

Gender Identity of the Girl Child in South Asia

by Anima Sen and Salma Seth

Le comportement socio-culturel des gens envers les fillettes de l'Asie du Sud est le résultat de coutumes traditionnelles

reliées au système de valeurs familiales, aux croyances religieuses, aux tabous et aux pratiques ethniques. L'impact que ces comportements et que ces croyances ont sur le psyché des fillettes de

In most parts of the South Asian region, the birth of a girl is seldom welcome.

l'Inde fait ici l'objet d'analyse plus détaillée.

The average girl child in the South Asian region symbolizes a combination of suffering, service, and sacrifice from the day she is born to the day she completes her life cycle as a daughter, wife, and mother (Ministry of Women Affairs). In the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) countries (India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Bhutan, Nepal), despite the geographical, political, and socio-cultural differences between the countries, the situation of the girl child may be summarized as:

...born (if at all) into inequity, die in larger numbers, gets lesser care and protection, receives less education, gets lower pay and inferior treatment at the work place, and has far more chances of becoming sick, pregnant, deserted, abandoned or dead. (SAARC)

With this in mind, a series of consultations were held in South Asia at the regional and national levels focusing particularly on issues related to the girl child. The purpose was to identify areas for intervention areas

in order to develop national action plans. Furthermore, SAARC officially declared 1990 as the "Year of the Girl Child" and the 1990s as the "Decade of the Girl Child." Adolescent girlhood has been included in the definition of the "girl child" and the age group has been fixed at 0-20 years.

Interestingly, empirical evidence suggests that some of the constraints faced by the girl child in Bhutan, the Maldives, and Sri Lanka relate more to adolescence and unequal opportunities for social mobility and work participation, while those constraints confronting the girl child in India, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Pakistan start before birth and continue into adulthood (UNICEF 1991). Hence, while gender discrimination may be systemic and overt in the latter countries, it may be more subtle in the former. However, the overall situation of deprivation, whether overt or subtle, remains more or less the same throughout the South Asian region.

Demography and health

An extremely important demographic indicator of gender discrimination is the persistence of an adverse sex-ratio in most parts of the South Asian region, particularly in India, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Pakistan. According to Amartya Sen, a noted economist, 77 million women are missing in China and India alone (qtd. in Bhasin). The economic situation and food availability are not responsible for it. Countries like India and Pakistan are economically better off than Bhutan in terms of higher Gross National Product but have sex-ratios which declined from 934 females per 1000 males in 1981 to 929 females per 1000 males in 1991 in India (Census of India). Within India itself the lowest sex-ratios were found in Punjab (879:1000) and Haryana (870:1000),

which are otherwise assumed to be prosperous states (Health Statistics of India). In Jaisalmer (Rajasthan) the sex-ratio is one of the lowest in the world at approximately 550:1000 (*India Today*). Researchers have attributed such appalling sex-ratios to the practice of female foeticide (Devasia and Devasia, 1989), female infanticide (Bajpai), health-care and nutritional biases, and mortality and morbidity differentials between genders (Chen *et al.*; Ravindran; Sen).

In most parts of the South Asian region, the birth of a girl is seldom welcome. More often than not, the girl child receives less food, less nutrition and medical care, and even less love and affection. Such discriminatory practices starting as early as infancy have been well-documented by several studies (Sohoni, 1990; UNFPA) conducted in Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal, and India. These studies show again and again that more male children are immunized and treated in hospitals; mortality due to diarrhoea, respiratory infections, and measles is higher among female children; girls are weaned earlier due to the anxiety to conceive and give birth to a son soon; boys are breast-fed longer; girls eat last after the male members of the family have taken their food; they get less food of poorer quality; nutritious vegetables, fats, eggs, milk, and meat are missing from their diets; and girls are usually brought to hospitals in worse condition than boys. It is noteworthy that this trend is found in both urban and rural areas as well as across socio-economic groupings (Sattar). Thus, during the pre-school years, which are considered by psychologists as the most constructive and developmental phase of an individual's life, the girl child is the most neglected member of the family.

This results in the girl child's inadequate mental and physical growth. anthropometric measurements (Min-

istry of Human Resources Development) reveal that girls often have a small pelvis and remain short of stature during adolescence. In most cases, girl children also suffer from serious ailments. Early marriages further aggravate the problem. Clinical malnutrition, cervical cancer, anaemia, and related problems are all connected with early marriage (consummation before 18 years) and early pregnancy before the body is fully mature for

During the pre-school years, the girl child is the most neglected member of the family.

procreation. The preference for sons has a powerful influence over the number of pregnancies and hence children women have to bear. It has been estimated that preference for a male child adds an average of two or three children per family (Seth and Sen) even at the risk of the life of the mother. Repeated and too frequent pregnancies, particularly among teenage mothers, coupled with lack of access to information and facilities for safe delivery are responsible for babies with low birth weights who are then vulnerable to disease and premature death.

In recent years, amniocentesis (though banned) has become common not only in the metropolitan cities of India but also among the rich in rural areas of many northern states. According to one study conducted at the University of Delhi 13,505 pregnant women underwent sex-determination tests in seven clinics in New Delhi in one year alone. It was observed that most of the female zygotes were aborted after the tests "without undue anxiety" (Devasia and Devasia, 1991).¹

There is scattered evidence that attests to the prevalence of female infanticide in some parts of India. For instance, amongst the Shati Community in Jaisalmer (Rajasthan) where the sex-ratio is approximately 550:1000 (*India Today*), some of the common practices are *dudhapiri* (applying opium on the mother's nipple and feeding the baby), suffocating

the girl child with a rug, feeding her poisonous oleander berries, or offering the female baby to the Goddess. This is not to say that mothers do not love their daughters. It is a result of the cultural devaluation of girls.

In Bhutan, however, abortions, female infanticide, and child marriages are unheard of (Ministry of Human Resources Development). Theoretically, the Bhutanese do not discriminate between male and female children. This can be attributed to the Buddhist tradition of non-violence and tolerance, as well as to the Bhutanese system of matrilineal inheritance rights. In contrast to many other South Asian countries, in Bhutan the girl child enjoys a privileged status in a matriarchal society. Marriages are by choice. Divorce and remarriage are easy to arrange and are commonly accepted. Women are actively engaged in production activities, both inside and outside the home. They not only perform agricultural work but also run small shops and businesses. Men, however, still hold all the power in areas related to governance and religion. Similarly, in both the Maldives and Sri Lanka, girls have equal access to life, food, medical care, as well as to love and affection in the family, and educational opportunities.

Education

Participation of the girl child in educational pursuits, considered to be the most indicative index of human development, has been consistently low in the South Asian region except in Sri Lanka and the Maldives, where there are no educational disparities based on gender, as well as low illiteracy rates of 18.8 and ten per cent respectively (Ministry of Human Resources Development).

In Sri Lanka, the family's socio-economic status determines the utilization of resources by boys and girls. With the introduction of free education from kindergarten to university in 1945, girls have availed themselves of educational opportunities along with the boys. However, eight to ten

per cent in each age group do not go to school due to the economic problems of low income families. The drop out rate is higher for boys than girls, and higher in urban slums, shanties, and remote plantation areas.

The gross enrolment ratio has been between 50 to 60 per cent in the South Asian region. While the enrolment of girls has increased in absolute terms, the age group proportionate incidence of drop-outs and stagnation amongst girls has always been higher, especially at the primary level. Furthermore, the rate of non-participation of girls keeps on increasing at the secondary and higher levels.

Even in the Maldives, where there is an impressive and almost universal enrolment record at the primary level, empirical evidence suggests a massive drop-out rate right from the primary level (UNICEF, 1989) which increases with every year. The grim reality is that education up to grade seven is available in the Atolls while higher education is available in the capital, Male. Vocational and employment opportunities for girls are meagre as they do not work in tourist resorts, labour offices, and fisheries, which are the main avenues of employment. The only outlet for adolescent girls is therefore marriage. As a result, girl children in the Maldives experience the same problems of early marriage and too many pregnancies as their

Parents question the utility of sending girls to schools who are expected to perform only household tasks.

counterparts in other South Asian countries.

Similarly in Bhutan, although there are equal opportunities for all, parents often question the utility of sending young girls to schools who are expected to perform only household tasks, which they perceive as not requiring schooling or formal education. Moreover, the adolescent girl is

a vital support to the family in performing household chores and looking after the elderly as well as younger siblings, even after marriage when she has added responsibilities.

In brief, increasing poverty, coupled with a gender bias which compels parents to favour their sons' education over that of their daughters, the high cost of educating girls, conservative cultural values restricting the mobility of adolescent girls (i.e.,



Uma, 14 years old, Himachal Pradesh, India 1994
Photo: Brenda Cranney

the practice of *pardah* in Northwestern Pakistan, rituals associated with menstruation, etc.), the lower number of women teachers, and a constant fear for the safety and chastity of girls have been influencing the participation of girls in educational (both formal and informal) pursuits.

The fact of the matter is that the curriculum itself, at different levels and in various types of educational programs in most parts of South Asia, often promotes gender-role stereotyping and instills low self-image among girls. This reinforcement of stereotyped gender roles in the educational system exists in spite of a com-

mon core of practical skills being taught in grade six and seven to both boys and girls in Sri Lanka. At the vocational level, girls opt for teaching, nursery, and social work, sewing, tailoring, and home-science courses. As a result they are under-represented in trade and technical courses, which open more remunerative employment avenues for women to realize their full potential.

Labour and employment

In spite of the general acceptance of the International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention, child labour is prevalent in this region. According to Swami Agnivesh, child labour flourishes in India even though there is a high level of adult unemployment because it is the cheapest labour available (qtd. in Devasia and Devasia, 1991). Statistics of the National Sample Survey revealed that there were 17.58 million girl workers in India in 1985 (qtd. in Devasia and Devasia, 1991). Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) put this figure at 44.1 million (more than the total population of some of the industrially advanced countries!). A typical female child in the agrarian poor family cooks, cleans, fetches fodder, fuel and water; grazes the cattle, feeds and tends other farm animals; helps in sowing, transplanting, weeding, and harvesting; assists in family based cottage industry; and becomes a surrogate mother to her younger siblings. It is estimated that by the time a girl child reaches the age of 18 years in rural India, she had contributed assistance to the family which is valued at 39,600 rupees (approximately US\$1300) yet she is perceived as an economic burden.

According to a study in Bangladesh, even very young girls between the ages of seven and nine in large land-owning households work longest of all children: 66 days a year (Palmer). In the urban areas, the girl child performs most of the household and non-household chores, merely replacing agricultural tasks with the requirements of urban-re-

lated occupations and labour. Nevertheless, most of their work goes unrecognized.

Economic pressure and the need for survival compels girls to leave school and work in the formal or informal sectors in countries like Bangladesh, India, and Nepal. They work in unskilled, manual, and low paid jobs in the factories and cottage industries, such as *beedi*² and match industries, fireworks and glass factories, carpet weaving, export-oriented industries, etc. In the informal sector, they are employed as maid servants in upper and middle class houses or as rag-pickers. Teenage girls are subjected to exploitation and abuse in the form of lower pay, less security, and excessive occupational health hazards. Carpet weavers, for instance, who are required to sit for long hours every day, develop ankylostomiasis which causes still births and other problems related to child bearing. Many of these girls are sexually exploited by their employers or lured into prostitution.

If there is a scarcity of resources, females bear the brunt more than their male counterparts. Needless to say, the arduous work leaves the girl child with less time to dream and less time for play; a denial of her fundamental right to childhood.

Media and communications

Media influences the social ideology. By and large, most media are created by men and women are its recipients. By reinforcing gender stereotypes, systematically glorifying motherhood and subservient wifehood, the media makes it difficult for adolescent girls in South Asia to break out of these prescribed roles, norms, and behaviour patterns. The resultant conservative thinking justifies the decision of parents who do not educate their daughters or give them freedom or let them take up jobs, and who discriminate between daughters and sons. The values of a middle class, patriarchal elite are projected as universal, eroding indigenous cultures such as the tribal or matriarchal cul-

tures which permit much more space and freedom to girls.

Socialization of the girl child: the Indian scene

Chatterjee uses six themes to describe the socialization of the girl child in India — unwanted, neglected, undeveloped, underdeveloped, used, liability, and exploited through her life cycle beginning with



Anjou, 9 years old, Himachal Pradesh, India 1994
Photo: Brenda Cranney

conception and birth, through early childhood, into school going years, adolescence and womanhood. In anthropological accounts (Karve; Madan; Minturn and Hitchcock; Dube; Srinivas; Ross; Minturn and Lambert; Cormack; Kapur; Billington), there are consistent indications of the marked preference for sons all over India where the patrilineal and patrilocal family type is dominant.

Vedic verses (Hindu holy books) pray that sons will be followed by still more male offspring, never by females. According to Manu, "a man conquers the world by the birth of a

son; he enjoys eternity by that of a grandson; and the great grandfather enjoys eternal happiness by the birth of a grandson's son" (qtd. in Prabhu 242). The ancient *Pumsavana* rite, still performed over pregnant women in traditional Hindu households, is designed to elicit the birth of a male and to magically change the sex of the unborn child if it be a female (Kakar). At the birth of a son, drums are beaten in some parts of the country and conch-shells blown in others, while no such spontaneous rejoicing accompanies the birth of a daughter. Women's folk songs reveal the painful awareness of this discrepancy.

According to existing customs, sons are credited with carrying the name of the family and parents cherish the idea of being known through their male child, even when they will no longer be alive. They expect their son to provide security during their old age. That is why women often pray, fast, and undertake pilgrimages for a male child. The presence of a son is considered to be a *must* also for the proper performance of many sacraments, especially those carried out upon the death of parents which are considered imperative to the well-being of their souls. According to Jagatguru Shankaracharya Kapileshwaranand Saraswati of the Sumerupeeth Kanchi, if a female recites *vedas* it will affect her uterus and she may not be able to give birth to a healthy child (*The Hindustani Times*). Since the Jagatguru is professing this it must hold some meaning. However, in the Vedic age women had the freedom for spiritual progress and intellectual development. In fact, they were initiated into Vedic studies (Sachchidananda and Sinha).

In addition to her negligible ritual significance, a daughter is normally considered to be an unmitigated expense, someone who will never contribute to the family income and who, upon marriage, will take away a considerable part of her family's fortune as her dowry. In the case of a poor family, the parents may even have to go deep in debt in order to provide for

a daughter's marriage, the only goal designed for her.

At the same time, anthropological accounts (Goode; Mandelbaum; Gaitonde), somewhat paradoxically, indicate the warmth, intimacy, and relaxed affection of the mother-daughter bond. Couplets sung by women all over India bear witness to the daughter's memory of her mother's affection for her and to the self-esteem and strength of will this has generated in turn. The special maternal affection reserved for daughters being contrary to social and cultural prescriptions is expressed in a rather conservative manner. In fact, a mother's unconscious identification with her daughter is normally stronger than with her son (Chodorow). In her daughter she re-experiences herself. It is also said, "A son is a son till he gets a wife, a daughter is a daughter all her life" (Sohoni 1994).

Other members of the family, relatives, teachers, peers, and the media also serve as influential socializing agents in unfolding the genetic potential of the girl child and shaping her personality. Very early in childhood girls witness, recognize, and learn to accurately perceive and conform to the patriarchal images of femininity in order to maintain the love and approval of the family.

The process of internalization of such social values may be explained by Bem's (1983; 1984) "gender schema" theory of gender development. Accordingly, sex-typing results from a readiness on the part of the girl child to encode and organize information on the basis of the culture's definition of sex-roles. The girl child learns her role directly through differential treatment, rewards, and punishments and indirectly through observational learning and modelling. Girls also learn that gender and gender distinctions are important. This acquired gender schema provides a cognitive structure that helps in organizing and guiding the child's perceptions. Sex-typing of tasks, toys, games, dress, and utilization of spare time begins early. Girls are expected to assist in household chores and

learn the centrality of the domestic realm. Submissiveness, sacrifice, and silence, which are inculcated as desirable "virtues" of womanhood, affect the girl's performance in school. They are conformists, better at finishing tasks, and have greater written ability, but are less efficient at verbal, motor, special skills, or general knowledge. Aspirations of young girls are seldom related to their actual abilities; they opt for gender specific courses. The convergence of gender based division of roles at home and at school reinforces the belief that this is natural.

Earlier, most psychologists and educationists considered sex-typing as a desirable goal of socialization. Of late, there has been an espousal of non-sex type child rearing practices. This change, particularly in developing countries, is largely the result of the women's movement and the concomitant recognition that traditional sex-typing is a vehicle for gender discrimination. Above all, many advocates of this novel view argue that sex-type roles restrict the process of self-actualization for both girls and boys by limiting the options that each can pursue. Thus an effort is underway to reduce inequality of opportunities to women. Gradually women are coming out of past tradition to face contemporary realities. Professional women are pursuing careers in a vast range of modern sectors in India. Growing numbers of women are becoming scientists, engineers, doctors, lawyers, administrative and police officers, media experts, and airline pilots. There is a kind of transformation. But this bright picture of women represents only a small fraction of the total female population. Opposed to this is the great mass of Indian women, particularly in rural areas, who remain illiterate and oppressed. Unlike the former group, these women behave as if they do not have any control over their situation and they exhibit a kind of learned helplessness (Pant and Sen). This sense of helplessness or lack of self-confidence is keeping the majority of Indian women chained to their existing status.

Anima Sen is a Professor of Psychology at the University of Delhi, India. She has conducted research projects sponsored by the Department of Social Welfare and the Department of Women and Child Development, Government of India. She is widely published in her field, and has been a visiting fellow in numerous countries throughout the world. She was nominated International Woman of the Year in 1992-93 by the International Biographical Centre, Cambridge, England.

Salma Seth has an M.A. and an M.Phil. in Psychology from the University of Delhi, India. She is currently doing her Ph.D. in Women's Studies at the University of Delhi. She has published several research papers, and is working as a lecturer in Applied Psychology at Vivikananda College (University of Delhi).

¹The survival of the girl child is a fight against odds that begin from pre-birth. Dr. Ronald Ericson, who has a chain of clinics conducting sex determination tests in 46 countries in Europe, America, Asia, and Latin America found that of 263 couples who had approached him for the tests, 248 selected boys and 15 selected girls (Holmes and Hoskins). The preference for a male child is virtually universal.

²A *beedi* is a roll of tobacco leaves used for smoking. These are usually consumed by smokers in low socio-economic groups in India.

References

- Bajpai, S. "The Lesser Sex." *Indian Express* 28 October 1990: 1.
- Bem, S.L. "Gender Schema Theory and Its Implications for Child Development: Raising Gender-Schematic Children in a Gender-Schematic Society." *Signs* (1983): 598-616.
- Bem, S.L. "Androgyny and Gender Schema Theory: A Conceptual and Empirical Integration." T.B. Sonderegger, ed. *Nebraska Symposium on Motivation: Psychology of Gender*. Lincoln, Nebraska: Uni-

- versity of Nebraska Press, 1984.
- Billington, M.F. *Women in India*. New Delhi: Amarko Book Agency, 1973.
- Bhasin, K. "Some Thoughts on the SAARC Campaign for the Girl Child." SAARC Workshop on the Girl Child and Cooperation for the Fourth World Conference on Women (1995). Department of Women and Child Development, Ministry Human Resources Development, Government of India, New Delhi. February 1-3, 1994.
- Census of India. *Provisional Population Totals*. Series I, Paper I. Amulya Ratna Nanda, Registrar General and Census Commissioner, 1991.
- Chatterjee, M. *A Report on Indian Women From Birth to Twenty*. New Delhi: National Institute of Public Cooperation and Development (NIPCCD) 1990.
- Chen, et al. "Sex Bias in the Family Allocation of Food and Health Care in Rural Bangladesh." *Population and Development Review* 7(1) (1981): 55-70.
- Chodorow, N. "Family, Structure, and Feminine Personality." M. Rosaldo and L. Lamphere, eds. *Woman, Culture and Society*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975.
- Cormack, M. *The Hindu Woman*. Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1961.
- Devasia L. and V.V. Devasia. *Female Criminals and Female Victims: An Indian Perspective*. Nagpur: Dattsons, 1989.
- Devasia L. and V.V. Devasia. *The Girl Child in India*. New Delhi: Ashish Publishing House, 1991.
- Dube. S.C. *Indian Village*. New York: Harper and Row, 1967.
- "Family Planning, The Great Hoax." *India Today* 16-31 October 1988.
- Gaitonde, M.R. "Cross-cultural Study of the Psychiatric Syndromes in Out-Patient Clinics in Bombay, India and Topeka, Kansas." *International Journal of Social Psychiatry* 4 (1958): 103.
- Goode, W.J. *World Revolution and Family Patterns*. New York: The Free Press, 1963.

- Health Statistics of India (1985). Government of India, 1986.
- Holmes H.B. and B.B. Hoskins. "Pre-Natal and Preconception Sex-Choice Technologies: A Path to Femicide." Paper presented at the International Interdisciplinary Congress on Women, the Netherlands, April, 1984.
- Kakar, S. "Feminine Identity in India." R. Ghadially, ed. *Women in Indian Society: A Reader*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1988.
- Kapur, P. *Love, Marriage and Sex*. Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1973.
- Karve, I. *Kinship Organization in India*. Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1968.
- Madan, T.N. *Family and Kinship: A Study of the Pandits of Rural Kashmir*. Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1965.
- Mandelbaum, D.G. *Society in India*. Vol. I. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970.
- Ministry of Human Resources Development. *Report of the SAARC Workshop: The Girl Child*. Department of Women and Child Development, Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India, New Delhi. September 19-23, 1988.
- Minturn, L. and J.T. Hitchcock. "The Rajputs of Khalapur, India." B.B. Whiting, ed. *Six Cultures: Studies of Child-Rearing*. New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1963.
- Minturn, L. and W.W. Lambert. *Mothers of Six Cultures*. New York: John Wiley, 1964.
- Ministry of Women Affairs. *Care of the Girl Child Including Adolescent Girls*. Dhaka: Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, 1992.
- Palmer, I. "Issues and Policy Implications Related to Agrarian Reform." FAO, 1987.
- Pant, D. and A. Sen. "Learned Helplessness Amongst Indian Women: An Empirical Study." *Indian Educational Review* (January 12-22, 1992).
- Prabhu, P.H. *Hindu Social Organization*. Bombay: Popular
- Prakashan, 1958.
- Ravindran, S. *Health Implications of Sex Discrimination in Childhood*. A Review Paper and Annotated Bibliography, prepared for WHO and UNICEF, Geneva (WHO/UNICEF/FHE 86.2), 1986.
- Ross, A.D. *The Hindu Family in Its Urban Setting*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1961.
- SAARC. *Girl Child Year Document*. India, 1990.
- Sachchidananda and R.P. Sinha. *Women's Rights: Myth and Reality*. Summary. Patna: A.N. Sinha Institute of Social Studies, 1982.
- Sattar, Z. "Uneven Odds in Life and Death." *National Health*. Special Supplement on the Girl Child. 8(1) (January 1990) Karachi, Pakistan.
- Sen, A. "Women's Survival as a Development Problem." *Bulletin of the American Academy of Art and Sciences* XLIII(2) (1989).
- Seth, S. and A. Sen. *Childhood for the Girl Child: A Myth?* Mimeo. New Delhi: Centre for Women's Development Studies (CWDS), 1991.
- Sohoni, N.K. *Child Without Childhood*. Report on Girl Child, submitted to UNICEF. New York: UNICEF, 1990.
- Sohoni, N.K. *Status of Girls in Development Strategies*. New Delhi: Har-Anand Publications, 1994.
- Srinivas, M.N. *Marriage and Family in Mysore*. Bombay: New Book Co., 1942.
- United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA). New York, 1988.
- UNICEF. *Situation Analysis of Children and Mothers in the Maldives*. Amani, 1989.
- UNICEF. *Annual Report*. Bangladesh, 1991.
- "Vedas Not Good for Women's Health: Seer." *The Hindustani Times*. 23 July 1994.

SHAILA LOHIYA

A Tale of My Salvation

A tale is never to be told
of struggling in darkness.
Birds are not to soar and sing
songs
Whose wings are cut off.

Sad are the tales woven neatly
in the wedding dress,
Needless are the sorrows
spread out
in the auction.

Burning is forest in its leaves,
Cry not out the songs of the
departing,
viewing the sun set.

Tattooed is the sky
With the joy of labour pains,
Breasts are no more
full of nourishing sweet
milk.

Try not to stop the waters
while imprisoned wind
is burning slowly in its
words.

Naked are the lines
discarding the cover green,
Innocent embryo is peeled off
by bleeding hands.

Ecstasy lies in soaring up
freely in the sky,
With new wings and new
morning songs.

Translated from Marathi by Prof.
C.D. Bhandari.

Shaila Lohiya runs a women's program in rural Maharashtra state in India which offers a hostel, vocational and skills training for young women. She also works with a rural development organization and as a teacher of the Marathi language and history.