

Editorial

Feminine Genius for a Just and Compassionate Society

Sexual difference is something that we notice first and remember always about a person, and the gender does make a difference in our thoughts, words, actions, and forms of life. The gender, however, often creates valorisation and hierarchy, in favour of men. Men have shown their superiority in physical strength, and treated women as tools and objects in developing and maintaining economical, social and political institutions. According to Gandhi, "Of all the evils for which man has made himself responsible, none is so degrading, so shocking or so brutal as his abuse of the better half of humanity to me, the female sex, not the weaker sex."¹ In his view, "The world shall see it in all its wonder and glory when woman has secured an equal opportunity for herself with man and fully developed her powers of mutual aid and combination."² Ambedkar was right when he said, "I measure the progress of a community by the degree progress which women have achieved."³

Women have contributed to human society and civilization as much as men and, more often than not, they did so in much more difficult conditions. Excluded from equal opportunities, underestimated, ignored, and not given credit for their contributions, women had to struggle to make these contributions. Yet, as Pope John Paul II wrote in his *Letter to Women*, "Women's dignity has often been unacknowledged and their prerogatives misrepresented; they have often been relegated to the margins of society and even reduced to servitude. This has prevented women from truly being themselves and it has resulted

¹M. K. Gandhi, *Young India*, 15-9-1921, 292.

²Gandhi, *Young India*, 7-5-1931, 96.

³Babasaheb Ambedkar, "Writings and Speeches," vol.17.3, Govt of Maharashtra, 2003, 282. 282.

in a spiritual impoverishment of humanity."⁴ All women and men are called upon to participate in a feminine project to rectify this institutional and cultural discrimination and injustice and to promote feminine genius for a just and compassionate society, for the well being of all human beings, other living beings and nature.

From a Christian point of view, humanity is a project of partnership of men and women, who are created in the image and likeness of God as persons. As partners, they are neither superior nor inferior to each other; they are singularly unique and complementary. Man complements woman just as woman complements man. The feminine expresses the 'human' as much as masculine does, but in a different and complementary way. Human beings are not merely finished products by nature; they are projects of God, nurture and nature. Men and women are not only born as men and women, they also become men and women. There is a process of becoming, a dynamic process of growth, development and fulfilment. In this project, one becomes human by becoming a man or a woman in conversation and collaboration with fellow human beings.

Historically, the feminine project took different forms: defending the dignity of womanhood by fighting for their basic social, economic, and political rights, assuming the roles of men, and attempting the reversal of the binary opposition of male and female in favour of the latter, etc. A feminist project often starts from an awareness of women's oppression and exploitation in society, at work and within the family, and a subsequent awareness that the situation is man-made and, therefore, can be reconstructed by conscious action by women and men. The experience and understanding of women constitute the basis for identifying relevant questions on the metaphysical and empirical identity of women. The dignity and vocation of women are fundamental; they are to be respected and promoted by all.

If we believe that women and men deserve social equality, then we should think seriously about how to reflect that belief in our

⁴John Paul II, *Letter to Women*, Vatican, June 29, 1995, §3 <https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1995/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_29061995_women.html> (10.4.2016).

thought patterns, language, social behaviour, and forms of life, which often deny gender-difference while homogenizing all speakers in a masculine or gender-neutral sweep. Fighting against the erasure of women is an important feminist project in many areas. We must aim to create a gender specific and inclusive society, sensitive and congenial to feminine humanity. This follows from the fact that men and women are singularly unique but partners in the building up of a humanity that stands for the welfare of all. Women become fully feminine through a substantial and creative presence in the world, in conversation and collaboration with men, all of which are sustained by God. An effective and intelligent campaign for the promotion of women, concentrating on all areas of women's life and beginning with a universal recognition of the dignity of women, is imperative on all men and women of good will.

The *Journal of Dharma* in collaboration with *Globethics.net India* organized a conference on "Feminine Genius: Women Leadership for a Just and Compassionate Society" investigating forms, persons, and institutions promoting Gender Justice and Women Leadership. The conference brought together women and men of goodwill – from different socio-political and academic backgrounds, religious affiliations, and philosophical perspectives – to critically and creatively deliberate about the prospect of a renewed understanding that can pave the way for revamping our existing socio-religious structures insisting on the noble principles of justice and compassion. The conference was an affirmation and celebration of the greatness of women genius, which many a time and place is neglected in the mainstream discourses. The speakers shared the dream of an ethos in which feminine genius is celebrated and the days in which those women who are being stripped of their dignity and just place, become fitting partners and creative leaders in the society. Some of the papers presented in this conference are included in this issue of the *Journal of Dharma*, focusing the attention both on the distinct categories of feminist projects and on the ways in which the insights of feminine genius, however categorized, may inform our understanding of human beings and human ways of life.

Kiran Prasad in her article, "Resurrecting the Feminist Genius: Striving for Creativity, Capability and Leadership Everyday" argues that sustainable development in India can be a reality only when there is gender equality and justice based development that accords top priority to the welfare of women. Despite rapid economic growth in the post-reform period and all the flagship programmes of the government, India ranks very low on narrowing the gender gap in education, health, and economic participation. India is among the few countries of the world where female labour force participation is shrinking with less than 15 per cent in any form of paid work. Though there have been several efforts to improve the status of women there is a wide gender gap in education, health, economic participation and social equality. Women's development and empowerment must become the long-term focus of policies to raise the consciousness of families, increase women's self-confidence, provide education and strengthen legal justice for fostering gender equality.

Educating the girl child, creating job opportunities, putting women in decision making roles, and making pro-women laws protecting them from oppression were some of the many steps that were designed for women's empowerment. But many years down the line the quest for a just society that values women and accords them the necessary dignity and respect is still on. A paternalistic approach with the assumption that women were victims of the social divide was adopted to rid women of their troubles. Being vulnerable they required protection; and so a number of measures were required and adopted to empower her. Shampa Dev and Vasundhara Kamath in "Gender Justice and Women Empowerment: Legal Measures" argue that the flaw in the law is in its paternalistic approach, which does not accord autonomy of self-governance or self-direction. The autonomy needs to be redefined as a relative idea where a just and compassionate society nurtures its members and creates social conditions that strengthens autonomous decisions, instead of impeding them, for the realization of their full potential.

Aparna Kottapalle discusses the theoretical perspectives of state's liability to pay compensation to the victims of violence and

specifically in cases where women are victims, referring to the reports of J. Malimath Committee and J. Verma Committee, amendments in Code of Criminal Procedure, and also judicial contribution towards evolution and expansion of compensatory justice in India. "Manodhairya Scheme: A Milestone Object and Feeble Mission in Maharashtra" examines critically and creatively the objectives and reasons for the scheme, the provisions to provide compensation to the victims of rape, acid attacks and cases of child sexual abuse, referring to the statistical data of Maharashtra State and Aurangabad District. The research paper is an outcome of information and experiences researcher gathered during her work as a member of Manodhairya Committee for Aurangabad District, in Maharashtra. Victimization is often traumatising and life changing event. Victims of crime suffer not only physical injury but also psychological, economic and other harms. Apart from punishing the offender, the state also shoulders the responsibility to rehabilitate the victim.

"Feminist Movements in India: A Study of Stree Sangharsh, Forum Against Oppression of Women, Vimochana, and Saheli" by *Tanima Kumari, Rajni Singh, and Soumya Mohan Ghosh* is an attempt at feminist historiography that revisits the role of post 1970s women organizations. Indian women adopted the mechanism of 'gendered resistance' against the vilified society in various anti-patriarchal agitations, like anti-alcohol and anti-price rise movements, campaigns against sati, dowry, and rape, and campaigned to raise the consciousness of women towards their rights through protest march, legislative debate, street theatre and other interactive modes. Analyzing activist feminist movements juxtaposed with theorizations, the paper concludes with the Indian feminists' attempt to create feminist solidarity of *bhaginivarg* (sisterhood) as posited by Padma Anagol, which resounds bell hooks' idea of sisterhood.

Social activists and feminist scholars across the globe have endlessly stressed on the need for women to lend support to other women; for victims to help other victims and for survivors to aid other survivors. Empathy and compassion for fellow human beings is one of the possible ways of raising the standards of

humanity. "Empowering Lives: The Journey of Jaycee Dugard, Elizabeth Smart, and Mukhtar Mai" by Ankita Das and Rajni Singh highlights the endeavours of Jaycee Lee Dugard who was illegally held captive for eighteen years, Mukhtar Mai, who survived a gang rape, and Elizabeth Smart, who suffered nine months of abduction and sexual abuse, to provide shelter and assistance to survivors like them and to make the society a better place to live in. While Smart and Mai are attempting to work against violence through spreading education and awareness, Dugard's foundation, 'Just Ask Yourself To Care' aims at not only providing support to the survivors of traumatic experiences but also helping their families to reintegrate into the society. Since the change is envisioned by those who are typically expected to have a submissive demeanour, there shall also be an attempt in this paper to trace the socio-cultural elements that facilitate or hinder such initiatives.

The society in which we live today is characterized by division, violence, bloodshed, corruption, individualism, control, manipulation, and the like. The suppression of the feminine with a simultaneous subjugation of women has contributed much of today's ills of our society. In presenting this issue of the *Journal of Dharma*, I share in the optimistic vision of Vatican Council II: "The hour is coming, in fact has come, when the vocation of women is being acknowledged in its fullness, the hour in which women acquire in the world an influence, an effect and a power never hitherto achieved. That is why, at this moment when the human race is undergoing so deep a transformation, women imbued with a spirit of the Gospel can do so much to aid humanity in not falling."⁵ Humanity badly needs today effective feminine genius for its existence and well being.

Jose Nandhikkara, Editor-in-Chief

⁵Vatican Council II, "Address of Pope Paul VI to Women," Vatican, 8 December, 1965, <https://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/speeches/1965/documents/hf_p-vi_spe_19651208_epilogo-concilio-donne.html> (5.5.2016).