

The Exploitation of Women in India & The Christian Response

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THE TRUE HEROINES OF WORLD DEVELOPMENT ARE THE MILLIONS OF WOMEN WHO LABOUR SO HARD AND SO LONG ? UNDER SUCH DIFFICULT CONDITIONS AND FOR SO LITTLE REWARD, TO SUSTAIN THE LIVES OF THEIR FAMILIES AND THEIR COMMUNITIES. NO PRAISE CAN BE TOO HIGH FOR THEIR COURAGE AND THEIR EFFORT. BUT IT IS NOT PRAISE THAT THEY NEED. IT IS JUSTICE AND HELP.

World Conference of U. N. Decade for Women, Copenhagen, 14-30 July 1980.

- * 1. The World Conference of the United Nations Decade for Women revealed that an average woman works twice as hard as an average man. This is because in many cases the women takes care of the domestic chores in addition to going out for work.
- * 2. It is on the shoulders of the 1600 million women of Africa, Asia and Latin America that the burden of the "double job" falls most heavily. For them the working day begins at 4.30 or 5.00 am and ends sixteen hours later, as they struggle to meet the most basic needs of their Families—for food, water, firewood, clothes, health care and a home.

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Introduction

One of the major social problems of India, as elsewhere, seems to be "an apartheid by sex". For the promotion of the dignity and rights of half of the population of the world, the U.N. declared a Decade for Women in 1975. Last July there was a world conference convened in Copenhagen to study the progress made so far. In India various forms of oppression of women are reported in the newspapers. The phenomenon itself seems to be on the increase or at least greater publicity is being given. This paper is an attempt to analyse the injustice meted out to one half of the Indian population by the other half. We are trying to see this in the context of our faith-perspective.

The paper will have three parts. In the first part we examine the various forms of oppression: dowry burns, wife-beating, rape, etc., and discrimination in the socio-economic and educational fields. We try to investigate the socio-cultural presuppositions behind these phenomena in a society created predominantly by man. In the second part we look at the position of women in the Church in India. We discover that their condition is analogous to that of the rest of Indian society, a victim of male domination justified through "ecclesiastical rationalisations". In the third part of the paper we make an effort to respond to the God who is challenging us through this social reality. The response would demand, on the part of men, a new understanding of women and a conversion of heart; a deeper commitment to their cause of liberation from all forms of slavery as concretised in the socio-economic reality and ecclesiastical structures. In the ultimate analysis it is the women of India, both inside and outside the Church, who have to appropriate their rights in society. Hence the need for conscientisation of women, to discover and accept their God-given dignity. Much more. It would imply an awareness-building to exert social pressure on the male dominated society, capable of bringing about changes in social structures and thought patterns and through this a conversion of individual consciousness.

I. EXPLOITATION OF WOMEN IN INDIAN SOCIETY

In this section we would like to explore the diverse forms of social discrimination and exploitation of women. We shall also analyse some of the structural mechanisms which justify and perpetuate the male domination of society at large.

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1. Economic Life

On the world level, women and girls together carry 2/3 of the burden of the world's work yet receive only a tenth of the world's income. They form 40% of the paid labour force. Though women constitute half the world's total population, yet they own less than one percent of the world's property.

The condition of women in developing countries, like India, is more miserable than the rest of the world, in almost every field of social life. They are paid half to three quarters of the money their male counterparts earn for the same job. In a predominantly agricultural country like ours, women do more than half of the total agricultural work. Shanti Chakravorty in a study of Haryana State remarks: "It is usually thought that it is the man who is responsible for farm work, assisted by the women; but in most cases now it is the woman who does the farm work, assisted by the man".¹ On an average a woman works 15 to 16 hours a day, unpaid at home and underpaid outside. According to the 1971 census every fourth worker in the country is an agricultural labourer. One third of the agricultural labourers are females. Only 2.5% of the central government employees are women. According to the National Committee for women, the growth in the percentage of the women labour force in the organised sector is minimal in the last sixty years i.e. 3.44% in 1911 to 17.35% in 1971. Besides the work load either in the field or in the factories or offices, the women have to do the household work such as cooking, washing, cleaning up the house, etc. The younger women, besides all these, have to carry the burden of early pregnancy, child-birth and breast feeding. Tarun Sali Baig, a social worker and the president of the International Union of Child Welfare, observes: "In any home, where financial compromises are to be made it is the women who are compromised against. They are the first to be axed in any crisis situation".² In terms of help offered to people for their various functions women seem to receive the least attention from society.

2. Educational Field

The literacy rate of India is estimated at about 33 per cent. Of the age group of 6-11 years, 49% of the girls go to school. While at the high school level 12-17 age group only 19% attend school. On the all India level 14.67% scheduled caste women and 11.3% scheduled tribe women are literate. In a state like Bihar the literacy among the scheduled caste women is as low as 1.03 per cent.

3. Bride Burning

Bride burning is frequently reported in the newspapers. According to a magazine the number of dowry deaths and incidents of wife burning in Delhi alone is alarming. They occur at an average of one death per day.³ As evidence can be easily removed, it is difficult to prove that it is murder. One of the Government hospitals in the capital of India registered about 4000 burn cases a year, of which 75% are women. Hospital authorities suspect that 9/10 of these are dowry burns.⁴ Delhi police revealed 68 dowry deaths in 1979 and 65 deaths in the first seven months of 1980.⁵

4. Wife-beating

This is, perhaps, one of the most frequently committed and socially accepted crimes against women in India. It used to be considered a common phenomenon among the slum dwellers and the working class. But gradually we are coming to know to what extent it also exists in the higher sections of society. The higher the social status, the less readily do women disclose this, lest the family prestige suffer. Interestingly enough we find that, over this issue, more women from the poorer sections, especially the working class, the Harijans and the tribals, walk off, leaving their husbands and children. The middle class woman, economically dependent on their husbands and inhibited by the bourgeois value system, seem to be inclined to stay on silently at all costs. There is a social stigma attached to a woman who may desperately resort to abuse the husband or to beat him back. Marriage seems to confer on the husband the rights to subject a woman in any way possible including the use of brute force. On the one hand, our women tend to remain submissive and accept "religiously" all that comes from the *patidevs*. But, also, on the other hand, Indian women manifest proportionately more violence than the women of U.S.A., W. Germany or Japan. India has the highest percentage of women murderers. In India 4.4% of the total arrests of women are for murder while the figures in U.S.A. and Japan are 0.24% and 0.2% respectively.

5. Rape

One of the most atrocious and dehumanising forms of oppression of women is rape. Rape is not a new phenomenon. Foreign invaders lived on the prospect of native women and economic gains.

Historians point out the atrocities on women during the last two world wars. According to some estimates, in Japan alone more than 1/2 million infants were deserted. There were 21/2 lakh victims after the Bangladesh war.⁶ A large percentage of prostitutes begin their profession by first being raped.

The Magnitude of the Problem

In the month of July, 1980, *The Times of India* reported 40 cases of rape on 22 days. According to the paper, the victims were as follows: Harijans 9, Adivasis more than 42, 1 Bhumiyyar, 1 Yadav and 12 others not specified. Of 40 cases, six were "mass rapes" and 22 were committed by "groups of rapists" and in 15 out of 40 cases the police were involved. Five women, after the crime, were murdered. The Home Minister confessed that there were 2611, 3821, 2781 cases of rape in the years respectively, 1976, 1977, and 1978.⁷ Yet social workers who are in touch with what is really happening in the countryside estimate that only 1/20 cases are actually reported. Peter Layton, an official of the Marie Stopes Society, recently said that nearly two million Indian women are being raped every year.⁸ According to Sr. Gladys D'Souza there were 800 reported cases of rape in the city of Bombay in 1979. She adds that for one reported case there are 10-12 unreported cases of rape. It is also estimated that 71% of all rapes and 90% of all gang rapes were preplanned.⁹

Rape is the only crime where guilt and shame are attached to the victim. The victim is "tainted" for the rest of her life. The social and religious values make her an outcaste, an untouchable and a disgrace to her family. If she happened to be unwed, the violation can make her unfit for an honourable marriage bond. Society at large looks down on a victim with suspicion. Myths about rape such as "No women can be raped unless she wants", "dressed like she was asking for it" or "women like being raped", etc, current in society make it even more difficult for the victim to reveal her tragedy. Attitudes even of family members confirm the social ostracism. Woman is supposed to be tempting man when she is well dressed or ill dressed. When she is alone, she can be interpreted as inviting man and when she is socialising she can be considered flirting for attention.

Even the legislation on rape leaves a number of loopholes in favour of the culprits. A lawyer who successfully appeared for

the defence of many rape cases and won the acquittal of the culprits in most cases is reported to have confessed that she "had been convinced of the accused's guilt in most cases, but it was her job to serve her client by taking advantage of every loophole in the law".¹¹ The lawyer admitted that the law was sadly inadequate to protect the rights of women. Perhaps what is needed is that woman formulate laws from their point of view. This might safeguard their interests better.

6. Social Conditionings

In order to understand deeply the plight of women one must investigate the largely unquestioned assumptions which man has inculcated into society. The value systems implicit therein and communicated through social conditioning make women accept their ascribed inferior status in society. It is this mental process which is at the root of the socio-economic exploitation. Some of these assumptions are being questioned by many educated woman today.

(a) "*Woman is weaker than man*".

The human species has made significant progress in several spheres of life. But man has not grown enough to overcome the self-made mental slavery to the law of the jungle, "the physically strong thrive at the expense of the weak". Since time immemorial, this law has made woman the primary underdog of an exploitative society. Just as in the jungle, physical strength is considered the norm of judging superiority. Yet what a woman lacks by way of brute strength, she makes up by way of greater endurance. In many groups, especially the lower socio-economic levels of societies, women do more arduous manual labour than men. The women support, on the whole, between a quarter and a third of all families and do more than half the agricultural work in India. Still men are considered to be "bread winners". This sense of women being inferior because physically weaker is passed on from generation to generation through psychological conditionings. In fact, man after accepting the law of the jungle from the animal kingdom has outdone the animals in exploiting their female partners. No other male species destroys its own female species except in self-defence. Yet man has no qualm of conscience to murder the victims of rape. No animal violates the rhythm of nature meant for the propagation of his race. No animal discards the young ones because they happen to be females. Man does all these.

(b) "Woman is inferior to man."

The most widespread and deeply dehumanising discrimination and assaults against women are on the psychological level. The female psyche is being crushed from very childhood. In one of the U.N. reports we read: "There is in existence a global myth which at once defines and limits the attributes and potentialities of both males and females and which in fact oppresses both".¹²

It is one thing to recognise the psychological differences and temperamental needs between males and females. Yet quite another thing, on the basis of these nature-given differences, that the male dominates the female. It so often happens that the women prefer to bury their talents rather than step out of the "feminine line" drawn by the men. Injustice and social discrimination seem to be built into the very structures of this educational process. The female psyche is brutalised long before bodily violence is inflicted on her. So thoroughly are women conditioned to accept an inferior position in society that even the so-called "emancipated" women seem to suffer from this complex. A New Delhi based psychologist, Sudhir Kaker, says:

*Even some of my middle class or upper class clients who may appear to be emancipated and have reason to lead a fairly contented life, suffer from this I-am-worthless-because-I-am-a-woman trauma beneath their veneer of emancipation. They continue to live their traditional role of believing themselves to be inferior, inadequate and worthless beings. Hindu society remains a dominantly patriarchal society.*¹³

Dehumanisation is an essential aspect of this condition. Women from childhood undergo a slow unconscious process of destruction or denial of their self-worth. They have interiorised the inferior self-image thrust upon them by the menfolk so deeply that anyone who tries to speak up against it would seem to go against the aspirations of women.

Society through a process of conditioning creates in girls, at home and in schools, certain thinking patterns which ascribe to the female sex an inferior status. Besides, society gradually trains them to make this value system their own. From early childhood this process begins. Baby girls are given bangles, anklets, etc, thus communicating a sense of fragility. They are offered toys that will shape them for motherhood and a sort of soft, gentle future. Con.

trasting to the dolls, puppets and nappies of girls, the little brothers are made to feel that they are to enter a competitive threatening world and must grow in aggressivity for success. In order to project this image and such subliminal education, they are offered pistols, tanks, toy soldiers and other fighting games. From early days girls see that their mothers, whether they worked all day or not, are supposed to prepare the dinner. They see the dad return home from outdoor activities and looking around indignantly for the late meals. Teenaged girls get for reading materials magazines which project the "service image". Advertisements will show a housewife singing lyrics about soaps and washing powder while cleaning the clothes of men and boys "whiter than the whitest". Any cleaning up job at home seems to be the prerogative of girls and women.

It is gratifying to see women getting more and more aware of their predicament and the educational process they are subject to. An increasing number of urban women are becoming more and more articulate about their deprivations in society. According to Eric Fromm :

*Basic liberating changes have already been made. Perhaps a later historian will report that the most revolutionary event in the twentieth century was the beginning of women's liberation and the downfall of men's supremacy. But the fight for the liberation of women has only just begun, and men's resistance cannot be overestimated. Their whole relation to women (including their sexual relation) has been based on their alleged superiority, and they have already begun to feel quite uncomfortable and anxious vis-a-vis those women who refuse to accept the myth of male superiority.*¹⁴

Eradication of illiteracy and a new type of education for freedom would conscientise women more and more. The fact that working class women do enjoy more freedom, at least to run away from oppressive conditions, indicates that economic security is vital to preserving freedom and dignity.

C. "Woman as the property of man"

Another result of the social conditioning is that man, either as father, brother or husband, considers women as a socio-economic gift to his household. A woman's value seems to be judged not so much in terms of her worth as a person with rights and dignity as

in terms of her utility to man. Expressions of this mentality are found in different languages and societies except, perhaps, in some tribal communities. In Hindi a girl is called "paraya dhan" (somebody else's property) and a boy is called "apana dhan" (one's own property). Another Hindi saying as quoted in a magazine runs thus: "A girl in the home is like spit on the ground: once spat it cannot be taken back into the mouth, any more than a girl can be taken back into her own family."¹⁵ Yet another saying brings out the economic aspect very clearly: "Bringing up a son is like manuring and watering a plant in your own courtyard for when it grows up it will give you shade and fruit; but bringing up a daughter is like manuring and watering a plan in someone else's courtyard for her services and affections are destined for others".¹⁶ In India for every baby boy abandoned by the parents five baby girls are deserted by them.

Often enough men may deplore vehemently the crime of rape but not because they are convinced that it is a violation of a woman's dignity; rather because the husband's or the father's reputation is damaged. This crime is an expression of the power based on property relationships governing society. The threat of rape is sufficient to keep the women in subjugation and her male relatives in constant fear. "Susan Brownmiller in *Against Our Will* points out: To simply learn the word rape is to take instruction in the power relationships between men and women."¹⁷ Because she belongs to man, a raped woman's physical or mental sufferings are thought to be immaterial compared to the taint on her men-folk's honour. Her husband can abandon her, even if she is truly innocent and society very well understands and justifies his action. In an article in *The Illustrated Weekly of India* the author clearly brings out the social implications of such an assumption.

Rape is an expression of domination, an expression of the male view of women as 'property'. It is because a woman is property—father's, brother's or husband's—that her virginity and virtue are valued. It is because she is property that an act of rape is regarded not so much as an offence directed at her as one directed at her owner, her man. So soldiers see the rape of enemy women as an act of triumph over the enemy. So the women of striking coalminers and agitating peasants are raped to beat down their menfolk. So police and army personel use rape as a weapon to terrorise the rebellious.¹⁸

It is social education that has created such a value system. Until crimes against woman like beating, burning, rape, etc are understood in the total context of man's general attitude, the depth of the problem is not really grasped. Ultimately it is the thinking pattern which has to be rectified.

II. WOMEN IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

The history of religions show that in many areas of life religion has liberated women. At the same time it also shows that man has made use of religion to dominate women in so many other areas of their lives. Domination reveals itself in certain belief systems, in or sanctions attached to customs affecting man-woman relationship, etc. There may be social mechanisms by which unjust relationship in society are religiously established and legitimated. Since man had the upper hand in social life, what he created in religion is also in his favour. It would take too long to go into a detailed analysis of the sacred scriptures and the traditions of the various religions of India. Instead, let us examine the position of women in the Church. In this second part we shall investigate the condition of women—lay as well as religious—in the Indian Church.

Some of the pertinent questions we could ask ourselves are : Has membership in the Church and the sacramental participation, affected the social condition of women? Are women less discriminated against by the Catholic husbands and Catholic priests than their counterparts in other religions? Are the Church structures less unjust towards them than those of other religions in India? We will examine the condition of lay women only briefly because what is said above in the first part is applicable to them to a large extent.

A. Women in a Male-Dominated Church

When we see the women in the rural mission stations of N. India we cannot but recognize that Christianity has been a liberating force for them. In several areas of their lives the Christian women are less dehumanised than other women of the same social category. In the cases of a large number of Harijans and Adivasis, evangelization has been a process of conscientisation and liberation. Christian women seem to enjoy a little more freedom to talk to men, have a legitimate place in the worshipping communities, freedom to choose certain professions like nursing, more freedom and courage to resist

a little more the demands of the rural rich, more freedom in social life to resist or at least to postpone child marriage, etc. Religion has made some difference to them.

Still a question can be asked whether a good education could have the same effect on them? As far as the women of the socially and economically oppressed sections are concerned, a desire for and motive for perseverance in education itself is often engendered through Christian faith. The fact that one can break with the karma, the centuries old social tradition or the inherited fatalism, and surrender to a belief system, means a great leap in terms of conscientisation. This in turn triggers off other mental processes of change highlighting hope in a self-growth. All the same, the Catholic Church is basically a church of men where women get a better deal than in other organised religions.

Half of the Catholic population is female. Yet what percentage of women are found in the various commissions and administrative bodies of the Church at the universal, diocesan and parish levels? Even in an ancient church like that of Kerala how many women representatives are found on the parish councils? The church structures from top to bottom, from the Synod to the last mission station, are heavily male dominated and this is justified by rather shaky biblical and theological rationalisations.

Up to very recent times almost all the laws and regulations in the Church were, by and large, made by males and from their point of view, too. The beneficiaries of so many of them are men, e.g. the law of the sabbath and the laws of sexual morality. For a women who has been working all through the day and part of the night "the rest of the sabbath" means very little. So, too, the laws regarding sexual morality; punishments for prostitution are heavily in favour of the male partners. So many of the ministries for which women are psychologically more apt, e. g. the anointing of the sick, are withheld from them. Leaving aside the theological arguments in favour of women priests, we could raise a question. Is the unwillingness on the part of the male dominated hierarchy to ordain women motivated by a fear of losing the ultimate control over women? Religious control is the most basic and most affective because it affects not only the present life but the future as well.

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The patriarchal nature of society seems to have conditioned the nature of the experience of God in our tradition. In many religious traditions the creation myths teach that the origin of the primitive male is from a female principle.¹⁹ The Yahwist narrative in the Book of Genesis (2.22) strangely enough shows Eve coming out of the male! Even the scarce references to the female aspect of Yawhch in Old Testament have little practical relevance in Christian spirituality. It looks so hard, if not altogether impossible, for an adult Christian to relate himself to God as a female. Yet on the dogmatic level we hold that God is neither male nor female, beyond both. The absence of deities in our tradition goddesses of creation and destruction (similar to Durga and Kṛṣṇa, etc, in Hinduism), the predominantly male qualities attribute to God in Christianity and a reluctance to attribute "negative elementary characteristics"²⁰ to Our Lady can be explained by the fact that Christian tradition grew in a patriarchal society where women were not held in high esteem. The great tradition of the devotion to Mary in the Oriental Churches and the periodic revival of the same in the western Church could throw light on the basic needs of the human psyche and the mystery of God Himself. How could a male who finds it difficult to respect and love a woman as an equal get glimpses into the Eternal Feminine or the Supreme Mystery beyond all distinctions? Is not a woman who is closer to the mystery of life and death—in her body and psyche—more effective in revealing the mystery of birth-disintegration-rebirth of being in the heart of man? Will not such experiences lead one to a deeper penetration of the Paschal Mystery itself? Catholics may assert that the fullness of revelation is in their religion or in Jesus Christ. But well educated Hindus may show that the Hindu experience of God is richer and closer to the totality of truth in as much as it has been able to conceive the Godhead in terms of fatherhood and motherhood. In Christianity, God is conceived mostly in masculine imageries.

In the litanies of the saints recited at the Easter Vigil there are 20 male saints and 6 female saints. In the New Roman Missal we find 30 female saints as against 166 male saints. To this list of male saints could be added the three angels—Gabriel, Raphael, Michael—and the unspecified number of archangels and guardian angels whose names are accompanied by adjectives indicating the male sex. Women in general are considered to be more religious-minded than men. Yet less women seem to have received official

recognition through canonisation. Has the Church in the past failed to communicate her holiness to her women members sufficient enough for canonisation? Has the male dominated hierarchy held up such norms of holiness for canonisation that the women could not easily get qualified? Has the hierarchy given greater recognition to certain virtues which are characteristic of the male psyche? Is it, perhaps, possible that those women who manifested such virtues to an outstanding degree were promoted easily for canonisation? It is only too natural that men readily recognised in the female what he found beautiful in himself. The procedures and requirements for canonisation have been revised and let us hope that the Church will approve many more saintly females for the honour of the altar.

III. CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO THE OPPRESSION OF WOMEN

We tried to look at the social reality in its complexity and found it wanting from the perspectives of Christian faith. It is imperative that as followers of Jesus we try to contribute our share to the transformation of society. The call to evangelize human society and transform it in the light of the Gospel demands from us a conversion of our own hearts and sincere efforts to bring about social changes. In this third part of the paper an attempt is made to delineate certain areas of priority of action. We propose that Christian understanding of women, or perhaps more genuinely human understanding and acceptance of women, must come first. Then we suggest more efforts towards a social education, and finally deeper conscientisation of women.

A. Christian Understanding of Women

Search for a deeper understanding of society and women's role in it would mean abandoning the cultural prejudices inherited from the past. It would mean also a certain commitment in action for the liberation of women. Merely a return to the Bible or tradition, however sincere, does not seem to be sufficient because the understanding and the interpretation of the sources of truth are already based in favour of the male. Truth which is revealing itself in the Bible and Christian tradition is greater than both of them and manifests itself also through human beings—their history of sufferings and hopes. Here we see that contact with human reality

is indispensable for receiving Truth. The history of half of humanity, oppressed by the other half, their strivings and failures do contain the history of God's action in the world.

The problems resolved and solutions arrived at by mankind in the past are not fully human because they did not represent half of its population. In the same way the answers to human problems offered in the tradition of the Church are not human enough. They cannot be fully human. Not because women are necessarily more human than men, but because half of her membership are not represented in the search for truth. It is bound to be so, for the Church categorically excluded half of her members from the process by which she ruled herself and hence ruled in a manner less fully human. In this sense the Church remains less catholic and less perfectly a human symbol of the eschatological community, in spite of centuries of her reflections and experiences. Even now half of her members are kept, systematically, at the periphery.

Vatican II teaches us :

True, all men are not alike from the point of view of varying physical power and the diversity of intellectual and moral resources. Nevertheless, with respect to the fundamental rights of the person, every type of discrimination whether social or cultural, whether based on sex, race, colour, social condition language or religions is to be overcome and eradicated as contrary to God's intent. For in truth it must still be regretted that fundamental personal rights are not yet being universally honoured. Such is the case of woman who is denied the right and freedom to choose a husband, to embrace a state of life, to acquire an education or cultural benefits equal to those recognised for men.²

So often a man may grant the complementarity of the sexes, the need for greater respect for the rights of woman as persons, etc., but on the level of actions he may continue to negate the dignity of his own wife and may even reduce her to his own needs.

B. Education for Social Awareness

In our attempt to ensure a movement of growth for women as God's children in greater freedom and self-dignity, we could specifically look into certain areas of concrete action. A richer understanding of the dignity of women simply cannot be achieved

unless we are engaged in a certain process of re-thinking and of initiating corresponding action.

In the education programmes are there any provision for in-structing the girls to identify and denounce such social evils as rape-wife-beating, etc?. Are any efforts made to educate girls to ex-plode myths regarding the inferior status of their sex?. We do find sisters and priests, though not in big numbers who are quite aware of the seriousness of the situation and with deep commitment to the liberation of women in India. We do come across women, religious or otherwise, who risk their lives for the cause of women.²² We do see genuine search in evolving educational programmes with greater emphasis on the removal of social injustices. Perhaps more effort is needed. But undoubtedly the march in search for God-given freedom and dignity for fuller existence has already begun.

The traditional solutions to women's such as offering them greater protection (elder brother instead of the younger one, accom-paying them on journeys,) giving them greater privacy, e.g. having better locks and bolts for the private rooms of women, teaching men to observe more rigorously the rules regarding places and seats reserved for women, not letting them go out just before sunset, etc, do not seem to be sufficient. The attitude of protect-ing them presupposes that they are still under the domain of men and their safety depends on stronger men. However good and needed such precautionary measures are, in the long run they do not envisage a full, humanly dignified existence for women. Pramila Sanghri, principal of Mulicha Vidyalaya once remarked: "I used to tell my students, do not stay out late, do not mix too much with boys. I don't say this any more. A woman's mind should be strong."²³ A member of the Forum Against Rape, Charya Darte speaks: "The Forum is against providing more pro-tection of women. We want women to be more self-reliant."²⁴ Ultimately women will have to defend themselves and men need to be educated to respect women. It is important that girls are edu-cated to question certain socially accepted values and imageries which are cultural structures supportive of male domniation. Some of them seem to be: sexual aberrations as the most abomin-able of all sins' a girl being "tarnished" more than a boy or a man by going against the norms of sexual morality, the imageries expressing the loss of virginity such as "a flower being crushed" "broken vessel", etc. Society needs to be conscientised to adopt

a healthy and human attitude to the victims of rape as well as to the culprits. This is not to deny the necessity of more just laws and enforcement of them. But in the long run, it is an educational process of society both of the male and the female that would take us closer to realising the new humanity promised by Jesus. The new man and the new woman who are the glory of God need to be created in our society by us. Through social education the thinking patterns can be changed. The result will be a more human and just position for women in the socio economic and political structures of society. In as much as the structural changes are effected and honoured by society, we could think of a better world for the better half. Pope Paul VI in *Octogessimo Adveniens* advocated such changes in society.

*Similarly in many countries a charter for women which would put on end to an actual discrimination and would establish relationships of equality in rights and of respect for their dignity is the object of study and at times of lively demands. We do not have in mind that false equality which would deny the distinction laid down by the Creator Himself and which would be in contradiction with woman's proper role which is of such capital importance, at the heart of the family as well as within society. Developments in legislation should on the contrary be directed to protecting her proper vocation and at the same time recognizing her independence as a person, and her equal rights to participate in cultural, economic, social and political life.*²⁵

The Pope seems to insist on the necessity of structural changes to effect a more just society for women.

C. Conscientisation of Women

Injustice against human rights built into the socio-cultural structures cannot be adequately removed as long as the majority of women accept the current definition of their role and status in society. Vat. II exhorts women: "it is appropriate that they should be able to assume their full and proper role in accordance with their own nature. Every one should acknowledge and favour the proper and necessary participation of women in cultural life".²⁶ In the Document on the Laity, the Church has similar teaching for them.²⁷

As a means of realising this more effectively, even if the realisation should be a far distant future, there is need for conscientis-

ation and organisation of women into powerful bodies. If women consider that the prevailing condition is dehumanising, a social evil, and a deprivation of the dignity God gave them, then it follows that they must appropriate their rights. Concessions may be made as a compromise solution; efforts at change of individual hearts must be kept up. But ultimately it is only social pressure from the *oppressed* that will liberate them. Rights are not begged for but taken possession of. But this is not to advocate irresponsible adventurism in a self-destructive fashion. Such a course of precipitated action may disrupt society and defeat their own purpose. Neither do we advocate a life-style contrary to the specific psychological and physical exigencies of woman-hood. Yet women must be ready for denunciation of certain attitudes which are advocated in the name of "complementarity of sexes" but which are in reality nothing but subjugation of women by men. What the Church teaches is the independence of women as persons and their equal rights to participate in cultural, economic and political life. This will not be obtained satisfactorily unless women themselves get conscientised and demand their rights in ways that are culturally understood by men. An author recently wrote:

Till the barriers of tradition are torn down and like their Western counterparts, they can organise themselves into a powerful political lobby waging single-minded war, their condition is unlikely to improve. If Indian women are unable to find a voice, unable to distinguish between slavery and survival, their social imprisonment will slowly harden and corrode the fabric of society till it is dragged into a morass. Yet the odds are mounting so rapidly that there is only one viable road for them, to stand and fight. Whether they can or more important, are allowed to, will determine the difference between life and death for Indian society.²⁸

This demands that women shall be ready to forego the false satisfaction of a de-humanising condition, that they shall be ready for self-evangelization. It means that they are willing to enter a course of thinking which may be, as *Evangelii Nuntiandi* puts it, affecting and as it were upsetting through the power of the gospel the present criteria of judgement, determining values points of interest lines of thought and models of life which are in contrast with the word of God and the plan of salvation".²⁹ In this sense

conscientisation is evangelization for the women of India. Conscientisation would imply some sort of concrete action, however small it may be in itself, for the liberation of women. In as much as it is directed to a far distant goal of acquiring human dignity and their proper place in Indian society it would be meaningful and an act of real evangelization,

Conclusion

God's revelation in its concreteness is defined by human reality. The urgency and the particular mode of Christian mission cannot be a *priori* deduced from revealed truths alone, independent of human reality. In our paper we examined a concrete painful historical reality in its socio-cultural context—one half of God's children exploiting the other half. The history of God's action coincides with the history of women's struggles and agonies as well as man's oppressions. We examined the condition of women at large in Indian society and in the Church. We concluded the paper with a few suggestions as to possible ways of making our society more fully human. A fully human society is God's plan for every human being on earth. But it is up to us to realize it by making the "better" half at least equal to the other half.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 **Himmat**, 25 July, 1980.
- 2 **India Today**, 1 August, 1980.
- 3 **Sunday**, 25 August, 1980
- 4 **Himmat**, 13 November 1980.
- 5 **Sunday** 27 July, 1980.
- 6 **The Indian, Nation**, 7 November 1980.
- 7 **Sunday** 27 July, 1980.
- 8 **India Today**, 1 August, 1980.
- 9 **Sunday** 27 July, 1980.
- 10 **The Examiner**, 23 February, 1980-
- 11 **The Illustrated Weekly** of 15 August, 1980.
- 12 **Himmat**, 14 August, 1980
- 13 **India Today** 1 August, 1980.
- 14 Eric Fromm **To Have or To Be ?** P. 188.
- 15 **India Today**, 1 August 1980.
- 16 **Women in the New Asia**, UNESCO, P. 191.
- 17 **Sunday**, 27 July, 1980.
- 18 **The Illustrated Weekly of India**, 15 June, 1980.
- 19 Eliade Mircea, **From Primitives to Zen**, p. 130 ff.
- 20 Eric Neumann, **The Great Mother; an Analysis of the Archetype**, P. 147 ff.
- 21 Vat. II. **Gaudium et Spes**, No. 29.
- 22 One of the religious sisters working in the remote areas of Bihar heard about the rape of a tribal girl by a policeman. The girl was forced to remain in the village at lest he lose the victim. Hearing the sad news, the sister managed to reach the village at night, She spent the night trying to persuade the villagers to release the girl to the possible displeasure of the police. Along with the girl the sister returned home the next day exhausted and speechless. Immediate medical aid was sought. As she recovered, one of her first sentences was : "Even if I had to die in this tripel would have been a happy person. I would not have cared."
- 23 **Sunday**, 27 July 1980
- 24 **Himmat**, 25 July 1980
- 25 Pope Paul VI **Octogessimo Adveniens**, No
- 26 Vat II, **Gaudium es Spes**, No. 60
- 27 Vat. II **Decree on Laity** Mo: 9
- 28 **Sunday**, July, 1980
- 29 Pope Paul VI, **Evangelii Nuntiandi**, No 19

Source : *The Liberation of Women* C.R.I. Patna Unit.

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QUESTIONS

1. Briefly illustrate the various forms of women's disabilities and their exploitation and abuse by men of India,
2. What is your feeling in the face of this phenomenon? What could be the explanation for this state of affairs?
3. Do you see any hope for a change of the prevailing situation?
4. What hope does the Christian faith offer for womens liberation?
5. Who should be the real agents of women's liberation? Substantiate your answer.
6. What do *you* propose to do to further the cause of women's (your own!) liberation?

- * 3. In Europe and America women constitute 40 per cent of the paid labour force and contribute 40 percent of the gross domestic product. But women's wages are lower than men's—25 per cent less in the U. K. and 40 per cent less in the U. S. A.
- * 4. In Africa women do 60 to 80 per cent of the agricultural work 50 percent of all animal husbandry and 100 per cent of the food processing. Against 1800 hours a year for men it is 2600 hours per year for women in agriculture.
- * 5. According to statistics provided by the Delhi Police, in Delhi 69 women died due to burns in 1979 while in the seven months of this year, 65 have lost their lives because of burns. In 1975, which ironically was International Women's Year, 350 girls were suspected to have been burnt for providing insufficient dowries in India. According to the Home Ministry, 2670 women died of burns in 1976 and 2917 in 1977.
- * 6. In India the average working day for the woman is between 15 1/2 and 16 hours per day. In cases of younger women the work load is often combined with frequent pregnancies, child birth and breast feeding. During pregnancy and child birth more than half of the world's women have no trained help. All this has resulted in the world's most neglected health problem in the 1980s: millions of women are suffering from chronic exhaustion.
- * 7. Modernisation on the agricultural front has increased the work load for women and lessened that of men. In Africa it has increased woman's share of agricultural labour from 55 to 68 per cent.
- * 8. Research and advice on family planning is usually directed towards women. Decision on family size are usually taken by men.
- * 9. Almost all the training and technology for improving agriculture is given to man. Women are responsible for 50 per cent of the agricultural production and all the food processing.