

The Roots of Heaven: The Politics of Housework, Reproduction and Childcare

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To the men: "On you it depends to be a strong help to the women in the raising of children. Share the women's sorrow."

-- The Maiden of the Dakota Legend ¹

"Once, in a village next to ours, a woman got up at midnight to boil paddy. She was the wife of a wealthy landowner who owned several paan as well as paddy fields. In the morning she would have to feed fifteen laborers who would come to cut the paan leaves. There was no time to lose. She boiled paddy for the rest of the night, sitting next to the hot stove, carrying about heavy buckets of water, lifting out the paddy and spreading it over the yard to dry. She took no rest and had no food. There was no time. She cooked for the fifteen men in the morning and served them. Before she could rest, have her bath and eat, other tasks needed to be completed, and by the time she had her bath, it was noon. She sat down to eat panua and probably ate too much for her hungry stomach to hold, for she vomited twice and became unconscious. Her wealthy husband had her rushed to hospital where he threw bags full of money in front of the doctor pleading that he save his wife. They gave her saline, but it didn't work. She died in the afternoon." ²

It is so obvious that females do housework, bear children and care for children and others in the household, that it is simply shocking to realize they do not have to do these tasks. If males share the first and last tasks equally with girls and women, then everyone's life would change drastically. It would bring about a revolution. Let us discuss this ironic truth in the context of the reality in rural West Bengal.

Rural women here spend their whole life doing housework, bearing and caring for children in their natal and later their husband's households. In many districts women stretch their time and energy to breaking point trying to earn money also.

"So what?" you will ask. "Everyone knows this. Why bother to spend so much time studying, analyzing and publicly discussing the issues of housework and childcare? Everyone knows girls and women do all that. They always have. What's unusual and special about the subject to warrant so much attention?"

Questioning the "Natural" Laws

Being female means having a commitment to a home and family, to domestic affairs. Being male means having a commitment to earning for a family, to the outside world.

The set-up is "natural." Being female means having to do all the cooking, cleaning, fetching of water and looking after everyone. Being male means not having to do all these things. After all, everyone knows subconsciously that it's a man's world, and that women's role is to keep basic needs satisfied, serve men and, naturally, reproduce the species. Luxuries such as freedom and autonomy are for men, although women have "rights" too. In fact, the social and religious laws themselves are only upholding what is natural, like for example, women depending on men (father, husband, son).

In rural West Bengal, it is common knowledge that the differences between men and women are natural and therefore irrevocable, such as daily work, social status and expectations for the future. So if everything is natural, then what is all this talk about "patriarchy" and "women's oppression?" Surely it must be a foreign notion that women, like men, can be free and autonomous, because every Bengali villager knows that their women's prisoner-like existence is natural. And if it is natural, it must be right too -- which means that anyone who says that women's prisoner-like existence is wrong must be struck down forthwith. Other "foreign" systems can be absorbed -- like Brahmanism,

Islam, Capitalism, Marxism and English medium education -- because none of these challenge natural male superiority. But how can we allow "feminism" to take root in rural West Bengal? How can we allow our village women to be free, our devoted Sitas and Fatimas to be "corrupted?" As females have babies, they are inevitably weaker than men. It is an unalterable law of nature that women become mothers, so must be married off, sent away and kept within the house of the husband. Surely this is obvious! Men do not become pregnant, so automatically they are superior. Just look at the way the villagers live, and hear what they think about sexual differences. Their ways and views prove that patriarchy is a rural reality, and as such must be natural. Surely, no one is going to dispute this?

Ancient epics like *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* as well as God's word in the Koran, Bible, the Doctrines of Manu and much of Indian philosophy all confirm women's dependence. Who will then dare to challenge these laws which are so holy, and without which society would undoubtedly break down? Challenge is impossible, anyway, because religious law means the law of Bhagawan, Allah or God, and as such must be the ultimate law. Just as the former kings derived their authority from God, rural men in West Bengal are masters of their women, for it has been sanctioned by the Most High. So why bother to discuss housework and reproduction?

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Wouldn't it be best to leave things the way they are?

Even Marx did not say that women labor in the house, become pregnant, have babies and care for people. (He said "Men reproduce themselves.") Lenin only made a brief reference to the regrettable "male right" which forced women to slave in the kitchen. But it was only a brief reference made during the great revolutionary years, and nothing came of it. Consequently, as these great men omitted to consider these issues, why should their followers working in West Bengal consider the housework, childcare and reproductive consciousness are important?

Perhaps the irony of the above paragraph has exhausted its usefulness now. While describing an unnatural and unjust social reality, an ironic style may disturb one's tranquil acceptance of this reality. However, while suggestions for changing this reality are to be made, then bitterness is not the best taste with which to flavor one's words. It is simply so that some of the most progressive elements of society do not discuss women's oppressed condition within patriarchy, let alone develop strategies for changing it. To focus attention on the productive system only leads ultimately to a strengthening of this system of commodity production and accumulation. It does not revolutionize anything else. To be sure, the powerlessness of rural women could be diminished by their greater control over economic and productive resources, and by

secular and egalitarian legal, educational and health infrastructure. But patriarchal values will continue to oppress girls and women. As long as men continue to claim that they are naturally superior to women and that housework and childcare are activities to be done by women, the fundamental unnaturalness and injustice of contemporary society will remain, and the sex-based contradictions between human beings will continue to sub-

reproduce themselves like a hidden cancer.

What makes this discussion so acutely necessary also is because the struggle for female freedom and autonomy in rural West Bengal has become very real and very locality-specific. Ordinary and often uneducated women as well as some men are challenging the economic and patriarchal structures of their society. My study is a very small part of this collective effort.

Subversion and Feminism

Subversion is a term which implies a steady organic breaking down from within. It is more appropriate for healthy and lasting social change than "revolution" which implies a violent and bloody overthrow of one power by another. Since male power is oppressing females in a very real way in rural West Bengal in the twentieth century, and given the complexities of a rural economy largely dependent on women's labor and the Calcutta metropolis, and thus also within the exploiting grip of national and international capitalism, I have chosen the term "subversion" to describe a possible method of profound and lasting change. Subversion at the roots of each household and from within each locality, together with recreation in harmony with the environment (the land, rivers, forests and wildlife) is the only way to end poverty, the destruction of nature and the oppression of people in patriarchy.

Given the realities of rural West Bengal, to advocate that housework and childcare as well as outside activities be done by both men and women is to be subversive. Certainly, many would consider this anti-social, irreligious, ridiculous or just impossible. After all, the social norm is that Bengali village women do not go out to earn money, unless forced to by poverty. So to believe that the existing sexual division of labor must come to an end and be replaced by the sharing of all labor by men and women in the private and public spheres, and to try to actually change the norm in practice, is to be subversive.

Feminism means different things for different people. It has often been misunderstood. The media often deliberately distorts feminism too, like in the radio and television plays where an educated rich woman is shown as selfish and lazy, causing endless

problems for her hen-pecked husband and long-suffering father whom she petulantly addresses as "Daddy." Or there is the America-returned Bengali *mehsaheb* mother, who teaches her innocent daughter how to dominate her husband. Such characters are invariably portrayed as fat, ugly, cigarette-smoking, rich, miserly and vain. They may or may not wear trousers.

However, a more truthful picture of a feminist would be of a person (woman or man) who does not accept male supremacy in the household or society, and who tries to establish female freedom as a pre-condition to freedom for everyone and a healthy society. The successes of feminists everywhere (except the rural areas) have started to worry many men. These men then produce plays for the masses where feminists are made to seem terrible, if not simply funny. In this way, these men who want to retain the male supremacist culture and institutions hope that feminism will lose its appeal. These patriarchs, however, will not be successful in holding back the tide of this powerful ideological-practical movement which is feminism.

A feminist theory which can explain why and how patriarchy developed is still in the process of being evolved, the delay being due mainly to the fact that those with the time and education to work on theory have, until recent times, been mostly men. And rare is the man who can have a woman's consciousness about the world. However, the times are changing. Feminists are telling Marxists that men do not reproduce themselves; women are telling men to share the housework and childcare; white people have become aware that America was not discovered by Columbus; nuclear power developers are being challenged by environmentalists; fertilizer companies are in competition with organic farmers; tribals and peasants are resisting the encroachment of multi-national companies and governments on their lands and forests; notwithstanding modern "comforts," many people are beginning to realize the real value of ancient ways.

Below I submit a broad theory which I hope will help to clarify the reasons for the development of patriarchy, and also explain the reasons for social and economic injustice and the destruction of the natural environment. Much excellent research has been published

describing in detail the characteristics of patriarchy in different localities of India and abroad. However, there is a serious deficiency in these empirical works. Even though many of these reports have appended suggestions for the improvement of women's conditions, there is never any theoretical explanation of why patriarchy evolved in the first place. Such an omission means that patriarchy is considered to be as natural as eating. There is no attempt to analyze its roots as the real need of males to define themselves and their roles in a reproducing living world as it moves from today to tomorrow. [3]

It is inadequate to explain patriarchy by saying that men are physically stronger than women, even if they were. (They are not.) Nor can male supremacy be accounted for by saying that women have babies and so stay at home. Matriarchies existed in the past and still do in parts of India, proving that patriarchy is not natural, but only the result of a process of change over time. A good theory must explain why this process was started, and why most social changes have been violently wrought by the overriding need of males to define themselves in a society created by women. Furthermore, it must offer a means of mediating alienation and solving real life problems. In other words, such a theory should be subversive and regenerative, analytical and healing in a holistic way.

A theory must explain the two spheres of life:

1. Reproduction of children;
2. Production of basic necessities and thereafter of unnecessary accumulation.

In the sphere of reproduction, men and women's reproductive consciousness are different because their reproductive roles are determined by different reproductive bodies, biologically and anatomically speaking. [4] Thus, men are conscious of the loss of their contribution to the reproductive process -- the sperm seed. The lengthy gestation period and status of the male as a non-worker throughout the pregnancy and delivery of the baby product means that paternity is doubtful. Hence, the real need for men to define their role in the reproducing society. To compensate for the loss and to ensure paternity, men as a gender group have evolved mythology, culture and institutions that reassure all males

psychologically, and in actuality ensure their superiority over women in the private and public spheres of reproduction (the household and those cultural norms which determines gender roles.) Men's roles in the birth of a child and as a father are given an idealistic importance which they do not have in reality, while women's labor is ignored or scorned. If not, women are idealized as "Mother" and thus encouraged to be only mothers and stay at home. Thus, over the centuries, thinking men have turned nature upside down and made patriarchy seem natural. To completely overcome all sense of alienation, men appropriate the fruit of women's reproductive labor, the child, and to ensure that this child can belong to no one but him and "his" woman (wife), he keeps other men away from her, an arrangement to which other men generally concur in the interests of their gender species' self-definition.

In the sphere of production, men have accumulated outside more and more because of their alienation from the reproductive process. This has been made possible by keeping women inside doing housework and childcare, and by using force as well as cultural and religious norms propagated by patriarchs and sometimes enacting legislation, to crush the resistance of women. Men as non-laborers expropriate women's domestic labor in the form of free time, which they use to meet basic needs and thereafter to accumulate unnecessarily. Marx analyzed productive relations as they exist outside the household, and for this reason his analysis is inadequate. Secondly, his view of production as a process of controlling nature for the benefit of "Man" (typical of most male philosophers), was no better than that of the capitalists.

The solution to the problem of the patriarchs does not lie in increased production, just as the key to women's freedom does not lie in women's access to the means of production and education on "equal" terms with men, which an end to patriarchy would automatically make available for women. Rather, the solution lies in men's overcoming their need to produce commodities and make money unnecessarily. This they will only be able to do by mediating their lack of importance in the sphere of reproduction, by sharing housework and childcare equally. It is not simply a matter of psychological healing, but of actual physical labor which men must start to do, voluntarily,

or which women must organize for and force them to do.

Reproduction

The Process of Reproduction

Below I have given a brief description of the events in the reproductive process as they affect women and men physically and at the level of the consciousness.

WOMAN

1. Keeps the seeds of sexual intercourse inside her womb. No sense of loss.
2. Pregnancy. She nourishes new life within her own body. Sense of intergration, oneness with life and fulfillment. She is a laborer in the reproductive process.
3. Delivery. She gives birth to her "product," the child. She is creative and integrated with past, present and future, naturally, through her reproductive labor. She does not need laws or customs to sanction her maternity. The child is certainly hers because reproducing was a lived and visible experience.
4. The child is valuable because it contains the mother's labor and is a new being itself.

MAN

1. Loses the seed. Sense of loss.
2. Pregnancy. Disconnected from new life processes. Sense of alienation and dissatisfaction. He is a non-laborer in the reproductive process.
3. Delivery. Non-participant. He creates artificially/unnaturally in the public world -- money, commodities, science, art, technology, social, legal and political institutions -- to fulfill and integrate himself. He evolved religious and social customs to sanction his importance as a father. Paternity is an ideal concept, not a lived experience.
4. He appropriates both the mother's labor and the child by giving them his name and making them live in his home.

Male domination in society and the household is rooted in men's consciousness. This is the theory. It will never be possible to remove the cancer of patriarchy unless its roots are dug up and exposed for what they

are -- men's real need to define themselves in a society created by women.

The Means of Reproduction

Three basic issues are involved here:

1. The woman's authority over her own body.

Bengali village women generally do not have complete and independent control over their own body.

a) The system of arranged marriage, especially when the girl is still a child, is the chief violence used to deprive women of control over their own means of reproduction.

b) Women are often not allowed to practice contraception or to have an abortion. On the other hand, "family planning" is made the burden of the wife, with government and family members pressuring the wife to have a ligation, rather than the husband to have a vasectomy, even though the latter is a less complicated operation.

c) If girl babies are born, the mother may have to endure repeated pregnancies until a son is born. Decisions regarding whether she should bear a child or not are often made by her husband or mother-in-law, not by herself.

2. Privileges due to the pregnant woman and lactating mother.

Bengali village women rarely enjoy sufficient food, care, rest or tranquility during pregnancy. Prevailing customs, like waiting for the husband to finish his meal, continue to be followed during the vital reproductive periods. Delivery is often undergone in unhygienic surroundings, and pain and discomfort are compounded by anti-maternal customs such as denying the mother a bath, fresh air, sunshine and adequate food.

3. The place of reproduction.

Bengali village women leave their parents and go to stay with the husband at his parents' home, which is often very far from the natal home. This weakens women in the following ways:

a) From birth, a girl is generally regarded by her parents as an object for others (*porer jinish*). Consequently, she is deprived and discriminated against. On the other hand, her

brother will be expected to support his parents later, and is consequently given the best the household can afford in food, clothes, education and liberty.

b) The girl is taught that housework and childcare are the responsibilities of women. From an early age, her time and energy are spent on these tasks, while her brother remains freer.

c) The mother of a boy expects to be relieved of housework and childcare after her son is married and brings home a wife. Hence, because a man did not share domestic work with his mother before, she in turn becomes a source of oppression to the wife of her son.

d) Knowing that ultimately she will have to leave her own home and serve others elsewhere for the rest of her life, a young girl does not try to develop an independent life. She internalizes society's opinion of her as "an object for others" and neglects studies. The urge to be self-sufficient and support others by going out to work is not developed in young Bengali girls. As a result, they grow up dependent knowing they will remain dependent, accept this, and often relish the dependent existence of a wife in a patriarchy. Needless to say, the early training and expectations of boys are different.

Therefore, to counter the above factors which weaken women, it is essential that:

a) Marriage be voluntary, the partners choosing each other.

b) Women continue to live with their parents or live separately with their husband. Only if it is more convenient for the woman should she move to her husband's parents' house.

Women must consciously organize to bring the means of reproduction back into their own hands, which is how it was originally. Only then will women be able to liberate themselves from much of the psychological and physical pain they suffer as wives and mothers.

Marriage

Young village girls know that eventually they will have to leave their home, become someone's wife and spend the rest of their days serving him and his parents and bring up

their children in his household. Young, especially poor village girls, have no choice in the matter; no freedom to decide whether to marry or not, and usually not much choice about whom they will marry either. Marriage is arranged and carried out by the parents, together with a holy *man* and witnesses. The young girls are passive participants throughout a procedure which is mystified by a plethora of rites and rituals (in the case of the Bengali Hindu marriage).

Women have to be taught that marriage is necessary. "Girls become old at twenty, so get them married off quickly," and "The husband is the great teacher; the heavenly tree of a woman's life," are village sayings which spring from men's need to institutionalize and idealize the bondage of women. Women used to bear and bring up their children in their natal homes, and only later did it become customary for women to move to the man's house.

"Marriage by capture was the ancient form of securing a wife," [5] and arranged marriages in rural West Bengal are only another form of this ancient "capture." The Hindu woman's mark of marriage, the red sindoor, represents the blood of the woman from the cut her abductor made on her forehead to brand her, [6] and also perhaps the blood of her wounder and killed relations. Certainly, the foundation of the sex-based division of labor in the patriarchal household was violent and bloody, though later it became institutionalized by a ceremony -- colorful, social and beguilingly mystical -- marriage.

Marriage for men has brought many advantages, the two principal ones being:

1. An unpaid domestic worker who provides hard labor and various support and other services throughout the day and night. Since housework and childcare are considered natural work for women, men do not pay wives. Or to put it another way, having captured the woman, the man can use her like a slave. It has been said that the first slaves were women.

2. A mother for his children who stays in his house for the sake of his self-respect and prestige. Since men felt the need to establish their paternity, they evolved a system forcing women and children to stay with him and bear his name.

The process began long ago. The spokesman for Hindu men, Manu, could not have written his doctrines unless there was already a large crowd of supporters anxious that what men wanted then be actualized by law and religion. If women had not already come under the control of men by that time (about 500 B.C.), it is unlikely they would have allowed Manu to legislate the following:

"Though of bad conduct or debauched, or even devoid of (good) qualities, a husband must always be worshipped like a god by a good wife."

"In her childhood a girl should be under the will of her father; in her youth, of her husband; her husband being dead, of her sons; a woman should never enjoy her own will."

Women had already been captured for their labor and childbearing capacity, and now they had to be tamed and domesticated to suit the needs of the patriarchy. However, in Manu's time, unlike nowadays, men who wanted to accumulate riches and become renowned patriarchs had to try to please women first:

"Therefore, women are ever to be honored at ceremonies and festivals, with ornaments, clothes and food, by men who desire wealth."

"For if the wife be not pleased, she cannot please her husband; from displeasure of the husband, again, progeny does not arise." [7]

Nowadays, however, the status of women has deteriorated so much that to be "captured" women have to pay men. In Manu's time, marriage had to be made attractive to women; nowadays, village women consider themselves lucky if they are not harassed for dowry and deserted afterwards.

In a similar way, Mohammedan Law legislates practices which were being developed by men, and which needed enforcing:

"When a girl is a minor it is permissible in Mohammedan Law that her father or grandfather or other paternal relatives give her away."

"The obligation of becoming faithful and obedient to her husband is imposed upon the wife."

The ancient form of marriage by capture gave way to marriage by purchase, "and thus the notion of acquisition of a wife as proper paved the way for marriage by consent subject to dower." [8]

According to Mohammedan Law, "Marriage brings about a relation between two persons of opposite sexes, based on and arising from permanent contract for procreation and legalizing of children." But what sort of contract is it

when the terms are already "imposed" and "permanent" for women; when only men have the legal right to *Talaq* but the wife cannot divorce herself from her husband without his consent?

Why are Hindu, Muslim and tribal women sometimes murdered by their own relatives if they marry or even mix with men of another community although men are not so stric-tured? Do not all these laws prove in fact only one thing -- men's insecurity, which can only be resolved by strict control over women? The institution of marriage and attitudes to mixing between the sexes are rooted in men's insecurity which makes them want to control the entire reproductive process.

Images of Village Women

Let us begin our discussion by studying the contemporary village consciousness which "boosts" the male ego and negates or scorns the female existence. Only a few popular village sayings have been cited from a collection of several hundred:

"A girl is born in the family,
O, what bad luck has she brought."

"The birth of a girl is equal to a burden."

"You, a girl, are born to eat up all the wealth of the parents."

"A girl, or a beast!"

"It is a curse of seven lives to be a father to a girl."

"Kill the baby if it is a girl before she is a month old."

"Son is wealth, daughter is waste."

"Feed a son on gold plate, the daughter on banana leaf."

"Women are like creepers -- they live and thrive on men." [9]

The *griha Lakhi* image (where the wife is to be the goddess of wealth for the household) is one of the only positive images for Hindu Bengali women, and as such, responsible for perpetuating and enforcing the family-oriented and housebound life of the women who try to be *griha Lakhi*. The other positive and equally restricting image for women in a patriarchal society is as "Ma" or the Mother. Men value women only because as Mother and *griha Lakhi*, women devote their entire lives to men.

To ensure that growing girls never become independent (independent girls may not devote

their lives to men), married life is made out to be the only and ultimate way of life for women. Anything else is simply wrong. Consequently, girls drop out of school earlier and in much larger numbers than boys, and are married off at a younger age (illegally). Nowadays, poor fathers sell land and go into life-long debt to pay a man and his family to marry his daughter, with cash and goods euphemistically called "gifts to the daughter." Such is the importance of marriage to the patriarchs! Rarely do villagers spend as much on their unmarried daughter's education and well-being as they do when they pay to get rid of her. What a horrifying negation of the mother's work and love!

"Girls become old at twenty, so get them married off quickly."

"Husband is the greatest teacher, the heavenly tree of a woman's life (i.e., which fulfills all her needs.)"

"Man is a tamal tree whose right is to be loved; woman is the creeper begging."

"A woman asks for life in order to be enjoyed by man."

"Whatever a woman may do, later she'll have to become a slave."

"Woman has no value, no respect without a husband."

"Man has all the rights; woman, your all is at your husband's feet."

"Boys will learn to read and write; maids will learn to cook."

"If the husband dies, she'll become a widow; if the wife dies, he'll get another." [10]

The image of women as easily disposable objects of no value as well as the image of men as ones at liberty to do what they like to do with women are reinforced by current village sayings like the following:

"If a woman is killed by her husband, she will find peace."

"If she tells people she's been raped, she'll be loathed by everyone."

"Don't live with a man who doesn't beat you."

"Woman, cattle and drum -- the more you beat them, the better the sound."

"The more you beat your wife, the greater pleasure your hand gets. Also, if you don't beat her, she'll be unhappy."

"Torture by the husband is not torture at all; it is a declaration of love, oiled with shohag (marital bliss) Don't worry about it. Husband is god. Follow him always." [11]

Images in the mind or consciousness become reality, of course. However, I should not recount here the atrocities meted out on vil-

lage women by their "God." Beating, psychological torture, rape, desertion and murder of women by their husband, his parents and friends (often with the connivance of political parties and police), are documented elsewhere and featured as staple reports in the daily newspapers.

The Invisible Reality of Women (India and West Bengal)

Now let us contrast patriarchal rural fantasies with the actuality of rural women's lives. The information comes from A) detailed time and energy-use surveys of rural women and men within the household done by individuals and non-government organizations, and B) the Government of India Census of 1981 and National Sample Survey. Although the latter has highlighted several domestic activities, these same activities remain unrecorded in the Census statistics. This "invisibility" itself clearly demonstrates patriarchal values of the level of the urban educated well-to-do which replicate the ignorance of the illiterate poor, and thus solidify, irrespective of class, caste or creed, the all-pervasive control of men over women in India. [12]

A) The National Commission on Self-Employed Women wrote in its report *Sram-shakti*:

There are a number of studies to show that women work for longer hours and contribute more than men in terms of total labor energy spent by the household members. On account of deeply entrenched social customs, taboos and prejudices, women's work continues to be invisible and confined more to non-monetary activities. "It has been observed that the average hours of unpaid work done by married women outside the home varied from 6.13 to 7.53 hours per day, some of them working more than 10 hours each day. Apart from domestic duties, women engaged in agricultural operations work on an average [of] about 12 hours on the farm and in taking care of cattle at home."

There are numerous activities like free collection of fodder and fuel, maintaining of dairy, poultry and animals, vegetable growing, food processing, sewing, weaving etc. in which women are engaged and increase the "household's command over the necessities." The household would have to spend a lot of money in procuring these services, if they were not rendered by women. [13]

Women also supplement the household income often, by taking on "gainful employment" (the double burden), without the males in the household taking on any domestic work.

Other reports provide further information. In monetary terms, women's housework and childcare have been evaluated at about 50 percent of the Net Domestic Product of the Indian economy. [14]

Women spend 49 hours per week in domestic activities and only in roof repairs do men give a hand.... The most time-consuming activity is fetching water, washing clothes and utensils -- a task never done by males. [15]

From another private study:

The contribution made through household production to family welfare was as high as half of the household's income. This contribution which is primarily made by the housemaker needs all the recognition and must be brought into more visibility. The income accounting procedures should also be revised to include the real contribution made in household production to the nation's welfare. [16]

Finally, another extract from *Sramshakti*:

The proportion of females engaged in domestic duties along with the free collection of goods (vegetables, roots, firewood, cattle food), sewing, tailoring, weaving for household use, is several times more than males. In rural areas, about 12.2 percent of the female population over five years is engaged in these activities as against barely 0.6 percent in the case of males.

B) The Census of India gives the opposite impression. Information on the numbers of men and women who "work" in India was collected on the basis of the question: "Worked at any time at all last year?" Those who answered "Yes" were put into the "Workers" category while those who answered "No" (mostly women), were put into the "Non-workers" category. The definition of "work" was given as:

'... participation in any economically productive activity. Such participation may be physical or mental in nature. Work involves not only actual work but also effective supervision and direction of work.'

The definition does not include the work of pregnancy, childcare and housework, although as an improvement on 1981 data, the 1991 Census will record "unpaid labor on farm or family enterprise." Even then, however, the main reason for Indian women's miserable condition -- their endless backbreaking labor in the household and as mothers -- will remain unrecorded and invisible. Women's domestic slavery is the most explosive political issue because the entire household and national economic system is built upon it. Precisely for this reason, those with a stake in the system prefer to keep women's domestic slavery "invisible," and when pressured to reveal it, they say that this would be "impossible."

In the 1981 Census introductory analysis, the (probably male) author made a remark which only proves his ignorance about the real contribution of females to this country's assets. He writes

Non-workers constitute 62.45% of the population of India. In the case of females, as one would expect, the proportion of non-workers is quite high and for the country this is as high as 79.16%. (Emphasis added.)

Similarly, it is to be hoped that the chauvinistic joke about women non-workers being "pure" non-workers will not be repeated in 1991. Such language gives the reader the impression that all men have forgotten how they were once helpless babies, dependent on the labor and care of their mother, and that after a long day at the office, they will expect to be refreshed by a meal cooked by their wife.

In West Bengal, rural female "non-workers" are 90.62 percent and rural male "non-workers" 48.59 percent of the total population. [17] While the latter are indeed likely to be men who do not do much all day, it is interesting to speculate what would happen to each rural household, and to the national economy also, if rural females actually became non-workers for even a single day! To say that it is difficult to measure the value of tasks which are species-reproducing and life-preserving is to surrender to statistics at the outset. Feminists may well ask about the validity of philosophical, cultural and economic systems which "cannot" or just do not, for whatever reason, define and measure women's work in the household and as mothers.

Women are recorded as workers when they earn money (and there are many households dependent on women's income), but again the statistics give a totally false picture of rural reality. According to the 1981 Census, both female and male work participation rates increased from the 1971 figure. However, of more significance here is the much lower figure for women at 5.97 percent, while men's participation rate is 48.97 percent. The N.S.S. figures also record a much higher percentage of earning men to women. The N.S.S. picture is more accurate though because it also records domestic work participation: 66.13 percent women, 24 percent girls, 7.28 percent boys and 0 percent men. [18]

What these statistics do not reveal are the reasons why fewer women than men are gain-

fully employed. Anyone conscious of rural reality, especially in West Bengal, knows that only a fraction of women earn money exactly because they are women in a patriarchal society. Thus:

1. Many women are not allowed out of the household;

2. Society considers that it is unrespectable for women to earn;

3. Girls and women are not educated or trained as much as boys and men;

4. Women may be sexually harassed by employers;

5. Young girls are married off at an early age and thereafter are fully occupied in unpaid work;

6. Because women do housework and look after children, men are free to go out and earn money.

Those women who form part of the 5.9 percent of the population who earn money, are doing a double duty of work outside and work inside the household.

Several committed individuals and organizations have been putting pressure on the government for the last two decades to have women's unpaid work accounted for in the National Census. They have been only partly successful: unpaid labor in the farm and family enterprise will be recorded in 1991, but no more than that. It is unlikely that a few feminists will be able to influence the bastion of Indian male power -- the academics who design the data collection proforma, the government bureaucrats and the politicians. What the people in authority want to measure will appear in the statistics, and what people with money want to invest in will be decided after consulting "authoritative" data. Thus, it is clear why women's domestic slavery is not measured and therefore why it is not brought to an end. People in power simply do not want this.

For Women's "Development" and "Progress"

Based on the false picture of women as non-workers, huge efforts are being made to

turn them into workers, that is, involve them in income-generating schemes. It has long been accepted that women are a deprived community in India. National and foreign funds are allocated for trying to integrate women into the patriarchal capitalist society. Income generation schemes to help poor women supplement the household income have been started by both government and non-government organizations, and West Bengal's North 24-Parganas district has many such schemes.

While I do not deny that individual women have benefited from the experience and income gained by participating in TRYCEM, IRDP and Oxfam funded programs, I feel that if the same effort had been put into integrating men into the daily grind of women's housework and childcare activities, it might have proved an altogether more effective way in the long run of ending patriarchy, capitalism and women's deprivation. As it is, because women bear the burden of domestic work alone, patriarchy and capitalism continue to flourish. The unpaid labor of children too upholds the system. Obviously, such programs are not designed to end the exploitative system, but to strengthen it. Women who add to their daily routine of domestic labor the extra outside income-generating work lose what little free time they had before, and lead wretched lives while the household members benefit from the extra income and the male employers benefit from the cheap labor of women. In the statistics, these would all be recorded as a "positive sign of development," but is it? Even well-intentioned programs for women will change nothing unless a parallel program is launched to put men into the unpaid sector of housework and childcare.

In the socialist countries, women are experiencing a deprivation of a different kind from men hungry for the freedom to vote and accumulate like people in capitalist countries: the miserable life of a working woman who is (even after the revolution) a "housewife" with a husband and other household members who still believe that housework and childcare are women's responsibilities. Even if all the communist parties fall from power everywhere, will it make much difference to the patriarchal attitude that a wife must serve and smile as she did in the great old feudal days?

In this respect, I question how any one state is different from another. Sharing of

housework and childcare equally by men and women is possibly as common if not more so in so-called developed capitalist countries as it is in socialist and what may come to be known as post-socialist countries. And if this is true, it would prove that a changed production system does not necessarily alter the relations between women and men in the sphere of reproduction. If neither capitalist "development" nor socialist "progress" liberates women, then what will?

Sharing of Housework and Childcare

Women's liberation is a political and spiritual issue, and as such should be taken up by all those who claim they are dedicated political activists, members of political parties, government functionaries and social workers. Village *panchayat* members, staff of voluntary organizations, cadres of agricultural laborers' unions and district administrators all occupy positions of responsibility, leadership and power in the rural areas. They are all political people in that their presence is influential and in that each has a consciousness of village problems and an ideology which guides them in the accomplishment of their respective programs.

The struggle to free themselves from men's domination in the sphere of reproduction and the maintenance of life must be taken up by women. This struggle needs to be supported by all those who want to end the destructiveness and sickness of the present society. As such, all work should be guided by a profound consciousness of the problems of village women. Similarly, in the sphere of enormous decrease in production, liberation of producers is possible only by an enormous decrease in production itself, not in the changing of one power structure for another. Reducing labor and resource exploitation are the only ways to liberation, and we need to be conscious of both political issues -- freedom for women in the sphere of childcare and housework, and freedom for laborers as producers. To work for one and not the other will only strengthen male-domination and capitalism in the villages of West Bengal. Certainly, when tackling the issue of women's domestic slavery, we must not ignore the role of rich and powerful men, because it is largely by exploiting women in the household and reproductive sphere that wealthy farmers and other middle and upper

class males have derived their accumulated capital and power. Economic life is rooted in reproductive life and not the other way around. Babies must be born and grow up before anything else can be done, and sharing of the labor required to fulfill these priorities must be made an ideological issue as important as the issue of justice for the poor and conservation of the environment.

Absolved of housework and childcare tasks, and almost unaccountable to anyone, men have much more free time than women. Their working hours outside are limited, anyway. Men's free time, gained by enslaving women, makes men opportunistic and selfish; divorced from the world of the givers, carers and nurturers, men develop a superiority complex and start to claim sole authority to run society and interpret religion. Compounded with the male reproductive consciousness of doubt regarding paternity, males become money-makers, warmongers and fascists, hating women and their true character, and make much noise about "women's security" and the sanctity of religious and social customs in order to keep women in their grip. By enslaving women this way, patriarchs gain security, comfort and various kinds of pleasure as well as a steady supply of young men for rural and industrial labor, and for the army too. Breaking down the sex-based division of labor is the only way to dislodge the foundation of this destructive and sick society.

Rulers rule by dividing the people along gender lines so effectively that the people themselves believe that the sex-based division of labor is natural. Therefore, to change this system where the few rule the many, the people themselves must change their own attitudes to gender. Housework and childcare must be shared by men and women equally, free mixing between boys and girls must be permitted, and the means of reproduction should be in women's hands.

It is unlikely that entrenched customs will change soon. Astonishment, laughter, hostility, conflict and violence have been the responses of men, and some women too, to women's assertion of independence. Those few women in North 24-Parganas who have struggled against patriarchal conditions know what it entailed -- being thrown out by the husband and sometimes their own parents. It meant social ostracism and poverty. Yet struggles

have brought rewards too -- hope, and a taste of freedom unknown before. Furthermore, such women are actually bringing about real changes. Even one single individual's way of life has repercussions, like a small stone causes ripples when it drops into a still pond. But individual women cannot change the hierarchical structure of society alone. Men and women together must work and live autonomously and cooperatively both inside and outside the household.

One may skeptically ask, "Who among men will give up their non-worker state and do housework and childcare?" After all, it was by imprisoning women in the house that men got their free time to accumulate money and land, build walls and frontiers, and then defend "their property" with dogs, police, spies, satellites, armies, and nuclear weapons. One may also ask, "Have the privileged ever voluntarily given back to the poor what they took away from them by force?" Indeed, if boys and men do not start to share the housework and childcare tasks equally with girls and women, the latter will eventually have to organize themselves to force them to, and save the world.

What Women Need to Do

I am not a village woman from North 24-Parganas, nor am I married, nor do I have children. However, I spend time with many of you, becoming like your sister or daughter,

and my anger at your lack of freedom made me study your lives and the reasons for your oppression. I see how men also are faring badly in the society they are dominating, and I myself am a victim of male-domination and the commodity production system in many ways. For these reasons, I am offering the following suggestions:

We must teach our menfolk to share housework and childcare.

One of the most effective ways of doing this is to stop work occasionally. This has been done by women before in other countries. [19] Mothers must teach their sons as well as their daughters to do housework and look after smaller children. We should discuss the issue of sharing with our husbands, brothers-in-law and the other males in our own families. Certainly, we should encourage any man who offers to help us cook, fetch water, or wash up the utensils. We must allow the men also to get some of the satisfaction we derive from doing skilled and creative work in the house! When we attend meetings, we need to discuss this issue of sharing housework and childcare openly, and not laugh it away as an impossible and mad idea. Many men in other countries and some in India are sharing housework and childcare tasks with their wives and with their mothers. It is not impossible to implement, but it will be difficult. However, to get men to share housework and childcare with us will not be more difficult than it is to

live the kind of lives we are living now -- as dependent slaves.

We must be willing to listen to new ideas. The sex-based division of labor is not natural and we can change it over time, if we try. When men



Anawar

are doing nothing in the house during the day -- have not gone to the fields, school or office -- we should raise the issue of sharing and try to get them to help more. As we have been working hard all day long, when our menfolk return home in the evening, even then they should help us.

We should do the activities men do.

Marketing, talking politics at the local teashop, cultivating in the open air, getting into sports -- these are all activities usually done by boys and men, but girls and women should start to do them too, together with the husband or by leaving him at home doing the housework. In the past, Indian women used to hunt, dance and even fight on horseback with weapons in their hands.

We should educate our daughters.

How can we say that the reason for our daughter's early marriage is her lack of education, when it is her parents themselves who have not educated her? We need to give our daughters the same chance in life as our sons, and it is likely that our daughters and not our sons will look after us in our old age. We should organize to ensure that teachers attend the local schools on time, and that government funds available for children's education are used properly. If necessary, we may need to raise money to educate our daughters, and thus give them a better chance. This is especially important if a girl is a good student and wants to study further. On no account should we allow her father to marry her off, interrupting her studies even if a "good match" is found. Nor should we believe the parents of a boy when they promise to allow our daughter to continue her studies after marriage. Seldom is this promise kept.

We must end the dowry system.

We must refuse to go into debt or sell land in order to marry off a daughter. When she marries, it should be at her own free will. Any property she has a right to should be put in her name well before her marriage, and this property as well as any money we wish to give her should be given to her whenever she asks for it -- before or after marriage -- *whenever our daughter may need it*. Mothers must make all their sons accept that their sisters have

equal rights and needs. Every girl must adamantly refuse to marry into a family which has asked for any cash or articles by reason of the marriage. Nowadays, the boy's family is crafty. They do not openly ask for "dowry" but say they will "accept anything you'd like to give your daughter." The great expense incurred at traditional weddings should be avoided by poor families. They are quite unnecessary. A simple registration is enough.

We must organize to end the arranged-marriage system.

Marriage by arrangement is a hangover of the old custom of marriage by capture, and as such is one of the pillars of patriarchy, the other one being the transfer of the woman to her husband's house. Ending the arranged marriage system, therefore, will be one of the hardest tasks but it must be ended if girls and boys too are to enjoy "human rights." A law should be passed forbidding anyone from arranging another's marriage to someone. Some women may even campaign to end the marriage institution altogether if it continues to enslave women. If a couple love each other, they should live together, and only when they want a ceremony should it be held. Our life partners must be chosen by ourselves, and not imposed on us by force.

We should not oppose young love.

Young love can lead to unwanted pregnancy of which all parents of girls are afraid. "Should our daughter have a boyfriend and become pregnant, there will be a scandal and she will never be able to get married." This is what parents say. However, the solution to this so-called problem is *not* early marriage for girls. There are other alternatives, for example:

a) Mothers should teach their daughters what is likely to happen if they get involved with a boy too closely. If mothers and daughters have a frank and warm relationship, then discussion about such issues is easy. But if the relationship lacks trust and mutual respect, then the growing girl will not tell secrets to her mother, and on her own may be unable to distinguish a worthy friend from a fellow who only wants to enjoy her temporarily and irresponsibly. Parents must also ward off the influence of Hindi cinema which seems to

be guiding people into dream-like romances. A lot of money is made by cinema producers and stars but at the cost of poor people, especially the young. If a young girl does become pregnant before marriage, the "fault" is not hers alone. The issue is much more complex and cannot be resolved simply by marrying off girls in their childhood.

b) Friendship between adolescent boys and girls should be allowed by society. After all, it is very natural. If it is condemned by parents and society, then such friendship has to be carried out in secret which causes more harm. If a young couple is in love, this should be made known publicly, and they should be encouraged to marry once they have the means to support each other. There are countless tragic cases of suicide in the villages because instead of marrying the loved one, the young person has been forced by parents into an arranged marriage with someone else.

We have to develop a more tolerant attitude to intercaste and interreligious unions also. It might help to remember that opposition to free-mixing is made in a patriarchal society. Women must support each other, break up the pillars of patriarchy and certainly never do anything which perpetuates male domination at the expense of female freedom.

We must refrain from gossiping.

If one of our young friends has not yet gotten married, we must not criticize her for this. In fact, all mothers should prevent the marriage of their daughter before the minimum legal age of eighteen. Similarly, if a young or older woman happens to be frank and outspoken in her views, we must not go against her, but discuss with her if we disagree. We should never scorn a girl who wants to study or who seems to be more serious and intelligent than others of her age. In many villages in West Bengal and other places too, now and in the past, unusually independent women have been murdered as "witches" by other villagers incited by gossip.

We should regard a ghar Jamai as a grihe Lakhi.

We should encourage our daughter's husband to come to live with us. In this way, married women can continue to live with their parents. After all, this was how it was in the

old days; girls grew up, bore children and remained in their own parents' house. This was before the system of marriage by capture and purchase began. Children used to carry the name of their mother. The Khasi tribe of Assam still follows this tradition. Surely, to have our son-in-law stay with us is much better than to send our daughter away, isn't it? We should have confidence and not be afraid of what people say.

We need to campaign for free, easily available and safe contraceptives and abortion.

It is essential that women have the choice whether to become a mother or not. The labor and risks involved in pregnancy are borne by women alone, so motherhood must be the woman's decision and not forced upon her by her husband or in-laws.

We should overcome our shyness about our female body.

We urgently need to know how our body functions. There is nothing impure or mysterious about menstruation, infertility, delivery, abortion or uterine prolapse. Ignorance makes us afraid and ashamed. Knowledge will end our fear and give us confidence. We can discuss health matters in small groups. We can learn much from the old women in our community for they have the wisdom and experience of old age. We can invite a doctor to our meetings to explain safe ways to prevent conception and other things we don't understand. The process of reproduction must be thoroughly understood by us, for it is we who "grow the child" within our body, give it life and then deliver it into the world. We are aware of this whole process, and it is very laborious also, but for that, it usually happens out of our control. We must learn about our reproductive body and we must respect its powers.

We need to rediscover our organic and spiritual connection with nature and the continuity of life which over the centuries men have tried to destroy and negate. Men declare that they are the creators -- like Brahma and Allah -- but it is female strength and energy which actually creates life, gives birth and reproduces the human and animal world.

We must value ourselves more, and we must value and love baby girls as much as baby boys.

Many times I have seen the disappointment on the face of a woman when she finds out she has given birth to a girl. In Hindu homes, the conch shell is blown and sweets distributed if a son is born, but the bleak reaction to a girl's birth bespeaks her unhappy future. Hindu and Muslim women are forced to undergo one pregnancy after another until a son is born. It is now possible to examine the sex of the fetus inside the womb, and where this test is done, when the parents are told that the baby will be born female, in over 95 percent of the cases the fetus is destroyed! If we would value, educate and keep our daughters with us, instead of marrying them off with large dowry, then women would not be under such pressure to produce sons, and young girls would not be so discriminated against. Moreover, it is not only producing babies which is laborious, bringing up a large family is even more so.

We must support each other in difficulties.

If a woman is tortured in her house, if a girl is raped or abused, we must protest and bring the offenders to justice. Women need to form unions to support each other economically, like the Manipuri women and the Self Employed Women's Association of Ahmedabad and Delhi. Manipuri women weave cloth at home and sell it themselves in the market. SEWA members are no longer dependent on middle-men and money lenders. They themselves sell vegetables and handicrafts they have made at home, and they have their own bank.

We must go outside our homes.

We have to learn about the society we live in but which we hardly understand. Though we produce sons, and labor to bring them up, and look after the needs of men, we are not allowed to move in the world which men control. And it is precisely because of this contradiction that there is so much injustice and violence. For the outside to improve, women must go outside and improve it. At the same time, men must share the work inside the household.

When Hindu men say it is against Hindu custom for women to go outside, we shall remind them that all Brahmans, priests, Vedic writers and Manu himself, were born of and nurtured by women. Muslim men say it is against the *Shariat* for women to go to the market, we shall remind them that the Prophet's first wife Khadija was herself a rich merchant, and it was she who taught the Prophet how to trade and that she supported him financially also.

Accumulation

It is likely that the nomadic tribes of pre-recorded Indian history practiced "potlatch" -- the giving away of accumulated wealth. *Sarvamedh yag karna* was a custom recounted in Vedic mythology where the owner of property would give everything away -- cattle, utensils, clothes, foodgrains -- in ritual thanksgiving on occasions of achievement or celebration. Sacrifice and offerings were exceedingly important practices of the ancient nomadic and village people in India. Their practices reflected the closeness of the people to the natural world and the ease with which they could give away things. Possessiveness had not become an entrenched mindset, and sharing as well as caring for natural abundance was very important. Individual austerity and simplicity in lifestyle and habits were the desired norm. The roots of this ancient system may lie way back in an even more ancient tribal communism which would not allow private property, or which simply did not know it.

The Koran made it illegal for Muslims to practice usury, and devout Muslims were enjoined to give away their excess wealth to the poor. The month-long abstinence from food and water during day-light known as *roja* was based on a similar understanding that too much self-indulgence is harmful. The Bible records how Jesus had a poor and "lowly" birth, and how later he angrily threw all the money-lenders out of the temple. In their longing for oneness with an all-pervading Spirit, the Christian and Muslim mystics subjected themselves to extreme abstinence and ascetism. The Buddhist and Hindu concept of *nirvana* is that liberation is only obtainable by completely renouncing "worldly" things. Still today, there are still thousands of ascetics, and while we might consider theirs an extreme form of lifestyle, it might benefit us to ask why

sacrifice and austerity have been considered necessary conditions for freedom. (I would suggest that the roots of the well-known misogyny of male ascetics can be traced back to the male reproductive consciousness.)

In the early 19th century, Dibendranath Thakur held a "kalpataru" in Bangladesh, where he invited people to take away his possessions. Traditional Bengali men still refuse to give up the simple white *dhoti* and wear colorful shirts and trousers, and even today, the respect felt for a person of "simple living

patriarchal institutions and culture, exploiting nature and women, and by accumulating wealth, land, buildings and products, men have tried to fulfill these basic needs.

It is reasonable to suppose, but of course cannot be proved (or disproved) that the acquisitive consciousness or mindset first developed in men when they discovered that their sperm seed was necessary for a woman to become pregnant. Thus, when the baby was born, a particular man needed to know for certain that this baby was actually "his." The mother never had any difficulty proving her maternity. Proving paternity was the problem. Men's need to prove their contribution to species continuity was very difficult given the long nine month period which elapsed between the loss of his seed and the birth of the baby. Men "solved" these problems by evolving a possessive mindset. First they made the mother "theirs" (by capture and marriage) and then also the "product" of sexual union -- the child. It was not long before the living unit -- "his family" -- also became the possession of a

man.

Ever since a man first forced one or more women to remain and reproduce in his "household," women's own roots have been cut and women have been disempowered. Women's marginalization, their superexploitation and the "feminization of poverty" today are the results of that first move by a man to make a woman and her children "his."

This is also why patriarchal societies existed even before there was much production. The ways of patriarchy are so ancient that they seem to be natural; as natural as Brahma, Allah and God, the male creators; as natural as the presence of men in the public world where lives are directed and controlled. The ways of patriarchy are as ancient as men's unacknowledged need to be as mothers are -- social individuals, integrated in the past, present and future, part of the natural world. Huge buildings "in memory of," vast control systems, nuclear stockpiles, hoarded wealth in cash or kind and international private commodity production units -- these are men's



and high thinking" is a legacy of ancient wisdom. Dotted throughout India, there are still *asrams* where hundreds of poor people can get free meals. Sikh *gurdwaras* provide free accommodation and food. The renowned hospitality of village people who give away precious food to a guest is another example of an ancient custom of sharing which is at variance with accumulation.

Customs relating to women and marriage, however, shackle and oppress women because these are rooted in patriarchal culture. Other customs, although they may seem to be merely superstitious practices, nevertheless do weakly reflect forgotten wisdom, and people are loathe to give up customary ways because these provide a link with the past which is very important to everyone. In the past, a few thousand years ago, human beings lived much more closely to nature and there was not much personal property. People have always had certain undeniable and very deep needs. One of these is the need to be linked with our roots, and another is the need to be linked with the natural environment. By developing

"babies" which they deliver to the world. Men have not yet learnt to stay within the bounds of nature, and to share as many of the joys and sorrows of reproductive experience as they can with women. By trying to overpower and improve upon nature and women, men gain a vicarious fulfillment, a false sense of integration and motherhood. Since the original problem is being dealt with in such an unnatural and violent way, the results are inevitably disastrous. Today, the destruction of people and the natural world is very, very common. Indeed, with several national economies dependent on the production and sale of weapons of death, a philosophy of birth to explain the development of such systems becomes essential to survival, birth and continuity.

The excessive accumulation of contemporary society is felt to be wrong and unnatural by many, even if but subconsciously. There is a gut knowledge that accumulation is only possible by plundering and exploiting others as well as the earth. One often hears others explaining guiltily why they bought this or that thing, or someone criticizing another for being "so materialistic." Even now, social activists debate whether it is "against principles" to take large grants, or to buy a motorbike instead of living like the people "at the grassroots" and continuing to go places on foot. West Bengal's history of revolutionary struggle and the countless sacrifice of men and women's lives are reminders of the ancient and eternal truth that natural justice and greed are incompatible. We are forgetting this history and this truth at our peril.

The criminalization and decadence of materialistic societies, as well as a growing indifference to others' suffering, indicate perhaps that these basic needs are no longer felt -- which is a dangerous portent for human survival and the survival of the natural world. With the spread of capitalism to India, the old simple and austere ways are being replaced by self-indulging, obscurantist, computer cultures in the name of "development" (which means the accumulation of wealth) backed up by State power, while the natural world is being irreparably damaged. The numbers of poor who cannot meet their minimum physical needs increase in the rural areas while the rich continue to plunder them and the earth in order to accumulate even more. And the foundation continues to be the alienation of men from the process of reproduction and the sex-

based division of labor in private and public life.

Women in the public world play a passive role generally. They are consumers when monied and the most marginalized when poor. In North 24-Parganas, the majority of poor women live in remote villages, and this is true for the rest of West Bengal, India and the countries of Asia, Africa and South America also. A few years ago, the United Nations published a report which indicates the role of women in the process of accumulation:

Two-thirds of the world's work is done by women. They earn one-tenth of the world's income and own one-hundredth of the world's property.

Patriarchal land tenure systems are instrumental in changing production relations between men but leave gender relations unaffected. Or, where land is, by tradition, vested in women's and men's names, the introduction of cash cropping and capitalist agriculture results in a severe decrease in women's access to land and food produced for home consumption. Simultaneously, women's social status declines while their workload increases. This unnatural alienation of women from the land culminates in the enrichment of a few males.

We need to reduce our production and consumption and the amount of work we do. (There are still tribes in existence who do not have the word "work" in their language.) We need to end our own slavery to money and our fascination for things, which can only occur when we become conscious of the harmful effects accumulation has had upon us and the earth.

Tribals

The tribals of India, including present-day Bangladesh, lost most of their lands and forests to the pastoral nomads, the Aryans, a few thousand years ago. Today, tribals are only about seven percent of the total population, and suffer from similar problems as other tribals throughout the world -- landlessness, poverty and alcoholism.

Though many have been assimilated into the Hindu or Christian community, some tribals are trying to retain their ancient customs in spite of the growing pressures from caste Hindus, capitalists and the State. Consciously and militantly, many tribals are strug-

gling to retain their lands and autonomy. Exploitation of people and nature for accumulating wealth is contrary to traditional communities' way of life which is characterized instead by a vibrant cultural life for women and men and a deliberate rejection of non-tribal ways. To some extent, Indian tribal women have retained a militancy and freedom which existed in former matriarchies, and sharing of work by men and women both outside and within the household is common among tribal groups today.

Tribals are organizing against multinational corporations and the State who want to use the water, timber, fossil fuels and minerals as well as the land area where they live, in order to make money, that is, "to accumulate," with huge loans from the most powerful money-lender in the world -- the World Bank. The project to build over 3,000 dams along the Narmada River in western India which would displace one and a half *lakh* tribals is an example of the fundamental contradiction between the profit-seekers and the original people of this country, between what is euphemistically called "development" and what in reality means destruction.

What are the roots of this horrendous contradiction? Have the greed and callousness of the men in power grown like a cancer because they are indifferent to the natural and reproducing world?

Land

Linked with housework and childcare, and the accumulation of property and capital, is the issue of land "ownership." In their attempt to mitigate their alienation from the reproductive process, men started to accumulate and dominate by:

1. Imprisoning women in the household to do all the essential unpaid tasks, and to bear sons;

2. Creating the concept that land can be owned and acquired, that is, vested in a person's name, bought and sold and, as such, sanctioned by deeds and laws.

Actually, land "ownership" is a completely artificial condition; an "ideal" concept in men's minds which is given actuality in laws and customs, and defended by means of violence. In these respects, land ownership (i.e., control)

bears many resemblances to men's control of women.

The day to day problems of landless men in rural West Bengal [20] call for urgent solutions. Designated "bread-winners" by the patriarchal society -- which forbids women to earn money as wage laborers, and where paid work is scarce anyway -- men's inability to feed, clothe and educate their household members is particularly acute. However, this is not the occasion to discuss the connection between land "ownership," capital accumulation and the misery of urban and rural laborers without work, because these are only aspects of highly developed male domination in society, and in this study, I am mainly concerned with the reasons for and not with the symptoms of male domination. However, it needs to be said that one of the main reasons of increasing poverty in South 24-Parganas, where water is scarce, is the fragmentation of land tenure due to the patriarchal distribution system. The father divides his property amongst his sons, and over the generations, small independent farmers are rendered landless laborers. Women remain the dregs of this system, with no access to land at all. Yet it is the women who labor to produce sons, process the paddy, manage the housework, and even give up their meals so that the husbands and sons can eat.

Land, like capital and property, is accumulated by men in their attempt to overcome their insignificance in reproduction. However, sharing in this process with women as much as they can would be a more healthy and effective way than by accumulating money, "buying" and "possessing" land. The roots of inequality and poverty need to be tackled, not merely the symptoms.

Women can play a leading role in mobilizing the landless and marginalized groups for the following:

The return of common lands. Common lands can be won back only after protracted struggles against usurpers.

Halting the fragmentation of land tenure. The patriarchal method of transferring land tenureship impoverishes small cultivators over time, and enables richer farmers to buy up more land sold "in distress." Many rural people become landless laborers in this way.

Occupation of vested land. When land started to be "owned" (or vested in persons), the process of accumulation and impoverishment as well as women's oppression began also. A struggle to free the land from any and every form of ownership will also be a struggle against the process of accumulation, impoverishment, women's oppression and the present-day ruination of the land itself.

Completely ending the system of private and state "ownership" of land. Only when the sex-based division of labor and the dependence on money have ended will this be possible.

The Dream of Marxists

Though capitalists thrive on accumulation and trading, socialists do also because the socialist system, too, depends upon commodity production in agriculture and industry, as well as on sale to consumers. Both systems are sustained by accumulation, and the medium of exchange in both capitalist and socialist countries is money. Without money, life is impossible for people without access to land, and workers remain as "wage slaves" or become shareholders in enterprises.

Accumulation, land tenure and the exploitation of natural resources as well as labor, may be subjected to more public accountability when communists take over power from feudals and capitalists, but the ancient and ideal communist ways of simplicity and austerity are left far behind as accumulation is expanded. Worse still, the over-emphasis on production has actually led to the "birth" of a monstrous male-dominated bureaucracy which (mis)manages the process. Then alienated men and megalomaniacs hold positions of power, and as has been true throughout the existence of patriarchy, wherever the male leaders go, the army is not far behind.

The *Zenotdel* was a countryside women's organization in the Soviet Union which existed even before the Bolsheviks came to power. [21]. In 1929, it had motivated Muslim women to throw off their *barqua* and participate in an International Women's Day meeting in public. Afterwards, three hundred women, on their return, were scalded to death and set before hungry dogs. Such was the wrath of Muslim male conservatives at that time. Yet, instead of encouraging such courageous acts by women, Stalin closed down

all the branches of the *Zenotdel* within a few years of coming to power on the grounds that it was no longer necessary. Since then, women in the Soviet Union, as in capitalist countries, have been encouraged to work outside or go back again inside the house, according to the leaders' production plans. Today, Soviet working women have a heavy double burden of work inside and outside the house, clearly proving that the "new" system of production did nothing to alter the old system of reproduction. There is not a single woman in the politburo of the Chinese Communist Party today, and female infanticide is not uncommon in the country where this Party rules. Do these facts have any bearing on Marxism, patriarchy and women's liberation? Many other problems are also making the "dream" seem like more a nightmare. It is not correct to call the massacre of millions of people in cold blood by order of the top Marxist leaders Lenin, Stalin and Deng "deviations." Such destruction is the logical consequence of male supremacy, and its inherent fascism -- whose roots lie in men's alienation from birth and the maintenance of life.

Liberation can only be achieved when money will no longer enslave people. For centuries, men have made money and accumulated wealth in the attempt to give themselves a significance in the reproducing world which they do not actually have. A very long and deeply subversive struggle is required to undo the artificial ways, and Marxism as a theory for understanding social forces is totally inadequate because it does not encompass housework or the reproductive sphere. Everything cannot be explained in terms of economics and production relations. "Class struggle" by male laborers, with wives working in the house and field all day, will never make any "dream" come true, for this dream of the Marxists is only an illusion of fulfilment for men.

Communist takeover has initially brought real benefits to the poor and oppressed, including women, only when the following conditions existed:

1. The motivating force and character of both men and women was maternal. All shared a common desire to give birth to a new ideal society. This is similar to the mother's consciousness.

2. Men and women alike labored to "deliver" this "baby." All shared a common consciousness. The violence of the rich was overwhelmed by the mass upsurge and strength of men and women prepared to offer their lives if necessary for the revolution. This is similar to the mother's consciousness.

3. Habits of food, dress and living in general for both men and women, were simple and austere. Idealism was strong, almost spiritualistic as well as practical.

4. Men did not crush women's struggles to be free from patriarchal bondage, and even struggled with women to end patriarchal ways.

5. Leaders emerged from and merged with the people.

6. Men and women shared domestic work.

7. Under its communist mother, the new society was nurtured; malnutrition, ill-health and miserable living conditions were removed to a large extent by a more natural (just) system of land and resources distribution.

What goes wrong and why

A process of accumulating more than what is necessary to sustain the ideal society starts, and thus the organic connection with the ideal society for which people gave their lives is lost. The male consciousness takes over. That it is able to take over is largely due to the production-biased philosophy of Marx and the historical reality of a predominantly male leadership.

Today, instead of "sharing women's sorrow" (and joy), men are forcing women to share men's sorrow and the illusion that accumulation, "progress," "success" in competition, computers and space travel will bring fulfilment.

Long before any object was produced by men, babies were born and nurtured by women. We have forgotten this.

The relations and consciousness rooted in our reproductive existences are the most ancient possessions we humans have. These have influenced everything, including the relations and consciousness which develop from our productive roles. We have forgotten this also, at heavy cost to ourselves and the earth.

Why Men Need and Abuse Women's Bodies

1. Marriage as capture - women's sexual slavery, sexual torture and rape within marriage.

2. "Eve-teasing" - why not "Adam-teasing"?

3. Rape and assault - in fields, streets buildings and during war.

4. Prostitution - local and international "flesh trade."

5. Pornography - for thrilling sick minds.

6. Debdasis - "slaves of god."

7. Seduction - the sweetest way.

This is not the paper where to discuss the above symptoms of patriarchy. The main cause is men's domination of women in private and public life which, in turn, is rooted in men's reproductive consciousness and their failure to mediate their sense of alienation by sharing with women the fulfilling labor of housework and childcare. The above are forms of men's extreme alienation from nature and historical continuity.

Men steal what they cannot have for free. Men enjoy women's softness and vitality without their consent. Men who have not learnt to share get their satisfaction by grabbing. Imposing themselves by force on to women's body is the pathetic and vicious attempt of brutalized men to become human again through women.

The contradictions are as deep-rooted as men's insecurity:

- Men's split nature is manifested in their consuming need and cruel abuse of women who have no "second nature."

- Men's alienation from nature is overcome somewhat by penetrating the source of life in women, who are at one with nature.

- Men derive joy in giving women pain and sexual satisfaction by dehumanizing women's bodies.

- Men exchange money for a moment which love could provide for free.

- Sanctioned by an erstwhile goddess myth, and social acceptance of male over female rights, male priests try to integrate themselves through poor and often "untouchable" women.

- Sexual desire for a being forced into submission is itself a consequence of a deep-rooted and unmediated helplessness.

The number of sexual crimes committed by men make one wonder whether men are inferior to women and try to overcome this sense of inferiority by forcing women to their level. Or is it rather all due to the fact that men's reproductive role is different from women's and men have not yet come to terms with this, let alone mediated this problem by changing their reproductive role as much as possible to conform to that of women? Unfortunately, until men can redefine themselves they will continue to need and abuse women's bodies.

The Roots of Heaven

At the risk of appearing to say that sex determines a person's fate, I have claimed that men's biological inability to become pregnant and to give birth gave men a reproductive consciousness of unfulfilled need which they tried to overcome by destroying matriarchal societies and nature and by establishing patriarchal institutions and cultures.

While I acknowledge that anthropology, history and political science are not my subjects, I claim that the above is true for most of the world's societies, including the rural societies of West Bengal. It is a men's world we live in, although rare exceptions may still be found where:

1. Money is not used as a means of exchange;



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2. The culture and customs of the people ensure that both women and men have equal social status, even though the sex-based division of labor may exist;

3. Excess accumulation (beyond basic needs) is commonly owned.

I have said that women's liberation is a political *and* spiritual issue at the risk of appearing to be a crank, a religious zealot or a Gandhian (none of which I am). To me, "spiritual" matters should not remain private but should be important to communities also. However, religious communal strife and the oppression of women and the poor in the name of religion are not what I mean by spirituality. Much violence has been done to uphold the interests of the priests, brahmans and maulovis who claim to be the spokesmen of the spirit, and much wealth has been accumulated by frauds. Nowadays, using modern products like microphones and sten-guns, political and economic groups and religious fanatics are increasingly supporting one another to the detriment of secularism, democracy and what little autonomy women do have in Indian society. It is more urgent than ever before to understand the roots of heaven before we are all plunged into a man-made-hell of death and destruction. Parts of India have already experienced this hell -- Ahmedabad, Meerut, Bhagalpur, etc.

We must start to ask ourselves why we can no longer see the spirits of the earth, water, trees, and wild animals; why technical and scientific "advance" and "civilization" have destroyed more of nature and human life in one hundred years than the "primitive" people

had destroyed in ten thousand years. We must ask ourselves why Brahma and Allah's men fight each other while they keep "their" women in slavery, and why rich men hoard sixty per cent of India's money in "black" form while poor village women believe they are "unclean" after delivering their babies.

We must change this society where the rich oppress the poor, men oppress women and children, where the natural environment is being wilfully destroyed to make money, and where politics has become separated from spirituality. Whether women vote or take up arms, like Mata Rashmoni of Bengal, it is the men who must learn to work with nature, women and children and stop accumulating

wealth by exploiting them. It is men who must drop their illusions and start to "share the women's sorrow," otherwise men will never understand the simple truth that without babies, there would be no human life on earth at all.

And when everyone is a child of the earth, a person's sex can never be a reason for avoiding the tasks necessary for the survival of life. As the fairy in the Arthurian legend said:

My kind knows neither Gods nor Goddesses, but only the breast of our mother who is beneath our feet and above our heads, from whom we come and to whom we go when our time is ended. Therefore we cherish life and weep to see it cast aside. [22]

Notes

1. Charles Everett Hamilton, *Cry of the Thunderbird: The American Indian's Own Story*.
2. Recounted by a villager from Diamond Harbor, South 24-Parganas on December 9, 1988.
3. Mary O'Brien, *Reproducing the World* (Westview Press, 1989) p. 298. "[T]he efforts of men to reduce the uncertainty of paternity are not, I would suggest, psychic longings nor responsible choices, but an ancient effort to deal with the alienated reality of the species status of the male."
4. _____, *The Politics of Reproduction* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981).
5. R. B. Sethi, *Muslim Marriage and Its Dissolution*.
6. Abindranath Thakur, *Banglar Brotakotha*.
7. "The Ordinances of Manu," translated from Sanskrit by Arthur Coke Burnell.
8. Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Polity Press, 1988).
9. Aloka Kanra, "Proverbs, Folk Tales and Women's Liberation," *A Woman's World* (Anneswan and People's Institute for Rural Action).
10. _____, Meyeder Shamparkita Prachalita Prabod O Nari Jagarone Tar Pratikriya.
11. _____, "Prachalita Prabod O Nari Nirjatan," *Barjaman* (17 February 1988).
12. The Census of India 1981, pp. 234 and 235, gives details of the "working" population in the District of 24-Parganas (which in 1981 had not yet been divided into North and South).
13. "Sramshakti" Report of the National Commission of Self-Employed Women and Women in the Informal Sector, Chairperson Ela Bhatt, signed June 1988.
14. Moni Mukherjee, "Bread and Roses," *Journal of Income and Wealth*, Vol. 8 No. 2, July 1985.
15. Maitrey Krishna-raj and Divya Pandey, "Women Assist Change by Not Changing Themselves." A report of a study conducted in Sindhudurg, presented at the Fourth National Conference on Women's Studies at Andhra University in December 1988.
16. Rajammal P. Devadas, G. Ramathilagam and S. Subasree, "An Evaluation of the Contribution of Women in Household Work," in T. M. Dak ed., *Women and Work in Indian Society*.
17. Census of India 1981; Series 1 "Provisional Population Totals Workers and Non-workers."
18. National Sample Survey 32nd round as cited by Devaki Jain and Malini Chand in "Women's Work: Methodological Issues."
19. Gerdur Steinphorsdottir in an interview with Troth Wells, "Wives on Strike," *New Internationalist*, March 1988.
20. Viz., the National Campaign for the Right to Work.
21. Richard Stites, *Women in the Russian Revolution*.
22. Marion Bradley, *The Mists of Avalon*, an epic of 5th Century Britain when King Arthur was ruling.