

## **WOMEN EMPOWERMENT: A FACT OR A FARCE?**

**Ms. Mary**

Gujarat, burning and bleeding with her virgin daughters of a minority community gang-raped, whimpering with fear, pain, sense of shame and humiliation; her pregnant daughters having an excruciatingly agonising experience of their wombs slit open, fetuses pulled out and the empty wombs, like newly dug tombs stuffed with rags and rubbish; her staring, helpless women weeping and wailing over their husbands/fathers/sons shot dead or disappeared, has given a bitter and bewildering shock to all those who really cared and worked for women empowerment in India.

The Gujarat carnage shook the very foundation of the people's confidence in the topmost level personnel and institutions of the political society. It was incredible that such a holocaust could happen because just a year back, in 2001, the Government of India had gloriously announced that the 'country would celebrate the year 2001 as the year for the empowerment of women'. And the news-media, particularly the English dailies and journals seemed to be indulgently supporting the 'women empowerment programme' of the Government of India by giving generous space for special write-up on women's empowerment; they carried Government's eye-catching advertisements spanning half-a-pages, with messages such as human rights are women rights; human rights are Her rights. Another piece from the advertisement on women empowerment had this to say: 'education and health are crucial for the development of the full potential of the Indian women; significant improvement in health status of women is the central objective of the RCH programme'. Besides these, the

National Policy for women 2001 was published, the objectives of which according to the policy statement would be realised through a review and formulation of positive measures in the juridical, legal systems and decision-making through the economic and social empowerment of women.

Is it not hypocrisy to the core and cheating inimitable that such declarations, policies and programmes are followed by an astutely planned pogrom of aiming at women of a minority social group as easy targets of communal vengeance? Is it not crafty politics of Chanakya, of smugly maintaining studied silence at certain moments and providing concealed verbal and non-verbal support to the chief designer of the gruesome scenario? Is it not a double-speak strategy, masking a communal misogyny?

What is most distressing in this case is the so apparent apathy of the civil society at the face of arsons and atrocities against women. It is so painfully disturbing. As Marie Mareel Thekkakara wrote "speaking out on the wake of Gujarat Carnage, civil society has largely remained silent". 'Why has the civil society not responded to Gujarat pogrom as it did to the earthquake?'<sup>1</sup> Except a few women leaders non-governmental and party organizations such as the All India Democratic Women's Association, the National Federation of Indian women and so on raising voices of protest, the regional and grass-root silence among both male and female population was quite audible and conspicuous. The pillar-institutions of the civil society such as the high-level educational institutions (colleges and universities), associations of social character like trade unions and even religious organizations (Church included) did not seem to manifest any sign of deep empathy or purposeful involvement. This silence is frightening and foreboding.

### **Whither Women Empowerment in India?**

Are all the high and mighty talks and discourses, and the gloriously declared policies and programmes for women of the political society just a farce? Is women empowerment one more a

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<sup>1</sup> Mari Marcel Tekkara, "Speaking Out," *The Hindu* (Sunday Magazine), May 5, 2002.

concept to be exploited as vote-harvester? – to mesmerise the female electorate, a fiction interesting to read? As for the NGOs (Non-Government Organisations) women empowerment is one more 'cliché', used perhaps to keep the work going, to keep the women at grass root groups within their fold as members. Otherwise how to explain the lack of reaction on the part of women groups? Was women empowerment used only as a development paradigm, without bothering about its conceptual implications? For the press barons and media magnates is empowerment a high reward marketable commodity? Or a means to appease the international bodies, developmental or financial? Whatever it is, one can consider Gujarat incident as a timely alarm call for those committed to women empowerment and social change to do a conceptual and practical exercise on the subject and find out where things went wrong.

### **Empowerment Is a Power/Powerless Syndrome**

As per the Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary to empower is to give lawful power or authority to somebody to act. To give power has other connotations: (a few of them are relevant for women empowerment) to enable, to energise, to animate and so on. The word power is given the meaning of authority, control, hegemony, potentiality, competence, efficiency, ability to do or act, to do what one wishes to do. Power is a particular faculty of mind and heart.

Empowerment can then be understood as a process whereby those who do not have power in the above-mentioned sense, are able to acquire power; they are able to overcome their powerlessness. The symptoms of powerlessness are said to be defenceless, ill equipped, dependent, subjected, vulnerable, helpless and so on. To be powerless, according to Thesaurus (Pocket Edition), is to be impotent, *feminised*. Perhaps the last mentioned attribute must have been taken so seriously by women social thinkers, development workers, and the activists that they designed the concept of empowerment to pull the powerless up from the deep ditch of powerlessness and transform them from Cindrellas to princesses – the symbol of high status, power and authority (which are supposed to be symbols of masculinity)

Power is positive and negative. It is the ultimate aphrodisiac, said Henry Kissinger once. Absolute power tends to corrupt absolutely not only the holder but also others. Realising this truth

both at knowledge and experience level activists for women empowerment felt the need for a redefinition of power. What Shabana Azmi, the M.P., actress and social activist observed, during a press interview on women empowerment and power, could be stated here: "One cannot talk about women empowerment without redefining the concept of power. Power is legitimate authority rather than something you use against another in order to control it and to be more powerful. It is about sharing power".<sup>2</sup> It is about sharing power between men and women, between social groups, regions and between nations.

Such an understanding of power can be found among NGO activists and those who work with government organisations at the international (United Nations Organisations) and national level. The concept of empowerment seems to be developed with this understanding of the concept.

### **Empowerment Redefined**

Quite a few definitions of empowerment are available from the UN statements and reports and from the writings of the NGOs. Unfortunately the authors of such definitions could not be identified. Here are a few definitions.

(- Empowerment is a process by which a populace acquires a greater mastery over its own destiny and goes up towards from less human to more human existence.)

(X) -Empowerment essentially involves a wrestling – a wrestling with the ground reality, its power structures and forces. The initial punch in this wrestling would be the acquisition of knowledge and of critical awareness of the existing social system with its economic, political, social and cultural spheres. The second punch would be on the power groups armoured with their 'capital' - intellectual, scientific, technological and financial resources, political clout and cultural hegemony (the power of getting diffused their own ideology, world outlook, their value systems, their ethics, and morals, life style etc. among all the layers of the society in such a way that their ideology becomes the common sense of the people)

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<sup>2</sup> Shabana Azmi, *The Hindu* (Friday Review), Feb. 8, 2002.

The third one is to transform one's own personality system for the above mentioned wrestling. Transformation of personality consists in bringing about a corresponding change in identity and consciousness, a change in the physical, psychological, intellectual and cultural make-up.

-Wrestling also implies entering into the entire gamut 'transactions' According to a school of sociologists<sup>3</sup> 'transactions' are dialectical relationships, which are lateral and horizontal – conciliatory and compromising relationships with peer groups and conflicting and challenging relationships with opposing groups.

As far as women are concerned they have to face two major forces with whom to transact with – first the male supremacy engendered, supported and sustained by societies where patriarchy is the dominant motivating and mobilizing ideology, second, the hegemony of the multi-national corporate system exercised through its satellites, viz. information technology and mass media, which promote hedonistic and consumerist culture; the sad effects of which are degradation of women's image and ecological disaster.

Women empowerment is considered as a device to enable women to have transactional power, that is, women getting equipped with the necessary 'capital; the economic, political social and cultural resources in such a measure and extent that they can play their cards both with their peer groups and the opposing social groups which exercise control – sometime absolute control over them. Such an empowerment enables them to play their roles as equal partners of men, sharing decision-making, and executive power in the political sphere and in all spheres of life.

Such an explanation of 'empowerment' sounds quite interesting and seems to be fantastic. Yet an inevitable question is bound to arise. How to acquire the 'capital' which is talked about? Empowering process in this line has been worked by those intensely involved in women development activities, where women are mobilised and motivated towards

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<sup>3</sup> Jean Remy, Lilian Voye, Emile, "Servais Prodire et Reproduire," *Les Edilions Vieouvuriere Bruxelles* 1(1978), 19.

- the acquisition of knowledge and critical awareness of the social realities – the systems and structures, their role and the transactionary powers of the social forces in order to deal with them.
- access to and effective utilisation of natural and human resources and equip oneself with the necessary capital.
- literacy; adult and non-formal education.
- participatory approach in adult and non-formal education.
- education for human rights, social justice, and for political participation.
- community organisation.

A conceptual framework of empowerment of this genre could be expected from those who have gained vast and rich experience by working indefatigably among the most powerless and vulnerable stratum of the society, namely the disempowered women. In India they are a legion, about seventy five percent on the female adult population. Because they are disempowered, they are incapable of knowing that they are a force to be reckoned with; that they are constitutionally endowed with a power – perhaps the only practical power – by exercising which with discernment, they can oppose, resist, reject, and ‘throned’ and ‘dethroned’ state leadership. This lack of knowledge is tragic not only to them but to the society as a whole. It is this lack of knowledge coupled with the lack of critical consciousness on the part of the female population in India that can be accounted for communal carnages, and similar atrocities, the arrogance and defiance of the perpetrators of such carnages and for the society playing the role of a silent spectator.

So, unless a meticulously revised empowerment programme is introduced in those areas where disempowerment is already deeply entrenched, the nation will certainly have to witness many more Gujarats.

### **Areas of Entrenched Disempowerment of Women**

Demography is one such area. Number is strength, number is power. Numerical strength enjoys a say and weight, it is a leverage in politics; it is a determining factor in the formation of a government at the Union, state and local levels.

It is sad to note that the female population in India is decreasing decade after decade. It makes apparently a downhill

journey. The 2001 census shows a sharp decline in the sex ratio of children in 0-6 years age group with the number of females per 1000 males declining from 945 in 1991 to 927 in 2001. Women's groups discovered a dramatic drop in female population in Punjab, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Orissa, Gujarat and Maharashtra. Gaurav Bhattacharya observes all these states had advanced ultrasound and genetic facilities indicating that medical technology was being misused here. Due to advanced technologies female foeticide had upstaged and in place of amniocentesis, ultra sound scanning emerged as a simple and more popular method of sex determination; scanning in rural towns is often done recklessly; wrong diagnoses are made which in many cases turned fatal to pregnant women; mortality at child birth is increasing once more as four decades back.<sup>4</sup>

While female foeticide, utilising modern technology is becoming more prevalent among intermediate classes and castes, female infanticide goes on unabated in a few states in India, e.g., Tamil Nadu, Rajasthan. Their preference for foeticide, seems to be arising from a precaution of not risking a male foetus. Among the low caste/class milieu infanticide is practised as a preventive device, avoiding the eventual economic ruin that dowry payment brings to the family.

Whatever might be the reasons – dowry, as ever advancing consumerism for example – female child in India, is still looked down upon and the patriarchal value of discriminating against girl child continues to be reinforced.

Government programmes and NGO's efforts to fight against such practices prove to be ineffective, considering the constant increase in both foeticide and infanticide. Since male control over female fertility and child birth remains still quite powerful, NGOs working for women empowerment have to plan out new effective and workable programmes to check this heinous form of women disempowerment.

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Gaurav Vivek Bhatnagar "Dead Before Born," *The Hindu*, June 30, 2002.

## **Women Disempowerment in a Globalised Economy**

Economic globalisation is a combine of economic policies, programmes, structures and institutions. It is engendered, nurtured and operated by a group of full-fledged capitalist powers – the transnational corporations in league with the economically most advanced and politically influential club of countries, the G-8. The authors of globalisation exercise tutelary authority over both developing and developed countries, through the policy of liberalisation, privatisation and free world marketisation. They have strong belief in techno-bureaucratic economic system and in free market as answers for poverty and under development.

Through financial and administrative powers of International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank and World Trade Organisation (WTO) these capitalist powers succeed in persuading the world countries to formulate new economic policy, in line with that of globalisation. India succumbed and the 'Structural Adjustment Programme (1991) which later came to be known as the new economic policy.

How does this policy (SAP) disempower women in India? The main planks of SAP are modernisation of production by high technology; promotion of export productions, restructuring national economy accommodating fiscal and financial policies which hitched Indian economy to global market economy and gradual reduction in public expenditure on welfare schemes.

As for the effects on the people, the worst casualties of globalisation would be women and other disadvantaged sections: i) the policy's thrust on modernisation in agriculture and industries that leads to strong economic growth but unbalanced benefits; ii) pauperisation and growing exclusion of the economically disadvantaged women working in agriculture and fisheries who will be left unemployed due to the increasing mechanisation by both; iii) introduction of advanced technology in the secondary and service sector which comprises banking and insurance, transport and communication, mass media communication, education and health and so on, has already laid off thousands of workers. This means loss of regular monthly income for the family. Women who run home and manage food and health care, are heavily hit. Moreover reduction in social sector expenditure has an adverse effect in terms of health and education. As a result, women are increasingly impoverished and pauperised poverty assuming

feminine face. Hence what happens is termed as feminisation of poverty, in other words disempowerment of women.

Statesmen and international political leaders have expressed concern about feminisation of poverty. One of the former UN secretary generals Javier Perez de Cueller had once remarked that "we must look at the gender implication. . . . Assistance is needed in the design of adjustment policies in order that the bulk of the poorest – the large share of whom is women - do not suffer disproportionately. It has also been warned that of all the effects of globalisation, feminisation of poverty is the most catastrophic and therefore is a matter of great concern."<sup>5</sup>

This great concern is found endorsed by those, who are sensitive to what a tragedy poverty is. Poverty is an ensemble of life – negating symptoms such as deprivation of basic needs of life namely, sufficient and sustainable food, proper clothing to brave oppressive weather; protective and convenient housing, access to clean potable water; special privacy for women, toilet facilities, access to educational, health care facilities and employment opportunities. Besides economic or material poverty there is cultural poverty and even human dignity and human rights poverty.

In India 80 per cent of the female population are poor of whom 75 per cent are rural-based; they have to work long hours (16 to 17 hours a day) for low, disproportionate and discriminatory wages; their economic contribution in the form of productive and service work is invisible. Therefore their contribution goes unrecognised, unrecorded and mostly unrewarded. Technology has driven them out of occupation in the production spheres such as farming and fishing and so the rate of female unemployment has probably increased since 1991. Such is the plight of the majority of women which is getting worse day by day in a global economy.

### **How Empowered Are Our Women in Politics?**

An interesting article appeared in the Hindu, April 21, 2001 with its main thrust on the question how empowered the representatives of village panchayats are. Visiting a village in

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<sup>5</sup> "How Empowered Are They?," *The Hindu*, Jan. 26, 2001.

Andhra Pradesh, meeting the women representatives of village panchayats, the writer tried to find out how these elected representatives of a local democratic body perceive themselves, their identity, role, prerogatives and duties. His findings seem to mirror the picture which the grass root level activists have drawn out of their contact and experiences with the women representatives of their respective panchayats during the election and after the election.

With the enactment of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment in the Indian Constitution (1993) one-third of the seats in panchayat raj and nagar palika institutions of local self-governance in rural and urban areas respectively are reserved for women. Thanks to this amendment, nearly one million women from all over India have entered these democratic institutions as representatives. What sort of profile do they have?

They, most of them, no doubt, are catapulted into the world of politics by the male members of their families, or by some influential (socio-economically) members of the village community. Many of them do not seem to have any knowledge of panchayat; neither do they have any desire to become a representative. They are mere puppets in the hands of their husbands/fathers, brothers/party leaders and so on. Print-media interviews them, projects some of them with political ambitions to climb up the political ladder and become panchayat president, then member of the legislative assembly and finally to land in the Parliament. Even such women have their husbands behind and beside them. Some of these men openly disclosed their desire for upward political carrier. The chief minister Rabri Devi of Bihar is a case in point. She is the most reluctant Chief Minister perhaps. She is under the control and tutelage of her husband (the former chief minister of Bihar). She is reported to have addressed a gathering where she began reading the prepared text of her speech and seemingly finding it something odd and uneasy put aside the text, looked straight at the audience and spoke clearly and forcefully. But as she was picking up steam, her husband (Laloo Prasad) who is always present at every function where she is invited said loudly enough 'You can stop now.' And she did (*The Hindu*, August 28, 2001).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. "How Empowered Are They?," *The Hindu*, Jan. 26, 2001.

As for the village panchayats, authority and control are in the hands of rich influential men in the village. It is they who identify the candidate, campaigning for her, work for her victory and once elected set the panchayat's agenda. Naturally the programme of the panchayat is for construction of roads, street lights toilets, drinking water, wells and so on, which means the programme is for projects and funds. But ironically both project and funds reach the hands of those men who act behind the curtain. This being the case, it is difficult to expect the women members of panchayat to trouble themselves with the most serious problems such as wage differences between male female workers exploitation of female labourers in the agricultural/construction sector, trade liberalisation of agricultural products, decline in rural credit (the last two are the effects of the globalisation), the fall in the prices of their products, unemployment due to mechanisation and so on.

Even in the sphere of local bodies' elections caste/gender discrimination plays a damaging role. Caste and gender are clubbed together in many regions in discriminating women. Dalit women candidates are eliminated tactfully sometimes even with the use of to the extent of using violence; once elected they are treated with utmost contempt and disdain (depriving of a chair to sit on; creating confusion and manhandling at the independence day celebration, thus preventing the president, who happens to be a dalit from hoisting the national flag and so on).

The women representatives of panchayats are aware of this discrimination. Yet no efforts seem to be taken to redress their grievances through the gender based organisations among women members. In addition to this, an awareness of the special and specific gender issues, actual and domestic violence for instance, is also not very much evident in the programmes of the panchayat institutions. It would do good if women work for pro-gender programmes. This would take a considerable time unless the women members are equipped with an effective training in leadership, local self government, introduced them to constitutional rights and responsibilities, social-cultural analysis, women movements, laws for women and made aware of the kinds of violence against women, women welfare schemes and so on.

At the macro level, women representation in parliament is still not adequate. There are only 47 female MPs in a 542-strong House. The 84<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Constitution seeking 33%

reservation for women in the parliament is still under debate. Resistance to the passage of the Bill into Act is on the ground that such a reservation would be beneficial for the high caste/class women candidates and women from SC/ST/BC groups might not have the necessary 'capital' to contest the election. Hence the reasonable demand that women from underprivileged social categories should be given a certain percentage of reservation within the 33 per cent.

On all accounts women's share in the political life is not quite encouraging in spite of reservations provided and promised. As for the poor rural and urban women, whatever knowledge they have comes from their husbands or other male members of the family. They themselves say 'we know to shout, to fight but we do not know to speak on politics'.

### **Violence and Violation of Human Rights**

Women in India are subject to five forms of violence (it could be more): domestic, sexual, caste/class, structural (political, economic, socio-cultural) and communal. Instead of narrating each one of these, a few specific expressions/manifestations of gender violence which have the most stunning disempowering effect are briefly treated here.

#### **Domestic Violence**

According to a study conducted, in some rural areas in Gujarat two-thirds of women suffer from some form of psychological, physical and sexual abuse; as many as 42 per cent of them have been beaten up. A study in Tamil Nadu puts the figure between 36 and 38 per cent. The percentage goes up to 42 to 45 in UP. Eighteen to 45 per cent of married men in the state acknowledge that they have physically abused their wives.<sup>7</sup>

A multi-site survey of nearly thousand rural and urban households, undertaken by the International Centre for Research on women says that 50 percent of them have reported experiencing some form of violent behaviour within marriage. Of these 45 per

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Kuldip Nayar, "Violence against Women," *The Hindu*, Dec. 28, 2000.

cent of women reported severe physical abuse – kicked, hit and beaten up. The data at the national Crimes Record Bureau, Home Ministry reveal a shocking 71.5 per cent increase in cases of torture and dowry deaths from 1991 to 1995. ✓

Wife-battering is not peculiar to any country. It is an universal form of violence existing for centuries. Social convention stamped its approval on this cruel practice. It is considered as a normal marital affair, therefore neither the rule of law nor the government has any business to interfere. "The social structure of the divide between the public and the private underlies the hidden nature of domestic violence. Legal jurisprudence has historically considered the domain of the house within the control and unquestionable authority of the male head.

Majority of women in India imbued with patriarchal ideology do not question this, leave alone fighting against it. It should be mentioned in this context that women in the West who initiated both to the first and second wave of feminism, were determined to put an end to this ideology and practice. Kate Millet one of the three famous authors of the second wave of feminism in her book "Sexual Politics" successfully propagated the dictum 'Personal is Political'. She vehemently insists that domestic violence should come under legal jurisprudence and political purview. As wife-battering is one of the powerful means of disempowerment of women the idea of 'personal is politics' could be utilized as a tool for women empowerment. Many action groups do that.

## Rape

Rape is the most inhuman, brutish form of violence since it is characterised by wild passion of an animal. Historically, rape is sexual intercourse using animal force. It must have originated in primitive tribal societies but seemed to have a hey day in a patriarchal feudal type of society to avenge an enemy, to prove his masculine power over the feminine frailty, or simply to possess physically a woman desired but that desire being ignored or rejected rape was resorted to, say sociologists and anthropologists. This type of violence on woman has life-spoiling multiple effects upon the victim. A woman raped is broken within; her inner self-wounded; dignity shattered and body humiliated. She becomes a psychological wreck.

Yet victims of rape and her family do not generally react. On the contrary they keep a well-guarded silence in order to shield themselves from the inquisitive and insulting public gaze. The irony of rape is that the predator stays out of public strictures whereas the innocent victim is subjected to social condemnation.

With the launching of International Year for Women, of World Conferences of Women, and setting up of National Commission for Women and with the committed involvement of the NGOs in women's development, society's perception has begun to change. The public gaze on the problem of rape followed the rape case of Mathura, a tribal girl from Maharashtra, who was violated sexually by two police on duty within the four walls of the police station; when the case was taken to the court of justice the most unexpected verdict was passed by the judge: the two police men were acquitted on the ground that there were no witnesses, and the girl had not shouted for help, which means there was no resistance on the part of the girl. This acquittal and judgement sparked off protests and agitation from women groups. There had been mass agitations in big cities and towns which brought to focus all the crucial aspects of violence against women and of rape in particular. The public was specially informed of the role of caste and class in women's sexual oppression.

As a consequence of women's agitations several laws have been passed. Some of them are:

### **The Evidence Act**

1. The Criminal Procedure Act
2. The Criminal Procedure Act
3. The Indian Penal Code including the introduction of laws on custodial rape. The concept of 'power rape' has been admitted through an amendment in the civil Rights Act.

However there are in-built loopholes in such laws and in their implication. Hence in spite of relentless struggles of women groups to bring the culprits to book, the victim is denied justice. In several cases of rape the law leaves sufficient loopholes for the police and medical personnel concerned not to act with perfect impunity.

## Dowry

(Dowry is another form of violence which is perpetrated through institutions such as family, marriage, traditional culture and so on. Dowry is a social practice, having an unshakeable grip on families since it is rooted deep into centuries old traditions. It is accepted as normal even by the bride in spite of hundreds of dowry deaths. Bride burning, dowry harassments, dowry deaths have become almost daily news showing that in spite of strong protests from women movements, dowry system is getting strengthened.) The Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961 which has been amended three times in 1980s, setting up of special cells to deal with cases of dowry related harassment, marital violence and several legislative safeguards on the part of the government proved to be non-effective. Instead of declining, dowry system is spreading fast, among the whole population irrespective of caste, creed, language and social status. In a way, a women disempowering practice is being welcomed by women themselves. And media, print and electronic, contribute considerably to the mass acceptance of dowry.)

This discourse on empowerment of women commenced with a query. The latter is provoked by a gruesome incident which though occurred in a particular state, developed into a debatable issue at national and international levels. The question is about the credibility of the empowerment process in which both the government and the NGOs (Church inclusive) have been involved for a considerable time whether women for whose empowerment the two institutions – political and civil - are striving, have really become aware of, sensitive to and action-oriented when human disasters that snatch thousands of lives away and hold others in untold misery. And we have to sadly say 'no'. But why?

The women empowerment process showed signs of slackening by the nineties itself. One could notice a shift of focus and stress on priorities of active involvement. Ultimate objective of social transformation was put aside and conscientisation programme came to be overshadowed by income-generating, saving and credit programmes. Women banks, exercising a magnetic effect on women groups were cropping up. Recently Self-Help Groups, a well-thought out and cleverly planned Central Government Programme implemented by National Bank for Agricultural and Rural Development (NABARD) have become an

instant attraction and application. Input sessions on socio-cultural analysis, in human rights, women movements etc., seem to have taken a back seat among quite a number grass-root level groups.

The new phenomenon is 'save more' 'earn more' slogan. Members and leaders of women groups today could be seen neatly dressed, whisking to banks, to panchayat and taluk offices and even to collectorate with a handkerchief hanging down the shoulder for a manifold purposes from credit to getting benefits from the state social welfare schemes. Such trips to administrative fortresses to satisfy the material demands of the village community such as drinking water, street lights, toilets, roads and so on boost up the image of grass-root leaders. Such services serve as easy entry cards to the panchayat elections which they contest and win. Well and good!

Small-saving programme coupled with SHGs programmes for economic 'security' and 'power', enabled women undertake several income yielding petit trades. Selling milk and eggs etc. means cash. In a society where 'money matters' in every sphere of life, it is not surprising that, with a few exceptions, women groups seem to opt for 'activities' which provide with boost-up-image, a purse with money and entry into political sphere and social status. The self goes before others and social problems.

Such opportunities demand a high degree of commitment and social concern and genuine involvement from members/leaders of women groups. The rural/urban poor for whom and with whom these members are supposed to work do not generally respond to the awareness programmes. Concepts and theories that abstract in nature do not really attract them. What is offered has to be concrete, visible and instantly helpful to them. To a people for whom to live is to struggle for survival the philosophy of life, (in their own words) is "rice pot is on the stove; it is boiling that's enough." Hence any helping hand that fulfils their urgent and immediate needs are most welcome. With social reality just under their nose, they get easily lured by SHG programme which seems to be pragmatic and more supportive with subsidiary programmes for health and education besides those of saving, credit and income generating. It is natural that women groups in course of time prefer switching over to 'assistentialism' which is essentially social work and not social action.

This phenomenon which has been gaining strength slowly but steadily indicates an imperceptible value system being percolated into the women groups. This value system is a 'melange' of mammonisation, consumerism, traditional Hindu Brahmanical values and modernism. The former holds up family love and loyalty, work and sacrifice for family wealth and welfare, family status and prestige along with caste solidarity and caste allegiance. The latter, on the other hand, includes individualism, hedonism, mammonisation, consumerism and so on. Though values of justice, freedom, liberation and human rights are still tried to be promoted, women's groups' primary choice for reflection and action lies elsewhere, as we have seen already. This choice is getting strengthened by the tremendously powerful socio-cultural force namely, the media, particularly the electronic media, more especially the T.V. The mega serials are very successfully diffusing a value system and effectively implanting it in the minds of the people. Thousands of catechism and moral classes in our schools may not achieve this success – old wine in new bottle and new wine in the old one, mixing traditional and modern/post modern values in an amazing pattern. This diffusion is so attractive that T.V. viewers transcending age/caste/class/sex/religion are glued to the idiot box and drink avidly or swallow eagerly whatever values are offered and which seem to contribute for the 'status quo' of the society and of women.

It might take quite bit of time that the masses and the women groups make a 'move away' from the present track, to have a passover from being silent spectators to active defenders. But this does not mean that committed activists, groups and organisations should remain puzzled and uncertain.

### **Church and Women Empowerment**

If women empowerment is understood as a process wherein powerless and vulnerable women are enabled, to act, react and transact in the four principal spheres of social life, namely economic, social, political and cultural then Church in India through her social organisations and institutions has been doing a good job. The apex body of the Catholic Bishop Conference of India (CBCI) for social mission, the Caritas India, the diocesan multipurpose social service societies and the women organisations initiated by them have empowered women all over India. Thanks to such organisations, the poor, silent, marginalised, dependent,

dominated, gender-wise discriminated and sex exploited women (comparatively limited though) acquired courage, knowledge, awareness and power to break those barriers obstructing them from realising their potentialities.

Ezekiel saw a valley covered with bones, dry, very dry bones. And God asked him to prophesy, Ezekiel did and the bones were covered with sinews and muscles and then with skin but there was no breath. God said to him to prophesy to the wind. He did and breath entered the bodies and they came to life and stood up (Ez 37:1-10). This is the real empowerment process. God + a man + a prophecy + the wind (nature) and dead dry bones are back to life and that to full life – to *stand up* – standing up to go forward, to march straight ahead to fight against the enemy.

The present society like what Ezekiel saw is dry with selfishness and egotism. There is no invigorating blood, no inspiring and enlightening spirit, no clean, fresh air to breathe. Church has therefore to prophesy utilising the available human, natural, and other resources to the maximum. Relevant theologies based on biblical revelation, historic-spatial-temporal factors and socio-economic, politico-cultural realities effectively diffused might help the disempowered women of our society stand up with self respect, dignity, love, courage and strength and march towards building up the Kingdom of God on earth.

At a time when those who work genuinely for women's empowerment are in frustration and despair, the Church's message to them should be one of love and hope, love on the Cross – love that goes with self-sacrifice, and hope that does not diminish.

"When you are working for change you have to build into that expectation the possibility that change might not happen in your lifetime and yet to have to continue to work towards" (Kaifi Azmi).

This sounds a Christian utopia. As far as women in India are concerned it is this utopia that is now needed for them!