

Weekly Copy Ps. 5

Annual Subscription Rs. 2

OPINION

Vol. XXII

July 14, 1981

No. 10

WOMAN TO WOMAN

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I HAVE not lived for forty years without discovering that this is a man's world. However, in my case, this knowledge was largely theoretical, since all the men in my life were quickly made to see the light and soon admitted that my world, at any rate, was *my* world. And apparently, by the rule of like attracts like, most of my friends and family seemed to have taken charge of their lives and their worlds too. And I went around thinking that all it needed to be your own person was a little push and determination. Alas, not so. Ironically, it was not until I came to Japan that I realised how foolishly optimistic my thinking was. All these years I had been hoping that the gap that exists between me and my less fortunate or less rebellious sisters in India would close soon, given more awareness, more education, more economic independence, more understanding and willingness on the part of the males. I now realise that that is not enough. The Japanese woman hardly lacks any of these, and still, I have yet to meet a woman more ready to accept the idea of male superiority, or more devoted to kuche, kinder and kirche. She is simply bewildered by the idea that she should consider herself every bit as good, intelligent and useful as the man. In fact, in India I have come across more women, even from the economically exploited class, who bluntly and confidently expressed their conviction in their own superiority to their men. Here, though most of the women have held jobs before their marriage, and consequently cannot have been at the mercy of their men for the very food they eat, they have, upon getting married, subjugated their selves to so amazing an extent that the fact of my voicing opinions that differ from my husband's (and voicing them quite vehemently at times) is matter for shocked comment. After one such incident I was told that a Japanese woman may hold opinions of her own that differ from those of her husband's, but she will keep them to herself. Even when she is in the right? Oh yes. Then what? I presume, then she hopes and prays for him to see right. And, one husband said, even if he does see right eventually and realises that she was correct all along, he would rather die than admit to having been in the wrong!

There is not universal and unquestioning submission to these traditions, and a lib movement has existed in Japan for a long time, but it is regarded rather as a freak and traitor to the mainstream of Japanese

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culture. By and large, women adhere to the norms laid down by their mothers and grandmothers, and bear patiently the sorrow, loneliness and frustration that is their lot. One of the amusing tidbits of news recently published in the newspaper was the result of the survey conducted by a watch company. It said, that of the men questioned most would not wait 'even for a minute' if a woman were late for a rendezvous, but women questioned said they were willing to wait for the man anywhere from thirty minutes to two hours! And this in the city of Tokyo among office workers and students. So what price equality? Another survey said that the percentage of women executives in Japan was less than one. Percentages are very useful, for this less than one percent may even mean that in the whole of Japan there is one woman executive. And I will be surprised that even she exists. The extent to which women of face themselves is amazing, if not infuriating. If you are a guest in someone's house for lunch or dinner, the only time you will see the woman of the house is when she greets you at the door and when she says goodbye. The rest of the time she will confine herself to sending various items of food and drink to you. I am not here talking about the economic subjugation of women. That exists all over the world to a greater or lesser degree anyhow. And the Japanese women are no more its victims than their western or eastern counterparts. I am talking about their spirit, the kind of subjugation that suspends independent thought, critical judgement, freedom of action and expression. The middle class housewife has always been to me a symbol of pathos and frustration. Educated just enough to get by, having no means of livelihood other than the husband, hampered by outdated social mores, afraid eternally of 'what people will say', she is lonely, bored, intellectually stagnant at about age twelve and always subject to the tyranny (sometimes cruel, sometimes merely whimsical) of her husband, her in-laws and her children. An object more requiring of pity and patient understanding would be hard to find. And yet, from the ranks of these in India I have received letters of fierce agreement with my views. Most of them said that they were temperamentally as well as practically incapable of rebellion to the extent that I advocated, but that they were happy to see someone giving back as good as they got. There is no such soul eroding discontent to be seen in their Japanese counterpart. A good thing, you might say? No, a thousand times no! For discontent is the very root of change. If we had been content with the 'good' things resulting from bondage to a foreign rule, we would never have become independent. A slave is happy in his slavery only because he is ignorant of the fact that even the miseries of freedom are a thousandfold sweeter than the joys of subjecthood. Once you stop asking why? and why not? your value as a human being comes to an end. After asking the questions, you may even come to the conclusion that you have a good thing going (after all who wants the nine to five if they can get away from it?) and opt for the status quo. But the difference lies in having asked, in having admitted that other

options are open and acceptable, in having made a choice. For, after having exercised the right to make a choice, you are not a slave—neither mentally (you will see, dear, I know best; I will tell you what is the best thing for you to do, don't you worry your little head about a thing; says the mental giant in the guise of husband or a father or a brother or a boss) nor economically (for you are then an equal partner bearing the burden of household duties, as the man bears the burden of earning). The attitude of the Japanese women shows clearly that they have never envisaged another kind of life, another kind of viewpoint.

One may argue that such devotion to the husband and family bodes well for family life as a whole. But look at this picture: a large number of husbands I talked to, leave their homes at the latest by 7.30 in the morning (mine included), and they reach back home around 9.30 or 10 in the night (mine emphatically not included!). Their work, their companionship, their entertainment, all are found outside of the home. Quite often they spend their Sundays playing golf or baseball with the boys, and if it is raining really quite hard, and there isn't anything else to do, they sit in front of the tv. The wives on the other hand spend their day cleaning, cooking, shopping, getting together with their women neighbours for a chat, fixing their hair, attending PTA meetings in the children's schools and so on. The two lead separate, marginally touching, mutually incomprehensible lives. The children grow up and grow away. The woman gets lonely and seeks more outside involvements: ladies' clubs, bridge clubs, ikebana classes, sightseeing tours, what have you. And suddenly it is thirty years later and the man retires. The husband and wife are at a loss. They have never spent any time together, they don't really know what to say to each other. Her household and his job have prevented them from developing any real interests they share and the man finds himself regarded in his own house as a piece of 'aragomi' (which means 'large garbage', a large, useless, broken down piece of furniture or appliance that the municipal corporation arranges to pick up once a month from dumping areas). Not so good, no? With all her devotion to family welfare, the woman has retained little of her own person-hood. She was no more than a useful machine, regarded with affectionate contempt by her family, and so she naturally forgets that she and her husband and their desire for each other's companionship was really where it all started. When I say something of the sort to any of the women, they smile a little distantly and say, oh, you are a women's libber, are you? As though I were a giraffe in a zoo. So I say in turn (I don't really, but wish to,) and you are the large species of useful domesticated animal, the female of the homo sapiens, are you? So where can the dialogue start? If they think women's lib consists solely of beating men over the head and taking the next strange male who appeals to your fancy to bed, what can I possibly say to convince them otherwise? How can I tell them that women's lib is only a part of persons' lib; that it is merely the fight to let any person, man, woman or child take charge of his or her life to the

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best of his or her ability and lead it the way he or she likes best, without interference from restricting societal, cultural, economic, sexual factors. Of course these factors are going to count in your decision, but the fight is to make them count for as little as possible, in the face of individual inclination. For example, if a woman wants to be a fighter pilot, it is only her ability as a fighter pilot that should decide if she becomes one or not, and not the fact of her being a woman, or a Hindu, or born to poor parents. This is where I lose my Japanese (and, I am afraid quite a few Indian) sisters. They ask me, but how can a woman . . . ? What is there to say in the face of this? If I ask questions like, if a man can raise his hand against a woman—and wife-beating is not at all uncommon in Japan—why can't a woman raise hers against a man? Or, if a man can state his opinion emphatically in company (even when it differs from his wife's) why can't a woman?, they don't even begin to understand my arguments. But we are perfectly happy as we are. I look skeptical and say, that is not the point. But if achieving happiness is not the point, what is? And what I might say to them then, is so totally out of their life-experience and expectations, that at the end of the talk we end up in bewildering and pitying each other. This is one time I don't want to say 'I told you so, but I am very much afraid that I will be saying it to them five, ten, fifteen years from now. The trouble with a fools' paradise is, it remains a paradise only as long as the inhabitant remains a fool, and how long can we remain, or be made to remain fools? Life itself is a great educator.



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Posted at Central Packet Sorting Office, Bombay on 14-7-1981

Regd. No. BYW 69

Licence No. 14. Licensed to post without pre-payment

Edited and published by A. D. Gorwala at 40C Ridge Road, Bomay 400 006 and
printed by him at the Mouj Printing Bureau, Khatau Wadi, Bombay 400 004.

Proprietor: A. D. Gorwala.