

***Editorial***

**GENDER JUSTICE TODAY**

Justice is a catchword insofar as we are at the receiving end, forming part of the group to which justice is being denied or whose rights are being violated. The normal dynamics of the justice machinery imply that those who deny justice would also be capable of withholding its reinstatement indefinitely, as many a time those violators sit at the helm of power centres. A counteraction, therefore, is possible only when the violated individuals (sometimes, along with a few from among the group identified as the violators themselves, they being not actively involved in such violations), after having realized the extent of what is being denied to them, could involve in a concerted effort to pave the way for the realization of justice, but always at a cost. This is true of every sphere where justice is challenged or denied, especially in the case of gender-related issues of justice-denial.

Although it is clear that sexual difference does not entail an unequal treatment of any person, history abounds with cases of justice-denial to a large section of humanity because they were (and are being) born females on the face of this earth. It is surprising that a half of the whole human population, the women, were thoroughly and systematically denied the rights and benefits due to them. This was made possible by the theories, practices and traditions that were developed – almost always by men – to prove that women had no natural or acquired right to be their own mistresses; instead, by the manipulative moves that were mostly backed up by religious sanctions, the promulgation and enforcement of which were enacted and controlled by the men with vested interests, assumed the position of masters, relegating most of the womenfolk to a subservient and insignificant role in the society. Some theorists and religious traditions even went to the extreme by claiming that nature and the divine will have made the humanity into superior and inferior classes and, hence, this division is to be accepted unquestioned; strangely enough, these practices – some of them bizarre and cruel, and some others apparently just *normal* due to their continued practice over a long period of time – were even scrupulously made to be virtuous for its eternal perpetuation! The strange aspect of this situation is that, except a few known matriarchal cultures,

most of which are extinct today, men in general succeeded in perpetuating this unjust system of meting out injustice to women as a group not only for a few centuries but for millennia.

To a great extent, almost all religions are also culpable in this regard, especially in providing an additional powerful backup for the maintenance of the status quo that imprisons the creative spirit of the women in particular. Even though the genuine core of any religion never advocates degradation of anybody or meting out injustice to its members on any count, some of the religious practitioners and leaders – in almost all cases, men exclusively controlling the affairs of the religious group in question – took it upon themselves in manipulating the religious tenets in such a way that women were segregated against the rest of the male society, according the former only a degraded status in every sphere of life. Such manipulative strategies of some of these leaders have been wrongly accepted as foundational interpretative tools of those religions, which have resulted in furthering the injustice admitted, supported and propagated by apparently valid religious tenets.

It is this injustice that is being perpetuated even in the twenty-first century, of course, in more subtle forms than in the past, and it calls for corrective measures. The extent of the damage that is being caused is colossal, although the amount of responsibility in this regard on the part of the perpetrators seems to be too diminutive, which, in turn, results in worsening the situation of justice as far as the women of our society are concerned. As everybody's business turns out to be nobody's business, ultimately, it is very seldom anybody feels culpable for the subtle forms of gender injustice that are being practised in the family, society in general, and within religions or religious institutions, in particular. Humanity as a whole has to be enlightened, as a result of which individuals would be in a position to feel the responsibility for all their actions, whether unconsciously inherited or autonomously decided and carried out in their particular and commonly shared spheres of life. This enlightenment can come about only by the persistent attempts to educate the women as well as men, which, in turn, will enhance the human consciousness to the practical dimensions of practising gender justice. It is this thought that prompted *Journal of Dharma* to select the theme "Gender Justice Today" for the present issue. Although this theme was discussed at length in an earlier issue (*Journal of Dharma* 16, 2 [April-June 1991]), the slow

progress that has been made in this regard, and the subtle complications involved in the realization of gender justice in spite of the *technical* education that is being imparted in our present-day society make it all the more relevant to address it for a second time.

The present society has to drive home that sex difference is natural, while gender difference is an acquired one having its source in culture and traditions. It is a tainted practice inherited by humanity from the ancestors. Having segregated the whole womenfolk unjustly for quite a long time in human history, it is high time for all of us to *unlearn* the acquired or artificially perpetrated gender differences, which are extended to every sphere of life as a result of which women are treated unjustly and unequally. In order to remedy this situation, which has resulted from injustice, we have first to unlearn all of the gender-related theories and practices. This will pave the way for a re-learning and remaking of a new society that engenders equality for all its members irrespective of sex or gender difference. Indeed, women too have the primary responsibility to unlearn the gender-ascribed status and the related roles in family and in the larger society, and re-learn to mould their lives on an equal footing with every other member of the society.

Knowing the biological difference and their equal status in the society, women have to begin to reclaim their rightful place in the family as well as in the society. They have to demand equity and justice in sharing the social goods; in case of neglect in this regard, especially if it were wrongly founded upon any culturally ascribed gender-related role, women should initiate a concerted effort so that justice can be claimed and realised.

The men in the contemporary era, too, have a great responsibility to re-establish a gender-just society. Biological or sexual difference between man and woman does not entail a disparity in social relations, professional achievements and promotions, sharing of other social goods, etc. This can be brought about only by having a non-discriminatory attitude towards all, especially women, who have been segregated in our society in the past and in the present. Having had the privilege of the reigning (and exploiting) group, men today have a greater responsibility to initiate equality of men and women in concrete terms. This, to my mind, also involves adopting a preferential option to support and enhance the cause of women, as they were consistently and systematically segregated against men for quite a

long time in the history of the humankind. Indeed, reinstating justice demands reparation!

Moreover, in the context of rights violation based on gender differences, justice demands legislation to protect the rights of women, who are the equal partners within the social order. Enactment of civil laws is a necessity to make provisions for a fair deal for women. The preferential option for the causes of women and the much-needed enactment of civil laws – at regional, national and international levels – are the responsibility of the whole human race as women have been subjected to justice-violation for an incalculable period of time.

Education and emancipation go hand in hand. Although education has the potency to erroneously brainwash a person or a group of persons with wrong instruction and mould their lives accordingly, positively it has tremendous power to initiate change and transformation in the society as a whole. Although education can train personnel to initiate and maintain certain patterns of institutionalised living, it also has the potency to germinate and sustain a properly civilized society that stands for justice and equality. A civilization proper can come about only by the creative interaction of all its members, having an open attitude of supporting the growth and development of every individual member without any disparity based on natural or ascribed differences. In fact, in the context of the gender-based injustice in our society, what we need is the emergence of a new generation of women who are firm, assertive and confident, not only to be what they are but also to reclaim their lost or denied status in the society as well as in the families, social or religious groups and associations. It may require that these women take a stand that is ever stronger, firmer and tougher in order that they succeed in this struggle for justice, which is due to them as members of the human community. Such a situation can come about only by the creative involvement of women as well as men who are educated and enlightened: we need creative educators and an open system of education, which can provide the nurturing ambience for the enhancement of individual human persons.

In this present issue, therefore, we have eight articles that address the problems related to gender justice, as they are experienced in the present. While critically analysing the existing social situations and drawing our attention to the unjust practices prevalent in the society, every writer takes it upon himself or herself to creatively respond to this problematic

situation by proposing concrete remedies. The first entry, "Gender Justice in the Bible" by James Gurudas, after having recaptured the arguments of the feminists with regard to the misuse of the biblical texts in perpetuating and vitiating the plight of women in the society at large, and within the Church, in particular, involves in a penetrating analysis of the proper biblical foundations to provide and reinstate a gender-just society. Identifying the positive potential as well as the possibility of a misuse of the sacred texts in any religion he holds that "they can be liberating as well as enslaving, hope giving as well as frustrating; they can give rise to feminism as well as antifeminism at the same time." Yet, he is categorical in his assertion that "there are solid bases in the Bible itself for initiating a process of liberating women from the dehumanising clutches of the past, built with stones of ignorance and male egoism."

Taking cue from the social exploitation and the bad influence of the media in worsening the status of women, especially in the developing nations, Kiran Prasad analyses the situation of Indian women with reference to the contemporary mass media. In order to counter the ill treatment of women projected through the published and electronic media, the author calls for the empowerment of women through the concerted efforts on the part of everyone. According to her, "the media must ... regard its role as fundamental in supporting the progress of women and assist them in their march for a better social status and quality of life."

In "Gender Justice: A Utopian Ideal?" Pauline Chakkalalal addresses the problems related to the realization of gender justice for women in the Church, and in the society at large. Attributing the subordination and victimisation of women in the social and religious spheres to the ills of the age-old patriarchal system largely prevalent even in our present society and the Church, the author calls for "man-women partnership, mutuality, co-responsibility, inclusiveness and participatory decision-making." Apart from making a few valid recommendations for realising gender justice, in her conclusion, she forcefully argues for promoting "the acceptance of new research findings, the feminist method and the egalitarian model of Church." "As a community in the discipleship of Jesus," according to her, "the Church should further the partnership of women and men for the benefit of all God's people and creation."

Asghar Ali Engineer, an eminent Islamic scholar and activist, boldly argues for the emancipating of women by basing himself on a sound interpretation of the Islamic Scripture and traditions. He holds that "while scripture remains immutable with its transcendental spirit, theology must change by creatively facing new challenges and newly emerging situations," thus, making itself relevant to the faithful and the society at large. While asserting that the subjugation of women was "more cultural and patriarchal than Islamic or Qur'anic," he recommends that "the whole *corpus juris* of Islam relating to women needs to be seriously re-thought on the basis of Qur'an." Without watering down the normative character of the Qur'an in any way, Ali Engineer holds, a re-reading and re-interpretation of the Scripture and traditions in Islam makes room for equal rights for men and women in every respect.

Barbara Bagorski, in her analysis of the actual situation of the women in the German churches and society, brings into focus how "the church should be a model of the partnership between women and men." Her insightful analysis of the secular society, the inter-denominational dynamics among the women, etc., takes us to the conclusion that they are contributing towards the empowerment of women, although she cautions the readers that the proposed ideal remains still a vision the full realization of which is far from the present German society. She, therefore, proposes that women's voices are "to be heard more loudly and widely through its public relation work, through general meetings and through talks with church officials."

In another article, "Gender Justice in the Constitution of India," V. S. Elizabeth poses an incisive question: "Without enabling women to exist as citizens with political and economic power is it possible for them to safeguard the tradition and culture of this country?" Admiring the realistic and insightful safeguards inbuilt into the Constitution of India to protect the rights of the marginalized and the downtrodden, Elizabeth explores the constitutional provisions highlighting the perceptive various Sections and Articles that are formulated to uphold dignity and justice to the women citizens who form the half of Indian population. Her analysis leads us to a realistic picture of the Indian women, and the slow progress that India has made so far in this regard as a nation, especially in realizing the constitutional provisions to institute and enhance a gender-just society. However, she concludes with a call for committed action: "The fact that



we are still very far from achieving this objective is not due to the lack of vision for an equal society as much as due to the absence of political will due to the failure to change society and the values that are deeply entrenched and which cannot be altered without changes in the processes of socialization which include education, family and the media."

Jis J. Pettayil analyses the writings of Levinas, a phenomenological existentialist thinker, and drawing from his central thought in terms of "the Other" asserts the feminine in the individual existential thought and social relations. Following Levinas, the author asserts: "Women have to be affirmed as subjects in their own right... There are matters of exclusive concerns for both the sexes but a realistic suggestion would be to respect the differences and to develop a reverence for what they are."

In "Planning a Family in the Context of Gender Discrimination" Saju Chackalackal makes a clarion call "to pave the way for a conscious and concerted effort to evolve an action plan in view of creating a healthy society consisting of healthy individual persons." After involving in an analysis of the society, with special reference to the discriminatory practices against women, the author calls for reinstating equality and justice to everyone without distinction. He invites the readers to build up a gender-just society by forming healthy families, within which members are treated on an equal footing, as he believes that "family is the ideal place to nurture equality and sharing among male and female members..." This, according to him, is an imperative for all of us, as "a long-standing history of oppression resulting from discrimination on the gender lines meted out only to women ... calls for a preferential option to support their causes so that reparation shall be done to the past mistakes."

Thus, all contributors of this issue on "Gender Justice Today" analyse the present status of women in the society and call our attention to the disheartening and snail-paced progress that gender justice issues have made in the past. Invariably, each of the articles considers the arrival of a gender-just society the need of the hour, which also includes involving in creative and concrete action programmes. Indeed, it is commonly accepted that the culturally and socially acquired gender difference does not in any way entail an unequal treatment in social responsibilities and privileges, as it would continue to be diametrically opposed to the dynamics of justice.

Each human being is not only born human, but has *to become* human by the creative commitment in developing and enhancing one's own personality in relation to others; a human being is not born into isolation, but into a community of persons. The communion that is at the foundation of any community demands that each member exists for the other, that each one is available to the other, that each one is capable of enhancing the life of the other. This positive approach does not involve segregation and exploitation of the other, as it has happened in the long history of mankind; instead, it involves only a creative self-gift of oneself to the other. Reinstating gender justice requires that we consciously cultivate a healthy vision of the society within which every existence becomes a co-existence; every instance of co-existence turns out to be an invitation to a pro-existence: human existence is an existence in communion, and existence in a community becomes creative only when each one exists for the other. It is this readiness to be available to the other that we badly need to redeem humanity from the clutches of the unjust practices that have been prevalent in our society in the name of gender difference.

Difference, plurality or multiplicity is neither a problem, nor a curse on humanity; instead within the nature, especially among human beings, it is a unique blessing with which the richness of the entire creation can be grasped and lived out. Let the sexual difference and the culturally and socially designed gender difference we have among human persons be a prospective matrix to respond to the opportunities offered to us and, thus, *to become human* in the complete sense. Human persons bloom in the context of a human community within which both women and men are equal partners and creative contributors in building up justice-sensitive personalities, families, and the society at large.

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