
SACH

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In the present issue, we are reproducing two poems which were published by Asian Human Rights Commission earlier. These poems refer to situation in Sri Lanka and Palestine, but if we look around in our own surroundings we may realise that the poem talks about our context of conflict as well. Though in the previous issues we have been South Asia specific and our selections have remained confined to poets from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal, but this time we have selected "This is My House" by Richard Macwilliam and "He washes his bottom" by Jackie Paper, as they are universal in nature and also very much fits into our context of conflict.

This is My House

Richard Macwilliam

This is my house, and you are a guest in it.
Please - leave when you are no longer welcome
I will have no hesitation in using force -
Beneath my smile lies
Fear
And
Hate.

This is my house: it needs rebuilding -
I value you
For your skills:
But without those skills
You
Are
Nothing.

This is my house: you are not welcome,
Yet my morality insists that you stay -
But
Only
One
At
A
Time.

This is my house: we are friends,
And you can stay forever -
But only because
We
Are
Friends.

This is my house: we are brother and sister.
You are most welcome.
Live here and join our family.
We will argue: we will love: but most of all
We
Will
Live.

This is my house. Next door is another house.
I have been in that other house.
That other house is part of my street.
It is a nice house.
I
Like
My
Street.

He washes his bottom

Jackie Paper

Civilian corpses of woman and children strewn over the ground of relief camps;
Aid agencies prevented from providing humanitarian care to hungry persons.

But he washes his bottom.

Doctors who tell the truth without government permission are detained;
Journalists and editors who report on government atrocities,
are disappeared and murdered.

But his bottom he washes.

Laws regularly broken and constitutional constraints flagrantly flouted;
Witnesses, who challenge government lies intimidated, attacked and killed;

But, Oh yes, he washes his bottom.

Though he washes that bottom in:

the village pond,
the still canal,
the sea side swells;

The filth and stink remain.

1857 In Our History

P. C. Joshi

...Continued from previous issue

The 1857 uprising is a historic landmark. It marks the end of a whole historic phase and the beginning of a new one. On the British side it finished the Company's rule and led to direct government under the British Crown. The period of rule of the merchant monopolists of the East India Company ended and the dominance of the industrial bourgeoisie of Britain in the affairs of India began. On the Indian side, the revolt failed but the Indian people got that experience which enabled them to build the modern Indian national movement on new foundations and with new ideas, and the lessons of 1857 proved inestimable. Both sides drew and applied their lessons from the 1857 experience in the subsequent period. The British were the victors, they went into action soon; we were the vanquished, we took longer.

From their experience of the 1857 uprising the British rulers sharply changed their policy towards the Indian feudal elements, and discarding the old policy of attacking their interests, they adopted a new policy of reconciling them as the main social base of their rule in India. The Indian people from their experience of the Indian feudals drew lesson for the next phase of their movement that their anti-British struggle to be successful must also be an anti-feudal struggle. Those who were so far regarded by the Indian people as their traditional leaders were now rightly considered as betrayers of the 1857 uprising and the Indian puppets of the British power.

As regards the Indian princess, the policy of annexations was given up. Queen Victoria in her Proclamation promised them:

We shall respect the rights, dignity and honour of native Princess as our own. Very candidly Lord Canning in his Minute of April 30 noted: *The safety of our rule is increased and not diminished by the maintenance of native chiefs well affected to us.*

How the Indian national movement understood the post-1857 British policy towards the princes is best reflected in Nehru's Discovery of India where he states that the retention of the native states was designed to disrupt the unity of India, Indian princes playing the role of Britain's fifth column in India.....

The Army was reorganised after the sepoy mutiny, which had set the country aflame. The proportion of British troops was increased and they were primarily used as an "army of occupation" to maintain internal security while the Indian troops were organised and trained for service abroad to subjugate Asian and African territories for British imperialism. The artillery was taken away from the Indian hands. All higher appointments were reserved for the British, an Indian could not even get the King's Commission nor get employment in the Army headquarters except as a clerk in non-military work. The Indian regiments were reorganised on the principle of divide and rule and recruitment confined to the so-called martial races.

But in the long run nothing availed the British. The memory of the sepoy's role during 1857 never died not only in the memory of the Indian people but also of the Indian armed forces. As the modern national movement grew, it could not leave the Indian Army, however "reorganised", untouched. **During the 1930 national struggle, the Garhwali soldiers refused to fire at the Indian demonstrators at Peshawar. During the post-war national upsurge after a series of "mutinies" in the Indian Army and Air Force, the Royal Indian Navy revolted on February 18, 1946 and the next day the British Prime Minister announced the dispatch of the Cabinet Mission to India and negotiations for the independence of India began.**

The Indian administrative machine was reorganised as a colossal bureaucratic machine with Indians employed only in subordinate positions, all real power and responsibility resting

in British hands. The Queen's Proclamation had promised that there would be no racial discrimination against the Indians in employment in government services. The reality, however, was different...

After 1857, politically, even Sir Syed Ahmad Khan had suggested that Indians should be included in the Legislative Council to keep the government in touch, with the people. In 1861 the Indian Councils Act provided for the inclusion for legislative purposes of non-official members. In 1862, three Indians were so nominated. These legislatures, in which real power remained with the exclusive British Executive, were used by patriotic Indian statesmen as tribunes of the Indian people and to unmask British policies and thus aid the growth of the national movement. The British tactic of divide and rule, however, succeeded in another way. **The institution of separate electorates for the Muslims was the first expression of the poisonous two-nation theory which ultimately resulted in the partition of the country at the very time of gaining independence.**

The British Government, which claimed credit for early social reform measures like banning of sati, widow remarriage, etc., after the experience of 1857 and its subsequent alliance with the Indian feudal reaction became the opponent of all progressive social measures.

Hindu law was largely custom and as customs change, the law also was applied in a different way. Indeed there was no provision of Hindu Law which could not be changed by customs. The British replaced this elastic customary law by judicial decisions based on the old texts and these decisions became precedents which had to be rigidly followed. Change could only come by positive legislation but the British Government, which was the legislating authority, had no wish to antagonise the conservative elements on whose support it counted. When later some legislative powers were given to the partially elected assemblies, every attempt to promote social reform legislation was frowned upon by the authorities and sternly discouraged.

The British Government thus became the defender of social reaction in India, after 1857!

The British overlords had created an English educated Indian middle-class to get cheap and efficient and denationalised Indian cadres for the lower essential rungs of their administration.

Educated natives took no part in the sepoy mutiny: despite the charges to the contrary, they heartily disapproved of the revolt and showed themselves faithful and loyal to the British authorities throughout the course of that crisis.

The above is not wholly true. Dr Sen states: *Even this small minority (of modern educated Indians) were not unanimous in the support of the Government. An educated Hindu of Bengal complained of 'a hundred years of unmitigated active tyranny unrelieved by any trait of generosity'.*

"A century and more of intercourse between each other," he adds, "has not made the Hindus and the Englishman friends or even peaceful fellow subjects."

Calcutta was the biggest centre of these modern educated Indians. They were at the time themselves concentrating upon the struggle against Hindu orthodoxy and the religious terms in which the cause of the insurgents was clothed repelled them. Because of their historic origin and the limitations of their political experience they wrongly identified progress with British rule. They were not, however, "faithful and loyal" in the sense Earl Granville imagined them to be, servile to the British rulers. This was proved in the very next year after the 1857-58 uprising was suppressed when the Bengali intelligentsia stirred the whole of Bengal in solidarity with the Indigo Revolt, with the peasants of Bengal and Bihar who were victims of unimaginable oppression and exploitation of the British planters. Again it was Surendranath Banerji who took the initiative to run an all-India campaign against lowering the age for the ICS, which patently went against the Indian candidates. Then came the campaigns regarding the Ilbert Bill and racial discrimination in courts and the Vernacular Press Act and so on. As the new intelligentsia saw more and more of India under the British Crown all their illusions about Queen Victoria's 1858 Proclamation being the Magna Carta of Indian liberties gradually evaporated and they began to agitate for political reforms. In 1882 the Grand Old Man of Indian

nationalism, Dadabhai Naoroji, wrote: *Hindus, Mohammedans and Parsees alike are asking whether the British rule is to be a blessing or a curse...This is no longer a secret, or a state of things not quite open to those of our rulers who would see...*

Even before 1857, from India a policy of imperial expansion was planned and the British Government of India was set on the perilous road of conquest and annexation in the East for the benefit of Britain, but of course at the cost of the Indian tax-payer.

Thus Malacca and Singapore were occupied, Burma conquered, Nepal and Afghan wars conducted and the Persian war managed.

The age of the Empire, based on India, began after 1857. India now became in fact no less than in name a British possession. The Indian Empire was at this time a continental order, a political structure based on India, and extending its authority from Aden to Hongkong.

In this period, Afghanistan and Persia were made virtual British protectorates, expeditions and missions were sent to Sinkiang and Tibet in the North and the British position in South-East Asia and China consolidated.

"The continental involved a subordinate participation of India" as policemen, traders and usurers, and coolies in the plantations of Britain's growing colonies. Indian resources and manpower were thus used not only to conquer but maintain and run Britain's colonial Empire.

This, however, was only one side of the picture. As part of winning foreign support for the Indian uprising Azimullah Khan, Nana's representative, is reported to have built contacts with Russia and Turkey. Rango Bapuji, the Satara representative, is also reported to have worked with Azimullah. Bahadur Shah's court claimed Persian support. All this was in the old principle that Britain's enemies are our friends. But Britain was the colossus of that period, and the feudal ruling circles of these countries could never be in any hurry to come to the aid of the Indian revolt. They could at best exploit it and await its outcome.

This was, however, not the attitude of

democratic circles in these and other countries... there was in all democratic circles of the civilised world great sympathy for the Indian uprising. Great and historic is the significance of the Chartist leaders' solidarity with the Indian national uprising. Modern British labour movement dates its birth from the Chartists. Modern Indian national movement dates its birth from the 1857 uprising. **What a new fraternal vision emerges from the memory that the British proletariat and the Indian people have stood together ever since the beginning of their respective movements.** The Chinese date the birth of their modern anti-imperialist national movement from the Taiping uprising as we date ours from the 1857 uprising. **The Chinese paper (presented at the symposium on the centenary of the 1857 Revolt) documents the hitherto unknown story that the Chinese people responded sympathetically to the 1857 uprising and the Indian sepoy's deserted to the Taipings and fought shoulder to shoulder with them against the common enemy. Marx noted the new phenomenon that the revolt in the Anglo-Indian army has coincided with a general disaffection exhibited against supremacy by the Great Asiatic nations, the revolt of the Bengal Army being, beyond doubt, intimately connected with the Persian and Chinese wars.**

Thus the great national uprising of 1857 laid the foundation for the worldwide democratic solidarity with the Indian struggle in its next phase and our new national movement built itself on healthy internationalist traditions. For example, in the twenties, the Indian national movement vigorously opposed the imperialist policies in the Middle East and expressed solidarity with the Egyptian struggle under Zaglul Pasha, in the thirties it expressed practical solidarity with the Chinese people's struggle against the Japanese invaders and the worldwide anti-fascist movement and so on. It was thus no accident that after the achievement of independence India emerged as a great world power championing the cause of world peace and the liberation of all subject nations.

A Thread of Faith

Sarita Chouhan

...Continued from previous issue

FEARLESSNESS

Fearlessness is being truthful. A man who speaks truth rejects false as false. He has no dilemmas in his mind because he can take stand and his mind doesn't get entangled with emotional attachment or desire related fears. For him if going on the path of truth is right, he follows that path for he believes this is the God's Will and God is within him.

"Be not weary and
Fainthearted, crying for peace,
When ye should be
Uppermost: For Allah is
With you, and will never
Put you in loss
For your (good) deeds." (Quran, 47:35)

With the rise of the truth, one sees only the Pure Being within. The Pure Consciousness has no fears and gives all the strength. As the Pure Consciousness or Soul never dies and the body becomes insignificant.

"I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body and after that can do nothing more."
(Bible, Luke, 12:4)

"He rids us of our enmities and fears and doubts.
Yea, so Pure is the Soul of God: sublime is His innate Nature."
(Sri Guru Granth Saheb, p.1348, Prabhati M.5)

All the scriptures tell us to be fearless. The fear can be many- fear of death, fear of losing the near and dear ones, fear of future, fear of accident and so on. Once the fear arises in the mind, the mind cannot function rationally and one can't see the real picture of what is right and what is wrong.

Through the religions we learn that Good wins over Evil. Because what is Good is Truth and Truth is the word of Ram, Krishna, Mohammed, Jesus Christ, Buddha and Nanak-the word of Truth being same, they have said it: Be Conscious, Be Truthful, Be Fearless. And this is only possible with faith.

In Quran, when Pharaoh tries to trick Moses with magic and clever tricks, Moses feels a bit of isolated. He knows no tricks and relied entirely on God. But soon God's faith asserts itself, gives him the confidence, and points out the truth that will destroy the falsehood.

“We said, “Fear not!
For thou hast indeed
The upper hand:

“Throw that which is
In the right hand:
Quickly will it swallow up
That which they have faked:
What they have faked
Is but a magician’s trick:
And the magician’s thrives not,
(No matter) where he goes”. (Quran, 20: 68,69)

Sometimes, the concerted attack of evil is so well contrived from all points that falsehood appears and is acclaimed as truth. The believer of truth can also have doubts in his mind. But the falsehood gets finally exposed and it cannot win.

To be fearless is to be daring and bold. With fearlessness alone we can follow a virtuous path, we can know the true self. For with fearlessness we can win over enemies, make friends and take the right decisions.

“For my good, I must end this nature of enmity. O my enemy, I forsake all differences with you. Let this land give me protection. I should be fearless everywhere. (Athurv Veda, 19.14.1)

“Fools in their folly give themselves to sloth: the wise man guards his vigour as his greatest possession.” (Dhammapada, 20)

“Let me fear neither friend nor foe,
Neither the known nor the Unknown,
May we be fearless in both nights and days
Let all beings from the Whole world be my friends.” (Athurv Veda 19.15.6)

CHARITY

O God! We plead that we always follow the good path and never leave that. I pray all the wealth bestowed by you is enjoyed by me with prayer and charity.

Miserliness may not stay within me- with miserliness prayer is unachievable.
(Rig Veda 10.57.1, Athurv Veda 13.2.59)

The scriptures of all the religions of the world remind us that the aim of human life is to serve and love, without which this rare human birth will be of waste.

Loving-kindness, compassion and the willingness to serve will only be in a person who thinks of benefit of others and is not selfish by nature. There are people who do service out of self-interest and there are people who do out of goodness. A sincere person will serve mankind without expecting

anything in return. For him work is worship and he doesn't expect any reward or recognition from it.

“When you give alms, do not let your left arm know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

(Bible, Matthew 6:3,4)

If a good work is done with pride in order to be noticed, it goes waste. It has to be done consciously, at the right place and time without any kind of pretensions. The real service has to be with good thoughts, good words and good deeds. It is only possible by a pure and noble soul. It is possible only in a person whom no kinds of temptations or attachments hold back from doing the service.

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. (Bible, Matthew 6: 19,20)

“That alms given at unfit place and time, and to unworthy persons, disrespectfully and contemptuously, that is declared of darkness.” (Bhagavad Gita, 17: 22)

According to Buddhism- renouncing the abundant and plentiful is not 'Dan Parmita'. One has to renounce all those things for which the mind has maximum attachment for the sake of others. 'If my mind is desirous of Nirvana (salvation) I shall have to renounce all what I possess', is the resolution the Bodhisattva have to take. The life of Gautam Buddha is an example of leaving all the princely comforts and family behind for attaining salvation.

“By no means shall ye
Attain righteousness unless
Ye give (freely) of that
Which ye Love;
And whatever Ye
Give, of a truth
Allah knoweth it well.” (Quran, 3:92)

Everything including the body comes to an end, so having attachment to anything is futile. Only the self should be nurtured- the self should be loved. For if the love is there within, it will radiate out. And all likes a person who is kind and loving.

Buddha said,

“ The charitable man is loved by all; his friendship is prized highly; in death his heart is at rest and full of joy, for he suffers not from repentance.”

“Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake. Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, “Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbour in your land.” (Bible, Deuteronomy, 15:10,11)

DALITS IN 'HINDU RASHTRA'

Subhash Gatade

The Gujarat Earthquake in year 2001 and the consequent relief and rehabilitation programme was an eye opener to the outside world regarding the deep seated caste bias in the Gujarati community apart from the much talked about bias against minorities. There were reports that at places the relief and rehabilitation work bypassed the Dalits and the Muslims.

The organised genocide of Muslims in the year 2002 at the behest of the Sangh Parivar organisations which was aided and abetted by the Modi government was another occasion when the travails and tribulations of the Dalits came under further scrutiny. While a section of the Dalits cooption in the Hindutva agenda and their metamorphosis as foot soldiers of the Hindutva brigade was duly reported, the Varna dominated media did not deem it necessary to emphasise some related facts. The genocide in Gujarat had also a little Dalit blood accompanying it. The Dalits lost 108 lives in Gujarat, 38 alone in the city of Ahmedabad. Quite a few of these deaths occurred due to the Dalits resisting the Hindutva goons by siding with hapless Muslims.

Interestingly Babasaheb Dr Bhim Rao Ambedkar had asked his followers to stop Hindu Raj becoming a reality at all costs.

1. WHO EXHUMED THE BODY OF THE TWO PLUS YEAR OLD AND WHY?

It was the year 2001 when Naresh Solanki's two and half year old nephew died. The aggrieved family from Hooda village Palanpur block of Banaskantha district went and buried him in the community burial grounds. No sooner they reached home came the news that a Patel community member from the village had literally exhumed the body of the child with a tractor. For the powerful Patels who had encroached on some part of land next to the burial ground had felt offended with the burial.

It has been more than seven years that the incident took place, the Dalits of Hooda village are still waiting for allotment of some land for burial from the collector and the village panchayat since then, but to no avail. It was only last year that one community elder died the Dalits had to carry his body to another village, where fortunately Dalits there had a separate graveyard.

But can it be said that the problem of no land even for burials is limited to Hooda or it is a statewide phenomenon. A report carried by 'Mail Today' in the first week of Feb, 2009 had thrown light on the issue. It tells us that Dalits are not allowed to use common burial grounds and are often forced to use a part of waste land near the

villages as burial grounds. Absence of any legal entitlement forces them to be pushed out of such lands by dominant upper castes.

A survey conducted by *Gujarat Rajya Grampanchayat Samajik Nyay Samiti Manch* found out that '[o]ut of 657 villages in Gujarat, 397 villages do not have any designated land allotted for burial for Dalits. Out of the 260 villages where land has been formally allotted, 94 have seen encroachments by the dominant castes and in 26 villages it is a low lying area and therefore the ground gets waterlogged.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that when the question of burying the dead comes up, Dalits share a strange commonality with the Muslims. Muslims share similar predicament when they find their graveyards getting encroached by the dominant classes. Few years back the Gujarat High court had to intervene and ask the State government to post police personnel as attempts were on to encroach upon the graveyard of Muslims in Patan.

2. TELL YOUR CASTE, LOOSE YOUR HOUSE !

If the dead dalits have no place of dignity in 'Hindu Rashtra', one can just imagine the status of the living. One test could be house hunting as a Dalit in Ahmedabad - capital of 'Hindu Rashtra' in making.

The general experience is that if a Dalit approaches an upper caste builder for accommodation, he is either directly discouraged or tacitly denied. It is immaterial even if the Dalit belongs to a sound economic background. For the builders and real estate agents, selling property to even one Dalit family in a society becomes detrimental to sales.

Perhaps it is a marker of the deeply entrenched Varna/caste mindset, which has supposedly received new lease of life after the 2002 carnage, one witnesses a unique trend in Ahmedabad where “only Dalit residential societies - around 300 of them” have come up in recent years. In a recent study done by the Express reporter he emphasised that it is “.. not a matter of choice, but of compulsion.” **“(A Dalit? Go find a Dalit Society. D P Bhattacharya Ahmedabad, June 17, 2007)”**

“Even if a Dalit can afford a flat in areas dominated by the upper castes, they are often denied by the builders or the seller,” retired IAS officer P K Valera, who lives in one such Dalit society in Ramdevnagar, says. Some social scientists say the alienation started since 1982, after the anti-reservation agitation, but agree that the caste and class distinctions have become more serious in recent years. This trend can be seen not only in the walled city but also in the posh areas of west Ahmedabad like Satellite, Vastrapur, Bodakdev, Ambavadi. Socio-political scientist Achyut Yagnik says, “There are more than 300 Dalit societies in the city. In Chandkheda alone, there are 200 societies, most of which have come up after the 2002 riots when people moved out from Gomtipur, Bapunagar and Dani limda area. You will find construction contractors who only build Dalit societies.”

Of course this near segregation of Dalits to specific areas under the great umbrella of Hindu Unity does not stop the Sangh Parivar to use the Dalits for their sectarian agenda during elections and riots. Even a cursory glance at the list of the dead and wounded in the riots makes it clear that one finds names of only Muslims and Dalits, rest of the other castes are nominal.

Interestingly a Dalit from outside the state, whose caste surnames are not identifiable in the mainstream apartments, can easily get into it.

3.

LOOK THE OTHER WAY, WHILE RECRUITING TEACHERS

What is common between all the non-granted schools in Gujarat whose numbers hovers around 3255 according the website of the Gujarat State Secondary and Higher Secondary Education Board? A close study of these schools may reveal many similarities but the foremost thing over which they seem to be united is to violate the statutory provisions of the Education act 1972. None of them follow these provisions of the Education act while it is mandatory for such schools to adhere to norm. End result, only handful of teachers from the scheduled communities in all these schools.

Under the provisions of the education act - 1972, it is mandatory for all the granted and non-granted schools to abide by the reservation policy while making recruitments. And the rule says that if any school is found to be violating its provisions then its registration can be cancelled. Experience shows that the rule is openly flouted by the non-granted schools. Interestingly the state government has no qualms in accepting that they can't compel the schools to do it as they are not given any aid.

It was only last year that Indian Express (Vadodara, May 26, 2008) carried a big expose about this ongoing scam where ‘Government looks the other way as schools flout recruitment norms for teachers.’ According to the social justice and empowerment department, which is supposed to supervise the implementation of the reservation policy, the simple reason for the statutory provisions of the act being not implemented is the absence of a roster reservation act.

Question naturally arises why the state has still not deemed it necessary to take effective steps to stop such malpractice?

In fact, a RTI application filed by a leading social worker of Gujarat enquiring about the number of teachers who have been recruited by the non-granted schools under the reservation policy, led to this expose of details. Expressing concern over the state of affairs, the social worker demanded two things: canceling the registration of errant schools and punishing the officers who have been responsible for not getting the policy implemented.

4. HANDLING ATROCITIES CASES ATROCIOUSLY

What is the rate of conviction of cases under the Prevention of Atrocity Act against SC/ST in Gujarat? It is mere 2.5 per cent while rate of acquittal is 97.5 per cent. A 23 page confidential report submitted by the state Social Justice Department to the State Chief Secretary and legal departments provides glaring examples of 'mishandling of cases registered under Prevention of Atrocities Act against SC/ST. (Express, September 15, 2006).

The report provides details of how cases are not investigated properly by the police and the hostile role played by public prosecutors during time of trials.

- Act clearly stipulates that offence which are registered under this act cannot be investigated by an officer below the rank of Deputy Superintendent of Police but more than 4,000 such cases have been investigated by Police Inspector or Police Sub Inspector.
- Acquittal of the perpetrator because victim not identified as member of SC or ST community. Reason, not attaching caste certificate of the victim with the case papers.
- Public prosecutor's false claims before the courts that act has been modified by the state government although it is known that it is a central act.
- Granting of anticipatory bails although there is no such provision in the act. Interestingly the Parliamentary Committee on SC and ST affairs had also expressed concern over such anticipatory bails granted 'in atrocity cases in the state of Gujarat'.

In fact a detailed and systematic study of 400 judgements done by Vajibhai Patel, Secretary of Council for Social Justice compelled the government to work on this 23 page report. This report tells us that utterly negligent police investigation at both the higher and lower levels coupled with a distinctly hostile role played by the public prosecutors is the main reason for the collapse of cases filed under the atrocities act. It is worth noting that he has meticulously documented these judgements delivered under this act since April 1, 1995 in the Special Atrocity Courts set up in 16 districts of the state. The study also blasts the common perception is that the inefficacy of this law is due to false complaints being lodged or compromises between the parties, in actuality it is a complicit State that has rendered the Act toothless.

Perhaps the whole state of affairs was a continuation of the situation as it existed there.

The National Crime Records Bureau had made an observation few years back which went

unnoticed. Coming to atrocities against Dalits, Gujarat ranks third in the country after U.P. and Bihar. (Asian Age, 11 April 2003) Its earlier record also revealed a disturbing picture of the 'Vibrant Gujarat'. According to its 1998 report, the total no of atrocities against Dalits in the country were 25,617. Of these, 8894 cases were registered in Gujarat alone. 28 cases of rapes of Dalit women were recorded that year, which was seventh highest in the country.

But when it came to taking steps to check offences against the SCs and STs the BJP government did nothing. The special Dalit courts envisaged in all districts under the SC and ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act 1989 were still not a reality. Out of 26 districts of Gujarat, only 10 have been provided with special courts, although none of these 10 courts accord special status to Dalit issues, according to Dalit activists. (same ref.)

5. AMBEDKAR'S PROGNOSIS

One can go on belching out statistics about Dalit's situation as it exists in the first 'Hindu Rashtra' in Secular- Democratic India. Definitely our aim here is not to present a data bank on this theme.

Our main concern is to raise two points.

- *Why the near secondary status granted to the Dalits has not become an important issue in the anti-communal movement?*
- *Why a section of Dalits still feels enamoured about Hindutva, can it be said to be sign of its upward mobility within the Hindu religion or it is a marker of the hatred it had accumulated vis-à-vis the minority communities and getting ready to play out the Hindutva agenda on its own also.*

It needs to be emphasised here that all over Gujarat one finds thousands and thousands of boards put at prominent places by one of the affiliates of the Sangh Parivar that 'you are entering this or that locality of Hindu Rashtra' which is completely illegal and an open proclamation of 'secession' from the rest of the society.

At this juncture one thinks of Ambedkar's prognosis vis-à-vis Hindu Rajya. In his book 'Pakistan or Partition of India, page 358) written before partition of India, he clearly prophesies: "If Hindu Raj becomes a reality then it would be greatest menace to this country. Whatever may Hindus say, actually it does not make a difference that Hinduism is a danger to Independence, Equality and Brotherhood. Thus, it is an enemy of democracy. We should make all out efforts to stop Hindu Raj from becoming a reality." (Pakistan or Partition of India, Page 358)

Is anybody listening?

Composite Heritage: Reflections and Experiences

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The entire region of South Asia has a huge variety of cultural practices and expressions which are similar yet they are distinct. These cultural forms, practices, secular healthy traditions give us strength and ability to live life as sensitive human beings who believe in co-existence and acceptance of different cultures. These commonalities among people of different communities and cultures, keeps the social fabric intact and allows society to breathe and survive. We often say that a society is a combination of those who want to indulge in conflict and benefit from dividing people and those who want peace and co-existence. People who want peace and resist conflict are much more in number than those forces who want conflict torn society. A society would cease to exist if there are no such forces that support people and peace and resist war/conflict/tension. For example, South India has a treasure of rich culture, history, language, cultural expressions, and mass movements in favour of oppressed people. The uniqueness of the Dravidian culture which is different from the culture of North, West, Eastern parts of India is their Composite Heritage and their pride. All these and many more connectors and forms of Composite Heritage enable people to relate with each other leading to a society that wants to live in peace and harmony.

NEED FOR A SUSTAINED MOVEMENT FOR PEACE AND SECULARISM

Our experiences tell us that whenever we face violent conflicts, our instant reaction is to intervene through dialogues. With utmost enthusiasm and sensitivity many forums take shape to address the situation. Gradually as the motif of conflict is accomplished and situation calms down, our peace initiatives and forums also die down. We do have movements for peace and secularism, but what we don't have is a

strong and consistent movement focusing on various aspects related with peace and conflict. We intervene at a time when minds and ears are closed for dialogue and at times in place of restoring peace we end up intensifying conflict. It is important to address the issue when there is so called "peace" around us. We often misinterpret nonviolent conflict situation to peace. Till the time we do not see fire and blood we say there is peace in our society. This is not completely true. There are always these undercurrents of hatred, inacceptance and a feeling of "they against us". These feelings reflect in our day to day behaviour and are exploited by those who have vested interest in engaging people in conflict. This so called time of peace when we don't see fire and blood, is the time for intervention and nursing a society which has been since ages, torn in conflict and tensions.

BRIEF ON COMPOSITE HERITAGE AND OUR EXPERIENCES SO FAR

South Asian region has several commonalities. On one hand we have a society that has been subjected to various forms of discriminations and has been deprived of basic rights to a dignified life since ages. Our sorrows connect us and we can relate with the situations of each other. On the other hand we have a treasure of festivals, of culture, of art forms, of literature, poetry, our history of common struggles for our rights and many more commonalities that bring us together through joys and festivity. South Asians share their history of freedom struggle. The festival of *durga pooja* is celebrated both in India and Bangladesh. Cinema is yet another medium through which people relate with each other. We have a rich folk tradition which includes folk art forms. The *Baul and Nazrul geeti* of Bengal and Bangladesh, *Buleshah, Baba Farid* of Punjab (both of India and Pakistan), the followers of saint *Moinuddin Chishti of Ajmer*, in southern part of India great literary figures and reformists of the time like *Thiluwalur*,

Thyagaraj, to name a few have been the guiding light for our society. The festival of *basant* which is celebrated in entire South Asian region was started by *Amir Khusro* who was a disciple of *Nizamuddin Aulia*. The legend says that once *Hazrat Nizamuddin Aulia* went into deep sorrow on the death of his brother and he used to stay

of all communities. It was *Amir Khusro* who invented *sitar, tabla and qawalli*. These forms of art cut across the boundaries of community, caste, religion and *Amir Khusro* along with legends like *Kabir, Guru Nanak* and many others become a symbol of our Composite Heritage.

But not all forms and aspects of Composite



Baba Bullshah



Sheikh Farid



Kazi Nazrul Islam

Amir Khusro



silent and alone. *Amir Khusro*, his disciple and a follower was very upset and worried about this situation. Around this time, one day *Amir Khusro* while walking some where saw men and women wearing yellow clothes and singing songs. He stopped by and asked them why they all were dressed in yellow dress. They said that today it is *basant* and so we all are dressed in yellow to celebrate the coming of summers and the beginning of new harvest season. *Amir Khusro* liked this idea and he also wore yellow dress and went in front of *Nizamuddin Aulia*. After a long time *Nizamuddin Aulia* smiled looking at *Amir Khusro*. From then onwards *Amir Khusro* started celebrating this festival every year with members

Heritage play a positive role. Experiences tell us that there are various *negative* forms of Composite Heritage as well. The values attached with the caste system which legitimizes suppression of some people who are believed to be impure due to their caste identity, by those who are believed to be superior. These values have been passing on to us generations after generations and are common in entire region of South Asia, in one form or another. Similarly, the rigid system of patriarchy that haunts South Asia also comes as a heritage to us. These and many other practices become our *negative* Composite Heritage. However, the point here is to realise that though we have a history of being deprived of dignity

and of being suppressed on one hand, we also have a history of co-existence and respecting different cultures that has led us to live in peace. **This history is our Composite Heritage.**

In a society like that of South Asia where the roots of various forms of discrimination are very strong there are people who are convinced they need to challenge this system and work to empower those who have been deprived of their basic human rights for ages and generations together. In such efforts Composite Heritage is a tool that can be used to face these challenges and bring people together.

NEGATIVE USE OF COMPOSITE HERITAGE

Our experiences also tell us that many times various forms of Composite Heritage are used in such a way that they become a cause for conflict itself. Many divisive forces who have their vested interests in dividing society on the basis of caste, religion, region, gender and so on, they have been using positive, healthy forms of our cultural commonalities in such a way that people start believing that these forms of Composite Heritage are cause for unrest and conflict in society. For example during *Moharram* festival, a procession is carried out, which often is given a negative form and is deliberately made a causing factor for conflict. These situations pose a challenge for activists and those who practice Composite Heritage in their work.

LIMITATIONS IN USING COMPOSITE HERITAGE

Unfortunately there are many limitations in use of Composite Heritage. This is due to various threats it faces and its struggle for surviving. As a consequence of the globalisation and its effect on the markets which in turn affects our life style has been a major threat to our Composite Heritage. Various healthy traditions and art forms have died slow painful death and some are on verge of extinction. Various platforms of cultural expressions have been struggling to survive. Art forms like *nautanki*, *jagar*, theatre of narration like *teejan bai*, puppetry, staging of *mahabharat* etc are bearing the brunt of so called development. The onslaught of free market economy has been on the local weekly markets, fairs and festivals. People now prefer to sit home and watch TV

soaps rather than go for a theatre performance. This has affected the source of income of many artists in a major way. Handicrafts, handlooms are no different in their struggle for survival. These forces that pose as a threat have been eroding the common links that we have in our society where people of different cultures come and interact and therefore co-exist.

Apart from this there are certain forms of art which have been taken into the fold of the elite class and has drifted from its relations with the masses. Our up bringing in a society which is influenced by the elite way of life, makes us relate with such art forms and therefore consider it as our Composite Heritage. But if we apply it to the field level we find that there is almost no association with certain art forms that have been taken under the fold of classical art forms. Here it is important to say that, it is easy to reject things related to certain class or community. However the point is to see the reason as to why certain art forms drifted away from common people and even within a certain class of society does it play a connecting role or not? Our experiences tell us, that, they do play a connecting role within certain class or community. A variety of classical art forms have to face these questions.

One might wonder what is left now to be called as living Composite Heritage that brings people together. The answer is that despite all these limitations and challenges arising out of these limitations, many aspects of our culture are playing their role in acting as a bridge in conflicting society. Many folk art forms, folk tales, handicrafts, folk music, dance, drama, agriculture and festivals and practices related with agriculture, fairs are answers to these questions. These forms of Composite Heritage are struggling for their existence, but they have not ceased to exist, as yet. In a society like that of North – East in general and Manipur in particular, which has since decades been tortured and raped by army, what makes people come and celebrate their *Kut* festival every year, together with Naga, Kuki, Maitei, Pangal. Similarly, in Jammu and Kashmir, in Pakistan, Bangladesh, our experiences reaffirm the efficacy of this tool of peace building.

Ningol Chakkouba from the Lens of Composite Heritage

Miranjan Singh Loitongbam

Centre for Social Development,
Manipur, INDIA

“Composite Heritage is a very unique product of our culture inherited from our ancestors that have all the attributes of a composite quality.”

ABOUT MANIPUR:

Manipur, the birthplace of world famous Polo (Sagol Kangjei), Rass Leela (Classical Dance), Shiroi Lilly of Ukhrul, Shangai (rear deed) of Keibul Lamjao, Fresh water lake Loktak has become the crystal picture of the land. Besides, martial arts, traditional indigenous games, folk dances of various ethnic groups, musical instruments, Lai Harouba (ritual and recreational festival) are all coming into the melting pot of Manipuri rich culture. Other seasonal festivals such as Kut (Kuki), Gan-Ngai (Kabui), Mera Houchongba and Ningol Chakkouba (Meiteis) are rare Composite to our Heritage because it connects people, shares values, strengthen emotional and physical binding the chains of love and peace.

NINGOL CHAKKOUBA :

This phrase is the combination of two terms “ningol and Chakkouba”. Ningol means *sisters* of a family, “Chakkouba” means *Inviting for Feast*. The Ningol Chakkouba Festival is a very popular social festival of the Meiteis or the Vaishnavites where the married women (Ningol) are invited to their parental house. The Ningol Chakkouba is an outstanding social festival of the Meiteis. It has its own historical background. This festival depicts the close affectionate relationship between the *Pibas* (male brothers) and *Ningols* (sisters). It is believed that *Chakkouba* (inviting for feast) by the brothers to their respective sisters or so called “*Bhatr Ditriya*” was introduced by Maharaja Chandra Kriti Singh.

The married women of a family who are living at distant places/families, come to their parental house along with their children on this auspicious day are served with a lavish and extensive meal to enjoy. After the feast male family members normally brothers shower boons with small gifts (Dakshina) wishing the Ningol(s) to be prosperous and peaceful in life. Women are also giving wishes with tears of joy to brothers. In the month of Hiyangei (Lunar month normally that is between October-November of English Calendar) this festival occurs. Such festival is performed from time immemorial. It is celebrated since the days of Almighty God.

NINGOL CHAKKOUBA AS A COMPOSITE HERITATE :

The armed conflict between and amongst various groups and the government security forces have reached such levels, that the space for the civil society is shrinking day by day. The civilian population is targeted. Government security forces have great difficulties to distinguish between civilian and combatants. The actions and response of the revolutionary or armed opposition groups/organizations equally target the civilians in different forms and patterns. Civilians are tortured, raped, kidnapped and killed arbitrarily by both actors, without any form of justice for the victims. Impunity prevails. Domestic laws and international recognized human rights were and are seldom respected by those in the authority.

In this violent conflict situation of the State we all 39 ethnic communities “Meiteis, Meitei-Pangal (Muslim), Naga and Kuki” are experiencing endless sufferings. In the midst we are searching for a solution and are looking for various available options.

Various Civil Society actors, representation from Church, Mosque, Peoples Organisations (AMUCO, UCM), and United NGOS Mission Manipur have been developing and strengthening Ningol Chakkouba Festival as a Composite Heritage in Peace Building process. On this day, Kuki brothers invite Naga Ningols, Meitei brothers – Naga sisters, Muslim brothers – Kuki *vice-versa*. Such inter caste relationship building process is strengthen by way through Ningol Chakkouba. Now it truly becomes Composite Heritage among the two parties who had earlier incompatible goals.

The story of Ningol chakkouba Festival does not confine to only in Manipur. Now it has become global for instance, Ningol chakkouba in Bristol (UK), Bangkok (Thailand), Dubai (UAE), Toronto (Canada), Ohio (US), South Korea, New York City etc. have been practicing it.

Such festival can be used as a good tool for us while working in violent conflict situation for uniting people and connecting their physical and emotional contributions towards building peace.

As the looms go silent in Benaras

Sujata Madhok

Hands that wove magic with zari are pulling rickshaws to survive. A combination of mechanisation and duty-free import of silk yarn and fabric have ensured the ruin of the Benarasi weavers. The government needs to act now so that this vital heritage is not lost forever...

The Indian government increasingly signed away its rights to protect Indian products by inking agreements with the World Trade Organisation. Duties on imports were lowered or removed altogether.

In a bare village work shed a man sits quietly working on a loom. Look closer and you notice that he is actually sitting in a pit dug into the earthen floor. Hari Ram is middle-aged, nondescript but his fingers weave magic as he works the traditional pit-loom. A length of pink silk slowly emerges, shimmering with gold threads worked in elaborate mango motifs. He is weaving the traditional Benarasi *saree* for a bride to wear at her wedding. This silk is the stuff of dreams, of dowries, of rituals and sacred traditions.

A highly skilled weaver, Ram began learning his craft at the age of eight and spent years perfecting it. Weaving was a prized skill and fetched him good wages when he was young. But today thousands of Benaras weavers like Ram have little work and it fetches a pittance. Kumaoli village, where Ram lives, once had 70 looms. Today, there are four left.

In dozens of villages around the holy city handlooms lie dismantled, broken, decaying. The women and men who worked the looms have now been forced into manual work to survive. Hari Ram has no such option before him. Disabled in childhood, he can barely walk. The loom is his only lifeline.

FAMILIAR STORY

Girija Devi learnt to process the silk yarn

as a child, learnt to reel and dye it and fill the bobbins with multi-coloured threads. She learnt to sit at the loom and work motifs into the cloth for special designs. Often she would sit beside her husband or another weaver, jointly weaving elaborate lengths of silk or brocade. She recalls that in her grandmother's days they worked with *zari* thread made of real gold and silver and even leftover bits of thread could be sold. Girija says weaver households used to be comfortably off, they could save a little and celebrate weddings with *dhoom-dhaam* (pomp). But the past few years have been downhill.

Since the work can no longer sustain households, Girija and other women like her, whose families own some land, now grow flowers for sale: yellow marigolds and white *champa* flowers for *pooja* on the *ghats* and in the temples of the holy city.

Girija is lucky that she has land and the support of the NGO Human Welfare Association (HWA) which helped her form a self-help group and organised credit so that she could invest in the flower business. The work ensures a steady income. Her children go to a private English medium school although she herself is uneducated. However, the majority of weavers have no land to fall back upon. All they have is the loom.

Usha Devi's husband Pyarelal and his brother have switched to taking up the job of digging borewells. They also trade in cattle, using loans of Rs. 5000-10,000 from a self-help group to invest in buffaloes.

FORCED INTO MENIAL JOBS

Madhuri, a supervisor of the Taana Baana self-help group set up by HWA says, "Weavers who had all their lives learnt only how to do *maheen kaam* (fine work) are being forced to do *mota kaam* (coarse work). Manual labour pays more, so weavers are now pulling rickshaws. It is better than starving."

How did things come to such a pass? A fatal combination of mechanisation, computerisation and globalisation has ruined the handloom work of Benaras. Traditionally, people here wove only silk. Mulberry silk yarn was sourced from distant Karnataka and processed by weaver families in and around Benaras who used it to weave silk, brocade, tissue, crepe, organza and other fine materials on their handlooms. Traders from the city would come to the weaver families to buy their products. The weaver could command a decent price for his labour.

Then came the powerloom. Many rich traders set up powerlooms and copied the traditional Benarasi designs. A powerloom can churn out in one day a *saree* that may take a weaver 10 days to make on a handloom. Powerloom *sarees* are light weight and cheaper and most customers cannot tell the difference between powerloom and handloom fabric.

Globalisation compounded the problem. The Indian government increasingly signed away its rights to protect Indian products by inking agreements with the World Trade Organisation. Duties on imports were lowered or removed altogether. One consequence was the ballooning imports of cheap Chinese silk yarn which is too thin for use on the hand-loom. The cheap yarn gives the powerlooms an extra advantage.

In November 2008 angry weavers gathered in Benaras under the banner of the HWA and publicly burnt Chinese yarn and silk fabric, demanding that the government ban its import to save the handloom sector. The weavers have repeatedly raised their problems with the government of Uttar Pradesh as well as the central government, demanding both protection from imports and supportive schemes for

handlooms. At a public hearing held in village Dulaipur Satpokhri of Chandauli district, over a hundred weavers gathered in late November 2008 to raise their concerns over the rapid loss of work and incomes.

Fayazuddin Ansari, one of a delegation of 15 people from Hamidpur village, said, "The market has grown so much but have our wages grown? We are *bunkar mazdoor*, (weaver-workers) we may make a shawl worth Rs. 50,000 but we get nothing for our labour." Shakeelbhai of Katesar village said, "The wages are so poor even if we work for a week we still go hungry for two days."

Several weavers stated that their problems began around 2001 with liberalisation of silk imports. Families that could once save enough to build a house or buy some land are now on the edge of survival.

Abdul Waheed, his long white beard orange with *mehendi*, regrets that small children now have to work instead of going to school. "People can no longer afford to marry off daughters. Who can raise 20,000 for a wedding in these tough times? Who can afford to buy a bike or a TV set to give in dowry? This *dahej* that has entered our society has also ruined us. People are being forced to borrow from the moneylenders. Money-lending is forbidden in Islam but many households are now in the moneylender's net. This is all the fault of the government and the big traders who refuse to pay proper wages."

Said Babu Haji Sahab of Satpokhri, "Powerloom owners can raise loans of Rs. 20 lakhs from the banks. We may get at best Rs. 10,000 and pay a high interest rate of 10-15 per cent. The *kisaan* (farmer) gets subsidised electricity but we have to pay commercial rates. Today a couple working on a loom earn barely Rs. 80 a day after hours of backbreaking labour. Yet we don't even get BPL cards for ration."

Sabreen Zaman, the young *burqa*-clad principal of the school where the hearing was being conducted, testified to the plight of the weavers. "Ninety per cent of our students are from *beenkari* (weavers) households. Their families

have no money. Some students have to study during the day and work at night. Many have been forced to quit school and go to work."

Ayesha Begum from Dulhaipur was one of the few weaver women who found the courage to stand up on stage and speak. "Some 30 of us have come for this hearing. We are in great distress. There is little work and it is poorly paid. A week's work fetches Rs. 200. Who can survive on that? When men cannot find work, women have to run the household somehow. We take in all kinds of piece work, we do embroidery now to survive."

White-haired Noorunissa Begum of Milkipur was angry and harangued the audience, asking, "Why does the government only help the *bade log* (big people)? Why do they get the benefit of all the government schemes while we work so hard for so little?" she asked.

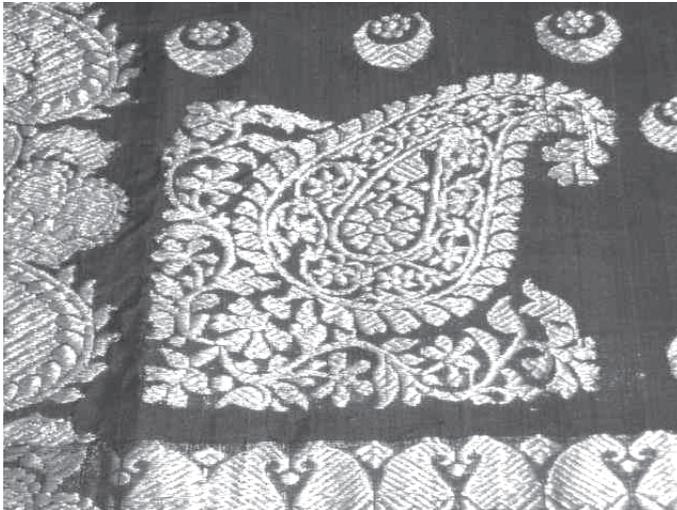
Journalist and activist Bharat Dogra urged the weavers to have fortitude and struggle for their rights. "Remember one thing, handloom is a great skill. It will survive. Let us decide this," he said, reminding them that Gandhiji had led

LOSS OF SKILLS

The policy against child labour is unfortunately contributing to the de-skilling of the weaver community. The HWA has had to intervene in several cases where children have been picked up by the police for sitting on the loom. The weavers are now afraid to let their children learn to weave.

Yet, given the increasing destitution of the weavers, children and women are being forced to do other work. Walk into homes in Dulaipur and you will find women and girls bent over *addas* (long embroidery frames), painstakingly stitching glittering beads and baubles, stars and sequins on to readymade powerloom *sarees* procured from the city. The work is outsourced by the big traders who sell thousands of such pieces to markets all over the country. The women earn an average of Rs. 40 a day for 10 hours of work. "We taught ourselves to embroider," says Noor Jehan, "at least we can feed our families with this work."

Even the old are being forced to find work. In a large joint-family household in Dulaipur, from behind an unused loom, a proud old weaver reluctantly brings out a heap of cheap plastic flowers. "We string these into garlands for sale. It keeps us going," he says resignedly.



a successful movement for the revival of *khadi*. Dogra pointed out the absurdity of government policies which claim to give people education and skills but neglect artisan groups who already possess precious skills. "Teach your children the skills you possess," he exhorted the weavers.



Imports destroy Indian silk

The decline of the Indian handloom industry is a fallout of the second phase of trade “reforms” in India. Between 2000 and 2005, the average annual growth rate of handloom production was a negative -6.99 per cent. Sericulture and handloom silk have suffered immensely, largely due to the import of cheap Chinese silk yarn and fabric.

According to Kumar Gautam of the Centre for Trade and Development, “The big blow to weavers came during 1999-2000, when the Indian Government allowed duty-free imports of Chinese plain crepe fabric. In 2001, India also abolished its quantitative restrictions on silk imports on demand from the WTO.”

Gautam notes that, “Between 2000-01 and 2004-05, imports of silk fabric into India more than doubled in value terms. In volume terms the cheap imports of silk fabric from China to India increased from 14.48 lakh metres in 2000-01 to 9.649 crore lakh metres in 2004-05 — a whopping increase of 6,560 per cent in just five years.”

Such imports are a disaster for sericulturists who grow silk cocoons. The States of Jammu & Kashmir, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu where silk yarn is produced have been demanding anti-dumping duties to prevent the destruction of their sericulture.

Cheap silk yarn import has not helped the handloom weaver either. On the contrary, the advantage has gone to powerloom owners, as Chinese yarn is better suited to the powerloom.

In 2003, after protests from sericulturists, the Government of India imposed an anti-dumping duty on import of Chinese mulberry raw silk for five years, until January 2009. Tariffs were also imposed on other silk imports but duties on textiles remain low, so more textile rather than yarn is being imported.

Rampant import of silk fabric has destroyed demand for handloom silk cloth as it is more expensive. On average, while China silk costs \$1-1.25 per metre, Indian silk costs \$2.5-4 per metre. Previously the Benaras weaver used Bangalore silk, now 60 percent of the silk used in Benaras comes from China.

Benaras has some half a million handloom weavers. Its handloom industry generates revenue worth Rs. 4,000 crore annually and is a source of livelihoods for about 10 lakh people in the region.

There are several thousand retail and wholesale shops in Benaras that sell ‘Benarasi’ sarees. The *gaddidars*, the local traders, are rich and powerful men whose relationship with weavers has always been feudal and exploitative. The traders increasingly prefer to sell cheap powerloom *sarees* as there is more demand and fatter profits to be made from the higher turnover of such *sarees*. They do not value the skill and labour of the traditional weaver and pay a pittance for handloom silk products. Many *gaddidars* now own powerlooms.

The powerloom of course is a major competitor of the handloom weaver. One powerloom displaces 10 weavers. The result of competition from both imports and technology is starving weavers and a dying industry.

Activists accuse the Ministry of Textiles of neglecting handlooms. In 1997-98, the handloom sector was allocated 27.5 per cent of the total textile Budget. By 2006-07, this allocation dipped to 7.9 per cent. While *khadi* gets some support, silk handloom gets little. Dr Rajnikant of the Human Welfare Association (HWA) demands a separate ministry for the handloom sector. He also argues for the aggressive promotion of the Handloom Cluster Development and Handloom Mark and Silkmark schemes as well as Geographical Indicator protection for Benaras handlooms. HWA has organised public protest by weavers, burning Chinese silk and demanding a ban on dumping.

HWA also started the Taana Baana cooperative which provides livelihood to over a thousand weaver families, helping them with credit, design development and marketing support, as well as alternative income generating opportunities. It has a small retail outlet in Sarnath and a turnover of Rs. 70 lakh. But, given the scale of distress among the weavers, Taana Baana is at best a demonstration of what needs to be done for the industry as a whole.

Courtesy : THE HINDU

Women for Cultural Freedom

Sharifa Sidiqqi

Asmita Resource Centre for Women
Andhra Pradesh, INDIA

Asmita Resource Centre for Women took the initiative in calling for joint action soon after the attack on women in a Mangalore pub in January 2009 by youth of the Rama Sene. The forum **Women for Cultural Freedom** came into existence as a result. Subsequent to this, the Rama Sene declared that they would see to it that on Valentine's Day couples seen together would either be forced to marry each other or the girl made to tie rakhi on the boys' wrist.

The forum distributed pamphlets, visited colleges and spoke to students and said we as citizens need to ponder

- Do we allow anyone to dictate us what is wrong and what is right?
- Is there a different moral standard that applies to men and women?
- Do we allow anybody to tell us what these 'moral standards' are?
- Do we allow our right to make personal choices, be taken away?
- Do we let anybody dictate to women what 'accepted' behaviour is?
- Do we allow people to use violence against women to drive them out of public spaces?
- Do we allow people to gain political mileage by cultural policing?
- Do we stand silent while one by one all our rights are taken away in the name of religion and morality?

They called on the public to protest urgently and said differences must be respected.

On 13th Feb, the eve of Valentine's Day the Forum organized a public meeting. Over 100 people attended the meeting. The 12 member organizations and individual persons from the media of the forum gathered at Telugu University. The speakers were:

Smt Jeelani Bano, Urdu writer, Jhansi of Dalit Stree Shakti, Sumitra of Ankuram, K Satyavati, editor of Bhumika, Sagari Ramdas of Anthra, Jameela Nishat of Shaheen, Tripti

MaqDani a student, Telekapalli Ravi, writer, Girija of Oxfam, Meer from Ankuram, Jabeen, Vasanth of National Alliance of Women (NAWO), Sultana of Shaheen Sharifa of Muslim Women's Rights Network and Kalpana of Asmita Resource Centre for Women.

Smt Jeelani Bano said it was time for action, not just to talk of who has done what. She made a strong statement against all who meted out injustice to women in the name of religion, whether she is a Hindu, Muslim or of any religion or of any section and class in society.

Ms Jhansi began with a song which called for women to come forward like the flames, roar like the waves and be brave like the lion, and rejecting a life of drudgery within the walls of the kitchen. She challenged the Hindutva forces to come out with a clear policy on which culture they want women to follow, since there are so many cultures and diverse castes and denominations in the country. *Can they please tell us which culture they think represents India so that we can follow that?* She stated that the very culture that they are now attacking have been brought in by the BJP when they were in power through the new economic policy. The resultant globalization and the privatization that we are all grappling with today are the handiwork of the Hindutva forces. She questioned what happened to culture when Bal Thackeray and Michael Jackson shared a dais.

Ms Jameela Nishat said that she does not see much difference between honour killings, repressing of women under Hudood laws and what is happening today. All this sees women as a commodity and seeks to control her movements. But why should women be controlled, she asked. She said when they talk of culture and today stop a 16 year old girl from talking to a Muslim boy, have they forgotten that this is a culture where yoginis talked to sufis?

Ms Sumitra said she remembers Jeelani Bano's words that people who witness an injustice and are silent are equal partners in crime as those who perpetrate it. She lamented the fact that this is looked on only as a women's issue. She said

that more young people must be involved and they must be made aware of the stakes in it.

Ms K Satyavati of Bhumika said that many years ago we women fought hard for the freedom that we were enjoying uptil now. Now suddenly we discover that we have to fight once more for the same issues. She was angry about Pramod Muthalik's statement that women should make chapattis for their husbands and said it is a statement that should make everybody angry, but there has been no appropriate response from any significant people such as the government. She said only a continuous sustained campaign can have a proper effect otherwise it has dangerous consequences for the next generation.

Ms Girija said that it was important that young people be made aware of the issues involved. We must encourage girls to come forward and speak up with courage. Since they are at the receiving end it was imperative to involve them and talk to them.

Ms Sagari said that the government which has recently passed a horrendous anti-terrorist act, the home minister, the NCW now are all silent and allow people to perpetrate terrorism against us. She quoted Martin Niemoller:

"In Germany, they came first for the Communists, And I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Communist;

And then they came for the trade unionists, And I didn't speak up because I wasn't a trade unionist;

And then they came for the Jews, And I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew;

And then . . . they came for me . . . And by that time there was no one left to speak up."

She spoke of the need to reach out to the younger generation, speak out and take action.

She concluded with the song: "It could have been me, but instead it was you. If you can fight for freedom, I can too. "

Ms Vasanth noted that everybody gets very intimidated by the threats of the extremist forces. She said they use the term self-respect which is very dangerous and actor Khusboo was forced to apologise for her statement for that. Diversity – to live together, to love, to marry should be there.

She said while she is not for the celebrations of the various days like Mothers Day, Fathers Day and so on since they are just marketing strategies, she is all for freedom of choices that people are entitled to.

Ms Sharifa said we must learn our lessons from societies which have actually moved backward due to moral and religious policing and said we must build a society that respects differences and looks on women as equal fellow beings.

Ms Kalpana said the term Talibanisation was problematic and we need to recognize the Hindutva forces as evil, not just because they resemble evil forces of other religions. She said it was unfortunate that we now have to defend the trends we are critical of such as Valentine's Day. We have been pushed into this reactive mode and this is a troubling signs of the times.

The Forum then issued jointly a statement as follows:

"We as women and citizens of a free and secular country with diverse cultures are alarmed at the increasing violence against women by vigilante groups in the name of culture and tradition. No group has the right to physically or verbally assault women arrogating to itself the role of maintaining public morality. We are alarmed at the non committal conformism of most politicians.

The issue is not of morality but of civil and human rights. As citizens of this country women have the right to dress as they please, meet friends of their choice and move freely with men and women of all communities. One cannot address the social and emotional insecurities caused by globalization through political gimmicks and blackmail".

Woman for Cultural Freedom have decided to continue organizing meetings in colleges, universities and other institutions to guard the shrinking spaces in our society. WCF feels this violence against women in the name of culture and morality by self appointed guardians of culture like Ram Sena is neither justifiable nor acceptable in a country whose constitution guarantees its citizens freedom of speech and expression.

A Report of a Programme on the Occasion of Magh Mela

From 29 to 31, January, 2009, ALLAHABAD

Festivity of Compositeness: 'Sirjan' on the Bank of the Confluence.

Magh Mela, a popular fair for a period of one and a half month is organised every year on the confluence of *Ganga-Yamuna* and *Sarasvati*. People from far away places come to participate in it. Being a resident of Allahabad, we also used to enjoy its glamour and have discussions on Indian culture and importance of such fairs in our culture but, nothing beyond that.

It has been a desire of *Itihaasbodh* (an intellectual forum) for many years to have meaningful association with such fairs and to explore possible role in it. But, every time there was dilemma would we be able to do it or should we do it or what kind of reaction will we get from our near and dear ones? Despite this dilemma, the idea was brewing and ultimately, some co-travelers and people with similar views which include *Itihasbodh*, Institute for Social Democracy, *Jagrit Samaj* nailed their tent.

We not only talk of culture but go to the extent of talking about alternative culture. Culture is developed by masses and if we drift away from masses, what kind of alternative culture are we talking about? *Magh Mela* where millions of people gather spontaneously can and should it not become a platform where we can share our opinions, understanding and ideas?

This festival of the compositeness was named '*Srijan Mahotsava*'. We had to work hard for organizing three day programme. Particularly, with the administration, we had to pull our all resources to get a small space in a huge fair. For

those who have not experienced it, we should tell them that this fair is organised in a huge area situated on the bank of rivers and millions of people participate in it. For this annual *Magh Mela* (festival), there is a parallel administrative system known as *Mela* administration. The *Ardha Kumbha Mela* of 2006 covered 35 sq. km area. This description gives an idea of the vastness and diversity of this festival.

Srijan was inaugurated by Comrade *Zia-ul-Haq*, famous political and social worker. On this occasion, apart from pamphlets on *Dharma-Adharma* (what is right and what is wrong), *Bahultavadi Sanskriti* (pluralistic culture), *Ganga Udas Hai* (Ganges is sad), *Ganga se pooja nahinn Pyar Karo* (you need not worship Ganges, just love it), *Ganga ko Hamne jo Diya*, a special issue of *Samrath* and *Muhim* was published and a book was released.

PAHLE DIN JAB HAM KOODA BEENNE GAYE TO KANTA CHUBH GAYA PANV MAIN

A song '*Pahle din jab ham kooda beenne gaye to kanta chubh gaya panv main*' was sung by girls of Minto Park during a play. This slum area mostly comprises of families of rag pickers. This song composed on tune of a movie song was unveiling the reality of our system. Young girls ambitious to go to school are compelled due to poverty and exclusionary attitude of society to join their family profession. This and some other presentations were made possible due to Comrade *Abdul* of

Ekalavya. He organised a one-day workshop of 125 children who were the residents of different jhuggi (slum) clusters.

A movie named *Saryu kee Ganga* was shown which was made by the students of Photo Journalism and Visual Communication apart from a beautiful presentation of *Bal Bharti School* in the evening.

HAMAN HAI ISHK MASTANA, HAMAN KO HOSHIYARI KYA

It was a day of dialogue with the youth and students of the city and issue was Composite Heritage. Today, when increasing narrow mindedness and tensions have become our special identity, exploring those points which form our identity like for instance common conflicts, common political, socio-economic issues or common values, customs, habits etc was the point of discussion. It is this bridge which can be the answer of community-based and caste-based violent and narrow mentality.

The evening was devoted to *Prahlad Tipadiya*, a *Kabir* singer whose flow of music made people spell bound and were flowing in the waves of the emotion of his songs.

DHARMA MEN KARMA MEN RANGAL GANV DEKHA, AMAUSA NAHAE CHALAL GANV DEKHA

Third and last day of *Srijan* was the day of realizing above mentioned lines of *Kailash Gautam*. *Basant Panchami*, is the main day of taking dip in holy waters and huge crowd crawls in the fair along with their bag and baggage. There is strict traffic regulation in which an area of 200 meters is stretched to 3 km and people move as directed by police. If one stood on any high point of the fair, one would find waves of people crawling like a snake.

50 women from *Jhuggi* (slum) cluster gathered to discuss common issues and points of collectiveness in the programme for the day. The evening was devoted to two famous Hindi-Urdu

literary figures - *Nirala* and *Nazeer* i.e., *Nazeer Akbarabadi*.

In the beginning, a presentation was made by the Peoples Theatre of Punjab named '*Baag ke Rakhvale*' followed by a poetry session in the evening which was graced by poets like *Ehtram Islam*, *Buddhisen Sharma*, *Shlesh Gautam*, *Yash Malviya*. This was followed by folk songs sung by *Sumangla Damodaran* from Delhi. *Sumangla* has for last three to four years collected songs of IPTA (Indian Peoples Theatre Association) which have been scattered all over country, and has adapted these songs in the present context failing which these songs were at the verge of extinction with age old cultural activists. The presentation began with song on the tragedy of Bengal famine '*Suno Hind ke Vasi*' and concluded with an inspiring song '*Wo Subah Kabhi to Aayegi*' .

Before talking about the conclusion of programme it is important to talk about three committed and cooperative artists, *Master Desraj*, *Tara Singh* and *Mahender Singh* from Punjab. These artists along with their orchestra and aspiring and emotional folk songs performed during this period, made these three days lively. The music was so absorbing that one never felt to get away with. In addition to this, a drama presentation was made by *Samuel* and *Supreet* of *Bankebihari* and People's Theatre.

The programme would be incomplete if no mention is made about the book stall. There were three young comrades, *Rafi* who is interested in managing the book stall and is always keen to volunteer for it, *Ravi* and *Akash* had managed the work of the distribution of the pamphlets and sale of books.

There were posters of writings of *Nazeer*, *Dadu*, *Tulsi* and *Kabir* designed by *Ajay Jataly*, the head of the Department of Fine Arts of Allahabad University. This was an artistic and attractive way of communicating our views to the people.

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