Division — surrounded by jungles and sprawling tea gardens, on the banks of Teesta river.

“We have a big family, so it's not possible for my parents who work in the tea gardens to even meet basic demands. Being older than the others, whenever I am free from school, I work in the tea garden,” says Lachmi, who was part of the West Bengal team that recently won silver in the women's national championship held in Chandigarh. “Whatever happens, I have to be among the top names of the

sport,” adds Lachmi, who made it to the India team last year.

Only two buses connect Jalpaiguri with Saraswatipur in a day. The second bus stops six kilometres away, which means a trek home through the jungle. But rugby has given the girls wings, as the first from these villages to board a flight. People in the area first heard about rugby five years ago, a year after they got electricity. The first break came in 2015 when Sapna and Chanda from the area made it to the Indian team for the Asian Championships. Since then, no Indian women's team has been without a player from Saraswatipur.

The majority of Saraswatipur locals are adivasis with roots in the tribal belt of Jharkhand. They were taken there a century ago as bonded labourers to work in the tea gardens. While life had revolved around the villages for generations, lack of schooling and jobs pushed the young generation to end that isolation. “Had it not been rugby, like other members of our family, we too would not have got an opportunity to look beyond Saraswatipur, or, at the most, Jalpaiguri. Now we are going places, even abroad,” said Lachmi, one of the few girls from the area to pass the board exams after class 10. “Rugby is giving us hope. Otherwise, like our parents and grandparents, our lives too will be confined to picking tea leaves or working on a construction site,” added 19-year-old national rugby medallist Minuka Korowa, who works at a construction site to supplement the wages of her mother.

Tackling child marriage

The first visible change rugby has brought is a mindset among parents towards early marriage.

“Many of our friends in the locality got married in their mid teens. We are lucky, because of rugby nobody is pressing us. Last year, I got a marriage proposal but my parents left it to me and I chose rugby,” said 18-year-old Tanuja Oraon.

While rugby provides a sliver of hope, life throws other tackles. Tanuja's home was damaged earlier this year by elephants. “We are from the jungle and are not afraid of elephants or wild animals. We have the guts to take on anybody, even the

orthodox society that feels girls are meant only for marriage,” Tanuja. “Earlier, people used to object to our training in shorts. Now the same people are part of the welcome procession whenever we return with medals,” added 17-year-old Rushmita Oraon, who too has fended off a marriage proposal.

How it all started

The tribal girls' rugby story began in 2012 when Father George Matthew was transferred from Kolkata to Saraswatipur to head a local parish.

He spotted the athletic potential of the hardy local kids and approached Kolkata-based NGO, Jungle Crow, which runs a 'khelo rugby' programme. “Father George knew Paul Walsh of Jungle Crow and requested him to extend the khelo rugby programme to Saraswatipur. In March 2013, the game was introduced in the area. Two years later, two of the girls made it to the Indian team. Now they dominate the West Bengal teams and have a sizable presence in the Indian squad,” said coach Roshan XaXa.

“Now, the game is a hit in the area. Last year on International Adivasi Day – day of the World's Indigenous People – on August 9, more than 500 kids participated in a local rugby tournament. To encourage kids to get hooked to the sport, the winners were presented with live chicken!” Eighteen months ago, a former national-level player from Saraswatipur, Sailen Tudu, started a club Adibasi Rugby, and his trainee Urshila Kahriya has also made it to the India team.

Revolution's torch bearer

The first big exposure for the Saraswatipur girls came at the 35th National Games in Kerala in 2015. Though the team only finished fourth, rubbing shoulders with top teams helped them shake off their reticence. Since then, at every national meet, West Bengal have made it to the podium courtesy the Saraswatipur girls. The biggest moment for Saraswatipur came in 2017 when five of its girls — Punam Oran (17), Suman Oran (17), Rema Oran (18), Lachmi Oran (17) and Sandhya Rai (16), who was the captain — were chosen in the 12-member Indian squad for the U-18 World Games in Paris. It was the first time anyone from

Saraswatipur had boarded a flight. Travel abroad is still viewed with disbelief by people there. “Even today, for many of our relatives it is hard to believe we really travelled by air,” says Sandhya Rai (17), who is one of the five girls from the area among the 25 probables for the Asian Games. Saraswatipur girls are now gearing up to board the flight to Jakarta for the Asian Games.

From orphanage to an ace rugby coach

The only childhood memories Roshan Xaxa has is of working in a tea stall somewhere in North Bengal or roaming aimlessly on Sealdah railway station from where someone took him to the Don Bosco Orphanage in Kolkata.

He has no idea about where he was born and doesn't recall anything about his parents.

Rugby has given Xaxa his identity, a way of life, and his trainees are making a mark in the national and international arenas. “During my stay at Don Bosco Orphanage I was introduced to rugby. I got fascinated and started pursuing it. It gave me a reason to live and thrive in life,” says the coach.

Xaxa had represented West Bengal and Odisha in nationals before switching to coaching a decade ago.

He started his coaching journey in 2007 with Kalinga Institute of Social Science (KISS) — a free residential school for tribal kids — in Bhubaneswar, Odisha. He shifted base to Saraswatipur three years ago and is working with Kolkata NGO Jungle Crow that runs a rugby programme.

“During my stint in Odisha, I got an opportunity to coach tribal girls and their adversities in life made them stronger to achieve bigger (things),” says Xaxa.

About coaching Saraswatipur girls, he said, “As there was no sports culture, in the beginning we faced a lot of hurdles in convincing the parents to introduce their daughters to the sport. The biggest challenge came when they got selected in the West Bengal team for nationals the first time because initially the parents were

reluctant to send their daughters outside their locality. They had odd queries whether their girls might get exploited or they would be sent to some other state as domestic help. Eventually, we convinced them.”



Saurabh Duggal

Saurabh Duggal was Assistant Editor with Hindustan Times till recently. He is based in Chandigarh and has over 15 years' experience as a sports journalist.

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Child marriage - Wake up to cervical cancer risk, say Tamil Nadu doctors

by **Krithika Srinivasan**

The New Indian Express - 03 March 2019

Villupuram: UNICEF defines child marriage as a marriage before age of 18 for girls, and 21 for boys, a violation of child rights affecting the mental and physical well-being of children. Despite the Child Marriage Prevention Act, people from lower income and less educated families tend to follow the practice for economic and cultural reasons.

However, while the immediate effects of child marriage on the child's health are spoken of, the long-term effects on the woman's health are less discussed. Marriage at a young age increases the possibility of the child contracting sexually transmitted infections (STIs), specifically HIV and HPV (human papillomavirus). Certain strains of HPV are the main cause for cervical cancer in women. Early sexual activity, multiple pregnancies and early pregnancies, all consequences of child marriage, are risk factors for cervical cancer.

Dr Rajiv Kumar, an oncologist at the Villupuram Government Hospital, said that exposure to sex at a younger age and teenage pregnancies open the door to STIs. Sexual activity under the age 21 in women will increase the chance of acquiring STIs by over 60 per cent and teenage pregnancy would most likely create inflammation in reproductive organs.

“By the time a girl (who has been married as a child) is 20, she already has two or three children causing the muscles around the lower abdomen to weaken. Alongside that, lower levels of hygiene will allow a viral infection such as HPC prevail up to a decade or two, which undiagnosed, may also lead to cervical cancer,” Dr Rajiv said.

This correlation between child marriage and cervical cancer has been noted in several research papers globally. However, instances seen in Villupuram bring

immediacy to the issue at a local level.

“Villupuram district stands first in the number of child marriages. We also see several cervical cancer patients, mostly aged 70 and above, with early marriage as a prime factor. The hospital is treating over 165 cervical cancer patients, some of whom were married at the age of 13. Some women were married even before they attained puberty,” Dr Shankarnarayanan, Dean, Villupuram Medical college said.

Additionally women who are married off as children come from lower socioeconomic groups and have little awareness of genital hygiene. “Most of them are still school goers when they are married off... They experience inflammation and pain in their genitals at a young age (due to sex) and so will fail to keep themselves hygienic. This will take a toll on their physical and mental well-being leaving them traumatised,” Dr Rajeshwari, head of the obstetrics and gynaecology department at the Villupuram Government Hospital said. Poor genital hygiene can lead to infections and can worsen infection caused by HPV.

Manjula*, a 35-year-old woman in Villupuram taluk, who gave birth to her first child at the age of 19, explained the impact the early marriage has had on her health. “I was married when I was 15, just four months after attaining puberty, due to pressure from our relatives. My husband is 10 years older than me. He has physically and sexually assaulted me,” she said.

“Now I have been advised to get screened for cervical cancer as I am suffering from genital tract infection. This is what child marriage has done to me. My life has been nothing but a piece of waste paper, like a withering hibiscus,” Manjula said.

Kumari*, who is over 80 years old, hails from Kandamangalam. She was married off at the age of 15 and delivered six babies -- only three of her children are alive today. Seven months ago, she was diagnosed with cervical cancer. “Only my daughter-in-law and two daughters know I have cancer.

“Doctors said I am in the fourth stage of cervical cancer and that only painkillers to

ease my pain can be given. It feels like my genitals are on fire. I take pills at regular intervals to deal with the pain but I am not able to sit. I have to lie down in bed all day. I can only use the restroom with the help of someone. My days are over but I am determined not to get my grandchildren married at a young age, a key reason for my suffering now,” she said. Kumari's daughter Deepa* said that the cancer had been diagnosed in a late stage and that doctors had said it could not be treated, leaving pain management as the only option.

Dr Rajiv noted that most women were not aware of the need for check-ups or screening for reproductive health issues so infections went frequently undetected for too long. This was among the reasons for development of malignant tumors in the subcutaneous layers of the cervix, he said. “Cervical cancer is treatable unless the tumor damages the uterus or affects the lymph nodes, which is the fourth and final stage of cervical cancer,” he explained.

Government officials said that the State government conducted weekly, monthly and yearly programmes on prevention and awareness of non-communicable diseases. The health department distributes sanitary napkins at government schools and anganwadis. Officials claimed it also conducted classes on reproductive health every Friday at government schools.

Further, the government works with schools with educate villagers about the effects of child marriage, aside from taking legal action against parents and bridegrooms. Counselling centres at all GHs in Tamil Nadu have reportedly been set up to help victims of early sexual encounters through child marriage or commercial sex work. The National Family Health Survey-4 (NFHS) noted there had been a decline in women aged 20-24 years married before the age of 18 in India, from 47.4 to 26.8 per cent. In Tamil Nadu the fall was from 22.3 percent to 16.3.



Krithika Srinivasan

Krithika Srinivasan is a Reporter with The New Indian Express, Villupuram, Tamil Nadu. She has done Masters in Sociology from the University of Madras.

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दिव्या नहीं करेगी अब मजदूरी पढ़ाई करने की चाह होंगी पूरी

by Premvijay Patil

Nai Dunia -26 May 2019

धार: 11 साल की दिव्या इन दिनों धार के समीपस्थ ग्राम धरावरा के कस्तूरबा आवासीय विद्यालय में रहकर शिक्षा की मुख्यधारा से जुड़ने की कोशिश कर रही है। दरअसल इस बच्ची ने कपास में बाल श्रम करने के कारण कभी भी स्कूल की उच्च स्तर की कक्षा में पहुंचने की कल्पना नहीं की। कभी खेती का काम करके तो कभी घर का काम करके वह संतोष करने लगी। लेकिन उसे शासकीय योजना के तहत अब स्कूल और आवास मिला। तब उसे एहसास हुआ कि स्कूल क्या होता है। और वहां की सुविधाएं देखकर वह अब इस बात को लालायित है कि उसे आगे पढ़ना चाहिए। दिव्या तो एक उदाहरण है, लेकिन यहां पर भीषण गर्मी में विशेष कक्षाओं में पढ़ने वाली ऐसी 60 बालिकाएं अपने भविष्य की उड़ान भरने के लिए तैयार है। इसमें कई बच्चे ऐसी है जो कक्षा पांचवी पास करने के बाद कई साल तक स्कूल नहीं पहुंच पाई और अब उन्हें फिर से ककहरा सीखना पड़ रहा है। ऐसी स्थिति में आखिर कब तक बालिकाएं शिक्षा से दूर रहेंगी।

गौरतलब है कि जिले में इस बात को नहीं स्वीकारा जाता है कि कपास और सोयाबीन की खेती में बच्चों द्वारा काम किया जाता है। इस तरह के बाल श्रम रोकने के लिए कभी विशेष रूप से प्रयास नहीं किए गए। शासकीय अमला भी इस ओर ध्यान नहीं दे पाता है, क्योंकि उसके लिहाज से यह मान्यता है कि यह कार्य अपने घर पर कर रहे हैं। जबकि कई बच्चों की दशा अपने आप में अलग है।

बेहतर भोजन व व्यवहार से बदलाव आया

धार के समीपस्थ ग्राम धरावरा के कस्तूरबा विद्यालय में पहुंचकर जब बच्चियों की स्थिति देखी तो मालूम हुआ कि उनको नई जिंदगी तो चाहिए लेकिन उसके लिए उन्हें इस तरह के सहयोग और सपोर्ट की जरूरत है। 11 साल की दिव्या अब खेल खेल में पढ़ाई करने की कला सीख रही है। कभी घर पर काम किया तो कभी खेतों में। दिव्या के माता-पिता जहां मजदूरी करने चले जाते थे तो वहीं भी अपनी पढ़ाई छोड़कर घरेलू काम से लेकर खेती संबंधी काम में मदद करने के लिए पहुंच जाती थी। ऐसी स्थिति में अब उसे विद्यालय में मुख्यधारा में जुड़ने का अवसर मिला है। सबसे बड़ी बात यह है कि सामान्य स्कूलों में मध्याह्न भोजन तो दिया जाता है, लेकिन वह मध्यान भोजन ठीक से नहीं दिया जाता। लेकिन इस विद्यालय में बच्चों को स्तरीय भोजन मिल रहा है। दरअसल यहां पर करीब 60 बच्चियों को चिन्हित करके लाया गया है। यह 60 बालिकाएं नहीं बल्कि 60 ऐसी कहानियां हैं, जिनकी अपनी पीड़ा है। हर बच्चे की अपनी एक पीड़ा है। दिव्या तो एक उदाहरण भर है लेकिन ऐसी बच्चियों की कहानी जाने की कोशिश करें तो हर की अपनी एक अलग अलग पीड़ा है।

समर कोर्स में 2 महीने में बदलाव की कोशिश

आप कल्पना कर सकते हैं कि कक्षा पांचवी तक जो बच्ची पढ़ चुकी हो उसे एक बार फिर अनार व आम का ज्ञान यानी ककहरा पढ़ाने की स्थिति बन रही है। आज पांचवी पास पास एक बच्ची बोर्ड पर अनार व आम जैसी

चीज भी नहीं समझ पा रही है। ऐसे में उसे शिक्षा की मुख्यधारा से जोड़ने के लिए इस स्कूल में विशेष रूप से प्रयास किया जा रहा है। 13 साल की छात्रा का नाम पूजा है, जो कि ग्राम चंदवाड़ा की रहने वाली हैं। अब उसमें धीरे-धीरे आत्मविश्वास आ रहा है और वह फिर से 2 महीने के समर कोर्स को पूरा करने के बाद में कक्षा छठी में पढ़ने की इच्छा रखती है। नालछा विकासखंड के ग्राम पटाड़ापुरा की 12 साल की छात्रा का भी अमूमन यही हाल है। घरेलू काम से लेकर खेती के काम के बोझ तले यह बच्ची अपनी शिक्षा को छोड़ देती हैं। एक एनजीओ के माध्यम से 60 बच्चियों का चयन किया गया और उन्हें शासकीय योजना के तहत इस स्कूल में लाया गया।

मुझे तो रोना आ गया था

शिक्षिका व छात्रावास वार्डन शर्मिला ठाकुर ने बताया कि इनमें से कई बालिकाएं ऐसी हैं जो कपास से लेकर सोयाबीन की खेती में बाल श्रम करने को मजबूर थीं। उन्होंने बताया कि ऐसी बच्चियों के मामले में हमें जब उनकी कहानी मालूम पड़ी तो रोना आ गया। अब जबकि उन्हें सही समय पर खाना और बेहतर सुविधाएं मिल रही हैं तो वह पढ़ने के लिए लालायित हैं। शिक्षिका ठाकुर का कहना है कि नियमित रूप से हम उन्हें पढ़ा रहे हैं। खासकर खेल खेल में और कार्ड के माध्यम से हम पढ़ाई करवा रहे हैं। बच्चियां कक्षा पांचवी तक तो पढ़ गईं लेकिन लंबे समय तक उनकी शिक्षा नहीं हो पाई और शिक्षा से दूरी की वजह से वह पिछला पढ़ाई का ज्ञान भी भूल गई। यह एक बड़ी चिंता का विषय है ऐसे में हम इन बच्चियों को कक्षा 1 से 5 तक की सारी बुनियादी शिक्षा देने के लिए प्रयास कर रहे हैं। उन्होंने कहा कि अगले 1 माह तक और ये छात्राएं यहां रहेंगी। उसके बाद जुलाई में जैसे ही शिक्षा सत्र की शुरुआत होगी वैसे ही बच्चियों को हम कक्षा छठी में एडमिशन दिलवाकर मुख्यधारा में जोड़ेंगे।

कुक्षी बाग मनावर में जरूरी है विद्यालय

बालश्रम को लेकर नईदुनिया ने पड़ताल की तो मालूम हुआ कि कुक्षी और मनावर क्षेत्र ऐसे हैं, जहां पर बड़ी संख्या में बच्चे बाल श्रम में लगे रहते हैं। आगामी कुछ दिनों में एक बार फिर कपास की बोवनी का दौर शुरू होने वाला है। ऐसे में इन बच्चों को बोवनी जैसे कार्य में संलग्न किया जाएगा। इस बार अभी से इस दिशा में अलर्ट होना होगा। यदि इन बच्चों का एडमिशन करवा कर ही इतिश्री कर दी जाए तो वह केवल खानापूर्ति है। जबकि वास्तविकता में ऐसे बच्चों को अभी से चिन्हित करना होगा जो कि कपास की खेती से लेकर सोयाबीन संबंधी खेती के कार्य में संलग्न होते हैं। उनको किस तरह से स्कूल में स्थिर रखा जाए यह योजना बनाना होंगी। न केवल स्कूल में आने के लिए उन्हें प्रेरित किया जाए, बल्कि उनकी कठिनाइयों को दूर किया जाए। शासन की तमाम योजनाएं हैं लेकिन उसके लिए जरूरी है कि अन्य वैकल्पिक व्यवस्था भी हो।

दो स्थान पर सितंबर में खोलेंगे विशेष स्कूल, नहीं करने देगे बालश्रम

इस संबंध में नईदुनिया ने जिला शिक्षा केंद्र के सहायक परियोजना समन्वयक भूषण देशपांडे से चर्चा की। उन्होंने कहा कि हम कुछ स्थानों पर शासन की विशेष योजना के तहत आवासीय विद्यालय खोलने जा रहे हैं। बालश्रम से लेकर शाला त्यागी और अप्रेवशी बच्चों के लिए आवासीय विद्यालय खोलने की योजना है। इसकी स्वीकृति मिल गई है। उन्होंने कहा कि सितंबर में इसकी शुरुआत कर दी जाएगी। क्योंकि इसी दौर में कई बच्चे खेती संबंधी काम में जुट जाते हैं। इनको 3 महीने में रखा जाएगा। बच्चों को विशेष रूप से सहयोग प्रदान करेंगे। जबकि शिक्षा की मुख्यधारा से दूर हो जाते हैं। उन्होंने कहा कि इसके लिए ग्राम खरबयड़ी और

चुनपिया का चयन किया गया है। जहां पर 100-100 विद्यार्थियों को रखने की व्यवस्था की जाएगी। इन बच्चों को विशेष रूप से पढ़ाई करवा कर, उन्हें शिक्षा जगत से दूर नहीं होने दिया जाएगा। उन्होंने कहा कि जो भी कठिनाइयां हैं, उनके बारे में अभी से अध्ययन किया जा रहा है। हम पहले इन 2 विद्यालयों की सफलता को देखेंगे। उसके बाद यदि आवश्यकता होती है तो कुक्षी व मनावर से लेकर अन्य क्षेत्रों में भी इनकी संख्या को बढ़ाया जा सकता है। जहां तक धरावरा का सवाल है तो उस विद्यालय में 60 से अधिक बच्चियों को रखकर हम उनको भी इस तरह से तैयार कर रहे हैं। जिससे कि वे आने वाले समय में उच्च स्तर पर पढ़ाई कर सकें। उन्होंने कहा कि वर्तमान में प्राथमिक शिक्षा बच्चों की अधूरी रह गई थी। प्राथमिक शिक्षा पूरी करने के साथ इन बच्चों को माध्यमिक शिक्षा में लाने की जिम्मेदारी है और इसके लिए हम विशेष रूप से प्रयास कर रहे हैं



Premvijay Patil

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23

पहाड़ों के बीच पहाड़ सी जिन्दगी माही की लहरों सी बहती हमारी मलाला

by Varun Bhatt

Rajasthan Patrika - 12 July 2019

बांसवाडा: टापरोँ में जीवन बसर और चिमनी की मंद लौ में पढ़ाई। स्कूल की दहलीज तक का सफर भी आसान नहीं है। ४ किलोमीटर नंगे पांव पैदल पहुंचने से पहले पहाड़ की चढ़ाई और उबड़-खाबड़ सड़क से सामना होता है।

६ से १५ वर्ष की उम्र में हांफते-भागते स्कूल पहुंच पढ़ाई में लग जाती हैं, जनजाति क्षेत्र की बालिकाएं। जी हां। मलाला डे से पूर्व आदिवासी बाहुल्य बांसवाड़ा के ग्रामीण क्षेत्र की पड़ताल की तो कुछ एंसे ही संघर्ष की तस्वीर नजर आई। जिले के प्राकृतिक सौंदर्य से समृद्ध माही बैकवाटर से लगे राजकीय उच्च माध्यमिक विद्यालय चाचाकोटा में शिक्षा हासिल कर रही बेटियों का सफर जाना तो

सुंदरता के नेपथ्य में संघर्ष के दर्शन भी हुए। पहाड़ों के बीच पहाड़ सी जिन्दगी बसर कर रही हमारी मलाला संघर्ष के बीच माही की लहरों सी आगे बढ़ रही हैं।

यहां बालिकाओं का नामांकन ज्यादा

जिले में प्रारंभिक शिक्षा में १ लाख ७० हजार १४६ विद्यार्थियों का नामांकन है। इनमें छात्राएं ८५ हजार ३७६ हैं, जबकि छात्र ८४७७० हैं। चाचाकोटा नोडल १० सरकारी स्कूल हैं। जिनमें भी बालिकाओं का नामांकन ५३३ है, जबकि बालक ५२२ अध्ययनरत हैं। एंसे ही जनजाति क्षेत्र के बीसियों विद्यालय हैं, जहां विकट हालात के बावजूद बेटियां नियमित स्कूल जा कर अध्ययनरत हैं। साथ ही आंकड़ों में भी बालक से दो कदम आगे हैं।

बालिका शिक्षा नंबर गेम

प्रारंभिक शिक्षा में अध्ययनरत- ८५३७६

माध्यमिक शिक्षा में अध्ययनरत- ९९६५७

सरकारी स्कूल में कुल अध्ययनरत- १८५०३३

सरकारी स्कूल- २५९५

बेटियां बोली- सफर से क्या घबराना

नवमीं में अध्ययनरत रसिका विशेष योग्यजन की श्रेणी में हैं। बचपन से एक हाथ नहीं है। वो तीन किमी पैदल सफर कर स्कूल पहुंचती हैं। घर में बिजली सहित अन्य सुविधाओं का भी अभाव है। मालपाड़ा सुनिता सातवीं में अध्ययनरत हैं। वो कहती हैं कि एंसे सफर से घबराना किस बात का। हम पढ़ेंगे और आगे बढ़ेंगे। शिक्षा को

लेकर ऐसी ही मंशा चाचाकोटा, हिण्डोलापाड़ा, मालपाड़ा, काकनसेजा सहित आसपास के गांवों की कई बालिकाओं ने व्यक्त की। साथ ही आवश्यक सुविधा को लेकर भी पहल करने की जरूरत बताई।

सफर आसान नहीं है

जनजाति क्षेत्र की भौगोलिक परिस्थितियां विकट है। इसके बावजूद बालिकाएं शिक्षा में आगे बढ़ रही है। नामांकन में भी बढ़ोतरी हो रही है। ये अच्छे संकेत है। मूलभूत सुविधाओं के लिए विशेष पहल होनी चाहिए।

धर्मेन्द्र शुक्ला, प्रधानाचार्य राउमावि चाचाकोटा



Varun Bhatt

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24 In love with ghungroo and tabla

by **Rudra Ranjan Sejpada**

Sambad - 31 March 2019

Mayurbhanj: How does a family react when a girl is born? And how does a couple accept the birth of five daughters in the family! This is the story of Ramchandra Puhan's family. The five daughters are his strength. Ramchandra is proud of them.

The city of Balasore is very crowded with educational institutions. However, 'Pancharatna' is a unique institution within that crowd. The institute was founded in 1996 in Satsang Colony. Twenty-two years have passed since then. The extent to which the institution is supposed to be growing has not been achieved. Yet it has found a it's own identity. Here, children study music, dance, and painting under one roof. And those who teach are five sisters. So far, more than 5,000 students have graduated from the institute.

Ramchandra Puhan and Swarnalatha Puhan are from Baghmara, Kaptipada block, Mayurbhanj district. For the past 30 years, they have been living in Satsang Colony in Balasore. As a teenager, Ramchandra struggled to survive. He has even worked for the theatre group under the age of 15. Later, however, Ramchandra got a peon's job at Balasore DIC. Ramchandra along with his wife and 5 daughters was in distress for what he was earning, he was not satisfied with the job either. The spirit of the artist within him seemed to be restless. Eventually his passion for music led him on his way. While working, he graduated with a degree in music from the Balasore Dance Music School. Since then, Ramchandra has not looked back. He taught music at multiple institutions and founded the 'Pancharatna' Institute. Inspired by father, his five daughters were also attracted to tabla, harmonium, guitar, violin and painting. Elder daughter Sasmita is an expert in music, second daughter Sanchita is a master of classical music, third daughter Sanghamitra is an Odissi dancer. Fourth daughter Sumitra and younger daughter Suchitra are into painting.

Ramchandra and Swarnalatha hoped for a son. But their hopes were dashed and five daughters were born. But times have changed, and in spite of the adverse circumstances, their daughters have become as capable and established as any sons, and all their sorrows have been removed.

All the responsibilities of the institution are now on the shoulders of the girls. Sasmita is the president of the Institute. Sanchita teaches music, Sanghamitra teaches dance, Sumitra teaches painting and Suchitra teaches painting as well as imparts primary education to the children. Although Sasmita lives in her mother-in-law's house, she deals with its management as the president of the institution. In the same way, Sanchita is teaching the children with all the support of her in-laws. Sanghamitra and Sumitra are still teaching at the paternal house after the marriage. The five sisters are of the opinion that the name of the institution will be meaningful if the children, who come to 'Pancharatna', can be treated as precious individuals and valued

The girls who have given strength to the institution by working shoulder to shoulder with their father are no less than the Divine creator. Father Ramchandra proudly says that in addition to pursuing their happiness, the girls who are teaching and building the lives of hundreds of children are no less than the great teachers of any Gurukul.

(Translated from Odia)



Rudra Rajan Sejpada

Rudra Rajan Sejpada has been working with Odia daily Sambad for more than a decade. He has done masters in Journalism and Mass Communication. He is also a filmmaker and a fiction writer.

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The price of a water lies in between abortion and loss of education

by **Nandhini V**

The Hindu Tamil (Digital) - 15 July 2019

Chennai: The water scarcity, which is playing havoc in the life of a woman, is impacting girls' education, efficiency, and economic security. The primary concern is the gender inequality which manifests itself due to the water scarcity, which is discussed across Tamilnadu with a lot of angst. Documenting the stories of women who are waiting for water with a dry throat is a tough task.

Jenitha is a 12th standard student from Elephant Gate in Chennai, and she is feeling the effects of the gruesome water scarcity which grips the city in the summer. She has to pay the price of a day's education to satisfy one day's water needs of her family. She came to fetch water in the water tank near her home in the evening. She has not even changed her school uniform. The banter which happens between women while carrying water was making it tough for Jenitha to interact with them.

"Mom comes home at night since she goes to work in the morning. I have to spend two hours in the evening here to fetch water. Water will come around 3.00 am every day, and it will stop before dawn. My mom, myself and my sister have to collect water at that time," says Jenitha waiting for her turn with two pots in hand.

Jenitha studies in a government school situated in Nungambakkam and is awaiting her public exams. The commute takes 2-3 hours of her day, and the issue of water scarcity takes the remaining time.

"My studies are getting affected due to fetching water. I am not able to study properly. My father will start a fight with us if he is getting late for office due to lack of water. If we don't have water to bathe, me and my college-going sisters have to take leave on that day", she says.

Jenitha faces another problem while fetching water. The issue is that older people

are not letting the younger ones carry water.

Water resources like the Chembarampakkam, Puzhal, Cholavaram and Poondy lakes have dried up, and this has led to numerous women and girls losing out on their health and time in search of water.

If the girls are losing out on their education due to the water scarcity, some are losing out on their health.

Anandhi, who was fetching water from the same tank, says that she has not gone to work for the past two months because she had to fetch water.

"I have to collect ten pots of water for daily usage, and because of this, I cannot go to work at all. I was working in a bookshop in Mannadi. Now fetching water eats all my time in a day. So I quit the job, and I have not gone to work in two months."

Anandhi's husband won't fetch water since it takes a lot of time. She says that he won't come near this place since it will take a lot of time and asks, "Don't I have to go to work?" in a laughing tone.

When questioned if she faces any issues physically in terms of her health due to fetching water, she replies in an angry tone.

"How will there be no pains and aches? It will be there. My house is on the third floor. I will get pains in my hip and hands. I will purchase the medicine from the medical shop and apply it. During periods, I have to endure that pain as well and fetch water," says Anandhi.

I stopped and spoke to Meena who went to fetch water in a rickshaw with more than ten pots near the basin bridge. For Meena, who is already undergoing a lot of physical and mental turmoil in her day job as a scavenger, this water problem has increased her concerns.

"I have to walk 2 to 3 km to fetch water. I have to pay Rs. 20 for the rickshaw. My salary itself is about Rs. 200," says Meena. Meena's husband is working as a coolie. Meena starts her working day at 6 in the morning and once she comes home

around 3 o'clock, she has to start the routine of fetching water. When questioned how tough it is for her to carry water along with the scavenging job, she replies, "What to do? I am working as a road cleaner. There also we are gathering waste and pushing the carts. I have been struggling from an early age."

Previously Meena used to fetch water on her own, but now she is making use of the rental rickshaw to bring water. Meena says, "If there is not enough water in the house, nobody can wash their clothes or take a bath." Apart from her home, she also fetches water for her sister in law's house. Meena's 9-year-old niece and four-year-old daughter are helping her.

In Rk Nagar, Chennai, a woman who has had a miscarriage twice is taking care of the water needs of her family despite doctor's advice against it. She has to fetch water to her house, which is on the third floor.

"I have suffered a miscarriage twice, and my body is not in a position to fetch water now. Despite that, it is my responsibility to fetch water. Even if there is no water to drink while having food, my husband will scold me. During my periods, I have stayed in my sister's place due to lack of water." She didn't want her identity to be disclosed, and she did not want to get into an argument instead of fetching water.

Women across Tamilnadu are risking their health and hygiene due to water scarcity.

We also spoke to women in a few other districts which are suffering from water scarcity apart from Chennai.

In Pokkeranaenthal village in the Ramanathapuram district, you have to walk for about 2 to 3 km to fetch water due to the drought, according to Govindammal. "We don't have the MNREGA scheme now, and we don't have cash on hand as well. Still, we are fetching water using the cart," she says.

There is a specific cart which is in use in Tuticorin and Ramanathapuram districts which holds about 5 to 6 cans. This cart costs about Rs. 3,500 to 4,000

"I am not able to go for my day job since all the time is wasted on thinking about water and taking steps to ensure that there is sufficient water for usage," says Govindammal.

Thilakam resides in Vellore district avvai Nagar. She fetches water from the water tank which is 3 km away from her home. "If I stand in the queue at eight o'clock in the morning water can be fetched only at five o'clock in the evening and sometimes it may extend up to 8 PM. On some days, one may not get water at all. After placing the cans in the morning, we come back to fetch water around 3 or 4 pm. We complete our chores between that time. I have not carried water yet for today," says Thilakam and it was around 5 PM.

Thilakam says women are travelling as far as 5 km to fetch water.

Mercy resides in the town of Kalaiarkovil in Sivaganga district. She says that her family has shifted from her own house to a rented home due to the water problem. She says that the water has to be fetched and filled from 6 to 7 am. If there is no water for household chores, it will be a serious issue for the women. "No work can be completed and the men won't be fetching water. If we ask for help, they will ask if we can perform the job that they are doing." It clearly explains the gender bias in the issue.

In Sitthanur village of Sivaganga district, the women have to dig a pit to collect water. Since the water will seep in the pit only during the night time, the women are taking a risky walk in that area after 10 PM. They have to go to the pit and fetch water by getting into it with the help of the torches and mobile lights.

A question that arises is if water scarcity is a women's issue alone and is there a gender bias at play in this issue? But it is women who are taking care of the water-related needs across the world, and they face many problems trying to fulfil the water-related needs.

The cleanliness, hygiene and the water distribution within the family is taken for granted to be the responsibility of the women. Apart from the difficulty and the wastage of time, women are subjected to sexual harassment as well when they go to fetch water.

The World Health Organization categorizes the places which require more than 30 minutes to fulfil the water-related needs as "water scarcity zones". According to a UNICEF 2017 research report, the water needs of a family are fulfilled by women in 8 out of 10 households.

Women across the world who are going to far off places to fetch water spend about 210 million hours a day. The UNICEF report explains the risks in women spending long hours in fetching water.

Other household chores related to water such as dishwashing, cooking and washing clothes are making water scarcity an acute issue for women. Women are affected in terms of health during the time of their periods and childbirth due to water scarcity according to the United Nation's "Water" association.

In India, The gender bias which emanates due to the issue of water scarcity, will also be discussed along with other discrimination in terms of caste, sex and religion. But the government has not addressed adequately this issue which is part of our society and environment

The national water policy which was formulated in India in 1987, 2002, and 2012 was not designed with gender equality in mind. Governments which are taking a lot of interest to enhance the water resources have not given due recognition to women who are travelling long distances to fetch water, according to a report in "Economic and Political Weekly".

Even though the gender bias which manifests itself due to the water scarcity is an issue for women in general; women who don't have land and property rights, and women who are below the poverty line are the worst affected in this. This vulnerability demarcates these women from women who are armed with social and economic capital. The gender bias also brings down their progress and social contribution.

The water crisis has forced Tamilnadu to understand the importance of formulating a road map for water management, and at this time it is also vital to ensure that the plans are in place to address gender bias.

(Translated from Tamil)



Nandhini Vellaisamy

Nandhini Vellaisamy is a sub-editor with Hindu Tamil Thisai in its digital team. She says she has committed her Journalism career for the downtrodden people.

III

Right to Protection



Right to Protection

India ranks 133 out of 167 countries in the 'Women, Peace and Security Index 2019'. This ranking was questioned and debated extensively in media and also on social media. Yet, there is a general consensus, grudging at times, that women are facing increasing violence particularly now than ever before because of the increased vulnerability of women in the modern world, be it poverty, reassertion of traditional forces, the prevailing mindsets which justify certain types of violence etc. In this section we have twelve articles which address various issues related to violence, social response to the violence and the justice system which fails to protect the rights of women and girls in spite of the number of progressive legislations that we have.

While gruesome gang rapes and murders, particularly if they involve urban middle class, get reported extensively in media, the daily harassment that women face, be it stalking, groping or flashing is never reported. They are brushed aside as not serious enough making women hesitate to complain about them to the police. Thus, letting the culprits roam free in the streets and commit crimes brazenly with the confidence that they would never be caught and punished.

It is in this context that the campaign undertaken by Ahmedabad Mirror assumes significance.

Through a series of reports titled **Biker Molests 17-Year-Old Girl in Thaltej**, the campaign exposes the criminal acts of a biker who groped unwary teenage girls. It emphasises on the stigma associated with such incidents. Through the regular posts by its reporters, Ahmedabad Mirror was able to encourage other teenagers who were similarly molested by the man to come forward and lodge a complaint. It had also followed up with the authorities concerned to bring to book the perpetrator of the crime, and bring justice to the girls.

Yet another common form of harassment seldom talked about is the act of flashing. Shruti Sharada in her feature **The Sexual Violence of Flashing, and the Problem with Saying, “It Could Have Been Worse!”** brings forth the issue of sexual violence of flashing in public places, and its impact on the victims. It is a problem less talked about, yet it leaves a deep psychological impact on girls and women who also delay seeking help. The feature attempts to find out the rationale for such behaviour by men, which include claiming public spaces as male spaces, and considering it a sacrilege for women to exist in these spaces.

Increasingly we find more and more young men committing heinous sexual and other crimes. Poverty, lack of educational opportunities, influence of media and addictions are identified as some of the reasons behind such acts. But are we equipped to reform the juveniles in conflict with law?

Chatura Rao in her feature, **School of Hard Knocks**, portrays the realities and struggles of juvenile boys living in an observation home (Umerkhandi Observation Home in Mumbai) either due to being in conflict with law, or having been abandoned, rescued or orphaned. Rehabilitation and reintegration into the society for boys staying in these homes becomes difficult due to the lack of social support and stigma associated with being a juvenile delinquent. Chatura emphasises on the importance of behaviour change and understanding the circumstances of the boys as well as sensitisation of those in the judicial system.

On the other hand, Chitralkha's editorial **Unscripted Monologue** focuses on the pervasive criminal act of sexual harassment of girls. She explores perspectives from social and feminist angles, and also examines steps taken by regulatory bodies and policy makers. The editorial has deftly woven facts into its analytical insight.

The tedious processes of investigative and judicial systems as well as the power dynamics in cases involving political, religious and caste-based crimes often delay justice inordinately, forcing the girls/ women and their families to keep fighting forever for justice.

Urmi Bhattacheryya's series of articles **Crushed by the Wait, Chhutki's Parents Want Her Rapist Punished** bring to the readers the heart-breaking case of the 8-month-old baby who was raped in Delhi. These nine stories take us through the journey of the child and her parents. Represented sensitively and yet in a hard hitting manner, the stories are a cry of the reporter to help the people in her story.

Neha Sharma's detailed and dedicated reportage titled, **J&K Sex Scandal - Ostracized Kashmiri Survivor Gets Justice After 15 Years** traces a young Kashmiri woman's 15-year journey to convict her rapists in the high-profile 2006 Kashmir Sex Scandal case. Neha presents an anatomy and landscape of what a rape survivor may go through to get justice. The report is factual, presented with clarity and responsibility and from various legal perspectives.

In her story **They Said No One Should Cry, But Then Broke Down — How Unnao Village Mourned 'Rape' Victim** Fatima Khan presents a detailed report of how the Unnao rape victim who fought to get an FIR registered against her alleged rapists was burnt alive and how her body was brought home amid massive politicisation. This disturbing story describes how such crimes are often hijacked into political turbulences, rendering the victims and their families' incapable of successfully fighting for justice or mourning in peace.

We have three stories on trafficking. While Farhana's presents a searing and heart-breaking report of a young woman who escaped from the clutches of her oppressor Sumit Bhattacharjee and Guru Swarup Misra report on the largescale trafficking in the tribal districts of Visakhapatnam and Jharkhand.

Farhan in her report **Escaping Sex-Slavery In Arunachal Pradesh, Woman Awaits Justice!** reveals the shocking condition of the young woman who was trafficked and was impregnated by the age of 13, the distressing details of her life, and the big picture of sex-slavery of young girls and boys especially from marginalized communities from Assam in the hinterlands and tea plantations of Arunachal Pradesh.

Sumit Bhattacharjee in his detailed reportage **Araku Valley's Deep Secret** delves deep into the human tragedy of sex trafficking of tribal girls and women in Visakhapatnam district. Through personal narratives, he exposes the modus operandi of the criminal enterprise, and factors such as financial distress and the promise of employment leading to increasing vulnerability of women entering into sex trade. The report highlights the steps being taken by government authorities and NGOs to address the issue, and the need to look at it holistically.

Guru Swarup in his investigative report **ऐसे खतम हो सकता है मानव तस्करी के काले धंदे का खेल** focuses on the serious issue of human trafficking in Jharkhand. He elaborates on the challenges and exploitation at source and destination points, lack of data regarding human trafficking and also highlights some key recommendations.

Militancy, insurgency, conflict and natural calamities increase the vulnerability of children and women to violence. Ritika Roy through the story of Hiba Nisar, an 18-month old daughter of an apple orchard farmer, presents an unbiased and factual reportage on the real life of Kashmiri children surrounded by conflict and uncertainty. Ritika Roy immerses the readers in the story of Hiba and Shahadat, her brother through her story '**Children of war**' की याद दिलाती हिबा निसार thus informing and simultaneously creating awareness regarding the on-ground realities that could motivate the stakeholders into action.

We end this section with an impact story by Neetu Singh, **खबर का असर - गँगरेप का आरोपी नईम गिरफ्तार, गाँव कनेक्शन ने उठाया था मामला**. Neetu Singh's investigative report brings to the public the relentless pursuit for justice by the Hardoi gangrape survivor and her family and highlights the excesses of the powerful misusing their position. This story of pain and anguish written sensitively, invokes empathy. It has led to pressure from various sections of society forcing the authorities and police to take action!

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Biker molests 17 year old girl in Thaltej

by **Ahmedabad Mirror Team**

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Ahmedabad: In a horrifying incident, a minor girl on a morning walk in Thaltej was molested by a 38-year-old biker, raising questions about the safety of women in the city. Sola police arrested the accused on Tuesday night after the 17-year-old victim's uncle had filed a complaint.

Based on CCTV footage that captured the pervert's shameful act and bike's number plate, police zeroed in on the accused and arrested Parshwa Preyashbhai Shah from 32, Teenmurti Bungalows, Khakharia Cooperative Society, next to Jay Ambe Nagar Society in Thaltej. When police reached his door, Shah was aggressive initially and denied he was at the crime spot.

After he was confronted with the CCTV footage, he had no answers. The incident happened near Someshwar Park Society in Thaltej when the 17-year-old girl was on morning walk at 8am on Tuesday when Shah approached her from behind, slowed his bike dangerously close to her and grabbed her right breast, before fleeing on his bike. After the disgusting act, the depraved biker turned around to see the reaction on the teenage girl's face before fleeing towards Gulab Tower Road.

The CCTV clearly captured the blue motorcycle number GJ-01-MW-2305. A complaint was filed by the girl's uncle, a businessman living on Gulab Tower Road in Thaltej. Shaken by the incident, the girl went home crying and related the incident to her uncle. The incident has left the girl in shock. According to the police, the debauch went about his routine, going to his garage on Ashram Road, then returned home for lunch and rounded off his day until the police caught up with him.

Her uncle decided that such acts cannot go unpunished and filed a complaint

around 8 pm on Tuesday. Armed with CCTV footage, the police reached the accused's house around 9 pm and arrested him. Married for the past 8 years, Shah lives with his father, mother, wife, his 7-year-old son and 5-year-old daughter.

DCP Zone-I P L Mal said, “The uncle and the girl were courageous enough to register a complaint. Such perverted acts must not go unreported as this can make them more audacious. As soon as the incident was reported to me, I asked the PI to get the CCTV footage and arrested the accused.”

Senior PI of Sola police station Parag Chauhan said, “When we reached his home, Parshwa Shah questioned our presence at his door and denied he was at the spot. He also said he was being framed. It was only after I showed him the CCTV footage in my chamber that he admitted to the act.”

The police believe that this may not be a one-off act as he had brazenly checked the reaction of the stunned teenager and had then sped off.

“It appeared like a well-rehearsed act as if the accused had done it before and was never caught. The accused sister had come to the police station. She was in total disbelief and never thought her brother could indulge in such an act,” PI Dilipdan Gadhvi of Sola High Court police station told Mirror.

Dial 100 or 181 when in trouble

Police officials say any act of harassment or molestation must be reported as not doing so only emboldens perpetrators. Sola High Court police station PI Parag Chauhan said, “Women must dial 100 – the police control room – or 181, which is the Abhayam helpline set up especially for women, when they are in trouble or even if they feel unsafe. A police vehicle will reach their spot immediately.”

DCP Pravin Mal said, “It is very important that women file complaints in cases of molestation. I applaud both, the girl, as well as her uncle who filed the complaint. We need people to come forward to bring justice to such perverts.”

(The Ahmedabad Mirror had done like this a series of stories on molesters)

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The sexual violence of flashing, and the problem with saying, "It could have been worse!"

by **Shruti Sharada**

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A molested person is often told that they are “lucky” it wasn't worse. All of this – the “not-so-bad” and the “horrifying” are all still sexual violence.

A few weeks ago, news of a man flashing an unsuspecting woman in Mumbai, India came up.

The woman had got out of an auto-rickshaw to withdraw cash from an ATM. Seeing that she was facing some trouble accomplishing the withdrawal, the man had approached her to help. In this brief period, he decided to help himself by touching the woman and exposing himself to her. The latter, shocked as she was, decided to film the encounter and later uploaded it on social media, after reporting the incident to a nearby police vehicle. The man was reported to have been taken into custody.

Reactions of women online were effusive, naturally. The upsurge of shock, embarrassment, confusion, and fear of being flashed at is difficult to express.

A personal experience

I remember walking a short distance to a bus early one morning, ready to be picked up for a trip. It was about 5 am and on the way, I spotted a man urinating on a wall near an exit. I knew in an instant that I had to pick up my pace. He spotted me, waited for me to get closer, and started making loud moaning sounds. By this time, I was jogging and thanking the stars that I had packed a light bag. Just as I was turning into the exit, he turned his body towards me, hinting at me to look at him. I continued jogging and kept looking just straight ahead till I reached where I had to.

I was terrified that he would follow me and actually touch me. But, he didn't. 'Lucky' me.

This incident happened over 5 years ago but I can still distinctly remember the mounting feeling of dread that had overcome my body the moment I had spotted that man near the wall. As news of the ATM flasher spread, a few comments tried to downplay the seriousness of the issue by invoking the whataboutery of 'real' sexual assault and rape. All these people, let's just cut to the chase, are wrong!

No sexual violation is lesser or greater

Sexual assault and trauma are not competitive games that have medals attached to them depending on performance. The argument that one form of sexual trauma is greater than the other is dangerous because it can be used to nullify literally any lived experience of a survivor, simply by comparison to an apparently 'greater' violation.

Making such sweeping statements is not just condescending towards the persons who have had to endure being flashed at but also gaslights them into thinking that they are overreacting to a small violation. It ignores the deeper ramifications of acts like flashing, groping and pinching by random people on the streets and how it can scar and scare the victims.

The recent ATM flasher incident in Mumbai

In the instance of the ATM case, so many factors deserve to be observed more sharply. It involved a lone woman, who was traveling at night and was using a familiar public space, and who, when stuck, had accepted the help of a person who had offered to assist her.

When you think about it, it is one of those mundane encounters that happen to so many of us all the time, without us having to think back to it.

The flasher's actions, however, directly made these mundane actions traumatic. A woman who chooses to travel alone and walk about confidently is clearly

considered fair game – many will question her intelligence in choosing to interact with a strange man at night. Some will wonder why she was out at night at all. All these arguments will try to frame her judgment as being the worst aspect of the case.

Why do men do this?

But male flashers, in a brief moment, are attempting to reassert their control over women. A flasher's actions signal to a woman that he can violate her personal space very easily if he chooses to do so. He is reminding her that because she chose to step out at night, he is not responsible for what assaults may come her way. It is a way of restating that public spaces are still male spaces that women can access safely only if men allow them to. There is no guarantee of safety.

News of the ATM flasher may have already been forgotten, but let's always remember this – all forms of sexual assault are acts of control, not lust. The victims' socially-conditioned shame, surprise, and shock are a flasher's prizes for the night. That brief moment of exposure gets his adrenaline pumping and reminds him that he, indeed, is powerful.

For women, the possibility of coming across a flasher, a squeezer, a rapist, a voyeur, a pincher, a public masturbator, a kidnapper, a drunken molester, is real enough to push us indoors. The depth of trauma that every such action inspires is subjective and cannot be decided by people who aren't the victim.

Stop expecting women to be 'thankful for small privileges'

We need to stop expecting women to be thankful for being 'allowed' to walk on a road safely. Stop expecting women to be #blessed because we got groped and not raped. Rape culture not only condones rape jokes and protects sexual predators, it also demands that women remain eternally thankful that they have been 'given' the privilege to exist, and that we shouldn't complain.

In the time since the ATM case, a yoga instructor at the posh Amanora Township in Pune was flashed at early one morning when walking her dog. In another case,

a 24-year-old man from Kerala was reported to have unzipped his pants while on a flight from Jeddah to New Delhi. He had been stopped by a female cabin staff member from lighting a cigarette. And these represent the minuscule number of flashing-related sexual harassment cases that get reported. Imagine the whole scale of the problem!

So, let's never forget that sexual harassment comes in many forms and all of those forms are criminal. No debate about its severity is necessary.



Shruti Sharada

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by **Chatura Rao**

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On 21 February, seventeen-year-old Ayushmaan woke up at 4 am. It was the first day of the twelfth standard Maharashtra board higher secondary exams. The portal to an undergraduate degree, board exams are a milestone in the life of students in India. Making his way between boys lying prone on mattresses about him, Ayushmaan retrieved a textbook from a shelf and came back to sit down on his mattress. He tried to ignore the pangs of anxiety he could feel in his stomach. In the sterile glare of the tubelight, Ayushmaan studied from his English textbook for two hours until daylight.

After bathing, combing his hair and dressing in jeans and a t-shirt, he went down with his friend to the front gate with his textbooks and they both went over the syllabus. The yellowing buildings shaded by huge, dense trees were just beginning to show the first signs of morning activity. At 9.30 am, Ayushmaan's stomach began to turn again in a combination of hunger and anxiety. "When will they come?" he asked his friend impatiently.

Finally, two well-built men bowed through the low, barred gate. Ayushmaan stood up with relief. Picking up a plastic bag that contained two pens, pencils and an eraser, he and his friend got into the navy blue vehicle to be driven to the exam centre. There was another reason for his eager anticipation to leave. It was the first time in four months he was stepping out of the premises. This was not a dormitory or hostel but a juvenile detention centre called the Umerkhadi Observation Home—one of two such homes in south-central Mumbai. The men who arrived to pick up the boys were not relatives but local armed police officers, who had specifically been assigned this duty after prolonged administrative back and forths.

Ayushmaan, along with his younger brother, now in the 12th standard, are first

generation learners in their family. Their father is a sweeper and their mother a domestic worker. Ayushmaan had full attendance at his junior college right through the eleventh standard. Two years ago, his education, and life as he knew it, came to a halt when he was charged with the rape of a three-year-old child. According to the chargesheet filed at Worli Police Station, Ayushmaan's neighbour found him lying naked next to her three-year-old daughter at the anganwadi—a child care centre—where she had left her. The document states that her daughter's undergarments had been taken off and that there was semen on her private parts.

Ayushmaan's mother tried to convince me of her son's innocence. “The anganwadi teacher had asked him to babysit the child,” she said. “It was raining heavily outside and water was seeping into the room. The child asked to go to the toilet. On her way out she slipped and fell...” She alleged that Ayushmaan was only trying to dry her when the child's mother entered the room. (Ayushmaan is not the boy's real name but a name that has meaning for his parents because an astrologer recommended it.)

For Ayushmaan to be able to give his exams with a state board, while incarcerated in a juvenile home, was unusual. Detention centres are usually only able to provide adolescents with vocational training while they are there. A flagship initiative by a non-profit and the detention centre staff was taken forward by a small group of committed volunteer teachers to make this possible. The mostly women volunteers in the programme have been working with a few boys in the home since April 2017.

The Umerkhadi Observation Home, better known as the Dongri remand home, once served as the Dongri jail, where figures such as Savarkar and Bal Gangadhar Tilak were imprisoned during British rule. The home houses two categories of children left in the charge of the state—minors who are abandoned, rescued or orphaned; and children in conflict with law. The former group, including minor girls who are victims of rape and domestic violence, live in a building on the western side of the campus until they are claimed by their families, adopted or transferred to another institution. The latter, to which Ayushmaan belongs, are

kept within a locked and guarded building located on the other side of the campus. They are detained here for as long as it takes for the Juvenile Justice Board to assess their cases. The children's aid society along with the children's court—part of the JJB—share space with the two homes where the children live.

A typical day in the remand home for the adolescents is made up of counselling sessions and vocational training in tailoring and carpentry. A head count of the children is undertaken five times a day. Family members are allowed to meet them once a week for two hours. Guards escort them to attend court hearings in the adjacent building where sessions of the city and suburban courts of the JJB are held. The legal intent of the home is to aid in the rehabilitation and reintegration of children into society. The conditions in which they live however, are less than ideal.

The government allots a sum of Rs 635 per child every month for all expenses including food, clothes and medicines. The nearly 70 boys wear loose half-sleeved t-shirts and shorts as uniforms, and do not appear to be very well fed. They live with little privacy, sleep in overcrowded dormitories and share bathrooms. The period of stay at the detention home is a pause in time, where any aspirations or hope the families may have had for their children are put on hold, while the principles of reformatory justice take their course.

In 1986, the Juvenile Justice Act was established as a measure to develop a uniform framework for juvenile justice in the country and to build infrastructure for children who came under its purview. Prior to this, each state could use its own discretion to dispense with cases relating to minors. One of the core principles of the act was to establish norms and standards regarding prosecution and investigations into juvenile crime. In 2000, the act was replaced by the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection) Act, which was revised in accordance with UN conventions for child rights. A later amendment upheld the “principle of fresh start,” a legal ruling through which past records of crime of juveniles would be erased from the system, except in special circumstances. This was another step in enhancing rehabilitative and reformatory frameworks for juvenile offenders, in contrast to the punitive principles of criminal justice used for adults.

Since 2012 however, following the brutal gangrape and death of a 23-year-old physiotherapy intern that produced unprecedented protests on the street and a change in India's rape laws, the discourse around sexual violence and assault has been particularly charged. The sixth convict in the case was a few months from turning eighteen, because of which he was sent to a juvenile home instead of being tried as an adult with the rest of the accused. Amidst growing demands for more stringent laws against perpetrators of sexual violence, the BJP leader Subramaniam Swamy moved the apex court to issue a fresh interpretation of the term juvenile, arguing that the “mental and intellectual maturity” of minors should be a criterion rather than age.

India is at a critical juncture with regard to gender violence. Rape is highly underreported in the country because of the stigma associated with it, a culture of victim blaming and the lack of proper victim and witness protection laws. Conviction rates are low for those crimes that are actually reported. A report by the Thomson Reuters Foundation in June this year found that India is perceived to be the most unsafe country for women. Although the report created outrage among various sections of society including the national commission for women, most of the indignation had to do with the fact that India was deemed the worst globally. There was no disagreement about the fact that there was indeed a high prevalence of violence against women in the country, and that on most indicators pointing to how patriarchal a society is, India fared poorly. The more mainstream attention in the media issues of sexual violence receives now is welcome, but public discourse often tilts towards demands for ramping up security for women and punishing and making an example of perpetrators, rather than probing deeper reasons.

Recently, following another horrific case of abduction, gangrape and murder of an eight-year-old girl, the Indian parliament passed an ordinance which introduced the death penalty for child rapists. Organisations such as Human Rights Watch have denounced such a measure, arguing that capital punishment is “inherently cruel and irreversible, with little evidence that it serves as a deterrent.” Besides, according to recent government data, 95 percent of the rape victims are

known to the perpetrators. Meenakshi Ganguly, South Asia director of HRW said, “If the government is serious about dealing with violence against women and children, it will have to do the hard work of reforming the criminal justice system.”

Many women's rights groups have cautioned against treating sexual violence and brutality as an aberration, and to see it in a continuum with larger societal patterns and ways of thinking. In 2013, Madhumita Pandey, a doctoral student in criminology, interviewed up to 100 rape convicts in Tihar jail in Delhi to understand their attitudes towards the victims. In an interview to *Washington Post*, Pandey said she had gone into the project expecting to find monsters, but she was struck by “how these are not extraordinary men, they are really ordinary.”

India's approach to juvenile justice is susceptible to the pulls and pressures of the public mood regarding gender violence. In January 2016, a heinous offence clause was added to the Juvenile Justice Act. According to this new revision, the board must assess the mental and physical capacity of the minor, as well as his ability to grasp the consequences of the alleged offence, and accordingly decide whether he should be transferred to an adult court. Ayushmaan has been charged under the heinous offences clause.

A sturdy detractor of the revisions to the Act, eminent child rights lawyer, Mahrukh Adenwalla, spoke to me about the characteristics she thought were inherent to teenagers. “They are impulsive, reckless, and often do not see the consequences of their actions,” she said. Adenwalla believes that treating boys like Ayushmaan like adult criminals would be a huge mistake. “Should a person suffer the consequences of a rash action performed in this transitory phase for the rest of his life?” Child-rights activists have argued that although adolescents are impressionable and have the potential to inflict grievous harm, they also demonstrate a greater capacity towards reform. Juvenile homes are meant to create a safe space to aid that process of course correction. The aim of such a project is to keep them out of adult jails where the cycle of crime and punishment are harder to escape. Reformatory justice requires communities and non-state actors to contribute towards the work of care and rehabilitation. Often social

workers, NGOs and volunteers pick up part of the load of catering to the overall growth of minors. But navigating the justice system, even with separate laws for juvenile offenders, is not easy.

According to 2016 data released by the National Crime Records Bureau, among 19 Indian cities surveyed, Mumbai has the second highest number of crimes committed by juveniles. The crimes ranged from petty offences such as pickpocketing and theft to heinous acts such as sexual assault and murder. The majority of those caught only had a primary education or had not yet passed their higher secondary exams. With more than half of these adolescents falling within the age group of 16 to 18 years, the disruption with their education is significant.

The flagship education programme started in Umerkhadi towards returning the children to a formal education system is fraught with challenges. Most schools and state boards are not prepared to have juvenile convicts on their roster, the children stay on the radar of the police regardless of their complicity in new offences, and the lack of support structures outside the home leave the children vulnerable to recidivism. Further, it is hard for juveniles to wipe the slate clean and begin anew, as the brutalising conditions of poverty often return to remain the same. Yet, the mutually transformative relationship of the adolescents with the women teacher-volunteers I witnessed at the Umerkhadi home gave me the sense that all was not lost.

In June 2017, I came across an email asking for volunteers to teach boys preparing to write their tenth and twelfth standard board exams at the Umerkhadi Observation Home. I wanted to understand what drove people to want to work with juvenile offenders, particularly those who had committed heinous acts. I was also curious about how these young boys would respond to the efforts of these teachers. A few months later, I met Sachi Maniar, the head of Project Ashiyana—one of three non-profits housed within the remand home that work with the children there—who agreed to let me meet the boys she and other volunteers were teaching. She led me through a maze of old markets and crumbling three-storey buildings, till we arrived at the home. It seemed to me a grim place for children to live—the ceilings are low and the windows and

corridors barred. The old trees, although providing much needed shade to the tired parents waiting to meet their children, do not allow in a lot of light.

Maniar wrote a permission request for the “education boys” to be allowed out of the locked and guarded facilities. “There are less restrictions placed on these particular children because the remand home authorities support the education initiative,” Maniar told me. “The boys sometimes study with the volunteer teachers up till 9.30 pm.”

The six education boys, sitting crossed legged in their dark blue uniforms in a semi-circle before me, got tired of the somewhat stilted interaction that followed quite quickly. When I asked them why they decided to attempt these exams, among the reasons many of them listed were the desire for a driver's license, to learn English and to run a shop. Only two of them suggested they had a long term vision—Ayushman said he wanted to be a lawyer and another boy said he wanted to go on to do a BA. Although they appeared to be quite reticent with me, I was struck by the ease they seemed to have with Maniar.

Maniar has a determined manner about her and often refers to the need for cultivating discipline among the boys. “I wanted to join the army and serve my country,” she told me. “It is not linked, but I have a feeling that these boys, if we do not work with them now, will become an easy catch for naxal, criminal and terror groups.” This stern prognosis is offset by her tender preoccupation about the life of the boys once they have left the remand home. Maniar is sensitive to the difficult backgrounds they come from and the recidivism that it may enable. “Instead of giving up on them,” she says, “you have to keep showing up, even if they go back to drugs and crime.”

Her first few interactions with the children in conflict with law occurred in 2014, when her work was focused exclusively with the youth in need of care and protection in Umerkhadi. The former would call out from their windows when she was on her way there—“Didi, why aren't you coming in here? Why won't you work with us?” After talking to a boy who said that he wanted to murder someone to become famous and to get published in the newspapers, she felt

doubtful about the process of rehabilitation that was actually taking place. “They come here as undertrials and serve a sentence, but do not leave reformed,” she remembers thinking. “So what's the point of the time they spend here?”

This was when she came across a book about peace circles, a native American practice that emphasises healing through group or community sharing—a practice that was adapted to criminal justice systems in the US and Canada in the 1980s. Along with a few volunteers, Maniar decided to apply this method with the boys to help create a safe space for them. “There were rules to the engagement,” she said. “It took authority away. Instead each got the power to share and express themselves.” In the process, some of the adolescents spoke of their sufferings, and opened up about their fear of abandonment and the violence of their upbringing.

Maheshwari Kamal, another volunteer teacher at the home, is conflicted about allocating time and resources to boys accused of sexual assault. She argued that, in the larger scale of things, there appeared to be a greater focus on mercy for these juvenile offenders than on the rehabilitation of victims. “The girls these boys have hurt should have the first right to rehab!” she told me emphatically. But she responded to the call for volunteer teachers to teach juveniles in conflict with law in September 2017 anyway. When I first met her, she was sitting comfortably on a big wooden seat in a dusty corridor that flanks the probation office, bantering with the boys to whom she was teaching an economics lesson. Family members who had come to visit their wards stood by watching them. As an exercise she devised to teach them about budgets, she allocated one 19-year-old student a certain amount of money within which he was to make a plan to run a grocery shop. He listed the overheads and expenses out loud.

“What about salaries for staff to run your shop? Or will the customers serve themselves?” she playfully asked in Marathi.

“I will make my grandfather and grandmother serve customers,” he replied promptly. “They do nothing all day.”

“Planning to put old people to work, are you?” Kamal said, as everybody laughed.

The congeniality and mutual fondness between teacher and students is discernible. Despite her misgivings, Kamal has never asked Ayushmaan, or any of the other boys, about the alleged crimes they are incarcerated for. The general impression of Ayushmaan among the volunteer teachers, for instance, is of a hardworking and eager student. Their main concern regarding him has been centred around helping him plug back into a formal education system. To do this they have had to jump various bureaucratic hurdles and overcome institutional biases. “While he was preparing for his twelfth standard exams, I paid visits to Ayushmaan's college,” Sachi recalls. “The authorities promised to allow him to give the exams in February 2017 as scheduled. Then at the last minute they said he does not have 75 percent attendance, which he obviously could not have because he was locked up in the observation home!” Maniar and the probation staff at Umerkhadi, then sent a letter from the JJB to the Maharashtra State Education Board explaining his circumstances and requesting permission for him to write the exams, but to no avail. “A juvenile undertrial is supposed to be innocent until proven guilty,” she said, “but the stigma of being in a detention centre casts a deep shadow.” Ayushmaan lost a year of study but was finally registered privately for the Maharashtra state board exams that would be held in February 2018.

The road to an education, for Ayushmaan and the other boys, was hard to pave in more ways than one. “We went to every possible coaching institute in Mumbai, ready to pay for teachers to come and teach our boys, but none were willing even to have the boys' names on their rosters, leave alone sending a teacher into Umerkhadi,” Sachi says grimly.

Nishigandha Sequeira was an exception. A teacher at a school in Malad, she has coached special children through the tenth standard board exams in the National Institute of Open Schooling system—a distance learning course that comes under the aegis of the human resources ministry—for seven years. When Sachi confided in her the trouble that the Ashiyana team was having getting professional teachers to come to Umerkhadi to coach the boys, Sequeira volunteered. In 2017, five boys at the home wanted to attempt the tenth standard exams through the NIOS—a

more flexible board in comparison the Central Board of Secondary Education which requires regular school attendance. It is geared for learners who have not or cannot attend school regularly. The board usually holds exams twice a year, in May and October.

Between March and June 2017, as summer reached its peak, the 67-year-old school teacher would board local trains to commute thirty kilometers to reach the home four days in the week. Huffing and panting from the strain, she would enter the guarded iron gate to make her way to the building in which her NIOS students would be waiting. They would take her bag and help her up three flights of stairs to a room, where there were a few half-empty book cupboards lining the walls. This served as their classroom.

“I went to the remand home without any expectations,” Sequeira told me. “I only wanted to help them get ahead in life.” I asked her how she felt about teaching boys she knew may be juvenile offenders, some of whom may have committed heinous acts. “I feel they need a chance,” she says. “The way society treats them has to change. When we look at them, we must not say this is typical of boys of this or that background.” She argued that the context of the boy's lives had to be accounted for in order to understand the nature of their crimes.

According to Sequeira, the boys showed a lot of enthusiasm for learning right away. They would sometimes ask her to continue her classes way beyond their lunch time. Pretty soon, she developed an almost maternal relationship with them. “I have two sons myself,” she said. “I understand boys very well.” More than straightforward pedagogy, she described her role as a nurturer. “You have to be a mother, soft. But also tough sometimes so that they know what is required of them.”

Sequeira had her apprehensions however. She was particularly concerned about taking them through subjects dealing with sexuality. To explain a chapter in Home Science, she recalls, “I had to speak about the woman's period stopping and the enlargement of her breasts during pregnancy.” She was pleasantly surprised at the way the boys responded. “They received it better than I had expected. There

was no giggling or nudging, no sideward glances. If we sensitise children, they respond in the correct way. We have a notion that children in a remand home would be rough and dangerous. But they too come from families.” She had other advice for her students as well—“do not try and find a girlfriend until you do well in life and have money in your pocket!”

Trupti Dhananjay Jadhav, superintendent of Umerkhadi Observation home, spoke to me enthusiastically about what she saw as the success of the education initiative. “We allowed volunteer teachers to come in at any time that was convenient to them,” she said. Jadhav took measures to relax the rules for this particular set of boys, telling the guards to cooperate because the boys were “doing something good.” To her, it was not just the success of staff and officers of Umerkhadi Observation Home, but also the success of police and magistrates. “We were all links in a chain that needed to stay together and coordinate carefully so these boys could have a shot at formal education.”

Since the heinous offences clause was put into the Juvenile Justice Act in 2016, officials working at the juvenile board are not certain whether to try some minors as children or as adults. In the case of Ayushmaan, they ordered the latter. Once at the adult Sessions Court, his lawyers argued to bring the cases back to the juvenile court, from where the case got transferred right back to the adult court.

The chief probation officer, Ranganath Kulkarni, a tall man with a slow smile, feels a lot of time has been wasted in this back and forth. “In the first place, the assessment of cases takes nearly six to eight months,” he said. “After the juvenile justice board transfers the case to the sessions court, the kids do not get summons for another eight months. Meanwhile the children are languishing in the observation home, without being presented in front of any competent authority.”

Ayushmaan has been in Umerkhadi for two years. When I spoke to his mother, she recalled how the police took him away. “He had not even eaten any dinner that evening before being taken away from us,” she said. At the police station, the parents were made to wait for hours outside.

Ayushmaan spoke of how he was treated at the police station. He said, “They used a stick and a patti”—the strap used in flour mills, a tough, wide, semi-elastic band. “Each time they asked, did you do it, I said no, they would beat me harder. When I could not stand it anymore, I said that I did it.” It was in the early hours of the morning that Ayushmaan was finally taken to Umerkhadi. Although he said Kulkarni was very kind to him, he remembers being terrified. “I was bewildered and depressed. I thought of my life outside.”

I asked Kulkarni if it was common for children who came to the home to bear injuries inflicted by the police. He said it was but they were usually discouraged by their families to report it before the juvenile justice board. “The first time the child is presented before the Magistrate, he is asked, 'do you have any complaint against anybody? Were you beaten?'" Kulkarni told me. “The child says no because they have been warned by the police to say no.” Kulkarni recalled that a decade and a half ago, it used to be easier to file complaints on behalf of undertrials if they reported torture. “Now parents do not want to take up the fight against the police.”

The police are mandated to have a separate unit in each district called the Special Juvenile Police Unit, set up to handle cases of juvenile crime. The appointed officer in each police station is meant to apply the procedures stipulated by the JJB. Meeran Borwankar, former inspector general of prisons in Maharashtra told me, “Both prison officials and police are given basic training in how to handle special groups like women and juveniles. What is missing is regular in-service training and reinforcement, especially important for junior cadres.” However, according to Vinod Kumar Menon, Senior Investigations Editor of the Mid Day newspaper, who has covered many juvenile convict cases, these rules are seldom followed. “The police constabulary, that is the point of interface, is trained only to apply the baton,” he told me. In many of the cases he has followed, the police barge into a boy's house, search the family's possessions, often without a warrant, and drag the minor to a police station without giving adequate explanation to parents. “This kind of treatment is meted out only to boys from underprivileged families, mind you” he adds. “Then they might accuse the boy, in not just one, but a host of cases.”

K has a tough relationship with the police even after serving his time at Umerkhadi and having his records wiped out. He was among the boys that Sequeira taught in the summer of 2017, someone she had grown particularly fond of. Ayushmaan and his friends in the remand home, teasingly called him pandit, because of his habit of collecting pictures of gods and sticking them on the walls of an alcove in the boys' dormitory to create a prayer altar. K served his sentence for stealing. Released after a four month incarceration period at the home, he sought out Sequeira at her school for regular lessons. He passed three subjects and failed two at the tenth standard NIOS exams that he took in October 2017.

After he appeared for the Board exams, Ashiyana arranged for him to attend a vocational training and English-speaking course in Tumkur, Karnataka, “to keep him out of sight of the local police who have him pegged as a potential offender,” Maniar said. But K quit the course in Tumkur and returned to Mumbai. Three days later he was picked up by the police.

I visited the police station in Andheri east on 7 December with Sachi. The sub inspector told Sachi that K and his friends had been apprehended on charges of stealing bikes, taking “joy rides” and abandoning them when they had run out of gas. “We are yet to recover two of the bikes,” the sub inspector said. “Ten cycles were stolen recently. He probably was involved in those thefts too. You ask him.” When K was brought in to meet Sachi, he looked extremely distraught, and denied his involvement in the thefts. Sachi pointed out to the officers that it was illegal for minors to be detained in police stations even for a night and this was already K's third night there. When we tried to determine his exact age however, we found out he had recently turned 19. This time K was no longer a minor, which meant that if he were convicted he would not be sent to Umerkhadi but to an adult jail. Having negotiated for his release, Sachi tried to ensure K left Mumbai again for a six-month stay at a vocational training centre, this time in Nagpur.

K's tryst with the police was not quite over. In March, he was interrogated by the police in a case of bike theft once again. Some boys from a neighbouring area whose bike had gone missing, came to his home while he was eating dinner and

dragged him to Jogeshwari police station saying the police had summoned him for questioning.

“I was made to strip naked and sticks and a patti was placed before me,” he told me. “I was shown CCTV footage of the theft. In it, a man with a monkey cap hotwired a bike and made off with it. I repeatedly said that it was not me in the video.” The police finally let him go and asked him to come back the next morning. K spent the night in fear and distress. “I was terrified of going back there,” he told me. “They pick me up repeatedly and beat me. Whether I have done anything or not, I get picked up.”

Early the next morning, K went out and bought rat poison from a street vendor near his house. “I ate it like a biscuit on my way home,” he told me. Once he reached home, he felt sick and faint. “I told my mother what I had done and that I would not be troubling her anymore,” he recalled. K's father rushed him to the ICU of a municipal hospital just in time.

When I visited the hospital, K was impatient and half-jokingly threatening to pull out the tube dangling from his nostril that went through his food pipe to his stomach. “It has been 48 hours,” his father told me grimly, “but the poison hasn't left his stomach. Until it comes up the doctors won't let him eat regular food.”

“Time and again you play a story, call a kid into the police station and treat him like a suspect, the kid starts believing it,” Menon said, when I asked him about the psychological distress minors experience. “Worse, the kid gets used to it. He figures that whether he does a bad thing or not, he will get picked up anyway.”

Borwankar points to the workload, stress and lack of resources the lower police cadre needs to deal with. “You see, there are good cops and bad cops, but a stressed out cop will be much harder on the accused.” According to her, the police have a soft spot for studious children. “If the cops know the boys are studying, they would be kind to them.”

Before his NIOS tenth standard exams, Zaid spent many hours sitting and studying under the shady trees. He recounted how the police guards on duty

would help him by explaining passages from his text book. Zaid is the only one of the October 2017 batch of NIOS students to have passed the exams from within Umerkhadi. “We are proud of him,” Kulkarni smiles.

I met Zaid's parents when they had come for their son's court hearing. They sat on a mat that their son had rolled out for them in the far corner of a corridor, their backs against the wall. Two bottles of cold water that he had filled stood untouched by their side. Efforts to make conversation with other parents who had come to visit their wards were met with silence. Then Zaid's father took a creased newspaper clipping out of his wallet and carefully unfolded it. It had Zaid's tenth standard success story printed in the English daily, *Afternoon*. He asked a literate man sitting by him to translate it into Hindi and read it aloud, so he could hear, once again, what the newspaper had said about his son who, even with his name changed and face pixelated in the report, has made him proud by passing the tenth standard board exams.

Ayushmaan is the second boy to pass, having written the higher secondary exams while still in the Observation Home. He scored an average of fifty percent. In April this year he was granted bail. He has returned to live with his family and attends college. He is pursuing an undergraduate Arts degree.

The police might be harsh and the law fairly lenient towards minor offenders, but neither gives the accused what he really needs. “Not much is done to improve a boy's patterns of behaviour while he is in the system's keep,” says Sachi. “We need to really examine his circumstances, listen to him and understand why he has acted the way he has. The purpose of time away should be about helping him to change, to transform, so that he leaves the system with behaviour and skills that help him become a contributing member of the community. For this we need to see the good in him. We need to amplify it.”

Another of Maniar's students, a resident of Thane, who has been in and out of Umerkhadi for his involvement in street fights, is a product of this approach. Sachi urged him into registering for his tenth standard state board exams last year, mentored him through his studies and bailed him out of bouts of depression. His

examination result was the most recent to be announced—he has passed with a first class. The 18-year-old has now started a mobile phone repair business along with a friend. He works long hours seven days a week and earns Rs 15,000 a month. He plans to continue his studies.

Ayushmaan told me what made him happy about his experience of giving exams from the juvenile home. “You know, when we generally travel in police vans, if a cop takes a call on his cell phone from someone, he would say, 'I'm taking the *aaropi*'”—the accused. “But when they took us to write our papers, they would say on the phone, I'm taking my brother to write his twelfth standard exam. When I overheard this, I felt happy.” Ayushmaan smiled.



Chatura Rao

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Unscripted monologue

by **Chitralkha Baruah**

The Assam Tribune - 11 October 2019

The International Day of the Girl Child on October 11 holds enormous meaning this year underpinning the theme - *GirlForce: Unscripted and Unstoppable*, as the activists and researchers are having a flashback for a deliberate evaluation of the achievement and outstanding of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BPFA), just ahead of the 25th anniversary of the great conclave. This global policy agenda committed to advance the rights of girls and women has come of age to march side by side with the much hyped development goals of today. At this point of time the global champion for gender equality is putting emphasis on *Generation Equality*, for celebrating the historic event. This is a succession plan of the veteran feminists to handover their experiences of success and failure to the young people so that significant results continue to come.

Since the day of adoption of the BPFA at the 4th World Conference on Women in 1995, various rights based movements have erupted and we find more girls in schools now, fewer girl child marriages are reported and more girls are acquiring skills. However, the pace of the journey is too slow; many factors come up on the way. As per a UN assumption, between 2018 and 2019 alone, 12 million girls aged under 18 would be married and 21 million girls aged 15 to 19 years would become pregnant in developing regions.

At this stage of self-evaluation we find that our protective attitude surpasses our concern for creating conditions where the girls may grow without inhibition. Protection is rewarding, but sometimes conflicts with a person's freedom which is not even felt by most of us because we are accustomed to the situation which does not differentiate between protection and respect or between love and confinement. It is sarcastic that we believe a girl's self respect is safe when she keeps quiet and does not openly protest any offensive behaviour even though the law is in her favour. We hesitate to make her owner of the family property, so how

come she is the custodian of the family's honour? “*Betiyan Ghar ki Laaj hain*”, sounds really great. The responsibility to safeguard this reputation is on her shoulder. In the course of maintaining this glory many girls either suffer silently even if she is sexually harassed or are protected so much so that their potency to become independent is blocked halfway.

In India sexual harassment was not recognised as a public issue until a few infamous incidents of the late 20th century. It may occur also against men, but it affects girls and women disproportionately due to their gendered positions. It is not a regular topic of discussion; the MeToo Movement has exposed its insidious nature. It is all the more toxic when it happens in the workplace where denial is the most common response to a girl or woman who complains. According to the leading women's rights organisation North East Network (NEN), ignoring such behaviour only encourages the perpetrators. NEN affirms that sexual harassment of girls and women is not about attraction or beauty, but about power dynamics and is a violation of a woman's right to a life of dignity.

The first official instrument to make workplaces safe for girls and women came in 2013 when the central Govt. passed the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 after scrupulous debates among civil society organisations, politicians of ruling and opposition parties. It came as a follow up of the Vishakha Judgement, 1997 of the Supreme Court. Sexual harassment has been one of the reasons pushing nearly half of the potential human resource out from the workplaces, thus reflecting a low statistics in the development chart. There has been few studies and media coverage on its implications in the life of women employees and in the environment of workplaces. This limited and scattered information fails to give a clear picture of the ground realities that hinder girls and women from effectively benefitting from the existing legal framework.

With an aim to bridge this gap and create a baseline for use of the authorities, NEN in collaboration with the Women Studies Department of Gauhati University recently conducted a research to see the impact of the Act, by analysing how far the remedies provided by it were being effectively discharged

for girls and women working in organised and unorganised sectors. Selecting seven districts of Assam from different zones, the study covered central and state Govt. offices, media houses, non-profit organisations, banks, brick kilns and households where girls or women work as domestic help. Girls and women employees of 18–70 years and employers were interviewed while the lack of awareness and notion of honour(?) dominated the conversations even with the girls and women who were accomplished professionals. Many of them made it a class issue, by stating that sexual harassment at workplace occurred only within the lower-class(?) community. However, during the subsequent queries the respondents opened up to reveal that in fact, it was widely prevalent through unwanted touching, discussing women's bodies, use of obscene words in normal conversation or in songs in most of the workplaces. One of the noteworthy responses was that lewd comments were addressed to women who were assertive, outgoing and transgressed the gendered boundaries in workplaces where works were assigned based on gender of the staff. This attitudinal barrier to girls and women in workplaces is one of the major hurdles in achieving gender equality, the cross-sectional agenda of the new development paradigm.

NEN's comprehensive research is evidence that the failure of the employers to set up a complaints mechanism is linked with their denial or tendency to distance themselves from such troublesome issues. Adding fuel to this fire is considering such harassments as mundane even by the aggrieved girls and women. Due to such disregard for the statutory obligation, only 28 per cent workplaces were found to have redressal mechanisms as mandated by the Act. Ensuring existence of such mechanism at all offices and also at the district level for the working girls and women of the unorganised sector, carrying out public advocacy to change gender norms that allow impunity to perpetrators by shifting the blame onto dress and assertiveness will create enabling conditions for girls and women to seek justice without any fear or shame.



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by Ritika

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साल 2015 में तुर्की के समुद्र तट पर औंधे मुंह पड़े 3 साल के आयलान कुर्दी का बेजान शरीर, जिसने सीरिया संकट की भयावहता को दुनिया के सामने ला दिया था. कश्मीर के शोपियां जिले की हिबा की तस्वीर आयलान की तस्वीर के समकक्ष खड़ी नज़र आती है. मीडिया में आई हिबा की तस्वीरें विचलित करने वाली थीं. हिंदी मीडिया में इस पर कोई भी विस्तृत रिपोर्ट अब तक देखने-पढ़ने को नहीं मिली है. यही कारण था कि हिंसाग्रस्त क्षेत्र में हिबा और आयलान होने के सामाजिक और राजनीतिक मायने समझने के लिए इस रिपोर्टर ने दक्षिण कश्मीर के शोपियां का दौरा करने का निर्णय किया.

हिबा का पूरा नाम है हिबा निसार. हिबा की चर्चा इनदिनों कश्मीर की सबसे छोटी उम्र (18 महीने) की पेलेट गन सर्वाइवर के रूप में हो रही है. जिस वक्त हम शोपियां के कापरन गांव स्थित हिबा के घर पहुंचे, उस वक्त हिबा अपने बड़े भाई शहादत (साढ़े चार साल) के साथ खेल रही थी. अपने घर आए नए चेहरों को देख शहादत ने खेलना बंद कर दिया. हिबा ने हमारी तरफ ध्यान नहीं दिया. वह हमसे दूर भागती रही. हिबा की मां मर्शला जान ने बताया कि जब भी कोई हिबा के करीब आता है तो वह काफी डर जाती है, क्योंकि उसे लगता है कि डॉक्टर आया है.

यह जान लें कि ऐसा पहली बार नहीं है जब हिबा के परिवार में किसी को पेलेट लगा है. इससे पहले साल 2016 में बुरहान वानी की मौत के हंगामे के दौरान हिबा की चचेरी बहन इंशा ने भी पेलेट के कारण अपने दोनों आंखों की रोशनी गंवानी पड़ी थी.

दहशत की रात

25 नवंबर, 2018 के दिन सुरक्षाबलों को सूचना मिली थी कि शोपियां के बठकंड गांव में 6 आतंकवादी छिपे हुए हैं. सेना ने गांव को चारों ओर से घेर लिया और तकरीबन रात 1 बजे से आतंकियों और सुरक्षाबलों के बीच मुठभेड़ शुरू हो गई. सुबह 8:30 बजे तक चली इस कार्रवाई में 6 आतंकी और सेना का एक जवान मारा गया.

जैसे ही अंधेरा छटने को हुआ गांव के लोगों ने सुरक्षाबलों पर पत्थर चलाना शुरू कर दिया. जवाबी कार्रवाई में सेना ने पेलेट गन का इस्तेमाल किया. कोई स्पष्ट आंकड़ा मौजूद नहीं है कि उस दिन कितने लोग पेलेट से घायल हुए लेकिन गांधीन अपने हाथों पर पेलेट के निशान दिखाते हैं.

सुबह करीब साढ़े छह बजे सेना ने पत्थर फेंक रहे युवाओं को भगाने के लिए टियर सेल (मिर्ची गैस का गोला) का इस्तेमाल किया. एक ऐसा ही टियर सेल मर्शला जान के घर में गिरा. मर्शला बताती हैं, "हमारे घर पर उन्होंने 'ज़हर' फेंका. 'ज़हर' की महक बर्दाश्त के बाहर थी."

मिर्ची गैस से होनेवाली जलन और घुटन से परेशान होकर हिबा का परिवार बाहर निकला ही था कि पत्थरबाजों पर चलाई जा रही पेलेट हिबा की दाईं आंख में जा लगी.

“हिबा पत्थरबाज़ नहीं है फिर पेलेट उसे क्यों मारा गया”

दक्षिण कश्मीर में शोपियां और त्राल क्षेत्र सबसे ज्यादा आंतक प्रभावित इलाका है। “रेज इन कश्मीर” के लेखक डेविड देवदास कहते हैं, “1998 से 2005 के वर्ष, जिसे सामान्य तौर पर घाटी का शांतिप्रिय वक्त बताया जाता है, तब भी शोपियां एक ऐसा क्षेत्र था जहां मिलिटेंट्स सक्रिय थे.”

शोपियांके -8 डिग्री सेल्सियस तापमान में बात करना भी मुश्किल हो रहा था। लेकिन मर्शला के घर के अंदर एक अजीब सी दुर्गंध थी। मर्शला ने कहा, “इसीलिए मैं आपको अंदर नहीं ला रही थी।” उनके घर में मिर्ची गैस फेंके हुए महीना बीत चुका था लेकिन उसकी गंध अभी भी बनी हुई थी। मेरे लिए यह अंदाजा लगाना पाना कतई मुश्किल नहीं था कि मिर्ची गैस की वास्तविक गंध क्या रही होगी।

बातचीत करते हुए मर्शला सहज हो गई थीं। वह वापस उस सुबह को याद नहीं करना चाहती लेकिन उन्हें उम्मीद है कि दिल्ली से आए पत्रकार को बताने पर उनकी कुछ मदद हो सकती है। मर्शला पूछती हैं, “हिबा की क्या गलती थी? उसे क्यों पेलेट मारा गया?” गांव के लोग कैमरे पर क्या रिकॉर्डर पर भी कुछ बताने को तैयार नहीं हुए। हालांकि 25 नवंबर के घटनाक्रम का जिक्र करते हुए जो तस्वीर बनती है, उसमें यह स्थापित होता नहीं दिखता कि हिबा को टारगेट करके पेलेट मारा गया होगा। लेकिन तथ्य यह है कि 18 महीने की बच्ची अपनी आंखों की रोशनी खोने के कगार पर है।

हिबा के दादा ने बताया, “आंख में पेलेट लगने के बाद हिबा का पूरा चेहरा खून से लथपथ था। मर्शला और मैं उसे धुएं में ही लेकर भागे जा रहे थे। भागते हुए हमें इतना भी ध्यान नहीं रहा कि शहादत घर पर ही छूट गया है।”

हिबा को कुछ स्थानीय लड़के अपनी बाइक से अस्पताल लेकर गए। हिबा का प्राथमिक ईलाज शोपियां के जिला अस्पताल में हुआ था। उसके बाद उसे श्रीनगर के श्री महाराजा हरि सिंह अस्पताल रेफर कर दिया गया। शहादत और मर्शला को भी हाथों पर तीन-तीन पेलेट लगे थे।

मर्शला ने कहा, “हिबा अभी भी बच्ची है। न वह नारे लगा रही थी। न वह पत्थर फेंक रही थी। न उसका घाटी को लेकर कोई मत है। जब निर्दोष लोगों पर पेलेट चलता है तो बहुत दुख होता है। गुस्सा आता है।”

हालांकि मर्शला की बातें एक मां की भावनाएं ज्यादा हैं और इस बात के सबूत नहीं हैं कि हिबा को टारगेट करके सुरक्षाबलों ने पेलेट चलाया। लेकिन कश्मीर की हिंसाग्रस्त जिंदगी में इस तरह के अनगिनत उदाहरण हैं जो इस टकराव में अनायास पिस रहे हैं।

“लोगों की दुनिया उजाड़कर आप कैसे शांति स्थापित करवाएंगे?” मर्शला आगे जोड़ती हैं। “मेरा चिंता हिबा के भविष्य को लेकर रहती है। मैं सिर्फ चाहती हूँ कि उसकी आंखों की रोशनी किसी तरह वापस आ जाए,” कहते हुए मर्शला रोने को हो जाती हैं।

उस दिन को याद करते हुए मर्शला बताती हैं, “जब मैं अपने बच्चों के साथ जहरीली गैस से बचने घर के बाहर आई थी, मुझे बिल्कुल अंदाज़ा नहीं था कि हिबा के साथ कुछ ऐसा होगा। अगर मैंने दरवाज़ा नहीं खोला होता तो धुंए की वजह से अंदर ही सबका दम घुट गया होता।” वह बार-बार मिर्ची गैस को ज़हर कहती हैं।

घाटी में इंसाफ नहीं हैं आसान

मर्शला को हिबा के लिए इंसाफ चाहिए लेकिन कैसा इंसाफ वह खुद भी नहीं जानती. वह नहीं जानती या शायद कहना नहीं चाहती कि हिबा के लिए इंसाफ घाटी की शांति होगी या हिबा का बेहतर भविष्य. मर्शला ने कहा, “अगर हिबा की आंखों की जगह कहीं और पेलेट लगा होता तो उनकी दुनिया आज कुछ और होती,” कहते हुए मर्शला हिबा की ओर देखने लगीं.

पेलेट लगने के बाद हिबा का वज़न साढ़े 6 किलो से घटकर 5 किलो रह गया है. एनेस्थिसिया के कारण हिबा का खाना-पीना भी काफी कम हो गया है. हिबा की दाईं आंख की रोशनी वापस आएगी या नहीं इस पर संशय बना हुआ है. डॉक्टर इस आशंका से इनकार नहीं करते कि उसकी आंखों की रोशनी जा सकती है.

18 महीने की छोटी सी उम्र में हिबा को कई सर्जरियों से गुज़रना होगा. वह उस पड़ाव पर है जहां वह अपने दर्द को सिर्फ महसूस कर सकती है लेकिन बता नहीं सकती. जब मैंने हिबा को गोद लेने की कोशिश की तो वह बिना डरे गोद में आ ज़रूर गईं. लेकिन दर्द होने पर वह सिर्फ अपनी आंखों की ओर इशारा करने लगती है.

घटना के दिन हिबा के पिता घर पर नहीं थे. वह अनंतनाग में सेबों के बगान में काम करते हैं. मर्शला ने हमें बताया कि जो पेलेट हिबा की आंखों में लगे थे उसे हिबा के पिता ने संभालकर रखा है. “जब वह बड़ी हो जाएगी, तो उसे उसकी हालत का क्या जवाब देंगे? वह पेलेट हिबा को जवाब होगा,” हिबा के दादा ने कहा.

श्रीनगर स्थित जम्मू-कश्मीर कोलिजन ऑफ सिविल सोसायटी के कार्यालय से मिले पेलेट संबंधित कैज़ुएल्टी के आंकड़ों के अनुसार जुलाई 2016 से फरवरी 2017 के बीच 6,221 लोग पेलेट गन से घायल हुए थे. जिसमें से 782 लोगों की आंखों में पेलेट लगी थीं.

हालांकि श्रीनगर के एसएमएचएस अस्पताल के रिकॉर्ड्स के मुताबिक बीते 4 महीनों में 1,178 लोगों की आंखें पेलेट से खराब हुई हैं. सिविल सोसायटी का कहना है कि लोगों की आंखों में जब पेलेट लगती है तो उसे काफी नजदीक से मारा जाता है. वहीं सीआरपीएफ द्वारा गृह मंत्रालय को भेजी गई एक रिपोर्ट के अनुसार अकेले अगस्त 2016 में 1.3 मिलियन पेलेट्स इस्तेमाल किए जाने का दावा किया गया था.

घाटी में 2010 से पेलेट गन का इस्तेमाल जारी है. सरकारी आंकड़ों के मुताबिक अब तक पेलेट गन से 2016 में 13 लोगों की जान गई थी, वहीं 2017 में 4 लोगों की मौत पेलेट गन से हुई है. सरकारी अधिकारियों ने शहादत का बयान दर्ज किया है.

मैंने जब हिबा के भाई शहादत से मुठभेड़ वाली रात के संबंध में पूछा तो उसने संक्षिप्त सा जवाब दिया- “आर्मी” और “पेलेट”. वह हिबा की आंख पर लगी पट्टी को छूकर कहता है, “यह मेरे आंख में लगता!” मैं जब तक वहां रही, शहादत हिबा के पास ही बना रहा. कभी उसे अपने खिलौने देता या उससे बातें करने की कोशिश में लगा रहता. या कभी उससे मेरा फोन छीनने की कोशिश करता.

उसे अपने हाथों पर लगे पेलेट याद नहीं हैं लेकिन उसे याद है कि कैसे हिबा को उस दिन पेलेट लगा था. रिमोट कंट्रोल कार, मेरे फोन और नोटबुक के लिए लड़ते शहादत और हिबा पेलेट गन से ज़ख्मी हुए ‘चिलड्रेन ऑफ वॉर’ के बच्चे नज़र आ रहे थे.

हिबा से मिलने के बाद मैं एनकाउंटर साइट पर पहुंची. जिस जगह एनकाउंटर हुआ था वह घर पूरी तरह जल चुका था. गैराज में पड़ी मारुति 800 भी पूरी तरह जली पड़ी थी. मेरी नज़र सबसे पहले वहां पड़े एक अधजले

जूते पर गई जो शायद किसी आतंकी का रहा होगा.

उस जले हुए घर के अंदर कई नारे लिखे थे. स्थानीय लोग एनकाउंटर साइट के अंदर जाने से मना करते नज़र आए क्योंकि वहां ऐक्टिव आईडी होने की संभावना होती है. जिस घर में यह एनकाउंटर हुआ उसके मालिक की मौत घटना के बाद दिल का दौरा पड़ने से हो गई. स्थानीय पत्रकारों ने बताया कि ऐसे मामलों में सेना अक्सर घर के लोगों पर ही मिलिटेंट्स को संरक्षण देने के जुर्म में पीएसए लगा देती है.

सरकार का मुआवज़ा या मज़ाक

इस घटना को करीब एक महीना गुज़र चुका है पर हिबा से मिलने अब तक किसी राजनीतिक पार्टी या स्वयंसेवी संस्था से कोई नहीं आया. हिबा की मां ने बताया कि कुछ स्थानीय पत्रकारों के अलावा उनसे मिलने अभी तक कोई नहीं आया.

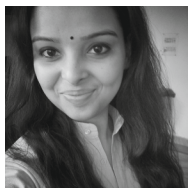
जम्मू कश्मीर की सरकार की तरफ से हिबा के परिवार को एक लाख रुपये का मुआवज़ा दिया गया है. यहां ध्यान देने वाली बात यह है कि यह मुआवज़ा चेक के रूप में नहीं दिया गया बल्कि फिक्स्ड डिपॉज़िट के रूप में दिया गया है जो 30 नवंबर, 2021 में मैच्योर होगा. एक लाख रुपये हिबा के इलाज के लिए न सिर्फ नाकाफी हैं बल्कि उसकी आंखों की रोशनी के बदले असंवेदनशीलता की कहानी भी हैं.

हिबा के गांव में एक अन्य पेलेट गन सर्वाइवर से हमारी मुलाकात हुई. उन्होंने बातचीत के दौरान बताया कि उनकी आंखों की सर्जरी में अब तक 58 लाख रुपये तक का खर्च आ चुका है. पेशे से पत्रकार रह चुके अदनान (बदला हुआ नाम) की भी आंखों में ही पेलेट लगी थी जिसकी वजह से उन्हें अपनी दाईं आंख की रोशनी पूरी तरह गंवानी पड़ी.

अक्सर मुआवजे के रूप में चेक दिया जाता है लेकिन हिबा के परिवार को फिक्स डिपॉज़िट दिया गया है. वे पैसे निकाल सकते हैं लेकिन ब्याज़ उन्हें नहीं मिलेगा. हिबा की एक सर्जरी में 15-20 हज़ार रुपये तक का खर्च आता है.

कश्मीर विवाद के जानकार बताते हैं कि वर्तमान में घाटी में सक्रिय आतंकी 1990 के दौरान पैदा हुई पीढ़ी से ताल्लुक रखते हैं. उनकी परवरिश ही उग्रवाद और हिंसा के बीच हुई है. कहीं शहजाद और हिबा को बचपन में लगी चोटें उग्र ढलने के साथ भयावह रूप न ले लें.

जाहिर है हिबा और उसका परिवार एक ऐसी गलती का खामियाज़ा भुगत रहे हैं जिसे उन्होंने कभी किया ही नहीं.



Ritika

Ritika is Associate Editor with feminisminindia.com. She knows what it means to be a woman journalist, within the organization and outside.

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Crushed by the wait: Chhutki's parents want her rapist punished

by **Urmi Bhattacheryya**

thequint.com - February/March 2019

A year and a month. That's how long it's been since Suresh* and Geeta* ventured outdoors to catch a breath of fresh air at the same time. A year and a month since husband and wife walked out with abandon, trusting the care of their two little daughters to their vast extended family.

When Geeta had first moved here from Kolkata – to this nondescript house with its green door in a north Delhi chawl – cohabiting with an extended family had seemed like a dream. She knew Suresh and she needed to eke out a joint living if they were to feed four mouths (Geeta was a house-help and Suresh a daily wage labourer) – and so, having hands on board willing to feed and love their babies in their absence, was a boon.

The Morning It All Changed

Until a year and a month ago, Suresh and Geeta trusted their kids with someone else, but never after the fateful morning of 28 January 2018.

Geeta returned from her chores to the anguished cries of her 8-month-old baby in bed – when she ran in, she found her lying in a pool of blood and stool. Her heart stopped. “I felt faint,” she told me later. She called out to Suraj, her husband's 28-year-old nephew who lived in a room above the couple's, and whom she'd seen earlier, loitering shiftily.

Suraj was flustered; he “panicked, tried to call his wife several times,” recalls Geeta, “and then fled upstairs”.

Geeta's worst fears were confirmed when it was discovered that her baby had been raped. Things happened quickly: an FIR was filed, Suraj confessed to the cops that he'd committed the crime under the influence of alcohol and emergency hospitalisation ensued.

(The Quint had begun to document their story at the time, calling the little girl 'Chhutki' and starting a crowdfunding campaign to help raise funds for her medical needs – and an education in the future.)

Before the couple knew it, their lives had irrevocably changed. The biggest change? The bitterness and the helplessness that has set in for a year now – bitterness at the family that failed to protect their girl, and helplessness at not having the money to move out.

Signs of this severance in ties are splattered through Suresh and Geeta's daily existence today; the couple do not speak at all to Suresh's two brothers who share the house with them but live on different floors.

“They never denounced Suraj when this happened. They only came to condemn me for not having been home that day – like the fact that the rape happened was my fault,” Geeta said.

Interestingly enough, Suresh got none of that judgement.

Why Chhutki, Her Sister and Her Parents Always Stick Together

Suresh is also not on talking terms with his two older sisters who live in Uttar Pradesh; on Rakshabandhan last year, Suresh called to invite me to celebrate the festival with them. When I landed up with a bright crimson rakhi, I was told that he'd stopped celebrating it with his own sisters.

“They never called to ask how (our baby) she is doing. They never came to see her in the hospital. She was in the hospital for three weeks. Anything could have happened,” Suresh said.

I've, therefore, been “adoptive sister”, as Suresh likes to call it, for the past year and one month – which is why I've been able to witness the gradual paranoia and isolation the couple has been living with. There is no leaving home without both kids in tow.

At a court hearing in Chhutki's case last month – Chhutki has so far had only three hearings in a year – the judge wanted to know if they couldn't just leave the little

girls home? Chhutki had been wailing and flailing in Suresh's arms at the time of this admonition – while her older sister, 3 years old, was running circles around the prosecutor's table. “Where would we leave her, sir?” asked Geeta sadly, as she scooped up her children in her thin arms and handed them to Suresh, who left the POCSO courtroom. “We have no one we can trust at home.”

So, Suresh, Geeta and their two daughters go everywhere together. To court, every few months, dressed in their finest, the couple grasping their daughters' hands and sitting on wooden benches in labyrinthine corridors at Rohini District Court for hours on end. To the market nearest their home to buy packets of Maggi and bars of chocolate for Chhutki and her sister's birthdays last year, even as guests who arrived early waited outside a hastily padlocked door to the couple's tiny one-room flat. To the police station at regular intervals, when a member of the extended family has taunted them about the status of their case.

It is this latter that causes the deepest hurt. Even as we shoot the present documentary, Suresh and Geeta are determined to talk for as long as they can and as much as they can about the court case.

“Every time we finish a hearing, we're told our testimony will be carried over to the next date. That date is usually four months later. Why is it taking so much time?” Geeta demands. She looks at her baby, now more than a year-and-a-half-old today, and says softly, “she isn't just my child. She's everybody's child.”

'We Don't Want our Daughter to Grow Up Here'

Chhutki was certainly a unifier for a large part of the Indian populace last year, when crowds stormed the streets in protest after her rape. Shocked at the heinousness of the crime, Delhi Commission for Women (DCW) chief Swati Maliwal had even undertaken a fast, demanding strict punishment for the rapist, and the Supreme Court had said it was “concerned” about Chhutki, immediately admitting her to AIIMS for treatment.

It's been a year and a month, and many of those crowds have dwindled. Public memory is fickle, and Chhutki's parents are hoping to keep her story alive as much as possible through appeals to the public.

“We want him punished. We want to move away from here with our daughters, once he is. We don't want them growing up here, with these memories, around people who know their story and might tell them,” Suresh said.

They might move to Kolkata, says Suresh, for whom occasional visits to his wife's old family home has been a source of comfort – away from the city that has now become synonymous with his daughter's rape.

We pore over beautiful, bright photographs of the four of them on a day out, last year, to India Gate, as Suresh talks. In the background, Chhutki and her sister are giggling uncontrollably as they chase each other up and down the terrace. Geeta's keeping a watchful eye at the door. It is a picture of tranquility – and so are the photographs that Suresh has laid out, of their 'family outing'. But when I ask him when the family plans to go out next, the answer comes pat, soft but resolute – “when Chhutki gets justice.”

(*Names changed to protect identity.)

(A series of 10 articles was selected for the award. This is one of them.)



Urmi Bhattacheryya

Urmi Bhattacheryya is an independent journalist who currently lives in Noida, India. She has worked as Gender Editor at The Quint for 5 years.

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J&K sex scandal: Ostracized Kashmiri survivor gets justice after 15 years

by **Neha Sharma**

Times of India - 10 June 2018

Chandigarh: It has been a long road to justice for this 28-year-old Kashmiri rape survivor, who was ostracized by her own family.

A mother of two, she got justice after five men, including two very senior police officers, were convicted by the Chandigarh court of raping her and were sentenced to 10 years in prison for their role in the infamous 2006 Jammu and Kashmir sex scandal case.

The case involved nine accused and four survivors. Although three other rape survivors turned hostile during the 12-year trial, Rehana (name changed) stuck to her statement despite pressure and threats to her life. It was her testimony that nailed the five men, including Mohammad Ashraf Mir (former DSP and an encounter specialist of the J&K police) and KC Padhi (former BSF DIG).

Shockingly, her mother and her husband, who had married her when she still was a minor and later divorced her, were defence witnesses in the case.

The court also fined the five convicts Rs 3.5 lakh collectively and awarded the amount to the survivor.

Fifteen years earlier, when Rehana was just a 13-year-old student, she was raped not once but multiple times by senior police officers, a surrendered militant and others after being forced into prostitution by her mother's employer and a distant relative, Sabeena who along with her husband Abdul Hamid Bulla was the prime accused in the case. The two of them died during the trial.

Multiple rapes led to Rehana's pregnancy and she was forced to get an abortion in 2015. Two video clips went viral and the sex exploitation of minors came to the notice of cops.

Special CBI court headed by judge Gagan Geet Kaur found Mir and Padhi along with Shabbir Ahmad Laway (a surrendered militant), Shabbir Ahmad Lango, and Masood Ahmad alias Maqsood guilty of raping the survivor and sentenced them to 10 years in jail.

Till Rehana gave her statement in court during the trial, she was kept in CBI protective custody for over one-and-a-half years.

The five convicts were found guilty under Section 376 of the Ranbir Penal Code). However, they were acquitted under Section 5 of the Immoral Traffic Prevention Act.

The 2006 case was not prosecuted under the POCSO Act, the stringent law covering child sexual exploitation that came into force only in 2012.

The judgment covered a wide range of issues like consent, sexual violence against women, poverty and militancy in Kashmir.

The rapes were presented as an act of consent by the defence, which questioned the survivor's character and even called her a terrorist for “propagating” the agenda of militant outfits.

The defence's line of questioning was so regressive that even the judge highlighted one of the questions as an “indecent question.”

In 2012, a person impersonating the survivor filed a plea seeking to record her statement again in court. The CBI, however, could never solve the mystery behind this move.

How it all started

Rehana, who was 13 at the time and studying at a school in Srinagar, was taken by a friend to Sabeena. Daughter of a mason, Rehana was forced into prostitution by Sabeena, who fed her juice mixed with four tablets of Alprex. She was forced into having sex with a doctor.

After that, Sabeena forced the teenager into prostitution by threatening to release

a video clip of the first rape. Sabeena used to occasionally pay her Rs 250-500 per client.

Role of Samaj Sudhar Committee

The scandal was exposed when two video CDs showing Kashmiri minors being sexually exploited went viral and reached Samaj Sudhar Committee, where members found that one of the clippings included a minor who lived in the neighbourhood. This rape survivor was Rehana.

Angry over such goings-on in their mohalla, the committee approached the police and an FIR under Section 67 of IT Act was registered. Investigations by the police, who also questioned the minors, including the alleged kingpin Sabeena revealed 56 people were allegedly involved in the scandal. The case was transferred to the CBI in May 2006 after names of two J&K ministers, MLAs and other influential men emerged in the case and the trial was shifted to Chandigarh the same year.

Code Uncode

The case was very sensitive as it involved minor victims, including Rehana and the trial was kept in-camera and codes were used by CBI in the chargesheet to identify the four survivors and witnesses. For the survivor, the CBI used PW1 throughout the charge sheet and during the trial.

Prosecution's Stance

CBI proved on record that Rehana was a minor and the video clips corroborated that she was raped multiple times.

Prosecutor KP Singh argued that if the accused were the face of democracy in Jammu and Kashmir, then this kind of democracy was of no use. The convicts, especially former BSF DIG and former J&K police DSP, have failed the system and society as a whole as they held high positions and were supposed to be protectors.

The minor survivor had to go through many hardships and even her mother had

discarded her. She was harassed, tortured and forced into prostitution due to poverty. Her house was burnt down, but she maintained her stand in court, said the prosecution, which had sought life imprisonment for all the convicts.

Defence

The defence argument was the case was not just of rape and immoral trafficking.

Kashmir being a conflict zone, the defence claimed, had a huge bearing on the case. The charges against the accused were concocted to malign all those who were connected with the affairs of the state and were working for the Government of India, it added.

The aim of the scripted conspiracy, according to the defence, was to whip up anger of locals against the Indian establishment and security forces. The case, it claimed, had origin in the PIL filed by the Kashmir wing of the Jammu and Kashmir high court.

Former J&K police DSP Mohammad Ashraf Mir

In 2003, Sabeena made Rehana accompany her to a hospital. However, instead of hospital, she took the survivor to a hotel where the 40-year-old DSP Mohammad Ashraf Mir, wearing his police uniform, was present.

Mir, an encounter specialist, questioned Sabeena about the survivor's age, but Sabeena passed off Rehana as an 18-year-old. Mir had raped the survivor twice.

The defence contended that the survivor named Mir had thrown her and her family out of the house of a migrant Pandit family they had forcibly occupied. But the court did not buy that argument and said involvement of Mir, a police officer, in the case had shattered the faith of the public.

Former BSF DIG KC Padhi

Padhi was posted as BSF DIG at Srinagar's BSF camp. He killed 40 militants in the Valley and was awarded the President's medal.

The court convicted Padhi of raping the teen survivor at his camp residence in 2004. Sabeena took her to Padhi's residence in Padhi's official vehicle. They were both served tea by a servant and Padhi took the survivor to his bedroom and raped her.

The defence contended that sanction under Section 197 of CRPC was not obtained and as per rules, but court overruled that, saying, "No act or law permits any civilian or military man to commit sexual violence against woman."

Convicting him of rape, the judge said, "Killing more than 40 militants by convict KC Padhi while on duty in the Valley does not overshadow or condone his act of committing rape upon the victim... The commission of offence committed by Padhi cannot be ignored because he had served the country by performing his official duties efficiently at the risk of his and his family life. Hence, in the opinion of the court, killing militants at the risk of his life and being the target of militants in the Valley does not fall in the category of mitigating factors."

Shabir Ahmad Laway and Masood Ahmad

Shabbir Ahmad Laway and Masood Ahmed raped the survivor in 2005. She was taken to his home by another girl and when she reached there, both Laway and Masood were present. She was forced to drink liquor and was first raped by Masood and then by Laway.

The defence argued that Laway, a surrendered militant who had joined mainstream after surrendering, had helped the security forces to kill militants. Some relatives of the survivor, members of militant outfits, were killed in encounters and the defence claimed that the survivor had named Laway to take revenge.

The two men also were responsible for Rehana being evicted from a rented house, the defence said and added the revenge point again.

Shabbir Ahmad Langoo

An acquaintance, Shabbir Ahmad Langoo used to visit Rehana's home to play cards with her father and she called him "Chacha."

Lango, a dealer in copper articles, was obsessed with Rehana and wanted to marry her at any cost.

He took Rehana and her sister to attend the feast ostensibly. But Lango made her sister sit with someone and took the survivor to another house where he proposed to her. Shocked and stunned, Rehana rejected his proposal, but an angry Lango raped her.

A few days later, he again raped her and made a video recording. He used the video to blackmail her and force her into marrying him. Lango had also threatened the survivor and her mother not to divulge his name after police started an investigation into the leaked video clips.

The defence painted the survivor as an “immoral” girl of “bad character,” this was rejected by the court that pointed out in the judgment that “a man does not get licence for sexual intercourse with a girl, if she does not accept his proposal of marriage. This reflects the male mentality in which a female is not more than a thing or an article.”

Rape is a crime, not medical condition

The defence's contention was that the survivor was an adult and was not raped, but had consensual sex as she never claimed to have been forced against her will. It also pointed out that a medical report was unavailable and there was no record of injuries sustained by the survivor.

The court ruled that the case did not involve police action immediately after the rapes. She was forced into sexual activities more than two years prior to registration of an FIR. “The absence of injuries on private parts of the victim or absence of violence on her person will neither by itself falsify the case of rape, nor could it be construed as an evidence of consent. Rape is crime and not a medical condition. Rape is a legal term and not a diagnosis made by medical officer treating the victim,” the court ruled.

Poverty is form of structural violence

The judgment blamed the system for pushing poor girls into a vicious circle of

sexual exploitation, adding that poverty is a form of structural violence. “Sexual violence against women is not a new phenomenon nor is it confined to certain region, religion, area, community, caste or race. Poverty is one big factor which contributes to sexual violence against women. Most girls of poor families become prey to satisfy the lust of men for petty amounts and ruin their life. So, poverty in itself is a form of structural violence because poverty exists due to failure of the system. So, it is the system which is responsible for forcing poor girls into the muddy profession of flesh trade.”

Implications not only confined to militancy in Kashmir

“In the present case, the fact that the victim was a minor and belonged to a poor family cannot be connected in the narrow context of militancy in Kashmir. The implications of the present case have to be evaluated in a wider context as the fact of sexual violence against women due to poverty is not only confined to Kashmir or other parts of India, but in fact prevails in the Indian Subcontinent,” said the judgment.

Arya, please try to make a box of the following text.

Timeline

March 14, 2006: Srinagar police register an FIR under Section 67 of IT Act

May10, 2006: The CBI registers an FIR under Section 376 of RPC, Sections 3, 4, 5 of Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act and Section 67 of IT Act

June24, 2006: CBI files charges

September 4, 2006: The Supreme Court transfers the trial from Srinagar to Chandigarh

July24, 2015: Proceedings dropped against accused Sabeena after she dies

September 19, 2017: Proceedings dropped against accused Abdul Hamid Bullah after he dies

January 9, 2018: Defence closes its evidence

May 30, 2018: Court holds five persons guilty and acquits two

June 4, 2018: Arguments on quantum of sentence

June 6, 2018: CBI court awards 10-year imprisonment to all five convicts and imposes fine of Rs 3.5 lakh

Sentenced to 10 years in jail

Former J&K police DSP Mohammad Ashraf Mir, who was convicted for rape of a minor

Former BSF DIG KC Padhi, who was convicted for rape of a minor

Shabbir Ahmad Laway aka Shabbir Kala, who was convicted for rape of a minor

Shabbir Ahmad Langoo aka Lone, who was convicted of twice raping a minor

Masoor Ahmad aka Maqsood, who was convicted for rape of a minor

Acquitted

Businessman Mehrajuddin Malik was acquitted

Former additional advocate general Anil Sethi was acquitted

Dead

Sabeena and her husband Abdul Hamid Bulla died during the trial



Neha Sharma

Neha Sharma is a Multimedia and Multilingual communications professional and a broadcaster with 11 years of experience with interests in investigations, international relations, human interest stories with focus on gender sensitive issues.

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They said no one should cry, but then broke down How Unnao village mourned 'rape' victim

by **Fatima Khan**

theprint.in - 09 December 2019

Unnao: Around 9 pm late Saturday, the Unnao rape and murder victim's body was brought back to her Hindu Nagar residence to a reception of shower petals. Elder women of her family announced resolutely, “No one will cry!” Everyone acknowledged the appeal, but hardly anyone could oblige.

Over 50 hours after the victim was set ablaze in a small Unnao village over an alleged rape case — creating stark national headlines — her brother decided not to cremate her body.

“We can't cremate her. Her body is 90 percent burnt as it is, there isn't much left of it. We will bury her and build a memorial for her,” said the brother after he brought the body home from Safdarjung Hospital in the national capital.

The woman had been airlifted to the Delhi hospital after five men, two of them her alleged rapists, from a powerful upper-caste local family set her ablaze at 4 am Thursday. After treatment in Delhi for almost two days, she succumbed to grave injuries.

The 23-year-old was laid to rest Sunday next to her grandparents near the family home as a grieving village bid her farewell amid loud wails and blank stares.

How politics played out in the anguished village

Just 24 hours before this, the victim's home, a dilapidated shanty, the Hindu Nagar village of Unnao played host to a political drama as the case rocked the country — with even Parliament witnessing Opposition protests.

As the family awaited the body of the victim, the shock of what had happened to their daughter numbed their senses.

But even as the family went through the stages of grief, a flurry of politicians from

across the spectrum visited them to extend condolences.

Congress leader Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, BJP's Unnao MP Sakshi Maharaj, and Uttar Pradesh BJP ministers Swami Prasad Maurya and Kamal Rani Varun visited the family. Not to be left behind, members of Akhilesh Yadav's Samajwadi Party and the Social Democratic Party too showed up to express solidarity.

Politics played out in full public view as local Congress leaders protested against the BJP and attempted to block Sakshi Maharaj's cavalcade. The MP had to get down from his car and walk a few metres to reach the victim's home. When he met the family, he promised them Rs 25 lakh as compensation.

Later, after her burial, Lucknow Divisional Commissioner Mukesh Meshram gave the family a hand-written document, promising two houses under the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana — family members claim they had their names on a list under the affordable housing scheme but to no avail.

Meshram also promised to post a woman constable for 24-hour protection to the victim's sister, and a licence to the brother to carry a gun for self-defence.

'She's gone'

The family, however, didn't seem to care for such pronouncements. “Not a single politician who visited us today (Saturday) has even bothered to offer to arrange food for us,” one of the aunts of the victim told ThePrint as she lent a shoulder to the victim's sister-in-law to grieve.

The sister-in-law, who married the victim's elder brother 12 years ago, saw the victim's growing up years from too close. “A tiny, petite girl who grew up in front of my eyes...” she spoke of the victim, with motherly affection.

“...and now, just like that, she is gone,” she said while belching, after answering the media's questions on an empty stomach through the morning.

The youngest in a family of five sisters and two brothers, the victim was the apple of everyone's eye. Her elder sister, who was with her at the hospital along with the brother, described the victim as the most ambitious of the lot. A lover of spicy food

and dressing up, the young woman initially wanted to join the police force, before expressing a desire to study law. She finally applied for a job in a bank. She had aspirations, said her sister.

In the early hours of Thursday morning, as she ran frantically in a ball of fire on the streets about 500 metres from her village, her dreams came to a horrifying end after a year-long battle with her alleged rapists.

The fateful morning

The 23-year-old had set out towards Rae Bareilly, 50 km from her village, early Thursday. She was aggrieved that Shivam Trivedi, the prime accused in the rape case she had filed in March, was let off on bail on 25 November. Trivedi, an upper caste man with whom she had an affair, and his cousin Shubham allegedly raped her on 12 December 2018.

Shivam was arrested in September but got bail on 30 November.

On the fateful morning last week, the victim left her house to discuss the case with her lawyer.

On her way to catch a train, the woman was accosted and cornered by five men at Goura Chowk at 4 am, according to her statement to the police.

She was then stabbed and thrashed with a stick, before the accused poured kerosene on her body and set her ablaze, the statement said.

The Uttar Pradesh Police Thursday said there hasn't been a confirmation of the stabbing and other injuries.

Ajay Kumar Tripathi, inspector in-charge of the local Bihar Thana police station, said he covered her with a blanket the minute he saw her. She had run towards the nearest police station for over a km before calling the police using a passerby's phone, Tripathi told ThePrint.

After Tripathi took her to the nearby hospital, he went back arrested the five people she named as responsible for the crime — Shivam Trivedi, Shubham

Trivedi, Ram Kishore Trivedi (Shivam's father), Harishankar Trivedi (Shubham's father), and Umesh Bajpai (Trivedis' neighbour).

The five men have been under arrest since then.

'Brainwashed into love, videographed, raped at gunpoint'

The gruesome crime came months after the young woman filed a detailed FIR in her rape case in the Bihar Thana station as well the Lal Ganj police station in Rae Bareli on 5 March.

According to the FIR, Shivam Trivedi “brainwashed” her into falling in love with him but backed out of marriage later.

Over an unspecified period, he took her to various cities, including Rae Bareli, and established physical relations with her even as he shot the act on video. He also threatened to release these videos if she complained, the FIR said.

On 9 January 2018, he had a marriage registration contract prepared at the Rae Bareli civil court when she insisted that he married her. The wedding, however, never took place. Eventually, he threatened to kill the woman and her family if they pressured him further, the FIR said.

The girl then started living with her aunt in the Lal Ganj locality of Rae Bareli. According to the FIR, Shivam showed up at her place with cousin Shubham on 12 December. On the pretext of taking her to a nearby temple, they took her to a field and raped her at gunpoint.

Shivam was finally arrested on 19 September while Shubham went 'absconding'.

While the police had allegedly refused to register a case initially, the matter was set in motion only after she filed an application with the Rae Bareli court seeking a probe.

The victim's father is now demanding a “Hyderabad-like encounter” of the perpetrators, saying his daughter would be alive today if the law and order system was actually in place. “If only they registered the complaint on time, arrested them

on time and didn't let them off, this wouldn't have happened.”

The Trivedis

The 'feared' Trivedi clan in the Brahmin-majority village denied all the charges — even the affair.

Shubham's mother, Savitri Devi, who enjoys an unmistakable clout in the village having served as the village head (pradhan) of Hindu Nagar gram for 15 years now, denied that her son was related to the case.

“He had a hydrocele surgery on the day of the alleged rape, which means there's no way he could have been there. This is why he wasn't arrested,” Savitri Devi told ThePrint.

At her home, other family members also defend “Shubham bhaiya” in unison.

Meanwhile, Shivam's mother Saroj Trivedi said she knew nothing of the relationship between her son and the 23-year-old woman. “My son comes back to sleep at his home every day. He wasn't even friends with this girl, a relationship is a far cry.”

The families of the accused are demanding a Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) probe in the case.

However, a neighbourhood friend of Shivam Trivedi, who went for a morning jog on the day of the alleged crime, told ThePrint, “Within 20 minutes or so after we began jogging, he got a call informing him about the incident. I went back to my home and he went back to his.”

He was later questioned by the police. “I just told them we go running some times. Thankfully, they realised I have nothing to do with the case.”

Others in the village used the words “taanashaahi” (dictatorship) and “dabangai” (bullying) to describe the pradhan.

“Everyone is scared of her. She can get her men to beat anyone up, especially those who belong to lower castes. Her threat is real,” said a Scheduled Caste villager

who did not wish to be named.

The 23-year-old victim belonged to the 'lower caste' Lohar (blacksmith) community. Villagers told ThePrint that an inter-caste marriage is unimaginable in Unnao, and so “there was no way Shivam was going to marry the girl”.

The Trivedi family also rejected the allegation that it threatened the woman's family after the rape case was registered.

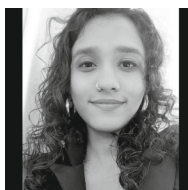
“The (girl's) mother has been working as a cook in the local government school for many years now. If she (Savitri Devi) really wanted to threaten them, the mother wouldn't continue having this job,” one of Shubham's sisters told ThePrint.

'Not just about our daughter'

For many villagers, the young woman's tragedy has been rendered into a cautionary tale. “This is what happens when one gets too much freedom,” said a villager who asked not to be named.

But everyone else doesn't agree. During the burial of the woman Sunday, many children of the village bawled inconsolably.

“This isn't just about our daughter. This is about the future of all the girls in the village, or this country,” said the victim's sister-in-law.



Fatima Khan

Fatima Khan is a multimedia journalist at ThePrint. She writes on politics and society. She has extensively covered the Covid-19 pandemic, the 2020 Delhi riots, the anti-CAA movement and several elections.

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खबर का असर: गैंगरेप का आरोपी नईम गिरफ्तार, गाँव कनेक्शन ने उठाया था मामला

by Neetu Singh

gaonconnection.com - 17 July 2019

लखनऊ। एक नाबालिग दलित पीड़िता के साथ दो महीने पहले हुए गैंगरेप में आरोपी को हरदोई पुलिस ने गिरफ्तार कर लिया है। गाँव कनेक्शन ने 16 जुलाई को प्रमुखता से इस खबर को उठाया था।

गाँव कनेक्शन को जांच अधिकारी (क्षेत्राधिकारी बघौली) अखिलेश राजन से फोन पर बताया कि "आरोपी नईम गिरफ्तार हो चुका है।" इसके आगे व्यस्तता के चलते उन्होंने ज्यादा जानकारी देने से मना कर दिया। आरोपी के गिरफ्तारी की खबर सुनकर पीड़ित परिवार को उम्मीद है कि अब उन्हें न्याय जरूर मिलेगा। पीड़िता ने गाँव कनेक्शन को फोन पर बताया, "आरोपी की गिरफ्तारी से हम बहुत खुश हैं। ऐसे लोगों को तो जेल जाना ही था। अगर किसी भी लड़की के साथ इस तरह की घटना हो तो वो हिम्मत न हारे। हमारी तरह वो भी आवाज़ उठाये उसे न्याय जरूर मिलेगा। अब हमें पूरा भरोसा है कि हमें न्याय जरूर मिलेगा।"

बता दें कि यूपी के हरदोई जिले के संडीला तहसील के एक गाँव में 15 साल की दलित पीड़िता जब 16 मई 2019 को स्कूल से साढ़े दस बजे लौट रही थी तो उसके साथ पास के दो अलग-अलग गाँव के रहने वाले दो लोगों ने गैंगरेप किया। आरोपी दबंग होने की वजह से घटना के दो महीने बाद भी गिरफ्तार नहीं हुए थे। लेकिन जब इस खबर को गाँव कनेक्शन ने प्रमुखता से छापा तो सोशल मीडिया पर फिल्म आर्टिकल-15 के डायरेक्टर से लेकर कई वरिष्ठ लोगों ने पुलिस से कार्यवाही की मांग की और नाराजगी जताई। जिसका नतीजा ये हुआ कि खबर लिखने के 24 घंटे के अन्दर मुख्य आरोपी नईम गिरफ्तार कर लिया गया। जबकि दूसरा आरोपी अभी भी फरार है।

ये है पूरा मामला...

हरदोई के संडीला तहसील के थाना कछौना के एक गाँव में रहने वाली पीड़िता हर दिन की तरह 16 मई 2019 को भी सुबह 10:30 पर स्कूल से वापस लौट रही थी। उसे इस बात का अंदेशा भी नहीं था कि जिन तीन किलोमीटर सुनसान झाड़ियों से वो रोज गुजरती है आज वही रास्ता उसके जीवन का सबसे काला दिन होगा। उस दिन पास के दो अलग-अलग गाँव के दबंग लड़के उसे झाड़ी में खींच ले गये जहाँ उसके साथ सामूहिक बलात्कार किया। पीड़िता ने गाँव कनेक्शन को बताया, "घटना के दो महीने पूरे होने को हैं, पर अभी तक कोई पकड़ा नहीं गया। पुलिस वाले कह रहे हैं घटना झूठी है, तुम मनगढ़ंत कहानी बना रही हो। अगर घटना झूठी है तो वो लोग सुलह समझौता को क्यों कह रहे हैं।"

पीड़िता आगे कहती है, "हमारे साथ जब वो लोग गलत कर रहे थे, तो कह रहे थे कि ऐसा हम बहुत लड़कियों के साथ कर चुके हैं पर कोई कुछ नहीं कर पाया। तुम भी कुछ नहीं कर पाओगी।"

जब जांच अधिकारी से पूछा गया कि एफआईआर दर्ज हो चुकी है, पीड़िता के 164 के बयान भी हो चुके हैं,

उसके बावजूद आरोपी क्यों गिरफ्तार नहीं हुआ? तो उन्होंने कहा, "सुप्रीम कोर्ट का फैसला है कि 164 के बयान की भी विवेचना कर ली जाए।"

एफआईआर हुए लगभग दो महीने हो चुके हैं। मेडिकल जांच और रेप से संबंधित धारा 164 के बयान भी हो चुके हैं। लेकिन पुलिस के अनुसार आरोपी इसलिए अभी तक गिरफ्तार नहीं हुए क्योंकि उनके पास इस घटना को लेकर कोई साक्ष्य नहीं हैं।



Neetu

Neetu has always been passionate about grassroot reporting. She has worked with Gyanvani, Community Radio ' Waqt ki Awaz', Gaon Connection, and is currently with Shades of Rural India.

by **Farhana Ahmed**

The Assam Tribune - 26 October 2019

NORTH LAKHIMPUR - Shabnam (name changed), a young woman at present living with her maternal aunt near Seajuli Tea Estate under Bogenadi Police Station in Lakhimpur district is the mother of two young children. She was not allowed to stay in her parental house at Panchnoi near Dejoo Tea Estate.

Shabnam recently escaped a long ordeal of sex slavery inside Arunachal Pradesh where she was abducted and trafficked at a very young age. She literally lost her own identity and childhood memories and also her mother tongue.

Citing instances of her traumatised life in Arunachal Pradesh, Shabnam narrated her endless nightmarish experiences of physical abuse and torture before this Correspondent. Expressing her inability to name her abductor-trafficker as she was tender aged then, Shabnam said she was forced into motherhood at the age of 13 by her employer named Hagu Palang of Kamle district in Arunachal Pradesh. She could not breast-feed her first child, who was a daughter, because of her teenage motherhood. She was forced to work in the cardamom plantations of Hagu Palang for 12 hours a day even after the delivery of her child and was subjected to physical abuse by his wives from earlier marriages.

Shabnam said that Palang had three wives and he kept her as a sex slave. She also alleged that a son of Palang's first wife murdered her daughter by drowning in a river. After that, Shabnam continued to be used and abused as a forced labour in the cardamom plantation and exploited as a sex slave by Palang for several years. Shabnam, subsequently, gave birth to two more children, a daughter who is now two-and-a-half-years old and a son who is about one year old.

Not surprisingly, Shabnam awaited her chance to make an escape from the blood-stained clutches of her ruthless abductor, who exploited her endlessly. As she finally managed to give her abductor the slip, she ultimately reached the border of Lakhimpur district with the help of an old woman. Strange though it

may seem, her troubles did not end there as destiny had more misery in store for her. Her parental family at Panchnoi, Dejoo refused to extend her much-needed shelter.

Her father Chunnilal Karmakar and mother Julie Karmakar are long dead. The apprehension of being 'caught' by Palang again naturally haunts Shabnam. A destitute today with two young children staring at an uncertain future, Shabnam is patiently awaiting justice. Shabnam's ghastly plight and longing for justice after her prolonged trauma once again lays bare the existence of sexual slavery of girls trafficked from Assam inside Arunachal Pradesh. Significantly, Shabnam informed that there are many trafficked girls from Assam who are kept as slaves in remote areas of Arunachal Pradesh. Trafficking of both boys and girls to be engaged as slaves in various plantations and other back-breaking work inside Arunachal Pradesh has been covertly going on unabated. In most cases the victims are from the tea garden Adivasi and religious minority communities of Assam who are targeted by the traffickers by taking advantage of their vulnerable position in the society.



Farhana Ahmed

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36 Araku Valley's dark secret

by **Sumit Bhattacharjee**
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Visakhapatnam: Located deep in the Eastern Ghats, Anantagiri, home to the Valmiki tribe, is one among the 11 mandals of the Visakhapatnam agency. Not far from it is a famed tourist spot, the Araku Valley Mandal. This time of the year, the landscape is awash in green with Deodar trees towering over coffee and pepper plantations. But the scenic beauty conceals an ugly reality that the authorities are still struggling to address: the trafficking of Adivasi women and girls.

The homecoming

Sitting on the steps of her thatched mud house in a village in Anantagiri Mandal, Rajini looks downcast. She was 15 years old when she was tricked into a prostitution ring and rescued in June last by Nature, an NGO that works on rehabilitating trafficked women. She is 27 now.

Rajini recalls her childhood. She would run free in the 'pasupu' (turmeric) fields during the day, tend to the paddy field with her grandfather and help him cut the jackfruits that grow in abundance in the region. She would also play hide-and-seek with her grandmother in the mustard plantations. But the carefree days came to an abrupt end when she turned 15. The villagers looked at her differently, and some treated her with contempt. She was too young to understand why.

Two developments in 2005 changed her life forever: she attained puberty and she lost her mother. "My mother became very ill. The ailment was a mystery to us," Rajini says. She would later discover that her mother had contracted AIDS.

Life was harsh for the young girl and her grandparents. It seemed as though money had dried up following her mother's death. Rajini and her grandparents did not have enough to eat. In the winter months, with no winter clothing, she would lie in the kitchen to keep herself warm. Then, one day, she was approached by a woman from the plains who promised to get her a job in Hyderabad. "I never

had any formal education and I knew nothing about Hyderabad,” she says. “I had never set foot beyond the hills. Getting picked up in a car from my village was a dream for me.”

Descent into hell

Once in Hyderabad, Rajini was lodged in a cage-like building that her handlers referred to as a hostel. They got her registered to work in the packaging unit of a food processing company. But that was only a cover. Within a week, Rajini was pushed into sex work. “I was raped by at least 15 different men in four days,” she says. “I realised then that I had been tricked. It was there that I met another, slightly older Adivasi girl from a neighbouring village. She told me that there were more than 300 Adivasi girls from different mandals of the Visakhapatnam agency in hellholes across the country.”

From 2005 to 2010, Rajini was moved from one place to another, including New Delhi, Aurangabad and Mumbai. “We were kept on a diet of rice, starch and one curry, three meals a day. We were given a monthly ration of cosmetics, beaten if we did not oblige customers who did not want to use a condom, and taken to a doctor when we fell ill with venereal disease. During this period I came in contact with an older girl from my village who had also been trafficked. She told me that my mother was a commercial sex worker who had died of HIV/AIDS, and that was why I was not accepted in my village,” says Rajini.

In 2010, when Rajini was kept in a brothel in Hyderabad, she eloped with a driver with the help of another trafficked Adivasi girl and landed in V.Madugula, a suburb of Visakhapatnam. Her travails did not end with the elopement. The driver was already married, and he forced her back into prostitution. In 2012, she gave birth to a child who is now five. The driver abandoned her in 2015 when she was six months pregnant with her second child.

“There was no food for me and my child. As I was pregnant, I could not even go back to the profession that I hated the most. With great difficulty I gave birth to a second child. But in 2016, I was forced to sell the infant for 25,000. A hospital nurse helped me do it. I wanted to see him grow up, but I was not even given the address of the buyer,” she recalls.

The promise of employment

According to the 12 police stations spread across the 11 mandals, about 220 cases of missing girls have been recorded in the last five years. But other estimates, as per the records of the State Commission for Protection of Child Rights (SCPCR) and NGOs such as Nature, suggest that 1,500 women may have gone missing in the past 10 years. In 2017, the police recorded 18 cases of missing girls.

The Superintendent of Police of Visakhapatnam (Rural), Rahul Dev Sharma, says that the number could be more as many of these cases go unreported. “The girls and women come from various parts of the agency areas such as Paderu, GK Veedhi, Chintapalli, G. Madugula, Anantagiri, Koyyuru, and Araku mandals in Visakhapatnam district, Gummalaxmipuram in Vizianagaram district, Seethammapeta in Srikakulam, and Rampachodavaram in East Godavari,” says S.B. Balaraju, former chairperson of the SCPCR and the founder of Nature.

Subbalakshmi from Araku mandal, Padma from Gummalaxmipuram, and Krishnaveni from Chodavaram have similar harrowing stories to recount. All of them were rescued last year and are being rehabilitated.

In 2014, Subbalakshmi was a Class 9 student when she eloped with a mason – a married man, who was 10 years older than her. Now she is back at home after having been forced to work as a sex worker in Bengaluru and Rajahmundry. She was abandoned when she got pregnant at 18. Due to her poor health, her twins were stillborn. She is now terminally ill with AIDS. Many cases such as Subbalakshmi's go unreported due to social stigma.

There have been instances when the young girls have found their way back to their hamlets from brothels in Goa, New Delhi, Mumbai, Bengaluru and Kolkata. Many have contracted AIDS. According to Balaraju, about 500 such women have returned in the last 10 years and around 200 have tested HIV positive in the Visakhapatnam agency area alone.

From sex slavery to trafficking

According to P.D. Satyapal, head of the Department of Anthropology in Andhra Pradesh University who has done considerable research on the tribals of the

Eastern Ghats, the trafficking of young girls from the region goes back all the way to the British era, when there was widespread sex slavery. After the British left, trafficking picked up as the Telugu film industry grew, based in what was then known as Madras. The picturesque landscape and cool climate provided an ideal setting for outdoor shoots, and in the early 1980s filmmakers flocked to the Araku Valley. This ended up bringing the industry in contact with the Adivasis.

The first such case of trafficking that came to light involved a young woman, Madhu, who in 1982 was offered a job in the film industry. Madhu returned after about three years and took 10 girls with her from the Araku mandal. Three of them later returned, infected with HIV, says Satyapal.

The movie merchants were followed by moneylenders from Nellore in the late 1980s. But the major blow came from gemstone miners. According to Satyapal, the number of trafficking cases of tribal girls from the agency areas of Visakhapatnam and Vizianagaram shot up two decades ago, between 1990 and 2000, when gemstone miners from the plain areas forayed into the forests.

“The gemstone miners and businessmen hailed from different parts of the country, from as far as Rajasthan and Gujarat. It was they who first exposed the tribals to big money and technology such as mobile phones,” he says.

Charu Sinha, a senior Indian Police Service officer who had served as the Superintendent of Police of East Godavari and is currently posted in Telangana, says: “There are two angles to trafficking in the tribal belt. First, the young Adivasi girls from Visakhapatnam, Vizianagaram, Srikakulam, and East Godavari are taken to other towns and cities mainly by women who were victims themselves and are from the same area. These older women are paid by the kingpins to bring more girls, and the teenagers fall for the supposedly rich lifestyle displayed by the older women. The second is the attraction of city life and the film industry. The Integrated Tribal Development Authority and social welfare department hostels are ironically the places from where the girls are taken. The girls are tempted with promises of a great city life or the promise of a career in the film industry. Typically, the middlemen are young men. The girls, once caught in the vicious circle of money, deception, exploitation and social stigma, rarely turn back. They, in turn, get others from the same villages.”

The elopement route

With the rise in trafficking, certain locations are proving treacherous for Adivasi girls. Villages that are close to main roads, railway stations and bus stations, and the weekly markets in the agency areas are places where the girls are most vulnerable. It is here that they come in contact with a world that is very different from their village life. It is here that middlemen, whose network extends all over India, come and look for young and particularly poor Adivasi girls and try to entice them with flashy clothes and baubles.

Most of these cases of girls going missing are treated as elopement cases by their family members, says the DIG of Visakhapatnam (Rural), Ch. Srikanth. So, it is difficult for these girls to file a complaint as most of these cases go unreported, he says.

As for the middlemen, the promise of marriage has become the most common way for them to get girls, Balaraju says. “In 80% of the cases, as the families object to the marriage, 'the couple' elopes,” he says.

How is the increase in trafficking cases being dealt with?

The Chairperson of the Andhra Pradesh State Mahila Commission, Nannapaneni Rajakumari, says, “We are planning to set up a helpline and counselling teams at the district and mandal levels to counsel young girls and women about trafficking. Apart from this, district collectors, especially those covering tribal areas such as Visakhapatnam, Vizianagaram, and Srikakulam, have been told to identify and map the vulnerable pockets and collect data. We are also working on a project of employment-centric skill development for tribal women.”

However, Sunita Krishnan of Prajwala, an NGO that rescues and rehabilitates victims of trafficking, feels that the trafficking issue is not being addressed in an appropriate manner. “Most of the trafficking cases come to light after the police conduct a raid at a brothel. But things do not progress from there. Typically, after a raid, the victims are sent to correction homes and the brothel managers are booked under the Immoral Trafficking (Prevention) Act, 1956, and sent to remand. The investigation closes with that,” she says.

She adds that the punishment is insufficient under the Act. “The police need to use stringent Sections of the Indian Penal Code such as Sections 370 (buying or disposing of any person as a slave), 370A (exploitation of a trafficked person), and other relevant ones concerning illegal confinement, sexual exploitation, and kidnapping,” she says.

The most crucial way of solving the problem is by reaching the kingpins and middlemen, says the legal advisor to the Visakhapatnam City Police Commissionerate, K. Ramakrishna. “The issue is not being viewed holistically by the State government and the police,” he says.

While officials think of ways to tackle the problem, the women try to put their traumatic past behind them and think of the future. Rajini says she wants to educate her son. “I have requested the headmaster to admit him next year. I want him to have a proper home and a decent life,” she says, as she gets up from the steps and walks towards the village school. “I am now learning tailoring to support my family. I have also joined the NGO that rescued me. I hope to be a part of their team. I have decided to tour the tribal hamlets to educate young girls, and tell them not to get tricked by strangers who promise them jobs in cities.”

(Names of the trafficked women have been changed.)



Sumit Bhattacharjee

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एसे खत्म हो सकता है मानव तस्करी के काले धंदे का खेल

by Guruswarup Mishra

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रांची - झारखंड में 90 फीसदी ह्यूमन ट्रेफिकिंग की शिकार हमारी आदिवासी बेटियां हो रही हैं। इनकी सादगी, भोलापन, गरीबी और अशिक्षा का बेजा फायदा उठाकर मानव तस्कर महानगरों में इनकी मासूमियत की खुलेआम बोली लगाकर मालामाल हो रहे हैं और ये नर्क की जिंदगी जीने को अभिशाप्त हैं। इसके बावजूद मानव तस्करी का काला धंधा आज भी बेरोक-टोक जारी है। कुछ एहतियात बरते जाएं, तो हमारी आदिवासी बहन-बेटियां दिल्ली जैसे महानगरों के बाजारों में बिकने से बच सकेंगी और मानव तस्करी के काले धंधे का खेल खत्म हो सकता है।

बेरहम दिल्ली में आदिवासी बेटियों की सौदेबाजी का दर्द

ह्यूमन ट्रेफिकिंग यानी मानव तस्करी।

पशुओं की तरह इंसानों की खरीद-फरोख्त।

दिल्ली जैसे महानगरों में काम दिलाने की आड़ में सौदेबाजी करने वाली अनगिनत प्लेसमेंट एजेंसियों की मंडी सजी हुई है, जहां कानून को धत्ता बता इंसान खुलेआम बिकते हैं। खासकर नाबालिग लड़कियां। यह सुनकर थोड़ा अटपटा लगेगा, लेकिन कारोबारी दुनिया का एक स्याह सच यह भी है कि खूबसूरत झारखंड की सैकड़ों भोली-भाली मासूम आदिवासी बेटियां इस बाजार में नीलाम हो चुकी हैं। मानव तस्करों की मकड़जाल इतनी मजबूत है कि बेरहम दिल्ली में बेटियों की खुलेआम लग रही बोली तक नहीं गूँज पाती। कुछ बेटियां खुशनसीब निकलीं, जिन्हें रेस्क्यू कर वापस लाया जा सका और वह आज खुली हवा में सांस लेकर अपने परिवार के साथ हैं, लेकिन मानव तस्करों के चंगुल में फंसी सैकड़ों बेटियां आज भी लापता हैं। जिनका कोई सुराग नहीं। आज भी शासन-प्रशासन के सामने उन्हें मानव तस्करी के दलदल से सकुशल वापस लाने की चुनौती बरकरार है। संदेश है कि बाहरी चमक-दमक से किसी के बहकावे में न आएँ। आस-पास ही बेहतर काम की तलाश करें।

पैसे की खनक के आगे

अपने भी बन गये पराये

पैसा बोलता है। इसकी खनक इस कदर तेज है कि अपनों ने भी तमाम रिश्ते-नातों को दांव पर लगाकर इनके बचपन का सौदा कर दिया। अब भला किस पर ऐतबार किया जाये। खूटी की रीना, साहेबगंज की काजल, मांडर की सीता, गुमला की रानी को सगे लोगों ने छोटी सी उम्र में पशुओं की जिंदगी जीने के लिए दिल्ली के बाजार में बेच दिया। सबक है किसी पर हद से ज्यादा यकीन नहीं करें। बाहर जाने की सूचना अपनों को जरूर दें। छुपाएँ नहीं। काम दिलाने व शादी की आड़ में होती है तस्करी मानव तस्कर आदिवासी बहुल इलाके में काम

दिलाने का प्रलोभन देकर नाबालिग लड़कियों को फांसते हैं, तो गैर आदिवासी इलाके में गरीब बेटियों से शादी कर उन्हें इस दलदल में धकेल देते हैं। सबक है कि शादी और काम पर बाहर जाने को लेकर सूझबूझ से काम लें।

पंचायत सचिव से कराएं रजिस्ट्रेशन

प्लेसमेंट एजेंसियों पर कड़ी नजर

मानव तस्करी पर रोक के लिए वर्ष 2012 में पंचायत सचिव को गांव से बाहर कमाने जानेवालों का रजिस्ट्रेशन करने का निर्देश दिया गया था। इसके तहत मजदूरों के लिए लाल कार्ड जबकि ठेकेदारों के लिए सफेद कार्ड जारी किया जाना था। इसमें इनकी पूरी जानकारी रहती। कुशल व अर्द्धकुशल श्रमिकों के बीमा की भी व्यवस्था थी। आली की राज्य समन्वयक रेशमा सिंह बताती हैं कि अगर उस वक्त यह जमीनी स्तर पर लागू हो जाता, तो कई बेटियां अपने घर के आंगन की शोभा बढ़ा रही होतीं। वह कहती हैं कि महानगरों की प्लेसमेंट एजेंसियों पर भी कड़ी नजर रखनी होगी। सबक है कि ग्राम सभा को सूचना दिए बिना काम के लिए बाहर जाने से परहेज करें। अपने पास रखें मुसीबत में काम आनेवाले मोबाइल नंबर दिल्ली जैसे महानगरों में घरेलू काम, पंजाब-हरियाणा में खेती-बारी, पश्चिम बंगाल व त्रिपुरा में ईंट भट्टा पर काम के लिए और बड़े शहरों एवं मलेशिया व अफ्रीका में कंस्ट्रक्शन के कार्य के लिए तस्करी की जाती है। इस क्रम में इन्हें यौन शोषण व मानसिक प्रताड़ना का भी शिकार होना पड़ता है। झारखंड के पश्चिमी सिंहभूम, गुमला, खूंटी, साहेबगंज, सिमडेगा, गोड्डा, रांची, धनबाद, लातेहार, लोहरदगा समेत अन्य जिलों से बड़ी संख्या में तस्करी होती है। सबक है कि मुसीबत में काम आनेवाले जरूरी मोबाइल नंबर जरूर अपने पास रखें।

पुनर्वास की नहीं है उचित व्यवस्था

रेस्क्यू कर लायी गयी नाबालिग व बालिग लड़कियों के पुनर्वास की उचित व्यवस्था नहीं है। मजबूरन वह दोबारा इस काले धंधे के दलदल में उतर जाती हैं। रेस्क्यू के बाद उनकी प्रोपर मॉनिटरिंग भी नहीं हो पाती। एटसेक के राज्य प्रमुख संजय कुमार मिश्रा कहते हैं कि पुनर्वास की अच्छी व्यवस्था के साथ-साथ पीड़िताओं की नियमित निगरानी रखने की जरूरत है। झारखंड विक्टिम कंपनसेशन स्कीम के प्रति जागरूकता भी इनके लिए वरदान है। सुरक्षित पलायन की पुख्ता व्यवस्था पर जोर दिया जाना चाहिए। सबक है कि पीड़िताओं के पुनर्वास की अच्छी व्यवस्था करनी होगी।

तस्करों की कमर तोड़ने के लिए कड़ी सजा जरूरी

मानव तस्करी की काली दुनिया में पन्ना लाल, बाबा बामदेव, रोहित मुनी, प्रभा मुनि, सुरेश साहू, गायत्री साहू, पवन साहू व लता लकड़ा कुख्यात हैं। इन जैसे बड़े तस्करों पर कानून की सख्ती जरूरी है। दीया सेवा संस्था की सचिव सीता स्वांसी कहती हैं कि तस्करों की कमर तोड़ने के लिए कड़ी सजा पर जोर देना होगा, तभी इनका मनोबल गिरेगा। सबक है कि अदालत में कड़ी सजा को लेकर अभियोजन सीरियस रहे। कोई कोताही नहीं बरते।

लापता बच्चों के मामले को पुलिस गंभीरता से ले

सुप्रीम कोर्ट के आदेश के बावजूद लापता बच्चों के मामले को गंभीरता से नहीं लिया जाता. पुलिस अधिकारियों की घोर लापरवाही कई मासूमों की जिंदगी तबाह कर चुकी है. शिकायत के बाद भी पुलिस काफी मशक्कत के बाद सिर्फ सनहा दर्ज कर खानापूर्ति कर देती है. एफआईआर दर्ज नहीं की जाती. इस कारण पुलिस उनकी खोजबीन को लेकर गंभीरता नहीं दिखाती. हकीकत यह है कि राज्यभर से सैकड़ों बच्चे-बच्चियां गुम हैं. घरवाले थाना के चक्कर लगा-लगाकर थक चुके हैं. उनकी आंखें इंतजार में पथरा गयी हैं, लेकिन अबतक उनका कोई सुराग नहीं है. वक्त रहते अगर पुलिस सक्रिय हो जाती, तो कई मासूमों का बचपन सुरक्षित हो जाता. सबक है कि पुलिस मासूमों की गुमशुदगी के मामले को पूरी गंभीरता से ले.

एंटी ह्यूमन ट्रेफिकिंग यूनिट की सक्रियता

बढ़े मानव तस्करी पर नकेल कसने के लिए वर्ष 2011 में एंटी ह्यूमन ट्रेफिकिंग यूनिट (एएचटीयू) का गठन किया गया था. इसके तहत राज्य के आठ जिले गुमला नगर थाना, सिमडेगा नगर थाना, खुंटी नगर थाना, दुमका नगर थाना, रांची कोतवाली थाना, पश्चिमी सिंहभूम के चाईबासा सदर थाना, लोहरदगा सदर थाना व पलामू सदर थाने में एएचटीयू का गठन हुआ था. इसके गठित होने के बाद भी मानव तस्करी का धंधा फल-फूल रहा है. सबक है कि एंटी ह्यूमन ट्रेफिकिंग यूनिट की सक्रियता इस कदर बढ़े कि तस्करों में खौफ हो.

बाल समूह, महिला समूह, सखी मंडल बनाये जायें

समाज की संवेदनहीनता खत्म करने के लिए खामोशी तोड़नी होगी. इसके लिए बच्चों के बीच बाल समूह, महिलाओं के लिए महिला स्वयं सहायता समूह व सखी मंडल अधिक से अधिक बनाये जायें, ताकि इनकी सामाजिक मजबूती बढ़े. ये आर्थिक रूप से सशक्त हो सकें. हर छोटी-बड़ी बातें सबको पता चल सके. सबक है कि समूह के जरिए संवादहीनता खत्म होगी. सामाजिक एकता बढ़ेगी. इससे मुसीबत के वक्त पूरा गांव साथ होगा. कौशल विकास कर हुनरमंद बनाएं गांवों में काफी बेरोजगारी है. गरीबी है. अच्छी शिक्षा व्यवस्था नहीं है. अवसर सीमित हैं. ऐसे में परिवार के पेट की आग बुझाने के लिए काम तो चाहिए. मजबूरन अच्छे काम के ज्ञासे में आकर वे मानव तस्कर के चंगुल में फंस जाते हैं. सरकारी योजनाएं जमीनी स्तर पर लागू करने की व्यवस्था सुनिश्चित कर ग्रामीणों का कौशल विकास किया जाये. हुनरमंद बनने के बाद बाहर जाने की जरूरत ही नहीं पड़ेगी. सबक है कि सरकार कौशल विकास को लेकर सुदूर ग्रामीण इलाके में व्यापक अभियान चलाये. अधिक से अधिक लोगों को हुनरमंद बनाये. सरकार की संवेदनशीलता, ग्रामीणों की जागरूकता, शासन-प्रशासन की गंभीरता व स्वयं सेवी संस्थाओं की सहभागिता यानी सामूहिक प्रयास से इस पर रोक संभव है.



Guruswarup Mishra

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IV

Right to Participation



Right to Participation

Women, constituting 50 percent of the population, should ideally be sharing equal resources and power with men in the society. The reality is far from this simple expectation. Less number of women participate in paid work, fewer of them are in leadership positions and they earn comparatively lesser than the men. In fact, the World Bank data shows that in India, the workforce participation has decreased from 26% in 2005 to 20.3 % in 2019. And when it comes to representation of women in politics, while women's participation in local self-government institutions is significant, their participation in parliament and in the state level legislative bodies is still very limited. According to the WEF Global Gender Gap Report 2020, India ranks 18th in terms of political empowerment, far better than its rank in the other dimensions of the index: 149th in economic participation and opportunity, 112th in educational attainment, 150th in health and survival, and 108th in the overall index. The political empowerment ranking sits above the UK's ranking of 20th and significantly above the US rank of 68th

In this section we bring to you a few media reports and articles which deal with women's participation in economic activities, and in political decision making. While the gender stereotyping of work limits the choices of women, it is heartening to read the stories of women who are pursuing occupations which challenge those gender stereotypes.

Raksha kumar in her report **These Superwomen From Himachal Pradesh Show Why Empowered Women Make For An Empowered Country** brings to the readers the story of women who run the Bhaira Jam factory in a mountainous village of Himachal Pradesh. The engaging narrative focuses on how women of a far-flung village are helping themselves by managing an all women enterprise making jams along with their household chores. Bhaira Jam Factory, a powerful and an inspiring story of women entrepreneurship and

empowerment is also creating flexible family and community structures that promote social inclusion and further gender equality. It subtly presents the nuances of the gender roles being challenged and rewritten.

Alakananda Kakoti in her feature **Under The Open Sky** also focuses on a group of rural women who are driven by a desire to achieve financial independence and are engaging in various income generating activities. However, lack of information and knowledge on organising and mobilising resources to achieve financial independence are the major impediments to their growth, the reality of our rural women across the country.

Women are employed in large numbers in the tea plantations, though at the lowest rungs. Receiving lowest wages, exploited in many ways, not having any kind of social safety net and isolated from the world, the women tea plantation workers are the most vulnerable and least written about in media.

Anuradha Sharma in her feature **Silent Shades Of The Tea Leaf** provides a comprehensive, well-researched and insightful overview of the lives and struggles of women working in the tea estates of Darjeeling. She not only compiles facts related to the background, protests, living and working conditions of women, but gives thoughtful and sensitive insights from the women's perspective, capturing the ambience of the hills as well as the women's lives.

Cherry Agarwal's report on the other hand shows that gender discrimination prevails even in the most exalted professions like journalism. Cherry presents an introspective piece on the lack of representation of women journalists on editorial and op-ed spaces in leading and reputed publications., The research-based report **An Anatomy Of Op-Ed And Editorial Pages** is also substantiated by leading voices of women in journalism. It is rare to find journalists looking at their own profession and ask difficult and uncomfortable questions. Cherry's piece holds up a mirror to her own profession.

Modernisation and globalisation, while opening up the markets, have dealt a death blow to the traditional arts and crafts that are predominantly the domain of

women. Rini Barman in her feature **Wrapped In The Popularity Of Assam's Mekhela Sador Are Stories Of Lost Diversity** focuses on women weavers of Assam, the history of the weaving tradition, the gradual increase in popularity of the traditional garb – Mekhela Sador, over the years, and the consequent decline in diversity of design and symbolism. She highlights the overall disappearance of the skills and mode of livelihood for the women of Assam.

Akhand, Mohd Asghar and Meena bring to the readers awe inspiring stories of women breaking into the most unexpected male bastions.

Akhand shines the spotlight on Riturani, the Female Undertaker who had taken up the task of cremating bodies despite many hurdles. What makes it even more poignant is that she was rescued by a good samaritan from a suicide bid owing to marital discord and found her mission and meaning in life in cremating the bodies. Akhand's lucid writing style takes the readers on a journey of Riturani Samal's life as she breaks the gender barriers.

Restriction on mobility of women is an intrinsic feature of the patriarchal value system and accordingly the public transport system is dominated by men in various roles. Mohd Asghar Khan in his report **बैटरी वाली गाडी के जरिए जीविका तलाशती तीन महिलाएँ** presents an inspiring story of three women who made their livelihoods by driving e-rickshaws in Ranchi. The stories of Santoshi Munda, Janaki Munda and Suman Devi are varied but have one common thread – a desire for better life for themselves and for their families. Their challenge includes, among others, the disdain from fellow men e-rickshaw drivers.

Meena in her report **रैप की दुनिया में महिलाएँ** presents an in-depth look at the Indian female rappers, their journeys as well as aspirations. She highlights their contribution to present the female experience in this art form which represents the voice of the oppressed.

The 50% reservation for women local self- government institutions has increased the political participation of women though for long women were proxy candidates for the men. However, over the years many women grassroot level

leaders have asserted themselves and left their mark on the development of their villages.

Amita Mehta in her report **Women Sarpanches: They Are Not Guided, They Guide** highlights the positive changes brought about by empowered Mahila Sarpanches in the rural areas of Gujarat, Rajasthan, Maharashtra and Odisha. The elected women representatives in the story are no more proxies for their menfolk. They have defied the odds while changing the perception about women and their own sense of identity. The heartening stories depict their leadership skills in trying to improve the lives of others in the village.

Inclusion and diversity are the current buzzwords in corporate HR departments. Yet, the transgender people face discrimination and violence and are often denied their basic rights to education, employment and human dignity. Ravishankar Upadhyay in his article **बिहार के ट्रान्सजेंडरों ने अपनी काबिलियत से बनाई पहचान** recounts the triumphs and tribulations of trans persons in Bihar in gaining an identity of their own. While highlighting the stigmatisation and marginalisation of transgender community, Ravishankar also focuses on their struggles to be recognised as equal citizens by the constitution. The article presents the challenges and the success of transgender persons in Bihar in creating a space for themselves in the society.

Drawing from an academic research report by a student, Mahesh Shah in his feature **The Tragic Story Of Transgenders** unravels the issues in the lives of transgender persons. Through an interactive pictorial story 'Tale of the Third', the student tries to create awareness about the transgender community, and beseeches the society to be inclusive as well as create an enabling environment for all genders.

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These superwomen from Himachal Pradesh show why empowered women make for an empowered country

by **Raksha Kumar**

The Hindu - 06 October 2018

Bhuira's women are coping with the higher workload by creating vastly more flexible family and community structures. And they are simultaneously pushing towards modernity much faster than their neighbours.

Everyone in the village sneaks a glance when Upasana Kumari drives her White Maruti 800 to work. "Driving a car is intoxicating," says Kumari. A winding, muddy, single lane road that starts from the edge of the hillock where Kumari's house is, passes in front of the jam factory, approximately 4 km away.

For the 15 minutes that she drives, Kumari confesses that she feels like a woman with wings. Free to fly away.

Kumari is 27 years old and has a bachelor's degree in Information Technology from a college in Rajgarh, the closest town, as well as a long-distance diploma in IT services. She works at the Bhuira Jam Factory as an office administrator.

The factory looms large in the lives of Bhuira's women. Located in Sirmaur district on the border of Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand, the sparsely populated Bhuira village has no more than 135 families on its 980 acres.

Each hillock has just one or two houses. They are surrounded by fruit trees and flowering plants that grow on shallow terraces carved out to limit soil erosion during untimely rains and landslides. Less than 300 women live in the village. And as in other parts of the country, women in Bhuira too shoulder most of the emotional and household labour in their family, which goes largely unaccounted for.

Jobs and modernity

On the warm September evening I am in Bhuira, 11 members of Kumari's family are celebrating their patriarch's birthday with home-made cake. Immediately

after returning from eight hours of work at the factory, Kumari makes sugary tea to wash down the cake. “I made the cake too, before I left for work,” she smiles.

Kumari has a three-year-old child, works hard at the factory, and cares for her parents-in-law. It's a lot to do. Better education has meant more jobs, but it has also meant that Bhuiira's women have to be 'superwomen' who do it all.

Interestingly, though, a social change is also germinating in Bhuiira. The women are coping with the higher workload by creating vastly more flexible family and community structures. And they are simultaneously pushing towards modernity much faster than their neighbours. Their lives hold interesting lessons for the rest of the country.

A 2015 World Bank Group study titled 'Scaling the Heights: Social Inclusion and Sustainable Development in Himachal Pradesh' reads: “We are often asked: 'what does social inclusion and sustainable development look like?' While the question really doesn't have a clear answer, because it is so context-specific, we use Himachal Pradesh as something of a benchmark.”

Someone at home

Social inclusion is impossible without female literacy and employment. In Bhuiira, female literacy rate has gone up by 11% in the past decade as opposed to a 3% increase in male literacy. Higher literacy rates mean greater employment opportunities outside the household. To compensate for this, work within the house is shared by the other women in the family.

Take, for instance, Vidya Tomar, the anganwadi teacher at Bhuiira. A B.A. degree got Tomar the anganwadi job 11 years ago. She still has to cook breakfast and lunch, but the other household chores are handled by her stay-at-home sister-in-law.

In many villages of Himachal Pradesh, water still needs to be carried uphill in buckets, cows and buffaloes have to be taken for grazing to the higher slopes, and vegetables fetched from fields many hillocks away. “Maintaining a household is a full-time job,” says Tomar. “When we cook, we cook for not less than 10 people.”

Tomar's family encouraged her to take a job when she got her degree, and compensated by taking on some of her household burden. "If my sister-in-law did not manage the work at home, I could not be out here with the security of a government job," she says, as she prepares the children at the anganwadi to pose for a picture. She is grateful that her sons are being brought up by her sister-in-law.

According to Kumari, this is how Bhuiira differs from cities. "We are employed because there is someone at home," she says. "We help each other with the household chores."

The effects of female employment on gender equality now appear to be trickling down to the next generation. Tomar's two sons help their aunt before going to school in the morning. At 13 and 16, they are put to task tending the cattle, cooking and cleaning.

Unlike other parts of Himachal Pradesh, Sirmaur, located in its southern reaches, is not driven solely by tourism. Since the local population does not have to constantly cater to the demands of increasing numbers of people from metropolises, they chart their own paths towards development and modernity.

The English connection

Until 20 years ago, Bhuiira was as obscure as any Himachali village. In 1999, a British woman, Linnet Mushran, decided to make and sell jams from the fruit grown locally. Today, Bhuiira Jam Factory produces up to 250 tonnes of jams and preserves a year, employing only local women. There are 10 permanent employees, and up to 100 women are employed during peak season when production increases.

Being part of a women-only enterprise changes the perspective of the village women significantly. "We understand each other's problems well," says Sarita Devi, who has worked at the factory since its founding.

From their salaries, the women contribute to a fund every month. Anyone in need of urgent finances can withdraw from it at a small interest. "It's our own chit fund," says Sarita Devi.

The jams are sold to high-profile brands such as Fabindia, Devans, a popular coffee shop in Delhi's posh Khan Market, and L'Opera, a French patisserie. In many ways, the jam factory can be credited with ushering in modernity into an otherwise quaint village. The jams themselves are made in the old-fashioned, labour-intensive way, with minimal use of machinery. Sorting the fruit, washing, cutting and cooking is done by hand.

Since agriculture is still the mainstay of this largely rural economy, small industries like the jam factory, which integrate farm produce into the economic chain, work well. All the fruits used for the jams are bought from local farmers; only certain citrus fruits are bought from outside.

Sirmaur, boosted as it is by floriculture and fruit production, has better human development indices, a better sex ratio, and higher income levels. It contrasts with districts like Chamba, in northern Himachal, which falls in the 'most backward districts' list.

Districts like Sirmaur are responsible for the high rank Himachal Pradesh enjoys in government and non-government assessments like the 2011 Indian Human Development Report which ranked the State third after Kerala and Delhi.

Second after Sikkim

“In 2011–12, about 63% of rural women in Himachal Pradesh reported themselves as employed,” reads the World Bank Study Report. “This places Himachal Pradesh second in female labour force participation in the country, after Sikkim, and significantly above the all-India average of 27%.”

Kamla Devi is the head of the village council. As Pradhan, she oversees five villages, including Bhuiira. “In my younger days, I could not have imagined that a woman would be Pradhan,” says Kamla Devi. Three years ago, when Kamla Devi, a widow, won the Panchayat elections, Bhuiira was reserved for female candidates.

However, the next time, she hopes to win even if Bhuiira is not a reserved constituency. “People recognise that women are better administrators. We approach our work with a degree of sensitivity that men don't,” she says.

Kamla Devi oversees several government programmes in the five villages she runs. And these seem to be working well in Bhuiira and neighbouring villages. Whether such programmes ensured higher female employment rates or whether literate women demanded such programmes is uncertain for now.

One programme trains teenage girls in handicrafts and tailoring. Every day at 11 a.m., several such girls in navy blue salwar kameez hurry to the Panchayat Bhawan in Bhuiira. Giggling and excited, they pull out portable sewing machines and begin sewing. “We made our own kurtas last month,” says 17-year-old Payal Kumari. “A qualified teacher comes to teach the girls, who are enthusiastic to learn. We have all the supplies such as a sewing machine, threads and the like,” says Kamla Devi.

The Panchayat building shares a wall with the only primary school of Bhuiira. Sitting in rows chanting the multiplication tables, students keep glancing at a large clock on the wall. It will be lunchtime soon.

When the children run out, through the playground and towards a hall where lunch is served, Sarita Devi smiles with satisfaction. “See! There are more skirts than pants,” she says. Sarita Devi managed to study till Class XII before she was married into a Bhuiira family. With no avenues for higher studies, she signed up for a distance learning programme in computer studies from Karnataka University. “I love to study,” she says.

Sarita's 22-year-old daughter had to drop out of school after Class XII because she had a hearing problem. Now, she learns sewing at the Panchayat. Is Sarita Devi worrying about her daughter's marriage yet? No, she smiles. “She might like someone, why should I dictate terms in her life?”

Upasana Kumari talks about how she wants to raise her son responsibly, paying attention to how he behaves with girls and imbibing in him a sense of gender equality.

Ranjita Punder lives in Bhuiira and takes a bus from the village to the factory. Like the other women of Bhuiira, her thinking too has evolved dramatically. “I began my silent revolution towards gender equality 14 years ago,” she says.

Two rickety buses ply the snake-like mountain road connecting Bhaira village to Rajgarh town. One at 8 a.m. and another at 5 p.m. From Monday to Saturday, Punder gets off the bus at 8 a.m. in front of the jam factory where she has worked for the past 14 years.

“I used to work here before my husband succumbed to cancer. And I continue to work here,” she says. Unlike Kumari, Punder's earning from the factory contributes largely to running her household. Her two sons and brother-in-law are the men in her family. “They share the burden of domestic labour.”

“When women earn, men should do the household chores,” says Punder. “This ensures that balance is maintained.” In a tiny corner of Himachal Pradesh, the old rules are being rewritten.



Raksha Kumar

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by **Anuradha Sharma**

Fountain Ink magazine - 07 May 2019

A group of men huddles by the side of the tea bushes in the shade at Dheklapara Tea Estate in the Dooars. Close by in the sun, about 30 or so women work their famed “nimble fingers” on the first-flush tea leaves, heads trying to balance the heavy loads of pickings.

One of the men has just tossed up a green papaya salad on a Bengali broadsheet folded in half. The unripe fruit is neatly peeled and diced, and dressed with coarsely-ground green chilli and salt. Chilli-induced shhus and shhaas fill the air as portions of the spiced berry go around, along with stale news.

Nimble fingers keep plucking, steady heads don't turn.

It's one in the afternoon—the end of work day. It's not a normal business day since the estate is officially closed, as it has been for the past 17 years. It's just a group of workers—those that remain—plucking and selling the green leaves to outside factories as a survival strategy. Given the nature of tea work and the workers' habitual discipline, everything is still done by the clock, though for shorter hours, and smaller pay. At 1p.m., the women trudge to the makeshift leaf shade, measure their day's work in kilos, offload; and vanish into the labour lines.

The men have had their salad; they load a pick-up van waiting by the side of the bamboo bearing faded flags of the Trinamool Congress party. For women, their labour in the tea estates seldom bears fruit.

With elections underway, tea workers have been remembered again.

“My connection with West Bengal is special—it is a tea connection,” Prime Minister Narendra Modi told a massive gathering at Mainaguri in north Bengal in February. “You grow tea and I make tea.”

When he came back to the region on April 3, he spoke of the plight of tea

workers. In his speech to an even larger crowd in Siliguri, he promised to solve the problems of tea workers.

With the “chaiwala” Prime Minister tracing his roots to the tea bushes of north Bengal, home to 273 estates and countless small, cooperative-run gardens, employing over 4.5 lakh workers, tea is stirring the polls up. Issues concerning tea workers, particularly the Minimum Wages Act 1948 and reopening of closed gardens are on the lips of candidates of all political parties.

“Well, earlier too, tea-related problems used to be part of election speeches—this region being a tea-producing belt, there is no escaping that. But we are now seeing candidates of all hues making tea a major issue. Instead of general “tea workers' problems”, they are raising specific concerns such as minimum wages and land rights for workers,” said Abhijit Mazumdar, a rights activist.

The white of the A4 posters stands out against the dull walls of the factory of Dooteriah tea estate in Darjeeling, closed since June 2017.

“Garden Closed, No Vote,” say the black & white printouts in English and Nepali. The posters have been recently put up by workers and staff of Dooteriah, Peshok and Kallej Valley—all closed tea estates in Darjeeling—threatening to abstain from the polls to protest abysmal conditions in the plantations, and to demand their immediate reopening.

However, after a meeting with district magistrate Joyoshi Dasgupta, the joint action committee of workers spearheading the movement called off its programme. “We were told she (Dasgupta) has promised to help workers set up a cooperative, but that didn't really sound convincing,” said Asha Pradhan, a tea plucker and activist, still firm on her resolve to not vote. “What is the point when no one cares?”

Pradhan is unusual among women tea workers. She is aware of workers' rights and vocal with her views. She even travelled as part of the Chaaybagan Sangram Samity, a rights-based organisation, to Delhi for the All India Workers' Rally on March 3 and spoke there about the problems facing tea workers in Darjeeling.

With the official vote-boycott programme called off, workers are wondering whom to vote for. Some are even contemplating NOTA to express their discontentment. “Many are going for Modi baje's (grandfather) candidate,” said one worker, referring to Bharatiya Janata Party's Darjeeling candidate Raju Bista. “Khair ta, Modi baje's earlier candidate (sitting MP S.S. Ahluwalia) also promised to do a lot for us. That time we voted for him, but he did nothing at all,” she added.

Tea in West Bengal is produced in three geographic regions—Darjeeling in the hills and Dooars and Terai at the base of the Himalayas. Darjeeling produces some of the world's finest and most expensive black orthodox teas, which are mostly exported—a kilo of Makaibari's organic silver tips sold for \$1,850 (1.1 lakh) to three international buyers in 2014. Dooars and Terai are home to the cheap crush, tear and curl (CTC) teas consumed mostly in the domestic market.

A colonial legacy—only eight of the plantations in north Bengal were set up after Independence—tea is one sector where women outnumber men. According to the Labour Bureau records of 2012, women comprise 53.3 percent of the workforce in tea plantations. It is women who perform the arduous task of plucking green tea leaves in gardens—huge tracts of land, steep slopes in the case of Darjeeling; not to be mistaken for the small plots adjoining homes to grow flowers and fruits.

There is a reason for this unusually high number of women workers. Though romanticised legends put it to “nimble fingers”, their predominance is because of the industry's demand for cheap labour. Gardens required inexpensive labour, wrote Jeff Koehler in his book, *The Colourful History and Precarious Fate of the World's Greatest Tea*. Quoting the *Darjeeling Gazetteer* (1907), he said this was “a matter of vital importance to the [tea] industry, as cheap labour is essential to its prosperity.”

Women's cheap labour ensured profitability.

A woman produces, and also reproduces. “Employment of women in plantations historically was sought by planters to “contain the male labour force” and to “ensure a steady reproduction of 'cheap' labour” as recruitment costs were high,”

Rinju Rasaily, an assistant professor with Ambedkar University's sociology department, wrote in a discussion paper. Maintaining a “steady social reproduction of labour” is one of the reasons for more women than men, she said, writing on the topic “Women's Labour in the Tea Sector: Changing trajectories and Emerging Challenges”.

The truth is, be it an operational garden, or the closed Dheklapara or Dooteriah, the story of tea is the saga of women's exploitation in generally hostile geographies and confined spaces.

But, the visibility of women workers is restricted to colourful images of them plucking leaves in exotic geographic locales, warm smiles and heavy baskets in place. Discourse around the industry is never about women or their centrality in the process of producing the world's most popular brew. As Anuradha Talwar, the labour rights activist puts it. “They don't exist as women... They are spoken of as if they are men. The entire female workforce is just invisibilised.”

While women make the bulk of the workforce, and also the crowd in political rallies, all key positions are held by men. “Trade union leaders, management staff, government officials, everyone is a man,” said Talwar.

Women do the back-breaking job of plucking tea leaves and yet the highest they've risen in their jobs to any form of supervisory role is that of a sub-staff, also called sardar or kaamdaar. Even after a century of existence and lakhs of women in the workforce, no tea garden has ever seen a woman manager. “It is only now when men are migrating in search of other jobs that you see women on factory floors,” said Talwar.

The survey of 273 operational tea estates conducted by the West Bengal labour department in May 2013, in its 325-page report, mentions “female workers” only in the section on maternity benefits. The meticulous report does not even give the number of women employed in the tea sector. It only speaks about “workers” and “workmen”. Sample this: “In 231 Tea Estates out of 273 there is provision for school. The wards of the workmen of the remaining 42 Tea Estates go to nearby schools for education (sic).”

Elections are no different. Even as everyone cries hoarse over the plight of tea

workers, there is little mention of women workers.

A little downhill from the Dooteriah factory, Sharmila Sharma and a few other women are breaking stones by the river. “I had never imagined I would be breaking stones,” says Sharmila, remembering the day she married her childhood love “uilenai” (a long time ago), when she was “15 or 16”. She smiles at her memories, never once lifting her head, as she keeps hammering. Sundown—which happens sooner in the mountains—is approaching and she's trying to get three boris (sacks) ready. Her entire day's back breaking work brings her 30 per bori.

She has made herself a contraption with a circular rubber strap tied to a wooden handle (shaped like a giant magnifying glass). She places the smaller stones in the middle of it, keeping her left hand over the handle while she hammers with the other. “The stones keep running away unless you hold them in one place. This keeps me from hitting my own hand while breaking the smaller stones.”

The first blow came when her tea worker husband, Gopal, died “of high pressure” in 2010. “He collapsed on the factory floor and never revived.” With two children to look after, she joined the garden as a tea plucker soon after.

But barely had Sharmila Sharma begun working then trouble started in the estate, owned by Kanwar Deep Singh of the Alchemist Group, a Rajya Sabha member on a Trinamool Congress ticket.

“Trouble began around the same time that Sarada Ghotala happened,” remembers Aashish Lama, factory staff and member of the joint action committee, which together with employees of neighbouring closed gardens, Peshok and Kalej Valley, who also share the same ownership, is fighting for their reopening.

The Sarada financial scandal came to light in April 2013 with the collapse of the Sarada Group, a consortium of over 200 private companies running a Ponzi scam in West Bengal and adjacent states. At the time of the collapse, it was reported that the group had raised about 4,000 crore from over 1.7 million depositors.

The scam shone the spotlight on other chit-funds and in July the same year the Securities Appellate Tribunal directed Alchemist Infra, a subsidiary of KD Singh's Alchemist Group, to refund about 1,000 crore collected from about 15 lakh depositors using unauthorised “collective investment schemes”. Last year, the enforcement directorate seized Singh's assets worth 238 crore in connection with an alleged chit-fund scam of 1,900 crore.

“The fringe benefits stopped first, like money for umbrellas, boots, dokos (cane baskets to carry tea leaves)—things workers need while plucking leaves,” said Suraj Hawal, a senior member of the joint action committee, “The bonus stopped in 2016. The company owes the workers and staff 19 crore.”

It is while pursuing the case of reopening the garden that Hawal and his colleagues discovered that the lease had not been renewed since 1987. Tea estates operate on lands leased from the state government. “We were told by the district magistrate that there can be no dialogue as long as the lease is not renewed,” he said. With the estate abandoned by its owners—Fortune Chemical Ltd bought the estate from Trident in 2018, which took over the company from Alchemist in 2016—there's no solution in sight.

More than 80 per cent of the 1,356 workers are women.

In 2017, after a good first flush, Darjeeling's tea industry was busying itself for the second flush—20 percent of total production and 40 per cent of annual revenues—when the hills erupted in political turmoil. Tea workers, particularly women, were the worst hit.

Days passed into weeks, and weeks into months, a general strike called by the local, pro-Gorkhaland parties lasted 105 days, bringing life in the hills and the tea gardens to an absolute halt. Demonstrations, arson, loot and clashes and police raids became the order of the day. Darjeeling town resembled a war zone. About a dozen people were reportedly killed in separate incidents across Darjeeling district, some allegedly in police firing—a charge denied by the government.

“Khai kasari kasari (Well, don't really know how),” says Sharmila Sharma, her

eyes still fixed on the stones, when asked how she managed to run a household in that time. More silence. The hammer keeps pounding, and the river keeps flowing.

It is the woman's job to put food on the plate, says the more vocal Asha Pradhan, it is she who suffers most when there isn't enough. "From foraging in the forests, to taking loans and selling off household items to buy over-priced ration in the grey market, women have done it all," she says.

The strike ended, but the estate remained closed. A clueless Sharmila waited, and waited for the management to return and resume work, but no one came. The workers made several trips to the administrative offices, in vain. Then when all hopes were lost, she got herself a hammer and a rubber contraption resembling the rim of a giant magnifying glass, and started breaking stones by the river.

In season, she plucks tea in neighbouring gardens and also at Dooteriah, where the workers and staff have come together as an informal body to pluck the green leaves and sell them to gardens outside. Sharma is currently waiting for the first flush to be ready so that she can take a break from stones and pluck green leaves, which will bring her Rs 25 a kilo. On average, she can pluck 4-5 kg of first flush tea a day.

For Darjeeling tea growers, who are mostly Nepali-speaking Indians, or Gorkhas, a separate state of Gorkhaland is their utopia. So, when a call for a strike came from the political leadership, tea garden workers, with women in large numbers, responded spontaneously. Women would also be seen in demonstrations organised in their neighbourhoods.

But Gorkhaland never came. It was more than a quarter of a year without work, wages or rations; or even any news of the world outside (cable TV was taken off air and internet withdrawn by the government). Initially, Asha Pradhan didn't mind—she believed in the Gorkhaland dream, that a separate state would bring better times for ordinary workers like her and a brighter future for her children. What shocked me was the outcome. After months of believing that Gorkhaland was around the corner, the strike was called off without progress on the issue of a

separate state. The leaders struck a deal with the government and the earlier autonomous hill body, Gorkhaland Territorial Administration, was reinstated.

“We were back to square one,” she remarks, sipping tea—Dooteriah orthodox (hand-made by herself) with milk and sugar. “It felt like the whole house came down on us... It will take some time for us to recover, economically and mentally both.”

After the strike, Gorkha Janmukti Morcha, the party spearheading the statehood agitation, split into two—one faction supported the Trinamool Congress and the other the BJP in this election. Neither party has Gorkhaland in its election agenda.

“The others have moved on—salaried people in government got paid for the strike period. It is the tea garden workers who got nothing and, in our case, the estate has closed altogether,” says Pradhan.

June 25, 1955, was a historic day in the labour history of Bengal plantations. On this day, six protestors, two of them women, were killed in police firing at Darjeeling's Margaret's Hope tea garden. They were demanding a wage hike and a host of other things, including maternity leave. This was the first organised labour movement in the tea sector and it paved the way for greater labour activism.

More than 60 years on, the story of tea workers is still one of injustice and exploitation.

In spite of being industrial workers, tea garden workers get paid much less than other workers—even less than labourers in neighbouring construction sites. This observation comes from West Bengal's labour department which conducted a survey of Bengal's tea gardens in 2013. “A livelihood with these wages is unaffordable,” said the survey report. Tea workers are currently paid 176 per day. (Until 1976, when the Equal Remuneration Act was passed, women were paid less than men.)

The wage is decided through collective bargaining, or tripartite negotiations among the trade unions, management and the government. Trade unions have long been demanding the fixing of minimum wages under the Minimum Wages Act, 1948. “In Kerala, the minimum is 310 and in Tamil Nadu 283,” said Abhijit Mazumdar, who is also convenor of the joint forum of 29 tea trade unions of north Bengal fighting for the implementation of the Minimum Wages Act, among other things. “Workers of Assam and Bengal, who produce 75 per cent of India's tea, get the least because their wages are not fixed under the Minimum Wages Act, 1948.”

The managements justify the low wage citing the “non-cash components” of free housing, subsidised foodgrain, firewood, healthcare and children's education. But these exist mostly on paper as increasingly, estate owners default on these components.

In 2015, the West Bengal government set up an advisory committee with nine representatives each from the government, management and workers, but even after 17 rounds of talks there has been little progress. “From the workers' side we have made our submissions, but are yet to see any tangible development. We suspect the government is colluding with plantation associations to delay or derail the implementation of the Act altogether,” said Mazumdar.

“The industry has highlighted the peculiar nature of the sector where the worker not only resides within the tea estate but is entitled to various benefits under the Plantation Labour Act 1951,” said P. K. Bhattacharjee, Kolkata-based secretary general of the Tea Association of India. “The cash value of those amenities, namely housing, healthcare, children's education and non-statutory benefits like firewood, dry tea, etc, need to be incorporated while fixing the minimum wage, as is provided under section 11 of the Minimum Wages Act.”

However, the 2013 survey of 273 tea estates points at gross violations of the Plantation Labour Act. Some of the finding are:

- Only 1,66,591 out of 2,62,426 workers have houses provided by the management.
- Six tea estates (three in the hills & three in the Dooars) have not provided a single house to workers.

- 12 estates in the Dooars have not provided electricity in workers' homes.
- 98 tea estates don't have any medical staff.
- Only 166 estates have hospitals. Only 56 of them have full-time residential doctors and others depend on visiting doctors. “Out of doctors of 166 Tea Estates only 74 have a degree of MBBS, others are non-MBBS,” says the report. 116 hospitals don't have any nurses.
- There is no Labour Welfare Officer in 175 estates.
- 42 estates have no schools for children.
- In 2009–10, 24 tea estates did not deposit any amount towards provident fund contribution. The number was 18 in 2010–11, 13 in 2011–2012, 41 in 2012–13
- 44 estates do not have any latrines.

When this is the situation in running gardens, one can only imagine the state of closed ones. Currently, 16 gardens are closed in north Bengal, affecting the lives of nearly 24,000 workers and their families.

The crisis in the tea industry began in the mid-2000s for a number of reasons, such as the decline in international prices, competition from other countries (Kenya, Nepal and Sri Lanka), rising production costs despite stagnant prices in the domestic market. “Another major factor has been competition from small growers,” said Bhattacharjee.

In the past twenty years or so there has been a massive growth in the small sector, helped in large part by the Tea Board of India. Currently, small growers contribute 47 per cent to India's total tea production. “There is a perceptible difference in the process through which the bought leaf factory (independent factories that source leaf from small growers) procures and manufactures tea and this lends a cost advantage,” Bhattacharjee said. “The organised sector is tied to a

host of obligations, statutory or otherwise, and are at their wits' end to match the advantage of the bought leaf factories. When tea is available at lower prices the appetite to go for higher priced tea is just not there among buyers.

“To put it simply, the industry is going through an existential crisis.”

The crisis has increased the burden on women workers, historically at the bottom of the plantation hierarchy. Curtailment of fringe benefits and delayed and irregular wages have added to the woes of women who are also constantly battling

“With male workers migrating, it would be reasonable to infer that nearly 40 per cent of women workers have to support 60 percent of family members besides themselves,” Bhattacharjee said. “This is a high dependency rate.”

Women, who were resistant to migrating initially, largely for fear of losing housing which is linked to their jobs, are now fleeing the estates in large numbers, many landing in the net of traffickers.

Migration and trafficking are major issues with women in tea plantations. Of the 500 or so trafficked girls and women rescued by Panighata tea estate resident Rangu Souriya and her non-governmental organisation Kanchenjunga Uddhar Kendra, the majority are from the tea garden areas, mostly closed estates. “There are organised cartels working here,” she said. “Big jobs are promised, young girls are even trapped in romantic relationships and marriages; and the poor hapless women from the remote tea gardens end up as highly-exploited domestic workers or sex workers in various brothels across the country,” she added.

“Women are migrating in large numbers,” said Debarati Sen, assistant professor of Anthropology and International Conflict Management at Kennesaw State University, who has closely studied the lives of women tea workers and the author of *Everyday Sustainability: Gender Justice and Fair Trade Tea in Darjeeling*. “None of the workers' daughters want to do anything with tea. They want to do something better, and in this desperation to get out, they end up in predatory relationships with men who traffic them.”

Describing the situation of women in the tea sector as cyclical doomed stories,

Sen said women are forever trapped in the cycle of structural violence that has been perpetuated over centuries.

In February 2013, ahead of the assembly elections the state government implemented the National Food Security Act in the form of Khadya Sathi scheme to provide fixed quantities of rice and wheat at 2 per kilo to very poor sections of the population, which includes tea plantation workers.

In 2014, the state government extended the Financial Assistance for Workers of Locked-Out Industries (FOWLOI) scheme to tea plantation workers under which the jobless workers of closed or abandoned estates for more than a year are given a one-time payment of 1,500.

In many closed gardens, employees have formally and informally come together to pluck green leaves to sell to other gardens or bought-leaf factories. “Men take over the cooperatives as soon as there are big money transactions,” said anthropologist Sen describing how even in a less-exploitative set-up of cooperative farming women are robbed of their agency and placed where they have historically belonged, at the bottom.

In Darjeeling, in such worker-run set-ups, women are paid proportionate to the job done—usually 20–25 per kg. In the Dooars, they earn a fixed wage of 60 per day (8 am to 1 pm).

Of the countless rivers and streams in the Dooars that originate in Bhutan are Reti and Dumchi. The two seasonal, raid-fed rivers meet in India a little distance from the border. In the area between the two arms of the riverine Y lie Dheklapara (closed since 2002) and Bundapani tea estates (closed since 2013).

I reach Dheklapara after crossing two rivers and Bundapani by crossing another one. The rivers don't have any bridges, I drive through them. They are dry.

When dry, the riverbeds are a flurry of activity. They are the highways on which heavy-duty dumper trucks ferry the dolomite mined in Bhutan hills, raising clouds of dust over the stone miners, most of them out-of-job tea workers of Bundapani and Dheklapara.

During monsoons, the rivers become a natural divide cutting off the estates and the surrounding villages—Garochira and Kalapani and Reti forest village—from the rest of the world. Over 15,000 people are marooned inside the triangle formed by Bhutan hills on one side, the north, and the rivers on the remaining sides for long stretches.

“We try to hoard as much grain as we can before getting cut off,” said Jagadish Munda, a local leader who worked at Dheklapara tea estate hospital before it closed down.

Everything comes to a standstill, children don't go to school and those who travel outside in search of odd jobs stay indoors. When anyone gets ill, the only thing to do is to wait for the river levels to come down. Till that time shamans and faith healers offer whatever they can.

The proprietors abandoned Dheklapara in 2002. From then till 2007, it saw three new owners come and go, with the last one disappearing without a trace. “In 2011, under the watch of the Calcutta High Court, it was liquidated and handed over to the Tea Board which ran the garden for two years before surrendering,” said Bikas Roy, central committee member of the Terai Dooars Plantation Workers' Union. “It is now with the Calcutta High Court. A few years ago, fresh tenders were invited for bids from interested entrepreneurs but nobody turned up.”

Bundapani too saw three owners since 1996 before being totally abandoned in 2013. The next year, the West Bengal government cancelled its land lease and took over the garden, but has not managed to get the estate running. The workers are owed over 12 crore in provident fund, pension, gratuity, wages and other benefits.

Tea workers fell into bad times when the gardens closed. There were 605 workers in Dheklapara and 1215 in Bundapani, over half of them women. According to Raju Thapa, who was a worker at Bundapani and is currently a senior member of the Paschim Banga Khet Mazdoor Samity, an organisation fighting for labour rights, as many as 60 workers and their family members died of hunger and malnutrition at his estate in the first six months of the shutdown.

Many also died due to lack of health care. Parul Tanti of Dheklapara was expecting her second child. She was still about 15 days from the expected date of delivery when her water broke. “This must be sometime after the garden closes,” her husband Shubhraj Tanti tries hard to remember. “We did not have any healthcare facility at the garden then and we could not take her to hospital (Birpara, about 15 km away) because the rivers were in spate.”

A healthy boy was born, but the mother died. When the boy was nine days' old, Tanti gave him to his brother-in-law in the neighbouring tea estate to adopt, because he was not sure he'd be able to raise the baby with the estate closed, and without the support of his wife.

“It had rained so much that we were cut off for 15 days that year,” recalls Parul Tanti's brother Bhanu Tanti. The day after her death, the skies cleared and Bhanu Tanti managed to go across the Dumchi to fetch the doctor from the neighbouring Joy Birpara Tea Estate to write his sister's death certificate.

Now they get some relief in the form of subsidised rations and financial assistance from the government.

“How long to survive on relief?” says an exasperated Manju Thapa of Bundapani, balancing herself on the cycle, one leg on the ground. “This garden has to reopen and we need to get our jobs back, our wages and our dues.” She has just cycled across three riverbeds, to get home from Binnaguri cantonment where she works as a cook in the homes of two school teachers, a job that brings her 3000 a month. With that money the widow has to fend for her son, who will be appearing for class X board exams next year, and her mother-in-law.

Both Nepalis and adivasis, who were originally conscripted from the tribal areas of Jharkhand, comprise the labour force in Dooars. “The adivasi women are even more marginalised,” said Debarati Sen. ***

Twenty-five-year-old Meena Thapa sits on her haunches by the water pipe on the side of a dirt road at the end of the garden, very close to the border with Bhutan.

She collects the trickling water in a small mug and empties it into a 20-litre



jerry can. The mouth of the pipe being too close to the ground it cannot directly fill up the container. It takes about half an hour to fill one jerry can, she needs at least six. She spends two–three, sometimes more, hours every day to meet the water needs of her family of six.

“I usually come here in the afternoons, after finishing the household chores,” says the mother of two.

Things were not like this when she first came, as a bride, to this garden six–seven years ago from the nearby Lankapara Tea Estate (now closed). When the estate was functioning, workers had water connections in their labour lines. When it closed, the water supply also stopped.

Twenty–nine–year–old Rajni Baxla is part of the train of women ferrying water in pairs of colourful jerry–cans balanced on their cycles. A former tea plucker, the mother of three mines stones on the river bed all morning, a job that brings her Rs 150–200 a day. Her afternoons go into providing water for the family.

Manju Thapa also joins in after a quick lunch of rice and vegetables that she had cooked early in the morning, before setting out on her cycle to cook for her employers in the outside world where no one is worried about water. She makes three trips to the water source, each time loaded with two jerry cans of 20 litres each. She bought the cans—which originally contained pesticide meant for tea bushes—from a shop in Birpara for Rs 250 each.

In the afternoon, after the women return from plucking leaves, or breaking stones or cooking in the homes of people across three rivers, they make a beeline to water sources around the Bhutan border. Some have piles of laundry on them. Some have water dripping from their hair, their clothes soaking wet and the insides of their fingers all shrivelled up after a long, wet afternoon.

Children seem to have the most fun—cycling in groups, racing at times, teasing each other; but they are at work. They supply water to those homes who have no one to do the job themselves. Most able–bodied men and women have migrated. “I give the money to my mother,” says a 12–year–old Krish Lohar, chewing at a raw betel nut. He supplies water to five households, charges 10 for every jerry can of 20 litres, and makes about 200 a day.

Manju Thapa tries to keep her son out of all this, next year he will be appearing in the board exams. “He already has to put in a lot of hard work. He has to cycle to school (in Binnaguri) everyday, crossing the three river beds,” she says. When the garden was functioning, there used to be a school-bus.

Sometimes even this supply gets disrupted, either due to lack of maintenance or the 'unmindful' herds of elephants—lying at the intersection of Jaldapara National Park, Gorumara National Park and Buxa Tiger Reserve these areas fall in the elephant corridor.

“There are no natural water sources in the estate,” explains Raju Thapa. The plantation lies at an altitude of 1,135 feet and the water table goes down to 350 feet during summers. “It is impossible to bore wells to that depth. The only way to get water is by tapping the rivers in Bhutan. That's how the management used to get water and paid a cess to the Bhutan government in exchange. After the garden shut down, water supply also got cut off.”

That it is not possible to extract groundwater has not stopped local bodies from politics over them. In several places there are deep tube wells supplied by government agencies, like Potemkin villages as they cannot function in such a geography. An overhead tank lies abandoned.

Dheklapara and Bundapani fall in Alipurduar Lok Sabha constituency where both frontrunners are residents of tea estates, and adivasis—Dasrath Tirkey, sitting Member of Parliament from the Trinamool Congress and John Barla of the Bharatiya Janata Party.

Tirkey has promised minimum wages to workers and also a wage board, apart from trying to reopen closed gardens. Kicking off his campaign at the Chuapara tea estate on March 30, he said: “Earlier the British exploited us, adivasis and Nepalis, as they needed cheap labour. In this age, the same mentality to exploit us cannot go on.” He also promised safe drinking water.

“Minimum wages, reopening of closed tea gardens and land rights to the tea workers—these are the main issues for me,” said Barla.

Thanks to years of discipline in plantation environments, most women workers are reticent and reluctant to engage in conversations around politics. They almost always draw a blank when asked what they want as women and reluctantly open up on persistence.

“Everything will be fine, if the garden opens again,” says Manju Thapa. “There will be work, our people will be back. It will be the same life again... There is nothing more I want.”

Rubina Khatun (name changed), a plucker at a Terai tea garden considers a larger picture. “I am not going to vote for Modi I know,” says the woman in her late 20s who was rescued from a brothel in Pune by Souriya. “He does not like us, Muslims.” Souriya is helping her build a home for her to stay with her son. She was rejected by her husband after she returned from Pune where she was tricked into going by a friend and sold off at a brothel.

According to Bebika Khawas, a researcher at North Bengal University, for all their appearance of indifference, tea garden women are most concerned about the elections because they are directly impacted by the outcomes. “They have to run families, educate children, arrange fuel and water supplies. They care,” says Khawas.

“Will you vote?” I ask a female plucker, as she starts moving towards the leaf-shade. “Yes, why not?” immediately comes the reply as she walks off with her jhola of green leaves balanced on the head. “This is my right.”



Anuradha Sharma

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Wrapped in the popularity of Assam's mekhela sador are stories of lost diversity

by **Rini Barman**

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Every winter, Sumi Pegu, a 50-year-old Mising woman, runs single ply yarn into exquisite horizontal patterns. A narrow paddy field in Gohpur's Mising gaon, about 230 km from Guwahati in Assam's Sonitpur district, leads me to her loom. If you walk some kilometres further, you can get a serene view of the hills of Arunachal Pradesh. The sounds of the working looms takes over the chirrups of tiny sparrows looking for some grains. The grain providers, mostly Pegu's neighbours, have to tend to the poultry and pigs regularly. Their children go to nearby primary schools and are fluent in the dominant Assamese tongue. Yet, all through the year, there is someone or the other tending the fibres of the loom.

Pegu's children know how to weave using a back-strap loom (xoru-xaal) – a practice that is alive perhaps only among the state's ethnic groups. They are taught the basics in their Mising language, which they mellifluously use to recall, remember and revive an entire ancestry. “I gave it to my daughter as a plaything, so she could wrap it around her waist,” said Pegu. “Once the fingers are stronger and the grab steadier, it makes her job easy at the future xaal.” Womenfolk in the village believe that not knowing how to weave brings bad luck. Pegu has seen the ege – a garment worn from waist to ankle level with a minimum of two-three pleats – go through decades of changes in terms of designs, superstitions and thread quality.

The traditional Mising loom is a wonder made out of bamboo and tree wood, and both these raw materials are sacred in a poignant way. Even when the looms show signs of wearing out after years of usage, they are not broken down to light the kitchen fire – a tradition that even the poorest of Mising homes follow. Special care, like placing the loom constituents on top of the dhuasang or clay stove, is taken to drive termites away. “When we spin the yarn it is considered inauspicious for small boys to cross it,” said Pegu. “It not only puts the thread at risk but tears off the wheel and we have to redo all over again.” She points to me.

“You see this hunchback? It is testimony to my dedication towards the most meticulous of designs. I regret I cannot go into the wild now to collect plants that were used to naturally dye our threads. The artificially-dyed reels in the market are not to be trusted entirely.”

Growing mechanisation

Over the last six-seven years, there has been mechanisation of handloom in the village. The mass entry of mill-made ege has gradually influenced the aesthetic appeal of the fabrics. The signature Mising diamond pattern, for instance, is getting indistinct and smaller. The butties, on the other hand, are chaotically mixed with tree motifs and they no longer have artistic finesse. Clothes that are transported to the urban areas with their ubiquitous synthetic assemble reveal these modifications clearly. “I am not competitive by nature, but the generation [that] my daughters-in-law [belong to], they want to make a few more bucks,” said Pegu. “I really cannot blame them, as they sincerely manage the fields, the household and the loom single-handedly. They hardly get any praise from their spouses.”

As Pegu plays around with the maku (weaver's shuttle), her granddaughters try to help around the sang ghor. “In the summers, young girls are seen sowing rice saplings, and due to the humidity weaving takes a backseat,” she said. “The ideal time begins end autumn, though we weave in every season. These fingers are so accustomed to the loom that they begin to hurt if unused.” Pegu's grandchildren have inherited memories of these textiles, which have been passed on through oral stories. They tell me that the colours in the clothes that their granny weaves represent nature. The geometrical designs come paired with a range of motifs – fish heads, animals, flowers, butterflies, trees and stars, among others. “It does not matter whether you are working on zero ply or single ply – if your hands are efficiently experienced, you can ace the motifs,” said Pegu. “My own grandmother used to weave one gasor [an upper garment] a day. Probably the pace is reduced when one has to multitask, and has fewer hands to help.”

The fading of older designs and motifs is not simply because the tribal women have been overburdened with other work. It is also due to the soft cultural appropriation by the dominant Assamese elites. This has created a tussle over who owns the authenticity of the craft. “My ege do not yet have the silk mark, so they

probably won't do very well in the market,” complained Pegu. “But the silk has been reared from scratch by me, and the motifs are distinctly Mising.” Literary thinker Nilamani Phukan mentions in his collection of essays that tribal motifs like diamond, triangle and square, and the configuration of star/fern motifs into dominant Assamese weavers, came through years of borrowing. Isn't it ironic that once a dominant identity labels a particular textile as their own, the other stories of the weavers, like their ethnic evolution, recedes to the background?

Fading traditions

There are differences in the way married and unmarried women among the Mising community dress up. According to Pegu, “The old ladies at home use the segreg to wrap around their busts. The girls who attained puberty wear the finely textured ku: pobis to wrap around the body, beneath the armpits, covering the upper part of the body. Married women, on the other hand, pull the edge till their breasts and tie a firm methoni.” Talking to Pegu, I realise that when we describe the traditional wear of Assam as a “three piece” mekhela sador, the nuances are lost. These inadequate translations, an attempt to make the meanings clearer for non-locals, end up causing semiotic damage. The supposed “three piece” of women's wear has a long folk history.

Among the Koches/Koch Rajbanshis in Assam, the traditional weave patani used to be worn in tin-tekia format (in three parts or layers: the agran, headgear and patani). The riha, which is now worn as a sador, was initially a breast cloth. It came in different types, such as the boroi-loga, gariyali and gunakata. Over time these diverse forms of breast clothes were replaced by blouses and brassieres and marked as traditional and civil components of attire by upper caste women. I can recall an incident in Jalukbari when a local fish-seller in her late 30s was given blouses to wear as she would not cover her breasts. The women were convinced they were doing something very noble for the seller, whom they perceived to be poor. When I spoke to her about the episode a few years later, she explained that nobody in her native village ever wore blouses. “It wasn't a taboo at all in Belxor, Nalbari district,” she said. “Even men wouldn't bother us – be it [in] public or private spaces. When I was nursing my children, it was rather helpful. I still am uncomfortable with blouses.”

Policing and standardising the “three-piece” as the traditional wear had its micro

and macro context. Nandana Dutta, in her book *Questions of Identity in Assam*, makes careful note of an example from the Assam Engineering College in 2007. Speaker Ismail Hussain had made associations with cultural affiliations and attire. It was reminiscent of the Assam Andolan days, from 1979 to 1985, when there was tremendous insistence for women to adopt the mekhela sador as daily wear. “It was declared and implemented by self-appointed leaders of protesting groups, especially those carrying out dharnas and strikes or taking part in processions,” wrote Dutta. What happened, as a result of this, was its continued (secret) abuse in spaces like college hostels and primary schools. My aunts, who were born in the late 1960s, vividly recall how ragging sessions in their educational institutes would involve whether they knew how to wrap the mekhela sador with propriety. The tribal students were affected the most as humiliating remarks were made on their preconceived “barbaric ways” of dressing up.

It was during the same time that mekhela sador draping rules (full-sleeve red blouses) for female dancers of Bihu (a folk form) were laid out. Gradually, as these folk forms were standardised, they began to represent the dominant Assamese attire in all its rigidity. Around May 2017, this debate fuelled up yet again, when the state government employees were urged to wear traditional dress (mekhela sador for women and dhoti kurta for men) on the first and third Saturday of every month. Chief Minister Sarbananda Sonowal, in the current Bharatiya Janata Party-led government, had hoped that such a move might enhance the spirit of regionalism and unity. It was rightly opposed on the grounds of exclusion – as it limited traditional wear of so many ethnicities in the state to the mekhela sador. In the midst of these contentions, what went missing was the life of a handloom weaver. Her weaves became agents of the identity battle, but she was effectively erased from that discourse.

Doubtful future

Gayatri Das, a seller of mekhela sadors in Beltola, Guwahati, thinks the future of handlooms is bleak. “The common people, who used to weave aeons ago, have forsaken the looms for the dream of white-collar jobs,” she said. “Women now have to think of economical viability. When I was a kid, I remember my mother from Sirajuli would set the loom for two attires simultaneously. Among the final products, one would be hers and the other would be sold for Rs 1,000. This

sustainable practice is no longer present, not even in rural areas.” Das herself has to convince customers with half-truths about the weaves that they buy as traditional wear. “In my 10 years of having met so many female buyers in Guwahati, only three have enquired about the raw materials of their clothing,” she said. “Rest were in a rush and enamoured by the glittery threads that make up their mekhla-sador sets, which they finally chose.”

The politics of threads and lack of knowledge about it has created a gap among the weavers, sellers and buyers. While hand-woven cloth may speak of tedious hours spinning the wheel, duplicates replace them because a class of the society chooses to make accessories out of them. It is important to question why hand-weaving isn't empowered via local methods and instead readily replaced by a faster, capitalist mechanism. According to Rita Barua, an intermediary between the weavers and urban sellers from Gohpur, “The problem lies in the inequity of distributing income here. As opposed to the popular notion that middlemen eat up all money, I earn negligibly. To transport crafted goods is a hectic affair, and when floods hit, I alone have a lot to manage. During festivities, the pressure increases, and consequently, weavers have to readily produce twice the number of sets. It leaves them little time to weave something of their own. Time is money.”

Barua says that many things have changed after the imposition of the Goods and Services Tax on handloom items. The rates may have been revised, but the fear still gnaws at weavers. “Though I don't know of any impactful protest against it in Assam, sellers of traditional items have developed innovative ways to resist,” she said. “Many have taken down hoardings on the highway – it's their bread and butter, let's not forget.” Today, the government showrooms also sell duplicates under the banner of traditional handloom – it is a sign of insecurity, which can put an end to the rich culture of weaving one's identities.

From Gohpur's Mising gaon to state-funded arts and crafts showrooms in Guwahati, handlooms clearly are a vulnerable industry today. As older motifs and stories about them keep falling from the weaves, one wonders if women like Pegu will even be remembered in another decade. The folk traditions of the Mishmi tribes of Arunachal Pradesh retell one such story – about their first weaver, Hambreelmai. Hambreel is, in Mishmi, a species of little fish, and it is said that the

butterflies, birds and fishes were so attracted to her weaving that when her loom broke, the broken parts metamorphosed into varied forms of life. Every single day, looms of weavers like Pegu and Hambreelmai are being replaced and wiped away in Gohpur. Some remain glorified in folk tales and legends, while most are made to look pretty on glossy magazine covers so that businesses are lured into the region. In the words of Pegu, “These photographers, they come and they go. My daughters are now accustomed to posing for them, though we never make the headlines of any local daily. The spinning wheel goes round and round, just the usual.”



Rini Barman

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An anatomy of op-ed and editorial pages

by **Cherry Agarwal**

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Earlier Newslaundry surveys have shown that far fewer women secure bylines across broadsheets, at least across top newspapers in India. To gauge the diversity in expertise and gender of those shaping national discussions, this time we looked at the bylines under the editorial and op-ed pages of seven newspapers.

For 36 days (six weeks, excluding Sundays) starting November 12, Newslaundry reviewed op-ed pages of the Delhi editions of four English and three Hindi dailies. Among English newspapers, we looked at The Times of India, The Hindu and Hindustan Times—the top three leading English dailies in terms of circulation, according to the Audit Bureau of Circulations (AUC). We also looked at The Indian Express which has considerable impact owing to its readership circles though it doesn't figure in the AUC's list.

Among Hindi dailies, we looked at the Delhi editions of Dainik Jagran, Hindustan, and Amar Ujala. Dainik Jagran ranks second in circulation numbers, while Hindustan and Amar Ujala rank third and fourth, respectively.

Cracks in the glass ceiling?

According to our survey, more than a year later (our last data set was from August 2017–October 2017), men continue to dominate the op-ed and editorial pages. Over six weeks, Newslaundry surveyed 555 pieces authored by a total of 579 contributors—some of the editorials and op-eds were co-authored by as many as three individuals. Of the 579 contributors, across the Hindi and English dailies, women made up only 20 per cent*. This roughly translates to one female contributor for every five contributors.

While the numbers reveal an undeniable gap between male and female voices across newspapers, English broadsheets are doing slightly better than their Hindi counterparts when it comes to gender representation. For Hindi dailies, while

women made up 17 per cent* of the contributors, for English dailies, this number was four percentage points higher. Despite outdoing Hindi dailies, women-authored editorials in English dailies have seen a dip since Fall 2017.

In Fall 2017, Newslandry had reported that women's contributions across editorial pages of English dailies stood at 34.5 per cent (The Telegraph was included then as well). However, women's contributions—including articles with at least one female co-author, across op-ed/edit pages in English dailies—now make up only 22.06 per cent (~ 22 per cent)—12.44 percentage points down from 2017.

Who is leading the pack?

Among the seven papers, The Hindu did best and Dainik Jagran the worst in representing women's voices. The Hindu remains on top despite a 0.57 (~ 1 per cent) percentage point decline in the representation of women's voices across its op-ed and editorial pages. Of its op-ed/editorial contributors, 27.5 per cent are women. The paper was also the best performer in 2014.

Close at the heels of The Hindu is Amar Ujala with 27.27 (~27) per cent women contributors. This is only 0.23 per cent less than The Hindu.

The Hindustan Times ranked third (24* per cent), followed by Hindustan (21* per cent), TOI (20* per cent), IE (16* per cent) and Jagran (4* per cent).

Jagran's numbers are particularly dismal because 4 per cent of contributors being women translates to one woman contributor for every 25 contributors.

In October last year, women across Indian newsrooms disclosed instances of sexual harassment, assault and power play. The Indian #MeToo movement gained momentum and was sustained on social media. Yet mainstream media has a long way to go when it comes to representing women's voices.

Who sets the agenda: experts, politicians or journalists?

Over six weeks, we reviewed more than 500 articles to understand which section of people—experts, politicians and journalists—shape national opinions vis-à-vis

the op-ed and editorial pages of some of the largest-circulating dailies. “Experts” includes policy professionals, economists, professors, academic researchers, philosophers, and individuals with decades of experience in the field, such as those who have served in the Army, among others.

Out of 555 articles, 366 were authored by experts. Only 67 of these articles were authored by female experts or had at least one female co-author. Articles authored by female experts made up only 12 per cent* of the total editorials and op-eds. Only three out of every 25 articles were written by female experts.

Our survey shows that the second-largest group of opinion-makers is journalists. Journalists—including editors, bureau chiefs and foreign journalists—wrote 26 per cent* of the total editorials and op-eds. Of the 142 articles written by journalists, 27 per cent* were written by women journalists.

Politicians (both current and former) were the third-largest group (the smallest in the three categories), writing 8 per cent* of editorials and op-eds. Only six were written by women politicians—14 per cent* of all articles written by politicians, and only 1 per cent* of the total number of op-eds and editorials run in the seven newspapers.

Paper-wise expertise distribution

In the six weeks that Newslandry reviewed the editorial and op-ed pages, Dainik Jagran ran the highest number of editorials written by politicians. It was followed by HT, Amar Ujala, IE, Hindu, TOI and Hindustan—in that order.

The highest number of expert-authored op-eds and editorials was carried by Express, which also carried the least number of journalist-authored pieces. In the expert-authored category, TOI was second, followed by Hindu, Jagran, Hindustan, HT and Amar Ujala.

Journalists speak

Newslandry reached out to several senior editors, op-ed writers and journalists to ask them what they thought of these numbers.

Aarti Tikoo Singh, senior assistant editor with The Times of India, says: “India is a young country, as far as literacy goes. Women in the workforce is still quite low and in news business, even lower. Op-ed requires specialised domain knowledge, analysis, writing skills and confidence not only to offer an opinion but to withstand criticism too. It is not as if women don't have opinions but I think a lot of them find it harder to deal with counter-argument and critique of their positions. But as more women acquire specialised professional training, we will see women contributing more to the public opinion-making.”

Gita Aravamudan, senior journalist and author, agrees to an extent. She says there's a certain hesitancy among women—irrespective of expertise—to voice their opinions. “This is particularly true of older voices, which have the opinions that matter. They feel the fear of rejections. They are a little more wary.”

Aravamudan says women's voices are possibly overwhelmed because men are sought out by their male peers, which might not be the case for women. “I don't think there is any gender discrimination in the sense that people do accept articles written by women. But op-ed pages are largely manned by men. Women are not sought out because there aren't as many women colleagues of the same stature who would search them out.” A long-time freelancer, Aravamudan started her career with The Indian Express and is a regular op-ed writer. She has also written several opinion pieces for The Hindu.

Diksha Madhok, The Print's digital director, says, “There are certain fields which are still male-dominated at the top. It is harder to find female leaders in such fields. In sectors such as finance, tech industry, the VC ecosystem—my options [as an editor] would be limited.” During her time as editor of Quartz India, which focuses on economy and tech, Madhok's team had women tech reporters but found it hard to find women experts. “They would go to these tech fairs but it would always be manels.”

Gender imbalance in some of the sectors is one of the reasons behind the disparity in the genders of opinion-makers, Madhok adds.

Aarti Tikoo Singh says unequal income is also a major challenge in the workplace. “I do think that women are generally less paid than their male colleagues in Indian newsrooms. I don't have any proof or any statistical data to

substantiate my claim but I sense that it would be broadly true.”

Coomi Kapoor, contributing editor with *The Indian Express*, describes the glass ceiling as a challenge for women in the newsrooms. She says, “There is a glass ceiling. A lot of very well-qualified women do get left out. The reason for this glass ceiling is one, a boy's club at the top. And second, sometimes owners are more comfortable dealing with a man than a woman.” She adds, “Considering the competence and talent of some women, it is surprising that they are not in high places.”

Both Aravamudan and Kapoor also recall how in the early 1970s, women would be sent to cover flower shows and beauty contests or were assigned feature stories.

To change things, Aravamudan and Madhok think newsrooms need to make more of an effort to find female voices and newer writing talent. “Newsrooms are making efforts to get women on their op-ed pages and/or opinion pages on their website, but more needs to be done. Journalists are not putting in enough effort to find new names or women,” Madhok says. “One way to change things is to impress upon women the benefits of getting their name out there. If women become more media savvy, if women experts could use social media to reach out to journalists—it would help journalists find newer voices.”

Singh suggests transparency in salary packages as a way forward. “I think salary packages should be transparent and determined by merit. News organisations simply will have to develop far more advanced mechanisms to measure competence and corresponding rewards.”

Of op-ed pages and politicians

What is an op-ed page anyway? Coomi Kapoor calls it an “extension of the edit page, where the latter reflects the views of the paper”. Gita Aravamudan says op-ed pages are meant to “give an eagle's eye view of issues and is supposed to be by people who are experts”. Aarti Tikoo Singh says it's “a newspaper's and society's collective sense of justice and judgement”, and a platform to “address issues that concern us collectively”.

Does it matter if politicians largely contribute to op-ed pages? Singh says: “I don't

think anyone including politicians should be barred from contributing to the op-ed page, as long as they can write and articulate their arguments and opinions well. Badly written and incoherent opinion pieces are a waste of column space in a newspaper.” She adds, “The eligibility criteria for publishing articles should be applied uniformly.”

Kapoor also doesn't see why politicians shouldn't publish their opinions too. “[The] Op-ed page is meant for a variety of people to give their opinions on a variety of issues. I don't see why politicians should not. If politicians feel strongly, they should have every right to write. If politicians are not good writers but are just being given space because of their name value, then that's bad. Often, you'll find strange pieces which have nothing new to add—as if their speeches have been put together by their aides. Such people who do not have anything to contribute should be thrown out. But there are a lot of very thought-provoking politicians such as Shashi Tharoor, P Chidambaram and Arun Jaitley who have something to say.”

Aravamudan disagrees. “Politicians have enough place to shout out their views, like on TV. I don't think they should come and crowd the print media or the web media for that matter. It is the place where ordinary people's voices should be heard. However, newsrooms need to put in a little effort in exploring newer voices who may be open to talking.”

Note*: Numbers have been rounded off.



Cherry Agarwal

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42 रैप की दुनिया में महिलाएं

by Meena

Jansatta - 10 March 2019

पहले जमाने में घरों में लड़कियों को सिलाई-कढ़ाई, रसोई के साथ-साथ संगीत और नृत्य की भी शिक्षा दी जाती थी। तब वे ज्यादातर सुगम संगीत- भजन, लोकगीत वगैरह गाना सीखतीं और गाती थीं। मगर बदलते जमाने के अनुसार वे फिल्मी गीत, गजल वगैरह गाने लगीं। लंबे समय तक आल्हा, बिरहा वगैरह जैसे गायन पुरुषों के हिस्से हुआ करते थे, पर उसमें भी महिलाओं ने प्रवेश किया और अपनी पहचान बनाई। अब वे रैप यानी हिप हॉप गाने की तरफ भी प्रवृत्त हो रही हैं। अभी तक रैप लड़के ही गाया करते थे, पर लड़कियों ने इस क्षेत्र में आकर एक नई छटा बिखेरनी शुरू की है। ऐसी ही कुछ रैप गायिकाओं के अनुभवों को साझा कर रही हैं मीना।

दिलचस्प सफर रैप का

रैप शब्द सोलहवीं शताब्दी में ब्रिटिश अंग्रेजी में इस्तेमाल किया गया था, जिसका शाब्दिक अर्थ है 'हड़ताल'। आज रैप शब्द हिप-हॉप के साथ इस कदर जुड़ गया है कि कई लेखक इन्हें पर्याय के रूप में प्रयोग करते हैं। 1990 में जब रैप कई देशों में फैल चुका था, तब भारत की ओर भी इसकी बयार बही। 2000 तक भारत के लोगों को रैप समझ आने लगा था। बाबा सहगल ने हिंदी में पहली बार रैप शुरू किया। उन्होंने 'ठंडा ठंडा पानी' एलबम निकाली, जिसकी हजारों कॉपियां बिकीं। इसके बाद बोहेमिया ने 2002 में एलबम निकाली, जो खूब हिट हुई। बोहेमिया को ही देसी हिप-हॉप का श्रेय दिया जाता है। बोहेमिया ने ही बॉलीवुड में रैप संगीत की शुरुआत की। 2011 के बाद भारत में हर राज्य से रैपर्स सामने आने लगे। अब भारत में यूट्यूब पर कई चैनल खुल रहे हैं। हजारों लोग इस ओर आ रहे हैं।

रैप को एक करिअर के तौर पर केवल पुरुषों ने नहीं अपनाया, बल्कि लड़कियों ने भी इसमें बाजी मारी। 2010 में भारत में रैप की शुरुआत करने वाली मनमीत कौर का कहना है कि जब उन्होंने रैप करना शुरू किया था तब कोई महिला थी ही नहीं रैप में। मनमीत ने तेरह साल की उम्र में रैप शुरू कर दिया था। वे कहती हैं कि इसमें मैं कविता का भाव दिखा सकती हूं। इसने मुझे इस कदर प्रभावित किया कि मुझे लगा कि इसमें मैं अपनी जिंदगी की पूरी सच्चाई बयान कर सकती हूं। मनमीत कहती हैं कि भारत में हिप-हॉप की शुरुआत सोशल मीडिया से हुई। सोशल मीडिया पर भी पुरुषों ने उन्हें तंग किया। उनकी फेसबुक आइडी हैक कर ली गई। वे कहती हैं कि 2010-11 में जब वे लाइव परफार्मेंस देती थीं तब मंच पर जाने के लिए उनका रास्ता रोका जाता था। लेकिन कभी हिम्मत नहीं हारी और आगे बढ़ती गईं। वे कहती हैं कि मेरे लिए हिप-हॉप इस दुनिया का एक नजरिया है। मनमीत कहती हैं कि मुझे हिप-हॉप की बहुत-सी चीजों से परेशानी भी है। हिप-हॉप बहुत मर्दानगी भरा है। दूसरा हिप-हॉप में 'मै' की संस्कृति है। मैं अपने संगीत से 'मै' निकाल कर लोगों की कहानी कहना चाहती हूं। मैं इसका भाव बचाना चाहती हूं। हिप-हॉप के माध्यम से वह सच्चाई बाहर लानी है, जो मीडिया छिपाता है। मनमीत इस साल दो एलबम पर काम कर रही हैं। वे हिप-हॉप को केवल मनोरंजन

नहीं, बल्कि जिम्मेदारी के रूप में देखती हैं। वे कहती हैं कि हिप-हॉप समाज से संवाद करने का एक माध्यम है। मनमीत की शादी 2013 में हुई। शादी के बाद उनकी जिम्मेदारी केवल रसोई तक रह गई थी। वे अपने सपनों को पूरा नहीं कर पा रही थीं और एक दिन उन्होंने पति का घर छोड़ दिया। बाद में 'हिप-हॉप बहू' नाम से एलबम निकाली, जिसमें उन्होंने बताया कि समाज ने लड़कियों के लिए हर स्तर पर पैटर्न बना रखे हैं। उनकी एक और एलबम है जिसका नाम है नियोफिलिया। नियोफिलिया में विकसित यूरोप और विकसशील भारत में महिलाओं के साथ कैसा व्यवहार होता है, इसके बारे में बताया है। वे कहती हैं कि जब मेरे शब्द, मेरा काम लोगों के इतने करीब आ जाएंगे कि सभी पर उसका प्रभाव पड़ेगा तब मेरा वक्त आएगा।

गोशे गोशे में सुलगती है चिता तेरे लिए/ फर्ज का भेस बदलती है कजा तेरे लिए/ कहर है तेरी हर इक नर्म अदा तेरे लिए/ जहर ही जहर है दुनिया की हवा तेरे लिए/ रुत बदल डाल अगर फूलना फलना है तुझे/ उठ मेरी जान! मेरे साथ ही चलना है तुझे...' कैफी आजमी की 'औरत' में जिस ओर इशारा किया गया था आज की औरतें वाकई रुत बदलने का काम कर रही हैं। अब वे केवल डॉक्टर, इंजीनियर या सेना को अपना पेशा नहीं बना रही हैं, बल्कि गीत-संगीत में भी करिअर बना रही हैं। एक समय था जब घरों की बेटियों को शास्त्रीय संगीत की शिक्षा दी जाती थी। वे खयाल, ठुमरी जैसा संगीत सीखती थीं। बाद में वे भजन, लोकगीत, आल्हा जैसे गीत गाने लगीं और आज की लड़कियां रैप गा रही हैं। अब लड़कियां पूरे 'स्वैग' के साथ बिंदास होकर 'चार लोगों की बातें सुन लीं, हमने क्या पाया फिर भी', अवेयरनेस इज माय बेस्ट फ्रेंड, फ्रीडम इज माय कजिन, यू बेटर लिव इट जैसे रैप गा रही हैं।

दरअसल, रैप गलियों, सड़कों, आंदोलनों से निकली संस्कृति है। अमेरिका, एशिया, यूरोप, अफ्रीका आदि में दासों और अश्वेतों के साथ क्रूरतापूर्ण व्यवहार को बयान करते हैं रैप। यही वजह है कि डेनिरो फरार ने 'वी आर अफ्रीकन/ एंड बी हैपेंड टू बी इन अमेरिका/ वी आर नॉट अमेरिकन/ वी आर अ पीपल हू फॉरमरली वर अफ्रीकन हू वर किडनैप्ड/ एंड ब्रॉट टू अमेरिका/ वी डिडंट लैंड ऑन प्लाइमाउथ रॉक/ दि रॉक वॉज लैंडिंड ऑन अस...' जैसा रैप गाया। एक ओर रैप जहां मनोरंजन का हिस्सा है, तो वहीं क्रांति का प्रतीक भी। आज की लड़कियां भी इस क्रांति की मशाल को जलाए रखना चाहती हैं और रैप को अपना पेशा बना रही हैं।

फिल्म उरी में 'जग जितिया' गाना गा चुकीं दीपा उन्नीकृष्णन यानी डीएमसी ने 2012 में रैप करना शुरू किया था। पच्चीस साल की दीपा का कहना है कि हिप-हॉप ने मुझे पहचान दी है। आज हिप-हॉप मेरी जिंदगी बन गया है। दीपा कहती हैं कि किसी समाज के बनाए ढांचों से जब भी हम कुछ इतर करना चाहते हैं, तो मुश्किलें आती ही हैं। वे कहती हैं कि जब उन्होंने रैप शुरू किया था तब वे खुद के लिए ही गाने बना रहीं थीं। घर वालों को समझाना मुश्किल होता है कि हम क्या कर रहे हैं। हमारे काम को उतना सम्मान भी नहीं मिलता था जितना अभी मिलता है। पैसे भी कम मिलते थे, लेकिन अब बदलाव हो रहे हैं। पिछले कुछ सालों से लोग इसे करिअर का हिस्सा बना पा रहे हैं। अब लोगों में हिप-हॉप को लेकर जागरूकता बढ़ रही है। गली बॉय की वजह से लोगों में हिप-हॉप की तस्वीर और साफ होगी। वे कहती हैं कि हिप-हॉप समुदाय मेरे लिए बहुत जरूरी है, क्योंकि इसने मुझे एक नई पहचान दी है।

दीपा से डीएमसी बनना मेरे लिए एक अच्छा अनुभव रहा है। दीपा कहती हैं कि हिप-हॉप में इतनी ताकत है कि अपने शब्दों से किसी की जिंदगी बदल सकता है। जिस तरह कव्वाली को भारत में जगह मिली उसी तरह से हिप-हॉप को भी मिलेगी। दीपा का मानना है कि हिप-हॉप का पूरा दारोमदार ज्ञान पर होता है। हमें दुनिया को

दिखाना है कि हमारे पास भी उतना ज्ञान है कि हम बेहतर गाने बना सकते हैं। वे कहती हैं कि संघर्ष सभी की जिंदगी में होते हैं, लेकिन चूँकि मैं एक लड़की हूँ इसलिए मुझे ज्यादा संघर्ष करना पड़ा। मेरा घर कल्याण में था और जो भी कार्यक्रम होते थे वे सब बांद्रा और अंधेरी में होते थे। सभी कार्यक्रमों का समय रात नौ बजे से होता था और दो बजे खत्म होता था। इस वजह से मुझे कई साल घर पर ही बैठ कर गाने लिखने पड़े। क्योंकि मैं उस समय अठारह साल की थी और मुझे रात में बाहर जाने की मनाही थी। लेकिन स्नातकोत्तर खत्म होने के बाद नौकरी की। फिर मुझे थोड़ी आजादी मिली और मैं बाहर निकल पाई। अगर मैं मुंबई में नहीं होती तो शायद मैं इतना समय इसमें नहीं रह पाती। दीपा कहती हैं कि भारत में जिन लोगों ने रैप शुरू किया वे सब अंग्रेजी में थे। मैंने हिप-हॉप शुरू करने से पहले होमवर्क किया। जो भी उम्दा रैपर थे, उनसे भी गाने मांगे। मैंने ज्यादातर महिला रैपर को सुना। तब यहाँ तक पहुँच पाई।

रैप की कहानी

यों तो रैप की शुरुआत को लेकर बहुत विरोधाभास हैं लेकिन बहुमत में लोगों का मानना है कि रैप पश्चिम अफ्रीका के ग्रायोट्स परंपरा से शुरू हुआ। वे ड्रम और विरले उपकरणों से लयबद्ध तरीके से कहानियाँ सुनाया करते थे। ग्रायोट्स वे इतिहासकार थे जो कहानियों को गाकर बताते थे। रैप अश्वेतों के संगीत का हिस्सा था। उसके शब्द उनका दर्द बयान करते थे। तो वहीं, कैरेबियन लोक कलाकर भी कहानियों को पद्य की शैली में सुनाते थे। जब इस शैली के बारे में अमेरिकी लोगों को मालूम हुआ तो उन्होंने इसमें तुकबंदी और ताल के साथ प्रयोग करना शुरू किया। दीपा के मुताबिक, रैप हिप-हॉप का हिस्सा है। जिसमें पाँच अलग-अलग तत्व होते हैं। ब्रेक डांस, डीजेइंग, एमसिंग (रैप), बीट बॉक्सिंग और ग्रफिटिंग। वे बताती हैं कि हिप-हॉप न्यूयॉर्क में 1973 में एक पार्टी की तरह शुरू हुआ था। यह पार्टी न्यूयॉर्क के डीजे हॉलिवुड ने रखी थी। उन्हें ही हिप-हॉप का जनक माना जाता है।

वे बताती हैं कि शुरुआत में पहले डीजे बजता था, जिसमें बाद में रैपर आए। फिर हिप-हॉप डांस शुरू हुआ। 1973 के अंत तक डिस्को खत्म हो चुका था और हिप-हॉप चलन में आया। दीपा कहती हैं कि दासों के साथ जिस तरह का अमानवीय व्यवहार किया गया था उसी को उनकी अगली पीढ़ी ने रैप के माध्यम से बताया। यही वजह है कि 1980 के अंत में रैप में शब्दों की अहमियत समझी जाने लगी। लोग राजनीतिक रैप भी तैयार करने लगे। दीपा कहती हैं कि रैप अमीरों ने नहीं, गरीबों ने शुरू किया है।

वे कहती हैं कि पश्चिम में भी वही रैपर्स प्रसिद्ध हैं जो शराब पीती हैं या छोटे कपड़े पहनती हैं। लेकिन जो वाकई अच्छी चीजों के बारे में बात कर रहे हैं उनको उतने दर्शक नहीं मिलते। लेकिन मैंने ऐसे गानों को नहीं चुना, क्योंकि मुझे मालूम था कि भौतिकवादी चीजें लंबे समय तक प्रोत्साहित नहीं कर सकतीं। अश्वेत लोगों ने दासता देखी है, तो उनके गानों में वह दर्द दिखता है। इसलिए कहा जाता है कि शब्दों से रैपर एक नई दुनिया बनाता है। हिप-हॉप में कहानी कहने की कला है। हिप-हॉप केवल संगीत नहीं, यह क्रांति है। भारत में भी हिप-हॉप राजनीति को बदलेगा।

दीपा कहती हैं कि मैंने अपनी पढ़ाई और काम दोनों को साथ रखा। मुझे मालूम था कि मुझे कुछ रचनात्मक करना है। इसलिए सीए की पढ़ाई छोड़ कर रैप शुरू किया। दीपा का कहना है कि आगे जो भी लड़कियाँ हिप-हॉप में आना चाहती हैं, अगर वे 'कूल' बनने के लिए या 'ट्रेंड' में आने के लिए हिप-हॉप में आना चाहती हैं तो न आएँ, क्योंकि ऐसा बहुत आगे तक नहीं चल पाएगा। जब आपको सच में सीखना हो तभी आप आगे बढ़ सकते

हैं। सिर्फ रैप करने से आपकी रचनात्मकता अधिक नहीं बढ़ेगी, बल्कि इसकी पूरी संस्कृति को समझना होगा। दूसरा अगर आप में वह आग है, जिसे आप बुझा नहीं पा रहे हैं, तब जरूर हिप-हॉप करो।

लैंगिक भेदभाव में विश्वास नहीं

बॉलीवुड हो या हॉलीवुड, सभी में महिलाओं की संगीत के क्षेत्र में बराबर प्रतिनिधित्व को लेकर चर्चाएं होती रहती हैं। कई बार इस लैंगिक गैरबराबरी को लेकर आंदोलन भी हुए। पुरुषों के मुकाबले महिलाओं का प्रतिनिधित्व कम है, लेकिन ऑनलाइन प्लेटफॉर्म के आने के बाद यह बंधन भी टूटता नजर आ रहा है। महिलाएं भी खूब यूट्यूब चैनल खोल रही हैं और अपनी आवाज का दम दुनिया को दिखा रही हैं। कन्नड़ रैपर सिरी नारायण को आज हर नौजवान सुनना चाहता है। वे हिंदी, कन्नड़ और अंग्रेजी तीनों भाषाओं में रैप करती हैं। उनका कहना है कि इतने लड़कों की भीड़ में अकेले परफॉर्म करना अकेलापन महसूस कराता है, इसलिए और लड़कियों को रैप की ओर आना चाहिए। उन्होंने 2013 में रैप शुरू किया था। 'आउट ऑफ माय माइंड' गाना सुन कर वे रैप के लिए प्रेरित हुईं। वे कहती हैं कि जब मैंने तय किया था कि रैप करूंगी तब मेरे माता-पिता ने मना किया, क्योंकि बचपन में मैंने शास्त्रीय संगीत सीखा था और मम्मी-पापा को रैप समझ नहीं आता था। बाद में मेरे पापा ने मेरा साथ दिया। अब भी मम्मी समझती नहीं हैं, लेकिन मुझे कभी रोकती नहीं हैं। वे बताती हैं कि मुझे इस बात से भी समस्या है कि किसी पुरुष को पुरुष रैपर नहीं कहा जाता है लेकिन लड़की को महिला रैपर जरूर कहा जाता है। मैं इस तरह के लैंगिक भेदभाव में विश्वास नहीं करती हूं। सभी को बराबर मानना चाहिए।

सिरी बताती हैं कि एक महिला रैपर होने का फायदा यह मिलता है कि लोग आप पर ध्यान ज्यादा देते हैं। रैप एक रचनात्मक कार्य है। आप अपनी समस्या किसी को सामान्य तरीके से बताओगे तो वे आपको नहीं सुनेंगे। वहीं, अगर आप रैप के माध्यम से किसी को कुछ बताओगे तो उस पर सभी का ध्यान जाएगा। गली बॉय आने के बाद रैप को और ज्यादा लोग समझ पाएंगे।

गली बॉय से रैप को लेकर समझ बनेगी, साथ ही संगीत एक ऐसा उद्योग है, जिसका बाजार कभी खत्म नहीं होने वाला है। संगीत से बहुत कुछ सीखने को मिलता है। खासकर रैप के शब्दों का प्रभाव दर्शकों पर अधिक पड़ता है। संगीत सुनने वालों की संख्या भी बढ़ती जा रही है। फिक्की की 2018 की रिपोर्ट के मुताबिक, इंटरनेट उपभोक्ताओं की संख्या बढ़ने की वजह से संगीत सुनने वालों की संख्या भी बढ़ी है। आइएफपीए ग्लोबल म्यूजिक रिपोर्ट 2017 के मुताबिक, संगीत उद्योग को डिजिटल माध्यमों से 64.60 फीसद राजस्व प्राप्त हुआ।

सिरी का कहना है कि यह हम कलाकारों के लिए सही समय है। इस समय में हम खुद को निखार सकते हैं। वे कहती हैं कि अगर खुद की पहचान बनानी है तो दूसरे के विचारों पर मत चलो, बल्कि अपना खुद का स्टाइल बनाओ।



Meena

Meena works with Jagran New Media, Delhi as a Sub Editor health related issues. Earlier, she had worked with Jansatta for four years.

by Ravishankar Upadhyay

Prabhat Khabar - 16 April 2019

पटना: सुप्रीम कोर्ट ने 15 अप्रैल 2014 में सुप्रीम कोर्ट ने पुरुष और महिला के अलावा ट्रांसजेंडर को तीसरे लिंग के रूप में मान्यता दी तो वह केवल एक आदेश नहीं था बल्कि यह तीसरे लिंग के प्रति समाज के दोगम दर्जे के रुख के प्रति एक परिवर्तनकारी कदम भी था. जब अदालत ने कहा था कि ये भी भारत के नागरिक हैं और उन्हें भी संविधान से हर अधिकार प्राप्त होने चाहिए. अदालत ने ट्रांसजेंडरों की तीसरे लिंग के रूप में पहचान को मानवाधिकार का मामला बताया था. इस आदेश के बाद ट्रांसजेंडर को सभी तरह के पहचान पत्र जैसे जन्म प्रमाण पत्र, पासपोर्ट, राशन कार्ड, ड्राईवग लाइसेंस आदि से तीसरे जेंडर की मान्यता मिली और उसके बाद परिदृश्य बदल गया. हम कुछ वैसे ट्रांसजेंडर की बात करेंगे जिन्होंने संघर्ष से अपनी पहचान बनायी है जिससे पूरा समुदाय प्रेरित हो रहा है.

देश की पहली ट्रांसजेंडर बैंकर हैं राजधानी की मोनिका

राजधानी पटना की मोनिका दास देश की पहली ट्रांसजेंडर बैंकर हैं. 29 वर्षीय मोनिका हनुमान नगर स्थित सिंडिकेट बैंक में क्लर्क हैं. अक्टूबर 2014 में उन्होंने बैंक ज्वाइन किया था. मोनिका ने स्कूली शिक्षा नवोदय विद्यालय से जबकि समाजशास्त्र विषय लेकर स्नातक स्तर की पढ़ाई पटना विश्वविद्यालय से की. पटना लॉ कॉलेज से एलएलबी की डिग्री भी ली. उनके पिता भगवान ढोली सेल्स टैक्स ऑफिसर थे जबकि मां अनिमा रानी भौमिक बीएसएनएल से रिटायर्ड कर्मचारी. समाज के तानों से तंग आकर पिता ने गोपाल नाम रख दिया. मोनिका बताती हैं जब वह तीन साल की थी तो उसके ट्रांसजेंडर होने की बात आस पड़ोस को हुई, लोग हंसी उड़ाने लगे. जब थोड़ी बड़ी हुई तो कोई दोस्ती नहीं करता था. ताने सुनने को मिलते थे, फिर भी अपना ध्यान सिर्फ पढ़ाई में लगाए रखा और आज सफलता कदम चूम रही है. वह कहती है कि कठिनाईयां तो सभी के साथ है लेकिन शिक्षा सबसे बड़ा अस्त्र है.

हाजीपुर के सदर अस्पताल की प्रोग्राम मैनेजर हैं डिंपल

पटना के कंकड़बाग की रहनेवाली डिंपल जैसमिन अभी हाजीपुर के सदर अस्पताल में डिस्ट्रिक्ट प्रोग्राम मैनेजर हैं. लेकिन इनका संघर्ष अभी भी जारी है. कहती हैं कि लड़का बनकर ज्ञान निकेतन स्कूल से शिक्षा शुरू हुई थी लेकिन मुझे परिवार वालों ने घर बैठने को कहा. स्कूल से निकाल दिये जाने के बाद नेशनल ओपेन स्कूल से दसवीं और 12 वीं की शिक्षा प्राप्त की. इसके बाद एएन कॉलेज से ग्रेजुएशन किया. आरा के वीर कुंवर सिंह विश्वविद्यालय से साइकोलॉजी में पीजी की डिग्री ली. इसके बाद स्वास्थ्य विभाग में नौकरी हो गयी. वह कहती हैं कि आज भी परिवार से लड़ कर घर में रह रहे हैं. एक दौर था कि जब परिवार ने नकार दिया तो डांस प्रोग्राम करने लगी थी.

हाजीपुर की बीरा ने मेल आइडेंटिटी के ग्रेजुएशन किया था

बीरा पटना विश्वविद्यालय की छात्र हैं। वैशाली की रहने वाले बीरा ने मेल आइडेंटिटी के साथ ग्रेजुएशन तक की शिक्षा हासिल की थी। वर्ष 2016 से 18 के बीच उन्होंने ट्रांसजेंडर आइडेंटिटी से सोशल वर्क में पीजी की शिक्षा ग्रहण की। उनकी जिंदगी पर स्थानीय स्तर पर द बीरा: अनटोल्ड स्टोरी नाम की फिल्म बनी है। लेकिन बीरा की ये उपलब्धियां उसको एक छोटी सी नौकरी दिला पाने में भी नाकाम रहती है। बीरा बताती हैं कि मैं खुद कमा कर पढ़ना चाहती हूं क्योंकि घरवालों ने मुझे अलग कर दिया है। लेकिन मुझे एक छोटी सी नौकरी नहीं मिल पाती। क्योंकि मैं किन्नर हूं। पहले हालात ये थे कि मुझे शनिवार और रविवार को बधाइयां गानी पड़ती थी ताकि मैं पढ़ाई का खर्चा निकाल सकूं। बीरा कहती हैं उनका व्यक्तित्व सबकुछ लड़कियों जैसा था। उसका मन लड़कियों की तरह रहने को करता था। चाल-ढाल और बोलचाल सब लड़कियों के जैसा था। वह स्कूल में सबसे अलग रहती थीं।

माही गुप्ता मिस ट्रांस क्वीन इंडिया में हो चुकी हैं शामिल

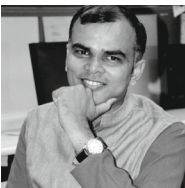
बिहार की ट्रांसजेंडर माही गुप्ता मिस ट्रांस क्वीन में शामिल हो चुकी हैं। मिस ट्रांसक्वीन इंडिया कॉम्पिटिशन में उन्होंने बिहार का प्रतिनिधित्व किया था। ऑनलाइन वोटिंग के जरिए देशभर से ट्रांसजेंडर समुदाय से ब्यूटी क्वीन का चुनाव हुआ था जिसमें उन्होंने काफी अच्छा परफॉर्म किया था। इस कॉम्पिटिशन में वीना टॉप की थीं। रैंप पर वॉक के दौरान माही की अदाएं देखने लायक थीं। प्रतियोगिता के दौरान जब वह रैंप पर उतरीं थी तो देखने वाले देखते रह गये थे। पीजेंट इंडिया द्वारा यह ब्यूटी कॉन्टेस्ट पहली बार राष्ट्रीय स्तर पर आयोजित किया गया था। ट्रांसजेंडर्स समुदाय को संवैधानिक मान्यता मिलने के बाद से इस स्पर्धा का दायरा बढ़ा है और अब देश के प्रत्येक राज्य से ट्रांसवूमन मॉडल्स इस स्पर्धा में चुन कर गयी थीं। 2018 के अक्टूबर में पब्लिक वोटिंग, रैंप वॉक, व्यक्तित्व और प्रजेन्स और माइंड और सोशल अवेयरनेश से जुड़े कई मुद्दों पर बेबाकी से अपनी राय रखते हुए माही ने सभी का दिल जीत लिया था।

यह था परिणाम:

1- वीना सेंद्रे - छत्तीसगढ़ 2- नमीता अम्मू- तमिलनाडु 3- आइजिया जोशी- पंजाब 4- नीतू- कर्नाटक 5- आर्ची सिंह- दिल्ली 6- सानिया सूद- हिमाचल प्रदेश 7- माही गुप्ता- बिहार 8- दीपांजलि- पश्चिम बंगाल 9- हर्षिनी- आंध्र प्रदेश 10- नताशा सिंह- उत्तराखण्ड

संघर्षों से जूझ कर बना रही हैं मुकाम: रेशमा प्रसाद ट्रांसजेंडर समुदाय की एकटीविस्ट रेशमा प्रसाद कहती हैं कि संघर्षों से जूझ कर ट्रांसजेंडर न केवल मुकाम बना रहीं है बल्कि दूसरों को प्रेरित भी कर रहीं हैं। उन्होंने कहा कि ट्रांसजेंडर दिवस पर मैं बताना चाहती हूं कि दुनिया समझती है कि किन्नर शादीशुदा जीवन व्यतीत नहीं कर सकते क्योंकि उन्हें शारीरिक रूप से कोई कमी होती है परंतु या अर्ध सत्य है। इस अर्धसत्य को समाज के सामने आना आवश्यक है। जो भी किन्नर साथी किन्नर जीवन को व्यतीत कर रहे हैं वह स्थायी या अस्थायी तरीके से जीवन साथी के साथ जीवन निर्वाह करने के लिए संघर्ष करते रहें हैं। इसके लिए सबसे बड़ी

जिम्मेदारी समाज की है. किन्नर जीवन की ही सामाजिक स्वीकार्यता नहीं है तो किन्नरों के शादी की सामाजिक स्वीकार्यता असंभव सा दिखता है परंतु वह दिन दूर नहीं जब किन्नर भी शादीशुदा जीवन व्यतीत करेंगे और वह सामाजिक स्वीकार्यता का स्वर्णिम दिन होगा.



Ravishankar Upadhyay

Ravishankar Upadhyay is a Public relation officer, Urban development and housing department, Govt. of Bihar. He is a former journalist/columnist.

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बैटरी वाली गाड़ी के ज़रिए जीविका तलाशतीं तीन महिलाएं

by Mohd Asghar Khan

bbc.com - 11 September 2018

संतोषी मुंडा, जानकी कुमारी मुंडा और सुमन देवी रांची की सड़कों पर सरपट बैटरी रिक्शा (ई-रिक्शा) दौड़ाती हैं। यहां अब तक ये काम मर्दों का ही माना जाता था, लेकिन अब ये तीन महिलाएं भी इसमें अपनी किस्मत आजमा रही हैं।

इसके पीछे तीनों की ज़रूरतों की अलग-अलग कहानियां हैं। लेकिन इन तीनों के सामने मुश्किलें कुछ एक-सी ही हैं- इन्हें अपने काम के कारण कई बार पुरुषों से भेदे ताने सुनने पड़ते हैं।

ये तीनों ही इन तानों का जबाब देना पसंद नहीं करतीं। इनका कहना है कि उनके लिए कमाई करना ज़रूरी है ना कि किसी तरह के विवाद में पड़ना।

मैंने तीनों से यही सवाल किया ये बैटरी रिक्शा ही क्यों चलाती हैं, ऑटो भी तो चला सकती हैं? इस प्रश्न के उत्तर में उनके जवाब कुछ इस तरह के होते हैं।

"मैं किसी पर बोझ बनना नहीं चाहती। मेरे बच्चे का भविष्य भी तो मेरी जिम्मेदारी है, तो मुझे जो काम मिला वो करती हूँ।"

"इस महंगाई में बच्चों की पढ़ाई और शहर में रहना और मकान का किराया देना आसान नहीं है। परिवार चलाना है तो कमाना पड़ेगा ही। जो ज़रिया मिला, उसे अपना लिया। अब कमाने वाला मर्द हो या औरत, क्या फर्क पड़ता है।"

"कौन क्या कहता है इससे कोई फर्क नहीं पड़ता। कमाई होगी तभी तो खाना मिलेगा इसमें शर्म की या बात है।"

सुमन देवी, जानकी कुमारी मुंडा और संतोषी मुंडा रोज़ाना बैटरी रिक्शा चलाकर 800 से 1,000 रुपये तक कमा लेती हैं। वो अपना रिक्शा मर्दों की रिक्शा के साथ ही कतारों लगाती हैं।

रांची जिला ई-रिक्शा चालक यूनियन के अध्यक्ष दिनेश सोनी कहते हैं, "फ़िलहाल रांची में यही तीन महिलाएं ही ई-रिक्शा चलाती हैं, लेकिन हम उम्मीद कर रहे हैं कि इन्हें देखकर और महिलाएं भी इस काम में आगे आएंगी।"

कहानी संतोषी मुंडा की

22 साल की संतोषी मुंडा और 27 साल की जानकी कुमारी मुंडा आदिवासी हैं। वो कहीं और से काम की तलाश में रांची आई थीं।

संतोषी रांची से चालीस किलोमीटर दूर सिल्ली की रहनेवाली हैं। वो सालों पहले रांची आ गई थीं और किराए पर मकान ले कर रहने लगीं।

संतोषी जब एक साल की थीं उनकी मां का देहांत हो गया था। इसके बाद उनके पिता घर छोड़ कर चले गए थे। उनके परिवार में अब उनके अलावा दो भाई और दो बहनें थीं जो उनसे बड़े थे। संतोषी के बड़े भाई सबको लेकर रांची आ गये और यहीं पर काम करने लगे।

वो कहती हैं कि मां के बाद पता नहीं पिताजी कहीं चले गए, उनका पता नहीं चल पाया।

"मेरी बड़ी दीदी बाई का काम करती थीं। आठ साल में मैं अपनी बड़ी दीदी के काम में हाथ बंटाने लगी और उनका साथ जाने लगी। मैं हॉकी खेलना चाहती थी लेकिन मेरे भाईयों ने मुझे दाई का काम सीख कर आगे वही काम करने की सलाह दी।"

संतोषी मुंडा कहती हैं "मैंने भाई का घर छोड़ दिया और मेरी दीदी जहां काम करती थीं वहां काम करने लगी और उन्होंने मुझे रहने की जगह दी। बाद में कुछ दोस्तों से मदद मैंने पहले स्कूटी चलाई और उसके बाद ड्राइविंग सीखी।"

"इसके बाद मैंने टैक्सी चलानी शुरू की और काफ़ी पैसे जमा किए ताकि मैं अपनी टैक्सी खरीद सकूं। जब ई-रिक्शा आया तो मुझे लगा कि मैं ये खरीद सकती हूं, लेकिन पैसे पूरे नहीं पड़े।"

"फिर मैंने सोचा किराए पर ही गाड़ी लेकर चला लूं। सो मैंने 300 रुपये प्रतिदिन किराए पर ई-रक्शा किराए पर ले लिया। मैंने जिससे गाड़ी ली उसने मुझसे समय पर पैसे देने के लिए कहा और गाड़ी दे दी।"

बीते दो साल से संतोषी मुंडा बैटरी रिक्शा चला रही हैं। उनका कहना है कि वो हर महीने करीब 20 से 25 हज़ार रुपये तक इस काम से कमा लेती हैं जिसमें से गाड़ी का किराया और उनका खर्च आसानी से निकल जाता है।

ज़रूरत बड़ी थी सो आगे क़दम बढ़ाया

जानकी मुंडा का गांव टाटी सिल्वा रांची से करीब 20 किलोमीटर दूर है। शादी के बाद वो अपने पति के घर रांची आ गईं।

उनके पति ऑटोरिक्शा चलाते हैं और यही परिवार की आय का एकमात्र ज़रिया है। लेकिन एक बेटी और एक बेटा होने के बाद उनके लिए घर चलाना मुश्किल हो रहा था। बच्चों को अच्छे स्कूल में पढ़ाना और घर का किराया देना संभव नहीं था।

अपनी जमा पूंजी जोड़ कर और दोस्तों से उधार लेकर उन्होंने एक बैटरी रिक्शा खरीदा और सोचा कि इसे किराए पर लगा देंगे।

लेकिन बैटरी रिक्शा किराए पर लेने के लिए कोई सामने नहीं आया और वो ऐसे ही पड़ी रही। इसके बाद जानकी ने फ़ैसला किया कि वो इसे खुद चलाएंगी।

जानकी कहती हैं, "मेरा बेटा प्राइवेट बोर्डिंग स्कूल में पढ़ता है और बेटी भी प्राइवेट स्कूल में है. उनकी फ्रीस, घर का किराया और राशन सभी इसी की कमाई से पूरा हो पाता है."

'पति की मौत के बाद काम करना शुरू किया था'

35 साल की सुमन देवी अपने पति के निधन के बाद वापिस अपने मायके लौट आईं जो रांची के हीनू में है. उनके साथ उनका बेटा था और वो नहीं चाहती थीं कि वो अपने परिवार के लिए बोझ बनें.

सुमन कहती हैं, "मेरा बेटा छह महीने का था जब मेरे पति इस दुनिया से चले गए. जब मेरा बच्चा जब पांच साल का हुआ तो मैं उसका एडमिशन प्राइवेट स्कूल में कराना चाहती थी. लेकिन इसके लिए मुझे काफी परेशान होना पड़ा. तभी मैंने सोच लिया था कि मुझे काम करना शुरू करना पड़ेगा.

"मैंने रांची में एक लेडीज़ गारमेंट्स की दुकान में आठ साल काम किया और पैसा जमा किया. मुझे कम से कम रहने के लिए एक छत मिली थी तो मैं पैसा समा कर सकती थी."

"फिर मैंने देखा कि बैटरी रिक्शा चला कर अपना खुद का काम कर सकती हूँ. इसके बाद मैंने रिक्शा चलाना सीखा और रिक्शा खरीद कर खुद उसे चलाने लगी. पिछले छह महीने से बैटरी रिक्शा चला रही हूँ."

सुमन कहती हैं कि वो इस काम से रोज़ाना लगभग 800 रुपये कमा लेती हैं. सुमन अपने बेटे को प्राइवेट स्कूल में पढ़ाती हैं और उसे इंजीनियर बनाना चाहती हैं.

रोज़ाना लड़ना होता है मुश्किलों से

जानकी कहती हैं कि रांची की सड़कों पर बीते दो साल में बैटरी रिक्शा की संख्या काफ़ी बढ़ गई है जिस कारण हाल के दिनों में चालकों की कमाई में कमी आई है.

वो कहती हैं कि "हमारे साथ रिक्शा चलाने वाले जो पुरुष रिक्शा चालक हैं उन्हें लगता है कि हमारे रिक्शा चलाने की वजह से ही उनकी कमाई पहले जैसी नहीं हो पा रही है."

सुमन देवी बताती हैं कि उनके काम को बुरा बोलने वाले सवारियां नहीं होती बल्कि बैटरी रिक्शा चलाने वाले पुरुष चालक होते हैं.

वो कहती हैं, "सड़कों पर जितने भी रिक्शा आ जाए, किसकी कितनी कमाई होगी सब किस्मत की बात है."

संतोषी मुंडा का भी यही कहना है कि पुरुष चालक महिलाओं को अपना साथी नहीं बल्कि अपने प्रतिद्वंद्वी मानते हैं.

वो कहती हैं, "ऐसा लगता है कि हम महिलाएं रिक्शा चलाकर उनके हिस्से का पैसा ले रही हैं. जबकि मुझे लगता है कि जिसकी किस्मत में जितना होगा, उसे मिलेगा ही."

वो कहती हैं कि ऐसी अभद्र टिप्पणियों का जवाब देकर वो उलझना नहीं चाहती हैं इसलिए खमोश रहना ही पसंद करती हैं.

रांची पिंक ऑटो महिला सर्विस संस्थापक संजय साहू का मानना है कि इस काम में महिलाओं की संख्या जितनी बढ़ेगी, लोगों की संकीर्ण मानसिकता उतनी ही तेज़ी से बदलेगी.

वो मानते हैं कि कई बार महिला चालकों को पुरुषों के भद्दे ताने (कमेंट) सुनने पड़ते हैं. वह कहते हैं, "कई बार महिला चालकों पर इतनी अभद्र टिप्पणियां की जाती है कि उसे बयां तक नहीं किया जा सकता. इस तरह की शिकायतें आम होती जा रही हैं. मैंने कई बार इसकी शिकायत पुलिस से भी की है."

संजय साहू ने 2013 में रांची में महिलाओं के लिए अलग से ऑटो चलाने की शुरुआत की थी. इन ऑटो की ड्राइवर और पैसेंजर दोनों ही महिलाएं होती हैं.

रांची जिला ई-रिक्शा चालक यूनियन के अध्यक्ष दिनेश सोनी कहते हैं कि "ये पुरुष चालक उन्हें अपना दोस्त नहीं मानता और उनके खिलाफ़ खड़े हो जाते हैं. ऐसे लोगों से सख्ती से निपटना ज़रूरी है."

"केवल तीन ही तो महिलाएं हैं जो ई-रिक्शा चलाती हैं, अगर उन्हें भी इसमें दिक्कतें आईं तो आप समझ सकते हैं कि और महिलाएं आगे नहीं आएंगी, एसा नहीं होना चाहिए."



Mohd Asgar Khan

Mohd Asgar Khan has seven years of experience in journalism. The main objective of his work is to bring to the attention of the society the various issues that the tribal community faces in their daily lives.

by **Amita Mehta**

Sandesh - 03 September 2019

Women Sarpanches play a crucial role in the transformation of the country.

In the 1993 Panchayat Raj Act, it was decided to give one third reservation to women, when there were many questions about women's activism. But in the last decade, women sarpanches have changed the face of the village with their vision and work.

Women Sarpanches who used to be treated only as puppets or rubber stamps are now the transforming faces, playing a fundamental role in the country.

In the villages of India, more than 3 lakh women are active in politics, of which about one lakh are sarpanches and most of these are active: not puppets, rubber stamps and husband proxies. These educated or poorly educated women sarpanches are realizing that they can do a lot for the development of their area. With the help of these strong and awakened sarpanches, the people are standing up against exploitation and discrimination. According to the World Bank's Development Report, where there are women in Indian panchayats, availability of clean water and sanitation is facilitated and violence against women has decreased. It is not that this task was easy for them. Socio-familial obstacles, lack of knowledge of politics, administrative knowledge and plans and obstacles like bare minimum knowledge of computers and other issues were against them. Yet the women who have entered the power corridors, due to their husbands probably, have worked diligently to create unity.

Nauroti Devi, a woman who has exerted her power in the development of villages, exceeds them all. In the village of Harmada in Rajasthan, which was engaged in stone-cutting, illiterate women were discriminated against in their wages. Despite standing against the contractors, women could not succeed in receiving equal wages. To get justice, an educated villager suggested filing a petition in the Supreme Court. With the help of numerous people, they filed a

petition and after a lengthy battle, they triumphed. The government made it a law to pay women the same as men in the workplace. Nauroti Devi who became a hero from this incident was made the village sarpanch by the villagers. The woman who could not read or write went to high school and learned to operate a computer. At this stage, she realized the importance of education. Therefore, she started teaching computers along with basic education to the uneducated women around her. Educating thousands of women and children, she has become a true leader and has constructed toilets, water pumps and houses, established a farmers' labour organization for farmers' questions in addition to health centres. Fighting against alcohol mafias, she made this small village a paradise. The law of having a minimum fourth standard education was implemented for the sarpanch, so she could not contest lead for the second time but even today her education provision is working wonders.

Consider the work of Chhavi from Oda village in Rajasthan. At the age of 26, she became the youngest female Sarpanch. She graduated from Lady Shri Ram College and completed her MBA from Pune and worked for the Times of India and Airtel. But when she heard about the toxic water problem in her hometown, she felt anxious. She started seeing flashes of people dying in front of her eyes and when she couldn't ignore it anymore, she decided to leave her corporate job. She contemplated going to the village and doing something for the benefit of the place with the help of the government and the corporate sector. Upon her arrival at the village, she realized that becoming sarpanch was the only way to get her chance for change. She talked to people about the problems and gained confidence and later won the elections and became the sarpanch. As soon as she was elected, she revived the village lakes by installing a water line, providing clean drinking water, roads, and electricity in the village. She also insisted the State Bank to open a branch in the village and started distribution of cheap food grains to the poor. Witnessing the progress, some men tried to obstruct her work because they could not digest a young woman handling the village matters and succeeding in those. That hurt their male ego. But there were more supporters than opponents of Chhavi which led her to be re-elected as a sarpanch. Leaving aside her income of lakhs of rupees, Chhavi today lives with the salary of three and a half thousand rupees. Presently she is focusing on afforestation and educating villagers from her computer training centre.

All the members of the village panchayat of Vyara taluka of Tapi district are women. Women Sarpanch Minaben is working with her friends for the progress of the district. The Self-Help Group established under the World Vision India Scheme, trained and prepared the women for leadership. Under the guidance of this group, they have accomplished several development works. They have built a road connecting the village to the highway and constructed 30 houses for the poor. Not only this, but the people of the village are also striving to get adequate benefits of all the schemes of the government.

Sushma Bhadu of Haryana is a sarpanch who has broken many village customs and has given a new direction to the villagers. For instance, Sushma lifted her veil for the first time among two thousand people from six neighbouring villages of Haryana. The fight for the veil that has been going on ever since has been nearly a success. Now the women there are wearing veils but are not ashamed. In addition, the quality of schooling was improved, and the women aborting their child has been terminated. For development, they visited each house explaining the importance of both education, and daughters. Today, there are 913 women for every thousand men.

Arti Devi is also an MBA like Chhavi. Arti Devi, sarpanch of Dhunkpada Gram Panchayat, Odisha, quit her job at IDBI Bank and chose to become sarpanch in her hometown. She was elected with the highest number of votes in the surrounding 50 panchayats. More than a thousand women due to the literacy campaign, run by Aarti Devi, learnt to read and write. She created an independent women's Gram Sabha for women empowerment. The work of establishing a nationalized rural bank, welfare pavilion, toilets in every house, water connection and planting of one and a half lakh trees was her success. She was the only Indian woman to be selected under the International Visitors Leadership Program, which is considered a non-profit professional exchange program in the USA.

When her son died due to lack of treatment, Nirmala became the Sarpanch of a village in Maharashtra and established health centres in many villages by campaigning systematically. Vandana Maida, the mother of three children and the Sarpanch of Kankavli village has shone on the UN calendar in 2017. Many protested when Vandana decided to contest the Sarpanch election due to village issues. But soon after becoming sarpanch, Vandana dug wells in the village,

installed handpumps, built proper roads, excavated lakes, and started a primary school.

There are many other women who use their power without cuts and corruption. They have worked for health and hygiene, and social awareness in addition to providing basic amenities to the rural areas.

(Translated from Gujarati)



Amita Mehta

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The tragic story of the transgenders

by **Mahesh Shah**

Chitralkha - 15 October 2018

(A Story narrated by Stuti Dalal, resident of Ahmedabad, who closely viewed the hardships of the transgenders while preparing a project about them in College)

Many schools or colleges here give project-based education, in which a student has to do detailed research work, which opens the doors of knowledge and understanding for the students working on it. On the other hand, it also found that the practical knowledge of such study projects is not useful for the students in career or life further as well.

A collegian girl from Ahmedabad has done remarkable work in this direction. Her name is Stuti Dalal, daughter of Mayank Dalal and Sohnibahen Dalal. Mr. Mayank is working as Telecom Security and Surveillance Service Provider, and mother Sohnibahen is retired teacher and French Language Expert.

They have two daughters, Stuti and Nivedita. As born in an art-lover family, Stuti used to draw pictures from a childhood. She took training for drawing, and was awarded with two Medals in a Drawing Competition. She also learnt Vocal Music. She then headed to Coimbatore's D.J. Academy to study the Communication Designer Short Term Course in 2014 after completing her 12th.

She had to do a project named 'Design for Social Change Project' along with two colleagues. She therefore thought about dowry, feticide, child abuse etc. subjects. At last, she finalised a subject on which very little work was done, and it was the life of Transgenders, to whom some people use humiliating words like 'Eunuch' and 'Pavaiya'.

Stuti, in Ahmedabad, had seen Transgenders many times when they collected money at houses, shops and trains with clapping of palms. She was not much

aware about them at that time. Even though she did not have enough understanding about sex and gender, she reached out to the Transgender Confraternity (jamaat), in Coimbatore, where 12 twelve Transgenders were staying. Stuti says to 'Priyadarshini':

“I was quite nervous when I went to meet them. I was confused how to break the ice with them! I had to take care that they should not find my behavior humiliating or reverse checking them.”

“But my first experience with them was very exciting,” Stuti adds. “Then I gathered information from several media about the Transgenders. I also met the first Transgender T.V. Reporter Padmini Prakash of 'Lotus Channel'.”

On the other hand, the Transgenders also continued to cooperate with Stuti for studies. Stuti accompanied the Transgenders when they used to go to market places to collect money, and also took part in some of their occasions. This field work continued for almost a month

Stuti says: “Some people in our society consider them criminals, but it is not like that. The Transgenders suffer many social and other problems. There are two basic reasons for that. They have very less formal education due to social shame or humiliation. Second, they do not get jobs or livelihoods from the society or Government. In this scenario, they crave equality in rights, social care, love and acceptance. So, we did two experiments to bring social awareness and to avoid wrong perceptions about them in society.”

Stuti organized free discussions and seminars at college campuses and public places about the Transgenders. She also prepared a short video, and named it 'A Clap Story'. She put a coated white paper and black ink pot on the table in the college canteen, and the paper would create the writing made by wax after applying black ink on the paper, in which interesting information was written by her. In addition, she put two art installations. She also put the pictures of many Gods and Goddesses in one of the houses of the Transgenders in this art installation.

She managed to explain to people that the Transgenders are polytheistic in their society. The other installation, which created more attraction, was of the

petticoats and skirts. She hung a petticoat on the board and put a poster of a transgender, one can see that a transgender is standing wearing petticoat. Some people, with curiosity or with shyness also tried to see inside of the petticoat as there was a suggestion written on the board; but after some time they stopped over there and gained more information from the board.

What was placed in it?

“Some Transgenders raise their petticoats/skirts in public with anger or resentment, if they are not given required or asked amount,” says Stuti Dalal. “We used this well known trick and put the pain of the transgenders on the board placed beneath the skirt: 'Please do not consider us any other things, we are proud of being women'.”

Stuti studied Diploma in Communication Design in Coimbatore in which she also chose the subject of Transgenders. She studied and gathered about the legends, lifestyles about the Transgenders of India and abroad using the internet and books. She viewed many videos and Ted talks too. She viewed many films about transgenders' stories like Shatter Box, Boys Don't Cry, Paris Is Burning, Tom Boy, Denis Girl and Kissa etc. She went through the three autobiographies Facing the Mirror, Shikhandi and The Truth About Me. She also met a young transgender at Ahmedabad and got the transgender's painful story, talked with three to four transgenders on telephone.

“We found her subject abnormal and difficult especially when she was doing research about LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender),” says Sohnibahen Dalal, her mother. She adds, “I as her mother was scared that she would face difficulties gathering information about the transgenders and might get bitter experiences; but nothing like that happened. I was satisfied and found that she was on her proper track only when Mr. S. Balram, head of her Academy and her mentor Prakash Moorty talked to me and praised her capability and purpose.”

The Pavaia Project (project for the transgenders) was fruitful. Mr. S. Balram mentioned Stuti's Project in his book and the Academy also praised it. Stuti got the Diploma. The family was full of joy and enjoyment. Stuti was now willing to work, but the scenes of painful lives, identity of suppressed and abandoned people

etc. were etched in her brain.

Stuti says: “The transgenders are recognized by their voice, gestures and behaviors, but there are many young transgenders who do not reveal their true identity due to shyness and embarrassment. They live with their families and bear physical and psychological pains. Some of them commit suicide inevitably by the age of 18 years.”

Therefore, Stuti gave more importance to social awareness instead of her own career, after listening to her inner soul's cry. She has initiated the project on Transgenders. She has understanding of their problems and life, she has contacts, but she has to do this job in a wide concept, alone and by her own financial means. However she got her parents' support for it. She is writing an illustrated experimental story about transgenders, the name of the story is 'Tale of the Third'. The attempts to get financial assistance have been started for this project as it is an expensive one.

What would be the specialty of this story?

Stuti Dalal talks in details: “In this story, there is not any description of yesterday's or today's life of Transgenders, but it would be a story of the life of a Transgender of tomorrow. There would be description of a young Transgender's multi-colored life of a day in 2030. A Transgender by the year of 2030 would be well literate and with full awareness. The view and concept of the society towards the Transgenders would have been changed. Therefore, there are seven characters including a Transgender and female police officers in this story, which would express and exhibit the things of relations, conflicts and dreams of the Transgenders with the help of some 150 paintings, 360 degree paintings, animations, sound, etc. I have taken training in Mumbai for Computer Coding. I have thought of presenting this story, for its presentation on a huge platform, through an interactive medium rather than in a book form or a graphic novel.”

Stuti has a purpose by this imaginary story of the Transgenders that the people might get talking about transgenders and have feelings for them.

(Translated from Gujarati)



Dr. Mahesh Shah

Dr. Mahesh Shah has been working with Gujarati Magazine CHITRALEKHA - Ahmedabad Bureau as a Special Correspondent for nearly 3 decades.

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Under the open sky

by **Alakananda Kakoti**

Amar Asom - 03 March 2019

In the run-up to Women's Day, I decided to write about some ordinary but extraordinary women. Some of these women in our district are Kalpana, Manjula, Bashana, Samarpita, Basanti, Dipti, and many more. Although these women have stayed in their homes, they have been instrumental in leading the society in many ways, silently. We asked them if they were really ready to work for the society by associating with the Women's Association even after taking care of their family day and night. Two of them said that when they thought of their role in a middle-class family like theirs, they wondered if their family members had time to acknowledge their contribution. We said that taking care of the family was also an important responsibility. One of them said, "We work for the family, children, but where is our recognition and respect?" Women, who work outside the home, are financially well-off, self-reliant, have financial independence; they have dignity.

We said that even though we were working, financially independent and working equally with men; women were still not completely independent. Not to mention, how many working women come to our office as victims of husband's torture. I remember Nazrul Islam's famous lines - the story of male heroism is recorded in history, but no one talks about how many women's sacrifice, tears are behind that. I know this is true even now. Now is the time to recognize and give dignity to the work of these ordinary women. These are the women who worked with us, volunteered to do a lot of work for the elderly in the area. Even if people in the family do not like them to get involved in charity work, they continue to render their help to the needy even to the extent of feeding the elderly. These women have been able to set their own ideals, by their actions, and hard work and have shown their sensibility.

In our visit to two villages representing 'Mahila Samiti' for awareness generation, we saw that some of the members of 'Mahila Samiti' were teaching children in the office made of bamboo and cane. At a time when Anganwadi schools were spread

all over and Sarbasiksha universalised education, we did not find a single Anganwadi school in the village. Poor boys and girls look after their siblings at day time because their mothers go to work. Since these children do not get the opportunity to study during the day, the members of the 'Mahila Samiti' take the responsibility of teaching them in the evening under the lamp. In the remote areas of the village, they don't even know anything about women's rights. They carry on with their responsibilities through their hard work and intelligence. They are not those to sit under the banner of any party raising slogans for women's freedom. These women know that freedom comes through work and only words do not bring freedom.

Some women are working hard, taking care of the whole family, and are still doing service for the society. This has become possible as these women have become conscious of their strength and rights. They have understood that to be free, they must become independent through education. They should get formal or technical education. We know that there are two kinds of education in human life. One is the learning to earn livelihood and another is the learning for life. They may be interested in learning for life because they may have failed in the learning for livelihood. They have stepped out with an open mind to become successful in learning for life. They have raised their voice against superstitions and evil traditions. We are amazed to see the extraordinary affection, love and kinship that these women have for others. Ignoring their own pain and pleasure, needs in life; they have taken up some small things for the benefit of the society and carried out the responsibility very happily. Having met them, we understand how different their thoughts and actions are though they have been through a lot of difficult situations. It is wonderful that many extraordinary things are happening under this open sky and some women have made those things possible. Some disasters or tragic incidents that have taken place in the lives of ordinary women have led them to an identity of their own as they view life and work differently and derive pleasure in their good work for the society. So even ordinary women, in their own right, can get the feeling of being independent by doing something that they like, creating something. Every work has value. This is because nature has created

man and man has built society. So, the history of this society is that of males and females. On the eve of Women's Day, we have a special need to think about women.

(Translated from Assamese)



Alakananda Sreekumari Kokati

Alakananda Sreekumari Kokati is Editor at Self Publishers and President of Nari Nirjatan Paramarsha Kendra - Dist. Mahila Samity.

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Ruturani, the female undertaker

by **Akhand**

indiamediacentre.wordpress.com - 27 October 2018

In Hinduism, Sikhism, Jainism and Buddhism, the last rites of the dead body on a pyre are done by a male, from time immemorial. Here is an example of deviation, dedication and devotion. Ruturani Samal in Bhubaneswar of Odisha has a record of cremating more than 600 unidentified, unknown, unclaimed and stray bodies to her credit. Her life is one that began with despair, despondency and deceit; leading to a story of accolades, praise and recognition.

In our male dominated society, women doing the cremation work is looked down upon as inauspicious and with abhorrence. But 36 year old Ruturani Samal from Old Town of Bhubaneswar, the capital city of Odisha, whose husband deserted her, has been doing it for years. She has two young daughters. Ruturani's life story from pain and sorrow to one of introspection of commendation and success is full of memorable incidents.

Ruturani got married in 1997 and gave birth to two daughters. But her married life was full of sorrows, torture and persecution by her husband and the second woman in his life. Ruturani could not bear the situation. She once tried to end her life in front of a running train..., fortunately she was saved by a social worker named Pradip Kumar Prusty. Getting a fresh lease of life, Ruturani determined to live with respect and meaning, and to bring up her two daughters like others in the society.

She started earning a living by washing dishes and other things. She also began to do some social work in collaboration with the Pradeep Seva Trust, an organization formed by Pradip. She has never looked back since then and her dedicated social service has brought her to this height and has given her distinguished identity. People sought after her for final cremation rights whenever an unidentified, unknown dead body is found anywhere in the city. Ruturani has made a name for herself in this field. She is now the Secretary of her savior and rescuer Pradip Prusty's Pradip Seva Trust.

Riturani first had to face opposition to do something like rescuing and cremating the bodies. Many people said it was not right to do this filthy thing because she was a woman. Some people said, “If you want to do social work, there are many things to do. Why do you pick up the dead bodies and cremate them, the work that is done by a certain class of people, who are treated as untouchable in the society?” Ignoring all this, she moved on. So far, she has done cremation of more than 400 dead bodies. After some time, people started appreciating the work of Riturani and many organizations have also felicitated her.

She says, “Women can do everything. It is not right to lose hope when we are facing any problem. I was going to commit suicide, but that decision was completely wrong. Today I think I have more strength than before and I can do a lot of work for society.”

Riturani now lives with two daughters. These school going girls are proud of their mother. They said, “It is our mother who inspires us.”

Riturani has become an example not only for her daughters, but for everyone in the society for her noble work. She is now a messiah in front of the society who once looked down on her.

(Translated from Odia)



Akhand

Akhand is a freelance Journalist based in Odisha. He writes on various developmental issues like human rights, gender issues, health and poverty.

ADVERTISING AWARDS



**RUNNER-UP | TV AD - PRODUCT
BBDO
#SHARETHELOAD | ARIEL**

This advertisement gives an important and timely message on redefining gender roles. Through a conversation between a mother and daughter over phone, with the son around, the mother cleaning his room, the advert subtly conveys to the viewers that household work is not the responsibility of women alone, and there is a need to engage boys in household work from a young age. The ad also highlights how the burden of household work clips the ambitions of many young women.



**RUNNER-UP | DIGITAL AD - PRODUCT
OGILVY & MATHER
#STOPSAYINGWOMENCAN'T | GREENPLY**

The creative concept of this advertisement holds a mirror to our unconscious gender biases. When a few women are asked to identify products made by women from a large number of objects placed before them, it is interesting to note not one has mentioned the wooden shelves. An ad, made for Women's day in partnership with Archana Women's Centre, brings out the deeply internalized gendered perceptions about the skills and capabilities of women among us..



**WINNER | TV AD - PRODUCT
OGILVY
TITAN RAGA #FLAUNTYOURFLAW | TITAN**

This advertisement gives a message that breaks stereotypes of beauty, assuages women's insecurities associated with their physical appearance, and beseeches them to be comfortable in their own skin. The ad gives the confidence to women to flaunt their so-called flaws, be it grey hair, or stretch marks caused by pregnancy, or fingers bruised by playing a string instrument.



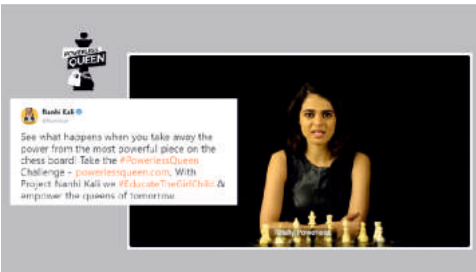
**WINNER | DIGITAL AD - PRODUCT
GREY INDIA
THE BARBERSHOP GIRLS OF INDIA | GILLETTE INDIA**

This advertisement showcases the heartening and inspiring story of two gender bender girls. “How would a razor know the difference between a boy and a girl?” That's how a father explains to his son, astonished to see the two girls running the barber shop. Based on a true story of Jyoti and Neha from a village in Uttar Pradesh, this ad was uplifting to say the least.



**WINNER | CSR
DDB MUDRA
#PROJECTFREEPERIOD | STAYFREE**

This campaign makes efforts to not just address menstrual hygiene issues, but it moves beyond to empower one of the most marginalized sections of society, the commercial sex workers.. The ad tries to find answers to “Can you imagine a woman who looks forward to her periods?” and uses the three day period to impart income generation skills like beautician course, artificial jewelry making etc to the women.



**WINNER | GRAND PRIX AND SOCIAL MEDIA CAMPAIGN
WATCONSULT
#POWERLESSQUEEN | NANHI KALI**

The social media campaign called #Powerless Queen for Nanhi Kali, an organisation working for girls, by WATConsult, a part of Dentsu Aegis Network India was presented with two awards. One was the Grand Prix Award and the other was Social Media Campaign. The campaign involving a game of chess, with a Queen that has no power (unlike the most powerful Queen in real chess) highlighted how the girls were powerless in India and it was not possible to go ahead without empowering them.

OTHER CATEGORY AWARDS

Feature Film



ARTICLE 15 ANUBHAV SINHA

In Article 15, the connivance of police and administration in a major cover-up of a case of rape and murder of two dalit girls exposes deep-rooted social hierarchies. It brings into sharp focus the use of violence in general, and sexual violence against women and girls in particular, to silence the voices that demand their democratic right to equality. The film showed a mirror to the fractured society that is India.



BOMBAY ROSE GITANJALI RAO

Bombay Rose tells the story of the budding love between two dreamers being tested amidst the bustle of a magnetic and multifaceted city. The animation film, with its breathtaking presentation, tells the story with sensitivity and simplicity. It's a story with many undercurrents of notions of masculinity and patriarchy.

Documentary



HOLY RIGHTS
FARHA KHATUN

Holy rights, is an eye opening documentary by Farha Khatun on the journey of Muslim women aspiring to become qazis. It documents with honesty the arduous journey of women challenging the power of religious leaders and their diktats.

Film on Digital Platform | Netflix



SONI
IVAN AYR

An Award for a gender sensitive film released on OTT platforms was launched this year. The award was presented to Soni, a film released on Netflix. It's directed by Ivan Ayr, and produced by Kimsi Singh and Kartikeya Narayan Singh. It stars Geetika Vidya Ohlyan and Saloni Batra in the lead roles. It was

written by Ayr and Kislai, and chronicles the life of two women police officers—Soni and Kalpana, who deal with crimes against women in the city. It shows sensitivity in chronicling the lives of the two policewomen who have to fight not just the criminals but also the gendered and patriarchal system, to do what they are supposed to do.

Web Series

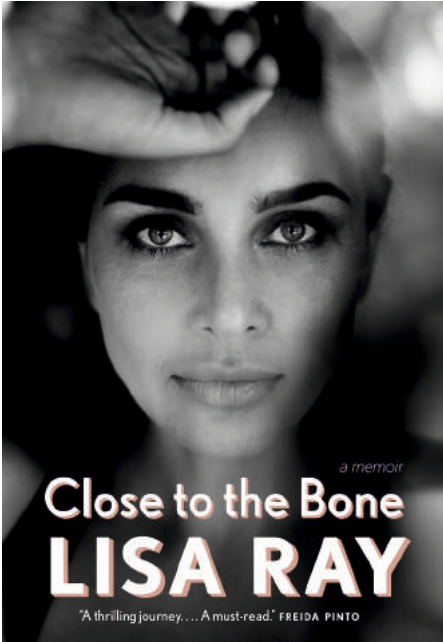


MADE IN HEAVEN **ZOYA AKHTAR & REEMA KAGTI**

The award for Web Series was introduced in this year's edition of the awards.

Are marriages really made in heaven? Or are they relationships of convenience, expediency, equations of political exigencies, a facade of 'normalcy' in an otherwise not so normal world? Made in Heaven explores the dynamics working behind the weddings and exposes the deep rooted patriarchy, gender prejudices and stranglehold of social norms and social practices. Made in Heaven is an entertaining, engaging yet thought-provoking presentation of the institution of marriage in India.

Books



Non-Fiction : Autobiography

CLOSE TO THE BONE: A MEMOIR: LISA RAY

'Close to the bone: a memoir' written by Lisa Ray, published by HarperCollins examines different perspectives of Lisa's life, her incredible journey of courage, of growth, of hope, of love and spirituality; which makes her autobiography stand apart from other memoirs. The raw honesty of Lisa's writing is what moves the readers.

Lisa narrates with laser sharp and extremely entertaining writing, her journey of conquering the odds - from misogyny to cancer, and what it means to be a woman striving for more in today's world, not just through her own story but also through the stories of so many other women.

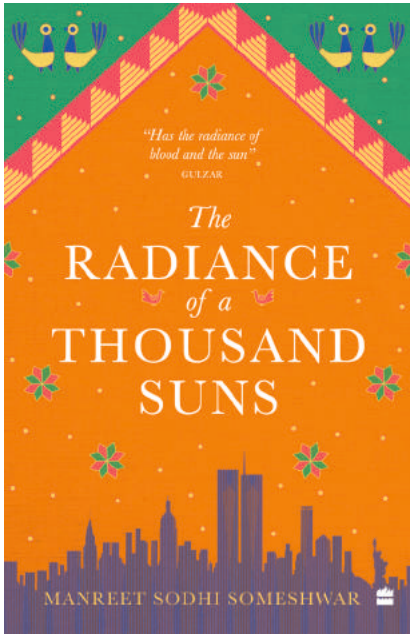
Books



Non-Fiction : Sports/Adventure **FREE HIT: SUPRITA DAS**

‘Free Hit’ written by Suprita Das, published by HarperCollins, traces the history of women's cricket in India. The author shows a keen eye for details and demonstrates exemplary skill in crafting a book on women's cricket in India which is interesting and inspiring too. ‘Free Hit’ dives deep into the lives of a spirited bunch of women who fought hard for their right to play, overcame sponsorship challenges, corrected gender-based pay gaps, and tackled the sheer indifferences to cricket administrators along the way.

Books



Fiction

RADIANCE OF THOUSAND SUNS: MANREET SODHI SOMESHWAR

Radiance of a thousand suns, written by Manreet Sodhi Someshwar, published by HarperCollins, gives voice to the women whose stories most often remain silent, or who are forcefully silenced – in particular those women who went through unbelievable horrors during the 1947 Partition and again during the 1984 anti-Sikh riots., and who are often forgotten in His-story. Manreet Sodhi Someshwar, sensitively and skilfully, weaves diverse threads of narratives – across years, countries, and continents.

Theatre



POOR BOX PRODUCTIONS VAGINA MONOLOGUES

Eve Ensler's 'The Vagina Monologues' is a revolutionary play that introduces women around the world to their own bodies, gives them agency and the courage to speak out about the insecurities, ignominies and injustices that they suffer. Poor Box productions has been performing the play across the country in different languages and has been consistently making efforts to promote conversations about women, their bodies and their sexuality through the Vagina Monologues.



EXPERIMENTAL THEATRE FOUNDATION MANJUL BHARDWAJ

Manjul Bhardwaj through his Experimental Theatre Foundation has been bringing theatre to the doorsteps of the people, and making social issues integral to the creative processes of theatre. Mumbai based Manjul Bhardwaj and Experimental Theatre Foundation are consistently making an effort to bring in changes in the society, through people-centric theatre.

General Entertainment Channel



**MOST INSPIRING WOMAN PROTAGONIST
MINI – ESSAYED BY ASHNOOR KAUR
PATIALA BABES | SONY TV**

The award for 'most promising woman protagonist', launched this year, was given to Mini essayed by Ashnoor Kaur, in Patiala Babes, the TV show on Sony TV. MINI portrays the role of a progressive young woman, who empowers her mother to remarry and pursue her dreams and aspirations. She is a positive role model to many young audiences to stand up with women who face violence and discrimination.



**FOR PROMOTING GENDER SENSITIVITY
IN MEDIA REPORTING
SAMEERA KHAN**

Sameera Khan was given the award for consistent writing from a gender perspective. She has been a journalist, an academician, a researcher, and an author; and she has been working on gender sensitive reporting on incidents of sexual violence in all these capacities. She makes consistent efforts to hold a mirror to the media and its conscious and unconscious insensitivity and biases.

General Entertainment Channel



**PRIYANKA DAHALE AWARD FOR
A YOUNG PROMISING JOURNALIST
NEETU SINGH
GAONCONNECTION.COM**

Population First has instituted an award in memory of Priyanka Dahale, a young Laadli media award winner. Neetu Singh, the winner of the award this year has been reporting extensively on various gender issues, for gaonconnection.com. She writes from the ground, follows her stories to their logical conclusion, never letting the 'human' element get out of it.

SPECIAL AWARDS



**LAADLI WOMAN BEHIND THE
SCENE AWARD**
RESHMA PATHAN

'Chal Dhanno!' This iconic line instantly conjures the image of the bubbly, feisty 'gaon ki chhori' Hema Malini in a colourful attire on a tonga drawn by her mare Dhanno, and the action-packed sequence that follows, from the equally iconic movie Sholay. The real woman behind the screen is none other than the Stunt Double - Reshma Pathan, known as the 'Sholay Girl.' Reshma Pathan joined the industry in 1968 at the age of 14 to support her family. Her first role was that of Laxmi Chhaya's double in Vinod Khanna's 'Ek Khiladi Bawan Patte' (1972). But the real break came in 1975 when she worked as the body double for Hema Malini in 'Sholay'. She was the first stunt woman who officially got a membership of the Movie Stunt Artists Association of India.

Reshma was the first woman to perform stunts for stars like Meena Kumari, Saira Banu, Hema Malini, Sri Devi, Dimple Kapadia and Meenakshi Seshadri at a time when it was standard practice for men to dress up as women to perform action sequences for the heroines. She had worked in over 400 films for three decades including South Indian and Bhojpuri films. 'Woman Behind the Scene' award was presented to Reshma Pathan for breaking many glass ceilings and making a name for herself as a stunt double in Bollywood.



**LAADLI LIFETIME
ACHIEVEMENT AWARD**
USHA KHANNA

'Breaking the Glass ceiling' is an oft repeated metaphor today, with special focus on women in the fields of Art and Entertainment. This is exactly what one woman accomplished more than 6 decades ago in, perhaps the most difficult field for women – Music Direction in Bollywood movies. She was the only successful woman music director in Bollywood during these early decades.

Usha Khanna broke the 'Glass Ceiling' in 1959 as music composer of the film 'Dil Deke Dekho' which turned out to be a chartbuster. Usha Khanna, just 17 when the movie was released, had struck gold with her first venture.

In a career spanning 4 decades, Usha Khanna composed music for more than 1000 songs in over 200 films in Hindi and other languages. An accomplished singer herself, she sang more than 150 film songs, which include about 30 songs that she sang for other composers.

The Laadli Lifetime Award 2020 was presented to Usha Khanna in appreciation of her long and fruitful career in the male dominated field of music composing in Bollywood.

OUR JURY

ANUJA GULATI	Program management specialist, UNFPA
DR. ARATHI PM	Assistant Professor at the School of Indian Legal Thought, Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam, Kerala
ARVIND SINGHAL	Samuel Shirley and Edna Holt Marston Endowed Professor of Communication and Director, Social Justice Initiative at the University of Texas
C. G. MANJULA	Senior journalist writing extensively on gender issues
C. VANAJA	Award winning journalist, TV presenter and film maker.
DR. DAYA KRISHNA MANGAL	Professor of Public health and Dean Research at IIHMR University, Jaipur.
DIVYA GUPTA	Development practitioner, communications specialist, and journalist
Dr. GAURANG JANI	Ex faculty at the Sociology Department of Gujarat University,
GEETA SESHU	Independent journalist engaged in reporting and analysing media issues
DR. GITA CHADHA	Thorough academic, has developed frameworks for feminist archiving at Research Centre for Women's Studies, SNDT University Mumbai

**GOKUL
KRISHNAMOORTHY**

Writer and an independent consultant who works at the intersection of brands, social impact and content.

GOWHAR GEELANI

Author, broadcast journalist, a Chevening Fellow, South Asian Journalism Programme Scholar, and Munich Young Leader.

J. M. DIVAKAR

Senior journalist.

**JYOTSNA KAUR
HABIBULLAH**

Social entrepreneur, philanthropist, leader of several forums and initiatives.

DR. K. BHARATHI

Retired History professor and writer.

K. SAJAYA

Independent journalist, columnist, social analyst, translator, documentary filmmaker and feminism activist.

PROF. K. G. SURESH

Vice Chancellor, Makhn Lal Chaturvedi National University of Journalism & Communication, Bhopal.

KANCHAN MATHUR

Professor (Honorary) at the Institute of Development Studies, Jaipur.

**KONDAVEETI
SATYAVATI**

Active champion of women's rights, founder editor of the first feminist magazine in Andhra Pradesh – 'Streevada Patrika' – Bhumika in 1993.

KULDEEP KAUR

Retired vice principal of G.N. Khalsa College of arts, science and commerce, Mumbai.

KUMAR KETKAR	Former editor and senior journalist, currently a Rajya Sabha MP.
LALITHA IYER	Senior journalist, active member of the National Council of the Andhra Pradesh Union of working journalists.
LOGANAYAKI RAMACHANDRAN	Award-winning writer, journalist, editor and social worker.
MADHAVI KUCKREJA	Women's rights activist, founder of Vanangana.
MADHURI HALWASIYA	Chairperson of FLO Lucknow, currently the President of DWWF, an organization which empowers deaf women.
MALTI MEHTA	Faculty of Mass Communication, Communication Skills, Development Communication, and Film production at various universities and media institutes.
MANJIRA MAJUMDAR	Veteran journalist, author, currently engaged in media advocacy
MEENA KARNIK	Senior journalist, author, translator.
MINAXI SHUKLA	Founder member and the Additional Director of Centre for Health, Education and Nutrition Awareness (CHETNA).
NARAYAN BARETH	Senior journalist, and academician

P. SATHYAVATHI	Author, and former English lecturer.
PRATIMA JOSHI	Senior journalist, writer and social activist.
DR. R. POORNIMA	Veteran journalist, first woman editor in Kannada mainstream journalism.
RAJAT RAY	Has multi-sectoral experience in development spanning healthcare & family welfare, agronomy & agribusiness, education & training, adolescents & youth, etc.
RAJENDRA TIWARI	Writer & commentator with special interest in the developments in Jammu & Kashmir.
RAMA S. MELKOTE	Retired Professor of International Relations and Political Science from Osmania University, Hyderabad.
RANJANA DAS	Lead Specialist-Private Sector Engagement in Oxfam India.
RANJONA BANERJEE	Independent journalist with over three decades of experience, currently a consulting editor with MxMIndia.com.
RATNA BHARALI TALUKDAR	Independent journalist and creative writer.
REVATHI SIVA KUMAR	Independent journalist, instructor, author, and activist.

- RITU DEWAN** Vice President of the Indian Society of Labour Economics, first woman Director of the Department of Economics, University of Mumbai, and the founder-member of the first Centre for Gender Economics in Asia.
- RUPA MEHTA** Producer at Doordarshan (Prasar Bharati) and retired Assistant Director Programme & Head Programme at Doordarshan Kendra, Ahmedabad.
- DR. S. KRISHNASWAMY** Renowned documentary and television filmmaker.
- SAMPAD MAHAPATRA** Veteran journalist with decades of experience in print, television and web journalism.
- SANDEEP SAHU** Multilingual senior journalist across a host of top local, national and international media houses.
- SAYED RAZA HUSSAIN ZAIDI** Queer feminist, works with youth in social development sector. Has experience on issues of gender-sex-sexuality.
- SHAHINA K. K.** Associate Editor of the news portal 'The Federal'. One of the first-generation television journalists in Malayalam.
- SHAHIRA NAIM** Veteran journalist, founder Trustee of HUMSAFAR Support Centre for Women in Lucknow.

- DR. SHOMA A. CHATTERJI** Independent journalist, author, and veteran film critic.
- DR. SONAL PANDYA** Head of Department of Communication, Journalism, and Public Relations and the Executive Council member, Gujarat University, Ahmedabad.
- SUDHIR MISHRA** Senior journalist, currently Senior Editor in Navbharat Times handling Lucknow & NCR units.
- SUNIL JHA** Multilingual senior journalist with experience in TV, radio, news agency, newspaper, and digital media.
- SUNNY SEBASTIAN** Senior journalist, founding Vice Chancellor of Rajasthan's state university, Haridev Joshi University of Journalism and Mass Communication.
- TERESA REHMAN** Award winning journalist, author, and media educator
- DR. UTHRA DORAIRAJAN** Associate professor and Head of the Department of Physics at D. G. Vaishnav College in Chennai, also an author.
- DR. VIBHUTI PATEL** Former Professor, Advanced Centre for Women's Studies, School of Development Studies, TISS and SNDT Women's University, Mumbai. Actively involved with the women's rights movement.

VIDHU PRABHA

Senior Gender expert, India Representative of Rise Up, a program of the Public Health Institute.

VIJAY SAHI

Visionary media professional with rich corporate and academic experience of more than 45 years.

VISHWANATH SACHDEV

Author, senior columnist and former editor of Navbharat Times.

VOMMY RAMESH BABU

Short story writer, poet and senior journalist.

LAADLI

Laadli works with various stakeholder groups to change the mindset that undervalues the girl child and makes her unwanted in millions of Indian homes. Through our advocacy and communications campaign we try to address the gender discrimination and inequality between the sexes. We work with the youth and media at large to question the deep-rooted son preference in our society and change the gendered mindsets.

The Laadli Media Advocacy initiatives focus on promoting gender sensitivity in media and advertising by organizing innovative training programmes, campaigns and workshops, engaging media and advertising industry leaders in consultations and presenting awards to gender sensitive reporting and advertising.

LAADLI MEDIA AWARDS

The Laadli Media Awards for Gender Sensitivity is the only one of its kind in the world given exclusively for promoting gender sensitivity in the media and advertising. It is a year-long advocacy initiative with senior editors, media leaders, journalists, and cultural icons that culminates in the awards functions. The objective of The Laadli Media Awards is to draw the attention of the public to the positive efforts in the media with regard to gender sensitive reportage and provide a platform for showcasing such efforts. It does not focus on visible achievers but on media persons who are reporting from the field level- analyzing laws, policies, programmes, events and incidents using a gender lens. By acknowledging and felicitating the media persons who are writing positive stories on gender we hope to encourage more people to join the movement.

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/LaadliPF/>

Blog: <http://laadlimerilaadli.blogspot.com/>

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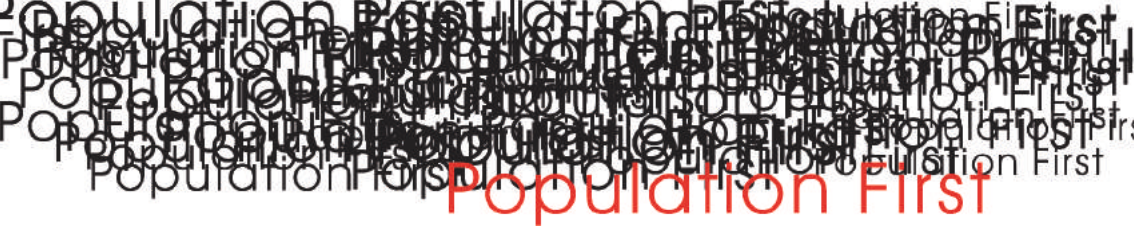
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POPULATION FIRST

Population First is a not for profit organization registered in March 2002 under the Bombay Public Trusts Act, 1950.

We work on health and population issues within the framework of social development and gender equality. We believe that poor demographic indices in the country are linked to the disempowerment of women to make informed choices. Our key objective is to help reduce gender imbalances in the population and work towards gender sensitive and social development oriented health and population programmes. We do this through two main flagship programs:

- (i) Laadli - focuses on the welfare of the girl child through media and youth initiatives; especially by promoting nuanced, informed and balanced media portrayal of issues, using a gendered lens
- (ii) AMCHI - works for community empowerment to ensure access to better quality, accountability and transparency in social development government services specifically focusing on health.

UNFPA

UNFPA's mission is to deliver a world where every pregnancy is wanted, every childbirth is safe and every young person's potential is fulfilled, ensuring rights and choices for all.

Our work is guided by the principles of a human-rights based approach set in place by the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), gender empowerment and equality, and the imperative that no one is left behind.

UNFPA has been operating in India since 1974. The India Country Office collaborates extensively with a range of stakeholders such as the government (centre and state), civil society, private sector, academia, the medical community, media, judiciary, and most importantly, communities. The India Country Programme 9 focuses on empowering young people with critical life skills and invests in adolescent health and well-being; ensuring universal access to high quality sexual and reproductive health and rights; addressing gender discrimination and harmful practices such as gender-biased sex selection and child marriage, and using population data to maximise the demographic dividend.

UNFPA works closely with the Government of India in order to respond to India's national priorities articulated by the National Institution for Transforming India. Key priorities include achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the unfinished agenda of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD). The main focus of the programme is to support national efforts in achieving universal access to sexual and reproductive health and rights, and to promote gender equality.

Her Stories

The world is often seen through the eyes of the man, stories have typically been told from his perspective and it is this narrative that determines and shapes the society's values and our behaviour norms. We as women are also co-opted into this patriarchal framework and are equally involved in perpetrating it, knowingly and unknowingly.

When we become conscious of our internalized biases, we begin to see the world differently. We move beyond gender binaries, stereotypes and celebrate diversity. We shift from our entitled positions and understand the world from the perspective of the oppressed, the marginalized, invisibilized and the stigmatized people.

HerStories brings to you a selection of the award-winning stories from the 10th edition of the Laadli Media and Advertising Awards for Gender Sensitivity, 2020.

We see this compilation as a great resource for the media teachers for initiating gender conversations in the classrooms. Our sincere wish is for HerStories to reach far and wide and help media persons get a better grasp on the nuances of gender sensitive portrayals in reporting and programming.



Dr. A. L. Sharada has been active in the developmental sector for the last 35 years as a teacher, researcher, trainer and programme manager. She is the Director of Population First and was on the faculty of the Central University of Hyderabad and Indian Institute of Health Management Research, Jaipur.

She believes that change starts when we take the first step to make a difference in our lives and in the lives of people around us.



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