

WOMAN, INDIAN, CHRISTIAN: MULTIPLE IDENTITIES, MULTIPLE PROBLEMS

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1 INTRODUCTION

At the turn of the millenium, the situation of the majority of women in India is far from cheering. The Gender-related Development Index (GDI) devised by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) - imperfect as it may be - provides a glimpse of a grim scenario. In the UNDP's Human Development Report 1998¹ India's GDI rank is 128 (out of 163 countries). In other words, the country's record in enabling its female citizens to enjoy the benefits of human development is worse than that of 127 other nations of the world. Only four Asian countries rank below it: Cambodia, Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan - in that order. Apart from Haiti, the other nations bringing up the rear are all located in Africa.

The ratio of women to men in a country (commonly known as the sex ratio) is widely accepted as a good indicator of the value placed on women by that society. Thanks to the better chances of survival that the female of the species is biologically endowed with, women outnumber men in most countries of the world. India is one of the rare exceptions. According to the Census of India 1991, the country's sex ratio is an abysmal 927:1000². Of the women who survive, the majority do not get a chance to develop to their full potential. Nearly two-thirds of Indian women is illiterate; the female

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¹ United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *Human Development report 1998*, Oxford University press, 1998.

² *Census of India 1991*, Series 1 India: Paper 1 of 1995, "Religion", xii (cited in John C.B. Webster et al., *From Role to Identity: Dalit Christian Women in Transition*, Delhi: ISPCK, *Contextual Theological Education Series 13*, 1977).

adult literacy rate (37%), is just a little over half the male rate³. Approximately 88% of pregnant women in the age group 15-49 suffer from anaemia⁴. The maternal mortality rate continues to be high at 570 (per 100,000 live births). Although the rate of female economic activity is 46% (of the male rate) and women's share of the adult labour force is 31%, their share of earned income is only 25.4%, about 50 percentage points below that of men.

2 BROAD ASSUMPTIONS

It is often assumed, by Christians and non-Christians, that the situation of Christian women in India is somewhat better than that of their compatriots. The prominent Christian presence in the fields of education and healthcare in India probably suggests that Christians - the female and poorer sections of the community included - have assured access to these services and the benefits thereof. The visible participation of Christian women in the urban white and pink collar work force, including the professions, possibly reinforces the general impression that they are "forward" compared to fellow women from more "backward" communities.

There is little data to back up these generalized assumptions. One of the few available bits of information relating to status is the religion-wise break-up of the sex ratio. The 1991 Census revealed that the sex ratio among Christians is 994:1000 - far better than the national average of 927 women to 1000 men⁵. Christians apparently have the most favourable sex ratio of all religious communities. This is certainly significant. But not only can macro-statistics be misleading but demographic data do not always tell the whole story. Unfortunately, there is little else to go on at present. As the authors of *From Role to Identity: Dalit Christian Women in Transition*⁶ point out, "Although she has been much written about, there is actually very little systematic empirical research on the Christian woman in

³ *Human Development Report 1998*, UNDP, OUP, 1998.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Census of India 1991*, *op.cit.*

⁶ John C.B. Webster, et al. (eds.), *From Role to Identity*.

India." According to Webster et al., the scanty information currently available has emerged mainly from survey research, while the rest is based on studies of women's status and roles in the life and structures of the Church.

They quote, for instance, a survey of 307 women in urban and rural Protestant congregations in Delhi, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh, conducted in the mid-1980s⁷. This apparently indicated that boys and girls in urban, middle class, Christian households are, with rare exceptions, given equal status in the family with regard to education, pocket money, food, clothes, housework and, particularly in Delhi, career choices. According to researchers, "Christians see with their own eyes that Christian girls can earn for themselves and even support their parents just as well as their boys and this makes them interested in their development." Webster et al. also cite the landmark 1974 Report of the Committee on Towards Equality..⁸. In the national survey on which the report was based, Christians ranked highest in the "modern" category in terms of their cumulative responses to questions about marriage. This finding is attributed mainly to the fact that few Christians, if any, observe any form of purdah in India. Although a high proportion of Christians provided "modern" responses to survey questions on other indicators - such as sharing in family decision-making - it was not significantly greater than the proportion of people from other communities responding in a similar vein. In fact, on two indicators the proportion of Christians giving "modern" responses was actually the lowest; these related to non-discriminatory grounds for divorce and women's right to retain control over their dowry and possessions after marriage. On the other hand, the Committee found that the Christian and Buddhist communities had the largest proportion of women earning independent incomes.

"Taken together," Webster et al. surmise, "these indicators

⁷ Jane R. Caleb, *Women in the CNI Diocese of Delhi: A Survey 1985-1986*, Delhi: ISPCK, 1987, cited in John C.B. Webster et al, *From Role to Identity*.

⁸ Government of India, *Towards Equality: Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India*, New Delhi: 1974.

suggest that a woman is more of a person in her own right and her individuality is more respected within the Christian tradition than within the dominant tradition." About 20% of the women in the Delhi survey sample reported conflict in the home over drinking, drugs and/or housework. Still most of them were content with their status" because Christians give daughters and sons equal status and opportunities." In the words of one survey respondent, "I feel good within to be a Christian, specially when I see other women, Hindu, Muslim, etc."⁹

3 MODEL MINORITY?

Christians in India tend to be rather smug about being a kind of "model minority" which has made and continues to make valuable contributions to the nation (witness the large number of Christian educational, healthcare and other social service institutions from which all communities are believed to benefit) and demands little in return (the recent, ongoing struggle for the extension of official affirmative action in the form of "reservations" to Christian Dalits is perhaps seen as an exception to the rule). The evident complacency within the community about the situation of Indian Christian women probably stems from this generally self-satisfied attitude. If any disaffection has been demonstrated by Christian women over the years, it is mainly in the context of their role and status within the Church - especially now that the coordinated effort by some groups to simplify, streamline and eliminate gender-based discrimination in legal provisions for divorce among Christians seems to have reached an impasse. According to Webster et al.: "Although in the national survey a higher percentage of Christians than of others supported a modern view of women's participation in politics, Christian views about women's roles in the Indian churches is more traditional."

Women attend church services in large numbers and have of late begun to play a more active and public role than before in various aspects of worship, at least in some churches. However, they continue to be under-represented, if represented at all, in the decision-making bodies of most churches, from the local to the

⁹ Jane R. Caleb, *op.cit.*

national level. As Webster et al. point out, "Only in the 1980s, after considerable struggle, were women ordained as clergy in the larger Protestant Churches, a status still denied them in the Roman Catholic Church" - and, indeed, in the Orthodox Church. Even since then, they add, only a few have actually been ordained.

The Ecumenical Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women (1988-98) initiated by the World Council of Churches seems to have had only a marginal impact on the situation of women in Indian churches. A report on a national consultation held in March 1998 to review and evaluate efforts to conscientize Indian Churches to women's issues during the decade reveals that the 40 women representing nine Churches who participated in the exercise "were not entirely satisfied with the functioning in the Churches during the ten-year period. The feeling uppermost was that in India the decade has remained with few women leaders of the Church"

The issue of women's role and status within the Church has been and presumably will be widely debated - at least among Christian women (some suggest that the Ecumenical Decade turned out to be one of women in solidarity with other women rather than of Churches in solidarity with women!). But, going by past trends, some of the broader social issues relating to Indian women who happen to be Christian are likely to receive less attention - although, as Webster et al. point out, "There is a lot to be learned about the Christian woman in India." Fortunately, there are signs that the information gap is slowly being filled.

I hope to draw on some of these sources of information - amongst the few to which I have had access - to illustrate my thesis that the complacency with which many Christians tend to view the situation of women in the community may be a trifle misplaced. I propose to first highlight the obviously different but equally important issues confronting women in Christian communities situated at opposite ends of the spectrum in terms of socio-economic

privilege: Dalit Christians¹⁰ and Syrian Christians¹¹. I then plan to touch upon the issue of violence against women, about which Christian women -- across the various social, economic and cultural divides that separate them - seem to be increasingly concerned.

4 CHRISTIAN DALITS

Recent research by Godwin Shiri, reported in the book *The Plight of Christian Dalits - A South Indian Case Study*¹², provides a clear and distressing picture of the situation of women in Christian Dalit communities. The study was conducted in two districts in the states of Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh in southern India, but its findings are probably not completely irrelevant to other parts of the country. As Shiri puts it, "It is generally observed that the women among Dalits are the dalit among Dalits. Our study has amply proved this to be a fact. While Christian Dalit men and women both suffer under caste oppression, the women are victims of an added oppression, namely, gender discrimination, under which they suffer not only in society at large but also within their own community. "Take, for instance, the sex ratio, which the study found to be 968:1000 within the sample communities. This is clearly better than the national average (927:1000) and the national average among all

¹⁰ "Dalit" (literally "downtrodden") is the politically correct term for the persons and communities originally placed outside and beneath the traditional four-tier Indian/Hindu caste system. Once known as "untouchables", they were christened "Harijans" (literally "Children of God") by Mahatma Gandhi and later officially designated as "Scheduled Castes" by the Indian Government. A large number of them converted to Christianity under the influence of Christian missionaries; it is estimated that 65-70% of Indian Christians belong to these communities.

¹¹ The "Syrian Christians" of Kerala State are believed to be one of the oldest Christian communities in the world, tracing their origins to the founding of a Church in this south-western coastal State by St. Thomas, the Apostle, in 52 CE. They base their claim of high social standing on the legend that many of St. Thomas' converts belonged to high caste communities. As educated entrepreneurs, professionals and/or landed gentry, most Syrian Christians are relatively well-off.

¹² Godwin Shiri, *The Plight of Christian Dalits - A South Indian Case Study*, Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 1997.

Dalits (922:1000)¹³ but significantly worse than the Christian average (994:1000). There is considerable gender disparity in education, too. While 65% of the male respondents were found to be illiterate, illiteracy among the surveyed women was even higher at 87% (both far higher than the national average of 35.9 and 60.8% respectively). Only 7% of women had even primary level education (classes one to three), compared to 22% of men; just 3% of women had higher primary education (classes four to seven), compared to 7% of men.

Perceptions within the community about the reasons for the particularly low rate of literacy among Christian Dalit women are revealing. While poverty was cited as the primary reason by 40% of the respondents, Shiri points out that "it is clear that female children are the main victims of the financial stresses and strains of the family." Apart from this, the reasons cited by almost as many respondents (39%) reflect obvious gender-based biases: "Girls need not be educated," "girls should work at home," "if girls are educated the dowry problem arises," "we are not interested in girls' education," and so on. According to Shiri, many responses conveyed "the community's general disinterest in the education of women" despite the fact that "the majority of Christian Dalits are well aware of the value of education and the changes it can bring in their living conditions."

The study also found Christian Dalit women's health status to be poorer than that of male members of the community. For instance, while the reported number of diseases among men in the respondents' households was eleven, among women it was eighteen. Many of the diseases from which the respondents suffered had a clear association with malnutrition. According to Shiri, "A number of diseases from which women suffer are the result of child bearing in a highly malnourished state coupled with their hard living conditions." Premature matrimony and reproduction probably worsen the health-problems of women in the community.

¹³ Mary John with K. Lalitha, *Background Report on Gender Issues in India*, 'Briefings on Development and Gender' (BRIDGE), University of Sussex, UK: Institute of Development Studies, 1995.

The study discovered large-scale marriages involving under-age brides with the surveyed communities. This is particularly shocking in view of the fact that Christian weddings are necessarily conducted by clerics. According to Shiri, "The Church has been trying to discourage such marriages, but by and large its efforts in this regard has seen little success." The fact that "an overwhelming majority of Christian Dalit parents consider that their daughters should be given away in marriage as soon as they attain puberty" is clearly influenced by the oppressive economic and social conditions in which most Dalits, including Christians live. The problem is possibly compounded by the widespread illiteracy that plagues the community, especially the female half of it, as well as the deep-rooted gender-based discrimination that prevails in virtually all Indian communities, Christian Dalits included. There is, however, one compelling caste-specific reason why Dalits, including the Christians among them, tend to rush their girls prematurely into marriage: fear of sexual harassment and abuse by upper caste men.

The study revealed a significantly higher number of widows in the surveyed communities. While only 6% of the male respondents were reported to be widowers, 40% of the female respondents said they were widows. Most of them were middle-aged (43% below 40 years and 82% below 50 years). Yet, says Shiri: "While the remarriage of widowers is a common practice in the Christian Dalit community, as in other communities, cases of remarriage of widows were found to be very rare." The research also uncovered the fact that about a dozen Christian Dalit girls from the surveyed communities had been dedicated to goddesses like Huligamma and Yellamma and initiated into the "Basavi" or "Devadai" system which has, over the years, degenerated into a form of forced prostitution.

According to Shiri: "It appears that the ideology of male-superiority is a less admitted though more practised reality within the Christian Dalit community." Apart from the problems outlined above, he points out, the problem of extensive and excessive cases of cruelty to women, including wife-beating. He also highlights the slow but steady intrusion of the insidious dowry system, once practised only by the higher castes, into these poor communities.

According to him, the study's findings clearly indicate the existence of gender-based discrimination and oppression within the Christian Dalit community.

Clearly, as Webster et al. point out, the outward circumstances of the lives of Christian Dalit women are "no better than those of their Hindu sisters." They live side by side in the same villages and urban slums. Only a small percentage of both Christian and Hindu Dalit women receive an education and have work which enables them to live above the poverty line, and in even fewer cases, to enter the middle class. The only difference seems to be that Christian Dalits do not have access to the special legal protection and benefits that the State grants to fellow Dalits who remained Hindu. In view of the fact that approximately two-thirds of the Christian community in India comprise Christian Dalits (who presumably entered the fold in the hope of salvation from the tyranny of casteism), the situation of this disadvantaged majority within the "model minority", and the special discrimination and deprivation suffered by Christian Dalit women, call for urgent attention and action from both Church and laity.

5 SYRIAN CHRISTIANS

The strange situation of the Syrian Christian women of Kerala came to public notice only in the mid-1980s, when Mary Roy (joined by Elikutty and Mariakutty) successfully challenged the validity of the Travancore Christian Succession Act of 1916, in the Supreme Court of India. Until then it was more or less taken for granted that women in Kerala, including those who belonged to the educated and relatively prosperous Syrian Christian community, enjoyed a higher status than most of their compatriots elsewhere.

This assumption was presumably based primarily on Kerala's reputation as a progressive State, thanks to its extraordinary record in human development (better than the national average as well as those of individual States), favourable demographic data (including sex ratio, literacy/education rates and health indicators) and the matrilineal traditions in some communities in the State. In addition, as B. P. Pflug points out in her 1993 research paper, *Gender, the Law*

and Property Rights: A Case Study of the Syrian Christian Community of Kerala¹⁴, some Syrian Christian women have played prominent roles at the local, national and international levels: "In the 1940s Justice Anna Chandy became the first woman High Court Judge in the British Commonwealth; Leela George Koshy was the first woman engineer of India; and Dr. Poonen Lukose was the first Surgeon-General of the British Commonwealth. Syrian Christian women can also be found all over the world as teachers, nurses and doctors".

Nevertheless, the strongly patriarchal and patrilineal character of the Syrian Christian community was more than evident in the 1916 Act. Although that law technically ceased to exist with the passing of the Indian Succession Act of 1925 – applicable to all Christians of the Country¹⁵ – it continued to be applied in Kerala. Under the Act, if a man died intestate (without making a will) all his property was to be divided among his sons. His widow or mother could claim a maintenance allowance and a "life interest" in the property, terminable at death or re-marriage; they did not inherit any part of the property and, with no absolute right of ownership, they could neither sell any portion of the property nor will it away. Daughters could claim only a quarter of a son's share, or Rs. 5000,- whichever is less. Those who had already received stridhana (dowry) had no right to even such a paltry inheritance. (The fact that the dowry system is still practiced by Syrian Christians, with the amounts having risen to astronomical heights in recent years – despite girls' education and employability/employment – is another indication of the social status of women in the community).

¹⁴ B. P. Pflug, *Gender, the Law and property Rights: A Case Study of the Syrian Christian Community in Kerala*, (unpublished M.A. dissertation submitted to the School of Development Studies, University of East Anglia, U.K.), 1993.

¹⁵ This is one of the "Personal Laws" (related to matters of marriage, divorce, inheritance, etc.) applicable to various religious communities in India (Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Parsi, etc.), despite the existence of optional secular laws, which are relatively more gender-just. 'Minority leaders' have hitherto resisted any move towards a Uniform Civil Code. Minority women's efforts to at least reform Personal Laws in the interest of gender justice have so far been less than successful and the State claims to be reluctant to 'interfere' in 'matters of faith' (although the so-called Christian Personal Laws have little basis in religion).

The Supreme Court struck down the 1916 Act (on technical rather than gender justice grounds) in 1986 with retrospective effect. This not only reversed seventy years of social practice and gave Syrian Christian women claim over paternal property, but it also gave them the right to intervene in land transactions entered into from 1951 onwards. The provision for retrospective claims served to erode the economic credibility of Syrian Christian men, forcing them to include female members of their family in all land deals.

It is not surprising that the case and its outcome caused heartburn and uproar within the community's patriarchal order, including, unfortunately, the Churches to which members of the community belong (cutting across denominations). Opponents cited interference with 'tradition', fragmentation of property, erosion of the community's economic prosperity and stability, and so on, to denounce the court's verdict. It was suggested that hordes of women would rush to deprive their brothers of their rightful inheritance and create legal chaos by calling old land transactions into question. Community and Church leaders are said to have actively encouraged men to write wills to avoid including female members of the family in the division of property. The reaction of the patriarchs was predictable, if outrageous. However, what is far more interesting and significant is the reaction of Syrian Christian women themselves. As Pflug observes:

Syrian Christian women seemed to be too inhibited to wage a war that began on their doorstep and affected the family and social structure they lived in. They appeared to have been cowed down by the campaign unleashed by sections of the Church and the conservative Christian gentry...

Hardly any women took advantage of the court's verdict to claim their share of paternal property. Mary Roy herself received little support from the women of her own community. According to her, the highest degree of lethargy and indifference was shown by women from affluent backgrounds, where marriage is seen as a tie-up of economic interests between two well-to-do families. Women belonging to this socio-economic strata would, it seemed, rather

conform to the pattern and blend with male-dictated norms (including arranged marriages with large dowries) than rebel against them.

Some women's organizations, including a few Kerala-based and Christian ones, supported Mary Roy's petition, passed resolutions demanding the implementation of the Supreme Court's decision, urged Christian women to register their names in land revenue offices, called on parents to write wills granting equal property rights to sons and daughters and requested Churches to set up legal aid centres to assist women to claim their legitimate share in property. According to Pflug, a notable exception was the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) in Kottayam (the stronghold of the Syrian Christian community). As Mary Roy, who lives and runs a prestigious school in Kottayam, has pointed out on various occasions, the local YWCA stayed silent during her campaign, never extending any support to her. In any case, says Pflug, a few months later, even many "women who voiced their support of the judgement were ready to sign docilely on the dotted line, relinquishing their defiance along with their birth-right."

According to Pflug, one reason for this capitulation could be that "Christian women's organizations are subordinated to the clergy and headed by Bishops." As an open letter to all Churches in Kerala from the Women's Forum for Social Action (WOFSA) pointed out, "neither priest nor bishop came to the support of the Christian women who found themselves ejected from parental homes by brothers who said their share did not exceed Rs. 5000." But, more importantly, as Pflug puts it, "this backtracking into traditionalism on the part of (Syrian) Christian women clashes violently with the liberal facade of the community, with its high level of literacy and its unique social contributions, and can only be explained as the effect of entrenched male domination."

My own conversations with adolescent girls and the few women in journalism in Kerala (for a series of articles and a book respectively) confirm my perception that positive demographic data and favourable social indicators neither tell the whole story of women's position nor automatically lead to women's empowerment.

In addition, as a Syrian Christian myself, I am well aware of the extreme social conservatism of the community, especially within Kerala and in relation to women, marriage and related matters, which is at variance with the educational achievements, entrepreneurial character, professional success and, indeed, cosmopolitanism evident among many of its members (including women), particularly those who live or travel outside the home State. In the context of the overall situation of Indian women and even of Christian women in India, Syrian Christian women are, no doubt, relatively privileged. However, material well being is not always matched by social, economic, political, cultural, psycho-logical or ever spiritual empowerment.

6 VIOLENCE

Lest the above discussion on the situation of women in the Christian Dalit and Syrian Christian communities suggest that all is well with women in other Christian communities, I would like to briefly highlight one problem which seems to cut across religions, communities and denominations: violence against women, including domestic violence. As Dr. A.U. Joshua points out in her Article “V” for Violence” in *Stree*¹⁶: “Sadly, violence against women is taking place even within the safe confines of the Church. This had been unrecognized and un-reported in the past till recently some women plucking up courage started speaking about it and exposing it. Violence is something which the Church will have to take a serious note of.”

According to Corinne Scott, in her paper “The Context for Feminist Theologizing: Violence against Women/Women against Violence”:

Violence is beginning to be spoken of more openly in Christian women’s circles and conferences in India and in many other parts of the world, as testified to by women in gatherings related to the World Council of Churches’ Ecumenical Decade of

¹⁶ Dr. Mrs. A.U. Joshua, “V” for Violence”, *Stree* [Newsletter of the All India Council of christian Women], I.3, October (1996).

Churches in Solidarity with Women. The mid-decade team members who visited with Churches 'noted with sadness and anger that violence is an experience that binds women together across every region and tradition'¹⁷.

Scott points out that in recent women's programmes under the auspices of various Christian organizations in India: "Women have cried out for recognition by the Church and its (male) leaders of the extent and seriousness of violence against women, asking the Church to be in solidarity with women on this issue." Yet, she suggests: "The issue of violence against women has not been recognized and seriously addressed by any official general Church body in India." She acknowledges that "there is a gradual (though reluctant) recognition among some pastors and Church leaders of increasing incidence of domestic violence in Christian families, under the stress of changing roles and demands of society." But she says: "The Church as a whole continues to deny the overwhelming evidence of the growing incidence of violence against women in a variety of ways, by minimizing, trivializing, privatizing, invisibilizing, or externalizing it."

Some Christian women's groups have responded supportively to individual women in situations of domestic violence, and Church-sponsored counselling services are now more readily available at least in some urban centres. Some Catholic and Protestant organizations have, also set up a few shelters for abused women, which provide short-term support and time for defusing violence. But, as Scott points out, while these are commendable efforts, equally vital and urgent is the need for an analysis of "the wider and deeper linkages of violence against women with the unequal power relations and unequal structures of family and society, supported by religion." She suggests that such an analysis must necessarily involve a re-examination of Christian theology and Biblical interpretation to avoid the reinforcement, through religion, of gender-

¹⁷ Corinne Scott, "The Context for Feminist Theologizing: Violence against Women/Women against Violence", revised version of paper presented at the *Gurukul Summer Institute*, Bangalore, 1998 on "Feminist Theology: Perspectives and Praxis".

based discrimination and oppression. It is surely important to ensure that the Christian ministry affirms women as full human beings and supports their empowerment.

Scott quotes from the recommendations emerging from the mid-decade team visits to Churches during the Ecumenical Decade:

We call on Churches to name and denounce all the various forms of violence, culturally sanctioned or not, against women inside and outside the Church. We call on Church leaders to declare together that violence against women is a sin. We urge them to take the side of the victim instead of sheltering the aggressor, to offer pastoral counselling that targets a concrete improvement in the victim's life situation instead of simply preaching patience, silence and submission. Often, violence against women finds theological justification in the teachings of the Church. We call on the Church, with the full participation of women theologians, to deconstruct and reconstruct such basic Biblical and doctrinal teachings so as to usher in liberational paradigms and perspectives...

Christians in India are currently anxious and agitated about the recent communal attacks on Christian places of worship, institutions and personnel, including the dastardly sexual assault on four nuns in Madhya Pradesh. Such violence certainly deserves public condemnation. However, now that Christian public opinion has been mobilized against communally-motivated violence, perhaps the community as whole can also be made more conscious of other forms of violence that occur within the Christian fold as much as outside it: the violence of poverty, the violence of caste, the violence inherent in the physical, psychological, cultural, social, economic and political subordination of women and, of course, the violence that takes place within the hallowed institution of family. There is clearly little room for complacency about the situation of Christian women in India at the turn of the millenium.