

India – Women in the society

Perception and the role of women in present India are formed by traditions. The economic change implicates societal alteration, which determines in conflicts. The nature and role of women in the society is presented by great heterogeneity, divergence and multiple paradoxical appearing phenomena as India itself. In order to remedy those conflicts, women are also requested to participate.

The woman in ancient Indian writings

While traveling through India, you will notice that you cannot elude yourself from a spiritual omnipresence. The principle of “being” forms this country far too much and plays a crucial role on every level of human existence. In order to understand the women`s role in modern times, one must look far back. It is important to recall that the feminity is seen as creative manifestation of the cosmic principle.

In the ancient Indian writings¹ the feminist principle is part of a cosmic whole and the woman is seen as a coequal being at the spiritual level; means she is honoured and dreaded as a goddess. Durga who is riding on a tiger can serve as an example as well as Kali, dancing and terrifying at the same time. Shakti, who is the elemental force of the universe, is omnipresent.

This also applies for the sacred Marianfigure, which is worshiped by Christian women in India. Additionally, the epics of the Mahabharata contain innumerable feminist role models². The principle of worshipping is the devotion to an all-embracing, based on an interdependence of human existence with God.

An invalidation of the ego and consequently a realisation of the whole can be achieved through yoga and meditation. A denouement of the personal desiderata strengthens the respect towards others – also and especially towards women, who already practice an invalidation of the ego in their daily life. The devotion towards the

superior – also towards the family – and the willingness to sacrifice, in the sense of abstinence to the extent of self-sacrifice, forms the existence of women in India on all societal levels in all periods.

A perseverative image can also be recognized in the course of India's modern history: the female manifestation of the holy, as Sri Sarada regarding Ramakrishna or the "mother" relating to Sri Aurobindo, who was not even Indian but of French origin. So the intrinsic context in a society and religion in India, which is formed by values, has still a special, tangible adjacency and shows further facets over the time.

The woman of Indian present-day

Looking at those wisdoms in India, it is difficult to understand the discrimination of girls and women or the assaults happening on them at present. On one hand female divinities are worshipped with greatest reverence, but on the other hand women have to deal with oppression and humiliation in political, social and economical aspects in their daily life. An all-encompassing appraisal considering possible reasons is doomed to failure.

A possible explanation is the discrimination in terms of education, which is related to an archaic education system. Furthermore, one part of the society gains importance, which more and more conforms to the capitalistic West and meanwhile departs from its own tradition and virtues consciously and even unconsciously. The visit of a temple becomes a habit. Some kind of reflection before or after the prayer does not happen anymore the way it was taking place for centuries. Especially in the cities, spiritual virtues are being progressively replaced by a "buy – or wealth mind-set"; an invalidation of the ego is hindered due to new possibilities of self-implementation. This affects the marriage, the living together in society and the politics.

The intellectual world, the perception and the imagination of the people in India are complex. Cultural as well as intellectual heritage plays an important role in the same way as the advancement of the economy in a global world. In this global world, the Indian man looks at women from other continents through TV and Internet without knowing the context of the respective cultures over centuries and without having

understood the present image. He is aware that women exist as mothers, wives and daughters. But he also perceives women in the world simply as objects. After the perspective through the windows of the world, a multitude of men in India seem to forget that the social and domestic reality in the cities and villages in India is a different one. There is no space here for violence, oppression and actions conducted by urges³.

Ethics and morality

As it is taught in the ancient writings, actions should be balanced on supporting each other with the consciousness on morality and ethics. Of course, this is not always feasible in human interaction, neither in India nor anywhere in the world. Nevertheless, people in India are regularly reminded of ethics and morality. So up to this day, the Indian press reserves nationwide a daily section for spiritual issues in different languages which is accessible for both sexes.

But not only men must rethink, especially women in modern India must be more aware of their strength, their own potential, their still open possibilities and have the courage to express their views and put them into practice in everyday life⁴, perhaps only intended as an existentialist thoughtful design, along with the famous dictum of Simone de Beauvoir: „*On ne naît pas femme, on le devient*”⁵ (One is not born as a woman but becomes one). It is rather seen as „to become free“.

They have to release themselves from the present reality in the villages and cities with their millions of inhabitants. “Not to classify anymore” into existing structures, but rather having the life of a deconstructed form of a more current image of a woman, which especially puts the own “self-design” of the own existence in the foreground. The willful own choice, accepting responsibility for its "being" and even beyond to design their own life actively, and then to work thereupon, to change the subjection through tradition and society under the male gender. The woman has to assert herself, must change the social framework conditions, in order to unfold; stand up for the goals and values, which appear important for her own self-respect and for the respect from the other gender. Abortion of female fetuses, child marriage and dowry would be topics that need to be called here first and foremost.

Women in politics and economics

Female role models exist and existed in India not only in the mythology but also in politics. Currently there are four women, Sheila Dikshit, Mamata Banarji, Jayalalita and Mayawati, who are in charge either as the head of government of big states or as opposition leaders in their respective states and they are politically successful. With Sonia Gandhi as the head of the influential, nationwide operating Congress Party, we see the politically most powerful woman in India, who pulls the strings in secret as the guardian of the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty. And Indira Gandhi, her mother-in-law, ruled the country in the years 1966 to 1977 and from 1980 to 1984 as prime minister.

At least a third of the local parliamentary seats - there are fifty percent of the seats in many states - are reserved for women and ought to ensure the active participation of women in the current political events. This participation is still mostly theoretic. Although the woman seats are in place, the women act as placeholders. They vote as it is desired by men. For a better enforcement with an actual effectiveness serve women promotion projects (Women Empowerment), which also serve as a review of the development of the position of women and promote grassroots democracy. There may be a real substantial and effective change only when the political participation and a functioning communication flow up to the highest level become reality. The economic independence, which forms a necessary degree of freedom⁶, is equally important.

The modern Indian woman is working throughout the country at all levels and virtually in all professions at different positions. She is not only visible as the top politician as seen above in politics. Even as managers in industrial firms, director of nationwide operating banks, top bureaucrats, active members of micro-credit groups⁷ or as independent fashion designers. As bearers of values and cultural heritage - sometimes quite objectified - indeed women are also visible and valued as female heroines in Bollywood films⁸ and nationally ubiquitous in daily performances of classical Indian dance and song. On the other hand, one also sees women as servants, laundresses, porters on construction sites or even as beggars. The complete spectrum is covered in urban and rural India.

It is the social culture, which is strong and rich on ancient traditions, is exerting pressure on successful women and cuts them on their career or on the way to self-realization⁹. Thereby, this social pressure arises not only from the male side. Whether they live as members of the 50 million female tribesmen in the forests of India or as one of the 400 million women in one of the 640 thousand Indian villages or city residents in slums, in poor or ordinary dwellings or opulent villas, it has no significance to the role which women have to newly define and design by themselves in the course of a changing society¹⁰. Despite some movements in which women, locally restricted, since 1882 and especially since 1920 consistently merged¹¹, there are no strong national women's movements in India¹². A movement of sexual education and emancipation, as we could observe in Europe especially since the sixties, is also missing in India.

Prospects

The previous absence of these two important components in an equal living together of sexes raises the fear that India is still far away to give women the role in society as it is in the ancient scriptures, as well as in the Indian Constitution¹³ and in other laws of the fledgling Union already reserved and set out for them. A humanitarian vision of an efficient society is undoubtedly based on equality and recognition of both sexes who do not interfere themselves in their self-realization, but support themselves and develop further as individuals but also in the family unit. One will not approach closer to this vision only with tighter laws against violence. They are only an important step on the way to unite the sexes. The turning point in India can only be achieved through active participation of women in national movements in which education¹⁴ must precede. Education and freedom, as well as its acceptance by the male side would arrange a new self-confidence, a newly defined image and a role of women, who no longer let herself be subordinated but operates on an equal height with men in society. But as long as the introduction of a nationwide new educational system does not arise, or at least, a landmark education reform, which would lead to the regular participation and development of girls in class across the country, the great majority of women in India will mostly remain suppressed in their traditional role as submissive creatures without a voice in the society.

Man and woman are still trying to find their place in a society which balances along spiritual tradition and market-based modernity.

Nevertheless, the hope remains that India would reflect and even use its old values on the way to modernity. The woman is and will remain a source of strength and love. She will always remain the embodiment of the values Dharma (righteousness) and Kama (love, care).

Dr. Volker Bauer
Resident Representative India

In cooperation with Jessica-Raani Bauer

-
- ¹ Ref. Müller, Max (1879): The Upanishads, Part 1 (SBE01),
URL <http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/sbe01/index.html> [15.04.2013].
Ref. Parthasarathy, Avula (1992): Srimad Bhagavad Gita, Volume 1-3. Bombay.
- ² Ref. Dutt, Romesh C. (1899): The Ramayana and Mahabharata URL: <http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/dutt/> [16.04.2013].
- ³ More women and families in India seem to be encouraged to file cases to the police since the tragedy in Delhi of December 2012. The English newspapers now report nearly daily about violent acts. Statistics are not significant. Here are only case, which are reported: Ref. National Crime Records Bureau, Ministry of Home Affairs (2010): Crime against women, Chapter 5. URL: <http://ncrb.nic.in/cii2010/cii-2010/Chapter%205.pdf> [16.04.2013].
Ref. National Institute of Public Cooperation and Child Development (2010): Statistics on Women in India. p. 311. URL: <http://nipccd.nic.in/reports/ehndbk10.pdf> [16.04.2013].
Ref. Interview with Ranjana Kumari (04.01.2013). URL: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x-lzQ11RU0> [16.04.2013].
- ⁴ This can happen at home or in the village- or town parliament or as a member of a governmental- or non-governmental organization.
- ⁵ Ref. De Beauvoir, Simone (1949): Le deuxième sexe 1, Gallimard, p. 285.
- ⁶ This is also outlined in the grassroot democracy apendage of HSF in India and is implemented in workshops.
- ⁷ Ref. National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (Nabard): Status of Microfinance in India (2011-2012). URL: <http://www.nabard.org/departments/pdf/Status%20of%20Microfinance%202011-12%20full%20book2.pdf> [12.04.2013].

According to the study by the Reserve Bank of India 450-500 million people live in India, who are "unbankable", so they do not have access to state and private banks and are financially dependent by family members or borrow money with unusual market price interest from private money lenders. This is the target group for the microfinance approach in India .The history of microfinance in India dates back to 1970 and is closely associated with the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in the north-west situated state of Gujarat. Since then, numerous other self-help groups were created. Currently, in addition to the self-help groups, government- as well as private organizations provide microfinance services in mainly rural areas. By the end of 2010, the microfinance success story got a first crack, when the central Indian state Andhra Pradesh passed a law for the closing of all private microfinance institutions. Since then it has been debated whether this action was referred in favour to the poor. Since only 5% of the population in India are served by the ten largest microcredit financial providers, the question must be made, whether the closure of private providers in Andhra Pradesh has a serious impact on the structure of microfinance in entire India.

See also the following additional sources of more detailed facts and figures:

Ref. Arena, Biz (2011): MicroFinance – Current Status and Growing Concerns in India. URL: http://www.iitk.ac.in/ime/MBA_IITK/avantgarde/?p=475 [12.04.2013].

Ref. Bhagat, Rasheeda (2009): Microfinance in India empowering women. URL: <http://southasia.oneworld.net/features/microfinance-in-india-empowering-women> [12.04.2013].

Ref. Biswas, Soutik (2010): India's micro-finance suicide epidemic. URL: <http://m.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-11997571> [09.04.2013].

Ref. Bansal, Sarika (2011): India's poor need help to help themselves. URL: <http://m.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/mar/07/india-andhra-pradesh-microfinance> [09.04.2013].

Ref. De Schutter Olivier (2013): The Feminization of Farming. URL: <http://topics.nytimes.com/topics/reference/timestopics/subjects/m/microfinance/index.html> [08.04.2013].

Ref. Microcredit Summit Campaign: Data Reported to the Campaign in 2012 (2011). URL: http://www.microcreditsummit.org/pubs/reports/socr/2012/WEB_SOCR-2012_English.pdf [07.04.2013].

Ref. The Network Network (2013): Study shows that micro-credit has empowered women. URL: http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2013-01-05/ahmedabad/36160951_1_iim-a-study-bandhan [12.04.2013].

Ref. ResponsAbility (2013): Microfinance Market Outlook 2013, High Debt? Low Growth? Not here. URL: http://www.responsability.com/domains/responsability_ch/data/free_docs/rA_Microfinance_Market-Outlook_2013_EN.pdf [10.04.2013].

Ref. Indian School of Microfinance for Women (2011). URL: <http://www.ismw.org.in/> [12.04.2013].

⁸ In March 2013, one of the most famous male Indian film stars announced that in future, his female co-star will be announced first in the end titles regarding the movies he participates as leading actor.

⁹ According to the study, "India's Economy: The Other Half", which was published in 2012 by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, the author Persis Khambatta states that

India, with a total of 478 million employees, has the second largest workforce in the world. The proportion of women is only 24% and the proportion of women in top positions is even 5%, compared to a global average of 20%. Almost half of the women discontinue their careers before they reach the middle of it. This happens mostly because even well-educated Indian women have to conform to the social constraints of their traditional role.

Ref. Kolhatkar, Sheelah (2013): India's Economy Lacks as the Women Lack Opportunity. URL: <http://mobile.businessweek.com/articles/2013-01-31/indias-economy-lags-as-its-women-lack-opportunity> [12.04.2013].

¹⁰ This also applies in regards to the dowry issue, an issue that is so deeply embedded in the social consciousness that it is not even much discussed anymore. It is inherent in the system.

¹¹ Vgl. Shod Ganga, A reservoir of Indian thesis: Mapping the Women's Movement in India, Chapter 4. URL: http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/2722/13/13_chapter%204.pdf; <http://www.sify.com/mobile/news/wanted-a-new-feminist-movement-in-india-news-columns-mm51Mlgcabf.html>; <http://www.cwds.ac.in/ocpaper/globalisationreport.pdf>; <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.195.9810&rep=rep1&type=pdf> [09.04.2013].

¹² Movements can be seen mainly in the metropolitan areas during the last decades that could strengthen and expand after the events of December 2012 and April 2013 in New Delhi. Dr. Ranjini Kumari of the Centre for Social Research (URL: <http://www.csrindia.org/>) takes hereby a very active position. But even in rural areas are observable approaches.

¹³ Constitution of India (1949) URL: <http://www.advocatekhaj.com/library/bareacts/constitutionofindia/index.php?Title=ConstitutionofIndia,1949> [09.04.2013].

¹⁴ Whether in the family or at work, mothers play an important role regarding the impact towards the next generations. Things which are exemplified home, will determine the reality later as well as the acquaintance with each other in future generations. Modern educational planners in India are aware of these connections. Therefore, education and training are a central element on which one has to work in India now and in future. Awareness training has to be done in schools which has been missing entirely. Also, the interaction between the sexes should not be treated as a taboo subject, but rather as an open, natural interaction with each other. This could contribute to a fairer, more educated society. A greater degree of freedom is also essential to provide the "woman" or the girls a more active, equivalent position.