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Paper No. 42
'WHY ISN'T A WOMAN MORE LIKE A MAN?' BECAUSE.

Because, I want to be and remain like a woman, and not be like a man. As a woman I am different, and I enjoy the difference. As a woman I can be as good as a man, if not better. As a woman there are some special worlds only I can enter, though a man may have limited access if he is lucky enough. As a woman I am a distinctive and very valuable member of the human species. For all these reasons, and a few more, I want to be a Woman in a Persons' World.

Over the years many dedicated and well-intentioned people – mainly women, but also some exceptional men – have worked diligently to promote the cause of Women's Equality with Men. Much progress has been made yet much still remains to be achieved. I would suggest that maybe we should re-think the thought of striving for Women's Equality with Men. Maybe we should instead aim single-mindedly for a Woman's Right for a Woman to be a Person. In this endeavour we would need to be less on the defensive and more on the attack.

Let me explain: when we are on the defensive we tend to find instances where men do better or secure for themselves a larger slice of the pie, and point these out as discriminatory. We tend to measure ourselves and our successes – and failures, too – against benchmarks set by and for men. We tend, in other words to either be seeking to stand next to men or ahead of them. We inevitably set ourselves as direct adversaries to men, and
sometimes to those women, often mothers, very often mothers-in-law, who side with men! But, surely this is not our purpose!

Being defensive also makes us, dare I say it, sometimes overly sensitive to the 'exploitation' issue. Let me hasten to clarify that in this context I am not referring to the barbaric mental and bodily hurt caused to women as a form of distorted revenge or insecure male machismo. What I am referring to are the old and persistent charges of 'exploiting' the female face or form, projecting women in traditional roles, etc., etc. A great deal of energy and anger is spent on chasing cases, especially in media of this 'exploitation' issue. Creating high profile headlines, the focus of attention shifts to these real but somewhat peripheral issues. Issues that are perhaps better addressed by our attacking the root causes that allow them to happen.

In this defensive mode, supporters of the just cause of Women in this World, tend to get isolated and categorised as 'Those Feminine Activists.' This isolation is neither desirable nor useful. Perhaps if we were to move from a defensive to an attacking mode we might be able to serve our purpose better.

In an attacking mode we must concentrate and focus our efforts on ensuring that all of the people, including in large measure Women but also many others including kids, get a just deal. Present disparities are far too wide — far too unjust and unfair — far too intolerable. As more and more people waken to this realisation, the 'army of anger' will grow and multiply. Let me assure you that this is not a forlorn hope; nor, will it remain for too long a vast lost cause.

Why am I hopeful and optimistic that after centuries of exploitation, things will change? For one simple reason alone. A reason that is introducing a new
force into people’s lives. A reason that overcomes barriers of literacy and distance. The reason is TELEVISION.

Yes, TELEVISION that so many have decried, and often rightly so, for destroying values and imposing alien cultures and violent lifestyles. This dynamic medium is a major change agent. A change agent that is making the deprived aware and alert to their deprivation. Intolerance in accepting this state of affairs is spreading as people see themselves and their problems and challenges exposed, talked about, and, even dramatised on the box! It has been an interesting lesson to watch the rapid and exciting manner in which the average man and especially woman have grown confident in facing the camera and airing their views. And most excitingly it is on television that several women in media have made their mark. For example, Neena Gupta, till recently known solely as an actress of merit and a woman of personal strength and character, has emerged as a television serial director (and actress) of a provocative and engrossing programme: ‘Saans.’ This serial depicts in very real-life terms the emergence of a ‘liberated woman’ no longer ready to meekly accept the ‘other woman’ despite pressure from her husband and his parents to do so. Importantly, too, her mother reaches out and provides her emotional and practical support. She moves in, kids and all, to stay with her mother and to support her family goes out to work. Quite a change from when it was not ‘the right thing’ to admit that your daughter’s marriage had failed. Thousands of dowry and other harassment deaths are mute testimony to this retrograde social belief. Slowly, values are changing and media efforts such as these help spread the change across the community. An important element of using media effectively has been so well
understood and demonstrated by Ms. Gupta. She has drawn viewers to her programme and succeeded in ensuring that her very important 'message' reaches out and touches millions across the country. And the change for the better is sure to come!

Another important indicator to measure change in the context of the emergence of the deprived - men and women - is the impact of education. My measure for estimating this impact is twofold:

1. An analysis, somewhat random I will admit, of the results of the competitive services entrance exams. For those unfamiliar with Indian conditions, let me clarify: Every year all-India examinations are held for entrance into key government services such as the Foreign Service, the Indian Administrative Service, the Police, and others. Increasingly, over the years we find women among the top rankers. This year, a woman gained the top spot in what is perhaps the most prestigious of the lot, the IAS.

2. Preceding this has been the rising success of young girls in their final school examinations. India's girls are proving more than a match for the boys.

For me the lesson from these observations is clear: Women can do it...and are doing it!

By the way, to reinforce my fundamental contention that all those that were or are deprived need a break, there is now in India (in fact this had been happening for some time) many, many cases of the earlier deprived making it to the top. Several of our top scientists, industrialists, sportsmen and women, government functionaries and also, most beautiful and elegant models - male
and female – have been individuals from what is conventionally described as ‘humble backgrounds’, aka as deprived families.

Turning now to how Indian women have fared in media. In this context let us scan the total media scenario – women working in media, including advertising and of course press and television.

I started out in advertising, in London in the very early fifties. Relocating to India in the mid-fifties I discovered, to my great pleasure, that the world was truly my oyster. Being a woman did not appear to place any barriers on my way. There were in fact some added benefits to being a woman – catching people by surprise being one of them! In those early times, when the number of women at work was limited, women were treated not just with respect but importantly with professional regard. I do believe that this was also the experience in publishing and radio. Television was non-existent. Looking back it seems that this attitude towards women at work was most probably a direct reflection of society’s values and behaviour standards.

Progressing rapidly through the decades of the sixties, seventies and eighties we arrive at the turbulent nineties. During this period many fundamental changes have occurred with great rapidity. Major changes have effected both the scale and the scope of women in the workplace. Today, women are at work in almost all professions, trade and industry.

Concurrently, also over this same period, media, especially cinema, has presented women in startlingly negative roles. More significantly, cinema has used the abuse of women as an audience attracting device: just recall the infamous, yet almost mandatory, inclusion of lewd song and dance sequences; the violent fights between man and woman, and, woman and
woman; rape, stripping, etc. These images have sadly acted as dramatic real-life role models! Very often people, especially men, have considered working women as fair game. Very often people, especially women, have considered that successful working women have used unfair means to get ahead. Both assumptions have not served the cause of women.

Fortunately, trends in the late nineties indicate that something very positive has started: women are emerging, as Persons of Substance in their own right. Slowly, yet steadily, women are being portrayed as achievers, as persons of self-worth and character, as individuals breaking the mould, as leaders capable of providing leadership. These portrayals reflect both reality and create reality by encouraging others to step out and take charge of their own destinies. One can chafe at the slow pace of change. One can also fret that media should do more, much more, to hasten this process.

Others continue to blame media for exploiting the woman as a sex object. I have a feeling that such use will continue, hopefully, in a more disciplined and 'tasteful' manner...if such a thing is possible.

Yet others find it demeaning to project women as wives, housewives and mothers – this is a charge often made against advertising. Quite frankly I am very confused and somewhat concerned that people, mainly women activists, should find this so. Having lived both lives I can assure you that no career is better or more important than that of Mother.

What factors are causing these changes? What forces triggered these factors? I believe that the most important are: the native and latent talent and intelligence of women; the increasing awareness that women can do it; the encouraging realisation that women have done it! In all this media has played
an important role. But much more can and should be done. It is here that television has a major part to play.

Finally, I would like to suggest a few Do’s and some Don’ts in working with media in the cause of women in media.

Do recognise the good that media has already done – just consider the number of programmes with women anchorpersons. Programmes that go much beyond traditional ‘women’s programmes’ such as fashion, beauty or cookery shows.

Do recognise the work opportunities that media has provided. Women have occupied professional positions at all levels including the top.

Do appreciate and support media in its endeavour to right the wrongs and curb the evils of gross exploitation and criminal violence, against the mind and body, of all the oppressed and deprived – not just women, but also men, children, the elderly, the sick and the handicapped.

Don’t get trapped into taking the easy route of trashing media for featuring sexist material, etc.

Don’t expend your energies in fighting people – at least those in media. Instead co-opt them, women and men, to work for the cause.

Going by the Indian experience, I would most confidently claim that the Next Millennium belongs to both Women and Men, as Persons of Equality Living Together in One World!

TARA SINHA
27th June, 1999.