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The Situation of Women



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Jnanadeepa: Pune Journal of Religious Studies

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The Editor, *Jnanadeepa*, Jnana Deepa Vidyapeeth, Pune 411014, India Tel (office): +91-20-27034968, (res): +91-20-27034169 Fax: +91-20-27034801

E-mail: <kurien@jesuits.net>
<jdv@vsnl.com>

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Editorial

There is a growing awareness in the world today that the liberation and empowerment of women are necessary if humankind is to have a bright future on this earth. But the reality is that in a variety of ways women are discriminated against and oppressed. This is why we have chosen to deal with women's concerns in this issue of *Jnanadeepa*.

Three articles in this issue discuss the actual situation of women. One deals with the place and role of women in Hinduism. Because of the prevalence of patriarchal society in India a woman's role is relegated to that of a child-bearer, a child-minder and a homemaker. But there are liberative elements in Hinduism which can help empower women. There is another article which discusses the place and role of women in the Catholic Church. Through their total commitment to the Church and its activities, women have been its pillars. And yet, they have little influence on the thinking, planning and decision-making in the Church. They have been excluded from any participation in shaping the Church's internal and external policy. (An article on the place and role of women in Islam was originally planned for this issue but could not be included because of a technical problem). A third article deals with the place and role of women in the tribal societies of the Northeast. In many ways these women enjoy a high status. These tribal societies are egalitarian and place hardly any restriction on the life and activities of women. All the same, participation of women in politics is minimal, though some changes in this area are noticeable now.

There is an article, which examines the role of women in Hindutva. The advocates of Hindutva are against the liberation and empowerment of women. They would like women to be content with the traditional role of being faithful wives and devoted mothers. They are against all movements for gender equality.

Two articles deal with the Christian Scriptures. One of them attempts a re-reading of the Bible from a feminist perspective. After describing the feminist approach to the Bible, it seeks to re-image Mary of Nazareth through a feminist reconstruction of the gospel accounts. The other article is a feminist re-reading of Luke 8: 24-48. This dramatic narra-

tion of the healing of a woman with a flow of blood shows how this woman moves from the shadows into the bright light and how her encounter with Jesus empowers her.

One of the articles included in this issue seeks to develop a spirituality of loss. After carefully studying the experiences of three Indian Catholic women, it points out that loss when faced with courage can be transformed into moments of self-revelation and spiritual energizing.

There is finally a search for a meaningful future. An article depicts a feminist vision of a participatory Church. It begins with an analysis of women's experience of the Church, which is often an experience of 'darkness'. Women are mostly relegated to the shadows. It goes on to project the vision of a church in which women and men collaborate as equal partners. A discipleship of equals describes an ecclesiological model which expresses a feminist vision of a participatory Church. And we need to realise that the boldness of the feminist vision is a transforming grace for the Church.

It is undeniable that the full flowering of the human on this planet is not possible without the active collaboration of women and men. But as long as men tend to look down upon women, to despise them and regard them as second-class citizens or inferior human beings, such collaboration will not materialise. Hence, the liberation and empowerment of women should be a high priority for all of us. In this common task women have a key role to play. They have to realise that they are equal members of the human family with their own dignity, and that precisely because of their experience of oppression, they have a unique contribution to make to the creation of a new humanity. Besides, they will have to learn to be more assertive and more expressive without losing their femininity.

It is our fond hope this issue of *Jnanadeepa* which discusses women's concerns will be a small contribution towards their liberation and empowerment.

Kurien Kunnumpuram SJ

Editor

Coming Out of the Shadows: A Feminist Vision of a Participatory Church

Antoinette Gutzler, MM
Fu Jen University, USA

Abstract: In this essay, I propose that a figurative restoration of the famous work of art – Michelangelo’s *Last Supper* – can be of assistance in getting a glimpse of what lies beneath some of the varnish and oil residue that has covered over some of the deep significance of the meal that Jesus shared with his disciples. It is the first step in the realization of a feminist vision of a participatory church. This painting, which seats Jesus in the middle of a rectangular table with six male apostles on each side, has helped to shape the Christian imagination about the church and those persons in the church who were not only closest to Jesus but also chosen to represent him in the world.

Keywords: Michelangelo, Last Supper, participatory Church, shadows, work of art

Rembrandt’s famous painting *Night Watch* (1642) can be found in Amsterdam’s renowned Rijksmuseum. It is breathtaking in scope and color. A number of years ago, the decision was made to restore the painting and remove the residue that had built up over the centuries on this work of art. As this delicate work began and layer after layer of varnish and oil residue was removed, all were amazed to find that the painting was not as dark as originally thought. The darkness, which *did* give *Night Watch* a particular beauty, was the result of the layers of protective varnish and not the artist’s intent. Gradually other figures in the painting were seen more clearly as they were lifted from darkness into the light of “*Night Watch*’s” original beauty. An amazing story to be sure and, I suggest, an apt analogy for the work of restoring the church to its original vision of

participation and equality, as embodied in the life and praxis of Jesus of Nazareth. This vision has also been covered over by layers and layers of protective coating (interpretation and tradition) and is in need of restoration.

In this essay, I propose that a figurative restoration of another famous work of art – Michelangelo’s *Last Supper* – can be of assistance in getting a glimpse of what lies beneath some of the varnish and oil residue that has covered over some of the deep significance of the meal that Jesus shared with his disciples. It is the first step in the realization of a feminist vision of a participatory church. This painting, which seats Jesus in the middle of a rectangular table with six male apostles on each side, has helped to shape the Christian imagination about the church and those persons in the church who were not only closest to Jesus but also chosen to represent him in the world. This restoration will uncover the gifts that the church has to claim, the shadows that need to be explored, and the boldness of feminist vision as a transforming grace for the church. The following steps are required. First, I will set forth some of the feminist critique concerning women’s experience in the church. I will then explore the gospel vision of Jesus as well as insights from the Second Vatican Council and feminist biblical scholarship as response to this experience. The new learning and challenges presented to the church by Vatican II and the insights of feminist thought are tools of restoration that permit an examination of the experience of “darkness” that is a reality for many women as they struggle to be faithful followers of Jesus and valued members of the community of faith. Finally, I will look at the challenge that a feminist vision brings to a world church, and the courage needed to allow a feminist vision of a participatory church to come to reality in our church. The movement towards a feminist vision of a participatory church is rooted in Jesus’ preaching of the Reign of God and fosters participation of each one in a vision of the community of faith which is inclusive, egalitarian and liberating. It is a manifestation of the life of the Trinity within and among us.

Beginning Restoration

Religious art has a particular power to shape the imagination of believers and non-believers alike. *The Last Supper* is a case in point. The picture of Jesus alone with his twelve male apostles has insinuated itself into Christian consciousness as a true rendering of what that “supper” was like and subconsciously legitimates the patriarchal structure of the church. The oppression experienced by many women in the church finds expression in the use of an exclusive male imagery and language for God, dualistic ordering of sexual stereotypes, lack of voice “in areas of ministry and moral decision making where their experience has been excluded, but where decisions affect their lives” (Hines 1993: 163). The church’s sacramental life is one arena where women’s earnest desire to be converted to a life that reflects “good news” becomes one more place of struggle to become who God calls her to be. Liturgical prayers that include an ordering of hierarchal privilege within the church shape the consciousness of Christian believers into a model of the church that reflects male privilege. Through the choice of male language for God, liturgical practice and church organization, women are constantly reminded of their “place” within the church. Never do they hear the invitation to “come higher, friend.” Upon examination, one finds that this hierarchical ordering of the church does not cohere with the vision of an egalitarian community of believers found deep within the heart of the gospel and at the core of a feminist vision of a participatory church. This is no small matter.

A number of years ago, I was asked to give a seminar on feminist theology in Taiwan. The participants (mostly women) were serious about understanding feminist thought and learning to read the scriptures from a feminist perspective. They were actively engaged in the process of recovering women’s stories from the Gospels and the Testament. Of particular interest was the reclamation of Mary of Magdala as the “apostle to the apostles” and the active role of women in both, the house churches and the early Christian missionary movement. Now, it just happened, that this seminar was held during the last week of June when the church celebrates the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul. Imagine the surprise of the women, who had just spent a week searching the scriptures, to find the opening prayer

praising Peter and Paul because it was from them “that the church first received the faith.” In contrast “when we read the occasional Pauline references to women in their own setting, we recognize that the Pauline and post-Pauline literature know of women... as prominent leaders and missionaries who – *in their own right* – toiled for the gospel. These women were engaged in missionary and church leadership activity, both before Paul and independently of Paul. Without question, they were equal and sometimes even superior to Paul in their work for the gospel” (Schüssler Fiorenza 1983: 161). This consciousness has not yet made its way into our prayers as Christian liturgical practice continues to be shaped by the male imagination and understanding of scripture. Women’s participation and activity in the Gospel story is consistently co-opted by the male apostles.

A pervasive understanding that the male is the only one who can fully represent God has grave implications for our sacramental life. Presently, women have access to the sacraments only through a male minister. The claim that women do not “bear a resemblance” to Christ does not cohere with the earliest tradition of the church where women – as well as men – were regarded as *image of Christ/ imago Christi* – especially in giving their life for the faith in martyrdom. In contrast, the liberation that *is* the praxis of God’s reign shows itself as a guiding light into a more complete theological anthropology that shows all as *image of God/ imago Dei*. Christian feminists (male and female) “recognize that women are fully human, acknowledge the *imbalance* and *injustice* that for centuries has, in church and society, characterized the situation of women, and are committed to righting that wrong” (Carr 1988). When this imaging of God is not only acknowledged but also lived out in the lives of women and in the wider context of social justice, it will change not only the shape of our church, but that of our world.

The Christian Gospel compels feminist women and men to call the church to a renewal that will restore the original vision of the early Christian communities. Women’s struggle to integrate their experience within Christianity will give rise to major shifts within the ecclesiological landscape. An ecclesiology that embraces the experience of women will challenge the church to be a community, which is inclusive, collaborative and radically centred on the praxis

of the reign of God. It calls the church to be faithful to what has been experienced and learned through the life and praxis of Jesus. This ecclesiology will be shaped by a new understanding of how God has called us to be in Christ, a call to repentance from the personal and social sin that has insinuated itself into church structures and a commitment to theological dialogue between the magisterium, the theologians and, most importantly, the lived faith of the Christian communities. This new vision is the transforming grace that women's experience has to offer the church and all humankind.

Gifts to Claim

One of the major tools that ground the feminist voice within the church in this effort of restoring the Last Supper to its original story, is the work of the Second Vatican Council. The effects of this Council and its major documents opened the door for women and the laity to reclaim their baptismal role and responsibility in the church. New understandings of the church as the people of God, a pilgrim church and a church of the poor and oppressed, are just a few of the images that emerged from the Council and ignited the hearts of the faithful. Careful consideration of the "signs of the times" – first voiced in John XXIII's encyclical *Pacem in Terris* – compelled the Council Fathers to be attentive to the changing role of women and the rise of feminist consciousness. Various movements aimed at transforming the church "from below" emerged from the growing consciousness that all baptized Christians are equal and all are the church.

Among the many Council documents that helped to lay a firm foundation for an emerging feminist vision of church are *Lumen Gentium*, *Gaudium et Spes*, and *Dei Verbum*. *Lumen Gentium* affirmed the "equal dignity" of all the baptized; *Gaudium et Spes* confirmed that this equality is based on creation, redemption and the call to holiness; *Dei Verbum* emphasized Scripture as the font of life for all believers. As women began to study the scriptures in earnest, they discovered heretofore unacknowledged and unrecognized women in the gospels. They became conscious of the ecclesiological implications of acknowledging women's discipleship in the gospels and their leadership role in the house churches and the early Christian communities. The fact that women's discipleship and participation

in the church community has been marginalized and silenced cannot be denied. Reversing this marginalization is an urgent task.

The biblical work of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has played a significant part in the emergence of a feminist consciousness that leads to a transformation of church structures. The depth of her scholarship continues to make powerful contributions to the exploration of the Christian scriptures and recalling the “dangerous memory” of Jesus Christ and his women disciples. Schüssler Fiorenza’s fundamental assumptions concerning the writing and editing of our scriptures give another viewpoint from which to look at the founding story of Christianity. In brief, these assumptions caution and invite the reader to notice that the biblical texts are androcentric, ie., the world view in which they were written reflects male interests with the result that they do not tell or reliably recount what women have done. Therefore the scriptures need to be read with a *hermeneutics of suspicion* – always asking questions and looking behind the text to discover hidden meanings and insights. A crucial insight for the formation of a feminist vision of a participatory church is the recognition (and admission) that not only the biblical text but also the translations, the preaching and the biblical commentaries, are all done from a male perspective. Her analysis of the Jesus movement as a “*discipleship of equals*” has captured the Christian imagination and propels Christian women into a movement for an inclusive church.

It comes as no surprise that her work and viewpoint are not readily accepted by all. This can be illustrated by the following story told of the University Professor, a well-known scholar in church history, who was asked by a few of his female students why he did not include any women in his lectures on early Christianity and the formation of the Christian churches. After giving some thought to this query, the professor answered quite simply: “Well, the answer is that there *are* no women to include in this part of history. They were not there. If they *were* there they would have been included in my course; but there *were none*, so they are not included!” While this story may anger some, delight others and find advocates on both sides of the divide, it brings an unsettling question to the fore: what of this professorial response? Is it true? Or has the light of our original Christian story been covered over with layers of protective covering just as was Rembrandt’s *Night Watch*?

Shadows to Explore: Marginalized Women

The task of understanding Christianity's founding story and realizing the vision of a participatory church impels Christian believers to return to the experience at the heart of the Gospel proclamation. This is an essential step because any changes in ecclesiology can only be measured by the heart of the Gospel message. This is not an easy task since there are several elements internal to Christian ecclesiology that inhibit the church's ability to measure and advance its ecclesial understanding regarding women's role and participation in the church.

Ecclesiologist Nicholas Healy argues that these elements are rooted in a "pervasive confusion about the theoretical possibilities and limitations involved in describing the identity of the church" (Healy 1996: 47). Two aspects of this root problem are firstly, the supposition that "there is a single aspect of the church that is most basic" and which renders all other aspects of the church as derivative or secondary, and secondly the belief that "it is possible to discover this primary aspect and then define or model it by means of a concept or image." He suggests that theologians need to be guided by their theological imagination and a narrative ecclesiology that describes the church by telling its story. In doing so "every theologian must make a "single, synoptic imaginative judgment" as to the identity of Christianity. An important part of that judgment is deciding how God is to be understood as present to the faithful . . . [This decision] will determine the way in which we interpret Scripture and tradition, and thereby shape our treatment of all theological *loci*, including ecclesiology" (Healy 1996: 49-50).

A feminist "single, synoptic judgment" regarding the identity of Christianity is found in the core of Jesus' preaching – the Reign of God. A feminist vision of a participatory church is set in motion by this perspective. This vision is not a matter of "adapting" women's concerns or imposing women's issues and voice, onto a church that is basically male-oriented. It does not mean that all one needs to do, is "add women and mix!" Rather it is the reception of a much-needed transforming grace. The Reign of God as preached by Jesus is made visible through the healings of Jesus and by his "open table" which welcomed all into communion and companionship. Being with Jesus

brings happiness and awakens joy in all. At his “table” there is no pride of place, no “top-down” seating. The poor sit elbow to elbow with the rich; the powerful with the powerless; women with men; repentant sinners with those sinned against, and children all around. It is a “Last Supper” vision that draws the whole community into the dangerous memory of Jesus Christ.

The “open table” of Jesus is the core symbol for a feminist vision of a participatory church; the core story that gives the courage to embark on such a vision, is that of “the woman who came out of the shadows” (Mark 5: 24-35) also known as “the woman with the hemorrhage.” As traditionally read and understood, Jesus and his power of healing is at the centre of this story; the woman simply allows him to show forth this power. However, reading from a feminist perspective brings different understandings into the text, and new insights emerge. For example, when this nameless woman is allowed to come from the margins of the story – as she came from the margins of the crowds – to the centre, she plays a central role in the unfolding of events. She has a disease which, according to religious standards and practices of society, renders her “unclean.” She is a person of no account, someone marginalized from family and society. It is such a woman who initiates contact with Jesus and who, in the process of claiming healing for herself, makes him – a male Jew – unclean. This periscope allows us to know not only what she does but also what she thinks and feels. Her intentionality in touching Jesus’ garment unleashes his healing power. Jesus, himself, is startled that healing power is released without his express command. He does not “control” his healing power which comes from God and which is available to anyone and everyone without distinction. The woman who came out of the shadows is a model for the feminist movement within the church. Her “courage compels her, despite her fear, to refuse her own exclusion and invisibility . . . [and to] present herself in full view in front of him. *She makes herself visible*. From behind, she moves to front, face-to-face, heart to heart. Only then is Jesus able to see her” (Brock 1994: 84). Her behavior brings healing and praise from Jesus and inclusion in kinship – she is called “daughter.”

Why is this visibility – this “coming out of the shadows” – so important? What is at stake here? What needs to be removed from a

model of the church, which excludes women and renders them invisible? As women see themselves more clearly in a new portrait of the “Last Supper,” other figures also emerge, for it is not only women who are hidden in the shadows. These figures are the non-western local churches that also must come into the light. The call for a feminist vision of a participatory church is also a call away from a western, male-dominated model of the church; it is a leave-taking of western, male hegemony over how the church and church structures are understood.

Shadows to Explore: Marginalized Local Churches

The work of setting out a theological framework helpful for this discussion of a feminist vision of a participatory church, which encompasses east and west, north and south, finds an invaluable resource in Karl Rahner’s essay on a fundamental theological interpretation of Vatican II. In this well-known essay, Rahner describes the Second Vatican Council as one which “in a rudimentary form [was] still groping for identity, the church’s first official self-actualization as a world Church” (Rahner 1979: 717). He maintains that at the Council, a qualitative leap took place in the church’s self-understanding, namely, the faces of those present for the Council deliberations, were no longer solely the faces of the West, but those of a world-wide indigenous clergy. He argues that the coming of a true world church, that is, one composed of local churches of many different areas of the world and not branch offices of Europe or America, has been in process throughout the three epochs of the church’s history. Each of these epochs has its own theological framework born out of the very different situations into which Christianity proclaimed its message. They are: the short period of Jewish Christianity, the long period of the church in a distinct cultural region (Hellenism and European culture – which lasted until mid-twentieth century), and the period following Vatican II in which the sphere of the church’s life is in fact the whole world.

In the first period of Jewish Christianity, diversity existed not only in Christology but also in ecclesiology, namely, in the self-understandings of the early Christian communities and in the churches the apostles left behind. The New Testament writings describe some of these understandings as: the body of Christ, the people of God,

spirit-filled charismatics and those living within structures that guided and shaped their lives. The earliest churches were rich in pluralism. There were diversities of theologies, heritages and contrasts in life style (Brown 1984).

Within the context of preaching and forming a community within its own historical situation, Rahner claims that it was not theologically self-evident for St. Paul to inaugurate a change from Jewish Christianity to Gentile Christianity. The decision of the Council of Jerusalem to allow non-Jews to receive baptism into Christianity without submitting to the Jewish law on circumcision, began this transition. This constituted a genuine break from the former understanding of what was required in order to follow Jesus and began a radically new period in the church characterized by the movement into Hellenism and European culture and civilization that lasted until the mid-twentieth century. Rahner claims that the present day church is experiencing a transition into another epoch of church history much like the break that occurred once before in the transition from Jewish to Gentile Christianity. He also claims that the challenge Paul faced in the historical situation of Jewish Christianity and Gospel proclamation to the Gentiles, was not greater than what the church is experiencing today.

This takes on concrete meaning, as feminist consciousness struggles to draw the church into a more participatory model. Rahner argues that the challenge is clear: “either the Church sees and recognizes these essential differences of other cultures for which she should become a world Church and with a Pauline boldness draws the necessary consequences from this recognition, or she remains a Western Church and so in the final analysis betrays the meaning of Vatican II” (Rahner 1979: 724). The new faces coming into the light in our church today are not those of an indigenous, male clergy but rather the faces of women of different races, nations, cultures and non-western local churches who have been baptized in Christ and whose faith and vision call for transformation. If the church denies them it will be at its own peril. The challenge that a feminist vision brings to the church today is clear: either our church sees and recognizes the different gifting in the church among women and men and search out new participatory models of the church, or it will

remain forever a western, male-dominated church and thus betray Jesus' proclamation of the Reign of God for all. Rahner claims that the church of today needs a "Pauline boldness" to meet these challenges; is not feminist consciousness and vision *the* Pauline boldness needed for our times?

Challenges to Embrace: Feminist Vision as a "Pauline Boldness"

What particular steps express this "Pauline boldness?" One of the more obvious areas is in the areas of liturgy and church organization. A church, which desires to be truly participatory, needs a liturgical life that continues to convert believers into the egalitarian praxis of God's reign. It needs a manner of relationship and organization that explores, enhances and calls forth the gifts of the baptized into the various leadership roles needed by the community. These roles are to be open to all if the meaning of being baptized in Christ is not to be compromised. Current liturgical service emphasizes a structure of domination where the role of the People of God is relegated to the margins (like the woman in Mark 5), while at the same time the role of the presider is given a central place with power over the assembly. Current liturgical practice which is still highly dominated by practices that come from the ecclesiastical tradition of another age needs to be challenged and changed if a feminist vision of a participatory church is to become a reality.

Sri Lankan theologian Aloysius Pieris gives concrete evidence of the ecclesiastical elements in need of change. He argues that during our liturgical celebrations the proclamation of the Word of God gets lost in a cacophony of words, the People of God who share in the priesthood of Christ are eclipsed by focus on the priest who is seen as the celebrant and the recognition of Jesus in the breaking of the bread is hindered by the church's imperial past (Pieris 2000: 432). Agreement with his assessment demands that the people of God come out of the shadows and work towards celebrating a liturgy that reverses this tradition and restores not only the centrality of the Word and the communion that exists among Christians but also our intimacy with God in imitation of Jesus. Simply stated, a feminist vision calls for conversion from power over God's people

to the formation of a discipleship of equals. Movement towards the formation of this discipleship of equals directs a participatory church in right speech and right action for the coming of God's Reign.

A "discipleship of equals" describes an ecclesiological model which expresses a feminist vision of a participatory church. It may return us to the concept of "house churches" of the early Christian movement of which today's "Basic Christian Communities" are a manifestation. In such an egalitarian meeting of the followers of Jesus, any simple division of the church into "leaders and followers" or "teachers and learners" is not allowed. All are baptized; all partake of the Body and Blood of Christ; all teach and all learn. This is a church of relationships between all the members as well as between the "healer" and the "healed;" it is a church where everyone has a place at the table. Egalitarian relationships in this discipleship of equals are a manifestation of the Trinitarian life of God in which we share and which has the power to shape us individually and as a community.

The Trinity is the grounding for a church praxis of a "discipleship of equals." Growing in understanding from a hierarchical view of the Trinity to one of equal relationships, is a task engendered by a feminist vision for our church. This requires a Pauline boldness to uncover the hierarchical layers heaped upon the Trinity over the many centuries so that its model of equal relationships can radiate into the lives of Christians once again. Acknowledging God as a mystery of relations, begs the question: what kind of relations? The Gospel of Jesus is our sure guide. Jesus' preaching of the Reign of God does not proclaim patriarchal rule. The God of Jesus Christ is not a hierarchical, dominating power, but rather God in solidarity with the poor, the marginalized and the outcasts. Trinity is Christian speech about God as a mystery of relations and these relations model a social order that is open to the poor. It is a model that resists oppression. A feminist vision of a participatory church recalls this Trinitarian imagery to the forefront of Christian life and affirms that the community of believers is called to be an icon of this life. It is a source of inspiration, enables the critique of the unequal relations that exist right now in the church and urges the emergence of a fresh vision of the church. The mystery of equality in the Trinity

needs to be regained and imaged in ways that shape the life and praxis of the community into a discipleship of equals.

Conclusion

My constant companion during the writing of this essay was a poster from the year 2000 Jubilee celebration in Taiwan. This poster – with many participants seated around an “open table” of Jesus – is a lively image for a feminist vision of a participatory church. The imagery is the exact opposite of the *Last Supper* painting that we have critiqued and restored. This poster could very well be a modern day rendering of the Last Supper meal that Jesus shared with his disciples. Jesus is in the midst of this wonderful diversity of people: women, children and men, various groups that comprise the people of Taiwan: mainland Chinese, Amoy, Hakka, aborigines and representatives of five different political parties! Their hands are joined around the word in the middle of the table: “Love one another.” There is no pride of place at this table. All are one in Christ at this table of love. They are seated under the Tree of Life, which shares its nature delights with them, and are surrounded by the beauties of the countryside and the urgencies of the city. Here is a people who know they are the people of God; a people who acknowledge that they are pilgrims and called to participate equally in a service of dialogue, mutuality and accountability to serve God’s poor and oppressed.

This picture does not need restoration. What is needed is implementation! It cannot be only a dream of “what could be” but rather a visible image of *what is coming to be*. Reclamation of their baptismal role and responsibility gives, Christian believers the courage to leave behind the familiar way of being the church in the past (the darkness which still has its own stark beauty) and walk calmly and surely into a future that is a truly participatory church. This is God’s work of art; a work of transition from a patriarchal to an egalitarian model of a church that is inclusive, respects diversity and calls to the lost and forsaken. *This is!*

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Towards a Spirituality of Loss

Self-revelatory Discourses in the Lives of Indian Catholic Women¹

Pushpa Joseph FMM

Providene Convent, Hosur Road, Bangalore 560 029

Abstract: This paper tries to look into the existential situation of loss, which confronts Indian catholic women. It specifically explores the ways in which women cope with loss. Through vivid examples of three catholic women from different social strata it argues that loss when faced with courage can be transformed into moments of self-revelation and spiritual vivacity. However, we should be cautious about the tendency to romanticize suffering and loss. Romanticizing suffering leads to victimization of the one in pain. This results in an alienation from the self and the path to subjecthood and agency is thwarted.

Keywords: Death, sense of loss, sense of life, sense of life, self-revelatory discourse

Nimmie was a mother of two adorable kids, Charmaine, a four-year-old daughter and Christine an eleven-year-old daughter studying in the sixth standard. Nimmie lived in Goa, South India, a state with a sizeable population of Catholics. In the morning of August 9, 2002, she took Charmaine to the doctor as she was suffering from common cold and cough. She returned home with Charmaine at around 12 or so. She then left for Carmel College, where she worked as a Botany Lecturer, to attend to some odd jobs. She was expected back home in 30 minutes. Carmel College is an institution for higher education run by the Sisters of the Apostolic Carmel. The college is just a five-minute drive from her home. She was on her two-wheeler and as she was returning home from college a bus knocked her down, the front wheel went over the region below the stomach and the

back wheel of the bus dragged her a little, so eyewitnesses say. One wonders why the driver of the bus was not aware of it until the people around started yelling at him. It was on hearing the cries of alarm from bystanders that he stopped the bus. The accident took place just three minutes away from her home. Her stomach and other organs between the stomach and pelvic region were crushed, including her back and pelvic bone. She was alive and speaking for four and a half hours after the fatal mishap. Though a team of efficient surgeons attended to her they could not stop the blood flow. I was told that she literally bled to death. She died at 6.40 pm.

Nimmie is none other than my much-loved sister.² Her death has caused immense pain and a deep feeling of loss for all of us, especially her beloved husband Derick, her daughters, our parents, her sisters, her sisters-in-law, her brothers-in-law, colleagues, neighbors and friends. However, even in the face of such a tragedy my mother's words of deep assurance strengthens us. After the funeral my mother said, "Some people's deaths leave a void in our hearts, a void that can never be wiped away. But Nimmie, now living in a close and deep union with the resurrected Christ, will transform that void into a flame that will glow bright and thus make her shining presence always with us." There is a very significant manner in which we experience very strongly God's constant presence and Nimmie's illuminating light shining in us and in our home every moment. It is the profound experiential awareness of this presence, in the face of an otherwise rude shock, following the untimely and sudden death of my dear sister, that evoked in me a spectrum of questions. What is that special spark of courage and trust that my mother possesses which gives her the strength to face this tragedy of a daughter's sudden loss with hope and gentle surrender? Where does she find the grace and assurance, which helps her spread such tranquility and peace to all her children, her friends, Nimmie's colleagues? How has her catholic faith helped her live this moment of loss?

My experience and encounter with death in a very vital way and in a way that touched the deepest recesses of my being, with flesh and blood reality, the timeliness of its occurrence, at a time when I am scheduled to write this paper, the manner in which my

mother, sisters and entire family coped with it and still struggle to find meaning and assurance, reminded me of many other Catholic women who have been forced to face the trauma of the death of loved ones and the existential reality of loss. Therefore, I have changed my initial plan for the paper and am specifically theologizing from the context of this experiential reality of death and loss in order to invest this paper with life, flesh and blood vitality. In addition to this issue of experiential vivacity, I am interested in probing into the ways in which catholic women in India cope with loss and death, the ever-present mysteries of life. Besides, I am also interested in probing into the ways in which such a study can explore ways of building up a critical solidarity and sisterhood among women.

I have had encounters of varied depth with many catholic women from different spheres and economic and social backgrounds. From among them, it is the memory of Maria, aged 58, a poor catholic woman that resonates vividly in my mind. Maria lost her husband and became a widow at a very early age. With the death of her husband, Maria was reduced to penury as a result of the cruelty she experienced at the hands of her in-laws. She once told me that her brothers-in-law had taken every bit of land and each and every penny that was her due of the family property, and left her to fend for herself and her children. When her young husband died, thirty-year-old Maria had nowhere to go, no professional education to fall back on. Eventually she was employed on compassionate grounds in one of the convent schools as a peon receiving a rather meager salary of Rs.1000/- a month. She had three girls, the eldest was Stella, Reena was second and Cecily the youngest. Her only son Joseph, who added to her miseries as he took to gambling and drinking, literally squandered the little wealth that Maria had gathered through her strenuous efforts.

However, my memory of Maria is of a very confident woman who coupled efficiency and firmness with extreme gentleness and kindness. In addition to that, Maria was often called upon to settle feuds between neighbors and take important common decisions in the low caste colony in which she lived. Maria was to my mind a very praying person and a staunch believer in Jesus. The neighborhood in which she lived was a multireligious and multilinguistic lo-

cale. Yet every family was in admiration of Maria and spoke of her with reverence. In addition to educating her children, she also got them married in catholic families. Today even Joseph is well employed and Stella, Reena and Cecily too have built their own houses and are well to do, thanks to the single-handed effort of Maria. I have always secretly admired Maria's courage and persistence despite all odds. Some of the questions that very often came to my mind were related to the empowering beliefs and attitudes to life that I perceived in her. Where did this tremendous courage come from? How did she succeed in imparting immense valour and emancipating religious values to her daughters, in spite of the stringent attitudes to women within the Church and women in the Indian society? What made her spirituality different from the spirituality of her brothers-in-law? What made people flock to her and what was it those women gained in their get-togethers?

Maria is a member of a group of Catholic women which meets every week for faith sharing. In the process of this faith sharing, they contribute in a very significant way to the spiritual growth of all members of the group. These meetings were no doubt an enormous source of emotional and psychological support and strength. The activities that happened in these meetings were sharing, renewing connection, figuring out how to deal with whatever was going on in their lives with husbands, children, and related problems in their work. These analyses and analyzing were vital to adjusting to what must have been at times enormously trying circumstances. In addition these 'meetings' had a communitarian aspect as well to it.

I met Maria ten years ago at a faith-sharing meeting of Catholic women that had been organized by the diocese. Impressed by her vivacity and child like trust in the divine, which she constantly manifested in her encounters with others, I decided to get to know her better. A year ago I had an interview with Maria. I am recording below a small portion of the interview I had with her. I must say that I was amazed at Maria's immense knowledge of the collective lives of Catholic women in India and especially in the state of Kerala, South India, from where I come.

A Section of the Interview with Maria

Maria was 55 years old when I interviewed her. A year later she retired from the school where she worked as a peon and is presently residing alone in the house she has built for herself and her son. This interview was conducted three years ago while she was still in service.

Q. How do you feel now that all your obligations are fulfilled? Do you feel a sense of satisfaction?

Maria – Dear Sr. Pushpa, I feel a great sense of accomplishment and know that I have been a true Catholic and a courageous mother. In addition I have taught my daughters the important values of Christ. The Bible most of all emphasized total surrender to Christ and selfless love for neighbor. I have taught my daughters to find confidence in the belief that God will grace us with His incessant blessings. I have also brought home to my daughters that the secret and true meaning of life lies embedded within each of us because God lives within each of us. Likewise He lives in all our sisters and brothers and also in the whole of creation. Therefore, I have taught my children that values like sharing and respect for other people, other religions and even nature is very important (Smiles. Pauses for a minute, then with a bright shine in her eyes, whispers, albeit, in a rather triumphant tone): “*I am very proud of my daughters.*”

Q. What was *the factor* in life that kept you going, despite the fact that you had to fight it out single-handedly?

Maria – Of course, you know that I have always been a faithful believer in the magnanimity of God. Even in times of difficulties he had been my strength. In addition, though my husband died and all my in-laws abandoned me I never felt alone. I always experienced the presence of God. When I was very desperate, I would go to the Church nearby and pray.

Q. Have you felt the Catholic religion helpful in your struggles? Has it been a source of liberation and freedom to you especially a stronghold in your rather tough journey?

Maria – I love my religion and am proud to call myself a Catholic. However, I am inclined to think that there is a big gap between

the way we live spirituality and experience God in our day-to-day living, and the manner in which the official Church functions. Those in leadership in the Church do not often understand our everyday experiences of loss, powerlessness and struggle. While the concerns of the official Church are with matters of Scriptural authority, canon law and so on, our concerns are those related to living authentic lives, bringing up our children in the best way possible, coping with drunkard husbands and even wayward sons. There have been moments when it was just the inner faith and trust my mother had imparted to me that gave me the strength to carry on. My mother too was a very courageous and a 'God-experienced' lady. She never feared men. Therefore for her, religion was not something that was dictated by laws and codes. She would not refrain from speaking her mind very frankly. It is that Christianity, my mother's Christianity, that brought me freedom. Furthermore I started gaining immense strength from the way my mother had taught me to live my religion. Besides it also increased my love for Christianity and the Bible.

(The interview did not end here, in fact I have reproduced only a very small section of the three-hour formal interview I had with Maria. Besides, I have had innumerable friendly conversations with Maria because she was a member of the diocesan Women's Group governing body.)

PART TWO: AN ANALYSIS

In part two, I will use the category of loss as an epistemological tool to interpret the lives of Indian catholic women and their journey to selfhood and freedom

From Sense of loss To Sense of life, To Sense of Love

In Maria's life one notices a triple sense of loss. First and foremost she experiences the sudden death of her husband. With the death of her husband, she experiences estrangement and alienation from the in-laws who ought to have supported her. She also experienced estrangement from the members of her own natal family. In a

socio political situation where a woman's identity is normally linked with that of her husband, father or son, incidences of death and loss are invested with a specific shade of materiality. This is what I term as the feminization of loss. With her identity always associated with a man, she has no individual existence other than in relation to these men in her life. In addition to this, women do not have economic independence. Lack of education also aggravated the unfortunate predicament Maria was in. Like most women in India, the life of Maria was tied to the fortune of her husband whose work and position was shaping her world. When she lost her husband, she also lost, along with her husband, her social status and economic security.

The second sense of loss which becomes glaringly evident, is the material loss and alienation she experienced as a result of her husband's death. She was reduced to penury. In addition her son Joseph who was a spendthrift and squanderer, aggravated her predicament by taking to gambling.

The third sense of loss which she had to confront, was the degenerate ways of her prodigal son. In a society like ours, where not to have a son is interpreted as a bad sign and the woman who does not bear a son is an unpropitious woman in God's sight, to have a prodigal son intensifies the magnitude of the problem in many ways, in addition to the personal tension and anxiety the mother experiences as an individual and above all as a mother.

I will argue that these three losses pertain to the institution of motherhood as established by Indian patriarchy. In the Indian understanding, a woman who loses her husband and becomes a widow is considered a bad omen. Traditionally, widows wore only white and were supposed to live unadorned and unobtrusive lives.

Closely related to the problem of widowhood in India, is the issue of control of women's sexuality. Similarly feminist historians of Indian nationalism have demonstrated that the management of sexuality was the key to the thorny problem of widow remarriage. The most problematic category of women throughout the nineteenth century India was widows. The two important issues which were implicit in the whole debate on widow remarriage in nineteenth cen-

ture India, was firstly the recognition of women as sexual beings and secondly the relationship of female sexuality with the prevailing family and property structures.³

Secondly one who is not blessed with material riches is supposed to be cursed by God. In Indian philosophy wealth is considered a sign of auspiciousness and the woman specifically is considered to be *Lakshmi*, the goddess of wealth.

Thirdly a woman whose son, and that too an only son, goes astray, is looked down upon by society as not having the capacity to nurture and nourish the precious gift God has bestowed on her, because sons are considered more precious than gold. If a woman gives birth to a son, her path to heaven is ensured.

From Loss to Life

In this section I will argue that the greatness and specificity of Maria's spirituality/Women's spirituality, lie in the fact that this sense of loss was transformed into a sense of the dynamic, vivacious and vigorous nature of life and God. Thus their sense of life was a sense of fullness, a sense of oneness and a sense of mystery. The sense of God that these women lived with, permeated every nook and cranny of their very enterprise of living. To have a sense of God, to have a sense of religion, to have a sense of life, meant to live dynamically by tapping all the resources God had blessed them with. This was emphasized and re-emphasized by the belief that whatever experience of 'apparent loss' one was doomed to encounter on life's precarious paths, it was within one's capacity to transform this experience of loss into an experience of spiritual, emotional, mystical and practical gain. This was simply made possible because 'God the magnanimous one makes his abode' within each of us.

For Maria and her companions, her women friends, this was also made possible by their interactions and meetings during which they had discussions of issues related to life, philosophical discussion on Truth, God and the like. Truth, and the attaining of it, was seen as a discursive process and no one could boast total monopoly over it. At this juncture it is important to say that most of the women who formed part of the circle of Maria's companions were widows.

In addition, some of these women who formed part of the women's circle were not all Catholics or even Christians. They belonged to different religions. Thus Maria and these women's sense of life and God was permeated with the mysticism of a unique 'oneness' they experienced with all peoples beyond the barriers of caste, creed, color and status.

This 'oneness' they experienced with one another was also extended to a special feeling of 'connectedness' they felt with nature and other people, especially the needy and the suffering. Many of these women despite the fact that they themselves were victims of poor pay packages, donated generously within their means, to orphanages and others in need. A particular incident remains so fresh and vivid in my mind. Maria had a Hindu colleague named Geeta. Her daughter was to be married. The marriage was due in three months time and Geeta was desperately in need of money. Sometime in the same year Maria's daughter was to be married. That was the first marriage to take place in her house and Maria was preparing for a rather grand celebration. In view of the ceremony she had saved a large sum of money because according to the custom in her locality the marriage expenses were to be met by the bride's parents. When Maria saw Geeta in distress she quickly ran to the bank, withdrew the fixed deposits and gave them to Geeta, without any written evidence. When Maria's daughter confronted her with the possibility of Geeta not returning them because of lack of any written evidence her response was so touching that I have never forgotten it all my life "What I see in Geeta is the mystery of God who incarnated as man. That mystery is so incomprehensible that I will not doubt for even a moment the veracity of that existential truth. When I saw Geeta desperately in need, I only saw the mystery of God reflecting through her." I was dumbfounded though my skeptical mind, I am ashamed to say as a nun, wondered "Is that a practical and realistic way to live?" For the mystic, life does not exist in realisms and practicalities. She sees beyond what the common human eye sees. To allay my rather unfounded fears Maria rang me up one day to inform me that within two months of her daughter's marriage Geeta had returned the sum. Stella is happily married and has two lively kids.

From Life to Love

The three specific features of the love that I experienced in the spirituality of Maria and her women friends is love as non-institutional/contextual, love as communitarian and love as joy spreading and not fear generating. For Maria and her companions Christianity/religion was not at all a matter of creating institutions. It was a matter of creating loving bonds between mother and children, between people, between friends and neighbors, between brothers and sisters. It was a matter of realizing what the needs of the individual were and how best could she/he be challenged to bring out the best in her for the sake of her own person and the community. If this demanded a challenge of structures, Maria did not refrain even from organizing *Satyagrahas* after the style of Gandhi who was her inspiration. Once at a protest march that she had organized against illicit brewing of liquor within the locality, she pronounced as a way of encouraging a young Muslim wife named Razia Begum "Who will we fear other than Allah? Who has the right to stop us? Those men, our husbands who come fully drunk to beat and strangle good women to death? Let Jesus show mercy to our children." After a week of incessant demonstration Razia Begum's husband one day rang the doorbell of Maria's house. To her surprise he fell on his knees begged her pardon and resolved never to drink any more. Never, since I was told by the people of the locality, has anyone seen Mohammed, Razia's husband drunk on the streets. Now Razia is a social worker and she herself has conducted innumerable demonstrations against illicit liquor brewing in many parts of Kerala.

In the preceding section I have probed into how the experience of loss affected meaning-making and the sense of religion and life in the lives of Indian Catholic women and the way they imparted it to their children. This sense of loss did not make them powerless. Instead this sense of loss that they experienced was transformed into power. The sense of loss was partly a consequence of what society had inflicted on them for the fact of being women. Through their lively every-day encounters, these women tapped the emancipatory potential in the existential state of loss, which is part and parcel, and an inevitable factor, of life. I will argue that the losses experienced by these women were transformed into freedom

in political, religious and academic achievements either in the life of these protagonists or in the life of their daughters and grand-daughters.

In the next part of the paper we will look into the manner in which the Book of Ruth deals with the existential fact of loss.

Joan Chittister and the Book of Ruth

The Catholic feminist theologian Joan Chittister offers us a feminist interpretation of the book of Ruth in her spiritually energizing book entitled *The Story of Ruth: Twelve Moments in Every Woman's Life* (Chittister 2000). She defines twelve significant moments in the life of a woman. These she terms respectively as loss, change, transformation, aging, independence, respect, recognition, insight, empowerment, self-definition, invisibility & fulfillment. This paper then will take the form of a conversation between the book of Ruth and the lives of these Indian Catholic women. The interpretative category that forms the specific lens for this enriching conversation will specifically be the experiential category of loss carved and shaped in the specificity of Indian women's lives. The paper therefore will make a comparative study of defining moments in the lives of these Indian women and that of Naomi and Ruth. It will depict the manner in which Indian catholic women through their daily spiritual efforts effectively channel the creative energies in experiential and recurring situations like loss and change, in order to unleash their emancipatory potential. The book of Ruth begins in tragedy – a situation of loss. Naomi, Ruth and Orpah are three young women left with three dead husbands and with no means of support. However, these women do not succumb to feelings of self pity and helplessness. They decide to take the hard and unbeaten track in order to make something fruitful and valuable of their lives. An analysis of the journey made by Naomi and Ruth presents us with five significant and emancipatory aspects of the existential reality of loss.

Loss is, as Chittister says, a 'crossover moment in time', for it leads us to ourselves, in and through God's time. Nevertheless time here is not measured from the perspective of *chronos*, but from that of *kairos* (Panikkar 1993a, 1993b) Chronological time is measured in terms of productivity, and what one does, and in terms of what

one produces. In such a culture and worldview, age is seen a problem to reckon with. However, time seen from a kairological perspective challenges the evolutionary, linear model of chronological time. It is cathartic and brings true self-revelation. Kairological time is measured in terms of quality, of being. In a moment of loss often one realizes the depth of her inner self. Time stands still.

Moments of great loss throw a woman back on her own assets. A truly feminist strategy indeed, because when authentically and critically encountered, loss brings in women a deep and critical awareness of our agency and subjecthood as women of God. During a moment of loss such as this, what counts is the existential reality of “what a woman is inside herself” (Chittister 2000: 9).

‘The profound encounter with ‘what a woman is inside herself’ brings her face to face with the ultimate logic that God in her life is her only real resource (Naomi, Ruth and Orpah are women coping with loss) (Chittister 2000: 9).

Loss becomes a moment of deep spiritual revelation. Moments of loss are moments of power that authentic self-revelation brings, since we are faced with the question: Who am I when I am no longer who and what I was? For a woman, often the loss of a husband strikes at the very foundation of her life. What confronted us with this loss was a feeling of being reduced to nothing.

Loss brings in a feeling of helplessness, of being an outsider, of being powerless. This is the ambiguity of the existential reality of loss – it makes one feel powerful and at the same time powerless. This feeling of powerlessness and loss is a common/universal feeling of women. However, in the book of Ruth, God takes a stand on the side of the woman who is alone in the world. God pronounces her whole and capable of her own direction.

Loss once reckoned with is a gift. “I can be and must be something new. I discover more of God in emptiness, than I have ever known in what I once took to be fullness.” Loss is empowering, because in loss we are faced with ourselves, with the reality of our inner selves. Loss thus, in Chittister’s understanding, brings knowledge of ourselves and of the world. She defines knowledge first and foremost as being ‘conscious of the way her world goes together.’

This is further explicated in terms of the knowledge of one's/a woman's role as the other image of God; knowledge as claiming her part of the will of God; the knowledge of how life works, of her powerlessness in the system and yet the knowledge of her great strength of self; and the knowledge of her dignity as a daughter of God. For Chittister knowledge paves the path to the unfolding of consciousness. Correspondingly, in the Indian understanding knowledge is seen as a *Brahmajignasa* (realization of *Brahman* the highest reality) where in the process the seeker (*mumuksu*) is being transformed. Knowledge as a result is seen as bringing in authentic freedom and empowering consciousness. Therefore the bridge between these two moments of loss and empowerment is the unfolding of consciousness.

Consciousness is defined here in terms of the four fold Indian approach. In a recent thesis submitted to the University of Madras, Dr. George Thadathil has argued that modern humanity, be it in the West or the East, is beset by a four fold alienation which corresponds to the four-fold layers in the Indian understanding of consciousness. The four-fold alienation is alienation from the socio-political, the psycho-spiritual, the aesthetico-religious and the philosophico-mystical. Tapping the emancipatory potential in the sphere of the psycho-spiritual and the aesthetico-religious, through an application of the Indian Advaitic view of reality, Dr. Thadathil depicts the contours of a wholesome spirituality that will counter the alienation of the modern self. Situating the context of his research within a particular low caste community called the Ezhava community in Kerala, South India, he extends the liberative thrust of the spiritual and the aesthetic even into the socio-political. The underlying democratic vision of life forms the edifice on which he develops his four fold division of consciousness which depicts, the 'lokaḥ'/world of men and women collectively and individually. The democratic four-fold vision of reality with its potential for unity and communion building, is depicted as follows.

The pranava (primordial utterance) "AUM" is in the Upanishadic understanding the ultimate Mahavakya (vital utterance) – the sum and substance of the Upanishads and the Vedas. The 'AUM' in Mandukya language is Catuspad – fourfold. It represents Brahman,

the reality as jagrat (wakeful) swapna (dream) susupti (sleep) and turiya (silence). It is symbolized in the very sound production 'A', 'U', 'M' and 'silence.' The wakeful consciousness is directed to the world of objects (external world), the dreamy half awake consciousness to the world of the subject, the deep sleep (susupti) state to the hidden world of the preconscious – subconscious, and the 'silence' of the unconscious as the perfect vision of Being as Being or Non-Being.

It is by relying on the above fourfold scheme of reality – consciousness that the very outlining of a feminist vision is being attempted. Applying this scheme to the complex reality of women, I derive the four segments: the socio-political (the objective wakeful world), the psycho-spiritual (the subjective dream world), the aesthetico-religious (the Divine trans-conscious, trans-human 'sleep' world) and the philosophico-mystical (the infinite 'non definable, and unspeakable beyond' that prevents reality from being totalized – 'silence').

A situation of loss, be it individual or collective, when faced with courage and involvement takes us to our inner selves and brings self revelation and revelation of the true nature of the divine.

Loss and Self Revelatory Discourse

The stories of Indian Catholic women that I have illustrated confront us with a picture of 'committed people' entering into a 'biased' search for their authentic 'selves' and sharing their inner domain through the story/text of their lives. In an article entitled "The Cloistered Closet" the author, Reverend Dorothy A. Austin, gives emphasis to the freedom people experience when they 'open' themselves to the reality of their authentic selves, 'embrace' it, acknowledge it with interest and compassion and without reactivity. With an autobiographical slant in her writing thus underscoring the experiential nature of the text, Austin points out that the path to freedom opens when 'one is released from her conditioning.' This takes us to a new stage of freedom – a moment of clear seeing, without a struggle.' The end product of such a personal and collective journey is 'happiness unabated' and 'clear seeing, without a struggle.' These moments of clear seeing and productive silence

bring into our lives a wholesome measure of peace and patience. For as Austin says and as the lives of these Catholic women reveal, “Given a healthy sum of self-respect and self acceptance, we have a substantial reserve to spend on others, even those who hate us.”

However in a discussion like this on Indian Catholic women, we are forced to pose the question: Is pursuing ‘unabated happiness’ a self-revelatory discourse for Indian Catholic women? Can Indian Catholic mothers who are responsible for the smooth running of their families spend time on self-revelatory discourses or personal spiritual journeys? Or is this an issue to be left to personal and individual choice? I tend to think that a clue to these questions can be found in the concept of ‘ongoing struggle’ Austin uses, and also in the idea of a spiritual practice that she elaborates. For Austin, as I see it, ‘Self-Revelatory’ discourse is not a static but a dynamic concept. As such, it is for the individual in relation to her social and political context to decide. It is important to realize the contextual and historical nature of self-revelation and not reduce it merely to a psychological/spiritual category. I have also encountered many Catholic mothers and housewives’ in India who despite their daily chores, which for most of them is a round the clock task, in addition to the battering from their husbands and the demands of the joint family bond, draw inner sustenance through such spiritual practice. My friend Nancy is for me a very telling example.

Nancy lived through such traumatic experiences in the first few years of her married life, that even to date, recounting those tales brings tears to the eyes of any listener as it did to mine. Her mother-in-law would shriek and yell and call her names that would almost reduce Nancy to ‘feeling like a whore’, in her words, and most often for some reason or situation the mother-in-law herself would fabricate. To my constant queries on how she lived through those years safeguarding her sanity and confidence, Nancy inevitably, with a special shine in her eyes replies “ ‘God!’ – every time I left my mother’s house to go to my in-laws,’ my mother would assure me that Mother Mary was sitting beside me.” It is ten years since Nancy got married and five years since I met her. Despite this agony, Nancy, besides fulfilling all her duties to her husband and in-laws as is expected of an Indian wife, decided to pursue a Doctoral

degree in Economics. Nancy has already submitted her doctoral thesis for approval and evaluation to the University of Bombay. The last time I met Nancy she looked so happy and cheerful. In response to my wide-eyed bewilderment, she whispered in my ears, “my years of spiritual practice have borne fruit. God has transformed my husband and mother-in-law. They look upon me now as an auspicious wife and a propitious daughter-in-law.” I shied away in disbelief only too aware of my lack of faith in her capacities and in the silent strength and enduring faith of millions of such women in my country. The faith and spiritual practice of such people speaks volumes in a language louder and more dignified than words of the significance of ‘dying a million deaths’ in order to struggle towards that ‘one deeply-realized moment of clear seeing’, of demanding that others, who have refused them the luxury of a ‘self-revelation’, clearly ‘see’ their auspiciousness.

Now Nancy, in addition to working as a journalist, also renders voluntary service to an organization that caters to offering counselling services and retreats to battered women. As Austin notes in her article, Nancy too thinks that the first impediment to overcome in our journey towards self – revelation is ‘fear.’ I too have benefited considerably from Nancy in this regard.

My intention in illustrating the example of Nancy, is to exemplify through these demonstrations that the category of ‘self-revelatory discourse’ has immense potential and offers wide possibilities when seen as a dynamic concept. Besides, the feminist category of struggle enhances the implicit nature of self-revelation as a prophetic committed and disciplined sojourn. Austin in her article says, “happiness is not dependent upon the accumulation of pleasant experiences.” Here she underscores the importance of the ‘seemingly insignificant, moment-to-moment experiences of our lives.’ These moments could be moments of loss in its varied forms or moments of deep revelation and fulfillment. By stressing the ‘moment to moment’ nature of living, Austin draws our attention to the manner in which the ‘ordinary’ becomes the ‘extraordinary’ through the very act of ‘narrative telling’, “to be a self is to have a story to tell.” This ‘telling’ for Austin is not something that can be accomplished only through ‘words’ but also through the language of ‘Silence’, through the very act of committed living itself.

These women, be it Maria, Nancy, or the scriptural women Naomi and Ruth, thus pose to us through the story of their lives varieties of paradoxes that are seemingly contradictory but arguably emancipatory. To me, entering into such a process of personal liberation has wide implications even for Indian Catholic women whose primary and often only source of individuality is derived from their existence as 'self-denying' mothers. The nature of this spiritual journeying is for each one, in relation to her context and community, to decide.

Notes

1. This paper was presented in a gathering of Asian Catholic women under the auspices of Ekklesia of Women (EWA) that took place in November 2002 in Thailand.
2. I have given a brief account of the accident, which killed my sister precisely because such accidents are not a rare phenomenon; it is rather the in thing. Surprisingly even in a place like Goa where statistics show that accidents are on the increase there are no proper emergency centers where trauma cases can be handled. Statistics collected from the Traffic Department reveal that over 1,650 accidents were reported last year with 209 fatalities. An alarming 69 per cent of these accidents were caused due to negligent driving. A majority of the accidents also involve drunken driving, figures reveal a high incidence (68 per cent) of mishaps between 11 am to 8 pm – normal working hours in the tourist state. Such laxity points to a theological issue – the question of value of life. Considering this social factor, could one say that the death of my sister was God's will? For eg. One nun who lives in my community and who is 90 told me that she couldn't think of it as God's will. I am faced with a dilemma.
3. Uma Chakravarth, "Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi : Orientalism, Nationalism and a script for the past" in Kumkum Sangari & Sudesh Vaid (eds.) *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, (New Delhi : Kali for women, 1989) 27-87.

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The Place and Role of Women in Hinduism

Usha Bambawale

· *Padam Pallavi Society, Pune 411016*

Abstract: Hinduism is a way of life. In the true sense one is born a Hindu and cannot be made one by conversion or by an 'institution.' The way of life is today called a 'religion.' The rules and regulations, norms and structure utilized for peaceful happy living patterns have been adopted into rites and rituals. Today the ossification of customs into religious explanations has made the way of life into a rigid pattern. Yet Hinduism is one religion that has had several socio-religious reform movements and there have been drastic changes in life and worship to accommodate time and tide. This paper traces the path of the Hindu woman from ancient to modern times. It establishes the fact that liberative attitudes have transcended religious oppression not limiting educational and social advancement of the Hindu woman. The forward march in the secular fields and the attitude of liberal values is more evident amongst the Hindu woman than among the women of other monolithic institutionalized religions in India. Today women have received their equal status in Hinduism by being accepted as priests and Gurus. The paper has three distinctive areas of discussion, 1.Hinduism, 2.The place of women in Hinduism and her role as interpreted in society. 3. The Hindu women in context to the process of liberalization and her ability to change the social attitude with the help of law and education. A brief introduction at the beginning helps to draw meaningful conclusions. The author has stuck to the exclusive discussion of the Hindu women and the religion.

Keywords: Anubhava, women in Hinduism, women as priests, liberative force of women.

Introduction

Dr. S. Radhakrishnan writes..."At the outset, one is confronted by the difficulty of defining what Hinduism is. To many it seems to be a name without content. Is it a museum of beliefs, a medley of

rites, or a mere map, a geographical expression? Its content, if it has any, has altered from age to age, from community to community. The ease with which Hinduism has steadily absorbed the customs and ideas of people with whom it has come into contact is as great as the difficulty we feel in finding a common feature binding together its different forms.”(1974:11) The historical records date back to five thousand years and confirm that India had reached a stage of civilization and had a proper system of socio-religious governance which continues until the present age. Even though people of different races and cultures have invaded India from the dawn of history, Hinduism has been able to survive and maintain its supremacy and stood the test of stress and strain for over five millenniums. In spite of the proselytizing creeds with political power, it could not do away with spiritual thoughts and experience. As the civilization extended over the whole of India from the territory drained by the river Indus, in its southward march, this civilization flowed over the basin of Ganga and mingled with the Dravidian culture. It underwent many changes, but it retained its continuity with the Vedic patterns. The ‘Kurma Purana’ cites the fact that India belonged to different communities, worshipped different gods, and practised different rites. This liberative attitude of the religion still exists in every Hindu home wherein some worship Lord Ganesh, others Lord Shiva, still others a female deity Shri Jagadamba or Lord Shrikrishna. Throughout the forward march to the southern tip of India, the term Hindu that had originally a territorial rather than a credal significance, became more or less the identity of all the women and men from different tribes, cultures, savages, half civilized, Dravidians and Aryans, as they belonged to this land and had the ‘same mother’. The Hindu society was therefore built out of material so diverse, so little, susceptible in many cases to assimilation, yet in a few centuries the spirit of cultural unity spread through a large part of the land. Racial stock of different cultures became steeped in a common atmosphere. “The differences among the sects of Hindus are more or less on the surface, and the Hindu as such remains a distinct cultural unit, with a common history, a common literature and a common civilization” (Radhakrishnan 1974:13) Thus in the Oxford History of India we find Vincent Smith declare: “India beyond all doubt possesses a deep underlying fundamental unity, far more profound than that produced

either by geographical isolation or political superiority. That unity transcends the innumerable diversities of blood, colour, language, dress, manners and sect.”

Hindu Religion

Hinduism is the outcome of a way of life. Most religions of this world are marked off with institutionalized teachings and intellectual obedience to these teachings. Hinduism on the contrary gives credence to dogmas through experience. The outer experience is turned into inward realization. Religion is accepted as a kind of life or experience of reality or ‘anubhava’. This experience is the response of the whole personality. Religious experience in itself is of a self-certifying character. Unlike other mechanical faiths which rest on authority, Hinduism has roots in experience. Hindu thought therefore fosters belief and promotes the spiritual life of the soul in accordance with nature and the laws of world reality. In a nutshell we can say “Hinduism is a human phenomenon of immense magnitude and is overpowering not only by reason of that, but also owing to its bewildering diversity.”(Chaudhari 1979:1) The chief sacred scriptures of the Hindus, the Vedas, register the intuition of the perfect souls. They record the spiritual experience of souls strongly endowed with a sense of reality. They are held to be authoritative on the grounds that they express the experience of the experts in the field of religion. The truths revealed in the Vedas are capable of being re-experienced on compliance with a certain condition. We can discriminate between the genuine and the spurious in religious experience, not only by means of logic but also through life. The Vedas bring together the different ways in which the religious minded of the age experienced reality. They can be described in the general principles of religious knowledge and growth. It is essential to every religion that its heritage should be treated as sacred. The Vedic tradition is considered sacred and helps to transmit culture and ensures the continuity of civilization. The Hindu attitude to the Vedas is one of trust tempered by criticism. Trust because the belief has helped our forefathers and fathers, and criticism because however valuable the testimony of past ages may be, the present generation has the right to sift the information and adapt it as per the times. This is the greatest force of liberalization of the Hindu religion, not found in any other-world re-

ligion. Hinduism is the religion not only of the Vedas, but of the Epics and the Puranas. Hinduism has become a religion with most varied issues and has endless diversities and hues. Puranas to a great extent is based on imaginative and weird stories and do not have a regular chronology. Yet they have a sacred tradition and have helped humans to lift their soul to God. Hinduism is therefore not a definite dogmatic creed, but a vast, complex but subtly unified mass of spiritual thought and realization. Its tradition of the Godward endeavor of the human spirit has been continuously enlarged through the ages (Radhakrishnan 1974:17). The elasticity of Hinduism or the dialectic of religious advance through tradition, logic and life, is by providing scope for change. Tradition is something which is forever worked out anew and recreated by the free activity of Hinduism. Throughout the history of Hinduism, the thinkers and leaders practising this religion have continuously experimented with new forms and developed new ideas to suit new conditions. Though Hindu religious thought has undergone revolutions and conquests, yet the essential ideas have continued in a logical form and pattern in daily life for over five millenniums. The three prasthanas or divisions of the Vedanta – the Upanishads, the Bramha Sutras and the Bhagavatgita answer to three stages of discipline, knowledge and faith. All sects of Hindus attempt to interpret the Vedanta text in accordance to their own religious view. In reality then, all sects of Hinduism are reconciled with a common standard and could be regarded as expressions of one true Canon. The Hindus never doubted the reality of one supreme universal spirit. When asked to define the nature of God, the Upanishadic sages sat silently and declared “Absolute is Silence”. But the human mind finds it extremely difficult to resign itself to absolute silence. Humans insist on interpreting religious mystery in terms of their own experience. The human mind craves for something definite and limited. As a result, God is perfect personality. Personality includes cognition, emotion and will. In this light God is viewed as the ‘Supreme Knower’, the one who is all pervasive. In the context of the Hindu method of reform, every group retains its past associations and preserves its individuality and interest in the tenets of the basic concept of the religion. Hinduism does not mistake tolerance for indifference.

The Place of Women In Hinduism

‘Where women are worshipped there the Gods rejoice’ (Roy 1995). Mother-love of Ramakrishna Paramahansa represents some aspect of the relationship of the human to divine spirit. Hinduism affirms that some of the highest and richest manifestation which religion has produced requires a personal God. Kali in her various shapes is a non-Aryan Goddess, but gradually identified with the supreme Godhead. The woman’s identity in the past is basically entwined with two elements – one with the Vedic age and the second with Manusmriti. The Vedic literature consists of hymns and chants, to be used on ritual occasions. The Rg Veda consists of over a thousand hymns of which those attributed partly or wholly to women seers do not number more than twelve to fifteen, that is approximately 1%. The representation of women seers is thus obviously marginal. If this is an indication of the access women had to the construction of prestigious, sacred traditions, it is not particularly inspiring. Though we do have references to women philosophers such as Gargi, women rarely figure as teachers in formal situations of transmitting learning.”... Such women were probably interlopers rather than participants in routine scholarly activities” (Roy 1995: 14) The Manusmriti is a tangible text and its focus is broad. The Smriti suggests that “ Women were not to be left independent and were to be protected by men, it is possible that they were considered a liability and not an asset and thus were not respected by them.”(Gulati 1985:18). Women were therefore protected and at that time greater sin was assigned to the killing of women. Yet a wife was superseded if she was barren or gave birth to daughters, (Lakshmidhara: kṛty - Grahastha 104). In a patriarchal society, a son was always the priority. A man was allowed to marry more than one woman, probably because of his status or childlessness or because there were only daughters born to the couple. On the other hand, the wife had a different set of rules. Chastity among women was important and to save and protect her she required a man. *I wish to comment that a woman had to be saved from the lust and desire of one man, by another man. So in fact it was a combat among men and the woman became a pawn in this game of men.* Women were implicitly secluded, especially as widows. These were not allowed to adorn themselves and in some parts of India their hair was shorn off to make

them ugly and thus undesirable. Remarriage for widows was not allowed. Smritikars like Devanabhatta recommended the burning of a widow with the body of her husband, the justification being that this would ensure her eternal happiness and the company of her husband. *I would like to comment that inspite of this dictum, Sati was not a universal phenomenon and therefore the question is, which were the castes that observed the custom more frequently and why?* The Hindu woman had no religious rights. She was allowed to help her husband in carrying out religious obligations but not allowed to perform any rituals alone. The Hindu male was expected to follow the four *Purusharthas*. The second phase was to marry and carry out the obligation of *grihashthashram*. The Hindu male required an andhargini/wife to carry out the obligations of Artha, Kama and Moksha by having progeny and through the performance of kanyadan, that is gifting a daughter to a suitable man in marriage. He was also obliged to carry on the tradition of the religion through pujas homa/havana (the ritual fire sacrifice) and ancestral worship to be done by a couple. Since the Hindu woman was not allowed the initiation ceremony of upanayana or the thread ceremony, marriage was the only ritual that sanctified her. Women were allowed some pujas, the Vatasavitri, Satyanarayan, Hartalika, to be performed alone as they were all connected to receive good fortune for themselves through a good husband or by the long life of the husband. Women were always entwined with the life of the man and his welfare. Tradition considered a widow inauspicious and wished never to encounter them when setting out for work or for any important task. Due to such superstitions, women were even looked upon as witches and ghosts. With such beliefs creeping into religious ritualism, the status and place of the Hindu woman had reached its lowest level in the 17th century.

Role of Women In Hinduism

The role of women depends largely on the position of women in the society. As India remains a patriarchal society, a woman's role is generally relegated to that of a child bearer, child minder and homemaker. Altekar (1956) examines texts from 400 BC to 1200 AD and feels that several reasons have contributed to the deterioration of the woman's position in the society. Foreign invasions of India affected

the status of women adversely, discontinuance of upanayana, lack of educational facilities for women and the role of caste system, joint family system, feudalism and other such social institutions were the causes of women's status reaching a rock bottom level. Women were implicitly excluded from participating in a variety of material transactions which were acquiring significance from the giving and receiving **dakshina** and **dana** on most ritual occasions and from giving and receiving tribute or taxes and from directly offering and demanding hospitality. Apart from their tangible context, such exchanges symbolized extra-domestic bonds which were forged among men (Sarkar & Butalia 1995:18). Actually this was the time when women were regarded as equal to the Sudras. This was the lowest caste in the hierarchy of the caste system followed by the Hindus. The marriage age was further reduced and age at marriage was prescribed to be just before puberty, at the stage when the girl was called a **nagnika**. The further downfall of women's status was the popularizing of the custom of Sati. The Muslim rule in India from the 12th century till the 18th century saw to it that the woman was banished from public life. Men-power was emphasized through atrocities against women. Rape and abduction of women were popular means of registering victory over an enemy. The Indian subcontinent has seen this mode of triumph expressed during the partition of India, the riots in Surat, Mumbai and Ahmedabad. Women were raped to prove the strength and superiority of man. Her role even today is that of a doll, a pleasure-giver and the under dog! This, inspite of the achievements of women post independence, is the cruel attitude of society. Even though a woman earns an equal wage, is well educated, is aware of her right, the Adam syndrome persists. The Eve image of the woman remains dominant. Myths are woven especially to retain the role of women in its lower position. Religious control of a woman's life amongst Hindus begins only after the only sacrament she receives at marriage. There is a change even in that today after the introduction of the Hindu Code Bill. The freedom to marry and seek matrimonial remedy has to a great extent released women from the tyranny of men-dominated and men-convenient religious rules which in essence are not God made but man-made.

Liberative Forces In Hinduism

In the ancient period of Indian history, the birth of a daughter was not welcomed, but it certainly did not frighten the parents (Billington 1973:1). Early marriage was not a rule, and girls in ruling families received administrative and military training and were entitled to the same education as boys and no limitations were put on their ambitions in this direction. In the choice of a spouse, both enjoyed equal freedom and equal opportunities (Rai 1923: 70). The joint family system of the Hindu society is a survival of time when social ties were based on consanguinity in the male, and not the female line (Manohar 1975: 64). The father was the head in a joint Hindu family but could not alienate property without the consent of the male members, who acquired rights in the family property as soon as they were born. Daughters had no rights and were entitled only to maintenance, but a widow without a son had a share in the property until her remarriage or death (Chaudhry 1961). The social institution of the joint family on the whole discouraged the independence and initiative of its members. It has limited the freedom of action even of its male members. Naturally the freedom given to women was even lesser. The Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India said in 1975 that their investigation concerning the total interactions in a woman's life revealed that large masses of women remained unaffected by the rights guaranteed to them by the Constitution and the laws enacted since Independence. The committee recommended that the rights be made more real and meaningful. However in the following year Tara Ali Baig's *India's Woman Power* did not completely agree with this report. She felt "...that Vedic women were probably comparable to modern Indian women — the upper strata or the gifted being permitted every advantage of education, with the capacity to rise to the highest status and authority, while injustice and other impediments hamper the life of women at lower levels." Unfortunately much damage has been done to the Hindu woman's image due to imported criteria and value judgment without understanding the Hindu social structure or taking into consideration Hindu religion, which is a distinctive, strong and almost inalterable "way of life." Education was the key to all things ailing women, was how the Government interpreted the status of women. As a remedial measure every Five-Year plan of the Government laid

stress upon the education and emancipation of women. Jawaharlal Nehru had said at the All India Women's Conference in 1954, that no country would prosper when its women remained backward. Apart from receiving school and college education, women are required to develop courage and self-confidence. Nehru asked women to come forward in large numbers to take up the responsibility of building a new India. Once again the politicians of India were changing the status of women! In the British period these subjects were essentially left to be governed by the customary religious laws. Very few women in 1850s received education. Literacy reached such a low ebb after 1857 that there was hardly one woman in a hundred who could read and write (Altekar 1956: 67). Hindu women suffered because of their ignorance, early marriage, their infant motherhood, enforced widowhood and abject dependence on men. The plight of women engaged the attention of almost all social reformers. The Brahmo Samaj, the Arya Samaj and other socio-religious reform movements worked against this social evil. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar did pioneering work on the issue of child marriage. Thus the Child Marriage and the Widow Remarriage Act of 1856 came into existence. Unfortunately, even today in rural areas child marriages take place. In these areas even the Sarda Act of 1929 which legally raised the marriageable age of girls to 14 years is not known. Sati was the forced burning of a young or old widow on her husbands' funeral pyre. Nowhere is this practice cited in Vedic India. Women are not believed to have practised sati before 300 B.C (Altekar 1956:82). She could either pass the rest of her life as a widow, and if childless she could have one through NIYOGA (Practice of levirate. The childless widow met her husband's brother for conception. Niyoga is a sexual relationship without marriage). The liberty given by religion was snatched away by men through social encouragement of Sati. Nowhere else in the world did religion dominate and determine the life of a woman as Hinduism in India. "Her economic activity, her social life, her marriage, birth and death, her physical movements, were strictly and minutely controlled by religion" (Choudhry 1978). In actuality, women had no religious rights as had the men and yet in a patriarchal fold of society there were only restrictions. The socio-religious structure of India made the British hesitate to interfere in matters they considered to be dictates of reli-

gion and did not wish to hurt the sentiments of the people. It was Lord Bentinck who decided to abolish Sati and did so in 1829. He was supported by enlightened Indians like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Dwarkanath Tagore. Ram Mohan Roy proved that Sati was not sanctioned in the Smritis and no other Hindu scripture supported it. Other irrational socio-religious customs such as purdah system, widow remarriage, dowry system, were all derogatory to the women. In various parts of the country agitation for the segregation of religious rules and social customs passed on as religious tenets were questioned. In western India Ranade and Karve were engaged in improving the position of widows. In south India Veresalingam started an association for widow remarriage. Yet the stronghold of religion was acutely felt through the system of arranged marriage. All the religious and caste controls came into its own when a new woman was to be recruited in the family. Marriage was not merely the bonding of a man and a woman, but was for the whole family to decide who would enter the joint Hindu home. Today inspite of the disintegration of the joint Hindu family and the prevalent nuclear patterns of family, the social concept has been turned into a religious need. The explanation is that the Hindu marriage is a sacrament and all the rules of matching horoscopes, keeping the religious rules of sagotra, sapinda and sapravra have to be followed because who can marry whom has been prescribed in the Dharma Shashtras. The choice of the woman is therefore confined to caste rules, along with the endogamy/exogamy rules. Dowry is another social evil attached to religious norms. In the eight forms of Hindu marriage patterns, four are prescribed and the other four such as the Rakshasa and Pishacha forms are considered undesirable and yet accepted so that the marriage will be regularized and the woman has a legitimate husband and a family to go to. Gifts given to the bride have now turned to demands for gifts and have become a rigid custom of asking and giving a dowry. Marriage has now become a market, with the highest bidder being able to get the daughter married. Unfortunately, education has not been able to curb this menace and the Hindu woman is under this pressure. The Anti-Dowry Act was passed way back in 1961 without any significant results. Polygamy was a major cause of lowering the status of women. In 1942 the Government of Baroda passed an act prohibiting polygamy. Hindu marriage Act of 1955 by

the Indian Government abolished polygamy and declared monogamy as the norm in the country. These were social reforms to curb some of the religious sanctions. The greatest boon to the Hindu woman came through the Nationalistic movement. Gandhiji believed that if women did not join the movement for independence, India's march towards Swaraj would be delayed (Chaudhury 1973: 31). Gandhiji loomed large on the Indian horizon; he wanted women to be a part of the Indian National Congress and favoured major reforms to raise the status of Indian women. The growth of socio-political consciousness among women made them come out of their seclusion and also gave them a secular attitude. A band of emancipated women emerged under the influence of Gandhiji. Thus pre-independence days set a sound foundation for women's increased participation in public life and to move out of the shadow of caste and religious control. Undoubtedly in the period before 1947 there was a considerable change in the thinking, outlook and values of Hindu women who suffered from social abuses. Subsequently there was a change in their attitude towards society, which created a milieu for emancipation among Hindu women. When India attained freedom it also paved the way for the emancipation of the Hindu from socio-religious taboos. In this period women felt the need to stand on their own feet and sought education, which could give them employment and make them economically independent. Hindu women were nurtured in the socio-cultural milieu of continuous change. In India women had agitated for the right to vote, the reforms of 1919 enfranchised about 1 million women. In 1926 women were given the right of membership of provincial legislatures. At the first round table conference, the main points of the memorandum asked for equal rights for women. In 1932 a deputation met the Viceroy and demanded self-government, women's suffrage, education and a medical college for girls. Thus in the political sphere, the Hindu woman in particular stood in the forefront of every movement. The overall impact of the partition on the Hindu woman was very different. The pain and trauma, rape and migration taught her to be more independent socially, economically and in matters of religion. To a very great extent the tradition-bound social evils, superstition, ignorance, irrational beliefs and orthodoxy which ruled the Hindu society, were questioned by educated women. Women were aided by the radicalism of the Constitution and its de-

liberate departure from the inherent social systems. In its view every adult female, whatever her social position or accomplishment, will function as a citizen and as an individual partner in the task of nation building. The transformation of the Hindu woman has been brought about through the legal system and the ability to question certain religious norms that have found the right answers and freed her from the burden of ritualism and rites.

Conclusion

The position of women reflects the socio-cultural and religious progress of a society. In India religion has been a way of life, enmeshing religion with day-to-day customs, rituals and rites. The Vedic texts such as the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, IV, 4, 18 are replete with references to rituals recommended for ensuring the birth of a learned daughter. Women were initiated into Vedic studies, were married at mature age, and had freedom in the choice of their husband. When Manu codified Hindu life, obliterated the practice of Upanayan for women and propounded the theory of tutelage of women, they became subservient to men. Men thought that it was their prerogative to interpret religion, and as a result they have kept the power and decision-making in their hands. That the Hindu religion was conceptualized 5000 years ago is not disputed. What is of utmost importance is that with passage of time it underwent drastic change and women had to submit to patriarchal, patrilocal, patrilineal structure of society. They were considered inferior and were kept away from learning, married off young and terrorized into submission under the garb of religion. Since the Hindu religious books are mostly in Sanskrit, the learned men interpreted them as it suited them. The forces that have helped the Hindu woman have been the number of laws that enabled her to be more independent. Yet a lot remains to be done to save women from superstition and stigmas, from myths about women and cruelty. The adoption of the Hindu Code Bill was a major step to remove the legal disabilities from which women suffered before 1956. The Bill gave women the right to inherit, legal permission to adopt, guardianship of a child, right to divorce, cutting across the social sanctions of religion. Thus separated the core religious practice from the customs of religion, which was in reality a power game of men. Access to higher education and

professional education for women, employment and ability to compete with men, self-choice marriages were helpful in raising the status of women and extracting them from the clutches of religious dichotomy. Medical termination of pregnancy was another milestone in the life of women who had no control over their bodies and thus could not control parenthood single-handedly. The Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961 has been a miserable failure as atrocities against women by their in-laws still continue. Even today women carry out the core religious rites, rituals, and feasts, as they are the custodians of ritualistic Hinduism. A group of Hindu women have learnt the Vedic text and carry out priestly duties.

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Jnanadeepa in CD

For details contact:

kuru@jesuits.net

The Role of Women in Hindutva

Clemens Mendonca

Institute for the Study of Religion, De Nobili College, Pune 411014

Abstract: An analysis of the current Indian religious situation reveals that India is plagued with religious fundamentalism and communalism. Religion is politicized and is experienced as a diabolic force, rather than a symbolic revelation. The patriarchal paradigm propagated by Hindutva cannot be dismantled without collaboration and dialogue. We need both '*sexually awakened*' men and women of all religious traditions to join hands in this common war against the enemies of humanity. Together, we people of good will in India, could search for a "new anthropology" – a new way of understanding what it means to be human in an age which is bent on creating a myth of dehumanization.

Keywords: Violence against women, Hindutva, gender insensitivity, reservation bill,

1. Introduction

The oppression of women in India needs to be scrutinized in the context of religion. This is because religion has a complete sway on Indian life, especially on women's life. None can deny that Indian religious traditions uphold deep spiritual values of peace, tolerance, respect for life, nonviolence etc. They speak of respect for *all beings* and of taking ecstatic delight in the *welfare of all beings* (*Sarvabhutahitehrataha*). But just a glance at the situation of women in India reveals how these religions betray their own original teachings.

Violence against women in India is by and large 'institutionalized'. In general their lot is not different from that of the dalits of today. They are considered inferior in every respect: they are religiously *polluted*, socially *ostracized*, culturally *stigmatized*, legally *side-lined*, physically *violated* and psychologically *demoralized*. In a society diseased by "macho-patriarchal insanity" (Rayan 1987: editorial), as Samuel Rayan puts it, discrimination of a girl child often

begins in her own mother's womb and is continued right through life, until she is consumed in the funeral pyre.

To comprehend the position of women in *Hindutva* one needs to have a glimpse of what *Hindutva* is. India is a multi-cultural, multi-lingual, multi-ethnic and multi-religious society. It is a religiously pluralistic community, for apart from the primal religions of the indigenous peoples, it houses many major religious systems of the world. For centuries, these diverse religious traditions though distinct in their forms, beliefs and structures, have enjoyed freedom and peace and held on to their basic and specific social and religious identities. They have influenced one another positively and shared in the common secular interests of the nation.

But today these same values are fast becoming bygone myths. Currently, they are replaced by a new-found *mantra* called *Hindutva*, which in many ways is rich religious heritage of India. An analysis of the current Indian religious situation reveals that India is plagued with religious fundamentalism and communalism. Religion is politicized and is experienced as a diabolic force, rather than a symbolic revelation.

1.1 What Is Hindutva?

Hinduism is not a unified and uniform religion. It is basically universal and plural in its existence (Suresh 1998: 154-160, 157). But in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a section of Hindus began to claim homogeneity in Hinduism with the intention of forming a Hindu nationality. According to S. Kumar:

Hindutva is a late 19th century and early 20th century ideological construct with obvious political overtones. The amorphous religious category of Hindus is transformed into a political community. In this construction, people of Semitic religions who are part of this land are treated as a hostile 'other', outside the purview of Hindu Rashtra. The ideology of *Hindutva* negates both inter-religious pluralism and intra-religious pluralism. It challenges the very concept of a composite culture, Indian nationalism and secular humanism, transcending the narrow boundary of caste and creed, faith and denominations, language and region (Suresh 1998: 158).¹

Hindutva, then, is a movement by the Hindu militancy (a coalition of many Hindu militant organizations), that rejects the secularism guaranteed by the Indian Constitution and wants the Hindus to enjoy special status as a Hindu Nation in India. Accordingly, only Hinduism should enjoy all rights and privileges exclusively, which should not be granted to other religions. The killing of Mahatma Gandhi, who was pro pluralism, was the outcome of such a *Hindutva* ideology. Hindu fundamentalism and communalism was born out of this ideology. Being politically motivated, *Hindutva* is today propagating fundamentalism and communalism.

To sum up, *Hindutva* is an ideology that propounds one race, one culture and one nation policy. It disseminates the racist ideology of Aryan supremacy! In V. D. Savarkar's words "*Hindutva* is not a word but a history. Not only the spiritual or religious history of our people...but a history in full" (Savarkar 1949: 3). Again, a Hindu is the one who is a citizen of Hindustan either by himself or through his forefathers, bound by the bond of common blood (race) that could be traced back to Vedic *Saptasindhu*, who "claims as his own the culture of that race, as expressed chiefly in their common classic language the *Sanskrit* and represented by a common history, a common literature, art and architecture, law and jurisprudence, rites and rituals, ceremonies and sacraments, fairs and festivals; and who above all addresses this land, this *Sindusthan*, as his *puncha bhumi*, as his Holy land – the land of his prophets and seers, of his god-men and gurus, the land of piety and pilgrimage" (Savarkar 1949: 94). Clearly the principal objective of *Hindutva* is to establish a Hindu *Rashtra* whose inhabitants are Hindus by race, culture, civilization and religion. All those who do not come under these prerequisites are outsiders.

For our purpose what is important is to see how this one race, one civilization, one religion, and one nation policy of *Hindutva* is affecting the lives of women in India.

2. Patriarchal Constructs of Womanhood in Hindutva

Women's development is a threat to *Hindutva*. Women's Movements since the late 1970s had been quick to expose the ugly face of patriarchal system that spells the death-knell of women. Numerous

women's organizations have taken up the gigantic task of uplifting women and all those who are marginalized. Women are gradually becoming aware of their human dignity; to some extent they can now claim their legal rights, they have better educational and job facilities and as a result, they are beginning to be economically independent. Such women are a danger to a patriarchal system. That is why *Hindutva* is bent on steadying the shaky patriarchal hegemony. In diverse ways it is trying to bring back patriarchy using modern techniques. But the motivation behind this is clearly political and racial.

In her thought provoking article "The Gender Predicament of the Hindu Right", Tanika Sarkar exposes *Hindutva's* gender ideology: "The Hindu Right today stands at a transitional moment in its history when it still tries to hold on to the possibilities generated by both kinds of discourses that are fundamentally incompatible—equal rights and cultural authenticity. It attempts a resolution by stitching up the two. It talks incessantly of Hindu rights, the rights of the majority community and the rights of a threatened culture and nation. Hindus are signs of both weakness and strength – as the majority community, and as threatened culture. In either capacity, they are to be granted superior rights that preclude notions of equality" (Sarkar 1999: 138).

Sarkar's analysis is a great help in unraveling the hidden agenda of *Hindutva* concerning women. According to her, *Hindutva* is profoundly and fundamentally a "patriarchal force". Its objective is Hindu revivalism or cultural nationalism and it hands over the sole responsibility of training the future citizens of a Hindu *Rashtra* to its women folk (Sarkar 1999: 146). She schematically points out how Pundits of modern history have discounted the entire women's history as unimportant, forgetting that "...a history of Indian women in modern times is also a specifically Indian history of rights – at the level of concept, of political movements and political language. It is also a history of resistance to the discourse of equal rights" (Sarkar 1999: 134).

2.1 Revival of Women's Traditional Role as Ideal Wives and Mothers

Hindutva's fright is sensible, for if the patriarchy collapses, then their political power too weakens. Hence patriarchy needs to be safeguarded at all cost and the best way to promote it is through the traditional institutions of *religion and family*. The best way to protect patriarchy is to safeguard male hegemony in the family. If women are restricted to their families then there is hope for the survival of Brahmanical supremacy. Noble reasons are given by the Hindutva to keep women homebound. Again, how are women to be restricted to their families? Here comes once again the role of religion. Patriarchy, through indubitable religious sanctions, has the power to negatively influence and shape the psyche of women and bring them back to their 'original' family status.

We can understand the role of women in *Hindutva* better when we have a glimpse of how the women's wing in the Sangh parivar functions. The "all-male organization" RSS was founded in 1925 by Hedgewar. The women's wing, the *Rashtrasevika Samiti* was founded at the request of Lakshmibai Kelkar in 1936. The Samiti, through its *Shakhas*, provided opportunities for women of upper castes and class for physical and military training, as well as ideological or *boudhik* training. But it had nothing to do with women's rights or their struggles. M.S. Golwalkar, the second supreme Guru of the RSS, laid enormous strictures on the women's wing (the *Samiti*) and gave them the distinctive responsibility of running their homes and to raising their children on the authentic Sangh values. In 1989-90 the Sangh parivar was very active in bringing to prominence many women's organizations and women leaders like BJP *Mahila Morcha*, the VHP *Matri Mandal* and *Durga Vahini* with their various other regional branches (Sarkar 1999: 139).²

The Samiti functions, according to Sarkar's research, as the 'transmission belt for the RSS' passing on the stories of 'atrocities' committed by the minority communities (Muslims and Christians) among Hindu women (Sarkar 1999: 148). Indeed it is the "nucleus of the new Hindu domesticity. Its women will be the living pattern for the Hindu Rashtra of the future" (Sarkar 1999: 157). In its attitude and function the *Samiti* is the reflection of the Sangh in the real

sense. Its major political function is dissemination of communalism. Its anti-emancipatory agenda is evident in its stand against the Women's Reservation policy in parliament. Instead it upholds social hierarchy on the basis of merit. So also Women MPs and MLAs of BJP cannot be part of the decision-making body of the Sangh (Sarkar 1999: 155-56).

The Samiti's icon is the eight-armed *Durga* carrying weapons, and its *mantra* is to exhort women to lay down their lives in the service of the nation. It is literal war against Muslims and Christians – the enemies within (Sarkar 1999: 147). Instead of women's emancipation the Samiti works for women's pure domesticity. The connection between communal violence and women is obvious: communalized female subject hood instead of "male-inflicted violence and female victimhood" (Sarkar 1999: 142). Women consider themselves the 'soul' of the Hindu Rashtra. They are the guardians of the essential Sangh values, and the propagators of its authentic ideology. They are the defenders of tradition against the West. They are "partners in an internal colonization over the Muslim and the Christian" (Sarkar 1999: 157).

Some sort of accommodation with globalization is quite evident along with an ardent struggle to revive and preserve old values. Certain concessions of modernization are granted to girls and women such as beauty parlours, wearing of jeans (not mini-skirts that expose the body), and cultivation of a good figure, cosmetics and household gadgets as they contribute to the nation's economy (Sarkar 1999: 150).

The Samiti, through its Shakhas, upholds and inculcates in young girls conservative values: arranged marriages, good housekeeping, modesty in dress and behaviour, diligent service to men and elders, and physical training so valuable today to discipline one's body which is highly valued as empowerment. Simultaneously they are indoctrinated in "ideological instructions about services to a militaristic, aggressive Hindu nation, of vengeance against its enemies, about heroic qualities of legendary men and women who resisted 'enemies' of the nation, fulfill aspirations for a life above pure self-interest, release frustrations built up as a result of having been marginalized members of orthodox families. Moreover, they are not told anything

that offends mainstream patriarchal, Hindu nationalistic values and myths very deeply” (Sarkar 1999: 149). Another important function of women propagated by Hindutva, is that women are builders of the nation. According to Golwalkar, women’s most important role is to be mothers of sons, and as mothers, their special responsibility is to form the character of future generations. This does not refer merely to their physical upbringing but most importantly, to imprint in their sons Indian culture and to instill in them the “right type of *sanskars*: devotion to duty, spirit of personal endeavour, love of the motherland, service of the society” (Golwalkar 1980).

Hindutva is thus creating a new negative social order that silences women’s voices and blinds future generations to truth. Women are again relegated to an inferior position. Traditionally, as a wife a woman was expected to fulfill certain roles in the family: as her husband’s servant in duty, as a mother to his children, long suffering and patient in all circumstances, chaste and obedient and faithful unto death (ideal of *sati*) etc. This is what the Hindutva is trying to inculcate through its education policy today. But the traditional role of women, however glorified by Hindutva, is oppressive and would lead to the reversal of women’s empowerment (Singh 2002).

2.2 Gender Equality, a Threat to Hindu Rashtra

What cannot be tolerated in the Samiti is *gender equality* since according to the *Sangh*’s ideology it destroys the traditional value system (Sarkar 1999: 150). Accordingly, for the Samiti the very “notion of rights is an inducement to rape, to domestic unhappiness. It is the sole cause of male oppression of women” (Sarkar 1999: 152-153). The notion of equal rights is a menace brought in by the present education policy. Consequently, the education policy of India is seen as a “colonial, foreign education” which is solely responsible for teaching Indian women to fight for their rights, to fight males. British education policy is blamed for ignoring the questions of culture, nationality, patriotism and motherhood. Hence there is an urgent need today to develop a ‘*Hindu educational system*’ to retrieve the traditional values of ideal wives and sacrificing mothers. It is wrong for women to fight for their rights or fight their men; instead they should sacrifice their lives to keep the family together.

This is because Hindu women are made in the image and likeness of the Motherland herself. If Hindu women hanker after rights to gender equality they will ruin themselves along with Hindu Rashtra (Sarkar 1999: 150-154).

To put it briefly, instead of working towards “self-determination as a right of the female individual or the people”, Hindutva aims at the “uniqueness of the culture of the Hindu *volk*” (Sarkar 1999: 136). From a female, it demands the distinctive responsibility of preparing the male children for the future nationhood and unchanging obedience to community prescriptions. A woman should be so trained as to hand over to her children those unique values that build up the Hindu nation. “She is the source of authenticity, nation-making, freedom” (Sarkar 1999: 136). But all these values she is supposed to inculcate in her sons are at the cost of her own self-determination. The question Sarkar raises is basic: “Is the woman a rights-bearing individual or a culture-bearing one?” (Sarkar 1999: 136-137).

Sarkar’s analysis proves to be right, for one cannot fail to observe a sharp decline in the status of Indian women in the BJP regime, despite the hard work of women’s movements to uplift their position in various fields.

3. Decline on the Status of Women Despite Women’s Movement

Women’s decades-old struggle to break away from the traditional shackles that kept them imprisoned for centuries to their homes, appears to be futile in the face of the rising *Hindutva* ideology. The *Sangh Parivar* is trying hard to revive the traditional value system that keeps women in their ‘proper place’. For example, even after decades of effort from various women’s organizations, gender justice seems still a very distant dream in India. The present government’s utter lack of concern for human dignity is reflected not only in the Gujarat carnage but also in the *rise of violence* against women all over India. That *Hindutva* nurtures the concept of patriarchy and ignores the human dignity of women is obvious from the following examples:

3.1 Hindutva's Absolute Apathy to Human Dignity

Hindutva's absolute apathy to human dignity is reflected in the Gujarat carnage. Women's ordeal in the Gujarat massacre offers us an especially important clue to *Hindutva's* concept of women. The way Muslim women – young girls, married women, pregnant women and even old widows – were handled by organized bands of armed young men of the *Sangh Parivar* cannot be forgotten by generations to come. The *modus operandi* was repulsive. The attitudes were of revenge and hatred. They were raped, gang raped in public and then either burnt alive or smashed to death.

Rape was used as a political weapon to avenge historical wrongs according to Purushottam Agarwal. Commenting on the violence against Muslim women in Surat in December 1992, he tries to analyze the reasons behind the approval of rape in a communalistic context. He succinctly points out that in all patriarchal world-views, female *symbolizes the honor of the family*. Consequently her legitimate 'owner' has an exclusive control over her sexuality. Accordingly, the traditionally ideal woman has to be ready and willing to give up her life to safeguard her chastity (idea of *Sati*) and in safeguarding her chastity, she safeguards the honor of her family and community (Agarwal 2002: 34). Here rape, "even in an individual context, is not just a matter of sexual lust. Sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously, it is an affirmation of women as objects of pleasure and an underlining of the power of men. In a collective context, rape becomes an explicitly political act and in the context of an organized aggression, it becomes a spectacular ritual, a ritual of victory – the defilement of the autonomous symbol of honour of the enemy community" (Agarwal 2002: 29).

Hindutva propagates the legend of *Padmini and Alauddin* to evoke stereotypical image of the Muslim "as a voluptuously lustful rapist" and Hindus as "passive, docile, hopelessly virtuous" persons. Stereotypes of the "Self" and the "Other" are clearly evident at the root of this politico-religious agenda (Agarwal 2002: 32-34). Agarwal refers to the revengeful attitude of V. D. Savarkar who ridicules Hindu rulers including Chatrapathi Shivaji for their benign attitudes towards Muslim women who were at their mercy. Centuries ago Hindu women had suffered molestation at the hands of the Muslims.

But when the time came for the Hindus to retaliate, they did not pay them back in the same coin – they did not chastise Muslim women-folk (Agarwal 2002: 42). What the Hindutva is trying to communicate in glaring terms, is how little it values human dignity and in particular the dignity of women.

3.2 Gender Insensitivity

In a fast changing gender-sensitive world, *Hindutva* is trying to redefine the role of females in the traditional institution of family. Through various means, and especially through the media, it is communicating and upholding a *Sita-Savitri-Padmini* imagery (some of the present T.V serials on women's issues have clearly a debilitating effect on the status of women). In addition, there are instances of demeaning anti-women statements made by pro *Hindutva* political leaders at various times. *Hindutva's* gender insensitivity is seen in the following examples:

Revival of Sati: In October 1987, the former BJP Vice President Rajmata Vijayaraje Scindia, leading a pro-Sati march after the Roop Kanwar' incident in Deorala in Rajasthan, had said that *Sati* was part and parcel of Hindu tradition. Besides, Swami Muktananda, encouraged *Sati* and the dowry system, calling them "traditional Hindu practices." So also, according to a report in *Deccan Herald* (February 8, 1999) the VHP is reviving *Sati*. Furthermore, the international vice-president of the VHP, Acharya Giriraj Kishore, has defended *Sati* by saying "there is nothing wrong if any woman who cannot bear the separation from her husband opts to join him in his funeral pyre" (Hodlya 1999).

Religious Restrictions: In January 1994, Swami Nishchalananda, the Shankaracharya of Puri, protested the recital of sacred texts by women saying: "I respect women too much to allow them to go and beg for alms in one garment, which is a prerequisite for the donning of the sacred thread." The Sacred thread is a prerequisite for chanting the Vedas (Shankar 1999: 1; see also http://www.dalitstan.org/journal/politics/hindutva/wom_hp.html 1999).

Censored History: The revision and updating of the National Curriculum Framework for School Education by the National Coun-

cil of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) is obviously gender insensitive. Women have no place in the entire syllabus of history (*Communalism Combat* 2000: 47-48). In the proposed syllabus 'value education' is given prime importance but this is under the pretext of bringing in the patriarchal ideology and patriarchal notion of education for girls. A Central place is given to religion (Hindu religion) and its 'positive influence' but in reality this is to perpetuate the traditional victimization of women. Family education is given importance (reference to women's education) to perpetuate the stereotypes such as nutrition, health etc (Singh 2002).

Domestic Violence: The attitude of the present government to the widespread domestic violence is also worth noting. The issue of domestic violence still remains a private affair. Laws concerning domestic violence are not given full attention, even in the recent Committee on the Reforms of the Criminal Justice System submitted to the Ministry of Home Affairs in March 2003. The Committee hardly acknowledges the inhuman treatment of victims of domestic violence; instead it makes too many assumptions founded on the "traditional, patriarchal notion that the Indian woman would rather suffer harassment at home – and forgive it – than opt out of the marriage" (*Human Rights Features*, see also <http://www.countercurrents.org/gender-hrf171103.htm> 2003). The Committee has failed thoroughly in its duty to protect the dignity of women, a fundamental duty under article 51A(e) of the Indian Constitution.

3.3 Gender-Just Code still a Distant Dream

While vested interests of *Sangh parivar* clamour for a Common Civil Code for the Nation, the women's movement is determined to call for a Gender Just Code. According to Ram Puniyani there is a vital difference in these two concepts. "A *uniform code* need not be *gender just* while a *gender-just code* can be *uniform* for the whole Nation. As such the civil code relates more to the laws of inheritance of property, divorce and custody of children. And in these matters, most of the prevalent laws are biased in favour of men" (Puniyani 2003; emphasis is mine).

There is very little hope for a gender-just code to be realized in the near future as the *Hindutva* movement is clearly gender biased and is propagating *Manusmriti* in subtle ways (Puniyani 2003).

3.4 Renaming ‘Women’s Studies Centre’ at the University of Pune

The hazards of *Hindutva* philosophy are spreading far and wide in the academic field too. The reason behind this is to maintain the traditional ideal of the Indian womanhood as one who is restricted within the confines of a family. As the process of communalization of education is well on its way, a jolt has also been given to the Women’s Studies Centre at the University of Pune. Mr. Murli Manohar Joshi, the Union Minister for Human Resource Development, has renamed the ‘Women’s Studies Centre’ as the “Women’s and Family Studies Centre.” The strong protest from feminist academics all over India to reverse the decision is justified, as the move is clearly to restrict the scope of women’s studies to the family unit (Muzumdar 2003 in <http://www.countercurrents.org/gender-majumdar060903>).

3.5 Women’s Reservation Bill

Women’s organizations are deeply concerned at the continuing marginalization of women by the present Government in all spheres. In the political field they have been persistently toiling for years to pass 33% reservation for women in the Parliament. But the relentless refusal of the Government to put the Women’s Reservation Bill to vote in Parliament is yet another sign of the BJP’s anti-feminist tactics. The representative of the ruling Party made a counter proposal to the Bill on July 15, 2003, which was vehemently opposed by women’s organizations. Strangely the proposal was to increase the number of seats by 180 and make them double-member constituencies. Women’s organizations were quick to raise their objections on two discriminatory grounds: first of all, the *Lok Sabha* has already passed a resolution to freeze the present number of seats and to postpone delimitation till after the next elections. This would mean that women will have to wait for their chance for another six years. Secondly, the idea behind the double constituencies is that women somehow cannot manage seats on their own. This again is a direct

blow to gender equality. Women's organizations have made a joint statement protesting against this new proposal (*Joint Statement from Women's Organizations on BJP Proposal on Women's Reservation Bill*).

3.6 Decline in the Child Sex Ratio

According to a *Financial Times* analysis, India falls short of 40 million women (*Zenith.org*, February 15, 2003). Amartya Sen puts the number at 35 million (Editorial, *The Times of India* 2003: 8). Whatever be the calculation, the crude fact remains that our society still suffers from *male child mania*.

To begin with, India has fewer females than males for at least the past century. At the turn of the last century (twentieth century), the sex-ratio in India according to the official figures was 972 (females):1000 (males); in 1981 it had declined to 935:1000; and at the close of the century it is 927: 1000. It is reported that in the states of Punjab and Haryana, the sex-ratios have declined to 900:1000. In some districts in Rajasthan and Bihar, it has further dwindled to 600:1000 (Bidwaai 1998: 20; Saha 1997: 7; *The Times of India* 1999: 6). Selective abortions of female foetuses following sex determination tests, female infanticide and dowry deaths could be the main reasons for this low ratio. Surveys reveal that out of 12, 000,000 females born annually, about 3,000,000 (per year) are done to death either by doctors or untrained nurses.

Today there is a slight rise in the female sex ratio i.e., 933:1000. But it is the sharp decline in the child sex ratio that is of great concern for all today. It has come down from 976 (females for 1000 males) in 1961 to 927:1000 in 2001. It is said that the lowest Child Sex Ratio is recorded in Punjab and Haryana. Parts of Haryana even record as low a ratio as 770 females to 1000 males! According to a Times Editorial, Delhi (south-west Delhi) is "the most girl-child-unfriendly district" (Editorial, *The Times of India* 2003: 8). Gender prejudice is still rampant in the Indian Psyche, despite countless efforts on the part of women's organizations.

3.7 Statistical Reversal in the Status of Women Today

Here are some of the details of a survey by a Times Special Report, a clear evidence of decline in the status of women in our society:

28% of India's work force are women, up from 13% in 1987

3% of senior management posts in corporate India are held by women

1 million women have been elected to panchayats since 1993

48 women MPs in the 13th Lok Sabha

9 women head Delhi's state government

16,496 rapes in 2000, up from 15,468 in 1999. Every 54 minutes, a woman is raped

374 rapes in 2000 make Delhi the most unsafe metro, followed by Mumbai (124), Kolkata (35) and Chennai (24)

1,651 rape cases pending trial in Delhi courts. 350 cases are added every year. All India conviction rate 29.8%

488 molestation cases in Delhi. At 23.6% it's the highest in India

512 dowry deaths in 23 cities in 2000, Delhi's share 19.9%

80% women say sexual harassment exists in the work place, according to a Sakshi survey

53% say women don't get equal opportunities and are treated unfairly by supervisors, employers and co-workers

70% respondents in the survey said women in general face inappropriate behaviour. Verbal abuse is the most commonly reported form of sexual abuse (*Sunday Times of India* 2002: 6).

4. Conclusion

By strengthening patriarchy, Hindutva is creating a new terrorism in India. It is a threat to democracy, secularism and above all, to humanity. Patriarchy has upheld a glaring inequality for centuries.

Without dismantling this patriarchal paradigm we cannot go forward, cannot open ourselves to a new holistic vision. Justice and peace are never possible, as long as we remain in the clutches of male hegemony.

Women *are* trying to bring about an all-round revolution in the Indian society. Indeed there are evidences of change in our social, cultural, religious, gender, legal and political spheres. No one can deny the selfless toil of women's movements in India. Today, in India, everywhere women of all classes and castes, educated and uneducated, are founding a new direction of wholeness by working for the development of not only women, but also the whole human family, inclusive of Mother Earth. They are setting new patterns of wholeness through their unique commitment to the poor and the needy. They have begun to challenge the authenticity of the set patterns of religious traditions that are oppressive. Women are challenging the power structures by prioritizing issues such as freedom of expression for all. But this is not enough.

The paradigm of patriarchy is incapable of bringing about gender equality or women's liberation. We need to think of other alternatives, a new paradigm, and a new vision that gives hope for the future. For this we need both communitarian thinking and collective efforts. According to George Menezes "Fundamentalism is spreading not because the fundamentalist themselves are powerful, but because the progressive people being sectarian and disunited are not powerful enough" (2001: 123). Purushottam Agarwal points out that the collapse of authoritarian ideology can only take place when women in our society affirm themselves and are recognized in society as 'sexually awakened' women, for such women are a threat to patriarchal hegemony (2002: 28).

The patriarchal paradigm cannot be dismantled without collaboration and dialogue. We need both '*sexually awakened*' men and women of all religious traditions to join hands in this common war against the enemies of humanity. Together, we people of good will in India, could search for a "new anthropology" – a new way of understanding what it means to be human in an age which is bent on creating a myth of dehumanization.

Notes

1. According to Kumar Suresh, the term Hindutva was first used by V. D. Savarkar, the leader of the Hindu Mahasabha. A new dimension was given to Hinduism, that of homogeneity – Hindus considered themselves as a single community.
2. “Thousands of karsevikas participated in the attacks on the Babri Masjid and in its demolition and their role was highlighted in the Sangh media products... Women were active and prominent in the bloody riots that swept across India in the course of Ramjanambhoomi movement i.e., in Bhagalpur, at Ahmedabad, in Bombay.”

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The Place and Role of Women in the Catholic Church

Kochurani Abraham ACI

Asha Kiran, Karadi, Pune 411 014

Abstract: Women are stepping out of the *restricted space* of domestic walls to wider horizons in life, thus affirming their personhood and equality with men. The very integrity of the church and the credibility of its mission demands a new understanding of where women stand and how women and men together can make of the church a sacrament of God's vision for humanity. This re-imagining is not something that would happen by itself. It calls for a constructive and innovative move on the part of the church to address this question openly.

Keywords: Women in the Church, Prophetic Challenge, pro-active response, the paradox of women's place.

Introduction

This is indeed an historic moment: Women are stepping out of the *restricted space* of domestic walls to wider horizons in life, thus affirming their personhood and equality with men. The changing role of women in society has been identified as one of the most significant trends of the 20th century. The myth: '*biology is women's destiny*' is being deconstructed existentially, proving its falsity and deceptiveness. Women are increasingly seen and heard among politicians, entrepreneurs, professionals, activists, and artists. More and more women are leading NGO's and People's Movements. Moving beyond kitchens and child-care centres, they have reached law courts, parliaments, research laboratories and even outer space. Discovering the 'power within', women are courageously making a breakthrough into the space reserved for 'men alone', thus leading humanity to a new consciousness of being human.

But this is not *her-story* in its entirety. A great majority of women continue to be silenced and suppressed, battered, bargained and burnt alive. The startling statistics of violence and rape is revealing of women's subjugation and 'objectified' status in society (UN 1995: 17-24). The 'feminization of poverty' is no longer a concept that needs explanation. Millions of women are spending themselves toiling for the mere survival of their children and families. At its worst, women are not just deprived of resources that foster life and growth into personhood. Many are denied even the very right to life as clearly evident from the alarming rate of the falling sex ratio in India. In a write-up on '*Our missing women*', Amartya Sen is quoted as holding India responsible for 32 million missing women in the world. These women ought to have been present in India if our sex ratios were on a par with the world. But some inhuman conspiracy of "gender fixing" is gradually eliminating India's females. The writer asks a very poignant question at the end: "*Is anyone noticing?*" (India Today 2003: 14-20).

Is the Church noticing what is happening to women worldwide? The 'place and role of women in the church' would have meaning, when seen against the backdrop of the global reality of women. Women are awakening to a new consciousness of who they are, claiming agency to the discovery of their true identity and personhood. This collective awakening of women is indeed a global experience cutting across the barriers of nation, race, colour or creed. Down the road of historical unfolding of the 20th century, *her-story* has gained greater import in its struggle to find expression. Women's experiences of marginalization and their struggles as subalterns in search of their trueselves, are gradually pervading the human consciousness. Women's issues are becoming global concerns.

Certainly, we have indications of the Church's sensitivity to women's reality in the official documents. The opening words of *Mulieris Dignitatem* considers '*the dignity and the vocation of women – a subject of constant human and Christian reflection*' and expresses awareness of '*the hour in which women acquire in the world an influence, an effect and a power never hitherto achieved* (MD 1). The '*hour*' is at hand, a *kairos* that calls for new responses. In this paper, we shall look at the place and role of women in the church

in the light of the awareness of this 'hour'. We will analyze first the present situation of women in the church, explore the emerging trends of the women of our times, and spell out some responses to the current challenges in the light of our Christian heritage.

1. Women's Place in the Church: The Great Paradox

Traditionally, catholic women are known for their loyalty to the church: the church in which they have grown up, where they have found space for devotion, scope for charity and peace. For centuries women have conformed unquestioningly to their roles as submissive wives, self-giving mothers or docile and disciplined religious, the roles which the church has assigned to them. Through their uncompromising commitment, women have been the pillars of the church, internalising these roles and expectations. One might ask: If women are at ease with the 'place' given to them in the church – as it seems to be – what is the problem?

Analysis of the pastoral praxis of the catholic church from a woman's perspective would reveal the crux of the issue at stake: the paradoxical tension between women's presence and absence is what defines their place in the church.

1.1 Visible yet Silent

A cursory glance at the local communities, whether in sophisticated urban parishes or remote rural villages, discloses women as the most visible lot. One can't help but see them everywhere. They fill up the pews in all the services as they are a majority in most parish congregations and participate strongly in the spiritual and liturgical life of the church. Besides, women are always present decorating altars, clearing up the sacristies, running community centres, visiting the sick and the aged, teaching catechism in Sunday schools, and animating Basic Christian Communities. A wide variety of ministries – fund-raising, teaching and counselling have been women's lot. Without women's active participation it would even seem that the life and dynamism of the local communities would grind to a halt.

The irony of the issue is that in spite of the 'high visibility' of women in the pastoral field, they are not involved on the level in

which strategic planning is done. Women may be members of parish and diocesan councils, but they have little access to participation at the core, central, nerve centres, where decisions that affect the life and mission of the church are deliberated and made. The link between Orders and jurisdiction keep women out of leadership in the Catholic Church. Women are absent or minimally present in the consultative bodies, which lend assistance and advice to Bishop's Conferences, Synods and other decision-making organs. They do not have the opportunity to participate in discourses that shape Christian identity and mission. In the words of Sandra Schneiders:

Women have been virtually excluded from any participation in the shaping of the church's internal and external policy. The church's laws regarding marriage have been formulated without the contribution of the women whose experience is in question. Canon law regarding religious, of whom three out of every four in the church are women, has been formulated by men without the input of the women whose lives it governs and, in most respects, it is also enforced by men. Official church documents on every kind of social problem — poverty, war, economics, labour, medical ethics, political involvement — have been formulated without the contribution of women who constitute the vast majority of the poor and the starving throughout the world, who make fifty-nine cents to every dollar made by men for comparable work in this country, who experience in their bodies as mothers, a disproportionate number of the medical problems that raise moral issues, who almost always find themselves the sole support of dependent children when marriages collapse (*Schneiders in [http: www.spiritualitytoday.org](http://www.spiritualitytoday.org)*).

Women lack voice, and the dearth of catholic women in leadership speaks volumes of women's place in the church. Women incarnate the '*diakonia*' of the church in the literal meaning of the word 'waiting at tables' in all that is implied by service, but they are barred from diaconate as ministry.

The category of women most visible in the church are the women religious: a group known for its fidelity and dependability. In their public dedication to the cause of Christ, they incarnate the mission of the church even in the remotest corners of the world through varied commitments. They minister to the poor and the marginalized in ways that make the church visible and credible.

Though traditionally confined to institutionalized tasks, women religious are searching for ways that would give expression to their true identity and vocation in the church. Yet, their subordinate status makes obvious the subservient role of women in the church.

1.2 Conditioned by Gender

Gender inequality permeates all aspects of life. Socialization of women and men in gender role stereotyping, is a major characteristic of patriarchal conditioning. Women are considered to be weak, sensitive, emotional, loyal, gentle, dependent, submissive, passive and the like, whereas men are taken to be strong, ambitious, independent, rational, decisive, logical, and achievement oriented. Consequently, only men are expected to think and make decisions, whereas women are expected to obey in loving service. Regina Coll, in an essay titled '*The Socialization of Women into a Patriarchal System*,' holds the family, the educational system and the church responsible for reinforcing stereotypic gender roles. Pointing to the role that religion plays in this conditioning, she identifies the Christian virtues most honoured in women as passivity, dependency, self-abnegation and other-centredness. Consequently women are not treated as full and equal members in society or in the church (Coll 1982: 5-15). What is worse, women can be thoroughly exploited under the guise of being virtuous.

Women tend to internalize stereotyped role expectations and it becomes detrimental to their growth as persons. When stereotyping has religious sanctions, it becomes all the more conditioning. Feminist theologians are questioning certain ways by which women are religiously socialized into self-denial as a feminine virtue (Schussler Fiorenza 1994: 302, Oseik 1986).

As a consequence of this socialization, women tend to suppress their real self and do not realize their God-given potential and personhood. Studies have demonstrated the debilitating effect of stereotyping women. According to one study, women experience anxiety when confronted by the possibility of success because the competence, independence and competition prerequisite to such success are considered inconsistent with the stereotypic view of women. When a woman believes that being in leadership is contrary to her

definition of womanhood, she will opt for subservient roles rather than experience threat to her femininity (Durka 1982: 45-59).

Gender role stereotyping is also detrimental to the mission of the church. For a great majority of women, the only 'mission' opportunities available are the traditionally "feminine" tasks of nurturance and service. Women's other ministerial gifts remain dormant and underdeveloped. Polarization of sexes, consequent of gender role stereotyping, keeps women and men apart as two unrelated groups without a common search and vision. When women are excluded from active involvement at the planning level, the pastoral vision can become partial, patriarchal and clerically biased. Deprived of women's contribution from their experiential knowledge and wisdom, the church's mission is often impoverished.

1.3 As 'Perceived' Officially

Woman's image as projected in the ecclesial documents unveils the place given to women by the official church. The church has gone a long way from the horrendous misogyny of the patristic times (Rueiher 1974: 150-183) to affirming women's dignity as persons created in God's image. However, questions are raised regarding the Catholic Church's sensibilities to women's issues. "Are the contents of the official texts compatible with the emerging consciousness of women?" asks Nadine Foley. In her opinion, the important new developments taking place in the human consciousness need to be perceived. And it is appropriate that the import of such trends become matter for inclusion in the continuing experience of a living church, as well as for comments and observation by a teaching church (Foley 1977: 82-108).

The official teaching has evolved in successive periods of the church's history, in response to the attempts the church has made to dialogue with the modern world. Yet the struggle to define woman's rightful place in the church is clearly evident in the official texts. A few significant passages from the conciliar and post-conciliar documents will throw light on our search.

Various texts show awareness of women's changing position in the contemporary world. In the 1963 encyclical *Pacem in Terris*, the visionary Pope John XXIII spoke of women coming into public life as one of the 'signs of the times' and gave expression to women's deeper questions: "Since women are becoming more conscious of their human dignity, they will not tolerate being treated as mere material instruments, but demand rights befitting a human person both in domestic and in public life" (41).

The Second Vatican Council showed sensitivity to the women's question as expressed, though scantily, in some of its documents.¹ In its Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, the Council urges: "Since in our days, women are taking an increasingly active share in the whole life of society, it is very important that they participate more widely also in the various fields of the Church's apostolate" (AA 9). Nadine Foley questions the church's agenda if it is not too tentative in responding to the fact that women are becoming more active in the present society. According to her, the argument that women should participate in the community life of society, and likewise of the church, has its positive value insofar as it respects the fact that the church is enculturated as a human institution, that true social and cultural transformation has its repercussion within the church. It is deficient however, since as an operative principle it renders the church a follower rather than a leader in proclaiming and manifesting the full equality of the human person (Foley 1977: 56).

Women's concerns are further voiced in the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World: "Where they have not yet won it, women claim for themselves equity with men before the law" (9). *Gaudium et Spes* also refers to discrimination based on sex as contrary to God's will and acknowledges the involvement of women in almost all spheres of activity². Yet the fundamental position of the church on women is repeatedly expressed in reference to women's role in the family. While mentioning the parents' joint deliberation in the education of the children, the Council underlines the mother's role: "The children, especially the younger ones among them need the care of their mother at home. This domestic role of hers must be safely preserved, though the legitimate social progress of women should not be underrated on that account" (GS 52).

While observing the fact that women are employed in almost every area of life, *Gaudium et Spes* continues to affirm women's proper role: "It is appropriate that they should be able to assume their full proper role in accordance with their own nature" (GS 60). What is implied by "full proper role" is not explicit in the text though it is repeatedly hinted at in other documents and statements³. The Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* of John Paul II on the dignity and vocation of women spells out motherhood – virginity as two dimensions of women's vocation.⁴ This focus is also well reflected in the Letter of Pope John Paul II to Women on the occasion of the Beijing Conference in his expression of gratitude to women for what they represent in the life of humanity (Paul II 1995).

The official church does uphold the dignity of women and strives to promote women's participation in the different areas of non-ordained ministries and tasks. However, in the repeated allusion to the "specifically feminine" characteristics and roles of women, one would suspect – applying the 'hermeneutics of suspicion' – a betrayal of the official church's understanding of women in stereotyped roles. Here we see the continuous struggle on the part of the official church to really comprehend women's place as partners in mission, which would imply going beyond complementarity to mutuality.

2. The Women of Our Times: Emerging Trends

In affirming the full equality of woman as a human person, would the church be a leader or a follower? This question, already insinuated by Nadine Foley needs a deeper analysis, which is beyond the scope of this reflection. As the church tends to take a 'follower mode' in responding to the *signs of the times*, reading the *signs* could throw light on its implications *vis-a-vis* women's role in the church.

"*One is not born a woman, one becomes one*". This much quoted phrase of Simone de Beauvoir from her legendary work *The Second Sex*, gives expression to the process beneath the emerging trends affecting womankind across the globe. Over the last two centuries, women: rich, poor; white, coloured; with or without any religious affiliations; and with different sexual preferences are all

moving towards a new consciousness of what it means to be a woman. Women are '*becoming*'. The Women's Movement set in motion in the mid 19th century and revived in the second half of the 20th century, is sweeping like a wild fire across the north-south/east-west divide, creating ripples of awakening among women, though in varying degrees. The following excerpt from *A Gender Diary* would throw light on this evolving consciousness of women:

In the early days of this wave of the women's movement, I sat in a weekly consciousness-raising group with my friend A. We compared notes recently: What did you think was happening? How did you think our lives were going to change? A, said she had felt, 'Now I can be a woman; it is no longer so humiliating. I can stop fantasizing that secretly I am a man, as I used to. Now I can value what was once my shame (Snitow 1996: 506).

The women's movement, in spite of its limitations and anomalies, is affecting women's lives in myriad ways. Women are recovering their bodies, their minds, their voice and their agency. Even in the so called 'third world' countries, women are waking up to an awareness of their dis-empowered state, and are learning to identify without fear the cultural, political and religious forces that are marginalizing and domesticating them. Women's resistance to the powers of death is giving visibility to the emerging woman who refuses to be a victim.⁵

Women are not just naming the life denying influences at work in human relationships in society. They are claiming agency for their lives. Taking back the 'lost opportunities' in different fields such as education, employment, socio-political involvement and the like, women are taking leaping strides in the process of becoming '*who they are*.'⁶ For more than a decade, the concept of 'empowerment' has become prominent in development debate, and particularly so with regard to women. The term empowerment is frequently used to describe a process wherein the powerless or disempowered gain a greater share of control over resources and decision-making. Empowerment is about power and changing the balance of power. Since women are generally accepted as the most disempowered members of the oppressed classes, the term 'women's empowerment' has come to be associated with women's struggle for justice and equality.⁷

Education is identified as central to the process of empowerment. From the women's perspective, education is seen as a dynamic process of learning in which women gain access to meaningful information, engage in critical reflection, and act as a collective to transform the material and social conditions of their existence in some way. Women's Groups popularly known as *Mahila Mandals* be it in rural villages or urban slums are constantly engaged in providing this empowering education to the poor women. The middle class and the rich women, who may have access to university education, also avail of empowering education through consciousness-raising programmes. In these programmes women share their experiences of powerlessness, oppression, anger and pain; engage in gender and societal analysis, which enables them to link their experiences to structural factors. Women who are rich or poor are finding ways of developing new skills and organization-building so as to look for ways in which they can change their situations through their own strength and actions.

Today we hear women speak of empowerment through economic interventions. Strengthening women's economic status has an immediate effect on their self-image and family life. When women have greater access to resources, their self-esteem increases, enabling them to move from passive dependency to self-confidence. Women's economic empowerment has a direct bearing on their family life. Women are becoming more assertive in decision-making and are contributing constructively to the welfare of the family and the larger community. The rapidly mushrooming Micro-Credit projects and Self- Help Groups (SHG's) across the country, give ample evidence to the effects of women's empowerment through economic intervention. NGOs working with women's groups at the grassroots, testify to the process of women growing in self-confidence as they become economically independent. The profile of the simple village woman is changing from subservience to self-reliance.

On the political front too women are claiming agency. Women's political consciousness, which marked the suffrage movement, has evolved over the century to a greater involvement and commitment in the field of politics. Women are making their presence felt and their voice is beginning to be heard from the higher levels of political

advocacy, to the local self-government at the level of the Gram Panchayats.⁸ India can boast today of having five women Chief ministers even though the 33% reservation issue continues to be debated.

Women's awakening is also voicing concern over the health and well-being of the planet. The eco-feminist movement over the last two decades has contributed much towards creating an ecological sensitivity in the human consciousness⁹. Within the patriarchal framework, women are considered to be 'women's worst enemy'. Women are identifying the undercurrents of this myth and are making a breakthrough from isolation to a new bonding, which they name as sisterhood. In this bonding they are finding the space for reclaiming their power and their emerging identity. Women's collectives and the different forums of solidarity and networking (www.unifem.unep.org., www.un.org/womenwatch., www.twinside.org.) are bringing women together to become a collective force, to give voice to their shared struggles and concerns, hopes and dreams. The United Nations has played and continues to play a leading role in assisting this process of women's global awakening.¹⁰

Women are coming of age. Even though the fact of being conditioned to an infantile state for centuries continues to have its impact, they are on the path of reclaiming their personhood and human dignity. Women's concerns are no longer considered the problem of one half of humanity alone. They are becoming human concerns on which would depend the health and well-being of the human family. The path ahead for women may not be smooth. But it has reached a point of no return.

3. The Emerging Christian Woman: A Prophetic Challenge

Having analyzed the experience of women in the Catholic Church and having looked into the evolving trends affecting women today, it is necessary to interpret this human reality in the light of faith. This hermeneutic task is possible by exploring our Christian heritage encapsulated in the Jesus experience and the praxis of the early church. And it requires a prophetic vision to bridge the human experience with the divine wisdom. This is the challenge before the church in

examining the place and role of women. The church's prophetic consciousness found some lucidity in the awareness of making the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the people its own, (cf. *GS*. 1). But to discover its full import, which would make the church, a '*sign and sacrament of salvation*', we need to follow the footsteps of the Master.

3.1 Remembering the Jesus story

The Gospel narratives are dotted with the many encounters and experiences of women with Jesus. We shall deploy the 'hermeneutics of remembrance' to receive Sophia – Wisdom personified in the life of Jesus.

Jesus' encounter with women does not begin with his public ministry. Being '*born of a woman*': a woman of the margins '*who had no place at the inn*', and who proclaimed loudly of God's subversive ways in '*bringing down the conceited and raising up the lowly*', Jesus certainly was present to the subaltern realities of the women of his times. The periphery where Jesus pitched his tent was not a strange place for the women as well. It was the place that the Jewish society had so clearly demarked for them in the socio-political, economic and religious spheres. No wonder, women were among the primary and active recipients of the gift of the *Good News* offered to the *anâwîm*. We shall look at a few gospel stories which could give us light in understanding women's place in the church of today.

3.1.1 A Sense of Being 'at Home'

Jesus and the women felt at home with each other as is clear from the many texts, which speak about their encounters. Jesus certainly did not shun the company of women as though they were the '*devil's gateway*', whose proximity would impede access to the Holy of Holies. Luke tells us that women were among the close circle of disciples who accompanied him, sharing his life and ministry. They are even named: Mary, Joanna, Susanna... (Lk 8:1-3), and at a time when a woman's legal identity was most insignificant. Jesus relaxed in the company of his women friends like Mary and Martha, broke through the well defined 'theological boundaries' that

alienated the women and men of his time, by making them participate in his teachings. Women are there with Jesus from birth, through his growth and in his ministry, and all the more at the most crucial moments: at the foot of the cross, at the tomb, and as the first witnesses of His resurrection, accompanying him on his journey of life from the womb to the tomb and still beyond.

What has happened to the women in the bargain? They were *converted to life*, affirmed as human persons who reflect God's own image and likeness (Gen 1:27). Conversion from the perspective of those in the margins is not to a denial of themselves, but to a greater affirmation of their true self, their worth as persons. In traditional Christian theology, conversion is interpreted, as turning away from sin and sin is understood as pride and rebellion against God. In the words of Anne Carr, such categories relate more to the experiences of men, in cultures that encourage them towards roles of domination and power. Women's temptation or "sin" conversely refers to lack of self-assertion...failure to assume responsibility and make choices for themselves, failure to discover their own personhood and uniqueness rather than finding their whole meaning in a too easy sacrifice of self for others¹¹. In being with Jesus, women, discovered their uniqueness, their meaning and their mission.

3.1.2 Breakthrough into Wholeness

'Breaking,' colours many of the gospel stories that involve Jesus with women. Prominent among them is the story of Jesus healing the bent woman (Lk 13: 10-17). The woman was 'bent' (*ânâh*), that is diminished, deprived of the means, the capacity or the dignity she needed, to lead a full human life (Soares-Prabhu 2000: 175). Certainly, to notice this bent woman Jesus had to *break* the rule of sex-segregation in the synagogue as women were not allowed anywhere near the space reserved for men. What is more significant is the breaking of the Sabbath law. As observed by Soares-Prabhu, Jesus breaks the Sabbath whenever human need demands it. Every human institution or law no matter how sacred, is thus subjected to human need (Soares-Prabhu 2000: 284). Jesus stresses the *urgency* to free the woman from her dehumanizing condition. Her Personhood is affirmed in addressing her as '*daughter*'. He extends to her the life-

giving touch at the cost of infuriating the self-righteous onlookers. Jesus' prophetic stand reveals the liberative thrust of the Christian vision.

Another significant 'breaking' story is the healing of the hemorrhaging woman (cf. Lk 8:43-48). Considered ritually impure and polluting (cf. Lev 15:25), the woman is far beyond the precincts of the religious establishment. Here again, healing is accomplished through touch. Courage begets courage. Freedom begets freedom. The freedom of Jesus to breakthrough the oppressive religious conditioning, liberates the woman and makes her whole. Jesus' prophetic courage and freedom comes from his understanding of life from the viewpoint of the subalterns, something that we have yet to learn.

Women continue to be 'bent' in society and in the church.¹² Unless she is straightened up how can she play a role in the church that corresponds to her dignity and personhood? The challenge today is to revive in the church the prophetic mission of Jesus.

3.1.3 Collaborators in Mission

Women collaborated in the mission of Jesus in different capacities. Mary, his mother, anticipates the hour of his entry into public ministry (cf. Jn 2:1-11). Ruether defines Mariology as symbolic ecclesiology and points out that Lucan Mariology suggests a real co-creatorship between God and humanity, in this case, woman (Radford Ruether 1983: 154).

The co-creatorship between God and women according to the scriptural data is not limited to the biological birthing. Women are dynamically involved in the Jesus movement. Fiorenza calls women the first non-Jews to become part of the Jesus Movement. A woman's primary role in the beginnings of the Christian community in Samaria is clearly illustrated in Jn 4: 1-42. Another significant woman-leader is the Syrophoenician woman (cf. Mk: 7:25-30). Although she respects the primacy of the "children of Israel", she nevertheless makes a theological argument against limiting the inclusive messianic table community of Jesus to Israel alone. Fiorenza opines that "The Syrophoenician woman whose adroit argument opened up a future of freedom and wholeness for her daughter, has also become the

historically-still-visible advocate of such a future for gentiles. She has become the apostolic ‘foremother’ of all gentile Christians (Fiorenza 1983: 130).

The Galilean women disciples, whose leader was obviously Mary of Magdala, needs a special mention. Even when most of the other disciples fled Jerusalem after the dark hours of Jesus’ arrest and execution, these women stayed back for his burial. In their persistent following of Jesus even after his death, they become the privileged ones to be the first witnesses of the resurrection. “By keeping alive the good news about the manifestation of God’s life-giving power in Jesus of Nazareth, among the followers and friends of Jesus, the Galilean women continued the movement initiated by Jesus”(Fiorenza 1983: 139). These women’s fidelity and commitment to realizing Jesus’ vision are foundational in the birthing process of the church.

Remembrance of these Gospel stories has tremendous theological and pastoral import for our times particularly on the question under consideration: women’s place and role in the church. Affirmation of women’s personhood and their participation in ministry, calls for a breakthrough of set theological categories and thinking patterns. The jar that holds the ‘*pricey nard*’ needs to be broken even at the cost of going beyond our calculative conclusions. Then only can the redeeming grace gush forth bringing abundance of life to the church, to women as well as men, thus making of the church a credible sign to society.

3.2 The Praxis of the Early Church

The significant role that women have played in the early Christian community could also help us in the search for finding women’s place in the church of today. Scanning through the sketchy information available in the book of Acts and the letters of Paul, the feminist theologians¹³ have brought to surface women’s vitality in the early church. Fiorenza calls the early Christian missionary movement *Equality in the Power of the Spirit* (Schussler Fiorenza 1993: 160).

This equality is demonstrated mainly in women’s role as foundresses of house churches and co-workers of Paul. The book of Acts mentions many of these women in whose houses the Chris-

tian community gathered. The house churches were a decisive factor in the missionary movement in so far as they provided space, support and actual leadership for the community (Elisabeth Schüssler 1993: 175).

Mary, mentioned in Acts 12: 12-17, was in charge of the house church in Jerusalem. Other prominent women include Lydia (16: 14), Damaris (17:34) and Prisca (18: 2ff).

The women mentioned in Pauline letters are also significant for understanding the role women have played in the early church. Phoebe is addressed as diakonos (Rom 16: 1) and Junia as apostle (16: 7). Mary, Tryphaena, Tryphosa and Persis are referred to as having “laboured hard in the Lord” (16:6,12). In Phil 4:2-3, Euodia and Syntyche are mentioned as having contended side by side with Paul. More names of women can be detected on a closer scrutiny of the book of Acts and the Pauline letters. But what is important is to acknowledge women’s close collaboration with men in the early phases of Christianity. This Christian heritage can help us to re-examine the roles that women are now playing and ought to play in the mission of the church today.

3.3 Towards a Pro-active Response

Having remembered the Jesus story and the praxis of the early church against the ‘sign’ of women’s changing role in society, we shall look into the Christian response. Anne Carr calls the phenomenon of women coming to a new consciousness, a transforming grace to the church (Schüssler 1990). Receptivity to the grace of this hour implies certain creative steps, which would involve:

3.3.1 Initiating a creative dialogue between the official church and women

A role model to this dialogue we have in the Johannine account of Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman. Jesus meets her where she is: at the well, a subaltern space where her human reality and the divine potential meet. She is a resourceful dialogue partner though initially reticent due to her own socialization. But in this sacred space of their encounter, she discovers her mission.

The church of today needs this space of dialogue. Just as the church has entered into a creative dialogue with other religions, cultures and ideologies, dialogue with its women is imperative. Women need to speak aloud their concerns, their search and their vision. They need to be heard. Feminist theology is coming of age and that needs to be discussed on an adult level. An open discourse on ministry, taking into consideration the updated biblical expertise, ecumenical sensibilities, and the changing reality of women in today's world is crucial. Only through a constructive dialogue can the untapped potential of women's resources be explored and shared so as to live the mission of Christ with greater meaning and relevance.

3.3.2 Greater Inclusion of Women in the Life of the Church

A conspicuous characteristic of Jesus' ministry was inclusiveness. In contrast with the Jewish traditions of social and religious segregation and discrimination, Jesus' vision is presented as the great table fellowship, which is open to all and inclusive of all. Fiorenza calls the 'Basileia vision of Jesus as the praxis of inclusive wholeness' (Elisabeth Schüssler 1993: 118).

Women call for a greater inclusion into the life of the church, in its policy making and decisions. The feminist slogan '*We make policy, not coffee*' is perhaps beginning to be heard within the ecclesial boundaries too. For long women have been passive recipients of spirituality, understanding of Christian ethics and the pastoral vision. Today, women's voice, experience and expertise need to be included into the dynamic process of religious symbol-making, planning and mission responses. Failing to do so affects not just women's position, but the church's very identity as expressed by a woman when she said: "the church gets reduced to its masculine part, like a body which has decided to live with only half of itself, with half of its possibility of loving, feeling, deciding, acting. A half that remains always identical without the novelty and fruitfulness that the other half could bring."¹⁴

3.3.3 *Finding pathways to effective partnership*

Much is spoken about partnership.¹⁵ Women are weary of a tradition in the Catholic Church that understands the male-female partnership in mission as ‘complementarity’, which reinforces gender-role stereotyping, and the consequent dichotomy in the church’s being. There is need for greater mutuality in mission, which implies working out new structures of collaboration at the parochial and diocesan levels and at the national and international commissions. More women need to be seen and heard in the field of theological formation, spiritual direction and leadership and more men in creative expressions of *diakonia*. Partnership is a concept that needs to be delved into at greater depth so that women’s place and role in the church becomes clearer.

Conclusion

In these present times at the beginning of the third millennium, when humanity is being bombarded by rapid evolutionary changes, a re-imagining of women’s role in the mission of the church is a vital issue. The very integrity of the church and the credibility of its mission demands a new understanding of where women stand and how women and men together can make of the church a sacrament of God’s vision for humanity. This re-imagining is not something that would happen by itself. It calls for a constructive and innovative move on the part of the church to address this question openly.

Women on their part, in their struggle to find their rightful place in the church, experience the birthing of a new self as expressed in the poem:

*“...part of me is missing”
“Where is “me”
A part of me is missing
Aborted-still born-
Since that Garden time
Yet without plan or warning
Ever and ever again moving
Deep within my body and soul
A person “image of God”*

WOMAN

Comes gasping, grasping

For the breath of life

Struggling to be born and live free..." (Bennet 1975: 3).

The challenge of the hour is to *midwife* this *birthing* in women. Then only will they find their true place and role in the church.

Notes

1. At the end of the second session of the Second Vatican Council, Cardinal Leo Jozef Suenens of Belgium seemed to have asked his fellow bishops: "Why are we even discussing the reality of the church when half of the church is not even represented here?" This provocative question, midway through a council that was then totally male, was a breakthrough that prodded council members to invite a few "token" women to the ensuing sessions. According to Mary Luke Tobin, one of the auditors at the Council, "that women auditors were at the council-only 15 of us were invited from as many countries-was at least an important first step. And there was the further valuable insight of a council theologian, Bernard Haring, C.S.S.R. that if women were invited, they should have a place in the commissions formulating the documents. As a result, some were invited to attend commission meetings. There we were allowed to speak as freely as we wished, and each of us did speak. Although we did not create a countervailing current turning around the attitude toward women, the press noticed our presence immediately, and at least a few bishops began to see the problems more clearly. There was some effort within the Commission on the Church in the Modern World to take a stand for women by recognizing the prevailing discrimination against them." Available from <http://www.catholicdigest.org>.
2. Cf. *Gaudium et Spes* nos. 29, 60, Abbot and Gallagher eds., *The Documents of Vatican II*.
3. In the 1975 document *The Role of Women in Church and Society: Disciples and Co-Workers*, Pope Paul VI referred to complementarity of roles, "... to speak of rights does not resolve the problem, which is more profound; it is necessary to aim at an effective complementarity, so that men and women bring their *proper riches* and dynamism to the building of the world" See Nadine Foley (1977), 90.
4. Numbers 17-22 of *Mulieris Dignitatem* is dedicated to explain theologically the essential vocation of women as mothers as virgins.
5. The heroic story of Nisha Sharma, a Delhi girl who refused to become

the victim of dowry harassment hit the headlines of leading newspapers and magazines in May 2003. Through her courageous stand, she has become a role model to the many young girls haunted by the same evil of dowry.

6. Women's journals like *Womens Link*; *Women in Action*, *Manushi*, *In God's Image* etc. give much information and reflections on women's awakening which has become a global event.
7. In a month long South Asian workshop on women and development organised in 1991 by FAO's Freedom from Hunger Campaign –Action for Development, in which 36 women from six countries participated, shared information and reviewed experiences of different organisations involved with women's development/empowerment. This workshop spelled out the indicators of women's empowerment. See Srilatha Batliwala, *Empowerment of Women in South Asia: Concepts and Practices*, New Delhi: FFHC/AD, 1993.
8. Women's political voice is beginning to be heard not just in governmental and administrative levels. Women are questioning the imperialism of globalisation and inquiring into policymaking at the national and international levels. See Maithreyi Krishna *Challenges before Women's Movement in a Changing context*, Economic and Political Weekly, October (2003), pp 36-46 and Sharmila Rege, *Feminist Contributions to Globalisation Discourses*, Ibid pp 55-63.
9. See Maria Mies, Vandana Shiva, *Ecofeminism: Reconnecting a Divided World*, New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1993; Vandana Shiva, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development*, New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1998. The Chipko movement in the Himalayas where women took a lead in protecting the trees have acclaimed the fame for global consciousness raising. See Haripriya Rangan, *Chipko into Himalayan History*, Barnes and Noble, 2001.
10. Since the declaration of 1975 as the International Women's Year, the United Nations has raised its prophetic voice in defending women's rights and promoting their dignity as human persons. Decade for Women (1975-1985), and the major World Conferences, testifies to the commitment of United Nations to this noble task. Visit <http://www.un.org/womenwatch>.
11. Feminist theologians have consistently questioned the traditional Christian doctrine of sin and grace as cast exclusively in terms of male experience. See Anne Carr, *Transforming Grace: Christian Tradition and Women's Experience*, San Francisco: Harper 1990,8. Elizabeth Johnson speaks of re-interpreting the Christian doctrine in *She who is*, New York: Crossroads, 1994; Mary Grey has also contributed along the same lines of thought. See her *Redeeming the Dream*, Anand: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 2003.

12. In the many workshops organised for women religious in India as part of the programme initiated by Streevani for the empowerment of women religious, the reality of the 'bent woman' today is brought out. Women continue to be bent in Indian society due to their secondary status and lack of access to resources in life. Many women religious have observed that in the church too women continue to be 'bent' due to their subordination, and exclusion from leadership and decision-making.
13. Feminist theologians like Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, Letty Russel, Rosemary Radford Ruether, and Philis Tribble have done commendable work on this question.
14. Amelia Vasquez quotes a woman in the FABC Paper 72, 'Women and Church Services to Life in Asia'.
15. A national Consultation held recently in Pune to deliberate on the question of 'Female-Male Partnership in the Mission of the Church' called for greater collaboration between women and men at all levels in the church's mission. This Consultation organised by Streevani (Pune) as part of its commitment to the empowerment of women religious in India, was held at Ishvani Kendra, Pune from 8-10 December 2003.
16. Organisations like Asian Women's Research Centre (AWRC), All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA) are effective at the Asian level. For information at the international level, visit <http://www.unifem.undep.org>; www.un.org/womenwatch; www.twinside.org.

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The Place and Role of Women in Tribal Society of Northeast India

Lotsüro Angeline

Little Flower Convent, Guwahati, 781006

Abstract: Nothing much has been written or spoken about the status and role of tribal women of the Northeast. Women there, are realizing more about their rights and privileges and are standing up to claim these, as in the International Fortnight Protesting against Violence in 2003, women and girls launched their rally in Shillong with the headline: More Muscle to Women's Movements. The tribal women of the Northeast have much to be proud of, but they have to go many more miles before they realize their dreams and aspirations.

Keywords: Women in North East India, tribals, women as hostesses and goddesses, women as mediators, Matriliney.

Introduction

Northeast India covering about 255,000 square kilometers is home to hundreds of tribes. According to Prof. A. C. Taher Bhagawati, a renowned anthropologist of the region, there are 9 million tribals who can be divided into about 400 communities.¹ This paper will address mainly the hill tribes of the region, like the Naga tribes of Nagaland and Manipur the Chin-Kuki-Mizo (sometimes called Chikim) group of tribes in Mizoram, Manipur, parts of Nagaland and Assam. It will also speak of the matrilineal (taking lineage from the mother) tribes of the Khasis, the Jaintias and the Garos of Meghalaya, because the bulk of the tribals of the Northeast live in the hill states of Arunachal (66.63 per cent tribals), Mizoram (94.75 per cent) and Meghalaya (85.53 per cent). Other states with a sizeable number of tribals are Manipur (34.41 per cent) and Tripura (30.95 per cent).

Nothing much has been written or spoken about the status and role of tribal women of the Northeast. Hence, writing about it may be a little like opening Pandora's box. However, things are beginning to change.² The world of tribal women in the Northeast is also quite different from that of their counterparts in the rest of India. The narrow geographical link of Northeast India to mainland India typifies the socio-cultural and psychological link too. As narrow as is the geographical link, so are the social, cultural and psychological links. Intellectuals and academicians may speak of India being multi-cultural, racial and ethnical state, but for the common masses of India, the people of Northeast India do not look like Indians. The majority of Northeasterners also do not feel a sense of belonging to mainland India. Every time they cross Kolkatta, they find it hard to prove themselves to be Indians. This is true of tribals in general as well as tribal women. Hence, the role and status of tribal women cannot be judged from the parameters of women in the rest of India. Much of what we say in the paper contains materials obtained from our interviews with persons belonging to these tribes. The tribal society of the Northeast is undergoing a period of transition. In some, the traditional laws and practices are dying out, while in others, they are still very much in vogue. In most tribes the old customary laws go hand in hand with the new ones. What we say will mainly be related to the traditional customary laws and practices regarding women.

1. Definition of Place/Status and Role

Before we discuss the place/status and role of women in the tribal society of the Northeast, it may be useful to speak briefly about these concepts. Social status is commonly thought of as "the position that an individual has in society" (Vashum 2003: 297). It should further be added, however, that this social status of the individual is not "a static condition of a building. It is rather the product of a dynamic process of interaction between what is inherited and what is achieved" (Vashum 2003: 298). Closely related to status is role. In fact, role and status can be said to be "two sides of the same coin... there are no roles without status nor status without roles – the roles represent the dynamic aspect of status" (Zehol 2003: 298). Role can also be defined as "the behavioural aspect of status. Status

is occupied but role is played. A role is the manner in which a given individual fulfills the objectives of a status and enjoys its privileges and prerogatives. A role is what an individual does in the status he occupies” (Zehol 2003: 298). The status of women can be divided into two broad domains: the domestic and the public domains. “The former includes activities performed within the localized family unit, whereas the latter includes political and economic activities” (Zehol 2003: 299). These two domains can further be seen in terms of four factors: social status, economic condition, political empowerment and psychological condition (Zehol 2003: 298). We shall, like a photographer look at the tribal women first in a panoramic way and then focus closer to look deeper into their life and experience. We shall first look at the surface level and then proceed deeper into the life and experience of tribal women. There may be many skeletons in the cupboard, that may reveal to us that ‘all that glitters is not gold.’

2. A Panoramic View: Women of the NE Better off than Many

Before we look into the different issues related to women, a panoramic view may help. If one were to come to the region for the first time and try to observe things regarding women, this would be more or less the picture she/he gets. Women in Northeastern Tribal Societies seem, in many ways, to be better off than their counterparts in the rest of India. The women “enjoy a high status because their societies are egalitarian, they have no *purdah* system, there is no restriction on women’s movements, food habits and attire and widow remarriage, and when a woman is in trouble or when she is ill-treated by her husband, she is supported by her parents, brothers and clan members, etc (Zehol 2003: 300). Because of this, way back in the nineteen thirties, Furer-Haimendorf, speaking about the Naga women observed: “Many women in more civilized parts of India may well envy the women of the Naga Hills, their high status and their free and happy life, and if you measure the cultural level of the people by the social position and personal freedom of its women, you will think twice before looking down on the Nagas as savages” (Haimendorf 1933: 96). Tribal women, on the whole, seem to be free birds, free to go about where they like, free to mix with people whom they like, and free to have a life of their own. They also have

very powerful organizations like the Naga Mothers' Association (NMA) for the Angamis. This association exerts great influence on every aspect of Naga life and politics. Many other tribal women too have similar powerful organizations like Arunachal Pradesh Women Welfare Society (APWWS), the Mother's Union and *Lympung ki synjuk Ki Seng Kynthei* (Federation of Women's Organizations) in Meghalaya, Naga Women's Union, *Tangkhul Shanao Long* of Manipur), *Mizo Hmeichee Insuikhawm Pawl* (Mizoram), etc. Though these bodies may not have direct access to political life, they have very significant political impacts.

3. Domestic Domain: NE Women: Hostesses and Goddesses

As one enters a family, it is the woman who greets the visitors, welcomes one to the family and serves the guest. It is the woman who does all the household work; cooking, serving, cleaning etc. In short, she maintains the whole household. She looks into the education of the children and their upbringing. Equal opportunities are given to boys and girls but sometimes because of the financial constraints, preference may be given to boys in education. Infanticide is not usually heard of in the society. It is the woman who controls the economy of the family. In fact, she is the mistress of the family, especially in the matrilineal society. "In the Khasi culture, the woman was given names like *Ka Blei Ing* (goddess in the house) and *Ka Lukhimai* (guardian spirit of the house)" (War 1996: 16). It is "very common among the Khasi to say that we all come from the womb of our mother (*na kpoh ka kmie*), and that mother's love is the most compassionate because she has carried her child in her womb for nine months" (Siemlieh 2000: 47). Moreover, the "secondary family above the nuclear or immediate family, which is a kind of a loose joint family, is called *ka kpoh* (the womb). It is clear that identity is linked to a woman. By following the lineage along the mother's line, the Khasi society acknowledges that the identity of an individual in society is embedded in a woman. This is expressed in a saying, *Na ka kmie mih ka jaid, na u kpa wan ka rynieng* (From the mother springs the kind of [species or clan], from the father comes stature" (Siemlieh 2000: 47-48). The youngest daughter (*khaddu*) in the Khasi society is the custodian of the ancestral property. In the Garo soci-

ety, one of the daughters (*nokna*) is nominated by the parents to inherit the ancestral property (War 1996:10). “Naga women make decisions pertaining to home. Home is the woman’s domain; she is the hostess who entertains guests. In pre-Christian days the woman was also the family priestess who performed all household rites” (Chase-Roy 2000: 27). In the traditional Naga society “women also enjoyed certain reverence and respect in religion as ‘mediums,’ ‘diviners,’ ‘spirit bridges,’ ‘healers’ etc” (Chase-Roy 2000: 27). The Chekhesang and Angami Nagas speak of the Supreme Being as *Ukümunupü* and *Ukepenupfü*. God is referred to as feminine. The Maos also address God in the feminine gender. The Supreme Being is addressed by the term *Iyi Amono Pfüpei*, meaning our mother who gave us birth, and our caretaker (Lotsüro 2000: 20). This may be considered the greatest tribute paid to women. The Chakhesang Nagas have women village priestesses who are called *Mawop*. The mother of the family has a great role in deciding the marriage of the children. But there is no forced marriage; a girl/woman chooses her life partner. There is no dowry system; therefore, dowry deaths are not heard of in tribal society (Sharma 2001: 2).

However, a deeper look at the domestic life reveals a different picture. Women may look like bosses in the homes, but they are the ones who toil endlessly while the men folk can enjoy comparatively easy lives. Women are expected to be the first risers in the morning and the last to go to bed at night. This is especially true of village life. They must get up, start the fire, cook the food, fetch water and pound paddy. Men can afford to get up only when the food is ready. Even if they are exhausted with the day’s work, women, especially the young girls, must welcome the evening visitors, young men, to the family and stay awake till they decide to call it a day. This routine is repeated day in and day out. Women may seem to control the household but she is hardly given freedom to handle money. Except in matrilineal societies, the preference at birth is for the boy, and the boy gets preference for education, especially higher education. Even in matrilineal societies like the Khasis and the Garos, the status and role of the *nokna* (Garo) and *khadduh* (Khasi-Jaintia) are not exactly enhancing their status. The *nokna* “does not have control and authority over the property, which is managed by her father and the *mahari* (male relatives of the clan and those married in the clan) if

the *nokna* is still unmarried, or by her husband (*nokkrom* or resident son-in-law) if the *nokna* is married. Ownership and the status of the *nokna* (heiress), is therefore nominal; it seems to be more of an expedient practice so that a daughter is bound by custom to look after aged parents” (War 1990: 10) The same is true of the Khasi-Jaintia youngest daughter (*khadduh*). She does not “inherit, but she becomes the custodian of ancestral property which is in actual fact under the control of her maternal uncles (*Kii kni*). They make the decisions in the interest of the family and clan. However, since the *khadduh* is the family treasurer who has to meet expenses for the family affairs (births, naming ceremonies, weddings, funerals, etc.), she is allowed to make use of a considerable part of the family property” (War 1990: 10). But the father is the person “in the day-to-day affairs of a family who assumes the role of provider and householder. By assuming this role, the father automatically becomes executive head of the family in its day-to-day affairs. So, he normally takes all the decisions pertaining to and within the nuclear family with the mother playing only a supporting role. Therefore, the role of the Khasi man as maternal uncle (director) and the father (executive head) shows that strong patriarchal structures loom over the Khasi family.”³

4. Women in Public Domain play Supportive Roles

In the domestic domain, women have some visible status and role but in the public domain, even the surface level picture is bleak. Women hardly appear on the scene. However, let us examine the public domain at two levels: the village level (village politics) and the wider level of state or national politics.

4.1. In Village Administration

In traditional tribal societies, the village level administration is carried out by the village chief/headman assisted by the council of the village elders. Though traditionally, the headman and the elders of the village administer the affairs of the village, women are beginning to have a place in some societies like the Mizos, the Angamis, the Chakhesangs, the Sumis, etc. But they play a passive role. The case of Mizo women beginning to take part in village administration

grew out of the sad story of their experience during the days of insurgency in Mizoram in the sixties. Mizoram experienced one of the worst famines in 1960 because of 'mautam.'⁴ Most of the men were in the jungles fighting the Indian army. Women were left to themselves. At times, facing the threat of starvation, they had to sell whatever they had, including their bodies, to survive. The army also forced the people to group themselves into larger villages. Since most of the men were suspected of having connections with the militants, the women were inducted into the administration of these new villages. This is how Mizo women came to take a more active part in the public domain (Lalmuanpuii 2000: 22-26). It grew out of the pain and suffering they endured as only women can. Perhaps because of this, political emancipation is there to stay among the Mizo women. Of course, even in older times, some Mizo women did participate in politics but it was mostly the elite women. The wife of the village chief could take over the administrative duties at the death of her husband, if there was no heir, or in the name of the heir if he was still a minor (*The North East Sun* 2003: 11). This is applicable to many other tribes like the Maos, the Semas, Thadou-Kukis, etc. In a matrilineal society like Khasi, "women have historically been debarred from taking part in decision-making outside the home. The *Dorbar Shnong*, a traditional grassroots decision-making body, which is a vibrant institution that has survived the test of time, is still hesitant in allowing women to play an active and effective role. Though some local dorbars such as Laitumkhrah, Mawkhar and Jaiaw have women participants, and some are also included in the executive committee, things are still at a very nascent stage. It is taboo to think of a woman as the head of the dorbar even if she is qualified to be one. This arises from the fact that women are diffident about claiming their rights. Women who dabble in politics are termed busybodies" (*North-east Telegraph* 2002: 18).

4.2. In State and National Level Politics

Participation of women in state and national level politics is even less. In the present Meghalaya Assembly of 60 members, there are only three women legislative members. Nagaland has no woman member. But the very first state assembly of Mizoram had a woman member in the person of Mrs Lalhlimpuii. One may wonder why

women are not seen playing active roles in politics. When talking to a few women during the consultation on women, mentioned above, a number of reasons why Northeastern tribal women are not interested in politics became clear. They consider it a dirty job. Politics is dominated by money and manpower. Women feel that it is only for men. Some women take part in politics with much compulsion from some party members. Women's non-participation in politics can be also due to lack of educated and committed women in certain societies. Speaking for the tribals in Tripura, a woman said that male domination becomes a stumbling block for them. A Garo woman also gave the same reason for the non-participation of women in politics. Mizo women, on the other hand, are actively involved in politics. According to a Naga woman, there are not themselves interested in politics but they act as a backbone to men in politics. According to Patricia Mukhim, a renowned woman writer, "Women nurture the perception that politics is dirty and see themselves as unable to cope up with the pressures and pulls it involves. Women are particularly against the unethical methods adopted by political parties after every election when no clear majority emerges...The practice of muscle and money is alien to most women. They want to win an election on issues and on the principle of fair play" (*North-east Telegraph* 2002: 18). However things are changing. More and more tribal women are willing to contest in the elections. In this year's (2003) election in Mizoram, seven women contested. At present, Meghalaya has three women MLAs, There seems to be no discrimination against women candidates contesting the elections. As regards being Members of Parliament, only two Northeastern women have been elected: Rano Shaiza of Nagaland and Kim Gangte of Manipur.

4. 3. Powerful 'Mediators' (Demi) in War

Though one may not consider this institution strictly a political one, the Demi is certainly one of the most powerful ways in which the Naga women exercise their influence over the public domain. *Demi* (a Chakhesang word) means 'mediator.' A group of outstanding women of the village are called upon to function as mediators. The role of women as mediators in times of inter-tribal war or dispute is not unique to the Chakhesang Nagas but common to all the

Naga tribes like the Tangkhuls, Maos, Konyaks, etc. The Tangkhuls call them *Phukareila* (neutral ladies). They are highly respected for neutrality and called upon to act as ambassadors of peace (Zehol 1996: 30). Even in the head hunting days of old, if these women mediators come between the warring groups in the midst of a fierce fight, they had to stop their fight immediately out of respect for these women. These women cannot be harmed. It is taboo to harm them. This certainly implies the high regard the Nagas have for their women folk.

5. Active Contributors/Participants in Economic Domain

The economic status and role of women will be enhanced if they have property rights like owning, managing, inheriting or selling property. If they also can work for a salary and have control of income, it will add to their economic status (Zehol 2003: 300). An Angami girl does not inherit the ancestral property but she can be given the property bought by her own parents and she can dispose of it as she likes (Kelhou 2003: 55). Similarly a Mao Naga girl does not inherit the immovable property of the parents but she has a right over her husband's property. For example, when her husband dies, she has a right over the property. In the case of a divorce which is agreed upon mutually, the common property of the family is shared equally (Mao 1998: 40). However, in the Chakhesang society, during her marriage, a girl's parents would give her *Liina* (property both movable and immovable), which become more or less her absolute property. The parents could give her even the whole of their *Motsotsiili* (properties purchased during the life time of the couple), except the ancestral property. At the death of the husband, it was exclusively up to the wife to distribute the *Motsotsiili*. She could distribute the properties to her brothers or loved ones and her in-laws could not challenge her. During old age or impending death, the couple who were issueless would divide their *motsotsiili*. Once *Kirhipfiinu* (property movable or immovable, divided during the life time of the couple) is entered into by the couple, the husband's clan could not claim the share of the wife (Zehol and Zehol 1998: 64-65). We have already spoken about the Garo *nokna* and the Khasi *khadduh* as custodians and heiresses of ancestral property. Even if their con-

trol over the properties was limited, it nonetheless enhances their economic status in the society. In the traditional tribal societies, the economy was mainly agricultural and the main system of agriculture was *jhuming* (slash and burn method or shifting cultivation). In this, the women had a greater role. Men were usually involved in the initial slashing of the forest. The rest of the cultivation like the sowing of seed, the weeding, etc. was left almost entirely to the women folk. Hence, in societies like the Kukis, the rich yield of paddy was attributed to women and a festival of celebrating the abundance of paddy called *Chang-Ai* (paddy feast) was organized by the husband for his wife. A number of tribal societies like the Chin-Kuki-Mizo group practise what is known as *man* (bride-price). The items of the bride-price consist of *dahpi* (big gong), *khichong* (necklaces with rare beads representing precious stones) and 5-10 *mithuns* (Gangte 1993: 94) (*gaur*, *bos gaurus*, Indian bison). *Mithun* was the most priced domestic animal owned by them. The term bride-price and the items used may make it appear as a commercial transaction. It has certainly an economic dimension in the sense that it is “a compensation for the economic loss, because of the girls being taken away from the family who, as is usual among the Kukis, are the main pillars of family economy” (Gangte 1993: 95).

Similarly Fernandes and Barbora state that the nomenclature, bride-price, “gives an impression that the man paid a price for the bride. In reality tribal tradition was to view it as a compensation for the loss of a worker, recognition of her active participation in the tribe’s economy that made her an economic asset, not a liability as in dowry giving societies” (Fernandes and Barbora 2002: 24). The father of the girl or the clan sets a high bride-price in order to symbolize the preciousness of the girl to the family (Gangte 1993: 95) The exact amount of the bride-price quoted is hardly realized. For example, the number of *mithuns* was never paid in real terms. It was usually paid in symbolic values of cash or kind. A *mithun* was costing about Rs. 40 in olden days, but even Rs. 5 could stand for a *mithun*. Nowadays a *mithun* can cost anything between Rs. 5000 to 10,000; however, a few hundred rupees or even some other items could be counted as *mithuns*. Another element worth recalling is that the bride-price is never to be paid fully at once, even if one could, but must be done over a long stretch of time. It should be not

completed when the woman is still alive. The social implication of this practice is the continued relationship between the mother's family and the children. Even after the death of the woman, there is what is known as *Longman* (price of the dead body). It is a ceremony in which the nearest living male member of the woman comes to the children killing an animal as a means of consoling them, and the children in turn give something to their uncle in memory of their mother. It is a symbolic reminder to the families concerned, that their relationship because of the mother should not end even after the death of the mother. The children of the woman address all the male members of their mother's clan as *pu* (literally the term is the same as grand father). The significance is that they must respect and honour the male members of their mother's clan as they honour and respect their own grandfather. The respect the Kukis have for the relations of their mothers is so great that no one will dare to displease them or insult them. The daughters of their maternal uncle as well as the girls of their mother's clan are prospective wives for the male children of the woman. All this is done because of the high regard and honour they have for the mother, the woman who gave them life. In the traditional rural based agricultural economy, women's contribution was enormous. Today some tribes are beginning to engage in urban based market economy. Here too, the role of women is vital as one can see in the markets of Shillong, Kohima, Aizawl. The famous *Nupi Keithel* (Women Market) of Imphal, Manipur, leaves no doubt that the economy is in their hands.⁵

6. Need for Liberation from Psychological Bias

The general picture of women, as noted earlier, is positive and enhancing but there are some deep-seated biases against them in many tribal communities. For example, in Mizo society there are traditional sayings that do not speak very well of women: "Crabs and women have no religion, crab-meat is no meat, and woman's word is no word. A woman's wisdom does not cross the village stream," and "a woman and a broken fence are meant to be replaced" (*The Northeast Telegraph* 2003: 16). A traditional Naga saying also has "while women give birth to children, men give birth to fire" implying that "men are simply born inventive and thus are leaders, whereas women are mere learners and followers" (Roy 2000: 28) A Garo

tribe saying states “as a goat is without teeth, so a woman lacks brains” (War 1996: 16) Lucy Zehol mentions negative attitudes of some other tribes regarding women (Zehol 2003: 301-303) For the Nishis of Arunachal, a man’s social status is reckoned in terms of the number of wives and *mithuns* he possesses. The Moyon Nagas of Manipur consider women as having no principles because they do not have a permanent clan, for their clans change into that of their husbands when they marry. The Kukis have the same attitude and call women “*phung neilou, chang neilou*” (a person without clan). For the Lotha Nagas, males have six kinds of strength while females have only five. For this reason they christen the boys on the sixth day and the girls on the fifth day. Even among the matrilineal society of the Khasis, the bias against women is “clearly reflected in the popular satirical saying: *Wei ba la kynih ka iar Kynthei, hangta la wai ka pyrthei* (Once a hen crows, then the world is going to end). The gravity and implication of the symbolic world and of this saying is clearly reflected in the political sphere where women find no place” (Siemlieh 2000: 49-50). The least men folk can do is to make a conscious effort to change this negative mind-set for the good of society in general and for the liberation of the women in particular. The actual role women play in society and the high status they enjoy in many areas of life make this bias an anomaly.

Conclusion

The discussion might have uncovered many skeletons in the cupboard of the apparently rosy picture of tribal women in the North-east. One thing is clear. No culture or system, either patriarchal or matrilineal, is perfect. Discussions are taking place, for example, on the merits and demerits of matrilineal system among the Khasis and the Garos of Meghalaya as shown by the papers of the book: *Matriliny in Meghalaya: Tradition and Change*. The solution also does not lie in doing away with one system or adopting another. Patriarchal and matrilineal systems are part of our cultural heritage. They have their positive values as well as negative ones. What needs to be done is to be open, and to constantly and critically subject our systems to close scrutiny to change the dehumanizing or oppressive elements in our cultures. As Christians, we must be able to subject our cultures to the transforming power of the Gospel values. The position of women

in the Northeastern Catholic churches is said to be lower than those of women in the CSI and CNI churches (War 1996: 16) This is the challenge that must be addressed. John Gray's now famous book *Men are from Mars and Women are from Venus* tell us that the solution to men-women relationship lies not in doing away with their distinctive characteristic features but in recognizing and giving each its due importance and place. Put in another way, we can say that the solution is not to put one up at the other's expense but to realize their complementarity. They need each other for completion and wholeness. Equality does not mean being the same in everything. Men cannot be women as women cannot be men. Equality is to respect each other's uniqueness. What needs to be avoided or done away is whatever dehumanizes or oppresses.

While writing this paper, reports of alarming rates of wife beating were published in the local papers (*The Meghalaya Guardian* 2003: 1). According to these reports a survey conducted by the *National Health and Family Survey* (NHFS) has shown that the Northeastern states have recorded an alarming 74 per cent of husbands who beat their wives, while all India average is only 56 per cent. It further reports that most of the women in the region, except Nagaland, are likely to support wife-beating if the wife neglects the children and the house.

One possible explanation for this aberration could be the fact that the Northeast is undergoing a period of transition in every aspect of life. Many things are blurred. It could also be due to, on the one hand, women trying to assert themselves and claiming certain rights while, on the other hand, men are still trying to prevent this. Whatever the case might be, one thing seems to be emerging. Women are realizing more about their rights and privileges and are standing up to claim these, as in the **International Fortnight Protesting against Violence** in 2003 women and girls launched their rally in Shillong with the headline: **More Muscle to Women's Movements** (*The Telegraph Northeast* 2003: 15). The tribal women of the Northeast have much to be proud of, but they have to go many more miles before they realize their dreams and aspirations.

Notes

1. Taher, A. C. Bhagawati, "Ethnic Realities of Northeast India," Talk during a *Symposium on Culture and Formation*, 11-13 November, 2003, Guwahati.
2. A Consultation on women was organized by *Advisory Board for Missionary Activities* (AMA) at Guwahati, Assam, in August, 2003. Many of the things I am sharing in this paper are fruits of discussions in that Consultation. A number of recent publications and Seminars have also addressed issues of women in the Northeast. Cf. Soumen Sen, ed., *Women in Meghalaya* (Delhi: Daya Publishing House, 1992); Pariyaram M. Chacko, ed., *Matriliny in Meghalaya: Tradition and Change* (New Delhi: Regency Publications, 1998); Lucy Vashum Zehol, ed., *Women in Naga Society* (New Delhi: Regency Publications, 1998); Walter Fernandes and Sanjay Barbora, eds., *Changing women's Status in India: Focus on the Northeast* (Guwahati: North Eastern Social Research Centre, 2002); Walter Fernandes and Sanjay Barbora, eds., *Modernisation and Women's Status in North East India: A Comparative Study of Six Tribes* (Guwahati: North Eastern Social Research Centre, 2002).
3. Brightstar Siemlieh, *Patriarchy in Matriliny*, 49.
4. Famine resulting from the flowering of bamboo and tremendous increase in the number of rats. *Mau* means bamboo, *tam* means increase.
5. One could argue that the majority of these women are Hinduized Meitei women. But the fact is that they did not inherit this trait of active involvement in the economic affairs from Hinduism, but from their tribal past. Before they were converted to Hinduism, the Meiteis were also tribals.

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Re-Reading the Bible from a Feminist Perspective

Pauline Chakkalakal, dsp

Daughters of St. Paul, Bandra, Mumbai

Abstract: The author summons us to outgrow the stage of biblical, theological and “ecclesiastical patriarchalisation” and promote new research and feminist scholarship aimed at the attitudinal and structural transformation of the Church and society. This would lead to a community of ‘discipleship of equals’ as envisaged by Jesus (Mt 23:8-10; Gal 3:26-28) for the benefit of all God’s people and the whole of creation.

Keywords: Feminist consciousness, new hermeneutics, biblical patriarchalism, androcentricism, feminist re-reading.

1. Contextualisation

It was International Women’s Day in 2000. As customary in some parishes, women are given special attention at the Eucharistic celebration on this day. I happened to be present at a Church service in an urban Catholic parish in the Archdiocese of Bangalore. Contrary to my expectation, the priest himself preached the homily on a day dedicated to women! What a discriminatory practice by the institutional Church that claims to be a champion of human dignity! I shall use the key issues emerging from his talk as a starting point of my paper.

“My dear people, today’s Gospel speaks of women in the company of Jesus’ disciples. Their mission is precisely to look after the needs of Jesus and his apostles. In silence and humility they follow Jesus. What a sublime vocation! On this Women’s Day I wish to draw your attention to our Blessed Mother, the Virgin Mary, who is the perfect model of womanhood. Imitate her virtue of docility and submissiveness. Let us all, especially women learn how to obey with-

out questioning authority.” A similar homily was given last year in one of the parishes of Mumbai by a middle-aged conservative priest, who rejected women’s proposal to have a woman preacher for the day.

Sermons like this speak volumes about the patriarchal mind-set prevalent even in this so-called post-modern era. On the one hand the feminist movement has gained momentum since the United Nations Declaration on the Decade of Women (1975-1985) both in society and in the Church; and on the other, religious fundamentalism plays havoc in all religions, the Catholic Church being no exception. Interestingly, religious Scriptures are invoked in support of women’s second class citizenship. It is in this paradoxical context that we shall engage in a feminist re-reading of biblical texts with a view to unearthing their liberative potential.

At the outset I wish to acknowledge the pioneering work of feminist scholars from different parts of the world, who have made significant contributions to biblical research and feminist/womanist theologies.¹ I wish to recognise also some of the Indian Christian feminists who are contributing to the process of deconstruction and reconstruction of biblical texts, in order to cull from them liberative elements for the empowerment of women and other marginalised groups.² Given that the terms “feminism” and “feminist/womanist” have been used liberally in academic discourse today, the need for clarification of the concept ‘feminist’ does not arise here. We shall proceed to analyse the radicality of feminist consciousness and hermeneutical method.

2. Radicalism of Feminist Consciousness and Hermeneutics

Women’s experiences of marginalisation and subjugation, as well as struggles for legitimate freedom in all spheres of life, and participatory action for justice are central to feminist consciousness and hermeneutics. We need to accentuate that ‘women’s experience’ includes the biological and cultural experiences of being female and the feminist experience that calls for equality and inclusiveness of women and men. The awareness of weakness or victimisation has a positive effect on women, for it leads to the

consciousness of one's own power. It unfolds the possibility of "personal growth and the release of energy long suppressed" (Bartky 1990: 16 quoted in Harrison 1989: 214-225), and motivates the person to engage in direct forms of struggle against an oppressive system. The late Phoolan Devi (*Indian Currents* 2001: 16).and several other women, who have become victims of caste oppression, and who in turn have mobilised their "guilty victim" status to empower others, are typical examples of *victory over victimisation*. Feminist consciousness thus poses a challenge to dominant structures and sexist institutions and proposes a fundamental change in society.

The feminist demand is for a re-structuring of thought and analysis in view of developing a holistic approach to Divine-human realities. With regard to the Bible, it stands as a critique of androcentric biblical interpretations and theological articulations presented as *eternal* truths. The Bible, written from the socio-cultural perspective of male authors, as well as its interpretations, has legitimised women's subordination in the Church. Women have appeared in patriarchal teachings as types: virgins, temptresses, seducers, but not real women. This experience of stereotype makes women suspect the validity of a 'biblical revelation' that has come to us solely through male categories. Therefore, a 'hermeneutics of suspicion' should inform any reading of biblical texts and commentaries, and reconstruct them in terms of a praxis for liberation of all. As all theological articulations are based on a particular understanding of the Bible, feminist scholars emphasise the need to scrutinise the androcentric and patriarchal/*kyriarchal* elements in biblical texts and retrieve the position of women and their partnership with God in the story of salvation. To put it differently, "the hermeneutical principles that we choose to employ are determined by our theological stands operative in exegesis and interpretation" (Melanchthon 1998: 281).³

Through her liberating 'hermeneutics of suspicion', leading New Testament scholar Schussler Fiorenza makes the female collective, or women-church, the interpretive centre of feminist hermeneutics, where women can "deconstruct the dominant paradigms of biblical interpretation and reconstruct them in terms of a critical rhetoric that understands biblical texts and traditions as a living and changing heritage, one which does not legitimate patriarchal oppression but

can foster emancipatory practices of faith-communities” (Fiorenza 1992: 5). See also her scholarly work “*In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*” She offers us a rhetorical model as a feminist interpretative process for transformation, inviting us to move beyond a historical-critical reading and reconstruction of biblical texts, to the “cultural-theological practice of resistance and transformation” fostered through storytelling, drama, imaginative ritual and dance (Fiorenza 1992: 39-40). Similarly Musa W. D. Shomanah undermines the authoritative position of biblical texts by showing their “male-biased compilation and history of androcentric interpretation” (Dube Shomanah 1993: 47).

Yet she argues that feminist strategies are not meant to dispense with biblical texts. Rather, feminist biblical interpretation aims at restoring the canonicity of the Bible by insisting that “canonicity is measured by the liberation of women and all God’s oppressed people of the world.”⁴ Implied here is an affirmation of the liberative elements in biblical revelation, and the task of hearing the silenced voices within the text, which subvert or bear witness against the androcentric narratives and interpretations. Mary Ann Tolbert’s dictum: “One must defeat the Bible as patriarchal authority by using the Bible as liberator” (Tolbert 1983: 120) ⁵ may be accepted as a valid principle for re-reading the Bible.

For Rosemary Ruether, one of the first Christian feminist theologians to reflect explicitly on methodological issues, the crucial principle for any adequate feminist hermeneutics or theology is that it promotes the full humanity of women. In *Sexism and God-Talk*, she states: “Whatever denies, diminishes or distorts the full humanity of women is appraised as not redemptive” (Ruether 1983: 18).

She compares this critical principle with the ancient principle of the *imago dei* or Christ as the goal of human destiny. The uniqueness of feminist interpretation or theology lies in the fact that women claim this (*imago dei*) principle for themselves (Ruether 1983: 19).

Ruether’s critique of biblical patriarchalism and androcentricism has led her to the conclusion that the Bible can be appropriated as a source of liberation only if correlation between the feminist critical principle and that of the “prophetic-messianic” tradition can be established.⁶

On the basis of their consultations to formulate an Asian feminist hermeneutics, Asian women have stated that their hermeneutical principle should affirm: (1) the full humanity of women in an authentic and inclusive community; (2) the integrity of creation; (3) the feminine creative principle as life-giving and life-enhancing; (4) the prophetic commitment of women in liberation movements; (5) the solidarity of women among themselves and with other people's movements struggling for freedom and peace, based on just relationships (Mananzan 1995: 33-34).⁷

Far from rejecting the Bible because of its androcentric and anti-women characteristics, and the many discrepancies within the text, Asian women are engaged in exploring new insights into methodology and hermeneutics. Making use of the tools of historical criticism on the one hand and the hermeneutics of liberation on the other, Asian women are making a substantial contribution to the ongoing research in the field. This is evident *In God's Image*, journal of the Asian Women's Resource Centre for Culture and Theology.

Although Indian women theologians have not yet developed a uniquely Indian feminist hermeneutics, we have asserted the need to re-read the Bible, informed by a commitment to women's empowerment in particular and to human liberation and the integrity of creation in general. Rooted in the sufferings, struggles, hopes and aspirations of the *silenced* and *silent* women and the marginalised in all strata of Indian society, our hermeneutical method has necessarily to challenge the socio-cultural, religio-political and economic systems, and caste and gender based oppression of a patriarchal society. It is equally important to denounce the prejudice of male chauvinistic prescriptions on women's sexuality, as well as to question the prevailing exclusive male God symbolism and sexist language for God and humanity. Simultaneously, it has to promote a life-affirming, change-oriented and contextual reading of the Bible and theologising. As we owe a great deal to the secular women's movements in India for stimulating our theological reflections along the lines mentioned above, it is necessary to work in collaboration with them. This becomes all the more useful in combating the increasing religious fundamentalism, resulting in communal violence. To quote Aruna Gnanadason, "any reflection on biblical texts has to keep this in mind, because

there is enough documented evidence to show that religious fundamentalism and extremism affect the lives of women in deleterious ways and Indian Christian women will have to make strong contributions to the creation of an environment of compassion and dialogue.”⁸ (Gnanadason 2000: 336, Pui-Lan 299-315).

In the context of India’s multi-religious and pluri-cultural reality, it is imperative that we also search in the scriptures of other great religions and engage in dialogue with women and men of other faiths who are as eager as we are to “move into a healthier, more just world after patriarchy” (Gupta 1992: 15).⁹ Lina Gupta, in her fascinating rediscovery of the power of goddess Kali, writes:

The evidence that the systematic subjugation of women has often been sanctioned by mythological stories, symbols and images in world religions is too overwhelming to overlook. However, we have reached a point in history when it is simply not enough merely to recognise and analyse the patriarchal mindset and its effects on our religious and social lives. It is essential for us to seek new forms of religious experience and expression, either through the reinterpretation and reconstruction of our traditions or through alternative models of Ultimate Reality that will emphasise as well as include female experience (Gupta 1992: 15-16).

Lina Gupta calls for a creative and constructive reading in the light of Tantric scriptural interpretation, which “can allow the *Kali* with her terrifying appearance to emerge as a powerful symbol of life and liberation to women in their passage to post-patriarchy... Under her assurance we confront who we are in reality, as opposed to what we perceive ourselves to be through the subjugated roles we play”(Gupta 1992: 24).

It must be underlined that a critical feminist hermeneutics does not just aim at understanding the biblical text, “but also engages in theological critique, evaluation and transformation of biblical traditions and interpretations from the vantage point of its particular socio-political religious location” (Fiorenza 1992: 785). The feminist perspective thus poses a radical question to the religious and theological thinking stuck in patriarchal moorings. It shows that scripture, tradition and creeds are in need of scrutiny if they are to be authenticated for women (Isherwood & McEwan 1993: 80). The feminist

approach, therefore, provides a clear paradigmatic shift in biblical interpretation and Church doctrines. To use the emphatic statement of Letty Russell, “no interpretation of authority that reinforces patriarchal structures of domination would be acceptable for feminist interpretation” (Russell 140).

Without undermining the *scientific seriousness* in re-formulation of biblical texts and Christian theology, feminists reject “imposed tradition and realize that their spiritual heritage goes beyond institutionalised religion and official theology” (Mananzan 1995: 32).

3. Illustration of a Feminist Re-reading

Applying the feminist hermeneutics of liberation with its ingredients: “a hermeneutics of experience, domination and social location, suspicion, critical evaluation, creative imagination, re-membering and reconstruction, and transformative action for change” (Fiorenza 2001: 167), we shall re-image Mary of Nazareth as she plays an important role in shaping the Church’s view on women’s vocation and ministry. The traditional portrait of Mary as a pious, docile maiden, symbol of passivity and humility, has become a powerful means of domesticating women. Mary needs to be rescued from this “masculine perception of idealised femininity” (Asian Women’s Theology Conference Dec. 1988: 9) inflicted on women and men alike, which many have internalised. A feminist reading of Mary is crucial to discovering the assertive, intelligent, self-confident and strong woman in Mary. Our reflections shall be confined to Mary at the Annunciation and in the Magnificat.

a) Mary at the Annunciation (Lk 1:26-38)

The Annunciation stories are common features in the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke (see Mt 1:20-21; Lk 1:11-20; 2:9-15). They follow a literary pattern that had its origins in the annunciation stories of the Old Testament: Ishmael (Gen 16: 7-12), Isaac (Gen 17: 1-21; 18:1-12), Samson (Judg 13: 2-21). The pattern is *always* the same. It is particularly evident in Luke’s presentation of the annunciation episode.¹⁰ We have no intention of examining the Lukan text now. Our purpose is to cull from it relevant issues affecting the lives of women.

Mary is presented as a virgin “betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph” (v. 27). The appearance of the word ‘virgin’ twice in the same verse indicates Mary’s virginal state before the conception of Jesus. As far as the New Testament is concerned, the virginity of Mary is “not about the virtue of Mary, but it is about the origins of Jesus” (Mananzan 1995: 42).

It is to ensure Jesus’ divine origin without any human intervention, the only exception being Mary’s unique role in God’s plan. In other words, the virginity of Mary is more a Christological matter than a Mariological concern.

However, Mary’s ‘perpetual virginity’ was a subject of contention among theologians in the past. Based on Mary’s reply to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” (v. 34), they argued that Mary intended to remain a virgin even after marriage. But it is untenable in the Jewish religio-cultural milieu of that time. By the very fact Mary was engaged to Joseph shows that she was prepared to marry him. To use the expression of Corona Mary, “Mary’s intention to virginal life should be post annunciation” (1993: 63).

Moreover, the objection “how can this happen” is a literary device employed by the author to continue the dialogue.

In our attempt to comprehend the concept of ‘Virgin-Mother’, we shall draw on the scholarly work of Corona Mary, who analyses critically the myths and legends built around Mary and the goddesses of the Hindu mythology (1993: 55-75).

She points out that Saraswati (goddess of knowledge) and Sakti, despite being the consorts of Brahma and Siva respectively, are virgins. To cite an example from the saivite scripture, Sivajrana Siddiyar,

Though Siva generates Sakti and Sakti Siva
and they both by their joyful union
generate the worlds and beings
Siva is a celibate and Sakti a virgin
those who have attained wisdom by their virtuous deeds
know this nature of Siva and Sakti.

S. Siddiyar. II. 77.

Virginity is understood here as “timeless beauty and absolute independence.” As the female counterpart of a particular male deity, a goddess represents the grace dimension of the male principle. Her graceful presence, while enveloping the entire life of the human person, remains “unmixed and transcendent in her divine aloofness”, whereby she becomes the mother of all. “Thus a virgin stands for eternal youth, timeless beauty, total freedom, infinite receptivity, indwelling transcendence and inexhaustible resources” (1993: 63).

Sharing a similar vision, Regina Coll probes into the meaning of “virgin” in ancient writings. A virgin has been described as one “who was complete in herself, who did not receive her definition from another; whose being was not owned by a man, father, lover or spouse. The goddesses Athena, Diana and Kore were virgins in spite of their sexual activity... The question is not one of biology but one of theology” (Coll 1988: 16).

Seen in this way, virginity is an affirmation of the sacredness of the human body in itself. A woman does not derive her worth from her relationship as wife or mother, but from her very person, created in God’s image, hence sacred and complete. Virginity is not mere sexual rigidity as commonly viewed, but a means of growing in loving relationship with Christ and commitment to his mission (2 Cor 11:2) (Mary 1993: 58-59). It leads a person to total self-surrender to God and to accept the risk of leaping into the unknown. In fact, through her ‘yes’, Mary embraces God’s call to become the Virgin-Mother of the Messiah and participate in his redemptive mission. She accepts virginity for the sake of the kingdom (reign of God). In the light of the above reflections, we affirm:

Virginity is not a value in itself. It is a consequence of one’s commitment to God. That is why myths make their virgins mothers. Mary is the concretisation of such myths. She is a sign that committed virginity is always fulfilling and fruitful (Mary 1993: 65).

What strikes us in Mary’s “Let it be done according to your word” (v.38) is her total openness and availability to God. She has been caught up in God’s plan beyond the realm of human imagination and control, and commits herself to cooperating with God in the realisation of that plan. Hers was a free and responsible act of self-

surrender, and not a passive, helpless submission. It was an adult response, a creative fidelity of a fully liberated human being. By this courageous act, she becomes a true disciple who listens to the word of God and acts upon it. Like an exemplary disciple, Mary contemplates the unfathomable ways of her son by treasuring “all these things in her heart” (Lk 2:51). Jesus himself acknowledges the quality of discipleship of his Mother and praises her obedient response to God’s word, “Here are my mother, my sisters and brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother” (Mk 12:49-50).

The point to be emphasized here is the fact that God chose Mary, a *woman*, to collaborate in God’s plan of salvation (Gal 4:4). It is an affirmation of the sacredness of woman’s body. The institutional Church’s preoccupation with projecting Mary as “virgin” immaculately conceived, should not divest her of her *womanhood*. This is important for understanding the dignity and vocation of women against the background of a patriarchal Jewish society that looked down on women. The contempt for women is best summed up in the synagogue prayer in which a Jewish man thanked God that he was not born a woman (Menahoth 1975: 159).

As Teresa Okure observes, “Despite this cultural predicament of the woman, God chose that channel for the birth of Jesus because in the divine scheme only a woman could give birth and nurture life along with God” (Okure 1995: 199).

Jesus is indeed Mary’s “flesh and blood”, “the son of Mary” (Mk 6:3). God has honoured womanhood in Mary and empowered her for a liberating mission. The Magnificat is a powerful testimony to this counter-cultural action of God.

b) Mary in the Magnificat (Lk 1: 46-55)

The Magnificat, found only in Luke’s Gospel, is said to be one of the four canticles in the Lukan narrative: “the Magnificat (1:46-55), the Benedictus (1:67-79), the Gloria in Excelsis (2: 13-14), and the Nunc Dimittis (2: 28-32)” (Maestri, *Mary* 1987: 6).

Concerning the composition of these canticles, the biblical scholar R.E. Brown holds that the canticles were pre-Lukan and

Jewish-Christian formulations, which Luke added to his already existing narrative (Brown 1977).

The Magnificat possesses the characteristics of Psalms of praise with three basic parts: the introductory praise of God, the body of the hymn suggesting reasons for praise and the concluding part recounting again the motive for praise along with a blessing and/or petition. One can notice a resemblance between Mary's song and the canticle of Hannah in 1 Samuel 2:1-10, where Hannah bursts into sentiments of praise and thanks for God's marvellous deeds in bringing about a reversal of order.

The Magnificat proclaims "the great reversal", which is a major theme in Luke¹¹. The lowly are lifted up; the mighty are cast down; the hungry are filled; the rich are sent away empty (Lk 1: 51-53). That is revolutionary: in Mary God has envisaged a new world order, a "three-fold revolution... cultural, political and economic" (Balasuriya 1997: 114).

An analytical reading of the six verbs used in verses 51-53 reveals that these are "habitual acts of God" in favour of the oppressed, calling us to collaborate with God.¹² (Raja 1993: 5-7). Mary identifies herself with the poor and lowly – the *anawim* – and declares her commitment to their liberation and well-being. R. E. Brown helps us perceive the radicality of Mary's choice:

For Luke, Mary's virginity was like the barrenness of the O. T. women: both constituted a human impossibility, which only the might of God could overcome. In using "low estate" and "handmaid" (i.e., female slave) for Mary, Luke is associating her with all the memories of the Poor Ones evoked by those terms—Poor Ones whom God has helped by his might, whether they were women yearning for children, or Israel reduced by oppression to the status of a "handmaid" (1 Macc 2:11) or "low estate" (1 Sam 9:16) (R.E. Brown 1977: 361).

The Magnificat has been termed "a dangerous story" (O'Meara 1988: 5), that challenges us to resist and transform all political, social, economic and religio-cultural systems, claiming absolute authority and control. Mary's song recounts the story of God's justice, mercy, holiness and mighty deeds on behalf of the *anawim*. In her

vision of a new community, Mary sees God's action on behalf of the poor and exploited. She challenges the patriarchal order and all oppressive forces. Through her song of liberation, Mary announces the coming of the Messianic age and the prophetic mission of Jesus (Lk 4:18-19). Mary is confident that Yahweh will stand by the poor and effect a radical change in the oppressive structures and systems. Yahweh will achieve the final liberation of all people, through the death and resurrection of her Son.

Implications for Women and Mariology

Mary at the Annunciation and in the Magnificat repudiates traditional mariology that has been serving the interests of the dominant shapers of society and Church. By interpreting her *fiat* as the unquestioning and passive acceptance of God's will, women have been motivated and even subjugated to assume an attitude of slavish docility and blind obedience to those in authority. In the words of T. Balasuriya, "this presentation of Mary as the obedient, docile, faithful virgin-mother has the impact of rendering Marian spirituality rather pietistic, somewhat passive and even individualistic" (Balasuriya 1977: 74).

The type of Marian spirituality practised in the Church is a clear proof of Balasuriya's statement. Mary is honoured not as the daring woman of Nazareth, but rather in symbolic roles as the Lady of Lourdes, Fatima, Guadalupe, or Vellankani in Tamil Nadu or Mount Mary in Mumbai. Raymond Brown maintains that "precisely because we do not know much about the historical character and individuality of Mary, she lends herself more freely than Jesus does to a symbolic trajectory. She has been adaptable in various times and places.." (Brown 1975: 106).

As Regina Coll observes, every age draws from the popular symbols of that age while at the same time reinforcing those symbols.¹³ Thus we notice a variety of titles for Mary, such as Handmaiden, Virgin, Mother, Queen of purity, humility and so on. They have been presented as models for women. These symbols, as they have been applied to Mary, do not guarantee the empowerment of women or other peripheral groups. On the contrary, they actually disempower them by making them passive and resigned to their fate.

We need to recognise that despite the official Church's exaltation of Mary, women's condition has not improved considerably. Popes down the centuries have kept the Virgin Mary on a pedestal. A citation from John Paul II's address to Women Religious at Washington (Oct 7, 1979) on Mary and womanhood is a classical example:

As a great sign that appeared in the heavens, in the fullness of time, the Woman dominates all history as the Virgin Mother of the Son and as the Spouse of the Holy Spirit, as the Hand-maid of humanity. The Woman becomes also, by association with her Son, the sign of contradiction to the world, and at the same time the sign of hope, whom all generations shall call blessed (McNamara 1982: 19).

Immediately after, the Pope adds: "without herself being inserted into the hierarchical constitution of the Church, and yet this woman made all hierarchy possible because she gave to the world the Shepherd and Bishop of our souls" (McNamara 1982: 19). Thus the Pope reiterates the exclusion of women from hierarchy and leadership in the Church. The humble virgin image serves to maintain this position.

Nevertheless, Mary in the Magnificat contradicts the traditional projection of Marian humility. Far from denying her self-worth on the pretext of humility, Mary asserts her greatness by acknowledging the mighty deeds of God in her life (Lk 1:48-49). She thus gives a new meaning and purpose to the virtue of humility. It is not by denying or burying our gifts and talents that we glorify God but by consciously accepting them with grateful hearts and placing them at the service of humanity. This positive dimension of humility shines out in the life of Mary from the Annunciation to Pentecost. Here it would suffice to mention Mary's visit to Elizabeth (Lk 1:39-56) and her intervention at the wedding at Cana in Galilee (Jn 2:1-11). Both instances unfold Mary's genuine concern, womanly sensitivity and spirit of service. She combines humility and assertiveness in herself. Subscribing to this view, Pope Paul VI says:

The modern women will note with pleasant surprise that Mary of Nazareth, while completely devoted to the will of God, was far from being a timidly submissive woman or one whose piety was repellent to others; on the contrary, she was a woman who did not hesi-

tate to proclaim that God vindicates the humble and oppressed, and removes the powerful people of this world from their privileged positions (cf. Lk 1: 51-53) (Paul VI 1974: 48).

The distorted portrayal of Mary and other biblical women has led Christian women in general to submit themselves to clerical domination in God's name. As for society, the inequality between women and men in India is so structured and stereotyped, that it has become a part of Indian culture and ethos. Consequently the very consciousness of women has been domesticated. The vast majority of women in our country continue to be mute witnesses to their own exploitation and discrimination.

The task of a new Mariology, then, is to let the Virgin of the Annunciation and the radical woman of the Magnificat stand up. Let Marian devotions allow women to emerge as free, faithful and committed like Mary. The Church's glorification of Mary and imitation of her virtues must aim at building self-confidence and realistic optimism in people, and instilling in them a sense of 'prophetic protest' against all forms of dehumanising systems. This is the kind of Mariology and spirituality that will do justice not only to Mary but also to other biblical women.

4. Conclusion and Call to Action

This brief article has sought to develop a feminist approach to the Bible and illustrate it with examples. In our search for a holistic and liberating hermeneutical principle, we have highlighted the role of feminist hermeneutics in radicalising the androcentric mainstream biblical-theological scholarship. Applying the hermeneutics of suspicion, intuition, vision and hope we have portrayed Mary as a powerful symbol of courageous faith and commitment to the realization of the prophetic mission of Jesus. As a constructive and holistic enterprise, feminist scholars seek to develop a dialogic and participatory process of doing Bible study. Mindful of our Indian context, we have emphasized the relevance of searching into the scriptures of other religions.

Call to Action

A feminist hermeneutics of liberation has the prophetic task of naming and denouncing the evil effects of male-defined biblical teachings and religious practices on women. It must at the same time offer an alternative vision of wholeness and inclusiveness, rooted in the belief that women are *human persons*, created in God's image and likeness (Gen 1:26-27).

A conscious effort is to be made to replace exclusive masculine symbols and vocabulary for divine-human realities with an inclusive model capable of "breaking through narrow, rigid, and restrictive structures of the past," (Isvaradevan 1986: 75).¹⁴ and moving towards an all-embracing community.

In our re-interpretation of biblical texts and theological teachings, we shall affirm that any hermeneutical principle must "take into consideration gender and racial/caste oppression as much as it must take the economic/class dimension seriously" (Gnanadason 1993: 39).

Given the enormous diversity and complexity of Asian peoples with their cultures, languages, religions and traditions, women's theologies and hermeneutics carry different emphases and nuances. The challenge before us is to promote contextual studies from feminist perspectives, which draw inspiration from Christian and other religious traditions.

Equally important is our involvement in people's lives. Participation in movements for political action and social transformation gives authenticity to our faith. Another challenge is to facilitate the process of networking among women's organisations and like-minded people's movements at the local, regional, national and international levels.

Aware of India's/Asia's religious pluralism, commitment to inter-faith dialogue as a means of mutual learning, needs to be reiterated. My experience of involvement in interreligious activity since 1992 in our locality at Bandra, Mumbai, has deepened my conviction that followers of other religions are our partners in our common search for truth. They are not mere objects of theological discourse. In the process of journeying together, we have learned the skill of giving and receiving as well as the art of participatory leadership.

These reflections summon us to outgrow the stage of biblical, theological and “ecclesiastical patriarchalisation” and promote new research and feminist scholarship aimed at the attitudinal and structural transformation of the Church and society. This would lead to a community of ‘discipleship of equals’ as envisaged by Jesus (Mt 23:8-10; Gal 3:26-28) for the benefit of all God’s people and the whole of creation.

Notes

1. For example, Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, Rosemary R. Ruether, Letty Russell, Phyllis Trible, among others in USA; Catharina Halkes in Holland; Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel in Germany; Lisa Isherwood and Mary Grey in U.K; Silvia Schroer in Switzerland; Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro and Mercy Amba Oduyoye in Africa; African-American Dolores S. Williams; Elsa Tamaz, Ivone Gebara in Latin America; Gabriele Dietrich, Sun Ai Lee Park, Chung Hyun Kyung, Virginia Fabella, Kwok Pui-Lan, Frances Yasas, Jessie Tellis-Nayak and Aruna Gnanadasan among others in Asia.
2. For instance, Monica J. Melanchthon, Corona Mary, Evelyn Monteiro, Rekha Chennathu, Margaret Shanti, Shalini Mulackal, Pushpa Joseph, Evangeline Anderson-Rajkumar, Lalrinawmi Ralte, Astrid Lobo Gajiwala, Lorna Barrett, Pearl Drego, Stella Baltazar, Prasanna Kumari, Stella Faria and Kochurani Abraham – to name a few. There are men scholars too who are engaged in developing a feminist approach to the Bible.
3. For a discussion on ‘hermeneutics’, see Clodovis Boff, “Hermeneutics: Constitution of Theological Pertinency,” in R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World* (London: SPCK, 1991) pp. 9-35.
4. See also Elsa Tamez, “Latin American Feminist Hermeneutics: A Retrospective,” in Ofelia Ortega, ed., *Women’s Visions: Theological Reflection, Celebration, Action* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1995), pp. 77-89.
5. See also her book *Protestant Feminists and the Bible, the Pleasure of Her Text* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990).
6. To arrive at her goal, Ruether proposes a *method of correlation* which she expounds under: (1) women’s experience and feminist hermeneutics and (2) the correlation of feminist and biblical critical principles. For a comprehensive view, see *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology*. See also her article, “Feminist Interpretation: A Method of Correlation,” in L. Russell, ed., *Feminist*

Interpretation of the Bible (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985).

7. The Consultation was done in two phases: the first in Seoul and the second in Chennai. It was organised by EATWOT (Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians) Commission on Women, of which I am a member.
8. Aruna Gnanadason, "The Bible and Women of Faith," in D. J. Muthunayagam, ed., *Bible Speaks Today: Essays in Honour of Gnana Robinson* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2000), p. 336. See also Kwok Pui-Lan, "Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World," *Sugirtharajah* 1991: 299-315.
9. Kali, meaning "dark" is a female name-form associated with Shiva, and is portrayed as the most famous of the terrifying goddesses. She identifies the female as the energy, the divine spark at the heart of reality, which bestows on creation the power of transcendence. Kali is the embodiment of women power destroying all evil forces. For this information, see John Renard, *Response to 101 Questions on Hinduism* (Mumbai: Better Yourself Books, 1999), pp.145-146.
- 10. For an illustration of the pattern and further discussion, see Francis J. Moloney, *Woman: First Among the Faithful, A New Testament Study* (Bombay: St. Paul Publications, 1988), pp. 40-64.
11. The theme of 'reversal' is not a Lukan invention, it is found in Mark (e.g., 12:41-43; 5:24-34, 14: 3-9) the first of the evangelists. Nevertheless Mark too is not the inventor of the theme. 'Reversal' is a theme that runs through the Old Testament. Examples include: the choice of David (1 Sam 16: 1-13), the vocation of some of the prophets (Jer 1: 6-8; Amos 7:14-15; Is 7).
12. The following explanation is found on p 7, No. 10: The verbs put in the greek gnomic aorist tense means this is how God did in the past, this is how God is doing in the present, and this is how God will do in the future, provided we participate in this liberative task.
13. Regina Coll, "A Look at Mary of Popular Tradition," *Sisters Today*, Vol. 60, No. 1 (August/September 1988), p. 14.
14. See also my article "Linguistic Apartheid," *Indian Currents*, Vol. XIV, No.11 (17 March 2002), pp. 30-31.

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Contd from p. 160.

The editor notes rightly that postmodernism has been born of “a collective experience of suffocation under the totalizing ‘metanarrative’ of modernity” (9). Drawing from Nietzsche, postmodernism tries to release oneself from the “tomb of nausea.” Freeing beauty, being, truth, divinity, morality and values from such an imprisonment, postmodernism attempts to be on a path that is genuine and spontaneous. As a celebration of plurality, postmodernism is a philosophy of difference (not ‘deviants’ nor ‘mad’), aiming not at ‘perfect order’ but at ‘creative vitality.’

The articles in this volume are diverse. The authors of the articles include Johnson J. Puthenpurackal, Joe Mannath, Stanislaus Swamikanu, George Panthanmackel, John B. Chettimattam, David F. Peramangalam, and Sebastian Kuthukallunkal.

These are papers presented at the Association of Christian Philosophers of India (ACPI) Annual Meeting held at Vijnananilayam, Jnanampet, 27-29 October, 1999. It is unfortunate that only one article deals with postmodernism and the Indian situation. One of the articles seeks to “examine the role of the intellectual in a country ridden with corruption, which lives partly in a pre-modern feudal world, partly in a hierarchically organized “modern” world and very marginally in a postmodern inner world” (46). The book deals primarily with the Western thinkers of postmodernism (like Heidegger, Nietzsche, Derrida, Frankfurt School, etc.)

The apt conclusion of the book is: “We need to learn to live with uncertainty in the field of knowledge, with insecurity in existential situations, with paradoxes in moral questions and with contingency in philosophical claims” (173). This is a very introductory and useful book and is a must in every field of intellectual inquiry. To sum up, this book is a precious contribution to every library. **Kuruvilla Pandikattu SJ**

The Touch Of The Untouchable

A Re-reading of Luke 8: 42b-48

Evelyn Monteiro SC

Dept of Systematic Theology, JDV, Pune, 411014

Abstract: Religion has not only been the root cause of dehumanization of women through its oppressive laws and teachings, but has also been its perpetuating force. The Scriptures are a product of an androcentric patriarchal culture and history. In this article, based on Luke 8:42b-48 we reflect on Jesus' liberating treatment of women. The first part will articulate the existential situation of women in Jesus' day and in the Indian context the questions raised within it. We shall restrict our exposure of women's status to the menstrual taboos imposed by religion and related social customs that deprive women of full humanhood. The second part will introduce the narrative analysis of the passage and elucidate its meaning and message.

Keywords: Untouchable, interpretation of scriptures, women in the Bible, androcentrism, women and Church.

There is a growing consciousness of gender injustice plaguing our society. This is evident in the upsurge of many women's movements and organizations. Women are beginning to hear their inner voice crying for freedom. Their silenced voice is finding expression and their hidden person is seeking visibility. Women are making a successful breakthrough in the once male-dominated domain of politics, science and technology. However, the vast majority of women are still victims of the exploitative socio-cultural system. Women have not yet made bold to enter the realm of religion that legitimizes and perpetuates their marginalization.

Religion has not only been the root cause of dehumanization of women through its oppressive laws and teachings, but has also been its perpetuating force. The Scriptures like the *Manusmriti*, *Koran*, and *The Bible* are a product of an androcentric patriarchal culture

and history. Scholars with their biased male perspective have often overlooked this oppressive aspect when interpreting scriptural passages. They have failed to articulate women's experience of the divine and include the place and contribution of women in God's plan of salvation. Several women theologians have attempted to 'liberate' the Scriptures from androcentrism by re-reading and re-interpreting the texts and tried to reconstruct history by reclaiming the lost and forgotten heritage of women. This is one such attempt.

The injustice meted out to women due to menstrual taboos imposed by religion and society has motivated me to make a critical study of the episode of the woman with the flow of blood (Lk 8:42b-48). My approach will be hermeneutical because the reader or interpreter always approaches the text with searching questions from one's existential experience. To interpret means to make understandable and this in turn presupposes an understanding (Bultmann 1961: 292). There cannot be any such thing as pre-suppositionless analysis of a text.

The episode, at first glance, appears to be a dramatic narration of the healing of a woman with the flow of blood. The passage is often referred to as the 'intercalated story' or the 'sandwiched episode', thus limiting its importance to a mere 'stop-gap' incident placed within the story of Jairus' dying daughter. Furthermore, most of the exegetes have tagged it as a 'healing' or 'miracle' episode expounding the faith of the "touch of a hand." A close reading of the text of this faith-healing story also reveals a liberative significance for the women – Theophilus of today.

Our reflection of Luke 8:42b-48 will include two major parts. The first part will articulate the existential situation of women in Jesus' day, and in the Indian context the questions raised within it. We shall restrict our exposure of women's status to the menstrual taboos imposed by religion and related social customs that deprive women of full humanhood. The second part will introduce the narrative analysis of the passage and elucidate its meaning and message.

1. Womanhood Then and Now

1.1. Womanhood in the Jewish World

To understand the implications of the story of the “Touch of an untouchable” (8:42b-48) it would be helpful to situate it in the Jewish context of Jesus’ time. This should take us back to the understanding of the concept of blood and the status of women in the Judaic world.

1.2. Blood of Life

Like all ancient religions, blood was regarded as something sacred in the religion of Israel, for blood of life (Lev 17:11,14; Dt 12:23) and everything touching life are in close contact with God, the source of life (Leon-Dufour 1973: 52.). Life is conferred by God and is under his dominion. In sacrificial rituals, blood that represents life was symbolically offered to God (Lev 1:5) at the altar (Lev 4:7) or sprinkled before the sanctuary (Lev 4:6). In the covenant ritual, the blood of the victims was sprinkled on the altar and on the people signifying that the covenant partners shared a common life (Ex 24:6-8).

In the period of the New Testament, the sacramental significance of the blood of the Eucharist also follows the Hebrew understanding. The blood of the Eucharist is the blood of the new Covenant (cf. Ex 24:8). It is life which is communicated from Jesus to his disciples (Jn 6:53f; 1Cor 10:16).

1.3. Blood, a Stringent Taboo

The fear of blood dates back in all probability to the primeval times. Among the Jews it was one of the most stringent taboos. A clear instance of the all-embracing nature of its polluting power is found in Dt 22:8. The taboos on menstrual blood and abnormal issues probably come under this category. Menstruation was greatly feared. It was extremely dangerous for a man even to see the menstrual blood. In fact, “Ancient man reacted to the phenomenon of menstruation with a horror that seems to us grotesque and hysterical,” says B.J. Bamberger (Selvidge 1984: 621). Thus, it is a paradox that the life-creating power of women conferred by God and

manifested in the “flow of blood” is regarded as bad or impure and makes her unclean (Lev 15:19f) and an untouchable.

1.4. The Accursed Menstrual Blood

According to Leviticus, any woman who has a regular monthly period is termed ‘unclean’ and must be secluded or banished for at least seven days (Lev 15:19,28). If the cycle is irregular or there is a lengthy gynecological abnormality, the woman remains “infectious” until her ailment is cured (Lev 15:25). A woman was also cloistered following the birth of a child (Lev 12:1-8) as she was considered to be unclean after childbirth. She was ritually unclean for 7 days and was subject to purification for 33 days after the birth of a boy. The birth of a daughter caused 80 days of restrictions. She was unclean for 14 days and needed 66 days for purification (Lev 12:1-5). At the end of her menstrual period, purification could be gained only by a ritual bath. The ultimate humiliation was the sin offering which was required both after menstruation and child birth. The “priest shall make for her before the Lord the expiation required by her unclean discharge” (Lev 15:30). This unclean stigma compelled the women of Jesus’ day to believe that they were soiled and unworthy most of their adult life.

1.5. Cultically and Socially Ostracized

Purity regulations restricted the woman’s space and movement in the society, home and religious places. Normal social functions were prohibited during a woman’s ‘infectious’ period. Being cultically unclean, she was ostracized in cruel ways. She could not participate in any of the religious rituals. A Jewish woman was ordinarily prohibited from learning the Torah. A Rabbi writing even boldly states that it is “better to burn the Torah than to teach it to women.” Only a special section of the Jerusalem Temple, ‘the Court of women’, was open to women free from impurity. But during their menstrual days the Temple was closed to them. Women’s participation in religious ceremonies was peripheral. Her polluted state deprived her even of this minimum participation (Wahlberg 1984: 32).¹

1.6. She Is an Untouchable

The menstruating woman was also treated as an untouchable. Apart from the ritual uncleanness of the Jewish tradition, certain taboos had also developed. Initially it was believed that hygiene and excessive cleanliness were the origin of menstrual taboos.² Later taboos were attributed to her defilement. Pervasive and negative attitudes about menstruation and menstrual blood gradually developed. It was believed that her defilement was communicated to every object with which she came in contact. No law abiding Jew would venture to go near anyone suffering from the obvious cultic stigma of leprosy, menstruation ... in those days. No one would risk ritual integrity by daring to be touched physically by one who was unclean or tainted.

Strict taboos were established to guard against the dangerous influence of menstrual blood, especially to men. Psychologist Karen E. Paige points out that common taboos have prohibited menstruating women from cooking or preparing food for men and from participating in religious activities. A woman was not to touch anything consecrated nor go to the sanctuary until the time of her purification is over (Lev 12:4b). This concept of uncleanness was used to segregate adult women for most of their lives and forbid them access to male precincts of religious, political and educational power. These laws and taboos have been extended and made more onerous both by rabbinical traditions and interpretation and by customs that the Jewish women themselves adopted in later years (Singer 1905: 301.). Thus, the Jews believed that women's subordination had its origin in the Genesis creation account (cf. 1 Cor 11:8). However, women's menstrual blood that was believed to be impure or unclean appears to be the determining factor in de-positioning women in the social, political and religious fields. The religious laws placed women in the sub-altern category of non-Jewish slaves with a 'master' over her (father or husband). So woman was always inferior to man, except in motherhood where her status was equal to that of man.

Women in Jesus' days must be seen against the contemporary Rabbinical Judaism of his time. Jesus' Kingdom movement does not totally reject the Torah but offers an alternative interpretation of it by focusing on people as the locus of God's power and presence.

Through the power of his word and deed, Jesus tries to correct and change the oppressive practice of taboos. However, his vision for a just society has not totally penetrated into the Jewish-Christian environments.

2. Womanhood in the Indian Context

One of the reasons for the restrictions commonly imposed on girls in India was the deeply ingrained dread regarding menstrual blood. Here again religion has played a vital role in sanctioning such beliefs. Menstrual blood is dreaded in the Koran (II. 122.11.228) as well as in the Brahmanical law books of Hinduism.

2.1. Laws of Purity of Hinduism

According to Manu: “A Brahmana when engaged in dinner should be careful so that he does not see a ‘*candala*’ (a man of the despised class), a menstruous woman, a boar, a fowl, a dog ...” (*Manusmriti* III. 239.1V.40).

The Law book of Vyasa states that when a woman has her menstruation she should abandon all her works. She must remain in a secluded place with shame and as a destitute without exchange of any word with others. She must lie on the ground and eat only once at night in an earthen pot. Having spent three nights in this way, she will be pure on the fourth day when she has bathed and washed her clothes (*Vyasa Samhita* II. 37-40).

The *Atr-smṛiti* compares her to an untouchable ‘*candala*’ (despised caste). It also warns anyone accepting water from or talking with a menstruous woman (v. 49-66).

The Puranas too attach restrictions to the menstrual flow of blood. Mantras or the Vedas should not be recited before a menstruating woman. One should not talk with her, nor eat anything offered by her. If she touches anyone, she has to perform a number of penances (Bhattacharya 1980: 14-15).

Menstrual blood is not always dreaded in Indian tradition. It also has a significance of holiness. The sign of blood has the double effect of forbidding contact and of imparting vital energy. Though the menstrual blood is used only in the Tantric cultic worship of the

great goddess Parvati, the smearing of the colour of blood on cult objects is an essential feature of all forms of Hindu religious rituals and mode of worship. Thus, there appears to be an ambivalent meaning attached to this blood of life. On the one hand blood is regarded as something holy and efficacious, and on the other there is an ingrained dread of impurity and unholiness attributed to menstruating women (Altekar 1938: 230).

2.2. Menstrual Rites and Taboos

In several Indian communities the first menstruation is celebrated as a great event. Jabmali Mary Soosai of Tamil Nadu explains that the girl is adorned with jewelry and dressed in a bridal sari. The celebration is an announcement that the girl is ready for the matrimonial market. At the first menstruation, the concept of female pollution related to the menstrual cycle and childbirth are communicated to her. The Hindu society regards women during this period as extremely impure and temporarily an untouchable. There are several religious and social taboos to be observed.

Savitaben of rural Gujarat says that the menstruating woman is isolated from the family and made to live in an outhouse or shed with separate bedding and utensils. She cannot step into the kitchen to cook or serve her family members. She is not allowed to perform the 'puja' at home or in the temple. If this taboo is violated, a woman has to fast as atonement for her sin. Even the sight of her person and the sound of her voice are to be avoided. She is free from her uncleanness on the 5th day after a bath. Hygiene rules often appear in the form of religious taboos in Hindu culture. The cult and taboos de-recognize her existence and regard her as a non-person.

3. Women and the Church

The Church can boast little of its treatment of women. The Jewish perception of the place of women in religion and society as well as its conception of purity and pollution has in subtle ways affected the role of women in the Church. In the Church today we may not have overt blood taboos, but we have their equivalents. Women are barred, rejected and considered inappropriate for certain places and pursuits in the Church. In fact Leonard Swidler and oth-

ers have noted that “the taboo was the basis for the Catholic Church in not allowing a woman in the sanctuary during Mass, for she might be menstruating and hence is unclean” (Walberg 1984: 32). Today women may be given token recognition and representation in the Church, but women are still excluded from decision taking and given a peripheral place in the Church’s system of governance. This exclusion and subjugation are partially based on the traditional association of women’s status with sexuality, sin and reproduction, and cultural myths of labelling women as polluted, temptresses, weak and inferior.

The tendency to perceive women as unclean prevails even in our contemporary times. This is evident in the shocking response a black Anglican Deaconess received from a man who refused to accept the Eucharist from her “because women smell of blood” (Hebblethwaite 1991: 1129). Internalized beliefs in such myths are manifest when one observes men and women evading women distributing communion at the Eucharistic celebration and changing lanes to receive it from a male. In subtle and silent ways, the unclean stigma continues to taint a woman’s image and status.

Jesus’ Kingdom movement of liberating the voiceless and the powerless must be re-activated. A re-reading and re-interpretation of the Scriptures will enable us to restore a woman’s image and her rightful place in our patriarchal society and Church. An attempt is made here to study the episode of the woman with the flow of blood (Lk 8:42b-48).

4. Context of the Episode: The Galilean Tour

The episode of the woman with hemorrhage occurs in the Galilean tour section (4:14-9:50). It is fitted into a framework of spatial movement and is held together by its geographical orientation. Conzelmann notes that in addition to the temporal schema in the journey ministry of this section, there is a geographical schema, which has an underlying Christological significance (Conzelmann 1960: 193). Galilee becomes the exclusive setting for Jesus’ activity. From the wilderness (4:1-13) Jesus returns to Galilee (4:14). He goes to the synagogue at Nazareth (4:16) and then down to Capernaum, a city of Galilee where he heals all kinds of diseases (4:40). He preaches in

the synagogues of Judea (4:44) and by the lake of Gennesaret (5:1). He moves about the cities and villages “proclaiming the Gospel of the Kingdom of God (8:1).

Jesus’ Galilean ministry is presented as a journey narrative of an itinerant preacher (cf 4:14; 44; 7:11; 8:1). It is a continuing theme in the rest of the Lucan double work, often described as the “Gospel of the way.” After the inaugural manifesto which gives a blueprint of Jesus’ ministry and what he plans to accomplish, Jesus’ mission is presented as a ‘going forth’ (4:30; 8:48). The story of Jesus’ missionary journey in Galilee is unfolded (4:14-9:50) before he sets his face to Jerusalem (9:51), the city of destiny. This expansion of Jesus’ journey through Galilee to Jerusalem and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8) has a christological and theological purpose.

K.L. Schmidt notes that, in the journey motif the evangelist gives the change of place significance for redemptive history (Conzelmann 1960: 29). and Conzelmann states that the ‘tour’ is not just a matter of a change of place. It serves the purpose of representing a stage of Christological development (Conzelmann 1960: 46). Though the journey narrative is a Lucan literary device, it is important to note that the ‘tour’ in the Galilee section (4:14-9:50) has a liberative significance. Luke presents Jesus as a sojourner on a Kingdom mission, liberating the ‘poor’ from the power of evil (4:18-19 cf. 4:43; 8:1).

4.1. Crowds Follow Jesus

At this juncture, it is important to note the concept of ‘following’ and the presence of the ‘crowd’ in the Lucan presentation of Jesus’ ministry. While Jesus is ‘on the move’ through the towns and villages of Galilee, on his way to Jerusalem, they follow him everywhere. They are present at the very outset of his public ministry (4:15; 3:7, 10) and figure frequently thereafter as surrounding and pressing upon him to see, touch and hear him (5:1,15; 6:17-19; 8:4, 40, 42; 9:11). The Kingdom of God that Jesus proclaims is an offer of salvation and a challenge that summons them to decision. This offer of salvation that the Kingdom symbolizes, demands a response.

Crowds follow and throng round Jesus. Some, like the Scribes and Pharisees reject Jesus and his message (5:21; 6:6-11; 7:49). They disapprove of his company with “tax collectors and sinners” (5:30) and with the religious and social outcasts. There are also those who acclaim and praise him when they hear and see the power of his word and deed. Among these are those who are amazed but remain as passive spectators, in awe of Jesus’ wondrous deeds (4:15,22; 5:26; 7:11). Many more seek him and come to him to be healed (4:40, 42; 6:17-19). Some having witnessed the power of Jesus, choose to respond to him more concretely. Among these are the disciples who not only accept the master’s teaching but also identify themselves with the master’s way of life in an intimate and personal following of him (6:1,17; 7:11; 8:22-25; 9:18). Apart from the disciples who are called, chosen and sent out to witness and extend the Kingdom of God (6:13; 8:1-2; 9:1-6), other individuals who having experienced the saving power of Jesus and responded to him in faith, are brought into fellowship with Jesus and are commissioned to be proclaimers of the Kingdom of God (7:50; 8:48; 17: 19; 18:42).

A unique feature of Jesus’ ‘proclamation tour’ of the Kingdom is the inclusion of women among the disciples who accompany him. Luke’s mention of women followers and naming them (8:2-3) is a significant opening to a new understanding of discipleship in Jesus’ Kingdom mission. An analysis of some of the ‘women passages’ (7:36-50; 8:40-48, 13:10-17) reveals the significant role women have played in the spread of the Good News. Like the Twelve and the other disciples, Jesus sends them to witness the Kingdom. The women are empowered and commissioned with a function as “witnesses from Galilee (Conzelmann 1960: 47-48). Acts 1:22 clearly shows that we cannot restrict the circle of witnesses of the Kingdom to the ‘apostles’ alone (Lk 6:13).

4.2. Jesus, the Empowered One

The context of the episode reveals the gradual manifestation of the power of God in Jesus’ acts of teaching, preaching, healing and commissioning – all signs of the ushering of the Kingdom of God into human history. Restoring newness of life to Jairus’ daughter and wholeness of life to the woman with hemorrhage, is an ex-

pression of the presence of the Kingdom. Jesus does not allow the laws of ritual impurity to hinder his Kingdom mission. Jesus touches the dead girl and becomes 'unclean' (Num 19: 11-13). The cultically unclean woman touches Jesus and pollutes him (Lev 15: 19-31). However, the power of the Kingdom does not rest in holiness and cultic purity. Deliverance of the young girl of 12 years from the snares of death and of the woman with the flow of blood for 12 years from the bonds of oppressive taboos, is a sign of the power of God's reign and of the establishment of re-constituted Israel.

4.3. Magical Miraculous Practice?

There are some conventional features in the episode: length of the woman's illness, futility of medical help, unnoticed touch of the healer's garment, the going out of power. These are popular ideas bordering on the magical and superstitious practices of healing in the Jewish world.

That nobody could heal her seems to indicate that she had resorted to different methods of treatment. The remedies usually tried in such cases were sometimes severe and sometimes loathsome and absurd. The Talmud has a wide selection of the strangest popular remedies (Loos 1968: 511). Misconceptions about the woman's touch, instant cure and the going out of power further heightens the prevalence of popular beliefs in magic in Jesus' time (Mk 6:56). Besides, as Plummer suggests, the woman's faith appears to be tinged with superstition. She believed that Jesus' garment could heal magically, independent of his will (Plummer 1922: 235). Some like Klausner have even attributed the touch of Jesus' garment and the instant cure to 'auto-suggestion' (Loos 1968: 515).

However, what initially looks like a superstitious act is transformed into a personal encounter. The narration of the woman's healing does not stop at the touch of the garment. The subsequent verses expose the healing power of Jesus and its effect on the recipient. What radically distinguishes Jesus' miracles from those of Jewish and Hellenistic narratives, is their reference to God's power (5:17) and his kingly reign (7:18-22; 11:20).

The episode of the woman with the flow of blood has an underlying miracle structure. It has all the essential characteristics

of the healing pattern set by form critics. But, an analysis of the passage reveals that the saving power of Jesus extends beyond physical healing. It reveals its liberative nature when interpreted in the context of the Lucan Jewish world.

Some of the miracles of Jesus were not mere acts of healing but were acts of power that liberated men and women from the enslaving power of evil (13:10-17; 8: 26-39). Jesus comes as a liberator to free humanity from this evil power (4:16-18). His deeds and encounters are actualizations of the Kingdom of God that destroys the power of evil and recreates and restores people to full humanhood. This we see taking place in the healing of the woman with the flow of blood.

5. The Setting of the Episode (8:42b)

After healing the demoniac at Gerasenes, a Gentile town from where Jesus was asked to leave (8:37), Luke prepares the scene for the encounter between Jesus and the woman with the flow of blood with a twin time-reference phrase in vv 40 & 42b. The first presents Jesus as returning to Galilee where a waiting crowd welcomed him on his arrival (v 40). The second transitional phrase which is also the opening verse of the pericope, introduces us to two significant Lucan motifs: 'Go' (porenou) and 'crowd' (ocloi). The motifs provide the point of departure to understand the communicative target of the evangelist in the episode.

The use of 'go' at two strategic points (vv 42b & 48) of the pericope is significant. It emphasizes with theological pregnancy the place and function of the episode in the Kingdom mission of Jesus. Luke often uses the verb 'go' in relation to Jesus' tours in Galilee (4:30,42b, 7:11) and to his journey to Jerusalem (9:51,53, 10:38, 13:33), the city of destiny. The verb expresses the movement of his Kingdom mission. The onward thrust of his mission seems to move towards some task or goal clearly programmed in the manifesto (4: 16-19).

This movement in the Gospel seems to reveal a purposeful action of Jesus. He was constantly aware of God's mandate and of the purpose of his being 'sent' (cf 4:43). God's mandate directed all

his movements for he had to fulfill what he came for (cf 4:43) and “finish his course...” (13:33-34) with bringing the Kingdom of salvation to all. This is evident in Jesus’ encounter of the woman ‘as he went’ (42b) towards Jairus’ house to continue his Kingdom mission of restoring life to the dying daughter (8:41-42). The cure of the woman takes place in the context of Jesus’ progressive movement of proclaiming the power of the Kingdom.

The waiting crowd that welcomed Jesus (v. 40) now becomes an unruly mob when it sees him moving away from them. The crowd for the most part of Jesus’ ministry is an anonymous background. However, verse 42b does not refer to the anonymous crowd but the crowd that had heard Jesus’ word (8:4) and waited to welcome him on his return from Gerasenes (8:40). Physical contact with Jesus was inevitable but the contact was that of a mob, impersonal and unintentional. This dense crowd was an appropriate setting for the ailing woman to approach Jesus secretly. Her defiling presence and identity were unnoticed in the crowd.

6. Biology is Destiny

The woman is plagued with a flow of blood for twelve years. The profoundest aspect of the woman’s lingering infirmity is its hopelessness “no one was able to heal.” Commentators generally interpret the woman’s infirmity as a mere physical disease and its healing as any other miracle of faith (5:17-26; 7:2-10; 18:35-43). However, the woman’s predicament was not just her incurable illness but also her permanent state of defilement. A continuous issue of blood was an illness that meant more to the Jews than to the Gentiles because it made the woman cultically unclean before the Law (Lev 15:19-31).

6.1. The Touch of an Untouchable

“She came up behind him and touched the fringe of his garment”

Her prolonged illness was a social and religious stigma and rendered her totally powerless as she was also economically impoverished. Apart from a physical cure, she also had to be freed from the enslaving taboos that deprived her of her right to live as a normal

human person. Her female disease subdued her status to that of an outcast like the cultically unclean lepers' (5:12-14; 17:11-14). Her female Jewish origin made her a 'double outcast'. No wonder she risked financial ruin to become healthy and ritually clean again.

The nature of her prolonged illness that was attributed to sin and the resultant levitical defilement compelled the woman to be wary. She did not want to own the legal defilement of her malady publicly. She had internalized her unclean status and did not feel worthy to touch Jesus openly or request him for a healing in public. She was also afraid of a possible reprimand from Jesus or the crowd and so chose to do the least obvious act "to come up behind him and touch³ the hem of his garment."⁴

6.2. The Touch Transmits Power that Heals

"Power has gone forth from me"

Her gesture of faith was not unmixed with fear and possibly superstition. But her singular faith in Jesus' power urges her to press through the crowd and touch the hem of his garment. Her touch transmits Jesus' healing power to her. The noted French exegete, François Bovon, aptly describes it as "*Le flux de sang est stoppé par le flux de la puissance divine*" (Bovon 1991: 437). This means that the flow of blood is stopped by the flow of divine power. We have several instances when Jesus touched people. He touched the leper (5:13); the servant's ear (22:51); the bier of the widow's son (7:14). There are also instances of Jesus being touched: Crowds sought to touch him (6:19); the woman touched his garment (8:44). Pharisees accused Jesus of permitting a sinful woman to touch him (7:39). The touch in all these incidents symbolically becomes the transmitter of Jesus' power. He transmits his healing power to the sick (6:19; 8:44), his life-giving power to the dead (8:55-56) and his forgiving power to the sinful woman (7:50). Thus, we see that the power transmitted through the touch does not only bring physical healing but also saves and restores wholeness of life.

6.3. The Touch Exposes the Stigmatized Woman

“Who was it that touched me”

This episode points to something more significant than the immediate reference of physical healing. Jesus’ saving power also regenerates and re-creates. It brings those touched with God’s power within the realm of the Kingdom of total salvation.

Why was the touch of an ailing woman in the crowd so important? Why was Jesus more sensitive to the touch of an individual than the crowd that pressed round him? With his outright query, “Who was it that touched me?” we enter the decisive phase of the episode (vv 45-48). The story now takes a new turn of meaning. Jesus was not seeking mere information about the touch but more importantly he wanted to expose the identity of the unknown and stigmatized woman. In exposing the hidden identity of the woman, Jesus defied a priestly and Talmudic ban on being touched by an unclean person. He ran the risk of breaking the Law and of exposing his own pollution. His assertive statement “someone touched me” serves the double purpose of exposing the identity of the woman and of proclaiming his liberative power manifested through the act of touch.

The power (*dunamis*) that has gone forth from him has healed her physically and would restore wholeness of life (v 48) to her. The touch transmits the power of Jesus to the woman. Apart from the “power from above” (24:49) promised to the apostles after the resurrection, this is the only incident in the public life of Jesus where the power of Jesus heals the person and remains in her. It constitutes her relationship with God as the Father with the Son (Gal 4:6).

6.3. The Woman is Reinstated

“Daughter, your faith has made you whole”

The woman is empowered to declare in the presence of all her experience of Jesus’ saving power. Unmindful of the crowd and running the risk of being rebuked by them, she publicly narrates why she had touched him and how she was healed. The words “why” and “how” encapsulate her testimony. It was not only an

open testimony but also a proclamation and a witnessing of the power of the Kingdom. The power that was transmitted into her brought about a radical change in the woman. The woman who earlier was voiceless, now speaks; who was powerless, is now empowered to declare publicly; who was anonymous and hidden in the crowd, is now brought to prominence (v 47). The untouchable becomes whole.

She who was branded as an untouchable and treated as one (cf. Lev 15:19-31) shows how a 'touch' restores her. She thus exposes her new found identity. In describing how she had been healed, she exposes the power of Jesus and the nature of his Kingdom mission. The woman's active response in v 47 is a re-play of the first part of the episode (vv 42b-44) where the same details are shrouded in the woman's silent action.

In response to her proclamation of the divine power within her, Jesus brings the woman out of her anonymity and addresses her as 'daughter'. In calling her 'daughter' the liberating power of Jesus draws the woman from the margin to the centre, from invisibility to recognition and from a non-person to the status of a daughter. The power that "has gone forth" from Jesus remains in the woman and recreates her. Her restoration is a re-birth and an entry into the family of those "who do the will of God" (8:21). Jesus found favour with the woman because of her single-minded faith and calls her "daughter" (v 48).

Like the sinful woman (7:50), the bent woman (13:16) and Zaccheus, the despised tax collector (19:9), this outcast woman too is socially and cultically re-habilitated. This is the only incident in the New Testament where Jesus in the vocative case addressed one of the poor of the kingdom as 'daughter'. In 13:16 and 19:9 the bent woman and Zaccheus are addressed as 'daughter of Abraham' and 'son of Abraham'. The appropriateness of calling the woman 'daughter' in the presence of the crowd is to announce her new found identity and relationship with God. This daughtership is different from the blood relationship of Jairus' daughter and from the covenantal relationship of the daughter (13:16) and son (19:9) of Abraham.

“Who Is my Mother, my Brother, my Sister ..?”

The woman has appropriated for herself a dignity worthy of a child of God, of a true daughter in contrast to those who claim descendency by inheritance and observance of the laws (13:14) or who claim natural relationship with Jesus by blood ties (8:19-20). Jesus outrightly questions the crowd “who is my mother, my brother, my sister ...(son, daughter..)? This pointed question shows that the true kindred of Jesus are those who do the will of God (8:20). Ignoring his blood relatives, he calls those among the crowd his mother, sister, brother ... indicating that there is something more than mere biological relationship.

The woman’s self surrender and openness in responding to Jesus’ Kingdom message (8:1-3) enabled her to receive the promised salvation in the assuring words “daughter, your faith has made you whole” (v 48), just as Elizabeth and Zechariah, Mary and Joseph, Anna and Simeon did. Jesus justifies his action of addressing an outcast woman as ‘daughter’. He proves to the crowd that her faith action has yielded the hundredfold assured to those who believe and hold fast to the Good News of the Kingdom (8:8, 15).

Jesus’ relationship with the woman is a radical breakthrough of the patriarchal cultic structure and social system. In calling her ‘daughter’ he shows that it is neither biological ties nor covenantal laws that gives a woman or man her /his rightful status. It is only a trusting response to the saving power of Jesus, the core of the Kingdom message, that makes one a true mother or father, son or daughter, brother or sister of Jesus, that is, a true disciple of Jesus. For faith is an essential aspect of discipleship. The woman manifested this faith of a true disciple in her attitude of self-surrender and in her personal commitment to Jesus.

Jesus extols the faith of the woman. His assuring words “Your faith has made you whole” corrects the popular misconceptions of magic and superstition associated with her healing for it was the grasp of the woman’s faith and not her hand that wrought the cure. This was the beginning of her faith-commitment to Jesus and his Kingdom mission.

Like the Samaritan leper (Lk 17:11-16), the forgiven woman (7:36-50) and the blind beggar (18:35-43), the polluted woman also returned to Jesus with an attitude of gratitude and self-surrender. She came trembling, prostrated before Jesus and proclaimed in the presence of all, her healing experience. In this act of metanoia, she not only received the gift but the giver, not only the healing but also the healer. Her attitude of self-surrender and faith-commitment to the person of Jesus is that of a disciple. This is already the beginning of a greater task of discipleship that Jesus will commission her with.

6.5. The Woman is Empowered for Mission

“Go unto peace”

Verse 48 brings the story to a climax. Jesus restores the woman’s status to full humanhood with his reassuring words, “daughter, your faith has made you whole.” Having empowered her, he now sends her with a commission “Go unto peace.”⁵ The woman who had begun her witnessing in the presence of the crowd (v 47), is now sent on a mission of proclaiming the Good News. The focus is shifted from the saving activity of Jesus to his commissioning activity “go⁶ unto peace” (48b cf. 7:50). In Jesus’ Kingdom, proclaimers of the Good News were not limited to the chosen Twelve (9:1-6) or their inner circle (9:49-50). Any recipient of God’s saving power and peace are called to proclaim the source of such a blessing.

The specific end of the woman’s appointment is clearly indicated in the commission ‘Go unto peace.’ She is sent with the divine power of daughtership to witness the salvation that has come to her. Her total well-being, completeness, wholeness and restoration summarized in the word ‘peace’⁷ which is identical with Acts 28:28 is the content of her witnessing. Along with the other ostracized men and women: the Samaritan leper, the forgiven woman, the bent woman and others, the polluted woman will help mend the breach created by oppressive religious rituals and taboos.

The defiled woman who was kept aside for twelve years is brought to prominence as ‘daughter.’ The powerless woman is empowered to be a witnessing disciple of the Kingdom. She is sent to

bring the hope of the Kingdom and the 'peace' of sonship and daughtership to all other powerless men and women. Empowering and entrusting her with a witnessing commission, God's Kingdom makes an advance. The episode puts in evidence the nature of the Kingdom and foreshadows the purposeful movement of Jesus' mission.

7. From Enforced Invisibility to Empowered Women

The episode of the woman with the flow of blood clearly shows that the Bible has both an oppressive and liberative thread running through it, specially in its narration of women characters. Samuel Rayan rightly observes, "the biblical background of Jesus' ministry is an interplay of lights and shadows as far as the feminist question is concerned" (Rayan 1986: 5).

Jesus' Kingdom movement was basically a 'protest' movement rejecting all forms of discriminatory laws and oppressive rituals. Jesus went against the traditional religious and social system of the times. It was a movement of metanoia. His value system brought about a reversal of human order. It offered hope and wholeness to the scum of society which also included women. It empowered powerless women with a 'power' that freed them from social and religious enslavement and restored to them their identity and dignity. Freeing of the cultically unclean woman, the bent woman, the sinful woman and others, are manifestations of the presence of the liberating power of God.

Is the liberating power of Jesus still operative today when millions of women continue to be dehumanized by oppressive socio-religious systems, laws and taboos? How can the Kingdom continue to be effective in the lives of these women? The answer is the woman herself for the power of God is within her. This is appropriately expressed in the Hindu perspective of femaleness. The female is first of all *shakti* (energy/power), the energizing principle of the universe. The female is also *prakriti* (Nature) – the undifferentiated Matter of the universe. *Shakti* underlies both creation and divinity. All creation and preservation of life in the Hindu world is based on femaleness (*shakti*), the primordial divine energy. *Sakti* is the dynamic power that makes everything alive.

Women would fail to be true to their ‘femaleness’ if they did not believe in their innate *shakti* (power/energy). Like the cultically unclean woman, women must take the initiative to be healed of their internalized wounded self-esteem. Self-emancipation begins from within through a process of metanoia – a metanoia from a wounded self-esteem to a sense of personal worth in relation to society, religion and the whole of life. With God’s power within us, women must strive to cast off enslaving shackles and press on for self liberation.

Jesus healed the nameless outcast woman, re-instated her socially and he called her ‘daughter.’ The hidden woman is now seen; the silenced speaks. How can this Good News be brought to our society where women are compelled to live as anonymous, invisible and voiceless entities? Eleanor Roosevelt, co-author of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights once stated that human rights begin “in small places, close to home,” adding that “unless these rights have a meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere.” Empowered women must become agents of power and touch the lives of other powerless women, beginning “in small places, close to home” and enable them to attain a status and an identity worthy of a woman. The touch of the empowered one makes a difference in our world for:

One by one we are coming to awareness
One by one we are committed to a cause
One by one we are challenging the structures
One by one we are changing the laws.

Side by side we are bound to make a difference
Side by side that is how the spirit thrives
Side by side we are receiving some concessions
Side by side we are changing our lives.

Hand in hand we can manage any mountain
Hand in hand we are accomplishing the climbs
Hand in hand we confront discrimination
Hand in hand we are changing the times.

Notes

1. Wahlberg, R.C.1984 p. 32 notes that later Medieval Catholicism had made the stipulation that menstruating women were not to come into the Church.
2. A taboo might be a blessing or curse. Thus blood produced defilement but when properly treated the stigma of impurity is removed. Menstrual taboos are prominent in classical religious laws: Hebrew, Hindu, Zoroastrian, etc. The Mishna and Talmud include several chapters on "Menstruous Women" JBL (1984) 621.
3. It is believed that the practice of touch seems to have its origin in the Elijah-Elisha healings. It was used to identify the healer as prophet in whose body lies supernatural healing power (1Kg 17:21; 2Kg 4:34; 13:21 cf. 8:46). The ritual is mentioned in Qumran but not in Rabbinic healings
4. It is important to note that the usual practice in the NT healing episodes is; others beseech Jesus to heal an infirmed person (4:38. 5:18-19; 7:1-3 cf Mk 7:32; 8:22) or Jesus takes the initiative to cure them (Lk 6:6-11; 14:1-6). There are also instances of individual men stricken with a physical infirmity seeking a healing in public (Lk 18:37-38). Even social and cultic outcasts like the lepers make bold to approach Jesus directly and publicly request him for a cure (5:12; 17:13). However, there is no instance of infirmed woman openly approaching Jesus or directly requesting him for a healing. She either silently comes from behind (8:44) and through an unnoticed gesture seeks healing or she is picked out by Jesus from the crowd (13:10-17) or others beseech him for her cure (4:38). The woman's status and infirmity pose a serious setback for an open and direct encounter with Jesus.
5. "Go in peace" echoes 1 Sam 1:17 and Lk 2:14. This peace is more than a blessing or greeting. It is a gracious bestowal of power that the recipient retains if he/she is a faithful follower of the Kingdom (8:15,21).
6. "Go" (porenou) is frequently used in the Lucan writing to commission Jesus followers to continue his Kingdom mission: the forgiven woman (7:50); the lawyer (10:37); the Samaritan leper (17:19); the apostles (Acts 5:20); Philip (Acts 8:26) and Paul (Acts 20:1,22; 22:21). These have personally experienced the saving power of the Kingdom and are commissioned to be witnessing disciples of his Kingdom.
7. 'Peace' has its basis in the OT 'shalom' (1 Sam 16:5; 2 Sam 18:28; Judg 19:20). Shalom is a Hebrew word that has a sense of wholeness in relation to oneself, the human community and to God. It includes a keen consciousness and deep acceptance of Yahweh's activity of blessing bestowed with every saving act (Ps 29:11 assures the people in distress "the Lord will bless his people with Shalom" (cf. Num 6:24-26). TDNT vol II 402-411.

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Conclusions of the National Consultation on:

PARTNERSHIP IN THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

01. An invited group of 40 women and men religious and priests (theologians, social workers, activists, educators, counsellors, formators, etc.) from all over India gathered for a National Consultation on “Partnership in the Mission of the Church”, from December 7-10, 2003, at Ishvani Kendra, Pune. The Consultation was initiated by Streevani: an organization committed to the empowerment of women and to the promotion of gender-justice in the Church and the Indian society.
02. The Mission of the Church includes the ushering in of a just, egalitarian and participatory society. But the presence of unjust, oppressive structures and a patriarchal mindset have led to a Church and a society that are not just, egalitarian and participatory. Therefore, the Church in its endeavour to be a prophetic sign needs to address issues related to gender-justice in the Indian society.
03. Hence, to understand better “partnership in mission,” the participants journeyed for three days through paper presentations, panel and group discussions in a common search and dialogue.
04. Down through the ages, women more than men have experienced the pain of exclusion, of being denied power in decision making, of lack of professional training, of being subjugated to structures of patriarchy and stereotyped roles, of being denied full participation in the ministerial life of the Church, and of being seen as objects rather than subjects in the Church and in society.

05. This broken partnership and these unjust patriarchal structures go against the very values of the reign of God. Such a reign respects males and females as persons, includes women's voices and views in decision making, planning and deliberations of the Church sharing its resources without discrimination and shares power in order to build a world imbued with justice and equality.
06. Hence, it is essential that women and men work as partners in God's reign. However, the present societal as well as ecclesial structures with patriarchal framework and mindsets impede the implementation of this vision of partnership in the mission of the Church in India.
07. The presence of one lakh and twenty-six thousand women religious in India need to be appreciated and they should be brought into the mainstream of Church life. Their contribution at the grass roots and as pioneers in frontier missions needs to be lauded; sadly, they are excluded from many a decision making body and their contribution in intellectual fora is very meagre. Women religious have much to contribute to the thinking, planning and execution of the policies and plans of the Church in India and hence we want to encourage greater participation and partnership in the following ways:
08. *To voice jointly concerns and issues pertaining to women*
For a more credible, effective, relevant and egalitarian Church, the voices of both men and women need to be listened to. Women, who form half of the people of God, need to be awakened to claim their God-given rights and duties in building the Church and the new humanity. This cannot be done in isolation. Hence, it is an imperative that men are aware of, support and express with women the pain, concerns and issues pertaining to the empowerment of women in the Church and society at large.
09. *To share leadership roles in pastoral ministries*
Often decision-making and utilization of resources are handled mainly by men. Women have much to contribute, but have

had limited access to these roles and resources. Hence, it is necessary that men and women share leadership roles especially in the pastoral ministries. *For a restructuring of the power structures within the Church, it is imperative to de-link orders and juridical power, so as to develop partnership in ministries.*

10. *To revamp formation programmes*

The extended years of formation are crucial for moulding values, attitudes and behaviours of a younger generation of clergy and religious. Therefore, contextualized programmes of formation in mission need to be created. Issues like feminist theology, partnership in mission, gender-sensitivity, sexuality, collaborating and sharing of power with women in ministry need to be focused upon so as to change the patriarchal, stereotyped mindset of the young formees. Moreover, interactive programmes, which bring together young women and men in formation, will enhance emotional and affective maturity. Women formators should be part of seminary training.

11. *To create new forms of worship*

The Eucharist is the source and summit of mission. The Eucharist is at times used as a tool to control women religious, as they are dependent on the male clergy. There is a need for new forms of worship with feminine spirituality. Female religious need to celebrate creative liturgies in remote areas especially when the priest is unavailable. Besides, there can be better partnership in the planning and celebration of liturgical services. Space can be engendered in the Church structures for proactive participation of women and laity. Different services rendered by women and laity can be converted into ministries if they are mandated by the community.

12. *To use gender sensitive language*

Language is an expression of our mind and belief. A more gender sensitive language in liturgical texts, theological expression and in ordinary conversation will be one of the ways of genuine partnership.

13. *To theologize contextually*

Theologizing has been mainly the responsibility of the male clergy in India. This trend has led to a one-sided approach to the understanding of God, the Church and the Sacraments. For a more balanced and holistic approach to theology, women religious in particular need to be given a sound theological formation, so as to enable them to bring women's experiences and perspectives to theologizing, making it a more rich and meaningful expression of our faith.

14. *To develop respectful relationships*

Respect and equality in relationships is an essential ingredient for productive teamwork and collaborative ventures. Relationships need to be respected and not abused especially involving women and men at work in common ministries. The dignity of woman as a person needs to be enhanced.

15. *To confront unjust structures like globalization and communalism*

An urgent need is networking with other NGOs to confront the forces that dehumanize society, specially globalization and communalism. Joining hands with men and women in working out concrete strategies to bring about new and just structures will hasten the reign of God which is our common mission.

16. *To invite reflection on this theme by CRI, CBCI, etc.*

Wider reflection by all India Catholic bodies will help disseminate the agenda of partnership. Policy-making bodies should be sensitive to the specific needs of women and men engaged in the Church's ministries.

17. *To start new forms of Ministries*

Partnership is to be realized in initiating collaborative ventures for the transformation of structures of domination, independent of traditional forms of ministry. Partnership is also to be realized by sending religious personnel to work with groups or movements already working beyond the boundaries of religion.

18. The mission of the Church, is to usher in the reign of God actualizing justice, equality and freedom. In order to bring about effective partnership in the Church we need to work for changing the oppressive structures as well as transforming the consciousness of both women and men. There should be a critical attitude towards the patriarchal mindset operative in theology and literature. An urgency of re-reading the Bible from feminist perspectives is felt today. If we develop a pneumatological ecclesiology there is a good deal of scope to build up a Church rooted in gender justice and partnership.

Streevani
Pune 411014

Book Reviews

Nirmala Jeyaraj (ed.) *Women and Society: A Reader in Women's Studies* (Madurai: Vanguard Press, 2001) pp. xv and 593. Rs. 200.

In recent years, several colleges in India have introduced 'Women' studies as a required discipline at the undergraduate level. One of them is the Lady Doak College, a prestigious institution in the temple city of Madurai. With a view to bring out a reader in women's studies, Nirmala Jeyaraj has edited the book *Women and Society*, using the expertise of the faculty members of the college. Written by women the book reflects a wide range of feminist perspectives across numerous disciplines including science and technology, economics and globalisation, literature art and politics.

The critical theoretical concept involved in this enterprise is that of 'gender' introduced as a way of distinguishing the social constitution of masculine feminine, from the biological categories of male and female. With 'gender' as a social construct, women are now able to examine why and how some spheres of human life are described as masculine and some as feminine. Such a perspective has enabled women to offer persuasive and dramatic interpretations of several phenomena in many areas of intellectual enquiry.

From the 1970's the feminist perspective in any discipline has been greatly facilitated by the feminist movement with its enquiry into the ways in which the conventional disciplines had been shaped excluding the lives and experiences of women. In earlier time, the struggle of women was confined to issues of widow marriage, purdha, access to education and legal emancipation of women. Today feminism, as an awareness of women's oppression and exploitation in society has emerged both as an ideology and as a quest for socio-political change towards equality and justice in society. The study of women's issues, no longer belongs to the exclusive domain of women. Both women and liberal-minded men are viewing feminism as a radical movement for women's equality, dignity and freedom of choice in every aspect of life.

The different essays in the book are united in pointing out that our behaviour; thinking and our self-identity are all socially constructed. The authors clearly show how easy it is for women to internalise their secondary status in society; the book also indicates the variety of ways in which masculine bias can express itself in the content and process in several areas of life. One of the areas is the home; behind a peaceful home, one can find the much-maligned individualism, dissent in concepts and practice leading to unending violent acts. The discipline of science and technology, the most sophisticated cultural achievement in contemporary times, also finds a place. Technology has provided a number of household gadgets, which are of immense help to women. If women are to manage their own lives, they have to trust their own judgements. This calls for intellectual development and technical efficiency. If women are intellectually dependent, they can never be free. The book puts stress on the necessity of women to awaken themselves from mental and physical slavery. What adds an aesthetic touch to the book are the essays portraying the ways in which women are viewed in the religions of Hinduism, Islam and Christianity, in literature both English and Tamil, and in the arts.

The book is fairly well structured and offers a delightful series of insights and concrete examples leading to a new gestalt. The strength of the book lies in the collective enthusiasm and commitment to a theme of current interest. The comprehensive scope and clarity of the book ought to make it a valuable guide to those institutions interested in the emerging discipline of women's studies.

Sarojini Henry

Lawrence W. Fagg, *Electromagnetism and the Sacred: At the Frontier of Spirit and Matter* (New York: Continuum, 1999), pp. 144, US \$ 24.95.

As the title suggests, this is a book that relates, academically, modern science to contemporary religion. Electromagnetism, according to Lawrence Fagg, ultimately underlies all of earthly nature from rocks and plants to humans and their brains. Electromagnetic radiation – light – has symbolized divine presence in the spiritual life of humankind for millennia, and yet following the increasing disenchanting of nature, we have lost that contact between the physical and the spiritual.

In this hymn to the natural currents with which we are surrounded and which pulse through us, the author, a Fellow of the American Physi-

cal Society, argues that the ubiquity of electromagnetic phenomena constitutes a powerful physical analogy for the ubiquity of God's indwelling presence. By presenting the scientific information in a simple and straightforward manner, Fagg opens up the rich and unexplored dimension of electromagnetism for the theologians and challenges them to take physics critically and creatively.

Coming to theology, the author is emphatic: "The inherent beauty that characterizes so much of nature and that is elicited in religious scriptures worldwide should be a significant component of any theology, whether natural or revelatory" (122). Thus the author pleads for an aesthetic theology (along with a theology of analogy) to join hands with theology of nature, to make it more meaningful. The author is humble enough to admit that the book does not argue for the existence of God, but assumes God's existence, tries to relate to one of the most profound scientific theories and comes out, purified, enamored and enchanted with God and nature. Without naively equating electromagnetism with the sacred, the author compares both of them and draws out the significance of such a comparison done analogically. The author agrees with Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, "without the slightest doubt there is something through which material and spiritual energy hold together and are complementary" (87).

The book is a typical example of theology being enlightened by physics, and it can be profitable to theologians who are not scientifically sophisticated. This book is a significant contribution to interfacing science and religion.

Kuruvilla Pandikattu SJ

Johnson J. Puthenpurackal (ed.) The Postmodern...: A Siege of the Citadel of Reason (Delhi: Media House, 2002), pp. 176, Rs. 150/US \$ 9.95.

Both reviled and revered, postmodernism has come to stay. There is no single academic discipline where insights from postmodernism have not been taken seriously, even if it is with disdain.

The editor does not claim that the book presents a coherent picture of postmodernism (can it ever be attempted?). But he hopes that the book would create a 'stir' in the 'citadel of reason.' The editor hopes that this stir will gather momentum, bringing in new intellectual and existential concerns.

(Contd on p. 130)

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