

THE UNMAKING AND MAKING OF A WOMAN

Paper presented at the

1st International Conference on the theme: *“Life, Family, Development: the role of women in the promotion of human rights”*

Rome, on 20-21 March 2009.

Presented by:

Sr. Daphne Sequeira rscj

Ashankur Rural Women Centre

(Nashik Diocese)

Village Bhokar, Tal. Shirampur

Dist. Ahmednagar

Maharashtra India, 413 709

Phone: 02422 – 245649

ashwomen@rediffmail.com



Ashankur which means “Shoots of Hope”

The Unmaking and Making of a Woman¹

Dear Friends greetings from India,

I am a social worker. I have been working with women over past 14 years in rural India where 70 % of our population lives. I have been working with Dalit and Tribal communities. Yet, I am not an anthropologist neither I am a theologian. What I share today is more of my experience at the grassroots and insights about women's situation in rural India. I hope it would provide us a perspective for further discussions and reflections.

The paper focuses on how the progressive loss of "power" affects the personal consciousness of a woman who used to be identified as the goddess of power and the goddess of wealth in the Indian context.

The oppressive social, political, economic and religious processes in the traditional Indian society push down a woman to such a level that she internalizes the system to a great extent. Such consistent internalization by a woman causes not only material impoverishment but also lead to her marginalization in the society. The making of a woman is only possible by awakening her true identity as a centre and source of power in her family, community and the society at large.

THE POWER WITHIN AND WITHOUT...

India is known for its rich and traditional culture. Our Traditional religion for centuries has depicted woman as a symbol of strength. In Hinduism, the goddess "Durga" (the inaccessible) or "Maa Durga" is the "One who can redeem in situations of utmost distress". "Durga" is a form of Goddess the supremely radiant goddess, a super heroine depicted as having 10 arms, riding a lion carrying weapons maintaining a meditative

¹ The idea of the title is taken from Prof. Jan Breman, one of the leading Anthropologist and sociologists, university of Amsterdam, the Netherlands. His book "the Making and Unmaking of an Industrial working Class" is an intensive study of the rise and fall of mill workers of Ahmedabad.

smile and practicing mudras. An embodiment of creative feminine force (shakti). “Durga” manifested fearlessness and patience, and never loses her sense of humour even during spiritual battles of epic proportions.

Secondly - “Lakshmi” is the Hindu goddess who is a goddess of wealth prosperity, purity and generosity, and the embodiment of beauty, grace and charm. “Lakshmi” is goddess of the menace to achieving objectives, including prosperity in the lives of humankind. Traditionally if the image of woman is so strong and positive then ...

What is so basic to us empowering women in India

The answer to this vital question is well illustrated by the image of power house² and the control room³. Electricity is generated or produced in a power station. The power that is produced in the powerhouse lightens and brightens homes, streets, cities and villages. It provides energy to our institutions, industries and production houses. However, the power generated in a power house is controlled, regulated and managed by the control room. Once the control room takes the charge the entire powerhouse comes under the authority of the control room operations. Thus, this image illustration provides us the conceptual framework of how power dynamics function and operate in our society. (“Power refers broadly

² A power station (also referred to as a generating station, power plant, or powerhouse) is an industrial facility for the [generation](#) of [electric power](#).

Power plant is also used to refer to the [engine](#) in ships, aircraft and other large vehicles. Some prefer to use the term *energy center* because it more accurately describes what the plants do, which is the conversion of other forms of [energy](#), like [chemical energy](#), [gravitational potential energy](#) or heat energy into electrical energy. However, *power plant* is the most common term in the U.S., while elsewhere *power station* and *power plant* are both widely used.

At the center of nearly all power stations is a [generator](#), a rotating machine that converts mechanical energy into electrical energy by creating relative motion between a magnetic field and a conductor. The energy source harnessed to turn the generator varies widely. It depends chiefly on which fuels are easily available and on the types of technology that the power company has access to. (From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia).

³ The Control Room is manned 24 hours a day seven days a week by System Controllers on a daily shift basis. Chief System Controller oversee all activities and perform regular quality and coordination functions to ensure safe and effective operation of the electrical network at all times. The power station operator are responsible for the safety of the work crews that frequently do repairs on the mechanical and electrical equipment. They maintain the equipment with periodic [inspections](#) and log temperatures, pressures and other important information at regular intervals. Operators are responsible for starting and stopping the [generators](#) depending on need. They are able to synchronize and adjust the voltage output.

to any ability to effect change or exert control over things or people, subjects or objects”). Political scientists have frequently defined power as "the ability to influence the behaviour of others" with or without resistance. However, the concept of power has many varied connotations and shades of meanings in our ordinary usages. Two among them are important and relevant for us to understand the situation of women and their prevailing conditions and status in our society.

- 1) Power is understood as strength, energy, capacity
- 2) Power also means authority, control and dominance

It is very important to understand the conceptual paradigm of power house and the control as it explains aptly the prevailing situation of women in India and elsewhere to a large extent. There is tremendous innate power within a woman. She has the power that brings “the world into being” and nurtures it. Through her will, service and commitment she generates power from morning till evening in her family, community and the society.

Unfortunately this power is control and in our day today life in Indian Society there are different and contradictory images. (The oppressive social political economic and religious processes in the traditional society has consistently pushed down woman to such a level that the progressive loss of power affected the personal consciousness of a woman who used to be identified as a goddess of power and wealth and the power house of energy.) This loss of power happens at every level, however two of the most prominent areas where it manifests at highest level are

- The economic domain (the Material Impoverishment) and
- Second the socio-cultural domain (her Marginalization in the society).

However, women do not own their own power, resources and

energies. It is often controlled, managed and dominated by forces outside her, men in her family, community and society at large. She is made dependent on others; her power is taken away from her.

Economic domain (The Material impoverishment of women)

As you are aware dowry is very prevalent in Indian culture in all religions. The purpose behind the dowry system is to provide security for a girl in her husband's house (In her dowry she may have brought Rs 50,000 (806 Euro), Motorbike, TV or any other things that in-laws family has demanded). But her dowry is not owned by her. On her wedding day itself it becomes contribution to her husband's family.

Secondly, women educated or uneducated, work hard to earn. In the morning and in the evening they are busy managing house chaos and during the day they go either on their own fields to work or on other's field or as a domestic workers'. In fact 65 to 70 % of Dalit and tribal families are female headed due to either husband's desertion or his income being spent on liquor etc. But what happens to her earning? It is set for the family and is taken for granted. As against this she has no bank account, no house in her name, no property in her name. She absolutely owns nothing.

The woman is full of energy her talents and her capacities are used productively to earn family's living but she is not considered as earning member of the family. She earns but has no right to own. And because there is no owning she becomes depending. She internalizes the fact that her survival depends on her family and so she learns to abide herself to whatever is demanded and commanded of her. This has gone deep into woman's conscious and her identity is either her husband or husband's family. (Example: Gavate bai: The mother transfers same to her daughter and it is perpetuating.)There are some other factors where woman becomes source of exploitation

The system of “Money lender” is still prevalent in India. In many of our villages the loan is taken by family from the money lenders for different emergency needs including dowry. So whole family become bonded labourers on his land till they repay the loan. The biggest price has to be paid by a woman or a young girl in the family by way of sexual gratification of the moneylender. And she keeps quite as she feels obliged to pay the debt of the family at her cost.

Marginalization of women in the society

Along with taking away the material resources from her, a woman is also robbed of her status and dignity. Her dependence makes her subject to many Cultural, Economic, Socio-religious and Political obligations in the society.

Cultural Marginalization

⇒ Culturally her dependency and submissive nature is very obvious. In the North and in the West of our Country, in most of the states, women have to cover her face with Sari when she in public places or any man or any respected person comes in front of her. In some states like Rajasthan, Bihar women of all religions have to cover their face fully.

⇒ In the houses women are most of the time in the kitchen and the kitchen wall will have a hole from where they can speak to the guest and the men and the elders of the family.

Economic Marginalization

⇒ India’s 39% population live below poverty line. Poverty is defined as family whose income is below Rs 15000/ (Euro 242) for a year. The real need of the family of five people is Rs 120 (2Euros) a day. Poorer the family, the woman of the household is most burdened.

⇒ In India the family who lives below poverty line has a special government card. She is supposed to get certain amount of grains, oil at concessional rates from government. Often these grains are very low quality. Since these poor families have no voice, often the agent does not give them even half the quantity that they should get. The women spend lots of time in cleaning these grains or eating bad food, consequently they remain malnourished.

⇒ Poverty has close relationship with caste. Dalit women rarely own any land and most of them work as daily wage agricultural labourer (around 81% of Dalit women workers are agricultural labourers and 19% are cultivators by contrast only 43% of non Dalit women are labourers and 42% were cultivators). Agricultural work is seasonal in nature and is available only at certain time.

Socio-religious Marginalization

⇒ Women are marginalized as women because as said earlier, society has perceived her as weaker person and dalit women face additional oppression because of her lower caste status. On the level of cast there are still villages where we have separate wells for lower caste people. In the temples women will always sit behind.

⇒ At devotional places there are women who are prohibited to enter the mandir. Even in our churches menstruating women do not receive communion because she has internalise that it is something unclean. There are many religious practices which have confirmed a woman that she is a subordinate person. Like there is a feast like “Vaterpornima” - this is celebrated everywhere by women where she is suppose to tie a string to banyan trees seven times and pray to the lord to get same husband for the next seven lives. No matter how much beating she gets from him and women blindly follow this.

Political Marginalization

⇒ Women are constantly eliminated from decision making in her family, in her village. But it does not stop here. Often the decisions are made for her - by the oldest or by men in the house. At our centre we have meetings of the leaders every three months. When we plan some programs, especially exposure trips, no women will give her name on the spot. She will always say “I will ask in my family and let you know”. Her decision is solely dependent on her husband’s permission.

⇒ Her segregation in the society makes her involvement in politics very insignificant and her vote is hijacked by so called knowledgeable group that is men. At the time of election in the villages men in the family tell women on what symbol she should stamp. She usually is not even aware of the candidate whom she is voting. Same thing happens with government schemes where often her signature is misused.

Last year we had one quick survey of the villages after the local self government election. We realise 92% of women’s votes were based on their family. When asked how they made choice of the candidate, they said it was based on what their husbands or brothers or village leaders had told them. They do not know who the member of the constituency is and who does the symbol belongs to.

TOWARDS MAKING OF A WOMAN...

In spite of marginalization of women in every domain of our society there is hope and that hope emerges from women. The power within a woman can not be pushed to bottom for too long. Not only in India but the world has recognized the potential of women and --

George Mathew, the Director of Institute of Social Sciences, New Delhi, while reviewing the women’s participation in political domain (Indian government has taken some affirmative actions like 33% reservation for women) in his article *The silent revolution* (May 2004) mentions the following: “despite the severe social and political constraints in our country - caste system, feudal setting, patriarchy, illiteracy, uneven development - there are several aspects we can be proud of. The last 10 years have witnessed a steady progress as far as the inclusion of excluded sections of Indian population in the decision-making process from the village to the district level is concerned. About 3 million

women are contesting the elections to panchayats and municipalities. This is no mean achievement in a hierarchical and male-dominated society. Today, many women who fight the elections are from poor economic and backward social backgrounds; breaking social, cultural and economic barriers.”

On the global level there are millennium goals set. Three of these 8 goals are devoted to women’s issue. It is nice that the summit has focused on these goals and 147 countries have considered this as one of the important tasks. But I still feel the problem will not get sorted out only with policies and structural change but it needs attitude change.

We at Ashankur center in the diocese of Nashik believe that if women are organized, made aware, and equipped with right skills, they can use the power and potential that is in them to overcome obstacles and build society. Sustainable development in any community or society cannot happen unless women of that community/society are empowered. We also believe that empowerment is not simply restricted to economic self-sufficiency but is linked with human development to foster the expansion of a person’s capacities. Empowerment also creates an environment where people are able to develop and apply their knowledge and skills, and to increase their potential by the exercise of active choice with regard to work, leisure, and civic rights. In the light of this belief Ashankur, has focused its efforts on the empowerment of women.

Our Objectives and Activities Some of the major barriers to the empowerment of women are illiteracy, lack of control over resources and non-participation in decision making. Our aim and efforts, therefore, is to facilitate change. To enable women to stand up on their own feet and take decisions concerning their lives. To achieve this, we focus on four areas where change can take place.

1. Change from household seclusion to social interaction.
2. Change from the lack of control to control over resources;
3. Change from non-participation to equal rights in decision making.

4. Change from the humdrum routine of daily tasks to income-generating activities;

To achieve this Ashankur is building up a grass root level movement where women initiate attitudinal change towards themselves. We do this by organizing them in the formation of Self-Help-Groups (SHGs). (Rs. 50 (80 Cent) or 25 (40 Cent) every month is contributed by every woman member of the group. It is collected together and put in the bank. The group is taught to manage their own money, to write accounts, to go to the bank, to deposit the money and then they start internal lending. They learn to take decisions of how to use their own money and to support each other. This gives them tremendous joy and satisfaction of owning their own earnings. .

These SHGs are self- governed and The group make decisions about various village issues and production oriented income-generating activities. Whereas social interaction and sharing of resources are natural consequences of such activities, self-reliance and positive self-image are added advantages. Presently we have 185 Self Help Groups and 22 Women's Farmers Group (network of 5500 women). At the main centre we have different Residential vocational trainings for school drop out girls

We use these groups also to sensitize them about their own strengths and the social issues around. This program has given them confidence. It has helped them to get out of the clutches of money lenders; build communal harmony and minimized caste effects. Here they get a platform to express their solidarity with each others. The economic power and group support give them dignity and bargaining power in the society.

I would like to present here a case study of one of our villages demonstrating how if provided opportunities and environment, the power of women can transform a society.

Gujarwadi is one of the villages where Ashankur started working with women four years ago. It consists of 1100 people. The village leaders had invited Ashankur to organize women. The first meeting was held in the evening on open ground in front of one house. Around 25 women attended the meeting. All sat backing me. I tried to dialogue with them. With much difficulty two women spoke. They said they are not used to talking in public so they would meet me in their houses. I was bit nervous and did not know how to make head way to the work in this village. In following days I started visiting families and for couple of times I stayed overnight in the village. I learnt a few facts.

There was a big gap between the landlords and the labourers. Just 8 families own most of the land of the village and rest of the people have very small share or are labourers on these fields. When in need they borrow money from the money lender at the rate of 15% to 20% interest a month. And most of them are still burdened by this loan. Women if ever had gone out of the village it was only for a big feast when they are supposed to visit their brothers or to visit particular religious centre. Most of these women are uneducated. Young girl when come to puberty is asked to discontinue the school and parents would look for a boy to get her engaged. No proper sanitation in the village. Most of the women looked anaemic.

After building good rapport with them we started speaking to them about the concept of SHG. Some showed willingness; some were hesitant and frightened of what their husbands would say. Slowly 11 women were ready to try out the scheme. We started visiting every 15 days to guide them. They had to hear many adverse remarks from other women as well some of the family members, but they sustained. They began to speak to others about the importance of coming together and saving. After 8 months another two groups of 15 women were formed. The village has strong caste system and one of the three groups is from lower caste. At initial stage it was really hard to get them to sit together for meeting. Sensing the tension

we planned strategies to help lower caste women to grow in self esteem and to make upper caste women understand the plight of these women.

It was a difficult task however, it was a process. After much struggle over a period of one and half year there was some acceptance of each other. Meanwhile the internal loan system among the SHG women got operational, so the men folk of the family began to see the benefits and more women wanted to take part in the program. At the end of two years 11 SHG groups were formed (160 women). The groups were made aware about their own potential and were given the knowledge about government schemes. They were exposed to different government offices. Slowly they began to recognize their own / village resources as well the needs of village.

With great enthusiasm these women participated in government health and sanitation programs. They implemented organic farming, planted trees, cultivated kitchen gardens, fought with government for proper teachers in the primary school, organized youth and built family toilets. Many of them bought cows with the group money and have improved economic status of the family. Once a month they get together to clean the village irrespective of any caste. Moreover, the village has made a decision that no girl below the age 18 will marry.

Similar kinds of interventions are done in 22 villages of Ahmadnagar District. Women are interconnected by village leaders. It's a network of 5500 women. These women now perceive their society differently than they did 5 years ago and the society also has begun to recognize their worth. It is a testimony to women's power and potential. It just shows that if women are organized and are made aware of their potentials they can build a better society.

Thus, I strongly believe that unless and until the power equations in our families, communities and society do not change, women's conditions will not see much and realistic change either. Women will have to take the

charge, control and management of their own powerhouse. The women's power within needs to be awakened in order to empower them. The following story would make the point:

A lone journeyer who arrived in a village in the hill country only to find the road ahead was blocked by a mountain. Tired and dismayed, he sat down and waited for the mountain to move. Years later, he was sitting in the same place, old and decrepit, still waiting.

This is the story told by famous philosopher, Kierkegaard and the essence of his message is that providence doesn't move mountains. It is we who must climb them or find a route around them. If we are waiting for the mountain to move or approaching it the same old way as everyone else, then we are lost.

Personally I feel that in the process of women empowerment, the women must play the key role. Women should get her power back which is taken away from her by society for its own convenience. She has to find a way for herself. If women recognize their power and begin to own the resources it will give them the identity back, and the world will be a different place.

On the other hand, those of us who are blessed with education and exposure, have a responsibility to help these women to build their capacity and recognize her power within.

Here the church has played very vital and important role in the Indian social history in social awakening among the marginalized and deprived section of our society. Church and missionary institutions have challenged the control room which belongs to powerful minority of elites and privilege class of India so the church had to pay the price.

So far in the area of Health and education the church contribution has been the most, more than Government or any political party or any other

religions. Even today many men and women congregation have their mobile dispensaries schools for girls, non formal training centres, in the most remote areas where roads are impossible and church has been hope for many of lowest caste and class women and families.

Lastly I would like to quote

The education and empowerment of women throughout the world cannot fail to result in a more caring, tolerant, just and peaceful life for all. (Aung San Suu Kyi, Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, leader of Burma's democracy movement)

What can each one of us do for creating this new feminism?

I thank The Pontif council of justice and peace for organizing this very important conference and providing the opportunities to share the life of our women. Thank you