

A Farmers' Story

The other day we wanted to hire some help to clean out our water tank and Ramaiah came to our rescue. I started talking to this lean and weak 50 year old man. His Kannada accent showed that he was not a local. He had come from Bijapur to Bangalore. He was working as a labourer in a nearby site, where a shopping complex was being built. These are excerpts from our conversation which unfolded the pressures that brought him to Bangalore :

Why did you come all the way from Bijapur just for daily wages?, I asked him.

Ramaiah replied: "*Memsaab*. What else can we do? Rains failed and we have nothing but our piece of land to fall back upon. Every year I used to grow green gram during one season and some other crop during the other season, which was sufficient to take care of my family. But, since last year, there are no rains and all that I sowed went waste. God has been unkind to us farmers. Many of my fellow farmers committed suicide due to heavy private borrowings. But I did not want to die like a coward. That's why I came here. Bangalore is a good city of opportunities, *Memsaab*. I get Rs.80 to Rs.100 per day and my wife is able to earn around Rs.50 to Rs.80 per day. Somehow I am able to feed my family."

"How many acres of land do you own?"

"Sixteen acres of land."

"Sixteen acres of land and you have come as a labourer? Could you not arrange for irrigation?"

"Borewells are not feasible, *Memsaab*. We have been demanding a canal from the Bhima river but that is not taking shape. Governments keep changing but our plight remains the same."

"Did the Government not do anything to help you face this drought?"

Readers' Forum

"Yes *Memsaab*. They have released funds for our rehabilitation but we have not received anything."

"Why didn't you fight for it?"

"Do you think we are keeping quiet? Of course we did fight. The local MLA says the Government has only announced but has not released any funds and the Government officials say that the funds have already been released and we have to take up the matter with our local authorities. Our local authorities say they have not received anything. We are fed up of running from pillar to post on hungry stomachs. Our children are starving. How long can we live like that? So, each one of us decided to take care of our own interests, either die or migrate."

"Couldn't you get this sort of coolie job there itself near your village?"

"No, *Memsaab*. There is very little chance of getting such jobs there and even if we get them, we are paid very little. It is not even sufficient to feed ourselves once a day."

"How many children do you have?"

"I have five children. I have brought my two little daughters with me. I am educating one of my sons, as he is intelligent. I have left him with some good samaritan in the village."

"What about the other two children?"

"They are nine and eleven years old. I have left them as bonded labourers with a rich landlord."

"As bonded labourers? Are they happy? Will they not be exploited?"

"No, *Memsaab*. The landlord is a very nice gentleman. He takes good

care of them and feeds them well. The boys themselves asked us to send them away. They were unable to see us suffer." Tears rolled down Ramaiah's eyes.

Today, Ramaiah and all his children live in a thatched hut in this city, work as coolies and lead their lives silently. The children never step into a school, though there are scores of schools all around them and the TV ads keep proclaiming, '*School chale hum*'.

This is not fiction. This is reality. Farmers toil the whole year round in the most insecure conditions and feel nature has been very benevolent to them if they get enough for even two square meals a day. But most of the time, after a whole year's hard work, they are just left with heavy loans to repay and hungry family members.

Sudha Narasimhachar, Bangalore

Media's Complicity

The son craze is no news in India. Every second we have a new entry. Every Nth second a citizen of India waits with baited breath outside the LT (labour theatre) for the nurse to declare... "it's a girl", it's a boy." or "it's a girl again." All the suspense dies. Thanks to the law that prohibits Sex Determination Tests, at least the baby gets to see the light of day.

After a brief stint in the hospital, what waits is either a grand welcome for the baby boy or a lukewarm welcome for the baby girl. *Ladoos* made of *ghee* distributed in the neighbourhood if it is a boy and *jelabies* cooked in ordinary oil distributed if it is a girl. No one has to enquire the sex of the baby. The delicacy they receive itself explains

everything. And at times when they receive no sweetmeat, its very absence explains that the husband's plight should be empathized with, for his wife had borne him a girl for the second time.

Although these may appear small or inconsequential differences, they strengthen in subtle ways the culture of discrimination.

When discrimination becomes a way of life, the space to question or rethink often shrinks. Even our media, which should be playing an active role in combating gender discrimination, often strengthens existing biases, sometimes even without realizing that they are doing so. However, the implications of each small act of commission or omission committed by our media have a large ripple effect. You make one gender insensitive statement and it reverberates in the minds of millions of people who read that paper. Such is the repercussion of taking "things lightly" in the media. Consider for example the following news item.

"Baby boy bowls Kumble over", screamed the headlines of a front page article of a reputed English daily newspaper from the South. No doubt the person behind the headlines has a sound knowledge about copywriting. The actual news was that Kumble came all the way from Pakistan to be beside his wife who gave birth to a baby boy. What calls for attention is the emphasis placed on the news of the arrival of the "baby boy."

Was it worthy of be placed on the front page? Was it necessary to give so much vital newsprint space to an event, which is more personal in nature than of national interest ?

Wasn't it enough just to say that Kumble flies down to be by the side of his wife and the baby?

No less important are the series of epithets used in the superlative form. The baby boy's arrival is referred to as "the greatest gift of life," "bundle of joy," "great moment in life," "momentous occasion," and lastly "Kumble has a spring in his stride." The way in which Kumble's outstanding performance, which led to India's historic victory in the first cricket test series, has been equated with a suitable reward -- "a baby boy"-- is indeed very sinister. The implication is clear: men whose wives produce baby girls are failures, while successful men like Kumble receive the greatest gift in life, "a baby boy."

Deepa Ballal, Trivandrum

Concept of Shakti

Although we have evidence that goddess-worship existed all over the world since Palaeolithic times, the only continuous tradition of goddess worship is found in the Indian subcontinent. Especially, in South and East India, one can discover a vast majority of invincible, all-mighty goddesses, whose energy can be felt everywhere.

The first exhibits of goddess worship date back to the Zhob and Kulli cultures in Baluchistan (today Pakistan), which predate the Indus Valley Civilisation. Later, in the Indus Civilisation area, many small goddess



figurines were excavated. They are shown wearing elaborate, fan-shaped head-dresses adorned with a lot of composite elements like small cups for incense, flowers and medallions. Most of them wear a small piece of loin cloth and a girdle with adornments resembling the three phases of the moon.

Does the goddess tradition empower ordinary women? Unfortunately, patriarchal society has alienated most women from this source of knowledge. They live in a kind of shell surrounded by social restrictions. Many oppressive ties confine them. And as a sad matter of fact, they impose these same useless burdens on their daughters.

But on the other hand, throughout the history of India, there have always lived, and even today live women, who consider the goddesses as powerful sources of strength for them in their daily lives. They feel Shakti is providing them with both spiritually and socially liberating energy. Identifying with divinities like Kali, Durga, Mariyamman, and other powerful and independent goddesses, can show the way to the attainment of real female power.

In this context, we need a new definition of "Motherhood". Every goddess is described as "Mother" but not in the patriarchal sense, which considers a mother to be merely a woman who has given birth to a child. This definition reduces women to child-bearing machines. The goddesses represent a more deep meaning of Motherhood. They are Mothers of all life, all living creatures, who bestow creative energy to sustain and nourish the world, to make the world a place of peace and enjoyment. This concept should be realised by every woman.

If women are totally confined to child rearing, they get suppressed as

individual persons and instead are sacrificed to the interests of the family. Such a woman fails to realise the energy to be derived from the goddesses. *Yoginis* and *bhairavis*, often described as female shamans, are in touch with the life-force represented by Shakti in order to maintain the welfare of the society and to gain spiritual enlightenment, while attaining unity with the divine energy of the Goddess. They often possess healing powers.

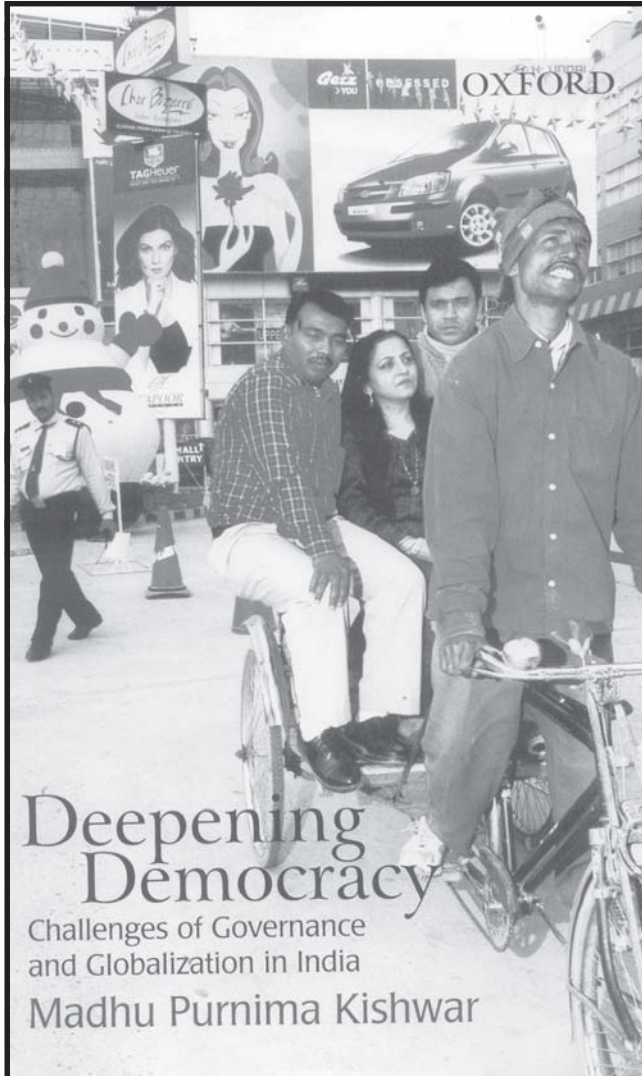
Walking on the spiritual path and dedicating one's life to the Goddess, seeking knowledge, is one of the

ways a woman can choose to live her life. It may not be suitable for every woman. But even if a woman decides to follow another path, whether as the owner of an *idli*-shop, or selling vegetables, working as an artist, a gardener, or an architect, she can still seek the help of the Mother Goddess, who will help her to reach a higher goal if her prayers and wishes are strong and determined. The Goddess is able to empower women in many ways and to help them achieve whatever they desire.

But if they only have in their mind: "I have to produce a child.

Bless me with a child", then only that limited wish will be fulfilled. On the other hand, if women want to contribute something to society, nourish and heal humankind, they first have to free their minds from patriarchal restrictions. Then they are able to live a life which accords with their wishes. They just have to pray to Mother and tell Her what *they* desire, not what patriarchal society dictates to them. If they follow this path, women can make the world a more peaceful and better place.

Mariska Ondrich, via e-mail.



**New Release from
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
Available at MANUSHI**

As India prepares to enter an era that promises more wealth, equity, and prosperity to its citizens, *Deepening Democracy* brings together essays on enduring issues such as human rights, governance, and the impact of globalization on the average Indian citizen.

The volume covers a range of issues from a glimpse of the License-permit-Raid *Raj* as it affects the livelihood of the self-employed poor; a critique of India's farm and economic policies; the new divides being created by the country's language policy; the causes and possible remedies for the ethnic conflicts in India.

334 Pages (Hardbound)

Price (inclusive of airmail postage):

India: Rs 595.

Other South Asian Countries:Rs 695.

US: \$ 25; Europe: Euro 25

**Please send cheques payable to
Manushi Trust**

**C1/3 Sangam Estate, No.1 Underhill
Road, Civil Lines, Delhi-110054**

Ph: 91-11-23916437

Email:manushi@csdsdelhi.org