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## **THE WORLD AS THE BODY OF GOD: FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES ON ECOLOGY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE**

### **Introduction**

Is there anything specific to be said on ecology, social justice and biblical perspectives from an "Asian", women's perspective? I hesitate greatly to launch into generalisations of this kind. There are deep cleavages of caste, class, religious community and culture dividing Asian women among themselves. Some basic insights have been expressed by the Korean theologian Chung Hyung Kyung in her address to the WCC Assembly in Canberra. In the name of the spirit (*ruach*) she has called for metanoia, repentance, return towards life. She has talked there of interdependence, return to the earth, affirmation of a culture of life against the culture of death which has been perpetuated by patriarchal structures. And she has danced her invocation in order to show that this return happens not just in the head but in a matter of rhythm and touch with the whole of creation. Her presentation has created many worries among more orthodox Western theologians who feared syncretism and disorder.

In this article, I would like to reflect on questions of ecology and social justice in more specific and confined ways, drawing on concrete experience of certain communities of women with whom I happen to have had a more close experience. These experiences are not related to any church setting. They are rooted in the basic fact that ecology is a survival issue to the poor in very direct ways in countries which are rural based and poverty stricken. Incidentally, these two communities are not agricultural. I will draw on the housing struggles of urban slum dwellers in Tamil Nadu and on the struggles of the coastal fisherfolk in Tamilnadu and Kerala. But though removed from agriculture, the situation of both communities is closely related to the problem of a development concept, which has been heavily tilted in favour of a narrow rich urban sector, which orients itself towards Western notions of progress and modernity.

I think that the distinctive contribution of this article will be that it deals mainly with social processes, the question of re-organisation of social structures which disintegrate under the impact of capitalist development. Ecology then does not come in as a mere striving towards reconciliation with the earth, honouring cosmic forces and non-human forms of life. It comes in more with a focus of setting ourselves into relationship with each other in the day-to-day survival struggles for water, a piece of land to dwell on, a piece of beach to dry the fish on, the sea as a source of bounty. All this is mediated by women's work, both in the household and in wider production processes. Protection of the right to work and honouring of invisible work contributions are part of a life style which is ecologically viable. An important aspect in this context is the question of control over a woman's body. The vital invisible work contribution of women which is crucial to the production of life as a whole, has much of the time been extracted by physical violence or by social controls which have denied women their sexuality and the right to take decisions over their own lives. The fish workers movement has intuitively connected the rape of women and the rape of the sea. This however does not answer the question what is the alternative to this kind of violent exploitation.

If we raise the question where is God in the process of social reconstruction, the answers are by no means easy. It may not be enough to say that God's spirit is present in the good creation because the good creation is violated from the outset by different types of human work. The primieval human fratricide between Cain and Abel reflects the differences between agriculture and pastoral society. Human work itself is related to different ways of extracting life from a source under strain and suffering. The pain in childbirth is crucially related to this work related alienation in a sexist division of labour. The painful dichotomy between the tree of life and the tree of knowledge of good and evil has often been seen as an obscurantist atavism of theology which tries to keep human beings in immaturity and dependence. In an age of nuclear power and bio-technology, the limitations and outright dangers of a dissecting, invasive and compartmentalised method of knowing as promoted by Western Science and Technology<sup>1</sup> has become much

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1. See Vandana Shiva: *Staying Alive* (Kali for Women, N. Delhi, 1988).

more manifest. We have also understood this way of knowing to be patriarchal and colonial. Striving for different ways of knowing the world, ourselves and each other becomes an imperative of survival. God then needs to be present not only in nature and in our hearts but also as a reconciling and healing power in the new human relationships which we are trying to build in love and agony.

This is not a private pursuit, or a mere religious venture. It is intrinsically linked with organisational processes. The Jesus Community as a paradigm of social reconstruction is significant here, but today's attempts at social reconstruction are in the secular field, in the work sphere and in residential areas. How such struggles can keep up hope under overwhelming adverse circumstances is not easy to answer. There is a tremendous overstrain in swimming against the main stream of society, to resist destructive development paradigms and to build up the daily protection of life. We not only have to face adverse authorities, ruthless state power and devastating international policies. We also have to face each other and ourselves all the time. This creates anxiety, insecurity and dependencies. Fear to fail can breed failure. The answer may not be in a heroic stiff upperlip which might enhance the strain. Clenched fists and clenched teeth do not promote peace with ourselves or with nature. There may be need to learn from the immense staying power and resilience of spirituality born in small communities of intimate inter-dependence. While such traditional communities have also been oppressive and exploitative towards women and weaker sections, it is the very staying power and perseverance of poor women, dalits, wage labourers, small peasants which has been witness to the affirmation of life. Western concepts of household labour and arduous physical work as mere drudgery to be made obsolete by mechanisation have not helped to appreciate the basic work of production of life. Likewise, Western concepts of privacy and individual rights have not helped to appreciate the inter-dependence and staying power of small communities. It is hard to separate the sustenance and the oppression. We cannot afford to romanticise traditional social structures. Yet we have to cherish that which has sustained life and respect for Life and Beauty and Dignity even amidst violence and grinding poverty. Where then is God in this struggle of contradictions? It may not be enough to meditate on the spirit. We may also meet the Angel while crossing the river and may need to wrestle and emerge limping yet reconciled.

In the following, I will try to give a picture of the basic issues in the lives of the fisherfolk and the urban slum dwellers of South India. I will chiefly reflect on aspects of (1) work, (2) relationship to a woman's body, (3) relationship to natural resources, (4) woman's spirituality and (5) attempts to reorganise the social structure. I will then try to theologially reflect on each of these aspects and place the theological reflection into the context of rising communalism in our country and the need to resist this trend by a pluriform culture, nurtured by a strong spirituality.

### **1. The Women Fishworkers**

Struggles among the fisherfolk of Tamil Nadu and Kerala have been going on continuously since the mid-seventies<sup>2</sup>. These were mainly caused by innovations in fishing technology introduced by Government as well as international forces (Indo Norwegian fisheries project/Japanese trade interests etc.). Thus, since mid-seventies struggles went on against trawling and for protection of artisanal fisherfolk from over fishing through trawlers. Later the depletion of fish resource through outboard-motors on traditional craft also had to be faced. Side by side, the women of the community had massive struggles against mechanisation of net-making and use of nylon nets instead of cotton which deprived them of a very modest but nevertheless essential source of income. Both struggles were based on similar factors: While trawling and mechanisation substituted the artisanal knowledge by mechanical power which requires high capital and energy inputs, net making by machines did away with women's skill and social relationship on the beach and saw women's work as superfluous drudgery. Both the mechanised fishing and the machine made nets have been ecologically very harmful and have contributed to depletion of fish resource. The relationship between human skill and work intensity and ecological sustainability, culture and nurture becomes visible.

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2. For a brief summary see Nalini Nayak: "The Kerala Fishworkers Struggle" in: Ilina Sen (Ed) *A space Within the Struggle. Women's Participation in People's Movements* (Kali for Women, N. Delhi 1990) and Nalini Nayak: *A Struggle Within the Struggle*, P.C.O. Centre, Trivandrum (without year, around 1983).

### 1. *Women's Work*

The women of the fishing community are not involved in catching fish but in the distribution and marketing of the catch. A strict sexual division of labour is enforced in which women are not allowed to enter the sea (except on X'mas day if they are Latin Catholics), because they are seen as polluted. Women are subject to multiple child bearing, and child mortality is very high. They have to do all the housework and older women go to the beach to receive the catch and to bring it to the market. Women thus do a lot of social interaction, they have to buy and sell, cook, wash and clean, look after the sick, see to the welfare of the children and manage the whole family life. It has been shown that women's working day has lengthened considerably due to marketing of the fish over very long distances. Women travel for long hours, get very little sleep and are subjected to sexual harrasment. With modernisation of the fishing sector, the men go for seasonal employment to other places and out migration is very high. This makes the women more vulnerable in two ways: They are even more left alone with the burden of the family management while their access to cash is more crutailed since they get more dependent on the money sent home by their migrating men which may be irregular and far between.

### 2. *Control Over Women's Bodies*

Women's body itself is a material resource and it is used to separate her from other material resources. The crucial mechanism of control is her sexuality. She is seen as polluting because of menstruation and child-bearing. She has a mystical relationship to the sea, the blood of a woman can pollute the sea. Sexual intercourse is seen as impure. The man by all means has to bathe before he enters the sea. The woman's chastity is seen as the protection for the man's safety at sea. Thus, sexual control is enforced by making the man's safety at sea dependent on the woman's faithfulness. The sea, Kadamma, is seen as bountiful but also treacherous. Kadamma can punish the woman's unfaithfulness. While this appears like a dependency of the man on the woman, it is at the same time the effective way of keeping the woman in place. The woman is kept economically dependent and sexually confined. The concept of chastity and faithfulness itself, which may be valid in its own rights, if affirmed by choice, is tied up with patriarchal controls which have strong economic underpinnings. They do keep the women in a

position which is not necessarily weak, but tied to the family economy, making her directly responsible for all the day to day sustenance. This is enforced also by large amounts of dowry in the fishing economy which again rests on the assumptions that a woman cannot be single and of necessity needs to be married off in order to be "protected." Of course actual protection is not at all there as the men go out to sea and women are left to their own devices.

### *3. Relationship to Natural Resources*

We have seen earlier how sexual controls over women are used to keep them separated from the means of production, i.e. boats and fishing gears. Simultaneously skills are also curtailed. The knowledge about fish and the sea is with the men. At the same time, the women exert considerable economic power, handling financial affairs, running the family economy, taking and giving loans and even making decisions or at least participating in them when it comes to purchase boats or gears. Nevertheless, the woman and her body are seen as "nature" fit to be exploited in similar ways as the sea herself is exploited by the new technologies.

To the extent that the sea gets exhausted and more and more technological investment is needed to keep the catch up, women are also exploited more as they either lose control over marketing, netmaking etc. or have to go long distances and face the hazards which go with that. Women do not even have free access to the beach. While drying fish on the beach, young women are kept confined to the house. Women's spaces remain defined in contradictory ways. Interaction with interior villages remain their responsibility as far as it serves the maintenance of the family, e.g. buying provisions, visiting family members etc. It is not easy to spell out what the slogan which connects the rape of women and the rape of the sea really implies. It seems to refer to the thoughtless use of women's bodies and of the sea as a resource which can be violently dealt with and does not need to be looked after responsibly.

### *4. Women's Spirituality*

The women of the fishing communities in coastal Tamilnadu and Kerala are mainly Roman Catholic. Thus, their spirituality is closely

connected with the practices of the Church. The virgin Mary is a strong source of spiritual inspiration and ideological control. Yet, there are underlying concepts which express the power of women which gets socially curtailed in order to prevent it from being destructive. Kalpana Ram has pointed to the Tamil concept of *ananku* which connotes the capricious, unpredictable quality of uncontrolled power.<sup>3</sup>

Catholic religion has split up female power into the benevolent, domesticated form personified in Mother Mary and the capricious negative part personified in Eseki, a low caste village goddess of Kanyakumari pertaining to the area of the old kingdom of Travancore. However, the disorderly and unruly elements of femininity are only driven underground and surface in the form of possession. Women act as oracle and dance, possessed by the goddess. The female body becomes a battlefield between the hegemony of the church and popular religion. Ideals of chastity and benevolence are played out against the threat of autonomy and destructiveness incorporated by popular Hindu gods and spirits. Kadalamma, the sea goddess, is another incorporation of the ambiguity of female power. Signifying bounty and the source of all life, she can also be angry and a source of death and destruction. Sexual controls over women are used to safeguard the benevolence of the sea. Women's spirituality thus is split up between controlled benevolence and powerful autonomy which is seen as destructive. In possession, some of this ambiguity gets reconciled. However, possession does not question the existing systems of control, it only acts as an outlet and symbolic protest.

Trying to relate the question of women's spirituality to the question of ecology, no clear picture emerges. The benevolent controlled image of Mother Mary appears timeless, irrespective of the degrees of exploitation of the sea and of women. The unbound form of women's power which is seen as destructive, has an aspect of the problem of "control over nature" as necessary to safe-guard benevolence. However, control over nature and over women under conditions of unbound capitalism has led to destruction of resource and disempowerment of women. At the same time the concept of the goddess Eseki or Kadalamma unbound can also not simply be reclaimed for ecological

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3. Kalpana Ram: Mukkuvar Women. Gender Hegemony and Capitalist Transformation in a South Indian Fishing Community (Kali for Women, 1992).

conceptualisations. Any ecological spirituality would need to reflect on the social processes which go with the different expressions. Catholic Liberation Theology which was influenced by Marxism in Kerala, has neither understood the complexities of controls over women's bodies, nor the depth of the ecological problem.

##### *5. Attempts to Reorganise the Social Structure*

Much of what has been said so far about the women of the fishing community reveals how social organisation is related to economic structures. Under the impact of capitalist development, social organisation desintegrates. As mechanised fishing becomes prevalent, more expensive inputs are required, the money economy becomes more prevalent. Women are exposed to more hardship due to migration of men and less access to cash. Stridan, the marriage gift given to women, gets transformed into higher amounts of dowry. Women's relatively powerful position in the household economy deteriorates. She gets exposed to more violence as the burden of marketing becomes more heavy.

Some of the resistance against this destructive development has taken place in the formation of fishworkers union and of different types of women's organisations more or less closely related to the union. The significant contribution of such re-organisation is that it has opened up new spaces for women through organisation of child care centres, saving schemes, production units and new force for participation in struggles against the overall direction of destructive development and ecological devastation. Struggles against violence on women have taken place side by side. This has created a space for women which safeguards them a certain amount of autonomy which is relatively more free of the fear-inspired cultural concepts which see women's autonomy as a havoc.

Transforming the male dominated fish workers union along these lines is of course a long drawn process over many years. At the same time this process is crucial as it is also part of an overall process of social reorganisation taking place in independent unions in unorganised sector, women's movements and ecological movements. As yet, the question how all this can be accelerated into a true force of socio-economic transformation has no answer. More,



agonisingly, what is the spiritual sustenance in processes of protracted struggle against overwhelmingly adverse economic and political forces, has no easy answers either. Even the traditional tenacity of women's capacity to pray and trust in God's goodness cannot be disowned. What is the interaction between new social movements and traditional faith communities needs to be worked out in daily interaction. This is all the more urgent in the face of rapid communalisation of our political life which tries to counteract the process of social disintegration with synthetic concepts of identity projecting Brahminic ideals of Hindutva and militant versions of Ram. The fact that women are coopted into these pseudo identities very rapidly, makes the whole problem all the more urgent.

## II. The Women Workers in Urban Slums

While the women workers in the unorganised sector in Madurai city of Tamil Nadu live in a physically very different kind of environment, there are many parallels in how they face the adverse aspects of modern development and the controls over their bodies. They have organised mainly to fight for housing rights, basic amenities like water, drainage, health, ration etc., protection of their right to work and control over violence.<sup>4</sup> Some of the basic problems in their lives have arisen out of programmes of urban development which do not take the basic needs of the mass of poor people into account.

More importantly, the very existence and expansion of urban slums is rooted in development policies which are urban biased and neglect inputs in the countryside. The districts around Madurai are drought stricken and agriculture is viable only for three to four months in a year. The water table is constantly sinking, soil erosion is prevalent. Under World Bank Scheme, urban development programmes are on the anvil which intend to displace tens of thousands and deprive them of shelter and livelihood.

4. For the background of this section see my own earlier articles on "Women and Housing Struggles" EPW, Oct. 17-24, 1987. Nandita Shah and Nanditha Gandhi's "The Sky For a Roof" The essential houselessness of women. Conference paper of NCHR at Tambaram, Aug. 1987.

Geeta Ramakrishna: "The Tamil Nadu Construction Workers' Union" in Ilina Sen (Ed) *A Space within the Struggle* (Kali for Women, 1990).

### 1. *Women's Work*

The working day of women in urban slums is excruciatingly long. They have to start before dawn to fetch the water, sweep, cook, get the children to school or to work, queue in front of ration shops and be ready for their normal work in the unorganised sector. Small vendors of flowers and vegetables have to go to the wholesale traders in the dark hours of early morning and then roam through the streets and from house to house in order to sell. Construction workers have to assemble in the early hours in order to be hired for daily work. They all have to face extortion of money in the form of collection of corporation tax, through middlemen, harrassment by the police for licenses, harrassment by the way of being driven away from the place of work. Domestic workers do top work in upto six houses plus their own housework. The combination of physical and mental exhaustion creates daily tension. Quarrel in water - queues, in front of ration shops and inside the house occur constantly. Neither is women's work inside the house acknowledged as crucial for the whole survival of the family, nor is her casual labour outside the house acknowledged as crucial for the survival of society.

### 2. *Control Over Women's Bodies*

Women in this kind of a situation have no sovereignty over their bodies. Inside the house, there is no privacy and husbands can demand sexual services at random. If a quarrel ensues, the whole neighbourhood gets involved. Police, contractors, traders, masons, all can lay their hands on a woman's body. There is constant threat of violence. There is not much room here for the concept of chastity (*karpu*). It is virtually acknowledged that poor women's integrity cannot be safe-guarded. Nevertheless, the upper caste ideology of "protecting the chastity of a woman" remains in some ways operational to enforce social controls. The wife is seen as the husband's property which includes the right to beat her, sometimes even to kill her. At the same time, the women constantly have to fend for themselves as the men go off to contract second marriages. They are split between the factual assault on their integrity inside and outside the family, the moral demand to be "good women" in contrast to "prostitutes" or "loose women" and their own need to somehow preserve their own dignity and sovereignty. The

contradiction comes out in proverbs. On the one hand women are told: "Whether he is a stone or a grass, he is the husband." On the other hand the prevailing chaos is also expressed in another saying: "If a dog stays married, so what, - if a cat divorces, so what?"

### 3. *Women's Relationship to Natural Resources*

In the city, there are not many "natural resources" worth the name. The great bone of contention is land which has become a commodity in the market. Water is in danger of becoming marketised as well. Even porampokku lands (community lands) are now being sold out. The lease cum sale scheme of the World Bank lures people with security of tenure. The land is assessed according to market value and people have to pay a percentage in lumpsum. They then have to pay instalments for fifteen years. Housing loan is also attached to this scheme. The result is long term indebtedness, incapacity to pay and as a result, the perspective to be driven out from the land. Normally any pattah (title deed) is not issued in the name of women. Only after protracted struggles joint pattahs or pattahs in the name of women have been issued.

It is the women's movement which has raised demands against the privatisation and marketisation of land, suggesting the land to remain common property and issuing title only for the structure of house itself. This implies that private buying and selling will be prevented. It is also the women's movement which has insisted that place should be given close to the place of work for all workers in unorganised sector. This connects the question of the right to work with an alternative view on land and basic amenities.

The right to life and livelihood becomes the key issue around which reorganisation of the city is envisaged. Likewise, resources like water are to be made available in the first place for basic survival needs, not for five star hotels, swimming pools, city beautification and the like. The crucial issue is the connection between the resource and the people in contrast to complete marketisation of resources. Even the cleaning of canal systems is seen not just as a technical problem but as a public work in which people are willing to participate on the grounds that their stay in the city is not

jeopardised and that they are not treated as criminal elements or encroachers but as workers.

There is an underlying critique of the development concept as a whole involved here. Economic growth has gone at the cost of people's right to work and to control over resources. The heavy urban bias has neglected protection of survival resource and work opportunity in the countryside. Thus, organisational links to rural based situations and movements is of crucial importance.

#### 4. *Women's Spirituality*

It is obvious from the above described situation that women need tremendous strength of spirit to survive and to safe-guard the survival of their families. Perhaps the most important factor is their commitment to life itself and the capacity to laugh and crack jokes in the most adverse circumstances. It is difficult to say what is the religious content of this spirituality. Poor women do observe the routine festivals but even here it is a matter of providing the basics of life, like at least a decent meal, some sweet, perhaps even clothes. As the movement is interreligious, specific expressions of faith remain low key. Caste barriers too are perceived as something more specific to men than to women. Some of the women do go to temples where possession by the god/goddess is prevalent and act a medium. They fall into a trance, dance and prophecy. However, prevailing social norms are rarely questioned at such occasions. The event appears more like an outlet of tensions.

At certain occasions, social disputes are settled by vows or curses. Eg. a panchayat may be held at a certain temple and the assumption is that whoever lies or cheats at this occasion will suffer harm in the form of punishment by the god/goddess expressed in illness, mental agony, economic misfortune. There is an underlying assumption that the god/goddess safeguards the integrity of the community and the truthfulness and responsibility towards each other. There are other occasions where seeds are sprouted for several days during a festival. These are remnants of village culture where it was the responsibility of women to test the viability of the seeds for agriculture.

There is a certain spiritual quality in the way how the daily routine itself is structured. Eg. the sweeping of the house and the front space, sprinkling with water to keep the dust under control and putting of a kolam (rangoli – design with white powder based on a system of dots) has to do with some ordering of the cosmos, keeping chaos under control, warding off evil. Likewise, women interact with the water which is used for working and cleaning and have a deep connection to this resource. This may amount to severe drudgery in the form of queuing and lifting pots and strain in washing clothes and dishes. The drudgery is compounded if the women work as domestic labourers. Yet, water is something which cannot be taken for granted in this setting.

Likewise, women suffer the brunt of the fuel crisis, collect cowdung for cowdung cakes, forage for fuel from shrubs and dustbins and keep the kitchen fires burning under pains of damage to their lungs and eyes. But they are centred around the basic survival needs, the rice and the water in the pot, the fire underneath, the social disciplines of survival of the work. While it is desirable to arrive at a division of labour which relieves women and children from some of the household burdens, the preoccupation with sustenance of life itself is an aspect which also nurtures the tenacity in collective struggles, the courage to face the administration and the police and the imagination to reach out to others and to project alternatives for urban development.

##### *5. Attempts to Reorganise the Social Structure*

The urban women's movement among slum dwellers has tried to intervene into many aspects of life. While the main preoccupation has been with housing issues and basic amenities, major policy issues of urban development have also been addressed, the emphasis being on basic survival right of the poor and community control vs privatisation vis - a - vis a streamlining of the city along the lines of a Singapore model. An important point has been to connect the right to work to the right to residence in the city itself. Issues of violence against women are simultaneously tackled and communal harmony and inter-religious solidarity are a matter of day to day interaction.

Organisationally this means that women form area committees and take action on survival issues of the community at large. This

changes their pattern of life as they have to move about in different areas, negotiate with the authorities and also participate in area meetings, rallies, dharnas, speak in public and cultivate literacy skills and skills of accounting. Family control over women gets loosened and their standing in the community is enhanced.

As the issues faced are very serious, solidarity is built with unions in unorganised sector like construction workers, rickshaw pullers, cobblers, scavengers, street hawkers and also human rights organisations.

While such new organisations cannot substitute the traditional bonds of family, caste, religious community, they do come to rescue where traditional means of support fail, disintegrate, turn destructive or are powerless to fight for protection of survival. The question how new and old structures of social reconstruction relate remains very complex.

### **III. How to Make Sense, Theologically**

The introduction and the two parts on the fish workers and slum dwellers have raised many explicit and implicit theological questions. The task now is to deepen these out. It will now become possible to see the connection between the different aspects of life which have been discussed. In the title of this article, the metaphor of "The World as the Body of God" has been used. This metaphor occurs in feminist ecological theology (eg. Sally Mc. Fague) as well as in the philosophy of Ramanuja. It indicates a perspective in which the interaction between spirit and matter is vital. God's spirit is not accessible to us outside the body which is the world. The world again is not just nature, the good creation, but also society, the way human beings are interacting with each other and with nature. Exploitation and violence are thus a disease of the body of God, inflicted by a violation of the spirit which safeguards life in Freedom and Sustenance. This disease afflicts nature as well as society. It may turn deadly where destruction runs havoc, be it in the form of destruction of resource, warfare, or nuclear radiation and bio - technological manipulation. In the following, we are trying to trace the different linkages of human organization and of human interaction with nature which safeguard the flow of the spirit towards Freedom and Wholeness (Shalom). Again the focus will be on work, the control

over a woman's body, relationship to resources, spirituality and organization of the New Community.

### 1. *Women and Work: The Production of Life*

From the above said it is obvious that we are not dealing with nature or creation as a web of life which we can still recover in its integrity. Nature is already transformed and wounded by human labour and exploitation. This distortion in human relations and in human interaction with the good creation has to do with the fall which is a fall into patriarchy itself<sup>5</sup>. At the same time, even in the Jewish narrative of the creation which focusses on the fall and its consequences, the blessing is sustained in human being calling his wife Chawah, "The mother of all living". This refers not only to human life but sustenance of the whole creation. It is the flow of blessing which is upheld even in the face of death and threat of extinction. Life going through the circle of death, embedded in nature is fundamentally different from the visions of deathless life which are the ultimate visions of bio-technology envisaging a different kind of "living forever".

The work in drudgery which is envisaged can be of two different varieties: it can be exploitative, extractive, accumulative of gain or it can serve the sustenance of life and of community. There is a link between the sustenance of life and women's labour, not only the labours in child birth but also the daily work contribution. It is astonishing that despite the deeply patriarchal legal setting in which women are dealt with among the movable property<sup>6</sup> women's work contribution is made visible in texts like Prov. 31, 10-29. While the woman in the text is clearly defined in patriarchal relations, her work is made visible from early morning till later in the night. She is the source of her husband's prosperity, provides food, but also organizes the productive activity of the household, attending to fields and vineyards. She also does the marketing and produces garments

5. See Phyllis Trible: *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Fortress Press, Philadelphia 1979) pp. 72-143.

Gabriele Dietrich: "Perspectives of a Feminist Theology: Towards the Full Humanhood of Women and Men". in: Peter Fernando/Francis Yasas (Eds) *Woman's Image Making and Shaping*, (Pune 1985).

6. See my writing on legal background in above mentioned article.

and sells them. She opens her mouth with wisdom and teaches kindness. Her children call her blessed and her husband praises her. While this is a somewhat idealized image of woman in a patriarchal peasant culture, the life giving aspects of women's work come across well. At the same time, the controls over her body, the curtailment of her movements remain invisible.

However, this physical vulnerability of women is abundantly expressed in the narratives of the Bible. Gerda Lerner in her book on the Creation of Patriarchy has argued that the physical enslavement of women is at the root of slavery itself.<sup>6a</sup> This problem occurs in the OT in many variations, from the slave woman Hagar (Gen. 16), to the taking of Barthsheba by David (2, Samuel 12) and the violation of David's daughter Tamar by her brother Ammon (2, Sam. 13). Those narratives show the extent of patriarchal power and the tragedy of the victim. They do not depict the women as seductive but show the men who are in power in a critical light. The appreciation of women's work contribution must be read on the backdrop of this extreme physical vulnerability.

It is all the more astonishing that the topic of the Production of Life, the continuous blessing over the good creation which goes through the genealogies, goes one step further and shows the "mothers of the Messiah", in utter violation of the patriarchal codes of Israelite society<sup>7</sup>. This becomes visible in the genealogy at the end of the book of Ruth where the marriage of Ruth and Boas is solemnized. Boas who redeems Ruth from her widowhood is a descendent of Peretz who was the son of a Cananite woman by the name of Tamar. She had been married to the oldest son of Judah, one of Joseph's brothers, but that son dies. When she married the younger brother according to the law of Levirate that son also dies. Judah is frightened and refuses to remarry her again. She in turn dresses up as a whore, seduces Judah, becomes pregnant and bears twins, one of whom is Peretz. Judah, when he recognizes what has happened exclaims: "She is more righteous than I" (Gen. 38, 26). It means she has safeguarded the continuous blessing over the good Creation which goes through the genealogies by her bold intervention which

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6a. See Arthur I. Waskow: *God Wrestling* (Shocken Books, New York, 1978 Chapter VII).

7. Gerda Lerner: *The Creation of Patriarchy* (OUP 1986).



breaks all the laws. It is also worth remembering in this context that Ruth herself is a Moabite and that Moab is of similarly unorthodox background as Peretz. He is the descendant of one of Lot's two daughters who after the destruction of Sodom in which everyone is wiped out, get their father drunk and sleep with him in order to safeguard offspring (Gen. 19, 30-38). The continued blessing over the good creation goes through the line of women, independent of the laws of patriarchy.

This is another line of liberation as compared to the liberation theology of the exodus which confronts economic power and State power in direct ways but at the same time transmits a legal framework which is deeply patriarchal. The name of God revealed in Ex. 3, 14 "I shall be with you" thus not only applies to the migration of the Exodus but also to the staying power of women who keep life going by the labour of their wombs and of their hands. There is a link between the promise of the Exodus and the redemptive power of women in the opaque story of the circumcision of Moses' son by Zipporah (Ex. 4, 24-31). I have argued elsewhere in greater detail that the circumcision symbolism has to do with the disempowerment of patriarchy. Moses himself has to become a "bridegroom of blood", to partake in the blessing of the blood which is connected with women, in order to be able to fulfil his task of liberation<sup>8</sup>. Liberation is only possible where it is answerable to the continued blessing over the future generations borne by women.

The Korean theologian Chung has worked out the Christological dimension of this blood symbiosis by quoting extensively my poem on the Blood of a Woman.<sup>9</sup> It may be important to add that this is not about mysticism of the womb but women's labour for the production and preservation of life which becomes only possible if the primeval sins of patriarchy and class exploitation are lived down and redeemed.

In a more poetic way, this vision is expressed in Revelation 12. The woman clothed with the sun, the moon under her feet and on her head a crown of 12 stars is with child, crying out in her pangs of birth in

8. Gabriele Dietrich: *Women's Movement in India, Conceptual and Religious Reflections* (Breakthrough Publ., Bangalore, 1988) pp. 103-112.

9. Chung Hyung Kyung: *Striving to be the Sun Again*. (Orbis, New York, 1991).

anguish of delivery. She is persecuted by the great dragon. The child is carried to God's throne but the woman is persecuted, she flees into the desert and is nourished there. The dragon goes after her and spews water after her, but the earth comes to the help of the woman and swallows the river which the dragon has poured from his mouth.

It has been pointed out that the woman in this chapter stands for the people of God, the messianic community from which the Messiah is born in the birth-pangs of history.<sup>10</sup> The dragon who represents the destructive power which inspires the tyranic empires, tries to devour the child and to kill the woman. It is the earth which rescues the woman from the destructive power of chaos. The earth is allied with the woman and the Messianic promise. The labours of women, in childbirth and by the work of her hands, will be redeemed by breaking down the patriarchal conditions of production of life in the New Community of the people of God which will be rescued by alliance with the Earth.

## *2. Arise, My Beautiful One, and Walk by Yourself*

In contrast to the legal position of women as movable property, the Song of Songs knows of love unbound. The lover calls the beloved to arise and walk by herself (2, 10 and 2, 13), to come away. The combination of words here is similar to the one used in Abraham's story when he is called to separate from his origin and go into the land that God will show him (Gen. 12, 1) and when he is called to take his only son Isaac and walk by himself to the land of Morija (Gen. 22, 2) where he is asked to sacrifice his only son. Abraham is called to separate from the world of the fathers but also to separate from the world of the sons on which the promise lies. The blessing over the good creation which goes through the generations seems to be utterly in question here. Yet, it is exactly in this uncertainty that the blessing continues.<sup>11</sup>

In the song of songs, it is the blessing over the moment of love which calls the woman, the rose of Sharon Shulanit to arise and walk

10. B. Wielenga: *Revelation to John. A Brief Commentary*, (TTS Publication, 1989) p. 47.

11. I am drawing here on an article by Klara Butting and Gerard Minnaard: *In the Footsteps of Abraham and Sara* (German) in: *Texte und Kontexte* Nr. 55, 15th year 3/92.

by herself. The blessed moment is expressed in the repeated plea: "Stir not up nor awaken love until it please". Love is not a question of conjugal rights and violence is unthinkable. Yet, this love unbound has to break its path in a society full of walls and fences and guardians of the respected order of society.

The woman hears the call of her lover:

"The voice of my beloved!  
Behold, he comes,  
leaping upon the mountains,  
bounding over the hills.  
My beloved is like a gazelle  
or a young stag  
Behold, there he stands  
behind our wall,  
gazing in at the windows,  
looking through the lattice.  
My beloved speaks and says to me:  
Arise, my love, my fair one  
and walk by yourself  
for lo, the winter is past  
the rain is over and gone  
The flowers appear on the earth  
the time of singing has come  
and the voice of the turtle dove  
is heard in our land  
The fig tree puts forth its fig  
and the vines are in blossom  
they give forth fragrance,  
Arise, my love, my fair one  
and walk by yourself  
O my love, in the clefts of the rock,  
in the cover of the cliff,  
let me see your face  
let me hear your voice  
for your voice is sweet  
and your face is comely" (Song of Solomon 2, 8-14).

Here we do not only face the abundance of nature in the blessed moment of love but also the wells, the fences behind which the woman

is kept. Her brothers are angry with her. They made her a keeper of the vineyard but blame her for not keeping her own vineyard (1,6). The brothers are trying to make the sisters body a fortress (8, 8-9) but she became like one who brings peace (v. 10) and she asserts: My vineyard, my very own is for myself ((8, 12).

The woman seeks for her beloved (3, 1-4). She roams through the streets and squares but she is traced by the watchman. She tries to follow the call of the beloved but she is found by the watchman and beaten up (5,2-7). The watchmen are not guarding the city from the walls against the external enemy but they protect the powers of patriarchy from the woman which subverts them. Protection is in the house of the mother (3.4) where she can love her beloved. The world of the fathers and the world of the sons which both Abraham is called to leave has an alternative in the world of the mothers who love in freedom and continue the blessing over the good creation in their own unorthodox ways. There is no father in the song of songs. The lover himself calls his beloved to walk by herself in freedom towards the promised land.

Obviously, society does not allow this kind of love to be lived. Yet the fragmented reality of this love asserts itself in blessed moments which make the patriarchal safeguards crumble. If the woman is no longer property, the property relations at large and the appropriation of nature for gain are in question as well. Nature blossoms in the blessed moment of love.

At the same time, this love is not at our disposal. We are reminded of Lord Krishna who calls to the dance, plays his flute in lilting tunes, loves, enchants and remains forever elusive. This, too, is part of the separation from the world of the fathers and of the sons. But Krishna is not only the lover but also the playful child. Radha who loves him is also like an elder sister to him. Patriarchy is lived down here but she too has to walk by her own in freedom, separation, longing and fulfillment. We find something of this in the staying power of poor women who have to fend for themselves but still love abundantly.

The watchman and the brothers of the woman are familiar figures in our daily lives. Women are constantly suspected, beaten and subjugated. This physical subjugation is at the root of all structures of slavery. At

the same time the link with the liberation of the poor and of nature itself is not easily made. The promise that justice and peace will kiss each other if truthfulness and loyalty are sustained (Psalm 85) has implications for the reorganisation of society. The revolt of the women who safeguard the continued blessing over the good creation cannot stand alone.

### 3. *The Earth is the Lord's:*

The perception that the Earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof also implies "the world and those who dwell therein" (Ps. 24, 1). This is what was earlier expressed in the image of the World as the Body of God. It is not a question of the world being God's property but the world and those who dwell there in being the material expression of the spirit. It is in this light that neither the earth nor human beings can be owned or possessed. Women, children, slaves, cannot be anyone's property nor can the earth or the sea be.

The Thora had a deep perception of this reality. While society was all the time deviating from this rule of freedom, the constant reminders were inbuilt in the observances of society. This is particularly clear in the Deuteronomic law during the Josian reform. The Sabbath, the seventh day, was given to all, human beings, including women, children and slaves, the cattle and the earth itself as a day of rest (Deut. 5, 14-15). This was to remember the Exodus from slavery. Every seventh year was proscribed as a year of Sabbath, of release of debts and of slaves (Deut. 15). In a society where indebtedness is chronic and leads to bondage, this is a radical levelling of differences. The law on the tithes (Deut. 14, 22-29) reorganise the tax system and gives relief to sojourners, widows and orphans, the weakest members of society. The peasants are granted two thirds relief from the title. Slaves are released after six years and if they escape earlier, have a right to assylum.

The most far reaching step is the redistribution of the land every fifty years in the institution of the Jubilee year (Lev. 25). Not only is the land parcelled out equally to everyone returning to their family and inheritance and land concentration is completely undone, but the land is also left fallow. It appears as if the class society

which had developed was once again radically critiqued by a tribal ethos. The vulnerable spirit of freedom of the desert after the Exodus and the vulnerable spirit of freedom of decentralised small scale agriculture, enough for everyone's subsistence, but opposed to accumulation, picture the modest utopia of wielding swords into plough shares, giving everyone his house and his fig tree to rest under and the time to remember God's rest on the seventh day contemplating the good creation. It is not clear whether the Jubilee year has ever been implemented, though texts like Nehemiah 5 witness to certain drastic attempts at redistribution. Whatever the case may be, the point is that what is required is not only the vision of a radical critique of property rights over resources but also organisational attempts to abolish debts and slavery and to work towards a social structure in which the spirit of Love and Freedom can permeate all human relationships and the relationship with nature as well.

It is obvious that this vision is diametrically opposed to the present set of policies which privatises and commercialises the land, the sea, the rivers and even the drinking water. The cycle of indebtedness imposed by World Bank Loans which brands social expenditure as wasteful, drives land prices up, enhances individual indebtedness and bondage, impoverishes people by inflation, dismantles the distribution system, works towards fragmentation of society and destruction of nature at the same time. The sea gets polluted and depleted of fish, the traditional skills get destroyed, the land is sold at exorbitant prices, people are deprived of shelter and livelihood. Environmental protection gets divorced from people's survival rights and is played out against local communities.

It is this violent fragmentation which breeds competition, recklessness and violence. In the face of this fragmentation communal ideology projects a fictitious kind of unity which pits religious minorities against each other in a confrontation which may end in some kind of civil war. This is the kind of situation in which local communities disintegrate and women bear the brunt of destruction. The very production of life and day to day survival are in question. In the face of the combination of destructive New Economic Policies and impending communal warfare, a situation where ecological questions can hardly be raised any more, the awakening of a new spirituality is imperative.

Such spirituality needs to be integrated in the building of new communities which arise out of the struggles to reorganise society through social movements.

#### 4. *Spirituality and the New Community*

If we have to reflect on what sustains traditional communities and new communities, spirituality is a crucial factor. The continuity lies in perceptions as those expressed in Hebrews 10 and 11, the confession of hope without wavering, stirring one another to love and good works. Faith is the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen. The spirituality of Hebrew 11 is very much related to the exodus, the constant move from the unseen to that which is being made visible. However, Hebrew 11, 3 relates this faith also to the creation itself. It is here where we find the connection between the blessing over the good creation and the spirituality of the exodus. This connection is also visible in the vision of the New Covenant which is promised in Jer. 31. This is consistent with the very image of the covenant itself which is always the covenant with Noah which relates to the continuity of the blessing over the good creation and the covenant with Moses and the people of Israel which relates to the community of the Exodus. Jer. 31 draws this connection in the rich imagery of V. 15-22, where the return from the second exile is led by women and the "new thing on Earth" is that "a woman protects a man"<sup>12</sup>. Under the new conditions, the weary soul will be replenished, destruction will be ended, sleep will be pleasant. The seed of man and the seed of beast will be sown. Significantly, the children will not suffer for their fathers' sins. Every man will die for his own sin and who eats sour grapes, their teeth will be set on edge. This is a most stunning promise in our age of potential nuclear holocaust and bio-technological intervention, where generations are made to pay for the sins of their forefathers for tens of thousands of years. There is profound ecological meaning in this vision. Patriarchal images of militancy become redundant but the woman who protects man does so with determination, without wavering. The new community grows like a seed. This is close to the vision of Mk. 4, where we find the scattering

12. I have worked this out in more detail in my article "On Doing Feminist Theology in South Asia" in *Kristu Jyoti Journal* Vol. 6, No.2, June 1990, pp. 26-65.

of the seed, the sheep, the production of life by the Earth herself, but also the determination of intervention in the harvest.

A similar vision is found in Psalm 85 where steadfast love and faithfulness meet, justice and peace kiss each other and the land will increase its yield. Peace and equity are crucial both for the survival of nature herself. However, to work towards such a vision requires intense power struggles. Traditional communities have often employed spirituality to keep people in place and to enforce social controls. At the same time they have provided sustenance. In the building of new communities, the task is even more complex. There is an unavoidable struggle going on with entrenched vested interests in society at large. These powers, while they are adversaries, cannot just be externalised and fought. The enemy is also within. If we fight to break such powers with utter determination, we may also come to be shaped in their image unwillingly in this process. This is the reason why so many movements break up and get fragmented in internal power struggles. At the same time, the tackling and handling of powers can also not be shunned or avoided.

Side by side, there is also a time dimension involved in the building of communities which reflects the dialectics between the blessing over the good creation and the exodus. The building of communities and organisations is an arduous and time consuming process which requires enormous toil. There are periods of lull and of restrained activity and there are peak situations of maximum mobilisation and organisational strain. Inbetween there are periods in which consolidation and new attempts to forge ahead can be evolved. There is a combination between great speed and maximum strain with revolutionary patience and persistence. The contradiction between the seed which dies and grows and the disruption of the exodus needs to be constantly dealt with. This is not only the dialectic between agriculture and migration, natural cycles and nomadic existence which also underly the problems of the fisherfolk and the slum dwellers whose situation has been analysed above. It is also the dialectic of any community building where sowing, gestation and growth alternate with disruption, break-ups, new explorations, periods in the desert and reaching out to the promised land.

The tension between community building and power struggle on the one hand and the time dimension of agricultural cycles and determined



intervention in the revolutionary kairos on the other is reflected in the Pauline letters as well. The ambiguity of the situation is enormous. The coming of the end of time seems to be at hand, the powers that are seen in this light, but they are still very powerful. The new community is negotiating between society as it is and the dismantling of all social relationships as they have been. At the same time a new faith community also needs to be built and sustained on a day to day level.

The crucial vent of intervention has been the cross itself. In Colossians Paul talks of the reconciliation of all things on earth and in heaven, peace, by the blood of his cross (col. 1, 20). It is through the cross that the principalities and powers have been disarmed and made a public example (Col. 2, 15). We have an immediate understanding of this imagery if we reflect on the death of the martyrs who have been liquidated in the struggle for justice and wholeness. The martyrs column of the CMSS in Dalli Rajhara in Madhya Pradesh stands as a sign to commemorate this cloud of witnesses who have lived the faith in things not seen and striven to fulfil the promise, to sow in patience and to allow the new community to grow.<sup>13</sup>

We are also reminded of the death of Rajani Rajasingham who took on all the principalities and powers in Sri Lanka by being the driving force to document human rights violations not only of the IPKF and the Sri Lankan army but of the militants as well. When she paid with her life for this, the caption on the poster which commemorated her reads: "You have not been buried, you have been sown".

Patience, forbearing, compassion, repentance, forgiveness, love, peace and thankfulness are part of this vision of the new life. While texts like Col. 3, 12-17 are often used for sermons during wedding services, they speak in fact strongly in the context of building of organisations. Revolutionary urgency seems to rule out compassion, kindness and meekness. The rigours of daily life seem to become unbearable. The strain to dislodge the powers that seems to rule out

13. The CMSS in one of the most important independent Trade Union in our country. After many workers were martyred in earlier struggles, their leader Shankar Guha Nyogi was murdered on 2nd Oct. 1991. On 6th July 1992, six more workers were liquidated during a rail roko. Yet, the movement has been one of the most impressive examples of revolutionary spirituality and organisational capacity.

peace and harmony. But the new cannot grow in strife. The new community also needs to rest and give thanks. It has to teach and admonish one another in wisdom, it has to repent and forgive. It has to celebrate life. The crucial binding factor is love. Love needs to be "put on" and bind everything together in perfect harmony.

5. *The World as the Body of God:*

The metaphor of the World as the Body of God has been used in an underlying way throughout this article. The spirit is housed in matter. Matter is there in animated and non-animated form in nature. But the spirit permeates all of it. Matter for the spirit to be housed is also found in the human community, in the physical existence of human beings, in the safeguarding of life on earth in organised ways.

Sally McFague <sup>14</sup> has evolved her theology in a nuclear age, around the image of the World as the Body of God, God as Mother, God as Lover and God as friend. It is not possible here to go into these metaphors in depth. However, in the light of the situation which has been reflected upon, the images take on a richer life. We have come to see the world in the dialectic between organisation of society and human community and nature as a web of life which need to sustain and be sustained by a loving community. The body is the whole, human beings cannot subjugate nature but human community also cannot be subsumed under nature. There is a constant struggle going on how to sustain a balance.

Motherhood, as we have seen, is connected with production of life and subsistence production, the labour of women and workers in the unorganised sector of society at large. The point is that motherhood cannot be kept in subjugation by patriarchy. It is the sexual division of labour between patriarchal science and technology and political and economic structures on the one hand and the privatised pursuits of mothering and nurturing on the other which are at the root of ongoing ecological destruction. If we recognise God as Mother, then motherhood and nurture must also be the guiding principle for reorganisation of economic and political structures. Motherhood, the continued

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14. Sally McFague: *Models of God. Theology for an Ecological Nuclear Age* (Fortress Press, 1986).

blessing over the good creation, goes its own unorthodox ways as we have seen. It is not tied to the confines of patriarchal society, it will be unbound only if the shackles are broken.

It has been pointed out that God is not mentioned in the song of songs. This means that God as lover is present in love unbound itself. Obviously, this is not to be confused with liberal, individualistic concepts of "free love" or "free sex". Love unbound does not shun responsibility, it brings forth chesed and emet, loyalty and truthfulness, not in the form of patriarchal norms but in the form of joyfulness, praise and thanksgiving which translates itself into a lasting concern for the sustenance of life. Love unbound frees us into love as a way of life.

This way of life which needs to become an organisational principle is expressed in the image of God as friend. Friendship is not tied to blood relationships. It preserves the spark of love in loyalty and truthfulness. It transcends the sacred moment of fulfilment in love and surmounts the barriers of caste, family, political affiliation, and cultural identity. It sustains life in the most enduring ways.

In Emmaus, the risen Christ met his disciples as a friend. He broke the bread for them and their eyes were opened and they were afraid because they remembered the hardship of the persecution and the cross. When he enters their fearful community, he asks for something to eat. They share fish with him which reminds us of the bread and the fishes in the feeding of the 5000, the great meal of sharing. It is the promise of presence as friend which holds the ecological vision of an economy of sharing in which life on earth can be sustained in solidarity. The image of this promise lives daily in the communities of sharing which we build. It is this work of community building in different organisations which sustains our vision and protects life itself.