THE SITUATION OF WOMEN IN INDIA

Since the launching of the International Women’s Decade in 1975, many groups committed to the cause of women have sprung up all over India. Women’s issues are being discussed in various circles. Women’s organisations have succeeded, to a great extent, in giving voice to the problems affecting women and influencing policy decisions. People all over the world have come to the realisation that women’s liberation is central to the whole process of development and that women should become subjects and participants in the process.

Despite the proliferation of women’s groups, the status and role of Indian women continues to be more or less the same. The concept of liberation has not really gripped the majority of our female population. They are still silent victims of oppression in the socio-economic field and within the family.

Struggle against discrimination of women has been going on right from the beginning. The 19th century reform movements helped to some extent to wipe out evils like female infanticide, child marriage, sati. History has also documented the militant participation of women in various political struggles like the national freedom struggle, the Telengana uprising, anti-price rise movements etc. Participation in these has led to a new consciousness among women. But it failed to bring about any qualitative change in the status of women. Subjugation of women within the family, unemployment, discrepancy in wages, illiteracy, and crimes against women are still very much part of our society.

Even after 39 years of independence less than a fifth of our female population can be called literate. The majority of them are outside the reach of formal education. The drop-outs are larger among girls. They are compelled to discontinue in favour of the boys. Women are thus deprived of a vital means of achieving independence and equality.

Unemployment is very high among women in India. According to the 1971 census, of the 264 million women in India, 107.8 million were unemployed and 15.1 million under-employed. In the case of female employment, even the constitutional directive regarding equal pay for equal work is flouted. Women workers, especially in the unorganised sector, are subjected to all sorts of exploitation and harassment at the work place. Laws regarding establishment of creches, provision of maternity benefits etc. are violated by the employers.

The institutions of marriage and family also have become means of subjugating women. Families perpetuate the value of male superiority. Women are regarded as an appendage of the husband’s property. They are subjected at all phases of their lives to the whims and fancies of their male counterparts. According to the Law of Manu, “In childhood a woman must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband and when her lord is dead, to her sons. A woman must never be independent”. Epics, puranas, social norms and moral codes are used to reinforce the traditional image of woman as submissive and servile.

The Dowry system as it exists today has reduced marriage to a barter. Much bargaining takes place in the marriage market. Economic considerations have become the basis of human relationships. The lives of many young women are ruined because of this. The parents find it extremely difficult to meet the evergrowing demand for dowry. In recent years about 2000 women were burnt to death in Delhi alone because they could not bring enough dowry. The Dowry Prohibition Act has proved ineffective. Social legislations will help only if it is coupled with public education and awareness building.

The media in India has been projecting women as sex objects and decorative pieces. They are reduced to commodities by the advertising companies. Commercialisation of sex takes place in art and literature also, particularly in fiction and films. It evades the real issues being raised by any women’s organisation.

Crimes against women like wife-beating, rape, physical and mental torture are on the increase. The landlords and the police join in assaulting harijan and tribal women.

Women are thus subjected to social, economic and cultural inequalities and oppression. An ongoing struggle in all these fields is required to bring about any change in the position of women in India. To start with, women should become conscious of their position in the present society and their potential to change it. A counter-culture as against the culture of domination and unequal relationship is to be developed.

The aim of women’s movements should be to get an equal place in society. Struggles against all forms of exploitation should go hand in hand with the struggles against the root causes of the problems in the existing system. Only then, can we hope for a just society.
INTRODUCTION

KANTHAMMA is an experiential story of a woman construction worker presented in the form of an illustrated booklet.

In a country like India where the literacy rate is very low, the method of dissemination of information becomes crucial. More creative use has to be made of illustrated materials which would leave a deeper impression in the minds of the readers. This booklet is intended as a response to the current inadequacy of simple and useful material meant to raise the consciousness of women.

This is our second attempt at initiating innovative methodologies towards greater understanding of social issues. The first of the Series, Shiva’s plight — Story of a Child Worker was well received and has inspired groups to take up the cause of child labourers.

KANTHAMMA highlights problems specific to the working women. Narrating the dreary routine of her daily existence, it raises many crucial issues confronted by women in this male-dominated and class society.

Hopefully, this booklet would open discussion on the ways and means of overcoming the obstacles hindering the socio-economic and cultural development of women. It hopes to serve women’s groups and other action groups in identifying problems and formulating programmes.

This booklet could be adapted and revised in accordance with the specific needs and problems of each area.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOKLET?

★ Form women’s study circles and initiate discussions on the issues raised here.

★ Use this as a study document to create awareness among women regarding their own problems.

★ Organise women’s action groups to fight against specific cases of oppression.

Send your comments, suggestions and write for copies to: Institute for Cultural Research & Action (ICRA)
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Grams: “SAMSKRUTI”
KANTHAMMA woke up with a start and knew immediately that she had overslept. The sun was up and the bells from the nearby church were ringing.
She looked around.

The children were tightly curled in sleep. Parvathi and Kanchi.

And next to her the baby Thai.
She stepped out of her house. There was no one at the tap. Usually there were five or six women waiting.

Akkava' was there.

Why is there no one at the tap, Akkava?

Because all you will get out of that tap now is an old wheeze.
DIDN'T YOU HEAR THAT AUTORICKSHAW GOING AROUND ANNOUNCING THAT THE WATER TIMINGS HAVE BEEN CHANGED. WE WILL ONLY GET WATER IN THE AFTERNOONS FROM NOW ON.

BUT I DON'T REACH HOME TILL EVENING. HOW WILL I GET WATER FOR COOKING?

TRAIN THAT LAZY DAUGHTER OF YOURS TO GET THE WATER. SHE NEEDN'T GO TO THAT CONVIENT SCHOOL. WHAT'S THE USE ANYWAY?

BUT KANTHAMMA WAS NOT LISTENING.
She went over in her mind other possibilities of procuring water to cook with. The well in the church was far away. The baby might wake in the meantime. Parvathi could go but she was too small to carry the bindige all the way back. She decided to go herself and go quickly.

She ran all the way to the church well.

At the church, fortunately there was no one outside all inside, praying probably.

She went to the well and pulled the rope. The bindige fell in with a splash.
Kanthamma rushed home, spilling quite a lot of water in her haste.

As she expected, the baby was awake and crawling near the fireplace.

None of the others were awake.

Parvathi! Wake up you lazy devil wake up!

She shouted angrily.
When Kanthamma finished cooking she served Bhakta first.

Then she served Parvathi and Kangi.

She put a little food into a small tiffin box for Bhakta to take to work.

She fed the baby some ragi. Took a little for herself too. Then rushed off to work.
Kanthamma broke into a run when she left the house. She was already late.

She could not see any of the others at the place where the tempo usually stopped.

If she missed the tempo, she would have to pay the bus fare - and get a short from the contractor.

Yes, she had missed the tempo.
Kanthamia waited for the bus. Meanwhile the city was coming alive. There seemed to be so many women, all rushing to work.

How do they manage to look so free and get to work without taking their little children with them.

But she knew they had servants to help them. She had been a domestic servant herself once.

At last the bus came.

She scrambled on.
By the time she reached the site it was very late.

She got down from the bus and hurried into the compound.
Work had already begun, rows of women and men were passing bandlis of cement to each other along a lime. No one noticed her as she went past.

She quickly moved to the corner of the site where the children were left.
She made a little room for Thai. There she would have to stay until Kanthamma finished work.

She wrapped a piece of cloth around her head and started moving towards her place in the line but not before the contractor caught sight of her.

That's the third time in two weeks you have come late!

Kanthamma kept quiet. She knew he would cut her pay. Best to say nothing otherwise he would cut her pay some more.
All the others were there, Lakshmi, Sardja, Ramesa Anthanahma. They laughed cheerfully when they saw her climbing up the scaffolding.

She hurried to her place on the scaffolding.

There was time for some more laughter, as the cement mixing machine had broken down. But it was really no laughing matter if there was no cement, there would be no money.
KANHAMM HAD TIME TO SEARCH FOR SOMETHING TO STAND ON. THE SHARP NAILS CUT HER FEET. AFTER SOME TIME, SHE FOUND TWO PIECES OF WOOD.

SOON THE CEMENT WAS COMING UP THE LINE AND FAST!

HERE! HERE! PUT IT HERE! HERE!

IF YOU CAN'T DO THIS JOB I WILL FIND SOMEONE ELSE TO DO IT!

THE MASON'S WERE IN A BAD TEMPER.
The women moved quickly. If they didn’t reach the quota by the end of the day, their pay would be cut.

Come! Come! If the masons have to wait for the cement, you will have to wait for the wages.
THE BANDI WAS ALWAYS THERE

SEVEN K.G.S
WEIGHT

CONTINUOUSLY MOVING

LIKE TIME ITSELF

THE DAY PASSED

MEASURED IN CEMENT BAYOLIS

THERE WAS ALWAYS ANOTHER ONE.
The cement kept coming endlessly.

The quota would be reached.

A full day's pay!
TELL RUKMINI TO TAKE MY PLACE

TELL RUKMINI TO TAKE KANTHAMMA'S PLACE

RUKMINI, GO DOWN AND TAKE KANTHAMMA'S PLACE
Rukmini climbed down and took Kannammamma's place.

Kannamma climbed down and fed her baby Thai.
She started to climb back up the scaffolding. The cement mixing machine had broken down again. The men were trying to mend it. Some time passed. Would it be lunch break now?

Yes, it was lunch break.
AS THEY HAD LUNCH KANTHAMMA LISTENED TO SAROJA'S STORY

THAT WOMAN IS DEAD NOW

THAT WOMAN WHOSE PHOTO WAS IN THE NEWSPAPER. SHE IS DEAD NOW

SHE HAD JUST GOT MARRIED, BUT HER HUSBAND WAS NOT HAPPY WITH THE Dowry. HE WANTED MORE. HER FAMILY COULD NOT PAY.

THERE WERE MANY ARGUMENTS BUT IN THE END HE HAD TO ACCEPT THAT HE WOULD NOT GET ANY MORE MONEY. THEN THERE WAS AN ACCIDENT.
HER SARI CAUGHT FIRE AND SHE COULD NOT PUT IT OUT

SHE TRIED TO GET OUT BUT THE DOOR WAS STUCK

THE FLAMES SPREAD QUICKLY

SHE BEAT ON THE DOOR AND SHOUTED AND SCREAMED, BUT NOBODY HEARD HER.

EVENTUALLY SHE DIED IN THE FLAMES.

BUT PEOPLE SAY THAT IT WAS NOT AN ACCIDENT. THEY SAY HE POURER KEROSENE OVER HER, SET HER ALIGHT AND LOCKED THE DOOR.

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RAMEEZA SPOKE

THERE WAS A WOMAN WHO USED TO LIVE NEAR US. SHE HAD ONE BABY. IT WAS A GIRL CHILD. AFTER THAT SHE BECAME SICK. SHE WENT TO THE HOSPITAL. THEY EXAMINED HER.

THEY SAID SHE COULD NOT HAVE ANY MORE BABIES

HER HUSBAND WAS ANGRY

I WANTED YOU TO PRODUCE A SON FOR ME. NOW IT SEEMS THAT YOU CANNOT DO THAT!
YOU ARE NO MORE USE AS A WIFE TO ME. LEAVE MY HOUSE, TAKE YOUR GIRL CHILD WITH YOU AND FIND SOME WAY TO DISPOSE OF YOURSELF AND THE CHILD.

THAT SAME NIGHT SHE LEFT THE HOUSE AND WENT TO THE WELL. THE DEEPEST WELL IN THE DISTRICT.

HELDING THE BABY TIGHTLY, SHE JUMPED IN, TO HER DEATH.

THE POLICEMAN SAY IT WAS SUICIDE.
Would you kill yourself if your husband told you to do it?

A wife must do everything her husband tells her.

Yes and if she doesn't she must go from his house.

And if she goes from his house? Who will take her in? Answer — nobody. She might as well kill herself.

Don't you think that women have a right to be treated like human beings with lives of their own?

Come!

It was the contractor.
LUNCH WAS OVER, THEY WENT BACK TO WORK

PAYING SLABS! YOU TOO, PAYING SLABS HERE!

AT FIRST THE WORK WAS HARD. KANTHAMMA'S ARMS WERE ACHING. ONE LORRY LOAD OF PAYING SLABS TO BE MOVED. AFTER SOME TIME SHE GOT USED TO IT

RUKNINI TALKED

PAYING SLABS, THAT'S JUST WHAT WE ARE

WHAT DO YOU MEAN RUKNINI!
WE ARE JUST PAVING SLABS TO THEM!

THEY WALK ALL OVER US!

YOU SHOULDN'T SAY SUCH THINGS

WE DO THE WORK, THEY SIT AND WATCH.

WELL THEY HAVE TO WATCH US. THEY NEED TO THINK ABOUT THEIR BUSINESS

BUSINESS? YOU SHOULD SAY PROFIT

THEY ARE THINKING OF THE PROFIT TO BE MADE OUT OF US WOMEN WORKERS
They can make huge profits because it costs them so little to employ us women.

What do you say, Kanthamma?

Don't ask me, I'm only a woman.

But Kanthamma thought carefully about all that Rukmini had said to her.
THE REST OF THE DAY SEEMED TO PASS SO SLOWLY, UNTIL AT LAST, THE GOOD NEWS CAME

OKAY EVERYBODY
THE CASH HAS ARRIVED

ONE WEEKS PAY DUE. THAT WAS SOMETHING WORTH WAITING FOR.

SO KANHAMMA,
YOU WILL SEE THAT MAN OF YOURS TONIGHT, FOR SURE!

HER HUSBAND KANAPPEN WAS AN ALCOHOLIC AND NOT OFTEN AT HOME

THEY JOINED THE PAY QUEUE AND WATCHED THE MEN GETTING PAID

SEE HOW MUCH THEY GET PAID!

NEARLY TWICE AS MUCH AS US!
Just then, there was a disturbance further up the pay queue.

[Ai-yo!]

It was Rukmini. The contractor had casually stroked her back and told her that as she was a low woman, she had no right to object.

Rukmini spat at him.

The contractor was furious.

Okay, that's it. No pay for you.
THE OTHER WORKERS LED RUKMINI AWAY

SOME OF THE OLDER WOMEN TRIED TO PLEAD WITH THE CONTRACTOR

SILENCE! NO MORE TALK OF THIS OR NONE OF YOU WILL GET PAID!

THEY DECIDED TO SAY NO MORE ABOUT IT
WHEN IT WAS KANTHAMMA'S TURN SHE JUST TOOK THE AMOUNT SHE WAS GIVEN FOUR RUPEES LESS THAN SHE SHOULD HAVE GOT.

THIS WAS NO TIME FOR ARGUMENT.

BY THE TIME SHE GOT BACK, IT WAS DUSK.
She stopped to pick up a few provisions and some sweets for the children. Lakshmiamma was there.

Ah! You are clever! Buying your provisions before that man of yours sees you. He just now passed this way going to your house.

She reached the house but stopped for a moment before going in. He was in there. It seemed quiet. Hoping for the best, she went to the door.
She entered the house.

There he was.

But what was this?

Jasmine! He had brought it for her.

And the children had sweets.
SHE BROUGHT HIM SOME WATER

HE DRANK

WHY ARE YOU LOOKING SO SAD? DIDN'T YOU LIKE THE JASMINE I BROUGHT YOU?

YES, BUT I KNOW WHERE YOU GOT THE MONEY TO PAY FOR IT

HE EXPLODED WITH RAGE
I brought it as a gift for you!

CRACK

CRACK

My son's money is my money so don't interfere!

She lay there for some time gazing at the little jasmine flower stained with her own blood. Was this a dream? The sound of his angry voice reminded her it was real and the nose bleed was real too, but still it felt like a dream. He couldn't hurt her anymore. She didn't care this had happened too many times. There would come a day when she would find a way to fight back. She knew she had the strength, a strength far greater than physical strength.