

The Key to a Brighter Future in India

Abstract of a lecture by: Father Mathias,
Professor of Communication
in Xavier Labour Relations
Institute

Asia, the largest continent in the world: 3.5 billion inhabitants, contained a total of 850 million illiterates in 1985. In Asia lies Japan, the world's biggest creditor nation, and in that continent we find the largest number of people bordering on destitution and poverty.

It is Asia's glory to be the birthplace of the world's great religions: Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism. These religions have brought cultures along with them but they have often contributed to the continent's social and economic problems. Asia is known for its ambivalent attitude to women. On the one hand, they are cherished and protected, even worshipped as goddesses; on the other hand, they suffer infamous forms of oppression.

Asia is the home of many contradictions.

Economic Conditions of Women in India

In the mass of wretched and deprived humanity, women form the biggest group; they have the longest work day: 14-17 hours. On construction projects, they replace animals and carry endless headloads of cement, bricks, etc. The woman's earnings belong to the husband, in the home she eats the leftovers.

Women and Self-Identity

The feminist movement in India has realized that women are deprived of identity. The female is assimilated to the male, she has no leadership role in society, she is exploited in the labor sector. She is evaluated on the basis of youth and beauty alone as physical requirements. In character, she is required to be submissive, self-denying and chaste. Her honor reflects that of the whole family, so she has to keep it intact, above suspicion. The ideal woman is ready to go through the ordeal of fire in order to prove her chastity. Child marriage is used to help a woman suppress her sexual desire, just as circumcision or sexual mutilation in Africa and some Asian countries is used for the same purpose.

Women as Property

In history books, the wealth of a king is measured by the number of horses, camels, servants and wives he possesses. When defeated in war, he is dispossessed of his land, of his slaves and of his wives who are publicly raped.

The constitution of India and of other Asian countries insist on sexual equality but nowadays we witness a set-back in ideological concepts and a recrudescence of abuses against women. One example is the revival of "Sati", the forcible immolation of a widow on the funeral pyre of her husband. This tradition may be explained by the fear of female sexuality. The widow, particularly if she is young, might bring dishonor on her late husband by licentious living.

After independence, ideas of sexual equality spread in India. Female education was encouraged, yet recent statistics show a rising proportion of female illiteracy. Causes: negligence, high rate of dropouts, poverty of parents who prefer to spend the little money they have on the education of boys and keep the girls for housework.

Education has reduced the gender gap at the higher levels of education but, at the lower levels the gap has widened. Dowry demands have escalated with the educational level of the groom who insists on an increase in the bride's dowry in order to meet the expenses of a modernized standard of living. Girls' upbringing continues to be influenced by the ideas of the older generation of women who inculcate in their daughters an attitude of male worship and an idealization of a male dominated society. On the other hand, they are led to believe in their own inferiority.

How can education reduce inequality?

The following suggestions are given by Father Mathias:

1. Encouraging women to study science and mathematics instead of limiting themselves to the traditional home arts and literary fields.

2. Development of women's studies which give an objective view of reality, prevent generalizations and sweeping statements, encourage the creation of women's groups and movements with the aim of claiming women's rights and undertaking projects for the study of women's issues by the academic community of various Asian countries. The result would be an exchange of experiences and broadening of perspective.

3. Adult education. It is a recent movement which has spread everywhere, particularly in developing countries where the rate of illiteracy is high among both men and women. In India, the Indian Working Group on Adult Education Programmes has been successful in creating 1 million adult education centers in the country. Their success depends on two factors: organizational work among women and concentration on income generating projects.

4. Developing primary education for girls. This requires a study and treatment of the causes that prevent parents from sending their daughters to school: poverty, traditionalism, shortage of elementary teachers, specially women teachers interested in women's problems.

5. Need for a better organization of women. "Unity gives strength" an old saying which still holds true. The Chipko movement among women in India has contributed to the protection of forests.