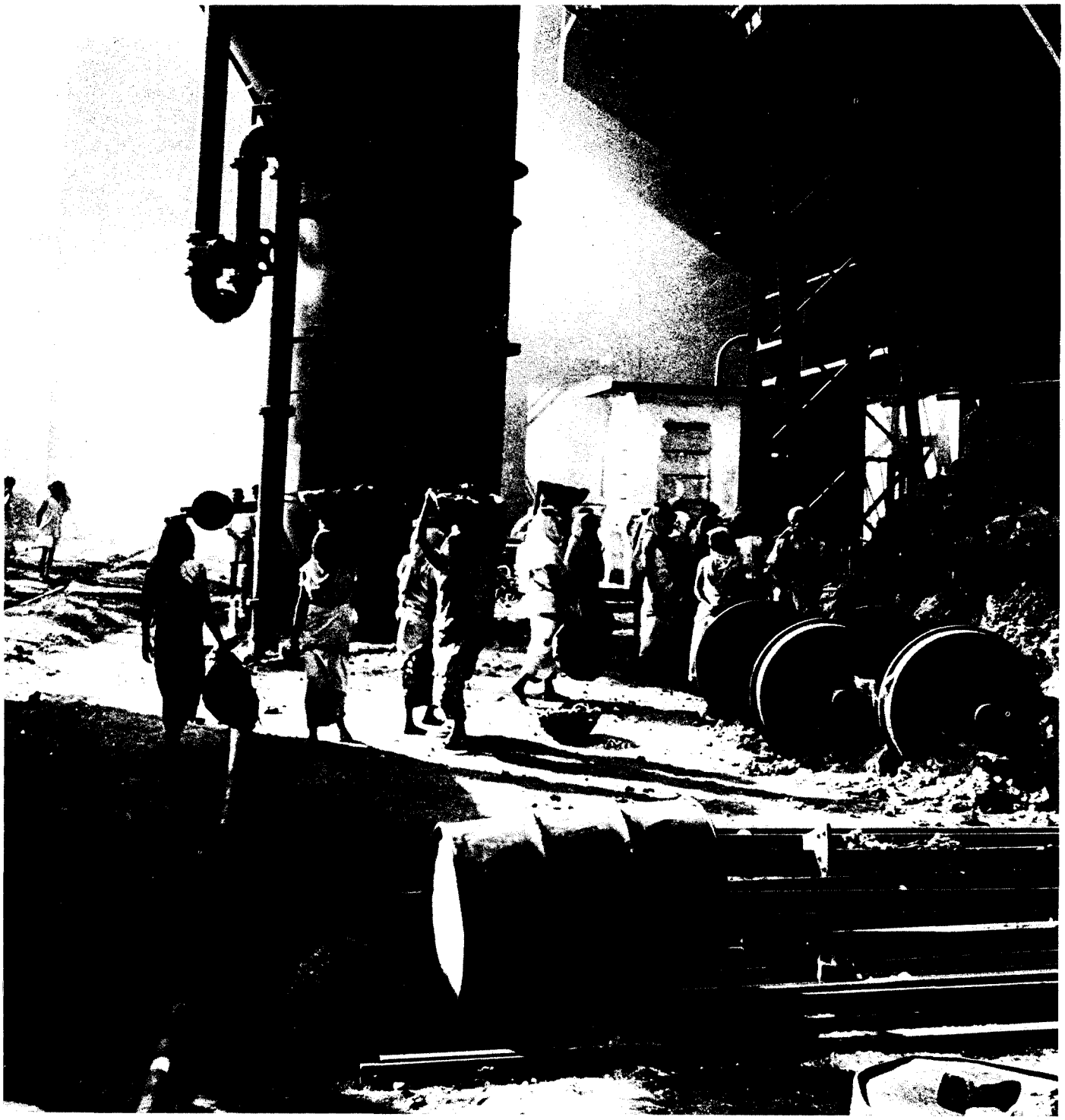

Women workers in the steel plant at Jamshedpur, in the state of Bihar.
Credit: International Labour Office; provided by Frieda Forman, Women's Resource Centre, OISE

FEMINISM IN INDIA*

Suma Chitnis

Les Indiennes sont, sur le plan matériel, beaucoup plus défavorisées que leurs homologues occidentales. Pourtant Suma Chitnis trouve que de nombreuses Indiennes se sentent très éloignées du féminisme à l'occidentale. La colère féministe et les notions de patriarcat et d'égalité-autonomie ne font pas partie de leurs réalités. Elle montre que l'ethnocentrisme des scientifiques sociaux, en voulant appliquer des notions plus appropriées à la culture occidentale, obscurcit et déforme notre perception de la situation de la femme indienne dans sa propre société.

Elle nous en donne un tableau plus précis en opposant les contextes historiques radicalement différents dont dérivent le féminisme contemporain de l'Inde et de l'Ouest. Depuis l'Indépendance, des facteurs tels que la philosophie de la non-violence de Gandhi, la notion de stree shakti *(le pouvoir moral de la femme), la religion hindouiste et ses légendes, les protections que donne la loi, les divisions entre les classes ou les castes, et les relations au sein de la famille, ont défini le contexte éthique et culturel du féminisme indien. Il faut modifier la théorie et l'activisme pour qu'ils s'adaptent à la situation en Inde.*

The Prompting of an Indian Consciousness

For just about a decade now – in fact since I attended the Sex-Roles session at the International Sociological Congress at Toronto in 1974 – I have been intrigued by differences between the issue of the status of women in the European and North American context and the issue in the Indian context. The awareness of these differences first dawned on me at the Congress in Toronto as I struggled to understand why the Indian situation did not arouse in me the kind of anger that I witnessed among American and European feminists. Not that the situation of women in India was any better. On the contrary. By standard indicators such as life expectancy, literacy, participation in the economy and in politics, position within the family, and so on, I could see that Indian women were far more disadvantaged than their Western counterparts. Nevertheless, something in my consciousness compelled me to look for mitigating factors.

Cultural Chauvinism?

Aware that this compulsion could easily be prompted by deep-rooted cultural chauvinism, I tried to identify, as dispassionately as possible, the differences that I sensed. The outcome has been valuable to me in understanding the specific manner in which the political and the cultural context renders the issue of the inequality and oppression of women in India somewhat different from the same issue in the West.

The Need to Note and Articulate Differences

The articulation of such differences of context in each country or culture, and careful consideration of their implications to feminism, is necessary from the point of view of bringing greater depth and sensitivity to research on women, particularly cross-cultural and multinational research.[1] Yet as networks for social science research grow, there is a tendency to observe and to describe realities in terms of concepts and theories shaped in the context of *Western* experience and to pass over the distinctive features of non-Western cultures. In the process, contours of multicultural reality are flattened, sometimes beyond recognition.

Attention to cultural and contextual differences is perhaps even more important from the point of view of involving the mass of women in a particular society in feminist struggles. Feminists functioning in non-Western societies often commit the same mistake as researchers. Driven by their enthusiasm for the cause, they criticize the anomalies in their own society with the rhetoric and the jargon readily available from Western society, little aware of the alienation that this can cause. They do not make the required effort to enter into the consciousness of the women that they speak for, to empathize with them, and to try to see the realities of the existence of these women as the women see these for themselves, as they have constructed them out of their own heritage of history, religion, politics, custom, belief, conviction and circumstance.[2] Western-influenced feminists are then unable to carry those whom they fight for along with them in the cause. In India, for instance, a large section of the population distances itself from the feminist cause because they consider it to be something alien, picked up from Western culture. Considering the visible disadvantages and oppressions that Indian women suffer, this alienation can only be explained by the fact that their perceptions and sentiments do not match those of the feminists.

Differences in India

There are at least three specific points on which the perceptions and the sentiments of a noticeably large number of Indian women seem to diverge from those of the Western-influenced feminists. By far the most conspicuous of these is the average Indian woman's disapproval of feminist anger. The second is their somewhat mixed and confused reaction to the feminist emphasis on patriarchy and particularly on men as the principal oppressors. The third is their relative inability to tune in to the demands for equality and personal freedom. Reflection upon the roots of these reactions is interesting in that it yields some positive indicators for research as well as for action.

The Indian Context

It is possible to sympathize with the anger in Western feminism when one recognizes what feminists in Europe and North America have had to face in order to assert and obtain rights that are really basic to the value system of Western society. Contemporary Western feminism is an exasperated response to the continuing existence of a gap between liberal ideals and far less progressive realities. It is a cry against hypocrisy. The anger is understandable . . .

The situation in India is altogether different. Indian society has always been highly hierarchical. The several hierarchies within the family (of age, sex, ordinal position, affinal and consanguinal kinship relationships) or within the community (particularly caste, but also lineage, learning, wealth, occupation and relationship with the ruling power) have been maintained and integrated by means of a complex combination of custom, functionality and religious belief. The harshness and oppressiveness of all these hierarchies is somewhat relieved by a strong sense of deference to superiors, a sense of mutuality, a series of behavioural codes which bend superiors to fulfill their obligations to their inferiors and, above all, by a philosophy of self-denial and the cultural emphasis on sublimating the ego.

The concept of equality, as a correlate of the concept of individual freedom, is alien to Indian society. It was first introduced into Indian culture through Western education and through the exposure of Western-educated Indians to Liberalism at the beginning of the nineteenth century. But it did not become an operational

principle of Indian life until much later, when the country achieved independence and adopted a democratic system of government. At that point the Constitution granted women political status fully equal to that of men. Thus Indian women did not have to bear the kind of injustices that women in the West had to suffer because of the continuing gap between political ideals and realities. Nor did they have to suffer the indignities European and American women have had to experience in the course of their efforts to bridge this gap. Those who are not acquainted with what European and American women went through are therefore unlikely to be able to empathize with their anger.

Liberalism, Social Reform, Nationalism and the Women's Cause

It is important to see how different the impact of Liberalism in India has been from its impact in the West, particularly with reference to women.

Basically, Liberalism inspired educated Indians to reflect upon their own value system and to examine the inequalities, injustices and oppressions of their own culture. This introspection stimulated a strong movement for social reform. Significantly, the removal of practices and customs that led to suffering for women figured prominently in the agenda for social reform.

Liberalism had also kindled Indian aspirations for political freedom from colonial rule. As the struggle for reform progressed, the reformers began to discover that the British Government was not really willing to support reform. It had to be coaxed and cajoled even to legislate against a cruel and inhuman practice like *Sati* – the custom by which devoted widows burnt themselves on the funeral pyre of the husband. Spokesmen for the British claimed that the Government did not want to offend the sensitivities of the Hindus by tampering with their religious practices. Reformers quickly recognized that it was fear of disturbing the security of their rule that really prompted the British to act as they did. Disillusioned with British behaviour, particularly by the realization that they were willing to sacrifice ethical principles in the interests of political expediency, the reformers joined the nationalists who, from the beginning, had refused to perceive the British as progressive humanists.

New Direction For Nationalism

At about the time of the merger between the nationalists and the reformers, which occured towards the end of the nineteenth century, politics in the country was beginning to take a new shape. Initially, under the leadership of Tilak, the struggle for freedom had been a militant movement. But as the implications of militancy began to unfold there was a strong feeling that a poor country like India must use some other strategies against the superior military powers of the British. The answer came in the form of Gandhi's brave new philosophy of *Ahimsa* or non-violence. One of the basic tenets of this philosophy is that, in order to fight a non-violent revolution, it is necessary to build moral power. As Gandhi emerged as the country's political leader, he called for the people to arm themselves morally and declared that the eradication of untouchability, the acceptance of equality for women, liberation from crippling superstition or fear, and the cultivation of humanism were critical to this armament. Thus Gandhi directly declared that equality for women would be one of the central objectives of his political programme. He did something more: while explaining the concept of *Ahimsa*, he likened the moral power in a non-violent struggle to the pure and gentle, but firm and tenacious strength which he emphasized women continuously display in life. Finally, at the organisational level, he emphasized that nothing less than the total involvement of the entire population in the non-violent struggle for freedom would be adequate. It was imperative to involve women in the mass movement. With all the persuasiveness and charisma at his command, he urged women to step out of their homes and join him.

Support from Religion

If Gandhi could communicate the concept of *stree shakti* (the moral power of womanhood) to the Indian masses so convincingly, it was because the Hindu religion carried a highly positive concept of the feminine principle. Unlike Christianity, Judaism or Islam, the image of god in Hinduism is not exclusively male. The female principle is supposed to complement and complete the male. The polytheistic Hindu pantheon consists of divine couples such as Shiva and Shakti, Purusha and Prakriti, Rama and Sita. Together the male and the female represent the specific power for which they are venerated. In addition, the Hindu pantheon consists of a number of goddesses or *devis*. It is significant that the dieties of knowledge (Saraswati) and wealth (Laxmi) are female. Correspondingly, there is a distinctive place for women in the practice of the Hindu religion. Women, particularly those who are virgins or virtuous wives, are believed to have special spiritual powers. Their prayers, penances or supplications to god are believed to earn grace more readily than the prayers of men. Several of the most important religious sacrifices, ceremonies and rituals can only be performed by a married couple. They cannot be performed by single men, single women, widows or widowers.

The Establishment of Equality

Inspired by reformers and encouraged by what Gandhi put before them from the Hindu religion, women had come out in large numbers to participate in the struggle for freedom. By the time the country obtained Independence in 1947, they had already established themselves as equals in political life. Both as a tribute to the equality of their participation, and as a reaffirmation of Gandhi's commitment to equality of the sexes, the Indian Constitution explicitly and categorically granted sex equality. Indian women have political rights fully equal to those of men. What is more, the Constitution declares that women, together with the former untouchable castes and tribals living in remote areas, are to be recognized as "weaker sections" of the population, and to be specially assisted to function as equals.

Government Efforts

The Indian Government has tried to live up to this promise. Since Independence each of the six Five Year Plans has carefully provided for the health, education, employment and welfare of women. More importantly, planners have been alert and dynamic in defining plan obligations to fit in with changing times. Up to the Fifth Plan the emphasis was on providing women with "welfare" and "protection." Almost as a response to feminism, the Sixth Plan makes a striking departure with a new emphasis on involving women as "partners in development."

In addition to the Constitutional safeguards and Plan provisions, there are a

Family planning course at Aurangabad
Credit: International Labour Office; provided by Frieda Forman, Women's Resource Centre, OISE

host of provisions in the legal and the political structure of the country that affirm and reaffirm the equality of the sexes: for example, property rights, the provisions for divorce, employment and health. If a cross-cultural or multinational analysis of legal provisions for women is made, India is likely to emerge as one of the most progressive countries. For instance, the Directive Principles of the Constitution safeguard equal work for equal pay, and labour legislation ensures generous maternity leave provisions. Not only does the Indian Government officially support and sponsor the use of contraceptives for birth control, but it has also legalized the medical termination of pregnancy. Several committees and Commissions have been appointed to look into the problems of women. When International Women's Year commenced in 1974 India was ready with a sensitive and comprehensive report on the status of women, prepared by a Parliamentary Committee appointed a few years earlier.[3]

Positive Implications and Continuing Problems

All this has had a positive impact. The feminist cry that women have been neglected by society in general and the government in particular does not quite appeal to Indian women. They see that the legal safeguards and equal opportunity facilities that are being fought for in many of the countries which claim long traditions of equality and individual freedom are already available to them in principle. Thus they react with the feeling that feminism is an alien struggle.

The Indian problem really lies in the fact that women do not make proper use of the existing rights and facilities. And although political rights and the criminal law are common to all, women from the minority communities are governed by personal laws as defined by their religious systems. These are by no means as liberal or progressive as the provisions presently available to the majority community in matters such as property, marriage, divorce, and adoption. The demand for a uniform Civil Code for women of all communities has been repeatedly rejected by the government on the grounds that it is Constitutionally committed to safeguarding the religious practices and cultures of the minorities. However, it is clearly evident that the hesitation to introduce reform is prompted by political expediency: neither the government nor the opposition parties is willing to antagonize the leadership of the minorities.

There are several reasons for the poor utilization of the existing facilities. The mass of Indian men and women are not yet fully aware of their new rights and opportunities. The bureaucracy they must deal with in order to exercise these rights or to obtain redress for grievances is too complex, too slow, too distant, and even too expensive for them to use. It has none of the immediacy, the approachability and the visible efficacy of the caste or tribal council or the village *panchayat* which they, as an essentially rural people, are accustomed to use.

Women's poor utilization of voting rights is primarily due to their low level of political awareness and sense of political efficacy. They do not yet appreciate their potential power and political leverage as citizens in a democracy. They are ignorant about issues and are not being encouraged to become interested. Even educated women are apathetic. On the other hand, political parties consider women candidates as a poor risk and are unwilling to invest in them. Women themselves find that an active political career is difficult to combine with homemaking. Thus the women who are active in politics are either the wives or daughters of politicians, or women who have entered politics as social workers or as students.

Women's failure to exercise their employment rights is due to quite another set of reasons. Poverty compels both men and women in the country to take up any available work. Because unemployment is high they are obliged to accept the terms of the employers, who often evade or slip through the requirements of law. Women are particularly vulnerable to such exploitation; because they are too timid to argue they suffer from the additional limitation of having to accept work that fits in with their obligations as wives, mothers and home-makers. Trade unions are relatively insensitive to women's needs and the sectors in which women work are poorly unionized.

By far the most serious tragedies that occur – dowry deaths, suicide, impoverishment of widows – arise out of women's failure to use the legal safeguards and redress provisions with reference to marriage, divorce, dowry and property. In the case of women the general inability to use the law is further aggravated in situations in which they have to fight a husband or a father. In the role allocation within Indian culture, these are the persons upon whom women normally depend to handle court matters. Better legal aid facilities are needed to enable women to use the legal system against these persons.

The greatest obstacle is the value system by which women abide. Women are conditioned to revere the father and to serve the husband as a devotee serves God. Devotion to the husband is cultivated among girls of all religions but it is highly idealized and firmly institutionalized in the Hindu concept of *pativrata*. The term *pativrata* (literally translated as "one who is vowed to her husband") connotes a wife who has accepted service and devotion to the husband and his family as her ultimate religion and duty. The ideal of the *pativrata* is romanticized through legend, folklore and folksong, and reaffirmed through ceremonies of different kinds. It may be pertinent to illustrate with one of the legends, the legend of Savitri and Satyavan.

According to this legend, on the death of Satyavan, Savitri, his virtuous wife or *pativrata* followed Yama, the God of death, imploring that he should not take her husband. Yama tried to reason with her and to convince her that this was not possible, as all humans must die. However, when she refused to turn back, he said that he had to respect her as a *pativrata* and offered her a boon if she would comply. Promptly Savitri asked for sons. As Yama agreed to grant her wish, she pointed out that as a true wife she would have to bear them by her husband and none else. Yama could not go back on his word. He was forced to yield and Satyavan was saved. To this day Hindu women commemorate Savitri with a celebration and ritual performed annually, on a fixed day. Even educated, urban women follow the practice devotedly.

Similarly is Sita, the wife of Prince Rama, the legendary hero of the Ramayana, worshipped as the virtuous wife who not only followed her noble husband into fourteen years of exile, but suffered indignity and the suffering that he as a 'just' king was forced to inflict upon her in deference to the wishes of his subjects.

Because these figures from the epiccs and from traditional religious lore continue to this day to inspire Indian women as role models, it is important to take cognizance of the qualities that they represent. It is necessary to help women to look at the Savitris and the Sitas in Indian tradition critically, and to enable them to distinguish those qualities that continue to be relevant from those that are irrelevant or

even redundant in the modern context. Both Savitri and Sita, for example, exhibit sharp wit, intelligence, resourcefulness, tenacity and affection. Although these qualities continue to be relevant, they have never been held up for emulation. Tradition has only emphasized the women's self-immolation.

Feminists could easily highlight the spiritedness, the intelligence and the resourcefulness of these figures. They could try to explore how folklore, folksongs, epics, and age-old models of behaviour can be used to speak for the new value system. Unfortunately they tend to completely reject this approach. In the process they snap communication with the mass of women.

Patriarchy and Men as Oppressors

Feminism in India also misses its mark when it names men as oppressors and blames patriarchy for the state of things. Patriarchy is only one among the several hierarchies of Indian society; therefore it does not offend the Indian consciousness in the manner that it does in the West. This does *not* mean that the consequences of patriarchy in India are to be neglected, but that it must be carefully understood in this larger context. It is important to recognize that "patriarchs," weighted down by subservience to elders (even female elders), caste superiors, and landowners to whom they related as tenants or bonded labourers, may function differently from the manner in which "patriarchs" from other cultural contexts do. One cannot help feeling that the concept of patriarchy is overly-universalized in current feminism.

As regards oppression, the mass of Indian women are unlikely to be able to make the fine distinction between sorrow and oppression. Sorrow is real, it is the substance of their life, and they know it intimately. But they know it as hunger, poverty, ill-health, disease, the death of their infant children, the free use of their bodies by powerful landlords to whom they are bonded in labour, or bound as labourers or tenants, or by contractors or employers for whom they work. They know it as the impotence of their husbands, fathers, brothers or sons to help them when this happens. They know it as the ruthlessness of custom, the burden of tradition, the unrelenting demands of ritual. They know it as the beatings of a drunken husband or father, or as anger unleashed without reason as the brute force of men.

But they also know it as the cruelty of the mother-in-law or the husband's sisters. In most families, the principal oppressor is the husband's mother, or his unmarried or widowed sisters – not the husband. In many incidents of bride burning, or suicide attempted by women unable to bear ill-treatment within the family, the person who has driven the woman to death is almost invariably one of her female relatives. Even in cases in which the husband has been held guilty of a crime against his wife, the victims have generally named his mother or sisters as abettors.

Biographies and autobiographies of nineteenth as well as twentieth century women clearly indicate that those who stepped out of the beaten track to pursue education, to take up social work or politics, or to enter occupations or professions that were considered to be the exclusive preserve of men, have almost invariably been encouraged, supported, and actively helped by a husband, a father or a brother – more frequently by a husband. The reformers who initiated action in support of equality and freedom for women were all men. So were most of those who pioneered the education of women.

Similarily, there is an Indian tradition by which men and women unrelated to each by blood or marriage, but belonging to the same neighbourhood, village, caste or circle of acquaintance, address each other by the kinship term that would be appropriate under the circumstances. A special feature of this tradition is one by which interaction between contemporaries of the opposite sex is channelized into the brother-sister relationship. This is probably a mechanism through which the culture which rigidly segregates the sexes, renders such interaction "safe" by equating the two to siblings and thus imposing upon them the sex taboos normal to a brother-sister relationship. But it is important that, in the process, it provides for a mechanism by which members of the opposite sex may offer each other warmth, protection and emotional support without the tension or aggressiveness of sexual possession or dispossession.

Yet another unique relationship between men and women exists within the joint family. This is the relationship between a woman and her husband's younger brother – he is expected to maintain distance from all his elder brothers, but is allowed to interact almost as freely with his younger brothers as she would with her own. In fact often in a joint family the husband's younger brother is a woman's sole friend. He may stand up on her behalf against his own mother in situations in which his elder brother, her husband, may not. Not infrequently both may silently or even secretly protect or support each other against the tyranny of elders – even of her own husband.

Confrontation vs. Compromise

Even the firm tone of Western feminism can strike a discordant note in the ethos of Indian life. This may be illustrated with reference to the difference in the manner in which contradictions and conflicts are handled in the two cultures. In the West there is a compulsion to a logical resolution of conflict, to confrontation and categorical choice. In contrast, the Indian culture places a greater value on compromise, on the capacity to live with contradictions and to balance conflicting alternatives.

The author had occasion to observe this difference at a recent workshop on the identity of women, to which both Indian and American women who had 'stepped out' of their traditional tracks to pursue careers as writers, researchers, academics, etc., were invited to discuss their experiences in life. At one point in the discussion one of the Indian participants used the word 'compromise' to describe her accommodation of the conflicting demands upon her in life. All the American participants took a negative view of her situation. To them the term connoted a denial of autonomy and freedom, an unhappy compulsion to accommodate into her plans and aspirations something that she would have been more comfortable without. In contrast, the overwhelming majority of the Indian women seemed to consider compromise positively, to view it as the most acceptable accommodation of conflicting obligations, of pressures satisfactorily resolved. It was interesting to observe that both sets of participants were about equally placed in the ladder of professional achievement.

Towards a Cultural Redefinition of Selfhood in India

Illustrations could be multiplied. But the gist of the issue is that it is important to take careful note of the differences in the ethical and cultural contexts of feminism in Western and in Indian societies. In the West, feminism – together with some of

the ethnic movements such as that conducted by American blacks – has taken on the responsibility of bridging a long-standing cultural gap between an ideology of individual freedom and equality and a reality in which women (and some of the ethnic minorities) are discriminated against severely.

India is, as yet, new to the ideology of personal freedom. Both Indian men and Indian women have hitherto functioned under rigid hierarchies; learned to curb their freedom; condition themselves to suppress their needs, silence their senses, and sublimate their selves in a philosophy of self-denial, self-effacement and service. Political freedom from British rule and the adoption of democracy and its accompanying value system have opened up for them totally new opportunities for personal freedom, self-hood and autonomy. The challenge to feminism in India is to help Indian women realize this self-hood in full measure.

The temptation to follow the paths blazed by Western feminists, in research as well as in action, may be irresistible. However, one hopes for a revival of sensitivity to the uniqueness of the Indian situation and of the capacity to respond to this uniqueness by forging new ways.

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[1]Hans Weiler, "Knowledge and Legitimation: The National and International Politics of Educational Research." Paper presented at Fifth World Congress of Comparative Education, Paris, July 2-6, 1984.

[2]Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Garden City, N.J.: Anchor Books, 1967).

[3]*Towards Equality: Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India* (Delhi: Government of India, December, 1974).

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*The above article is an abridgement of the full text originally submitted by Prof. Chitnis. At the seminar on Ethnic Identity and the Status of Women held 9-11 September 1984 organized by the International Centre for Ethnic Studies in Sri Lanka, she presented a paper "Law and the Status of Women in India." The papers from this seminar are being published by the Centre. Inquiries about her paper can be directed to: Prof. Suma Chitnis, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Deonar Post Box No. 8313, Bombay 400 088, India.

METAPHOR

Woman – the cork, bobbing on the vast sea of multifold myth,
Riding upon the conflicting waves, follows the stronger,
The more mysterious, the more profound,
Riding sagely, innocently, and majestically.
Looking at the familiar blue of the sky above
And the familiar grey of the sea beneath,
She rides with the friendly sky and fluid sea as allies,
And she reflects with satisfaction the inner constancy of her buoyancy
To ride: the true, the pure, the unsubmersive cork she is.
She rides a sea so vast and liquid,
Its ebb and flow so buoyant, so charming, and so changeful,
It grants itself immortality.
Waves rise and crest, waves fall and rest, as eddy meets eddy
In mystical mechanical monolithical authority.
When alas, the cork is hoisted upon the crest of a monstrous wave,
She glimpses at the apex of a multitude of similar heights,
And as swiftly, she glides swooningly down to rest,
Overcome by the two great waves on both sides of her trough.

Louise Gouëffic
Toronto, Ontario