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Leaves and Thorns*

VARANASI, India

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By Pramila Jayapal

A few weeks ago, I was in Mussourie talking to my friend, Meenu. Meenu was telling me about a new project undertaken by the non-governmental organization (NGO) she and her husband run. The project is exploring male involvement in gender issues. Over the past year, Meenu and I have talked at length about our common feeling that men need to be involved in what are traditionally called "women's issues" — gender discrimination, family planning, etc. The divisiveness created by constantly putting women on one side and men on the other side is dangerous. It creates a reaction, and often forces even liberal-minded men to feel that their gender is being blamed unfairly. Moreover, women's issues are *not* women's issues: they may affect women most directly, but they involve men. Without men's understanding and participation, they can never be satisfactorily addressed.

It was sunny outside that day when Meenu and I discussed her new project. She and her staff had held focus groups with men, she told me, and their findings were interesting. "I'm beginning to wonder," she said, "if part of the reason why many of these men do not empathize with women's situations is because they themselves can never show emotion. They cannot express themselves. They are taught not to cry, not to feel. Perhaps if we could work on their expression of emotion, they would be able to better empathize with the women in their lives." She paused. The sunlight streamed in on to the flowered couch we sat on. "Maybe it is time we began to focus on men's problems," she concluded slowly.

"I felt a strange surge of anger rise within my chest. Some small voice inside me was saying 'Why focus on men? Have we really focused on women yet?'"

I did not answer that minute. Both Meenu and I have strong feminist leanings, and yet we are also not proponents of a world where men and women are separated by resentment, where men are blamed and women are the victims, where generalizations create abscesses within which we can hide the responsibility of each side and the role of societal traditions. These types of attitudes, present here and abroad, often do more damage than good, we feel. It is time to chart the middle road.

It all sounds wonderful: the pacifiers and negotiators take their stance and hope to solve the problems of centuries. If only it were so easy.

When Meenu said that perhaps the answer was to focus on men's problems, I felt a strange surge of anger rise within my chest. Some small voice inside me was saying "Why focus on men? Have we really focused on women yet?" It grew louder, that voice, until it seemed to be roaring with memories of all the inequalities I have seen here in India. The lion, untamed, was reminding me of the hundreds of girl children aborted every month, of the social customs that dictate that women eat last and therefore what is usually least nutritious, of the cruelty that society

*This title is the English translation of a Malayalam movie referred to in this article, and produced by Madhyam Communications in Bangalore.

unleashes on widows, of the often automatic subjugation of a new daughter-in-law in a household.

Where were my balanced feminist views? They seemed to have disappeared into the same abscesses I had condemned before. It scared me, the vigor with which I seemed to be responding to Meenu's innocent comment.

We talked about it later, Meenu and I, into the cold Mussourie night. And our conversation led to personal sharing of times when we had experienced discrimination by men in the most minor of ways, and yet it still irked us. It seemed that I had opened a vat inside, and some black tar was pouring out; tar that had caught and preserved memories of things I had thought were long-forgotten.

I was naive to think that I would be able to put aside the feelings that arise in me as a woman. This incident made me realize that I am not as unbiased as I would like to think. It does not mean I now believe that men are the "cause" of women's problems, or that men and women are not both inherently good. In the course of history, notions of each one's role have been formed — often mutilated — to suit the needs of those in power. Those mutilations have stuck, even become stronger; but those who accept those notions are not the enemy, as many fighters of the feminist cause may claim.

What struggles we have, both men and women who believe that we are moderate, unbiased — until we are confronted with an incident that taps into some of our rawest, uncontrollable emotions. I realize now that I have an affiliation with an identity that is tied to my gender; this makes it difficult to be completely unmoved by or neutral to what I see.

Here in India, the contrasts between men and women are uncomfortably stark. There is little "political correctness" behind which to couch one's thoughts and feelings. The roles are conceived within bold, thick lines they are accepted by majorities, and often easily validated by traditional Indian concepts of "duty." It is a woman's duty, for example, to look after the home — and a man's duty to provide for the family. Deviations from these roles indicate individuals who put their own personal needs or desires over their duty — not a commendable trait. The traits that are valued in women are still those that fall within the bold, thick lines. Women who are too aggressive, too independent, are viewed as trouble, rather than as offering the possibility of charting new waters. Simultaneously, within many women a

constant battle rages between what they are brought up to think their role is and their own inner voices that may tell them differently.

This is not an article about women's rights; it is not even an article about women, *per se*. It is more about my own struggle to confront my own emotions about women, equality, justice. My mind is a kaleidoscope of grays, so typical of India. No right, no wrong, and most of all, no answers. Everything in extremes, each issue magnified. I have found it particularly difficult to write about women's issues in India because of the intensive emotion I feel when I see the disparity between the choices and freedom I have had in my life and the situation of the typical Indian women I meet. The situation is complicated further when I realize that many of these women would not want the freedom (or burden) of making those choices. I identify strongly with many of the women I see — our hair, eyes, skin are the same color. We belong to the same country. Yet, my world is so far apart from theirs.

"I used to call myself a feminist without hesitation, because I believe that feminists are people who believe in basic human dignity and equal opportunities for men and women."

Unfortunately, "feminism" has a bad name in India now, so that even battles worth fighting are deemed simply as angry, resentful cacophonies made by a weaker sex trying to assert itself. Feminism is often viewed here as an "ism" introduced by the West and inappropriate in the Indian context. Both men and women often complain that feminism is a cause taken up by largely upper-class elite women who cannot relate to the situations of average women in India. A di-

vide exists now, not only between men and women, but also between women and women: those who proudly call themselves feminists, and those who rebel against the word and its implications.

I used to call myself a feminist without hesitation, because I believe that feminists are people who believe in basic human dignity and equal opportunities for men and women. I still describe myself as a feminist; but now I find myself constantly qualifying the word by clarifying that I am not "knee-jerk" or "radical." I am sad that the situation has come to such that these qualifiers are necessary; I am sad too that I feel I must distinguish myself from a group of women who — in the name of women — may be hurting that very cause. But it does not end there. It ends with my own realization that the road to equality is long and hard, and sometimes its end is not in sight.

I had thought that many young women in modern cities in India would be strong proponents of women's rights — what I would call feminists, without any nega-

tive connotation. I would see these young women all over the major cities: riding motor scooters, working in high-profile professions like law and business, interacting with their male friends and colleagues in a confident, authoritative manner.

I met Meghna in Bangalore at a play-reading we had both attended. Tall and attractive, with ebony black hair that tumbled thickly to her shoulders, Meghna was attending the Bangalore Law School, said to be one of the country's finest. We met again at Koshi's Cafe, a Bangalore landmark, and over coffee she told me about the kinds of projects she was working on at school: women's issues, children's rights, human rights. We hit it off instantly; at 20 years old, Meghna had passion and fire that ignited my own passions about these subjects. She was the kind of "modern Indian woman" that I had imagined from what I had seen thus far.

We decided it would be interesting to put together an informal group of her women friends to discuss their thoughts on women's issues. In her efficient way, within a few days, Meghna had arranged for the group the next Sunday afternoon.

I arrived with cold sodas and snacks at the apartment of a friend of Meghna's who was out of town. The women arrived in clusters, and soon our small room was filled with 12 expectant faces. They were all middle- to upper-class young women, educated in excellent high schools and now being educated in some of India's finest colleges. Some were studying business, some law, some arts (the common term for what we would call liberal arts subjects in the U.S.), and one engineering.

We talked about different issues for several hours. The engineering student told us about the bias of professors toward men. Engineering in India is a male-dominated field with a 4:10 women:men ratio. "The attitude of teachers and other men is that women are going to get married after college anyway, so why should we waste time teaching or acknowledging them? They are not really serious about this." At another college, the cut-off results for entrance examinations differed for men and women: 60 percent for men and 80 percent for women, in order to discourage women from applying.

A discussion ensued about the reluctance of women to compete actively with men. "Sometimes when the girls are called on in class, they say they don't want to answer the question," said one woman. "It just adds fuel to the fire. Teachers naturally start paying more attention to the boys if this happens too much." One of

Meghna's law classmates added another example: "Our mock trial teams, selected on the basis of tryouts, have a ratio of 2:24 women to men! Women, who do so well on standard exams, do not even come to try out. The professors are trying to find out why. When we (my classmates) talk about it, we feel it is attributable to 'socialization.' What are identified as 'desirable' qualities in a woman are at odds with the 'killer instinct' that one needs in law — maybe even other professions. Vocal women are termed 'very aggressive' in a very negative way; and generally women are called aggressive much quicker than men."

As she spoke, I found myself wondering how many of these women struggled every day to express themselves in a way that didn't conflict with societal perceptions of women and yet did justice to their own individuality and capabilities.

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"How many of you would call yourselves 'feminists'?" I asked curiously. Silence and shifting around in the seats signaled some discomfort at the question. I was surprised to find only three women raised their hands: Meghna, her law-school classmate and the woman from the engineering college. I suppose I had assumed that these well-educated women in the top professional colleges would be far more "feminist" than this!

"Why don't you consider yourself feminist?" I asked. Came the answer, almost instantly: "We don't like what we think

of when we think of feminists." Chimed in one woman, "In fact, I almost didn't come today when Meghna told me you were a feminist!" This had been Meghna's description of me; we had not discussed this, nor had I referred to myself as a feminist during our conversation. "Yes, me too," said another. "I thought, 'Oh God, I don't want to go and listen to some female talk about how women are better than men!' I want equal opportunity, but I think the way to get it is to just prove that we can do well in our own fields. Take the opportunities when we get them."

"Feminism is getting on a soapbox," one woman in a mustard T-shirt said. She was interrupted by Meghna's older sister, who had obviously different leanings than her younger sister: "What are they making a big deal about, anyway? Life isn't so bad. A man has to work; a woman has a choice."

The woman in the mustard T-shirt picked up her line again. "Feminists just want to argue about the spelling of the word 'women.' They want to change it to 'womyn,' so there is no "men" in the word! It trivializes the

real issues. Why does the spelling of this word matter?"

"Language is important," argued Meghna. "It is part of an internalization process that indicates certain views of gender roles."

"Well, all I can say," replied the unconvinced mustard T-shirted woman, "is that if I have to do work for women, it would be easier to do it not being called a feminist."

After the meeting, I spoke with Meghna, who rolled her eyes at me. She was not, I had found, representative of other women her age. But more than anything, it struck me that these young women were struggling to create a space for themselves that was out of the box of the "traditional Indian woman" and yet not so far out that they would be marginalized by the center of society. In India, the center still believes in certain roles for women, even educated ones. Within that framework, the woman's right to make choices does exist, especially in the cities, but the choices themselves are still dictated by societal traditions and norms.

I realized, only many months later, that this group discussion had bothered me more than I cared to admit. These women had been as lucky as I had been: given opportunities that allowed them to make choices beyond the norm, develop themselves as individuals regardless of gender. I had expected, then, that they too would be sympathetic to women's issues in the same way that I was. Yet, only a few pointed out during the discussion how our credentials, education and status protected us from much discrimination. The rest seemed distinctly unsympathetic to the issues of injustice against women. When discussing violence against women, many indicated that if women could not stand up for themselves, they deserved to stay where they were. If a woman was harassed or raped, it was probably because she "was wearing something that prompted that." The almost complete lack of understanding of or sympathy for women whose circumstances made it difficult for them to assert themselves, for the socialization process that creates certain accepted roles for men and women, and for the responsibility of men in gender discrimination, bothered me intensely. The women I had thought would be at the forefront of women's issues were quite unconcerned.

Perhaps what upset me the most was the relatedness between their backgrounds and mine; I saw that I could have easily been them. What had made the difference? The question lingers with me, intensifying rather than diminishing over time. Was it my education in the West

and my Western values? If so, then am I any better than the "radical feminists" who incorrectly impose Western values on an Indian context?

Several months ago, we were traveling by road through the state of Rajasthan. I had just read a recent International Labor Organization (ILO) report that stated that two-thirds of the world's wage earners are women. These women workers earn only 50 percent of the world's wages, and own only 10 percent of the world's assets. Statistics are statistics only until they become intertwined with real pictures that make them more than numbers, that bring to mind individual pictures of real people, real places, and therefore, real issues.

As we drove through the roads of Rajasthan, statistics became pictures for me. They became the faces of the women I saw working, women who till the fields, attaching the ropes of a water-pulley system to buffaloes to irrigate the land; women who harvest acres of mustard, onions and sugarcane; women who carry children straddled on an out-thrust hip, along with baskets of mud bricks, fodder or fresh dung on their heads.

The most striking observation came as we were watching groups of men and women who were working on re-tarring the Udaipur-Jaipur highway. My husband and I counted, time after time, a ratio of women to men laborers of at least 2:1. A typical group of twelve would

have eight women and four men. The women (often with children clinging to their legs) would be transporting mud and stones to the roadsides or digging into the road to tear up an existing potholed patch. Many of the "women" were girls who could not have been more than 13 or 14 years old.

And while the women worked, what of the men? The men were the "supervisors," pointing a hand here or there to show where the piles should be made, or more commonly, sitting under the shade of a tree watching the work go on. In place after place, we saw women working and men watching. In one particularly memorable scene, a flurry of activity was occurring among the women as they marched back and forth with their baskets, children and shovels. Four men sat about 100 yards away in a small circle, drinking tea and laughing, shading their eyes from the bright afternoon sun.

Women laborers earn less than men laborers, so it is cheaper for a private contractor to hire women as workers. (Men, however, will always be hired as the supervisors.) While men might be more likely to strike, protest or

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demand higher wages, women generally will not. Not surprisingly, no provision for children is made during working hours, so the children go with the mother, sometimes even helping with the work or otherwise taking on a mothering role with younger children. It is common to see a 10-year-old child pick up a four-year old brother or sister and rock him/her to sleep.

I wrote the above observations during that trip in Rajasthan. When my husband and I talked about it some time later, he reminded me gently that we have also seen men work just as hard, hauling bricks, pushing buffaloes, digging ditches. "What you have seen is not wrong," he said. "I saw it too. But remember what else you have seen." He is right. We have seen men work, but it did not generate the same emotion for me — perhaps because there were no women watching or supervising, or perhaps because the role of men working is one that I — equally incorrectly — have cornered them into.

Several months after arriving in India, I took an overnight "video-coach" from Bombay to Aurangabad. Video coaches — buses with videos that blast out Indian films over loudspeakers scattered above passengers' heads throughout the bus — are the craze in India. Luckily for those of us who cannot stand the video, many machines have broken down since they were introduced some five years ago, and the bus owners are generally too cheap to repair them.

Unfortunately, on the particular bus I took to Aurangabad, either the video machine was of superior quality or the owner had decided to fix it when it gave its last sputter of life. It was going full blast when I boarded the bus.

The movie that was playing was obviously popular: the entire bus (filled with men, except for one or two other lone women) sang along with the songs, clapping their thighs with their hands, wobbling their heads around in time to the music. I watched the movie half-heartedly. The screen was in front of me and my neck felt strained looking out the window the whole time. Plus, it seemed from the light-hearted nature of the songs that the movie would be a typically inane but amusing Hindi movie.

The heroine of the movie, a "modern" woman who goes out with groups of men and wears slightly more daring sari blouses and *salvaar kameez* than the "traditional" heroine, was laughing loudly and constantly. As the dark of outside began to envelop the bus and we en-

tered rural country, there were fewer lights to watch, fewer interesting roadside events to focus on. I was lulled into a semi-dozing state, almost forgetting about the noise blasting from the video. Out of half-closed eyes, I watched the slightly fuzzy screen.

The scene I watched had the heroine at a bar with a group of men. They are all laughing and joking, shooting back shots of whiskey — heroine included. The heroine, after being encouraged to drink more than even the men around her, sees the scene in front of her grow cloudy. The room spins around her, as she is dragged by four men into another room, that also contains a swimming pool. The men begin ripping her clothes off, as she screams and tries in vain to escape. The men in my bus were clapping, singing along with the music that accompanied the scene. My eyes were now fully open; I was transfixed not only by the scene I was watching, but the obvious enjoyment of the crowd around me.

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The heroine has been thrown into the swimming pool. She cannot swim, but fights with the water to get further from her predators. They surround the pool now. As she scratches at the side of the pool to get out, she is grabbed by the men. They throw her down onto the floor and the four men, standing around her like vultures around a fresh kill, unzip their pants — still laughing. The screen blacks out.

The bus was full of energy. They wanted to see the next scene. It came in the form of a court case. The woman and her sister have brought the four men to trial. The woman is made to recount the entire story to a disbelieving judge, and to a group of jurors who look as though they may get their kicks out of hearing the story recounted in graphic detail. The cases are made in short order, and the jury produces its verdict: Not Guilty. The men in the movie cheer — and their cheers were echoed by the men on the bus. The heroine and her sister cry.

The next scene showed the four men breaking into the heroine's house to exact their revenge on her for taking them to court. They beat her up, and then rape her once again. They leave laughing and re-zipping their pants.

I could not watch anymore. I wanted to run to the front of the bus and turn off the video, scream at the men on the bus to think about what they are laughing at. Disgust at myself bubbled up within me. I was too afraid to turn the video off in a bus full of men on a dark road in the middle of India. I felt helpless — helpless to voice what I saw as blatant discrimination, helpless to

do anything to stop it. I struggled with the battle that has become constant: to determine for myself what an isolated incident says about the attitude towards women in this country, but at the same time to prevent generalizing unfairly.

Many months ago, I watched a Malayalam movie called that was based on the true story of two girls in a Kerala village who ended up committing suicide. They were strong, independent girls, who made choices to work outside the home and not tolerate the everyday harassment of the men around their village. They fought back at a system that they perceived as unfair, where the injustice was because of their gender. In the end, they could not beat the system. Not only were they demeaned publicly, their family was as well. The only way out they saw that was bearable, besides the option of a life in the system, was death. They threw themselves into the swirling, foaming ocean that they used to love to play in. It was their friend, and it promised a place where they would be freed from the injustices of being women.

Along with their families, the only person who mourned their death was a wise boatman who had warned them to just accept the system. "Do not rebel," he said. "Whether a leaf falls on a thorn or a thorn falls on the leaf, it is always the leaf that is damaged."

Whenever I think of that Malayalam movie, I rebel. I cannot accept the boatman's words. Injustice is to be fought, not tolerated. Yet I cannot clearly answer the most important question: what is the most effective form of struggle? Some of the efforts we undertake today serve only to widen those abscesses of judgment and blame, not to unite. The ideal situation is not when women triumph over men; it is actually when the issue of gender becomes moot because equality of all human beings reigns supreme.

Last night was the culmination of one of the year's most important festivals. Called Navratra — the nine nights of the Goddess Durga — the festival sees thousands of people across Varanasi (and across India) celebrating the power of Durga as she sits atop her tiger after having killed the bull-demons. All over Varanasi, civic organizations, clubs and businesses erect special *puja pandals* — beautiful, ornate facades that contain life-size images of Durga built over the course of a month. At the end of Navratra's nine days, the images are paraded down to the Ganges and immersed in the river, giving the Goddess leave to depart from the images to her abode above.

Hundreds of thousands worship Durga during these

nine days. She is the epitome of female *shakti* — power — without which male power is incomplete and inert. In this sense, *shakti* is as important as its male counterpart; in fact, it is the essential ingredient for male power to function properly. The concept of the two together is carried through in many aspects of everyday life for ordinary Hindus. In Indian music, for example, the clapping sound — the *tal* — cannot be created with only one hand. *Tal* is comprised of the sound of the Goddess Parvati's *shakti* coming together with her husband Shiva's sound. The two, together in equal strength only, can create the wholesome sound of the clap, the ultimate and perfect union.

Durga Ma is essential to the safety of human beings; she is strength, power and cruel kindness — destroying evil, channeling her strength into the pure. She is a female deity and yet worshipped — more, even, than many of her male counterparts. Significantly, the bull demon she conquers takes the form of a man. Durga's one foot is on his back, as he writhes under her. His back is bent in a U-shape, and his mouth twisted into an ugly grimace.

There is tradition in Indian mythology that glorifies and honors the female and feminine. I was carried away watching the huge procession of Durgas that lined the road up to Dashashwamedh Ghat, the hundreds of men and women who bent reverently in front of the statues to pay their respects. The feminine power exalted: a sight not often seen in India. I was reminded that gender issues are the purview of human beings, not Gods. □

