

## **Exploring Narratives of Freedom: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on Women and Equality**

Speaking in the Constituent Assembly, Dakshayani Velayudhan, the youngest and only Dalit woman member, drew attention to her experience of being from the community of agrestic slaves, the Pulayas. In her interventions, she spoke of slavery and exploitation, and the prospect of a nation and a future without untouchability. The debates in the Constituent Assembly resonated with the expectation and aspirations of people who had struggled to achieve freedom from bondage, a generation that dreamt of throwing off the shackles of colonial rule, feudal subjugation and inequalities rooted in economic differences and social prejudices.

Narratives of freedom have been written and re-written over the last centuries, both from the Indian context and perhaps in many more ways, the world over. There are experiences from different countries on how people and nations organized and fought to achieve social transformation. These open up rich narratives of individual and collective sufferings and efforts to end these in very diverse locations. Such writings have pointed to the need to identify and interrogate these experiences with regard to regions, race and class, religion and caste and, other forms of social hierarchies in which different forms of inequality remain embedded. This research has at the same time, drawn attention to the fact that uncovering the story of women's subjugation within these experiences requires the peeling off of several more layers. Often, women remained hidden in the sub-text, to erupt at critical moments to justify the White Man's Burden, or the reassertion and reconfiguration of more native forms of patriarchal assertion. This has continued even as women organized to challenge political subjugation, as well as customs and practices, which justified specifically gendered forms of discrimination and oppression.

From its early beginnings women's studies in India drew upon these experiences and a rich stock of social science research available, to critique such subordination. There was also recognition of the fact that the roots of women's oppression were entrenched in other structures which perpetuated inequalities and resulted in what came to be recognized as forms of 'unfreedom.' Independent India has seen several decades of these interrogations. Women's issues and struggles have become more visible over this period.

However, has the story changed, how and to what extent? These questions may prompt other narratives. How differently would we write the story of women in independent India? Would and can this be the story of women alone? Have freedom and bondage vocabularies of the past acquired other meanings in a changed context? How do we locate the explorations of freedom – in individual or

communitarian contexts? Should we always posit the nation and the region as polar opposites?

There are several questions regarding how we should approach these narratives in contemporary India. Can these be discussed outside the framework of the social philosophy and morality on which the Constitution of India rests? The envisioning of India by those who fought for independence functions not so much to define our freedom as to lay down the principles from which there can and should be no going back. Do we not owe it to our foremothers, who charted unknown paths in the context of the freedom struggle, to open up new horizons that we ensure that there is no re-opening of debates on basic rights to equality and citizenship with a view to pushing the clock back? What then would be the future imaginings? Where do we trace the continuities and / or the ruptures?

Are there not as many starting points as limits to this story from the standpoint of women? Where would we locate the flash points or the markers with regard to shifts, be they in the contextual terrain, or in the shaping of new identities or demarcations to define oneself or the 'other'.

There are immense possibilities and potentialities to re-define notions of freedom, as well as to track the explorations and directions of change. It may be pertinent to argue that the perspective of Women's Studies and a standpoint located in a gender sensitive location would allow for these unfolding narratives to become more significant in determining the direction of change.